Mr and Mrs Percy Weasley

by Singular_Oddities

Summary

Percy met Audrey during a trying summer for Percy. Their relationship developed and eventually, they married and had children. This is a look at their story set over the course of events of the war and afterwards.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
When Percy met Audrey

August 1995

When Percy left Hogwarts and started his job at the Ministry, he had an expectation that his parents would be proud of him. He was the third son, so he wasn't expecting to do anything Bill or Charlie hadn't done already while at Hogwarts. Percy didn't expect to command attention at home like Fred or George did or receive the coddling Ginny did, however much it chafed her. He was more invisible than Ron who had managed to make friends with Harry Potter. But Percy had expected his parents to approve of his choice of career. They hadn't, and he hadn't predicted how badly it all would turn out. Some days it was impossible to trace the steps from there to here, but here was where he most certainly was.

Percy stared morosely down into the cup of tea he was nursing. It had gone cold, the milk forming a greyish skin on top of the liquid. He didn't know what to do. It was the end of August, it had been an impossible summer. The tiny room he rented in the house share with the other Ministry workers like him, was empty and uninviting.

He was going to move out. Ever since the papers reported what had happened to Mr Crouch, his housemates had been edifyingly sympathetic, but Percy wasn't a fool enough to think that they weren't all gleefully glad it hadn't been them. It was time he stood on his own two feet and got used to living alone. It would be preferable to have somewhere he could lick his wounds in peace even if he'd never lived alone before. From the overfull Burrow to Gryffindor Tower, to his current house share, Percy had never been simply alone. It was a terrifying and exciting prospect.

It would have to be a muggle place, and that was the rub, no overt magic. He couldn't afford anything wizarding, or at least nothing that wasn't more than a shoebox, and while he was happy to accept small, he wanted more space than he had now.

His house hunt had been narrowed down to a handful of properties, the details of which were spread in front of him on the small table he occupied in the little bistro café. Going into the Muggle side of London had been the only way he had felt he could get away from the stares and whispers that followed him when he appeared in the Alley.

He'd known enough from the magazines left around Gryffindor Tower to transfigure his clothes into something passable. Something that would allow him to blend in and not stand out like so many magical people that couldn't be bothered to do their research. The muggles he had passed on his meandering path had been wearing much brighter colours and with patterns but for all that, in his sober suit, Percy had attracted no attention. He was invisible.

The waitress bustled around collecting up cups onto her tray. Percy watched her covertly, marveling at the volume of cups she stacked on the tray and handled easily without a single featherlight charm to help her. The café he was in was nothing like Madam Puddifoots in Hogsmeade, it was inviting. The menu was written in French with the English translations printed underneath. The walls were decorated with framed Muggle posters in French. Percy liked the place.

When the waitress got to his table, he frowned down at the estate agent details and his own notes not wanting to draw attention to himself.

"Are you finished with that?" the waitress asked.

Percy's head jerked up guiltily. "Yes, sorry. Yes, I've finished."
The waitress smiled in a friendly manner. "Do you want anything else? Another pot?"

Percy glanced down at the property pages spread out before him and sighed dejectedly. "Yes, yes please I think I'd better."

She swept the cup and teapot up off the table onto her tray and patted him consolingly on the shoulder. "I'll bring it over love."

Percy smiled his thanks and gave himself a shake, he needed to concentrate and stop dithering. He was going to get his own place to live, he was going to have a place just for him. He was going to make something of himself. If his family ever came around, then he'd be able to show them that he hadn't yearned like a lost puppy, he'd made something of himself.

The waitress slipped the fresh pot of tea and a clean cup onto his table and left as unobtrusively as she'd arrived. Percy dealt with pouring his tea then shuffled the pages and his notes and started looking in earnest. The only advantage he had was that the conversion rate from galleons to pounds was favourable. He'd be able to afford a little better than he'd expected while still maintaining his savings. Percy drew out the map of London he'd taken from the bus station and marked the location of the Leaky. He'd need to apply for a licence to set up a floo connection and if the Muggle property didn't have a fireplace, then he'd need to make sure it was within walking distance, or there was somewhere he could apparate to and from.

He listed the pros and cons of each property in neat, tidy columns before deciding on making an appointment to view three potentials. If he accepted one today, he could then bring the paperwork to the estate agents on his lunch break on Monday. He could slip into the Ministry tomorrow and get all the documents drawn up. No one would think it odd that Percy Weasley was in the Ministry on a Sunday.

One week later Percy was back in the café. The flat he had chosen was a short walk away from the café, and if it wasn't on a sunny terrace in France where he could sip coffee and eat delicious pastry, it was warm and welcoming. The waitress had recognised him when Percy had come through the door and greeted him with a smile that convinced Percy that he'd made the right decision. So far he had done little more than sleep in his new home. He'd been able to collect the keys on Tuesday's lunch break the day after dropping off his documents and deposit, and he'd wasted no time at all in moving his things out of his house share into his new home.

Percy, however, discovered that his things didn't take up as much space as he had thought and the flat was looking rather bare. He would need to find a sofa and a coffee table and a table to eat at. He had considered transfiguring the things he needed but had admitted to himself buying a comfortable sofa was probably a lot easier than transfiguring one, so that was his job for this weekend. He was going to go out and find some furniture and some kitchen equipment, and since his flat was muggle, he might even look into getting a television just to see what all the fuss was about.

Set in his thinking, he didn't notice the café filling up until a pleasant voice broke him from the newspaper he was perusing and the crossword he was trying to complete.

"Is this seat taken?"

Percy looked up to see a woman his own age with a silk scarf of a dark cobalt blue wrapped around her neck and left to hang to her waist.

"Only it's getting a bit full in here," she said glancing around.

Percy tore his eyes from her to follow her gaze around the tea shop. She was correct all the tables
were currently occupied.

"No," he blurted out.

She smiled at him in gratitude. "Thanks," she said, awkwardly pulling out a chair balancing her bag and cup in hand. Percy hastily gathered up the newspaper he had brought with him, trying to wrestle it back into the shape it had been before he'd started spreading it about.

"That's the problem with broadsheets, isn't it?" the woman commented. "They never seem to want to go back into place once they're loose."

Percy shuffled the pages as best he could then folded them over a few times clearing room for his companion.

"I'm Audrey," the woman said holding out her hand.

"Percy Weasley," Percy replied automatically taking the hand and shaking it gently once before letting it go.

"Hello, Percy," Audrey said as she settled into the chair unwinding the scarf from around her neck. Percy watched in fascination as the scarf revealed itself to be a lot thinner than he expected but considerably longer.

"I know," Audrey said catching the look. "It's crazy how long it is but I really loved the colour, and I couldn't leave it in the shop."

"It's very becoming," Percy said then cringed internally. Becoming? He sounded like an idiot.

Audrey, if she noticed the odd word choice, only smiled at the compliment and picked up her cup.

Percy stamped on his growing embarrassment and turned back to his now folded newspaper to continue the crossword.

"Are you any good at those?" Audrey asked after a moment.

Percy looked up surprised. "I'm, well. I've never completed one."

Audrey smiled. "Me neither, devilishly hard, aren't they?"

Percy put the folded paper down and picked up his cup, observing his new companion. His mother would have scolded him for ignoring her, and while he no longer felt the pressing need to obey his parents, good manners had been ingrained. "Do you prefer the Guardian or the Financial Times?"

"The Telegraph actually," Audrey replied with a smile.

Percy looked at her and smiled the first genuine smile he had done for a long time. She was pretty, and he had an urge to converse with her as long as he could.

"I don't think I've seen you in here before," Audrey said with another warm smile.

"I moved to the area last week," Percy said. "I moved out of a house share I was in. I wanted my own space."

"I'm not sure I'm brave enough to live in a house share. I know they are all the rage, but what if you end up with someone who drinks all the milk? Or leaves the bathroom in a state? Or throws wild parties every weekend?" Audrey said shuddering.
"I didn't have those problems," Percy said. Silencing Charms were invented for a reason after all, and after living in a house with five brothers, he'd learnt the necessary cleaning and freshening charms at a very young age. His mother had insisted they all had. "But I think it was time for me to move out."

"How long have you lived there?"

"Just over a year," Percy answered. "My housemates, and I all work for the same place, so there's mutual respect about not having parties and such."

"Banker or law?" Audrey guessed.

"Pardon?"

"Where you all work, at a city bank or in law?"

"What makes you say that?" Percy asked curiously.

"The suit," she waved a hand at Percy who was wearing the same Muggle suit he'd worn each time he'd been in Muggle London. "It's too formal for day to day management, so that leaves an older establishment that expects a higher standard of dress than current fashion. Which rules out most things except high-end banking or law."

"Neither I'm afraid. I work for the government," Percy confessed.

"Really?" Audrey said surprised, she considered him again closely. "You don't strike me as the type."

"I beg your pardon," Percy said straightening up, a little put out that she didn't think he could work in government.

"Oh, god, sorry. I mean, you're what my age? So it's going to be some sort of entry-level thing. I have a friend, Rose, who works as a Data Clerk for Whitehall. Which sounds very glam but honestly, she does nothing but complain about it. She was telling me about the blokes there, and well they are either aristocratic arses coming in from boarding school on Mummy and Daddy's money. Or they are the ideological type who won't last six months in the rat race but make up lovely support staff for the aristocratic arses who know how to play the game." Audrey winced. "And, umm, you don't seem like either of those. Sorry, I didn't mean that to come out quite like that," she finished.

Percy who had sat in shock at the diatribe coming from this woman smiled. She was beautiful, especially with the blush covering her face at her embarrassment over her blunt assessment.

"Ah well, I am the type apparently. It's an entry-level post to a department buried within the depth of the government checking on the standards of imported items. It's horribly dull, but I did go to boarding school," Percy said with a smirk.

"Oh God," Audrey said covering her face with her hands. "Could you just pretend I didn't say any of that?"

Percy laughed surprising himself. "Perhaps," he said to ease her embarrassment. "If it helps my case of 'not the type', my parents aren't part of the aristocratically wealthy class."

"Neither are mine," Audrey replied. "You might have been able to work that out for yourself however as you witnessed me placing my foot in my mouth."

"So, what do you do?" Percy asked happy to spare her any more embarrassment.
"I'm in antiques," Audrey replied swallowing a mouthful of her tea.

Percy looked at Audrey waiting for further clarification. When it didn't come, he asked. "What does that involve?"

Audrey shrugged. "If I worked for anyone other than my uncle probably making a lot of tea. It's a bit of a family business, my grandparents used to own an antique shop, my uncle runs it now. I'm an Assistant Valuer. Lifelong exposure to the Antiques Roadshow on TV as a child combined with been taken to the sales on the weekends and during the holidays and I've got the bug. My parents are horrified. Supportive, but horrified. It's not the most lucrative of things to do, and my grades at school were good so they'd rather I got a steady job. But ever since my first auction I've wanted to be an auctioneer. We've compromised, and I'm still taking night classes in case it all goes belly up, and I need a job as a data clerk in Whitehall."

Percy settled back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. "Most of that meant very little to me. What is a valuer and what are these sales you were dragged to?" Percy ignored the reference to the TV, he knew nothing about it and hoped his silence would be mistaken for understanding.

Audrey nodded as if him not knowing wasn't unusual and proceeded to explain her chosen career and the bug she had developed as a child.

The conversation meandered over antiquities, Percy's need to buy furniture for his flat, Audrey's recommendations of where to get a bargain and parental expectation. It was two hours, and two shared pots of tea later that Audrey bit her lip and shot him a look he didn't quite understand but could see was tinged with a little bit of embarrassment.

"I feel I owe you dinner," she confessed.

"Why?" Percy asked twisting in his seat to see the clock on the wall over the counter that showed it was nearly four in the afternoon.

"Well, I wasn't very honest. You see my last relationship ended badly and I was upset. It was serious, and I liked him a lot. And you know how it goes, one day it's all sweetheart and roses and the next day you're hunting for a flatmate to share the rent. Anyway, I've not been on a date since and it's been eight months, and I don't mind. I'm happy, but my friend, Lucy, who kindly stepped in as a flatmate until I could get out of the lease. Well, she wants me to date, and I told her this morning that I was meeting someone for coffee thinking that she'd leave me be. Only she followed me here, and I didn't have a date so I took a bit of a gamble and asked if I could sit with you knowing she was watching through the window. In my head, it didn't sound crazy, but there you go, now I've said it, it does. But since you've been an absolute trooper and put up with me, I'd like to thank you." Audrey explained in a rush glancing at him with her guilty and embarrassed expression.

"With dinner?" Percy clarified.

"Yes," Audrey nodded.

"Dinner that would make it look like you were moving your dating life onward even further when you reported back to your friend Lucy?" Percy asked in a slightly condescending manner but with a smile to take the sting out of his words.

"Well yes," Audrey admitted squirming. "But that's not all of the reason. I find I quite like you Percy Weasley and I'm hoping you improve on further acquaintance."
A very Muggle Christmas

November 1995

Percy began to notice as November started. He suspected that he'd not noticed sooner because it had been a gradual thing, but by the time November kicked in the Muggles had officially begun their run-up to Christmas. It was unlike anything he had ever seen. The wizarding world didn't do anything like this. Percy had the fleeting abstract thought that Professor Dumbledore would have loved it. It was bright, it was loud, it was frankly obnoxious in places, and made Percy recoil. An ingrained sense of propriety offended by the over the top displays.

He had caught himself doubling back the first time he had seen the depiction of Father Christmas. The beard and the twinkling eyes had made him look twice. Although to be fair to Professor Dumbledore, Percy didn't think the meddlesome wizard would ever be accused of being that overweight.

The supermarket close to his house where he did his food shop was the main culprit in Percy's enlightenment. He shopped there because it was easier than owl ordering and he felt should Audrey ask, he needed to be at least aware of his local supermarket and somewhat familiar with it. Also, Muggle beer, something he had tried in a pub with Audrey, had been on sale there, and Percy was taking to occasionally drinking it in the evening. The wizarding world was short on things like bottled beer. Muggles, on the other hand, had a mind-boggling selection catering for every taste.

His more recent forays into the supermarket had been met with a seemingly never-ending loop of the same festive songs and a significant amount of marketing geared towards the holiday. The music was awful Percy decided. He couldn't tell if it was meant to encourage or discourage enjoying yourself, but he'd had enough of it already.

Once he had noticed that it was coming up to Christmas, it had brought up a mild panic that he would have to get Audrey a gift. Percy knew enough from his dating of witches in Hogwarts to know that whatever he gave her would be subject to the scrutiny of her friends and family. Who would use it as a means to judge him worthy of Audrey.

On top of that, there were the Ministry events he would have to attend. The Yule Ball, the charity dinners, the events that were no more than self-congratulatory back-patting for another year over. Then there was the overtime since everyone decided that they were going to enjoy the festivities and someone else could pick up their slack. Added to that was the fact that Percy was estranged from his family and this would be his first Christmas on his own.

Christmas didn't look like it was going to be something he would be celebrating this year.

He didn't know how to feel about that. He was under no illusions that the Burrow wouldn't be full to bursting, that his Mum and Dad wouldn't be hosting as many people as they could. There was no way he could go, however. Even if they managed not to drag up politics, which, considering their likely guests seemed an impossibility, he knew his brothers would be unforgiving. Bill would be unamused, a disapproving elder brother siding firmly with their father. Ron would be belligerent and ill-mannered when he wasn't doing his best to ignore Percy's existence. Harry and Hermione, who would be in attendance, would likely ignore his presence. Not that it wouldn't be any less awkward, but they could be relied on to at least show manners. Ginny would be cold if not outright hostile. The twins, however. Percy suppressed a shudder at the thought of what his two prankster brothers set on the course of their righteous anger might do to him.
He put the thought of his family out of his mind, he had to get Audrey something for Christmas. Something that signified his growing regard for her. He would have to decide between something Muggle, which he didn't have a lot of experience in buying, and was unsure about where he could purchase something that would suit and be of acceptable quality. Or, he could buy something from the wizarding world that was benign enough and not of such superior quality it would cause unwanted questions to be asked.

The problem, Percy mused, was that the wizarding world really was old fashioned and the use of repair spells meant that even the tattiest of things could be fixed up. A girlfriend who could recognise a sixteenth-century goblet at forty paces and assign value based on its condition was a problem. Especially when sixteenth-century goblets of reasonable condition were forty a knut in Diagon Alley, and a few cleaning and repairing spells could have them looking, well, not new, but certainly in better condition than anything that old had a right to be in the Muggle world.

Audrey would love a set, she really genuinely would, but Percy couldn't buy her any because she would have more questions than he had answers. High-quality silk, on the other hand, he mused to himself, remembering the scarf she wore when he first met her, and she'd worn since. Yes, an Acromantula silk scarf would raise fewer questions. The haberdashery in Diagon Alley could be availed upon for such things.

He wasn't going to buy her jewellery. Percy's family might not cleave to the old pureblood traditions but that one his father had told all his sons about. You didn't give a witch jewellery without meaning the promise behind it. The promise that you were making your choice known to the broader community. That you had chosen your witch and she had accepted you. Audrey clearly wouldn't be aware of the custom, but he was, and until he was sure, he would not be gifting her jewellery. Satisfied he at least had an idea that wouldn't land him in trouble, he made a note in his calendar to spend a lunch hour away from his desk one day this week so he could start looking for something suitable.

Three days after his musing about Audrey's Christmas present, Percy woke up in a strange bed that was becoming all too familiar. He reached over to the bedside table for his glasses bringing his murky world into focus and enabling him to look at Audrey in the weak light. She grumbled and rolled closer, still asleep. The t-shirt Percy distinctly remembered taking off her had been reinstated, and he allowed himself a flash of chagrin.

Percy gently dropped a kiss onto her cheek before swinging his legs out of bed. He had to go to work and tardiness, however excellent the excuse, was not a habit he wished to form. Percy headed for the shower snagging his overnight bag on the way.

Pretending to be muggle wasn't difficult, he enjoyed travelling around by public transport with Audrey when they went out. He enjoyed the food, music and culture he had so far been exposed to. He did not enjoy the early mornings he had to endure when he stayed over at Audrey's. His place of work was further away, and he had to act accordingly, which meant getting up earlier. It wasn't all bad, his early starts on the days he stayed at Audrey's allowed him to feel he was not slacking when he didn't work over the weekend because he and Audrey had plans.

Audrey had left the bed by the time he came out of the bathroom, showered, shaved-by magic although he did carry a Muggle razor, and dressed in robes he had transfigured into a Muggle suit. Audrey was leaning against the kitchen cabinets, a cup of coffee steaming in her hands. His cup was laid out next to a steaming teapot as was his preference for brewed tea over Muggle tea bags, next to her on the surface. He added milk to his cup then poured the steeped tea into the cup, a quick stir,
and he sipped appreciatively. "Thank you," Percy said.

Audrey lifted a shoulder in a gesture communicating it was nothing. Percy hid his smile behind his cup. Audrey was not a morning person, a phrase he hadn't understood until his first overnight stay with her. Until she had consumed her first cup of coffee, she was practically mute.

"Mum has invited you over for Sunday Lunch."

"I will, of course, accept gladly," Percy replied. "You said I'd be asked eventually."

"Mmmm," Audrey acknowledged taking another sip of coffee. "It's a warm-up. She's going to ask you to attend Christmas. Dad said that your first time meeting them shouldn't be as fraught as Christmas and you should come for Sunday lunch first. Break you in gently."

Percy looked at her in surprise. For this early in the morning that was an unprecedented amount of coherence. Audrey caught the look and pulled one of her own. "I meant to tell you last night, but it seems other plans took precedence."

Percy smiled at that flicking a glance quickly over her. Her t-shirt covered her bum but little else, and it had been washed thin by constant use. It was not an unattractive look with her hair still tangled and unbrushed.

Audrey rolled her eyes at him then more seriously said. "You don't have to come at Christmas. I'd like you there, but you have your own family."

Percy put his empty cup in the sink and ran water over it to rinse it out. "I'd like to think about it if I may. I assume Sunday lunch will be this Sunday?" Audrey nodded. "Then I'll have my answer when they ask." He turned from the sink, kissed her thoroughly goodbye then collected his overnight bag and left for the Ministry.

It seemed that this week in early November was the week the world decided Percy had to think about Christmas and all that the holiday would entail. The Minister arranged a two-hour conference about the upcoming Yule Ball, its guest list and relative importance at being a success. Percy had been unsurprised that the Minister's eager involvement, the wish to be kept up to date and involved in the decision-making had been dumped on Percy's desk. When the Minister said things like that, it actually meant Percy would have to know everything and give the selected highlights to the Minister.

The rest of the day had been taken up by organising the Minister's schedule around those Charities and organisations that had invited the Minister to attend a dinner or party. To give a speech, or hand out an award, or just turn up and lend propriety to their cause only with his presence. Add to that the Minister himself had his own ideas about those people he would indulge and those he wouldn't, by the end of the day Percy felt herding cats would be preferable. He hadn't really considered what his appointment as junior aide to the Minister for Magic might involve before he took the job.

Minister Fudge breezed through Percy's office space seconds after the clock struck five. He paused in front of Percy's desk, an eye passing over the number of bits or parchment and the large planner Percy had laid out trying to get everything to align.

"Weasley. I want the weekends kept clear. I have a family, and they are as entitled to my time as everyone else."

"Minister, the dinner hosted by the International Healers Confederation is on a Saturday," Percy objected.

"Then refuse the invite or tell them to reschedule."
"I don't believe that would be possible Minister," Percy replied hesitantly.

"Nonsense, I am the Minister for Magic aren't I? If they want me to attend this dinner of theirs, then they'll move it or go without. Dinner with a bunch of old cronies wittering on about hideous injuries is hardly something I want to attend Weasley. It sickens my stomach listening to them blather on about spell damage over the main course." Fudge complained.

"Yes, Minister," Percy said dully looking down at his planner in dismay. It seemed very doubtful that the International Healers Confederation, which was an organisation that worked closely with the Ministry and St Mungo's, would reschedule the dinner just for the British Minister for Magic. But, they were an influential group, and Percy was aware if the Minister was not, the importance of keeping relations between the Ministry and them in good health.

"Good," Fudge said before turning smartly on his heel and leaving Percy alone.

Percy groaned in dismay and selected from his pile of parchments those invitations that were set for the weekends. He sorted through to those he could, without too much offence, decline with only the reason that the Minister wasn't attending, from those that the Minister needed to participate in and would require a more diplomatic approach. That done, Percy waved his wand at the first pile sending out the refusals then placed them into a folder with the other rejected events. He then selected the second collection, making notations of when they could be rescheduled for into the Minister's already busy schedule.

He'd managed to juggle things around to allow the Minister to attend two of the dinners and one award ceremony and had sent out the appropriate messages and suggestions before his office door opened once more.

Percy looked up to see his father hover nervously in the doorway. Percy put the parchments down and took a moment to look his father over.

"Ahh, Percy," Arthur said with a small smile and a friendly nod. "I was hoping to catch you before you left for the day."

Percy rose from his chair indicating the chairs by his desk. "Will you come in?"

Arthur bobbed another nod and closed the door behind him as he came forward. His eyes flickered around the office taking the room. It was, Percy knew, sumptuous. Something he had stopped seeing as his working hours got longer and longer. The antechamber to the Minister for Magic's office had carpet that was thick and muffling, the wall hangings were silk, and the ornate frames dotted around the walls held portraits of former Ministers. The desk Percy was sat behind was vast and elaborate. Nothing to the Minister's office, nor to the other department heads, Percy knew, but to Arthur who due to his department had a wonky old desk from the bygone era, the desk at which his son sat at must look impressive.

Arthur settled into the armchair uncomfortably. The chair was nicer than anything at the Burrow, the covering was dragonhide leather of such quality it was butter soft. It was either the quality or the placement of it before his son's desk that was making Arthur uncomfortable Percy summarised.

"Tea?" Percy offered.

"Err no thank you, your Mum is cooking dinner, and you know what she gets like," Arthur said with a smile.

Percy subsided into his own comfortable leather chair waiting for his father to get to the reason he
"You're not working too hard?" Arthur asked glancing at the parchment covering Percy's desk.

"Christmas is a busy period for the Minister," Percy replied stiffly.

Arthur bobbed another nod, his fingers fiddling anxiously with the drape of his robe. "Ahh well, that's why I'm here. We were wondering if you'd be coming home for Christmas?"

Percy didn't stop the look of shock crossing his face followed by one of suspicion.

Arthur held up a hand. "Percy, son. It's Christmas, I know things have been said, and perhaps they shouldn't have been, but we worry about you." Arthur cast a not so subtle glance at the closed doors to the Minister's office. "You're a smart lad Percy. Christmas is a time for family. It would mean the world to your Mum and me if you'd come and spend Christmas with your family."

"You'll both apologise?" Percy asked.

"Percy, Ron told us about the letter you sent. I have to say I'm disappointed in you." Arthur said with a stern look. Percy bristled but held his tongue as his father held up a hand and continued speaking. "If you feel you need an apology for our behaviour that is your right, but you'll need to be giving your own. Not just to your Mother and me, but to Harry. You had no right to malign him like that, he's done nothing wrong."

"He's dangerous!" Percy hissed.

"He's not," Arthur replied sternly.

"He is, I've seen the reports! He's going to get someone hurt if not killed, and if you don't heed me it might be one of you!"

Arthur shook his head sadly. "Percy, please." He stood wearily. "This ground doesn't need going over again. Harry isn't a threat, the threat is from You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters. Some of whom walk the same corridors we do. Who are working within these halls of power, not for the good of Wizarding kind but to push You-Know-Who's agenda. The invitation stands, you're family Percy, and we'd like to see you there."

Percy stood as well, his hands balled into fists, hidden in his robes, the same hot anger firing him as had done so when he broke from his family. "Thank you for the invitation, but I won't be attending. I have been invited and accepted an offer of alternative hospitality for the season."

Arthur looked closely at his son. Percy kept his head up meeting his eyes refusing to be cowed. He saw the slight slump in his father's shoulders.

"Very well, I'll inform your mother. Look after yourself Percy." With that Arthur turned and left Percy's office, the door closing softly behind him. Percy felt the anger in him morph into disappointment, and he sat down heavily.

Sunday lunch at Audrey's parents went well. Percy dressed smartly wanting to give off the right impression and made sure to bring a bottle of wine Audrey had said her parents both liked, along with a small bunch of flowers for her mother. It had perhaps been overkill, but they had both welcomed him warmly. When during the coffee after the large meal Audrey's mother invited him to
Christmas dinner he accepted warmly and offered to arrive early to help with the preparations. The offer was rebutted, but Percy thought it had been received well.

Percy pushed the meeting with his father to the rear reaches of his mind and concentrated on his work and his burgeoning relationship. It worked well as a distraction up until the middle of December when he heard the reports that his father had been attacked and was in St Mungo's in a critical condition.

Percy forced himself to stay at his desk to continue his day’s work while gleaning as much information as he could from the gossips and whisperers. When five o'clock came around, he left his office returned to his home and called Audrey on the telephone he’d had connected. Percy apologised, cancelled their evening plans, and sat on his small sofa thinking. He needed to go to St Mungo's, he needed to know his father was alright and receiving the best care. Since his family had not thought to inform him of the attack on his father, Percy assumed he would be unwelcome should they spot him. Percy also thought that since his father was hurt in part of the Ministry he had no business being in, he would also have to get around whatever guard the Order had provided.

The trip was not a total success nor failure. With robes and hair charmed, Percy had made it up to the ward where his unconscious father was. His mother had been at the bedside, so Percy had watched them both through the window until the sound of feet further down the corridor had him fleeing in the opposite direction. He had no further information about his father's condition, but he had at least seen he was still alive.

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Christmas Day at Audrey's house was much as it was at the Burrow, just missing the use of magic and all of Percy's family. Audrey's family arrived at her parent's house, and Percy was introduced to a veritable horde of people. The uncle she worked for, the sister she had told him about, the grandparents that got her hooked on antiques. An aunt and her husband and children, another aunt with children but no husband. Percy put his mind to the task of remembering everyone and trying not to trip up while answering the dozen or so questions each of Audrey's relatives asked.

By the time they left together, Percy was exhausted. He had a Ministry function tomorrow that would take up most of the day and night, then he was back at work for three days before the weekend.

He and Audrey had agreed that since New Year's Eve was a Sunday and he had to attend yet another Ministry party, he would meet Audrey and her friends in the pub on Saturday night. It would be the first time Percy would be introduced to all of the people he had been told about, but he readily agreed thinking it couldn't possibly be any harder than meeting all of her family.

Audrey smiled up at him amusement dancing in her eyes. "You did very well you know, and thank you again for the scarf; it really is beautiful."

Percy smiled at her. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Your family were OK with you spending the day with me? You've not mentioned going to see them between now and New Year's?"

"No, I won't be."

Audrey noticed the look on his face and dropped the topic. She led him to the sofa and pulled him down next to her. "I don't think I'll eat for a month. I'm so full."
Percy rested an arm around her shoulders pulling her closer ignoring the pangs the thought of his family brought on. "What do you usually do now then?" he asked.

"Watch rubbish on TV until I fall asleep," Audrey replied.

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Percy said getting comfortable. "I'll leave it to you to choose something to watch."

Audrey picked up the remote control turning the TV on and started to flick through the four channels to select from. Settling on something that looked festive on Channel Four she set her head on Percy's chest and let her eyes droop closed.

Percy watched as Audrey fell asleep on him. Once he was sure that she was sound asleep, he turned the TV off and slipped his wand from his sleeve. Quietly and carefully so not to wake her, Percy summoned the book he had packed in his overnight bag and the blanket from the chair across the room. He checked that covering her with a blanket hadn't caused her to stir before summoning his teapot, cup, and tea leaves from the cupboard in the kitchen. Percy filled the teapot with his wand, then brought the water to the perfect temperature with another charm. He summoned the milk from the fridge and added the splash he preferred to his cup before sending it sailing back to the kitchen. Tea steeping, he checked Audrey was still sleeping before slipping his wand back up his sleeve.

Percy didn't mind living as a muggle when he was with Audrey. Spending today as a muggle, fetching and carrying dishes and plates, and washing up by hand had been part of the Muggle Christmas he had just enjoyed. It didn't mean he didn't appreciate his magic though, and if he could get away with it, he saw no harm in using it while he was with her. Making tea the Muggle way would have disturbed her and taken longer. Magic meant a few charms and wand movements later, Audrey was undisturbed, and Percy was supplied with tea and something to read.

He smiled down at the woman in his arms, she'd made a day he had not looked forward to special in its own right. He held her a bit tighter, a bit closer. She mumbled in her sleep cuddling up to him, and Percy embraced the moment where all was right in the world.
Suspicious Minds

There was something about Percy that was off. On the surface, he was the nice young man her mother had always told her to settle down with. He held doors open, he was unfailingly polite and a little reserved enough to be interesting. He took notice of her likes and dislikes and acted accordingly. He didn't drone on about his job, boring her to tears with how important or how hard his days were. In fact, of his work Percy said very little. He didn't obsess over football, and in fact, he had the first time she mentioned it, asking if he watched or supported a team, looked at her blankly.

That Audrey thought was the thing that got her thinking about Percy. That blank look, the one he hid as quickly as it came. It happened less and less the more time she spent with him, but the source of it puzzled her. Why would a young bloke, well educated, with a host of brothers not know what football was or understand the idea of a soap opera?

Smaller things such as not having eaten Chinese food or pizza had not raised as much suspicion when they had cropped up. Not everyone's parents were adventurous when it came to cuisine, and a Scottish boarding school didn't strike her as likely to serve Chicken Tikka Masala. Percy couldn't drive and couldn't name a single car brand. He'd never flown, but he had spoken fleetingly of a visit to Egypt.

Since she'd started keeping track of the idiosyncrasies of Percy, Audrey realised that there was an awful lot of them.

But that left her in a quandary of its own. She liked Percy. She didn't really want to stop seeing him. But if something was off, she didn't want to wake up one morning and find out she'd fallen for someone who wasn't who they said they were. Or worse, was no longer there at all.

She'd have to confront him, only what to say? Hi, Percy, look there are a few things that don't add up and before I decide I've fallen for you could you tell me if you're a serial killer? Or a con man? Or an undercover something with a fabricated backstory? – Yeah, that wouldn't make her look crazy.

Oh, and how come Percy never got stuck in traffic? Like never ever. If they arranged to meet no matter the weather, or location, or state of the roads he was always on time. He'd had to cancel on her a few times which was refreshingly normal, but if they were going to meet, Percy was always on time. No one managed that on London's public transport. No one.

There was something rotten in the state of Denmark.

Finally, after a week of prevaricating Audrey had done something about it. She'd made a phone call and agreed to a lunch meeting. Now Audrey was sat in the busy London restaurant nursing a glass of wine while waiting for her companion to show up. She stared out the window watching the passing people as they scurried about on their lunch breaks escaping the confining office, the bad lighting, and the terrible canteen food. Audrey thanked her stars she hadn't had to get a job like that. That so far, she'd been able to follow her passion.

Audrey spied Rose coming down the street, and it drew a smile to her face. Rose was fun, quirky, the sort of person who was written off as pretty and shallow by most who didn't see past the blonde hair and the dedication to fashion Rose had slaved to since she was old enough to spend her pocket money unsupervised. Rose came through the door, flirted with the closest waiter by reflex and made her way to Audrey. She dropped into the seat with a genuine smile of greeting. "Hello, I'm not late, am I?"
"No," Audrey assured her. "I came via the market, and it wasn't as good as it could have been, so I was quicker than I planned."

"Someone else had all the good stuff already?" Rose asked with a sympathetic smile.

"Probably," Audrey said. "Drink?"

"Yes, whatever you're having."

Audrey waved a waiter over ordered Rose a drink and settled back into her chair waiting. It was a short wait.

"So?" Rose asked arching an eyebrow.

Audrey smiled hesitantly. "I need a favour."

"Obviously, otherwise you wouldn't have called me out of my little circle of typists to this rather nice restaurant to treat me for lunch, would you?" Rose answered with a cheeky grin.

"It's, well I'm not sure I should be asking you this, but it's Percy."

"Percy?" Rose looked startled, and the cheeky grin faded to real concern. "It's been what? Six months, what's he done? He's not asked you for money has he?"

"No, nothing like that," Audrey reassured her fiddling with the cuff of her sleeve not meeting Rose's gaze.

"Then what? He seems nice enough, smitten with you obviously. Didn't even so much as look at the rest of us in the pub and you've had that goofy grin on your face for months now."

Audrey shifted in her chair taking a fortifying sip of her wine. "He never talks about his work."

Roses face stayed attentive waiting for further information. Audrey swallowed the doubt about what she was trying to explain, making her words come slowly. "He doesn't, at all never. Well alright," Audrey qualified. "No more than how his day was or warning me if he's going to be really busy and working late. Do you not think that's weird?"

"Umm no?" Rose said. "I mean a bloke who doesn't spout off about how fantastic his job is and his never-ending list of workmates who you've never met but are supposed to be able to keep straight and remember sounds great." Rose looked at Audrey over the top of her wine glass before taking a sip.

"I know," Audrey said frustrated. "I mean a bloke who doesn't spout off about how fantastic his job is and his never-ending list of workmates who you've never met but are supposed to be able to keep straight and remember sounds great." Rose looked at Audrey over the top of her wine glass before taking a sip.

"I know," Audrey said frustrated. "I know, and it is, and he's interested in what I do, and you know how unusual that is. But Percy doesn't socialise with anyone from work either. He's never said he's gone out with them after work, and he only ever seems to attend functions he's required to. He's not interested in football or any kind of sport other than a passing enquiry if it's something I'm interested in. He'll sit and watch TV with me, but he'll pick up a book more often and not and let me watch what I want."

"Audrey, love, what's the problem and how can I help? He seems pretty ideal to me. I mean, if he had a bit more muscle and was broader in the chest, and was a bit easier going. Because he looks the type to not have piles of clothes on the floor and I live in organised chaos, and I couldn't cope with someone picking up after me or trying to get me to put things away." Rose smiled encouragingly.

"Could you, maybe, you know, find out?" Audrey asked sending Rose a pleading look for
understanding.

"Find out what?" Rose replied looking puzzled.

"Who he works with. What they think of him? I've never met any of his friends, he's estranged from his family. Who else is there?"

Rose looked concerned. "Audrey, do you think there's something off about him?"

"Yes. No. I don't know," Audrey said putting her glass down in favour of sinking her hands into her hair. "It's been six months, and I'm not comparing him to, you know, Steve, I'm not, but if I was…"

"Percy's ahead?" Rose provided knowingly.

"Streets ahead. And I don't want to suddenly find out he's been lying to me all this time or God, I don't know, is a con man or something. What if he's got a criminal record!" Audrey exclaimed.

Rose laughed. "Audrey calm down. Percy doesn't strike me as the type. He's straight-laced by the book kind of guy, and he's great. He's witty in a dry way, he's not a foam party type, but he's certainly the type to get you in a cab at the end of the night and home safe. If it eases your mind, I'll ask around the pool, see if anyone knows of him and I'll ask Jennifer to ask around her pool. She's got higher clearance than me."

"You don't think I'm crazy?" Audrey asked worriedly. "That I'm maybe looking for problems that don't exist?"

"No, I think you're crazy, but I get it. Somethings bothering you and this is an easy thing to do. Give me a week or two, and I'll have your answers." Rose reached over and patted her hand. "Now, you promised me lunch, and that waiter has been dying to come over here and introduce himself so what are we having?"

By the time Audrey got home, she half regretted asking Rose to find out about Percy through her contacts, but she pushed it out of her head. It might be untrusting, but if something were wrong, she'd look stupider for ignoring her gut.

Two weeks later when Audrey had managed to forget the favour she'd asked of Rose, she'd settled in front of the TV just as the doorbell went. Surprised since she wasn't expecting Percy, she went to the door to find Rose on her doorstep. The favour came rushing back, and the look on Rose's face made her stomach swoop.

"Come in," Audrey said leading her friend back to her sofa and the burbling TV. Rose shrugged off her coat dropping it over the armchair and settled onto the sofa next to Audrey, fishing a bottle of wine out of her large floppy handbag.

Audrey looked at the bottle and then at Rose's face before wordlessly getting to her feet and collecting glasses and a corkscrew from the kitchen. Back on the sofa, Rose took the corkscrew, opened the bottle and poured two large glasses.

"I'm sorry," she said handing Audrey a glass. "There's no Percy Weasley listed as taking an entry-level position in any of the Ministerial departments that my pool works with which is a good third of them. I didn't want to tell you that, so I asked the others and asked Jennifer to ask around as well. He's not an employee as far as I can find out. I'm so sorry love."

Audrey looked at Rose with a blank face. "So, he doesn't work for a Minister?"
"It doesn't look like it, but only within the bits I can find out about. There's nothing to say Percy works in a different branch. I'm sorry I don't have better news."

"It's ok," Audrey said fighting down her feelings.

"Look, so if he doesn't work for a Minister, maybe he's just a flunkie. A paper pusher buried in a pool of other paper pushers and thought that working for a Minister sounded more impressive. He wouldn't be the first to stretch the bounds of their job description, and Percy's a good guy, you just need to ask him," Rose said encouragingly.

Audrey's smile was woeful. "Ask him how? Something felt off, and I have terrible luck with men, so I thought having my friend ask around about you was a better idea than asking you straight out because I didn't want my heart broken? My god, I'm like every chick lit ever written."

"Yeah," Rose agreed. "But it does mean you were wrong to investigate, although maybe don't mention his habit of being on time was the thing that pushed you over the edge."

Audrey looked at her friend for a beat and they both dissolved into giggles. "Oh hell, I'm mad aren't I?"

"All the best people are," Rose said nudging Audrey with her shoulder comfortably.

They settled on the sofa turning to the TV and sharing the bottle of wine. When it was finished, and they had talked about Audrey's next move, Rose stood collecting up her discarded shoes, coat, and handbag. "What are you going to do?" she asked referring to the scenarios they had gone through which had ranged from the extreme of leaving the country with no warning to more rationally asking Percy to explain.

"I'll ask him. I'll have to I suppose, I have to now, and we'll see what he says." Audrey said walking her friend to the door.

"I think it's highly unlikely that it's going to be any more than he exaggerated his job to impress you. But if it isn't, just so you know, my freezer has ice cream, and there's wine in the fridge," Rose said hugging Audrey goodbye as she stepped through the door.

"Thanks, Rose," Audrey replied.

"No problem kiddo," Rose said smiling and waved as she headed for the stairs.

Audrey didn't see Percy for two more days. He arrived at her door at half past six on the dot carrying a bag of hot takeaway. She let him in, greeted him with the usual friendly kiss, and they sat at her tiny table to eat the food. Audrey admitted that she made a poor showing and a blind man could see something was distracting her, so it came as no surprise when Percy cleared the dishes away and returned to the table. He retook his seat, and she let him take one of her hands in his. When he asked her directly if something was wrong, she took a deep breath.

"Maybe," she admitted.

"Is there something I can do?" Percy asked. Audrey felt her heart melt at the earnest expression on his face, the way his hair was ever so slightly mussed and knew that if she was this far gone already, it was only going to hurt worse if something was truly not as it should be.
"Percy, who do you work for?"

Percy frowned slightly at her his puzzlement showing. "The Ministry, I told you."

"I know what you said Percy, and to be honest it wasn't much. And well, there isn't a good way to say this, and I know that it's possibly not the best way of handling things, but I didn't know what else to do. I thought that maybe if I were just inventing trouble, then it wouldn't matter because I wouldn't have to tell you, but it didn't work out that way and now—."

"Audrey," Percy interrupted squeezing her hand. "You aren't making sense. What's the matter?"

"I asked Rose to look into which department you worked for in the Ministry. She couldn't find you on the list of people employed within Whitehall."

Percy looked shocked, Audrey bit her lip and tried to explain. "I know I probably shouldn't have, but I thought she'd just tell me you were on the rolls and it would just be me being slightly crazy. But you weren't," she shrugged helplessly. "And now I don't know what to think. I've had this feeling, and I tried to ignore it I did. I wanted to, but I couldn't."

Percy blew out a breath. "Feeling?"

"You're going to think I'm crazy," Audrey said miserably. "I've probably ruined everything already, and you're not going to want to keep seeing the crazy stalker girlfriend who sent her friends to check up on you."

A small smile passed over Percy's face, and Audrey couldn't help the tiny flicker of hope that as nuts as she apparently was, she might still have a relationship at the end of the night.

"I do work in the Ministry," Percy said. "I don't know how deep Rose can dig and there's a lot I can't tell you because my work is classified." He held the hand up that wasn't holding hers to halt her reply. "I know that that sounds like an excuse, but it isn't. The work we do is covered by the Official Secrets Act. I simply can't tell you. What I told you I did is the cover I use, no one is usually that interested in something that sounds a lot like boring paper pushing."

"What about everything else?" Audrey blurted.

"What everything else?" Percy asked.

Audrey bit her lip again. She pretty much had to say something now, but it all sounded so stupid when faced with actually saying it out loud.

"I can't tell you if you don't explain," Percy said with a worried look on his face.

Audrey nodded. "I know, but it sounds nuts, it really does."

Percy smiled a small warm smile at her squeezing her hand in encouragement. "I like you a lot Audrey Stone, and I would like our relationship to continue, but for us to do that we need to clear up whatever it is that's bothering you."

Audrey swallowed. She'd never felt just as stupid as she did right now, but Audrey acknowledged that Percy was right, if she didn't explain what was bothering her then she'd probably go looking for problems. Better to have it out now. "It's small things," she said slowly, watching his face carefully. "Not just that you never talk about work, which, if as you say it's classified, I can understand. But you're not interested in football or any sport on TV. Or TV at all really, and sometimes you get this look. This blank look, like you didn't understand what I asked you, even about everyday stuff like..."
famous art, or places, or events that have happened. It's like you don't know about this stuff until I mention it. And you never bring up a topic of conversation that I haven't done first, and it's just, well it's like you don't know what stuff is, but I can't see how you don't."

Percy looked down at their hands still linked across the table. Abruptly he stood, tugging her to her feet and led her to the sofa. He indicated for her to sit and waited until she had before he took his place next to her. Audrey couldn't help the fluttering of fear that appeared around the edge of her stomach. She'd expected him to laugh her off. This didn't look like he was going to laugh it off. She suddenly worried that she'd inadvertently stumbled over something he had been trying to hide because she wouldn't like it.

Percy looked at her still holding her hand. "I understand what you are saying, and in some respects you are right. I don't have an opinion about football or television because they aren't part of my life."

"How?" Audrey said.

Percy's smile grew thinner. "I suppose the modern way of seeing it was that I was brought up in a commune."

Audrey sucked in a startled breath. Of all the things she had imagined Percy would say that hadn't even made it to the list. "Do they even exist in the UK?" she asked before she could stop herself.

Percy smiled wryly at her. "Yes, but it's probably not quite what you are thinking. It was a closed small community. We didn't have mains electricity so no television or kettles or washing machines."

"You're Amish?!" Audrey exclaimed. "That's why you didn't have them in your flat for that first month."

"Yes, well not the Amish part," Percy replied with a nod. "But until I started spending time here and you started visiting I didn't see the need."

"But you said you went to school in Scotland?"

"I did," Percy said. "I was home-schooled until I turned eleven then I went to school in Scotland, but it was the school all the community children went to until I finished at seventeen. The school operated on the same principles."

"But how did you get a job in government? I mean if you lived without electricity how do you even cope?" Audrey asked.

"Well," Percy said. "You adapt pretty quickly. And I did start in an entry-level position, I was just moved quite quickly into the department I am in now, and honestly, it does involve a lot of paper. There's nothing overly modern about reading reports and collating information."

"And your family?"

"It's complicated," Percy answered. "Once we finish school we were sent out into the world to find jobs but with the expectation that we would hold to the values that we had been taught. It's not that I disagree with the values of hard work, honesty, doing the right thing. But the leader I suppose you could call him. He was, well, I thought he was putting my family in danger, and they didn't agree with me, and well, we fought. Things were said that perhaps would have been better not said but…"

Audrey squeezed Percy's hand "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to drag up bad memories."

"It's alright," Percy said. "I never quite fit in but they are my family, and I want what's best for
Audrey leant back on the sofa considering everything Percy had said. She turned her head slightly so she could see him and thought about the things that had been nagging at her. It did make sense, the lack of knowledge that he had about things, but she couldn't quite believe that communes still existed in Nineties Britain. It seemed such a sixties thing to do, live in a community off the grid, managing without modern amenities.

"Would you do me one favour?" Percy asked.

"What's that?" Audrey replied.

"Would you not mention it? To your friends and parents. It's just that people don't understand, they jump to conclusions. That is if you still want to see me?"

Audrey scooted closer to Percy on the sofa taking his other hand in hers, so she held both, and looked up into his face earnest and honest. "I do, I do want to keep seeing you. I'm afraid I'm very much on the way to falling for you Percy Weasley, and I'm sorry if I've stepped over boundaries you didn't want me to, asking about your past."

Any worries that Audrey might have had that she might have scared Percy off fled as a grin bloomed on his face. It was a broad happy smile that she didn't think she'd seen before. It took years from him and made her breath catch in her chest at how attractive Percy was.

They got comfortable on the sofa. Audrey leaning into Percy's chest, her feet curled to one side, his arm wrapped around her and by unspoken agreement left the topic of Percy's past alone. Instead, they talked about the next visit to Audrey's parents for lunch and whether or not they should look into taking some time off and perhaps going away for a weekend.

When Percy left that night, he trotted down the stairs from Audrey's flat to the street. Crossing the road, he continued out of sight before apparating home. Once there Percy shed his outerwear and headed straight for his bed. Night time routine complete he found himself staring up at the ceiling, his mind reeling over the evening.

Audrey had actually looked into him, had noticed his lack of knowledge about the muggle world. He rubbed a tired hand over his face, she'd accepted the excuse, and it had been a good thing she had. He knew the rules, he would have had to make a call to the Ministry and have the Obliviate squad come out. It wouldn't do him any favours at the Ministry to be known to be fraternising with Muggles. Worse, though, he didn't want to have Audrey's memories tampered with. She had a right to be suspicious of him, and as much as he was required to keep magic from her, he didn't think she deserved obliterating because he hadn't played his part well enough. Percy vowed to do better to cover his tracks better and to give Audrey no more reasons to suspect him.
March 1996

It had only been a week, maybe two but not three since Audrey had confronted him with her suspicions. They had talked since that night, Percy had said no more of his upbringing, and she had not mentioned it. He knew that the matter wasn't dealt with and that the story he had told her would invariably come up again at a later date, but for now, they were both happy to let it lie.

It was a Saturday evening, and Audrey had come to his flat after work. She'd spent it working in the shop, and he'd spent it at the Ministry. Legislation was brewing there, laws that had no right being considered, never mind going up for debate by the Wizengamot. It was, Percy thought, against everything the Ministry was striving for, and while he was confident that it would get no further, he was concerned that it was given a voice.

While everyone had the right to plead their case, this law, in particular, seemed to be coming out of nowhere, and it made Percy take note. That, plus his regular duties, plus covering for Undersecretary Umbridge while she was teaching at Hogwarts, was keeping Percy busy.

He had to admit that when he had been informed Undersecretary Umbridge would be reassigned to Hogwarts and Percy would be expected to pick up her workload; he was disheartened. Until that was, the third week or so when he realised that she had been pushing her work on to him for months while she pursued her interests, meaning his workload was only slightly increased. Percy had said nothing, of course, it would do no good, and he did not want to gain a reputation of shirking his duty if he was to make something out of his career. Notice like that never left you.

It was then, pleasant to have an evening with nothing more pressing than making sure the takeaway was still hot when Audrey turned up, the Muggle beer in the fridge was cold, and there was something that Audrey also enjoyed drinking.

After dinner, they settled on the sofa. Audrey sat in her usual position next to him, leaning on him her legs curled under her, his arm wrapped around her shoulders. She didn't reach for the TV remote and instead fidgeted with her cuffs shooting him small quick glances. Percy braced himself for an evening of explaining life in a commune. He glanced down at her meeting her eyes, he raised an eyebrow at her and said. "Ask. Ask whatever it is that has you fidgeting so nervously."

Audrey dipped her head to the side slightly, giving him a rueful look. "I was wondering…"

"Yes?"

"Do you think you could get some time off in April?"

Surprised, as that had not been what he had expected to hear, Percy paused lips pursed in thought. "Perhaps, I would have to put a request in soon. As there is one other person in my department that has a temporary reassignment, I cannot speak to the success of such an application. What were you thinking?"

"Two weeks?" Audrey said hopefully.

Percy didn't stop the slight frown as he thought. Two weeks was not an unmanageable amount of time, but he was only a Junior Aide. He was allocated holiday days and had yet to take any, but with Undersecretary Umbridge on reassignment, the request might not be approved. "I can certainly ask,
but I cannot promise anything."

"No that's understandable, it is a bit soon, but I have to go anyway, and I thought it might be fun if you came too."

"Go?" Percy asked puzzled.

"To France," Audrey replied nodding her head.

"I think I've missed something," Percy said.

Audrey smiled up at him tucked under his arm, her head resting on his shoulder. "I might have missed some details out." Her eyes crinkled at the corners as she smiled, and Percy mused on how crinkles at the corner of smiling eyes could be so lovely on a woman.

"So, details?" he repeated.

"Every year someone from the company goes to France. In April last year, I went alone for the first time, I've been a few times with my uncle, but last year was my initiation as it were. The trip is due again in April, and I thought you might like to come. We'll start in Paris, drive to Belfort then down through Switzerland to Anancy. From there down to the south coast to Carpentras, Avignon and Arles. Then along the coast and up to Toulouse, then up to Orleans and back to Paris and then take the Tunnel home. It's a huge loop of southern France," Audrey explained.

"For what purpose?" Percy asked.

"For the antiques, of course, those towns have some of the best markets. We might miss some, it depends on how the travelling goes. But we already have pickups in Paris, Arles, Toulouse and Orleans, and we have to collect the Paris pick up on the way out."

"Oh?" Percy inquired wondering at her emphasis.

"Because," Audrey said with a small, shameful huff. "Last year the first time I went alone, the Tunnel was delayed, so I missed the pickup and rather than waiting until the next morning when they would be open again I went straight on to Belfort and made the whole loop. Only by the time I got back to Paris, the van was full, and the sideboard that I was supposed to pick up in Paris wouldn't fit in the van. My uncle had to come over with another van to collect it. Needless to say, it's one of his favourite stories to tell everyone. I'm surprised you didn't get told it at Christmas. Anyway, it turns out that the humongous dresser I had in the van which was the reason the Paris pickup didn't fit, was worth six times more and it sold within a week of me getting back, while we still have the sideboard."

"Ah," Percy said. "Will I not be in the way? I know nothing about your profession."

"No," Audrey said smiling at him for his consideration and acceptance of her idea. "The markets are usually on over a weekend or a couple of days, and in between them, it's a lot of driving. Southern France is lovely in spring. We could if we make good time stop for a few days or so, it's beautiful there, the whole of the south of France is."

"What would I need to accompany you if I am allowed the time?"

"Just yourself, clothes and the like. We'll take the company van and go over on the Tunnel both to and from France. You'll need a passport though, I didn't think you'd have one, so I picked up a form from the Post Office. I can help you fill it in, but you'll need a copy of your birth certificate."
"I don't have one," Percy said automatically then bit his lip, he was trying to be more aware of his slips.

"That's OK you can apply for a replacement from the registry office," Audrey said not seeming to take the news amiss. "I'll help you with that form as well if you like. You need to apply for a full copy, not the short copy, the Passport Office need the full one, or they'll reject your application."

Percy nodded. "Very well, I will put in the request for holiday and apply for a passport."

"Great," Audrey chirped. "I've got the form in my bag, don't let me forget to give it to you."

Percy arrived at work on Monday morning with the passport form in his pocket. He worked quietly at his desk until Minister Fudge entered, then slipped into the office twenty minutes later. Experience told him the Minister would have finished his perusal of the morning papers, his first cup of tea at his desk, but not yet started on the pile of folders Percy had placed on his desk before he had arrived.

"Minister,"

"Weasley? What is it?" Fudge looked up at Percy stood politely in front of his desk.

"Minister, I would like to request some annual leave," Percy stated without fanfare. The request form in his hand completed and just waiting for the Minister's signature.

Minister Fudge looked surprised then narrowed his eyes at Percy. "Annual leave?"

"Yes, Minister, two weeks in April if I may."

"Hmm, with Undersecretary Umbridge already reassigned I'm not sure that I would be able to authorise any." Fudge tried to look apologetic, but Percy was unconvinced.

"I understand that Minister," Percy replied deferentially. "However, as per Ministerial edict 93C subsection 14, I am entitled to take time off if appropriate cover can be found and I have taken the liberty to ensure that your office will be unaffected."

"It's dangerous you know Weasley," Fudge replied eyes narrowed at his assistant.

"Minister?" Percy asked his manner still deferential.

"Finding someone who can replace you so easily at short notice, and if you are to be believed, do your job for you with minimal training."

"Indeed, Minister, I take your point. However, Mr Stubbs is between assignments for the Financial Investigative branch and while being fully qualified to cover my absence, is entirely expectant of a new assignment by the start of June."

"Financial investigations?" Minister Fudge asked eyes narrowing.

"Yes, Minister. As per Ministerial edict 45, subsection 8, annotations 34, any employee of the Ministry can be reassigned to offer cover if not already engaged by their department. Excluding the Aurory, of course, sir."

"Indeed," Minister Fudge said his expression curious.

"Yes, sir," Percy replied straight-faced. "Shall I bring a copy of the edict Minister?"

"No, no," he replied looking slightly ill at the thought. "Very well Weasley, since you appear to have
this all in hand I'll approve your time off. Going anywhere interesting?" Fudge waved his hand beckoning Percy forward. He took the form from Percy and inked his quill before signing his approval across the appropriate section.

"France sir, the South of France is supposed to be beautiful this time of year," Percy replied accepting the completed request back.

Fudge nodded. "Yes, yes, quite beautiful. Well, enjoy yourself, Weasley."

"Yes sir, thank you, sir. Your first appointment is in half an hour sir, shall I send them in as soon as they arrive?"

"Who is it again?" the Minister asked.

"Accounting sir, there was a small discrepancy in the budget of the Department of Magical Games and Sports. They applied for more budget than was approved and overspent. Accounting wants to know where it's coming from and Magical Games and Sports aren't willing to cover it."

"Damn Bagman and that new chap Bertram? Bedford?" Fudge muttered.

"Beauchamp," Percy supplied.

"Him! Yes him," Fudge said stabbing a pudgy finger into his desk. "He was told to take over and get the respectability of his department back after the mess that Bagman left, and what's he done? Caused this kerfuffle that's what. Now I have to deal with it. I can't just pull funds out of thin air that's what budgets are for, for Merlin's sake."

Percy stood quietly letting the Minister vent, knowing that Beauchamp wasn't actually to blame for the budget issues and had been the one to report the problem in the first place. Bagman had traded on his Ministry position long after leaving it and doing a runner from the rightly angry Goblins. Beauchamp, Percy thought, was a reliable chap. Pureblood, of course, to be given the department head role, but not bigoted with it, being of a minor family and half French on his mother's side. The Minister finished his ramble and Percy nodded smartly before turning on his heel. His holiday had been approved now he had to get a birth certificate and passport sorted.

Percy's day was long. Once Minister Fudge had swept out of his office on his way home passing Percy's desk with only an acknowledging grunt in his direction, Percy quickly tidied his desk up and left his office locking up on his way out. He found a space in the lift and pushed the button for the third floor.

Percy stepped off the elevator into the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes and made his way to the office of Muggle-Worthy Excuses. He knocked lightly on the door and was bade to enter by a female voice. Percy entered the room and closed the door behind him before making his way over to the desk and accepting the seat offered to him.

"Mr Weasley," the witch behind the desk greeted him. "How can the Muggle-Worthy Excuses office help you today?"

Percy pulled the passport form from his pocket and handed it over. "I have need of a passport and a birth certificate Mrs White."

The witch put the glasses that had been resting on her desk on her nose and flipped through the form that Percy had handed her. Frowning slightly, she rose and crossed to a filing cabinet. Pulling open a magically expanded drawer, she removed a form from within one of the files and returned to her seat.
The witch frowned further as she compared the two forms side by side.

"Ahh," she said looking up with a satisfied smile. "They've changed the forms." She tapped the form she had removed from the filing cabinet. "Not much but enough. May I keep this?" she indicated the form to Percy.

"I'll need a copy," Percy said. "I'm expected to have photographs taken I believe, and submit it via the Muggle post?"

"Of course, of course, but we'll sort the passport out for you. Fill in the form and have the photographs taken if it's necessary but don't put it in the Muggle post. I'll have a passport done for you tomorrow." Mrs White assured him with a smile. "I'll check with my contact that the new form hasn't caused a change in the documentation and it will be ready by the end of the day."

"And the birth certificate?"

"A work of a moment," Mrs White assured him. "You can collect that tomorrow too if you like, or I can do one now?" She looked over at him enquiringly.

Percy shook his head. "Tomorrow will be just fine, thank you, Mrs White."

"Tell me; you were in here just before Christmas needing a cover story. I've received no alerts, so the Muggle authorities haven't examined it." She peered at him over her glasses.

Percy nodded. "It has sufficed, I was unsure if further investigation would be undertaken, but it seems to have been enough."

"Communes often does with muggles. They accept that some muggles would eschew modern living, it's quite amazing what they will believe." Mrs White smiled at him.

Percy shifted slightly, uncomfortable with her interest. Mrs White was trustworthy, she had arranged all his paperwork to get his flat, and when Audrey asked him to spend Christmas with her family, it had been Mrs White who had given him the cover story.

Muggle-Worthy Excuses meant precisely that, and the department handled the Muggle documentation any witch or wizard might need. It was a small overlooked office that was protected from meddling by the secrets kept in Mrs Whites filing cabinets. She had the list of all the bolt holes in the Muggle world that witches or wizards had acquired, and her continued silence kept her office unmolested. A sensible solution in a shifting political landscape, but be that as it may Percy was not going to hand her his secrets.

He smiled at her the empty political smile he had mastered and stood. "Thank you for your help once again Mrs White. I will see you tomorrow at the end of the day."

"Mr Weasley," she returned equally politely with the same nondescript smile. "Always a pleasure."

The business for applying for a new birth certificate and passport the Muggle way was the work of ten minutes. Audrey helped him fill in the forms, and he incinerated them after he arrived at work. After checking with Audrey how long he could expect to wait for the birth certificate to come, he promptly produced it after the allotted time had passed. Percy then took the completed passport form with its photographs and birth certificate to work the next morning and incinerated everything but the birth certificate, which Audrey had told him would be returned with his passport. He then produced both documents after the predicted time had passed.

Audrey was thoroughly delighted, and Percy took pleasure in her joy. She then began to more fully
expand on their trip, explaining that she hadn't wanted to in case his documentation had not come through in time. It was a scant two weeks until his official first holiday and Percy allowed himself a small measure of excitement at the prospect.

The day of their departure dawned. Percy had stayed over at Audrey's the night, before his neatly packed bag waiting in the hall for their early morning start. It was still dark when they rose and dressed. Percy put his bag in the back of the large white van and got into the passenger seat. He heard the sliding door slam and Audrey walk around the front to hop up into the driving seat.

Percy, in anticipation of the trip, had paid more attention to Muggle means of transport. He had been on a bus, finding it much less jarring than the Knight Bus and a much more enjoyable experience. He hadn't yet been on any of the trains that the muggles used to travel around London, but he had gone in a taxi with Audrey. The taxi had been nothing like his dad's car, although Percy rather thought the taxi drivers approach to driving was reminiscent of that of Percy's father who at least had the excuse of not knowing the rules of the road.

"Right," Audrey said breaking into Percy's thoughts. "Seatbelts on, please." Audrey reached behind her shoulder, slid the cloth ribbon over her torso and slotted the clip into the device by her side. Percy copied her actions and felt relief when the seat belt stayed in place. His first small test out of the way.

Audrey rummaged through the pile of large slim books on the seat between them before withdrawing one and folding it open before handing it over to him. "You are the official navigator for the trip!" she announced. "I know how to get to the train station, so you only need to follow along and get used to reading the map. The map of France and the route we'll take is in the other map book. I've done the route a few times, so I only need to be given road numbers. There are detailed notes stuck all over the map which if you tell me about as they come up, we'll do just fine." She leant over and pointed at the map she'd given Percy. "We're here, see. And this is the road we'll need to get on to get to the terminal. Think you can manage?"

Percy frowned slightly, following the coloured line which evidently denoted a road through the tangle of other coloured lines. He nodded, though not confidently. "You do know the way if I get the direction wrong?"

"Yes," Audrey said.

Percy gave Audrey a smile. "Then yes I'd like to try."

"Great. We won't stop until we get to France and I'll show you the maps once we're on the train. It's a half hour crossing so we'll have time and I've packed drinks and snacks." She pointed to the plastic bag under the map books. "One other thing." Audrey rooted in her handbag pulling out a black rectangle. "This is the company mobile telephone. It's so Uncle can ring me and let me know of anything he has arranged to be collected other than what's on my list, or so I can check in before I make a purchase. I've got a car charger as well as a plug and adaptor, but I'm hopeless at remembering to charge the thing, so you'll need to remind me if you don't mind." Audrey plugged a thin black cable into the mobile telephone and a fat round end into the silver hole in the dash before putting the mobile phone into a cubby hole. "Right I think that's everything." Audrey grinned, started the engine and pulled away from the kerb chattering about the road they were on and about to turn onto as Percy followed along supplying the name of the next road. Audrey's smile gave him a glow of confidence, and he kept an eye out on the road they were travelling comparing it to his map.

The motorway came upon them, and Percy marvelled that they were moving at the top speed of a
Cleansweep Eleven with no discomfort whatsoever. Vehicles were going past them at high speeds, and Percy wondered if in a straight race the latest racing brooms would be faster than the muggles cars. The cars, Percy thought would be a lot nicer to travel in, no cold wind or exposure to the weather.

The radio was on playing to disguise the road noise and making conversation only required if they wished. Audrey broke the peaceful, comfortable silence that had fallen between them. "I'll need the pack of documents out of my handbag please, we're nearly there."

Percy dug around in her bag and found the wallet of papers, laying them on the seat between them. He paid more attention to the scenery outside now they were at the terminal. Audrey guided them through a chicane of cones up to a barrier. There she dealt with the guards who inspected their paperwork before waving them onwards. They joined a queue of other vehicles edging down a ramp towards the train platform.

Percy was very curious. He'd travelled on a train before, but even a small amount of exposure to the muggle world had taught him that the Hogwarts Express was not the usual kind of train muggles travelled on. The times they walked through Kings Cross station they had seen the other trains waiting at the platforms, they had been long and sleek with either square faced or rounded protruding noses.

The train to transport them to France was nothing like anything Percy had seen. It was a light shade of purple. The engine was boxy and square, the carriages were large grey metal containers. Percy watched fascinated as vehicle after vehicle carefully manoeuvred and drove into the carriages. They crept up the queue until they were next to board and Percy watched eyes wide as Audrey drove the van aboard and followed the vehicle in front down the tunnel of carriages. Percy could see where one carriage ended and the next began. Curious he asked Audrey. "There are doors," she supplied. "They swing out between the vehicles, and the roller door comes down on a track from the ceiling, it stops any fires spreading."

Percy nodded. "Now what?" he asked.

"We wait," Audrey answered. "Departure will be soon. We're near the middle so once they've finished loading, we'll be off. There's nothing to see," she said shrugging. "It's a tunnel after all."

The half an hour journey passed without incident and Audrey drove them skilfully out of the train and up the ramp. They had gone over the maps while they travelled and Percy was confident of the next few roads they would need to take. It was as Audrey pulled out on the first road Percy noticed the difference. "You're on the wrong side of the road," he said in some alarm.

"No," Audrey replied with a smile. "The French drive on the other side. It takes a bit of getting used to especially at roundabouts, but it's simple enough."

Percy subsided, curious and alert to more of the differences that Audrey took in her stride, and he hadn't even known about.

The journey to Paris continued without a hitch; they stopped for brunch at a motorway service centre before proceeding on to the hotel.

Audrey checked them in and led the way up to the room. "We'll drop the bags off then we need to meet Monsieur Remir to collect the pickup, it's only a pair of side tables thankfully. Then the rest of the day is ours. How do you feel about being a proper tourist?"
"I know the introductory stuff about most things. I tend to prefer furniture more than trinkets and objects. I can still tell you something about most things, of course, such as age, condition, and approximate value, but I wouldn't hang my hat on it without consulting someone. I don't have the experience and practical knowledge of someone who has been in the industry fifty years." Audrey explained as she led Percy through a small market town. The fourth or third that they had stopped in.

"Naturally not but you do this to learn don't you," Percy responded.

"Oh yes, and it's one of the best times to be here. I've got a chap I need to speak to. Do you want to meet me in half an hour? I'll show you where his shop is, then if you want to browse the market then meet me at the shop, I can go around afterwards. Or I'll find you if you're not there when I finish." Audrey offered.

"Yes of course," Percy said. "I'll see if I can find us somewhere for lunch, shall I? Or will we need to be back on the road? Who is this chap? Is he a regular dealer?"

"Lunch would be lovely. We've done a few deals that have been profitable, and we're hoping that Monsieur Moreau might agree to become a contact in this area and then we can drop it from the tour."

"That would be a shame, it is quite beautiful here," Percy said glancing around him at the shaded crooked street. It was full of the romantic charm he had thought were the works of artist impressions. Certainly, parts of France were devoid of charm as progress replaced quaint with indistinguishable, and steel and glass took over the skyline. This little town with its older architecture and colourful window boxes had somehow escaped the inexorable march and was still charming.

"Yes, but think we could come here on holiday and appreciate it rather than with work. This is the shop. The market is further down. Take the first left and follow the road until it opens out into the square. I don't expect to be more than half an hour."

Percy nodded and stopped to kiss her before walking away. The sun was warm on his head and shoulders, and Percy let it sink into him, warming him to his bones. England in April was so often drab and dreary. He looked around him with curiosity, the old stone buildings were well cared for, the shutters were all brightly painted and thrown open against the walls. Small metal balconies protruded only wide enough for a single chair. Percy saw some of them were occupied by old French women who sat squinting down into the street, watching the people pass by.

The market was bustling even this early. Percy stepped into the cooler shade of the overhanging canopies and started glancing over the wares. Having been through markets with Audrey had already taught him one or two things. He made sure his politically polite and disinterested mask was in place as he browsed the stalls. Audrey had taught him to pick things up, to turn them over in his hands and feel them, not just look at it from a surface view.

Percy still didn't really have a grasp of everything she'd told him. He had yet to find anything that tempted him enough to try his luck at bargaining and had been content to watch Audrey haggle for whatever it was she had seen. His flat was devoid of nicknaks, he wasn't overly sentimental about things. He had a few bits he'd picked up from the shops when he had purchased his furniture, but they were primarily practical pieces. They held no charm, and Percy felt no deep attraction to them.

He admired a decanter set at a stall he passed, pausing to pick it up. It felt weighty, the glass was
heavily cut, it was a pretty thing. Percy noticed that there were three short tumblers with the matching pattern cut into the glass sat by the decanter and he rooted around looking to see if there were more. There were, but he found the last glass of six had a large chip on the rim. He let his disappointment show to the stall owner who had offered a few words. Percy shook his head and repeated. "Je ne parle pas franais." It wasn't an outright lie. He didn't speak French, but the translation charm he cast upon himself every morning in the bathroom meant that he understood the language even if he couldn't speak it.

The stall holder smiled encouragingly and held up a hand. "Cent franc"'

Percy shook his head replacing the decanter with its now assembled tumblers. "Soixante-dix," he offered.

The stall holder grimaced and shook his head. Percy waited patiently for the man to make another offer. He bore the scrutiny as he was weighed up and when the stall holder offered a grudging "Quatre-vingts." Percy held his hand out. The stall owner shook it and gathered the decanter and its glasses together to begin wrapping them. Percy handed over the paper money the Muggles used, accepted his wrapped package with a satisfied nod and moved on. It didn't matter about the chip in the glass although it was helpful as a bargaining tool, he was a wizard after all, a quick spell and it would be fixed. Now he had a lovely decanter and matching tumblers for his fire whiskey.

The next stall held curios that Percy found himself browsing. Silver, gilt and bronze sat about in the form of small statues, goblets, salvers, and other objects. Percy couldn't imagine anyone would want a carriage clock as heavily gilded as the ones set out on the table, and the candlesticks were especially horrendous. If ostentatious had been the aim, then the smith in question had outdone himself. Percy found himself drawn to a small collection of ink bottles. Old, and cloudy at the bottom, never the less they twinkled in the sun that managed to shine between the gaps in the canopies.

Charmed, Percy took a closer look. Some of the bottles were sat on stands, and a small wooden stand with two ink bottles caught his eye. The wood was inlaid in a scroll and flower pattern with recesses for the ink bottles. Carefully Percy removed the bottles to turn it over, looking for some sort of mark. He couldn't see one, but the layer of dirt he could feel under his fingers could conceal it. The stand itself felt sturdy in his hand, the small draw in the front came out smoothly, and there were no visible problems. Percy weighed it up, he could fix and clean the inkstand removing the staining from the bottom of the glass jars. Interesting to look at, it would be practical enough that no one seeing it on his desk at the Ministry would question it.

That decided Percy. They had passed souvenir shop after souvenir shop selling brightly coloured plastic that Percy had no interest in buying. The decanter was practical and would get used, but he would like for his office one memento of his first adult holiday with the woman he was fast. Well, that bore more consideration. He looked up at the stall holder proffering the inkstand a little in a silent question for the price.

France was as lovely as Audrey had suggested. The weather had blessed them with warm sunny days. Percy had barely touched his magic the entire trip. He had come to appreciate that somethings Muggles were just better at than magical people. There were many things to like about muggles and the way they lived.

Honestly, muggles were tough. When it got hot, they ate ice cream and drank cold drinks. When the seat was uncomfortable after four hours' drive, well, they put up with it. There were no cooling or
cushioning charms. In fact, since leaving on his holiday, Percy had barely used his magic. The first night Audrey had surprised him with an open top night tour of the famous Parisian landmarks, and he had subtly cast warming charms on them both before they had left the hotel. But after that, it was a quick translation charm in the bathroom in the morning and nothing else.

Travelling wasn’t a small undertaking, but the journey was part of the holiday. No uncomfortable floo or portkeys, just time spent in a van with Audrey, watching the countryside pass by as they sped down the roads to their next destination. They had talked, laughed, and listened to the radio. They had sat on the side of French lakes and eaten cheese and bread taking a break from the driving. Or stopped at the side of the road to photograph a particularly charming vista. They had travelled on the schedule laid out but had happily delayed or arrived early waiting for the markets to open as whim had taken them. Percy wasn’t entirely sure that Audrey’s trip was as work-centric as it might have been, but the van was steadily filling as the days passed. He forbore not to ask and risk spoiling the holiday.

In Avignon, Percy collected their bags from the van and knocked a box of glassware over. The resulting crash and tinkling of broken glass had caused him to panic. It had only been as he had summoned the courage to go and find Audrey to tell her of the accident, it had occurred to him he was a wizard. The relief that flooded through him as he recalled he could fix this made his knees weak. Percy had cast a repair and cleaning spell on the glass before applying cushioning charms on the inside of the box to prevent any more accidents.

Percy smiled to himself, able now some four days later to see the humour in the situation. He was sat on a beach staring at the Mediterranean enjoying the warm sun, waiting for Audrey to return from whatever errand she had deemed needed to be done before they left the area.

Audrey finally returned with ice cream. Plopping down in the sand next to him she handed over a cone. "Here, I thought you might like one. Uncle has called. We're to miss the next stop and go a little further out than planned. He's had a call from a contact who has some pieces and Uncle wants me to take a look. You don't mind, do you?"

"No," Percy said between licks of the ice cream. "Where ever you need to go, I am a happy passenger."

"Great," Audrey said. "It's inland from now on then, so any sand castles you were planning will need to be constructed now."

"We have time?"

"About half an hour at most," Audrey said apologetically. "It's not long which is a shame because it is beautiful here, but we'll just have to come back."

"I'd like that," Percy said.

Audrey nodded and leant against him watching the sun sparkle on the Mediterranean as the waves came onto the beach.

After the two weeks were up they returned to England, it felt peculiar to Percy to leave Audrey and apparate home. To use his magic to unpack instead of doing it by hand. To flick a cleaning charm around the flat to get rid of the dust that had accumulated.

The acclimatisation to his return to work went smoothly. Within a week Percy could hardly
remember that he had been away. The photographs he had developed turned out well, and he put his favourite picture of himself and Audrey on the beach, in a frame on his bookcase with his newly cleaned and repaired decanter and glasses. The inkstand turned out to be rather pretty under the grime, and Percy regarded it with pleasure as it sat on his desk.

It was his second week back when he heard the news, and it was delivered by the Ministers 'friend and advisor' Lucius Malfoy. Percy didn't like the man. It was nothing to do with the ongoing feud between the Malfoys and Weasleys, it was simply that Lucius Malfoy rubbed Percy up the wrong way. The comments were snide and barbed which Percy could deal with, but Malfoy saw Percy as an extension of his Father and Percy wanted to be seen for himself, not for his family. He strove to become his own person in the eyes of his employer, and for the most part, he had achieved that with the people he worked with, but the moment Lucius Malfoy entered a room Percy was lumped back into being 'one of the Weasley brood'.

Percy left the Minister's office after a briefing on the latest legislation being discussed at the Wizengamot, a meeting the Minister had missed, to find the Malfoy patriarch stood in front of Percy's desk turning the inkstand over in his hands.

"Might I help you, Mr Malfoy?" Percy asked as he approached his desk. Lucius looked up at the words.

"Ahh, Mr Weasley, I thought I'd pay my respects to the Minister since I was in the building."

"The Minister has a free quarter of an hour," Percy said checking the appointment book on his desk. "Shall I announce you?"

"Yes, yes," Lucius said vaguely. He looked down at his hands as if only just noticing the inkstand in them, he placed it back on the desk. "An excellent example of Boulle's work don't you think?"

"Yes," Percy replied as he replaced the ink bottles in the stand.

"Where did you find it?"

"France," Percy replied shortly. Lucius raised an eyebrow inviting further information and showing no interest in moving towards the Minister's office.

"I recently passed some vacation time in the south of France." Percy elaborated.

"My wife is an admirer of his work, I did not know you were also."

"I find his marquetry excellent, and France is, of course, the best place to pick up examples of his work. I am sure Mrs Malfoy has found the same."

Lucius eyed him up and down. "Yes, I'm sure she has." He picked up his cane from where it rested against Percy's desk, turning slightly towards the door of the Minister's office.

Percy moved towards the Minister's door as well and slipped through to announce the visitor.

As Percy held the door open for Malfoy to pass, Lucius paused. "You seem to be full of surprises Mr Weasley. Much as your younger brothers I see. It's a shame that unlike you, they were unable to complete their education is it not?"

Percy kept his face as blank as he could as Malfoy swept passed him. Percy promptly pulled the door closed and returned to his desk sitting in his chair blowing out a breath. Audrey had told him of the inkstand's provenance, impressed that it was in good condition and Percy had bought it from the stall
holder at a reasonable price. She summarised that the stall owner hadn't realised what he had sold or the cost would have been higher. Percy had listened as Audrey told him the best way to clean and care for the piece and had dutifully used the gentlest cleaning charms he knew once he got it home.

It wasn't, however, Malfoy's mention of Percy's unexpected knowledge of Boulle that had him shaken. The only brothers he had that were foolish enough to leave school without their NEWTs were the twins. Worry niggled at Percy. Something had apparently set the twins on this course, and he couldn't think what it would be. He pushed it down. His family was estranged. Whatever the twins were up to was of no concern to him. He wouldn't think about it. If the twins wanted to leave school without their qualifications, then that was up to them. Percy had work to do.

He heard the news in the Ministry canteen when he was eating his lunch. The front of 93 Diagon Alley had been covered. A new shop was opening, and the Ministry workers sat at the next table over were speculating over who had taken the premises and what sort of shop would be opening.

Percy listened with interest and decided that he might walk down Diagon Alley and take a look himself. He hadn't been in the alley for some months as he arrived and left the Ministry each morning via the Muggle entrance. Flourish and Blots took owl orders, and Percy had no need of Madam Malkin's except for the robes he wore to work, and he had not bought any new ones for some time. He had chosen the cut of the robe he wore himself, it was simple but would also not look out of place as the fashionable cuts came and went. The navy-blue colour didn't make him look sallow or washed out, and the waistcoat and trousers he wore under the cutaway front were Muggle in origin. Percy had bought some waistcoats and matching ties so he could wear the same simple robe. It was a cheaper way of maximising his wardrobe, and he had been gratified that even the dandified Minister Fudge had begrudgingly approved of his work clothes. Lucius Malfoy who routinely sneered at Percy had yet to actually say anything directed at his apparel and Percy had counted that as a huge point in his favour.

Percy left the office at the end of the day, heading to the exit leading to Diagon Alley. The street was bustling with people heading home, and Percy slipped amongst the crowds until he reached the covered front of number 93. He considered the shop front with curiosity. The sheets covered any and all clues as to who might be making their home there. Wondering if he might be able to see through the sheet if he was closer, Percy stepped up to the window.

The wards that sizzled over him made him step back and freeze in place.

The wards were a little further out from the shop front than they should be and Percy recognised that they were set to encourage a sense of curiosity while encouraging the witch or wizard to move along and not linger.

Percy's hand came up by itself and broke through the ward line again. The wards washed over him once more. He blinked and turned away, following the magical urging for him to move along.

As he did so, he made a fist out of his hand thrusting it deep into his pocket. Denying the tingle, and feelings it evoked. He hadn't realised that he missed it.

It had felt like home, like belonging, like loss. It had felt like Weasley magic.
A Shocking Truth

June 1996

Audrey had a sale in Scotland. Later when the dust had settled figuratively and literally, Percy would remember thinking it was possibly the best thing that had happened to him that week.

Audrey was in Scotland, and Percy was alone in his flat fast asleep when he was abruptly and rudely woken by a loud noise. He reached for his glasses and his wand. His wand instantly stopped wailing. The wards on his office desk that he set every night when he left had been breached. The wailing of his wand was caused by the ward failing. Someone was in the Minister's office. Percy scrambled out of bed, hastily exchanging his pyjamas for casual trousers and a shirt, before throwing on a robe and some shoes and apparating away. He had no notion of what he was going to do when he got there, but he'd think of something.

To his surprise, he found the entrance to the Ministry bustling with Aurors. The Minister himself was stood with a robe thrown over his pyjamas demanding to be let through the crowd to enter the Ministry. Percy immediately joined the Minister.

"Minister Fudge, how can I help?" Percy asked.

"Ah, Weasley. About time, come with me. The Ministry is under attack!"

"Under attack Minister?" Percy said visibly paling.

"Yes!" Fudge declared. "The Aurory came to collect me, Lucius flooed me as well asking if he could assist. I suppose he heard it from someone. I told him no, of course, now is the time for decisive action. I suspect that we'll find that Dumbledore's vigilante group is behind this. That man!"

Percy said nothing but dutifully followed the Minister into the Ministry. They got no further than exiting the lift. Minister Fudge was correct Albus Dumbledore was present, and a quick glance around the edges of the room showed Percy that it was likely that the rest of the Order of Phoenix would also be there. Harry Potter could be seen crouched to one side as Dumbledore duelled a figure clothed in black robes. Percy's eyes swept the room again. There were black-robed, silver-masked figures duelling the Aurors while avoiding being dragged into the main duel between Dumbledore and his opponent. Words were exchanged between the pair, and a blast of magic sent them flying apart before the dark robed figure along with a wild-haired witch disapparated away.

Percy observed the wreckage of the atrium. Slowly the shock wore off allowing him to hear the conversation between Dumbledore and Fudge. Fudge blustered as Dumbledore coolly regarded him. Then with Harry Potter in tow Dumbledore left.

"Minister." A cool, smooth voice came from behind Percy. Fudge turned. "Might I offer my assistance in any way Minister?" Lucius Malfoy stood there not a hair out of place his robes immaculate, but Percy noted his feet were shod in mismatched slippers.

"Lucius, thank you. I think however we have everything under control. I shall owl you if I require anything." Fudge blustered.

"Indeed, Minister. My door is always open to your owl." With a bow, Malfoy smoothly moved towards the lift.

"Oi, is that Malfoy?" A voice called out.
"Yes," Fudge snapped at the Auror who was hurrying over.

"Stop him!" the Auror called out.

"What? Why are you detaining Mr Malfoy?" Fudge demanded.

"We've had reports he was involved in what happened tonight, Minister," the Auror replied glancing between the Minister and the departing lift.

"Nonsense," Fudge snapped. "Mr Malfoy flooed me from his home not fifteen minutes ago, how could he be involved? He was merely offering his help."

The Auror looked unconvinced. "Still we'll have to question him."

Fudge stared at the man in outrage. The Auror stood firm. "He's been involved with the likes of He Who Shall Not Be Named before. A floo call is hardly a solid alibi."

"I think you'll find Mr Malfoy was exonerated of those charges, and if you are casting aspersions tell me why the Ministry of Magic was broken into by Albus Dumbledore and his group of vigilantes, including school children. Is the Aurory unable to defend against children now, Auror Wigglesworth?" Fudge replied scathingly.

"No sir," Auror Wigglesworth replied before moving away sending resentful glances back over his shoulder.

"Weasley," the Minister snapped. "I have to make a statement to the press. Get the department heads here and get a report from the DMLE. I want the full tally of the damage and the names of those responsible."

Percy nodded and moved away as Fudge marched over to where reporters were trickling into the Ministry, alerted that something was going on. They filled the destroyed atrium with the excited chatter and shouted questions.

Percy continued robotically in his assigned task, his mind reeling with what he had witnessed. You Know Who was back and had been duelling Dumbledore in the atrium of the Ministry.

It was starting again.

The clean-up in the atrium didn't begin until the Minister had made a statement and it was a damning one. Having no choice, Fudge admitted that You know Who had returned and had been responsible for the events in the Ministry that night.

Percy's report detailed the damage to the atrium and the Department of Mysteries. The Hall of Prophecy was recoverable but the Hall of Time had suffered a catastrophic loss. The Death Eaters that had been apprehended by the members of the Order of the Phoenix and the Aurory were named and shipped back to Azkaban that night.

Percy made his way to his office finally remembering the ward he set on his desk had been breached causing him to come to the Ministry in the first place. Nothing in his office looked amiss, but the door to the Minister's office was unlocked. Concerned, Percy entered the room. Nothing seemed out of place. The portraits were all empty as the former Ministers spread out watching the ongoing events. Puzzled but too tired to think on it further Percy absently swept his wand at the fireplace where a small trail of floo powder lay on the hearth. The spell gathered up the floo powder and returned it to the pot.
The Minister's floo was the only floo in the Ministry that was not monitored and able to connect to floos outside the Ministry network. It made little sense however that anyone would bother breaking into the Minister for Magic's office to simply use the floo.

Percy returned to his desk and dropped into his chair with a tired sigh. He'd heard enough of the gossip along with the reports he'd gathered. He'd write up the official report and leave it on the Minister's desk. He didn't know when Fudge would return to his office. If he would. The Ministry had spent the year discrediting Dumbledore and Potter only for the Minister to be proven wrong in a manner utterly irrefutable. It would take some slick manoeuvring on Minister Fudge's part to survive the storm. That meant that Percy would have to keep abreast of all the gossip and news going in and out of the Ministry as best he could to advise the Minister. Not that Fudge had ever appreciated the work Percy did.

A Ministry memo sailed through the door landing on Percy's desk. The bright green of St Mungo's. Percy picked it up, and the magic folded the aeroplane flat. A glance down and Percy groaned in disbelief. Madam Umbridge was in St Mungo's. Percy got to his feet. He would have to go to the hospital and find out what happened. Percy crossed to his floo straightening his robe as he did so. A pinch of floo powder and he was whirling away in the green flames.

Madam Umbridge was not well. She would be resigning her post as High Inquisitor of Hogwarts and Dumbledore would be reinstated effective immediately. The memo was sent out to the press to ensure it was included in the next edition that was going to print. Percy arranged for the Undersecretary's work to continue to funnel through to his desk, and Fudge distractedly authorised his plans. When Percy made it home after a full day's work he immediately fell into bed to sleep off the worst day he had had in his albeit short career.

The fall out of the Department of Mysteries resulted in Fudge losing his job to Rufus Scrimgeour. Lucius Malfoy was arrested and released due to the alibi Minister Fudge provided and the investigation proved that Lucius had flooed the Minister from Malfoy Manor. Percy didn't quite believe that Harry Potter who declared loudly and to anyone who would listen, that Mr Malfoy was present at the Department of Mysteries, was lying this time. But saw nothing would come of him throwing his voice behind Potter's.

Scrimgeour, on the recommendation from Fudge, chose to keep Percy in his role. A decision Percy was grateful for, but understood was as likely motivated by Scrimgeour not being able to replace him that quickly. Percy didn't care, he still had a job and the small hope that Scrimgeour would be able to put in motion the actions needed to squash You Know Who and the Death Eater movement before war descended upon them once more.

September 1996

Hope that Scringemour would have more pull than Fudge when it came to policy died shortly after the events of June.

Percy had read the proposed Marriage law and scoffed at the logic behind it. He held fast to the belief that this monstrous bill that he heard debated in the Wizengamot would be quashed when it came to the vote. He was mildly horrified that it was discussed at all, but had found detailed in the records that every ten years or so someone promoted the idea. Percy cleaved firmly to the thought that this was yet another one of those times. That it would be shot down and that the society he lived in would not do something as insane as force witches to marry against their wills.

Percy went home to Audrey and in the act of self-flagellation brought up the topic of arranged marriages with her. Her resulting scathing opinion was a comfort and a real concern. The Muggle-
born did often leave their families behind and fully immerse themselves in the wizarding world, but they did not forget the principles that they were raised with. In a society that did not make it easy for them, assimilation was rarely without its challenges. It seemed to Percy that pushing this law onto the Muggle-born would cause a riot.

Percy was set to be disappointed. The bill passed and was brought into law on the first of September, and a riot was not forthcoming. Percy scanned the reports that crossed his desk looking for details of arrests of Muggle-born witches not adhering to the law, but found none. It occurred to him that Hermione Granger would be caught up in this law and he was curious as to who exactly she would choose from the raft of suitors she would likely receive. Percy remembered she had looked quite pretty at the Yule Ball and in the photographs the Daily prophet had printed of the event.

Curiosity drove Percy into the Department of Records after work, when the rest of the Ministry staff had left for the night. He told himself it was plain curiosity and it was likely there was a betting pool already set up. He wouldn't be doing anything that the overseeing department wasn't already doing. There was an advantage to reading all the reports that crossed his desk. He knew where the files were being kept and the Ministry worker who oversaw them. He let himself into the office and approached the desk of Mr Thomas. Percy sifted through the files on the desk until he found the right one. Flipping through the list, he found Hermione's name. Surprise and concern filled him. Draco Malfoy was listed next to her as the only applicant.

Percy hadn't been in Hogwarts for a few years, but even he remembered the animosity between the younger Malfoy and Hermione Granger. He couldn't believe that Draco Malfoy had overcome his prejudice and somehow come to love or esteem the Muggle-born witch. Percy flipped the file closed and asked himself why he was here. Why was he looking into the records of a witch he neither knew well or had any real connection to? She had been present at family gatherings and had visited over summer. They had shared a handful of conversations about the wizarding world. He had answered her questions and offered his guidance where he could when they were at Hogwarts, but that was it. Why did this bother him so much?

Percy put the folder back, making sure everything was as it should be and left the office. He was the Minister's aide. He could do nothing in this situation. He did not believe for one instant that his family were going to allow her to marry the Malfoy scion. If he interfered then he might spoil whatever plan they had, they certainly wouldn't tell him of any. Percy nodded to himself once as he made his way out of the department and to the exit. He would wait, watch, and the Order would resolve this so Miss Granger would be kept from the likes of the Malfoys.

January 1997

Percy was under massive pressure. Despite the very public split from his family, it seemed that when Harry Potter and Hermione Granger disappeared it was conveniently forgotten. He was grilled for any knowledge he might have about the pair over and over.

He had hoped that the Order had a plan to save Hermione from marriage to Draco Malfoy. He had expected to see the announcement of her marriage to Ron, or another of the potential candidates the Order would have drummed up to save one of the best friends of the Boy Who Lived. He had not expected them to disappear. He had certainly not expected it to be reported that they had done so seemingly without anyone knowing about it. How exactly did two underaged teenagers disappear from the wizarding world?

The Minister fielded as many enquiries as he wanted to then pushed the task of repeating the same trite lines onto Percy. In light of the total lack of information coming out of the Ministry, the press
decided to make up outlandish tales of a soul bond between the pair. Percy read the news concerned that there might be a grain of truth in the articles. If the Ministry were accused of trying to separate a soul bonded pair, the fallout would be disastrous.

The news, however, seemed to be aiming for a peak of ridiculousness with no consideration of the likely truth. It wasn't until the orders crossed Percy's desk for the Minister to sign that Percy realised that Hermione Granger had become a fugitive from the British Ministry of Magic.

At a loss of what to think he spent the evening on the sofa with Audrey, his book laying unattended in his hand.

Sensing his disquiet, Audrey turned the television off. Percy lost in thought didn't notice her observing him. Audrey let ten minutes pass then nudged him none too gently.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Uh? Pardon?" Percy said coming out of his revery.


"Tell you what?"

"Whatever it is that has you off in your own little world. You've been stressed and off for months now Percy. What is the matter?"

Percy pushed his glasses up to his hair and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his free hand. Pushing his glasses back into place he smiled sadly at Audrey. "It's work, and you're right I've been distracted by it for a while now. I'm sorry if I spoiled Christmas I know I wasn't at my best at your parents."

"It's alright," Audrey replied. "I told Mum and Dad you had trouble at work. But will you tell me about it? Or as much as you can?"

Percy looked away wondering if there was any way he could explain anything that he was dealing with without sounding insane or breaking the law. A gusty sigh escaped him, and he shook his head. "Sorry, I can't tell you details. My department is under a lot of scrutiny, and it's been going on since last September if not June."

"You're not in danger of losing your job, are you?" Audrey asked carefully.

"No, I don't think so. My boss resigned last June, and his replacement seems disinterested in replacing me as long as I do my job."

"Oh, Percy, you didn't say."

Percy shrugged. "It was rather sudden and my new boss, well I thought perhaps he might be better, but I'm not sure he really is and its just more work for me. I've been working late a lot recently, and I'm just tired."

"Oh, well, perhaps if you want, we could do something? Maybe take a weekend break? Just a Saturday and Sunday with one overnight somewhere?"

Percy tugged her a little closer and rested his cheek on her hair. "That sounds great. Where are you thinking?"

Audrey hummed. "Well how about somewhere like Prague? We could get a flight out there I believe
that it's under two hours."

Percy considered the idea. Just up and leave for the weekend. Be in another country in two hours
time and leave the mess that was the British Wizarding World behind.

"The flights won't be expensive," Audrey offered as a further enticement.

Percy considered a little longer. "Do you have a brochure with the hotels listed or something?"

"No, but I can get one tomorrow. So you fancy it then?"

"Yes," Percy said decisively. "Yes, let's do it."

As he sat on the taxiing aeroplane, he felt the jolt of realisation run through him. Hermione Granger
was Muggleborn. She would be familiar with Muggle travel. She would know about flying on
aeroplanes. Percy mentally marvelled that it hadn't occurred to him before now that Hermione might
have made her escape by Muggle means. It was all but certain that she was no longer in Magical
Britain. She might still be in Muggle Britain, but Percy considered that she would have weighed that
risk against the consequences of being found in violation of the law. He wondered as the plane
engines became louder and the plane began its ascent into the sky, if anyone else in the Ministry had
put the pieces together. If they had found proof that she had left the country.

Percy glanced out of the window, and further thoughts of Hermione Granger fled from the forefront
of his mind. He watched the ground fall away at a rapid pace and roll past beneath them. Percy was
flying. He was flying on a muggle aeroplane. He let a small smile of delight slip across his face.
Aeroplanes, who would have thought that Percy Weasley, pureblood, sacred twenty-eight blood
traitor, aide to the Minister for Magic himself would be the first of his family to get on an aeroplane.

Percy felt strangely at home in Prague. The architecture was a mix of styles which he found familiar
and comfortable. Parts resembled that of Hogwarts with it's gothic turreted and spired castles and
buildings. The Baroc, Renaissance and Rococo styles of the Manors of the upper echelons of
Wizarding society bragged about were present in the buildings. Cobbled streets wound between the
buildings. Percy wandered down the streets arm in arm with Audrey, looking at the offerings of the
tourist shops and ducking into alleyways to find the less travelled paths. Percy stared in fascination at
the Astronomical clock until Audrey dragged him away complaining of the cold. Percy allowed
himself to be led away but kept an eye out for a place where he could cast a discrete warming charm
on them both. The warming charms proved pointless as they climbed the hill to Petrin Tower then up
the stairs to the observation deck. They agreed that it was worth it but would take the cable car back
down the hill.

By the time they were flying home, Percy was feeling much better. He could do no more than he
was doing and when it got to be too much, he had found someone who was happy to drag him out of
his own head and enjoy his company. Percy took Audrey's hand and squeezed it. "Thank you," he
said. "For this weekend. I really enjoyed it and I'm also very thankful you've put up with me for as
long as you have."

Audrey returned the smile. "You've not been that bad, just distracted and a little unhappy. I'm glad
this has helped. I've always wanted to go on a mini break. And Prague was beautiful in the snow.
But I'm pleased that we'll be back home before the Valentine hordes descend."

"Speaking of Valentine," Percy replied thoughtfully. "To allow me to make up for my inattention.
Would you consent to spend the evening with me?"

"Of course," Audrey replied instantly. "I'd like nothing better. Will we go out or stay in?"
"I'd like to cook for you, but afterwards we could take a trip to the cinema?"

"That sounds perfect."

"Then that's settled," Percy said satisfied settling back in his seat to stare out of the window at the sky they flew through as they returned home.
The Ministry canteen was busy. Percy wouldn't generally take his lunch there, he preferred the muggle cafes and the odd stolen hour with Audrey.

Today, however, it was raining, and Audrey had told him she wouldn't be available for lunch all week. Rather than run the gauntlet of inclement weather with no impervious charm, Percy settled for the Ministry canteen. The food was passible, his salad lacked imagination but was at least fresh and crisp. The table in the corner he managed to snag was one of the last free ones, and he sat quietly, his back to the wall watching the crowd.

Three tables over, a witch and a wizard were having a heated fight no louder than a whisper. If the couple were trying to keep their relationship a secret the very public fight was possibly a mistake. Fingers were thrust and parried at the other, their food ignored and congealing on their plates. The cottage pie looked like it was worth missing out on as it cooled to grey lumps covered in anaemic potato.

"Mind if I join you?" A voice came from Percy's left startling him from his contemplation of the couple. Percy turned to see Edward Harrow, a wizard who had been in the house share with Percy, stood with his lunch tray balanced in his hands and a thick Ministry folder wedged under his arm.

Percy nodded. "Harrow, yes, of course. How have you been?"

"Well enough, I moved out a month after you as it happens. Can't say I really miss the old place." Harrow replied as he set his tray down and retrieved the file from the death grip his elbow had it under. The lunch tray was moved to one side to make way for its bulk on the table and once seated Harrow pulled a quill from his pocket. "Sorry," Harrow apologised. "Wilkins is an arse, and wants all the updates since the last meeting documented. He's had another brilliant idea. I swear if this weren't going before the Wizengamot next week I'd set it on fire. I've done more hours on this one dossier than any other. How's the Minister's office treating you? Don't usually see you in here."

"Long hours and more report reviews than is good for a wizard," Percy replied. "I usually leave for lunch, at least I see daylight once a day then." Percy stabbed some more of his salad as Harrow remembered his own food and took a bite of the limp sandwich. Percy considered as he chewed, reading upside down as best he could. "Is that the proposal for the adjustments for Auror budget increase under section 14?"

Harrow's head popped up in surprise, nodding in answer to Percy's question.

"Then it's not going to the Wizengamot next week. It's been pushed back until the end of next month at the earliest. Sports and Games have got your spot. Proposals for bidding on the next Broom Race Championships."

"What?"

"It's true, the paperwork is on my desk. The Minister has, just this morning, rearranged the next six weeks of the Wizengamot's schedule. They will only be sitting four times in the next month."

"You're kidding! This is eight weeks of my life Weasley. You've got to be kidding. Wilkins has had meeting after Merlin be damned meeting. Adjustments, reviews, the lot. Next week was our slot!"
You're sure?"

"Yes," Percy replied. "I'll have the reworked schedule out at the end of the week as per usual, but I'm telling you, you're not on the docket for next week."

"Merlin! Why?"

Percy looked down and away unsure if he should say anything more. He wasn't supposed to tell anyone about the schedules until they were sent out, but Harrow had been decent when they had shared a house, and long nights for nothing was more than he'd wish on the man.

"Well," Harrow said in disgust not noticing Percy's hesitation. "At least I can make Friday's game after all. Puddlemere are playing. Michaels got tickets. Their Chasers are really starting to come good, you know."

Percy nodded. "Glad I could help."

"Oh, oh no! You said broom racing. Merlin's beard, Michaels is on that proposal. He's not ready for a slot next week. They haven't even sorted the location, never mind the funding. Look, Weasley, will you do me a favour and come with me? He won't believe I'm not pulling his leg otherwise and if he doesn't find out until Friday, then he won't make the game either."

"I can, but it will have to be later. I've got back to back with the Minister and the Department Heads from one till four."

"Yeah, that would be great, half a day isn't going to hurt. Thanks for that Weasley, I owe you one."

Percy waved it off. "Information flows two ways. The next time you're going to come crying for something, a little warning will be appreciated. It goes down better with Scrimgeour if he can have a tantrum behind closed doors first."

"Fair enough. You don't know why the schedule got rearranged do you?"

"Not the exact reason, but if someone were to ask me, I'd say that for being wealthy enough not to have work Mr Malfoy has very regular hours within the Ministry none the less."

"Malfoy, he did this?"

Percy shrugged. "I couldn't say."

Harrow cocked an eyebrow. "No, I suppose you couldn't. Bastard deserved more than two weeks locked up."

"Mr Malfoy's alibi was the Minister for Magic himself," Percy pointed out. "He has been proven innocent of all charges pertaining to the incident in the Department of Mysteries. I believe that he offers nothing more than advice to the Minister in an unofficial capacity."

Harrow snorted. "Sounds like hippogriff shit to me."

Percy smiled. "I always knew you were astute Harrow. I'll call by your office after four."

"Aye, we'll swing by Michaels and ruin his week. You free after work? The least I can do is buy you a drink."

Percy stood up from the table brushing down his robes and collecting up his tray. He nodded. "I appreciate it. Invite Michaels, I'll bring the latest notes on the proposal from the Minister. It might
"help him prepare."

"Thanks, Weasley."

Back at his desk Percy scanned over the new schedule once again then compared it to the one it had replaced. The budget for the Aurory training had been put back six weeks. The Department of Mysteries had requested funding for experimentation, though in what he didn't know. Either way that had been canned altogether. Regulation of Magical Creatures had been moved up by four months. Their proposal was a rehash of the social responsibility to provide free wolfsbane to registered Werewolves. That cropped up every two or three years. If they had been moved up by four months on extremely short notice, then someone wanted them to fail miserably. Perhaps badly enough that the proposal could be dismissed when it next came up without having to go through review. That would put werewolf rights back years.

Two other proposals that were first time through the Wizengamot had filled the last of the spaces on the new schedule. First time through was nearly always just so the Wizengamot could hear the case, suggest where the proposal was lacking and where lines had to be drawn. They wouldn't pass anything on a first time through, it was unheard of.

Percy flicked through his stack of reports looking for them. New licensing for imports on XX category ingredients. Which would cause a fuss with the apothecary’s, but do no real harm. Not unless the new legislation could only be met by one or two suppliers instead of five or six. Then, of course, someone would start making money hand over fist which was probably the point. There was no real reason to add more legislation to category XX imports, the ICW had already set the standard and everyone adhered to it.

The final docket to go before the Wizengamot was something about portkey licensing and relaxing the law regarding creating portkeys for personal use. Percy weighed the idea and came to the conclusion that one could go either way, but it wasn't important enough to snag one of the now very limited slots.

A chime sounded from his desk, and Percy silenced it then began gathering his things together. He would consider the implications later. Right now, he had Departments Heads and a Minister for Magic to manage.

The meeting was arduous, and Percy was glad when it ended. His list of things to do was longer, and he was ready to call it quits for the day.

The Department Heads left the meeting in small groups, chatting, muttering and grumbling together depending on how they felt they had done in the meeting. The Minister was hot on their heels his coat already on.

"Good evening Minister," Percy called as the man crossed Percy office.

"Weasley." Was the abrupt reply followed by the door firmly shutting as the Minister made his escape. Percy snorted in dark humour at the hasty exit. Scrimgeour was under pressure to come up with something to show that the Death Eaters and Voldemort were being handled. The Minister was coming up empty-handed. It had turned the gruff man gruffer and their conversations from terse to monosyllabic.

Percy dropped his notes into his desk draw locking and warding the draw. He collected up his coat and bag swiping the slim file from the edge of his desk before dowsing the lights and leaving his office. He locked the door and made his way to the lift. Harrow was two floors away, and Percy didn't want to be late.
Harrow led Percy to Michaels' office. Percy stood unobtrusively while Harrow broke the news and stepped in to provide the necessary assurances that they were in earnest. Michaels was suitably distressed until Percy offered to look over the proposal with him using the notes that the Minister had already. Harrow also volunteered to help, and they adjourned to the Witch and Wand, the pub that the housemates in Percy's house share had frequented.

Settled in at a table, Michaels went over what he had already. Percy chipped in with what the Minister was expecting and what had gone before in previous successful and failed bid attempts. It was information he had pulled up before leaving his office. Two hours later the three men were feeling quite pleased with themselves for stymieing the attempt to make Michaels look underprepared.

"Thanks for this Weasley," Michaels said for the third or fourth time. "You've saved me a serious headache. Look, I don't know if you've got plans or not, but I can get another ticket to Friday's game if you fancy it? Just as a thank you."

Percy considered it. Harrow was good company, Michaels seemed friendly enough, and it had been a while since Percy had watched a professional Quidditch match. "Can I tell you tomorrow?"

"Gotta check with the missus, do you?" Michaels asked.

"Yes," Percy said. "She's been away for a week with work, and I'm not sure if she's back Friday or Saturday."

"Say no more. Let me know tomorrow, and I'll organise the ticket. A mate of mine at the ground can fix me up."

"That would be appreciated. I really should be getting off though. Let me know if you need any more help, and I can see what I can dig up." Percy said as he collected up his discarded coat.

"Nice one, thanks," Michaels raised his glass in salute followed by Harrow as Percy made his way out of the pub.

In the cold air, he took a breath and considered if he was sober enough to apparate. Deciding he was probably borderline he concentrated on his destination and twisted himself into nothing.

The landing was a stumble followed by barking his shin on the sofa. Collapsing into a heap onto the offending furniture rather than fight to remain upright, Percy considered if he was actually drunk or out of practice apparating after drinking.

Percy heaved himself to his feet toeing off his shoes and pulling off his coat. A swish of his wand and they floated over to the hall. A cleaning charm set to work on both to rid his coat of creases and polish his shoes to a high shine for the next day.

In his kitchen, Percy poured himself a glass of water and sipped it while squinting at the list of dates on the fridge. Audrey had taped it there, listing the days she would be away for. The list of dates included Friday. Percy felt a small frisson of excitement at the thought of the Quidditch match. Taking his drink, he returned to the sofa and dug around in the pile of papers on the coffee table for the latest copy of the Daily Prophet. He had a basket for them with a Notice-Me-Not charm on so Audrey wouldn't find them, but as he had been alone for the week, they had remained folded on the coffee table when he had finished with them. Percy flicked to the back section and settled down to refresh his memory on the current lineup of Puddlemere United and their opponents on Friday.

The Quidditch match was fast and furious. Percy found himself welcomed and wanted within the
magical world for the first time in what seemed a long time. Percy thoroughly enjoyed himself and in an act of daring he would not have suspected of himself, smuggled bottled muggle beer into the stadium. He had removed all the labels, and the innocuous brown bottles had raised eyebrows until the caps came off. Then keen appreciation replaced scepticism, and Percy once more found himself toasted as the hero of the hour. After the match, he had joined Michaels, Harrow and more of their friends in a post-match analysis that lasted into the early hours. Happy, tired, and drunker than he had been in a long time Percy stumbled from Harrow's house, where they had all ended up, to find a taxi to take him home. He sat in the back of the dark car watching the street lights flash overhead and realised the weight he had carried had lifted. He might not have friends but he had been accepted, and it felt good.

Percy spent the weekend after the match with Audrey and thought no more of what he had done, further than the offhand promise he had made to help Michaels with more information if he could. When he returned to work on Monday, he set a small charm upon his blotter to highlight folders and information that might be of use and carried on with his day.

Percy had connections in some departments, he could hardly work for the Ministry as long as he did without doing so. But the shadow of the Crouch incident, the estrangement with his family and the fact that he worked for the Minister himself had set Percy apart. He had not known how to breach the invisible barrier between him and the other aides, secretary's and department workers that would allow him to build a network.

One favour, done with no more thought than to save an ex-housemate a few late nights caused ripples.

By Tuesday Heather Thompson was at his door requesting five minutes of his time. Cautiously she laid out the problem she had been having. Heather was supposed to be drawing up the proposal for the latest project for the Department of Improper Use. She was hitting a brick wall in getting the information she needed from the Department of Accidents and Catastrophises, and she'd heard Percy might be able to help her get what she needed.

Percy was puzzled until Heather mentioned that Michaels had told her that Percy had helped him with his proposal. Understanding dawned, Percy offered to take a look at the plan and send over anything he thought might help. Heather smiled brightly dropping the folder she had been clutching tightly on his desk with profusions of thanks and promises of favours owed. Percy picked the file up and skimmed over the first page. Absently he found a fresh sheet of paper and started making notes.

It was the beginning of a small network of favours owed and collected amongst his peer group in the Ministry. Percy found that Michaels and Harrow had put the word out he was willing to help for reasonable favours. The Muggle beer Percy had taken to the Quidditch match had become the stuff of legends thanks to Harrow and Michaels, enabling Percy to buy information he needed with bottled beer with their muggle labels stripped off.

Percy wasn't kidding himself. He knew that by building a network within the Ministry, he was stepping down the same path that Lucius Malfoy travelled. It wasn't much of a justification that he was trying to help the people that Lucius Malfoy and his power mongering were screwing over. It became a small personal crusade for Percy to hinder whatever Malfoy was up to. In that, he supposed he was following his family's footsteps in relation to the other man. He wouldn't stop though. Malfoy was visiting the Minister, the Wizengamot was dancing to the tune that Malfoy 'suggested'. Every proposal that was aimed at bettering and improving society was quashed, or pushed back, or brought forward so abruptly the proper research couldn't possibly be done. It never touched Lucius, his hands were clean. The Minister set the schedule, and the appropriate departments
made their cases. If they failed to make their cases successfully, it looked like they had underprepared, not that they had been thrown under the hippogriff with no warning.

If Percy could help, then he would do so. If only to wipe the smug grin off the face of the man that crossed in front of his desk three days a week.
Family

Chapter Notes

AN: We have finally caught up to where Percy enters the timeline of Escape. If you have recently read Escape and remember it, then forgive me but I will be quoting it where necessary. I am not going to be reposting great swathes of it, just what is relevant. If you haven't read Escape then don't worry, things should make as much sense as they ever have.

June 1997

Percy didn't want to feel hurt, but he did. He didn't want to care, but the ache was undeniable. It wasn't as if it would have made any difference anyway.

He twirled the heavy card stock between his fingers feeling the weight of it, the coloured ink flashing as the card turned over and over in his hands. He threw it on the table and stared at it balefully.

He couldn't. He couldn't go. Too much time had passed. How would he ever be able to explain? They certainly wouldn't listen to him. Even though it was clear that while he had been wrong about You-Know-Who's return and the Ministry's ability to deal with the problem, his family had been wrong about Dumbledore and his plans. Harry Potter had left the country. The Death Eaters were attacking innocent people again. The Ministry reshuffles hadn't gone unnoticed by Percy. People were moved around departments and while he no longer feared for his job, he feared that his faith in the Ministry dealing with the problem effectively and efficiently was shattered. Not one Death Eater had been apprehended after the breakout of Azkaban, not one. Oh, there was speculation that You Know Who was no longer in the country but Percy didn't believe that. He was here, waiting, watching. For what, Percy didn't know.

He heard the door open and remembered he had agreed to meet Audrey. A glance at the clock confirmed he was not only late, he was so late she'd come to his flat looking for him.

"Percy?" Audrey's voice was hesitant, surprised to see him sitting in his flat.

Percy stood up and crossed the room to meet her. "I'm sorry," he offered, dropping a kiss onto her hair as he wrapped his arms around her. Audrey's arms came up in automatic response.

"Percy?" She queried.

Percy soaked in the feel of her in his arms before releasing her and gesturing to the card on the table.

Audrey moved to the table and picked it up. "William Weasley? He's your brother?" Audrey hazarded.

"Eldest," Percy confirmed joining her staring down at the card.

"You are going to go?"

Percy shook his head.
"Percy why not? He's invited you, surely that means he wants you there?"

Percy huffed. "They don't want me there. Bill wants Charlie there, Fred and George. Ginny probably, even Ron, but not me. Not unless he can lecture me on my responsibility to my family and how I've hurt Mum and Dad with my behaviour. 'Toe the line Percy.' 'It won't hurt you to do as they want.' 'You don't have all the facts and you have to listen to them.' The sanctimonious elder brother that he is. As if I don't have an opinion to call my own." Percy dropped onto the sofa scowling.

"So, you want to go then."

"What part of what I've just said gave you that impression?"

"Percy, you stood me up so you could brood over an invitation to your eldest brother's wedding. Would you have done that if you didn't care?"

"Sorry," Percy said. "I should have called, or better yet stuck to our arrangement."

"It's fine, they're your family. Being estranged has to be hard on you. Are you sure you aren't going to go? I can come with you if you want. Moral support and all that. Then if it's terrible, we could slip off early and find a pub or something."

"Thank you for the offer, but I'm not going."

"Well, let me know if you change your mind. I've got a dress in my wardrobe that will just need a quick iron."

Percy smiled thinly. "I shan't."

"Mhmm. Do they have a gift list or something? Is Fleur as French as she sounds?"

"Fleur is yes."

"You've met her?"

"Yes, not while she was seeing Bill. I don't think I knew they were together, but she came over from France with her school as part of an inter-school competition. I met her then. She seemed to be a confident sort of person, beautiful, clever," Percy shrugged. "I didn't really speak to her beyond the pleasantries."

"Oh," Audrey said looking down at the invitation again.

Percy heard the tone of Audrey's voice. "She was a student at the time. Seventeen yes, but a student. I'd been out of school a year by then. It was just as everything started going wrong. You have nothing to concern yourself with, I can promise you I did not spare Fleur a passing thought."

"Well, you said beautiful and clever. It's stiff competition."

Percy pulled Audrey to him and held her. "I promise that I am quite in love with you and could not care a whit for anyone else. As for beautiful and clever, be assured that I find you both those things."

"Oh," Audrey repeated, hugging Percy in return. "Well, I love you too."

They were silent for a moment in each other's arms before Audrey tilted her head up to look at Percy. "If they don't have a gift list, we can hunt through the shop for something to send them. We've got some nice bits in. Or, if you're feeling petty, we've got some hideous gilded pieces from a house clearance we did a couple of weeks ago. We'd let you have them for free if only to get them off our
hands. They'll never sell."

Percy snorted a laugh. "It's a tempting thought. I'll think about it."

"Take your time," Audrey said warmly. "They really aren't going anywhere. Alternatively, how about an amateur impressionist painting of mutant fruit?"

"Mutant fruit?"

"Hmm yes. I think they are supposed to be apples, but if anyone gave me an apple that colour and shape I'm not sure my first thought would be to eat it. Hand it over for scientific research perhaps. Or how about cherubs on plates? I saw some of those at a sale, we could inquire if they are still available."

"Do you often send gifts to the people unfortunate enough to upset you?"

"Sometimes. Occasionally it's worth the postage," Audrey confirmed. "There's something satisfying knowing that a nicely wrapped and package box delivered with no note will get even the most cynical person's expectations raised, only to find something awful inside. It did backfire once. I sent a chap a genuinely terrible jug, it was a bad fake, looked like a five-year-old had done it as their first school project. Anyway, I saw him two weeks later down the pub, and he was raving about this jug, thought it was the best thing since sliced bread. Convinced it was some early work by a Master that an admirer had sent him. Not quite the reaction I was hoping for."

"And what had he done to displease you so?"

"I don't remember. Likely he made Rose cry. She went through a stage of picking awful men and showering them with crap in prettily wrapped boxes was therapeutic for her. Something about them being a mirror of the people she was sending them too."

"Ouch."

Audrey grinned. "She has a mean streak does Rose, you'd do well to mind it."

"I shall endeavour to. Since I have behaved abominably in missing our date would you care to be taken out for dinner? We can go around the corner to the Indian?"

"Fair enough, although I've an early start in the morning so I can't stay over I'm afraid. You could come back to mine though if you like unless you have to be in work early?"

"Not especially early. Let me put a bag together." Percy said moving towards his bedroom to gather his things.

August 1997

Percy had visited his brothers' shop once. It had opened with all the fanfare that Percy had expected from them. Loud, bold exuberance that demanded you join them. In the crush of inquisitive witches and wizards Percy had slipped in, hidden by the crowds and judiciously placed glamour charms. He hadn't been sure what had driven him to visit. He hadn't approached Fred or George or done anything to attract notice, but he hadn't been able to stay away. He could admit that he wished them well. The gossip going around was that the products the twins sold had become must-haves for the wizarding population. Percy wondered how much of the defence lines he had seen in one corner was being purchased under the guise of shopping for Skiving Snack Boxes. Or perhaps the population, now aware that You-Know-Who was alive, was trying to hide their heads in sand in the form of his
brothers' own brand of distraction.

It was Mills that mentioned the latest news to Percy. Mills worked in the permits office, and Percy had been able to add him to his stable of contacts within the Ministry with a few well-placed bottles of muggle beer. When Mills sauntered up to Percy in the corridor early in the morning and followed him into the lift. Percy only acknowledged the other wizard with a pleasant good morning. The lift door rattled closed behind Mills, and the lift set off on what Percy noticed to be the longest continuous journey a Ministry lift was able to take.

"Weasley, something fell on my desk a couple of days ago, and you're a hard man to get alone."

Percy hummed noncommittally.

"Your brothers, run that joke shop. Seems they do well enough at it, but they've applied for a permit to sell wands. The decision is being looked at by my boss. I'm not sure he's going to grant it, they run a joke shop after all. Robards isn't going to run the risk of them hurting a bunch of folks especially eleven-year-olds. I don't suppose you know what they are about do you?"

Percy swallowed his surprise and paused for a moment to think. "Not specifically no. If they have set up to sell wands, then they will have done their research. They aren't in the business of getting people hurt or launching things that won't be a hit. If they fulfil the requirements, I can't see why the permit shouldn't go through"

"Fair enough," Mills said. "I'll tell Robards."

"Don't mention me," Percy requested. I don't want to be on any official record.

"You won't be," Mills replied. "I've got a nephew in need of a wand this year. He's a muggle born. My sister married a half-blood. Her husband's brother and his wife are as muggle as they come, little Trevor though. He's a demon, my sister took him in hand you see, when his parents struggled. Helped like, you know. Flies a broom like he was born to it. I see him when I visit my sister, bright as a button too. Destined for Ravenclaw that one. Beatrice is a Hufflepuff through and through same as her mum."

"He no longer lives with his parents?"

"Oh no he does, just my sister takes him so he can learn, you know before he goes to Hogwarts. It's better for him as well, he learnt to control his magic along with my sister's brood. His parents have been pretty good about it all. Least they don't think he's ill or they are losing their minds. A bit of a shock of course, but not as much as his Hogwarts letter turning up out of the blue. They'll come shopping with him so they'll get to see a bit more of our side of it. We're going to make a family day of it. Beatrice, my sister's eldest, is going this year as well. It's a damn shame Olivander's is closed, my whole family have his wands. Wanted that for Beatrice and Trevor too."

"There are other sellers."

"Yeah but Trevor is Muggleborn. I'm not taking him or his parents into Jerkins Wands. If Jerkins let them over the threshold, I wouldn't trust anything that he tried selling them."

"Fred and George wouldn't discriminate on birth," Percy said firmly.

"No, Weasleys don't discriminate, you can say that about your lot."

"It's not a bad thing to be said," Percy replied.
"I suppose not. Well, this is me," Mills said as the lift stopped and the doors swung open. "I'll see you another time."

"I look forward to it," Percy responded. The doors closed and he continued by a shorter route to his floor and onto his office.

Percy thought about his brothers' latest venture until he reached his desk and started working. Then it slipped to the back of his mind and troubled him not a whit until the week after when he chose to stroll down Diagon Alley for some sun and fresh air on his lunch break.

There, swinging from the frontage of the shop, was the new sign. Percy continued towards the shop peering through the crowded display. Percy paused as he caught sight of one of the twins conversing earnestly with what had to be a crowd of first years on their shopping trip for Hogwarts supplies. Percy stepped closer to the window and watched fascinated as the red-headed wizard engaged the child in small talk then handed a wand over. The wand failed to react to the child and Fred, or George shrugged and gave the child another wand to try. Percy watched in fascination as the process was repeated, his brother keeping the child engaged with whatever he was saying until the fifth wand was handed over and a rain of bright colours fell from the end. The other children gasped in excitement and crowded around their compatriot. Percy's eyes were on Fred or George who nodded in satisfaction and pride. As the next child stepped forward eagerly, Percy started moving again.

Whatever his brothers were up to they were not intent on causing harm and the match Percy had witnessed was as good as he had had with his own wand. Perhaps he would contact Mills and inquire if he had taken his niece and nephew to get their wands yet. It would be interesting to hear what he had to say if he had found wands in Weasleys Wizarding Wands. The unanswered questions of how his brothers had obtained their stock and learnt the craft of matching wands to witches and wizards remained unanswered, but Percy was in no position to get them.

October 1997

When the letter was delivered, the first thing he noticed was that it was not addressed correctly.

It merely said Mr Percy Weasley, Ministry of Magic, it didn't reference his job title, or office, or floor number, as all proper Ministry correspondence should do. While it took the author a little more time to write these things, it did ensure that the post was delivered correctly, and promptly. No one really wanted their personal quibbles being given to the wrong person and splashed all over the Prophet, but by not adequately addressing correspondence that's exactly what you risked.

The second thing he noticed made the first thing moot.

Percy might not have seen his family in a while, but nothing would stop him remembering what his younger siblings handwriting looked like. He had spent hours helping them learn to read and write, and longer regretting it. As invariably, one of their pranks they had cobbled together from a source of books, had been set upon him.

Fred and George had written to him.

It was clearly Fred and George together even though Fred's handwriting was on the outside. Those two had a hive mind and never acted without the other. If one didn't want to, the other would talk them round or change the plan until they both agreed. It was what made them brilliant.

Percy looked at the parchment suspiciously, putting it on the blotter in front of him. He cast a detecting charm on it. The one he had asked Bill for before, well, before and used on any incoming
mail he didn't recognise.

The charm said the letter contained no jinxes, that opening it wouldn't turn him yellow, or transfigure his nose into a beak, or anything else the Twins might have come up with.

Sadly, this only made his suspicions heighten. Since when did Fred and George pass up an opportunity to prank anyone? Sending a letter without a prank attached … oh, Merlin. Suddenly a rushing noise filled his ears, and he couldn't swallow properly. Every harsh word he'd ever exchanged with his loud, boisterous, sometimes alien family, came screaming back to the forefront of his mind.

If they hadn't sent a prank, then they wanted him to read it, and if they wanted him to read it… Merlin. He hoped no one was seriously hurt in whatever foolish errand they had gone on for Dumbledore. He hoped that at worst it was a couple of weeks in St Mungo's. That he wasn't being told that fences couldn't be mended with one of them on a permanent basis.

Hands now trembling and throat so tight he thought he might suffocate, Percy ripped the letter open, taking less care than he should to ensure he didn't tear the contents.

His eyes scanned the message not really taking it in just hunting for the news. His shoulders dropped and his head sagged as he realised that it mentioned nothing of any injuries, attacks, and possible deaths. He took a minute or five to get himself back under control.

Percy didn't want to admit it, but Audrey was right, being estranged was hard. He ignored it most of the time, but it never left him. Under the anger and disappointment, he held against his family it didn't stop the worry. Estrangement hadn't stopped him loving them or worrying about them. He heard things about them of course. There were enough gossips in the Ministry to put the Prophet out of business although they probably kept the prophet in business printing rumours and supposition.

Picking the letter up he read it over properly. It was short, succinct for the twins, and written as usual in both their handwriting as they had taken it from each other and penned bits.

_Percy,

Don't throw this away. You can't because we've charmed it not to be destroyed. If you want to try, you can, but we suggest you don't set it on fire. Being responsible for evacuating the Ministry at whatever ungodly hour you chose to start work will look bad on your record.

It's true don't try it – unless you know, in case of an emergency sort of thing. Not like a real emergency, where the building is coming down around you and people are already panicking, because no one will notice. But a small emergency, where forewarning was helpful and makes you look good. Seriously, it will work, the siren on this thing is loud. Testing it was a nightmare.

We're writing because we thought you probably didn't want us coming to visit. We'd have to ask at the desk which department you were in, and where that was. Since we're not exactly good for your Ministerial image, we didn't think you would appreciate that.

This isn't about the whole working for the Ministry thing.

Well, it is, but not because you got huffy and walked out on us.

Right, we weren't going to mention that so you'd actually listen, so ignore him. We need your help. It's nothing illegal or dangerous.

The only danger is losing your mind, your arm falling off and a potential national ink shortage.
Exactly, so nothing that is going to make you look bad. We promise to abide by the terms of parley and will meet on accorded neutral ground. We've no idea where you Ministry types hang out anyway.

Will you come? There's a park in London called Kensington Gardens. It's Muggle so you know we can't pull anything. There's a statue of Peter Pan, we'll be there tomorrow after your shift ends. Ask a Muggle for directions.

Your brothers,

Fred and George

Percy dropped the letter onto his blotter again and looked it over. He was willing to take the twins at their word. They never warned you about the consequences of their products unless they were serious about them, and they weren't part of whatever they were planning.

What did they want? They said it wasn't about his separation from the family since they hadn't been planning on mentioning it.

Where did the twins find out about Kensington Gardens? He knew where the Pan statue was of course. He'd told Audrey about his brothers, and she had, in turn, told him the tale of the boy who never grew up. It fitted them somehow. They'd gone to look at it on a weekend, enjoying the autumn colours and the fresh air after a tiring week at work.

His shift didn't end until five, but he needed to do an hour or so more after that to keep on top of the new legislation that was being pushed through. Without checking them over, he couldn't be sure his boss was getting a full and complete breakdown. It wouldn't do for the Minister to be under-prepared to answer questions at any time. He folded the letter up and slipped it into his pocket. When he was ready to go home, he'd think about it then. Otherwise, he had a solid day in front of him.

The end of the day arrived. His office was silent except for the scratch of his quill against parchment. The buzz of activity in the Ministry had quietened and died off as more and more people left for the day.

When Percy reached the stopping point he had set himself for the day, he cleaned his quill and placed it neatly on the inkstand on his desk. He tidied his parchments filing them until tomorrow. He cast a charm on his outbox, the spell had each memo and packet of parchment neatly fold up in an aeroplane and zoom out of his door. They would float to their destinations slipping through the cracks under the doors to settle in the recipients in trays ready for perusal the next morning.

One last thing lay on his blotter. The letter Fred and George had sent.

Percy grumbled to himself. He was going to go. He'd not gone to Bill's wedding despite Audrey's encouragement to attend. He stubbornly shut down any conversation that broached the topic. He had caved to Audrey's urging and sent them a gift, and despite her initial offer, he had turned down the gilded carriage clock and the painting of mutant fruit. Audrey had picked out a delicate bud vase, and Percy had agreed that it would do.

But the twins hadn't sent him an invitation, one of many sent out if he knew anything about his mother. They had specifically written to him and specifically requested his help. Percy wasn't reassured about their assurances that whatever they were doing wasn't illegal. Many things weren't illegal, but that did not mean his prankster brothers should be getting involved with them.

Grumbling to himself he locked his office up and made his way to the floo. The sooner he found out
what they wanted, the better.

Percy approached the meeting place, his hands stuffed deep into his pockets. The cold nipped at the end of his nose, and he wondered if his brothers would still be waiting for him. As he came around the corner of the hedge, he paused spying the two lanky forms huddled together, and their conversation floated over to him.

"...Think he's chained to the desk? Manacles rubbing his wrists and ankles sore, wand held hostage?"

"We'd have to think of a daring rescue."

"Heroic, too."

"Of course. Maybe we could ask Charlie for a dragon, a small one. We could have it fly around outside the Ministry, distracting everyone. Drawing them outside to gawk, while we bravely battled through the corridors to rescue our fair brother from his prison."

"I would rather you didn't if it's all the same," Percy said as he stepped out of the shadows and walked towards them. "The dragon alone would need three import licenses signing off."

"Percy!" the twins whirled as one, throwing themselves at Percy.

Percy staggered slightly under their combined weight and effuse thumps of greeting. He had a moment of surprise as his siblings threw themselves on him, followed by a rush of relief that they had done so. As they drew away, he smoothed his hair and robes in an automatic gesture and saw the twins catch each other's glances and roll their eyes. He ignored them and instead said. "You wanted to speak with me?"

"Yeah, we did," The twin Percy thought was George responded eagerly. "Do you want to go somewhere warmer? Only it's a bit cold out here."

Percy eyed them suddenly wary. They had agreed to meet on neutral ground to show they meant to behave. If they went elsewhere would that still stand? For all their joking a moment ago, Percy wouldn't put it past them to take him somewhere he could not leave if they thought it for his own good or they were under orders.

"We're not going to do anything, and no one in the family knows we're here. You can pick where and we'll behave," Fred offered sincerely.

Percy looked at them, concerned as to why they were acting so politely. The twins were not serious people and only earnest when something really mattered. Politics warred with family inside him once again. He sighed in inevitable defeat. "I suppose you can come to my flat. But I'm taking you in, and you are not to touch or otherwise mess about with any of my things."

Once the twins settled on the sofa, Percy was unsure of what to expect. The explanation of their need of his help with their business puzzled Percy. The forms were perhaps detailed, but he had not expected his brothers to find them onerous. When the forms were produced in a dramatic flourish, Percy felt his eyebrows rise. Certainly, he hadn't expected quite so many. A glance through also showed that they were as detailed as Percy recalled. The worry was that the file was surely big enough to cover every product the twins sold, and yet they claimed that this covered just their wand selling business.

Percy sighed knowing he had already agreed to help them in whatever they needed when he had decided to meet them. The idea that it was just dry form filling in relieved him as much as he didn't
anticipate the evening of completing the forms in question. He summoned the ink and quills and picked up the first folder indicating they should start.

The conversation stayed for the most part in the safe zones of his brother's wand business. It was some two hours later disheartened by the futility of what the twins were expected to do Percy made a decision. He had enough contacts within the Ministry. Perhaps instead of just acting against Mr Malfoy, he could use that network to help his brothers.

"If," Percy said, drawing Fred and George's attention. "What I mean is, that if you like, if it would help. I can advise you on the newest legislation coming from the Ministry, and help you fill in the correct forms, to make sure you don't build up such a backlog again. Obviously, I can only tell you what has passed into law. Speculation on my part, of anything being discussed at higher levels would be a flagrant disregard of my responsibilities and oaths as a member of the Ministry."

The twins greeted this offer with eager acceptance, and Percy felt a flush of pleasure sweep through him. He had been uncertain if this would be a onetime thing.

Percy summoned the courage to ask after the rest of the family and Fred, and George quickly ran through the family offering insights into the last they knew of them. It was only when Percy cautiously inquired after Harry and Hermione did the old resentments flare up again, and Percy had to bite his tongue to stop the angry words that clogged the back of his throat.

Fred and George exchanged a speaking look and what must have been a silent agreement to change the subject passed between them.

The next words however caught Percy off guard and he felt himself suck a lungful of air in as if there simply wasn't going to be any more in the room other than what he could hold inside himself.

"So, who's the bird?"

Percy couldn't form words.

The picture," his brother pointed to the bookcase. "Who is she?"

"Audrey," Percy replied eventually. "We met shortly after I moved in here."

"What's she like?" Fred asked encouragingly. "Would Mum approve?"

"I, she," Percy shook himself, gathering himself together. The turn in the conversation and the realisation that his brothers would, of course, notice the picture and certainly be interested in who she was, sinking in. Percy wasn't ready for this conversation, he hadn't ever expected to have it in truth. "I would rather that you didn't tell Mum and Dad, especially Dad if you don't mind."

"Eh? Why not? Mum will be thrilled. You know she's desperate to marry us all off."

"Yeah, I see your point there Percy. Best keep it to yourself. Don't want Mum scaring her off."

"No, you don't understand, you see…" Percy trailed off suddenly nervous despite everything. He knew the twins, he knew his family were considered blood traitors but acknowledging muggle-borns was one thing. What he had done, what he was doing, was something entirely different.

"What? Is she a bit posh? Don't worry, we wore Fleur down. Your Audrey will be no match for our charm,"

"I, she. She's a muggle!" Percy blurted, snapping his mouth closed as the last syllable left his lips. He
closed his eyes. He knew that if he ever fixed what was broken between him and his family he would have to tell them about Audrey, about her being a muggle. This was not how he had imagined it happening, though.

"Does she know about cinema?"

Percy snapped his eyes open his face a picture of shock, gaping at his brother.

"Oh please! Tell me she can get you Chinese food. Can you get it here?" his other brother said eagerly.

"I, umm. Yes, she knows about cinema. But, she's a muggle, I mean, not that there's anything wrong with that but..." Percy answered reeling at the horror of what he had told them and their confusing reactions. How did Fred and George know about cinema and why would they want Chinese food?

"But what? You didn't think we were going to run screaming, did you? Denounce you for not dating some lovely young witch from the Department of So-Boring-I-Can't-Remember, did you?"

"I, err, well. Yes?" Percy confessed.

"Pfft, she's a muggle Percy, not an alien. Can we meet her? Does she know about us? Not the magic bit of course, but you know, your family?"

"She doesn't think I was born from an egg no," Percy replied drily.

Fred and George seemed delighted that he was dating a muggle and Percy couldn't fathom it. Weasleys don't discriminate. He hadn't been flippant when he said that to Mills, but he had never considered that Weasleys wouldn't discriminate against Muggles as well as Muggle-born.

Their entreaties to meet Audrey had Percy wavering. It would be a relief to have at least a small measure of contact with his family. It would make him feel less utterly alone, but the risk of the twins slipping up and exposing Audrey to magic was not to be disregarded. They were eager puppies anxiously waiting his answer and Percy didn't have the heart to crush their fledgling peace talks with his refusal. He would have to speak to Audrey, and he had no idea of what he would say or how he would explain.

Percy directed them back to the forms giving himself time to get his thoughts together. When they were complete, he offered to send them out to the relevant departments in the morning and herded his brothers out of the door.

The evening had taken a toll on Percy, and he wished for nothing more than quiet solitude to get his thoughts straight. Fred and George knew about Audrey, knew that he was dating a Muggle. Fred and George, his younger brothers. He had spent years looking out for the pair, keeping them from getting into more trouble than they could handle. He had just given them the means to destroy him. One word in the wrong place and Percy knew that losing his job was possibly the best-case scenario.
October 1997

Owls were portents of doom, evil and bad news.

Percy watched as the short-eared owl glided down the street straight towards him and understood why. He didn't glance behind him to check if the bird had someone else in its sights. His luck didn't run that way. He was not in contact with enough people in the wizarding world to warrant correspondence been sent to seek him personally in the middle of the afternoon. There was only one reason that anyone would send him a letter in this manner.

The owl hooted as it got closer. Percy grimaced and hoped that this owl was not also predicting death along with its unwelcome news. He raised his arm allowing the bird to land upon his forearm. Percy slid the rumpled parchment free from the bird and stuffed it in a pocket. He petted the soft plumage gently instead of a treat and offered a few complimentary words. The owl shuffled under his fingers in pleasure before opening its wings slightly in warning. Percy withdrew his hand and helped launch the bird back to the skies whence it came.

Percy calmly made his way to a bench in front of the Wizarding stationers he had been to on an errand for the Minister. He sat down pulling the crumpled missive from his pocket. It had a coffee ring on one corner, and his name hastily scrawled in the centre in a lurid shade of green ink.

Percy broke the magical seal in lieu of a wax one and braced himself for the news contained within.

Percy,

Bill's hurt. Work accident. St Mungo's, Spell Damage, room 394.

F&G

The note itself had evidently been torn from a larger piece of parchment. There were ink blots scattered over the page and words torn in half around the edges. A doodle of a hippogriff covered one section of the paper although Percy presumed it had nothing to do with the note itself.

He shoved the note back in his pocket. Pushing his glasses up on top of his head Percy scrubbed his face with his hands willing his brain to come up with a plan.

A work accident sounded plausible. Curse breaking was dangerous. But, But Bill was good. Bill was also the eldest son of the most visible Blood Traitor family, who were also known members of the Order of the Phoenix. Could it be an attack by the Death Eaters and disguised as a work accident? Could it be that Fred and George didn't want to put anything incriminating on a note that might have been intercepted or read over his shoulder? Could it be a simple work accident?

Percy checked his watch. Four o'clock. Well, he couldn't go now. His working day wasn't over, and his parents would be there. Even with Fred and George backing him up he wasn't ready to have that conversation.

So, after hours then. His parents would stay as long as visiting hours would let them. Unless Bill was seriously hurt, then nothing short of You-Know-Who himself would drag his mother from Bill's bedside. That was workable. He could work late and go straight from the office. Better to distract himself with work than sitting around brooding making Audrey suspicious, and he wouldn't be able to explain.
Percy pulled his shoulder bag onto his lap. Rooting through the bag, he found the communication mirror George and Fred had given him for her. He thought they were brilliant, but he had been utterly unable to think of a way of giving it to her and not having awkward questions he couldn't answer. Muggle technology was not that advanced and while he could try passing it off as some sort of 'spy equipment' he had got from work, the idea sounded ridiculous when he tried saying it out loud. Audrey would never believe it and how was he supposed to explain having it and giving her one. No, he had kept hold of it, he appreciated the thought, but it just wasn't possible. Pushing aside the mirror he withdrew a small plastic rectangle.

Checking around him through habit rather than any real suspicion he depressed the small button on top of it and waited as the Nokia logo appeared on screen, indicating the mobile phone was booting up. Percy had decided that Fred and George had a point. He did need to be able to reach Audrey and he her, should she run into trouble. Thankfully Muggles had been on the case a lot longer than his brothers. While his brothers had invented something genuinely remarkable, the Muggles hadn't exactly turned up with nothing.

The mobile phone was the answer he had needed. He couldn't keep it on while he was at the Ministry because the ambient magic fritzed the device. He was working on something to stabilise it so he could, perhaps by replacing the electrical battery with some form of magic. As soon as he understood it all correctly, he was sure he could figure something out. For now, Audrey left him an answerphone message or sent a text message, and he would make sure he went outside during his lunch break to turn it on and pick them up. Once he was free of work, it was turned on and left in his pocket.

The device settled on its home screen and Percy waited. A few moments later it beeped, signalling he had at least one text message waiting for him. A quick perusal told him Audrey was suggesting meeting some of their friends in the pub after work for drinks.

Percy pushed the call button and waited for Audrey to answer.

"Hello Percy," Audrey's voice came through the ear piece.

"Hello love. I've just seen your message about tonight. I'm afraid I can't make it."

"Oh? Has something come up?"

"Bill. He's had an accident at work, and he's in the hospital."

"Oh no! Percy, is he alright? He's not in intensive care or anything is he?"

"I don't know at the moment. I was going to go down to the hospital after work."

"Yeah, yeah of course. I'll let the guys know. Do you want me to come? Or is it family only?"

"It's probably going to be family only, he's on a specialist ward. I'm sorry to do this to you. I'd normally quite like to go for that drink."

"Percy it's a drink we can do that anytime. Look I won't see you if you aren't coming home, but if you want when you get back from the hospital, you could come over. You can tell me about it then."

"I don't know how late I will be."

"I'll be home, and you've got a key."

"Alright, I'll do that. I'll try not to wake you if it gets late."
"OK, well I'll see you later then. Give your brother my best won't you."

"Yes of course," Percy said.

"Bye Percy."

"Bye Audrey," Percy replied taking the phone from his ear and ending the call. He breathed out a large breath. He was thankful that Audrey was generous enough to let him deal with his family in his own way. She always offered to accompany him but didn't seem to mind when he refused. With Fred and George wishing to meet her the lines between his two worlds were getting closer. It put him on edge.

He had no idea how Audrey might react to the truth. He wanted to believe that this warm, compassionate woman he was madly in love with would accept him as a wizard as she had as a muggle. But it would be one of the biggest gambles he'd ever taken should he tell her, and he wasn't sure he had enough stacked in his favour to risk it. She would be well within her rights to end it all, and Percy wasn't sure that he could get over losing Audrey easily.

He would tell her one day. Before he made any promises, he would come clean but that day was not today. Today he had to visit a hospital without his parents finding out.

Percy paused outside of St Mungo's taking a steadying breath shoring up his nerves and courage. Then before he could rethink the already over thought plan, he stepped into the entrance lobby. At the desk, Percy checked if Bill had been moved from Spell Damage. The Welcome Witch confirmed Bill was still where the twins had told him he was, but pointed out that the visiting hours were over.

Percy had anticipated this and drew himself up to his full height. Then staring down his nose at the witch he replied using his most officious voice. "I am the Undersecretary and Aide to the Minister of Magic himself. The Minister is a very busy man, and if he wishes for information it is not my place, and it is certainly not your place, to say otherwise. Or to tell the Minister for Magic that visiting hours are over."

The witch blinked and opened her mouth to say more. Before she could, Percy slapped his Ministry credentials down on the desk. The witch took one long glance and thought better of what it was she was going to say. Instead, she smiled meekly and gave him directions to the correct floor.

Percy nodded and channelled the cold sneering civility of Lucius Malfoy. "I thank you for your cooperation. You have been most, helpful." Gathering up his credentials he spun on his heel. He crossed the room with his head up, his shoulders back, and his chin elevated. The people in the waiting room melted from his path in a wave.

Percy kept his face blank and his posture in the same stance until the lift he had called arrived and the doors shut behind him. Alone in the lift, he released the tension he had held himself under and allowed a silly grin to cross his face. Percy had never pulled rank on anyone before, and he admitted a certain amount of childish glee at doing so. He also quite enjoyed the way the crowds had melted out of his way. He had seen Lucius Malfoy do the same on many occasions and hadn't dared to hope he could emulate it. But apparently, all it took was attitude.

Wiping the smile from his face, Percy got out his wand. He was past the gatekeeper, but he was not in the clear yet. The dragon could still be guarding the door, and Percy did not have the One Ring to allow him to sneak by. He did have his wand and a decent knowledge of glamour charms, and it would have to do. Percy altered his hair colour to full brown and pushed a warm golden tint on to his skin tone. The robes he wore for work shouldn't draw any attention but rather than risk it he
transfigured his open fronted robe to a more traditional closed one. The mirrored surface of the lift wall reflected back an image that wouldn't immediately scream Weasley, and that would do nicely. If his parents were still there, he had no intention of staying. He would come back later when they had gone.

The corridor was empty as Percy walked down it. He glanced at the rooms as he passed by, tracking the door numbers. As he arrived at his destination, he turned his head to look through the small window as he passed by.

The room looked empty of visitors. Bill was in bed, but the privacy curtain wasn't drawn. Percy turned around and more slowly made his way back to the room his brother was in. Percy stopped outside the room staring through the small window. The room was indeed empty of visitors. His parents must have gone home.

Percy eased the door open and closed it gently behind him. A small spell he wasn't supposed to know, and the window pane turned opaque in the same way the healers would do when they were in with a patient.

Bill's chart hung from the end of the bed. Careful not to disturb the sleeping occupant Percy picked it up and started flicking through it. It wasn't as bad as he feared, but it was quite bad enough. The bandages that were covering some of Bill's face, neck and snaking down to his shoulder under the non-descript hospital gown, were covering some serious sounding wounds. The prognosis was favourable for which Percy was glad. A sanctimonious elder brother was better than no brother at all.

Percy replaced the chart and moved to the visitor's chair by the bed. He slumped into it and stared at his brother, Bill hadn't changed much. Percy tried to remember when the last time he had seen Bill was but couldn't. Possibly sometime around the final task at the Tri-Wizard tournament? He hadn't been at the Burrow when Percy had finally had enough and moved out amid the recriminations that still stood between him and his family. Hadn't he seen Bill in nearly three years? How was that even possible? Granted they didn't work in the same circles and they certainly didn't socialise in them, but it was almost unbelievable that it had been three years.

Bill stirred in the bed, his face scrunching as the pain dragged him from his sleep. Percy froze. Bill's head turned towards him as his eyes cracked open. "Who are you?" he croaked.

Percy automatically reached for the glass of water with a straw that was on the bedside cabinet and offered it. Bill brought a hand up weakly pushing the glass away. "Who are you?" he demanded a little more roughly.

Percy remembered his glamour was still in place. Carefully he withdrew his wand keeping his movements slow and his eyes on Bill. Bill eyed him with further suspicion until Percy cancelled the glamour and his features came back into view.

"Percy?" Bill exclaimed in surprise.

"Bill," Percy replied offering the water once more. Bill waved it away struggling to sit up. Percy rose to help, casting the charm on the bed to make the top half rise up lifting Bill into a sitting position.

Bill grunted his thanks and Percy offered the water again. Bill accepted the straw, and thirstily sucked up the water. Percy refilled the glass and proffered it again.

"I, err, heard that you'd been hurt and I, umm, came to see if you were alright."

"Right," Bill said. "And the disguise?"
"Ahh well, I…"

"You didn't want Mum or Dad to recognise you if they saw you," Bill guessed.

"Yeah."

"You're avoiding them? Then how…?"

"The gossip mill at the Ministry. Nothing stays secret for long and when someone inquired if I was going to St Mungo's this evening, it didn't take long to find out the rest."

"Don't you think…"

"No." Percy cut him off. "It's, well it's not that simple."

Bill subsided, turning to face the wall opposite his bed swallowing back whatever he was going to say. He turned back. "You didn't come to the wedding."

"No. I. It would have ended badly. We wouldn't have agreed, and it would have turned ugly. You wouldn't have wanted your day spoiled."

"Was my brother missing my wedding not spoiling it?"

"No. I chose not to antagonise the situation and make it worse. Things were said Bill and some things can't be brushed off. Somethings just can't."

"Mum misses you. You sent her jumper back, and you didn't come home for Christmas."

Percy nodded stiffly. He kept his opinion of his mother's choice words to himself. She might miss him now she had calmed down, but he still remembered the things that she'd flung at him, and he wasn't inclined to forget them.

"How are you doing Percy?" Bill asked.

Percy looked surprised. "Significantly better than you by all accounts."

Bill smiled lazily. "It's not all bad, waited on hand and foot by a beautiful woman. I won't have to lift a finger for weeks. Between Mum and Fleur, I'm not sure I'll be allowed to so much as summon a book."

Percy sniffed. "I suppose it's one way of getting attention."

Bill chuckled darkly but stopped as the movement pulled his neck wound. "You've read my file?"

"You'll live," Percy responded, relaxing slightly now they had moved away from the topic of family.

"I suppose. Not going to be so pretty anymore though. The Healers don't think they'll be able to heal the scars."

"I wasn't aware you were pretty to begin with, so no great loss," Percy shot back.

Bill snorted another laugh. "You're doing alright though? The job is OK? I don't even know where you live."

"I have a flat," Percy said. "I've been there a couple of years now. Moved in when I left the house share. Work is alright. Keeps me busy."
"You're keeping yourself safe?" Bill asked.

"I'm not an imbecile, and I'm also not the one laid up in a hospital bed."

Bill gestured clumsily with his hand. "You're living alone Percy. I'd guess you work pretty unsociable hours. Just want you to be safe."

Percy didn't correct Bill's assumption that he lived alone. Technically, he and Audrey did have separate homes but they interchanged between them regularly, and it was a rare night that they weren't together. "I'm fine," Percy said. "I'm the Minister's aide I'm not exactly high profile."

Bill grunted. "Still."

Percy waved him off. "I'll look both ways twice before crossing the road. Unlike you. A work accident did this to you?"

"It was a book."

"A book?" Percy said in disbelief.

A smile ghosted across Bill's face. "Yeah, something I've not seen before, though I suppose I'll know better for next time."

"It wasn't related to your other activities then?"

Bill looked at him in surprise. "No, just a cursed book from some old musty library. Came in through the anonymous box. People send in their cursed objects. We break the curses and keep the stuff unless they pay the fee to get it back."

"They just give you cursed objects?"

Bill nodded tiredly. "Not everyone wants their relatives cursed stuff. Not all of it is safe, and it's a pain keeping it warded from inquisitive fingers. Think what Fred and George would have done had Mum and Dad had something behind wards that said do not touch."

Percy smiled then pulled a face causing Bill to chuckle before yawning widely. The door opened, and a female voice had Percy spinning in his chair.

"Bill? You are awake yes?"

"Yes, love," Bill replied as another yawn overtook him. "Not sure for how long though."

Fleur shot Percy an inscrutable look as she moved up the opposite side of the bed. She took Bill's hand and perched on the edge of the bed, turning to face Percy.

"Mrs Weasley," Percy said getting to his feet. "I do not think we've been formally introduced. Percy Weasley at your service." Percy held his hand out over the bed.

"Non, we have not, but I remember who you are of course." Fleur took his hand, and Percy shook it once gently before releasing it. Fleur gave him another look. "You spelled the window glass, yes?"

Percy's gaze darted to it. "Yes, I can undo it if you'd prefer."

"Non, please, leave it. The healers would not tell me how it was done and I did not wish Bill to be gaped at like a fish in a bowl."
Percy nodded in understanding and retook his seat. Even as worried as Fleur undoubtedly was, she was still beautiful. The worry creased her brow slightly, and Percy could understand how some men might think that it was worth anything to smooth the creases. Percy hid the small smile at the thought of Audrey attending his bedside. Likely she would not be as Fleur currently was, wiping his forehead with a cold cloth and murmuring things in smooth, lilting French that Percy was glad he could not understand. He rather thought Audrey would demand he moved over and give her equal space on his sick bed. She would probably eat his fruit basket while complaining there were no good films to watch while he convalesced. Percy was under no illusions of which woman he would prefer, and it wasn't the one tending his brother.

Percy stood again quietly. Bill's attention moved to him at the movement. "I should go," Percy said. "You're in good hands."

"Thank you for coming. It's good to see you, Percy."

Percy shrugged. "I'm glad it's not worse." He raised his wand reapplying his disguise. Then with a wave of a hand in farewell, he left the room and slipped down the corridor trying to act in a manner that would not draw attention to himself.

"Percy."

Percy's head lifted to look in the direction the voice came from. He watched in wary caution as his father crossed the plush carpeting and stopped in front of his desk. He had wondered if his family would officially come to give him the news. It seemed a day and a half later, they had.

"I have been trying to get hold of you, but I keep missing you."

Percy lifted an eyebrow. His gaze flicking to his empty in-tray.

"It's not something that could be sent by memo or letter," Arthur said following Percy's gaze.

Percy placed his quill down leaning back in his chair stretching out his cramped back after being hunched over parchment for the past hour. He indicated the empty visitor's chair with one hand. "Well, you've found me."

Arthur stayed on his feet. "Percy, Bill has been hurt. He's in St Mungo's in the Spell Damage ward. He's going to be OK, but he's been hurt quite badly. We thought you should know, you are still family. He was hurt at work, but we think it might have been more targeted."

"I see. It seems much more likely it was a work-related incident if it happened while Bill was working. What evidence do you have it was a targeted attack?" Percy asked mildly.

"Percy don't be obtuse. You cannot deny that You-Know-Who is back. You were there. You saw him." Arthur replied testily.

"I did and while I can accept that there are attacks perpetrated by the Death Eaters you have yet to explain why you are stirring the pot with no evidence. Bill being hurt while carrying out his duties is hardly a targeted attack. He works in an industry that has a forty percent work injury incident rate per year. That means forty percent of the work Bill undertakes will cause him some injury in one form or another. It seems presumptuous and inflammatory for you to declare that he was attacked by Death Eaters with no evidence. Such claims cause panic within the populace. That then decreases the ability for the authorities to respond to the real threats because a panicked populace is reporting that their neighbour's cat is spying on them. Or that the wizard or witch three doors down is a Death Eater and practising satanic rituals. If you are convinced that Bill's injury was malicious, have you..."
"The Aurors? You think that a Ministry and Aurory that is in the pocket of You-Know-Who will find any evidence? I thought you were intelligent Percy."

"I can assure you that despite your low opinion of me, my intelligence and morals, I am not a supporter of You-Know-Who. Your claim that You-Know-Who controls the Ministry is another example of your hyperbole, you do realise that your assertion included you as a Ministry worker."

"Don't be obtuse Percy. You cannot pretend it isn't happening. The Order needs every capable hand. Please Percy, would you not at least consider joining us. We could keep you safe if things dissolve here. You wouldn't be without protection." Arthur's hand was on the back of the chair he had refused. His knuckles were turning white at the pressure he was applying to the leather. Percy knew it was a sign his father's temper was roused and he felt his own stir in response.

"Keep me safe like you have kept Bill safe from the Death Eaters you believe perpetrated this attack against him? I cannot imagine that Bill hasn't signed up and isn't subject to all your protections. How do you propose to keep me safe? Make me move into your Headquarters?" Percy asked, his tone scornful.

"If needed!" Arthur snapped back.

"It shall not be needed. I have not changed my opinion of the Order of the Phoenix despite your recent validation by the Ministry." Percy said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Merlin, Percy would you cease this petty stubbornness. The Order is the only group taking action against Him. If things get as bad as they did last time, you will not be safe. You will not escape unscathed. Despite this clinging to some imagined principle, you are my son Percy, and I would have you safe through what comes. Even if it is so you can continue to hang on to this childish grudge of yours." Arthur declared angrily, his irritation obvious.

Percy narrowed his eyes at his father's words and sat up straighter in his chair. "I am not a child, and you cannot command me as one. You cannot bring me to heel when it suits. I have made my decision, and I have no intention of changing my mind because you are having a parental crisis due to your inability to stop harm coming to Bill. You didn't come here to tell me Bill was in the hospital because you think I should know. You came to browbeat me into doing what you want while holding Bill's accident up as the dire consequence should I refuse. I am not so ignorant as to misunderstand you."

"You're wrong," Arthur exclaimed loudly, his temper finally loosed. The hand that was on the back of the chair was clutching it tightly as if it was the only thing keeping him from dragging his wayward child out from behind the desk.

Percy rose to his feet no longer willing to sit and listen to his father. He leaned his hands on the desk as he hissed his livid response. "I am not a child, and you cannot command me as one. You cannot bring me to heel when it suits. I have made my decision, and I have no intention of changing my mind because you are having a parental crisis due to your inability to stop harm coming to Bill. You didn't come here to tell me Bill was in the hospital because you think I should know. You came to browbeat me into doing what you want while holding Bill's accident up as the dire consequence should I refuse. I am not so ignorant as to misunderstand you."

"Percival Ignatius Weasley you will stop this foolishness at once." Arthur took a step towards the desk his hand outstretched, his index finger stabbing downwards to emphasise his words. "I am your father, and as head of the family you still belong too…"

"You have no sway. Yes, I am aware of my rights. You cannot compel me as a son of your Family"
and Name. By spurning the old ways, you revoked your right to pull rank as it were." Percy sneered.

Arthur stopped and took a lungful of air that expelled through clenched teeth. "As you say I cannot force you. But by Merlin, Percy this is not over. I will not stand by and watch you blindly walk into danger. I will not go home to your mother and break that news to her. You might be an adult and you might have made your own decisions but I am your father, and your welfare is still my concern. If it comes to it, do not think I will hesitate to take whatever action is necessary to save you. From yourself if need be."

"If you are threatening to kidnap me until I see reason as you see it, then I am very much afraid that you would be wasting your time entirely. I will not join the Order of the Phoenix. I will not work in any capacity for Albus Dumbledore. The man is a lunatic."

"Albus Dumbledore deserves your respect as a man of honour and a wizard of power. You might think you understand things Percy, but you don't. You don't." Arthur replied sharply.

"We will not agree on this point, and I believe that it would be best that it was not raised between us again," Percy responded coldly. "As I said, I believe our business is concluded."

Arthur shook his head, his frustration visible in the stiff way he held his shoulders. "Percy…" he said in a softer tone trying once more.

"No," Percy snapped. "Everything that could be said this evening has been. There is no need for further discussion."

Arthur gritted his teeth and nodded once before turning on his heel and leaving the room. The door closed smartly behind him, and the sound was the signal for Percy to release his own rigid stance. His shoulders dropped, and his breath hissed out in a long exhale of tension.

His family. Damn his family. Damn them twice and thrice. He was trying for Merlin's sake, trying to juggle so many things. The situation was getting worse, he knew that, but he would never, could never, bend the knee to Albus Dumbledore.
A Day Trip

Audrey was concerned. Percy was edgy, his anxiety was manifesting as an irritating twitch in his fingers. They were twitching and tapping, and the noise was grating on her nerves. Audrey understood that today was important to Percy, but she couldn't decipher if his nerves were caused by his concern of her meeting his brothers or something else.

Audrey had her own thoughts about today. It had taken nearly a month since the suggestion was raised for them to be able to find a weekend when everyone was free. She and Percy had work and commitments to Audrey’s family for Sunday lunch.

Audrey was torn over how well her parents had taken to Percy. They insisted he visited regularly, while she was glad they liked him and they all got on, she was a little put out at having to share their weekends with her parents.

When Percy had told her his twin brothers had been in contact and he had met up with them, she'd been cautiously optimistic. Percy had a large family, and while as she understood he hadn't always fit in they had at least accepted him. The split was difficult. She saw it when they were at her parents, he would make every effort to get along with everyone, but she caught the odd wistful look when they were all sat around the table.

Audrey had held out hope that Percy might have attended his elder brother's wedding, but he'd stood firm and refused. Audrey presumed that the relationship between the two was strained. That, or possibly the relationship between them hadn't ever been very good before the split, or things had been said that couldn't be easily forgiven. Percy was hard headed when he set himself against something. She hadn't seen him be properly stubborn about many things, it had happened rarely. Percy was usually quite happy to go along with most things, so when they had run up against something he had stood firm against it was Audrey who acquiesced.

The twins, George and Fred, Percy spoke of with a fond if exasperated warmth. He always had a kind word for them praising either their enthusiasm or underlying cleverness. The age gap was smaller, and Percy said he'd often looked after them. Audrey supposed that their relationship had always been close. Granted Percy spoke of his family hardly at all, but in two years Audrey had gleaned bits here and there.

Then something had happened last week. So far, Audrey wasn't sure if Percy had told her everything. Bill the eldest had been hurt in an accident at work and taken to the hospital. Percy had called to say he was going to the hospital after work. When he had made it back to her flat later that evening, he had been visibly relieved. Bill would live, though with some scarring and Percy and Bill seemed to have gotten over the initial meeting with good grace.

Audrey had been delighted for him. Percy had made inroads with three of his brothers and she thought some of whatever it was that stood between them, might have been resolved.

But then just two days later, it all seemed to go horribly wrong. Again. Something else had happened to upset Percy, and it involved his family. Personally, Audrey was beginning to see Percy's point when it came to his family. They seemed to stumble from one drama to the next. Percy wouldn't tell her what had happened, and he had gone back to shutting down any conversation that broached the topic of his family, bar the proposed meeting of his twin brothers.

The events had done nothing to reassure Audrey that today was going to go well. She wanted it to for Percy's sake, but she remained apprehensive.
Audrey looped an arm around Percy's waist as they approached the vast arched door of the Museum. Percy smiled at her encouragingly, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders as he led them closer. Audrey scanned ahead trying to see the two brothers they were to meet.

She spotted them leaning against the curved wall and nudged Percy gently. "Is that them?"

"Yes," Percy replied.

They approached, and the twins straightened off the wall standing slightly stiffly upright. Audrey got the impression that they were as nervous about this meeting as she was. Comforted somewhat that she wasn't alone in her nerves she let Percy complete the introductions

"Fred, George, this is Audrey. Audrey these are my brothers, Fred and George." Percy introduced them stiffly. They held out their hands to her, shaking hers gently, smiling broad smiles of welcome.

"How do I tell you apart?" Audrey asked glancing towards Percy.

"Well usually."

"No one can."

"However, we have recently been told,"

"We aren't actually identical. Although it takes specialist knowledge."

"Built up from years of study to be able to tell."

Audrey's glance bounced from one to the other as they spoke, finishing each other's sentences. She glanced briefly at Percy to see his reaction to the odd way of talking. Percy looked resigned and slightly quelling.

"However, since we'd like to make a good impression," one of the twins winked at her with a cheeky smile flashing over his face.

"We promise that just for today, we'll answer to our own names." The other finished triumphantly.

Percy looked startled at their words and was about to say something, but Audrey got in first. "Percy told me that you two liked to play practical jokes." She narrowed her eyes slightly considering them. "Will you tell me who is who to start with? Without knowing who is who until I speak to you, I'm not sure that your offer is as good as it sounds."

The twins said nothing but stood silently smiling at her. Audrey's own smile slowly built. "Fine!" she said laughing. "I'll take what I can get. After all, I've got Percy on my side, I'm sure between us we can work it out."

"Challenge accepted!" One of the brothers declared holding out his hand. When Audrey placed hers in his, instead of shaking it, he turned it and bowed slightly over it. Releasing her hand, he swept an arm dramatically towards the doors of the museum and the people streaming inside. "Your museum awaits milady!" he said winking at her. She eyed him, amused and tucked her arm back through Percy's.

They set off up the stairs and into the museum proper. The group paused briefly inside the door to drop their donations into the box and walked forwards. The twins halted as they glanced to the side and caught sight of the diplodocus. They stood and gawked openly, stepping closer to the towering frame.
Audrey came up beside them, Percy by her side, delighted laughter in her face at their expressions. "It's always like that the first time," she murmured to Percy. "You can always tell the new visitors to the ones that have been before."

Percy looked at her. "I'll try and get them to behave." He shot a worried glance to his brothers who were starting to amble down the length of the fossil, their identical grins blooming.

"Nonsense," Audrey said. "They are grownups, I'm sure it will be fine, and anyway, dinosaurs work for little and big kids alike. Do you think we should take them there first or promise they can go if they are on their best behaviour?" She smiled up at him mischievously, and it drew an answering smile to his face, the worried creases smoothing away.

The twins came bouncing back words tumbling out in their excitement. "How do we get to the dinosaurs? The rest of them. Is the T-Rex still here?" they asked over each other.

Audrey sent a smug look at Percy before turning back to the twins. "Dinosaurs first or last Fred?"

"First!" Fred said.

"George?"

"First!" he immediately chimed in.

She nodded. "This way then." Leading them out of the hall and into the flow of people.

Audrey liked Fred and George. She'd had no luck with their names, having not managed to guess correctly the first time she addressed one of them. She didn't mind the game though, they were polite and courteous and genuinely funny. It was clear to her, that like Percy when they first met, their experiences of life outside whatever commune they had been brought up in was limited. They did nothing overtly obvious, but some of the displays in the museum seemed to be genuinely new ideas and concepts to them. Perhaps though, Audrey admitted to herself, she was watching for these things. After all, she and Percy had been together a while, and he had finally lost the blank looks that had caught her attention in the beginning. Now she had an idea of what caused them in the first place it was simple to spot them on the faces of his brothers.

They stared at Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, and Big Ben like typical tourists. Audrey led them down Parliament Street filling them in with what little information she had managed to retain from her school days. As they passed the Cenopath, she explained the significance of the monument knowing that British history was something that they didn't have, thanks to their upbringing. At the gates to Downing Street, she quietly giggled as they peered through the gateway to the quiet side road in disbelief.

"I don't know why that house," Audrey replied to their inquiries. "I guess that at some point, one of the Prime Ministers lived there and bequeathed it to the government for the purpose of housing the Prime Minister or something. I honestly don't know, but all of them live there."

"Oh," they said unconcernedly. "So, are you hungry yet? Because we're hungry and I've been dying to try Chinese food."

"George?" Audrey hazarded.

"Yes," George grinned back.

"Well then George, if you aren't too fatigued then I suggest we get back on the tube and head over to
China town.

"China town?"

"You'll understand when you see it," Audrey said. "Come on I know a couple of good places." She started back towards the tube station. "We'll just need to jump on the tube for ten minutes then across a few streets."

Soul searching the muggles called it. Magical folk didn't. Souls were real things in the magical world. If you didn't know what you were doing, messing around with your soul got you into the kind of trouble that St Mungo's couldn't fix. It would likely as not get you a lengthy stay in the Department of Mysteries. That's if you survived whatever you'd done of course.

Percy wasn't soul searching. He was doing the next best thing. He was reviewing his life and weighing every decision he had made. He was plotting his future. The likely outcomes, assigning variables and tracking the results through a complex arithmancy equation that was at least fifty percent complete rubbish. Drawing straws would have given him as much clarity, but the swirling numbers gave him the illusion that there was logic fuelling his thought processes.

It was time to pin his colours to the mast. It was time to sign up, stand up and be a part of fighting for the future he wanted.

It terrified him.

The consequences stared him in the face from his glowing equation. Total loss. Audrey, his family, his job, his home, his freedom.

Death in the face of that seemed simple. Percy didn't think he was worth torturing. He held no information that You-Know-Who didn't already have. At least if he were caught, it would be quick.

He noticed the curious glances of his brothers and Audrey and realised he had missed whatever was being said. He screwed up the piece of paper he had been scribbling on as they walked ahead and chatted. He had tried to keep his head together today, but seeing Fred and George treat Audrey with civility and warmth was eroding his ability to keep his worlds separate. They would want to see each other again. She liked them, and the twins seemed to like Audrey in return.

If he wanted to live in a world where that was possible, then it was time.

"Percy?"

Percy shoved the piece of paper deep into his pocket and smiled apologetically at Audrey. "Sorry I was miles away. Where are we going for lunch?"

"George wants Chinese food, so I thought The Lotus House? It's only fifteen minutes away. Or maybe The Great Wall if they are busy."

"Sounds like a good idea." Percy wrapped an arm around Audrey kissing the top of her head before tucking her against him as they continued down the street.

His brothers chatted and joked, Audrey laughed and returned their humour with her own. Percy hung his hope that this would not be the last time but the first of many.

Lunch had been followed by a walk in one of the large parks until the daylight had begun to wane and Audrey had made polite noises about getting home. Percy sent Audrey home without him,
explaining he wanted a quick word with his brothers and he would meet her at her place. They walked her to the Underground station, and she vanished inside.

He led Fred and George to a side alley full of collapsed cardboard boxes rotting away into grey mush and apparated them to his flat. Coats and shoes divested he led them to the sofa and indicated for them to sit down.

"It will take Audrey half an hour or so to get home, so we've got that long," he said as he dropped into the other chair. "Not that I am not grateful for the efforts you have made," he said without preamble. "But it makes me wonder where you two learnt how to operate in the muggle world."

George looked surprised at the accusation in his tone. "We didn't want to muck it up for you Percy, and we wanted to meet her, she's nice."

Fred pulled out his notebook handing it over. "We asked some people we know for help," he explained. "We took notes, lots and lots of notes. They told us what to wear and how to get around."

Percy looked down and opened the notebook flicking through the pages. They were covered with notes; how to buy tickets, how to navigate the trains, and buses, the shops and restaurants. Notes about the money, directions, and comments about trivia, bits of history that any ordinary muggle would probably know. All scribbled in Fred's hand. He swallowed, "You did this just to meet Audrey?"

"We didn't want to look like loonies did we? And Audrey's great." Fred said nonchalantly.

Percy looked up at them both sat clearly wanting to please. "You sent me that note, about Bill." Not sure what he was asking.

"Well yeah, your family, we thought you'd want to know. We sent it as soon as we found out. Err sorry about the state it was in, we were in the workshop, and it was all we had to hand."

"Dad. Dad didn't come and see me until a day and a half later." Percy admitted quietly. He drew a hand down his face. "It didn't go well." Fred and George winced, Percy ignored it and continued. "Thank you for that. For letting me know as soon as you did." They shrugged as if it hadn't even been a consideration. Percy leant back in his chair weighing his next words. "I've been thinking. I've been able to help you with the shop, and the forms and what not—,"

"We're really grateful," George broke in.

Percy's brows drew together faintly at the interruption. "Yes," he said quelling his brothers into silence with his stare. "I was looking through the latest legislation from the Ministry that might affect you..." he trailed off again, making his mind up just to go with it. "What do you know of the new apprenticeship scheme?" he asked abruptly.

"Err," Fred said. "Well, we were sent some sort of diversity questionnaire about who we employed, then received a pack back about taking on an apprentice and some of the reasons why. But the shop work is handled by Verity, and the back end stuff?" he shook his head. "It would take too long to train someone up from scratch, and finding someone who has the knack for it is like searching for a needle in a haystack. The wand business is too small to need anyone. We're doing OK, so we have mostly ignored it."

Percy nodded. "That makes sense for you I suppose. I had a look over the paperwork in case you indicated an interest. If, if you know anyone, who wants to take one up," he said haltingly, even though he had decided to say something, he still struggled to get the words out. "Tell them to take
any contract to a solicitor, a good one."

"Why?"

"The standard Ministry contract leaves the apprentice open to..." Percy paused searching. "Well it boils down to indentured labour," he said finally.

Fred looked at him a faint frown on his face, the thoughts flickering through his sharp mind. "The only people who would use a standard Ministry contract are those who wouldn't know to draw their own up, or quite what a magical contract can entail," he said.

"Solicitors are expensive," George put in. "Especially a good one."

Percy said nothing allowing them to draw the conclusions he had.

"The apprenticeships would be taken up by those without the connections, the people whose families don't have the money or position or connections to get them something," George mused, following the logic.


"How bad are they?" George asked grimly.

"Bad," Percy said. "They could get themselves into a lot of trouble very easily, without proper guidance."

"Which wouldn't be readily available to them," Fred pointed out. "What can we do?" Fred asked George.

"To fix this? You can't," Percy interrupted. "The apprenticeships have got a lot of backing; it was approved by nearly three-quarters of the Wizengamot. You won't be able to stop them. The Order, well, there's nothing they can do except make a fuss and paint targets on themselves. I didn't tell you so you could stir up trouble."

"No," George said. "We weren't planning on doing, but we can get the word out, let Hogwarts know, and they can tell the students."

"Dumbledore voted in favour of them," Percy said. "He's not going to withdraw his support."

Fred and George exchanged a glance. "We weren't thinking of Dumbledore."

Percy looked at them with sharply narrowed eyes. "Oh?" The single word carrying more weight and questions.

"Look, Percy, you said you didn't want to be involved, and we're not going to drag you into something you don't want to be a part of, so the less said, the better?" Fred offered, no humour showing on his face.

Percy met his gaze. "I am a part of it. As much as I don't want to be, I am. Bill is in the hospital, you two are up to who knows what, and I'm going to go out on a limb and say Mum and Dad don't know?" he didn't wait for the shaking heads. "I can give you information, not much, and not a lot all at once, but maybe it will help." He took a deep breath releasing it in a heavy sigh. "If I stand to one side and do nothing they'll win. Dumbledore wants to overthrow the Ministry but not lead it, leaving a vacuum that will be filled by the person with the most clout and not the best person for the job. You-Know-Who wants to have the Ministry in his pocket to run a dictatorship over us all. The
current Ministry doesn't care if Audrey is a Muggle. Unless we have children, she's to be kept in the
dark about magic, and I can see why that's reasonable. If we split up and she told someone, they'd
think she was crazy. The next administration, I don't believe that they'll be as forgiving. So I'll help,
as much as I can. I'd still rather this was kept quiet, though."

Fred and George exchanged another long look. "What if we could find someone, someone
trustworthy and dependable. Someone that you could pass the information along to, that worked in
the Ministry? That way you wouldn't have to risk being spotted seeing us."

"How many people are there like that in the Ministry? That isn't in You-Know-Who's pocket or
Dumbledore's?" Percy asked dispiritedly.

"Percy," George said. "Since when have we failed to deliver?" He smiled reassuringly. "We'll find
someone. They'll make contact as soon as its sorted. Don't worry mate, we'll keep your secrets. No
one will find out about Audrey from us."

Percy checked his watch. "I need to get moving, Audrey will be home soon, and I should probably
pick up something to eat for us both."

They all stood and went to retrieve their coats and shoes from the hall. Fred and George clapped
Percy confidently on the shoulder. "Thanks for today Percy, and tell Audrey thanks too. We should
do it again sometime." George said.

Percy looked slightly startled but nodded. "I'll pass along your thanks." They vanished with a crack
and Percy paused only a moment to centre himself. Relief at the decision he made flowing over him,
along with a new host of worries. The consequences of someone catching him squirrelling
information out of the Ministry to Fred and George's contact resurrected the old fear he'd buried deep
within him.
Spying and a Coup d'état

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 1997

Kingsley Shacklebolt winked at Percy as he left the Minister's office and passed by the younger man's desk on the way out the door. Percy pretended not to notice. He had come to the realisation that the six requests by the Head of the DMLE to see the Minister this week were part of a ploy. It was Wednesday, nobody needed six meetings with the Minister in three days.

The Minister was, Percy knew, getting more and more annoyed about the constant disruptions and meeting requests, never mind the meetings themselves. He hadn't been able to turn Kingsley down, they had been to discuss the budget for the DMLE in light of the wave of attacks that had taken place, Percy's brother amongst them.

Auror Shacklebolt was pushing for paid overtime, better equipment, and more training. In short everything the Head of the DMLE would push for in such a case, but rather than being polite about it, Auror Shacklebolt was getting up the Minister's nose. When the Minister had been unable to have the actual meeting due to his schedule, he'd come back from his lunch breaks muttering imprecations. Percy got the impression that Auror Shacklebolt had somehow managed to find the Minister at lunch, and turn the hour-long leisurely meal the Minister liked to enjoy, into a half-hour meeting about budgeting.

"Weasley!" The demand came from inside the Minister's office, through the open door. Percy picked up his parchment and quill and walked through the door to stand in front of the Minister's desk.

"Yes, Minister?"

"Weasley, it cannot be borne."

"Minister?" Percy asked deferentially.

"Six meetings Weasley! Even when I say no he's finding me in the corridors and at lunch! You are to block all further requests from the Auror Department!"

"I'm sorry Minister, but Auror Shacklebolt has the right to speak to you directly," Percy said. "To block his requests would be acting against the legislation of the Minister for Magic's office and could lead to a formal complaint." The Minister's face turned an interesting shade of pink on hearing the news.

"Minister," a cold voice drawled, heavy sarcasm on the title. "What is the good of having staff if you don't use them? Have Weasley here meet with Shacklebolt. If that doesn't impinge on legislation?"

Lucius Malfoy was sat in the corner of the office, his sneer firmly in place, a lazy hand resting on the head of his cane.

The Minister looked at Lucius before turning to Percy. "Well?" he snapped at Percy. "Would that work?"

Percy paused framing his response. As he did a Ministerial memo folded into an aeroplane flew into the room and stopped, hovering in front of Percy. Percy plucked it out of the air and unfolded it, he glanced over it quickly. "Auror Shacklebolt requests a meeting at your convenience to further discuss
implementing the new proposals you have discussed."

"That's it!" The Minister shouted, banging a fist down on the desk for emphasis. "I will not see that man anymore. Weasley, deal with it."

Percy opened his mouth to object.

"I don't want to hear it. Meet with him, take notes, write a report. I don't care! I will not have this office continuously interrupted by that man again. Just where does he expect me to find the budget?! Well? Why are you stood there? Get out!"

Percy nodded to the Minister and turned to leave, nodding to Lucius Malfoy, as little as he could without being rude. Lucius smiled a condescending smile and nodded more deeply in reply. "Good day, Mr Weasley."

Percy left the room and closed the door firmly behind him. He went to his desk and jotted a reply onto the memo, setting up a meeting for that afternoon. He sent the plane whizzing from the room, Fred and George had come through. They'd found him a contact and their soon to be meetings the idea of the Minister himself, helped along by no other than Lucius Malfoy.

Percy swallowed, pulling a report towards himself, he stared at it determinedly, forcing his thoughts to clear and focus on his work. He'd made his choices, now he would honour them.

An hour of diligent work later, Percy tossed a quick spell at his door and another at the Minister's before he cleared his desk. Yes, he would have to speak to Shacklebolt about his budget, but that was not the point of the meeting after all. The meeting was all about what Percy could supply and how much that might help. Percy pulled the Minister's briefing reports towards him. A quick scan provided no more information that Percy already had.

The Head of the DMLE would have his own battles, budgets and funding the least of them if things continued. Perhaps if Percy could offer a way to ensure that Shacklebolt could trust the Department he headed up unequivocally, that might at least give Shacklebolt more latitude. Decided that that would be enough to bring to the meeting in the first instance, Percy flicked his wand at one of his magically expanded filing cabinets.

The filing cabinets were stuffed full of files from every Minister for Magic that had sat in the office. After a hundred years passed the originals were sent down to the Archives, but copies were kept in the Minister's aide's office. It would not do for a Minister for Magic to have to send a request down to the Archives to retrieve a file. Much better for the Minister's aide to produce the relevant file with a simple spell taught to each aide that sat at Percy's desk.

Percy had had to take an oath of allegiance to the Ministry of Magic upon becoming the Minister's aide. After making that oath, he had to swear a number of other vows, one of which was that the spells to operate the filing cabinets would never be divulged to anyone but his replacement. Peculiarly confidentiality of what went on in the Minister's office was not covered by any of the oaths or vows required. Percy presumed that it had been included initially, but persons throughout history who had planned a takeover would have needed an inside man, and the Minister's aide was as inside as it got.

The filing cabinet drawer slid open, and a file flew up and landed on Percy's desk. The draw slid closed again sealing with a solid sounding thunk. Percy glanced down at the folder, an eyebrow raised at the dossier's title but never the less he pulled parchment and inked quill towards him and started to read.
Percy knocked lightly on the Minister's door. On receiving the permission to enter Percy opened the door and moved into the office. Malfoy was no longer lounging in the corner, so he must have left when Percy had been away from his desk or via the Minister's floo.

"What is it, Weasley?" Scrimgeour asked.

"I am about to leave for my meeting with Auror Shacklebolt. I expect to be away from my desk for half an hour or an hour perhaps. Shall I leave the door open?"

"No close it. An hour of uninterrupted peace sounds just the thing."

"Very well Minister," Percy said before turning and leaving.

In the corridor outside the entrance to his office, Percy cast another spell. When someone came by the door would display a message that the Minister for Magic was unavailable and to come back later. The spell would allow department messages through to await Percy's return, but everyone else would find no way of getting through the door.

Percy walked through the Ministry on his way to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He exchanged greeting and polite nods with those he passed. Upon entering the department, he made his way towards Shacklebolt's office and knocked on the door. Shacklebolt bade him enter, and Percy did, trying to look as unruffled as he wished he felt. He felt as if the eyes of every Auror in the department were boring a collective hole through his back and he was determined that they wouldn't see him squirm.

"Ah, Mr Weasley, I expected the Minister, is he running late?"

Percy stepped over the threshold feeling immeasurably better when the door closed behind him cutting off the stares. "I am here in the Minister's stead Auror Shacklebolt."

"I see. Well down to business then. Take a seat. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No thank you," Percy replied as he took the seat offered.

"I should tell you that you are free to speak freely here," Shacklebolt said seriously, retaking his seat. Percy nodded then said bluntly. "What do you need to know?"

"Everything."

"That seems a little unachievable. Do you really want to know that the Minister has a preference for coffee over tea though he always drinks tea in public because he thinks it makes him look more 'British'?"

"He does?"

Percy nodded.

"Well no, not that. But who is he meeting with, talking to? What is being done? Actually done, rather than the sound bites."

"You would know as much as I, after all the Aurors must know the law to uphold it."

"Pre-warned is pre-armed, and you know how these things go. Just because it's the law doesn't mean that it is inflexible. Whatever you can get, what departments are lost, what legislation is coming, that sort of thing. Who is still with us, those that we can rely on and trust. They might be able to come
together and fight back."

"Or become targets themselves."

"Everyone is a target. I don't need to know your reasons Mr Weasley, but you aren't in any danger, are you?"

"I believe Auror Shacklebolt that as you have just said, everyone is a target. I perhaps don't share the ideology that my family does, but it does not mean I lost my morals along the way."

"No, I didn't mean to imply you did, only that if you found a situation which became untenable you…"

"Thankfully no such ill fortune has befallen me. I thank you for the offer, but currently, it is entirely unnecessary."

"Good. That is good."

"The Aurory Department no longer take the sworn oaths, do they?"

"No," Shacklebolt replied. "Why do you mention it?"

"You are looking for ways in which to boost the Aurory are you not. Training, equipment, and so on, as I am sure the Minister has told you, is expensive. The vows of office that the Aurory used to swear, unite the department do they not? Inspiring a bond between Aurors. Offering the assurance and confidence that each fellow Auror is in a position to support and protect their brothers and sisters in service. These oaths do not require any additional budget yet have a proven boost to the performance of the units. You might find, Auror Shacklebolt, that while the Ministry budgets cannot be stretched to offer a tenth of what your latest requisition has asked for, no one would think it strange that the Aurory Department renewed their oaths. Indeed, an Aurory that was operating under such vows might find public relations much more comfortable. The public, I am sure would be reassured that their Aurory was working under an oath of fairness and non-discrimination. Don't you?"

Kingsley looked at Percy puzzled. "The oaths of office as a tool? I do not think that they have been in use for quite some time. There might be some resistance to enforcing them once more. Where did you hear about them?"

"The Minister's office is privy to the minutiae of how each Department of the Ministry is run, Auror Shacklebolt, even if some of those methods are no longer in use."

"Perhaps they might be worth looking into. I can see that they might be able to offer advantages that we do not currently have."

"Quite," Percy replied. "As it stands, the Ministerial budget cannot offer any additional funds. Perhaps in the next quarter review, it could be readdressed, but for now, Auror Shacklebolt if you will excuse the Muggle expression. I suggest that you work outside the box. By motivating your staff and improving their performance, you may find that the Review Committee looks more favourably upon your request. No one likes to think that tax payer's money is being thrown down a black hole. Prove your department has what it takes to step up to the challenges they face with no budget. Prove a measurable improvement. Chart what more funding is expected to do and then the Review Committee will find refusing your request that much more difficult. If you discover that you are struggling to pull the relevant information together, I may be able to offer my services. It behoves me to ensure that you are not wasting the Minister's time after all. He finds that much of his days are
taken up with meetings with Mr Malfoy."

"Mr Malfoy?"

"Oh yes, Mr Malfoy has been generous enough to aid the Minister by offering him advice regarding juggling the demands of the office."

"I see. Is the Minister in need of such advice?"

"The Minister for Magic is a position of power and responsibility. Opinions and advice can only be welcome, do you not think? I am sure that Minister analyses a great deal of information before making his opinion known. Mr Malfoy suggested that I could attend these meeting in the Minster's stead. I, myself, informed the Minister that this would not break protocol and would fulfil the obligation of the Minister for Magic's office towards the department heads if the Minister was unable to attend in person."

"I see," Kingsley replied again, a thoughtful look on his face as he scribbled something on a scrap of paper.

"I am sure that you do Auror Shacklebolt. Now I believe that concludes our meeting for the present. I can pull together some information for you this afternoon and have it on your desk first thing in the morning. You are familiar with the 'brevis notitia ex fama', perhaps?"

"I do not believe so," Shacklebolt replied politely.

"Very well." Percy pulled a report from Shacklebolt's in-tray towards him. "Observe." He took his wand and with a full circle and a flick he recited the incantation. The front page of the report shimmered and coalesced into succinct bullet points. Percy looked expectantly at Shacklebolt who glanced at the report then Percy and nodded.

"Some of the reports can be lengthy, and it can help draw out pertinent information," Percy said blandly. He stood from the desk, smoothing his robes. "My report shall be on your desk first thing in the morning Auror Shacklebolt. If the Minister for Magic's office can be of any more help, do let me know I have been tasked with dealing with your requests personally."

"I believe that I may call upon you further then Mr Weasley if your report pans out. I shall certainly call upon your services regarding information for the Review Committee. I am committed to ensuring that the Aurory offers the best service it can," Kingsley replied.

"I shall ensure I clear a spot in my diary for you then," Percy replied. "If you have a preference then do let me know. I shall inform the Minister that you are willing to work with me in his stead."

"That would be satisfactory," Kingsley said standing to offer his hand to Percy. Percy accepted the handshake which was brief and firm on both sides, then the younger wizard left the office. Kingsley sat at his desk wondering why after so long in this job it surprised him that people could still surprise him.

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December 1997

"PERCY!"

The shout brought him to a halt. A glance around showed that other than the two of them, the corridors were yet empty, and no one would discover them.
Huffing and wheezing Mills caught up to him. "Weasly. Merlin, I'm out of shape. I've been chasing you through this accursed place for ten minutes."

"My apologies," Percy replied waiting while Mills caught his breath. "Something troubling you?"

"Yes! Yes, of course, anyone with half a brain is troubled and you Weasly, you are not missing half a brain."

"You flatter me."

"I don't. I need info, Weasly. I need it, and I'm about willing to pull in every marker I've got to get it. I'll owe a few if that's what it takes."

Percy frowned sending another glance up and down the corridor. "How is your day looking?"

"Fucking awful."

Percy rolled his eyes. "After work tonight, the Witch and Wand. You can lament your appalling love life to me, and I will listen with the patience of a saint. I will not, however, pass information to you about a witch who has made her intentions clear."

Mills looked at Percy with a frown. Percy continued. "That's my offer, take it or leave it. You know White won't stand your complaining anymore."

The sound of a scuffed footstep came from further down the corridor out of sight of the two men. Mills looked at Percy in silent question. Percy twitched a hand in acknowledgement.

"Tonight, the Witch and Wand and you can tell me your troubles," Percy said encouragingly.

Mills nodded. "Thanks, Percy, it's just, she won't even speak to me."

They met outside the pub and Percy paused on entering. "Perhaps we could go somewhere else? It looks a little busy, you wouldn't want to put people off their drinks."

"Sure," Mills said. "My place?"

Percy nodded, and Mills whipped them away in a crack of apparition. Once the preliminaries of arrival had been dealt with Percy settled on to the sofa.

"Drink?" Mills offered.

"Yes, something soft, please."

Mills pulled his wand from its holster, and it dipped and twirled summoning the drinks from the kitchen. "I don't have a girlfriend or ex."

"I know," Percy replied. "But the reason you chased me through the Ministry is the same reason we're here tonight, and if anyone asks you are lamenting the fact a witch won't pay you a moment of consideration."

"It's bad then?"

"If you've heard the rumours flying about the canteen, then yes."

"How long has the Minister got left?"
"A week at best. Though more if Scrimgeour goes quietly."

"Percy, my family. You know that they are on the wrong side. I do not want to tell either my nephew or niece that they are orphans. You've got to help me, Percy."

"There little I can tell you. Scrimgeour is going. So far I don't know who will replace him or if I'll even have a job once they do."

"Your family your parents they're part of the Order of the Phoenix, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Percy, are you? Is there anything the Order can do to keep my family safe?"

"I'm not, and I cannot tell you not to go to the Order. I will say that if you want something from them, the cost is not always commensurate with the result."

"Then what can I do? There's got to be something!"

"There's very little at the moment. Malfoy is engineering it from the Ministry side, and I don't suppose there is any doubt about who is giving him orders."

"So that's it?"

Percy was about to reply when a knocking came from Mills' front door. The two wizards exchanged a look before Mills got to his feet and went to answer the door. He was back moments later followed by White.

"I heard you were down the Witch and Wand tonight. The place is packed. When I couldn't see you, I thought I'd try here." White said. "Now what's this about a witch that won't pay you any mind?"

"How did you hear about tonight?" Mills asked

"Theresa in Accounting. Caught me on the way out, said that if I was passing, I might find you there. Said she'd heard it from her boss that Mills had been knocked back by some witch. Thought it was fishy since her boss is hardly someone anyone with sense socialises with."

"He was likely whoever it was listening in," Percy said.

"Listening in?" White asked in surprise. "What for? Phil getting knocked back by a witch isn't exactly groundbreaking. Happens all the time."

Mills flushed but replied. "There is no witch, you git. Percy made that up."

"Then what?"

"Tony, you bloody cretin, you've heard the rumours. Now use that brain of yours for something useful. My family, Tony. My niece is half-blood, and my nephew is muggle-born."

"Oh."

"Yes, bloody 'oh'. Now, before your interruption, we were discussing something. Can you keep your trap shut or not?"

"Yes, yes of course sorry."
Percy leant forward sipping from the orange juice Mills had given him. "Look it's not simple, OK. Do anything obvious, and you might as well paint the targets on them yourself. The muggle parents, how much do they know? How often do you see them? Will not seeing them for a few months cause upset? You need to minimise the contact. The regime coming, it's going to go after the muggle-born first. Then the blood traitors and half-bloods no one is getting out of this unscathed unless You-Know-Who is stopped."

"The Order, they worked against him last time. What about this time? Everyone's heard how your brothers herded people into their shop when the Alley was attacked, and nothing got through their wards. They've got to be getting help."

"I don't know. I don't have any contact with the Order. My family do, my parents have more sway than any of my brothers that might have joined, but I don't exactly speak to them. Look if you are desperate to get your family in under the protection of the Order, I can maybe find someone and get it passed up the chain. But they won't shelter muggles, and the best you can expect is a safe house somewhere and waiting it out."

"And if we don't want to wait it out?"

"If we want to do something?"

"Overt action on your own, alone, will get you killed. This isn't some kind of action film where the lone hero stands against an army and triumphs. You will be killed, and that will be the end of it. Rational caution is the best thing at the moment."

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"Come on Percy, you're the Minister's aide. You're about to work hand in hand with whatever puppet they put in that swanky office. And your girlfriend is a muggle."

Percy froze.

"Fuck, she is, isn't she?!" Mills exclaimed with a trace of guilt.

"What?" White exclaimed his head spinning to face Percy.

"I knew it! Well, I suspected. You never did ask when I prattled on about the kids and the muggle world, and you knew what I was talking about. There are not many ways to be that familiar with the muggle world. Action film? Lone Hero?" Mills shook his head.

"A muggle really? I'd never have thought. No wonder you kept her quiet." White chimed in.

"I am not ashamed of Audrey," Percy snapped at White. "I have nothing to be ashamed of, and I will thank you for keeping comments like that to yourself."

White held his hands up. "Woah, Woah. I didn't mean it like that. Just you never brought her up, never introduced her to us."

"My private life is my own," Percy said frostily.

"Yeah of course, but as she's a muggle she wouldn't have been able to come to the pub would she. We could have gone muggle," White said. "Phil has dragged me to enough of them with his family I can manage the muggle world quite well."
Percy shook his head. "I think we have strayed from the topic at hand."

"Not really mate," Mills said. "But if you're as invested as me then fine. I'll let Trevor's parents know we need to lay low for a while."

Percy rubbed his head. "Until the Minister is replaced keep your head down. There have been rumours of more reshuffles coming. They can't put anyone with ambition in office in case he doesn't toe the party line, but a complete idiot is going to need too much handholding. Malfoy can't exactly deliver all the speeches, can he? Either way, it will be an opportunity that won't be passed up to get rid of the dissenters."

"That ponce would like to try," White replied. "I don't think I've ever met a man who loves himself quite as much as Mr Malfoy. How long does it take to brush his hair in the morning? Do you think he puts in in a braid like your Beatrice used to before she went to sleep? To stop it tangling?"

"You're a strange bloke Phil," Mills said.

"And that's the image I'm going to be thinking of tomorrow when he swans into the office. Thanks for that." Percy said wryly. "Lucius Malfoy with a braid and silk pyjamas because you know they'd have to be silk."

The three shared a laugh before the mood went sombre again.

"If you can share more will you?" Mills asked. "Nothing that's going to put you in the firing line but anything that will help keep my family safe."

"Yes," Percy said. "Yes of course."

"Weasley, a word if you would."

Percy nodded rising to his feet, straightened his robes and followed the Minister's retreating form into his office.

"Shut the door, Weasley."

Percy did as requested, and stood waiting for further instruction. To his surprise Scrimgeour drew his wand sending a twist of magic out into the room, activating the inbuilt anti-spying wards embedded into the fabric of the office.

"No doubt, as you seem to keep yourself well informed, that you are aware that my tenure as Minister for Magic is over."

Percy nodded mutely.

"Yes, well as I said, you do keep yourself well informed. However, what you don't know is that Pius Thickenesse will be taking over. He's a moron, but he will fulfil the role prescribed for him. I have for what it's worth, put a word in for you. Whatever your views, you've never let it affect your work and being well informed at least has made you useful."

"Thank you, Minister."

"Don't thank me," Scringemour replied. "I didn't do it for the right reasons. You're a good worker but that split from your family, well, I doubt you'll ever get out from under it. Not many people set themselves against Dumbledore and win. The other side, of course, is stupid enough to think you'll
toady to them. You won't. You're many things Weasley, but sycophant isn't one of them. You've never liked me, but you've worked for me, and I'm not such an arse I can't recognise it. So here's the brass tacks. Thicknesse is to be Minister, but he won't be sworn in. I don't know if it's because You-Know-Who wants to be able to replace him if he becomes a liability. Or because their sources aren't as good as they should be, and no one but me or you can clue them into what taking the oaths mean."

"He won't be able to control the Ministry; the wards won't recognise him," Percy said.

"Exactly. I will be surrendering my post, Weasley. I will comply with Ministry protocol, and that will leave just you with access. Keep your job, Weasley. Get in contact with that ragtag group of idiots Albus calls an Order and end this. I've done things I shouldn't, in weakness I accepted that what I needed and thought little of the consequences. Well, my chickens have come home to roost and there's nothing more I can do. I don't regret it, I'm not some sop to think I could have done better. That some glorious victory could have been mine if only. I did what I could, what was possible. I'll live with that for as long as they let me."

Scrimgeour sent another twist of magic out into the office cancelling the wards. "You'll at least be able to hear everything. Though whatever drivel that might be, I wish you the joy of. I shall be glad not to have to listen to Malfoy's condescending drivel any longer. One bright spot I suppose."

Scrimgeour glanced around the office. "Right then, Weasley," he said with a nod then walked past Percy out through the door.

Percy didn't move. He stood frozen listening as the outer door opened and closed behind the Minister.

Percy wand came up in his hand. His hand made a movement. His wand twirled swooped and dipped mirroring the actions of the Minister from moments before. His magic washed outwards. The wards rose at his command. Percy knees promptly gave way leaving him crumpled on the plush carpeting, the desk of the Minister for Magic looming over him.

The Minister's aide could only control the Ministry wards when given direct permission from the sworn Minister for Magic and would only revert control when the sworn Minister desired it. Technically it meant that the aide could act in the Minister's stead when they were unavailable or travelling. In this case, as Thickenesse wouldn't be sworn in, it would leave Percy the only sworn Ministry employee with access to the full might of the Ministry. From this very office, he would be able to lock the Ministry down, close off floors, shut down the floo, the apparition points, all the public entry points. He had the ultimate power over the Ministry itself. He had become the Keeper of the Keys.

Logic fought blind panic and won long enough to get him off the floor and back to his own desk. Logic declared this nothing new. He'd always had the access. Never the permission, but always the access. Logic also demanded that he pull himself together. If he was reading Scrimgeour right, then Percy was carrying the responsibility until this was all over. Puppet Ministers might come and go, but as long as Percy held his job, the Ministry wouldn't be available to You-Know-Who.

Percy sank into his chair and gave blind panic a moment to rip through him. He had always believed that he was relatively unimportant, he was one person doing what he could to keep the magical world on an even keel. Now the target on his back was a lot bigger.

A large extended breath blew out, and in a moment Percy was back on his feet heading back into the Minister's office. Behind the desk, he paused once more then grit his teeth and took hold of the bottom right-hand drawer. He pulled sharply, and the drawer slid smoothly open. Percy gulped. Then snorted in annoyance at himself. He had expected it to do that. The fact that it had opened was
further proof he didn't need, but Percy persevered and reached down into the desk for the bottle and glass he knew were there. A quick cleaning spell on the glass and Percy poured a healthy measure into it from the bottle.

The spirit went down smoothly sending tendrils of warmth outwards from where it pooled inside him. Percy cleaned the glass and replaced it and the bottle back in the drawer. Fortified and nerves held at bay by the false bravado the spirit had provided, Percy scanned the Minister's desk. He collected up all the files he had sent through to the Minister for final review along with any remaining correspondence. Then he marched from the office and closed the door behind him. Dumping the files on his desk, Percy turned back to face the door. His wand was in his hand, and the spell was spilling from his lips before he acknowledged to himself he was effectively locking everyone out of the office until Thickenesse was given the job. The door wouldn't open till Percy told it to and he had no plans to do so until the day he walked into the office, and Thickenesse was waiting for him.

Percy stuffed the folders into his bag along with the other files from his desk he had been working on before Scrimgeour had spoken to him. He was going home. He'd had quite enough for the day, and if he was going to do what he very much thought he was going to do, then he needed to get on top his work and quickly.

The next morning Percy took a diversion on the way to his office. The deviation would make him late, but then it wasn't as if the Minister would be at his desk expecting him. The detour led him past every Head of Department's office where he handed back the budget reports he had spent the night working on. Each department head was given the same information. All budget reports were to be returned to him as soon as possible or would languish until the New Year to be signed off, likely once the budget had been allocated. He was met with grumbles for the most part. The sneering condescension from the few, he chose to ignore. If they thought that because they were getting a Minister who was controlled by You-Know-Who would mean they could throw their weight around, then they were in for a rude awakening. Thickenesse would be able to sign off whatever budget he liked, but Percy was the only person left on the Ministry account that could authorise the spending. And he had no intention of doing so unless proper channels were followed.

When he finally arrived at his office, Percy found Lucius Malfoy lounging against the door outside.

"Mr Malfoy," Percy said politely unlocking the door and leading the way in. "I wasn't aware I had an appointment with you this morning."

"You don't." Was the reply Percy received as the wizard followed him into the office.

Percy nodded and took his place behind his desk. A flurry of memos came into the room settling into his in-tray. Lucius watched but turned away when Percy turned to face him. Percy collected up the notices and pulled his ledger from his desk opening it up. More memos fluttered in, and Percy began to read them acutely aware of the man loitering in the room.

It didn't take Lucius long to attempt to open the door to the Minster's office. The rattle of the handle brought Percy's head up from his work. "Can I help you?"

"This door is locked."

"Yes."

"Then open it!"

"I'm afraid that the Minister for Magic is the only person that can open the door."
Lucius frowned briefly. "And the Minister's work?"

Percy shrugged. "Awaits the Minister."

The look he received in return was cool and assessing. Percy held himself under it refusing to flinch. They wanted to take the Ministry then they were damn well going to have to their own research. He certainly was not going to volunteer a knuts worth of information.

Malfoy sneered the left in a swirl of expensive robes. Most likely silk. Percy wondered if the plans for Thickenesse's arrival had just been moved up. If the idea had been to gain entrance to the office of the Minister for Magic with no Minister in place, Percy had thwarted the attempt. He wondered if there would be another or if the Minister would take office before Christmas.

Chapter End Notes

I shall bore you with a little information in regards to this chapter.

In canon Fudge is replaced a fortnight after the debacle at the Department of Mysteries by Scrimgeour. On August 1st, 1997, the Ministry fell, and Scrimgeour is replaced with Thickenesse who keeps the job until the Battle of Hogwarts. Percy is employed as the Minister's aide all this time. He resigns his position at the Battle of Hogwarts shortly before Fred dies.

In my story-verse not much has changed but the timing. Fudge still goes after the Department of Mysteries debacle and is replaced by Scrimgeour. It's not directly dealt with because of reasons….but Percy mentions it in conversation to Audrey. Scrimgeour hangs on to his job longer in my version than in Canon, only being outed in December 1997. No particular reason other than that's how I wrote it. Percy again is employed throughout this period as the Minister's aide.

There really is NO information in Canon about Percy's job, what it entails, and what his responsibilities might be. I'm going along as I wish frankly, concerning what he might be able to do. There is no Deputy Minister for Magic, so I assumed that the Minister's aide who would be a sort of Deputy/PA, lots of responsibility but no real power unless it's granted by the Minister themselves.

Yes, in this story Percy is a bit of a hero, but it's his story for cripes sake, he gets to be the hero.
Set Up

January 1998

Christmas and New Year had been stressful. It had taken all of Percy's skill to keep his temper, his job, and a lid on his burning desire to lock the doors of the Ministry and tell them all to fuck off.

Balls, parties, and dinners. All to welcome in the Puppet. All to congratulate themselves on passing another year with their heads in the sand.

Percy had attended as he had been ordered. He had stayed to the outskirts of the ballrooms where the feckless flocked and fawned. He had participated in dinners and made polite conversation with those on his table, that like him, were there because they were support staff. Not guests.

Percy missed Christmas and New Year with Audrey. He hadn't spent a weekend with her over the entire festive season, he had barely made it home to sleep. He had apologised, begged forgiveness and promised that he would make it up to her. All the while not knowing how or when his time would become his own again.

When the Minister insisted Percy attend a small party at short notice Percy protested. It was the third of January, Percy had attended something nearly every evening for the last fortnight, and he had had enough. The Minister's diary was full for the first whole working week of January as well, and Percy was dreading it. He would be working during the day putting in long hours on top of the events in the evenings.

At his mutinous face, the Minister smiled a smile that Percy trusted not at all. "Very well Weasley. Attend this evening, and I will release you from your duties at the rest of the functions in my calendar next week. That should satisfy you, should it not?"

Percy deliberated long enough for the smile to fall away and be replaced with a slight scowl. "Thank you, Minister," Percy said with a subservient nod. "I would be grateful to accept your gracious reprieve."

The Minister smiled once more. "Marvellous. This is the floo address." Thickenesse handed over a small card. "You are to be there at six. Do wear something appropriate and try not to be late. It wouldn't do to upset the host now would it."

Percy went home on his lunch break to gather his dress robes for the evening. He wouldn't have time to come home, eat, and change. Instead, he would raid the Ministry canteen and change in his office, before making his way to the evening’s event.

Percy wasn't sure where the event was, the floo address had been vague. One of those 'if you have to ask' situations, where he had declined to ask and merely lashed the floo powder into the fireplace at the prescribed time and wished himself elsewhere.

The floo room was large, exotic marble covered the floor, and Percy got the impression that this was not an 'official sponsor of the Ministry gets to entertain the Minister' event.

The main ballroom he was shown to wasn't crowded, but enough people were milling around to make it look comfortably populated without being over full. Percy ran his gaze over the crowd trying to pick out the Host the Minister had neglected to name. There were several senior Ministerial employees in attendance. Some were those that Percy knew were in league with You-Know-Who,
others were neutral or on the fence according to Percy's information. The room also included some
people Percy recognised as Death Eaters such as Malfoy, or those suspected of being supporters by
Kingsley who had asked Percy for information on their comings and goings about the Ministry to
build a picture of their allegiance.

The air of the party was not what Percy had come to expect. The Ministry people were acting like
they had been let into the adult's party for the first time. There was no preening and boasting of their
own achievements to a crowd of admirers. A feat all but unheard of at any sort of party where they
attended, as Percy had duly witnessed in the last fortnight. Instead the tide of people centred around a
man. He was nondescript, but the aura of power that radiated from him was clear from across the
room to the corner Percy occupied.

The deference that was offered to this man by the obviously wealthy and connected people in the
room made Percy twitch. He didn't get closer. It didn't take a genius to work out that You-Know-
Who must have a public face since nose-less, red-eyed rage wasn't exactly endearing.

Percy hadn't thought he'd ever see it. He hadn't thought he'd ever be in the same room as You-
Know-Who. Percy knew his Occlumency wasn't strong. He had the basics that he had taught himself
on and off over the years, but the basics in this room were like saying you knew how a bicycle
worked because you had seen someone ride one once.

Percy stuck to the shadows of the room. Hopefully, he was here as a show of power by the Minister.
A demonstration of how things really were and what was on offer if he toed the line, or what would
happen if he didn't.

A shadow loomed up by his side and Percy fought not to flinch.

"Mr Weasley you are an unexpected surprise." Severus Snape commented quietly.

"Yes," Percy said keeping his eyes fixed on a particularly ugly piece of art depicting a wizard slaying
a dragon while he built up his meagre shields. Or at least that is what Percy presumed the wizard to
be doing. It was hard to tell really; the composition was such that the wizard could have been trying
to conduct the dragon in song. "The Minister insisted I attended the reception. I do not believe my
invitation extends to dinner."

His companion hummed thoughtfully. "The Dark Lord was not expecting you, the Minister will
have to explain your presence. I believe making your excuses before dinner would be satisfactory."

"Could you point out my host?" Percy asked. "I did not have the good fortune to be introduced on
my arrival."

"You do not think the Dark Lord is your host? "

"I believe I thought him to be the guest of honour of the evening." Percy dared to meet Severus' eyes
and hoped the fear he was feeling wasn't showing.

"You are correct, I shall introduce you to your hostess. Madame Hortensia du Barry has arranged
this little soiree."

"She is French?" Percy asked quietly as they crossed the room. More than one eye was drawn to
their progress, and Percy let his steps fall slightly behind that of the dark wizard, giving the
impression of a subordinate following a superior.

"She's as French as English tea," Severus replied, his head tilting in approval at Percy's action. "The
pretence, however, is one that is indulged."
Severus directed them towards a witch that was conversing with a pair of wizards. Her dress was elaborate, layered with tiers of fabric and lace, and she was fluttering an honest to goodness fan in her hand as she cooed at the wizards attending her.

The wizards melted away as Severus stopped by the witch. Madame du Barry frowned slightly after them before turning and fluttering her eyes and fan at equal speed at Severus.

"Oh, Monsieur! Must you always be so formidable?" she purred coquettishly, closing her fan in an attitude of rapt attention.

"Madame. Mr Weasley had the misfortune of not making your introduction upon his arrival. If you would allow me?"

"Certainly, Monsieur Snape I shall indulge anything that you wish of me."

"Madame du Barry may I present Mr Percival Weasley. Mr Weasley, this is our hostess, Madame du Barry."

Percy stepped elegantly forward and held out his hand politely.

Madame du Barry hesitated, flicking a puzzled look at Severus and Percy before she reached out with her own. Percy caught the hand twisted it expertly and performed a short half bow.

"Enchanté Madame," Percy said over her hand with a French accent Audrey would probably laugh at him for. But if his hostess were indulged in her whimsy it would be rude of him to ignore it. And he had a suspicion that it would gain him some measure of favour. He straightened up releasing her hand and observed the blush that had spread to her cheeks, her other hand rose to snap open her fan, fluttering it by her face. "Oh! Monsieur Weasley, I do not think that….

"No, Madame the fault is mine," Percy said smoothly. "The Minister asked me to attend him, but I was unaware that it was a private function. You have my deepest apologies for intruding upon your hospitality. I do so wish not to cause you any inconvenience and shall take my leave at once."

Madame du Barry fluttered a little more, apparently overjoyed at the attention from a younger man and slightly torn at having to give it up. A quick glance around the room decided her. "Very well Monsieur Weasley you shall have my forgiveness for your transgression."

"A thousand thank yous," Percy said as charmingly as he could, offering another short bow. He straightened, backed away two paces and turned heading for the large double doors out of the ballroom.

"I shall ensure he does not get lost, Madame." Percy heard Severus say as he made his way to the edge of the crowd. Percy felt rather than saw the presence of Snape loom up behind him, clearing his path in front of him.

Once out of the ballroom and away from the prying eyes Severus stepped up next to him. "This way Mr Weasley, I will get you back over the ward line. It would not do for you to find yourself trapped."

"Merlin no," Percy muttered quietly with a small shudder.

Severus led him to a room off the main hall past the floo chamber. Stopping in the middle of the circular pattern in the marble he indicated for Percy to take his arm. "I shall take you to a street I know in London."
Percy nodded and took the proffered arm, Severus twisted them away, and they landed in a side alley off the main thoroughfare. Cars travelled down the road indicating that they were in Muggle London.

"Thank you," Percy said.

Severus scowled. "What do you think you were doing walking into that viper's nest? The Dark Lord is a skilled Legillimens."

"I am aware," Percy said. "I was only told to attend. I did not have the luxury of the details or a refusal."

"Try not to be caught out again," Severus said. "I do not attend when it can be avoided, and I will not be able to extract you again."

"I am grateful you made my exit more graceful than my own plan."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"I was going to do a fade out of the room and run like hell back to the floo," Percy said with a deprecating shrug.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Be thankful that you managed an exit more graceful than that."

"Madame du Barry, does she have any standing?"

"No," Severus said. "A hanger-on who runs the gossip mill of the ladies' circles. She likes to brag that she can get anyone to attend her evenings. She has significant contacts in France as she spends time over there to authenticate her ancestry. If the Dark Lord is to move on from England, it is people like Madame du Barry that will get him an audience with those that matter."

Percy leant back against the stone wall, enjoying the coldness of the brick seeping through his clothes after the warmth of the ballroom. "Do you think they bought it?" he asked.

"Madame du Barry certainly did. You will feature in the discussion over petite fours and tea tomorrow, I am sure."

"Mother will be proud," Percy muttered.

Severus raised an eyebrow at the bitter tone.

Percy sighed. "Well no she won't, but I suppose there's no point in learning the elegance of courtly manners if you don't use them when the opportunity arises. Not that the Weasleys hold with that sort of thing," Percy said slightly sourly. "Should you not be heading back?"

Severus shook his head. "I despise such events. I had permission to leave least my sour mood spoil the soup."

Percy snorted a laugh then let the humour roll out of him with the stress of the evening's events. When it died away, he met the eyes of his former potions teacher. "Thank you."

Severus nodded. "Do try to take more care next time you floo into a room on the Minister's orders."

Percy nodded then offered his hand to the other wizard. The handshake was brief, the calloused hand of the potions master sliding over the smoothness of Percy's own.

Severus turned away in a flare of dark robes and vanished with a crack, leaving Percy to gather
himself and prepare for his own disapparition.

After that night Percy regained his evenings and also the forgiveness of Audrey for his absence. The rest of January was less socially busy but just as fraught.

Percy began his campaign to sabotage the new Minister for Magic with the power he now wielded, in earnest, and devoted nearly as much effort into not being discovered doing it.

It was a sophisticated use of the bureaucratic nightmare that was the Ministry of Magic. Percy was exceptionally glad he had seemingly been born with an innate understanding and patience for paperwork, forms, and hoop jumping.

He was burying everything he could under a mountain of legalese, of triplicate forms, authorisations, sign off reviews, and committees. All the while he stood before the Minister for Magic and his handler explaining that the Ministry was a machine made up of many parts. Much like a Swiss clock, each one moved another. There was no waste, there was no redundancy. It was a marvel of governance that had served the Magical population of Britain for a millennium, and this was simply how things were done.

It was the biggest pile of tosh Percy had ever tried to sell.

Percy had an unforeseen advantage. His mother had an inbuilt bullshit detector that was more sensitive to lies, obfuscation and hyperbole than any other person he had met. He had grown up in a house full of mischievous siblings, and if he hadn't been one of them, he had witnessed them wiggling out of trouble enough times to have a fair idea of what would work.

And he was motivated. Oh gods, was he motivated.

The legislation repealing werewolf rights and imposing restrictions upon them turned his stomach and made him grit his teeth. 'Tom', as Fred and George called him had used the werewolves to cow the population in fear in the last war. He was using them again in this one, or so could be assumed from the number of attacks on the rise, but he clearly had no intention of rewarding their loyalty. Percy didn't want to know what 'mandatory routine monthly testing' meant, but he had an idea it wouldn't be anything particularly enjoyable for the afflicted.

Muggle-borns were, as predicted, doomed. From birth, they would be monitored. Once magic manifested they would be removed from their family homes and placed in 'welfare centres'. Percy's muggle history had been filled in in the years he had lived among them. It was plain to him that if these 'welfare centres' didn't entirely mimic the concentration camps of the past, then it would be a close-run thing. There was no way that he would allow the proposals the light of day while he could act.

Percy worked his network, collected and owed favours to feed himself with enough information so that if he needed to bury something deep enough or have something thrown out on a technicality, he could. He made a pact with himself that nothing would be put into law that trampled over the rights of those in magical Britain unless it was utterly unstoppable, and he was extremely motivated to stop whatever he could.

That didn't stop the Minister from assuming things and acting as if they were law. There was no way Percy could prevent him from acting, not without throwing away everything he was trying to achieve. Percy fortified himself that the worst wasn't getting through, and kept his head down. He presented the persona of ambitious yet meek secretary, who could answer nearly any question but had no real power or future without those above him.
February 1998

The last weekend of January, he and Audrey had met Fred and George in a muggle pub for drinks. They had a good night out and had left the establishment only as last orders were called. George had caught Percy's arm as Fred distracted Audrey. The look had been enough to convey to Percy that whatever his brothers were wrapped up in was getting closer to whatever end game was planned.

George had simply said 'Soon' with a nod and left it at that.

Percy decided. He made his decision, and it was the right thing to do, for him. Not for Audrey possibly. Not as far as the magical law was concerned certainly, but for him, for them, it was the only way forward.

Percy wrote his will and lodged it with Gringotts. He asked Mills if he knew of a solicitor who could work in both the muggle and magical world. Mills did, so Percy lodged a copy with him as well. Then he converted the lump sum of his savings to muggle money and transferred it to his muggle bank account. Percy also made sure all his overtime was paid up and threw that into the muggle bank account as well. There were some advantages of being the person who authorised payments after all, and he would be damned if he went into whatever was coming with back pay from the Ministry owing. He was giving them enough, the least they could do was pay him for work he had done.

All that was left was to hope there was time to gather his courage before the tide swept him away and he possibly lost his chance. To make sure he didn't Welch on his decision, he rang Audrey on his lunch break and found out when she would be home. She was free all weekend. Not ideal, he was cowardly hoping for a longer reprieve, but determined, he agreed that he'd come to hers on Friday night and maybe he'd cook. Satisfied he'd backed himself into a corner Percy shoved down any lingering doubts and carried on with his day.

Percy left work on Friday night dead on time. He wasn't going to linger and let Thickenesse drop some spurious task on his desk or an urgent task that he had been blithely ignoring. He swung past the supermarket to collect what he wanted to cook and let himself into Audrey's flat. There was no sound coming from the shop below, so Percy cast a small warning spell on the top stair outside the front door and went back inside. In the kitchen he whipped out his wand and dinner started the necessary preparations. Percy then went around the flat liberally using cleaning spells to give himself something to do. He would prefer dinner to turn out well, and his nerves were fluttering around his stomach and fracturing his concentration hence the magic. But with no dinner to prepare he had too much time on his hands to think. The cleaning spells were done in ten minutes. Percy paced in the kitchen watching the dinner preparations continue without his input.

Annoyed that he had gotten himself into this state he stomped off to the bathroom. A shower was called for and a change of clothes. That would at least kill time.

He was out of the shower and back in the kitchen before the warning spell triggered. Dinner was already in the oven and cooking, so all Percy had to cancel was the charm doing the dishes. By the time Audrey found him in the tiny kitchen, Percy had his sleeves rolled up and his hands in the sink finishing the last few things.

"Hello," Audrey said as she came through the door. "This all looks very good."

Percy wiped his hands on the tea towel and greeted her with a kiss. "Well it's been a while since I
have, so I thought I'd cook. That's OK?"

"Yes," Audrey replied. "More than OK. I wasn't feeling up to it tonight. How long are we off? Do I
have time for a shower? We've been sorting through the last of a house clearance, and I think there
was grime from the eighteen hundreds on some of the stuff."

"About twenty minutes," Percy said eyeing the oven clock.

"Great, I'll take ten. Is there wine?"

"There is," Percy said. "Go clean-up it will be waiting for you."

"You're a star," Audrey said dropping a kiss on to Percy's cheek before spinning and heading out of
the kitchen.

Audrey entered the bedroom and blinked. The bed had been changed. The usual pile of books and
magazines on her bedside table were suspiciously neatly aligned in a pile. The carpet had been
hoovered too. Audrey cast a glance over her shoulder back towards the kitchen. Just how long had
Percy been here and what exactly was he planning?

Audrey stripped tossing her clothes in the hamper and grabbed her dressing gown before heading off
to the bathroom. She stopped in the doorway. Percy's cleaning had obviously reached the bathroom.
The room gleamed. Audrey knew she was guilty of performing the required cleaning in a
perfunctory manner. There was no way that the tile had ever been this clean after she had done the
cleaning.

Shrugging at how odd Percy could sometimes be she stepped under the spray and let it trouble her no
more. If Percy wanted to do the housework she had no problem with that. Showered, dressed, and
hair partly dried Audrey went to find Percy.

"How long have you been here?" she asked accepting the wine he proffered as she approached.

"Not long," Percy answered.

"Not long, but long enough to clean the bedroom and the bathroom?" Her eye landed on the coffee
table, and she pointed wordlessly to the neat stacks with nary a speck of dust to be seen. Percy
squirmed. Audrey stepped over to give him a one-armed hug. "I'm not complaining I'm just
wondering why."

Percy hugged her back, and she rested against him enjoying the comfort of the embrace. "I had
things on my mind. Tell you about it after dinner?"

"OK. What is for dinner? It smells great."

"Beef casserole. My mum's recipe."

Dinner was as good as it smelled and Audrey complimented Percy on his cooking. Percy was quiet,
and she let it pass telling him instead of her day and the things they had found during the house
clearance.

After they had finished Percy stood up taking her hand. Audrey indicated the dinner plates. "I should
at least wash up, you did all the cooking."

"Leave it," Percy said tugging her hand gently. "I'll help you later."
Audrey followed the tugging, bringing her wine glass with her. Percy sat on the sofa inviting her to sit next to him. Suddenly wary she did, but rather than lean into him as she would usually when they settled on the sofa for the night, she sat up straight, body angling towards him but far enough away that they didn't touch.

"Percy?" she asked at his serious face. Her train of thought stopped as Percy's hand came out his pocket holding a small box. She knew what it was. He didn't have to open it and ask, she already knew. Tears filled her eyes, and she pressed her fingertips to her lips trying to stem them. She hadn't ever wanted to cry at this point.

Percy was watching her and slowly opened the box turning it to face her. "Audrey, I love you. Would you do me the very great honour of becoming my wife?"

Audrey nodded, unable to swallow the enormous lump that was in her throat. Her smile was killing her cheeks, but she couldn't stop it any more than she could squeeze any words out of her throat.

Percy smiled in what was clear relief as he handed over the box to her. Audrey lifted it up to look at the oblong emerald flanked by the two round diamonds. She couldn't help the analytical part of her brain that recognised that the ring was probably made somewhere in the early nineteen hundreds, but she did manage to shut it up before she assigned it a likely value.

"Audrey, I, I need to tell you some things. Some things about me that I haven't told you."

Audrey's attention immediately left the sparkly ring and latched on to Percy's face. The worry visible there sent the lump in her throat plummeting through the bottom of her stomach. "About your childhood?" she hazarded her voice hoarse.

Percy nodded. "About that and about me."

Audrey took a deep breath and looked down at the ring box in her hand. He'd asked, she'd accepted. Now it seemed the terms and conditions would be laid out. Audrey pulled the ring from the box and held it out towards Percy. "Put it on" she requested.

Percy hesitated.

"Put it on," she said again determined. "You want to marry me, I want to marry you. We want a home, a family. All those things we've talked about. I wanted to marry you five minutes ago. I'll want to marry you in ten. Unless. You aren't already married, are you?"

"No."

"Ever been married?"

"No."

"You've not got any children already have you?"

"No."

"Right then, so put it on."

Percy took the ring from her with fingers that shook slightly, and Audrey clenched her free hand into a fist where he wouldn't see, to stop herself from shaking. She was engaged. The ring flashed as it settled on her fingers and her smile grew wide again. She looked up at Percy who was still holding her hand staring at the ring.
"Percy?"

"Right," Percy said. "Right. OK. Do you believe in magic?"

"What? I don't understand."

"I know," Percy said. "Just bear with me, OK."

Audrey nodded and held on to Percy's hand a little tighter. She would listen, she would do her best to understand, and if that meant she had to answer very odd sounding questions well then, she'd do that too. "I, I don't think I believe in magic per se," she said slowly. "I mean, I don't believe in little green men, although the idea that there is intelligent life out in the universe somewhere is something I can accept. I think I believe in possibility." She said trying the words out, weighing them as she heard her voice speak them. "I mean to the Vikings, a cruise liner would be magic. To a Victorian, a mobile phone would be magic, yet all these things are real. They were possible, and they achieved that possibility to be real. I think things are possible we just haven't figured them out yet, and until we do somethings will always be only in the realm of magic and fantasy. Does that answer your question?"

Percy said nothing and Audrey could glean nothing from his face, so she sat waiting.

"Magic is real," Percy said softly but firmly.

"Real," Audrey repeated trying to understand where Percy was going.

Percy nodded.

"Magic? You mean stage magic?" Audrey asked.

"No, real magic. The old stuff. I'm a wizard, Audrey, I don't mean a performer, I mean a genuine proper wizard. Magic is real, and I can use it."

"What?" Audrey said confused. Percy looked serious, there was no lurking twinkle in his eye to say he was pulled her leg. If anything, he looked really worried.

"I'm a wizard," Percy said again softly.

"You're a wizard?" Audrey let her spine slump against the back of the sofa as she tried to understand what Percy was saying and where this fit in their lives.

"Yes"

"So, you don't mean Paul Daniels, do you? You're thinking more, Gandalf?" Audrey clarified.

"Well no, but OK yes. Yes. More Gandalf."

Audrey lifted a hand to rub her forehead. Her eyes fell on the wine glass, and she decided that now was a very good time to be drinking wine. She took a sip letting it trickle down her throat. "Right. So, magic is real?"

"Yes."

"And you can do magic?"

"Yes. I can show you?"
"You can? Oh, I suppose, OK then." Audrey placed the glass back down wondering what Percy would do. She had half decided that he was setting her up for some elaborate joke. She really didn't think it should have followed a proposal, and she really wanted this to be done with so they could get back to the part of the evening that made sense.

Percy pulled a stick from his pocket slowly and carefully as if expecting her to react to it. "What's that?" Audrey asked half hoping that she wouldn't get the answer that was likely coming.

"My wand."

"Wand? You have a magic wand?" Audrey said deadpan.

"Yes."

"Gandalf doesn't have a wand. Paul does, but its black with a white tip and probably made of plastic." Audrey pointed out taking another sip of her wine.

"Mine is made from wood and has a dragon heartstring as a core."

"Oh, does that mean something?" Audrey decided she might as well humour Percy. So far, he had seemed like a perfectly sane bloke. She'd never seen this coming. It was a little left field, but she didn't think being a closet wizard was something that needed to follow a proposal like it was some huge deal. She'd wondered about the commune and considered asking Percy to take her there, but now she was less sure. It wasn't as if hobbies were bad things, had they frowned upon it or something? It was a little nerdy, but then she was into antiques. How many twenty-somethings thought George the Third sideboards were something to get excited about?

"Yes, both the wood and core have certain characteristics."

"Right, so magic?" Audrey encouraged.

"Umm OK," Percy said he glanced at her once more, perhaps to make sure she was watching and waved his wand.

Percy's empty wine glass shot from the table to his hand. Audrey raised her eyebrows, she hadn't expected that. Percy had said it wasn't stage magic, but his wand had made her think that perhaps 'wizards' were snippy about categorisation.

Percy waved his wand again, and the glass floated over to her and hovered just in front of her. Audrey reached out and plucked it from the air. Placing her own glass down she turned it over in her hands. It was the same glass that Percy had been drinking from at dinner. It felt the same as her glass in her hand but to make it levitate it would need some force to do so.

Percy reached out carefully and pushed her hand holding the glass down until the glass was lying in her lap aligned between her thighs, then when she glanced up at him, he waved his wand again. Audrey's eyes were on the glass as the glass morphed, grew blurry, and the weight in her lap shifted. The insignificant weight of the glass grew and spread. Once the shifting stopped there was a rabbit sat in her lap. A brown rabbit. Audrey gaped. Her hand once again made the descent down to the rabbit's back, running gently over the fur.
"It's real."

"Yes," Percy said.

"You changed a glass into a rabbit!" Audrey said accusingly.

"Yes."

"Yes." Percy still looked nervous, and Audrey was most certainly sure he had good reason to be. She looked at the rabbit in her lap. "Shit" she swore. "It's a rabbit! Fuck. Fuck I thought, god I don't know! I figured you were winding me up or something. Shit. You're serious. Fuck."

"I can change it back," Percy offered nervously.

"You can?" Audrey asked staring at him then the rabbit.

Percy waved his wand again, and the rabbit morphed back into a glass laying in Audrey's lap.

Audrey picked the glass up, examining it before putting it gingerly back on the table. "I'm not drugged, am I?"

"No," Percy said.

"Right. Dreaming?"

"No."

"This would have been much easier if you had just been a closeted stage magician or something, you know. I'm not sure I was ready to find out magic is real." Audrey's elbows rested on her knees, her upraised hands sinking into her hair as her eyes remained fixed on the glass on the table.

"I know it's a lot, I am sorry."

"Is this why you grew up in a commune because you can do this?"

Percy flicked his wand again, and the bottle of wine came over from the table. Audrey watched in startled awe as it floated across the room at the command of Percy's wand.

He picked up the glass from the table, but Audrey's hand shot out. "Don't, I'll get you a clean one. That one was a rabbit!"

Percy stared at her, and a smile crept on to his lips.

"What?" Audrey said. "You turned it into a rabbit. You don't want to drink out of it, do you?"

"Audrey, love, I'm a wizard." Percy flicked his wand at the glass, and the glass went from used with fingerprints smears and a ring in the bottom where the red wine they were drinking had settled to sparkling clean in an eye blink. Percy leant over and picked up the glass from the table handing it to her.

Audrey turned it over in her hands, her head spinning with what she was seeing. It didn't make any sense yet here was her fiancé flicking this stick about, and glasses were changing into rabbits and back again. Things were levitating to him, and cleaning took no more effort than a wave of a wand.

Something about that thought struck her. "You did the same thing to the flat, didn't you? You weren't here that long before I turned up." She gazed around the flat again taking it in. "You didn't clean it, magic did. Oh hell, did it need a spoonful of sugar!" Audrey started to smile then giggle.
Percy looked confused but waited until she had the giggles under control.

"Mary Poppins! It's a kid's film about a woman, she's a magical nanny. She sings this song and the tidying up does itself." Audrey explained.

"I used a spell my mum taught me," Percy said. "She has a book of them."

"Your mum?" Audrey said the humour vanishing from her face. "Your family? Fred? George? They can all do this?"

"Yes," Percy said.

Suddenly it wasn't funny anymore, and her head was back to hurting.

Percy seemed to understand as he settled himself back on the sofa. Audrey copied him and accepted the glass of wine that had poured its self and floated over to her.

Percy took a sip and started talking. "There has always been magical people in Britain as far back as history goes. But, in sixteen eighty-nine the Statute of Secrecy was established. It became law in sixteen ninety-two, and all wizards and witches vanished. The problem was that the muggles, the people without magic were hunting us. The witch hunts, they were real. The magical population is small, we would have been eradicated if we had done nothing. So, we hid. Went underground. A separate government was set up, and we became a society apart. We became stories and legends, and we were forgotten. When I said, I was brought up in a commune that's not true. I grew up in a house. A magical house in Devon near a village called Ottery St Catchpole. It's a real village, my parents' house is about a mile from the main high street, but muggles can't see it. I was home-schooled with my brothers. My mum taught us to read, write, and do maths until, when we were eleven, we went to the school. We didn't spend any time outside our own community though, we had nothing to do with the village or the towns close by, we only dealt with other magical folk."

"Can I learn it?" Audrey asked curiously.

"Magic? No. You're either born with it, or you aren't."

"How do you know if you have it?"

"Well, it manifests when you're a child, and obviously, magical parents are more likely to have magical children. Some non-magical people can have a magical child though."

"So, if we had children?" Audrey asked carefully.

"They might be magical," Percy admitted

"All of them?"

"It's possible. It's possible they might not be, or only some of them are. It's not very well understood how it all happens."

"And this is it. You're a wizard, there's no other revelation your waiting to spring on me?" Audrey asked leaning back on the sofa.

"This is it," Percy answered. "I didn't want to lie to you. If you still want to get married, I didn't want to live a lie."

"Don't they have a pamphlet or something to explain all this?" Audrey asked.
"Well yes, but non-magical people aren't supposed to know about our world unless they have a magical child. Then, when the child turns eleven, and they get their Hogwarts letter, the parents are told so the magical child can attend the school to learn how to control their magic."

"Wait, you aren't supposed to have told me?" That made her sit up again and look at Percy.

"No. No, I'm not, it breaks the Statute of Secrecy."

Audrey thought about that. "So, when you said you work for the Ministry and your job as classified, I take it now, that you didn't mean the British Ministry and your job has something to do with magic?"

"It's the British Ministry of Magic I work for, yes. And they are an entirely separate system of governance to the one that you are familiar with. Although the Minister for Magic does liaise with the British Prime Minister, and if the need arises the wizarding police are occasionally leant to the Muggle Prime Minister. And I am honestly not supposed to tell you about magic."

"Muggle? You keep using that word."

"That's what non-magical people are referred to by magical people."

"Why Muggle?"

"I don't know."

Audrey let that go as unimportant. "So, what happens if they find out you've told me?"

"I go to prison for the rest of my life, and a team will come and wipe your memory."

"Oh my god."

"If you don't think this is something you can accept…"

"What?" Audrey asked in alarm.

"Well, I can…"

"Wipe my memory?!"

"It's standard protocol."

"Holy shit. Hang on, if you wiped my memory of magic would we not get married?" Audrey asked her eyes narrowing as she glared at Percy.

Percy rubbed his face with both hands. "I've thought about this. It's all I've thought about for so long. The only thing I can come up with is if it were too much I'd wipe your memory of magic and of me asking you to marry me, and then I'd break things off."

"What?!" Audrey cried outraged.

"Audrey, I don't want to live a lie. If I took away your knowledge of magic and we got married, and we had children. How would you feel about finding out about magic when your child turned eleven? To find out then that I had lied to you from the very first day we met? I have been a wizard since I was born Audrey, I can't stop being a wizard. I have lied to you for these last nearly three years, and it's not easy. I couldn't betray you by not telling you the truth and giving you a choice. You have the right to make an informed choice even if you might not remember it."
"And you'd do that? You'd walk away?" Audrey felt the tears well again.

"Yes," Percy said miserably.

Audrey shifted herself over to Percy and curled into his side. His arm lifted and settled around her.

"It's a lot. It is an awful lot. But I love you, Percy. If you are willing to risk going to prison for telling me, then I am willing to risk marrying the man I love who happens to be a wizard."

"Thank you," Percy said quietly. Audrey felt his arm tighten and they let the silence cover the room. Audrey gave up trying to wrap her head around what Percy had told her. She didn't think that she'd be able to tonight. She would take it a day at a time, at least now she knew.

"Percy, why are your family not speaking to you?" Audrey asked breaking the silence.

"It's political, not because of us. They umm, well obviously Fred and George know about you, but I haven't told the others, or Mum and Dad."

"What do you mean political?"

"Well, I wasn't exactly lying about the cult leader. Only it's not a cult per se, but he's the headmaster of the boarding school we attended."

"So, you did go to boarding school?"

Yes, in Scotland. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Headmaster Dumbledore is a powerful wizard and is quite influential. He is the head of a group called the Order of the Phoenix which was, until recently, a vigilante group. But it managed to get government backing to become official. The rest of what I told you is true, I couldn't follow him blindly, and my family and I fell out over it."

"So, wizards and witches just live in the world around us, and we don't even notice?"

"Well, most don't live amongst Muggles the way I do. Some do, but most live in wizarding properties that are purpose-built by wizards, or in property that's in the family as it were. Magic interferes with electricity you see. To be honest, there isn't a lot of difference between the way we live. I mean yes magic can do a lot of things, but we still live in houses, eat three meals a day, and go to work. Perhaps we don't have to do the dishes or the housework, and we can fix things that get broken or damaged rather than having to replace them, but it's not wildly different." Percy stood up. "Hang on a minute, there's something at my flat I want to show you."

"Percy no, it's late, can't it keep?" Audrey protested.

Percy grinned, raised his wand and vanished.

"Percy?" Audrey called out. She stood up and began to walk to the kitchen as a crack sounded behind her making her jump. Percy was stood by the door. "Percy? You left?"

"Yes, I wanted to get something from my flat."

"You can teleport?"

"Err, we call it apparition. But yes, teleportation is the same thing. I think."

"So that's why you're never late!" Audrey said in sudden realisation.
"Pardon?"

"You're never late. It's one of the things that made me get Rose to ask around about you." Audrey said waving him off as they retook their seats on the sofa.

"What? Really?" Percy said in amused shock

"What?" Audrey huffed defensively. "You've just told me magic is real. I think being suspicious about your punctuality is looking a lot less crazy by the second."

"Are you… Are you OK with this?"

"I, I don't know. I mean I'm not happy about your supposed alternative. I love you Percy and to separate us, to make me give up on us, that would take something colossal. I don't like to think of what you'd have had to do."

Percy held her a bit tighter, and she was grateful for it.

"So, what did you have to go get?" Audrey asked wanting to change the topic of conversation.

Percy held out a photograph frame.

"A photo?" Audrey asked.

"Magical photos are different to muggle ones," Percy explained. Gesturing with the photo.

Audrey looked a little closer. She recognised the picture, it had been taken while they were in France. Percy had set the timers on both hers and his cameras, while they were on the beach. They were sat in the sand, arms slung around each other smiling at the camera, the blue sky bright behind. The wind had caught Audrey's hair, and she had been worried that she'd spoilt the photo when she'd reached up to restrain it behind her ear. The photograph had captured them just before the wind had caught her hair however and turned out well. Percy whispered something too softly for Audrey to hear but as she watched, the picture he was holding in front of them both started to move.

The wind picked up her hair the same as it had on the day on the beach. Her hand came up to tuck it behind her ear the same as she had that day on the beach. Then her face turned to Percy with a rueful smile. Percy had smiled back and kissed her.

The actions played out before her eyes. The kiss broke, and the cycle repeated.

"What is this?" she said.

"Magical photographs don't capture a moment. Or they do, but it's a longer one. And they show it all."

Audrey watched enraptured as the photograph played over and over again. "Can I have this?"

"I'll have a copy made," Percy said. "But you can't let anyone see it. Anyone non-magical. I can put a charm on it so it will revert to the same image mine has been when you come over."

"Yes," Audrey said. "Yes please."

Percy nodded as Audrey put the picture frame on the coffee table watching as the images went around again. Her ring flashed in the light drawing her attention to it. Her smile came again. It wasn't as wide as it had been earlier, but she took it as a good sign that the sight of her engagement ring made her smile. Magic was real. Well, who knew? She caught sight of the dishes they had left on the
Percy raised an eyebrow at her. Audrey indicated the table with a hand.

Percy ruefully smiled back and flicked his wand at the dishes. They neatly stacked themselves up and floated off to the kitchen. Audrey stood up to follow them as the tablecloth fluttered past her making her jump slightly. In the kitchen, the tablecloth shook itself out over the bin then shivered as the small stains from the meal vanished. It folded itself up and floated over to the drawer in which it lived. The dishes were piled by the sink which was filling with soapy water. Audrey watched amazed as the dishes began to wash themselves around her, her smile breaking forth. "This is amazing really. It is."

Percy was leaning on the doorframe watching her watch the dishes. His familiar lean frame, his broad shoulders and his warm eyes that made her feel so very loved made her cross the space and wrap herself around him. "It will be OK, won't it?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," Percy said holding her close to him. "Yes of course."
Introductions

Chapter Notes

This chapter is taken from Escape. I've gone through it to make it more Percy/Audrey centric but essentially it's very close to the version in Escape. I couldn't miss it out because Audrey needed to meet all these people and be told what was going on.

19th February 1998

Audrey had come over to Percy's to stay the night. She had a late start in the morning, so it made sense for her to come to him rather than for Percy to travel the extra distance to her flat. Not that distance was a problem for Percy, but she found the habit was ingrained. It had only been seven days since she had found out, so she didn't let the slips in memory worry her. Now that she knew, Percy was a lot more relaxed than she'd seen him. He was still stressed about work, but he did try not to bring it home to her which she appreciated.

Percy hadn't really used much more magic around her. He acquiesced to her point about doing the dishes. It would hurt neither of them if Percy let the housework charm take care of them and it wasn't that much different than if either of them had a dishwasher installed. She had also seen Percy's work wear. The outer robe which looked to Audrey more like a long frock coat over his suit wasn't terribly odd. He had changed the robe to what he had said was a more traditional closed fronted robe to show her the difference. The closed fronted one reminded her of a monk's habit, and she expressed a preference for the open fronted one. At least that she could identify as taking root from more recent fashions if you had to consider Regency as recent.

They had split a fish and chip supper then to her delight Percy had cast an air freshening charm to get rid of the lingering aroma. Audrey was pouring the wine to take through when a loud hammering came from the front door.

Percy scowled at the intrusion and went to find out what the issue was. The door opened to reveal Fred and George on the doorstep. "What on earth-" he started to say, but his brothers pushed him none too gently back into the hall, shutting the door behind them. The scowl melted off Percy's face to be replaced by a look of pinched concern.

"Percy," one of the twins said. "Percy you've got to come with us." They herded him back into the living room coats and shoes still on. Percy frowned down at their feet, but they ignored him. "Percy please, now is not the time. We'll clean the damn carpets later. You've got to come now, pack a bag."

Audrey came into the room, a glass of wine in each hand, a puzzled frown on her face. "Fred, George. Why does Percy have to leave?" She came and stood next to Percy, and his arm went around her.

"Audrey, love! George." George greeted her and introduced himself quickly, the warmth of the greeting and the smile on his lips not managing to replace the pinched worry of his eyes. "It's great to see you, in fact, you've saved us a trip."

"What?" Percy said. "What do you mean?" He pulled Audrey closer to him as if to shield her from whatever the twins were saying.
"Percy, mate, you've got to come, Audrey too. We've got somewhere, a safe house for you to go. It's got excellent wards."

"Wards that Bill would give his eye teeth for ten minutes with."

"They won't find you, either of you."

"But," Percy said his frown deepening.

"Percy, it's tomorrow. You can't go back to the Ministry, and they know where you live. You do not want to be here." George said pleadingly. He glanced at Audrey. "Err Percy? Does Audrey…?"

"Does Audrey know about magic and the apparent existence of an entirely separate world running parallel to the one she lives in?" Audrey's voice was tart but amused. "Why yes, she does. Does she also happen to know that you two are also wizards? Why yes, she does. Does she understand totally what that means and why you two are so desperate for us to leave? No, no she does not."

Percy closed his eyes, hiding from his brothers questioning glances. "I told her, not everything obviously, but enough."

"Umm, Percy, the law?"

Percy took the wine glass out of Audrey's left hand and held it up so the twins could see.

"Right," George said. "Doesn't quite cover you but we're not in a position to complain about bending the rules. Welcome to the family Audrey! We're delighted! Now, how do you feel about a weekend or maybe longer away in Scotland?"

"We are not going to the castle!" Percy said instantly.

"No, we weren't suggesting that. I think we used the term 'safe house' not 'safe castle'."

Fred dropped a kiss on Audrey's cheek. "Congratulations," he said. "We really are pleased." He slipped around her, heading for the bedroom.

Audrey turned to watch Fred pulled his wand from somewhere about his person, her curiosity won out, and she crossed the room to see. Whatever he did made Percy's clothes fly out of their respective places and fold themselves neatly on the bed. "I've not seen much magic," she said to him as he turned and caught sight of her. "Percy doesn't use it around me. I think he doesn't want to frighten me. How much danger are we in?" Audrey doesn't use it around me. I think he doesn't want to frighten me. How much danger are we in?" Audrey asked as she watched as a bag came out of the wardrobe and everything filed into it. The bag he then shrank and shoved into his pocket, Audrey's eyes widened as the large bag disappeared.

"Shrinking charm, extension charm and wizard tailoring," Fred explained walking back to her. He took her arm guiding her back to where Percy was obstinately shaking his head at George. "And enough that we'd like to move you elsewhere. It might not come to anything; it might be bad."

"But, I don't understand," she said.

George turned to her and in a calm tone, explained. "Percy works for the Ministry, the Government, a separate system to the one that governs you, but your Prime Minister is aware of what happens in our world. Percy's boss, he's not a good man, and he's mixed up in some shady deals and with bad people. The people he made those deals with put him in power and are directing him, but they are about to make a move to remove one of the few individuals who can rally support against them. A 'hit' if you will. They are a bit like a mob family crossed with a terrorist group."
"Percy's family work openly against them. We do too, only it's slightly more convoluted where it comes to us. We know the coup is going to happen tomorrow, so we want to get you and Percy away." Fred added.

Audrey took the wine glass Percy had taken from her back from him, putting it and the other one she was holding down on the coffee table. Then she turned back to him and took both his hands in hers looking up at him earnestly. "Do you trust them?"

"Yes," he said looking at her his face a mixture of fear and worry.

"Then let's go. If it's just a couple of days, I can tell my boss you proposed and whisked me away for a long weekend, it's only one Friday. I don't suppose you'll need to tell your boss anything." She looked at Fred and George. "Have we time to swing by my place and collect some things?"

"No," Fred said. "But we'll send someone to get them."

She nodded and with one last squeeze of Percy's hands moved away. Walking calmly to the hall to put her coat and shoes on, she brought Percy's back to him. He was still stood frozen in the middle of the room, he accepted them, and it seemed to snap him out of his stupor.

"How are we getting there?" he asked as he sat down to pull his shoes on.

"We'll take you to the flat, and you can go through the floo," George answered.

Percy shrugged on his coat, and George took Audrey's arm. "You'll need to come with me. Percy, Fred will take you in, we closed the wards."

Percy nodded, and Fred grasped his arm and vanished. Audrey stared at the spot they had stood in then looked up at George for an explanation. She didn't know if she could teleport as well, she had no magic.

"It's called apparition. I'm going to take you in what's called a side along. It's mostly horribly uncomfortable, and you might be sick when we land. Don't worry it's normal."

"I'm not looking forward to this," she muttered but nodded her permission. George grasped her firmly and twisted them away. Audrey dropped to her knees as they landed. Her stomach heaved, but she didn't throw up. Percy was instantly by her side.

"Are you ok? You're not splinched?"

"Splinched?" she asked. Percy stopped and bit his lip realising that the explanation might not be all that reassuring.

"We'll explain when we're there," Fred said stepping in. "Now, this time you can travel with Percy if you like."

"Travel how?" Audrey asked staggering to her feet. Fred threw a pinch of floo powder into the fire, and the flames flared green. "You have got to be kidding me," Audrey said looking between all three men. "Through the fireplace?"

"Well more through the flames actually," George said.

"Do you have any normal methods of travel?" she asked hopefully.

"Flying brooms and a magic bus," George said smiling ruefully. "But brooms would take hours to
get to Scotland, and it's a cold, uncomfortable way to go that much distance. The bus is well, it's all kinds of awful, to be frank, and it's public."

"Right," Audrey said shaking her head. "Well then, by all means, lead on."

Fred stepped forward to the hearth. "I'll go first. They do know we're coming, but better safe than sorry." He stepped into the flames and called for McGonagall Lodge.

Percy's eyes widened at hearing the address.

"Percy, you've got questions, Audrey's got questions, and we'll answer as many as we can. But not here." George pointed at the fireplace. "Please, Percy."

Percy nodded and took a pinch of floo powder, drawing Audrey close to him he called out the address and was gone.

Percy and Audrey stepped out onto the hearth. "Well that was marginally better than apparition," Audrey said as she staggered only slightly. Fred pointed to a chair, and she walked on wobbly feet over to it. George came out of the fireplace next, and Folly reappeared to vanish the soot from him as well.

"They are on their way down. I have a room made up for your guests," Folly informed Fred, then she vanished again.

"Where are we?" Percy asked abruptly.

"Minerva McGonagall's family home. It's been in her family for generations. It's as safe as we're going to get. No one knows where it is and yes, we have permission to be here. The wards will keep you safe."

"What are wards?" Audrey asked from her chair. "You keep mentioning them."

"Err," George said. "I'm not sure of the muggle comparison but I know someone who will, and they are going to be here any second."

Percy whirled as the door to the study opened, and a blonde woman came into the room. She looked vaguely familiar to him.

"Percy! How lovely to meet you properly at last, and you must be Audrey. I'm Helen Granger."

Helen held out her hand to Percy who shook it automatically.

"Granger?" Percy said. "As in Hermione Granger?"

"The one and the same. I'm her mother." Helen let go of Percy's hand and moved to greet Audrey offering her hand to the woman.

Percy drew himself up and glared at his brothers. "I think there are some explanations due."

"Yes," Helen said. "There probably are." She smiled warmly at Audrey. "Don't worry, we're muggles too, Dentists if you can believe. When we found out Hermione was magical, it was a bit of a shock, but you adapt quite quickly."

The door opened again, this time admitting a tall man with unmistakable curly brown hair followed by Hermione herself with Harry bringing up the rear.

"You've been here? All this time you've been hiding in Professor McGonagall's house and no one
knew?" Percy spluttered at the sight of them.

"Hello Percy, Audrey. And no, we haven't been here all the time, we got here a few weeks ago." Hermione said in an amused voice. Harry smiled and waved standing next to her.

"Hello Percy, Audrey," he said genially.

John walked up to Percy and held out his hand. "I'm John, Hermione's father. Pleased to meet you." Percy shook the hand reflexively and looked around him bewildered. "I, I don't think I understand."

"No, that's fair. Come through to the library. Have you eaten? Folly will bring some food if you're hungry. We can explain and answer your questions there. I'm sure Audrey has more than one or two." Helen said.

"Closer to four or five," Audrey replied coming to stand by Percy, feeling more like herself after her first experiences of wizarding travel.

Helen shepherded them all out of the room, as they moved, Audrey turned her head back over her shoulder. "Have you done the apparition thing? Or the fire travel? Is it always terrible?"

Helen smiled. "We don't travel by floo very often, that's what they call the travelling by fire and as for the apparition? No, it doesn't get any better, you simply get used to it. Although we've found that elf apparition is less awful. Though only by degrees. You don't feel like you're going to lose the contents of your stomach when you land at least."

Audrey looked thoughtful for a moment. "That isn't that encouraging," she said.

Helen smiled. "No, I suppose not, but our flying carpet is lovely. Though not very practical for long distances."

"You've got a flying carpet? They are real?" Audrey stopped in shock, dragging Percy to a halt beside her. "Can I see it?"

"Yes, they are real. Of course, you can see it, and if we can find a space big enough, you can have a go if you like. It's simple enough to drive."

"But you're muggle, aren't you? Like me? I thought we couldn't use magic?" Audrey said confused as she started walking again.

"You can't," Percy said, looking at Helen with puzzled curiosity.

"That's true, we can't use wands to channel magic through ourselves. But there are such things as squibs, non-magical people born into magical families. Not all countries treat squibs as poorly as England. Our carpet is useable by squibs, and as a consequence useable by muggles, us."

"I think my number of questions just jumped to double figures," Audrey said ruefully.

Helen patted her arm comfortably. "We have time, and anything John and I can't answer, Fred and George, or Hermione and Harry probably can. Anything they can't answer Minerva probably can, and anything she can't answer, Severus probably has a cutting remark about."

They arrived into the sitting room as she was speaking and when she finished a smooth baritone drawled. "Madam, if you so insist on disparaging me, why would you expect civility?"

"Oh, Severus, I didn't know you were here." Helen arranged her face into feigned shock that an
intelligent five-year-old wouldn't believe.

"I find that highly doubtful," he replied glancing up from his book. Helen grinned wickedly at him. His face stayed in its blank mask, but the corners of his eyes crinkled upwards.

He stood and moved over towards Percy and Audrey who had remained standing by Helen. Severus held out his hand to Percy. "Mr Weasley, it is good to see you have come to no harm for your endeavours."

Percy shook the hand. "Thank you, Professor Snape, sir," he paused briefly and remembered his manners. "Allow me to introduce my fiancée Audrey Stone. Audrey, this is Professor Snape, my former Potions Master."

Severus took her hand gently and bowed over it. "Miss Stone, it is a pleasure to meet you."

"And you," Audrey murmured back politely.

"Minerva will be joining us after dinner at the school. Kingsley may or may not drop in. Can I suggest that your business associate is made aware if he intends to join us downstairs?" Severus addressed the twins.

George nodded and vanished through the door.

"Business associate?" Percy asked

"Garrett Ollivander," Fred supplied.

"The wands smith?" Percy asked.

"Yes," Fred said.

"But he's dead!"

"Evidently not," Severus murmured as he returned to his chair, picking up his book and for all intents and purposes ignoring everyone in the room.

"Well you see this is where it gets convoluted," Fred said.

"And involved breaking any number of laws" Severus added helpfully from his seat, his eyes never leaving his book. Percy turned to look at his brother, a silence falling around the group.

George re-entered the room during the pause. "He's going to stay upstairs; crowds are a bit much still." Noticing the silence, he looked around. "What did I miss?"

"Is he alright?" Audrey asked. "I mean it's not because of us, is it?"

"No, no, he's a bit of an odd duck, and what happened to him hasn't helped. He likes company but in small doses. He is happiest when he can sit and make wands." George said. Audrey smiled at him, but it was small and uncertain.

"I think there's quite a bit to explain. Shall we sit and we can give you the Cliff Notes version?" Helen said leading the group over to a grouping of sofas and chairs. Percy and Audrey settled on the small sofa, and everyone else spread out around them.

"So," Helen said taking control. "Is there anything, in particular, you want to know or questions you would like answering?"
"Well," Audrey said. "I'm not very clear on who you all are, and how you all know each other. Could we start there?"

Helen nodded. "Hermione is our daughter. When she turned eleven, we were told all the odd things that happened to her were due to her being magical. Since she had turned eleven, she would be allowed to go to Hogwarts to study magic and learn how to control her own. Percy, Fred and George are brothers which you obviously know, they have one younger brother called Ron. He, Harry and Hermione started Hogwarts at the same time. Hogwarts is the magical boarding school that most magical English children go to, all the Weasley children went. Severus is the Potions Master there and has for the last two years taught Defence Against the Dark Arts. Which is sort of like how to defend yourself against creatures and magic that might harm you. This house belongs to Minerva McGonagall who is the Deputy Headmistress of the school. She teaches Transfiguration, which is basically turning one thing into another."

"I'm sure she'll be delighted to know you have boiled down years of rigorous study and training into five simple words" Severus drawled.

"You haven't heard me describe potions yet," Helen shot back.

"Please do," he said still not looking up. "I'm sure I would find it utterly fascinating to hear."

Helen turned back to Audrey. "Basically, Potions is the art of chucking a load of improbable, random things, that you would never think would do anything at all, together into a cauldron of hot water and giving it a stir."

The former students of Severus Snape snorted with laughter. The man himself slowly raised his head from his book to stare at Helen. "It is a wonder, Madam, that your child turned out as well as she did. Truly the art of brewing potions is a science, full of subtly and exactness. Not just any blithering idiot can achieve the correct results, and fewer still can excel in the field."

"So, you all went to school together?" Audrey said indicating the younger people in the group and interrupting the interplay between Helen and Severus.

"Yes," Helen nodded.

"But Percy said you were in hiding?"

"This is where it gets a little more complicated," Helen said slowly.

"Is this to do with Percy's boss?" Audrey asked trying to link what little information she had together.

"Yes and no," Helen said. "There isn't an easy way to explain, and it's a long story. But you should probably be told what's going on since you are here. Twenty years or so ago a wizard called Tom Riddle decided that he wanted power. In the way it usually goes, he wasn't too bothered how he got it as long as he did, and he could keep it.

To finance his rise to power, he played on the fears of those with the money and standing to give him what he wanted. These people were from old families. Those that had long lineages of only magical people. These people feared that those born to non-magical parents would dilute the bloodlines and thus reduce the magical community over time. The magical community is about a hundred years or so behind the muggle one. Not just in their technology and science but in their social attitude. Women are still possessions, children are to be seen and not heard, that sort of thing. It's not everyone," Helen reassured a horrified looking Audrey.

"Some families are more accepting. The muggle-born, however, were being born and raised for the
first eleven years of their lives in the muggle world where the attitudes are significantly different. Respect to the landed gentry was wiped out generations ago, but it is how the magical society still operates. No muggle born would know about the customs of the magical world because they weren't raised in it, they were probably causing offence left and right and wouldn't know any better. Those coming in weren't showing, I presume, the expected amount of deference to those in power. Tom used this, used this fear of diluting bloodlines, of social superiority, and he set them against each other, and while they were distracted fighting each other, rose above them all. There were some that fought back that didn't believe what he was peddling. Harry's parents were part of that resistance group called the Order of the Phoenix. Tom, however, decided that Harry was a threat to his plans through some information he gained, so he killed Harry's parents and tried to kill Harry. But, because Harry's mother put herself between Tom and Harry when he killed her and then tried to kill Harry something happened. Nobody knows what, nobody understands how Harry survived the killing curse only that his mother's sacrifice was something to do with it."

"That's awful, so this Tom is dead?" Audrey asked her eyes as round as marbles, glancing between Harry, Helen and Percy.

"No," Helen said. "Before he died he had made sure that he had a way to come back, to live again. It took him fourteen years, but he managed it. He came back to life, called his followers and picked up from where he left off."

"So, you've been hiding from him?" Audrey said.

Helen's smile was sad. "No, we've been hiding from the Ministry of Magic. Tom has infiltrated them, and because Harry is lauded as having defeated him, and prophesied to be the only person that can, he's still trying to kill Harry. As an attempt to get to Harry, Tom's followers pushed through a law. The law required all muggle-born witches to marry into pureblood or half-blood families. Hermione is a year older than Harry, she came of age before him. Fred and George both offered for her, but the proposals were blocked at the Ministry. They wanted her married off to one of Tom's followers so she could be used against Harry."

"That's, that's appalling!" Audrey cried. "How could that even happen?"

"There is a social stigma for being muggle-born," Helen said gently. "They are just… less. Half-blood is acceptable, but muggle born to many, are inferior. No ancestry, no lineage. Upstarts I suppose."

Percy squeezed Audrey's hand gently drawing her attention. "Nearly half the Ministry is under his control. It only affected the muggle-born witches so relatively few people. The individuals in power thought that being able to control the women who would bear the children that would dilute the bloodlines, would be the best way to manage the problem they perceived. I'm not proud of everything this government has done Audrey, but there was nothing I could have done, nothing any of us could have done." Percy looked down at his lap, unable to meet Audrey's eyes.

"Last time it was bad, people were afraid, they were being attacked, people were dying. The government had been rendered impotent." Helen explained.

Percy nodded. "It was like a sickness, a malaise that swept through and settled on everyone. Nobody smiled, nobody laughed. Mum and Dad, they used to hide the paper. Bill and Charlie would find it, of course, I think because it had been hidden. I'd have to put it back later so they wouldn't be found out. Mum and Dad, they tried, they did, but you could see it, the fear. The smiles that fell away. They told me to be good, to look after the twins, to stay out of trouble. So, I did, I thought that if I did as they said they'd come back. They'd stay safe, they'd be happy." He closed his eyes as the pain and confusion of his younger self washed over his face, his eyes were dry though and his tone
expressionless,

"You were good," Audrey said clutching hard at him, reassuring him. "You kept them safe, Percy you did."

He opened his eyes and looked at her, raw, desperate emotion in his face. At that moment there were just the two of them, everyone else melted away. Audrey understood more now than she had before. Percy's face begged for her forgiveness, and she could not withhold it. Audrey felt the tears rise and didn't stop them instead she leant against him forcing his arm to come around her so she could embrace him. Percy leant into her for a moment before he stiffened his shoulders again pulling a crisp, clean handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. Wordlessly she took it and wiped her tears, getting herself back under control.

"You went into hiding?" Audrey said to Helen bringing the conversation back on track away from Percy.

"We sold up, the house, the practice, everything and left. Hermione asked Harry if he wanted to come and he said yes."

"But your family?" Audrey said turning to Harry. "Didn't they protest?"

"My Aunt and Uncle are probably euphoric never to see me again. They didn't like me, I was a freak to them and, well, it wasn't a happy home." Harry said keeping his tone flat.

"So why are you back then?"

"The things that Tom was using to stay alive have all but been destroyed. We have an opportunity to move against him to destroy the last of his horcruxes and stop him. So that's what we are going to do." Helen said firmly.

"Just you?" Audrey asked looking around the small group. "But there's nine of you! And you and John are muggles, what can you do?"

"There's a few more than nine," Helen said. "But yes, it's a small number. As for what we're going to do were going to do what it takes. This man, if you can call him that, has to be stopped. Until he is no one is safe. He won't stop with Britain; he'll solidify his power and move to the next country until he can't be stopped."

"My God," Audrey said. "Percy only told me magic was a, a thing, a week ago. Now you're saying that there is a war on?"

"I'm sorry," Percy murmured. "For dragging you into this."

"Don't be daft," Audrey snapped back. "It's a lot, but I'm hardly some fainting damsel. I just need a minute, or maybe five." She shook her head out of her face and straightened her shoulders and spine. "OK, Magical war, Corrupt government, anything else I need to know?"

"Dragons and Unicorns are real," Harry offered with a smile from his place by Hermione. "Wizards don't know what the metric system is, so their currency makes no sense what so ever and you'll quickly develop an appreciation for biros."

Audrey looked at him unsure if he was pulling her leg.

"Oh no," Hermione said catching the look. "He's right about the biros. Quills!" she said throwing her hands up. "I mean honestly, just why?"
"I'm wounded Granger that you would besmirch the fine institution of proper calligraphy. It's a subtle art, perhaps some could call it a science. Not just any blithering fool can pick up a quill and create a masterpiece of lettering." George said casting his gaze dramatically to the ceiling in mock despair.

"While of course, the unicorn and dragon are available in your average Forbidden Forest. For the escaping lovers, there is nothing better than a winged Pegasus." Fred joined in.

"But romantic moonlight flights across lakes should only be done on the back of a noble hippocorn,"
Harry added winking at Hermione. She rolled her eyes at him and nerved him in the ribs with her elbow.

"So all those things are real?" Audrey asked unsure if they had just wished to lighten the tone of the conversation which had grown heavy.

"Yes," Percy said. "Although I'm fairly sure there's a story behind everything they just mentioned."

"Do you have zoos or something?" she asked Percy then glanced around the room at everyone else.

"Actually, that's a good question," Helen said. "Do you?"

"No," Percy replied. "We don't, not like you do. There are the dragon reserves of course and some enclaves of the larger magical species where those interested go and study, but not in the way that you do."

"Mum," Hermione said. "Did we bring the encyclopaedia?"

"Oh, I'm not sure," Helen replied.

"Encyclopaedia?" Audrey asked.

Hermione nodded. "You must be eleven on the first of September to attend Hogwarts. I had to wait a year, so we bought an encyclopaedia about magic, so we could learn about it in the meantime. If you like, you can have a look through it."

"That would be quite helpful," Audrey said. "Why are they sniggering?" she asked pointing at George and Fred.

"Because," Hermione said with a sniff, a toss of her hair and a smile. "I happen to like reading books and studying, and those two think that the only way you can learn anything is by making it explode."

"Hermione, saying you like reading books is possibly the understatement of the year. It's like saying Tom is slightly interested in my life ambitions." Harry said.

"How are you so calm about it?" Audrey asked.

Harry shrugged. "You get used to it. Since I was eleven, I've had some crazy adventure every year until the last one when we were in hiding. Honestly, you have to let it go, or it drives you insane. Also, I'm young and stupid enough to secretly think it's a bit exciting." Harry and the twins burst out laughing at the different expressions of horror that appeared on the faces of the others at Harry's pronouncement. "I'm joking!" Harry said holding his hands up, trying to get his face into some sort of serious expression. "It's terrible, awful, very dangerous. I'm completely focused."

"Right," Audrey said. "Even I'm not convinced by that, and I've not known you very long."

"Well you're with Percy, so presumably you're quite smart," Harry replied with a shrug.
"Stop it," Hermione said to Harry as Audrey looked at him warily. "She'll think we're all mad."

"I thought all the best people were," Audrey replied automatically with a smile at Hermione.

Hermione laughed. "Yes, that's true."

"So now what?" Audrey said. "What do we do?"

"The hardest part I'm afraid," Helen admitted. "We wait. Our plans are laid, the people who need to be informed are informed, and until tomorrow there's nothing we can do. So, I propose dinner?"
They didn't eat as everyone admitted to having eaten already or not wishing to. Instead, they remained in the library and drinks and nibbles were brought by the elves.

Time passed in a blur. Audrey sat between Fred and Percy letting the conversation swirl around her. Fred and George seemed comfortable with the Grangers, and Audrey got the impression that they knew each other quite well. Helen and John were involved in the conversation that went on around the group and seemed unfazed by all the talk of magic and spells. Audrey thought perhaps that she could take comfort in that.

These two people who had only learned about magic alongside their daughter, had managed to accept what that involved. They had then given up everything to keep their magical daughter safe, and not insisted Hermione leave magic behind. If they could do that, then Audrey thought she might stand a chance too.

Percy was right, she probably wouldn't have taken it well if they had a child born magical and the first eleven years she had spent worrying that there was something wrong. The anecdotes that the Grangers told about Hermione's accidental magic were humorously related and made the young woman blush and laugh. But Audrey thought that while it had been happening, the Grangers probably hadn't been so amused.

Audrey glanced at Percy. He was sat listening, his face thoughtful, and she wondered what Percy thought of the Grangers. Were they reassuring him the way they bolstered her?

Audrey admitted she had adapted to the whole magic situation quite well, but when it appeared to be nothing more than a few cleaning spells, outdated clothes and ability to teleport, it hadn't seemed so much to accept. The future, their future, children and schools had been hazy and far off, and her prevailing thought was that she would deal with it when they came to it. That train of thought had been derailed as she sat in the study of a house in Scotland belonging to a woman, a witch, who Audrey had yet to meet. She had been abruptly told about an ongoing war, a corrupt government that had implemented forced marriages, and a class system that seemed to belong to the annuals of history. And she was marrying into it.

Percy must have felt her gaze as he turned to look at her. He scrutinised her face before squeezing her hand comfortingly where it rested in her lap.

They were due another talk. Percy had said being a wizard was his secret. What exactly did a war qualify as then? Possibly it wasn't as significant a bomb drop as realigning her worldview to include magic as a thing, but still. She had gathered already from the things that Helen had told her they intended to throw themselves in the path of danger, but just how much danger?

As the conversation began to dwindle people began to drift away to other pursuits or their beds. Percy lingered in the room allowing the others to leave so they could have the room to themselves. Percy stayed by her side, and when they were alone except for the elves who came to clear the empty glasses, she turned to Percy.

"War? Really?"

Percy reached out tugging Audrey towards him, closing the polite gap they had sustained while in company.
"Not a war like you think. Yes, there's going to be a fight, a skirmish or whatever but wizards don't fight like muggles. There is no army in the real sense, the numbers tomorrow if they top a hundred will be over the estimate."

"But you're going to hurt people, possibly kill people and they will be looking to do the same to you," Audrey clarified.

"Yes."

"Percy! Do you know how mad that sounds? You work in an office! Do you know how to fight?"

"Yes," Percy replied. "It's been obvious to anyone looking that this was coming, I've made sure that I could defend myself."

"Percy..." Audrey said clutching at his arm.

Percy covered her hands with his. "I know this is more than I should ask, for you to accept and understand that this is something I must do. But I need you to."

"Why?" Audrey exclaimed.

Percy struggled to find a way to explain. "The magical and Muggle societies are supposed to be separate. You aren't supposed to know about any of this. But if I want our future, then I have to fight for it. I'm not prepared to give you or our future up. There are going to be enough people who think they have something to say about our relationship if we win."

"Is it so very unusual?" Audrey asked curiously.

"Possibly not. But generally, because of the restrictions, and because as witches and wizards, giving up or hiding our magic isn't easy, many people don't bother looking outside the magical community. It does happen, but it isn't spoken of, and those people don't advertise. I am afraid that we will become public fodder and there may be no way to stop it."

"I don't want you to be hurt," Audrey protested returning to her original topic.

"I don't want to be hurt either, but it's a possibility. As is my not returning," Percy admitted.

"Percy—."

"No Audrey, please. It has to be said and I'd rather you know where you stand. I moved the bulk of my assets into the muggle bank I use. I've named you the beneficiary in my will, and you'll get everything."

Audrey shook her head denying his words.

Percy squeezed her hand understandingly but continued. "I've got the name and number of the solicitor, he works in both worlds. He is instructed to terminate the lease on the flat and settle any outstanding payments owing there. Then he will close everything up in the magical world and transfer it to the bank account."

"I don't want it," she said plaintively. "I don't."

"I know," Percy said gently. "I know you don't."

"Percy, I don't want you to go."
"I know that too," Percy replied. "I don't really fancy it much either. They are planning to hold this thing at my parents' house, my family is going to be in the middle of it. My friends, people I care about. I cannot stand aside. I've been working inside the Ministry to stop the worst of the proposed legislation getting through and becoming law, destroying our society. But everything I've done won't be enough if we don't win tomorrow. If we don't finish this for once and for all. I want a better future for us, our children, my brothers. I want to believe that I will be able to marry you knowing that I've done everything possible to ensure that we will be able to have everything we want."

"Is there nothing I can say?"

"No. I am sorry. This isn't fair on you, I do know that."

"I'm scared," Audrey admitted quietly. "Everything that Helen said. About being less, about the system of discrimination. I don't know anything about your world, about magic, and I can't talk to anyone because it's a secret."

"Perhaps, if you feel you could, you could ask Helen and John. They seem to have a good understanding of magic. They are the people who taught Fred and George to operate in the muggle world, perhaps they might be able to help you adjust."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"I don't believe that I can honestly understand your viewpoint. The Grangers have at least got the same frame of reference," Percy offered.

The door to the library opened interrupting them. Audrey looked up to see a woman dressed in the closed formal robe Percy had shown her, enter the room.

Percy immediately stood. "Professor McGonagall."

"Mr Weasley, Miss Stone, I apologise for my late arrival, but the students detained me," Minerva explained as she approached the couple.

"Of course, Professor. Might I introduce you to my fiancée Audrey Stone? Audrey this is Professor McGonagall."

Audrey had stood up alongside Percy and smiled cautiously at the other woman.

"Call me Minerva dear, and you as well Mr Weasley. I am no longer your professor, and I was never Miss Stone's."

"Audrey," Audrey said stepping forward to offer her hand. "Thank you for letting us stay here. It is very generous of you."

"Audrey, you are both very welcome," Minerva said shaking the proffered hand. "Now since you are both here might I take a moment of your time?"

"Of course," Percy answered immediately.

Minerva took one of the armchairs waving her hand towards the sofa Audrey, and Percy had been sharing. "First, think nothing of using McGonagall Lodge as your home until it is safe to return to your own. Currently, the Grangers, Harry, Hermione, Garrett Ollivander and your brothers Fred and George are staying here. There is room for more and more might yet arrive. The elves will see to anything you wish for. You may call Stitches who will attend you both personally. If she cannot attend you, one of the others will. Now I would caution you, Audrey, that while the bathrooms are
all fairly mundane, the lighting is not. Any room you walk into will light for you, but if you wish to alter the brightness or turn it off, you will need to speak aloud. The elves have been instructed to listen for such commands and will act in your stead. It is a service that John and Helen also require so do not think you are putting them out. If Mr Weasley is with you, then you shall obviously not need the assistance, but I wish you to feel that you can move freely about the house. As to that, please be aware that some of the books in the library while safe to read, may choose to interact with you. Some make noises, some will ruffle their pages at you. They are harmless and merely seeking some attention. I live in the castle during the school year leaving only the holidays for me to spend time here and I cannot give the books quite the level of attention they wish. If you do run into difficulties, call an elf, and they will be able to assist."

"Thank you, this is very kind of you."

"Actually, I'm not generous or kind," Minerva replied with a smile. "The elves are over the moon to have so many people to look after and are quite excited to have people staying who need a little more attention than others. House-elves are magical beings that take great pride and pleasure in their service. I have several elves and have been unfortunately unable to keep them fully occupied until now. They are quite delighted with me currently for filling the house." Minerva paused peering at the two of them over her glasses.

"Now, Audrey, I would also like to offer my time to you in particular. I am one of the members of staff that visit the Muggle parents of magical children. I am not sure what Mr Weasley has told you regarding the magical world, but I am quite willing to sit with you and answer whatever questions you have. Can I also suggest that if you have not done so already, you speak to Helen and John? No one is expecting you to just accept things blindly. Helen and John have a perspective of magic that is entirely unique from that of most muggles and magical folk, and it might help you find a balance."

"Percy and I had discussed approaching Mr and Mrs Granger," Audrey confessed.

"Do call them Helen and John," Minerva advised sagely. "Is there anything pressing this evening, or shall I have Stitches show you to your rooms? Mr Weasley gave the elves directions, so I believe they have collected your things for you, Audrey."

"They have? But how did they get in without a key?"

"Apparition," Minerva replied. "Elf magic is different to ours, and they can go where they have been sent without having visited before unless there is a ward stopping them."

"I don't suppose they brought my hairdryer, did they?"

"Unfortunately, even if they did, this house is not wired for electricity. Also, the magic of the house would stop it working. Mr Weasley should be able to help you with your hair or Hermione will know the charms to dry it."

"Oh, OK," Audrey said shooting a glance at Percy. He nodded at her which Audrey took to mean that Percy knew the charms to dry hair. "To be honest I would like to take you up on your offer, but I don't know what to ask. There's so much I don't know, and I am uncertain as to what is important and what isn't. Especially after what I learnt this evening."

"That's understandable," Minerva said. "Take tonight to think about it, we will have some time tomorrow."

Audrey nodded then glanced once more at Percy who got to his feet helping her to her own. Minerva rose with them.
"I will see you both at breakfast or shortly after dependent on my duties at the castle."

"Thank you, professor," Percy said

"Thank you, Minerva," Audrey echoed.

Minerva smiled at both before leading the way out of the room. In the hall, she called for Stitches.

"This is Stitches," Minerva said introducing the elf. "Stitches this is Percy Weasley and Audrey Stone, you are to serve them while they are guests here."

"Stitches will serve," the elf squeaked bouncing slightly.

Minerva smiled fondly at the elf before nodding to her guests and removing to her study.

Audrey stared at the elf in fascination. "Hello Stitches," she said offering her hand. "I'm Audrey."

Stitches stared back for a long moment before holding her own hand out. When Audrey clasped it and shook it gently Stitches regarded her with greater curiosity.

Once free of the handshake Stitches straightened up and said proudly. "Stitches collected the Miss Audrey's things."

"Thank you Stitches," Audrey said gratefully. "Would you show us to our room please."

Stitches nodded and turned to the stairs Audrey trailing behind with Percy bringing up the rear.

The room Stitches showed them to was well appointed and surprisingly large. When assured they wanted for nothing Stitches left the room with a pop that made Audrey jump.

"Are all house elves like that?" she asked Percy.

"It can vary, but I find most elves a little odd. They aren't human so don't think or react like a human. I doubt Stitches has ever shaken hands before."

"Oh, was I not supposed to do that?"

"I doubt very much it matters. As long as you treat them kindly and politely, you should get along."

Audrey walked around the room. She couldn't see the bag that had been brought for her, nor Percy's. She opened the wardrobe and was slightly surprised to see her clothes hanging neatly next to Percy's. Audrey pulled a dress out of the wardrobe. "Are we dining out?" she asked waving the evening dress. "This isn't exactly what I would think to pack in the circumstances."

"There are more practical clothes?"

"Yes, jeans, jumpers, tops, and even a scarf or two from the looks of it," she replied with humour.

"Then Stitches likely took a selection of everything."

Audrey replaced the dress and closed the wardrobe door then crossed to the chest of drawers. Pulling open the drawers she was surprised to find t-shirts folded neatly. Picking out a t-shirt to sleep in Audrey raised her eyebrows in surprise as it unfolded crispy with no creases. "They iron?"

"No, laundry charms. House-elves have the market cornered on them along with the cleaning and cooking charms which makes them so highly valued."
"Oh,"

"Does it bother you?"

"No, not really I hate ironing. It seems, I don't know, just different."

"Do you want to take a shower?"

"Yes."

Percy opened the bathroom poking his head around the door. Audrey followed him t-shirt in hand. "You know how to dry my hair?"

"Yes, it won't harm your hair."

Audrey nodded and stepped into the bathroom closing the door. She examined the shower discovering it was as Minerva said. She twisted the knob to start the water. It came out of the shower head warm. Audrey tried not to be surprised. She felt that she shouldn't be when she knew that magic was involved but she still was, it was all still so new.

Audrey turned from the shower, undressing and put her clothes into the hamper. They promptly vanished. Hoping that nothing had happened to her clothes, she stepped under the spray. Her shampoo and soaps were on the shelf next to Percy's. It seemed that Stitches had been thorough when fetching her things.

Audrey finished her shower and returned to the bedroom in her t-shirt and her hair wrapped in a towel. "The hamper eats clothes," she warned Percy. Percy raised an eyebrow making Audrey wondered if there were hampers that actually ate clothes. "The clothes vanished," Audrey clarified.

Percy nodded. "They will have been cleaned and returned to the wardrobe and drawers."

"That fast?"

"Magic."

Audrey pulled a face at Percy who shrugged in 'a what can you do motion'.

"I can dry your hair before my shower," Percy offered.

"No, its fine," Audrey waved him off. "After will do."

Percy vanished into the bathroom an Audrey went back to the wardrobe wondering what else the elves had packed. There were her usual day to day clothes, a suit that she had worn once or twice and to her delight her dressing gown. Slipping on the warm dressing gown Audrey snuggled into it taking comfort in the familiar.

Curiosity made her explore the room more. Audrey peered into the top of the table lamps wondering what kind of light was used. A ball of light glowed from the top of the lamp where a bulb would typically be. She stepped back. "Lower the lights please," she said clearly. The lights dimmed.

"Brighten them again?"

The lights responded with her voice. Audrey paused unsure of what to do next. She licked her lips realising she was thirsty, but she had no idea of where the kitchen was. Minerva had said that Stitches would be listening for her. Perhaps she could ask.
"Umm, could I have a glass of water please?"

A quiet pop and a glass of water appeared on the bedside table.

"Thank you," Audrey called out. She wasn't sure if she was expecting a response or not and was only half surprised not to receive one.

Audrey took the water and sat on the edge of the bed waiting for Percy to finish in the bathroom.

Percy came out of the bathroom cutting a glance towards her. He crossed the wardrobe and rifled through the clothes searching for his own dressing gown. Not finding it Percy shrugged. He summoned his wand he cast a drying charm at his towel before transfiguring it into a dressing gown.

"Fred didn't pack yours?" Audrey said a trace of smugness in her voice.

"No, but it's not a problem. Let me dry your hair," Percy said joining her on the bed.

Audrey pulled the towel off her hair, Percy took it from her and sent it sailing back to the bathroom.

"How do you know hair drying charms? Yours hardly needs more than a towel."

"Hogwarts was a mixed school. There were always magazines left lying around the common room in the tower. They had useful bits of spells and charms in them, primarily aimed at girls, but helpful none the less. I did also date," Percy added wryly. "You pick things up."

Audrey hummed an agreement as Percy waved his wand chanting something softly. Audrey felt her hair lift, and a warm tingle spread over her scalp. It was only seconds later her hair fell back against her shoulders and neck, thoroughly dry. She stood and crossed to the mirror over the chest of drawers.

"Wow," she commented. "You can do this again. I can never get it looking this good with a hairdryer. It's got swish!" she said with a laugh shaking her head gently from side to side watching her hair move. She returned to the bed stripping off her dressing gown, draping it over a chair and crawled under the duvet. Percy joined her, and she cuddled up to him.

They remained silent for a time before the churning thoughts in Audrey's head coalesced into a coherent thought. "Quills? Why quills?"

"Tradition, mostly," Percy responded not missing a beat at the question.

"But they're so inconvenient. You don't use one, do you?"

"At the office? Yes."

"No! How do you keep your hands clean?"

"Magic."

"Oh, well yeah, I suppose. But it still seems so odd. What about a fountain pen?"

"Hmmm? Oh, too Muggle."

"That's silly, it isn't as if a wizard invented calligraphy."

"Might have done," Percy said with a smirk.
"It's simply not possible. Not if your population numbers are correct. It would have been impossible for wizards to develop every advance in society especially if you left it." Audrey pointed out tilting her head to see him better.

"Only after sixteen eighty-nine."

"Still. I'm going to get you a fountain pen. It's not a ballpoint there's plenty of traditional ones about at the trade fairs it won't be too shocking. Although I think I'm going to have to adjust my ideas of old-fashioned. Quills, honestly."

"Candles."

"Pardon."

"The Great Hall at school, it was lit by dozens and dozens of floating candles."

"Wizards are weird. I can see your point about electricity, but what about the lights that are in the lamps? What's wrong with them?" Audrey asked indicating the table lamps next to the bed.

"I don't know," Percy shrugged.

Audrey fell quiet again, an idea turning over in her mind but unsure if she could give voice to it. Deciding to risk it she asked hesitantly. "Do you think you could show me a unicorn? Don't laugh, it's just, you know, it's a unicorn."

"Muggles are weird," Percy said stifling the laugh that wanted to escape.

"Touché, is that a yes?" Audrey replied drily but unable to hide the eagerness in her voice.

"Yes."

"Brilliant!"

"I didn't think you'd be so accepting," Percy commented. "Not in the beginning and not after today."

"Why not?" Audrey asked puzzled.

"It's what we're told. That muggles can't understand and would fear it, or something."

"What about all the parents like Helen and John?"

"I don't know, it's not something we're encouraged to think about. Witches and wizards belong in our world, their Muggle parents don't, they leave them behind."

"It's a high price of admission don't you think?"

"Yes, maybe. I suppose." Percy said absently. "I've never had to think about it."

Audrey scrunched herself down into the bed. "Turn the light off would you please."

Percy complied and settled himself down in the bed rolling to hold Audrey to him. If it took a little longer than usual for them both to fall asleep no mention was made of it.
Explanations and Reasons

In the morning Percy and Audrey followed Stitches' directions and joined the other residents of McGonagall Lodge for breakfast in the dining room. Breakfast was brought by a parade of Elves. Audrey politely introduced herself to each one asking their name and thanking them for each dish they brought through.

Thimble, Pins, Needle, Hem and Sew all gave their names and accepted the thanks then vanished promptly.

Audrey noted Percy, Fred and George looked on in mild amusement as she did so but ignored them, assuming that it was some sort of wizarding protocol she had no idea about. When the Grangers and Harry also thanked the elves, she felt better. Perhaps it wasn't so much protocol as an open show of manners and appreciation. Minerva had said the elves took pride in their service, Audrey thought open acknowledgement of that service seemed sensible. However, the reaction of the Weasley siblings made her wonder.

"I'm sensing a theme," Helen commented when the elves left them to breakfast, the table near groaning under the weight of the food provided.

"Yes," Audrey said. "I noticed that too, although I don't know if names are picked or given. Is it usual for them to run in themes?" she asked, directing the query at Percy.

"Names are given, when an elf enters service," Percy replied. "The theme I would imagine there is a reason for, although I do not know Professor McGonagall well enough to speculate."

"Perhaps Minerva will tell us," Helen mused out loud. "She's expected at lunchtime as she has no lessons in the afternoon."

The conversation around breakfast was stilted after the topic of the elves drew to a close. When everyone had finished, Hermione stood from the table and announced she was going to find a patch of sun then promptly vanished.

Audrey made an inquiring noise at Helen. "Where has Hermione gone?"

"She hasn't," Helen said pointing to the large cat crossing the floor towards the door.

Audrey glanced at the cat then back at Helen. "Hermione can turn into a cat?"

"Yes," Helen said. "Many witches and wizards learn how to change themselves into animals. It's difficult but entirely possible. Minerva is a silver tabby house cat. Hermione is a south American Margay."

"Oh,"

"The form is largely reflective of the witch and wizard, but they do not get to pick as it were," Helen explained. "Shall we follow her I'm sure that you've got questions."

"Yes, thank you," Audrey said following Helen and Hermione out of the room. John and Percy followed on behind as Harry, and the twins headed off in different directions.

Hermione settled on the window sill in the sun tucking her paws under her and her tail around her. Audrey approached cautiously, curiosity driving her.
"She is still Hermione," Helen said following Audrey. "She can understand you. She is still very much Hermione, but she describes it as having cat-like concerns as well. Hence the reason she transformed. The Margay is unconcerned with upcoming events allowing Hermione to push them to the side easier."

Audrey stretched a hand out touching the fur atop of Hermione's head stroking it gently. She stopped and moved back towards the chairs casting a curious glance back at the cat that watched her with equal curiosity. John and Helen sat together on a sofa while Audrey sat in an armchair next to the one Percy had claimed.

"Thank you for agreeing to speak to me."

"Its fine," John said gently. "It can only help to have someone else in the same boat."

"I'm not sure were quite in the same boat," Audrey replied. "You seem so accepting and unfazed. I'm lost. Everything you told me yesterday, everything that will be happening later. We're sat in a library making polite conversation when later today you'll all be going out to get involved in a fight against terrorists. It's just so unreal to me. How do you cope? How can you accept all this?"

"It's not as easy as all that," John said. "We're accepting because we've known for considerably longer than yourself. As for coping, it wasn't always so easy. When Hermione was young, and things happened around her we worried, we were scared. When it was finally explained, the relief that she wasn't ill didn't last long. The more we researched magic with her that year before she left for Hogwarts the more we understood that it was a world we truly had no part in. The expectation was that Hermione would join the magical world and leave the muggle one behind. We didn't wish to lose our daughter, so we made the decision to accept everything. To give her no reason to question or doubt us and our support of her. It meant that we asked questions, we got her to describe her lessons. We treated it much as a subject to be learnt, we read her books and those books we had bought on the shopping trips. It became apparent early on that Hogwarts hadn't told us everything. They hadn't told us about the discrimination, or the society that she was entering wasn't similar to the one she was leaving. Hermione was bullied terribly, she was an outcast until she made friends with Ron and Harry and that relationship was hardly smooth sailing. And the trouble she got into."

Helen smiled at her daughter, picking up John's story. "Hermione was a very good pupil. Her reports from school before Hogwarts were exemplary. She was top of the class and the best behaved. It didn't make her popular with her peers admittedly, but we never worried that she would actively seek trouble. Hogwarts changed all of that. The things she would write home about it was as if a completely different person was writing to us. When it began to get dangerous when the trouble went from name calling to physical attacks we considered pulling her out. There are other magical schools we could have applied to, but Hermione wanted to stay. She didn't want to leave Harry and Ron, and we couldn't tear her away from her friends. It was the agreement that total honesty was absolutely necessary that got her back to the castle. She held her end of the bargain, so we held ours. Until the marriage law but I think by then even Hermione knew that it was too much."

"For all that though, we don't live magical lives. We go to work, and we pay the mortgage. Yes, Dobby does the housework, but he is a new addition to our household. We still travel by aeroplane and car. Dobby, Hermione and Harry can apparate us, and we can use the floo with a magical person, but for the most part it's more like having a few extra perks than anything else," John added.

"Don't you find it difficult not to talk about it?" Audrey asked.

"No," John replied. "That actually is the easiest thing. Firstly, because well, who would believe you and secondly because the repercussions are severe. Harry and Hermione would get into trouble, and we would have our memories wiped. It's not difficult at all to keep it to ourselves. When we have
problems yes, of course, we would like someone else to talk to someone else's opinion, but it's not worth it."

Audrey paused, considering their words. Percy had told her the consequences, and it had been enough to ensure her silence, but what about the days when she couldn't talk to Percy? What about the days she needed her Mum or Dad's opinion? "It just seems lonely," Audrey said. "Being cut off from everyone."

"It can be," Helen agreed. "But it needn't be. We'll always answer our mirrors I'm sure Harry, Hermione, Minerva, and the twins will also."

"Mirrors?"

Hele looked surprised. "Did Fred and George not give you one?"

Percy spoke up. "Yes, they did but it was before I spoke to Audrey and I couldn't think of a way to make it sound muggle. I have a mobile phone if either Audrey or I need to stay in touch."

"Does it work?" John asked curiously. "We've thought about it, but we weren't sure they could stand up to the magic saturation."

"As of yet no, I have a few ideas however just not enough time in my schedule. I am unsure of how to replace the battery without overloading the circuits."

"Ah," John said. "Well perhaps a surge protector? That could stop it frying the circuits if that is your problem."

Percy frowned. "I'm not so familiar with electronics. If you could offer some advice, I would be interested."

"Yes of course," John said. "A little later perhaps?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Mirror," Audrey said to Percy interrupting his conversation.

"Yes, hang on," Percy stood up and left the room.

"That's another thing," Audrey said. "He can teleport, but he walks upstairs?"

Helen laughed. "It can be considered rude to apparate in someone's house. Also the wards might stop you from doing so, and hitting a ward to prevent apparition hurts, or so I'm told."

"What are wards?" Audrey asked. "They keep getting mentioned, and I forgot to ask yesterday."

"Think of them as forcefields," John said. "That's what I do. Basically, if you think of magic as science fiction come to life it makes it easier to understand things. Wards are magical shields that surround objects or people or whatever you cast them on. So, an anti-apparition ward would stop the witch or wizard teleporting, a waterproofing ward would stop water passing through it. They are quite encompassing in what they can do, and the more complex they get, the more they can do. There are wards on this house that stop it being found by anyone not invited personally by Minerva. There are wards to stop the muggles in the street seeing it at all."

Percy re-entered the room carrying the small silver compact that Fred and George had sent him for Audrey. "You should keep it on you," he said handing it over.
Audrey turned it over in her hands and opened the clasp. "It's a mirror," she said glancing up for clarification.

"A communication mirror, here," John said pulling a small leather-bound mirror from his pocket. He held the mirror in one hand and spoke clearly. "Audrey Stone."

Audrey was bemused by the action and jumped when the mirror in her hand became warm and made a quiet chiming noise. "What do I do?" she asked.

"There will be a symbol etched on the edge of the frame," Helen advised coming to perch on the arm of Audrey's chair, pointing at the symbol. "Put your finger on it."

Audrey did so and was startled when the mirror showed her John's face. Glancing up she saw John holding his mirror up in front of him.

"Hello," he said. The sound came from the mirror and Audrey gasped.

"You mean this is like a telephone with a screen?"

"Video conferencing," John said cutting the call off. "Portable, easier to use and much better than anything available currently in video conferencing technology."

Audrey nodded. "How do I call someone?"

"Put your finger on this symbol," Helen said. "And say their name aloud. Most everyone you have met in the wizarding world has one. And they can all communicate with each other. Fred and George made them with Hermione's help."

Audrey tried out the mirror calling Percy, Helen, John on theirs then Fred. Fred answered it cheerily, and Audrey thanked him for the device.

"Is Percy there?" Fred asked.

"Yes," Audrey nodded.

"Righto," Fred said before ending the call. Moments later the door opened, and Fred, George and Harry came in.

Harry was carrying two small boxes with him and approached Audrey and Percy. "These are for you," Harry said offering the boxes to each of them.

There was a soft thump from the window where Hermione had jumped to the floor. She padded over to Harry and transformed to stand next to him.

Audrey opened the box to see two rings one silver and one gold nestled together.

"One is a shield," Hermione offered. "And the other a glamour spell. The glamour will change you enough to hide your identity. We've been using them while we were away so we could attend school and not tip off Dumbledore. The shields Harry made for my parents and us, they are like a forcefield that will protect you from magic."

"Thank you," Audrey said looking at the young woman.

Hermione shrugged self-deprecatingly. "We're giving everyone as much protection as we can. This isn't what we want, but it's the best chance we have."
"There's one thing," Audrey said. "You all seem to have a problem with this Dumbledore fellow. How can one man affect you all so much? He's just a headmaster isn't he?"

"From my perspective," Harry said finding a seat. "Dumbledore made bad choices. Choices that affected my life. My parents died, and Dumbledore put me with my magic-hating relatives. For the first eleven years of my life, well, it was bad. My godfather was supposed to get custody of me, but he was put in prison without a trial. Dumbledore could have done more, or anything at all, to make sure Sirius was treated fairly. He knew of the problems with my childhood so held Hogwarts out like a gift. I was grateful, of course I was, anything was better than my home life. He hinted and mentioned, and I followed the breadcrumbs like a good little boy." Harry smiled sadly. "I didn't know I was being manipulated, I just thought he cared. He was supposed to be the greatest wizard that ever lived, and he was interested in me."

Harry shrugged. "Hermione kept me safe and sane then Dumbledore turned on her as well when it came to the marriage law. His solution wasn't a solution. She would have been taken before Tom just to hurt me, and I would have done anything to get her back and keep her safe. It was a disaster waiting to happen, and he didn't do anything because he believed that my loyalty would lie with him first as the person who saved me from my miserable childhood. He gave me magic and had known my parents and could answer my questions. None of which he ever did, but it was offered. Always left hanging just out of reach with the promise of just one more thing and he'd answer my questions."

Audrey looked at Fred and George. "Percy said his family followed Dumbledore."

"We did," George admitted shamefully. "Right up until the marriage law. We offered to marry Hermione, the both of us. We knew that she wouldn't be able to have Harry, with him underage, so we thought in a pinch she might cope with one of us. Only the Order or Dumbledore rather wasn't going to do anything. When Hermione's letter arrived, it was pretty damming. She explained why she'd left, what had been happening and yet they argued about getting them back. Not Hermione you understand but Harry. Hermione was secondary to Harry, yet it was Hermione that needed the protection. Hermione sent a half completed spell and the glamour rings and the tape which is when we really knew that there were others like us, no longer swallowing everything Dumbledore had said."


Percy fidgeted in his seat. It was possibly time and the only chance he would get, and after the gift, Harry and Hermione had given him and Audrey he felt he owed them at least an explanation. "I was much like Hermione when I started Hogwarts. Not that I was new to magic, but I was determined to prove myself. To step out from under my brother's shadows and prove myself. A trait I fear I have not shaken. I am studious, I followed the rules, respected my teachers. I was probably as unbearably snobbish as Fred and George accused me of being. Humongous Bighead."

Fred and George flushed but grinned as well. Percy rolled his eyes at them and continued. "I wanted to do well. I wished to forge a career for myself that I could be proud of and make my parents proud of. I don't suppose that makes me different from anyone particularly. Wishing to please their parents. Hogwarts' house rivalry has existed for I do not know how long, but it is not impossible to make friends across the lines as it were. I made friends in Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and even managed to find an acquaintance in Slytherin to study with. School houses do not exist outside of Hogwarts. I wished to work in the Ministry and I developed a contact network that could help me achieve it. Friends do recommend friends or acquaintances in some cases."

Percy paused his gaze flicking around the grouping. He had quite simply captured all their attention.
He addressed Harry and Hermione. "You probably don't realise, but before you came to Hogwarts, Hogwarts was just a school. There were no adventures, nothing threatening the school or the students. I understood you asked for none of it. I know it cannot be laid at your feet. Do you know how many people went into the third-floor corridor? I was a Prefect if you remember. We caught so many students that first week that the Head Boy and Girl placed a charm on the corridor to deter students from going down it."

"But we went down it" Harry objected. "Ron and I got lost in our first couple of weeks and ended up down there."

"I know. It was tampered with. It still worked, or so we thought, it was turning students away until you three went through it. How else would you have gotten through a charm that repelled the rest of the student body?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance. It didn't need explaining who would have done the tampering.

"Before your arrival, the house point system was fair and measurable. Slytherin house won the house cup for seven consecutive years because they are the ambitions hard working house. The day of your first leaving feast the Headmaster broke over a thousand years of tradition. To be fair, to be fair to everyone, your extra points should have been added before the leaving feast. Before the entire school walked into the Great Hall. Yes, everyone but Slytherin cheered. It was the first time in seven years that the Great Hall wasn't covered in green and even longer since Gryffindor had won the house cup, but the points weren't even justly awarded. They were handed out with just enough margin to prove that no matter the difference the house cup would have been assigned to you. It created a rift between the houses that strained relationships. The headmaster was playing favourites and the feeling of my friends and acquaintances were getting hurt. In their eyes, I was benefiting, thus I was complicit. It was not your fault, it was Dumbledore's."

Percy glanced around, wishing for something to keep his hands from twisting. On seeing the motion, John called for Dobby softly and asked the elf for drinks to be brought. Once the elf had returned with the tray, and everyone had helped themselves Percy continued. "Your second year Dumbledore let a dangerous monster roam the school. Hogwarts should have closed after the first petrification. Nothing justifies risking children's lives in the way Dumbledore did. If the basilisk had appeared in the Great Hall during the evening meal it would have killed everyone. All of us."

"It was a creature. It did not care who was pureblood or muggle-born, who came from a family of Death Eater sympathisers and who didn't. Yes, it was under control, but the control of a soul piece of a sixteen-year-old boy inside the body of an eleven-year-old girl. It was a miracle that we only had petrified students. And how easy would it have been for that control to slip? If Ginny had fought back against the soul that was possessing her while the basilisk was in the school, she wouldn't have been able to speak with it. It would have killed her first. She is my little sister. My mother's favourite, my parents who have been loyal, deserved more than their children being thrown in harm's way."

"Then came Black's escape. Dumbledore knew that it was possible to get into the grounds via the Whomping Willow. Dumbledore knew the risks of letting a werewolf teach. He never saw to Sirius' lack of a trial and if he had then the school wouldn't have had a swarm of dementors floating around it or attacking the train. Lupin had to save students from being kissed on the train, and your car wasn't the only one affected by their presence. The prefects, the seventh years, were all helpless to protect the younger students. That train had eleven-year-olds on it. Some of them muggle-born, their first taste of Hogwarts was a dementor floating down the train bringing every awful thing that had happened to them. You cannot think that Harry's was the only unhappy home?" Percy shook his
head and saw John and Helen stiffen. Audrey was watching him, on meeting his eyes, she smiled and took his hand offering reassurance.

"Then the Triwizard tournament. That was a travesty. The Goblet of Fire was clearly tampered with, and instead of fixing the problem it was allowed to continue. I understand it was bad for you, Harry at school, but in the wider community, we were under siege. The Hogwarts champion was upstaged. The British couldn't count. We were so magically weak we had to field two contestants to ensure we had a chance in the competition. Then it turns out that a teacher was under the influence of Polyjuice potion and had tampered with the entire tournament right under Dumbledore's nose. It was impossible that he was ignorant of what was going on. And if he was then what was he doing? He had a duty to ensure the care and safety of the students in the school, and he had a Death Eater impersonating a man he's known for over thirty years?! Instead of leading, protecting the children under his care, he was using them as political pawns in his power games. We were innocent bystanders, the lot of us, we couldn't do anything." Percy took a breath, it was true all of it, but it hadn't caused the rift that existed between his parent and himself.

"My family was getting hurt because of the power games Dumbledore was playing. He set himself against the Ministry of Magic and didn't care who was trodden on. There could be no public backlash, he presented the twinkly demeanour to the world. Fudge feared him, the ICW listened to him. Thanks to the confrontation with Grindewald he had an in with the Wizengamot as Chief Warlock. He controlled the education of the nation's magical children. He became untouchable, and he used it to manipulate everyone. He deserved to be ousted as Headmaster. Madame Umbridge was not fit to take over, she had no idea how to run a school and by all accounts that wasn't her only failing. But the games the Headmaster was playing stymied the attempts to run the school as a school. I'm not sure he's altogether sane anymore or perhaps he's lost down the rabbit hole of his own making. So focused on the strings he's pulling, he's lost sight of everything else."

Percy stopped to drink his tea, allowing the information to sink in with his audience. They were still paying rapt attention, and he squashed the urge to squirm. This was his chance to get his side of the story out. He didn't believe his brothers at least would turn from him anymore. They clearly didn't trust Dumbledore and had been working around him for some time, but Dumbledore wasn't family.

"When I was promoted, I, I do not believe that I could have ever anticipated the response. I knew that things were happening that were odd and out of place, but I could not see then how they could involve me. How one single promotion of a junior nobody could herald the start of the second war. My parents, and I firmly believe that their information came from Dumbledore, told me that my promotion was not because I had worked hard, earned it, or even deserved it. They told me I was a pawn. That I was little more than an easily manipulated lackey, who would spill secrets about the Order, Harry, and Dumbledore's plans. I was going to be used and discarded. I tell myself that this was not the worth that they saw in me, but I fear at the time I did not believe it. The argument was heated and vicious on both sides. I lashed out. Throwing my father's lack of drive and ambition in his face, his willingness to let my mother dictate the household. For allowing her paranoid hysteria to taint any form of good sense. For them to be just as used and blind as I was in following Dumbledore who had put their only daughter and four of their sons in harm's way with nary a thought. If they were to be believed that You-Know-Who was back, then their leader had enabled the rise of a Dark Lord not once but twice. I pronounced that I would sooner be a pawn of the Ministry than a loyal, blind subservient to Dumbledore."

Percy took a fortifying sip of the tea he held to wet his rapidly drying throat. "It was perhaps a pronouncement made of hurt pride and vanity, but my mother's temper once roused truly is a thing to fear. Howlers from her had at least meant she had sat down and composed herself to write coherently. My mother told me that she had not raised me to turn my back on my family and that it was my duty to resign my position. No son of hers would join with You-Know-Who, marked or
otherwise."

There was a deathly silence. Percy made a wry face. "That was rather my reaction too. I had not ever thought she would accuse me of joining the Death Eaters. So, I left. I threw myself into the only thing that I had left, and it turned out to be the ashes that I had been told it was. This was just after the Tri-Wizard Tournament when I became a pariah to everyone wizarding for not realising my boss was his escaped Death Eater son. A wizard who had been kept in a basement for twenty years and was presumed dead. Shortly after that I met Audrey, so the year wasn't a total loss,"

"Oh my god," Audrey said. "No wonder you aren't speaking to your family."

"Things are a little fraught," Percy agreed.

"Did you know?" Audrey asked looking at Fred and George. "Did you know what she had said?"

"No," Percy said answering for his brothers whose faces were still pictures of shock. "I've never told anyone until now. I am angry with my mother, I cannot forgive her words, but I do not think it was something she came to on her own. I believe that Dumbledore played on her fears."

"Percy your mother accused you of joining a terrorist organisation that commits unspeakable acts of violence against other people. Your mother! You're angry?" Audrey said standing up suddenly and pacing. "You're angry? I'm bloody livid! How could she? How could she even think for one moment that you would do such a thing?"

"Audrey."

She spun towards the voice.

"I appreciate what you are saying, but truly there is no need for you to work yourself up over it."

"Percy Ignatius Weasley don't you dare patronise me. I have accepted your magic, I am coming to terms with the fact that today you are going to go out there and fight against people who are looking to hurt you. I have accepted that and done so quite calmly I feel, but if you think that I am unaffected, that I don't wish that none of this was happening, then you are very mistaken. If I want to be angry at your bloody mother for insulting you and being a total bitch then as your fiancée I have the goddam right. If I want to be angry at her because it's better than being scared out of my mind for you, then you better believe that that's what I'm going to do."

Percy blinked at Audrey unsure of where this sudden fierceness had come from. Experience in volatile tempers, however, made sure his mouth remained closed, and he only offered his hand to her.

Audrey scowled at him before accepting the hand and returning to her chair shooting him suspicious looks.

"I apologise I did not mean to patronise you. I only wished that you would not upset yourself on my behalf for words spoken in the heat of anger."

"Of course I'm going to be upset Percy, it was a horrible thing to say. No one should be accused of such a thing, there are lines Percy and some you do not cross."

"I've never thought you were a Death Eater," Harry offered into the silence. "I mean yeah, I get that you were worried about the danger I posed. I mean I was pretty concerned about myself too. But I didn't think you sent Ron that letter because you didn't care. I can't believe Mrs Weasley said that. It's awful. Really awful."
"What did Dad say?" Fred asked his voice quiet.

Percy looked away. Fred made a growling noise in his throat causing Percy to turn back to him.

"He didn't say he believed it too. Did he?" Fred asked in a deadly quiet tone.

"No," Percy said. "He didn't, but nor did he correct Mum. He simply let her shout until I left."

Fred and George looked mutinous.

"You cannot hold this against them," Percy said sharply. "This has nothing to do with either of you."

"Shove off Percy of course it does, you are our brother, and they are our parents. You've been spying on the Ministry to help us. You can't think we are going to stand for this, can you? Wait till Bill finds out."

"No," Percy protested. "Today is not the day to bring a rift between yourselves and our parents. The reasons for my estrangement need not cause further damage."

Fred and George sat back in their chairs their faces insubordinate, and Percy was unsure that he would be heeded. His brothers were no longer liable to listen to him as they had as children.

Percy glanced at Audrey and got the distinct impression she had sided with his brothers. Percy wiped a hand over his face in concern. He felt lighter for sharing the load and getting confirmation from these people that they did not hold the same view as his mother, but more than anything, he didn't wish to drag it all up and face how terrible it had made him feel and how hurt he had been.

Further conversation on the topic was ended when the door opened admitting Minerva and Severus. Eyebrows were raised at the tense atmosphere, but nothing was said as the two newcomers were made welcome.

Fred and George gave Percy a long look before announcing they had some errands to run and some people to see. Percy's ears perked up, and he excused himself to follow his brothers from the room.

"The others, the volunteers that are going to be turning up. How are you getting in touch with them?"

"Communication galleon," George said. "Why?"

"I need some," Percy responded.

"How many?"

"Twenty?"

Fred nodded and made for the stairs.

George stayed with Percy. "It's not right," he said.

"Leave it," Percy said tiredly. "It's done. It can't be changed."

"But Dad at least…"

"Is ruled by mum," Percy said shaking his head. Fred reappeared holding two small pouches.

"They work like the DA coins, they will heat up when we want people to come. Your people. They
"Yes," Percy said.

Fred nodded. "If they don't know where the Burrow is the coins can be used as a portkey. They just have to keep hold of them. Those that have been via the shop were given shield rings as well, these are the leftovers we've got. Give 'em a ring and a coin and tell them to wear the rings. They'll stop them being hexed in the back, but they won't stop an unforgivable."

Percy nodded accepting the two bags.

"How are you going to get them to them?" George asked.

"I'll go to the Ministry."

"That's not safe Percy," Fred pointed out.

"I'll go straight to my office and send them out from there," Percy said. "No one will see me."

"The Minister?"

"You think he's going to be in today?"

"It's a big risk Percy."

"It's worth it."

Fred and George said nothing but looked at their brother unconvinced.

"Don't you have things to be doing?" Percy asked.

Fred and George exchanged a glance before nodding and heading off to Minerva's study to use the floo. Percy sighed sagging against the wall.

"Be advised Mr Weasley that your brothers have a point and the Ministry can no longer be considered safe."

Percy glanced over his shoulder at Severus. "I only need twenty minutes sir," Percy replied. "I'll be back before they get to missing me."

"Missing who?" an arch voice asked, and Audrey stepped around Severus.

"I need twenty minutes to run an errand," Percy explained.

"Oh really. What errand?"

Percy huffed as Severus retreated back to the library leaving him to face Audrey. "There are some people, friends of mine that I should warn. I'll be twenty minutes."

Audrey cocked her head. "It's dangerous going there today, that's why we are here."

"Yes," Percy agreed. "But I do not intend to be seen."

"Okay." Audrey nodded. "I'll see you when you get back."

Percy raised an eyebrow in query, but Audrey waved him off. "The sooner you go, the sooner you are back."
Percy shook his head, she would explain later he was sure, and he was aware that delaying would not reduce the danger he faced. Percy left the house via the front door and once past the ward line span himself into nothing. He landed in his office, the crack of his appearance freezing him in place, ears straining to hear anything that might warn him he was in danger.

The office was dark, there was no sound coming from the Minister's office either. Percy's wand flicked a quick spell to check for occupants. The office was empty.

Percy left the lamps in his office dark and felt his way to the Minister's door. He grasped the handle and let himself into the space closing the door behind him. He threw up the privacy ward and took his first complete breath.

Percy lit the lamps and spilt the contents of the pouches on the desk. On a piece of parchment, he wrote a terse explanation then set the charm to incinerate the paper two minutes after it was handled by its recipient. Percy duplicated the note the required times and spread them out on the desk placing a coin and ring atop of each one. Then using another stack of parchment, he configured small boxes, slipping the note ring and coin into each one before writing the direction on the outside and sealing them. That done Percy applied a small compulsion charm to each box to ensure they were opened and the contents protected by the recipients. Then with one more wave of his wand, he sent the boxes on their way tumbling through the Ministry floo.

There were a few more things he could do so Percy tided the desk and moved to the centre of the office. Taking a deep breath, he reached out his magic for the wards. He felt them buzzing around him, and Percy pushed his will into them. At his command, a door appeared in the prisoner cell block. Behind that door, cells began to form up in wizarding space. The door shimmered out of existence until it was needed later, and Percy breathed heavily at the effort it had taken. After catching his breath, he reached for the wards once more. He solidified his idea and pushed his will into the wards. Breaking the connection, Percy sagged slightly. The Ministry would be empty by five minutes past five this evening. Every department, office, nook and cranny would be empty except those that ran a skeleton staff such as the Aurory and the Department of Mysteries. Everyone else would find themselves packing up and leaving, looking forward to their weekends. It would mean that no one would be able to enter the Ministry until Percy unlocked the doors. If he had to, he could bring everyone inside the Ministry. They would have one final bolt hole, and it would be the seat of power in Magical Britain.

Percy really hoped it wouldn't go that badly wrong.
The Burrow

Audrey had indeed had an ulterior motive for her calm dismissal of him earlier. Upon Percy's return, she found him and dragged him to a quiet spot before demanding to be included in the numbers at the Burrow. She had contended that she didn't want to be left behind. That waiting for them to return or not was too much to ask. She could come to the Burrow, she could help Helen and John at the aid station. No, she didn't know first aid, but she could follow instructions. Helen and John were muggles, it was no more dangerous for them than it would be for her.

Percy was immovable. She wasn't coming. She was staying at the Lodge. Helen brought Pins through to them introduced them again and made a sharp exit. Audrey wasn't going to drag the older woman into the argument. She was, after all, a grown up and capable of making her own decisions, a small fact that Percy was running roughshod over.

Eventually, in the face of his outright refusal and not wishing to cause an argument that couldn't be forgiven, Audrey submitted. Not gracefully but none the less she agreed to remain at the Lodge.

When the mirrors chimed, and they all gathered in the hallway before they left, Audrey was calm. She wished them luck and was suddenly alone in the house except for Pins who stood by her, and Ollivander, who was in a room upstairs.

Audrey refused to let herself cry. She was no damsel in distress and crying would do her no good. Percy promised her he would be fine and despite everything, all the possibility and likelihood, she was going to hang her hope on that.

Audrey went back into the library settling down in a chair. Pins vanished and reappeared with a tea service and small cakes. Audrey thanked him and accepted the tea. The cake she put to one side, her stomach wasn't going to be happy if she ate anything. Instead, she turned to Pins. "Please stay, would you tell me about yourself? I know so little."

"Miss Stone is wise," Pins said with a sharp grin. "So few admit they know little."

"Well I'm muggle, and I've known about magic for about a fortnight, so I'm very aware that I know nothing at all. Please stay, I'd like to learn what I can."

Pins hopped into the seat in a movement spryer than she would have given the elderly elf credit for. Once comfortable on the chair he looked over his long nose at Audrey. "What is it you ask?"

Audrey smiled at the sight of the elderly elf. "Well for a start, how old are you? How long have you been in service? Is there a reason your name is Pins and the other elves except Folly have names relating to sewing? I meant to ask Minerva, but I didn't get a chance."

Pins nodded. "Sensible questions. Pins will start at the beginning."

Percy arrived at the Burrow with the Grangers. After he had escaped Kingsley and the prospect of entering his family home he gladly led the Grangers around the back of the house. Percy looked around in shock, the garden had been completely taken over. The elves were bustling about setting up rows of camp beds sheltered by canvas. The hum of activity was everywhere as preparations were underway. Helen and John strode forward eager to make the acquaintance of the healers they would be working with. Lacking in anything else to do, Percy followed. He stood unobtrusively by as introductions were made and provided answers as to where things could be found when they were
The number of people milling around gave him hope. This was the first wave, the others would be called later. If they could count on enough wands, then this might all work as planned.

Whatever signal was being waited for came, and the Order boiled out of the kitchen and set off towards the woods. Harry and Hermione joined the back of the group with Fred and George. Percy set off after them and was joined by Kingsley.

They entered the wood and headed towards the flashes of light that indicated that the Order had already engaged the Death Eaters. Soon enough they came upon the fight and raised their own wands.

Percy held nothing back. He had every intention of leaving this fight in one piece. He would see Audrey again, and he would marry her. They would have a family and live happily ever after.

His magic flew from him seeking targets and bringing them down. He used every advantage he had of knowing the wood he had played in as a child. Percy ignored the surprised look on Kingsley's face, he was aware of his reputation, the persona that everyone saw and didn't look past. He wasn't his brothers, but he was a Weasley. Kingsley got over the surprise and stepped up beside him. Percy was glad to have someone with him, and they moved together further into the fray.

Percy saw the shields in action when Kingsley didn't quite make it behind a tree to avoid the curse sent his way by the Death Eater they had come across. The spell splashed against the air three feet out from Kingsley and disappeared. Kingsley looked around in comic shock obviously confused as to why he was unharmed.

"Shield," Percy called sending his own spell back towards the Death Eater. The Death Eater dodged but the follow-up spell hit, and he dropped to the ground, blood gushing from the slice across his neck.

Kingsley nodded his thanks, sending a pitiless glance at the downed Death Eater. He summoned the wand from the dead wizard and disillusioned the body, marking where it was so they could return for it later. Percy kept watching while Kingsley worked, once he was finished Kingsley indicated they should continue.

They were nearly through the wood a slew of injured, incapacitated or dead Death Eaters left in their wake. They had found a rhythm that worked for them and brought it to good effect. The bright flash of light brought them up short, and they exchanged glances.

"Hermione and Harry?" Percy said panting and resting his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. He had been expending his magic at an alarming rate, and his job did not lend itself to battling through trees, exposed roots, brambles and uneven terrain and that was before the darkness of the winter evening was added. He was sure that not only were his shoes ruined but his ankle would be very sore from where he went over on it earlier.

"Possibly," Kingsley agreed, sounding slightly winded himself. "Come on," Kingsley said pushing himself off the tree he had leant on. "They need witnesses. We need to get over there."

Percy nodded and drew himself up. A quick point me spell, and he turned in the direction of where the final confrontation was to take place.

"There's a potion in your pack," Kingsley said. "It will perk you up."

Percy nodded. "Not yet. I'm alright yet."
Kingsley shrugged. "Don't let yourself get too run down."

They began moving in the direction they wished to go, but at the sight of the numbers of Death Eaters on the field, they exchanged a look before apparating.

They arrived at the edge of the lit space. Moving carefully so not to interrupt the tableau in front of them Kingsley led Percy closer to the Death Eaters that had arrived and clumped together. More of the Order arrived, and the area was soon surrounded by the Order, the volunteers, and Death Eaters alike.

Percy watched in horror as the plan unfolded in front of him. He had understood what had been discussed but watching it was something else. When Severus disappeared, Percy felt himself gasp in shock. Seeing Harry face down Tom had Percy clutching his wand and wishing to do something, anything to help. He gritted his teeth as he was forced to stand and do nothing. Percy saw Severus reappear from under the disillusionment and haul Minerva to her feet, both turned together, and the bright green spells left their wands slamming into You-Know-Who.

Kingsley clutched at his arm as the body hit the ground, and they began moving through the crowd. The Order was cheering, and Percy could already hear the sound of disapparition as some of the Death Eaters sought their escape. Others turned, howls of madness ripping from their throats as the spells once more began to fly. The Aurors came at Kingsley signal, they turned on the Death Eaters. Those in the Order and the volunteers closest cut short their celebrations and went after them as well throwing their wands into the last part of the fight. The Death Eaters began to panic as they were incapacitated as they tried to flee. The confusion allowed some to get away, but there were many more bound and wandless being guarded over by an Auror in uniform.

Once the initial requirement of apprehending the Death Eaters was completed Percy joined in with directing the milling crowd back the Burrow. Kingsley sought him out again as he sent the exhausted witches and wizards the most direct route back towards the Burrow.

"Percy, we need to get the Death Eaters away and to the cells. My Aurors can't get through, and they need to start clearing out the cells for the new arrivals. We need to know if Riddle did something at the Ministry before he died."

"Oh," Percy said, having momentarily forgotten he had locked everyone out of the Ministry. "I can probably do something."

"Then do it," Kingsley said. "And quickly."

Percy nodded. "Which of these potions did you mean earlier?" he asked Kingsley pulling them from his pack. "I have to say now I've stopped, I'm beginning to feel it."

Kingsley nodded sagely. "The bright green one. Harry and Hermione call it Rockstar potion."

"Merlin," Percy muttered putting the other potions away in his pack again then shoving the pack back into his pocket. He eyed the potion but shrugged and knocked it back. "Not terrible," he commented.

Kingsley nodded in agreement. Percy felt the difference as the potion hit his system, the tiredness caused by the end of his adrenalin rush suddenly vanished leaving him feeling fresh again. Percy eyed Kingsley. "Have you taken this stuff?"

"Yes," Kingsley said. "About five minutes ago. It's good stuff."

Percy nodded. "I'll be a moment," and he apparated away.
In the office of the Minister for Magic Percy altered the wards allowing the Aurors to come and go and uncovered the door to the cells he had asked the Ministry wards to create. Satisfied Percy returned to the field.

"The Aurors should be fine to transport people. They'll find a new door in the cell block leading to more cells," Percy told Kingsley.

Kingsley eyed him. "They will?"

Percy nodded.

"We're going to have a chat you and me, Weasley," Kingsley said. "Not now but it's coming."

Percy nodded. "As you say."

Kingsley clapped him on the back. "Stick by me. I think I'm going to need your help sorting this mess out."

Percy stayed with Kingsley. He had no desire to return to the Burrow. He had no wish for someone to see through his disguise and expect an explanation. Kingsley set the authors off in groups to collect up the death eaters that had been incapacitated in the wood. Those still breathing were divided by their needs of medical attention, and Percy found himself returning to the Ministry to open another portion of wizarding space. There the injured death eaters could be held in until healers could be found. The dead were placed into another wizarding space. You-Know-Who's body was taken by Kingsley himself to a cell that Percy created. Once the body was placed inside the door sealed and vanished.

Percy met Kingsley back on the field and waved off the questioning glances Kingsley was sending him.

The field soon became empty of those still able to move under their own power, and the two men headed back towards the Burrow. Outside the field hospital, they stopped to speak to the healers who rattled off the numbers of wounded and dead. Percy was relieved that the walking wounded far outweighed the dead and none of his family was listed. Kingsley accepted the list which Percy took from him and placed in a folder he had snatched from his desk on one of the trips to the Minister's office. Information was coming to Kingsley thick and fast. Percy was happy and able to step in as secretary enabling Kingsley to keep making decisions while Percy kept track of the details.

As they finished up with the healers, John approached.

Kingsley looked up at the sound of his name. "Yes, John? Something I can do for you?"

"Yes actually. It's Narcissa Malfoy." John answered.

"What about her?" Kingsley asked puzzled.

"She didn't participate in the battle or with the Death Eaters. She followed her husband, and she's currently alone in her house where all the people who escaped still have access to. Could you arrange for her to go into protective custody?" John requested.

"Can I ask why you would be remotely interested in such a thing?" Kingsley asked a look of confused shock passing over his face.

"Draco, he asked me just before he left," John explained
"Draco Malfoy?" Kingsley said dumbly.

"Yes, he was here, Severus asked us to keep him safe, so he was here with us helping," John said looking at Kingsley with impatience.

"Draco Malfoy?"

John frowned in exasperation. "Yes, is this a problem?"

"He's marked," Kingsley answered.

John shrugged. "He did nothing but what he was instructed to, he saved a few people while he was at it and he wants to keep his mother safe. I said I'd ask."

"The blond apprentice you had with you?" one of the healers spoke up.

"Yes, that's him," John confirmed.

"Huh, he didn't look like a Malfoy. Does he not have his father's hair? Bet that went down well with the arrogant prick."

"He does," John replied. "We disguised him so not to cause a panic."

Kingsley turned to the healer. "You spoke with him?"

"Oh no," the healer said. "But he followed orders, held people together until we could get there and dished out water mostly."

Kingsley rubbed a hand over his face. "Where is he now?"

"Back at the school, Dobby took him back once Harry and Hermione returned," John answered promptly.

Kingsley looked at John with concern. "I'm not sure I can offer anything. She's not going to answer the door if we go knocking and the Ministry won't treat her any better than the Death Eaters."

Percy listened silently to the exchange between Kingsley and John. His brain was suddenly analysing a lot of information as the possibilities tumbled around inside his head, his gut told him he had to say something.

"Kingsley," Percy said hesitantly, shooting a look at the healers who were avidly listening.

Kingsley followed the look and smiled at the healers. "If you'll excuse us this might take some time. As your patients are being moved onto St Mungo's feel free to grab some refreshments. We'll take your full statements tomorrow if you wish to get some rest."

The healers made polite noises clearly disappointed they wouldn't be hearing anything more and moved away. Kingsley rolled his eyes and threw up a privacy charm around the three of them. "Go ahead, Percy."

"If Draco Malfoy stayed here helping, and it can be corroborated with witnesses, any trial he is subjected to, can use it to offer clemency," Percy said.

"He's marked. I don't intend to let those who are marked get away this time," Kingsley replied firmly.
"That might be difficult since Severus killed Tom," John pointed out.

"Severus has been on trial for joining the Death Eaters once already. We can't charge him with the crime again," Kingsley said with a wave of his hand. "Draco on the other hand."

"Was underage when he was marked," John rebutted. "He wasn't legally responsible for his actions, his parents were, and I presume from what I've been told his father is a piece of work."

Kingsley frowned at John, Percy cut across them both before the men started an argument. "Of course we can't. His being underage and helping here means clemency can be offered. If we protect her son, Narcissa Malfoy is more likely to help us."

"So rather than charge a child, you're going to leverage his mother?" John asked.

"Yes," Percy said firmly. "The network the Malfoy's control can topple any government we try and put in place if they are free to do so. We need to pull their teeth before they can regroup and we end up back here again."

John shook his head. "One family?"

"One family rich as Croesus and have been collecting dirt on people for years," Percy added.

"Percy's right," Kingsley sighed. "We need the information they have."

The bubble around them shimmered then broke as Minerva came through it.

"Gentlemen," Minerva said. "Albus wants a word Kingsley, he's getting tetchy."

"We'll be right in Minerva," Kingsley said.

Minerva looked between them. "Something the matter?"

"You don't have another safe house where we can stash Narcissa Malfoy do you?" Kingsley asked. "I imagine the Lodge is pretty full at the moment."

"Any particular reason you want to do such a thing?"

"Yes," Kingsley answered.

Minerva raised an eyebrow at him waiting.

"Long story. We need to get her out of Malfoy Manor and somewhere safe," Kingsley allowed.

Minerva paused and thought for a moment then nodded. "Yes. I can, she can be put in one of the castle guest suites."

"Can you do that? Doesn't Albus need to sign off on it?" Kingsley asked in surprise.

"Of course I can," Minerva said. "Do you have a way of getting her from the Manor? Severus can't go."

"I was going to suggest Dobby, he's familiar with the place after all," John replied.


An elf appeared at her feet. "Tippy go with Dobby, retrieve Narcissa Malfoy and enough clothes and
such for a fortnight. Then take her to the guest rooms nearest my rooms then ward the door. No one goes in or out without me."

"Yes, Mistress," the elf bowed.

Percy reached for his parchment and quill as the elves were called and given instructions to retrieve Narcissa Malfoy from her family home. Quickly Percy drafted an executive order allowing the Aurors to enter the Malfoy property with the expressed permission of Narcissa Malfoy, to apprehend those witches and wizards on the property. The draft was then shoved under Kingsley's nose.

"Sign this," Percy said handing over the quill. "Once Minerva has the agreement of Mrs Malfoy you can let the Aurors go in."

Kingsley scanned the document in surprise. "Percy, you've just written this?"

Percy nodded. "Charmed quill and a template draft. It saves time. This keeps the raid on the Malfoys legal. Mrs Malfoy, depending on the marriage contract, might not have executive authority over the estate. It might fall to Draco immediately on the demise of Lucius. This gives you legal authority to take her permission over whoever the head of the household is."

Kingsley nodded scribbling his signature on the bottom of the page. "Keep hold of it for me. I'll need your notes from the healers." Kingsley said as they set off towards the house. Minerva exchanged a few last words with John and followed them
Percy took a breath before he followed Kingsley into the kitchen of his family home. The glamour ring was hiding him in plain sight. The little group the twins called the Secret Order obviously knew who he was despite it, but he'd already seen Bill and his elder brother had not recognised him.

Percy had spent months spying in the Ministry, feeding information to Kingsley. They had developed a good working relationship, but he'd never lost the sense of impending doom hanging over him. That they were only a breath away from being discovered, and the consequences of his actions would be every nightmare he'd ever had. Now it was over, the monster vanquished his role no longer putting everything he loved at risk. Yet the work was just beginning, revelations were coming, the vacuum of power they had created would have to be filled. They were now going to have to emerge from the shadows and move openly against the one remaining wizard who could bring all their plans to ruin. The wizard who was sitting the other side of the Burrow's kitchen door.

Percy stepped into the warmth of the Burrow and stared in shock. His mother was sat at the table while Minerva's elves, because who else would they belong to, ferried refreshments out of the kitchen. He took an unobtrusive spot against the wall next to Kingsley accepting with a nod of thanks the tea the elf held out. He watched his mother twitch and had to suppress his amusement that wanted to spread across his face. A quick glance at the table showed his brothers were all trying to hide their own amusement at their mother's predicament. He caught the twins' attention exchanging a brief smirk before expressions were schooled again.

Albus cleared his throat, and Percy observed the man. He was sat in his father's chair. Percy bristled in indignation on behalf of his father who had been usurped in his own home. Arthur wouldn't care, Percy knew that he would be happy to defer to Albus, but Albus, a guest in the Burrow, should have better manners. Instead, he was playing the power games Percy had come to despise him for, even now declaring that he was to be deferred to. Percy dropped his gaze before Albus noticed his reaction and decided to question it.

"Kingsley, perhaps now you are here, you would be so kind as to update us all on the situation?" Albus said an undercurrent of steel running through the words.

Kingsley, to Percy's profound gratitude, was no more enamoured of Albus than himself. Kingsley straightened off the wall and nodded once before saying. "Riddle is dead. His body has been contained and moved to a secure location. The Death Eaters who were present have been arrested and are currently being held. We'll transport them as soon as we have somewhere to put them. There's a team at the Ministry clearing some of the high-security cells. They'll be held there until the trials can be arranged which will start as soon as the Wizengamot can meet and elect a new Minister. I've had a report that Minister Thicknesse has retired with immediate effect. He is currently under monitored house arrest. Those Death Eaters that were injured or killed on the field are being rounded up. The injured are being transferred to the Ministry to the first lot of free cells where they will receive medical treatment. The dead are being held for identification. Any families that want to claim the bodies will be allowed to do so. Otherwise, disposal will fall to the Ministry. Thanks to the efforts
of the healers here, our losses are significantly less than they could be."

Kingsley pulled a roll of parchment from his pocket. "I've a list of the dead that has been brought here so far. Unfortunately, Alastor Moody is on it. Unless anyone objects or comes forward, the Auror office will be claiming his body. He was one of us, we'll honour him."

Kingsley paused a moment to let the news sink in, then continued. His tone was brisk, not inviting questions or remarks as he continued his debriefing. "Going forward, we'll clear out of your house Molly and Arthur, once we have everyone off the field, and the healers say their patients are able to leave. As soon as it's possible, so within the next few hours to a day or so, everyone will be required to give a statement. The Ministry will be petitioned to offer a blanket pardon for any spells that were used tonight that might otherwise have been cause for concern. The statements will also allow us to collect and corroborate the names of the Death Eaters present, which is information that we'll need for the trials. I don't anticipate there being any problems in getting that passed by the Ministry. We'll make the pardons specific and a one time deal. We don't want people going half-cocked on self-appointed missions of revenge. Other than that, I've got nothing else to tell you all. If you can make yourselves available to the Auror's taking your statements, that would be appreciated." Kingsley looked around the room watching as everything he said sunk in.

Albus spoke first. "You seem to have things under control." The statement was heavily laden with implications.

"We were fortunate that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement recently renewed their vows of office," Kingsley replied glibly. As though the surprise meeting, where he'd called the entire department in and had them all swear the traditional wand oaths - to preserve and prevent offences against people and property with fairness, diligence, and impartiality, according equal respect to all people, had been a small matter of ten minutes.

Kingsley had been gladdened by the overall positive response to the oaths that had fallen out of favour since the last war. Those that had baulked or refused had been given until the start of their next shift to comply or be taken off active service effective immediately. There had been less than a handful who had refused in the end. The oaths had allowed Kingsley to deploy his Aurors to the best effect to handle the events of tonight, and without being totally sure he could rely on them, he knew that the clean-up wouldn't be running as smoothly as it was.

It would have been easy for captured Death Eaters to slip away helped by those Aurors who thought to take advantage. Kingsley was aware that the unobtrusive man who was stood by him was largely responsible for it all happening.

The plans laid by the Secret Order had been detailed and in-depth, the result of many a late-night, but they were paying dividends in spades. Kingsley was gratified to see the fleeting surprise that appeared on Albus' face. He watched as it was chased away by suspicion and that to be smoothed away by narrow-eyed calculation.

Albus drew his wand and flicked it. The air tightened as the privacy spells settled into place blanketing the room. "This plan you've implemented. It is not the work of a moment."

"No," Kingsley agreed.

"And yet you didn't come to me as the head of the Order? Did you inform anyone of your plan Kingsley? Did you perchance think that there might be more than one option? That the actions you have taken this evening may very well lead to further loss and suffering? That attacking in the manner you have, you have not ended this war but in fact, prolonged it?" Albus frowned at Kingsley, his expression demanding an answer.
"As it happens, Albus, all of those things were considered before this evening. Tonight was a farce. You were never going to set the wards on the Burrow for it to become a new headquarters. How many people did you tell about your plans, Albus?" Kingsley retorted.

Albus' expression changed to one of regret. "I was not aware that Voldemort would be present until he appeared, nor was I aware his Death Eaters were set to attack. The location for this evening was not my doing Kingsley. Severus was quite insistent we used the Burrow."

Kingsley gritted his teeth in the face of the blatant manipulation. Severus, for his part, said nothing and continued to sit by Minerva, his eyes hooded, sipping his tea, seemingly ignoring everyone. Minerva's back stiffened at the accusation, and the twins shot Albus disgusted looks.

Albus concentrated on Kingsley. "There was an operational advantage to tonight's plan. The Order never has, and will never operate in a manner that increases the risk of plans falling into the enemy's hands by sharing everything with all the members".

"Convenient don't you think?" Kingsley said.

Albus drew himself up, his magic responding to his rising ire. "Necessary," he retorted. "As necessary as the chain of command you have willfully ignored. Your actions, while in the best of intentions may have cost us more than you could ever imagine."

"You heard the report, it's over," Kingsley said firmly. "This was our stand, made on our terms and we won."

"You believe Riddle to be defeated so easily?" Albus asked shrewdly.

"Nobody said it was easy Albus," Kingsley said with a sigh. "But he is dead. His Death Eaters are being rounded up, and I have work to do. If you have genuine concerns then feel free to share them otherwise, as I said, I have other places to be."

"You are a member of the Order Kingsley, you report to me. You do not have the right to summon the Order and deploy our forces as you have. You recklessly endangered everyone and everything we have worked towards with no thought to the consequences."

Kingsley looked at Albus and shook his head in regret. "Albus, you came here tonight to die, how much thought to the consequences did you give?"

"Albus?" Molly interrupted, the demand for a rebuttal was written all over her face

Albus smiled at her kindly. "It was always a possibility Molly, a risk. One that I accepted as part of my role."

Severus snorted in scorn. Albus shot him an unfriendly look.

"Come, Albus," Arthur intervened. "While Kingsley gave us the impression that this was sanctioned, and I understand that while this wasn't the case. He has perhaps acted beyond his permissible authority, but if You-Know-Who is dead, the results should outweigh that, shouldn't they?"

Albus smiled politely at Arthur. "If that was the case, Arthur, you may well be correct."

"Well then, perhaps we should convene again tomorrow? Once everyone's had a bit of time to recover? That way we might have a better idea of how the Ministry has reacted. Who they have appointed as the next Minister and how we can work with them going forward. If, as you believe, the threat of You-Know-Who has not passed." Arthur suggested.
Albus nodded. "You speak sense Arthur, perhaps the idea has merit. We are all understandably overwrought by tonight's events. Very well, we will call a meeting at the headquarters tomorrow evening. That should give everybody chance to recover. I will expect a full report, Kingsley from the Auror department. I shall attend the meeting of the Wizengamot and bring what information I can from it." Albus looked around the table projecting an air of a forgiving leader. A leader that was understanding this time but would perhaps not be best pleased if crossed again.

"No," Kingsley said.

"Hmm?" Albus said turning his head to stare at Kingsley, the forgiving air wavering.

"I said no. You have no active role within the Ministry. The latest Minister for Magic rescinded your position as Chief Warlock after Fudge and Scringemour allowed you to retake it. You might have forgotten to bring it up Albus, but it does not mean that people weren't aware."

"Pious Thicknesse was a puppet for Voldemort," Albus said genially. "Now that he has resigned I can once more perform the role."

"No," Kingsley said once more shaking his head for emphasis. "The Ministry will need to elect a new Chief Warlock along with a Minister. It is up to the Wizengamot to appoint the roles."

Albus' smile slipped. "It falls to those who can, to offer their services."

"Offer, not assume, Albus. You hold no part of the current Ministry. If the Wizengamot invites you to reprise the role, then you may attend. The Aurors on duty will not allow you to pass. You might perhaps be better waiting for the invitation before causing a scene."

Albus drew himself up and at the same time leaned back in his chair, his demeanour indicating this new challenge to his authority was not welcome.

"No," Kingsley said, looking down at Percy's notes as if they were far more important that Albus' posturing. "You don't have a position anymore Albus. If we are serious about removing outside influences over policy, then the Wizengamot will hold a closed session. A decision will be made and announced. The Ministry has ground to make up to restore its reputation, starting as it means to go on."

Molly glanced between Kingsley and Albus. "Surely though Kingsley, Albus has experience, he's the leader of the Order for Merlin's sake."

Kingsley looked at Molly for a long moment before apparently making his mind up about something. He drew himself up putting steel into his tired spine, straightening his robes, seemingly settling and centring himself before responding. "Albus is responsible for Hogwarts, which he has stated is to be kept separate from Ministry influence. He has been offered and refused the position of Minister for Magic numerous times. If he wanted the job, then he should have taken it. The British Ministry of Magic no longer has time for kingmakers, no matter which side they are on."

Kingsley reached into his robes and pulled out a sealed envelope. He flicked it down in front of Albus. "That is my formal resignation from the Order of the Phoenix, you'll note that it is backdated. I would have handed it over sooner, but other events took precedence. Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do. Molly, Arthur, thank you for what you did this evening." Kingsley turned to face the eldest of the Weasley children. "Bill, if you'll make yourself available, I'd like to see you first thing Monday morning at the Ministry, that ward, I think we'll find a use for it." He turned to the twins. "Fred, George, as always, a pleasure working with you. When you've worked out the details of the mirrors, and the glamour rings with Harry and Hermione let me know, we'll take a serious
The twins nodded in agreement, and Kingsley turned lastly to Minerva and Severus. "We owe you both a great debt of gratitude. I need both your statements, along with those of Harry and Hermione. I know some of it obviously, but if we can get everything down on the official record, it will make moving forward easier. Will you be at the house or the castle?"

"The house," Minerva said. "I think that would be easier for everyone."

"Very well, keep your mirror on you." Kingsley exchanged a brief glance with Percy who nodded back, and they stepped toward the door.

"Do you mean to take the position yourself, Kingsley? Is this what you've been heading towards? Control the board and elect yourself?" Albus cut across the quiet that had descended with Kingsley's shock resignation. His tone was purposely disappointed, sorrowful as if a favoured student had suddenly done something regrettably foolish.

Kingsley turned back to Albus a polite blank expression on his face, hiding his internal fury. His voice betrayed him. "No Albus it hasn't. I'm happy in my role at the DMLE. I was glad to get involved when approached to by people who wanted to do something positive to make the change everyone wanted, but were all too busy sitting around expecting Harry Potter to deliver. If the Minister for Magic needs me to work in my role for the next thirty years cleaning up the messes made by those with good intentions, I'll be happy to Albus. If the Wizengamot wants me to hold the office of Minister I would gladly make the sacrifices necessary to do so. I hold no personal ambition, Albus, I do not need to manipulate, connive, and lie to get through my day. I joined the Order to protect innocent people, to work towards the defeat of Riddle to ensure that wizarding society could live in peace and prosperity. Riddle is gone," Kingsley nodded at the envelope lying untouched on the table. "My loyalty and responsibilities no longer lie with the Order but with the rebuilding of our society and in serving its people."

Severus made a small sound to draw Kingsley's attention. "Kingsley come to the house if you have time. There's something I believe belongs to you there, you'll need it before your meeting." Severus felt Minerva turn to look at him, his eyes didn't leave Kingsley's face and he watched as Kingsley evaluated his words and Minerva's reaction.

"I'll be over first thing in the morning. Can you spare me an hour or so? I might as well take your statement at the same time." Kingsley agreed.

"Bring your contact," Severus said indicating Percy with a subtle tilt of his head. "His input may be required."


"Albus," Severus said lazily.

Albus scowled. "Any and all information you have should have been shared." He didn't add 'with me,' but it echoed in the room.

"No Albus, my vows were to keep Potter safe, to spy for you until the Dark Lord was defeated. Both of those conditions have been met. I believe our business is concluded. As I was never an actual member of the Order of the Phoenix, I don't feel that I need to formally resign." Severus replied his tone subtly mocking.

Albus' face became thunderous, and the swell of his magic rising caused the china on the table to
vibrate before it cut off abruptly as he got it under control.

"Posturing Albus?" Severus needled laconically. "While in the room with the people who brought down the man you couldn't? You must be feeling confident." Severus stood. Minerva looked up at him a question in her eyes. He rolled his eyes at her and held out his hand. "Madam?"

Minerva took the hand and rose to her feet and turned to Albus, her face set in the stern lines of a disapproving teacher, her tone controlled and cold. "The war is over, Albus. You squandered the opportunity presented at the end of the last war to unite the next generation, and for my part, I let you. It is not a mistake I intend to repeat. If you require my resignation from the Order in writing, you will have it. If the actions of Kingsley disturb you so, feel free to take it from the date upon Kingsley's letter, or better yet the date of Miss Granger's letter."

Before anyone could say anything else, the kitchen door was flung wide open, and a brunette woman entered followed by John. Her gaze flicked around the room then settled on one person.

"Percy!" she shrieked in relief. Audrey flung herself across the room at a near run squeezing around people to reach her goal. Percy looked up at his name, worry and concern crossing his face. Audrey threw herself the last few steps, and he caught her, gathering her to him. She held his face between her hands and looked at him earnestly. "Are you OK? You're not hurt?"

"I'm fine. But what are you doing here? You are supposed to be at the house." Percy replied slipping the ring from his finger and removing his disguise, so she could see him properly.

"I was," Audrey said. "But I was starting to climb the walls and Pins is a lovely chap, but he kept trying to feed me, and I felt terrible for not eating it since he cooked, but I couldn't. He was kind enough to sit and have a chat with me. Did you know he's served for three generations? He doesn't know how old he is, but if you think that extended lifespans are normal he's got to be really old! Anyway, I asked him to check on what was going on here, and once everyone started gathering, I figured that it was all but over so I asked him to bring me."

Percy enfolded her in a hug and rested his head against hers. "You should have stayed at the house, it's safer," he said but with no censure.

"And wait until someone remembered me and let me know you were alright? You could have called on the mirror," Audrey replied drily.

"Sorry," he answered. "It's only just over." He drew her a bit closer tucking her head into his shoulder. She snuggled into his embrace for a moment before pulling away slightly to look up at him.

"Umm, is everyone OK?" her eyes flickered about the assembled people. "Oh, have I just intruded?" she asked noting the looks they were getting. She sent a smile and a small wave at Fred and George who returned them.

"Percy?" Molly's voice cut across the quiet that had formed after Audrey's entrance which had broken the tension between Albus and Minerva.

Percy closed his eyes briefly clutching Audrey a bit tighter to him, Fred and George winced in sympathy.

"Audrey, love," George said holding out his hand from his seat. "If you can stand to let Percy go, we'll give you a tour if you like?"

"I think I'd rather stay with Percy," she said with a small smile.
George shrugged good-naturedly. "Well can't blame a chap for trying."

"Percy who is this?" Molly stood from her chair by Arthur's side and moved around the table to stand in front of Percy, eyeing the woman he held in his arms with suspicion.

Percy straightened holding back a sigh. "Mum this is Audrey, Audrey this is my Mum."

Audrey glanced first up at Percy before turning to face Molly. "Mrs Weasley," she said in acknowledgement, her voice politely cool.

"Molly, do call me Molly, dear," Molly said warmly. "We didn't know Percy had found himself, someone."

"No," Audrey said in the same cool tone of voice. "I imagine that not speaking to your son would be a hindrance to that."

Molly stiffened, and her smile became brittle. "Families do have disagreements, but Percy is back now, and we're very happy to welcome you as well."

Audrey said nothing but sent a small smile back. She looked up at Percy. "Do you need to stay? We could go back to the house."

Kingsley broke in. "Audrey, is it?"

Audrey nodded.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, I work at the Ministry with Percy," Kingsley said as he stepped up beside the couple and held out his hand to her.

Audrey shook it. "Nice to meet you Mr Shacklebolt."

"Kingsley, please. I'll need Percy's help sorting a few issues out, paperwork and such. If you would be so kind as to let me borrow him?"

"With the Ministry? Now?" Audrey looked at him askance then up at Percy.

"Yes," Kingsley said flashing a look at Percy. "Excuse me Audrey, but are you fully advised of the situation?"

"No, not entirely. Percy hasn't been able to tell me everything for obvious reasons, but I understand most of it." Audrey said cautiously.

Kingsley smiled warmly at her. "A few things need tying up immediately, and Percy is the best placed. I'll have him returned as soon as possible," Kingsley said reassuringly.

Audrey looked between Percy and Kingsley.

Fred spoke up from his seat. "We'll take you back to the house or our flat if you like. Maybe not yours or Percy's just for now."

Percy pushed her gently towards Fred and George. "Go with them I won't be long. Shall we get started then, Kingsley?"

"I don't understand," Molly broke in, her tone showing her rising indignation at being left out of the conversation.
Kingsley turned to Molly and raised a querying brow. "What is there to misunderstand?"

"You've been working with Percy? You put my son in danger and didn't tell me?" she demanded.

"No," Kingsley said calmly. "Percy volunteered on the condition that the Order was in no way
involved. If he chose not to tell you about his involvement, that was a family matter and certainly
nothing I could get involved in."

"Kingsley, Molly has every right to be concerned for her children's well-being," Albus said genially.
"You have apparently been working with more information than anyone else, and I would be
interested in going over it with you, there is still much to be discussed."

Kingsley smiled a tight smile that didn't convey anything other than annoyance. "As I have just
resigned from the Order Albus, I am afraid there will be things I cannot discuss with you. But as
soon as I am available, I'll owl you." He turned away moving towards the door Percy following. Just
as they were about to step out, Audrey was suddenly surrounded by a glowing golden sphere,
drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

The shield hovered in place, and Audrey carefully reached a hand out to it. Before she could touch it,
it vanished. "What was that?" she asked looking at John who had remained unobtrusively by the
door, unwilling to leave the young woman in a room full of magical people.

"You're wearing your jewellery?" John asked.

"Yes, Helen told me to keep it on at all times. I didn't bother with the disguise since I didn't need it,"
Audrey said looking slightly perplexed at the space the glow had been in.

"I would say then that someone's just cast something on you that the shield deflected, although Harry
said he'd sorted the light show," John said calmly.

"Someone cast a spell on me?" Audrey looked around slightly panicked. Percy took the two steps he
had moved away, back towards her and pushed her behind him. Fred and George scrambled up from
their chairs, joining Percy in shielding her from the magic users in the room.

"The shield blocked it?" Percy demanded of John.

"Yes," John said.

"Then who?" Percy whirled to face the room.

The kitchen door opened again and this time admitting Harry and Hermione. "Dad," Hermione said.
"Something has happened?"

"Audrey's shield just lit up," John explained. "Although how did you know?"

"Lit up?" Harry asked his eyebrow climbing, ignoring John's question.

"Like a golden sphere all around me," Audrey confirmed.

"I thought you'd gotten rid of the light shows?" John asked Harry.

"I did. But I tweaked it a bit. If someone uses Legilimency on you, Helen or Audrey, it glows, so
you know. Legilimency is a specific spell, so it wasn't that much extra work." Harry explained.
Hermione snorted rudely next to him, and he shot her an amused look before turning back to John.
"Not everyone who uses Legilimency is an obvious threat. It glows, so you know, and you get the
option of getting out of dodge."

"Fun fact," Hermione said with a falsely bright smile. "Harry is rubbish at Occlumancy. We thought it was best to have a backup plan in case someone tried to use it against him. Well, not the jewellery we crafted for the battle for everyone, but anything we made especially."

Severus raised an eyebrow and cleared his throat. "You trained your parents, could you not have done the same for Mr Potter?"

Hermione shook her head. "I taught Mum and Dad to deflect a low-level attack specifically looking for information in regards to mine and Harry's whereabouts. They knew that if either yourself or Mr Dumbledore turned up, they would have to do as we'd practised. Audrey, on the other hand, wouldn't know or be able to defend herself. Neither would my parents if the information someone went digging for wasn't specific. If they were just perhaps trying to glean information as to who Audrey knew in the magical world or where she had spent the last day for instance. Yours and Minerva's don't have the alteration. We thought it had the potential to make things awkward."

"Indeed," Severus said his expression betraying nothing.

"So, this Legilimency, what is it?" Audrey asked.

"It is a spell that allows the caster to delve into the mind of the victim, permitting the caster to see memories, emotions and thoughts," Severus answered smoothly.

Audrey looked at Severus appalled. "Can you all do this?"

"No," Severus said. "It's an uncommon skill."

"Then who?" Audrey asked glancing around the room from her position behind the twins and Percy.

Albus arranged his features into a grave expression. "My apologies Miss, however, I'm afraid it was an entirely necessary action on my part. I am head of the Order of the Phoenix, and the Order has been fighting a war in the shadows for longer than you have been alive. Security breaches are serious, there is more than your own safety at stake. I needed to make sure that you were who you said you were."

Percy bristled, and Fred and George looked mutinous, but Audrey answered, pushing Fred aside so she could step out from behind the three brothers. "I've heard about you, not all of it is good. I can understand that you might feel the need to know who is who, but wouldn't it have been polite to ask first?"

"A witch skilled in Occlumancy would be able to use the time to form a defence," Albus replied. "Taken unawares you were more likely to reveal your true identity."

"A witch skilled in Occlumancy walking into a room with a man such as yourself would have her defences in place already Mr Dumbledore. As I said, I've heard about you." Audrey turned from him. "Fred, George, do you think we could go?"

"Miss…?" Albus asked.

"Stone," Audrey answered turning back to Albus.

"Miss Stone, my questions remain unanswered," Albus said.

"Your questions? Are they relevant? Haven't you won the day?" Audrey asked Albus a slight frown
between her brows.

Albus' expression was still grave, but his eyes twinkled becomingly. "It behoves me to ensure the safety of those within the Order—"

"Percy isn't in the Order," Audrey said sharply cutting him off. "So as far as I can see that means that you have no need to question me. I am not going to be subjected to an interrogation to gratify your curiosity. I am sorry that I seem to have interrupted your meeting, but I am quite willing to leave and allow you to continue, thus learning nothing about your organisation."

George reached for Audrey's arm. "Come on, back to the house. Did you send Pins away or is he hovering?"

"Oh, no he's probably still hovering," Audrey said turning away from Albus.

Percy caught Fred's arm as George led her out. "Take care of her?"

"Of course, Percy, don't worry about her," Fred said and followed George and Audrey out.

"What right do you have to do such a thing?" Percy said rounding on Albus as the door swung shut behind them his temper boiling within him. "Despite what you might think Audrey isn't a threat and moreover the casual use of Legilimency against anyone is borderline illegal and certainly downright rude. This is not your castle, she is not a recalcitrant student playing pranks in the corridors. She is not a supporter of Riddle or in anyway affiliated with the Ministry."

"Percy!" Molly exclaimed appalled. "You can't speak to Albus like that. It might be an unpleasant truth that such things need to happen, but it is a truth none the less. You-Know-Who might be gone, but his supporters are not, and not all of them carried the Mark."

"Audrey isn't a Death Eater. She didn't know about any of this until I told her," Percy snapped.

"You've no way to be certain," Albus said kindly. "Your position at the Ministry—,"

"So, that's it, is it?" Percy demanded hotly swinging around to face Albus again. "Because I'm not blindly following you. Because I hold a position at the Ministry, one you all think I got so I could inform on my family and Harry, you now believe that Audrey is a part of it as well?"

"Percy," Molly protested reaching for his arm. "You have to admit…"

"No," Percy said snatching his arm out of her grasp. "I don't. I don't have to see what you see. I'm glad you are all well, and you all made it out of tonight unharmed but I can see coming back isn't going to work out." Percy spun on his heel and stalked to the door, he wrenched it open and went through it leaving it to slam behind him. He didn't look back.

Kingsley looked at the shocked faces of Molly and Arthur, he smiled tightly. "I'll be in touch." Then he turned and followed Percy out of the door.
Percy had not gone far. He was stood on the other side of the door taking deep breaths in. Fred and George had taken Audrey away already for which he was glad. She would be safe with the twins, and he didn't want her to see how upset he was. There was still the chance he would turn his wand on something and reduce it to smithereens, and he had no desire to frighten her.

Kingsley came to stand next to him a hand clapping on his shoulder. "She seems like a nice girl."

Percy took another breath, nodding curtly. "She is."

"When did you get engaged?"

Percy looked at Kingsley in shocked surprise.

"I saw the ring."

"Oh. A fortnight ago."

"Ah," Kingsley said. "Well, you've picked a keeper. I've always liked a woman with spine enough to stand up for herself. Where did you meet?"

"A café near my flat, nearly three years ago."

"She's staying with you at the Lodge?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps I'll get a chance to speak to her properly. Percy, Hermione said the ring they gave Audrey was the same as they gave Helen and John. Am I to infer it was for the same reasons?"

Percy swallowed his anger and took another breath. "Yes," he said. "Yes, she is, and so no, she's not a Death Eater."

Kingsley sent a sympathetic look at him. "It was badly done, all of it."

"It's hardly the first time my mother has thrown the Death Eater card at me," Percy said bitterly.

Kingsley looked back at the kitchen door. "That seems odd," he mused. "Molly's temper is volatile, but the lot of you are the least likely to turn to the nonsense Riddle was pedalling than any family I know."

Percy rubbed his face briskly. "Well, I have no answer for you other than Dumbledore was feeding her fears."

Kingsley snorted. "Now that I could believe. Come on, we've got work to do before I can send you back to Audrey and I did promise I wouldn't keep you long. Do you have any more parchment in that folder of yours? I need a few messages sending out. I want the Aurory put on alert not to let Dumbledore into the Wizengamot chamber until the new Minister and Chief Warlock is appointed. I also should send a copy of that directive you drew up with Minerva for Narcissa to sign."

"Verbal agreement will do for now," Percy said. "Ask Minerva to send her Patronus with confirmation."
"Good idea. I'll deploy a team of Aurors to stake out the Manor in the meantime, see if we can get an idea of numbers coming and going. With luck they will be taking advantage of the fact none of the Malfoys are present, and the Manor is open to them."

Kingsley started walking towards the edge of the Burrow's garden. "I also want to put St Mungo's on alert for anyone coming in after the fact with injuries that look like they were caused by duelling. We can assume that some may lie low until they think the fuss has died down before seeking medical help."

Percy scribbled as Kingsley spoke, another quill and parchment hovering next to him writing out the messages as directed. When Kingsley stopped, Percy had the notes ready to go. "Stitches," he called.

Stitches appeared next to Percy. "How can Stitches serve?"

"Is Audrey back at the house?"

"Yes, Miss Audrey is in the library with the Mr Weasleys. Stitches brought food."

"Thank you, Stitches. Can you deliver some messages for me, please? I understand that this might not be part of the duties you have been asked to perform for me, but time is of the essence."

"Stitches can take messages."

"Thank you," Percy said again remembering Audrey's admonishment that manners cost nothing. "I need this delivering to Auror Brown. This to the head medi-witch on spell damage at St Mungo's. Lastly, I need you to take a copy of this document to Minerva and ask her to get Narcissa Malfoy to sign it as soon as she can. In the meantime, could she send a Patronus when she has received confirmation that Mrs Malfoy will cooperate? If you could bring any replies, then return to the house to watch over Audrey, I would be grateful."

Stitches took the proffered notes and nodded solemnly. Then with a pop, she vanished

"Minerva's elves?"

"Yes," Percy said. "Stitches was assigned to look after Audrey and I. Mostly Audrey. I'm not sure that Minerva meant for her elves to be used as message carriers, but I can ask for forgiveness when I see her next."

"I doubt she will mind. The Grangers have put them to good use this evening, and I am happy to say I was completely wrong in my opinion of what they wished to achieve with this field hospital."

"You were against the idea?"

"I thought it an unnecessary liability," Kingsley replied. "But they did a lot of decent work, and it saved a lot of people we might otherwise have lost. For that alone, I will take my slice of humble pie with gratitude."

Percy was silent a moment. "When this all comes out, when the press finds out, when the media storm takes the Ministry, and the committees come together to decide who needs to be congratulated, they won't be on the lists, will they? Does it not strike you as selfish? As a society we deride them, yet they are clearly not inferior?"

"They won't, no," Kingsley agreed. "As to the other, I have neither your perspective or the Grangers. I've never been in the muggle world, I've never spent time with any muggles. While I have headed up the Aurory, I have never had the opportunity to work with the British Prime Minister. No, the
Grangers won't be recognised for their contribution. Most of the people they treated won't consider they are muggles to begin with. The robes helped with that which is why I believe Fred and George gave them some.

The conversation lapsed as the two men crossed over the ward line of the Burrow and stood together at the gate, considering their next move.

"We need to call an emergency Wizengamot meeting as soon as possible. How soon could they assemble?" Kingsley asked Percy.

"You won't get them all in one place with less than three hours' notice. When you say 'emergency' and speak of the Wizengamot, it is best to remember that these are some of the more elderly members of our society. They have some rather… set ideas, as to what counts as an emergency and what an appropriate response is," Percy answered wryly. "Three hours is the fastest they have ever been assembled, and that's once the messages have been sent, and you've no way of knowing the loyalties of the panel. If you wish to remove all the people carrying the Mark, then we will need a way of ensuring they are correctly identified. Bill's ward, you plan to add it to Ministry?"

"Yes," Kingsley said. "I do."

"Then perhaps it could be applied to a single entrance with a guard of Aurors present. The Wizengamot can enter the Ministry that way ensuring they walk through it. If it rejects marked individuals, you can arrest them at the same time."

"We need Bill," Kingsley said turning back to the Burrow.

Percy didn't try to hide his unwillingness to return to the Burrow. Kingsley thankfully didn't request it instead pulled his wand and cast his patronus, sending it to summon Bill.

They waited patiently until Bill appeared, Fleur by his side.

Fleur nodded in greeting. "I am leaving. I did not wish to stay, so I left with Bill." The witch leant up, whispered something in her husband's ear before vanishing with a small pop.

"Bill, we may need your ward sooner than expected it's just a single door, however," Kingsley explained.

Bill nodded. "Of course."

"How is it applied?" Percy asked.

Bills gaze flicked to his brother. "To the inside of the door frame, there's a small rune set and an incantation."

"Does it need to be applied to the door physically?" Kingsley asked, unhappy at the idea of having to apply it to each individual door while trying to control the flow of personnel that would need to be at their desks come Monday morning.

"Unless there's a decent ward network yes," Bill nodded. "Can I ask what you are planning?"

"In the first instance, just a single entrance at the Ministry, ideally, it would be all entrances into the Ministry," Kingsley replied.

"Then I don't know," Bill said. "You could feasibly add it to the existing ward matrix set up at the Ministry, but you'd need access, and I've not got the familiarity with the Ministry wards to work with"
"That won't be a problem if it's possible to do it that way," Percy said. "I suggest that both you Kingsley, and Bill, floo to the Minister's office. From there we can look further at what can be done."

"Is the floo open?" Kingsley asked in surprise.

"No," Percy answered. "But it can be opened to allow you entry. Say from your own home? I can remove the connection as soon as we are finished."

Kingsley nodded. "Very well, give me a minute before you establish the connection."

Percy twisted himself away to the Minister's office leaving Bill and Kingsley stood by the gate.

"You can't just take me to the Ministry?" Bill asked.

"No," Kingsley answered. "All the entrances are currently closed. I can apparate us to the Aurory holding cells, but we would be unable to leave from there. The Ministry is locked down."

"So where has Percy gone?"

"To the Minister's office to open the floo for us."

"Percy can apparate directly into the Minister's office," Bill asked startled.

Kingsley gave Bill a long look of evaluation. "If my hunch is right, apparating into the Minister for Magic's office through the Ministry wards which have been set to keep everyone out of the Ministry of Magic, is the least of what Percy can do. Come on, I'll take you to my floo so we can begin."

Bill was taken in a side-along through to Kingsley's own study. Kingsley made the connection with the Minister's floo and waited only a moment for the link to open. Bill and he both stepped through.

Bill looked around with interest, he had never been in the Minister for Magic's office before.

Percy gestured to the door separating the Minister's office and his own. "If you would show me, Bill."

Bill glanced between Kingsley and Percy, on receiving a nod from Kingsley he approached the door. "I'm not going to be arrested later for this am I? Meddling with the Minister for Magic's wards, seems to me, to be something you might find yourself in trouble for later."

"I'll put a good word in for you," Percy replied drily.

"Thanks," Bill responded just as drily. He took the enchanted blade from the sheath at the small of his back and made the marks on the inside of the door frame where, when the door was closed, they would be hidden. When he had finished, he stood back and drew his wand. Bill centred himself and pushed his magic into the ward set, powering them up. Once he was satisfied they were running correctly he stepped back and indicated that he was finished.

Kingsley looked at Percy who stared at the door leaning back on the Minister's desk. One arm was crossed over his middle supporting the elbow of his other arm, and fist he rested his chin on, considering the problem in front of him.

Bill watched Kingsley watching Percy and took in his brother once more. There was more going on that he had a handle on, and after what had been said back at the Burrow he had a feeling there might be more to the split between Percy and his family.
Percy made a slight noise before standing upright and heading across the office to pass through the door. He waved a hand to illuminate the lamps moving to his filing cabinets. "Perhaps," he muttered unaware that both Kingsley and Bill had followed him into his office.

He pulled the drawer open and pulled out a large rolled parchment. The drawer closed with a thunk, and Percy cleared his desk with a wave of his wand sending all his things to the nearest shelf. The desk expanded under Percy's wand, and he flicked the parchment out, unrolling it over the top, smoothing it down so he could peer at the schematic it showed.

Bill and Kingsley approached.

"This is the schematic of the Ministry," Percy explained. His wand touched the parchment, and the image on it changed to show a different level of the Ministry. "It's the old way of drawing plans," Percy added absently. "Completed when the Ministry was built and since they have fallen out of favour. They are deemed too difficult to complete, and we have adopted the muggle way of doing things by having a drawing for each level on more modern buildings. This, as you can see details all the entrances and exits to the Ministry from the public ones, the staff ones, the trades and service entry points, and the house elf quarters," Percy said making the map flicker showing everything as he spoke of it.

Bill looked on in fascination, Kingsley looked more disheartened. "We cannot possibly place the rune set on each door. The man-hours alone are too high. Even if we brought in extra bodies, we could only allow those with the necessary skills to complete the work. Damnit, I thought we had something."

Percy looked up at Kingsley. "I think we still do. This document is tied to the Ministry. We can use this to guide us in instructing the wards to change. If we use the rune set Bill has just placed on the minister's door then we can use that to feed the rest of the Ministry."

"The rune set on the door can't take that much power," Bill said shaking his head. "Its only designed to be a barrier over one entrance, you are talking what? A hundred or more doors?"

Percy laid his wand on the map communicating his will to the document. The drawing faded away leaving a neatly printed list in its place. "One hundred and twenty-three exits and entries to be exact," Percy told them. "How much power would it need. Could we use the magic of the Ministry to stabilise the runes to allow it to do what we need it to?"

"In theory," Bill said. "But you are talking about the Ministry of Magic's wards, they were laid down generations ago. You'd need to find someone with the ability to manipulate them directly, and I don't think after a few hundred years you will find anyone."

"Percy?" Kingsley asked.

"It can be done."

"Percy, I'm serious you can't just tweak these kinds of wards. If you destabilise the matrix you risk the lot falling and I don't think there are enough 'good words' in the English language to keep us all out of Azkaban should that happen," Bill protested.

"It won't," Percy said. "Show me the enchantment."

"Might there be someone in the Department of Mysteries?" Kingsley offered.

Percy shook his head. "There isn't. Take it off this door Bill. Teach me the enchantment, and you can check my work."
Bill exchanged a look with Kingsley who waved a hand at Bill giving permission. "Before we go any further," Kingsley said. "I feel that I must ask for your oath Bill. I am aware that on receiving my message you will have been asked to inform the Order of as much as you can, but this," Kingsley waved a hand around the office. "Doesn't get passed on. You can tell Albus we have warded a door to ensure the Wizengamot is free of marked individuals if he asks but no more."

Bill nodded. "Of course, Albus isn't aware of the purpose of the ward unless you told him? I didn't mention it on the recommendation of Fred and George. I am not sure what is going on, to be honest, but I can keep my mouth shut."

"Thank you" Kingsley replied.

Bill turned back to Percy. "Ready?"

"Yes," Percy said. Bill went through the wand movements slowly, enunciating the incantation clearly. Percy watched frowning slightly in concentration as he took in every nuance of his brother's actions and speech. Bill repeated it twice more before Percy nodded indicating his readiness. Percy mimicked his brother's actions, Bill corrected his wand movement slightly but nodded in affirmation that Percy had it correct. Percy ran over it once more, and Bill confirmed that it was exact.

"Alright let's give this a try shall we?" Percy turned to face the door and channelled his magic at the rune set. His magic swirled out and settled in the runes which Percy thought he could hear humming faintly.

Bill approached the door running diagnostic charms over the frame. "It's up and running. Feels a bit different though. It's not sitting on top of the frame as I would expect. It's sunk into it a little more. That's not a bad thing," he hastened to explain at Kingsley's sharp glance. "Means that it will last longer."

"OK then," Percy said taking a deep breath and steeling his nerves. "Let's get it on the doors, shall we?"

"Percy?!" Bill said spinning to face his brother.

"You didn't think we went through that so I could show someone else, did you?" Percy asked with humour.

"Well, yes?" Bill said.

Percy shook his head and walked back into the Minister's office. Standing in the middle of the room he centred himself and reached for the wards. The buzz of the magic flared over his senses. Percy gritted his teeth, it was becoming easier to interact with the wards the more he did it, but the raw power of them was still a shock every time he touched them.

Percy's wand moved, the enchantment fell from his lips, and his magic instructed the wards. He felt them shift and he felt the rune set on the door falter. Percy moved the magic around, propping up the runes on the door, then stood waiting as the wards settled down around him. Waiting to see if the changes he had made were having any effect on the matrix. The wards settled into their new makeup and Percy could detect no problems. The rune set on the door was trickle fed magic so not to overload it and Percy estimated at the rate of magical flow it might take a few hours for every entrance and exit to be affected. He pulled back from the wards and faced the two wizards in the office with him. "It's done. It is probably going to take all night for it to feed through the Ministry as the runes can't take the load, as we expected. If we are to call the Wizengamot, I suggest we open the floo nearest to their chambers. Have them floo in and apply the ward directly to the door they need to
pass through. It would speed things up and ensure that we didn't accidentally pick a door that wasn't yet affected."

"Let's do that," Kingsley said. "We can not afford to delay in having them sit to select a new Minister." Kingsley led the way back into Percy's office towards the schematic laid out on the desk.

Kingsley touched the map, the schematic changed to show the Aurory and the holding cells. "Wait," Kingsley protested. "That's not what I wanted."

"No," Percy said. "But you are the Head of the Aurory thus that is what you can see. It's old magic from when we were all a little more paranoid."

Percy touched the map, and the Wizengamot chamber with its tiered seating showed up on the parchment. The surrounding rooms came into view, and Percy examined it. "This one?" he suggested pointing to a chamber. "It has a floo we can open and is large enough to hold everyone until they are all assembled."

Kingsley nodded. "Seems reasonable. I want to post a team of Aurors outside the door. Will that be possible?"

"Of course, you'll want the doors open to allow them to walk through after all," Percy answered.

"We'll keep the doors in the corridor outside the chamber locked," Kingsley said. "And that one there at the end, that way they can't make a run for it. The Wizengamot can't apparate through the wards, can they?"

"No, no one can," Percy confirmed.

Bill coughed lightly. "You can."

"Yes," Percy said. "I can."

Bill raised an eyebrow waiting for further explanation. It was not forthcoming. "I don't mean to step out of line, but you can apparate through the wards. You can manipulate a document to show every level of the Ministry that doesn't respond to Kingsley the same way. And unless I miss my guess, you've just manipulated the Ministry wards, wards that have been laid for generations. That is something that some of the best Curse Breakers and Ward Masters who have studied for years would struggle to do. Especially something as far-reaching as you've just done and yet you did it in under five minutes with what appeared to be relative ease."

Percy looked at Bill and Kingsley.

"He has a point, Percy. You've done things this evening I didn't know were possible."

Bill looked at Kingsley quickly, his eyebrows raised then back at his brother.

Percy rolled his eyes. "I am the Minister for Magic's Undersecretary and Aide. What is it you find surprising? That I can pull a document from the Archives? That I can use the document because Merlin forbid the Minister for Magic does his own research? That I can apparate into my own office?" Percy gestured around him. "You are possibly reading more into these things because it is rare for anyone to see the inner workings of the Minister's office. The Minister's personal floo is the only floo in the Ministry that can be accessed from outside that doesn't lead to the main foyer. It is no great feat to open a floo connection I assure you."

Further discussion was interrupted by the silver tabby cat that shimmered into being in front of
"Narcissa Malfoy has been retrieved and agrees to the plan. The document will be signed, and I shall bring it to the Lodge in the morning."

"Excellent!" Kingsley exclaimed pulling out his wand. He cast two patroni giving each instruction and sending them on their way. "I need to check on the cells see how we're doing with filling them up."

"The schematic?" Percy suggested indicating his desk. Kingsley nodded turning back to the document. Bill moved away from the desk wandering around the office.

"So, this is where you spend your days?"

"Yes," Percy said watching his brother.

"It's nice."

Percy snorted at the inane statement. "It's less nice after a twelve-hour day let me assure you."

Bill hummed shooting a glance at Kingsley. Seeing the man was still examining the schematic Bill put a hand on Percy's shoulder drawing him across the room. "Listen, Percy, what Mum said, about your girlfriend. Well, she was out of order, alright? Dumbledore too. No one should have Legilimency used against them like that. I just want you to know that, well, maybe I don't know everything that went on between you when you had that fight with mum and dad. But you're clearly working on our side even if it's not with the Order directly. I've missed you, Percy, you're my brother and other than that visit to the hospital I've not seen you in years. I didn't even know you had a girlfriend. This probably isn't the time or place, but do you think we could meet up? Me and Fleur with you and Audrey and be introduced properly?"

Percy rubbed a tired hand over his face. Today was becoming a day to go down in history. "Yes," he said. "Yes, probably. I'll need to speak to Audrey and make sure she is comfortable with the idea, but I'll let you know. The next few weeks are going to be mad, will muggle be alright?"

"You too?" Bill asked in surprise.

"Me too what?" Percy asked.

"Fred and George drink muggle beer. Shop in a muggle supermarket too."

"Oh," Percy said. "I do that too."

Bill blinked.

Percy took pity on his elder brother. "I'll owl you as soon as I can."

"Percy?" Kingsley called drawing the wizard's attention back across the room.

"Kingsley? Do you need more space?"

"No, we should be fine, but I should go. I'll take Bill back through if you'll close the connection? As soon as you can, can you summon the Wizengamot? I don't suppose they will come tonight, tomorrow morning is the earliest we can expect them. I still want them flooing into that room. Can you send out the messages for me?"

"Yes," Percy answered. "If Bill can return in the morning to do the warding on the door frame?"
"Can't you?" Bill asked.

"I don't have a fancy knife. If you can spare the time?" Percy replied.

Bill shrugged. "Sure. Do you want me to give my statement when I come back in the morning then Kingsley?"

"Yes." Kingsley agreed. "I can have one of the Aurors take it from you."

Percy rolled the schematic up now it was no longer needed and returned it to the filing cabinet. A wave of his wand reverted his desk back to normal size, and his belongings returned to the top of it. Kingsley and Bill made their way to the floo and Percy closed his office up behind him as he waited for the two wizards to leave.

"Do you still need me?" Percy asked before Kingsley left.

"No," Kingsley said. "Go back to the Lodge, grab whatever sleep you can. Severus wants to see us first thing, so I'll be with you by seven."

Percy nodded his acceptance and waited for the flames of the floo to die down after their departure to disconnect the link, lock and ward the floo once more. Then after turning off the lamps, he apparated to McGonagall Lodge to find Audrey.
Beginnings

Percy got back to the Lodge and found Audrey and twins in the library playing a game of exploding snap.

Audrey looked up when Percy came into the room waving him over and pulling him to sit down next to her. "You never told me about this," she said indicating the game. "Isn't it mad? The cards explode! I mean it's great, but completely nuts you let kids play this."

Percy smiled at her enthusiasm, hugging her to him enjoying the feel of her in his arms, her warmth and the smell of her hair. He was relieved that she was still finding his world interesting and not frightening, that she was still herself, and still with him after everything. "Who's winning?" he asked.

"Not me," Audrey said with a small laugh. "I'm a little scared of getting singed to be fast enough."

"I'll join your team then," Percy said.

"Do you want a cuppa?" Audrey asked looking him over. "You look shattered."

"That would be welcome," Percy admitted. "I confess I'm feeling a little drained despite the Rockstar potion. Kingsley and I had to go to the Ministry with Bill to prepare for summoning the Wizengamot. Which reminds me I need to send off the messages."

Percy summoned his quill and parchment from his bag as Audrey called for an elf and asked for the tea.

"You'll be working tomorrow?" Audrey asked.

Percy nodded as he wrote out the message then duplicated it. From his bag, he pulled a small seal and wax. Folding each message up he applied the wax and seal. Audrey took the seal from him once he was finished turning it over in her hands.

"This is a lovely thing," she said.

Percy shrugged. "Official summons to the Wizengamot must carry the correct seal. I have three for various reasons, all much alike."

"They still use them?"

"Yes, there's magic in the seal that reacts with the wax meaning that no one but the recipient can open it and it also informs the recipient that whatever is contained within is to be taken extremely seriously."

Audrey handed it back, and Percy slipped it back into his bag, he called for Stitches again.

Stitches appeared waiting politely.

"I apologise, but I need you to deliver some more messages for me please," Percy explained to the elf. Stitches nodded accepting the packet of folded parchments.

"If there is nobody home, please leave the message in the silver box with the Wizengamot symbol on it. You should find one at each property."

Stitches nodded and vanished.
"No owls?" George asked curiously.

"They take too long," Percy replied. "Stitches can deliver all of the summonses in less time than an owl can deliver one message."

The tea warmed Percy, and once Fred and George had set the cards back up, Percy joined them in playing a round. It was a bizarre end to the day but one that felt fitting. It was as he and Audrey settled in bed that Percy remembered Bill's request.

"Bill has asked to meet you properly. Him and Fleur. They would like to go out for a drink."

"Oh. OK, and how do you feel about that?" Audrey asked.

"I said yes as long as you were comfortable with it."

"I guess I've got no objections. Does Bill not support your parents though? Not that I mean to be rude but..."

Percy took her hand, rolling over to face her. "I know, they were inexcusably rude to you. I never want you to be afraid of being in a room of magical people."

"It wasn't your fault Percy," Audrey said. "And I wasn't hurt. A little shocked yes but I wasn't hurt. I think I will keep wearing that shield ring though. I know that Severus said that the ability to read minds wasn't common, but I think I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"Neither Fleur or Bill can do it," Percy reassured her. "They would just like to get to know you."

"OK well, we can manage a drink together I'm sure. Percy, what are you going to do about your family. I mean your Mum..."

Percy rubbed his face. "You'd left, I lost my temper a little. She accused you of being a Death Eater too."

"Oh," Audrey said.

"I told her it wasn't going to work reconnecting with them."

"But Bill?"

"Bill doesn't agree with her. Neither do the twins. They are my family, and I confess I do miss them. If it's possible..."

"Well then, we'll meet Bill and Fleur and see how we go. You've got Fred and George back, and I think after everything that has been said recently they aren't going to suddenly take your Mum's side."

"No, I suppose not."

"So, what are your plans for tomorrow? Can you tell me?"

"Statements for everyone that was there tonight. Kingsley and I dictated ours to an Auror while we were still sorting everything out tonight. It's a written record sealed with magic. Until the new Minister is elected, we will be gathering in as much information as we can. We need to weed out those that support the policies of Riddle and remove them from power."

"Will you be in any danger?"
"Probably not. If you want to go back to your flat, you can. You can probably go back to work on Monday."

"Will you stay here?"

"For now. With everyone using this as a base, as long as Minerva is alright with it."

"I'd like to stay with you, as well as everyone else. I am learning things here things about your society about how it all works."

"I will be away most of tomorrow, will you be alright?"

"Yes, I'm sure John or Helen will be about, I might take a walk into Inverness."

"Please don't go alone."

"You think I'm at risk?"

"I think I don't much care for the thought you might be."

"Well, I'll see if someone fancies it then if I decide to go."

Everyone attended breakfast. Percy was happy to sit and listen to the others discussing the events of the day before. When Harry and Hermione let slip the students of Hogwarts including his underage sister had been present Percy watched as Minerva and Severus took them to task. The news that the elder Greengrass daughter had attended the battle as a repayment of debt had his mind spinning as fast as it seemed the former spy's mind was.

When questioned on the likely scenarios resulting from the unexpected turn of events, Percy was unable to supply anything substantive. Without knowing how much Lord and Lady Greengrass were aware of they would be unable to calculate the effect of this shifted alliance.

Percy defended his wish to clean house and keep the Ministry as far away from corruption as possible when John questioned the likely hood of such were probable. Even after Helen had interrupted the conversation with a request to take the conversation form the breakfast table Percy was dissatisfied with the impression that John would remain so sceptical. It was truthfully understandable. Hermione was running afoul of the law, and Percy understood that Hermione and her parents had found the magical world to be failing in areas compared to their own.

The Marriage law was pointless, Percy knew that. It wasn't designed to widen the gene pool and encourage healthy bloodlines, and encourage assimilation and inclusion as the Ministry had promised when passing it. It was designed to punish, and degenerate, and it needed repealing, but in the light of the work in front of them, it would not be simple. If the Marriage Law had passed under Thickenesse's government, there was a chance that it could be repealed when Thickenesse was denounced for being a puppet of Tom Riddle.

But since it had passed under Scrimgeour, they would have to be careful how they repealed it. On paper, it went through the proper procedure. To denounce it as unlawful based on Wizengamot members being under the influence of Riddle would also mean that any number of other laws that were passed could be subject to the same circumstances. If it were deemed that Scrimgeour's tenure as Minister was subject to scrutiny, then Percy own actions would be called into question. It had been Scrimgeour that had given Percy the permission to utilise the Ministry wards. It had been Percy that had stymied large amounts of legislation seeing its day in the Wizengamot while Thickenesse was Minister. No matter that the legislation had been terrible, Percy knew that the Ministry would
Minerva announced that Kingsley and his Aurors had arrived and were waiting. Percy excused himself and followed Severus out of the dining room and into the room where the interviews would be held.

"Percy, Severus, this is Auror Jones and Auror Abanathy they are here to take all the statements." Kingsley introduced the Aurors.

"Before we begin," Severus said pulling a folder tied with a ribbon from his pocket and enlarging it back to its original size. "This is information I copied while at several of the estates of Death Eaters. I am unaware of how much is out of date or irrelevant based on who fell last night, but it should certainly help in your endeavour to clean house." Severus tipped a nod at Percy.

Kingsley accepted the folder untying the ribbon and flicking through the top pages. As his gaze fell on some of the photographs he grimaced and snapped the folder shut.

"Thank you. We will do what we can to bring whatever appropriate charges against those involved can be done."

"You are seeing Narcissa today?"

"Yes. I've sent Tonks over this morning."

"Tonks is pregnant," Percy objected. "Shouldn't she be on maternity leave?"

"Not yet," Kingsley said. "And I promise you it was not my idea. Lupin didn't come home yesterday. I have no information as to his whereabouts or status at the moment, but Tonks has refused to stay home. The interview with Mrs Malfoy at least won't require her to be out in the field and subject to any retaliatory attacks."

"I didn't think the relationship between Mrs Tonks and Mrs Malfoy was on such good terms," Percy ventured.

"It isn't," Kingsley said drily. "But Tonks is a professional. Shall we begin? You've given me a lot to go through here Severus, but I'd like to hear what you have to say about your role for Albus. I fear that we are not yet out of the woods when it comes to him."

They sat and listened to Severus account of his role as a spy for the order. The Aurors had quills charmed to record everything on an increasingly long roll of parchment and diligently questioned their interviewee.

Once they were done Kingsley stood thanked Severus and informed Minerva that he would be unable to stay. Percy collected up his bag and made himself ready to leave with him.

They went to the Ministry and to Kingsley's office. There they spread the file out between them and started sorting through the information filtering out those who were already in custody or dead from those who would need to be apprehended.

Once the two piles were made up, they went through the pile of witches and wizards that would need to be apprehended and started writing up arrest warrants. Kingsley showed Percy the forms and how to fill them in, and they divided the pile between them. Percy placed his completed forms to one side so Kingsley could check and sign them before handing them over to his Aurors to enact.

"How many of the Wizengamot do we need to have?" Kingsley asked as they busily filled in the
forms.

"The council has thirty seats occupied currently," Percy said. "You need at least twenty to elect a new Minister, and you'll need a majority ruling. The wider the margin, the better."

"How many do you think we'll have once they walk through that door?"

Percy flicked the end of his quill back and forth over his chin eyes narrowed in thought. "I think it's likely you'll have more sympathetic to Voldemort's cause than actual marked members, but I would be most surprised if not a single member bore the mark."

"If we have to arrest them, how do we go about electing new members?"

"If they are arrested and convicted of charges they are automatically stripped of their privileges. To elect a new member to the Wizengamot, the Wizengamot has two weeks to put forward their candidates, and then they hold a session to argue it all out. Once they have decided by majority the witch or wizard in question is officially invited to take a seat."

"What about the inherited seats?"

"They are as named. Scared twenty-eight or services to wizarding kind will get you one."

"The Weasleys?"

"Our family seat is inactive. My father has no wish take it up, and neither Bill or Charlie are interested either."

"What about you?"

"I've no real desire to sit on the Wizengamot. It excludes you from working in the Ministry in other capacities due to conflicts of interest. If I were to be offered it by my father, I would refuse it, and no one else in the family as of yet qualifies. The Potter seat is also inactive, if anyone has ever told Harry about his seat then he has clearly chosen not to take it up although he would be unable to do so yet due to his age. I rather thought the Shacklebolt seat was inactive due to your preference for your role as Head of the DMLE."

"It is," Kingsley answered. "I've no desire to sit in a chamber debating the finer points of legislation. But in saying that if we lose too many members, we may have to look at encouraging those inactive seats to be taken up."

They worked diligently until it was time to meet the Wizengamot in the chamber they had set up for the purpose. Kingsley gathered up the warrants handing them out to the Auror on duty with the instructions to follow them up as soon as possible.

Audrey decided that she would go out. After broaching the idea with the others in the house, John agreed that he would appreciate some fresh air and would accompany her. They spent the morning exploring Inverness and returned after lunch with a few shopping bags to mark the success of their venture.

Audrey joined the Grangers, Harry and Hermione in the library that evening to listen in on the meeting that was taking place at the Order's headquarters. Disbelief was her main thought as she and the others listened in. Harry paced along the rear wall, and Audrey watched as his agitation and temper caused the room to react to him. She wasn't sure if he was aware of what he was doing, but she hadn't realised that emotional distress would cause such a reaction. In fairness to Harry, it was
must be hard to listen to a man you had previously thought was looking out for your welfare, to be
denouncing you as dangerous. Helen went to Harry laying a calming hand on him, and Audrey
noticed that all the effects his magic was seemingly having instantly halted under Helen's
ministrations. She wondered if it was because Harry had no wish to hurt his future mother in law or
that he was better able to control it when it was brought to his notice. Helen brought Harry back to
the grouping of chairs.

"Sorry," he offered to her a touch sheepishly.

"Are you alright?" Audrey asked hesitantly. "I didn't know you could do that."

"Umm yeah, it's not supposed to. I'm meant to have better control, but," Harry gestured with a hand
in the direction of the mirror.

Audrey nodded understandingly. "Yeah, I guess anyone would react the same way."

"Great," Harry replied still staring at the mirror unhappily.

The pop of apparition sounded from the hall. They heard Folly greeting whoever had returned then
the door opened.

Percy came through looking surprised to see the expectant faces. "I wasn't expecting you all to be
here," he said. "What's going on?"

Hermione moved from by Audrey to sit by Harry allowing Percy to take her place. He hugged
Audrey with one arm, giving her a quick kiss hello before turning back to the room.

"We're listening in on an Order meeting," John said gesturing to the table. "The quill is recording
everything. Albus seems to believe that Harry is the next Dark Lord. How was your day?"

Percy looked at John blankly for a moment but took in the mood in the room and nodded. "Kingsley
was sworn in as the new Minister."

"Kingsley?" Harry responded. "But what about the DMLE and the Aurors? If he's no longer in
charge."

Percy slumped back into the chair, an uncharacteristic gesture of tiredness from the usually prim and
tidy man. He rested only a moment gathering himself and sat back up. As he started to form up his
response, the noise of apparition came from the hall, and the door suddenly flung open. Minerva and
Severus came into the room.

Severus took in the sight of them gathered around the table the quill still moving across the page.
"You were listening in?" he asked as Minerva strode to the end of the room and began pacing
angrily much as Harry had done.

"It's recording everything," Helen confirmed pointing at the quill. "Hermione turned off the sound
once you left."

"That man," Minerva spat as she whirled and stalked back and forth across the floor.

Severus settled into a chair within the group drawing a surprised look from Helen. Folly brought a
tray of butterbeer, a decanter of whisky, and an assortment of glasses before vanishing again. John
handed the butterbeer to Harry and Hermione before offering one to Audrey who accepted with
curious delight. Everyone else took whisky. Minerva waved her glass off.
"I am sorry," she said pausing in her pacing. "For telling them about the accident."

"It's fine," Harry said. "I mean if anything was going to derail him it should have been that. But instead obviously, I'm not me, I'm some soul possessed thing?!

"Wouldn't we have noticed?" John interjected. "You know if you turned into a psychotic murdering Dark Wizard?"

"Well, you're only Muggles," Harry said bitterly. "So apparently no, you wouldn't."

"Harry," Hermione gently chide. "Dumbledore's wrong. We know he's wrong." She gestured around the room. "No one thinks you're not you except him."

Harry looked at her miserably. "Heir of Slytherin, Tri-Wizard championship, demented lying attention seeker."

Hermione faltered biting her lip. "Alright," she allowed. "You might have a point. The wizarding press isn't exactly known for its objective fact-checking reporting. But you weren't alone then, and you're not alone now. Kingsley is on our side, and he is now the Minister."

"He is?" Minerva said coming over to the group, finally sitting down and accepting her drink.

"Yes," Percy confirmed. "I've just got back myself." He was interrupted again by the entrance of Fred and George, who came into the room with none of their natural bounce and smiles.

"Sorry," Fred said looking at the group. "We came as soon as we could, but we wanted to stay and find out which way the wind was blowing so to speak."

"Sit down," Helen invited pouring them both drinks and passing them over. "Percy was just about to tell us about his day."

They accepted the drinks and slipped into chairs while Percy cleared his throat once more. "Kingsley has been sworn in as Minister. He's still at the Ministry with the Wizengamot selecting a new Chief Warlock. With Kingsley as Minister, it's unlikely that Albus will be invited to reprise the role. They are looking for one of the less extreme pureblood houses for a candidate to keep the balance. Perhaps an ally of the Greengrasses."

"Because of Daphne?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Percy replied. "It appears that the younger Miss Greengrass wrote to her parents once Daphne left with the rest of the Hogwarts contingent and confessed that Daphne had gone. Lord Greengrass approached Kingsley via message sent to the Ministry this morning. He hadn't been aware of her actions obviously but was happy to support his daughter. It helped we won, and certain pressures that had been brought to bear on him were no longer a consideration."

"Pressures?" Helen enquired.

"Talks of a marriage contract between the families of Greengrass and Malfoy. Factions were applying pressure on Lord Greengrass. Should Riddle have won, they would have had to capitulate to ensure the safety of both daughters."

"Jesus," Helen muttered. "That's horrible, no wonder she went to fight."

Percy shrugged. "It's a moot point now. Kingsley has selected his replacement in the DMLE and is going to be working very closely with them to make sure they round up everyone. Bill's ward is
going to be on the Ministry building entrances on Monday morning." Percy turned to Severus. "Kingsley wanted me to tell you that especially, Sir, to avoid any potential embarrassment. It's going to remain in place until all Ministry personnel are located and have passed through it."

"You won't be able to try them again for the same crime, will you?" Audrey asked.

"No," Percy shook his head. "However, if new information has come to light then they will have to answer for that."

"So, we have a Minister who's not in Dumbledore's pocket and is committed to cleaning up the last of Riddle's followers. That's better than expected." John said optimistically.

"It's not going to be enough to stop Albus," Minerva said sourly. "How many of the Order believe him?" she asked turning to Fred and George.

"It's not all good news I'm afraid. I don't know what you heard after Minerva and Severus left?"

"I muted it," Hermione said. "It is hard to pick out individuals anyway."

"It did descend into a bit of a shouting match," George agreed. "The upshot is Tonks, Andromeda and Ted left first, on the premise of not harming the baby in any crossfire since that was where it looked to be heading. Tonks thinks Albus is nuts, Remus seems to have kept her in the loop a bit. She doesn't have the full story but enough not to listen to him. She'd like to see you, Harry. Bill and Fleur are with us I suppose you could say. But," Fred and George exchanged a look.

"What?" Harry asked resignedly.

"It's Mum. She, umm, well she thinks you need to be checked over." They looked unhappily at Harry. "It's not that we think she thinks you aren't you or anything. More that you might be, and living with Hermione's parents might mean that you aren't getting as much support as you could be."

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione. "She said I was in danger living with Muggles, didn't she? She believes Albus."

The twins looked miserable. "Yes," they admitted. "I'd like to say we tried to reason with Mum and she'll come around, but you know Mum."

"I'm a harlot and corrupting Harry, how could my parents do any less?" Hermione retorted tartly. They looked away shamefaced.

"It's not your fault," Helen said into the uncomfortable silence. "Neither John or I am holding your parent's views against you."

They flashed her a grateful look, quickly glancing to Percy's side then back again.

"Oh, no," Audrey said catching the look. "Don't give me that. You've never treated me differently for being a Muggle don't start now."

Percy took her hand. "Thank you."

Audrey shrugged. "If she doesn't like Muggles, she doesn't like Muggles. It's not as if I'm in bad company is it."

"Well, thank you," John drawled amused. "We like you too."
Audrey flashed him a cheeky grin

"The problem," Hermione mused. "Is that Mrs Weasley is a fair reflection of the general wizarding public, she believes this about Harry because Dumbledore said so."

"So, we change the story," John said.

"How?" Minerva said. "Yes, we might curry a little positive publicity because of resolving the Dark Lord issue, but that isn't going to be enough to change the tide of this. Albus isn't listening."

"Then we should make sure no one listens to Albus," Helen said grimly.

"How? He's a beacon of the light. He's the moral standard for most of the population. There's a handful of us. We are ignorable. Kingsley's hands are all but tied, he'd risk his position as Minister before the nameplate on the door was changed if he came out against Albus."

"I was thinking of someone who more people listen to than Albus Dumbledore," Helen replied.

"Oh," Hermione said. "That might work."

"What might work?" Fred and George asked in unison.

"Rita Skeeter," Harry said a smile blooming on his face as he caught on to Helen's plan.

Percy looked around the room puzzled. "Her readership is very broad, but didn't she write most of the articles slandering you Harry?"

"I don't follow," Minerva said.

Severus sighed in exasperation. "Obviously, Minerva, your erstwhile students have dirt on Skeeter." He flicked a glance at Harry and Hermione. "I would judge the Princess of Gryffindor has dabbled in the art of blackmail once before and is looking to capitalise on the situation once again."

"Blackmail!" Minerva repeated shocked.

"She was a horror," Hermione defended. "She spent our fourth and fifth years printing every kind of rubbish imaginable. I simply asked for one fair and balanced article to be published in the Quibbler."

"Indeed," Severus drawled.

"You blackmailed someone?" Fred and George turned to Hermione looking delighted.

Hermione blushed and bit her lip. "It wasn't quite like that."

"Oh, no," Fred said. "Don't spoil it with how polite and nice you were about it. We're going to stick with holding her at wand point until she conceded to your demands."

Hermione laughed. "That's not how it went but if you prefer."

"So," Percy interrupted. "What are you thinking of offering her and in exchange for what?"

"Albus Dumbledore has led a long life," Helen replied. "One I am sure is not free from the youthful indiscretions that we all make. For the price of Harry and Hermione's exclusive story she might be induced to find out what Albus is hiding, and then, well the public has a right to know about those they use as moral compasses."
Minerva looked at the gimlet light in Helen's face. "Offer her mine as well."

"Pardon?" Helen said.

"I said, offer her my story as well. I presume there are details we can't share such as those in regards to the horcruxes since I can't see the Ministry wanting a rash of copycats. But Albus has been using Hogwarts for his ends for too long. Never mind the business with the Order. If there's a chance to put the record straight, then I want it done."

Helen nodded. "I'm sure that arrangements can be agreed. If we give her a week to start digging, she can use the information we supply to lay the groundwork before she goes after Albus. That way we aren't jumping on the bandwagon so to speak."

"You may have mine as well," Severus said.

"Severus?" Helen asked.

He waved a hand at her. "I am not so delicate as that Madam."

"Delicate? No. Private? Yes. Rita is a muckraker if you give her an angle she'll go after it. I wouldn't have thought that you'd want that." Helen cautioned.

"While there are elements that I would prefer left in the past, I can accept that there has been a larger question hanging over me since the first war, namely what induced me to spy for Albus. It will answer that question for good."

Helen nodded in understanding. "Very well, we'll offer her everything exclusively."

"Perhaps," Percy said. "You might wish to write up a contract stating the terms of your agreement. I'm quite sure the initial meeting will come off the back of the information you hold on her. Though, unless you want to risk her turning on you at a later date, there will need to be restrictions put in place as to how she can use the information."

There was a general nod of agreement and noise of approval at the sensible suggestion.

"Does your solicitor deal in contract law, Minerva?" John asked

Minerva shrugged in response. "I don't know if this is something he could do or not."

"We'll send an owl first thing then," John replied. "One to Rita as well, see if she's willing to come on board."

"I hardly think she'll refuse," Severus commented.

"No," John agreed. "I don't think she will either, but it's polite to ask."

"You're blackmailing her," Percy pointed out dryly.

"Politely," John protested. "We're blackmailing her politely."

Percy looked unconvinced but let it go. "Do you mind?" He pointed at the pile of parchment that lay on the table. "If you allow me to read through and make notes I can make sure Kingsley is aware of what has transpired first thing tomorrow. He'll need to know what we're up against, he might not be able to go on record, but he won't stand idly by either."

"If you could make a copy, you can keep it," John suggested.
Percy nodded casting a duplicating spell on the parchments and picking up the copy folding the sheets tucking them away into his robes.

"So, we have a plan," George said. "I have to say it feels a lot like before. I thought we might be past this after Friday."

"Dumbledore declared war when he named Harry the new Dark Lord," Helen said. "We're merely responding to his opening salvo. He's underestimated us before. You'd think he might have learnt something from last time."
Kingsley arrived at McGonagall Lodge late that night. An elf had been dispatched to see if Minerva would allow him entry and had returned with one of Minerva's elves in tow.

It was late, he should be going home, but there were questions that he wanted answers to. Answers that wouldn't wait in until morning. Not if he planned to get any sleep which he would need, if he were going to navigate the next few weeks.

The elf deposited him in the hallway and indicated the library. The warm glow from under the door assured Kingsley someone was waiting on him. Minerva and Severus were both in the room, John Granger with them.

"Good evening," Kingsley greeted them and settled in a chair regarding the three people. "I am sorry to interrupt, I would like to ask your opinions and I hope that you will indulge me."

Kingsley waited for the collective response of acceptance and curiosity before asking. What do you think of Percy Weasley?"

"Percy?" Minerva asked puzzled. "Haven't you been working with him?"

"Yes," Kingsley allowed. "But not intimately. That will obviously change now I've taken up the Minister's role, but I wondered what your opinions of him were."

They exchanged puzzled glances between themselves before John quirked an eyebrow at Kingsley.

"Ambitious, idealistic, but not naive. He's helped Fred and George extensively with keeping their business open in the face of the pressures brought to bear on them by the Ministry. Percy is exceptionally well informed on how the Ministry operates. Organised and a bit of a perfectionist according to Audrey. He's also honest to a fault, depending on your point of view," John said. "He's hardly a coward considering what he's done and risked. It's not run head first into danger courage though, it's the courage of standing up for your principles and accepting what may come because of it."

Kingsley looked at John in surprise. "I hadn't thought you had spent so much time with him."

"I haven't, but I've spoken to Audrey quite a bit and Fred and George, Harry and Hermione. They've all spent time with him, I was just summing up their words."

"Percy is intelligent," Minerva offered. "His grades were excellent at Hogwarts. His NEWTs while not record-setting were certainly high enough to be proud of. He held the position of Prefect and Head Boy and was commended by other members of staff on his diligence. Perhaps seeing as by the time he attained Head Boy his elder brothers had left home he didn't get the recognition he deserved from his family for achieving the positions, but he never seemed to hold it against them. He was able to ferret out what the twins were up to better than most. In fact, once Percy left the staff noticed a marked increase in the trouble the twins were causing. I understand that the issues with Percy's career only drove a wedge between him and his family once the dust settled from the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Although I confess to not following his career at the Ministry at all."

Kingsley nodded to Minerva acknowledging her words then turned to the dark wizard who had remained silent.
"He's got a cool head on his shoulders," Severus said. "He'll think a problem through. He extracted himself from a meeting where Riddle was present without causing offence or causing a scene."

"What?" Minerva demanded. "What was he doing at a Death Eater meeting with Riddle?"

"Thickenessee was evidently annoyed by him and thought to demonstrate his power and standing."

"Oh, Merlin."

Severs shrugged. "He made his apologies to the hostess, flattered her and made his excuses and left unscathed. It could have been worse. The event ensured that Riddle was aware of who he was. If we hadn't won the day, it is likely that he would have been approached by those with more clout than Thickenessee. The Dark Lord valued competence. Especially capability that came from a line of pureblooded wizarding family, he would have been offered power, authority, money."

"When was this?"

"New Year."

"Then yes it could have been significantly worse," Kingsley said.

"Percy is hardly Death Eater material," John objected. "Despite what his mother seems to think Percy doesn't subscribe to the dogma of the Death Eaters."

"No," Kingsley said shaking his head. "I didn't mean that. Perhaps Percy can explain better, but as far as I understand it, he is the only wizard in Britain up until my swearing in as Minister that could wield the authority of the Ministry of Magic. And has been so since Scrimgeour left office. You see my concern wasn't him joining up, it was that Percy was and still is a valuable asset to whichever side he throws in with. I don't know if he has any Occlumency, but being in the presence of Riddle while being the only wizard to be able to control the Ministry of Magic is perhaps not a situation that was best for the health of either Percy, or the wizarding public."

"What do you mean?"

"As I said, perhaps Percy can explain it better. I can safely say I barely understand it. If we can ask him to join us?"

"Yes of course," Minerva replied calling for Stitches and sending the elf off with the message. It did not take long for the younger man to appear at the door.

"Minister? You requested my presence."

"Sit down Percy, get yourself a drink. And drop the title, it's been barely an hour."

Percy nodded and moved to comply. Once he was seated, Kingsley addressed him. "I have a few things I want to speak to you about in regards to recent events, and the situation moving forward. I was nominated to take over as Minister for Magic by the Wizengamot as you know. Upon my appointment, I was asked if I would take an oath of office. Prior to recent events, I had no knowledge of what oaths of office truly meant until you, Percy, chose to enlighten me. By doing so, you allowed me to take control of the Aurory unchallenged. The oaths bound everyone to the common cause and to my orders when issued as such. You did this I assume as a show of good faith when we first met."

Percy nodded. "The oaths would resolve several issues you were facing. The loyalty of your department was no longer in question. The leaks would be stopped as they swore to confidentiality"
as pertains to Auror business. It would allow you the latitude to act on behalf of what Fred and George called the Secret Order."

"Percy, I took the oaths. I'm a sworn in Minister for Magic."

Percy's shoulders slumped in relief.

"Thickenesse didn't take them, did he?" Kingsley enquired.

Percy shook his head. "Scrimgeour, they had him on something, though I don't know what. He resigned his post before Christmas. He was a sworn Minister. He didn't tell them about the oaths. He speculated that Thickenesse wouldn't be taking them because it's easier to get rid of a Minister not sworn in, or they weren't aware of what the oaths involved. As you are aware, they have fallen out of favour with most departments other than the Department of Mysteries which still operates at the highest levels of secrecy. Either way, Scrimgeour chose not to inform them. He granted me permission to act in his stead before he resigned and gave up his oath."

"When do you think you were going to mention you were the only wizard in Britain with access to the wards that control the Ministry of Magic itself? When, Percy, did you think you would have mentioned that you locked every single person in wizarding Britain out of the Ministry of Magic itself yesterday while we took to the field against Riddle. If you had died on that field Percy, we would not have been able to access the Ministry whether we had won the day or not." Kingsley levelled an inscrutable look at Percy.

Percy shook his head. "If it had gone badly, we would have needed somewhere to pull back to. The Burrow would be of no use, the Orders headquarters was secret kept by Dumbledore, and he wouldn't have allowed it even if it was able to hold everyone. The Ministry has room to spare. We could have pulled everyone in, we could have sheltered everyone. The Order, volunteers, innocent bystanders, the lot. The Ministry canteen is supplied by contractors, staffed by elves. We could secure a floo for supplies to be delivered indefinitely. It has an army of house elves bound to it. Riddle would have been forced to lay siege to the Ministry of Magic itself, and he would not have succeeded. It was our last option and one I am glad we did not have to use. If it had gone the other way, if we hadn't won, he wouldn't have been able to take control. Not without the oaths. If I had died, then control of the Ministry would have passed when the next aide or Minister was sworn in. If that didn't happen, then either they would have had to find a curse breaker team good enough to break them or would have had to act around them."

"But if Riddle had forced the Wizengamot to swear in a Minister."

"Then yes, he could have wrested control from me. But the Wizengamot has to be in accord and has to be inside the Wizengamot chamber to swear in a Minister. Not all of them are in his back pocket, and he still would have had to get inside the Ministry."

"When did you think you were going to mention all this?"

"Never," Percy replied. "My oaths on taking my position are to the Ministry, not the Minister. I serve it first, the Minister second. Ministers do come and go," Percy said whimsically.

"The Ministry of Magic has wards?" Minerva interrupted the conversation between the two wizards.

"Yes, much like Hogwarts. From the Minister's office, you can control everything, and I do mean everything. Entry points, access to levels within the Ministry, you can remove the locks on the holding cell doors if you so wish. The Ministry accounts at Gringotts, the staff of house elves that work inside the Ministry, power over legislation, everything. And until about lunch time today, Percy
was the only wizard who could," Kingsley replied.

There was a general air of shock as all eyes fell on Percy.

"I believe Minister that that information considered as confidential." Percy said fidgeting slightly in his seat.

"I'll take their vows of secrecy in a moment then," Kingsley said.

"Merlin," Minerva murmured. "The wards at Hogwarts are complex. I cannot imagine holding the Ministry wards."

"It's tiring," Percy replied dryly. "I would ask Minister that you revoke permission."

"That I would, but I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know what I'm doing and for the next few weeks you are going to be teaching me everything. Having access means you can catch what I miss before it becomes apparent. We must look strong, or this won't take."

Percy frowned but considered the idea. "Very well."

"Thank you by the way," Kingsley said. "I am not sure that what Scrimgeour did was the right thing, but I am glad he did it."

"How much is needed to be undone?"

Percy shrugged. "Everything that was sent through official channels and approved was signed off. Everything that didn't wasn't. I put up as many roadblocks as I could, but it wasn't as much as I would have liked, however, there are some legislative proposals currently mired in a bureaucratic swamp from which extraction is difficult."

"Wait," Minerva said. "Let me get this straight, Thickenesse was put in as a puppet Minister, but since he never took the oaths of office he could never fully control the Ministry?"

Percy and Kingsley nodded.

"Because Scrimgeour gave Percy permission before he left Percy could control the Ministry?"

More nods.

"So Thickenesse wasn't just a puppet for the Dark Lord but you, Percy, could undermine him as well?" Minerva asked eying her former student.

"Yes. Much of the legislation that was introduced by Thickenesse, tried to use the emergency power of the Minister for Magic in time of war to circumnavigate the Wizengamot. To put the Ministry into a state of war, the Minister himself must intervene. You can't just declare it, and it is so. You must alter the setting to 'war' as it were. Obviously, that wasn't done, so the legislation was buried in the pile of 'to do'. Thickenesse didn't know, he assumed it was done. Malfoy's knowledge of the Ministry isn't as detailed as he'd like due to the nature of the oaths taken." Percy explained letting a small smug smile grace his lips at Malfoys lack of knowledge.

"So, it's not as bad as we imagined?" Minerva asked looking slightly relieved.
"No," Percy answered. "The worst never happened. The registration of muggle-born is illegal. The Ministry might be sued by a few, but the records can just be destroyed."

"You've been acting as the Minister for Magic." John clarified quietly.

"No," Percy shook his head. "I have never stepped beyond the bounds of my role of Minister's aide. I am quite sure of that."

"Wouldn't Umbridge as undersecretary know this?" Kingsley asked.

"Possibly, but Madame Umbridge was retired due to medical unfitness. Any access she had was revoked and her vows, like mine, call for confidentiality regarding her role. I can speak because I have permission." Percy indicated Kingsley. "I have not divulged more than what the Minister has asked of me."

"There's more?" Minerva asked with concern.

"Of course. I imagine that there is more to Hogwarts wards than easily anticipated."

Minerva nodded.

"Bill's ward, you applied it directly to the Ministry ward matrix?" Kingsley asked. "And the holding cells? They aren't temporary?"

"No. You may, of course, if you have control of the wards, alter things. But what I have done so far is permanent. The wards will need to be changed to open the doors again before the first shifts start on Monday. I have a report of who has tried to access the Ministry since the point where I locked the doors as it were on Friday."

"That is why you returned to the Ministry?" Severus asked.

"Yes," Percy agreed. "A risk I thought worthwhile. I was able to apparate into my office no one saw me."

"Then if you would, I will need to spend some time with you tomorrow, or considering the current hour later today, going through what you can tell me about the Ministry. What departments we will have to restructure etc," Kingsley requested.

"I am at your disposal Minister."

Kingsley sent a ruefully humorous look at Percy. "I suppose I will have to get used to that. But enough of that, what can you tell me about the Order meeting?"

The mood instantly shifted.

"Oh," Kingsley said perceptively. "I see, it went that well did it."

"Albus Dumbledore is certifiable," Minerva growled.

"We recorded the meeting Kingsley," John said. "Percy has a copy of the transcript. To summarise Mr Dumbledore has decided that the Horcrux within Harry has been able to take possession of his body. The horcrux was previously contained by the blood wards surrounding Harry's relatives home and the inherent magic of Hogwarts. Mr Dumbledore believes that Harry's relocation with our family has caused the circumstances to come about."

"Alright, and this is tosh, and we can prove it, can't we?"
"Yes and no," Minerva snarled. "As Albus well knows. The Order is divided there are those who have been kept slightly better informed and are aware its rubbish. Tonks, Ted, Andromeda perhaps Bill and his wife, but Molly is vocally in support of Albus as she always is, and they call me his lieutenant."

"And the plan going forward?"

"What makes you think we have one?" Minerva asked.

Kingsley laughed. "Minerva really. John, Helen, Hermione and Harry were here listening in. You, Severus, and I assume you Percy, and Fred, and George, all returned here after the meeting. That by my estimation left you with four hours to come up with something. Even if I were a betting man, I wouldn't touch those odds."

"Helen has fielded the idea that we speak to the press and set the story right," John said. "We'll get our version of events out before the more ludicrous stories can see the light of day."

"Do we have a contact in the press with a readership large enough?" Kingsley asked. "I know a few reporters but not with a readership broad enough for a venture like this."

"Yes," John replied. "Hermione has had dealings with Rita Skeeter and has been able to agree on terms with her before."

"Skeeter?" Kingsley repeated with surprise, he caught the expression on Minerva's face and held up a hand. "On second thoughts don't tell me how, that way I can deny everything should I be asked. As long as Percy is kept abreast of developments I can claim that the Ministry office is aware of what is going on without having to lie. If that is alright with you Percy?"

"Yes, Minister."

"Will the interviews do enough though?"

"They will build interest in the public domain which we are going to use to launch an investigation into Mr Dumbledore," John replied.

Kingsley choked on the sip of whiskey he had taken. "You're sending Skeeter after Dumbledore?"

"Yes," John replied sanguinely. "It's Helen's idea, Rita is rather good at what she does, and Mr Dumbledore has had a very long life."

Kingsley sent a worried glance at John. "Remind me not to cross Helen Granger."

John smirked. "That would be wise."

Sunday was given over to planning. Percy sat with Kingsley, and they went over all the information that Percy had been collecting since the events at the Burrow, the information that Severus had handed over and the progress of the Auror department. Along with what information Percy had collected himself he was willing to share with the Minister.

There would be a limited number of entrances made available come Monday morning. The entire Auror department would be split between them. Any that the ward rejected would be taken into custody.

"If we can present a front of business as usual, there will be less backlash from the public in general. While the Ministry cannot expect to have its praises sung in the newspapers will at least be shown to
be headed up by those that took action," Percy said scribbling himself more notes and reminders. "You'll need to have a meeting with the department heads as soon as possible. Not only to assure them that the Ministry of Magic is operating business as usual, but also to let them know you are stepping up. The current Wizengamot schedule is light at best. While it is a travesty that the council is being so little used for the next month, you might wish to keep it that way. You are, as Minister, expected to be fully conversant on each and every issue going before the council, and it is my job to ensure that you are. I attend the weekly meetings that are held for those due in the Wizengamot the following week, and I have a report issued by the council on the issues raised etc. The minutes are also available although I usually provide a summary of those. They tend to be long, and if the council gets bogged down, they can be deathly dull."

"That's fine," Kingsley agreed. "We'll keep it as is for now then. Do I set the Wizengamot schedule?"

"Yes," Percy answered. "The Minister sets the schedule and the frequency which the council meets, although I can tell you that you will fail miserably if you expect them to achieve more than three times a week."

"Right, you can walk me through that when it comes to it I think. Set up the meeting with the department heads we'll get that done first thing as well, give them time to spread the word."

Percy snorted. "It's the Ministry, Minister, gossip travels as fast there as it did at Hogwarts."

6th March 1998

Percy and Kingsley sat in Kingsley's office at the end of an eventful week. Using the cover of Rita's interviews the week before, they had quietly rounded up all the remaining Death Eaters they could, along with those supporters of Riddle that were unmarked and buried within the Ministry that they had dirt on. The week of Rita's investigations into Albus kept the public riveted enough that most of the trials had been done and dusted before the public had thought to think of them. The remaining were scheduled for the next week but were few enough not to cause too many ripples.

"I've got the notes of the meetings scheduled Monday morning before the trials in the afternoon," Percy said reaching for the satchel at his feet. He'd given up trying to carry all the folders and files he needed in his arms after the first day and resorted to a satchel which had some useful charms cast on it.

"Enough Percy," Kingsley protested. "It's Friday night, shouldn't you be going home to Audrey?"

Percy shook his head. "She's away with work this week. There's a fair in Wales somewhere."

Kingsley frowned slightly. "What does she do again?"

"Antiquities," Percy said. "She works for a company that do valuations and restoration work and have a small auction house on the side. She's training to become an auctioneer."

"I knew it was something to do with furniture," Kingsley said.

Percy nodded leaning back in his chair to relieve the ache in his back from being on his feet all day, closing his eyes briefly.

"So," Kingsley said the clink of glasses bringing Percy's eyes open to look at his boss.

"So?"
Kingsley poured the drinks and pushed a glass over to Percy and raised it. "Here's to the second most powerful man in the Ministry of Magic. Without you, this last two weeks would have been impossible. We got the bastards, well most of them, and have pulled the teeth of the rest so they shouldn't be a problem."

Percy demurred. "Hardly powerful."

Kingsley sipped his drink observing Percy. "I don't know how to do this. You've been telling me what to do since I took office. Oh certainly, I've had ideas, and I've not been blindly following, but I was the head of the DMLE after being an Auror. I've no pretensions to knowing how the office of Minister runs."

Percy tasted his drink before answering. "You're the Minister. It is my job as your Undersecretary and Advisor to guide you. Until you can do it without me and then by gathering and disseminating all the information you need to run the office. I've done nothing more than I'm supposed to."

"I don't want it you know, the office as Minister," Kingsley confessed.

"Then why accept it?" Percy asked.

"Because I was the best one for the job," Kingsley replied. "Because the measures that were already in place, measures we had put in place, meant that the Ministry wouldn't crumble, and we could clean house. The tide of legislation that the Ministry has been approving that is doing nothing but discriminating against sections of our society can be turned, and we can achieve a brighter future. We're failing our future generations clinging to trivialities such as blood purity. No bloodline can stay 'pure' without risking dying out there's enough proof of inbreeding being hushed up along with the increased risk of the birth rates. The Ministry needs to be leading the charge on inclusion and acceptance, I can do that, and I already know it's something you support."

"My relationship with Audrey isn't about inclusion," Percy said sharply. "I love her. It's no more or less than that."

"You love her, and you're making a life with her despite the views of the magical society," Kingsley said.

"We're not going to be a rallying point," Percy said firmly placing his glass down. "My relationship is exactly that, mine. It's nothing to do with my work."

Kingsley held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Do you want it?"

"Want what?" Percy asked suspiciously.

"The job, as Minister."

Percy gaped at him.

"Come on Percy, don't tell me you haven't thought about it," Kingsley grinned.

"I, that is, I suppose yes, I have," Percy admitted. "But never seriously."

"Why not? You could do it. Your credentials check out, you know the way the office works, and you got here on your own merits."

Percy snorted at that.
Kingsley gave him a sympathetic look. "I know what your family said, and they were perhaps not so much misguided in their concerns as the way they expressed them. You might have moved up to the Minister's office as a way to keep track of Harry, but you stayed on the back of your hard work. Once you broke with your family, they could have buried you again. The fact you managed to keep the job and your principles, well it says a lot about you."

"I've never seriously considered it," Percy said. "Not as any real possibility and considering my choices I doubt it's something I could achieve."

"You could do it," Kingsley said confidently. "No one can doubt your bloodline or your family's allegiance."

"Audrey, she's a Muggle. They'll never elect a Minister married to a Muggle."

"Not today," Kingsley agreed. "Not even next year, but they will. We'll continue to clean house. We've got the chance to do it properly this time. Those marked can't hold Ministry jobs and everyone else we'll bind to an oath of loyalty like they used to do in the old days. We're on the cusp of a new dawn when we can push for change this time. Malfoy's gone, his blackmail network exposed."

Kingsley thumped his glass down on the desk decidedly. "We're going to drag this place kicking and screaming out of the Dark Ages."

"My family," Percy shook his head.

"What about them?"

"They... well,"

"Percy, your family are loyal and have shown that blood doesn't matter. You've got connections through Minerva, Severus, your brothers, your contacts here at the Ministry. Even Harry and Hermione would support you if you asked. Your sister helped lead the contingent of Hogwarts students which had led to a political change already. Don't think for a minute these things won't matter."

"My parents are hoping I'll change my mind about Audrey, they worry about the grandchildren being squibs," Percy admitted his anger and shame at is confession colouring his voice and face.

Kingsley winced. "All your family? I thought the twins?"

"Mum and Dad, possibly mostly Mum. She asked me to lunch last Sunday. Wanted to talk to me about what the Prophet was printing and possibly get the Minister's office to come out against it."

"But we didn't," Kingsley said sending him a regretful look.

"No," Percy agreed. "We didn't, but she also didn't extend the invitation to Audrey, so I didn't go."

"Are you, ahem, planning on a family?"

Percy shrugged his face closed. "At some point but if they are magical or not, I don't care. Healthy, happy, that's important. If they aren't magical, then they'll grow up as Muggles. I wouldn't turn a child away for the lack of magic."

"We've got four years until the next election," Kingsley said. "If you don't want it or aren't ready for it I won't push, I'll take another term."

"I don't think you get to decide, do you? Since the Minister is an elected office," Percy commented
wryly.

"It is," Kingsley agreed. "But we're going to use the time we have to get you ready so that I can return to the DMLE, and wizarding Britain can hold its head up again."

Percy looked at Kingsley before sighing. "I see you leave me with little choice." He raised his glass to Kingsley in salute.

Kingsley grinned. "You're welcome."
Double Date

10th March 1998

The pub was muggle. It was familiar to both Percy and Audrey, and quiet enough on a Tuesday night they didn't run the risk of bumping into anyone they might know. Percy and Audrey were already there seated at a corner table when Bill walked in followed by Fleur.

Bill noticed them and came over. Audrey and Percy stood to meet them.

"Hi Percy," Bill said pulling Percy in for a quick hug. "Audrey," Bill said turning to her. "We've not been introduced, I'm Bill, Percy's eldest brother. This is my wife, Fleur."

"It's very nice to meet you both. Sit down, please. What are you drinking?"

Bill's eyes flickered to Percy.

"Beer?" Percy offered.

"Yes," Bill said looking a little relieved.

Audrey turned to Fleur. "I'm on gin and tonics, the wine here isn't up to much, unless you prefer beer as well?"

"No thank you, I will try what it is you are drinking."

"Two G and T's Percy. Here, it's my round." Audrey pulled out some cash from her purse.

Percy waved her off. "It's fine. You can get the next one."

"If you're sure?" Audrey said putting the cash into her pocket.

Bill glanced at Fleur before following Percy to the bar.

"Well," Audrey said looking over at Fleur. "That was subtle."

"Oui, yes." Fleur settled into the chair next to Audrey looking around the pub in interest. "I have never been to a place like this before."

"Oh well, it's nice enough," Audrey said leaning back giving the pub an assessing glance. "It's halfway between where I work and where some of my friends do so we come here a bit. Or the Queens Head which is just around the corner. It's noisier there, they have quite a lot of live music, and it can be a bit much."

Audrey watched Bill and Percy at the bar. Percy was holding himself stiffly while Bill was leaning on the bar looking a little uneasy. "Does Bill not come into the muggle world much either?"

"Non, we do not. It is only recently he has found out that the twins and Percy do so. For all that his father is interested in muggles, they have not spent any time in the muggle world."

"Percy's Dad is interested in muggles?" Audrey asked in surprise.

"Oh yes, he has a shed full of muggle things. Molly does not approve so it is kept there out of the way."
Percy and Bill came back to the table placing the drinks down in front of their respective partners and taking their seats.

"What are we interrupting?" Bill asked with a smile.

"Your Dad has a shed of muggle things," Audrey asked an eyebrow arching at Percy.

Percy nodded. "He's been collecting it for years."

"What kind of things?"

"Batteries, small electronics. Dad has a car, but it's got that much magic running through it, it resembles nothing much like a car."

"A car, really?"

"Yes, it flies."

Audrey sipped her drink processing that. "Well, I suppose, you wouldn't get stuck in rush hour."

Fleur tried her drink cautiously making Audrey hide her smile. Did wizards not have gin?

Fleur obviously liked her drink as her next sip was more confident. "I do not think I remember you from when I visited at Hogwarts. Were you in the same year as Percy?"

Audrey exchanged a glance with Percy. "This is going to come up a lot, isn't it?"

"Yes," Percy said.

"I'm not sure if I should find it amusing or irritating."

"I would suggest you find it amusing for as long as you can because it will become irritating," Percy advised.

"What?" Bill asked.

"I didn't go to Hogwarts," Audrey said.

"Oh? I did not know that there were other magical schools in Britain," Fleur said with interest. "What was it like."

"No, you misunderstand," Audrey said. "Although I don't know if there are any other magical schools in Britain either. I didn't go to Hogwarts. I didn't go to a magical school. I'm a muggle."

The puzzled looks on Bill and Fleur's faces as they tried to understand what Audrey was saying morphed into surprise as she announced she was a muggle.

Fleur put her drink down. "Really? You have no magic at all?"

"No," Audrey said with a small smile. "Not a lick."

"You're not a squib?" Bill asked squinting at her.

"A child with little to no magic born to magical parents," Percy clarified. "And yes, irritating."

Audrey looked back at Fleur. "I assure you I am as muggle as Helen and John Granger."
Bill rounded on Percy. "And you let her come to the Burrow? She's a muggle! She could have been hurt, if not by a stray spell then by any of the enchantments on the house!"

"Percy didn't let me do anything," Audrey snapped back, her eyes narrowing at Bill. "I am an adult, and I decide what I do. I was escorted by a house elf, and John, Fred and George were with me at any given point. Don't you dare accuse Percy of putting me in danger, it wasn't Percy using mind reading spells on me. It wasn't my mother accusing him and his fiancée of being Death Eaters."

"Death Eaters?"

"Fiancée?"

Audrey blinked at the two responses glancing at Percy looking for clues as to who to answer first.

Percy shook his head at her with a small smile of amusement. "Now look, love, you've thrown them both. Yes, Audrey is my fiancée. I asked her at the beginning of February. And yes, our Mother thought that my refusal to give up my position in the Ministry was directly related to my choosing the 'dark' over the 'light'. Hence the split and the reason we have not been speaking. Upon meeting Audrey for the first time at the Burrow, well, you both witnessed how that went."

"Percy," Bill said. "Audrey, she's a muggle."

"Yes," Percy replied with a smirk. "I did know that."

"She's also right bloody here!" Audrey said pointedly.

"The Statute of Secrecy! Percy, the law! Merlin's balls, do you know what you've done?" Bill exclaimed aghast.

"Yes," Percy agreed. "I happen to be fully aware. Why do you ask?"

"How are you so blasé about it? It is punishable by life in Azkaban! Merlin."

Percy shrugged. "I'm not sorry, and I'd do it again."

"As far as I can see," Audrey said reasonably. "The only reason your Oblivitiators need to worry is if I go spouting off. Since I'm not going to do that, there's no problem is there? And once we have a family I'll be told anyway, so I don't see what the fuss is all about."

Bill frowned at her. "Have you considered what life imprisonment for Percy might mean?"

Audrey shrugged. "Who is going to care? Your society has bigger problems than one clued in muggle running around, when in fact I'm not running around shouting the odds. I'm marrying Percy. We're going to have a family, and if you have a problem with that, I suggest you either get over it immediately or accept that you will not be spending time with Percy in the future."

Fleur took Audrey's hand in hers, her eyes shining with delight. "I would very much like to get to know you better. If Bill has a problem with it, he can join his mother. She does not like me although she has never called me a Death Eater. She would not have me as I am part Veela. She will not have you either as you are a muggle."

"What's a Veela?" Audrey asked. "I don't mean to be rude, but I'm still learning."

"We are considered creatures," Fleur said with a sniff of contempt.

"I can get you a book," Percy said quietly.
Audrey nodded. "Which part of France are you from?"

"The south."

"Really? Where? I've spent a bit of time in France. Percy and I are due to go again in a few months."

Fleur looked at Percy in surprise. "The village is in the hills towards the border with Switzerland."

Audrey nodded. "We travel through that area. Remember Percy? The valley we went through before we reached Arles?"

"Yes," Percy nodded. "I had not realised your family lived there."

"Non," Fleur said. "We are small and closely knit."

Bill shook his head lifting his beer. Percy, the brother least likely to break the rules had broken the biggest of them and was blasé about it.

"I have not travelled much," Fleur was saying. "It is not the same for us. Port keys and floo and apparition."

"I've not done port keys," Audrey said. "But I'm not much of a fan of the other two. Although Helen and John took me out on their flying carpet and that was very exciting."

"Where else have you been?" Fleur asked.

"Well, we went to Prague recently. Percy needed a break from work, so we went for a weekend."

"How did you travel?" Fleur asked.

"Oh, we flew."

"On a broom?" Fleur said aghast.

"No," Audrey laughed. "On a plane."

Bill spat out his mouthful of beer, muttering apologies he surreptitiously cleaned up the mess before turning to his brother. "You've been on a flying muggle plane?"

"Yes," Percy said. "It was before Audrey found out I was a wizard, so I didn't have a lot of choices."

"That's a point, now I understand better, how did you get a passport?" Audrey asked curiously.

"It's fake," Percy deadpanned.

"What!?"

"It's fake," he repeated.

"But security, they said nothing, not when we went through the tunnel either."

"It's a very good fake," Percy said. "Magic, remember? There's a department at the Ministry that provides muggle documentation when you need it. There's enough of a paper trail in the Muggle world now that if they did a check on me, my address is correct, my bank account and so on. I do exist there now."

"You know it's totally illegal to travel on a fake passport."
Percy shrugged. "What can I say? It's totally illegal to tell you about magic. It appears I'm more like my brothers than I knew."

"Oh yeah," Audrey said drolly with a roll of her eyes and a wide smile. "You're a total badass."

"Pretty much," Percy joked.

Bill looked between them. "I'm flabbergasted," he admitted.

"Why?" Audrey asked. "Because I'm a muggle or because you didn't know Percy was a rule breaker?"

"No," Bill said. "Percy just made a joke. I feel I should write it down or something or at least let Fred and George know."

Audrey's eyebrows climbed her forehead, her tone came out cold and her words sharp. "I'll have you know that Percy is funny. He's also kind, loyal, brave, and fantastic in bed. Just because you don't know these things doesn't make them less true."

Fleur shot Bill an annoyed look. "Could you please not offend everyone at the table. I would like to get to know these people and you are acting as if you are intent on never seeing them again."

Bill held his hands up placatingly. "I'm sorry I didn't mean it."

"It is not me to whom you should apologise," Fleur replied tartly before muttering insults in French under her breath. Bill nodded at Fleur then turned to Percy and Audrey. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to offend."

Audrey checked that Percy was unconcerned before she shrugged at Bill and picked up her drink. Before she took a sip, she said quietly "Avoir les deux pieds dans le même sabot."

Fleur choked back a laugh. "You speak Français?"

Audrey tipped her head in an affirmative. "Necessary for work since we travel through France. It wouldn't do to not understand what the traders are saying."

Fleur smiled broadly then shot Bill a hard look. "You will be polite. I wish to have Audrey as a friend, we have much in common."

Bill nodded raising his hand placatingly again. He looked at Percy. "You don't speak French as well do you?"

"No, I cheat and use translation charms. I plan on learning enough to get by while I'm with Audrey though."

"Ha!" Fleur said having heard Percy's response. "See, Percy will make an effort. You must. It is no good for you to rely on the charms to speak to my family."

Bill hunched down a little under his wife's insistent look. "I know, you've said so before."

Percy smirked at Bill. "Something for the to-do list?"

Bill grunted tipping the last of his drink into his mouth using it as a reason not to respond. "I'll get the next round, shall I? Same again?"

A chorus of yes sent him to the bar with Percy to help with the money leaving Audrey with Fleur
"I would like to be friends," Fleur said. "It is not easy with Bill's family, it would be nice to have someone that doesn't judge me."

"I'd like that. Fred and George are great, they've been nothing but kind. I've not met Ron or Ginny yet. What are they like?"

Fleur frowned a little. "Ron, he was fourteen or fifteen when we first met. My magic, it is an allure, it would not affect you unless you prefer women. Ron, he was affected most severely. Perhaps it was just that time of his life, the hormones no?" Fleur shrugged elegantly. "I spent very little time around him. It is hard to know that you affect people and cannot stop it, it is uncomfortable to be stared at. You learn to block it out, but it makes it no less terrible. I am a quarter Veela, for me, it is not as bad as if I was half or full. That is why we live in small close villages."

"That sounds difficult. To be stared at and approached with unwanted attention."

"Yes," Fleur said. "Ginny, she was younger still and Molly, she did not like me and encouraged Ginny in this. She called me 'Phlegm' and pretended I could not hear."

"And I'm a muggle," Audrey said pulling a face. "I suppose she won't like me either."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Fleur replied. "She was very much infatuated with Harry then, and Harry was as affected by me as Ron. Hermione was not pleased either although she remained polite. I understand. No one wants to see their chosen partner looking at another woman."

"Percy seems unbothered," Audrey said. "Not to say you aren't beautiful, you are. He told me you were beautiful and clever when I first asked about you. But he isn't acting any different than he does with my other girlfriends."

Fleur shrugged. "For some, it is not the same. Percy has you, he is in love, what need of me has he?"

"So, your allure doesn't work on those in love?" Audrey asked slightly sceptically. "I mean no offence, but it seems a bit of a reach. How would you know if they were in love or I don't know, just infatuated?"

"It is magic," Fleur replied simply.


Fleur blinked. Audrey was saved from having to explain by the return of Bill and Percy. They handed out the drinks and retook their seats.

"Is work keeping you busy? Dad said he hasn't seen much of you at the Ministry and you didn't go to Sunday lunch last week. Mum said she'd invited you. She wanted us all back I think, well except Ginny and Ron." Bill commented as he settled back into his chair.

"If you're about to start campaigning for our Mother, then I would prefer you not to," Percy replied stiffly.

"Campaigning?"

Percy looked at Bill carefully, trying to determine how much he knew. "The owl I received extended an invitation to Sunday lunch for myself alone. It made no mention of Audrey or her being welcome. It also hinted at the opportunity to discuss my future and the wishes of those in the Order. Regardless
of the fact I want nothing to do with Albus Dumbledore and his Order if Audrey isn't welcome I am not stepping foot over the threshold. The invitation did not contain an apology for insinuating Audrey was a Death Eater, nor an apology for accusing me of being one. The owl I returned to her made it quite clear that until both apologies were sincerely given in person, I would not be attending any meals at the Burrow. As far as I am concerned nothing has changed, I am estranged from my family."

"Well, not from Fred or George, and seeing as we're both sat here not us either, and did you really fall out with Charlie? I mean he's barely been back to England three times in the last few years."

"Yes, well, if you wish to be pedantic I am estranged from some of my family."

"Are you going to give them a chance to straighten it out?" Bill asked leaning back in his chair his pint glass in hand.

"That sounds an awful lot like campaigning for us to become one big happy family again."

Bill shrugged. "I'm the eldest, born mediator. It's basically my burden to carry to make you lot sort yourselves out. But you can't complain you haven't had the apology you're due if you never give them a chance to give it."

"Could we change the subject?" Percy asked pointedly.

"Sure," Bill agreed. "So you can change the wards at the Ministry. Odd that, because I had a chat with a mate of mine who happens to know a thing or two. He says that the Ministry wards are some of the most complex and powerful anyone could get to play with should they be given the opportunity. He also said that if someone were to try and break them, it would take the biggest team of overqualified curse breakers you could find. Which would be impossible because they would all laugh and say it couldn't be done. But you, little brother, waltzed into the Ministry and set up my ward matrix on the ward network itself after watching me do it once, and my ward set only sat on the surface."

Percy nodded. "I'm sorry if there was a question in that I think I missed it."

Bill shook his head. "No question. Just letting you know that I know."

Percy lifted an eyebrow at his brother. "I am unclear if the beer is affecting you more than you think since I'm quite sure you don't know what you think you do."

Bill grinned at Percy. "Oh really? So you weren't sharing a house with Fred and George? And that house didn't happen to belong to a Professor of Transfiguration?"

Percy shrugged. "I concede you might know one or two things."

Bill laughed. "Percy, you got careless. If you're going to have meetings with the Minister for Magic, the Order's former spy, the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts and a muggle that no one is quite sure what to make of, then ward the door."

Percy blinked then groaned as he realised what Bill was driving at. "Damnit."

Bill smirked. "Yep. You got played brother mine. Though you have to hand it to them, you wouldn't have known if I hadn't told you."

"Well that's not entirely true," Audrey piped up.
"Pardon?" Percy asked Audrey.

"Well as I understand it, Kingsley asked for Minerva and Severus' wand oaths not to reveal certain information relating to your Ministry work. John Granger does not have a wand and Kingsley in a show of seemingly typical wizarding behaviour, forgot to ask John to keep it quiet. He told everyone else what was discussed the next morning. Although he did say, he hadn't told us the parts Kingsley hadn't wanted to be shared. He saw it as a gentleman's agreement since there was no way he could have made a wand oath even if Kingsley had asked."

"You know? You've never said."

"I've had no need to, although it's likely you would have found out when I knew more than you had told me. You would have told me if I needed to know and I know you take your job seriously," Audrey explained. "Between us all, we pieced a bit of a timeline together. I remember how you seemed to get more stressed out in November, then Christmas and New Year were a write-off. I feel bad you know, I wasn't exactly thrilled you were spending so much time at work. I'm sorry I added to your stress."

"No," Percy said. "Don't apologise. You didn't know, you couldn't know. You acted exactly as you should have."

"It's true then?" Bill said taken back. "I thought the twins were playing it up."

"I don't know what they've told you."

"You were running the Ministry. You were spying for the Order undermining Thickeness and killing the legislation You-Know-Who was trying to put through."

Percy shrugged.

Fleur leaned over covering Percy's hand with her own. "Thank you," she said sincerely pausing for a moment before taking her hand back. "The legislation to those considered not fully human that was coming was, well, I think I would have been more comfortable moving back to France."

Percy nodded accepting her thanks.

Audrey smiled at him as well then turned to Fleur. "So what do magical folk do when they go out for the evening? It's still early so we could catch a film if you fancied it?"

"Film?"

Audrey threw a rueful look over at Percy shrugging, she would let him decide if it was something they could do together.

Percy nodded. "Come on, we can either catch a taxi, or I can side-along you both then come back for Audrey."

Bill and Fleur exchanged a look. Audrey caught it and offered. "Fred and George have seen one, and they enjoyed it."

"I would like to see a film," Fleur said. "I have not travelled in a taxi either. We took the knight bus here, and it was not pleasant. They are not similar, are they?"

"No," Percy reassured the witch. "Muggle cars are quite comfortable."
"Then yes, I think we should go," Fleur said finishing her drink and looking expectantly at Bill.

Bill downed the dregs of his pint and nodded at Percy. "Let's go."
Percy was working late. Audrey was away overnight, so his guilt was offset by the knowledge no one was waiting for him. When the door to his office opened, he didn't immediately look up. After hours visits to his office had become a bit of a regular thing. Those he had sent warning and shield rings to had come to thank him, to ask him about the magic he had given them. The explanations had become pat he had repeated it so many times.

"Percy."

His head lifted to regard his father. It seemed that they would forever be in this situation, Arthur visiting after hours.

"Percy, I want to apologise."

Percy blinked.

"I cannot continue like this." Arthur sat himself down in one of the visitor chairs. "This thing, whatever it is, that is causing this rift, I want it resolved. I have seen you working with Kingsley these last few weeks, and I will admit that I have perhaps previously not understood your role. I have not comprehended how hard you have been working and I want to apologise. When you were promoted, I—we. We were genuinely worried that you would be put into a position where you would have had to choose. Not between the Order and the Death Eaters but your life or that of your family. I did not want you in a position where you were forced to compromise yourself to keep yourself or us safe. I feared for you Percy, and somewhere, somehow, that fear for your welfare became the thing that drove us apart. I am ashamed that we have been through the events of the last month, and yet we are unable to sit and talk or share a meal."

"Audrey was not invited to the Burrow, and I would not insult her by attending without her."

"I didn't know Percy," Arthur replied. "I thought your mother had extended the invitation to the both of you."

"Even though you think she might be a Death Eater?"

Arthur sighed. "No, I do not think Audrey is a Death Eater. I am sure that she is the lovely young lady she appeared to be and for what it is worth I apologise for both Albus and your mother."

"And what of the accusation that I am a Death Eater?"

Arthur looked sadly at his son. "I have never considered that you would join the ranks of You-Know-Who's followers, never. It is inconceivable. I know that Molly has said it, but I fully believe she was angry and scared. The war, the risk of her children being injured or dying is not something your mother is able to deal with. I thought her words were merely lashing out in anger. I've never considered that she seriously meant them."

Percy looked away. "I believe she meant them. She accused Audrey of the same. She insists that Dumbledore knows best and everyone is either with him or against him. The world is not so black and white."

"I can only apologise that you feel that way. Will you come to the Burrow with me? Speak to your mother, explain this to her. Explain so that she can understand, and we can fix this. She wants what is best for you Percy, we both do."
Percy regarded his father. He wasn't sure, but he thought that Bill had something to do with this. Perhaps Bill in his role as the officious elder brother had told their father where the base of the problem lay so Arthur could at least get this far. It would be like Bill, meddling, officious, peacemaker. Although his father had come to see him more than once. Even though those visits had usually ended in heated words being exchanged, his father had still tried.

Percy sighed, irritingly Bill was right. If he never gave them a chance to apologise, then they never could. It would be something to end the estrangement that had plagued them. He had had an owl from Ginny already stating as far as she was concerned Audrey could be pink with green spots as long as Percy was happy. And if just so happened Audrey was available to take Ginny muggle clothes shopping then they could get to know one another a little. It had made an odd sort of sense that Ginny had been unfazed about the Audrey being a muggle, if only to be contrary and get something she wanted out of it.

Audrey had seen the note and been somewhat relieved. She had agreed to the shopping trip when Ginny returned for the summer and had given Percy some fashion magazines to send with the reply. Audrey had confessed that Fleur's stories of how she had been treated by Ginny and Molly had had her worried and a shopping trip seemed a small price to pay for having one more family member on-side.

Which just left his mother, who would be at the Burrow cooking his father's dinner and any of her children she had managed to coax to her dinner table.

Arthur waited patiently allowing Percy to think through his answer. When Percy nodded slightly to indicate that he would accompany him, Percy saw his father's shoulder drop from the release of tension.

Percy tidied his files, folders and parchments, clearing his desk as he prepared to leave for the night. Arthur watched silently as he went through his routine patiently waiting until, satisfied that everything was as it should be, Percy summoned his cloak to him and indicated to the door, signalling he was ready to leave.

Molly sat at the kitchen table, the one they had sat around as a family as long as he could remember. The kitchen was in full flow of preparing the evening meal. The pans stirred by enchanted spoons, the ones they had bought her for presents as children. Heavily used and loved. This domestic scene, one he had seen so often, no longer warmed him. No longer gave the comforting feeling of everything been right with the world.

"Percy!" Molly said in greeting as he followed Arthur through the door. She rose from the table coming to greet Arthur in their customary manner. "I'll set you a place. You'll stay of course. You've lost weight, you are eating properly, aren't you? I can prepare a basket you can take home with you."

"Molly, no. Please, come sit down," Arthur urged his wife. "Please."

"Why? What is it? Arthur, what's wrong?"

"Molly, Percy has come to speak to us, both of us."

Percy watched his mother's worried face move from her husband to look at her son properly for the first time since he walked through the door. The distracted attention she had given him when he had walked in was nothing new, he was the quiet one. The one that no one noticed. Percy gestured to the table. "Shall we sit?"

Arthur summoned the tea things making up three cups. His mother casually halted dinner
preparations with a twitch of her wand. She sat at the table accepting the cup of tea Arthur pushed on her and Percy joined them accepting his own.

Percy exchanged a glance with his father, Molly caught it and crossed her arms. "Would someone explain to me what is going on?"

Arthur broke the tension. "Molly, when Percy received his promotion things were said. Things that have been left hanging between us. I want very much for our family to be whole again Molly, I want Percy to feel welcome in our home and, so we thought it best if we cleared the air."

"Of course our family is whole," Molly rebutted. "Percy was working with Kingsley, Kingsley was working with the Order. Although I'm not happy that no one told me that you were doing so and putting you in danger like that. But it's over now, You-Know-Who has gone. Of course, Percy is welcome here, he always has been."

"Molly, love, it isn't that simple. You said some terrible things to Percy and while I don't think you meant them, and said them in anger you do need to apologise."

"What things?"

Arthur grimaced. "Molly you accused Percy of siding with Riddle, you accused him of joining the Death Eaters."

Molly frowned as she looked at her husband and son. She turned to Percy. "You refused to listen, you abused poor Harry. Accused him of terrible things, of putting us all in danger when it was You-Know-Who all along. You refused to join the Order or leave your position at the Ministry even though it was clear that You-Know-Who was going to take over which he did. You repudiated Albus Dumbledore more than once Percy. What was I meant to think?"

Arthur drew back from his wife in unhappy surprise. Percy had remained silent and passive as his parents spoke and fought to remain stoic in the face of the idea that his mother hadn't just been angry.

"You were not supposed to believe that I would join the Death Eaters," Percy said quietly but firmly. "You were supposed to believe better of me as my mother if nothing else. I have never demonstrated that I agreed with the propaganda of the Death Eater movement. I was raised not to discriminate, I was raised to believe that everyone deserved equal treatment and respect. You, my mother, taught me these things, yet you, my mother, thought I would abandon the principles by which I was raised."

"You refused to join the Order Percy. You refused to listen to Albus, the only wizard who was leading the fight against him. You chose your career over us, Percy. You chose the Ministry, the Ministry riddled with witches and wizards working for You-Know-Who, over your family. No son I raised would do that. Each of my children except you have expressed a desire to join the Order to fight against You-Know-Who and yet you did not."

"You are judging your children's worth by their willingness to sign up to a vigilante group? A group that you have expressly forbidden your children from joining," Percy clarified incredulously.

"Molly, what you are saying makes no sense. Percy had a right to choose to join the Order or not. Not joining is hardly an indicator of joining the other side. But regardless of that, Percy is not a Death Eater, nor has he ever considered being one. You owe him an apology, Molly."

Molly looked at Arthur and Percy in turn. "Yes, I can see that I was wrong," she nodded. "I do, and I am sorry. I should not have suggested that you were a Death Eater."

Percy nodded his acceptance unsure if the apology was enough to heal the hurt that his mother
clearly held reservations about his loyalties, especially when it had been given in the manner it had.

"Right, now, that is cleared up would you care to tell me why you didn't invite Audrey for Sunday lunch?" Arthur asked his wife.

Molly blinked. "Well because it was a family lunch, I wanted us all to be together. I am sure that Audrey would have understood that. Although your reply made it quite clear you thought she should have been invited."

"Yes, I believe that she should. Audrey is my fiancée you insinuated that she might be a Death Eater. I believe that an apology for that is owed as well. It disturbs me greatly that you believe so little of me that you accuse me of consorting with Death Eaters as well as being one myself."

"Nonsense Percy, Audrey appeared in the middle of an Order meeting. The precautions that were taken were not so unusual. If Allister had still been alive, then she would never have been able to enter the house without someone to vouch for her. You didn't join the Order, Percy, you don't realise that security is taken very seriously."

"Professor Dumbledore performs Legilimency on everyone that is introduced to the Order, does he?"

"Well," Molly hesitated. "I don't know what security measures he considers to be necessary as anyone entering an Order meeting has already been vetted, but it would not be so unusual for legilimency to be used."

Percy shook his head. "And you can't see the problem with that? The invasion of privacy? The inability of most who have no skill in occlumency to protect those parts of themselves that need not bear scrutiny? Nothing but powerful occlumency shields could stop Professor Dumbledore taking anything he wished from such an intrusion."

"No one said it was pleasant Percy," Molly refuted. "But we were at war, and sometimes the ends justify the means."

Percy shook his head appalled that Dumbledore would demand such things from those who volunteered their efforts but pushed the thoughts away. The Order had grown, if it was a necessary ritual, it seemed few objected. "Audrey is not affiliated with the Death Eaters."

"Percy, you have no way to be sure. She might be a plant to gain information from you or your family or the Order."

"She isn't!" Percy snapped. "Please stop it. Your paranoia is unwarranted and unwelcome. Audrey is a muggle. She wouldn't qualify to become a Death Eater, and it seems highly unlikely she will sign up to an organisation that believes in the extermination of people like her."

"A muggle?" Molly repeated shocked.


"She's not a squib?"

"No, I haven't researched her ancestry as I saw no need, but her parents and grandparents are non-magical," Percy replied.

"Albus he said he couldn't feel much of a magical signature from her. I didn't want to believe him, but you've said its true, oh Percy! What were you thinking? You have to end it," Molly said earnestly. "I'm sorry Percy, but you've got to end it before it gets serious."
"I will most certainly not!" Percy responded indignantly.

"Yes Percy, yes, you must."

"Why in Merlin's name?"

"Percy she's a muggle. And she came here! Oh, Merlin! She came here, we'll be arrested, thrown into Azkaban! Oh, Percy, what were you thinking? Your father could lose his job and then where will we be?" Molly's alarm and distress visibly grew as she spoke.

"Why would Dad lose his job?" Percy asked confused.

"Because she's a muggle and it's against the law Percy! The Statute of Secrecy. I told you, I told you every day while you were young that you weren't to let the muggles see and now look you've gone and told her."

Percy held up his hand. "Yes, I've told her. Due to the upcoming battle, I thought it the honourable thing to do but Audrey understands the law, she understands the risks that we're taking, and she isn't going to say anything. No one would believe her anyway. We're going to marry and start a family. If the child is magical, then she'll be told anyway."

"Married? A family? but Percy you can't!"

"Why can't I?"

"Because she's a muggle!"

"I fail to see why that means I cannot marry and have children with the woman I love."

"But your children they might be squibs!"

"Any child I had whether with a witch or a muggle has the chance to be a squib."

"Not with the right witch and there are rituals to help with conception, but she's a muggle!"

"And it makes not a lick of difference."

"Of course, it makes a difference Percy. She's a muggle, she has no magic. A child needs magic in the womb for healthy development. They need to have magic running through their mother's blood, the blood they share to aid their development."

"That logic seems inherently flawed," Percy replied testily. "Especially since squibs are born of witches and wizards and the muggle-born are born of muggles. Is your only objection to Audrey that she is a muggle?"

"Percy, she is a muggle. It's insurmountable, you can't marry her. Percy, please reconsider. Find a nice witch, one that you can take the Ministry functions and what not. A Slytherin if you must and if she's from a pureblood family, we, your father and I, can brush up on the old ways. We can meet away from here. Your career Percy, a muggle wife, won't be able to help you in the Ministry. You need someone who can stand beside you, build a network of the society wives. Someone who can garner support for you in that way."

"You think I should marry someone like Narcissa Malfoy?" Percy asked incredulously. "She performed that exact role for her husband, but I did not know you admired her for it."

"I don't," Molly replied stoutly. "But I am not so blind as to not understand that Narcissa Malfoy did
much to build her husband's position within the Ministry and their toadies. You will, if you wish to succeed in the Ministry, need a witch who can help you do that and Audrey cannot. And she's a muggle. Oh, Percy, how could you?" Molly buried her face in her hands, elbows propped on the table refusing to look at Percy.

Arthur and Percy exchanged confused concerned glances. So far this was not going the way either had hoped.

"How could I what?" Percy asked reluctantly.

"Muggles Percy! The influence of muggles on the magical community has a, a diluting effect if you will. We need to halt the disintegration of our culture which is why the Statute of Secrecy was put in place, to protect our society. It became essential to take steps to establish a clear and clean separation between the two races. Because we are magical, we can never suffer a muggle race which has nothing to do with us to claim the leadership of our people. It would be absurd, and your actions are the very thing that risk that happening. I thought you understood, I thought you knew better. Percy, muggles are dangerous."

"Audrey is not dangerous."

"Perhaps one muggle alone is not," Molly said. "But if she tells her friends and they believe her, and they tell their friends and families then the whole thing comes down, you will expose our world to the muggles. There are more of them than us, we could never survive if they joined forces against us. They won't understand what magic can be used for and what it cannot, they will just see an easy solution to their problems and when they don't get the answers they want, then they will hunt us. That's why we went into hiding in the first place."

"I'm not telling the whole of the muggle world I'm telling one woman."

"But Percy that's how it starts. You tell one muggle, and someone else tells another and then another and another."

"Mother there are over fifty-eight million people in Great Britain alone. There are not enough magical people to each tell a muggle and what of the parents of the muggle-born who already know about magic because of their children the so-called collapse has yet to happen."

"Muggle-borns join our world, Percy, they don't stay in both."

"Some do, but we digress. I am not giving up Audrey. We are getting married, and that is the end of it. Will you welcome her to the family or not?"

"I'm sorry Percy. I think you are making a mistake and I cannot will not, be party to it. Perhaps you've gotten away with telling her because you're working with Kingsley and you think your children will be magical, but you are risking everything and no. No I cannot," Molly threw her hands up, shaking her head she stood from the table and retreated to the kitchen.

"Then I'm sorry but I shall not give up Audrey, and it seems we are at an impasse," Percy said stiffly.

Arthur looked after his wife then indicated Percy to stand. Quietly they both left the kitchen for the garden and apparated away.

Percy took Arthur's arm when they landed from the first apparition and side-alonged him to the front door of his flat. Leading the way in Percy stripped his cloak and shoes off hanging them up and holding out his hand for his father's outerwear. Divested, Percy led the way to the sofa dropping on to it and waving his wand to summon the whiskey decanter and glasses. Healthy measures were
poured, and Percy took a mouthful before he spoke.

"I cannot return to the Burrow. I will not put Audrey aside. I love her, we are engaged, and we will marry. Audrey is to be my wife, and she was treated abominably when she was at the Burrow. I will not expose her to the same thing again."

Arthur nodded silently in agreement looking around his son's home in interest. There were things that he did not recognise, things that he assumed were muggle in origin but put his curiosity to one side to deal with the current crisis at hand.

"Percy. There are things I should tell you things I didn't think you needed to be told but I see that I was wrong. Things that might shed light on your mother's attitude.

We thought you too young to remember the war, we thought that you'd escape the worst of it. I told Bill and Charlie, I'm sorry it's taken so long to tell you, but there are things you should know. It's about your mother, Percy."

Percy looked up at his father in interest. Arthur settled back into his chair obviously organising his thoughts.

"Her parents died shortly after our wedding. Dragon pox took them both. Molly was the youngest, and while she was graduated and married, she had been close to her family. I had married into the Prewitts if you like. It hit her hard when they died, and she clung fiercely to her brothers and me more than ever because of it.

We had always planned a family, we hoped to be able to have more than one child, but nothing was certain. Bill came along, and we were delighted, then Charlie, then you, then the twins, Ron, and then Ginny. We were happy. Each child we thought would be the last. It's unheard of to have so many successful births. We were blessed. Yes, your mother wanted a daughter, but we would never have terminated a pregnancy. Magical children are a gift, more so because of the problems so many families face." Arthur sipped his drink shifting to get comfortable for what was likely to be an uncomfortable conversation.

"When the first war started, Molly was more concerned about raising you then the fighting. I was involved in the periphery but nothing dangerous. Nothing that would risk my ability to come home to you all. Molly's brothers, they were involved in the front lines, and they paid for it." Arthur shook his head. "Molly, she was lost. I honestly thought I might lose her, she was depressed, grieving. I could do nothing to help her, then Albus came along.

It was unwise of me, but I admit I didn't know what else could be done. Molly was so deep in her grief it was unfathomable. Albus offered her something, something that helped her pull herself out of the despair that was drowning her. She came back to me, to us, slowly, but she came back. She was a mother again, and I could breathe a sigh of relief my children would not be motherless, I would not have to mourn my wife. The price for that seemed to be that Molly believed in Albus."

We attended a few Order meetings, but my job provided very little in the way of useful information and your mother's time was taken up with your care. Then it was all over. He was gone, and I thought that we could finally get on with living.

I know you think badly of me for my job and perhaps you have a point. I never sought advancement, I never lusted for the fame and glory that came with the higher profile and prestigious departments. But Percy, I had seven children and a wife to support. In the shifting sands of political alliances, I could not afford to risk losing my job. The department isn't glamorous, and it is much maligned, but it pays a good wage. It meant that while you may never have had new everything and anything, you
always had food. You always had a roof over your head, and you always had a family that loved you dearly." Arthur looked over at his son. "Job security means much more when there are children at home that look up to you. Rely on you to love them, shelter them, feed and clothe them. We might never have been wealthy, but we were rich in the things that are often overlooked."

Percy nodded. "I know what I said when I left that summer was cruel. I do regret demeaning you in that way. I have never doubted that as little as I seemed to have in common with you all at times, I wasn't part of the family. It was only after the events of the summer where I felt I could no longer stay and I am unsure how much of it was justified hurt and how much was stubbornness."

Arthur laughed. "Stubbornness is a Weasley trait I am afraid, along with the temper and the red hair. But you are my son, and I have never stopped loving you or your siblings, nor has your mother and we are very proud of each and every one of you. But I digress." Arthur sighed looking down into the tumbler of whiskey he was swirling gently. "Your mother isn't the same witch I married, her brothers' death broke her. Albus helped her, the loyalty she showed him after was a concern, but what could I say? Molly took her cues from Albus. I don't hold with blood supremacy and wouldn't abide it in any of my children. Molly never discriminated, but Albus enforced the idea in her that muggle-borns belonged in the magical world. That Muggle-borns should be shown how to live in the magical world, and that rejection of the muggle world was only natural.

It wasn't until Ron made friends with Harry that I began to realise that Molly was still loyal to Albus in ways I thought she had left behind. The boy clearly had problems at home, but when Albus told Molly that Harry was to stay with his relatives, she agreed. Not a word to be said about it. I suggested we brought him to the Burrow and she wouldn't hear of it saying Albus had said that the muggles were the safest place for him and moving him was a risk to him and us.

I couldn't change her mind and to be honest Percy, perhaps I should have tried harder. For Harry's sake. When he came to the Burrow, I saw a sad little boy starved of love. Molly has always loved you fiercely she treated him as one of her own and Harry needed that. But she was adamant that he was to return to the muggles, that Albus had a plan and we could do nothing more for him than offer a few weeks in our home over the holidays."

"I don't understand why she believes in him. Ginny could have died."

Arthur looked pained. "We weren't told."

"We wrote! I certainly kept you informed."

"You did," Arthur said. "But when we followed it up with Albus he brushed it off as students playing tasteless pranks."

"Students were petrified. Penelope, Hermione, both of them and a first year!"

Arthur nodded. "Yes, but I couldn't find out anything about their condition as I wasn't responsible for them, and again Albus assured us that while the students were in the infirmary, they were not harmed in any way, and the cure was imminently going to be administered."

"They were petrified for months."

"Percy, if it had been one of you we could have done more. Our hands were tied, they weren't our children. Molly wouldn't hear of keeping you from attending school. She was of the mind that Hogwarts with Dumbledore at the helm couldn't be dangerous."

"But Sirius Black broke into the castle a man accused of murder! How was that safe? The school
was surrounded by Dementors!"

"I know Percy. Truly I do, but there was nothing to be done. Albus was the Headmaster, and he told us that everything was under control. Albus saved your mother. I don't know what he did to do it. After all this time, I don't want to know, but whatever it was, it was enough to pull her out of her grief enough to get her through the hardest time of her life when her children and her husband weren't enough. She will never stop believing him, and Albus Dumbledore believes Magic is Might."

"She will never accept Audrey, will she?"

"I don't know Percy I truly don't. But please, son, don't cut your self off again. Whatever your mother says or thinks or believes, I have no problem with Audrey, I don't wish for this to be the next things to come between us."

Percy nodded sipping his drink with quiet resignation.

Arthur allowed the silence to stand for a few minutes then half guilty looked over at his son. "Is that a telley-vision?"

Percy's head snapped up registering what his father had asked. He smiled, amusement and weary resignation in the small smile that wormed its way on to his face. "It's a television Dad. Here, let me show you how it works."
Favours

June 1998

When the public read the articles published by Skeeter, telling the stories of the four war heroes and of Albus’ machinations, it was to the surprise of no one that the public demanded Albus Dumbledore’s head. With the promise of more to be revealed in a soon to be released tell-all book, authored by Rita herself, the outrage and outcry only built. It was less of a surprise when the Board of Governors at Hogwarts conceded to the demands of the public before anyone thought to question why the Board themselves had not been aware of the goings on at the school.

Albus Dumbledore was asked to resign his post as Headmaster in April. The Board assured the clamouring, angry public that they would announce a new Headmaster or Headmistress as soon as the school year had finished, and the candidates had been robustly vetted.

Speculation then ran rampant as to who would get the coveted role of Headmaster or mistress of England's premier magical school. The unofficial Ministry betting pool had Deputy Headmistress McGonagall out in front followed by Filius Flitwick, Miranda Goshawk, and Jocunda Sykes.

It was then to most a shock when Severus Snape was announced as the new Headmaster. While muttering ensued, it was overall seen that if the witch that slew Voldemort wouldn't be Headmistress, then the Spy that Helped would be the next best thing.

The Ministry’s policy of interfering as much as it could in Hogwarts business received only a slight set back upon the announcement of Severus Snape taking the role. There were few who didn’t remember being taught by him, and fewer still were willing to risk his infamous temper. It was with trepidation and owl post that the Ministry decided to conduct its business. So when Severus Snape swept into Percy's office three days after the school term finished in a billow of black wool, it was unexpected.

Percy double checked his appointments in a lightning-quick glance as he stood to greet the visitor.

"I do not have an appointment, Mr Weasley. However, I wonder if Kingsley might be available?"

"Certainly, Prof, Seve- Headmaster." Percy stumbled wincing at his faux pau.

"You may call me Severus still, Mr Weasley," Severus said his eyes gleaming with humour while his face remained passive.

"You may still call me Percy," Percy replied with a small nod of acknowledgement.

Severus inclined his head and refused the chair Percy offered as he moved to the Minister's door.

"I'll just see if Kingsley is available, he does have a meeting in half an hour." Percy slipped around the door and informed Kingsley of his unscheduled visitor. Kingsley was as startled as Percy had been but urged Percy to invite the Headmaster in.

Percy opened the door to his office. "Severus, the Minister can see you."

"Thank you, Percy," Severus replied crossing into the office, his robes flaring around him. Percy shut the door as Kingsley offered Severus a seat and a drink and returned to his desk. Kingsley had not yet revoked the privileges of Percy's office and the curiosity of what they spoke tickled a corner of his consciousness.
Percy debated only for half a minute before he gave into his curiosity. A twitch of his wand activated the wards to transmit the conversation to him. A second more of thought and he sent a quick spell at the door to the corridor to stop anyone entering and discovering his eavesdropping.

"What can the Ministry do for you, Severus?" Kingsley enquired.

"I have come about the former students who have recently graduated who were through one means or another linked to the Dark Lord."

"What of them?"

"They have completed their Hogwarts education and have been thrown out into the world. With the current political climate, they are not being offered work."

"Well, that's hardly surprising," Kingsley said. "Those families that have proven links to the Death Eater movement were always running the risk of such an eventuality. I am sorry Severus but what is it you want from this office or me."

"As much as I think Dumbledore is a Machiavelli menace, he believed in second chances. Some of these students haven't yet had the opportunity to spoil their first and yet the wizarding public has written them off for the actions of their parents."

"Severus, I am not sure what you think I can do."

"Employ them," Severus replied.

The room was silent, and Percy wondered if Kingsley's poker face was holding.

"Have any of them applied for positions in the Ministry?" Kingsley eventually asked.

"I believe some may have."

Percy heard Kingsley's desk drawer open and close and the thunk of a bottle on the table top.

"If they apply, then I can ensure they have a fair shot at whatever the role. I can send a memo out to the departments stating that discrimination will not be tolerated. But it guarantees nothing, I cannot stop the Department Heads picking one person over another if they are equal on paper. If they have a good reason that is related to the ability to do the job in question, then I have no power to stop them. If the student in question is obviously better qualified and still aren't picked then yes steps can be taken, but that's it. That is the extent of what I can do. I cannot cobble together some sort of committee or agency just to give these people work."

There was a moment of quiet, and Percy wished he could see into the room as well as hear.

"Very well, I shall inform them," Snape said. "There is one other thing. Draco Malfoy has expressed a desire to undertake healers training. The events at the Burrow seem to have made an impression on him. It is my understanding that St Mungo's is under the same warding as the Ministry."

"It is. While it is good to know that Mr Malfoy desires to do something useful with his time I am afraid that the Ministry of Magic cannot, and will not, make an exception for him. You must understand that if I did it would be political suicide. The Malfoys have not yet had their public fall from grace, Lucius death rather than his capture has stymied it. The information exchanged for leniency in Draco Malfoy's case has also had the same effect. If I were to make an exception for Draco Malfoy to enter the Ministry or St Mungo's as a marked Death Eater, I would be out of a job before the ink was dry. I am sorry Severus, but the answer is an unequivocal no."
"Would the Ministry stop him studying abroad?"

"No," Kingsley replied promptly. "If he wishes to leave the country and darken some other shores he is welcome to. The British Ministry of Magic has no jurisdiction abroad as you know."

There was another pregnant pause then a rustle. "Then I thank you …"

Percy hurriedly flicked his wand, cancelling the transmission and unlocked his office door. His wand was away, and his attention riveted on his paperwork when the door opened, and Severus exited the Minister's office. "Severus," Percy said standing.

Severus waved him back into his seat. "Good day, Mr Weasley," he said and swept from the room.

Percy deliberated only a moment before going to the door and sticking his head around it. "Anything you need me to do Minister?"

"No Percy," Kingsley replied looking up.

"The Headmaster…?" Percy trailed off.

Kingsley huffed in annoyance. "Like everybody else wants a miracle. Draco Malfoy wants to learn healing at St Mungo's, and Severus wants me to make an exception."

"And you aren't going to?"

"No dammit, I'm not!" Kingsley said thumping his tumbler down on his desk. "He's a marked Death Eater. No marked Death Eaters are eligible to work at the Ministry or St Mungo's. End of. If he wants to plead his case to a foreign government, then let him, although I'd say he'll be unsuccessful there as well. No one wants the headache that is employing Death Eaters. Some of the European countries might agree with the principles, but that doesn't mean they brand themselves and follow a wizard who waged war only to be beaten by children, twice! No one wants them."

"Ah," Percy said nodding. "Does the Headmaster know that Mr Malfoy's chances of studying abroad are slim?"

Kingsley shrugged. "If he doesn't, then he soon will."

Percy made a noise of agreement. "Your meeting with the Department of International Law Enforcement is in fifteen minutes, Minister."

"Very good Percy. Show them in when they get here."

"Yes, Minister," Percy said retreating back to his desk.

Percy cooked dinner for him and Audrey that evening. After they had eaten, they settled on the sofa while the cleaning charms were dealing with the dishes. Audrey curled up into Percy side yawning widely. "I'm shattered! Today was so long. Absolutely nothing interesting happened at all. Not even a wrong number called the shop asking for someone who doesn't exist. Telemarketers would have brightened my day. What about you?"

"Nothing either, really," Percy said. "Meetings, forms, the usual. Oh, Severus stopped by to see the Minister."

"He did? What did he want?"
"Hmm? Oh, it was about the graduates that are linked to the Death Eaters through family but aren't marked. He wanted Kingsley to employ them."

"Will he?"

"Kingsley? Well, the memo went out to ensure that all potential candidates are treated fairly. If a candidate is rejected who might be linked to Death Eater families, then the department will have an onus to prove they weren't discriminating. It's not much, to be honest, and I think it will be hard to prove in court either way, but it will at least keep some people honest. But I think really Severus came about Draco."

"Malfoy? The posh blonde one who was horrible to Hermione, but John and Helen looked after at the Burrow?"

"Yes."

"Why? What's the matter with him?"

"He wants to take up a healer course, but he's marked, and St Mungo's wards won't allow him through them."

"So, what will he do?"

"Kingsley? Nothing. He'll have to try his luck abroad."

Audrey peered up at Percy. "Your tone implies you think this might not be so easy."

"It won't be, according to Kingsley. No one wants to open the can of worms that is employing a marked member of the Death Eaters."

"But he was a kid. You couldn't even charge him for it, and that's it? No one wants him?"

"Technically he's wealthy enough he doesn't have to work. The Ministry might have fined the Malfoys heavily for their involvement, but I doubt very much it has made a dent in their overall wealth."

"But still."

"Still what?"

"Well," Audrey shifted moving around to face Percy. "If he wants to become a healer, he's obviously trying isn't he? He's made some bad choices, but he's trying to fix it. Don't you think it would be better to help him rather than washing your hands of him? He's gone wrong, but he's trying to turn it around."

"Perhaps," Percy allowed. "But if the Ministry is seen to be helping then we'll be open to accusations of corruption. After all, we've already offered clemency, and neither of the Malfoys has seen trial."

"Yes, but I thought it was Lucius, his father who was the ringleader?"

"Yes, it was but the name Malfoy is one of those its synonymous with power and corruption. They've blackmailed a lot of people and made a lot of enemies. If we go out on a limb further, then we'll be seen as colluding with them."

Audrey turned back around again. "I guess I understand that."
"But?"

"But, well I don't know. John seemed to think he might be redeemable and he's trying, and now it's not going to come to anything. Severus was given a second chance, and without him, you'd never have won."

Percy hummed softly. "He might be able to get on a course yet, not everyone will reject him for his mark."

"And if he can't?"

"I don't know."

The conversation with Audrey nagged at Percy. It was unfair to a degree Percy acknowledged. Malfoy had been a bully when he was at school, but it seemed ridiculous to hold that against him, few people were the same as they were in school all their lives. His actions as a Death Eater were scarce, other than the betrothal offer to Hermione, Draco had had very little traction as a Death Eater. The Ministry would have only been able to charge him for belonging to a terrorist group.

Percy understood that it wasn't easy to step out of the pigeonhole people put you in. Other than their money, the Malfoy's had no influence available to them, and Percy doubted very much that they had any friends that were publicly willing to own them never mind call in favours for them.

But a disgruntled Draco Malfoy with time and money might turn into a bigger headache. Just because he couldn't enter the Ministry, didn't mean that he could become a kingmaker.

Percy muttered to himself, regretting allowing his curiosity to drive him to listen to the Minister's conversation and wishing the whole topic would leave him alone. He sorted through the paperwork he was dealing with making sure nothing was missing before sending it sailing into the filing cabinet. Percy dropped his head into his hand tiredly rubbing his face. The nagging feeling was only getting worse, and he knew that he would be forced to do something before it would go away.

He sat up and drew a piece of parchment towards him inked his quill and wrote a short message. A small charm dried the ink folded the parchment and sealed it with magic. He crossed to his floo ignited it and tossed the parchment in. The floo would deliver it to the Ministry owlery were it would be attached to an owl and sent on its way. Percy returned to his desk feeling marginally better.

That evening he met Audrey at her flat and asked to use the large mirror Fred and George had gifted her. Audrey readily agreed and followed Percy curiously to the hall which had been the only space large enough to take the size of the mirror. Percy conjured himself a tall stool and seeing Audrey hovering conjured her one as well. Then he made the connection on the mirror.

"Percy, Audrey," Hermione said answering the mirror. "It's not often I see you. How're things?"

"Fine," Percy said. "Umm I actually called to speak to your parents, are they in?"

"Mum and Dad? Yeah, I can go get them."

"Please, if you wouldn't mind."

Hermione nodded and disappeared from the frame.

Audrey shot Percy a quizzical look, he reached over and squeezed her hand, silently bidding her to wait.
John and Helen returned with Hermione on their heels.

"Percy? Hermione said that you wanted to speak to us?" Helen asked as she and John settled on the edge of the desk. "Is everything OK?"

"Yes," Percy answered. "It's, well, the thing is, I've an opportunity to help someone. Someone who isn't necessarily the nicest person, but is trying to make a change, and I wondered if you might share your views."

"Oh," Audrey said catching on to Percy's meaning. "Is this about Draco?"

"Yes," Percy nodded.

"Malfoy?" Hermione asked in surprise. John and Helen said nothing but looked expectantly at Percy.

"He wants to take a healer course. But St Mungo's is barred to him due to his mark. He wouldn't be stopped from studying abroad by the Ministry if he secured a place," Percy explained.

Helen interrupted. "While that is lovely, so far I don't see how it involves any of us."

Percy acknowledged Helen with a nod. "I could pull strings and ensure he received a placement. But I'd like your view on it."

"Why?" John asked.

"Well, because as far as I really know, you're the only people that have spent time with him outside of school."

John rubbed his chin in thought. "Why you? Why not the Ministry, or his family, or his connections?"

"Because Severus asked the Minister," Percy said. "If the Malfoy's had enough pull to do this themselves, then I doubt Severus would have approached the Minister. The British Ministry is unequivocally not going to make an exception for him to study at St Mungo's."

"Why would you help him though?" Hermione asked coming to stand by her parents. "You, specifically?"

"Because I can, I think," Percy replied. "The Malfoy's are a political toxic waste at the moment, but that won't last. In five, ten years when everyone has forgotten, it is quite possible that the Malfoy's would be able to take a run at the Ministry again."

"Disaffected, disillusioned, wealthy. I can see why you might be concerned," John agreed. "There's not much I can tell you. That night at the Burrow he was scared. Properly scared. Not one person there was his friend. We might have done as much as we could to keep him safe, but in the grand scheme of things, it was very little. There were ten people, armed witches and wizards at the Burrow who would have happily turned on him and he knew it. But for all that, he helped. I agreed to ask for his mother to be retrieved because it was the right thing to do, as was taking him on when Severus asked us to. If you want to offer him the chance, you'll not hear a peep from me about it."

Helen shrugged. "I've got no opinion. Was he a little shit at school? Yes. Should that be held against him in the long run? Probably not. Being a Death Eater under the circumstances he was is possibly one of the few forgivable instances. And as you said, they are a toxic waste now, but in five, ten years, you might find you've got an ally when you need one."
Percy looked over at Hermione.

She also shrugged in response. "He was a git, but honestly, I've moved on. Perhaps this would give him a chance to?"

Percy nodded. "Thank you for your opinions."

The group on the other side of the mirror all made dismissive noises indicating it was nothing. Audrey squeezed Percy's hand and caught Helen's attention starting a conversation catching up on the goings on allowing Percy to sit silently thinking.

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A message was waiting in Percy's in-tray when he arrived at the office the next day. It was brief and set up a time for a meeting. Percy filed it into his personal correspondence, he wrote out a short letter, signed, sealed and sent it swirling away in the Ministry floo.

That evening he left the Ministry via the floo. Arriving in the Three Broomsticks, Percy quickly made his way out the door and set off down the familiar road to Hogwarts.

Severus was waiting at the gate, his lean, dark form blending with the shadows of the growing evening.

"Good evening Severus."

"Percy, I trust everything is well?"

"Yes. Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"Come in, this conversation would be better conducted inside, do you not think?" Severus twitched his hand and the gates swung open allowing Percy admittance. The two wizards walked in silence to the castle.

"Are the Malfoy's still in residence?" Percy asked as they entered through the large front doors.

"Yes, although the term is over, and the school closed for the summer I had a number of tasks as newly appointed Headmaster. It was easier for me to remain here, so they too have done so."

"Perhaps then we might discuss my proposal directly with the Malfoy's then?"

"Indeed, this way." Severus swept up a staircase that had aligned for them at their approach and led the way to the rooms in which the Malfoys were living.

Severus knocked on the door, Narcissa answered it and graciously bade them welcome and entry. Percy handed over his outer robe to the hovering elf and accepted an armchair. Severus took the one opposite him leaving the two Malfoys to take their places on the sofa.

The elf reappeared with a tray of refreshments, and polite conversation was made as they were distributed. Once everyone was furnished with drinks and small delicate cakes a silence fell.

Percy took a sip of his tea to whet his throat then addressed himself towards the two Malfoys. "The political climate in Britain is going to be hostile towards your family. It will severely hamper your ability, Draco, to attain any position within Britain. You both understand this?"

Draco tried to sneer, but it failed to manifest past a twitch of his lip.

"Yes," Narcissa responded coolly. "Due to our actions, we have become disliked by all sides. There
are Potion Masters in Italy. Severus had agreed to write a letter of recommendation if Draco's grades were acceptable."

"Yet you are considering healing?" Percy addressed Draco.

"Yes," Draco responded warily.

Percy hummed a little more running a finger over his top lip as he thought. He glanced over at Severus to find the man regarding him carefully. His eyes landed back on the two people in front of him. His last concerns lingered but his mind was made up.

"The Malfoy family is a problem," Percy said bluntly. "You are a marked Death Eater, and while Mrs Malfoy does not carry the mark, it is known that she stood by her husband. If your father had not died on the field that night, he would be in a cell. He would remain there for the rest of his life. The Malfoy family would be disgraced, the Ministry would have imposed fines for reparations to the victims of the crimes committed under the command of Riddle. It is likely you will be unable to fully escape that fate. You are likely to face disapprobation from the general populace for supporting and joining the Death Eaters despite the circumstances. Your family has already been issued with some fines to compensate those who were killed or injured. You, Draco, as a carrier of the mark will be unable to enter the Ministry of Magic and St Mungo's." Percy stopped giving the young man in front of him a moment to absorb what he had said. The pair of them held their faces in polite blank masks, but Percy could see a slight twitch in Draco's eye that indicated that reiterating the truth of their position was not welcome.

Percy took another sip of tea and continued. "It is a commonly held belief that the Treaty of Versailles was a contributing factor to the muggle Second World War. The British magical society cannot sustain another war. It cannot endure the pureblood propaganda that was the dogma of the Death Eater movement. We have no choice but to adapt, to strengthen our position, to ensure our very survival as a species by including the muggle-born into our midst. Think what you may about them, but they are first generation magic."

Draco glanced at his mother who sat solemn-faced. She nodded slightly, and Draco turned back to Percy. "I have no interest, views or otherwise towards the inclusion of muggle-borns into society. I wish to concentrate on building a career for myself. As I cannot hold a position at St Mungo's, and our inquiries to other courses have not proven fruitful, I-I don't know quite what to do."

Percy nodded. "Do the Malfoys own any property abroad?"

"The Ministry has seized a number of our assets," Narcissa answered coldly. "However, there are some that they were unable to touch."

"Very good," Percy said. "While your focus has shifted to healing, do you have any issue with relocating to Italy as suggested by Headmaster Snape?"

Draco once again glanced at his mother. "No," he said hesitantly. "I believe that that might be for the best."

"Well, then," Percy said withdrawing a shrunken folder from his pocket and returning it to the proper size. "Have a look over these and let me know if you think it would be of interest."

Draco accepted the folder glancing down at it, he began blinking in surprise. He shot a glance at Percy who kept his expression passive. Draco opened the folder moving it so Narcissa could see it as well and started reading.
Percy regarded them both while he waited. Narcissa looked up first, her impassive face better than his own and Percy reminded himself that this woman had been doing this a lot longer than he had.

"This is a prestigious course, Mr Weasley. While Draco certainly qualifies, I was given to understand that there was a waiting list and admissions were stringently allocated."

"You are correct Mrs Malfoy," Percy said unsurprised that she had researched the courses available for healer training while been confined to a suite in Hogwarts. If Draco was to be understood those without waiting lists, they had applied to, had been less than enthused by his application. "The Signora in charge only accepts the best and half of them don't make it through. Those that do, well many doors open for those that can graduate from the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence. It is the premier training course in Europe. St Mungo's takes graduates from that course without subjecting them to the usual one-year apprenticeship. It's four years. You get very little time off as the course is so demanding. The number of students that burn out before completing it is high. You must want it to finish it. Draco will need nothing lower than E's on his NEWTs and an O in potions would be preferable."

Draco nodded at his mother. Narcissa turned to Percy. "We have some contacts in Italy. If Draco wishes to attend the course, I would, of course, move to Italy with him. I would not be parted from my son."

Percy nodded in agreement. "I suspect Mrs Malfoy that the weather in Italy will suit you. However, the applications for the course this year are closed."

Draco deflated visibly. Narcissa's eyebrow climbed her forehead. "I see."

"Yes, I suspect you do," Percy said drily. "The healer in charge of the training course happens to owe me a favour. I can get you a place," Percy said bluntly to Draco. "The rest is up to you."

Draco gaped but snapped his mouth closed when Narcissa made a small noise. Severus stirred, his face impassive but his eyes communicating unspoken questions.


"It's not charity," Percy said firmly. "It's a fair exchange. I do this, and you both continue to cooperate fully with the Ministry. Then in July you both pack up and leave Britain for four years. You will not be barred from Britain, you will be able to return, but if I might offer some unsolicited advice?" Percy waited for Draco's nod. "Lucius Malfoy thought that turning up at the Ministry, swanning into someone's office and announcing from on high, was the way to make policy and run the government. To date, of his six-month run at playing policy maker within the Ministry of Magic, not a single motion was made law. Lucius Malfoy never worked a day in his life, and thus he didn't understand how to work. You will be given an opportunity to learn how to work. Take it. If you start that training course with the attitude you began Hogwarts with, you won't last a month."

Narcissa watched Percy thoughtfully as he spoke to her son, as he handed over wisdom that Draco would never have received from his father.

"You will need to be interviewed prior to commencing the course. It's a formality that everyone has to go through. There are no exceptions. As your current situation is somewhat delicate, I can arrange for Signora to come here as long as that is acceptable to everyone. It may take a day or three to organise. She will be aware of your mark and what it stands for, but it will not hold you back from attaining a place on the course."
Draco’s eyes dropped to his arm his face twisting into something that looked like frustrated anguish.

Narcissa intervened smoothly. "Yes as long as Severus will allow is to retain use of this suite, we can be available to meet… I’m sorry what was the name of the healer in charge?"

"Signora Buonarroti."

Narcissa quirked an eyebrow.

"Yes," Percy confirmed the unspoken question. "Her family were in architecture, to begin with."

"Can I inquire as to how you met?" Narcissa asked politely.

Percy smiled a little to himself. "At a dinner. She had a small difficulty with her dress, and I happen to be quite handy with tailoring charms. I saved her from a measure of embarrassment."

Narcissa's face was politely interested. "Indeed."

Percy checked his watch for the time. The lateness of the hour caused him to grimace. "My apologies Mrs Malfoy but I shall be unable to stay any longer, I have a prior engagement this evening."

Severus stood and crossed to the door. An elf silently appeared and returned Percy's coat to him. Percy rose from his chair, bowed slightly towards Narcissa and nodded at Draco before stepping out of the room Severus on his heels. The two wizards traversed the first corridor silently.

"Might I ask why you have called in a sizeable favour for Draco Malfoy?"

Percy tilted his head slightly so he could look at Severus' face. "You might. And I might tell you that the favour I called in isn't the only favour Sophia owes me. I might also tell you that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. I do not assume I am a good man, nor do I believe I have all the answers. But if I stood by and let an alienated, dissatisfied young man like Draco Malfoy, who has enough money to do nothing but ponder how everyone hates him, I would be responsible for the inevitable trouble that would stir up. He might have been a terrible Death Eater, but that would not stop him being a political adversary. Lucius Malfoy didn't know how to run a government. What is to stop Draco Malfoy learning from his father's mistakes and doing a better job at kingmaking?"

The conversation paused while they waited for a staircase to move in their direction. As they stepped on to it, Percy continued. "It wasn't entirely altruistic. That training course is one of the more punishing ones. The hospital treats everyone from the poorest to the richest. The trainees must put up with the over-privileged whining while stomaching the sight of starving children who have been abused and thrown out on the street. That course is going to drag every scrap of emotion out of him, it's going to wring him dry and only reward him when he lets go of his prejudice and cares about more than himself and his mother."

Severus stopped forcing Percy to come to a halt with him. "You will offer him this? It is a gift more than he can possibly realise."

Percy shrugged. "It is an opportunity to make something of himself. He gets a chance. Sometimes a chance is all you need. I didn't give Draco the first chance, I doubt I will provide him with the last."

Severus regarded him for a long moment. "You have just made an ally of the Malfoy family. Perhaps Draco doesn't realise just yet how much he owes you, but I suspect in four years time he will."

Percy shook his head. "I would be foolish to say that I wasn't aware of that. I would be outright lying
if I said I hope for his sake that it does turn out like that because then he would have used the opportunity the way it was meant. But I am not lying when I tell you that it isn't why I did it."

"Then why did you?"

"Because if it were any of my siblings who needed help, I would hope that someone would do the same for them if I could not. You get out of the world what you put into it. Draco Malfoy is trying. Trying to do something other than be a Death Eater, why should he not receive the help he needs to achieve that?"


"Hardly noble, Headmaster. I know of some who have done more. I am simply doing what I can."
A Saturday in Muggle London

July 1998

Audrey was nervous. She knew Percy was a wizard. She understood that he lived in a separate world to her own. She had met his school teachers, stayed briefly in a magic house, had met house elves, but she had never been into the wizarding world. Not properly. Certainly, not one of the large centres of commerce and she was nervous.

Percy wasn't supposed to have told her about magic. A surprisingly considerable number of people knew she knew, for something that was supposed to be a secret. They would remain uninterested in them as long as she held her end of the bargain. Which arguably was as simple as keeping her mouth shut. But it meant that she couldn't tell anyone if she was worried or having problems. Well except the Grangers, who had becoming quite dear friends despite the age difference between them. They were always willing to talk to her about her experiences and anything to do with magic, but they also spoke to her of normal things as well.

But now possibly the biggest test Audrey thought she might face was upon her. She was going with Percy to Diagon Alley to meet his sister. The meeting place was Fred and George's shop. A safe harbour in a sea of unknown. Audrey wanted to see it all, but she didn't want to draw attention to herself and be discovered for the muggle she was.

Percy looked her clothes over. Since she and Ginny were going to take the promised shopping trip to Muggle London, Audrey had dressed in comfortable trousers, flat shoes and a simple t-shirt. The weather was dry, but her compact umbrella was in her handbag because July in England couldn't be trusted to stay sunny.

"Ready?" He asked

Audrey nodded.

Percy carefully raised his wand and pointed it at her. Audrey didn't flinch, she had no fear Percy would hurt her, but she was admittedly unsure about the transfiguration of her muggle clothes to a wizarding robe. The feel of the cloth wriggling against her skin made all the hair on her body stand up, and she couldn't stop the shudder that rippled through her.

"Alright?" Percy asked.

"Yes," Audrey said when the clothes had settled against her skin again. "It felt a bit weird feeling the fabric move that's all."

"Ginny will cast the finite on you once you are both ready to leave the Alley. Are you sure you don't want me to stay with you until you leave for London?"

"No, Percy, we'll be fine. We're not going to be able to get to know each other properly with you hovering. Drop me off at Fred and George's then go and do something fun. I'll wear my ring and have my mirror on me, and I'll have my phone which I will switch on as soon as we get back into London. I'll be fine." Audrey assured him.

Percy didn't look like he was completely convinced, so Audrey smiled reassuringly. "Come on Percy it will be fine now. We'd better get a move on, or we will be late."

Percy took Audrey to the apparition spot in Diagonal Alley via side along. He walked her up the
street, discreetly pointing out the landmarks. Fred and George's shop needed no introduction when he finally guided her there, and Audrey stared in delight at the many things in the window.

"Your brothers do all this?"

"Yes," Percy said. "They've been playing pranks and jokes on everyone since they were old enough to read and cobble something together."

"Oh no, they must have been terrors!"

"They were," Percy said wryly. "The rule is you never eat or drink anything George or Fred give you. Although they have promised never to prank you."

"Oh, why?"

"Well for one if you eat or drink something that they have invented I'm not sure how you might react, or if you might be allergic. The magical world has ingredients you have no way of coming into contact with so you might not know if you are allergic. If you do have a reaction or a delayed reaction a muggle hospital isn't going to be able to help you. You'd need to go to the magical one, and the twins would be in trouble because they have used magic on a muggle."

"The statute thing?"

"Yes."

"Oh well, I suppose."

"It stops being amusing," Percy advised her. "There are only so many times you can turn into a canary, or turn purple, or be unable to speak without rhyming or speaking in verse."

"They can do all of that?"

"Yes, and frequently did."

"Hmm perhaps you're right, I don't think I'll bemoan my off-limits status then. Shall we go in?"

"Of course," Percy said stepping forward to hold the door open for her.

Audrey murmured her thanks as she entered the overfull, brightly coloured, loud shop. She let Percy guide her steps as she looked around her trying to take everything in as much as possible.

"Audrey, Percy!" A familiar voice called from the rear of the shop.

Audrey turned towards the sound of one of the twins and blinked. "Hello." She eyed the brightly coloured robe that suited the man wearing it not at all but held her tongue.

George hugged her in welcome before turning her to face the shop and seeking her opinion.

"Is Ginny here?" Percy asked interrupting George.

"Haven't seen her, but she might be in the back with Fred. Follow me."

Audrey and Percy followed George around the back of the counter and through a door into a short corridor. "In here," George said cheerily.

"Oi Fred! is Ginny here?" George called out as he opened the door.
"Yes, she is." A female voice answered.

Audrey entered the room behind George to see an athletic redhead leaning against the counter beside Fred. She was quite clearly yet another Weasley.

"Audrey?" Ginny asked as she came forward.

Audrey nodded. "Yes, Ginny?"

"Yep. Right, shall we get going? I've got a couple of things to pick up in the alley before we set off. You don't mind, do you? You could stay here and wait till I get back?"

"No, its fine I'll come with you. Percy gave me the tour, but we didn't go in any of the shops."

"You'll turn your phone on when you reach your side of London?" Percy asked keeping hold of one of Audrey's hands.

"Yes, Percy."

"You'll be careful in the Alley?"

"Yes, Percy." Audrey replied again this time with a warm smile and a roll of her eyes.

"Percy, c'mon, I'll look after her, promise. Then Audrey can return the favour when we get into London. Honestly, we'll be fine," Ginny smiled winningly at her brother.

"Yes, I am sure you will, but it doesn't hurt to be cautious."

"Right, cautious, check. Got it. From the brother who was spying on the Ministry while working with the Secret Order and then went to a fancy party with Riddle himself."

"I wasn't…"

"Yeah, right. Of course you weren't," Ginny retorted rolling her eyes. "But you know, I have spoken to Bill, Harry, Hermione and these two. I'm fairly sure it was exactly like that. Anyway, Audrey and I will be just fine. We'll be home before we turn into pumpkins." Ginny caught Audrey by the wrist and pulled her from the room and back into the chaos of the twins' shop. "Sorry for bodily removing you but once he starts worrying he can give Mum a run for her money."

"It's fine," Audrey said reclaiming her wrist. "I had a bit of a thing at the Burrow the night it all happened, and he's been cautious about my being around magical people. Frankly, I think he's got a point."

"Well, you're with me so we'll just be two witches out for a bit of shopping. I like your robe by the way."

"Oh, thanks, Percy did it. You need to cast a finite on me before we cross back into London."

"Will do," Ginny opened her arms as they walked down the street. "I wasn't really sure, but jeans seemed pretty safe?"

"You'll be fine," Audrey said. "So where are we going first?"

"Gringotts if you don't mind."

"The bank?"
"Yes. I've got some savings and Dad gave me some money to get myself something, but I need to
change it into muggle money. Umm, I don't really understand how the money works. You don’t
mind telling me, do you?"

"No, not at all. Your money is much more confusing I assure you. Do you know what you want to
get while we're out?"

"Bits and pieces, stuff for weekends at Hogwarts. Jeans, jumpers that sort of thing. Usually Mum
takes us to the clothes shop that does muggle jeans and t-shirts, but my muggle-born friends always
have much more interesting things than I ever see in there."

"Well, we can manage that. Do you know how much you've got to spend?"

"Umm, thirty galleons?"

"That's about … a hundred and fifty pounds I think," Audrey said mentally doing the conversion.
"You will be fine with that, you're not going to be wearing designer, but high street will be fine."

"What's designer and high street?" Ginny asked as they climbed the steps to the bank.

"High street is what most people wear. Designer is more exclusive and much more expensive. If you
want, I can call my friend Rose. She has been following fashion all her life. She is who I usually
shop with, she's good at mixing and matching clothes and finding bargains."

"Will she mind? I mean I don't know anything about your world."

"Well, how about we have a good look around ourselves and if you think you'd like some help and
are comfortable enough I can call her."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"Not at all, I don't know if she will be free, but she won't say no if she is."

Ginny walked up to the counter where she would exchange her galleons for pounds. Stuffing the
paper into her purse, she re-joined Audrey who had taken a seat on a stone bench at the edge of the
room.

"Ready?" Audrey asked.

"Yes, they gave me paper. Fred said that was normal," Ginny said in a low tone.

"It is. Come on. Let's get your bits done, and we can get started."

Ginny led Audrey out into the street and made her way to the Quidditch supply shop where she
bought herself a new pair of gloves. Audrey stayed close beside her, but Ginny could tell she was
taking in as much as she could without being too obvious.

"Do you fly and play quidd…?" Audrey asked stumbling over the name of the sport.

"Quidditch? Yes, I do. All my brothers do, has Percy not taken you flying?"

"No," Audrey said glancing back at the broomstick hovering in the window. "I've been on the
Granger's flying carpet but the brooms, there doesn't look to be much about them, you know? Are
they comfortable?"

“Yes, the newer ones are. They have the best cushioning charms. The Grangers have a flying carpet?
I've never seen one."

"Really? Are they not normal?"

"Outlawed in Britain. The broom makers didn't want the competition, so they said they were more likely to attract Muggle attention."

"But broomsticks? It's such a cliché."

"Is it?"

"Yes! If we pass a bookshop, I'll show you."

"Well come on then. We're going through the Leaky to get to muggle London." Ginny paused outside the pub and withdrew her wand, indicating Audrey's robe.

"Oh, wait," Audrey said quickly. "Let me take my ring off, otherwise it won't work."

Audrey slipped the ring off, and Ginny cast the finite on her. Audrey's clothes reverted to their normal state, and she put the ring back on her finger.

"Is that one of Harry's?" Ginny inquired.

Audrey glanced down at the ring. "Yes. It's the same as they made for their parents, so it protects me from more kinds of magic than the others they made for everyone else."

"Is it weird for you?" Ginny questioned.

"Is what weird?" Audrey asked looking around pointedly at the different customers of the pub as they passed through.

Ginny grinned rolling her eyes and held the door open to the street for Audrey. "Well, magic. You just found out about it existing, is it not weird?"

"A bit," Audrey admitted. "But I guess it's no different for me than anyone else who finds out that their child is magical. Percy has done as much as he can to answer my questions. I've read a lot of books on magic and Helen and John have answered all the questions I have. It's hard in that I can't tell my parents and I'm hiding it from them, my friends as well. I've never had secrets from my Mum and Dad before, or Rose, and now I have this huge one. I'm not going to say anything. I know what it would mean for Percy if I did, but it's hard sometimes. Oh, this way," Audrey indicated. "Did any of your brothers tell you about the Tube?"

"No," Ginny said warily eyeing the steps that went down in to the pavement.

"Right well, don't worry, it's simple. We'll go down the steps, you'll need to buy a ticket from the machine, and I'll show you how to do that. Then we'll go through the barriers and down some more steps, and perhaps a set of moving steps called an escalator. Then we'll get on a train that runs underground and will get us across to the part of London we need to be in."

"What?"

Audrey smiled. "So, do you find it weird? You've just found out there's this entire world you don't know anything about."

Ginny looked at Audrey in surprise and laughed. "Yeah, I see your point. Come on then. How much of what you said is what we have to do?" Ginny asked as she approached the stairs.
"All of it."

"You really have moving stairs?"

"Yes," Audrey nodded. "You'll see for yourself in a minute."

Audrey guided Ginny through buying a ticket and getting through the barriers. She guided her on to
the escalator keeping up a stream of easy conversation about the twins first trip to the museum,
allowing Ginny to get her bearings in the unfamiliar environment. When they reached the platform
via the escalator, Audrey watched Ginny take an involuntary step back as the train rushed into the
platform.

The journey on the tube was blessedly short, and when they reached street level again, Ginny cast a
long look back down into the station. "And that's how you get around?"

"In London," Audrey confirmed. "Or you can take buses which are nothing like your bus, or taxis
which are muggle cars."

"It's nothing like I expected," Ginny admitted. "I mean I've heard Dad talk about muggle stuff for as
long as I remember but I didn't expect well, any of this."

Audrey nodded. "It is very different. When I first started seeing your brother I noticed that there were
somethings he hadn't done, or heard about, or seemed to know anything about."

"Really? What did you do?" Ginny asked curiously as they made their way down the busy street.

"Well, Percy told me he worked for the government. Rose also works there, so I asked her to ask
around about him. Obviously, that didn't work out so well and after a night on the sofa drinking wine
and coming up with the most outlandish plans with Rose, I asked him."

"What did he say?" Ginny asked fascinated.

"He told me that he had grown up in a commune." At Ginny's puzzled look she elaborated. "It's a
small closed community that often eschews modern amenities and lives a simpler life. They all work
together to grow their own food and stuff. It made sense then that Percy wouldn't know what football
was or have a washing machine or TV. I'll be honest, even the most outlandish ideas Rose and I
came up with fell short of the truth. Right, in here. This is a department store which means it sells
loads of different things from stuff you need at home like plates, dishes, bedding, TVs, kettles and
fridges. It also sells clothes, lots of different clothes all under one roof which means you can work
out what you like, and we can go looking in other shops for that. This is just to give you some
ideas."

Ginny hauled the glass doors open and entered the cavernous space. "Wow," she said looking at the
sheer volume of small stands selling perfumes and makeup.

"Unless you want any," Audrey said gesturing to the stands. "We'll head straight for the escalators."

"Err no, but maybe we can come back? We have glamour for make-up, but perfume might be interesting."

Audrey nodded leading the way weaving between the stalls to the escalators.

"More moving stairs. Are these common?"

"Most shops that are on more than one floor have them," Audrey said.
"We don't have them," Ginny mused. "I mean the stairs move but it's the whole thing, not the steps. You still have to climb them."

"Don't you live in a tower in this castle of yours?"

"Yeah, seven flights of stairs to the common room, then a flight of stairs for every year you've been at Hogwarts to get to your dormitory."

"That sounds utterly horrendous!" Audrey exclaimed aghast.

"It can be, especially if we've had a wet practice."

"I suppose it keeps you fit."

They walked into the women's wear, and Ginny shot an incredulous look at Audrey. "All of this in one shop?"

"Well yes, I mean, this is one of a handful of department stores, there's probably three or four on this street alone. Then there are the shops that are dedicated to selling one thing, such as just women's clothing, or just jeans, or shoes or handbags, books, music and films."

"Ok, ok," Ginny said holding up a hand. "I want to see all that. Do we have time?"

"No, not really, but we can certainly do a lot more window shopping. Music and films won't do you any good, as you need electric to play them so we can skip those. Books travel anywhere so we can have a look around there if you like, and you're supposed to be looking at clothes now so go on. Then we can narrow down our next choices better."

Ginny set off into the racks with Audrey trailing behind. After twenty minutes and a quick consultation about sizes, Ginny had found some things to try on. Audrey sat outside the changing rooms and sent a text to Percy assuring him they were fine and so far, no disaster had befallen them. She then sent a message to Rose to see if she was busy.

Ginny came out of the changing room with only a couple of t-shirts in her hand.

"Those then?" Audrey asked

"Yes. Can we get them and go somewhere else? I'd like to try using the money."

Audrey agreed and led the way to the cash desk. "I sent Rose a message to see if she was free."

"You did? How?"

Audrey looked surprised. "You don't...? Right sorry, I forgot. Percy has one, so I just assumed. I sent her a text on my mobile."

"Mobile?" Ginny asked.

Audrey checked how fast the staff were dealing with customers before she pulled out her phone. "Yes. This is a mobile phone, you can use it to call people or send them short text messages."

Audrey flicked through the menus and showed Ginny the messages she had in her inbox. "It's like a very short letter."

"And you get the messages if you have one of those?" Ginny said.

"Yes, Percy and I each have one. They don't work in the Ministry, if you use magic on it, it will
break, so Percy keeps his switched off while he's at work or out in the Alley. He's trying to fix it, so it works in a magical environment."

"That's really clever. Loads better than having to wait for an owl or a floo call."

"That's the idea," Audrey said nudging Ginny towards the free cash desk. "She'll scan your items and then tell you how much to pay." Audrey murmured quietly.

Ginny nodded to indicate she'd heard and handed over the clothes to the assistant. When the two t-shirts were rung up Ginny handed over the largest number of the paper money she could see in her purse and hoped that it would cover her.

Audrey smothered a grin at handing over a fifty-pound note for eight pounds worth of t-shirts but smiled politely at the assistant as the change and receipt were handed over. Ginny collected her carrier bag and followed Audrey out of the store.

"Did I do that wrong? She gave me a weird look."

"No, you didn't do it wrong, but fifty-pound notes are uncommon. We use the twenties, tens and fives more. The amount you needed to pay was only eight pounds so a tenner would have done."

"Do I have any of those?" Ginny asked proffering the purse.

Audrey stepped out of the flow of foot traffic and took Ginny's purse. "Yes, see the fifty-pound notes are the red ones, the twenties are purple, the tens are orange and the fives are blue. The round gold coins are single pounds."

"So, I shouldn't try to pay with the fifty ones?"

"No, you can, just try and do it when the total is nearer to fifty than ten."

Ginny nodded. "This is harder than I thought it would be."

"You're doing fine. Now, where next?"

"Well, more clothes. I've still not found any jeans, but before I forget, do you know where I can buy a rubber duck?"

"Why do you want a rubber duck?" Audrey asked bemused.

"Dad," Ginny said. "He's got this thing about them. He asks everyone if they know what one is for."

"Oh. They don't really have a purpose, they are decorative. I guess at best they are toys for young children to play with in the bath to make having a bath fun. They don't do anything other than float."

"Really?" Ginny said with a grin of delight,

"Yeah, why?"

"That's great! Thanks so much!"

"What for?" Audrey asked completely confused.

"I'm going to tell him," Ginny declared gleefully. "I'm going to be the person who knows what rubber ducks are for. This is going to be great, I'm going to be trading on this for years! I cannot believe Percy didn't tell him."
"Well, they haven't exactly been speaking recently," Audrey pointed out. "In fact, they weren't speaking before Percy moved to his flat, so I don't suppose it's come up just yet."

"Well, it will be too late," Ginny grinned. "Do you know where I can get one from?"

"Yeah, I think so, follow me," Audrey said.

Audrey took Ginny to the nearest shop she thought had a good chance of selling a rubber duck. It didn't have any so with a little bit more thought she turned back to her companion. "Are you up for a bit of a stroll? The only other place I can think you'll find one is Hamley's, but it's going to be a fifteen-minute walk, or we can jump on the tube and shave off maybe five?"

"Walking is fine. What is Hamley's?"

"It's a toy shop, a muggle toy shop. Entering it is a bit like walking into your brother's shop for the first time."

"Well, now I have to see it," Ginny declared.

Audrey nodded and led the way. "We can grab some lunch afterwards…" she trailed off as her phone beeped. Pulling it out Audrey read the message. "Rose can meet us. Do you want to meet her before or after lunch?"

"I don't mind if she joins us for lunch," Ginny said. "Umm, exactly where are we going for lunch?"

"Oh, err, how do you feel about Italian?"

"Never had it."

"Not even pizza?"

"No… what is pizza?"

Audrey blinked. "What is…. Right, sorry, I shouldn't do that."

"It's alright," Ginny replied with a rueful smile. "I mean I can only imagine you do the same thing about magic stuff."

"Well yes, it's just easy to forget you're new to this as well."

Ginny shrugged unbothered, so far today had been more than interesting enough to make her want to do it again. She only hoped she could persuade Audrey to join her. She certainly wasn't comfortable venturing out alone. "So, what is pizza?"

"Sort of a large round thin flat bread with tomato sauce and cheese on top cooked in an oven. That's the basic then depending on taste other things can be added."

Ginny nodded. "Sounds interesting, I'm game. There will be other things if I don't like it?"

"Yes, of course, I'll let Rose know to join us."

Hamley's had the same effect on Ginny Audrey was sure the twins shop had on her. They found a variety of rubber ducks and Ginny proudly bought one. Audrey was still mystified why anyone would think a rubber duck was interesting but let it go. After an hour of wandering around the toy shop and persuading Ginny not to buy the twins a chemistry set just to see what they would do with it, and settle instead for a box of magic tricks, they emerged out on to the street blinking in the
sudden daylight.

"I am going to buy them one of those chemistry sets," Ginny with a wicked smile. "It would be amazing. Christmas presents sorted for life. And those tiny little bricks they built into that, dino-saur did you say it was?"

Audrey nodded. "Lego, most kids get Lego of some description."

"We've got to come back," Ginny said. "Have you shown it to Fred and George yet?"

"Hamley's? No."

"So, I'm the only one that knows?"

Audrey laughed at the sibling rivalry. "There is more than one toy shop, it's just that this is the biggest."

Ginny pondered that as they stopped outside a glass-fronted restaurant. "Well, I'm going to keep it a secret as long as I can. Is this where we're eating?"

"Yes," Audrey said leading the way inside. "Rose is already here, there, look towards the left by the window."

Ginny looked over to see a pretty woman about Audrey's age waving at them. They made their way over to the table and introductions were made.

"Ginny, is that short for something?" Rose asked.

"Ginevra," Ginny said. "But I really prefer Ginny."

Rose nodded. "Well at least you can do something about yours. Both Audrey and I are stuck, and I swear the number of bad Shakespeare quotes gets old fast."

Ginny nodded, not having a clue what Rose was talking about and hoped that her ignorance wouldn't show. She picked up the menu and browsed it as Audrey and Rose caught up quickly.

"So," Rose began. "You're out shopping. I take it this is the first step in reconciliation? Does that mean Percy's side of the church won't be completely bereft? Because I'm still game for hiring a bunch of hunks to sit there and look pretty."

"Yes, we're out shopping and yes Percy is making inroads with his family. As for the wedding it's not even on the radar yet." Audrey answered absently as she browsed the menu.

"Why not?" Ginny asked as a waiter approached to take drinks orders.

"White wine?" Rose asked the table in general. Audrey nodded sending a questioning look at Ginny. Ginny raised one shoulder, what she knew about wine wizarding or muggle could be written on a sickle.

"White wine then. Pino Grigio and a jug of water for the table," Audrey confirmed. The waiter smiled at Rose and wrote down what Audrey said barely glancing at her.

"As for the wedding, we want to live together which means one of the flats must go. Mine is linked to the shop so while the rent is next to nothing it's also the smaller of the two. And Percy wants a garden in the future, which means a house. Which in turn means saving up for a deposit and then the cost of the wedding on top? It's just going to take a while to get all that money together."
"So, who is moving out?"

"We haven't decided. Like I said, mine is cheaper, but Percy's has more space. If we end up living there for a few years, more space would be preferable, but cheaper rent means more savings."

"We can still go dress shopping though, can't we?" Rose asked in a wheedling tone. "You're my best friend, and I absolutely should be allowed to go dress shopping with you."

"I have a dress," Audrey said.

The waiter returned with the wine, and the conversation broke off as the three women decided on what to eat. Ginny chose to order her first pizza.

"You already have a dress?" Ginny asked once the waiter had departed and the wine was poured.

"Yes," Audrey confirmed.

"It was her Mum's dress, and her grandmas, and her great grandma's." Rose clarified. "It's a tradition which is lovely, but we are going to go dress shopping. I want to see you in a meringue!"

"Thanks," Audrey said drily.

"You know your Mum wants to go too, and Ginny will as well, so that's three against one."

"We can go and look but closer to the time," Audrey conceded. "Which is to say when we have an approximate date, I am not going this year."

"Spoilsport," Rose muttered playfully pulling a face.

Lunch past pleasantly. Ginny enjoyed the pizza and the glass of wine. Clearly Rose and Audrey had forgotten that she wasn't yet of age, but Ginny was far too enamoured by the feeling of having a proper grown-up girly lunch to mention it and decided one glass of wine wouldn't hurt.

Having discussed what Ginny wanted from her clothes, Rose cheerfully led the way out of the restaurant throwing a wink at the waiter who had attentively served them.

Audrey stepped closer to Ginny to murmur. "Just let her do her thing. Anything you don't like, say. She won't be offended, but it's quicker just to follow where she leads.

There followed to Ginny, a whirlwind of shops. Some big, some small, but in each one Rose found something that Ginny truly liked. By the time they had to separate Ginny had more clothes than she thought she would have found and spent less money than she had anticipated.

Audrey and Ginny made their way back to Percy's flat as neither could be bothered with the trek across London to re-enter Diagon Alley. Audrey let them both in and took Ginny's shoes and coat before leading the way to the sofa and dropping on to it.

"Give me a minute, and I'll put the kettle on," she said closing her eyes as the ache in her feet overtook her.

"I'll do it," Ginny offered.

Audrey cracked an eye open. "Don't take this the wrong way, but do you know how? You can't use magic on the kettle, it's electric, it will break."

"I can't use magic at all," Ginny said. "I'm still underage, but I can probably work out a kettle. How
hard can it be?"

"Push the tab down that sticks out under the handle," Audrey advised.

Ginny made her way into the kitchen and examined the kettle. Cautiously she did as Audrey advised, and a light went on inside it. "It's lit up," she called back to Audrey nervously.

"Then it's on," Audrey replied. "Cups are to your left, and the teapot and tea are over the sink. Milk is in the fridge. The big white thing in the corner."

Ginny entered the room with the tea things sat on a tray. The milk was in a jug and the teapot was steaming. "See," Ginny said proudly

Audrey gently laughed. "Yes, you have managed a British staple. Welcome to the world of muggles."

"Thanks for today," Ginny said. "I like Rose."

"She's great, exhausting but great," Audrey agreed.

"Could we maybe do this again?" Ginny asked shyly. "I had fun, and well I don't have many friends I can go out for a day shopping and lunch with. Six brothers aren't exactly the best shopping partners either. The wizarding world is small, and yours is so big and different."

"Sure," Audrey said. "I think we can probably sort something out. I do work some Saturdays, but if you want to do it again before you go back to school, we could get together again."

"Thanks. You're good for him you know."

"Percy?"

"Yeah. He speaks to the twins now rather than just rolling his eyes and acting like they are just annoying little brothers. He wasn't as relaxed or happy before. I mean he's my bossy older brother, so it's not like I paid loads of attention, but he just seems, happy."

"Well, I'm glad," Audrey said. "He makes me happy too."
"Mum is up to something," Audrey said as they arrived at the out of the way ginnel that Percy apparated them to.

"What do you mean?" he asked as he followed her out of the narrow, overgrown path to the main footpath. He offered his arm as they turned up the road that would lead to Audrey's parents' house.

"I mean Mum was insistent that we visit this weekend and that both of us come."

"Well we haven't seen them in a few weeks," Percy offered. "It's probably only been once since we told them we were engaged."

"Yes, that's true, but still, there was something in her tone."

"I imagine we'll find out soon enough," Percy said genially. "It is unlikely it will be anything too terrible."

"Ha! You say that because you didn't have to talk her out of that party she wanted to throw."

"It was kind of her to offer."

"It would have been awful. She would have found every relative and school classmate from her childhood to drag there and parade us round like prize cattle. We've have been stuck in a room with people we didn't know, who would most likely delightedly tell you that they hadn't seen me since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. Oh, and hadn't I turned out well? And weren't we a lovely couple? We could chop children up into small pieces for fun, and they still would say the same things."

"You seem to have thought about this a lot," Percy commented.

"Experience," Audrey said grimly. "My cousin's christenings. God, they were awful. I swear I didn't think I had that many living relatives."

"Your cousins are ten now yes? There's a chance a few of them might have died," Percy offered nonchalantly tilting his head towards her with a smile of conspiracy.

Audrey smothered a laugh, lightly hitting his arm in admonishment. "Percy that's awful!"

He grinned unrepentantly. "I said might."

"Yes, well despite your proposed wish to bump off my elderly relatives, I thought the party might be better missed completely."

"Will they be at the wedding? Assuming they live that long?" Percy asked as they turned on to her parent's street.

"Probably. Mum will invite them."

They arrived at the bottom of the short drive on which Audrey's mother's car was parked. A narrow paved path ran up the side of the car to the front door. Percy gestured her forward. "Shall we learn our fate?"
Lunch was, as ever, tasty and plentiful. Rick Stone took great pride in his ability to lay on Sunday lunch, and it was the one meal he refused to let his wife help with. Once everyone had eaten their fill, the coffee, and tea had been brewed and drunk the small family sat back to take stock.

Percy was adamant that he would help with the dishes and dutifully removed the plates along with Audrey's Mum Lizzy. In the kitchen, Lizzy belted the apron around her waist with quick efficiency. "Wash or dry?" she offered.

"Wash please," Percy said rolling up his own sleeves.

Lizzy acquiesced and returned to the dining room to retrieve the rest of the plates. Percy began to run the warm water into the sink and sort the mound of dishes on the sides into a semblance of order.

"I fetched your wine," Lizzy announced as she came back through. "You might as well have it while you wash up and we can have another cuppa before you go. We'd like to speak to you both anyway."

"Audrey said you were plotting something," Percy admitted accepting the wine and placing it on the window sill in front of the sink.

"Ha! Little Miss Smarty-Pants."

"Something about insisting we came?"

"Well," Lizzy said as she found a clean tea towel in the draw and began to dry the glassware Percy had carefully washed. "I do want to speak to you both and its easier face to face than over the phone."

Percy's head shot up at her words his brow crinkling in concern. "Lizzy, there's nothing wrong is there? With you or Rick?"

"What?" Lizzy asked confused.

"You're both well?"

"Oh, oh no! Silly boy, whatever did you think that for? No, we're both fine. It's not that."

Percy let a breath of relief out. "I'm glad."

"So," Lizzy said after some moments pause. "Audrey tells me she's met some of your family."

Percy assented. "My elder brother and his wife. My younger twin brothers and my sister, who is the youngest of us all."

"How many siblings did you say you have?"

"Six," Percy replied. "Bill the eldest is married, his wife Fleur is French. Then there is Charlie, but he lives and works abroad in Romania in animal conservation. Then me, then the twins Fred and George. Then Ron who Audrey hasn't met then Ginny."

"My, your mother had her hands full with all those boys."

"Yes," Percy agreed. "I suppose she did."

"Audrey also said you'd met up with your father?" Lizzy asked delicately.
Percy nodded fixing his eyes out of the window, on the garden. The grass was a tired winter green surrounded on three sides by borders of plants and shrubs with a small shed tucked in one corner. The fence rose up behind the plants shielding the Stones' garden from the neighbours. The housing estate was only ten years old, and the trees and shrubs that had been planted were only just beginning to fully mature. "We've put a few things behind us. We are going to make a bit more effort to see each other and speak."

"That's good isn't it?" Lizzy asked softly.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it is."

"Well, I'd like to meet your family. If you think we could?"

Percy shook himself focusing his rambling thoughts, looking over at Lizzy. "I don't know. My mother and I are still not speaking."

"That's a shame, but I'd still like to meet the others." Lizzy laid a hand on his arm. "I know you're only just getting through your estrangement, and it's great that you are, so maybe not straight away, but, we'd like to meet the other half of Audrey's family. So we know who is who and we can build some sort of relationship with them. These are the people we are going to have to compete with to see you at Christmas after all. Not to mention babysitting duties once you start a family. I need time to suss out the competition you know."

Percy smiled at Lizzy's humour. "I will do my best. It's early days yet."

"Well, then that will do nicely. And if it doesn't work out we'll get you both on all the holidays, won't we?"

Percy concurred then asked Lizzy about her work. Lizzy accepted the change in conversation and related an anecdote about her colleague while they finished the dishes.

Once everything was done Percy helped Lizzy fill the tea tray with the various necessary things and carried it through to the lounge for her. Lizzy dished out the tea and coffee to each person then sat on the sofa next to her husband and cleared her throat.

"Audrey, Percy."

"Yes, Mum?" Audrey replied shooting Percy a knowing look.

Lizzy ignored Audrey and continued. "You both are aware we wanted you here, and it's because we wanted to speak to you both about your future. We understand that currently, you aren't looking to get married soon. Instead, you want to save up for a deposit for a house and the costs of the wedding. Well, your Dad and I think that there is merit in your plan. It is no bad thing that you try living together properly. Sleepovers most nights of the week aren't living together Audrey," Lizzy explained cutting across the objection Audrey was about to make. "Living together is about finding out that Percy never replaces the loo roll or that you leave the last half a splash of milk in the fridge because you didn't want to be the one that used the last of it. Or find out which of you cooks the best and which of you is willing to learn because you cannot live on takeaway. Living together is about more than just sharing bills and space. So, since we agree that its sensible of you to want to live together, we've decided that we will gift you a sum of money to help towards your deposit."

"Mum, Dad that's really generous of you, but I've got some savings, Percy has too."

Lizzy shrugged. "Technically its money we saved for you. When you and Rachel were born we put a little money aside for you and Rachel both. We did that every month until you turned eighteen."
Originally it was to help you both go to university if you wanted. Rachel had hers when she attended Loughborough, to help with feeding her although I doubt it was spent on actual food."

Audrey grinned. "She assured me it was possible to live on nothing but liquids for a week before you felt it."

"Yes well. Anyway, you haven't chosen to go to university, so we thought that putting it towards a deposit for a house might be the next best thing. Or, if you want, if you've got the savings between you, you can leave it alone and use it for the wedding. Rick, be a dear and get the bank book, will you? I left it in the hall table."

Rick got up and left the room, returning moments later and handed Audrey the book. Audrey looked at her parents waiting for permission before she opened the book looking for the last printed page.

"Mum, Dad, that's six thousand pounds." Audrey gasped her eyes wide in shock.

"Well," Lizzy said looking at her daughter fondly. "We wanted you to have a good start, and with you following in the family business you can't expect to get a very high wage. Your Uncle is already paying you top drawer salary until you finish your training."

"Thank you," Audrey said standing up to hug both her parents the bank book clutched in her hand. Percy also stood to offer his thanks.

Lizzy reclaimed the bank book from Audrey. "You're the named beneficiary, but you'll need one of us to access the money. Once you've settled on what to do with it, your Dad or I can arrange the transfer."

"Do you have any plans for your house?" Rick asked.

Audrey and Percy looked at each other before turning back to Rick. "Not specifically," Percy answered. "I'd like a garden. Audrey would like to remain near to or in Richmond. We'd like something with a bit of space, maybe two or three bedrooms, but we haven't given it an awful lot of thought."

"Well," Lizzy said with a smile clapping her hands together with enthusiasm. "That is where Rick comes in."

Rick sat up facing Percy and Audrey. "I wondered if you would let me help you find somewhere. I can do a bit of the legwork for you. The details you've given me will be enough to start with. We can find out what's available, then if you like, we can sit down and work out a proper budget for you both."

Percy smiled. "I would find that helpful. The few estate agent windows we've looked in have had such a broad range of houses I'm not sure what we should be looking out for."

"We can start with three and two beds with a garden in the Richmond area. Do you not want to stay close to your work? Commuting across town can be hard work some days," Rick asked.

"I don't mind it," Percy said. "Audrey has more ties to the Richmond area than I do to where I live. I quite like the café where we met, but there is nothing to stop us going there even if I no longer live where I do."

"Don't let Audrey bully you into something," Lizzy warned. "You've got to be honest about this. Buying a house is a big step, if one of you does all the compromising, then neither of you will be happy."
"I assure you that my commute is a lesser concern," Percy said. "My parents have a large garden and a small orchard attached to their home. Outdoor space is much more valuable to me."

"Fair enough," Lizzy said. "So, give Rick a week, and he can find you some properties then we can all go and do the viewings. The viewings are my favourite bit."

Percy left work early. No more than half an hour but the frisson of guilt he felt for leaving early annoyed him. He had been in early and worked late all week. Half an hour would matter to no one. He had managed to shower and change and begun to consider what he would cook for dinner when a knock sounded at the door.

He paused, some instinct screaming caution. Very, very few people knew where he lived. Fewer still would arrive unexpectedly.

The knock came again.

Percy's wand was in his hand as he opened the door, a spell on the tip of his tongue.

The person on the other side of the door didn't make him feel any more comfortable.

"Dad."

"Percy."

A pause.

"Might I come in?"

There was the smallest of hesitations before Percy stepped away from the door allowing his father entry.

Arthur closed the door behind him feeling his son's wards sizzle and snap as they went back up. "Thank you."

Percy led him to the living space after claiming his coat and shoes. Arthur settled on the sofa, accepting the offer of a drink. Percy moved to the kitchen briefly returning with two bottles of beer from the fridge. A simple spell had the caps off, and he proffered one to his father.

"Oh, is this the beer that Bill was telling me about? You went to a muggle pub?"

Percy took his seat relaxing back into the sofa cushions. "Similar but not the same. This is one Fred, and George found in a supermarket. I quite like it."

Arthur tried the drink. "It's terrific," he commented with a slight shake of the head in admiration. He bit back on the urge to compliment the clever muggles who had brewed it. Fred had quietly pulled him to one side and explained 'clever muggles' came across as patronising and condescending. Muggles weren't clever because they managed simple things without magic. They were clever because they had discovered X-rays and put a man on the moon and taken pictures of planets. Arthur had been surprised at Fred until Fred had imparted that Hermione had commented on how awkward it had made her feel interacting with him. Fred had assured him that Percy wouldn't stand for such a perceived attitude towards Audrey.

"We don't make a beer like it," Percy said not noticing Arthur's introspection.

"It's good. If you could, perhaps you could get me some? I could keep it in the shed to have while I
tinker with the car. A cooling charm won't hurt it will it?"

"No cooling charms are fine, and that's not a car Dad. It's completely behind the times and so full of magic it wouldn't register as a muggle artefact anymore."

"I know," Arthur agreed. "It's officially an experimental wizarding transportation according to the DoM. They ask me about it every now and again, but I doubt it will ever catch on. It's a good excuse, however. I've got a comfy chair in there you know. A nice bit of quiet to catch up on the latest arithmancer journal or the quidditch match analysis. It was hard to get a bit of calm in a house as full as ours, and well I suppose I've just not broken the habit. Not that you need to mention that to your Mum mind. She tolerates my strange hobby, but I feel she might not be as forgiving of the truth."

Arthur looked up from his beer over at his son. Hesitantly he spoke. "If you would permit me, I would very much like to make the acquaintance of Ms Stone. Fred and George speak very highly of her."

Percy put the beer bottle down on the coffee table. "It's up to Audrey. She is aware of the reasons of the split and is not inclined to see it as a simple misunderstanding. She is accepting but wary after the more recent events. If she is at any point uncomfortable..."

"I did not think you thought me an ogre." Arthur protested.

"Perhaps not," Percy acknowledged. "But whatever you might have heard, Audrey is a muggle. She is mine to defend and protect, and I shall do so to the last breath in my body. So, if she feels threatened at any point I will ask you to leave."

Arthur met Percy's stare. "You have my word."

Percy nodded shortly. "She'll be here soon, if she is amenable, then you are welcome to stay."

Arthur professed his thanks, reclining in his chair, Percy picked his beer back up and tried to release the tension he could feel gathering in the back of his neck. "Have you been to any Quidditch matches recently?" he asked Arthur to break the uneasy silence growing between them.

"Not recently, although if Ginny is going to try out for a team once she graduates I should probably make more of an effort to go. I keep up via the Prophet, but it's hardly the same? You?"

"Not since last year a match in February I went with some work colleagues. Puddlemere, Good game though considering how fast they caught the snitch I think they were worried about the Magpies seeker. She has shown promise in games since I believe."

"Yes, the pundits have said she might yet rival Krum."

"That seems unlikely. Krum was already an exceptional seeker at seventeen, Johansson is good, but she's already in her twenties. Krum has three years at least on her, she might be as good, but I doubt that unless she is truly remarkable, she'll eclipse him."

Arthur protested Percy's stance, and their conversation became more comfortable as they discussed the relative merits of the current players flying. A half an hour passed barely noted by either until the sound of a key in the lock brought the conversation to a screeching halt, and the previously forgotten tension between the two returned abruptly. Percy shot his father one more concerned look before getting to his feet followed by Arthur.

"Percy, are you home?" Audrey called from the hall her voice muffled as she removed her coat and
shoes.

"In here," Percy answered moving towards the door.

Audrey came into the room a large envelope in her hand, halting at the sight of Percy's guest. She moved over to Percy's side smoothly, unruffled but her wary gaze did not leave Arthur.

Percy took her hand squeezing it. "Audrey, I would like to introduce you to my father."

Audrey glanced up at Percy, he tilted his head in encouragement, she squeezed his hand and stepped forward, away from Percy towards their guest.

"Mr Weasley,"

"Miss Stone," Arthur replied formally holding out his hand.

"Audrey, please," Audrey offered as she accepted the handshake.


Audrey nodded and indicated the seat that Arthur had risen from. Audrey sat closest to Arthur's armchair next to Percy on the sofa, tossing the envelope down on the coffee table.

"Is there any wine?" Audrey asked Percy. "Since we're starting early, I'll have a beer if there isn't any. Are you staying for dinner?" Audrey turned to address Arthur.

Percy flicked his wand and noises from the kitchen resulted in a glass of wine floating towards Audrey who plucked it from the air.

Arthur threw a glance at Percy waiting for his cue from his son as to if he would be welcome. Receiving none Arthur turned back to Audrey. "If you would find it no inconvenience, then I would be delighted to stay for dinner."

"Excellent. We'll have Chinese if that's alright?" She looked at Arthur and Percy in turn.

Percy agreed wordlessly, and Arthur did the same. "Thank you, I would be delighted."

"So," Audrey said sipping her wine. "George and Fred have told me that you have a fascination with muggle culture. Your job is something related to what you call muggle artefacts? Is this visit an opportunity to stare at the muggle like an exhibit in a zoo or have you come with the intention of suing for peace?"

Arthur blinked at the bluntness of the statement but acceded that some suspicion might be warranted. "Audrey," Arthur began. "I have already apologised to Percy for my role in the split in our family. I hope that we will be able to move forward and begin again although I by no means expect that to be immediate. Percy is my son, you will become my daughter in law. I wish to get to know you. Yes, I have an interest in your culture. It is different to ours, and I have not been so fortunate to be able to spend time in it. I do not, however, wish to observe you like a monkey in a zoo?"

Audrey glanced once more at Percy. He was watching their interaction, but she could detect no censure or disagreement from him. "Well then, if Percy is amenable, I am sure we could do something towards getting to know one another. Shall we order?" Audrey got to her feet to retrieve the takeaway menu handing it to Arthur. He accepted it opening it up to look at the list of dishes.

"Is there something you recommend," he asked Audrey.
"You've not had Chinese either?"

Arthur shook his head.

"Well then perhaps we could order a banquet. That would allow you to try a little of many dishes. We did the same when George and Fred first tried it."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Arthur replied smiling and handing the menu back.

Percy roused himself fishing his mobile from his pocket. "Which one?" he asked Audrey.

"Oh well I'm quite hungry today was a lot of lifting so number five?"

Percy sent her a quick smile of agreement and dialled the number, he placed the order and hung up. "Half an hour or so," he announced. "Do you want to come with me to pick it up?"

"No," Audrey replied. "You can go, I'll stay here if you don't mind. You won't be long after all will you."

"No," Percy said with a faint smile.

"Is that a telephone," Arthur asked curiosity winning out.

"A mobile telephone," Audrey replied. "One that can be carried anywhere, they are becoming more and more common. Telephones usually must be plugged into the socket to connect to the telephone lines to work, but mobile phones don't. They are a bit like the mirrors that Fred, George, and Hermione made, but you only get sound and no picture."

Arthur nodded in understanding but forbore from asking more questions about the muggle device. "I am not sure I know what it is you do for a living Audrey," Arthur asked a little awkwardly in an attempt to keep the conversation going.

"I work for my family's antique business," Audrey replied. "I assist in the valuations buying and selling. My uncle took over from my grandparents."

"That's based in London?"

"Yes, though we travel quite a lot for auctions and house clearances. We spend a few weeks a year in France collecting things from the markets there."

"Bill, my eldest, his wife is from France," Arthur said. "Which part do you travel to?"

"From Paris to the east then down the border to the south coast then back up the west coast finishing off in Paris again," Audrey answered sipping her wine slowly. It was so very awkward and odd. She wondered if this is what Percy had felt like upon meeting her family.

Silence fell over them again, with no one seemingly able to find something they could say that might make the situation easier.

"So, what is it you do Arthur? Obviously, the twins told me it was to do with muggle things," Audrey asked a little desperately.

"Err, well, my department investigates muggle artefacts that have had magic applied to them. We try to keep them out of muggle hands to preserve the Statute of Secrecy and prevent the muggles getting hurt." Arthur explained. He hesitated, wanting to ask questions about the muggle world and the artefacts he came across, but sure that Percy and possibly Audrey would take offence, he held back,
and the conversation lapsed once more.

Audrey glanced around the room searching for something that they could discuss and keep going as a topic. If they couldn't find anything, then the rest of this evening would be acutely painful. Her eyes fell on the envelope on the table. She leapt upon the idea and reached for the envelope.

"Dad came into the shop today. He dropped these off for us to take a look at." Audrey pulled the wad of papers from the envelope, handing them over to Percy. "I've not had a look through yet, but I thought we could go over them. I know we need to sort out the budget, but Mum is chomping at the bit a little and well Dad," she shrugged and turned to Arthur who was looking on in polite curiosity. "We're looking at buying a house," Audrey explained.

Arthur blinked. "I see," he said hesitantly shooting a confused look at his son.

"Is there a problem?" Audrey asked bristling at his reaction.

"Ah, no. I'm sorry. I wasn't aware Percy and yourself were actually married. You are still using the name Stone," Arthur trailed off at Audrey's confused and surprised expression. She turned to Percy.

"Percy?"

He looked at her and shrugged. "It's a cultural thing."

"Percy," Arthur rebuked gently. He leant forward, capturing Audrey's attention. "It is customary in our culture that a couple marries from their home or at least it was. Nowadays children do leave home when they come of age. They move into flats, houses, house shares, that sort of thing, but living together as a couple, without being married is not something that is done."

Percy huffed. "Yes, it is. What my father means to say is that the older generation sees it as 'living in sin'. Not because they are overly religious but because the wizarding culture is somewhat behind the times when it comes to progressive attitudes towards women. For a witch to live with a man she is not related or married to is seen as to be a failing on the witches' part. Her reputation would be ruined, her morals loose, and in short not the type to be associated with. The wizard, of course, will come out of it unharmed possibly with the label of 'cad' should he make a habit of living with several witches. This, of course, is another reason that muggleborns are derided within society by those cleaved to the old ways. They're all loose women you see. They co-habit with their friends be them male or female and don't understand that its frowned upon and can affect their careers because no one thinks to explain it to them. House shares are usually advertised as single sex only. While Hogwarts is a mixed school, the dormitories are all single sex. Not that that actually achieves anything."

"You're kidding? It's not the eighteen hundred's I thought that sort of thing went out with the suffragettes!"

"Wizarding culture missed out on the suffragettes," Percy pointed out. "We don't have a democratic voting system. It's hereditary seats that make up the Wizengamot who cast a vote. While some positions such as the Minister for Magic are an elected role, it's not by public vote directly. The Wizengamot vote them in due to pressures brought to bear by the people that they have politically aligned themselves with."

"No wonder you had a war," Audrey muttered. "I'm amazed you've survived this long. Well anyway, we're not married, and we aren't planning on it yet. We're going to buy a house together first. Muggles, well some muggles, because I'm sure there are some that probably think your way too, but muggles tend to try living together before marriage. After all, you can always sell a house
and move on. Divorce is a bit more involved."

Arthur assented, accepting that in this anything he said would be unwelcome. He had no real objection with Percy and Audrey doing as muggles would even though he had to admit to a small twinge of concern at the idea. "Are you looking at mixed residential areas?"

Audrey looked puzzled once more.

Arthur winced hoping he hadn't put his foot in it again. "Where magical and muggles live together there are a handful of such places although I understand that the houses can sell quite quickly."

Audrey turned to Percy raising an eyebrow in question.

"No," Percy answered both Audrey and Arthur. "They are scattered around the country. Your work is in London, and there are no such places in the city. While travel is of no consequence to me, you will not enjoy a three-hour commute to work each end of the day."

"Oh no, you're right," Audrey said. "Is that the nearest place?"

"Yes," Percy said. "I had looked briefly as it is easier with established places such as those to blend the muggle and magical lifestyle, but they are not suited to us."

Audrey shrugged accepting what Percy said.

"You'll be living in a muggle house then?" Arthur commented.

Percy agreed as he handed Audrey the details of two of the houses in the packet, so she could look through them. Audrey handed them straight over to Arthur.

"Muggles advertise their homes with estate agents. My Dad has gone looking for us to find us a starting point to whittle down what we want and what we would compromise on. He likes finding the hidden gems. If my Mum would let him they would probably move to a new house every couple of years."

Arthur looked down at the pages Audrey had given him. He read the description flicking through the details before returning to the front page and the first image of the outside of the house. What held his attention, however, was not the static, unmoving picture but the number underneath it.

Arthur placed the paper carefully back on the coffee table. Percy had handed Audrey another sheaf of paper, she was reading through, and he watched them both absorbed in what they were doing before letting his eyes wander around the room and take in Percy’s home. There were few personal items on display as he had expected of his more reserved son, but those that were displayed were obviously significant. Quietly Arthur got to his feet his actions receiving a curious but uninterested glance from Audrey. Arthur felt rather than saw Percy watching him as he stepped over to the bookcase. He resisted the urge to touch anything, but the picture had caught his eye, and he watched as it cycled through. After its third rotation, Arthur returned to his seat. Percy had returned to reading the details of the houses, but Arthur supposed that his son was more than aware of his actions. Clearing his throat brought Percy's head snapping up supporting Arthurs supposition.

"I know practically very little about the process of buying a house in the muggle world. However, I do know a few things about buying houses, and that is you need money to do it. Judging by those numbers quite a lot of it."

"London is expensive," Audrey agreed.
Arthur continued. "It is customary, well I say customary, but perhaps that's an exaggeration. What I mean is that when each of my children was born, I was determined that I would help them establish themselves when they finally left the Burrow. The idea was that by saving each month for each of my children, by the time they were grown and reached their majority, I would be able to hand them each a nest egg to ensure their start in life. The wizarding world has very few professions you understand, and while Ministry work is paid well, it is subject to fluctuating political favour. I had no notion of what my children might wish to pursue when the time came, but I hoped to be able to provide for them the means to achieve it. I admit that at times once I realised how large our family was that this meant that we wouldn't be able to provide the things that others could, but I thought it worth the sacrifice."

Arthur fidgeted slightly in his seat at the confession. "Anyway, for better or worse it is done. To date, Bill has received his, as has Charlie. Bill and Fleur used it towards Shell Cottage. Charlie for relocating and settling in Romania. I wanted you each to have need of it, something meaningful rather than a lump sum handed out on your birthday. For a wedding, or a home, or like Charlie, for a start in a career." Arthur smiled fondly. "I have a notion that despite your mothers wishes Charlie will never leave his dragons. He'll perhaps find someone as devoted to them like him or he'll stay single and married to the beasts. Though don't tell your Mother, she wants him settled quite badly, preferably with someone that might persuade him into a less dangerous career."

Arthur shook off the thoughts of his second eldest and concentrated on his third. "The money is yours to help you buy your home. There are no strings. I'm not trying to buy my way back into your lives. It's yours free and clear. Each of you will receive the same amount when the time comes."

"You didn't give Fred and George theirs to help them with their business?"

"No," Arthur said. "The twins went their own way as they ever do. I had no notion they wouldn't finish Hogwarts. They don't know yet, and I ask you don't tell them as I asked your brothers before you. When they need it, it will be there for them, but their business is stable, and neither of them has plans to settle down yet."

Percy sat for a long moment in silence before looking over at his father and meeting his eyes. "I won't say anything. Thank you for the gift," he said sincerely.

Arthur smiled gratefully. "I'll have Gringotts transfer the money over to your vault. I hope it is of some help."

Percy stirred glancing at the clock. "I will be back in a minute."

"Take my purse," Audrey said. "It's my turn to pay."

Percy shook his head. "It's fine." He went to put his shoes and coat on shooting his father and Audrey one last look before he vanished.
Audrey got to her feet. "Do you want another drink?" she asked collecting the empty beer bottles and her wine glass up.

"Yes, yes please," Arthur said.

Audrey heading for the kitchen. Returning with the beer before beginning to set the table. Arthur stood immediately hovering by the table.

Audrey smiled gently. "Take a seat Percy won't be long. Your ability to apparate means the food will still be hot. Could you put a warming charm on the plates for me?" she asked holding them out to Arthur.

Arthur readily agreed, pulling his wand from his sleeve and casting the spell silently.

Audrey smiled her thanks, laying them at the place settings. "Thank you for the money, it is very generous of you."

Arthur shook his head. "I want what is best for my children. I might have regretted it on occasion when they were younger and asking for things we couldn't give them, but I think it's better this way."

"My parents have given us a sum as well," Audrey said. "My sister used hers to go through university. They want us to use it for the house or the wedding. We've been very lucky to have such generous parents."

"Might I ask why you aren't marrying first?"

Audrey took her seat at the table waving Arthur into one. "For me? I love Percy I do, and I honestly think he's the one, but we've got to be sure, you know? We're still young, I don't want to be married at twenty-three and divorced at thirty. And, possibly this isn't really fair on Percy but, I've spent a bit of time with the Grangers and Hermione and Harry. I talk to Helen and John quite a bit on the mirror. They are helping me understand this world of magic I've been thrust into. It's not as if I can ask my parents for help you see." Audrey paused searching Arthur for understanding. "The law that made them leave, the one demanding Hermione marry. It's wrong. Not just unfair, or badly worded, but wrong. How can I marry Percy knowing that Hermione can't freely marry? How could I do that when Hermione can't? I'm not political, I don't protest or march or anything like that, but I know that it's wrong. As a muggle, my not marrying will have no effect whatsoever on this law, but if refusing to marry until they can, is the only way I can support them then so be it."

"It's under suspension now. It's no longer affecting any of the other muggle-born witches." Arthur pointed out.

"Yes, its suspended," Audrey agreed. "And they know that, but like John said, suspended isn't repealed. Suspended means that a political shift could bring it back and the muggleborn witches would be stuck again. Once it's repealed, they would have to pass it again, and that might meet more opposition." Audrey sighed. "I don't know. At the moment it just seems grossly unfair. I don't think Hermione and Harry would mind if we got married, but I think I would."

Percy reappeared with a small crack, a plastic carrier bag in one hand the smell of the hot food
flooding the room. He eyed Arthur suspiciously at the sombre mood of the room. Audrey perked up and smiled brightly. "That smells good."

"Everything alright?"

"Yes, Arthur asked why we weren't marrying straight away, and I told him about Harry and Hermione."

"Ah," Percy said understandingly, he placed the bag down on the table and pulling the containers from within. Audrey started taking the lids off as Percy put them down.

"The suspension is to be reviewed in the autumn session," Percy told Arthur. "Since it is likely the law will be repealed once it undergoes that review I don't believe that it matters overly much to our plans. I have no objections to starting our home life before we marry." He shrugged as he sent the bag back floating back to the kitchen with all the lids of the containers. Taking a seat, he offered a serving spoon to Arthur and one to Audrey.

Arthur accepted the spoon and served himself some of the nearest containers. Rather than dwell on the topic of politics, he turned it back to the more immediate subject of houses. "What is the process for buying a house? Is it very different to ours?"

"Well," Audrey said between bites. "We'll work out the budget then see if there's anything we can afford we like, then do the viewings. Once we've found somewhere, make an offer and hope the sellers accept it."

"Not very different to ours then. We do viewings but also inspections of the magical foundations of the house. Will you be putting a hearthstone into the house you buy?"

"What is a hearthstone?" Audrey asked.

"It's a stone, literally, about the size of this plate that is covered in runes. Runes are magical symbols that have a variety of uses in a home. They are usually used for such as protection or to make the house welcoming to those that live there. Some can reduce illness in the house, so if you or Percy got a cold, you might get over it quicker if you stayed within the home as the magic of the Hearthstone will help you along."

"What sort of things do you have on your hearthstone?" Audrey asked fascinated.

"Ah well some things are family secrets, so I can't tell you, but we have one rune set that helps the garden grow. It also powers the wards that protect the house from being seen by our muggle neighbours as well, which was very necessary when the children wanted to fly." Arthur leaned over to Audrey conspiratorially. "We told them never to fly higher than the tree line when they played, but the wards on the house would have shielded them if they had flown at regulation quidditch height."

Percy sputtered at that. "They would?"

Arthur smiled serenely. "Oh yes," he waved a hand casually. "Not that we wanted you flying that high when you were younger. The accidents!" he shuddered.

"What else?"

"Well, there's things to ward against fire and flood. To help the structure support itself. Paint never peels, and the window cases won't rot or leak, that sort of thing."

"And we can put one of those in our house?"
Arthur glanced at Percy. "Well, it depends I suppose."

"On?" Audrey asked.

"The Burrow has a minor ley line running through the land. The ley is what powers the hearthstone in part as well as the magic of my family. I don't know if you will find a house on a ley line if you are looking for one in London. If you don't have a ley you can tap the magic from, it has to be infused with Percy's magic, and they can take a lot of magic to get up and running. Once they are in as long as Percy lives there, it will draw small amounts of his magic to keep it going."

"Oh," Audrey looked over at Percy hopefully. "Will we not have one then?"

"I had thought we might have a small one put in, but nothing as elaborate as some houses. Wards will need to be set around the property edges, I was going to ask Bill for his help." Percy admitted.

Arthur offered hesitantly. "If you like, I can help with your hearthstone."

"But you said it needed Percy's magic," Audrey pointed out.

"It does," Arthur explained. "Percy is my son; his magic came from mine and his mother's. I can help Percy do this because he's family. It wouldn't work with someone that wasn't closely related. I will speak to Bill and the twins if you have no objections? Between us, we can get a decent stone laid in. That is if you'd like us to help?"

"I would," Audrey declared. "And Percy would too. I think it's a very good idea to have something that can help protect our home."

Percy shook his head slightly and conceded gracefully. "Thank you. It is generous of you to offer."

Three days after Arthur had attended dinner Audrey and Percy sat down intent on working out their budget and how much they could afford to spend on a mortgage.

"If we can," Audrey said. "I'd like to leave the money my Mum and Dad gave us to one side for the wedding. I just think that if we can find somewhere that we like and don't need to use it, that means when we choose to get married when we want."

"That seems reasonable," Percy replied sitting down with a few sheets of blank parchment and the fountain pen Audrey had bought him. He rather liked the pen and found it much more pleasurable to write with. Audrey had a notebook open on her knee and a biro she was thoughtfully chewing the end of.

"I did some sums, my living expenses are seven hundred and twenty-five pounds a month including bills. The rent on the flat is five hundred a month, and the council tax is another eighty-five. Gas, electric, telephone bill, tv licence, food and a small clothing and entertaining budget make up the rest." Percy said writing the number down on the parchment.
Audrey sighed. "Mum helped me with mine, she came over to the shop last week and gave me the Spanish Inquisition. Needless to say, it was very thorough. I've got five hundred and fifty coming out of my pocket every month. There's a couple of saving I could make here and there but nothing spectacular. I've got nineteen and a half thousand squirrelled away in a savings account. I've been putting about thirty percent of my wage away every month. My low rent has helped boost that though."

Percy nodded as he jotted down the details. "I've done similar, I put nearly half of my wage after tax into savings. I know now why we didn't ever have a lot of money growing up but being brought up with very little money, I didn't want to live like that. I wanted the security of money in the bank and not worry about paying for new clothes."

Audrey reached out for his hand. "Was it that bad?"

Percy shook his head. "No, it wasn't, hand me down clothes and books didn't bother me it was the way my parents were treated because they were 'poor' and yet, they were sat on an enormous amount of money."

"Percy, how much did your dad give you?"

"Two thousand galleons."

Audrey choked. "That's ten grand. Holy mother of…. There's seven of you!"

"I know," Percy agreed. "It was a bit of shock for me too. It's genuinely amazing that he did it. That he held to the idea when they had so many children. Halving it would have still have given us each a lump sum and eased the burden on them while they brought us all up."

Audrey took a moment to marshal her thoughts after the bombshell of Percy's dad saving seventy thousand pounds to give to his children. "Right well, how much in savings do you have?" Audrey asked.

"In pounds?"

"Please, unless its an easy number the conversion is difficult."

"Sixty-four thousand."

Audrey felt her mouth drop open. "Pardon?"

"Sixty-four thousand," Percy repeated obligingly.

Audrey gaped at him her brain fumbling for purchase. She had always been proud of her savings. Her current pay of seventeen and a half thousand year before tax meant most of her friends earnt more than she did. She had thought her savings were impressive even if they were subsidised by her inflated wage and low rent. "How much do you earn?" Audrey asked flabbergasted.

"Currently just over thirty-eight thousand a year after tax. Pay rises at the Ministry are stringently enforced so there will be another in April."

"I didn't know," Audrey said faintly. "I mean I guessed you were paid well what with your working for the Minister but dear lord, that's a fortune!"

Percy shrugged. "It's paid in galleons. Eight thousand galleons seemed less."
Audrey smiled faintly. Eight thousand did sound less until it was multiplied by five. She shook off her surprise and picked up the details they had received from her Dad. "Is there anything in this pile that has caught your eye?"

"Perhaps," Percy admitted. "But I think we need to make an appointment and find out how much we can afford before we get to set.

Audrey concurred. "I'll ring the bank and make an appointment. You bank with a different bank, don't you? Do you think you should ring them? Can your wizarding bank offer a better deal?"

"I think we should stay muggle. It will make things easier in the long run."

"You mean they might not deal fairly with me?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. But if we keep the mortgage in a muggle bank it isn't a problem."

Audrey shrugged largely unbothered, she wasn't magical after all, perhaps it was illogical to expect them to deal with her. She shuffled through the packet of estate agent details. "I liked the look of this one."

Percy accepted the house details and held his hand out for the pile. He selected the details of the house that had caught his eye and handed it to Audrey who started to smile then laugh. "Oh no, they couldn't be more different!"

Percy laughed as well. "I thought that. It seems compromises will be in order, but this is the first look at some details. Rick may yet find something that suits us both."

"Let's hope so."

Two weeks later the appointments at the bank had been attended, and they had a better understanding of the position financially. Lizzy had dragged them to see both the houses they had liked out of the initial pile while Rick set to work on finding something within budget. Neither houses had really been right for them, and they were happy to wait until something better came along. So when Rick called on Friday night and asked them to meet him the next morning, they agreed happily.

Saturday morning found them in Barnes on Madrid Street. The street was quiet, filled with tall semi-detached and terraced houses. Rick and Lizzy were waiting for them on the corner of the road as agreed.

Rick clapped his hands together after the hellos. "OK, what do you think so far?"

"It's nice," Audrey said glancing up and down the street. "Quiet, but I thought this area was the top end of our budget? These are not small houses. They must be well over two hundred thousand."

"They are," Rick agreed. "Except this one," he said taking three steps forward and pointing.

The house was sad. The windows were original wooden frames with peeling paint and dingy net curtains sagging behind dirty glass. The garden was overgrown, and the tiled path moss-covered.

"I know what it looks like," Rick said. "And I promise you inside isn't a picture, but you can see what it could be. These houses are big, you'll be able to raise a family here as long as you aren't afraid of a bit of hard work."

"How much is a bit?" Audrey asked. "It looks like it's going to fall down."
"It's not," Rick said a little impatiently. "I wouldn't show you anything that was that bad. It needs new windows. Certainly the gas and electric will need to be sorted, and it's going to want a new kitchen and bathroom. Obviously, it will need decorating completely, but you could make it yours. There's a garden that while overgrown currently is a good size."

"And how much will this hard work cost us?" Audrey asked warily.

"Let's look around it first," Rick said. "Then if you really hate it, it doesn't matter."

Audrey looked at the house misgiving writ large across her face. "What do you think?" she asked turning to Percy.

"Hard work isn't a problem," Percy replied looking at the house. Audrey turned to her Dad and indicated to him to lead the way.

"The estate agent is already here; the owners have already left," Rick told them as he half lifted half swung the gate open for them.

Audrey muttered under her breath and followed the group up the path. The front door was peeling the stained-glass porthole obscured by dirt.

Inside, the long dark hall led to the rear of the house with two doors leading off it. The estate agent who had been waiting for them inside the hall greeted them brightly and started rattling off the particulars about the house. "There's a front room and separate dining room. Of course, you could knock through and make it one lovely large room. This leads to the kitchen, at the back, there's some potential to expand that into the garden." The voice faded away as she led Rick and Lizzy into the kitchen. Audrey gingerly stepped into the front room. The walls were brown, and the carpet under her feet was dark and sticky. She tried not to think about that too much.

"Percy," she whispered to the man at her side. "What are we doing here?"

"Looking at a house," Percy replied.

"Percy, look at it, it's awful, someone probably died in here!"

Percy shook his head at her. "Rick wouldn't have brought us if he didn't think it was a good idea. Didn't you say something about hidden gems?"

Audrey snorted rudely. "There are hidden gems, then places like this Percy. It will cost a fortune to fix and take god only knows how much time."

"Presumably its cheap," Percy pointed out.

"It should be free," Audrey muttered darkly.

Percy snorted in amusement. "It's not likely to be, but magic is."

Audrey had been examining a suspect stain on the wall over where the sofa was unsure if it was damp or something more sinister. At Percy's words, her head whipped around. "What?" she hissed quietly.

"Magic," Percy said again his eyes dancing with mirth. "Audrey I'm a wizard. This," he held his hand out expressively. "This is a swish and a flick."

"Really?"
Percy smiled wider. "I don't know the right spells to sand the floor or sort the plumbing, and there aren't any spells for wiring the electrics, but at least some of the things that you are worrying about are not issues. I can learn the spells. You'd be surprised what a good cleaning spell will do."

"Do they have fumigation spells?" Audrey asked.

"It's not that bad," Percy laughed. "Under the dirt, I think it has charm."

Audrey choked. "Charm?"

"Yes," Percy said decidedly. "I think it does. Come on, let's go and find out how bad it is. Stop looking at the dirt and start thinking of how nicely your bureau would go in that alcove." Pointing as he turned them towards the door.

Audrey glowered unconvincingly. "I'm not going to be swayed by having space for a bureau Percy."

"Well, you can't blame a chap for trying. I'm sure you've done estate sales worse haven't you?"

"No," Audrey said. "I have to say that this has stolen the top spot for 'most awful house'."

They stuck their heads around the dining room door which was gloomy and dark due to overgrown bushes and dirtier net curtains. The room was a good size, and the previous owner's table clearly sat eight with ease though currently buried under a mountain of unidentifiable detritus.

The kitchen was worse. The cupboards were hanging off the wall, and the sink and cooker were missing completely leaving cables and pipes hanging forlornly out of the wall.

"Yes," the estate agent said seeing their looks of horror. "Unfortunately, the local kids broke in. The bathroom is in a similar state I'll warn you now, but that wasn't kids. They didn't really get very far into the house, it was the kitchen that took the brunt of the damage before the police turned up."

Audrey exchanged a horrified look with her mum who was clearly on the same page as her daughter as they followed the estate agent back down the hall and up the stairs.

The two main bedrooms were both large. The master bedroom at the front of the house took up the entire width and the large windows overlooking the overgrown front garden. Dutifully Audrey stuck her head around the bathroom door and wished she hadn't. The fittings were gone as was the flooring. The room was a bare shell with pipes protruding where a sink, bath and toilet should have been.

"What happened?"

"A tap was left on, and the bath overflowed. The floor was ripped out as it was ruined."

Audrey gave the ruined space a final glance and headed to the final bedroom at the back of the house. The window was boarded from the inside with a piece of ply, and she was unsurprised. "The garden?" she asked wanting to get out of the house.

"Yes of course," the estate agent said leading them back downstairs and out through the kitchen. "It's rather overgrown as you see," she offered lamely. "There's a large shed, big enough to get a car in."

"Is there access for a car?" Audrey asked in surprise.

"Well no, but for scale, as we don't have a key for it so I can't show you inside."

"It's probably where the bodies are anyway," Audrey muttered to her mum who had come to stand
by her as Rick and Percy had ventured up the garden to see this large shed.

"What do you think?" Lizzy asked Audrey quietly. Ignoring the furtive looks coming from the estate agent.

"I think someone died here," Audrey said. "And I really hope it doesn't have a cellar."

"Oh it does!" the estate agent piped up eagerly.

Audrey exchanged a horrified look with her mother and the pair burst out laughing.

The estate agent looked on unsure of what to say. "Do you want to see it?" she offered anxiously.

"No," Audrey said firmly. "Absolutely not, but I think Percy and Dad will. You can show them."

The agent hesitantly smiled her agreement. "It is such a shame, the house, letting it get this bad. It's got such potential, and you can see that the neighbours have already extended out the back to give themselves bigger kitchens."

Audrey nodded politely at the estate agent's words waiting for Percy to return. As they came out from the overgrown jungle, she called out. "It's got a cellar. Mum and I aren't going down there."

"It has?" Rick said excitedly.

The estate agent gestured back to the kitchen. "Shall we?"

As they passed, Lizzy said in a sotto voice. "If you find a chest freezer, don't open it."

Audrey giggled and stayed in the garden while Percy went to explore more of the house. The garden while overgrown was large and she walked the perimeter of the paved patio, occasionally looking at the jungle of green a few yards away.

"Do you like the area?" Lizzy asked gingerly leaning back on the house tilting her face to the sun.

"Yes, it's weirdly quiet," Audrey said after a moment's consideration.

"That's not a bad thing."

"No. It's big isn't it?"

"Yes, there's one for sale down the road we're going to next. A bit of, if you don't want to do the work then here's one already done for you."

"I don't think Percy would mind doing the work," Audrey commented.

"He wouldn't?"

"No, but Mum I couldn't live here while we were doing it. I don't really want to go back inside to get out the front door, it's awful!"

"At least it doesn't smell of cats," Lizzy said.

"Oh god yes, that would actually make it worse."

"There you go a bright side. Oh, come on, they're back, and we can go see a nice house now."

Audrey looked through the window to see a dim figure gesturing at her and followed her mother
back through the house.

As the estate agent led them up the street to the second house, Audrey tuned out the spiel about the area looking around her instead. The street was quiet, there were cars parked and the odd shout of a child playing in the back garden. There were odd trees planted up the pavement, and the front gardens were all green and vibrant.

The house was near identical to the one they had just left, but it was well presented, tidy, and clean. The rooms were large and full of light, and the kitchen extension had already been completed.

After the tour, the estate agent bade them goodbye, and they piled into Rick's car to travel to the Stone's for a debrief. The journey wasn't long but was oddly quiet. It wasn't until everyone was sat around the dining room table that Rick kicked the conversation off.

"So, what do you think?"

"Someone died in that house," Audrey said.

Rick rolled his eyes. "Did you like the second house?"

"Yes," Audrey said cautiously. "How much was it?"

"Three hundred and seventy thousand."

Audrey choked on her tea. "How much?" she wheezed.

"Three hundred and seventy thousand," Rick repeated blandly.

"But that's way out of our budget!" Audrey exclaimed.

"I know," Rick answered.

"How much was the first house?" Percy asked catching on.

"They're asking eighty."

"Eighty thousand?" Audrey said shocked. "As in eight zero? Even when half way up the road it's over three times as much?"

Rick nodded. "The first house is a wreck, it's a complete re-wire for the electrics, the gas and water will need replumbing. The kitchen, bathroom, and every room in the house will need overhauling. It's going to need serious money spending on it, but you'll get it back. This is one of those houses that don't come along very often, love. It has potential, but you have to see past the surface."

Audrey looked over at Percy who was studiously not meeting anyone's eyes as he fixed his gaze out of the kitchen window. "Percy?"

He turned to her a half-apologetic look on his face.

"Oh no!" Audrey groaned. "You want it, don't you?"

Percy inclined his head slightly. "Yes, but not if you hate it. The second house that is what it could be, and I admit there were things I liked about that house. It wouldn't tie us to owing the bank for the next twenty years. The garden was big enough, and we could add on to it when we were ready."

Audrey looked around the table. "Am I the only one that didn't instantly fall in love with this house?"
"No," Lizzy said. "I didn't either, but if you want me to be honest, you don't have the money for what you want. So, you can either compromise and take something that isn't quite everything and hope you can sell it when you find something better or take a risk."

"With our life savings," Audrey pointed out.

Lizzy nodded. "Yes. There is that. But you'll turn a profit even if you do the bare minimum to it."

"Can I think about it?"

"Of course," Percy assured her. "I would like to arrange another viewing," Percy addressed Rick. "My father and brother Bill have expressed an interest in anything we find that is a potential."

Rick looked at Audrey briefly before turning to Percy. "I'll set another viewing up for you. I know they are asking eighty, but according to the estate agent, there has been next to no interest. They've had a couple of silly offers but nothing they would consider accepting. That being said I don't think you'll need to pay eighty for it. I reckon we can get it for close to sixty."

Audrey blinked. "So little?"

Rick shrugged. "I think so."

Audrey sighed torn. Percy had told her it wouldn't be as much work with magic and she knew that that was swaying her towards it more than if they were going to have to do it without. Yes, they would have to find an electrician, plumber, and gas fitter but the idea of just using magic to fix everything else made the house a lot more appealing.

"Second viewings then if someone doesn't snap it up," Audrey agreed finally after a few minutes.

"Really?" Lizzy asked.

"Yes," Audrey said her eyes moving to Percy and his delighted expression. She smiled herself at the sight, perhaps living in her flat while they did the work wouldn't be so bad. She'd get the opportunity to have real input into how the house looked as well, and she'd always had a thing for wooden floors.

Chapter End Notes

This is the 'show your working' part of the chapter, if you have no interest in how the numbers came to be, please skip.

Things I have used as rules.
1 galleon equals 5 pounds Stirling. That exchange rate is static.
The wages assigned to Arthur, Percy, and Audrey are real-world wages. Also, I've decided that the wizarding world liked the PAYE system and used it.

According to the Office of National Statistics, a sales assistant wage was around 14k pa.
Audrey is slightly more skilled than a shop assistant and has more responsibility, so she got a bump in her pay. After all, you do not send a lackey to foreign counties to buy for your business.

Arthur and Percy are paid in accordance to the wages the UK Government pays.
I have treated all Department Heads as the equivalent as Cabinet Minister for the House
of Lords. Percy is treated as a Parliamentary Undersecretary to the House of Commons until he gets his new role under the Minister of Magic at which point he gets bumped to the pay of a Parliamentary Undersecretary to the House of Lords. Their salaries then follow what the UK Government paid to its Ministers and Secretaries.

As I was following real world pay structures, I decided it appropriate to follow real-world tax as well.

To work out if Arthur could, in fact, save the amount of money I was proposing I had to know how much he was taking home. So, a couple of hours later and I have a spreadsheet with a formula calculating the tax from 1970 year by year until this point in my story. I would like to point out that at one point in history there were eleven, yes, I said ELEVEN tax bands. Did I mention I left sense behind because clearly, I wasn't the only one!

Once my spiffing formula was up and running, I then was able to calculate how much money Arthur would be left with and deduct the required amount of savings and leaving me with an answer of how much the Weasleys would have to live on.

Due to the lack of real term value of a galleon I decided that throwing an average of 25% of your wage after tax into a savings account would be doable. It's not as if we didn't know they had no money….

I then did the same thing for Percy and Audrey from the date they were most likely to enter full-time employment since I already had my spiffing formula.

What about compound interest on the savings account? Oh, and National Insurance contributions?
Arthur skimmed it. That is the answer, and I'm sticking to it. He took the interest back and threw it back into the household kitty. There you go, nice and neat, everyone is a winner.

Audrey and Percy? Well umm, they spent it? I don't know, I don't really care. It would have been quite a bit even at 3 or 4 %, but frankly, I had started not to give a damn….

National insurance contributions…. Well, there isn't a force on the planet strong enough to make me go back and calculate that so I'm throwing them a bone. The total tax they paid included national insurance contributions. It might mean they were taxed at a slightly lesser amount than the UK muggle population but yay for being a wizard. This obviously isn't true for Audrey but well, umm, tough?

Percy and Audrey's savings accounts.

They are both paid and taxed in line with the UK muggle population. I drew up both their monthly budget to make sure I wasn't again pulling stupid numbers, and because a single person living in a flat is easier to do than two adults and seven kids in the seventies and eighties.

Percy's living expenses averaged £8.7k pa. In today's money adjusted for inflation that's about £15k pa.

Audrey's are £6.9k pa, adjusted for inflation that's £11k pa.

That is based on earnings over the five years since they left Hogwarts/Higher education,
salary each year, the tax paid, the savings made, then the cost of living on top of that, plus walking around money.

Percy’s walking around money had to be slightly higher due to the concern that a galleon has no comparable value thus I didn’t want him ‘poor’ just to make his savings work. I did the same calculations for Audrey ensuring that her monthly budget included practical amounts for clothing and entertaining, and giving her walking around money of £100pcm (£172pcm adjusted) Percy got more - £600pcm and converted into galleons that gave him 120 galleons pcm.

When you crunch the numbers, lacking an expensive habit, Percy averages tucking away 50% of his wage and Audrey saved 30%.

The house prices were researched thanks to Rightmove. co.uk sold house prices website, so are accurate to the time and location.

To be honest the house I picked sold for £65k in June 1998. I guess the term ‘fixer-upper’ most certainly applies considering the other houses on the street were selling for well over £220k back then.
Audrey knew a lost cause when she saw one, and even if she didn't, it would be hard to miss this one. She had come with Percy to the second viewing with his father and Bill. Fred and George had got wind and turned up as well and the collective unease on their faces when they saw the state of the house made her laugh silently to herself. The hesitant questioning of if this was really the best they could afford had her stuffing her fist in her mouth to stifle the giggles. They had stood there huddled together in the grimy front room looking around with concern giving her and Percy such looks of worry she hadn't been able to not laugh.

Percy had then gone on, of course, to wax lyrical about the opportunities. Building something of his own for them both. She'd heard a variant of this speech before of course, but she watched as both Arthur and Bill listened their expressions changing from wary caution to deepening understanding. There must be something about magic making you able to do things that made you want to do things because Arthur and Bill started looking around the sitting room with renewed interest. Even the twins seemed to have been caught by the idea although for those two it was less surprising they spent so much time finding potential it made sense they could see what Percy was driving at.

Either way, it seemed not to matter, the house wove its spell on the Weasley men as surely as it had on Percy, and Audrey just knew that she would end up living here. It was possibly a good thing that she was now ignoring the atmosphere of 'recently deceased elderly person' and starting to come around to Percy's point of view.

The estate agent had remained outside in their car during the viewing which had made it easier for Percy to explain how he was going to put in a fireplace worthy of floo travel into the cellar so it could be easily hidden from her family and friends. How the garden could be warded so they could have privacy though it wasn't big enough for real broom flying it would be suitable later. She ignored the significant looks exchanged between the elder siblings and their father.

The conversation between the three of them had descended into the confusing depths of hearth magic, and despite her general curiosity about how that would affect their future home Audrey wandered off to find where the twins had gone.

She found them poking around upstairs.

"Audrey!" They greeted her. "This is certainly something."

Audrey laughed. "I know it is a fixer-upper. My Dad found it for us, it's cheap it's the size we wanted in the area we wanted without plunging us into thousands of pounds of debt for years to come. And weirdly Percy really likes it."

Fred snorted. "Has he seen the bathroom?"

"Yes," Audrey said with a smile. "And the garden, the cellar and the kitchen, but it doesn't seem to matter."

"I've had never have guessed," George said gingerly leaning up against a doorframe. "He was always so neat and proper. His school uniform was always perfect he looked like he'd spelled it that way."

Audrey shrugged. "He wants to do it himself, to fix it and build something. I get that."

"Do you like it? The house?"
Audrey looked around the grimy landing. The dirty lightbulb casting a depressing yellow hue on the filthy walls. "There's a feeling you get with houses," Audrey said. "They've got history and a story of their own. I think this house has been neglected for so long it's crying out for someone to love it, to make it a home. There's a house up the road for sale that hasn't been let go and its lovely. Not perfect and completely outside of our budget but I can see how this house could become that."

"You're both mad you know," Fred said cheerfully.

"Yes," Audrey agreed. "But Percy is going to learn the magic necessary, and I'll do whatever can that can't be done by magic."

"We'll help," George said. "Dad and Bill will too by the look on their faces."

"See," Audrey laughingly accused. "You aren't immune to the idea of fixing it up either."

"No," George agreed. "The Burrow is a bit like this. Not structurally of course but it was added on to by Mum and Dad as they needed it. It's not well organised or anything but it fairly hums with our family's magic, and there's something about it. I can understand Percy wanting that."

"How soon will you be able to have it?" Fred asked as the three of them made their way downstairs.

"We'll be cash buyers so no more than a couple of weeks. All the surveys will need to be done of course which is what takes the time but it's possible we will have the keys before Percy's notice is up on his flat."

It took three weeks for the purchase to go through, the survey threw up nothing unexpected, and Rick was able to negotiate a price of sixty-five thousand. While they could have afforded to buy it outright, they went to the bank for a twenty-thousand-pound mortgage so not to tie all their money up in the house leaving some left for the work that couldn't be done by magic.

Audrey and Percy went to collect the keys together having both arranged to take the afternoon off work. They went straight to the house letting themselves in through the front door. Stood in the hall, the sun trying and failing to properly illuminate the space through the dirty glass Audrey took Percy's hand.

"So, home."

"Home," Percy said pulling her into an embrace. "Thank you. I know you aren't as sold on this as I am."

"I'm not against it Percy, I wouldn't have agreed to it if I was. I'm nervous about how much work it will need and how much money we'll need to spend despite how much magic can save us."

Percy squeezed her gently in acknowledgement. "I haven't been idle while the sale was going through."

"I know," Audrey interrupted with a smile. "'100 spells for the home'. I found it when we were packing up your flat."

Percy grinned abashedly shrugging. "It's Dad's he leant it to me. They will be coming over at the weekend to put the hearthstone in."

Percy let her go and went to the front door poking his head out. He left the door open and retreated further up the hall checking to ensure he couldn't be seen from the street although the overgrown
Audrey watched him withdraw his wand and with the promised swish and flick Percy sent a spell at the front door. Stepping forward and taking her hand, he smiled and indicated the door. The glass was sparkling clean inside and out. The grime was gone and the paint now an attractive green colour, though peeling and cracked. The door knocker and letterbox were revealed to be a tarnished bronze from under the layer of dirt that had coloured them black.

Audrey smiled in delight.

"Wait, there's more," Percy pulled her back up the hall where they couldn't be seen again. Another flourish and Percy led her back to the door. The paint looked good as new, and the letterbox and knocker gleamed untarnished and bright bronze.

Audrey swung the door shut and it smoothly slotted into its frame the slight sticking gone with Percy's spells. The stained-glass porthole in the upper half of the door now let sunshine spill in beautiful colours into the hall. Audrey felt the tears come up the back of her throat at the restored door. It was beautiful, and it showed her the real possibility that Percy had hung on to while she had been so uncertain.

She turned to Percy who was looking pleased with the door. "How much can you do today?"

Percy shrugged. "The windows can be cleaned easily enough. I can clean the nets, which we are going to have to leave up until we're done as we can't let anyone see what I'm doing. But they will at least be clean," Percy made a moue of disgust at the sagging grey fabric hanging in the front room windows.

"I'm going to cast a cleaning charm on the paint outside as well although I'll use a weaker one over several days, so the neighbours don't get suspicious. It's quite dirty, and it would be noticeable if it were suddenly clean overnight."

Audrey nodded in understanding. "What about the guttering? Can you fix that? The survey said it would need replacing."

Percy nodded. "Yes, I can do, this weekend once it's gone dark I'll do that. I can do it all at once since no one really pays attention to it. I'll go up into the loft and put the charm on the roof as well this weekend."

"What can you do now?" Audrey asked looking around the front room they had moved into.

"Well," Percy said with an excited grin. "We'll need to open the doors and windows first, then I'll show you?"

"Alright," Audrey nodded stepping over to the front bay window and inspecting the window opener. Gingerly she lifted the bar and shoved the frame with her hand. Paint cracked and flaked as the window opened. She suppressed the desire to wipe her hands on her jeans. Once they were done, she'd wash them in the sink. Her face dropped as she realised the house didn't have a sink in either the kitchen or bathroom.

Percy noticed the fall in her expression and raised a querying eyebrow as he wrestled with the other window.

"There's no sink to wash in," she explained.

Percy shook his head slightly holding out his hand. "Give me your hands."
Audrey held them out and watched as Percy waved his wand over them. Instantly they were clean, and Audrey turned them over in surprise.

"Just like Magic," Percy said laughingly smug.

Audrey dropped her hands rolling her eyes. "Alright smart arse, I forget okay. This is probably the most magic I've seen other than the stuff that does the dishes."

Percy dropped a kiss on her head. "Well hold on to your hat then. I don't think we're going to get the windows open without a fight considering it looks like they have been painted shut. So," Percy left the room with Audrey on his heels. In the dining room, he pointed his wand at the window and with a quick pronouncement of Latin they popped open. Into the kitchen and the same spell was cast on the door and windows. Then he turned half jogging upstairs with Audrey following poking his head into each room where the windows all instantly obeyed his wand.

Back downstairs in the hall, Percy pulled Audrey close to his chest facing outward, one arm wrapped around her waist keeping her there while his wand arm flourished in front of them both. "Stay still," Percy instructed. "Mum usually kicked us all out of the house before she did this. It's going to get a little blustery in here."

Audrey watched as Percy waved his wand in a convoluted pattern, his spell a garbled string of complicated Latin-sounding words she didn't try to keep track of.

A wind blew in the front door and in through the open windows of the front room which she could see from their position in the hall. It swirled around them, gusting against them, flattened thier clothes to them and catching her hair up tossing it around her head. Her hands came up to tame her hair as her eyes widened at what was happening in front of her and she assumed all over the house. The wind was scouring the walls and ceilings, scouring away the muck, collecting up all the dust and dirt and stripping layers of grime from the floor as it swirled around the interior of the house.

Audrey watched in growing amazement, and the cloud grew darker as more dirt came away from the surfaces. "Where's it going?" Audrey asked raising her voice over the noise of the wind buffeting around the inside of the house.

"The back garden," Percy answered as the wind around them died from a heavy bluster to a light breeze as it exited the house. "There's a spot by the shed that seems to have been a sort of compost heap at one point. I've sent it there."

Audrey looked around her in stunned amazement. The house wasn't sparkling by any stretch, but it was significantly cleaner. The smell that had lingered was gone leaving the cold, sharp smell of the wind. The tiled hall floor was now not only a distinguishable pattern but also colours.

"It's a series of spells," Percy said. "The first does the heavy lifting the next two are more specific."

Audrey nodded and waited patiently in the circle of Percy's arms as he once more raised his wand.

The floor under her feet suddenly changed significantly, the muted colours brightened, the pattern on the tiles standing out in sharp relief. Audrey looked around her wanting to see what other changes there were and noticed that the walls were now clean. A glance upwards showed that the ceiling was white again the plaster showing the cracks that the dirt had hidden.

Percy sagged as the spells complete causing Audrey to whirl in his arms in alarm.

"Percy?"
"It's alright," he said tiredly. "It's a lot of magic and its tiring."

Audrey pulled Percy towards the stair. The carpet no longer looked like it might give either of them a disease, so she pushed him down of to the stairs to sit and rest.

"You didn't say this was going to tire you out," she gently accused.

"Magic is like a physical effort. The more you do, the more you tire. Magical exhaustion is quite possible. Rest will have me back to normal levels, sleep as well. I'll be fine, it's a bit like a muscle, you can use it one way, and you grow used to it, so you don't notice the effort things take. Then you do something different, and it takes more effort, more energy."

"Well, no more for today. We'll lock up and go and get some lunch. Your brothers and Arthur are coming this weekend they can do this hearthstone with you. You will be OK for that won't you?"

"Yes, I'll probably be fine after some lunch. Shall we get something and bring it back here?"

"Yes. Alright." Audrey agreed. "Should I take the nets home with us, and we can put them through the washer?"

"I can clean them," Percy said. "They might still want to go through the washer, but I can get them clean enough."

Audrey got to her feet offering Percy her hand, shaking her head at his comment. "Come on, let's get the windows closed and get some lunch. The washer will do fine for the nets. Not everything has to be done with magic, especially if the washer will get them cleaner. You can dry them if it makes you happier."

Percy rolled his eyes. "Fine have it your way." He raised his wand again, and a distinct thumping could be heard.


Audrey trailed after Percy as he locked the door with a key then cast a spell on it.

"What was that?" she asked.

"A locking spell it reinforces the muggle lock."

"Oh, but how will I get through it?"

"You can't, for now, but I'll tie it to the key. Then as long as the key unlocks the door, the magic locks will unlock too."

"You can do that?"

"Yes, it's the same set up I have on my flat. That's why I told you not to copy my keys. Without the added charms you wouldn't have been able to use it."

Percy led Audrey out of the front of the house and closed the door behind him. He locked it with the key then discretely pulled his wand out and cast the locking charm on the door.

"What are we going to do about the kitchen and a bathroom. They need to be fixed before we move in."
Percy shrugged as they walked down the road their house was on in search of the nearest chippy.

"I can fix the floors. I can get some new floorboards and fit them. I can repair the existing plumbing, but we'll need to find someone to fit a new bathroom, and the cooker and hob. The flooring in the kitchen isn't exactly a favourite of mine, and I don't think there are spells enough in the world to repair it."

"Lino isn't my favourite either. What if we pulled it up and put some tiles down?"

"We could. It wouldn't be too difficult I don't think."

"Magic or?"

"I'll check the book and see what it recommends. If we can't find a way to do it magically, we'll have to go muggle and find someone."

Percy apparated them both to the house from her flat.

Today the Weasley men were turning up excepting those out of the country or still in school. Today the ward line would be addressed and the hearthstone laid in. Today their house would become a home.

There was a plan of course. The hearthstone would be set in the cellar. A decision she'd queried with her belief that kitchens were the heart of homes. Percy had explained it needed to be set in the foundations touching the house and the ground it was built upon. That made sense, so she raised no more questions.

Bill had decided he would bring the stone as a gift. Arthur, Fred, and George along with Bill would come and help lay it in lending their magic to power it up and get it running.

Audrey wanted to be there to watch, magic was a huge thing, and she kept getting glimpses. Glimpses were all she was likely to ever get without magic running in her blood, so she didn't want to miss those that were on offer.

Neither Harry or Hermione had laid a hearthstone and Hermione had been very interested in the whole concept. So much so that Audrey suspected if the witch could have managed it she would have been here too. Alas for Hermione, Harry had a Quidditch match, and she was already promised to cheer herself hoarse in the stands.

The Weasleys were due imminently, so Audrey went into the kitchen to drop off the milk, they had migrated a kettle and a collection of cups. But with no fridge, the milk was brought over with them each time they came, and Percy cast a cooling charm on the bottle. Tea things were left on the countertop.

The kitchen was still a mess. They had had the house a week and once the hearthstone was set and the ward line sorted, it, and the bathroom was next on their list to tackle. The house was at least clean now. Clean, however, did not equate to good repair. The dirt had been hiding cracks and holes in the plaster. The skirting boards were under nine layers of gloss paint that had faded yellow, the doors, and door frames were in the same state. The wallpaper was a collection of faded flowers and painted over anaglypta, and it all needed stripping off.

Percy, however, had come prepared, and Audrey knew that she would need to keep her parents away for yet another week to hide the speed in which the house was being fixed up.
They had been surprised by how clean it was only three days after they had collected the keys. Her parents had come armed to do battle against years of dirt and grime only to find that they were late to the party.

Audrey had thought on her feet and claimed Percy had organised a cleaning company to come, to make up for her agreeing to buy a house that was so unclean. Her parents had agreed the idea was sensible, and instead, they had help roll up the carpets in the downstairs room and the stairs.

They had happily loaded them into the back of Rick's estate and hauled them to the tip. Coming back to collect the underlay which was stained, thin and incapable of holding office.

They had stripped out the upstairs carpets as well as Lizzy declared them dreadful. The floorboards underneath were covered in splatters of paint and black with whatever varnish had been applied at the time the house had been constructed.

There had been an agreement that carpet would be returned to the bedrooms and stairs, but the floors would be salvaged downstairs. All the net curtains Percy had wanted to keep up to hide what they were up to, were stripped out by an officious Lizzy who promised that if he really wanted them back, then she'd bring them around the next day once they had been washed dried and ironed. They now hung in the windows once more, starched, clean and still somewhat drab.

Percy had brought some things with him for the when the heathstone was to be laid. He went to drop off his own bundle and Audrey followed him down the stairs to the cooler space. The cellar was, in fact, two rooms mirroring the layout of the front room and dining room above. There were no windows, and a bare bulb hung forlornly from the ceiling in each room over flagged floors. The larger of the two spaces Percy was claiming for himself to put a floo in and some sort of office type space he had yet to clarify.

The back half of the space they were going to give over to the normal sort of thing you kept in a cellar. Although currently, Audrey was sure neither she or Percy owned any of that sort of detritus. She presumed they would in time.

In the space Percy had claimed, there was nothing but whitewashed walls and the floor joists with the wiring and pipework that fed upstairs running alongside.

"What about insulating the walls?" she asked. "I mean its freezing down here."

Percy nodded. "I'll insulate it the wizarding way. Perhaps fix some of those plasterboard sheets to the ceiling to cover the joists wiring and plumbing. The fireplace will provide the main source of heat, and I can use charms to keep the warm circulating and not leaking out of the walls."

"More of your handy tips?"

"Yes," Percy agreed.

"And the fireplace. How much bigger can you make it? Without affecting the house?"

Percy shrugged. "I was going to make it as tall as the room or as tall as I possibly can. It's not going to be quite big enough for Bill to step out of without ducking but he'll only have to duck his head a little I think."

Audrey eyed the chimney breast it was over five-foot-wide and had a large brick hearth that she presumed went a few layers of brick down into the ground to support it as it rose through the height of the house.
"I'll get a gate for it," Percy said reassuringly. "So no one can come through when it's closed."

"Won't that stop you using it?"

"It's our house, I can apparate through the wards. I can set up a charm to let us know if someone is trying to get through. I thought I might leave the shed open for visitors to apparate into, that way they won't be appearing inside the house without invitation while you are here or arousing suspicion in the neighbours."

There was the sound of heavy knocking reverberating through the floor, and they both turned leaving the room and heading for the stairs back up to main part of the house.

There were shadows of people standing on the doorstep. Percy closed the door under the stairs leading to the cellar while Audrey went to open the front door,

George and Fred were stood on the doorstep, and she ushered them in and through to the kitchen.

"It looks a load better," George commented as he walked down the hall sticking his head into the front room and dining room. "Oh," he said as he reached the kitchen.

Audrey didn't stop the wry smile. The kitchen while dirty had looked awful. Now it was clean it was clear that it would have to have alot of attention paid to get it back into a working state again. The cupboards were still hanging off the wall, and the floor was still worn through not that she liked the lino anymore now it was clean.

"It's on the list for today," she said. "Once the hearthstone and wards are done. I have repeatedly been assured that they are the two most important things despite the fact the only running water we have is the outside tap. Or would have if the water was turned on."

"Well," Fred said as he put the kettle on and prepared cups of tea for everyone. "You aren't living here yet and protecting your home is very important and filling a kettle with a charm isn't difficult."

"I know," Audrey said. "But we're currently trying to live in my flat which could probably fit the same space as the front room and dining room combined, and we have this house with all this space. Running water and a working heating system would mean we could live here and fix the decorating."

"You need muggle people to do the plumbing and electrics?"

"Yes," Audrey nodded. "My Dad has contacted a friend of his who is coming out next week to check everything over. He'll give us a quote for what needs doing."

"Can't you just repair the pipes?" Fred asked

"No idea. Certainly not with the electrics and we need more sockets adding to some of the rooms this house hasn't been updated in years and the small bedroom doesn't actually have any sockets in it."

Another knock came from the hall, and Audrey paused listening to see if Percy who hadn't followed them into the kitchen was going to answer it. She heard him move towards the front door and the sounds of Arthur and Bill's arrival. The high, lilting voice that followed them had her standing up from leaning against the counter and moving towards the door.

"Fleur?" Audrey asked in surprise.

"Oui," Fleur came forward to greet her. "Bill told me what he was doing, and I wanted to see your
new home. You do not mind?"

"No, of course not, only," Audrey held her hands out gesturing to the house. "It's not exactly liveable yet."

Fleur shrugged. "You will change it yes? Then it matters not."

Fred put the kettle back on as Bill and Arthur joined them in the kitchen.

Once the greetings were out of the way, and the tea brewed Audrey gestured them to follow her through to the dining room where there was more space for the seven of them to discuss things.

The previous owners had left the large dining room table and chairs to be included in the sale of the house. Since it filled the room admirably and it was in good condition now it was clean they had decided to keep it. Everyone took a chair around the table, and Bill pulled a large flat grey rock out of his pocket and placed it on the table.

"I did scout about, and you're nowhere near a ley line. We're going to have to dump a bit of power into it to get it running, but that shouldn't be a problem with so many of us here. The main thing is what do you want on it?"

Percy pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and slid it over to Bill. Arthur leaned in as his elder son perused the list.

Bill pursed his lips. "All of those we can do, I've got a suggestion or two."

"I have as well," Arthur said. "Family wards that I can lay in for you. Did you bring the tools, Bill?"

"Yes," Bill said pulling a roll of soft fabric out of his pocket.

"Right then I suggest we find a way of getting all these to fit on the stone then and then we can get it in." The three moved together around the table, and Fleur gestured to Audrey.

"Will you show me the rest?"

"Yes," Audrey said standing. "Fred, George, Percy was going to put the floo in the cellar. And insulate the walls down there so he can have an office. If we go there first you can get started if you aren't involved in that." Audrey indicated the scribbled diagrams Bill was producing.

The twins nodded standing up. "There's nothing we can add. Bill did our wards, and we don't have a hearthstone in the flat."

Audrey led the way to the cellar leaving the twins examining the walls as she and Fleur returned back upstairs. The tour encompassed the front room then up to the main two bedrooms the hole that the bathroom currently was before ending in the small bedroom at the back.

Fleur looked around at the room. "This would make a good nursery," she commented.

Audrey nodded looking around. "Perhaps, though we aren't planning a family at the moment. Getting the house livable is the first thing. I don't think my parents would mind terribly if we had a child before we got married but Percy would want us to be married before taking that step."

"Once you are married then?"

"Yes," Audrey agreed. "We'll probably have to extend the house a bit if we want more than two."
"It is daunting isn't it," Fleur remarked.

Audrey shot her a quizzical look.

"Bill, he is one of seven!" Fleur explained. "I cannot imagine having that many. Children, magical children are a gift yes but seven." She shuddered. "Two, three even. Perhaps four at a push if they were spaced out, but seven all on top of each other, no I couldn't imagine it."

"Hmm no, two or three might be my limit as well, certainly not seven. I'd never work again. Percy wants a family, but not one as large as his own. And if you think about it if each of them marries and has two or three children, then that's fourteen to twenty-one children. Christmas would be a nightmare you'd never get everyone in one space."

Audrey and Fleur went back to the kitchen. Audrey explained their plan of removing the lino on the floor and fixing whichever cupboards could be saved. Fleur indicated her understanding then pulled her wand from her pocket.

"Then we shall start by getting rid of this floor?" A wave of her wand and the lino was gone. The floor underneath their feet was now grey concrete with the faint outlines of the glue that had previously held the lino down.

"And these cupboards?" Fleur gestured.

"I think we might need to check the wall first," Audrey said. "If the screws have come out of the wall, then the plaster might need fixing. If we can take them off the wall first then put them back on?"

"Yes," Fleur agreed. "If you are keeping them then we can rearrange a little. It would be better to have your sink a little over to the left no? Then it is centred on the window. We can remove and repair them before putting them back."

Audrey nodded in agreement, and Fleur removed the wall cupboards from the wall one at a time with a spell, piling them in the middle of the kitchen.

"There's a spell for putting them back on the wall with screws," Audrey commented. "It's in Percy's book."

Fleur looked interested. "What book is this? I have not heard of such a spell."

"It's one Arthur leant Percy. '100 households spells', its full of things for DIY projects". Audrey carefully manoeuvred around the towers of cupboards. "I'll get it for you it's in the dining room."

Audrey returned with the book and flicked to the correct page handing it to Fleur. While the witch studied the spell and the diagrams showing wand movement Audrey went around the now bare walls checking for broken plaster and failed rawl plugs.

"I think if you can summon the rawl plugs out of the walls and fix the plaster we can rearrange the cupboards to get the best layout before putting them back on the walls. We've got a combined fridge freezer, and there currently isn't space for one so it would be good to make space for that."

Fleur nodded her agreement and summoned the rawl plugs out of the walls. Then she cast several repairing spells on the plaster to seal the holes and fill the cracks.

"Are going to change the wall colour?" Fleur asked as she regarded the now fixed walls which were an unattractive avocado green.
"Yes," Audrey said. "I think we'll just paint in here not wallpaper."

"What colour?" Fleur asked flourishing her wand again.

"Umm, well, the cupboard doors are wood so maybe cream? I think the work surface is ok," Audrey considered the dark laminate surface. "I don't have any burning desire to change it. The repair and cleaning spells mean it's in good condition."

Fleur flicked her wand, and the walls became a buttery cream colour.

"Oh no, too yellow," Audrey said immediately. Fleur nodded another flick and the yellow faded. Leaving a warm white colour.

"Yes," Audrey nodded. "That's better."

Satisfied Fleur started levitating the cupboards around the room at Audrey's direction as the two women found the best layout for the kitchen. Just as they were discussing the placement of the final wall of cupboards and the need to remove the work surface so they could rearrange the under counter cupboards, Percy stuck his head around the door.

"We're ready to go downstairs. You've done a lot in here," he said noticing the improved layout.

Audrey nodded. "Fleur has been a great help. We just need to sort the under counter cupboards, then the cooker and hob need to go in and our fridge freezer can be brought over and we'll be good to go. Well, once we've sorted the floor". Audrey explained as they followed Percy down into the cellar.

In the cellar, the rest of the Weasley's were already gathered.

On the flagged floor stood a small dark cauldron of indeterminate age, a ceramic saucer and a small cloth sack.

Percy stepped forward to the cauldron and knelt on the floor next to it removing things from the sack. Laying out the contents within easy reach around him, his brothers and father arrayed behind him one hand one Percy the other on the person next to them making them a connected circle.

A dull green bundle was selected from the floor, and a whisper of spell caught it alight, smouldering, releasing the scent of sage which began to fill the space.

"For cleansing," Fleur whispered from Audrey's side as they watched.

Percy picked up the flask of water and carefully poured it into the cauldron ensuring it didn't splash. Then he picked up a bundle of dill bound in blue and red chords and put that into the cauldron too.

"Do the colours mean anything? Audrey asked just as quietly.

Fleur nodded. "Dill bound in blue and red will keep anyone meaning harm from entering. The lavender is for love, happiness, and wellness. The silver sickle for prosperity. The iron knife for safety and happiness as well." She recited as they watched Percy add each item into the cauldron.

The explanation stopped as Percy carefully lowered the stone into the cauldron.

"You will need to give blood," Fleur hurriedly whispered as Percy placed a piece of wood on the saucer and cut his finger letting three drops of blood dripped onto the wood. Audrey forewarned, stepped forward when Percy's eyes sought her out. She held out a finger nervously but didn't feel the knife pierce her, and she squeezed the three drops of blood down on to the wood with Percy's before
sticking her finger in her mouth.

Stepping back to her place by Fleur, the French woman explained. "The wood is sandalwood for protection, wisdom, and good fortune. See, Percy is using dragon's blood as well, this is for protection and healing. Your blood is bound along with Percy's."

The small piece of wood ignited and as the dragon's blood touched it. As the flame consumed the wood, Percy dropped the saucer and its burning contents into the cauldron.

Audrey couldn't help but remember Helen's words about potions all those months ago. She couldn't imagine how any of what was being done wouldn't result in a mess in the bottom of the cauldron, but she didn't look away, she was determined not to miss anything.

Percy drew his wand and placed the tip on the top of the stone inside the cauldron the began to intone the blessing.

"Grant us walls for the winds, a roof for the rain, tea beside the fire, and laughter to cheer us. Let those we love to be near and may our home always be too small to hold all our friends."

There was a flash of light within the cauldron, and Percy withdrew his wand. The circle was broken as he stood up removing the stone from within the cauldron. Arthur nodded in satisfaction, Bill lifted the flagstone nearest the base of the chimney and made a hole. Percy placed the stone placed in a hole and replaced the soil as Bill lowered the flagstone back into place.

Audrey stepped forward to look inside the cauldron, it was empty. The water and various herbs and ashes the iron, silver and even the ceramic saucer were gone.

Arthur smiled at her curiosity. "The stone absorbed it along with our magic. It has worked very well."

Audrey nodded having to trust Arthur knew what he was talking about because how could a stone absorb an iron knife, silver coin and a ceramic saucer along with the rest of the things, was beyond her. "The blessing?"

"Ah yes. Well, quite a few generations back at least one Weasley was Irish. The cauldron was handed down through the family. Bit of an heirloom."

Fleur came forward and handed Arthur a phial of potion which he accepted with a smile of thanks.

"Pepper up," Fleur answering Audrey's questioning look. "It is draining, and there is still work to do."

"George will take the garden, and Percy and Fred are to go and get some floorboards for the bathroom. I believe you and Fleur are working in the kitchen and I have been tasked with wallpaper removal." Arthur explained.

Audrey followed Arthur and Fleur back upstairs and into the kitchen. Once they had sorted out the rest of the cupboards, she would nip out and get lunch, and they could eat at the dining room table. It would be the first meal they had served in the house, and it was only right that it would be shared with the people helping their house become a home.
They were in the garden laying out which areas they would turn into flower beds and which area Percy wanted to use as a kitchen/herb garden. The Burrow had always had a supply of vegetables and herbs growing and Percy had liked working with plants and earth as a child. It wasn't going to be a large space, but they had used scraps of paper to mock up the layout, and now they were out there with sticks and string as Audrey showed Percy how the muggles did it. Outline complete they flopped onto the grass as the sun tried to beat them into submission.

"I could really go for ice cream," Audrey commented. "But I don't think we have any."

"Fortescue's has amazing never melt ice cream," Percy reminisced. "Mum would take us as a treat in summer. I don't think I've had one since."

"What's never melt ice cream?"

"Exactly that, it never melts and dribbles down the cone."

"Wow, so does it last as long as an hour?"

Percy snorted. "Does any ice cream ever last an hour? Especially in the hands of children?"

"It would have to be a pretty big cone," Audrey replied smiling. "But I meant, you know, if you bought some in a tub to take home. When you buy it from the supermarket, it melts on the way home. If it lasted an hour, you could get it home without having soup."

"Oh," Percy said in understanding. "I've no idea. Wizarding travel and freezing charms being what they are I've never had to find out."

Audrey shrugged. "Doesn't matter, just a stray thought."

"So," Percy said after a moment of contemplation. "Fancy trying some?"

"Ice cream?"

Percy nodded.

"Yeah," Audrey said. "Why not." She glanced down at her grubby shorts and t-shirt. "I guess I'll have to change."

"Yes," Percy agreed. "Unless you want to cause a scandal. I doubt very much any witch, or wizard has gone through Diagon Alley with that much skin showing."

Audrey tilted her head back to the sky grinning. "You're telling me no wizard in history has gone on a stag night and streaked down the Alley as a dare?"

Percy paused considering. "Well, now you mention it, that probably has happened, though certainly not recently."

Audrey snorted a laugh.

"What?"
"Your pictures move. God, imagine if your mates took pictures!"

Percy joined in the laughter while he got to his feet and offered a hand to pull Audrey to hers.
"Remind me never to do that then, just in case."

"Fred or George would," Audrey said.

Percy nodded grimacing comically. "Yes, thanks for that image. Please don't ever mention it to them.
No, really, don't."

Audrey sniggered heading for the house. "Come on, let's get sorted, and you can treat me to your fancy ice cream."

Audrey had a shower to wash off the feel of grass sticking to her skin. Perusing her wardrobe in
thought, she flipped through the clothes. Her eye settled on a dress that Rose had persuaded her to buy. It was a vintage fifties tea dress which she hadn't really known when she would wear, but had quite liked and given in willingly to Rose's assurances it looked good on her.

Audrey pulled it out of the wardrobe. She didn't want to wear transfigured robes it was far too warm.
She was reasonably sure her shorts and t-shirts would make her stand out as a Muggle or Muggle-born, and she didn't really want to draw a lot of undue attention to either of them. The dress, however, was demure and feminine. Its bold polka dot fabric was still quite fun and wouldn't make her feel like an old maid. That decided Audrey and she dived back into the wardrobe for some shoes to go with it. Perhaps she might have to get Rose to find her some more dresses.

Percy was waiting downstairs for her dressed in a shirt with the top button undone, smart pressed trousers with a lightweight blazer. She caught their reflection in the mirror and smiled, they looked like they were going to church not for ice cream.

Percy looked at her with an appreciation which was reassuring. When his gaze got to her feet though he paused.

"What?" she asked.

"The alley is cobbled."

"Oh," Audrey said looking down at her heels. "I don't really have any flats that go with this dress."

"Can I?" he asked, his wand in his hand.

"Yes," Audrey said.

Percy cast a spell on her feet, and Audrey felt her balance adjust.

"What have you done?" she asked curiously noticing no change in the appearance of the shoes.

"Balance and cushioning charms," Percy replied. "You'll be able to walk over the cobbles without turning your ankle, and the cushioning charm means your feet won't hurt as much."

"Brilliant!" Audrey smiled. "Are we ready then?"

"Yes, I've locked up we'll take the floo to the Leaky."

Percy vanished the soot of their floo travel as they stepped out of the fireplace. Audrey used the time to take a few deep breaths and calm her disquiet. Floo travel would never be her preferred method of
Percy held out his arm, and Audrey accepted it allowing Percy to lead her through the dim pub and out into the back alleyway.

"If only magical people can use this entrance, why isn't it nicer?" she asked looking around at the bins.

"I don't know," Percy replied as the brick wall shimmered in front of them. "I can't say I've ever thought about it."

The Alley was bathed in sunshine, and a good number of people had taken the warm weather as an excuse to come out and be sociable. Percy guided them up the street allowing Audrey to pause and look at whatever caught her fancy while subtly providing background information.

Before they reached Fortescue's, Percy was hailed by a familiar voice. "Percy, Audrey, how lovely to see you both,"

Percy stopped and turned towards Kingsley as he strolled towards them. "Minister," Percy said politely.

"Kingsley, please Percy, we're not in the office. Audrey, it's been a while. You are keeping well I trust?"

"Yes, thank you, Kingsley."

"I'd like to introduce you to Tonks. Tonks this is Audrey, Percy's fiancée."

"I've heard about you from Harry and Hermione," Audrey said offering her hand to the other woman. "I think Harry mentioned he was godfather to your son. I am sorry about your husband."

Tonks smiled a little wanly. "Thank you. I didn't know you knew Harry and Hermione."

"Yes," Audrey said. "I speak to Hermione's parents reasonably regularly, they have been very supportive."

"Oh? Oh," Tonks said obviously putting things together. "My Dad is muggle born. My Mum's family cut her off, so I spent a fair bit of time at my paternal grandparents. They were great people, took it really well when I morphed."

"Morphed?" Audrey asked.

"I'm a metamorph, I can change myself at will." Tonks demonstrated by changing her dull pink hair to the rich brown of Audrey's.

"Oh," Audrey said a little dumbly. "That's quite a talent."

Tonks laughed. "Yeah, it is," she shrugged self-deprecatingly. "So, what have you come to the Alley for?" she asked changing the subject and flashing her hair back to its bright bubble-gum pink.

"Fortescue's," Audrey said. "I fancied ice cream, and Percy suggested we come."

"It is good ice cream," Tonks agreed. "We should let you go, otherwise these two will stand here and talk shop all day." Tonks tugged on Kingsley's arm to regain his attention.

He broke off his conversation which had drifted to work-related matters and gave the witch an
"We're interrupting their date which is quite rude. I'd like to pop in and get Teddy a couple of new things. He's growing so fast his clothes can't keep up, and I'm crap at tailoring charms. We should leave these two to get on with it."

"Oh," Kingsley said. "Yes, of course, I am sorry for interrupting you."

"Its fine," Audrey said with a smile. "It was lovely to see you again and meet you, Tonks."

Kingsley shook Percy's hand in farewell before taking Audrey's up with both of his. "It was a pleasure to see you again in less fraught circumstances. If time permits I'd like to invite you and Percy for dinner. I'm sure I can browbeat Tonks into playing hostess for me."

Tonks huffed a laugh. "Only if you don't want any plates or glasses left at the end of the evening. I'm clumsy," she said as an aside to Audrey. "It's a curse."

Audrey raised her eyebrows. "A real one?"

Tonks laughed again. "No, though knowing my family…. But no, I'm just horribly clumsy, I can fall over fresh air and trip over my feet standing still. My mother despairs of me since she is as graceful as a swan. I only hope Teddy hasn't inherited it from me as well. He can morph too you see, and it can be a side effect of the magic. Since your body is always in flux, your balance can shift near instantly." She shrugged unconcernedly. "But if Kingsley is willing to risk his flatware."

"I'd like that," Audrey said. "I know some of Percy's family but few from outside that circle."

"Then we'll organise a date," Kingsley said pleased. "I understand you can work away a fair bit, but we can hash something out in the next few weeks I'm certain."

Percy nodded in agreement, and the parties went their separate ways.

"That was kind," Audrey said. "And Tonks seems very nice."

"Yes, she went to school with my brother Charlie they were best friends, probably still are, to be honest."

"I've not met Charlie, have I?"

"No, he's still abroad."

Audrey nodded, but her attention was taken by the frontage of the ice cream shop. "Oh, is this it?"

"Yes," Percy said as they joined the queue and accepted one of the hovering menus.

Audrey asked Percy about the flavours she didn't recognise before settling on a cone of the raspberry ripple ice cream. Percy had a rich looking chocolate ice cream cone, and Audrey made him promise they could come back to try the other flavours.

They wandered away from the busy shop frontage and settled on a bench contentedly consuming their cones despite Audrey's curiosity about how long the ice cream would stay frozen. It seemed that five minutes was a few minutes longer than necessary. The ice cream was delicious, and she'd eaten it far quicker than was possibly polite.

Audrey glanced around watching the people come and go. All of them were dressed conservatively despite the heat. Most dressed in long robes, though they looked to be of lighter weight fabric than
the wool ones Percy wore to work. She noticed a wizard spot them both and turn towards them. She nudged Percy tilting her head.

"Percy," the wizard said. Percy stood up shaking the wizard's proffered hand.

"Phil, this is Audrey. Audrey, this is Phil Mills, he works in the permits office at the Ministry."

"Audrey," the wizard said with a friendly smile. "It's about time Percy brought you around. This is my niece Suzanna," Phil said indicating a girl of about eight or nine trailing behind him. "She's Trevor's sister. Since Beatrice and Trevor went back to Hogwarts last week I said I'd bring her out again for a bit of a look around that wasn't overrun with kids getting school supplies."

"She's a witch too?" Audrey asked as the girl sidled up to her uncle shyly peeking up at them.

Phil shook his head. "Her parents are muggles, but my family is close, so her brother spends time at my sister's place with his cousins. My sister's house is set up with the right enchantments in case of accidents. Suzanna can get a bit left behind when they all go haring off."

"It's nice to meet you, Suzanna," Audrey smiled at the girl. Suzanna looked up at Phil before sending a small smile at Audrey.

Phil shrugged at his niece's shyness. "Anyway, it was good to see you, but I've got to get off. The pictures are showing Mulan in the kid's slot, and I have been drafted in as official chaperone. It's nice to finally meet you, Audrey, you should come next time we go down the pub. I'll let Percy know."

"Yes, thank you," Audrey said politely. "I hope you enjoy your film."

Phil grinned rolling his eyes good naturedly before shaking Percy's hand and heading off, his niece at his side.

"He seems nice."

"Yes, there are a few others I work with that would like to meet you," Percy replied offering his arm as they began walking down the Alley. "It might be best if we have them over for an evening or else arrange to meet everyone at a pub. There's a shop I want to take you to, it's this way."

"They know about me?" Audrey asked as Percy guided her down a small alleyway between two buildings that opened up into another wide street with shops.

"They know I'm seeing someone and that someone is called Audrey. A few know that you are a muggle, Mills does, as does his friend Anthony White. I haven't mentioned it, because it wasn't safe until You-Know-Who was gone, then because it isn't important to me. I don't care. Some people might but if they have a problem it's their not ours."

Percy stopped outside the door of a crooked three storey building. The shop front was narrow, the bow window cloudy and difficult to see through, giving no clue to what it sold. "Anything in here, anything and everything should be safe for you to handle, but if you aren't sure, then please don't and ask me."

"Alright, are you expecting me to want to buy things?"

"Yes," Percy said with a knowing smile. "I am only worried how we are going to explain it all."

He opened the door ushering Audrey inside the gloom.
Once her eyes adjusted Audrey sighed with longing. "Oh, Percy."

Percy chuckled. "Go on. I'll follow you."

Audrey spared him not a single glance as she headed over to the first shelf. Sixteenth-century goblets were arrayed catching the dim light filtering through the window and glowing mutely. Audrey's hand was reaching for one as soon as she was in range. She waited long enough to send a look over at him in question. He raised his hand waving her on, then stood and watched as she picked it up turned it over and felt the weight of it.

Ten minutes was given over to goblets. A collection of six was left in his possession as she moved over to the selection of sideboards grouped together.

Percy followed watching Audrey keeping an eye out for stray magic left on the pieces by the previous owners. Percy had checked into the shop before bringing Audrey here. The furniture here was mostly from estate clearances much like her own work. The pieces were more expensive than in other shops because the stock was evaluated by an experienced team of curse breakers who ensured that all harmful magics were removed before they were sold on. Percy thought that the extra expense was certainly worth it if it meant Audrey could indulge in her passion with antiques the quality of which she couldn't normally find.

One sideboard got tapped on its top, and a look sent at Percy to indicate that she was interested in it. Percy nodded summoning the small cardboard card with the details on it to him.

Audrey smiled and moved on to the corridor which had a wall of hall trees down its length. Percy went to find the assistant. If some of Audrey's choices were to be put through the family shop, then he would have to ensure that the provenance of the pieces would be provided by the shop and were suitable for muggles.

The assistant was a recent Hogwarts graduate by Percy's guess. He sloped after Percy to the sideboard listening to Percy's request for the provenance with a disinterested nod. He drew his wand casting a glowing red circle over the piece before following Percy down the hallway Audrey had disappeared down. He found her handbag on the seat of a hall tree. "This too," he instructed the assistant picking up the handbag. A clatter of feet on stairs had Percy moving towards the stairs leading to the next floor.

"I was just coming to find you. I've found a wardrobe, and I was wondering..." Audrey told Percy then caught sight of the assistant and addressed him instead. "Oh, good. There's a Louis XV up there missing it's door mirror."

"Yeah, it was cursed," the assistant said. "They had to take it out. It's alright otherwise."

"Without its mirror, it's a box. I want thirty percent off its ticket price, re-glazing it will be a pain in the arse." The assistant blinked. "Well, I don't know."

"You aren't going to sell it otherwise," Audrey pointed out. "Not without a mirror and if it were easy to do, you'd have done it. I want the bedstead too, the carved walnut one. You've overpriced it even if its provenance checks out but I'm willing to negotiate."

The assistant shot Audrey an alarmed look before glancing at Percy. "I, uh, well I'm not really the right person to ask."

"Well, floo whoever is," Audrey said. "I haven't got all day, and there are other places we can go to
The assistance nodded scurrying off to a door concealed behind a bend in the corridor.

"I can't bring the van here, so I don't suppose you can shrink all this stuff down?"

"Shouldn't be a problem," Percy confirmed.

"Oh good. Umm one other thing the wardrobe and bedstead and that sideboard aren't for our house. Can you buy it and I'll get you refunded Monday? I'll get an account set up I think. There's a couple of other bits I think we might find a buyer for, but I'll have to check Uncle hasn't lined something up for them."

"I had a suspicion that bringing you here might result in such things," Percy commented wryly.

"What do you think of the hall tree?" Audrey asked leading him back to it. "It's the right size for the hall, and they really are quite useful especially when they have a seat and the mirror in the back."

A witch came from the office trailed by the assistant. Audrey went to meet her. "Thank you for coming in."

The witch shook Audrey's hand, eyeing them both. "My assistant said that to wished negotiate on prices?"

Less than twenty minutes later Audrey gave him a smile, and he stepped up to the desk where the assistant was busily compiling an invoice.

"Bill it to this account at Gringotts," Percy said handing over the details. "Could you shrink it for transportation as well, please? We'll need a box."

The assistant nodded again still bent over his quill.

"We have new items come from our curse breakers every second Tuesday," the witch explained as Percy came up to her side. "I can send you an owl with the details of the pieces if it would be of interest to you."

"It might," Audrey replied cautiously. "I can give you the address to send the owl. If there are pieces I'm interested in I can send a reply."

"That would be satisfactory," the witch said nodding. The assistant came over to them and held out a shoebox-sized box sealed with Spell-o-tape.

"Thank you. The documents are enclosed?" Percy enquired.

"Yes," the wizard confirmed.

Percy nodded then looked to Audrey to check if she was finished. Audrey nodded, so Percy crossed to the door holding it open for her to pass through.

Back in the alley and away from the shop Audrey turned to Percy. "Why don't more wizards do that? I paid peanuts, literally, for all that. Four or five hundred pounds for a Louis XV wardrobe in that condition even without a mirror is daylight robbery. It's upwards of four thousand on a slow day at auction. The same with the bed. The conversion on the currency goes the wrong way for wizards admittedly, but with a little seed money you could make a killing in the muggle world."

"The furniture is cheap to buy because there's quite a lot of it still around. Magic will keep it in good
condition, it goes in and out of fashion like everything, but we can shrink and store things so throwing things away is really for those things that can't be repaired. As for why don't more do it, well, it's about knowledge. Not just knowledge of the furniture and the markets you are selling to but also of how to operate in the muggle world. Phil is as comfortable in the muggle world as anyone, but he still lives as a wizard. He still shops in wizarding shops. He might go to the supermarket for bits and pieces, but he lives in a wizarding house so his food shop can be delivered by owl if he wants. Your profession is fairly niched to start with, so from a small population sample, you aren't going to get a huge number of people interested. It's certainly not something you are offered as a career when you go through career advisement at Hogwarts. Unless it's a family business but if it is then it needs to be a family that is open to dealing with muggles, and there aren't very many. Muggleborns are problematic enough."

"So what you are telling me is that I can make a killing because I have the market to sell to and the access to suppliers who have more than enough furniture to get shut of."

"Yes, in essentials."

"Well then," Audrey said with a smile. "They do say don't look a gift horse in the mouth. How do I go about setting up an account with Gringotts I can have billed like you just did?"

Percy checked his watch. "We have time if you want to go back now. The goblins won't have a problem with you being a muggle for a simple account. They deal with all the muggle parents."

"Great, let's go then."

Percy led Audrey back into Diagon Alley and up to the bank. This time instead of sitting quietly and watching Audrey stayed with Percy and approached the goblin at the desk when Percy nudged her forward.

"Hello, I'd like to open an account with you if I may."

"Hogwarts?"

"No, for me to use when I'm shopping in the alley," Audrey explained.

The goblin gave her a long look. "Name."

"Audrey Stone."

The goblin scrawled something down with a quill. "You already have an account," the goblin said after a moment giving her an accusing look.

"That is my account," Percy explained stepping up beside her. "You are named on my account details so should anything happen to me it is easier for you to access what is in my vault."

"Well, this is just for me, for business purposes. I don't want to link it to that account." Audrey clarified to the goblin. Percy nodded then retreated again knowing the goblin would be suspicious if he hovered.

The goblin muttered and handed over a scroll of parchment, then pushed a quill and ink pot forward. "Fill that in."

Audrey gave the quill and ink pot a funny look before reaching for her bag. "You don't mind if I use my own pen, do you? Only I've never used a quill, and it would take three times as long." She flourished the fountain pen at the goblin. "You can check it's not, hexed, or anything."
The goblin looked offended. "No cheap wizard trick can fool Gringotts."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend."

The goblin gave her another long look and Audrey flushed under it. She picked up the scroll looking around for a table. "Should I do this here or do you have somewhere I can sit so you can serve the next person?"

The goblin if anything, looked more upset. "You fill it in here."

Audrey nodded uncapping the pen and started filling in the information requested. As she wrote she glanced up at the goblin who was watching her with suspicious eyes. "So, will I get a bank card? And can I transfer money from our bank to yours? Do you have a BACS or CHAPS system?"

"You bring the money here."

"I have to come into the bank? What about making payments in stores? I am expecting to spend reasonable sums. Your gold coins are quite bulky."

"Give them your account number and sign," the goblin snapped impatiently. "The money will move."

"Well, that's a bit like electronic payments then. You don't physically have to move the gold, do you?"

"No," the goblin replied testily.

"Ahh, good. It would be quite exhausting."

She finished the form signing the bottom before handing it back over. The goblin read it through then using a wooden handled stamp pressed a seal onto the bottom of the parchment. The scroll rolled itself up and vanished.

"Oh," Audrey said in surprise.

The goblin pushed a key over to her. "For your vault. Replacements will be provided for a cost, so do not lose it."

"Thank you," Audrey said scooping up the small key.

Percy, having seen that Audrey had received her key, came back to the desk. "We'd like to visit my vault then Audrey's please."

"Visit? But,"

Percy shook his head at Audrey. "You'll see." Percy led her over to the door where the goblin was waiting for them. Percy helped Audrey into the cart then settled himself next to her.

"Percy, Audrey said nervously. "Just what is going on?"

The cart set off at speed down the track and Audrey didn't hold back her shriek of surprise. The cart rattled along twisting and turning before slamming to a halt.

"Come on," Percy said getting out and holding his hand out. "This is my vault. The key lets you through. There's nothing much to show you, but you might as well see it."
Audrey followed Percy to the small stone door. He placed his key in the hole as the goblin laid his hand upon the stone. The door clunked and swung open. Inside was like a small cave, a large chest was on one side with a few books arrayed on a naturally forming shelf. Audrey looked around in interest while Percy threw up the lid on the chest.

"Some wizards just leave their gold piled up on the floor like a dragon's hoard. Personally, I find a good size chest much more to my taste. My Ministry wage comes here automatically, the magic on the chest means it is stored inside without my having to visit to put it there. If you think you'll need one, we can purchase you one. Here, open your handbag up."

Audrey did as he said holding it open as he scooped handfuls of large gold coins into it. When it was full, he closed the chest and led her back to the cart.

"We'll go to your vault now, and you can deposit that. Perhaps if you set up a muggle bank account which you can transfer the funds to, I can withdraw them and bring them to the bank. It would mean that you wouldn't have to make the trip as much."

Audrey refrained from answering as the cart shot along the tracks again. She tried harder to see to each side of her now she knew what she was looking at, but the maze of rails and twists and turns distracted her from getting a good look.

The cart stopped in front of a door. Audrey dutifully fished out the key, and the goblin opened the door for her. Inside was similar to Percy's vault only it stood empty. Audrey made neat piles of the gold from her handbag on the naturally forming shelf then turned to leave.

"We'll get a statement from upstairs. Now you have a deposited balance. If you need to you can have the furniture you buy stored in here, if you need to," Percy suggested.

"Yes, that would be convenient especially if the showroom or the warehouse if full. That's a good idea, Percy, thanks."

Out in the foyer of Gringotts again Audrey smoothed her hair down and followed Percy back over to the counter. She handed over the key and asked the goblin for a balance sheet. The goblin weighed the key then handed it back with a scroll of parchment.

Audrey thanked him then followed Percy out into the street again. "Can we go to the warehouse and drop those bits off? Only they will need enlarging, and I can't do it, and Uncle can't see. He won't be there today."

"Of course, if I take us to the front step of the flat above the shop?"

"Yes, there's room in the storage for them."

Percy apparated them out of the alley and to the door of the flat. Audrey cast it a fond look before heading down the stairs pulling her keys out to get them into the storage area.

"Just in here. I hope we don't have anything coming in on Monday."

Percy retrieved the wardrobe and bedstead and cancelled the shrinking and packing spells. The bed had been shrunk made up, so it took the bulk of the available space with the wardrobe next to it. Percy levitated a table and chairs over to allow him the space to enlarge the sideboard. Once they were back to full-size Audrey checked them over while filling in a stock form and stapling the paperwork from the shop to the records.

Percy went further into the storage area, he hadn't been in here for a while and was interested in what
had arrived and what had left. Up against the back wall behind a table was a mirror in a gilt frame that was missing one long side. The glass was freckled but otherwise looked in excellent condition. An idea occurred to him, and he headed back towards Audrey.

"You said you would re-glaze the wardrobe. Would it make a difference if it was done with an older mirror as opposed to a new one?"

"Yes," Audrey said. "Obviously newer glass would detract from the value, but not a huge amount. Older glass is nearly impossible to get though."

"What about that mirror in the back, the one with the broken frame?"

"Well yes, but the glazer probably won't want to cut it. Why?"

"I could do it."

"Sorry?"

"I mean I could do it. Reshape the glass to fit the wardrobe. That is, as long as its alright with you. You might not want to."

"No," Audrey said moving past him to the mirror. "This one? We were going to fix it, but it's just not worth it. If you think you can do it go for it."

Percy levitated the mirror over to the wardrobe. He removed the frame with a wave of his wand vanishing it. He then took a closer look at how much he would need to change the shape of the mirror. He cast the spell, and the mirror began to slowly shrink. He moved the mirror closer to the wardrobe as its shape changed so he could better judge it. Confident he had the right size he cast a permanent sticking charm on the mirror and pushed it onto the wardrobe.

Audrey stepped up to examine his work. "Wow Percy, that is perfect."

Percy scrutinised it looking for flaws. "Well,"

"No really, it is, the glazers wish they could do so well and the freckling hasn't distorted at all. It looks great. Thank you."

"It's no problem. It was good to try, I've never used that spell before."

"One out of your Dad's book?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to give it him back?"

Percy smiled. "Yes, but I might invest in a copy for myself."

"Well, I'm done here so let me lock up and then we'll go home?"

"Yes of course."

Sunday morning Percy went down to collect the paper and the post. The Daily Prophet was waiting for him in the basket set out for owl post. An owl was perched on the windowsill and pecked impatiently at the glass when he entered the kitchen.
"You are supposed to leave it in the basket," Percy said opening the back door allowing the owl to flutter over to him and remove the letter. The owl fluffed its feathers importantly.

"Right, so you have to wait for a reply. Fine." He fished a preserved frog leg out of the jar they kept in the kitchen disguised from prying muggles. "Here, you can rest in the tree at the bottom of the garden. I'll have something to you as soon as I can."

Percy made tea and tucked the post into his dressing gown pocket, and the paper under his arm then made his way back upstairs to their bedroom. Audrey yawned sitting up as he came in gladly accepting her tea. "Thanks," she mumbled. Percy grinned, dropping the paper onto the bed, remembering to collect the post from his pocket before sending the dressing gown sailing back to its hook.

Audrey unrolled the paper and started scanning through it. Percy noted that she didn't really read the articles, just skimmed for an idea of what was going on should he mention something. He turned his attention to the post. He could read the paper later when Audrey had finished.

The first letter was from Bill and Fleur inviting them to Shell Cottage for dinner, the second was work related, and he took his time to read it properly. It shouldn't have come to him at home really, but someone had obviously told the post owl to take it to him personally rather than his office. The third letter was the one the owl was waiting for a reply to. Percy was just about to break the wax seal when Audrey spoke.

"So how does this work? Is above the fold a good thing in your world as well as mine?" She handed the page over. It was a photograph taken yesterday when they were in the Alley. Kingsley, Tonks, himself and Audrey stood in the sunshine talking together.

"Should I start a scrapbook? I'm a pretty young witch, and you are the right hand of the Minister according to this. They obviously stuck around because they saw Phil talking to you, and he's described as an up and coming something or other in the Ministry."

Percy scanned through the article. It was mostly a fluff piece written around the picture of the four of them. "Great, that's just what we need," he grumbled handing the paper back to Audrey.

"Oh, come on, it's not that bad," Audrey said. "It's quite a nice picture. No one is pulling a silly face, and look we're laughing at the end."

"It's not that. Now they've seen us they'll keep an eye out for us, and I've no desire to have my life splashed over the society pages of the Prophet. They crucified Hermione and Harry more than once. I am more than happy being a faceless nobody."

"Oh well," Audrey consoled. "We don't spend a lot of time in the Alley. Perhaps they'll lose interest in a few weeks."

"Mmm," Percy agreed dubiously. He continued to break the seal on the letter and unfolded it. He read it through twice. "Oh, for Merlin's sake!"

"What?" Audrey said looking up from reading the article on them again.

"Dumbledore has died."
"Percy?"

The parchment creased under his tightening grip. "Bloody hell, I need to owl Kingsley. This… Why couldn't he just go quietly?"

"The Headmaster? Former Headmaster I mean?"

"Yes, he's decided to die."

Audrey blinked. "Decided?"

"He was cursed. You might not remember, but his hand and arm were shrivelled."

"Yes," Audrey said slowly casting her mind back. "I remember, but I didn't know it was a curse."

"He put a cursed ring on, one of the horcruxes," Percy explained briefly. "Severus Snape was helping keep it under control alongside Dumbledore's own magic. Severus said it was tiring him, wearing him out and without regular aid, he would eventually lose the battle. It seems that Dumbledore has realised that himself and has decided that his time has come. Kingsley assigned an Auror to watch him discreetly. We knew that he would know we were keeping tabs on him and thought he'd rather like the attention. It seems that he's decided to die and has one last grand plan. Essentially this is a summons to Dumbledore's deathbed. Clearly, he fancies that he should lie in state and we are to be the first supplicants."

"Will you go?"

"That's the thing, isn't it? Ignore him and risk the public causing an outcry that the Minister, thus the Ministry, snubbed a great wizard, or go, and wind up involved in some deluded grand scheme. He wasn't sane. I'm quite sure of it. He's been utterly alone since he left the castle. His brother won't have anything to do with him, and he's had no other visitors."

"Floo Kingsley or use your mirror. Perhaps he has had the same letter. You can decide between yourselves what to do."

"This is going to turn into a circus," Percy said slumping back against the headboard.

"Well, perhaps it won't be. He got a good grubbing after February. Perhaps public opinion won't have swung back his way."

"He's dead. There's going to be a run on rose-tinted glasses. He wasn't what you might consider a good man, but he did resolve the Grindelwald situation, although that seems hardly altruistic on his part considering his antics in his youth. He was given his positions and titles. He didn't ask for them, but then he used them to wield influence and power where perhaps he shouldn't. You see what I mean? It's going to be a mess trying to sort it out. There's little chance Severus will allow any sort of memorial erected at Hogwarts. Kingsley will have to tread the line of keeping his distance and recognising his contributions. Then if the public does want some sort of event, we'll have to find somewhere to host it. Godric's Hollow certainly isn't large enough and its mixed residents. We can't afford for wizarding Britain to descend on the village more than they already do."

"Is it an important village?"
"Well possibly it might not have been, but it's where the Potters were living the night Riddle came for them. The house is still there preserved as a memorial to them. As you can imagine it gets a lot of visitors on the anniversary of the end of the war. Dumbledore's family have a family plot in the churchyard. I assume that it is where Dumbledore will want to be interred. Though if the gossip is to be believed from Rita's book he may well not be."

"So, what will you do?"

"Contact Kingsley, see if he wants to go. Send the owl back to the Auror with our decision then have breakfast."

"Eggs do you? I can start while you floo Kingsley."

"That would be lovely," Percy said getting out of bed and gulping his cooled tea. He summoned both their dressing gowns, handing Audrey's hers then throwing his on and heading to the cellar and the floo.

Kingsley answered the call similarly attired. "You got one as well?"

"Yes, I suppose the Auror wasn't sure who would be available to respond."

Kingsley sighed. "Look, we're both up, let's do this via mirror. It's too bloody early to be on my knees with my head in a fire."

Percy agreed, withdrawing his head and closing the connection. The large communication mirror was now hung in the dining room and was positioned overlooking the table. It meant that you could at least sit down. It also made it convenient if Percy needed to have a late meeting as he could spread his files across the table.

Audrey stuck her head out of the kitchen at the sound of his footsteps. "That was quick."

"We're using the mirror."

"I'll bring your breakfast in then, do you want more tea?"

"Please."

Audrey nodded and vanished back into the kitchen. Kingsley was already calling the mirror when Percy entered the room. He answered the call and took a seat at the table. Kingsley didn't have a large wall mirror but did have something more substantial than the pocket mirrors that had been handed out initially.

"I must get Fred and George onto making me a bigger mirror," Kingsley said as Percy retreated to a seat behind the table.

Percy absently summoned the table mats and cutlery for breakfast. "I'm sure they would be willing."

"To business," Kingsley sighed. "I think we're going to have to go. I don't want to but forewarned is forearmed. I'm hoping for a private ceremony and burial before the public gets wind of it. If we are extremely lucky a small notice in the Prophet will do."

"You're unlikely to be so lucky. The Prophet, despite the articles earlier this year will be falling over itself to make a splash of his death. Whether they tout him as a loss as great as Merlin remains to be seen."
"Cynical but likely true," Kingsley admitted with a sigh. "This is not how I wished to spend my Sunday morning."

"Nor I. Shall we say a half an hour, and we'll meet at the property?"

"Yes," Kingsley agreed. "That should do. Oh, good morning Audrey, I am sorry to disturb you."

Audrey had entered the room carrying the plates of breakfast. Placing them down on the table she shrugged. "It's not a problem Kingsley, somethings won't wait, and your Mr Dumbledore seems to be one of them."

"Sadly yes. I checked the diary last night, and I've got the second week in October free. I thought I'd invite Andromeda and Ted as well, they are Tonks parents. Teddy can sleep upstairs."

"That should be fine," Audrey smiled. "I'll make sure I don't have any work away that week. Then we can move the day as needed with whatever you two have to deal with."

"Great. I'll leave you to your breakfast and go in search of my own." Kingsley nodded and closed the connection.

They ate breakfast together. Percy gave Audrey a quick recap of the conversation then collected up their dishes and set the charm up to clean them as he went to get dressed.

Audrey met him at the bottom of the stairs a cup of coffee in her hand. "I'm going to laze for another hour I think. I might make us lunch if you think you'll be back in time?"

"Make it dinner," Percy said giving her a kiss. "I might not be able to make lunch."

Audrey nodded waiting until Percy had vanished before making her way back upstairs.

The cliff top was lovely. Windswept, isolated. Birds circled the edge riding thermals so close you could believe you could touch them. Like that illusion, the house was another. Percy knew because he had checked, that the house was externally as big as it looked. Which was not to say he wasn't surprised by it. It was not Malfoy Manor. It was smaller than the Burrow. Smaller than his and Audrey's home. It was a two-room building of whitewashed stone with a slate tiled roof. Probably used to be used to house a shepherd. It hunched down into the cliff defensively as if protecting itself from the storms that battered it.

It was in good repair, the small garden that ringed it was well tended. It positively reeked of humbleness, and it was that that which made Percy dislike it. It was yet another manipulation. You were supposed to look at it and think that's not the house of a great wizard. That a wizard as great as Albus Dumbledore, who ruled over Hogwarts castle, must have found some deeper meaning to see this as satisfactory.

Was the location or the view enough to make up for the deficit of grandeur, of space? You were meant to think no, because it was a two-room shack, albeit in good condition. You would be able to touch the front and back wall standing in the middle of the room. Dumbledore was not the tallest wizard, but even he would be reaching the ceilings and ducking through doorways. So no, the location and the view wouldn't be enough, and that would prove that you were lacking in some manner.

Of course, none of this would be voiced aloud, it would be the unconscious thought process that went on as you arrived and approached the door. Nothing Dumbledore had said, but never the less, by the time you reached his door you would be wondering what made him special, without ever
consciously deciding he was special, to begin with.

Percy hated it.

Better it be Malfoy's Manor with its hollow, pointless grandeur boldly stating it thought itself, and the family living there, better than you, than this subtle undermining power play.

It was typically Dumbledore though.

Percy followed Kingsley to the gate of the garden. The Auror revealed herself from under a disillusionment charm, and Kingsley dismissed them after attaining their vow of confidentiality until the family made the announcement. At least the Prophet wouldn't hear of it that way.

Inside the house, the illusion wasn't maintained for very long. The narrow low ceiling hall opened on to a bright sunny room that was made entirely out of wizarding space. Percy could imagine the knowing twinkle that Dumbledore would give his guests as they saw the space. The acknowledgement that yes, he had bent a few rules in having this much space inside the small building, but it was just between them wasn't it?

Percy pinched the bridge of his nose trying to get a hold of his resentment. He removed his glasses and polished them on his handkerchief giving himself a moment to order his thoughts. He had chosen to come, it was then necessary that he behave in a professional manner even if he itched to take his wand to the enchantments and unravel them all. To stand back and watch as this illusion shattered.

"We could, you know."

"Pardon?"

"Unravel it all." Kingsley brandished his wand at the walls.

Percy's lips quirked. "I shall have to practice my occlumency."

Kingsley snorted. "You don't need legilimency to know that Percy. It screams Albus Dumbledore, his games and tests. Pushing boundaries, seeing who will stand and who will fold and the cost of each. You stood, it took me too long to do the same, and I can tell you that there isn't much difference in the cost of either."

"Why are we here? Why are we giving him this?"

"Because he is Albus Dumbledore. And for better or worse, he had irons in fires and fingers in pies. We may never know how many of each, but we may, by coming here, learn a little more about what he had planned and what is coming at us."

"So, you don't think he went quietly?"

"No, I think Albus was overly fond of burning bright and chose to live by it. I think he's going to burn and rage, and I think he isn't going to go quietly into the good night."

"I'm not sure if I should feel better or worse. Better, because clearly, I'm not the only paranoid one, and worse because if you are thinking it too then, it adds an amount of certainty to the belief that this is just the beginning."

"Hope for the best, plan for the worst."
"If you could elucidate what those might be?"

Kingsley shook his head. "No, it's going to be a surprise. Aren't you excited?"

"Thrilled." Percy deadpanned.

They found the stairs hidden behind a bend in the wall. Percy wondered how long it had taken to stabilize this much wizarding space inside such a small shell. Upstairs there were only two rooms to choose from. The first looked like some sort of personal office, the second was Dumbledore's bedroom.

Albus was laid out on the bed in gentle repose. He was dressed in a set of robes that were unusually understated and sombre. The midnight blue was shot with silver thread, the matching slippers were on his feet. The crooked wizarding hat sat beside the bed on a chair.

"He is dead?" Percy asked pointedly looking around the staged room.

"Auror Smethwick got a negative from the spell. Do you think he means to lie in state here?"

"Well if it came to it, it would be better. Hogwarts will refuse, and the Ministry will be forced into certain concessions in other areas if it was to let it happen there."

Kingsley cast a spell on the body. "He's dead. Lock him up here, check any paperwork we can find for clues, then go tell Aberforth?"

"Are we the appropriate people to be delivering death messages?"

"Who else is there? Three people know, and I'm not sending Auror Smethwick."

Percy nodded resignedly. Kingsley cast a stasis charm on the body until it could be collected.

They rifled the bedroom carefully. Kingsley explained how Auror searches were conducted to Percy and showed him the spells to reveal hidden things. Both men were cautious and conscientious of their work. For all that though, they moved quickly.

The bedroom was done in minutes, the study room took longer. There were letters and journals stacked in seemingly disordered piles on the desk, the bookshelves and the floor. For their efforts, they found nothing but a few scraps of parchment with burnt edges. Whatever Dumbledore had planned he had decided not to share. Or, Percy pointed out, he had left the burnt scraps for them to find so they'd stop looking. The rest of the house revealed nothing of note and the two men agreed to stop.

Percy paused and jogged back up the stairs to the bedroom. He looked around the room one more time then stuck his head into the study again.

Downstairs, Percy, had Kingsley wait as he went through every room once more.

"Percy, what are you looking for? There's nothing here, we're just going to have to wait and see what our surprise is," Kingsley called out.

"This," Percy said as he reappeared. He held out his hand in which nestled an egg.

Kingsley raised an eyebrow. "Hungry?"

Percy choked. "No!"
"Then are we taking souvenirs? If so, then an egg wasn't what I would have had."

Percy followed Kingsley out of the house and waited while he locked the door and set protective enchantments to stop anyone from entering. "Think, what is Dumbledore famous for?"

"Being so far in the closet he's crossed Narnia? Terrible fashion sense? Being irritatingly correct when he has no right to be?"

"Narnia?"

"I do read Percy, you aren't the only one who wanders over to the muggle world once in a while. He had an obsession with sweets and tragic ideas of what a suitable secure password to his office was."

"Being the leader of the Order of the Phoenix, so named because he has a Phoenix as a pet," Percy butted in as Kingsley didn't seem to be getting the point.

"Ohhh. Is that?"

"Well I assume so," Percy shrugged. "It's not like I know, but it was sat in a pile of ash on a bird perch. I was just going to check if any food had been left out or if it was still hanging around."

"I thought Phoenixes were reborn from their ashes."

"Well birds are born out of eggs, and I've never seen his Phoenix burn. Perhaps they timed it so the bird could stay in his egg in till he found a new person. I'm hardly an authority, but it seemed wrong to leave it here especially if, you know souvenir hunters do come. I'll give it to Aberforth. I suppose it's his more than anyone.

"I can't see Aberforth with a Phoenix somehow, it seems a touch flamboyant."

"Yes, well, I'm not going to leave a defenceless Phoenix egg in a house with a dead man. I'd get reported to the Creatures Department or something."

"Percy, you do know I'm the Minister for Magic?"

"Yes, which is why I would be reported not you, even though you are clearly the superior at the scene."

"I could probably get you off the jail time. Not sure about the fine though," Kingsley said squashing a grin.

"Thank you for your consideration Minister."

"Have you ever had a magical pet?" Kingsley asked.

"No," Percy said as they crossed the garden. "I thought I'd see if Audrey would like to get a cat. A half kneazle or something. I've always quite fancied one."

The arrived in Hogsmeade having apparated separately. Percy had never been to the Hogshead. He was happy to follow Kingsley as the wizard strode around the side of the pub and banged heavily on the door.

The door opened before he could repeat the action.

"Aye, well I thought you'd be along soon enough. Didn't think it would be the Minister himself that came."
"Aberforth," Kingsley greeted the elder wizard. "Might we come in?"

Aberforth shrugged turning away from the door leaving it open. Kingsley was apparently no stranger to the wizard’s odd behaviour and promptly followed on his heels. Percy followed Kingsley closing the door behind him and dropping the latch. Aberforth was leaning up against the bar. A glass of fire whisky in his hand.

He thumped two more tumblers on the bar. Percy noted they weren’t especially clean, but Aberforth slopped a measure of whisky into both before turning and walking up the stairs. Kingsley grabbed the glasses, a murmured incantation over both had the glasses clean. He handed one to Percy then followed Aberforth up the stairs.

In the small open space, a fire burned brightly in a grate. Aberforth was sat in a chair beside it. Kingsley took the other armchair leaving the sofa to Percy. Percy hid his grimace at the state of the sofa and sat down gingerly, unsure if it would hold his weight.

"So the old bastard is dead. Something I can drink to."

"Might I ask how you know?" Kingsley enquired.

Aberforth jerked a thumb at the picture frame. "Arianna told me. He's woken up in his portrait in the family vault. She's got a painting in there with our parents she visits."

"Do you know what Albus intended for his funeral?"

"No, and I don’t care. I’ve no use for fancy ceremonies. It's enough for me that the world found out about him before he died. That he saw that people hold him accountable for what he did."

"The thing is it's going to be a circus," Kingsley said. "I'm hoping that you'll want to bury Albus quietly and put a notice in the Prophet and that will be it."

"You got out from under him, how likely is it that he agreed with that plan? Isn't that why you're here? Very few could have a Minister for Magic dance to his tune like my brother."

"I chose to disagree with his methods."

"Not many that can say they've done that. I'll have him put in the family plot because that's what my mother wanted. For himself, I'd leave him to rot. I've no reason to inform that bunch of fish wives at the Prophet."

"Thank you," Kingsley said gratefully. "My office can send out a notification to the Prophet. I do think that if we announce it quietly, then the conspiracy theorists will have less to build on."

"You think they'll remember he is the great and all-knowing Albus Dumbledore."

"I am very much afraid they will."

Aberforth snorted. "Meddling bastard."

Kingsley raised his glass to Aberforth, Percy joined him and the three men drank.

A thumping on the door had Aberforth wearily climbing to his feet and stumping off down to the bar. The latch on the door sounded, and footfalls were heard on the wooden floor before coming up the stairs.

The wizard entered the space and paused on seeing them. "Minister, Mr Weasley."
"Headmaster." Kingsley and Percy chorused back.

Aberforth came up the stairs behind him, a bottle in his hand. He sloshed more whisky into his glass before doing the same for Kingsley and Percy. He paused before Severus who calmly conjured his own glass. Aberforth grunted and splashed the whisky into the glass.

"Twas a time you weren't too good for my glasses."

Severus joined Percy on the sofa. "There was a time," he agreed sitting down. "But then I gained a little wisdom and realised that if I had illusions of living to the grand old age of thirty then not drinking out of your glassware would substantially increase my chances."

Aberforth snorted a laughed thumping the bottle down.

"Albus' portrait has awoken in my office. A surprise most unwelcome I assure you. I can understand how Aberforth discovered his passing but how did you come across this information Minister?"

"Kingsley," Kingsley corrected. "If you don't mind Severus, I'll leave my title at the door for this one. I've had an Auror stationed watching his home since the day he left Hogwarts. It was a recommendation that made a lot of sense." Kingsley tilted his head at Percy indicating where the proposal had come from. "He knew, of course, that we were watching, and seemed delighted in acknowledging Auror Smethwick each morning despite the disillusionment charms. When he didn't come outside to make his usual morning greeting, and no smoke rose from the chimneys, Auror Smethwick checked for signs of life. Approaching the door, she found a note pinned to it asking that Percy or I be summoned. She sent the owls, and Percy and I agreed that attending was better than ignoring him. We went to confirm the news then came here to inform Aberforth."

"And the Ministry's position on his passing?"

Percy sat up straighter. "The Ministry of Magic is sad to hear of the passing of Albus Dumbledore. The office of the Minister for Magic extends its condolences and asks that respect and privacy are extended to the family during this time of loss. Any expressions of grief must be kept within the bounds of the Statute of Secrecy. Due to the nature of the population at Godric's Hollow, any visits to the grave site should be kept respectful at all times."

Kingsley blinked. "What he said."

"So hands off then," Severus said.

"We dethroned him," Percy replied. "We cannot now come out and join in the teeth gnashers and wailers or the professional mourners."

"I will announce his demise at dinner this evening," Severus said. "I cannot bar him from the other portraits for too long and breakfast at the weekends is to scattered for any cohesive announcements to be done. I will not have Hogwarts be used as a Mecca to those wishing to worship at the altar of Albus Dumbledore."

Decisions made and agreed by all parties the conversation fell to other things. Once the whisky in the glasses was gone, Kingsley stood. "I'll take my leave and let you have your day back Aberforth. The property is warded by myself to stop mischief coming to it. By all means floo me if you wish for me to take it down."

Severus stood. "I'll walk you out, Kingsley. Aberforth, as always it has been a dubious honour."

Aberforth nodded at both men as they headed for the stairs. He paused looking back over his
shoulder at Percy who had remained standing by the sofa. "You got something to say?"

"More like something to give," Percy answered holding out the egg.

Aberforth looked at the egg, a wealth of emotion crossing his face. "I don't want it."

"But."

"I don't," Aberforth snapped. "Keep it for all I care."

Percy put the egg back in his pocket, nodded to Aberforth and descended the stairs after Kingsley and Severus. Out in the lane he caught sight of Kingsley apparating away. Severus looked over as Percy exited, at the thump of a door closed and barred by magic.

Severus raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Percy held out the egg. "It was at the house. I didn't want to leave the bird without food but when I found the perch there was just this egg sat in the ashes. I didn't think it wise to leave it there in case it hatched all alone. Aberforth doesn't want it."

"Unsurprising. Fawkes was a symbol of Albus' power. The same power that drove them apart."

"Do you?"

"No," Severus answered. "Fawkes and I didn't have a particularly good relationship. He disliked the taint I carry. I doubt very much he will hatch for me."

"Aberforth told me to keep it."

"Then I suggest you do so. If you hand the egg over to the Creatures Department, it is unlikely it will ever hatch again. A battery of tests and researchers is hardly the environment for a phoenix to find a new companion."

"And my home is?"

Severus shrugged turning away. "Stranger things have happened."

Percy looked down at the egg once more. It seemed unlikely that the egg would hatch for him, but he would at least do a little research and see if he could find the correct environment for a phoenix egg to be kept in. He was still young with a hopefully long life before him. In all those years he might find someone the egg would hatch for.

Percy arrived home to find Audrey in the kitchen humming along with the radio.

"How did it go?" she asked as she peeled potatoes at the sink.

Percy took off his robe, removed the egg from his pocket and sent the robe to hang its elf up.

"What's that?"

"A phoenix egg," Percy said. "Dumbledore had one for a companion." Percy explained how he had come into possession of the egg.

"So it will hatch for someone eventually you just have to find them?"

"Yes."
She reached out a hand to the egg, sending him a questioning look. Percy shrugged, so she scooped it up. "It's a lot heavier than I was expecting," Audrey commented, gently turning the egg. "It's warm as well."

Percy took up the potato and peeler Audrey had put down. "I might see if I can owl Newt Scamander. He's an authority on the more exotic animals. He may well have some useful information."

Audrey settled the egg on top of a cup, so it didn't roll off the work surface.

Percy looked over at her. "I was going to ask you if you would like to get a cat, a part kneazle."

"A cat?" Audrey asked in surprise.

"Yes," Percy replied absently, his attention focused on peeling potatoes. "I've always quite fancied one."

"A cat sounds better than a bird," Audrey said. "I've got a bit more familiarity with them. By kneazle, I assume this is a magical cat."

"Yes, there's a pet shop in Diagon Alley. If you like, we can pop in one weekend and see if anything takes our fancy."

"Sure," Audrey said turning away from the egg. "Why not?"

The notices were drafted and owled to the Prophet that afternoon. Copies were also sent to the press department within the Ministry with strict instructions that only the supplied party line was to be repeated. Any divergence would result in the department coming under severe scrutiny.

Percy was unsure if the threat was a step too far, but it did seem to be effective. The Prophet ran the story in the evening edition despite having little to go on. Dumbledore's home wasn't secret kept, but it was little known enough that the Aurors posted there to prevent anyone from breaking in, reported only a few visitors.

Unfortunately, there was an easier target available, and everyone knew where it was. Hogwarts was inundated with visitors. Unable to gain access into the grounds, wreaths were left leaning up against the gates. By Monday lunchtime the tributes were ten-foot-deep, by the end of the day they were thirty.

Percy could only imagine how well Severus would be taking it. Since he wasn't an idiot, he wasn't going to ask Severus, but he was curious enough to give in and send Ginny an owl.

Ginny responded that at dinner on Monday the student body had been collectively told that detentions would, for the foreseeable future involve students going down to the gates collecting up all the tributes. They would then separate out what could be used or salvaged and practice their vanishing charms on everything else.

On Tuesday when Monday's detentions had been completed, the collective opinion of the students attending them was that cauldron scrubbing was better than this task. The Headmaster was providing lists of useful plant parts to harvest for potions. Madam Sprout had a list of plants to look out for, for taking cuttings from and for potting into the greenhouses. Professor Flitwick was gathering up every enchanted thing he could get his hands on to allow his seventh years practice in deconstructing spell work. Anyone actually caught loitering by the gates when the students arrived was treated to a blistering lecture on how Hogwarts was a place of learning, and if the wizarding public wanted to honour Dumbledore, then they'd bugger off and let the school do its job of teaching children.
Ginny seemed to find the whole thing rather amusing. She assured Percy that the Headmaster did not.
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Christmas day they hosted Lizzy, Rick and Rachel. The dining table was a point of pride for Percy, who, following Rick's example, had insisted on cooking everything. True, magic had helped him out when he had realised he might have bitten off more than he could chew, but if Rick could do it, and his mother could do it, then he would do it.

The food to his relief, received plenty of compliments including from Audrey who had witnessed his flustered spellcasting when the veg took too long to prepare, throwing off his carefully calculated timetable. And the flurry of cleaning charms that had been necessary when he had knocked the bag of flour to the floor while making the roux for the gravy.

The flour explosion had nearly been the last straw, but Audrey had stepped in to keep his roux from burning as he hastily dealt with the floor, work surface and cupboard fronts that were sporting a coating of flour.

By the time Audrey's family had arrived Percy had the kitchen back under control, and the cleaning charms had finished the mountain of washing up he had created. The kitchen was a picture of organisation with everything either cooking or waiting its turn in the oven.

Percy had given over the carving of the rib of beef to Rick, more than happy to step aside and let the other man do something he took pleasure in. Percy watched in satisfaction as Rick carved the joint complimenting Percy on his cooking and offering a few tips for things he might try next time.

Percy choked on his mouthful of wine at the thought of doing it again but nodded wanly in agreement when Rick offered to allow Percy into his kitchen on the next Sunday lunch. Audrey gave him a wide-eyed impressed look lifting her glass in a silent toast.

Percy toasted her back, Audrey had taken over decorating the house and the table for Christmas. Percy was still amazed at how good everything looked. He might have blanched when she asked him to fetch her branches of pine and holly with bundles of mistletoe but had willingly returned with her requests. Audrey had wrapped the pine branches in the mistletoe, added fairy lights, a few glass baubles and laid them on top of the mantle pieces. The sideboard in the dining room sported one and a wreath of holly, pine, pine cones, mistletoe and ivy made up the centrepiece of the table.

It was lovely, and Percy was considering casting preservation charms on the lot so they could use them again next year.

The Christmas tree in the lounge was another marvel of understatement. Audrey had a collection of baubles she told him were German Kugels, finding one or two a year since she was eight. She would be gifted them if someone in her family found one at a market or auction, but they weren't easy to get hold of. They were pretty glass spheres, and Percy could see the charm of them. A quick bit of wand work later and they were protected from breaking, cleaned and the colours as vibrant as the day they had been made.

Audrey had looked askance for a moment when she saw his wand work but burst out laughing confessing that he had just made her collection possibly the only one in the world in such good condition thus virtually priceless. Percy assured her they were safe from damage and Audrey had happily hung them on the tree.
The meal eaten, and coffee and tea savoured, Lizzy and Rachel volunteered to clear up the kitchen. Audrey and Percy protested saying it could just wait and they didn't want their guests to spend the afternoon washing up.

It took some time, but eventually, both women relented and joined everyone in the sitting room. The washing up was forgotten about as the family monopoly board was brought out by Rachel who had smuggled it with her. When the groans of mock despair and catcalls of smugness had died off the coffee table was appropriated, and they settled down for another Christmas tradition.

Once Audrey's family had gone, Percy set the cleaning charms on the pile of washing up and brought a glass of wine back through for himself and Audrey.

"Thank you, for today, it was brilliant, and the food was amazing." Audrey said sincerely.

"I had help. If you hadn't taken over while I dealt with the flour, we would have eaten bacon sandwiches."

"I like bacon butties."

"Yes, but not quite what your family was signing up for."

"Perhaps not," Audrey agreed, settling down next to him letting the food and wine lull her. Percy summoned a book catching it deftly as it sailed towards them. He flipped it open one-handed lifting his other arm to wrap around her as she sank against him and Audrey let her eyes drift closed.

Boxing Day would see Percy's family descend upon them, his father, the twins, Bill and Fleur. Ginny had asked for an invite for herself and Neville. She had escaped Christmas at the Burrow by spending the holiday with the Longbottoms. But they weren't coming until the afternoon, and this morning he had something special planned and a promise to fulfil.

"Wrap up warm," he instructed Audrey after breakfast.

"How warm?"

"Two feet of snow warm. We're going to be outside for an hour or two."

"Okay, are we going anywhere special?"

"Yes," Percy said with a pleased grin. "We're flooing first but then it's about a mile walk, and there's snow on the ground."

Once they were both ready, Percy took them through the floo to the Three Broomsticks. He nodded a greeting to Madam Rosemarta who nodded in return.

"The hamper will be ready to collect on your way back Mr Weasley."

"Thank you," Percy said leading Audrey out of the small inn.

The cold outside was biting stealing their breath and nipping at their exposed skin. Audrey squeaked in surprise burying her hands in her pockets. "Where are we?"

"Hogsmeade," Percy replied casting warming charms on them both, he felt the chill try to fight its way in through his layers, London was not this cold and it had taken him by surprise despite his earlier warning.
Audrey blinked in surprise. "Is there a particular reason?"

"Yes," Percy answered ambiguously, smiling at Audrey’s narrow-eyed assessment of him. He held out his arm. "We won't have time now, but we're coming back here to get home, so I'll take you around the village then. This way, it wouldn't do to be late."

The snowy lane assaulted Percy with four years worth of memories of walking the route at the weekends. They were silent on the walk, and it wasn't until they rounded the last corner and the gates were before them that Audrey stopped, a gasp escaping her.

"Oh, Percy, I wish you could see it."

Percy watched Audrey's face, her expression wrestling between wonder and sorrow.

"It's a ruin," she explained. "I think, from what I can remember of the pictures, the astronomy tower is snapped in half, and the other towers are missing completely. The roof of the great hall is gone just the arches are left. It's so sad and yet beautiful too."

Percy was surprised by her declaration. He could see Hogwarts in all her glory and hadn't really thought of the image projected to the muggles.

A dark figure approached the gates as they came closer.

Audrey steps became less sure slowing and dragging. "Percy, no. I don't, I think I left the iron on. I need to go home. Percy let's go."

Percy stopped aware that this would be a problem and may even be insurmountable.

"Percy, Audrey," Severus greeted them swinging the gates open and stepping through.

"Severus!" Audrey said in surprise. "I mean Headmaster Snape. Sorry, I'm all in pieces, I was just telling Percy I'm sure I've left the iron on, and I need to go home and check."

"Severus is still appropriate Audrey. Your distraction is also expected. The wards on Hogwarts are designed to keep Muggles away from the grounds. Percy, perhaps if as discussed, I take Audrey over the ward line."

"Ward line?" Audrey said confusion twisting her face. "I'm sorry, but I really should be going. It's lovely to see you of course but..."

"Audrey please," Percy said. "Just trust us. If this doesn't work, then we can go."

Audrey nodded. Percy watched anxiously as Severus took up her free arm, Percy let go only once Severus nodded to him. Severus led Audrey closer to the golden gates, the winged hogs atop of the gatepost turned to watch as the three of them came closer and passed between them. Audrey's steps were hesitant and unsure, as if she dearly wished to be going in the opposite direction but had agreed to let Severus lead her and was allowing him to do so.

"I am the Headmaster of this school," Severus explained to Audrey. "As such, I am inviting you in, and you're welcome to spend time on the grounds."

Once they were through the gate Audrey confusion melted away. "What was that?" she asked.

"Hogwarts is protected by enchantment to repel muggles. Your reaction, your desire to return home to check on something was the magic of Hogwarts acting upon you. Now you are on the grounds..."
Audrey reached for Percy’s hand clutching at it for comfort. "I can still only see the ruin."

"While we haven't invited any muggles in to check, that doesn't surprise me. The castle itself is shrouded in enchantments in case someone like yourself was able to cross the ward line."

"Would I ever be able to enter?"

"If you are flooed in, yes. Back in the late eighties, we had a Muggle-born student here who fell ill. They were from quite a prominent family in the muggle world with several highly placed connections. Their parents petitioned the Muggle Prime Minister to be allowed to see their child, or they would blow the lid on the Statute of Secrecy and implicate the Prime Minister in the conspiracy. The Prime Minister contacted the Minister for Magic who then insisted Dumbledore allow them to visit else cause an international incident. You must understand, that while it seems to be an open secret that you are a muggle for a number of us, it is still a grey area of the law that you inhabit. While any number of muggles do know about magic because of their links to our world, you did not find out about us through the usual method. You are potentially courting trouble should someone decide to make something of it. If you had you come through the floo, there would have been a way to track that. Walking over the threshold, however, well, muggles can't do that can they?"

"No," Percy agreed complacently. "The wards on Hogwarts would repel any muggle making it impossible for you to cross."

"Thus we are safer from scrutiny. I will leave you here," Severus said stopping. "The school is still hosting some students for the holidays, and as Minerva is away, the Gryffindor students are taking any opportunity to rampage. I trust you can get yourselves safely back over the threshold? If you have any issues, you may send a Patronus to find me."

"Yes, thank you."

"I believe you still know the way. Hagrid will be there should you need him." Severus swirled away his robes billowing out around his feet.

Audrey watched him go then turned to Percy. "Is it worth it? I'm causing so much trouble."

"Yes, it's worth it, that isn't in doubt. I don't want to leave you out of this part of me, not when you can do some things. I asked Severus for his help arranging today, in granting us access on to the grounds and in helping you through the enchantments as the Headmaster of the school. I find nothing in my conscience that has a problem with owing Severus a favour."

"I'm sorry I can't see it."

"You can see pictures, and it's not why I brought you here." Percy retook her arm and began to lead her over to the left. As they walked, he told Audrey anecdotes of his time at Hogwarts. They rounded a corner, and the paddocks at the edge of the first came into view. A large man was stood by a fence forking hay into a large round cattle feeder. "They are," Percy said pointing.

Surrounding the feeder, a herd of bright white horses milled, snatching mouthfuls of the hay. In amongst the group, a couple of shiny gold horses stayed close to the centre of the herd.

"Oh god! Are they?"

"I did promise," Percy said. "In summer the herd are deep in the forest. It's only in winter when Hogwarts supplements their diet that they spend time close to the castle. That's why we had to come
while the school was still occupied although most of the students have left for the holidays."

They reached the fence, and Audrey stopped to stare, her eyes wide, drinking in the magical creatures. Hagrid noticed them and after throwing one more forkful of hay into the feeder came over to them.

"Alright there? The 'eadmaster said you'd be visiting. First time seein' the beasts is it?" Hagrid asked kindly as Audrey barely acknowledged him.

"Yes," Percy answered for Audrey.

"Aye well, they are pretty enough I suppose."

Percy remembered the blast-ended skrewits that Hagrid had cooed over and thought the man was monstrously unfair to the unicorns. He kept a wary eye on the herd and Audrey as a few of the younger ones approached cautiously staying out of arms reach while weighing up the visitors. "How are your classes?" he asked politely.

"Aye well, right enough I suppose. I'm on my last year teaching you see. The 'eadmaster he wants to expand the number of magical creatures Hogwarts is home to." Hagrid puffed out his chest in pride. "He says that I am the only one that can get some of these creatures to breed, so he wants me to concentrate on that rather than teaching. It's a shame as I quite enjoy it, but the unicorn herd here is to expand if possible, an' he's found me a new breeding pair of hippogriffs. He wants 'em adding to the herd here. There's to be a new piggery as well, to feed 'em all with so I'll be busy enough."

"Pigs?"

"Aye to feed the thestrals and hippogriffs," Hagrid nodded. "Save the school some money by rearing our own. He's got a deal with the Centaur to let 'em feed in the forest, and they can have some to hunt."

"But don't the Acromantula live in the forest? Won't they just eat them?"

"The 'eadmaster he's been contacted by the Ministry in Malaysia. Their colony of acromantula is suffering, the poor things. He's arranged for the colony here to be transferred out there. It's a right shame. They've been here for years, and now they are being shipped across the globe."

"Isn't Borneo their natural habitat?" Percy asked cautiously.

"Aye," Hagrid said miserably. "An 'ees right that if the colony out there is in trouble and struggling, then we should help."

Audrey's giggle drew Percy's attention back to her. She had slipped under the fence and into the paddock. A young unicorn, under two years old judging by its still gold coat, was lipping at her coat pocket. Audrey was stood still, careful not to startle the animal while laughing softly at its antics.

"What 'ave you got in your pocket he can smell?" Hagrid asked.

Audrey slipped her hand inside the pocket, pulling out a paper and foil wrapped tube. "Polo mints. Are they allowed them?"

"Aye," Hagrid said disinterestedly. "Some o' my fourth years like to feed them to them. Does them no harm and they seem to like them."

Carefully Audrey got a mint free and laid it in the middle of her flat palm. The unicorn lipped it
away, crunching quickly before nudging her again. Audrey carefully reached out to stroke the gold coat watching for any sign of distress. "Oh, you're so soft. You are lovely, I never thought I'd ever see one of you." She jerked suddenly falling against the first unicorn. Turning she found a second unicorn alternating between investigating her by blowing hot gusts of air at her and lipping at her pocket. "Alright, here," she said fishing out another mint for the bigger white unicorn. Soon Audrey was surrounded by the curious magical creatures as they demanded mints and she willingly handed over all she had, stroking and petting them as they allowed.

"I don't think I've ever seen them take to anyone so fast," Percy commented. "When we studied them, they were quite skittish."

"They can like women more, and a crowd of students can be difficult for some of them. This way there's more of them than us, and she's handing out sweets which always helps," Hagrid said.

"What are hippogryphs and the thestrals?" Audrey asked from the center of the milling unicorns proving she had been paying at least some attention to their conversation. "Do you have some here?"

Hagrid nodded. "The hippogryph herd is in the paddock by the carriage house. They don't like to be too close to the forest unlike the thestrals and the unicorns. Y' can come an see 'em if you like."

"Could we?"

"You have to be careful of a hippogryph," Hagrid said. "Right finickity and particular about people."

"I'd like to see them if it won't upset them," Audrey said.

"Well, I can't see any harm in meself. Right you lot, let the lass out. You've had all your sweets go eat your hay." Hagrid pushed and nudged the unicorns out of the way to clear a path for Audrey

"Thank you."

Hagrid led Audrey and Percy to the paddock containing the hippogryphs giving Audrey the safety lecture given to all the Hogwarts students. Once they got closer, and the hippogryph could be seen clearly Audrey slowed and came to a stop, out of lunging distance of the paddock fence.

"What stops the flying away?" she asked Hagrid.

Hagrid shrugged. "They've got a good deal going on here, and hippogryphs aren't really wild anymore. The last of the wild herds were hunted years ago, they're more domesticated now. Mind, if they take against a person, they might leave. But as a whole, they stay in herds an' as long as the herd is happy they'll stay."

"They are quite intimidating, aren't they? Strangely beautiful and fascinating but they certainly look fierce."

Percy nodded. "I think it took at least three bows before one would acknowledge me. I don't think I've ever been so nervous."

"They're 'armless as long as you treat 'em right," Hagrid said dismissively.

Audrey shot Percy an incredulous look mouthing 'Harmless?!' while subtly pointing to the taloned front feet of the hippogryph.

Percy turned away stifling a laugh. Hagrid had made Care of Magical creatures one class Percy wouldn't be soon forgetting.
"What's that?" Audrey asked as she caught sight of another animal. She turned to face the paddock. "Oh, look, it's got a baby. What is it?"

Hagrid turned to where she was pointing. "That's a thestral," he answered. "There's not many that can see 'em. Hogwarts has the largest tame herd of them anywhere in the world. Right clever they are and gentle too. They pull the carriages for the students."

"You can see them?" Percy asked surprised.

"Yes, should I not be able to?"

"To see a thestral you need to have seen death and realised it for what it is. Not many people have."

"Oh well, I can. Why is it here and not with the herd?"

"Injured in the forest," Hagrid explained. "She's nursing too, so I brought her here to heal. The herd isn't far away they come out at night and stay with her. The forest is too dangerous on a lame leg with a foal. If anything were to threaten her, she wouldn't be able to protect her foal or herself and get away."

"Can I approach her?" Audrey asked.

Hagrid shrugged. "You can try, they are gentle but shy. They eat meat, I've got a few bits you can see if she’ll take from you. Don't go near her foal though, they are protective, and she can still hurt you even lame."

"Oh no I wouldn't," Audrey assured him as she walked to the edge of the paddock and ducked under the fence.

Hagrid fetched a bucket full of what looked like strips of steak and handed it over to Audrey.

Audrey took a few strips of the raw meat putting the bucket down and carefully approached the thestral, Percy on her heels.

"I haven't been able to see them before," he said quietly. Audrey split the steak with him and then held one out calling to the thestral gently.

The mare watched with a wary expression, the scent of meat making her ears swivel towards the pair. She flared her wings and tossed her head be for taking a step towards them. Audrey beamed encouragement, shuffling a bit closer, the meat on an extended hand.

The mare nipped the steak out from Audrey's hand, chewing it placidly while letting her pet her nose gently. Percy proffered his piece which the mare also took. The foal emboldened by its mother stepped curiously around her flank, its nose stretched out as far as it could, wings flaring slightly to keep its balance. Audrey proffered a small piece of meat to the foal stretching her own arm out. The foal took it and skittered backwards chewing its prize greedily.

Audrey smiled at the foal then turned back to the mare continuing to pet her, stroking over the smooth, soft coat stretched over the bony features. Her mane was thick and lustrous hanging tangled down her neck. Audrey scratched the itchy spots she remembered from previous encounters with the horses of her childhood which had worked on the unicorns. The mare swung her head around bumping Audrey gently before returning her attention back to Percy who was holding the pieces of meat.

Audrey grinned, pleased by the thestral's acceptance of her attention. Cautious of touching the folded
wings of the thestral she returned to Percy's side stroking the long nose while the mare bumped them looking for more food. Finding they had none she moved away, nudging her foal ahead of her.

Percy cast a cleaning charm on his and Audrey hands before turning back for the fence. Hagrid was throwing ferrets at the hippogryphs. "We should head back," Percy said. "We're meeting Ginny and Neville at the Three Broomsticks."

They thanked Hagrid and headed back to the unicorns paddock.

"The thestrals were amazing."

"Not the unicorns?"

"No, they were amazing too. I mean, unicorns, who wouldn't be blown away? But maybe because we, muggles, that is, still have unicorns and hippogryphs if only in stories, the thestrals were, I don't know, more magical? I mean it's a bit like unicorns and hippogryphs being real is amazing, but I knew what they were supposed to look like. I didn't know about thestrals, I had no idea, and it's almost like that are my first magical creature. The first one that is part of your world and not part of mine in any way at all, not even in fairy stories."

"So you wouldn't be impressed by dragons either?" Percy asked humorously.

"Oh no I probably would. Dragons in Muggle stories all look different. There are so many ideas of what they look like it would be interesting to see what they actually look like."

They reached the gates, and Audrey looked at them nervously. "I didn't like the way they made me feel. I don't like the way they made me so fixated on something," she confessed.

Percy took her hand. "We'll go through them and keep walking. It won't last long."

"Do you think many muggles find Hogwarts?"

"No, I doubt it. I don't know exactly where we are because Hogwarts is unplottable but its pretty isolated up here even in the muggle parts."

They stopped just before the gates which swung silently, magically open.

Audrey took a breath and blew it out. "Alright, let's do this and if I tell you I've left the iron on or forgotten to put the milk back in the fridge or whatever, you aren't allowed to laugh at me afterwards."

"I won't," Percy assured her. "You're very brave to do this." He took her arm wrapping it around his and holding on to her hand tightly. Audrey wasn't the only one who didn't like the effect of the wards had on her.

Audrey's features twisted up into confused concern as they passed over the invisible boundary. "Urggh, parking tickets? Who sets those things?"

Percy shrugged. "I think they are probably refreshed every generation or so. I know after recent
events the Headmaster, Severus, was looking into beefing them up to protect the castle from more modern threats."

"It's so weird it's like a compulsion."

"It is a compulsion, a version of one at least. You'll do exactly as the spell wants you to, which in this case is leave the vicinity." Percy explained.

"Can you all do that? Can you protect yourself from them?"

"it can depend on the strength of the spell. Some require only a small measure of will to ignore, others more. There is one spell called the Imperius curse. That allows the caster to compel the person it is cast on to do whatever they are told. Few witches and wizards can resist the Imperius curse. Its one of the three Unforgivable curses because it allows such control over another."

"What are the other two?"

"The Killing curse, the spell Severus and Minerva used against Riddle and the Cruciatius Curse which is a torture curse. It causes unimaginable pain, and if a person is held under it long enough, they can lose their minds. Riddles followers used all three unforgivable liberally. It's an instant sentence in Azkaban if its proven you used them."

"That's awful."

"Yes. Magic isn't always a wondrous thing. It is nearly biological. What you do with it, what it can do is governed by the caster. Feelings, emotions, intent, subconscious or not, it shapes the magic inside you. It's beyond your science and biology. It's, mystical. Not the charlatan turbans and incense mystical but acts of god mystical."

Audrey shrugged. "You might be right but, in all honesty, I just figure it's the same as having superpowers. I'm Teri Hatcher, and you're Dean Cain, without the love triangle with your alter ego."

"I don't…"

Audrey laughed. "Things like that make me feel better you know, knowing that as much as I don't know about your world, you don't know just as much about mine. It was a programme on the TV a couple of years ago. The New Adventures of Superman. Louis Lane and Clarke Kent. Louis was an intrepid reporter who managed to get herself into some daft situations from which she needed to be rescued. Clarke was Superman a man born on a different planet and the rays of Earth's sun gave him super strength, made him bulletproof. He could fly, shoot lasers from his eyes and a host of other amazing abilities. He disguised himself as Clarke Kent to pass amongst the humans and worked with Louis as a reporter. It was pretty good Saturday night TV."

As they approached the Three Broomsticks, three people were loitering waiting for them. The bright flash of red hair gave away the connection of two, but Audrey didn't know the third.

Ginny came to meet them her chin set at a stubborn angle. "I didn't tell him. Neville and Dad did. if you want him to leave I can make him."

Audrey looked at Ginny surprised by her tone. "Who?"

"Ron," Ginny replied. "You've not met him and considering some of the things he's said about Mr and Mrs Granger, I'm not sure you'd want to."

"Give over Gin," Ron demanded exasperatedly. "It's different alright."
"I don't see how!" Ginny declared. "You and Mum are like peas in a pod."

"Perhaps," Percy broke in. "This is not the place for this discussion." He sent a pointed glance around at their public location.

Ron looked at Percy. "It's not like Gin says." Ignoring her disbelieving huff, he ploughed on. "It's not. I've got nothing against, uh, muggles," he said with a furtive glance around for eavesdroppers. "And Dad said that we weren't to mention it because of the laws you are breaking, so umm, yeah. Look, whatever Mum has said, and I don't know because I haven't asked, and she's not said anything to me, I don't have a problem with whatever you're doing. I wanted to, I dunno, spend Christmas with my family, and you're my family, and everyone keeps telling me I'm wrong about everything I think I know. As far as I can see until I actually, I dunno, talk to you, I'm still going to be wrong, and so I'm here." Ron finished on an explosive breath. He stuck out his chin and stared at Percy.

"Hello Ron," Audrey said politely holding out her hand. "I'm Audrey, Percy's fiancée and we'd like to invite you over for dinner. Will you come?

Ron took up the hand swiftly, shaking it twice. "Hello Audrey, I'm Ron, I'm Percy's brother. Pleased to meet you and dinner sounds great." He let go before folding his arms and meeting Ginny's stare with one of his own.

A small cough took Audrey's attention from the staring match to the third person.

"Neville Longbottom," Neville introduced himself holding out his hand. "Pleased to meet you and thank you for the invitation."

Audrey smiled shaking the wizard's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Ginny said she would be spending Christmas with you."

Neville held his hand out to Percy. "I know we went to school together, but it feels like this is the first time we've met. I'm Neville Longbottom, I'm dating your sister, and I thank you for the extended invitation."

"Pleased to meet you properly Neville," Percy replied shaking his hand. "Welcome to the family, though are you sure you are making the right decision?" He tilted his head towards his siblings who were still scowling at each other.

"Yes," Neville replied firmly. "I've known her since she was eleven and I'm more than acquainted with how your family tends to be."

Percy nodded. "I don't think I need to warn you off hurting her then."

"No," Neville answered. "You don't, but I have a feeling no matter what all her brothers could come up with, and there is an intimidating number of you, it wouldn't hold a candle to what Ginny might do first."

Percy laughed sharply. "You may well be right. But I do work for the Ministry of Magic. Ginny might be more demonstrative, but you'd be surprised how many ways the Ministry can make your life unpleasant with seemingly minimal effort."

"I'd like to think I won't have to find out. I hope you don't mind, here," Neville pulled a small box from his pocket. A quick tap with his wand enlarged it, and he handed the gaily wrapped gift to Audrey. "A thank you for your hospitality, Ginny said your home was a mixture of magic and muggle, so I thought this might be for the best."
Audrey touched the wrapping paper which melted away to reveal a lush green plant in a pot.

"I have a talent with plants. This is a Germander. You can use it in cooking as well as in drinks."

"Oh, that's lovely, thank you."

Neville shrugged deprecatingly then asked. "Are we flooing?"

"Yes," Percy replied. "I have arranged with Madame Rosemarta for the use of her floo. We should be going as everyone will be arriving shortly."

Percy headed to the door, Neville and Audrey following as Neville explained how to care for the plant. Ginny shot Ron one more hard look before they both followed the group into the pub. Percy accepted and paid for the hamper from the barkeep then opened the floo. He held out his hand to Audrey then took them both through the flames.

Once home he cleaned off the soot of travel and flicked his wand sending glowing spheres of light to hover in the lampshades. Ginny, Ron and Neville all came through the floo which Percy closed as they cleaned themselves up from travel. Pulling the grate back over the fire to ensure it wasn't opened again he then led everyone upstairs.

"That was my study," Percy said answering Ginny question. "It's down there to be out of the way of the main house. Our muggle friends and Audrey's family have seen it, but since it predominantly runs on magic, it's better it's out of sight and out of mind. Especially since closer inspection would raise questions."

Audrey took all their coats, and Percy indicated their shoes should be left by the hall tree Audrey was hanging the coats on.

"Audrey will give you the tour if you like, there are some things I need to finish in the kitchen."

"Oh good," Ginny said. "I've been dying to see this place since you got it. Boarding school is a right pain sometimes."

"We'll start upstairs if you like, then we can finish down here."

"Lead the way!"

The tour was over just as the doorbell chimed. Audrey excused herself from the group which had settled in the lounge to answer the door. The boisterous noise of several people wishing each other Merry Christmas rang through the house.

Fred and George bounced into the room their father on their heels. The family greetings took time to settle down again as news was exchanged rapidly over each other causing the sound of the doorbell to be almost lost. Percy slipped out of the room to answer the door and greet their last missing guests. When Bill and Fleur entered the room, the greetings were once more exchanged. Percy with adept use of his wand extended the sofas and conjured more chairs so that everyone could find a seat and a Weasley family celebration began.
August 1999

Audrey, Percy, George, and Fred were all in the garden trying out the garden furniture they had recently acquired thanks to an upturn in the weather. The twins were due to leave to attend the Burrow for Ginny's birthday party an event that Percy had been invited to and Audrey had not. Ginny had contacted Audrey on her mirror to explain as far as she was concerned Audrey was more than welcome to attend. Since Mrs Weasley had sent out the invitation Audrey politely declined Ginny's offer not wishing to cause a scene or go where she clearly wasn't invited.

Percy was still deeply annoyed with his mother about the whole episode and despite his sister and father apologising for his mother. The conversation around the table was broken by the distinct crack of apparition and the muffled curse and clang as someone tripped over the garden implements stored in the shed that was also the apparition arrival point. The door was thrown open, and a red-faced Ginny stomped out shooting a death glare at whatever implement had greeted her upon arrival.

"Ginny?" Percy queried in surprise. "Aren't you supposed to be at home?"

Ginny crossed the grass to the grouping and dropped onto the grass her robe falling open to reveal her sweaty t-shirt and grass-stained jeans. "I'm not going back, and you can't make me."

"Gin, it's your birthday why aren't you primping for tonight," Fred asked of his sister.

"Stuff tonight, I'm not going." Ginny scowled up at her brother crossing her arms tightly over her chest.

"What happened?" Percy asked resignedly, recognising the signs of a Weasley pushed to the brink.

"Mum that's what. I've had nothing but her going on about how I'm going to have to get a proper job. How Quidditch isn't a real career and how Neville will want me to be a proper wife. As if she has the slightest idea what Neville wants, and as if there is any such thing as a proper wife and don't get me started on the rubbish she's come out with about Audrey."

"Me?" Audrey asked in surprise.

"Yeah," Ginny said her arms still crossed tightly, her anger fairly vibrating her slim frame. "You don't want to know, trust me, but suffice to say this proper wife I'm supposed to turn into is what Percy should be finding himself. Well, she can shove off. I'm of age, and I'm not going back."

"Then where will you stay?" George asked. "You said try-outs would be all summer ready for the autumn training."

"I don't know," Ginny said. "And I don't care as long as it's not there."

"You can stay with us if you like." Freed offered.

Ginny pulled a face. "Thanks, but Mum will just come to the shop and cause a scene. I was thinking of bunking with Luna maybe, I don't want to have to ask Nev, it's hardly fair to him."

"You can stay here."

"You wouldn't mind?" Ginny whipped around to face Percy.
He sighed. "If you are here then you aren't tramping around the countryside sleeping on sofas. You will be safe, and while Dad and Bill know where we live, Mum does not. The wards are set to filter post so you won't be subjected to howlers either."

"Percy!" Ginny squeaked jumping up and throwing herself at him. "You are the best brother."

"Oi, we offered too!" the twins protested in tandem.

Ginny turned in Percy's arms. "Yes, you did, and I am grateful, but not daft enough to live with you pair."

"No parties. No gentlemen callers. If you want to see Neville you do not see him here." Percy said. "I'm not having anyone say you got pregnant while under my roof."

"Wand oath," Ginny said. "Thanks, Percy. It was awful. I couldn't take it much longer."

The silver form of Mrs Weasley Patronus shimmered into view. Ginny's wand was in her hand and slashing through it before it could fully form. "No," she said standing stiffly, scowling at the space the spectre had appeared. "I don't want to hear it."

Mr Weasley's Patronus arrived stopping in front of Fred and George. "Ginny has left. Let me know she is safe, please. I'll deal with your mother."

Fred looked over at Ginny with an eyebrow raised.

Ginny made a gesture with her hand. "Go ahead, Dad's been trying, you know."

Fred whipped out his wand casting his Patronus and sending it on its way with the messages that Ginny was with them and had somewhere safe to stay.

"So, since you aren't going to your birthday party shall we have a do here?" Audrey suggested. "I wouldn't want you to miss out. Seventeen is your version of the muggle eighteen, isn't it?"

"Yes," Percy said.

"Well then, if you promise not to hex it, there's my CD player and CDs. We can order in and make a bit of a night if it. If you want to invite your friends Luna and Neville over?"

"Really?" Ginny asked shooting a glance at Percy.

"Really," Audrey said. "I mean you've just come of age and walked out of your parental home. It's a big day."

"Well, in that case," Ginny said her frown disappearing. "I'll let Luna and Neville know. What's a CD player?"

Fred and George grinned. "You'll love it but no magic near it, or it goes funny."

Ginny shrugged. "Seems reasonable. Is there anywhere I can change, only I was running drills in this."

"I'll show you where everything is. You'll be in the spare room, I'll get you some towels and show you the shower. I have a hairdryer unless you know the charms?" Audrey said leading the way inside and upstairs.

"Thanks for this," Ginny said once they were alone.
"It's alright," Audrey replied. "My sister did something similar when she turned eighteen. She was seeing this guy, and my parents hated him, absolutely hated him. They wouldn't have him at the house or anything. Rachel pitched a fit said that if they wouldn't accept them, then she wasn't going to stay under their roof any longer and left."

"What happened?" Ginny asked curiously sitting on the end of the bed pulling her shrunken bag from her pocket.

Audrey shrugged. "Rachel found out her boyfriend was a waste of space after spending two weeks sleeping on other people's sofas and came home. Big apology later and all was well. My parents were frantic until one of Rachel's friends called to say she was staying with her. Then they kept tabs on her best they could and let her work it out."

"Yeah well, there will be no big apology," Ginny said. "I'm trying out for Quidditch teams, and I think I've got a good chance and unless Mum sorts her life out, I'm going to take up Harry and Hermione's offer."

"America?"

"Yeah. I don't know if I'm good enough for their leagues, but I'll try out anyway. If I end up signing for a team here, I'll have to find somewhere to live."

"Percy was in a house share before he got his flat," Audrey said as Ginny started taking off her robes and wriggling out of her jeans and t-shirt. "You might be able to share with a teammate."

Ginny pulled her dressing gown out of her bag pulling it on over her underwear. "The bathroom is this way," Audrey said. Ginny scooped up her toiletries and followed Audrey.

Once Ginny was showered and changed she joined her brothers and Audrey in the garden again. Percy had already put a CD into the player, and the music was filtering through to them.

"This is different," Ginny said cocking her head as she listened. "I like it."

"Remember no magic," George said.

"Ok. Err where do I tell Neville and Luna to go?"

"Have them go to the shop," Fred said. "Percy's floo is attached to the flat, we can let them through from there."

Ginny nodded and sent her horse patronus on its way with the messages about the change of plans.

"We've invited Bill. He's going to the Burrow first to see Mum. It will be suspicious if he doesn't turn up too."

"Is Fleur coming?" Audrey asked.

"You've met Fleur?" Ginny asked in surprise.

"Yes," Audrey said. "Shortly after the thing in February. She's quite nice and since your Mum isn't exactly welcoming to her either we've got things in common."

"Fleur is coming," George answered. "She coming straight here while Bill goes to the Burrow. Dad is going to calm Mum down then come over for a bit too. He won't tell her where you are just that he found you at a friend's."
Ginny winced at the implications of that.

"So, baby sister, what do you want to eat? There is a cornucopia of possibilities available to you."
Fred said leaving his chair to drop down onto the grass next to her.

Ginny shrugged. "I liked pizza and Dad has taken me out for Chinese which was an experience. I'm not sure he got everything right because they looked at us a bit funny when we walked in to order it and I had to help a bit with the money, but it was pretty good."

"There's a decent pizzeria and Chinese that delivers here," Audrey said. "What about your friends? What will they eat?"

Ginny shrugged. "I don't know I don't know if they've eaten muggle food before."

"Well, perhaps we can wait and see what they want. We could always have a bit of everything it's not as if bringing it back or keeping it warm are problems for us." Audrey offered.

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**December 1999**

"The muggles are putting on a firework display. I thought I'd go and see it. Do you want to join me?" Arthur asked casually.

"Oh no Arthur, honestly why can't you just go down Diagon Alley? I'm sure you could get fireworks from your own sons if you want them so much."

Arthur hummed non-committaly. "Well, I shouldn't be home much later than one or two in the morning."

"Fine," Molly said. "Do try and stay out of trouble."

"I will," Arthur promised fondly.

Arthur flooed to the twin's shop. Fred and George were fizzing with excitement at the prospect of the coming event. They flooed through to Percy's house. After Percy had closed the gate on the floo, they tromped upstairs to find Audrey laying the table.

"I thought we should eat before we go out. Also, we can watch the celebrations in France since they are ahead of us. The BBC has a programme on the telly showing all the other countries celebrations as they tick over to midnight, its quite interesting," Audrey said to the collection of Weasleys. "I assume that Fred and George found us an excellent spot to watch from and if we apparate there, we won't have to fight the crowds on the Tube so we can afford to be a little bit later."

"Yes," George said helping set out the cutlery. "We went on a reconnaissance mission. You did say you wanted as broad a view of the river as possible."

"Yes," Audrey said. "It's going to be turned into a river of fire, or so the rumours go."

"Well then, we found a spot. It's an apartment building. They haven't sold all the penthouse apartments yet, and there is one empty on a corner with a brilliant view."

"And a security service I would expect," Audrey replied with a trace of worry.

Fred's grin grew devilish. "Well perhaps on the ground floor but we're not walking in the front door. We'll apparate straight on to the balcony."
"And what about the neighbours?"

"Won't know we're there. There are dividers between balcony spaces, and if they do see us, we can say we're the new neighbours. By the time they recover from their hangovers they won't remember us."

Audrey shrugged. "If I get arrested for breaking and entering, I expect you to bail me out since I'm the only one of us who can have a criminal record."

"No sooner said than done. But we won't be."

Audrey let it go. In the company of four wizards, it was entirely likely that no one would know they were there or would remember come morning. And for a few hours for one night an apartment that was unsold and unoccupied wouldn't really hurt anyone.

The meal eaten, the washing up done by magic, they settled down in front of the television to watch the world welcome in the New Year. The display in France impressed everyone, and they set about getting ready to watch London's efforts with anticipation making them slightly giddy.

Fred and George apparated them all on to the balcony. Fred had the large glass door open in a trice and curiosity drove her inside to look around. The apartment was empty. The carpet on the floor was thick and plush, and it smelt faintly of paint. The view was spectacular. The twins had found the best place for them to watch the fireworks from.

Percy enlarged the shrunken garden chairs he had packed for them all, then the picnic that Audrey had packed to see them through the fireworks. Dinner meant they wouldn't be hungry, but there was still a fair amount of alcohol in another bag Percy had despite the fact they were only expecting to be gone an hour, so she'd thrown munchies and nibbles in to help soak up some of the booze.

Audrey poured herself a glass of wine and went out onto the balcony to settle in and watch as the crowds along the river banks and bridges swelled. To her surprise, Arthur joined her.

"Do you do this every year?"

"Break into an empty apartment to watch fireworks?" Audrey asked with a smile.

"No," Arthur said. "Though I find it unsurprising this was Fred and George's answer. I hope that it's not too uncomfortable for you. I know that sometimes we seem to ride roughshod over your laws and rules and that must become frustrating after a while. But I was referring to the fireworks."

"No this is a new thing for the millennium. Most people have their own celebrations and let off a few fireworks. This is the first time it's an organised event. It's a new millennium, so they want to mark it. I mean its technically the same as it was last year and it's just going to be another day tomorrow, but it will be two thousand instead of nineteen ninety. I don't think world poverty is suddenly going to end, but perhaps it's the hope that we might as a society fix the things that are wrong. That's probably hopelessly naïve of me, but sometimes I think you have to go with the hype. Otherwise, we'd all be sat here worrying that tomorrow none of the computers will work and the financial systems will have crashed, and we'll all be plunged into a blackout of proportions that we cannot predict."

"Is that a possibility?" Arthur asked with interest.

Audrey shrugged. "Well, there's a theory that the end of days is set for twenty-twelve so I suppose anything is possible. It's something to do with the computers seeing the two-digit date as two zeros and that resetting all the systems or something, I'm not very sure. The papers are making a huge deal about it, telling everyone they need to make sure their computers are Y2K compliant although how
that is done, I'm none too clear on. Do you not celebrate New Year's in the magical world?"

"Oh yes, there's usually a few fireworks set off in Diagon Alley. People go out to the pubs and what not, but there certainly hasn't been the buzz about the millennium that you describe."

"Perhaps because you are longer lived," Audrey mused. "If over a hundred years is the average and you had a wizard that was three hundred years old maybe living for a thousand is a matter of time for you rather than the impossibility it is for us."

Percy approached with Fred in tow holding out flat folded paper bags. "Audrey, I'm not sure what to do with these. There isn't a built-in microwave."

"Oh no, I didn't think there would be. I thought a warming charm might do it. I brought more than a few in case it takes a bit of finessing."

"What are they?" Arthur asked.

"Microwave popcorn," Audrey answered. "The popcorn kernels are inside the bag with the butter. Usually, you put them in the microwave that heats the kernels until they cook and pop. The butter in the bag flavours the popcorn and the bag expands as the kernels pop keeping them all together."

Arthur nodded and eagerly reached out for one of the folded bags. Percy handed one over dubiously. "So how hot is a microwave?"

Audrey shrugged. "Usually, four minutes on high and a regular microwave is eight hundred watts. I don't know how that translates into heat."

"Well," Arthur said pulling his wand out from his pocket. "In the interest of science shall we find out?"

It took two attempts to get the right level of warming charm to cause the bags to fully pop. Arthur's concentration had wavered when the first kernel had popped causing his spell to falter. Fred impatient and eager had cast a stronger charm on the bag causing the kernels to promptly burn without popping. Arthur had reapplied his charm, and the results had been a fifty-fifty split of popped and un-popped kernels.

"You can try again on those that haven't popped," Audrey encouraged. "Sometimes they'll pop on a second go. Fred's are only fit for the bin."

Each of the Wizards picked up a bag and silence ensued while they concentrated, only broken by the sound of popping corn and munching as Audrey sat back with the popped corn from Arthur's attempt and watched.

Popcorn done, drinks replenished, warming charms and a charm against the threatening rain cast they settled in to watch the last of nineteen ninety-nine slip by.

They joined in with the thronged masses along the riverside the chanted countdown loud enough to hear from their balcony. From around them the occupants of the apartment block could be heard counting down and as Big Ben tolled, the night sky lit up.

"Happy New Year!" They chorused was the bangs of the fireworks drowned out the raucous chorus of auld langs syne coming from all around them.

The twins had picked well, they had an unparalleled view of the river. The fireworks went on and on and on while the cheers and whoops of the crowds drifted up to them. For fifteen magnificent
minutes, the black night sky was painted a glorious cornucopia of colour.

When it was over Audrey lowered her gaze from the sky, her neck protesting the movement. Percy had an arm wrapped around her, and he kissed her softly. "Happy new year."

"Happy new year to you too," she smiled. Then glancing over at the twins and Arthur who were still watching the spectacle she turned back to Percy. "Clean up then back to ours? I think it might start to rain."

Percy nodded summoning the rubbish and removing all traces of their presence. Assured that the door was locked the four tipsy wizards apparated back to the house Percy taking Audrey with him.

The settled into the sitting room where Audrey turned on the television. "We can watch all the other displays of all the people behind us."

Percy unpacked the bags arranging the uneaten nibbles neatly on the coffee table and summoned everyone a new drink.

"I reckon we could do something like that," George said. "Portable firework displays. Ours are good, but they aren't as spectacular as that."

"That cost rather a lot, and was for public display," Audrey countered. "You wouldn't want to put something like that on just for any old reason. For a start, you'd need to get a permit for the noise alone."

"Yeah, but we could market them for events rather than garden parties."

"Don't you have things like that already?"

"Not quite," Percy said. "The Tri-Wizard Tournament while not finishing in quite the expected way, didn't have anything set up for afterwards as it were. There would have been a ceremony to hand out the cup and crown the winner but nothing more. The students were expected to return to their assigned sleeping quarters and carry on. The Quidditch world cup celebrations are a little more organised in that celebrations are expected, and fireworks are included in the planning but there is nothing like that. If you could make the displays big enough and last long enough there might be a market for it. You would have to do some market research, but sports teams might be interested, to celebrate winning the leagues. The World Cup organisers, if you could get in with them, might give you an opening to a more global market. But, and I don't want to throw cold water on your ideas, but aren't you going to be stretching yourselves a bit thin? With the shop and the wands and now this?"

Fred waved a hand dismissively. "Fireworks are not difficult to make. We could employ someone to make them in bulk or hire someone, or several someones to make them in bulk. We can market anything. Then it would be a case of selling them and making sure that everything went alright on the night for the first few then either sell them as a complete kit or find someone to set up and light them when the time was right."

"Tonight's were all run by a computer," Audrey put in. "There will have been people setting them up, but the ignition would have been electrical. Presumably something you could use magic to imitate?"

George leant forward eagerly. "Really?"

"Yes," Audrey nodded.

"Well then, it looks like we've got some work to do," George said to Fred.
Fred nodded and toasted his brother then Audrey, Percy and Arthur. "To good ideas!"
January 2000

Percy tossed the document down on his desk. His eyes moved to the door separating his office from the Minister's that stayed open at Kingsley's behest. Percy knew, knew that the document he had just finished reading, to be included in his weekly summary report for the Minister, was something Kingsley was already aware of. Percy knew it, and he wondered why Kingsley had let him find out this way.

Percy got to his feet, crossing to the open door. Kingsley had been the Minister for coming up to two years, he had become comfortable with the power he wielded. He had begun to drive forward legislation. Changes were being made, and for the most part, Percy was on board with them. But this, this Percy was not on board with.

"Minister?"

"Yes, Percy?" Kingsley sat in state behind his desk, looked up from a report Percy could swear the man wasn't reading. Percy had learnt Kingsley's mannerisms as he had learnt the two Ministers before him. He wasn't fooled, Kingsley had been waiting.

Percy stepped further into the room, the report was still clenched in his hand. "Minister, I've just seen that the repeal of the marriage law has been struck from the schedule."

Kingsley leaned back in his chair his hands steepling as he regarded Percy over the top of them. "Yes, look, Percy, I'm sorry, but a deal had to be made, and since the law is currently suspended until a full review the legality of it, the repeal is less important. We need to move forward with the changes that are going to make an immediate difference to the population."

"Minister, the law needs to be repealed, it isn't sound. The preliminary reports from the scrutinisation panel clearly show that it is in violation of the rights of the muggle-born witches. The longer it is left in place, the more the Ministry will have to do to overcome it."

"I do understand that Percy, but the Auror department needs funding. St Mungo's needs every knut it can get its hands on. The new ward for long-term care wasn't exactly free, and you know how much push back we suffered on that. This was simply a casualty for the greater good."

Percy looked down at the report crumpled in his hand. "Audrey speaks to the Grangers regularly. Once a fortnight or so. When they ask because they will, shall I tell them that you decided that the new department at St Mungo's was more important than their daughter's rights as a witch? Shall I tell Phil Mills that his niece is going to be forced to marry in less than five years? Shall I tell Audrey that any daughter we have will still run the risk of being subject to this travesty?!"

"Percy, I am not in the habit of defending my decisions to anyone. I am the Minister for Magic, this decision, while not palatable for everyone, was the right one at this time. The marriage law is no longer a threat to Muggle-born or half-blood witches, it's suspended. No one is being forced to marry anyone. By the time any child you have is of age, the law will be a distant memory. We will address it as soon as we are able. Once there is an open slot it will go on the docket."

Percy nodded knowing there was no point in arguing. "Yes, Minister."

He turned to return to his office smoothing the crumpled parchment out. He completed the report he
was drawing up for the Minister and sent it through to Kingsley's in-tray by magic rather than hand delivering it and going over the highlights as was his habit. Percy knew Kingsley would see the snub for what it was, a show of Percy's disapproval, but it was the only thing Percy could do. Audrey wasn't the only one that spoke to the Grangers after all, and he was the one with a fiancée awaiting the law being repealed so she could start planning her wedding. He was the one who wanted a family, and he was also the man who might have to explain to his daughter that she was to be married off. The more he thought about it, the more it grated, it wasn't just him, Mills' niece wouldn't be safe, neither would her cousin. Mills had told Percy over drinks that Suzanna, while having never displayed accidental magic had received her Hogwarts letter on her birthday surprising everyone. How many more half-bloods and muggle born would have to have this threat hanging over them, waiting for the day they no longer had a choice? How could he face his own hypothetical daughter and explain that this law existed?

Kingsley left on time a curt nod and a simple 'good evening' marking his exit from the office. Percy returned both just as curtly. He tided his files and reports away clearing his blotter and lowering the lamps, so he was sat in semi-darkness.

Percy didn't believe Kingsley. There was always an amount of wheeling and dealing to get things done. That was just how things were, and Percy had seen it done for good and for ill. The marriage law was relatively unimportant to most. The numbers of those affected were small, and as a suspended law it was no longer in effect. But that wasn't the point. It was still law, suspended or not. One word and the law would become active again, and the affected witches would back where they started. Riddle had instigated it to trap one witch, to gain ground in his fight with Harry Potter. They had won, Riddle was gone, the Death Eaters had been rounded up and arrested. The British Ministry for Magic had patted itself on the back for a job well done and capitalised on Riddle's defeat. Yet this law was still hanging on, a shadow of a regime they were slowly irradiating, a reminder of how far they had fallen.

Percy pulled a piece of parchment towards him. If Kingsley was going to let it be used as a bargaining chip to get what he wanted from the stauncher traditionalists within the Ministry and the Wizengamot, then there was nothing Percy could do about that. That was Kingsley's right as Minister.

That didn't mean, however, that Percy was going to do nothing. He had controlled the Ministry once before. He had spent months curtailing Thickenesse from being a competent Minister. He had worked under both Scrimgeour and Fudge doing the heavy lifting, so the Ministers didn't have to. If Kingsley wasn't about to repeal this law, well then, the answer was obvious, Percy would do it himself.

The list of contacts he had was a significant number. Those that would be of use for what he was planning would be fewer, the number willing to help probably fewer still. But that didn't matter, sometimes the wizarding world forgot that those with muggles in their ancestry weren't always born in isolation. Some had half-blood relatives. Any number of first-generation half-bloods had non-magical siblings, it wasn't a stretch to point out a comparable situation and drum up sympathy and outrage. Sympathetic, outraged witches and wizards were concerned citizens. Concerned citizens who could be motivated to bring the right amount of pressure to bear on a Ministry they saw as slow to act.

Percy spent his evening at his desk plotting. When he finally finished he gathered up the sheets of parchment and placed them in a drawer under a secure ward that Kingsley couldn't break, even with his access to the Ministry wards.

Percy wouldn't be able to get the law repealed in the next six months. He probably wouldn't be able
March 2001

"A word," Kingsley said as he came through the door. Percy stood up from his desk and followed the Minister into his office. Kingsley dropped the folder he was carrying on his desk and whirled on his aide. "Just what in the name of Nimue was that?"

"I'm afraid—,"

"Don't," Kingsley barked. "Don't stand there and prevaricate. You damn well know what. This has your fingerprints all over it."

Percy tipped his head slightly in acknowledgement. "I am unable to, as an aide to the Minister for Magic, raise issues to be discussed for a vote in the Wizengamot."

"So you got Wallace to do it for you?" Kingsley demanded. "Do you know what I just walked into? I just had to defend this office for an hour! An hour! While that uptight windbag berated me for the discriminatory actions of the Ministry of Magic. I didn't even put the bloody law in place."

"No," Percy replied icily. "But you didn't repeal it when you had a chance either."

"So you went over my head? For Merlin's sake, what were you thinking?"

"I thought that the law was a travesty! I thought that there is a large portion of our society that forgets what half-blood means. I was thinking that I didn't want to speak to John and Helen Granger, and Hermione and Harry one more time without being able to tell them we had done something! If I had to tell them one more time, that this government, the government which they fled and returned to save the arse of, had still not managed to collectively get its shit together enough to repeal this ridiculous law, then I was going to pack up, and bloody well join them." Percy stepped towards Kingsley, his hands waving for emphasis.

"The Ministry of Magic is making headway, headway that three years ago was a pipe dream. But this notion that Muggle-born and half-blood witches are somehow to be controlled to stop the dilution of the bloodlines is still hanging over us. Our international standing is not going to get any better. We are not going to attract investment and overseas workers with laws like that. And you played it like it was nothing. You used it as a bargaining chip, every time it was raised by this office you sold it to the highest bidder. So, no, I wasn't going to watch you trade on the lives of British witches. I wasn't going to stand aside and do nothing, I've never stood aside and done nothing when it has been in my power to help, and I wasn't about to start now. You've brought this on yourself."

Kingsley stood silent and still as Percy declared his defiance, his face a hard mask of anger.

"And this, you think, will get you elected to this office? This was your play for power. Fuck, Percy, no one is going to elect you with this tied to you. We've come a long way, yes, but the traditionalists still have a hand on the reins. How are you going to convince them to elect you when your name is all over this repeal?"

"It wasn't about getting elected. It was about doing the right thing."

"The right thing?" Kingsley scoffed. "The right thing would have been letting the issue be dealt with in due course and due process. Not even the influence of the Malfoys could get you in power now, and yes, I know about the aid you gave Draco Malfoy just after he graduated."

"That wasn't about power either," Percy retorted. "It was about giving a disaffected young wizard,
with nothing but time and money on his hands to brood about how the world had done him wrong, something else to focus on. You knew the risks the same as I did."

"Oh, so you're the better man, is that it?"

"It's not a bloody pissing contest," Percy snapped. "I did what I could. I believe in a better future. I believe that the magical society of Great Britain can be better. Maybe that makes me an idealist, maybe it's never going to happen, and I'm deluding myself. But there will always be a time when we must choose between what is easy and what is right."

Kingsley made a sharp gesture with his hand. "If you had any notion of becoming Minister next year forget it. While your plan has worked, and the law is due for repeal at the next Wizengamot session, I was hounded on the way back to this office. Damnit, Percy, three years of laying the right foundations and you threw it over for this."

Percy shrugged. "It was worth it."

"It had better have been." Kingsley snapped. He dragged a hand down his face and took a deep breath in and out, releasing some of his anger. "No, you're right, it was worth it. Perhaps it should have been done sooner but never the less its done now. Just, next time, just, tell me, will you?" Kingsley requested looking tired and drained.

Percy felt a fluttering of remorse, the meeting had obviously been hard on Kingsley, and he had had no prior warning it was coming. It had been delivered as fait accompli to remove the risk of it being cut again. Which was also why it had taken longer than Percy's estimation of twelve months to be delivered. "Yes, Minister."

Percy went home that night and called America on the large mirror they used to contact the Grangers and Ginny. John answered the mirror promptly making Percy think the man might have been waiting for his call.

"Well?" John asked eagerly. "Did you do it?"

Percy nodded. "Yes," he said his voice hoarse as a lump swelled in his throat.

John jumped off the edge of the desk he was perched on, approaching the mirror. "Goddamnit, Percy I want to hug you! Hang on, stay there, Helen is downstairs, let me get her." John moved from the visible range of the mirror and Percy heard him faintly calling for Helen. John returned to the room. "She's coming, you need to tell her yourself."

"Tell me what?" came the familiar sound of the woman Percy held dear for a number of reasons.

"The law, it's going to be repealed at the next Wizengamot session," Percy dutifully informed her.

Helen clasped her hands together and jumped slightly in delight. "Oh, Percy! That's wonderful! Thank you. I wish you were here, I could just hug you."

Percy smiled at Helen's reaction. "John said the same thing, perhaps you should hug each other instead."

Helen followed his instruction and hugged her husband tightly. "So? Who knows? Have you told Audrey? Or Fred and George yet?"

Percy shook his head. "No. Until it goes before the Wizengamot I wasn't going to."
"But it is on the docket?"

"Yes, and it will pass once it gets there, we've tied everything up. I'm sorry it's taken so long."

"No Percy, you did this. It was going to get pushed aside again and again because of the suspension but this way she's finally free."

Percy nodded unable to find anything to say at the moment.

"Will you come to the wedding? The both of you? We can send Dobby to collect you."

"Wedding?"

Helen nodded. "Once the law is repealed Harry and Hermione will be getting married. They didn't want to until they could freely."

"I'm sure if you give me notice we could get away. Without having to get on a plane, travel time will be significantly less, we could perhaps make mini-break of it."

"That sounds like a plan only it won't be here. The chap we work for has a house in the Bahamas we borrow it every so often. They want to get married there, it's private, so Dobby is able to come with us, it has own stretch of beach that is cut off from the rest of the island. We won't have to worry about stray muggles wandering in and seeing Dobby or any magic."

"If I say no I think Audrey will be most upset with me so I will say yes for both of us. I'll let you have the Wizengamot date as soon as its set. But it's likely to be the week commencing the ninth of April with what I know of the current schedule."

"Shall we say the fourteenth? That gives us just over two weeks."

"Can you plan a wedding that quickly?" Percy asked.

Helen laughed. "Goodness probably not, but most of it is done. Dobby will be doing food, and we aren't going to do much more than put tables and chairs out with a few decorations and with, you know, magic, it takes very little time to accomplish these things."

"I suppose," Percy said. "I confess I haven't really thought about it."

"Aren't you and Audrey getting married?"

"Yes, summer this year. I am extremely lucky this law is set to be finally repealed, if she had to wait any longer I might have found myself short a bride."

"Wait for what?"

"For Harry and Hermione to be able to marry."

"Why? It's a nice gesture I suppose, but you shouldn't have held off just because of this law."

Percy shook his head. "it was Audrey's way of showing solidarity. She also thought, rightly so, the law was atrocious and was not happy it would impact on our future children, but that wasn't all of it. There were questions as to what it might mean when it comes out that I have driven it through."

"You won't lose your job, will you?" John asked worriedly.

"No, no, nothing like that. While I cannot put forth motions to the Wizengamot, I have instead used
what influence I have to push it through as you know. There is a cost to that, and it is simply that I
will not be able to run for Minister next year as was Kingsley's plan."

"You never said. Percy, I'm so sorry I didn't realise it was going to impact your career." Helen said
clasping her hands together in concern.

"Don't worry about it. I was aware of what it would likely mean, and I accepted the fact long before
we got to today. I won't be able to run for Minister next year, but I will be able to get married this
year without having that pressure so shortly afterwards. I'll have three more years before I have to
decide if I'm going to run, and in that time Audrey and I can take a look at when we want to start a
family, that sort of thing. I would not want to stand for Minister if we had just had a child, it would
be grossly unfair to Audrey."
I'm doing that thing again where the timeline gets a bit fluid, so we're going back to go forward. Sorry.

November '00

"New year. We've got nearly everything sorted. By New Year we should have Higgins on board, and once that's done, there's nothing to stop the repeal," Percy said tiredly leaning up against the kitchen cabinet after a long day at the office.

"Really?" Audrey brightened turning around from the stove where she was cooking dinner, wooden spoon in one hand.

"Yes."

"So, in the summer of next year? I think we could probably still get dates. Mum is going to insist on a church. Do you mind?" She turned back to the stove as a pan hissed. "How do you do it? Can we have a magical wedding? Will a muggle one count for you?"

"We can't have a magical marriage where two people go to the Ministry and say the vows. There's an element of magic in the process. Also, you wouldn't be allowed in the Ministry. Having an official come to perform the vows much like Bill and Fleur did is pointless if your parents can't be there and again involving an aspect of magic. If we are to marry in a church, particularly your family church, is there a way I could perhaps familiarise myself?"

"You mean, go to Sunday services?"

"I hardly know," Percy replied regrettably. "Which is rather the point."

"Of course, we can go. I'll let Mum know. We can go together if you like. Dad will want us over for Sunday lunch afterwards. Do you not have a religion?"

"We follow the Christian calendar of celebration, Christmas, Easter, but there's no emphasis on religion. Water into wine? Well, that's basic transfiguration."

"Oh, I suppose." Audrey mused.

"I can still respect the tradition," Percy said gently.

"I didn't mean anything by it. I'm not particularly religious myself. It was something we did as kids, but I stopped going as soon as I was allowed. But you didn't answer my question, would a Muggle marriage count for you?" Audrey glanced back over her shoulder at him.

"Audrey, I assure you, that no matter what the final Ministry decree is, my marriage to you, whether in a muggle or magical ceremony will most certainly count."

"Fleur said wizards don't divorce," Audrey said turning back to the stove.
"It is uncommon, but not impossible. Some magical weddings favoured by the more traditional involve magical vows, reducing the ability of the participants to dissolve their marriage."

"Would they hold it against you? Having a muggle wife? If you went for Minister?"

"I shall not be running for Minister in a year, so it has no bearing," Percy replied.

"Percy, of course it does! This is your career!" Audrey spun around to face him, ignoring the pans on the stove in favour of looking at him properly.

"This is my life," Percy indicated to them both. "If I never rise higher than my current position in the Ministry because of the choices I made, then so be it. I will not apologise for my actions under Thicknesse. I will not back down regarding pushing for the marriage law to be revoked, and there is not a day that I would consider that you are not the single most important thing in my life. The Ministry can go hang. I shall marry you in a church, and that will be that."

"I just think that we should have a plan. Something that they can't argue. If something happens to you, will they even recognise me as your wife? What about when we start a family?" Audre said, quickly turning back to the stove as a pan hissed as it began to bubble over.

Percy crossed the kitchen to come up behind her, he clasped his arms around her as she stood, tending the pans on the stove. "There may not be a way to formalise our marriage through magical means, but if there is, I shall find it and discover if it is a viable option for us."

Audrey nodded then nudged him gently. "Get the plates, would you? This is ready. We'll have to tell my parents about the dates as soon as we can, and well, I think we're going to have to organise something where my parents can meet your family. Mum hasn't been pushing for it, but once she knows we're setting a date, she will."

Percy laid out the plates and stepped back, allowing Audrey to dish up the meal. They carried their dinner through to the dining room where a swish of Percy's wand had the table laid.

"Entirely understandable. I suggest that we perhaps host a Sunday lunch. Invite your parents around for lunch, then my lot over for dessert. I think an entire meal together at this stage might be asking a bit much."

"Do you think your Mum would come to the wedding?"

"Honestly, no."

"We're going to invite her, aren't we?"

"Yes," Percy said after a pause. "Yes, we can, but I cannot see in the next six months, resolving what is between us."

Audrey phoned her Mum to let her know about the plans to marry in June. After the initial excitement had passed, Audrey brought up the reason she had called.

"We'd like to invite you for Sunday lunch, and well, we thought we would invite some of Percy's family for dessert. So, you could meet. Before, you know, the actual wedding."

"We'd like that," Lizzy replied. "Who would we be meeting?"

"Well, Fred and George, the twin brothers, possibly Bill his eldest brother and his wife, Fleur."
"What about his parents?"

"Probably his Dad, Arthur."

"Not his Mum?"

"No," Audrey sighed. "I don't think that's likely."

"Well, I suppose it's enough to be going on with."

"Yes," Audrey smiled, dropping into the armchair in the bay window of their front room. "I haven't met Charlie yet. That's Percy's second eldest brother. He works abroad and doesn't come home very often. I have met his youngest brother and his sister. They are nice. Ginny is in America though so I don't suppose there will be many chances for you to meet before the wedding. And Percy and Ron aren't especially close."

"So, we're meeting everyone else, then?"

"Yes, are you alright with it? We just thought if it was dessert, it meant that there were fewer chances for it to get too awkward."

"Of course, and with so many of them, dessert is much more manageable than a whole meal."

"There's that as well," Audrey laughed. "Percy tells me that mealtimes when he was growing up, were something else."

"I can only imagine," Lizzy replied. "Well put us three down as RSVP-ing yes and let me know if there's anything you want us to bring. I'll phone Father Hirst and see if we can't get a date in June. You might not get to be too picky."

"Thanks, Mum," Audrey said her goodbyes and hung up the phone, letting out a sigh. She was not looking forward to her mum quizzing her future father in law about his wife's refusal to accept her. Frankly, she'd quite like to forget that that particular sword of Damocles was hanging over them.

Sunday came bringing Rick, Lizzy and Rachel to the house. Percy took command of the kitchen quietly confident in his abilities and allowed Rick to join him to escape the inevitable turn towards the wedding the conversation between the women made.

"How're things?" Rick asked, leaning against the cabinets out of the way.

"Work is going well," Percy replied. "We're on the home straight to wrap up a largish project. It's taken quite a lot of time, but I'm optimistic that come the new year we should have it completed."

"That's good," Rick said. "It's good to know you've settled on a date. I didn't think you'd have such a long engagement."

"It wasn't deliberate," Percy said. "We wanted to get the house done, and that took time, then this project took off at work. It has taken a lot of effort to complete, we agreed that I would finish it before we started on the wedding because of how involved it has been. Audrey has hardly been any less busy with the expansion of the shop. She's done exceptionally well."

"She has," Rick agreed. "She attributes it to you, introducing her to new suppliers."

Percy shrugged. "I'm not sure I did anything so impressive. I happened to know of a shop, and I took her there hoping, to, well, impress her, I suppose," Percy laughed. "Everything after that is Audrey's
hard work."

"Lizzy said Audrey asked if you two could come to services with us."

"Yes, if that's alright with you. My family isn't religious, and I would like to familiarise myself with things before the wedding."

"It's a good idea," Rick replied. "You can meet Father Hirst. He christened both Audrey and Rachel, he'll be delighted to marry you both, I'm sure."

Percy nodded his agreement. "I understand from Audrey that you are planning a holiday soon?"

Rick nodded, accepting the conversation change and went into detail about the planned trip to Italy until Percy indicated that the food was ready to be taken through.

The table had been cleared, and Audrey was in the kitchen, making coffee when the doorbell rang. She hurried down the hall to open the front door where a gaggle of Weasleys all crowded.

"Come in," Audrey said. "We're in the dining room still, I've just started making the coffee."

Fred and George bounced across the threshold, divesting themselves of their coats before heading to the dining room. Bill and Fleur followed them in, Fleur was holding a silver tray. "I have dessert. Shall I take it through to the kitchen, it just needs warming through."

"Please, I'll be with you in a minute," Audrey said then turned to the last person in the party. "Hello, Arthur."

"Hello, Audrey, dear, thank you for inviting us."

"It's quite alright. You're alone?"

"Yes, I am sorry."

"It's alright," Audrey said, laying a hand on his arm. "I can't say we were expecting her to come. Come through, my Mum and Dad would like to meet you, and I'm sure Fred and George have finished making an impression by now."

Arthur smiled. "They did promise to behave I'm just not sure that that means anything in the grand scheme of things. They've been trouble since they could crawl."

Fleur joined them holding a tray of cups and a teapot and coffee pot.

"I was going to do that," Audrey admonished. "You're a guest."

"It was no trouble," Fleur smiled. "I was in there and only finished what you had started."

Audrey gestured Fleur into the room where the rest of their guests had gathered. The dining room table was looking crowded now everyone had arrived. Percy had found some extra chairs which Audrey assumed he had transfigured out of something else in the cellar. As the ten of them jiggled and jostled for elbow space, Audrey took her own seat and let Percy complete the introductions.

Fleur handed out tea and coffee then took a seat at Bill's side. There was a pause where everyone looked at each other and Audrey bit her lip denying the laugh. It was slightly ridiculous that they hadn't gotten their respective families together in all the years that she and Percy had been together.

"So," she said. "We're planning to get wed in June. Any objections?"
The tension in the room broke as everyone smiled at the attempt at humour.

"Do you know where you will marry?" Fleur asked.

"The church I attended as a child," Audrey answered. "We'll have the ceremony at the church then arrange a hotel or something for the meal and the night do I suppose. I haven't really thought about numbers, but I don't think we'll go over a hundred or so."

Lizzy shook her head. "For the dinner, perhaps, but for the night do expect it to creep up to double that. There's always such and such who's a friend of a friend, and then there are all the plus ones."

Audrey sighed. "You're probably right, we haven't even started organising yet."

"We can get some magazine and look through them for venues," Lizzy assured Audrey. "We can visit those you think might be a possibility and narrow down the lists that way."

Audrey looked over at her sister. "Fancy touring venues with me?"

Rachel lifted a shoulder. "Why not, if you put me in some monstrous concoction of tulle and lace, however, I will ruin all your photographs."

"But I thought you'd look so good in custard yellow," Audrey smirked.

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Think again. No to puffy sleeves either thanks. I'd like to be able to attend the reception rather than hide in a loo because you've got awful taste."

"You'll be a bridesmaid as well, won't you, Fleur?" Audrey asked. "Since I've promised no puffy sleeves and to avoid custard yellow."

Fleur looked stunned for a moment. "Yes, of course," she replied, blinking quickly. "I would be honoured."

Audrey smiled back, warmly. "Do you think Ginny would agree as well?" she turned to Arthur. "I'll call her and ask, but I'd like her to be part of it as well."

Arthur smiled. "I'm sure she would be delighted to be asked. Although she does not suit custard yellow either so perhaps don't mention that."

"Who else? In the bridal party." Lizzy asked

"Just Rose. Four isn't too many, is it?"

"Four is manageable, and as you're all a similar age, you'll only need to find one style of dress which will help immeasurably. What about you, Percy, have you thought about groomsmen?"

"Err, well, not really. Do I need to match Audrey's numbers?"

"No, though it shouldn't be too tricky with the number of brothers you have," Rick pointed out.

A chime sounded from the kitchen and Audrey got to her feet. Fleur followed her into the kitchen as Audrey bent down and pulled the strudel out of the oven. "Fleur, this is a work of art!" she exclaimed at the delicately layers pastry.

Fleur shrugged. "It is not so difficult." She made a twirling motion with her hand.

"Oh," Audrey said grinning. "That I suppose is true. Can you grab the bowls and that jug there? It's
got the custard in it." Audrey glanced over her shoulder down the hall. "Umm, could you give it a quick reheat before we take it through? Save chucking it in the microwave?"

Fleur nodded, withdrawing her wand and casting the charm to bring the custard back up to temperature.

"You're a star," Audrey said. "Let me grab the ice cream, and we can take it all through."

The strudel was oohed and ahhed over before being sliced up and dished out. The conversation picked up between the group and Audrey breathed a sigh of relief that this wasn't a disaster. Her parents seemed to be getting along fine. Fred and George had been polite and distinctly calm for them which had Percy casting them glances every now and again. Audrey hid her smile in her dessert. Fred and George had been very much the same when she had met them for the first time. Right up until the dinosaurs had reverted them back to small boys again. She could appreciate their efforts not to overawe her family.

It wasn't until dessert had been cleared away that things went distinctly sideways. Audrey only caught the end of a silent conversation her parents had and instantly knew that they were about to bring up the one topic that Audrey had hoped that they wouldn't.

She shot a glance around the table searching for Percy hoping that he would know how to derail the conversation before it started. Her eyes landed on Fleur before they reached Percy and Fleur's own eyes widened taking in the situation.

"Ahem," Fleur said, drawing everyone's attention, interrupting Lizzy who had just turned to Arthur. "I hope you don't mind, but as you are all here, Bill and I would like to share our news. I'm pregnant."

Bill looked at his wife in slight shock and Audrey understood that they hadn't been planning on sharing that news today. As a distraction, it worked exceptionally well as the conversation was diverted into congratulating Fleur and Bill.

Audrey got up, moving around the table to hug Fleur. "Congratulations, I'm delighted for you." She pulled Fleur a little closer. "Thank you," she breathed.

Fleur released the hug shrugging laconically, "I hope that it does not spoil your wedding plans."

"Oh, god, yes, when are you due?"

"The end of April," Fleur said. "But with these things, there is no telling I understand."

Lizzy had come around the table to offer her own congratulations. "Yes, Audrey was on time bless her, but Rachel had to be induced. I'm very happy for you."

The conversation stayed safely in the areas of weddings and babies until Rick started making noises about leaving. Audrey walked her parents out to their car.

"They seem a friendly bunch," Rick said.

"God, how did Percy cope with so many brothers?" Rachel said. "He's the quiet one, isn't he?"

"Yes," Audrey replied drily. "I have told you about them before."

"Hearing and seeing Audrey, hearing and seeing," Rachel said as she got into the car.
Lizzy hugged her briefly. "I'll ring you in a day or so about venues if you want to get some magazines to start with."

"Thanks, Mum."

"Don't think I'm going to forget, though."

"Forget what?"

"About his Mum."

"Mum, please," Audrey protested. "Don't make a thing out of it, alright. It's, it's not simple, and Percy is really hurt and upset about it, and if you start grilling his Dad, it's just going to upset him more."

"What about you, love? Are you not going to be hurt?"

"She's not my Mum, and I don't care if she's against our relationship and wedding. She can't stop it."

Two weeks later, Audrey followed her mum back into her family home and dropped tiredly into a chair at the kitchen table.

"Tea?"

"Yes, please."

"So, did you like any of the venues?" Lizzy asked as she put the kettle on and got the teabags out of the cupboard.

"Urgh, maybe the second one. Maybe. The first one is too far away and that third one, I think Percy would bang his head on the ceiling in that function room."

"There is no garden on the second one though just the ballroom which admittedly was exquisite."

"Hmm, Percy would like it," Audrey said. "And let's be honest a garden isn't necessary it will probably rain anyway."

"Well there's a good chance, yes, but by the twenty-first of June, you should be able to expect some good weather. Are you sure you want to get married on a weekday? Father Hirst did say they still had some weekend slots later in the year open."

"Yes, but they weren't until September. I don't mind, and if people can't make it because of work commitments, then that's fine. Also, you know that it will help with the reception costs not to have it on the weekend."

"I liked it, the second venue. We'll have to take Rachel and Percy to see what they think. Does Percy's family want any input?"

"Arthur won't," Audrey said with a shake of her head.

Lizzy gave Audrey a knowing look.

"Mum don't."

"You've been engaged for nearly three years, and she won't come around at all?"
"No. She doesn't approve of me. Percy's mum wants him to marry someone within their community. Someone who understands, who isn't an outsider."

"But Fleur, Bill, you said that Fleur grew up in France?"

Audrey nodded.

"They got to marry, why shouldn't you and Percy?"

"Molly doesn't really approve of Fleur either. She was quite cruel by all accounts until Bill had his accident and Fleur stood by him."

"She went to their wedding, though."

"Yes, though Fleur would sooner she hadn't. She took over. Molly is quite controlling."

"You have met her, haven't you?"

"Yes, back in ninety-eight. It wasn't auspicious. She was polite, but Percy wasn't on good terms with them, and once she found out I wasn't from their community, she refused to invite me to family events such like."

"I suppose it's better she doesn't come if she's so against it, but I couldn't imagine hurting your child like that. It's unfathomable."

Audrey shrugged, sadly. "I think it's quite beyond reconciliation. Arthur and Percy's brothers are all standing by him, us."

Lizzy reached out to cover Audrey's hands with her own. "I want it to be special for you."

"It will be, without her and her bigotry" Audrey said with a smile. "And talking of special. Can I have the Dress."

Lizzy blinked. "You don't want one of your own?"

"No," Audrey said, shaking her head. "I really don't."

Lizzy got up, leaving her coffee behind. "Yes, I mean you can have it, of course. Whichever of you married first was to be offered it. But honestly love, it was delicate when I wore it."

Audrey followed her mum up the stairs and into the spare room that used to be Rachel's. "But it will be ok, won't it? We got it out as kids, and it was alright."

"Yes, well, let's see, then. You'll need to have it altered to fit you. You're slimmer than I was. A touch taller too." Lizzy opened the wardrobe, reaching for a larger white box on the top shelf. The box was stained and crushed but still holding its shape.

Lizzy put the box on the bed, flipping off the lid and removing the top layer of tissue paper. Audrey reached for the neatly folded dress running her hands gently over the beaded lace. Carefully, Lizzy lifted the dress out from the box, laying it out on the bed and returning for the lace veil that accompanied it.

Audrey reverently touched the dress, rubbing the lace between gentle fingers. The underlying dress was a simple sheath with a deep v neckline held up by thin straps, it flared out at the back to provide a train. Over the top was a layer of lace and beadwork that as simply stunning to behold. Her great-grandmother had worn it when she married in nineteen thirty-eight, and it had since been worn by
her daughter, her daughter - who was Audrey's grandmother and her mother. Audrey would be the fifth member of the family to marry in the dress.

"Oh," Lizzy said in dismay. Audrey looked over at where her mother was spreading the veil out. The veil as had been the fashion in the thirties was a huge thing and mirrored the lace detail and beading of the dress all the way around the edges offering weight and solidity to the delicate fabric.

Audrey's face fell as she noticed the damage to the veil. The beading had come away, and the fabric was worn and fraying.

"The tissue," Lizzy said in dismay. "It must not have been acid-free. Here, let's check the dress as well."

Carefully they unpacked the dress to find the bottom hems in similar condition. The train, which was some five feet long, was nearly in tatters.

"Oh, love, I'm sorry," Lizzy said, wrapping an arm around Audrey. "I haven't looked at it in so long."

Audrey swallowed down the lump of disappointment welling within her, this was the dress she'd always wanted to get married in. It had been one of those things she'd known. Now it was looking horribly unlikely. Lizzy picked the train up carefully, trying to minimise further damage. "Perhaps if you shorten the train," she offered. "It was dreadfully heavy, and they aren't as fashionable anymore."

Audrey nodded dully, looking on as Lizzy continued to examine the dress. "Oh," she said the tone of her voice sinking Audrey's spirits even further. "The stitching has gone here as well. I'm sorry, if it were just the stitches, we might have managed something."

Audrey twitched, her brain latching onto the word, a memory surfacing. "Stitches?"

"Yes, here," Lizzy folded the seam back to show Audrey the frayed threads.

Audrey blinked as the memory coalesced into an idea. "Mum, can I take this with me?"

"Take it? Where?"

"I think I know someone who could fix it."

"Audrey love, this dress, its, well it's practically an antique. Your local dressmaker isn't going to be able to fix the lace or the beadwork, this was hand sewn."

"I know," Audrey said. "But I think I know someone who could restore it. Please, mum."

Lizzy sighed. "Ok, fine, but do consider that fixing it might not be cheap. Restoration work is only likely to be hideously expensive. I know you want to wear it love, but it might be cheaper to get a new dress."

Audrey nodded, carefully packing the dress back into the box. Wrapping it in the hateful tissue. "I know. I'd like to try though."

Lizzy shrugged, folding the veil and placing it on top before putting the lid back on. "Well, let me know, alright."

"Yes," Audrey agreed, gathering up the box. "I'm going to go. I'll ring and see if they can see me."
"Do you want me to come?"

"No, it's alright, Mum, I'll call you later and tell you what they said."

Audrey carried the box with reverence and determination. She honestly had no idea where Minerva might be at half past three on a Saturday, but she hoped that she would have at least one mirror with her and that the witch would be amenable to her idea.

Audrey stopped at an empty bus shelter and perched on the bar. Balancing the box on her knees, she rooted in her bag for her compact. "Minerva McGonagall," she said clearly into the mirror. It was a minute or two before the mirror showed the witch on the other end and from what Audrey could make out, she was still at Hogwarts.

"Audrey, this is a surprise. Is there something wrong?"

"No," Audrey said hurriedly. "Both Percy and I are fine. It's not that. It's, well I was wondering if I might ask a favour of you and more specifically of your elves?"

Minerva didn't hide the look of surprise on her face.

"I know it sounds a bit odd, but if I could explain?"

Minerva turned her attention to her surroundings briefly before concentrating on the mirror again. "I've got nothing pressing to detain me at the moment. Do you have access to a floo? I can meet you at the Lodge."

"I've just left my Mum's," Audrey said. "I'm about forty-five minutes from Fred and George's. Percy isn't home, so I can't use the floo there."

"For expediency then, shall I send Stitches to you, if you'd like?"

"Yes, please Minerva that would be great."

"Well, do go somewhere you won't be seen then, dear. No use giving someone a heart attack."

Audrey nodded and stood up. "Thanks, Minerva."

"Nonsense, my day was quite dull. This, at least, is a break from marking."

Audrey smiled in acknowledgement, then the connection was cut. She shoved the mirror back in her bag and got up from her perch. Looking around her to decipher which way she had walked from her Mum's she set off at a jog towards the ginnel where Percy apparated them to. Hidden in the shadow, it wasn't a moment before Stitches appeared at her side.

Audrey smiled a welcome and took the proffered hand. The Lodge looked the same as it had when she had stayed briefly. Clutching the large box closer to her, she followed Stitches into the conservatory where Minerva sat straight-backed at a small table. The tea things were already laid out, and Audrey couldn't help marvel at magic all over again.

"Audrey," Minerva welcomed her with a smile.

"Thank you for seeing me," Audrey said. "Especially at short notice."

"It's quite alright. Tea?"

"Please." Audrey settled into the chair, setting her bag down on the floor and the box next to it.
Once tea was dispensed Minerva looked at Audrey expectantly. "How might I or my elves help?"

"Right, well I don't know if it is possible yet and I know elves have a thing about being paid but I, I do want to pay you or them for their time. I'm not sure if it can be done and if it can be, well a professional in the muggle world would demand payment so I would, of course, pay you whatever you think reasonable."

"Perhaps," Minerva interrupted. "If you start at the beginning. You're starting to ramble worse than a second year out after curfew with no good reason."

Audrey nodded and rose from her chair picking up the box and setting it on her recently vacated seat. She flipped off the lid. "While you were all gone that night in February, I spoke to Pins. I'd noticed that all your elves bar Folly, have a theme to their names and Pins explained that they had all been employed to work for one of your ancestors who ran a successful high-end clothing shop."

Minerva nodded calmly, waiting.

"My great grandmother was married in 1938 in a dress she and her mother and grandmother, aunts, sisters all helped make. The dress has passed down the family, all of the daughters have worn it at their weddings, and I've always wanted to wear it when I got married. Only, when Mum packed it up after her wedding, the tissue, its damaged the lace. Mum wasn't sure that it could be mended because it's not just the lace and the train, but the dress it's self. I really don't know if a dressmaker or even a costume restorer could fix it, but Pins said that the elves used to do really high detailed, complex work, and I thought if anyone could fix it maybe they could?"

As Audrey looked at Minerva, the witch noted the quiet desperation in her eyes at the idea that this dress might be beyond salvage. Minerva's heart went out to the young woman. She had had something of her families when she had married, and it had meant the world to her.

"Well then," Minerva said, briskly over the lump in her throat. "Let's see what they make of it, shall we?"

Audrey's smile was blinding, and Minerva returned it with one of her own. "Pins?" she called out.

The elderly elf arrived with a slight pop bowing to his mistress and casting a curious glance at the box on Audrey's chair.

"Pins, Audrey has a wedding dress that has been damaged. I would like to know if you think it might be fixed?"

Pins quivered, a light coming to his clouding eyes. "Really, Mistress?"

Minerva wondered once more about her cabal of elves but nodded.

"Pins would be needing help," the elf said.

"Retrieve who you want," Minerva said with a nod. The elf vanished, and Minerva picked up a spoon from the table, transfiguring it quickly into a dressmakers dummy. "Get it out, and we'll put it on this so they can see it," she instructed Audrey as the elves returned in an excited murmur.

Audrey gently took the dress out of the box to an excited coo from the elves. She shot them a look before exchanging a humorous smile with Minerva.

"If they make me open a dress shop," Minerva said with a sigh, "I'll know who to blame."
The dress was put on to the dummy with care and Minerva transfigured a head on a pole so that the veil could be laid out alongside it. The elves swarmed the two dummies, and Minerva indicated that they should return to the table.

"It is quite special isn't it," she said as they sipped their tea.

"Yes," Audrey said. "It is to me."

After ten minutes of activity and low murmured conversation Pins approached Minerva. After looking for permission, the elderly elf bobbed in quiet excitement. "It can be done. It will take some time, the stitching of the dress will need to be done by hand, magic will help but it is delicate work. The lace and beadwork can be done the same way."

"You can do it?" Audrey asked. "You can fix it?"

Pins nodded, looking at his Mistress. Minerva smiled at Pins in approval as Audrey slumped in relief in her chair. "How long do you think the work will take?"

Pins shuffled his feet nervously. "It would be best to go slowly. If the Miss wishes to wear the dress, then it would be better for it to be fitted while the repairs are made."

"When are you thinking of getting married?" Minerva asked Audrey.

"June," Audrey answered.

Minerva looked expectantly at Pins.

"It will be done," Pins said a beaming smile creeping over his face.

"What do you need? Materials? Thread?" Audrey asked, sitting up and paying attention.

Pins shook his head. "The dress is too old for new things. The repairs will show."

"Then, how are you going to fix it?"

Pins looked at Minerva again, clearly asking for permission. Minerva waved a hand to indicate he should continue, curious about why her elf was reticent.

Pins turned back to Audrey. "We have things." The elf shot a cautious glance at Minerva again. "From before. We were not told to get rid of them, only pack them away."

"Ahh," Minerva said in understanding. "You have my permission to use the materials required from the stores to fix the dress."

Pins nodded. "Buttons is the best pattern drafter. She would need to know how Miss would like the dress to look. It has been changed since its original form."

Audrey looked at Minerva, who said in exasperation. "Honestly, tell them what you need and want, and they will do it. You need not look to me for permission for every decision."

Relieved Audrey turned back to Pins. "I don't know much about how it looked originally. The photographs of the dress when it was made have been lost."

Pins turned and called Buttons over. A quick chatter in what Audrey assumed was elvish and Buttons popped away. Buttons returned clutching a drawing pad which was over large for the elf, but easily levitated it while sketching furiously with a stub of a pencil.
Buttons flipped the drawing around. "This," Buttons said stabbing the sketch. "The train has been extended using material from the sides, making the dress more sheath-like. The veil was cut to provide material for the gathered lace over the train."

Buttons eyed Audrey up and down then flipped to a new sheet of paper while the two women watched. Furious scowling and scribbling followed then Buttons flipped the pad around again. "This would suit Miss the most while retaining the original dress as much as possible. The veil will be mended. The dress brought into a closer fitted sheath. The lace overlays the sheath loosely to show off the beading."

"Yes," Audrey said. "Yes, please."

Buttons nodded and returned to the elves crowding around the dummies.

Pins took hold of the box Audrey had brought the dress in and carefully shook out the tissue paper, catching the loose beads up before contemptuously incinerating it. Audrey squeaked in surprise at the sudden blast, but Pins seemed not to notice. He examined the box, then seemingly satisfied, snapped his fingers, and it vanished. Then he returned to the gathered elves. The chatter of eager happy elfish grew then stopped as the elves the dress and veil vanished.

Minerva chuckled.

"You don't mind, do you?" Audrey asked again. "I seem to have distracted your entire staff."

"It's good to see them happy," Minerva said, picking up her tea. "Though I am not opening a dress shop."

"Well," Audrey said. "Perhaps you might ask them to make you an outfit for the wedding. It would provide them with a challenge. That is if you want to come?"

"I would be honoured," Minerva said, smiling. "I haven't been to a wedding since Bill and Fleur's. My husband and I eloped, you see. Ran off because he wasn't quite the right sort, or that's what my Mam said, and I wasn't of a mind to listen to her. We went to Gretna green. They do wizarding marriages as well as muggle ones. Bonded over the anvil."

"That sounds lovely. Mum wants a church, sit down meal evening do the whole lot."

"There are worse things you can do than let her have it if you don't mind."

"I don't," Audrey confessed. "I want a day as well, but well, it might be a lot to ask at least half the guests?"

"Nonsense. We're magical not troglodytes. I can't speak for everyone magical of course, but we're not so different are we."

"No, but it's ingrained in Fred and George to reach for their wands and they've spent more time in the muggle world than most. Percy is better, but he's been pretending to be muggle longer. I'm just not sure I want my wedding crashed by a team of obliviators because someone made the wine levitate. We might get away with the odd happening or two, but I think even the thickest of my family might notice if a bunch of wand waving, robe-wearing people storm the reception."

Minerva laughed. "I can see you might have a point."
A Potter Wedding

January 2001

Fleur came over for dinner one night when Bill was working away. She was now obviously pregnant and glowing with happiness. After they had eaten, Percy had subtly suggested he go and finish some work leaving the women to chat. He left the room with two fond gazes following him out before the women turned back to each other. Fleur pulled out her wand, summoning her handbag to her. From it, she removed a flat wooden box holding it on her knee. "You have been kind to me. Accepting."

Audrey shrugged. "Fleur? What's this about? Why would I not accept you?"

"Perhaps it is the hormones, but I want you to know that your friendship has meant a lot to me. When I married Bill, I knew that his mother wanted something else for him. She always seemed to be the driving force of the family from the stories I was told, and I worried that it would hurt my marriage to be the wedge that drove Bill to choose. But you are Percy's choice. He is standing up to them, and he has brought his family onto his side, and so I no longer worry that Bill will ever blame me because he can now see it is not just him." Fleur stopped picking up her glass of water, sipping at it slowly. "More than that, I have a friend, a close friend." she looked meaningfully at Audrey. "Something I did not think I would get so I wanted to do something for you, who is my friend and will become my sister." Fleur stopped again and waved helplessly at her face where tears were filling her eyes. "I am not normally this weepy."

Audrey handed over the box of tissues from the coffee table. "There's nothing you need to thank me for, honestly."

"Perhaps, perhaps not, but that is not important. I know you have your dress and it is something old but what of the rest?"

"Oh well, I don't really know. Fred and George have insisted on having my something new, and while Percy practically fainted at the prospect, I have let them. The wedding is muggle so there isn't very much they can really get involved with. There is definitely a bit of an air of wanting to impress Percy with their muggle knowledge about them, I just couldn't crush them by refusing."

"Then if I may, might I have your something borrowed?" Fleur held out the flat box.

Opening the box, Audrey drew in a sharp breath before whispering. "Oh, Fleur, I couldn't."

"My arrière-arrière-grand-mère was like you. Not muggle, she was a witch, but a fish out of water. My arrière arrière grand père was a wizard of the aristocracy before the revolution, and they fell in love. But grand père, could not, or I suppose, would not, leave his titles, wealth and place in society. So, my grand-mère left to join him in Paris at the Court of Louis. She was a Veela, beautiful, alluring, and utterly devoted to her husband, but the life, it was hard. The Royal Court, it was not good. They escaped back to her people when the troubles began. All the wealth was converted to buy the land that my family still live upon, the family name was changed to avoid notice, and the Delacour's sprang into existence. Grand-mère's jewellery has been worn by the family over the years and the larger pieces sold when the need arose. Some were left. This piece, she was given to wear on her wedding day. The same day she left her family, for as far as she knew, the last time. It has not been worn since she died, and I would be honoured if you would wear it on your wedding day. When you join a world that does not understand you fully and will not treat you the way you deserve. Because you are brave and beautiful as grand-mère was."
Audrey's own eyes were quickly filling with tears at the emotional story. Her smile was wobbly but genuine as she reached out for Fleur's hand. "They are beautiful, and I will, of course, wear them."

**April 2001**

Percy breathed a sigh of relief when the Granger's elf finally let go of their hands. International floo travel was a terrible experience in his opinion and portkey was some degrees worse. He had been seriously considering whether it was worth flying on an aeroplane rather than putting themselves through the what was likely to be the trauma of side-along apparition by elf. To his surprise, however, it had been less bad than he was expecting.

Dobby had vanished, and Percy hoped the elf had a chance to recover because it can't have been an easy feat but put the elf out of his mind as Audrey's weight sagged against him.

"Are you alright?" he asked, turning towards her.

"Yes, I think. Yes. I will be, but Christ, your methods of travel are awful."

Percy hummed a note of agreement as he gently rubbed up and down Audrey's back as she settled herself.

"Are you both alright?" Helen asked as she approached.

"Yes," Percy replied, accepting the hug the woman bestowed on him then Audrey.

"Excellent. Well since you are the man of the hour as it were, let me show you to your room. It's wizarding space, we've got quite a few coming after all. Harry and Hermione have done it all themselves, and I have to say I am quite impressed. I must warn you though, your whole family accepted the invite and I know from what the twins have told Hermione that you're still working things out with your Mum, and well I just wanted to say, I've got no desire to bend over backwards for her. So, if she upsets you, she'll be removed, alright? I mean that's assuming she'll come because, well, muggles," Helen explained gesturing to herself with a grimace.

Percy squeezed Audrey's hand really wishing that people would stop apologising to him because his mother was being unreasonable. "You are not obliged in any way to me. I should not like to cause a scene."

"Don't be daft," Helen shot back as they entered the house and walked down the hall. "I'm the mother of the bride and sort of the mother of the groom, so there is no higher authority than mine. If she starts, then she's getting kicked out. I've asked Dobby to do no more today, so he's capable of taking her home. I mean, he won't listen because he's in a tizzy about the wedding, but I reckon he'll be strong enough by then. But anyway, that's a problem for tomorrow. This is you two, once you've settled come out to the veranda we've got a spectacular view and there are cocktails."

Audrey thanked Helen, who left them to it with a smile and nod. Audrey looked around the room, appreciating the space, the bed was low to the floor and covered in crisp white sheets. The large windows looked inland at the lush green vegetation.

Percy waved his wand, and their bag unpacked itself, the clothes smoothing as they hung up in the wardrobe.

Audrey poked her head around the other door in the room and found a well-appointed en suite. "I may be extremely jealous, this place is amazing."
"It's done exceptionally well. Most wizarding space feels a little claustrophobic as if it might waver at any point."

"This doesn't?" Audrey asked.

"No," Percy replied. "It's very good."

"Well, I'm not tired or jetlagged, and it hardly mussed at all considering I've just travelled four and half thousand miles in about ten minutes, so, shall we head out to the veranda?"

They walked through the house and found their way out to the veranda where John Granger and Harry were lounging.

"Percy!" John said, getting up and greeting them both warmly. "It's great to see you again. Well, you in person. How was the trip?"

"Mercifully brief," Audrey replied, accepting the hug from John. "I'm impressed with the rooms, Harry. Helen said they were yours and Hermione's doing?"

"Yeah," Harry said, hugging Audrey and shaking Percy's hand. "We thought it would be better than slinging up a load of tents."

"How are the preparations going?" Percy asked as he took the lounge chair offered.

"All done," Harry said. "I think Hermione's going over everything four times and even she had to say there's no more to be done."

"Where is she?"

"Sleeping," Harry said. "She's been working hard, and with tomorrow, she needed it. We've not got many people arriving today, just you two and the twins and they're coming from New York. They've been here a week or so working with Hermione, something about a product. I confess I didn't ask for details though I think Helen knows something about it."

Percy and Audrey rose early the next day and joined the Grangers for a relaxed breakfast. Fred and George joined them halfway through, a fizzing energy about them that Percy noted with caution. When the twins were that pleased about something, there was invariably trouble ahead for someone. Percy decided he wasn't going to worry about it, they liked the Grangers far too much to upset them, and Percy didn't think that they would bother either Harry or Hermione on their actual wedding day. Probably.

"What time is everyone due to start arriving?" Percy asked.

"The Portkeys are set for five-minute intervals from ten, the last is due at twelve," Helen replied absently checking her watch.

"Is Bill coming?" Fred asked the table in general.

"No," Audrey answered. "Fleur isn't fit to travel, and he didn't want to be away if she should go into labour. They've sent a gift, I've got it with ours."

The ceremony started at one. Everyone gathered in the large open space living room which had been transformed by magic. Rows of chairs sat facing a clear space in front of the thrown open folding doors. The sound of the surf was barely audible above the conversation of the guests who drifted in
from outside at some unknown signal.

Harry took his place at the top of the aisle formed by the chairs, nervously shuffling his feet. Ron stood next to him a hand on his shoulder as he offered quiet words of support.

Once everyone was seated, Hermione, escorted by John entered the room and walked through the corridor of chairs to Harry. There were no nerves visible, just blinding smiles. The ceremony was magical rather than muggle, Harry and Hermione recited their vows before the officiant who wove his wand over their joined hands a golden rope of magic wrapping around their wrists to flare with a bright burst of light before vanishing.

Magic had all the chairs cleared away while the guests congratulated the bride and groom. Everyone politely exited the room to allow the tables of food to be laid out and with yet another seemingly invisible signal everyone once again gathered inside.

John tapped his glass, and a tinkling chime rang out through the room. "Thank you," he said, addressing the room. "Before we get to the cake and food part, it's traditional to have speeches. Harry and Hermione decided against those, but since I'm only getting one chance to do this, they dutifully let me have an opportunity to say something." John sent a fond look over at the couple before turning to address the guests. "I'm not going to tell you that Harry and Hermione are made for each other, nor am I going to bore you with the details of how they came together and have stuck together. There are more inches of print covering that than I could do justice to. I wanted to say thank you for coming. There are people not here today that we would wish to be here. In this room, more people know the price of sacrifice than don't. Helen and I were lucky that the sacrifices that we had to make were not overly onerous. We have our family, and it is still whole even though for a while there it didn't look like we'd be so lucky.

Today has been a long time coming, and for that, we have another thank you to make. Today Hermione married the wizard of her choice freely. She stood up and made a commitment that wasn't compulsory and overshadowed by necessity. As of two weeks ago, my daughter is no longer a fugitive from the Ministry of Magical Britain.

Hundreds of witches for generations are no longer living with the fear that one day, someone is going to remove the suspension on a law that was breathtaking in its discrimination. Those witches are free, my daughter is free, and there is only one man that I can thank for that. Though I know, he declares his actions not wholly altruistic and would be the first to point out that it took many more people than him alone, without him, without his determination, commitment and pursuit of egalitarianism, today would look very different. I would ask, Ladies and Gentlemen that you raise your glasses to Percy Weasley."

John raised his glass, his eyes fixed on Percy. Percy felt his face heat but held his ground, he toasted John back with a small nod as the room raised their glasses to him. Audrey was looking up at him, her face delighted, so he leant down and kissed her hoping to hide a little longer.

John made his glass chime once more. "Now that's done, it's time for cake!"

Harry and Hermione stepped forward, and together, they picked up the knife. Percy edged to the back of the room and escaped to the veranda giving himself a moment to collect himself. Audrey followed him out.

"Well, that was unexpected," Percy allowed with an uncertain smile.

"Nothing you don't deserve," Audrey said, leaning into his side. "Your name can't be on it, so is it not better you get the acknowledgement you deserve from the people it matters to?"
"Yes," Percy agreed hesitantly "But in public?"

Audrey laughed. "Well, not very public," she teased "Only a small wedding."

"The wedding of Harry Potter, Chosen One, to Hermione Granger, the war heroine. A wedding attended by the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, the current Minister for Magic, the Head of the Department for Sports and Games in America, the entirety of Harry's excellent, world-renowned professional Quidditch team, a good handful of the British Aurory and my entire family. Need I go on?"

"No, but you knew that you'd be tied to it."

Their quiet moment was interrupted by the Minister for Magic himself and Tonks who followed him out protesting. "Kings, maybe not now."

Minister Shacklebolt ignored her and stopped beside Percy. "Perhaps this could have waited, but I have something for you. Call it an early wedding present." Kingsley pulled a small roll of parchment from his robe pocket and held it out to Percy who accepted it but didn't unroll it. "You've been reasonably decent about the repeal, and while I'm not fond of standing in a room and being forcibly reminded that I had nothing to do with it, that isn't actually your fault. You are on thin ice, however, and as the Minister for Magic, I had the power to help on that front at least. That is a registration of an Informed Muggle. For Audrey. I backdated it to February ninety-eight. No one can question Audrey's knowledge of the magical world. As far as the Ministry of Magic is concerned, Audrey was informed of the existence of the magical world in line with the current laws, and that is as far as anyone can take it."

Percy unrolled the parchment skimming it quickly. He handed it to Audrey, who also read it. "Thank you," Percy said formally.

Kingsley shrugged. "You deserved something in return."

Tonks sniffed. "Really? Because you've been an utter prat about the whole repeal even though you know, it affects me. We're never doing that," she waved back towards Harry and Hermione who were handing out the cake. "If they'd ever removed the suspension, I would have to do something I don't want to do again."

Kingsley took Tonks' hand. "I would have married you had it come to that."

"Now it won't," Tonks said. "Anyway," she turned back to Percy. "I'd thank you too, but he gets grumblly about it, so I won't. I also won't thank you for buggering up getting elected next year. I'd quite like not to be having an affair with the Minister for Magic, thanks. It's a nightmare trying to avoid the press finding out, and Teddy doesn't need the details of his parent's lives slapped across the Prophet."

"It's not a secret if you tell people," Kingsley pointed out drily.

"It's Percy, he probably already knows," Tonks replied blithely.

Percy looked uncomfortable.

"See," Tonks pointed out. "He knew."

"I took the inclusion of your parents at that meal as an indicator."

Kingsley sighed. "I don't suppose I need to ask…?"
"No," Percy replied promptly. "I don't gossip."

Kingsley nodded his thanks. "Could you be a little less annoying? It is really grating that you're, well you."

Percy smiled. "I have been a selfish being all my life, in principle, though not in practice. As a child, I was taught what was right, I was given good principles, but left to follow them as I saw fit. In truth Kingsley I cannot be anyone other than myself, everyone else was taken."

Audrey stifled her giggle and turned to face the sea until she could control her features.

"You're quoting at me," Kingsley huffed exasperatedly.

Percy shrugged seemingly earnestly. "You claimed knowledge of muggle literature, I was building upon a shared interest."

Kingsley gave him a slantwise look but said nothing. Shaking his head he held his arm out to Tonks who was smirking at Percy. "Shall we sample the cake?"

Tonks led him off grinning throwing a wink at Percy over her shoulder as they reentered the house.

"So," Audrey said, leaning on the rail bordering the veranda. "I'm no longer a secret."

"No," Percy said. "I didn't know of this," he reached out to touch the parchment Audrey held. "If I had, I would have done it sooner."

"You can't know everything, Percy."

"I suppose not." Percy wrapped an arm around her, staring out at sea. "I'm glad you're safe," he said in her hair. "Glad that I'm not a danger to you."

"You're not a danger to me, Percy," Audrey replied softly. "You've never been a danger to me. You've protected me, you still protect me." She glanced down to the ring on her right hand, the one that Percy had refused to allow her out of the room without despite this being a wedding full of people who knew her and liked her with a few notable exceptions.

Fred and George slipped up next to them. "So this is where you are hiding."

"It's considered bad form to one-up the bride and groom on their wedding day," Percy replied, raising his nose and looking down it at Fred.

George leaned over conspiracy to Audrey and whispered loudly. "Do you think he's deluding himself that he's, you know, intimidating?"

Audrey let her head fall against Percy's shoulder trying to quell a smile. "I am perfectly sure that Percy will succeed in any venture he puts his mind to. I have landed myself a brilliant wizard, and you're just jealous."

"Err, well, perhaps not," Fred said, giving Percy a long look over. "Too thin for my tastes, and well you know a wizard, and you know, my brother. Perhaps it's for the best you keep him. But, if you could bear to let him go, we have a proposition for you."

"And this is a secret proposition that you can't tell me about here?"

"You are very astute."
Percy removed his arm from around her waist. "I'll come and find you in a little while to make sure you aren't missing anything vitally important."

"Cheers, Percy," Fred and George chorused before grasping on to one of Audrey's arms each and pulling her away.

Percy went to collect himself another of the fruit cocktails and find a seat somewhere in the shade and out of the way. His linen suit was perfectly comfortable, but the sun was still fierce despite the sunblocking charms.

His peace was soon disturbed by the tall form of the Headmaster of Hogwarts who paused upon rounding the corner and seeing that it was not as empty as he had assumed.

Percy waved him into the seat next to him and took up the book he had summoned from his luggage. It was perhaps impolite to be hiding away and reading at a wedding, but he would not enjoy the attention that would come his way after John's speech, and he had no desire to be caught having to speak with his mother.

The quiet sigh told Percy that he was not the only person happy to have escaped the requirements of polite company. Percy glanced up at his companion. Severus had stretched his legs out in front of him, his was head tipped back, eyes closed with a finger easing the creases between his eyebrows.

Percy smiled to himself and reapplied his attention to his book. Audrey would find him when she was free of the twins if she needed him. Until then, he was quite content to remain exactly where he was.

A rustle came from his companion, Percy's eyes flicked up in time to see a book return to its original size and Severus open the page marked with a ribbon. The page was annotated in the familiar cramped scrawl. The frustrated noise of a hand unable to find what it searched for in a pocket had Percy slip his own hand into his jacket pocket and remove his beloved fountain pen. Wordlessly and without breaking from his reading, he held it out. It was taken with a quiet noise of thanks, and comfortable silence fell between them.
May 2001

"I owe you a drink," Phil said as he came into Percy's office at the end of a particularly trying day. "Are you free or have you got wedding stuff waiting for you at home?"

"I'm free, I have been relegated to official fetcher and carrier. Audrey and her family have got everything under control, or so I have been told multiple times," Percy replied. "And you don't owe me anything."

Phil didn't look convinced but said no more as Percy tidied his desk. They left the Ministry and made their way to the pub. Enclosed in a booth, Percy let out a sigh, stretching out his shoulders.

"Long day?" Phil asked with sympathy.

Percy nodded. "Unofficially, the Minister is still unhappy with me. It doesn't help he attended the Potter wedding, and well, I would be much happier if people stopped thanking me. As would the Minister."

"Ahh," Phil said with understanding. "Like that is it."

Percy nodded as he lifted his pint. "Officially I had nothing to do with it, and so officially I can't be called onto the carpet for it. Unofficially I can have my days filled with tedious, pointless busywork until Kingsley gets over it."

"Merlin, that's unfair."

"He's mostly over it, to be honest, and it's the nature of the beast I'm afraid. Anyway, enough of that, how is Suzanna settling in at Hogwarts?"

"Sorted into Ravenclaw, she's a good fit there. She wants to be a vet."

"Magi-zoology?"

"No, a muggle vet. We didn't know she was magical till her letter, so it's a bit of a change. She's going to do her OWLs then if she still wants to be a vet she can leave and go get her qualifications."

"Really? Won't she be behind her peers?"

"Yeah, but she can be behind a year. As long as she has the results, she can go to college late then into vet school. There's no age limit on that."

Percy drank more of his pint. "How many?" he asked idly.

"How many what?"

"Oh, err, sorry. I was thinking out loud."

"Go on," Phil gestured with his glass.

"Well, I was just thinking how many kids coming from muggle and half-blood families had plans before they get their letters."
"Most of them," Phil replied. "I mean every kid dreams of what they want to be, don't they? Finding out about magic just gives you different options. It's not great, in her case because we're finding out how much work Suzanna is going to have to do if she wants to be a vet. I'll be honest, I hope she decides to be a magi-zoologist because at least she can do her exams and be qualified and won't have to start again."

A small frown appeared between Percy's eyes.

"Ah no," Phil said, pointing his finger at him over the table. "Percy, you're getting married in three weeks. You've just passed the repeal; you can't make this your next project. You'll never get the top job."

Percy nodded. "Suzanna should get to be a vet if she wants, magic shouldn't hold her back."

"It won't," Phil said. "It will take longer, and she'll have to work a bit harder, but if she wants it, then that's what it will take."

"But what if we could offer apprenticeships? What if we could find a way that students could start studying when their muggle counterparts do so that they can apply at the same time as their peers. I'm not suggesting setting up a secondary education system, but there must be a way to help those that want or need it."

Phil leaned back, nursing his glass. "Maybe, but are you sure it's worth it?"

"I'm going to have a family with Audrey, Phil. What if they want to be astronauts or pilots or scuba diving instructors? No, I think this needs looking at, some groundwork could be done. Take a look at some of the statistics, a little bit of initial investigation."

"Merlin, Percy. Kingsley is going to have hippogryphs if you do this."

"Maybe," he shrugged unconcernedly. "I like a project, something worthwhile. How many people get into the Ministry jobs and do nothing? I want more from the Ministry than keeping the status quo."

"I've been thinking," Minerva said as she led Percy and Audrey down the hall to the conservatory of McGonagall Lodge. "A magical binding would save you a lot of bother later on. I know Kingsley gave you that waiver or whatever it was, but I think if you agree to go through with a binding then even magically, they can't argue. And what's more, since your wedding day falls on the solstice, I think I've found the perfect location even if I do say so myself. The Nine Ladies, on Stanton Moor."

"I don't believe I know it," Percy said, cocking his head in interest.

"The Nine Ladies is what the muggles call it. Although if we ever called it anything else, I don't know it. My point is that you should bind yourself to Audrey with magic. To do so, you're going to have to use a ritual site. Stonehenge is overrun with muggles these days as are most of the sites in Ireland. Stanton Moor, however, is off the beaten track and holds no significance to the muggles as it isn't on the equinox line. You need to perform the ritual in a circle of standing stones to bind your magic. Although if I'm not mistaken, by doing so on the summer solstice means that you're going to be drawing on fertility rites as well. Are you ready to accept the consequences?"

"Yes, of course."

"Percy, Audrey's muggle, you are a Weasley. There is very little chance you will struggle to conceive. There are no genetic issues of bloodlines, your parents had seven children. It's unheard of.
You must realise that the same is all but certainly possible for you and Audrey. Muggle contraception won't hold out against ancient magic. I would fully expect the consummation of the binding to result in pregnancy."

"You're kidding!" Audrey said in shock, glancing between Minerva and Percy.

"No. Rituals are what ritual circles are used for after all, and if they didn't work, there wouldn't be so many of them. You'll be evoking circle magic." Minerva explained.

"I hadn't thought," Percy said hesitantly.

"Oh, don't be daft, Percy." Minerva flapped a hand at him.

"But Audrey," Percy began again.

"Audrey, needn't worry; she has enough witches that will join hands for her."

"Pardon?" Audrey said with pointed concern.

Minerva took pity on the decidedly uneasy young woman in front of her. "Essentially, what you are doing is marrying by magical means. You aren't magical, but that doesn't matter. In days of yore, you would have essentially 'given' yourself to Percy. It's not as bad as that," Minerva said with a laugh as Audrey pulled a face at the implied misogyny. "It's no worse than being given away now, is it? But I digress. You will give yourself to Percy, as a supplicant, if you like. You promise to be his, he promises to be yours, and in that binding, he swears his magic to your protection, health, and happiness."

"Wait, swears? You lot have funny notions about vows, what does it mean."

"It means exactly that. Percy's magic will encourage him to ensure your health, wealth, and happiness."

"Encourage?" Audrey asked eyebrows raised.

"Yes. It's still a choice, you will still argue, fall out and that sort of thing, it isn't going to force Percy into anything. Magic is slightly, sentient, I suppose, Percy is still going to be able to put his foot in it, but his magic will nudge him if you are in danger or worried or generally unhappy. It will not help him solve the problem mind; he'll have to do that on his own." Minerva said with a smile.

"Isn't that slightly invasive for both of us?" Audrey asked.

"Well, it depends, I suppose. Do you think having your husband know if you are in danger is invasive?"

"Well no, but,"

"You're reading too much into it," Minerva advised. "It's a feeling a niggle that something is off no more."

"So, I give myself to Percy as a supplicant, and he binds his magic to me. So why do I need witches, and why do they need to join hands?"

"Because you are evoking old magic. Percy will have wizards walking for him, you need the same, it's about balance. You don't have any magic, but you are female, and it is based on a fertility ritual. We can stand in for you for the magic, we'll each give a little bit of ours to you to help seal the bond."
Think of it as a sort of welcome to the family. We approve and accept you, thus willing give a bit of ourselves to you. The men will do the same for Percy."

"You and Percy walk into the circle holding hands. Once you two are in the middle, the women join hands and walk thrice around the inside of the circle while the men walk thrice around the outside in the opposite direction. While that happens, the binding is recited and is completed in time for the sun to come up."

"Binding?"

"Ropes," Minerva said innocently

"What!?" Audrey squeaked.

Minerva twinkled in humour. "Binding chords. Quite real. Colours signify things, and they are magically imbued. There's usually three. Harry and Hermione used them if you recall. Be glad I doubt Percy wishes this to be a traditional ceremony."

"Dare I ask?" Audrey asked in feigned horror.

"Heard the term 'sky clad'?"

"Oh my god!" Audrey choked on a laugh.

Minerva cackled.

"No, we're not, please." Audrey turned to Percy mostly serious.

"No," Percy assured her. "We aren't, you will wear a robe."

"Robe?" Audrey turned back to Minerva.

"That's the only thing you'll be wearing," Minerva put in. "No shoes, no makeup, just you. Take a shower before you sleep. If you want to wash in the morning, then we can get you some purified water, but you have to come in your natural form as it were. Hair down as well."

"So just me in a robe?"

"Yes, Percy will be the same, as will all the wizards and witches. It's delightfully pagan, my dear, harking back to when we revered the earth, lived and worked together. Once the binding is done, we'll all leave, and you'll consummate your bond."

"You want us to have sex outside in the middle of the moor?"

Minerva laughed again. "Yes. Although I shall warn you now, my dear if the bond takes, you might not give a fig if we sat around and watched."

"You, mean…?" Audrey asked.

"Yes, it drives your desire for each other. It is a fertility rite."

"And you think I'll conceive even if I'm not ovulating?"

"It's very likely."

"I don't think I'm going to tell my Mum about this," Audrey said, taking a large gulp of her tea.
"You'll need seven witches."

"I don't think I know seven witches," Audrey tilted her head considering.

"Nonsense," Minerva said.

"No, really, I don't think I do."

"Fleur and Ginny will stand for you," Percy said.

"Exactly, Hermione will come of course, and Harry for you, Percy. Don't look at me like that," Minerva said. "If you wish to contact them both and say that you aren't inviting them, then I wish you the joy of it."

"No, I wouldn't want to not invite them, but isn't it a lot to ask them to do this?" Audrey asked.

"Nonsense," Minerva waved her off. "It's an honour to be asked. Nymphadora would if you asked, and I would ask her mother as well. They are related to Percy," Minerva said over Audrey's objection. "Ginny, Nymphadora and Andromeda make up the feminine side of Percy's family, it is important to the magic. Hermione is muggle-born mirroring another aspect of your life. I would suggest that you invite Luna Lovegood as well. The Lovegood family are near to part fay as it gets, she has a connection with things that aren't discernible to most. She would be a strong aspect."

"I don't think I know her."

"She's friends with Ginny, Harry and Hermione, she came to Ginny's birthday party at our house, and was at the Potter wedding," Percy said.

"There you go your seven witches. You shan't have as many problems," Minerva said to Percy. "Bill, Fred, George, Harry, Severus, and Arthur. They will all stand for you, I'm sure. You only need to find one more. Kingsley will do the binding. Do you think Charlie would stand with you? We need to start planning. I will contact Andromeda as soon as I may. I've not planned a binding ceremony in so long."

"You are coming to the muggle wedding?" Audrey asked the smug witch. "Please, you've done so much for us, I really do want you there."

"Of course, I will be. I've seen the progress the elves are making on your dress, and I must say I think you're going to look spectacular."

"I'd like to invite everyone that comes to the binding to the church. Do you think they would come?"

"I'm positive that if you ask my dear, they won't refuse you," Minerva replied honestly.

"Even Severus?" Percy asked deadpan.

"I'm quite sure that he will be secretly pleased to be asked and quite certain he will hide it behind his most dour expression."

"Asking him to the be in the photographs might be a bit much then?" Audrey sniggered.

Minerva's laughter pealed out. "By all means, ask him, but please allow me to be there, for I would dearly hate to miss it."

June 2001
Audrey hadn't thought she would sleep, but when she was gently shaken awake by a spindly hand that she knew wasn't human, it was dark.

"Miss must be wakening." The voice whispered in the dark.

"Stitches?"

"Yes," the elf replied, then a dull low light illuminated the room, allowing her to see but not so bright to blind her sleep-fogged eyes. "You must be coming with Stitches to prepare."

Audrey nodded her acceptance and felt the immediate jerk of apparition.

Audrey landed on a bed, glad she had slept in a t-shirt and pyjama bottoms in anticipation of being whisked away in the middle of the night. Anything else would have been somewhat embarrassing due to the number of gathered women already in the room.

Warm greetings were exchanged as Audrey climbed off the bed and stretched, rubbing her eyes and trying to jump-start her brain. It was disconcerting to be woken then transported the length of the country even if required no effort from herself.

Minerva shooed Audrey towards the en-suite of the bedroom she had appeared in, and Audrey recognised it as the room she and Percy had stayed in during their visit.

"There's a bowl of water by the sink. Use that to wash," Minerva advised. "Then we'll get you into your robe."

Audrey closed to door and made quick use of the loo before whipping off her sleepwear and dipping the natural sponge into the bowl of gently warmed water. The wash helped her brain whirl to life, ensuring she would be at least capable of speech in the next fifteen minutes. Audrey suspected that Minerva had been pre-warned of her tendency to be dumb first thing by Percy. Ablutions complete she slipped a dressing gown from the back of the door and returned to the room.

Her witches were waiting when she returned to the room the robe was laid out on the bed.

"Now then," Minerva said, holding the robe out like a coat. "Out of that and into this and we'll show you how to fasten it. Once the binding is done, you'll call for Stitches, and she will return you to your bed, leaving everyone none the wiser."

Audrey nodded, letting her dressing gown slip to the floor and let Minerva help her into the robe shielding her modesty from those gathered. Once it was securely fastened, Audrey found her voice.

"I want to thank you all for this what you're about to do for Percy and me."

The short grass was cold and damp beneath her bare feet. Audrey concentrated on following the low light provided by her escort as they crossed the clearing towards the circle.

It was no Stonehenge. To describe them as boulders was being generous. They were barely knee-high and only big enough for a person to perch on. But for all that in the gloaming light there was something in the air. Something that harked back to the mystical. Or she was being silly, caught up in the idea that they were gathering here in their robes, these magical people who wielded power she had no comprehension of, to join her and Percy. To offer their approval and blessing and magic to the match.

They stood huddled together for warmth, the robes were only thin and the morning cool, until the sharp crack of apparition signalled the other half of their party had arrived.
Audrey felt a shiver run down her spine. Somehow, sheltered amongst the group of witches as she was, she had not noticed the effect of their costumes, but as the men came towards their group wands held loosely, robes glowing white, she became aware of the raw power of them.

Audrey stayed where she was, knowing that these people would need a few minutes to work at the beginning of the ritual without her. She saw no overt magic, but the hairs on her body rose in tandem as the two groups separated and took their places. Percy approached and offered his hand. Audrey accepted it and walked towards the gap between the stones that aligned them with the rising sun as she had been told they would. As they stepped into the circle, the two halves of the circle split and started walking a low chant marking their steps.

Kingsley smiled briefly, waiting until both halves had done a full rotation before laying the three coloured chords over their joined hands.

Kingsley recited the blessing as the two halves made one more rotation. The chant a steady monotone, in time with the steps. The bindings tightened around her hands, drawing her eyes to them and as the two halves completed their third and final rotation, the chords brightened until Audrey was forced to blink and then vanished.

She felt as if perhaps she was grasping a live wire as a rush of tingles washed over her, radiating outwards from her hands up and down through her body. Every hair straining to stand on its very tip. Then it was gone, and her eyes locked with Percy's and genuine desire slammed into her. Audrey let it propel her closer to him, her head tilting to meet his descending lips, and her hands suddenly free to touch him went gleefully to their work.

Magical was a muggle expression. It denoted something out of the ordinary, something that was other.

To Percy, magical was mundane, he was a wizard after all. He didn't really understand how the muggles applied the term magical to things that were in fact not magical, but then he had never thought he had a poet's soul. Not him, stiff-necked uptight Percival Weasley.

Since leaving home, since Audrey, since the war, he had come to realise that the way his family had seen him at fifteen, sixteen and seventeen wasn't necessarily who he was, but still. He didn't have the soul of a poet; he was not an artist. But at that moment, he thought he might be able to understand, be able to glimpse at what it was.

He had turned to watch. He had debated with himself over if he should or not but at the last moment, decided that she was already his and so he should.

As she stepped through the doorway on the arm of her father dressed in antique lace, a bouquet of carefully selected flowers in her hand, Percy understood.

The organ music swelled the congregation turned and time stopped.

It was cliché, but it didn't make it less accurate.

He'd seen her every day for years, but it was like the first time. Only it wasn't, because he knew her, loved her. He was watching her walk towards him a with that smile he loved so dearly under her veil.

Percy instead thought magical was an apt description. It was. She was.

He hoped to Merlin someone had captured that moment with a camera, preferably a wizarding one
because he never wanted to forget it.

He was brimming, straining at the seams. It wasn't magic, he knew the feeling of his magic rising, this wasn't that. This was pride, and, Merlin, happiness wasn't a big enough word, it didn't cover even a percentage of what he felt he was... exultant. If he had to cast a Patronus in this instant, Percy knew without a doubt it would be a lion. It would burn with the brightness of a thousand suns and roar with all the clamour of thunder. He didn't feel big enough to hold all his feelings inside him, he was going to burst.

She was walking up the aisle towards him, sunlight from the tall windows gilding her, and he couldn't take his eyes off her. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. All the blood in his body had made a rapid descent to his feet, his stomach hot on its heels. Upon hitting his toes, it rebounded back to his head. He concentrated on breathing. She was still walking up the aisle, just how long was it? Had someone jinxed it? It hadn't been that long when he'd walked up it, and he'd stopped to greet people and say hello nearly every three steps.

But then, she was there, her hand slotted into his and the world abruptly righted itself. Percy took a breath and helped lift the veil back over her head. Rose and Rachel came forward and fussed with it, so Percy let go and found her slim fingers again. It was then he noticed the goblin-wrought jewellery at her throat and hanging from her ears. His gaze dropped to their hands where she still held the bouquet, and he saw the delicate small flowers of shimmering angel's breath, and he felt the implications hit him like a truck.

His throat closed, he felt himself tear up. He hadn't really paid attention. Hadn't really understood Audrey's strange insistence of certain things but now he did. In the small ways that she could, she was including his world, her acceptance of him, of his magic. At her very muggle wedding, Audrey was standing at his side with declarations of acceptance visible for those who knew what they were seeing. It didn't matter his mother was not present. It didn't matter that his father had had to come and apologise for her and that Percy had felt the hurt cut into him as deeply as it ever did. It didn't matter because Audrey was stood there willing to tie her life to his, with all the complications it would bring.

He didn't deserve this woman.

Percy blinked trying to regain his control. Audrey smiled beatifically at him, and he knew she'd understood everything he'd just been through.

A gentle cough snapped his attention back to his surroundings. Father Andrews met his eye with a twitch of his lips. He lifted his book held in the flat of both hands, with one more understanding look he raised his chin and addressed the church. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this Congregation, to join together this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony."

The swore their vows, sang the hymns, and signed the registry then paraded back down the aisle of the church together. The pomp, the ceremony, the circus and pageantry that was a muggle church wedding was suddenly the best thing ever. Percy had the wherewithal to know that not every eye in the church was dry, but he felt as if someone had cast an overly enthusiastic cheering charm on him along with a mild levitation charm.

A discrete finite incantatem netted no difference in how he felt.

They stood on the steps of the church while the confetti was thrown to be captured by the photographer. No one had told Fred and George about the confetti, but after a moment's surprise, they found or conjured more and gleefully joined in. It was perfect, it was more than he had ever
hoped for.
Educational Reforms

October 2001

Percy opted to floo to the Three Broomsticks and walk up to the gates. He'd been given the option of floo-ing into Severus' office directly but, it had felt presumptuous. As if he would be trading on the relationship that they had. Which technically, he was, since it seemed unlikely anyone else from the Ministry would be given leave to speak to the Headmaster of Hogwarts so easily.

Percy reached the gates and waited patiently. His mind wandered back to the Christmas he had brought Audrey here and how distressed she'd been about the magic that kept the muggles away. He felt a shiver run down his spine. A finger of unease prickling at him, reminding him that just because he couldn't feel it, didn't mean it wasn't there.

The gate swung open in front of him. Percy stepped through, pushing the unease from the forefront of his thoughts, heading up the path to the castle at a brisk walk. Severus was stood in front of the castle door waiting still as a statue, a patient predator. Percy shook his head bemused as to the slant his thoughts had taken.

Greetings exchanged with polite thanks on Percy's part they made their way up to the headmaster's office.

At the suggestion of retreating to the headmaster's private study, Percy shook his head. "I think for this meeting, your office should suffice."

Percy waited as Severus paused, his assessing look passing over him before he stepped smoothly around the large ornate desk and settled in the chair behind it. Percy waited until he was seated before taking one of the chairs in front of the desk. Percy smoothed his robes so they wouldn't crease while they talked and accepted the offer of refreshments.

Tea was delivered and poured. Percy waited the requisite number of heartbeats before catching Severus' gaze. "In the interest of full disclosure, as the muggles say, I believe I am about to overstep my bounds. It always was the previous Headmaster's position that the Ministry of Magic shall not, in so much as possible, interfere with the education offered at Hogwarts. This position was not started by, and nor has it ended with him. I am an agent of the Ministry for Magic, and I am asking you to allow me to broach the topic of the current curriculum offered by Hogwarts."

A dark eyebrow rose.

Percy took a breath and continued. "I have recently come into possession of some information that concerns me. I wish to act upon this information, but I have limited time in which to do so. Kingsley wants to keep to his plan, and should that come to fruition, I shall have less ability to do what I wish, to undertake this project. I have four years, Headmaster. I believe I shall need all of them, and that is if I have your agreement and help."

"I shall hear you out. But that is as far as I am prepared to go until I have heard everything."

"That is very generous of you," Percy replied relieved. He sipped his tea, whetting his suddenly dry mouth. "Suzanna Hearth, she's a second year. Up until her letter arrived, she was unaware she was a witch. She'd never had any displays of accidental magic, she's a half-blood, one parent is magical, and one is not. Suzanna was not dismayed not to be a witch despite her siblings displaying feats of overt magic. Her parents have the unique ability to offer her a world that did not treat her differently
because of it. She did well at school and decided she would like to become a veterinarian. Then on her eleventh birthday, her life was changed. Her plans that she had been nurturing for some years have suddenly become something that she cannot achieve. She cannot go to school and get her GCSE's then on to college to get her A-Levels and join Veterinarian school. She is here learning magic; her life's path has been changed. But she's not giving up on her plans. Suzanna is ambitious. She's decided that she will become a vet despite being a witch. Suzanna is hard working. She's studying her muggle lessons in and around her magical ones. I am given to understand that she will take her GSCE's the summer she completes her OWL's. If her grades are good enough, she will not return to Hogwarts to take her NEWT's, she will apply to a muggle college and continue her goal.

I did some research. You are no doubt aware that the dropout rate after OWL's has remained constant for the last fifty years. I looked at the data, the muggle-borns that drop out spend anywhere between one to three years away from the magical world before returning. When they return without their NEWT's, they are unable to advance except those fortunate enough to find a position that allows them to gain on the job advancement or begin some sort of apprenticeships. Those half-bloods and purebloods that drop out spend no more than two years away before finding some level of employment. They are trying to go back," Percy said quietly. "They do what they must then they try to return to those they had to leave behind. Only, they can't survive in the muggle world after five years of absence without the qualifications and understanding that they would have had they never left. The children like Suzanna who have a family to support them do better. They work twice as hard and achieve what they aim for but not every child is Suzanna Hearth."

"What is it you intend to do?"

"Support them," Percy replied. "I want to rewrite the muggle studies curriculum. I want to set fire to the current text used to teach. It does not prepare witches and wizards to live amongst muggles. It is hilariously out of date and touch with muggle society. I took the subject, I transitioned from living in the magical world into the muggle world, and that module helped me not at all. It's useless. I want to change that. I want to give the students the chance to learn what their muggle counterparts learn. To turn an OWL in muggle studies into a set of GCSEs. If they continue with the program, turn a NEWT into an A-Level. It's going to be limited, the number of subjects could be offered at A-Level, I understand that. It might be that a provision for allowing the students to attend a muggle college to attend subjects that can't be taught here is necessary. If that becomes the case, then I want the Ministry to step in and make sure that those who need to operate in the muggle world can do so. To stop asking for them to choose and start offering help and understanding. How many witches and wizards who have never stepped foot in the muggle world would at least think twice about deriding it if they were exposed to their classmate's studies? How many of those witches and wizards would then leave Hogwarts better informed if only by secondary information? How much would that do to remove the stigma of blood purity in the future?"

"You will build a reputation for being partial."

"I am partial," Percy replied. "There are no two ways about it."

"If you succeed in this change to the curriculum, what do you plan to do with it?"

"Push it further," Percy replied. "I want the British Magical society to lead for once. To hold our heads up and say we understand the dichotomy that we live in. That we will support all our citizens in achieving their goals no matter what they are. And I'll do it with the apprenticeship program that was pushed through. Its uptake is low, I can use that."

"You made your brothers aware of its contractual shortcomings. They told Minerva and me, was that not your aim?"
"Yes," Percy replied. "Of course it was, but it's in. It had a high approval rating, it won't be removed. I am going to use it, re-write it. A succession of small changes can be managed without difficulty. I can certainly have the standard contract rewritten, make it less onerous. The major changes are going to need Wizengamot approval. Present them with a complete picture, a Hogwarts education coupled with a supportive apprenticeship program."

"Say that you achieve your aims with my curriculum, and you begin whatever changes it is you desire to policy. How are you going to get it through a Wizengamot review when the Wizengamot is still mired in traditionalist views? You run the risk of never being elected."

"Election isn't a problem," Percy waved him off. "As for the Wizengamot, that is, well not necessarily simple, but certainly not insurmountable. Public opinion is currently riding high in favour of policy decisions that benefit the wider society. What I am suggesting is the widening of the employment market. By allowing those students who wish to the opportunity to join the muggle world and find employment there, I am, in fact, reducing the number of people who need to find work within the magical world. Less competition may, some will argue, reduce the standard of the applicant, but it will push the onus onto the employers to be more attractive to the right candidate. Which, in turn, means that the candidates will value themselves more highly. I am not looking to exclude anyone from taking the elective or applying for support after Hogwarts. This isn't going to be about blood it's going to be about opportunity."

"Yet I presume that you will be operating much in the same way you have done recently?"

"Yes," Percy nodded. "In some ways, the success of the marriage law repeal makes this plan possible or at least increases the feasibility of it being a success. The people who worked on the repeal are receiving the praise and thanks they deserve for their work. There is no one to take it from them, no superior who can claim their hard work as their own because I cannot. In turn, it makes them willing to work with me again and increases the pool of people who want to work with me. If I am not able to accept the accolades, then they are better positioned to receive them," Percy said drily.

"It is widely known that the repeal is down to you. You have been publicly thanked in front of the Minister for Magic no less."

A lifted shoulder was the reply. "But I am not claiming credit for it."

"The changes you are suggesting in regards to the curriculum, they are no small thing."

"I am aware that of yourself and of Hogwarts I am asking the most. To support this scheme, I am possibly trading on more than our entire acquaintance can encompass and then some."

"I have no wish to trade favours. I shall consider the merits of this plan and will make a decision based on what is best for this school and its students," Severus responded. "I am unsure if this idea of yours is even workable."

"I understand that," Percy replied. He pulled a file from his pocket and enlarged it. "I thought it prudent to do some preliminary background research. You can purchase teaching materials from the local bookshop that lays out the curriculum and necessary standard a student must achieve to take a muggle educational exam." Percy waved his hand at the ridiculously thick file.

Severus rolled his eyes. "You are expecting me to read all that."

Percy's smile was small but genuine. "You did say you would consider my proposal. If it helps, I have a list of names of witches and wizards currently studying to teach muggle education to GCSE standard who have either graduated or will graduate in the next twelve months."
Severus' eyebrows rose in tandem.

Percy shifted in his chair. "It was not illegally obtained. There are several ways in which information about citizens is recorded, and the Ministry records are updated by magic so at least are accurate, extrapolation is a matter of knowing the right spells," Percy petered off.

"Dare I ask how long this particular crusade has been brewing?"

Percy shrugged his shoulders, letting out a laugh that was part relief that he'd finished saying his bit. "Not as long as you might imagine, the last six months only. My last eighteen months have been quite busy. But Phil Mills is Suzanna's uncle, and he and I go back some years. He was trying to distract me from the wedding preparations in a pub, and we got chatting about Suzanna."

Severus pulled the file over to him, his hands wrapping around the sides to keep all the papers and booklets together. A command had an elf reappear and whiskey brought in short order. Percy accepted his glass with thanks.

"You have been in communication with Mr Malfoy," Severus said, leaning back in his chair.

"Ahh, I was not sure if you were aware of that scenario."

"I would not have been, but he wrote to me on an unrelated matter and mentioned in passing an investment opportunity he had been presented and his surprise that it was you who had sent it. He queried if you had given up your position in the Ministry."

Percy nodded. "Again, I am unable to move in the manner that I wish due to the plans that Kingsley has. There are many advantages to approaching Mr Malfoy, he has a promising career ahead of him, but it is outside of these shores. By investing in something like this project at the early stages and remaining a silent partner, he can use its success to relaunch the Malfoy family. The project is not obviously political. A hotel is hardly a statement of alignment. If the project does not reach all its goals, it is still a financially sound investment and should have no difficulty in repaying in monetary terms."

"How does it tie back to your scheme for educational reform?"

Percy gave Severus a rueful glance. "I should not like to think I am so obvious. A small amount of cunning is involved, after all." He sipped his whiskey and explained. "There is a dearth of magical hostelry. There is an utter lack of hotels where muggles and magical can mix. I do not wish to ignore the Statute of Secrecy, but a meeting with the muggle Prime Minister that he can be invited to, rather than popping out of his fireplace might do wonders for the interactions between us. By having something as large as a hotel, it gives the opportunity to launch more apprenticeships. Hostelry is a valuable market. Management roles, chefs, event planning, accounting, front of house staff, marketing. All these things we could offer through one place. If it succeeds not only will it enable graduates to launch their careers it will enable the expansion of the idea. I'd like to see the first skyscraper designed by a Hogwarts graduate be built. I want to read the latest research of a marine biologist who attended school here."

"You wield power very casually. For a man earmarked to be the next Minister of Magic, are you not as you say, overstepping your bounds?"

"My share in the hotel is barely over one per cent, while I don't doubt that unless things go very awry, I shall get my original stake back, I don't stand to make a fortune from it. Nothing that would lead me to be investigated certainly. As for any future role I may hold, you are probably as aware as I, that should I become the Minister of Magic while I shall be in a position of power, my ability to
use it shall be severely hampered.

"Yet as the Under Secretary to the Minister, and for a brief period of acting as Minister, you have enacted changes that are both wide-reaching and of great consequence."

"I cannot say, I am too close to the situation I believe. My goals are set on the betterment of our society. That those plans have a greater impact on some sections of our society than others, I believe, is because for too long, we have not progressed as a society. It is not as deliberate as it might seem, yet it is not without purpose. This is my opportunity; this plan has a chance of working. The educational reforms will take some years to get in place and for the students to work through them. Setting up a business now, at this stage, means there is a tangible target that they can aim for. We can have a few years making sure that the business is ready to take them on. We can look around for other similar businesses that might offer the same schemes in the muggle world."

Severus proffered the decanter of whiskey; Percy accepted a refill. "It is possibly past time that Hogwarts curriculum has been scrutinised. I will take your proposal seriously. I will bring Minerva in, and we will seriously consider what we can offer. I do not doubt your sincerity, but Hogwarts will always stand removed from the Ministry of Magic. I have no interest in changing that status quo."

"Neither have I," Percy assured the man.
Despite Minerva's warning, Audrey had been surprised to find herself pregnant. It was mid-September when she finally got around to taking a test. Two missed periods were really enough of a clue, but she'd written it off to the stress of the wedding then outright disbelief that magic could override biology. Magic had won, and she'd booked herself an appointment with the doctor when the test had come back positive.

Percy had taken the news with a small smile that spoke volumes about how pleased he really was. They'd planned a family, and it really wasn't that much ahead of schedule. Fleur was thrilled for her, and now that Victoire was four months old and sleeping properly, she actually had the energy to come over and demonstrate her joy.

It was coming up to Christmas which would be celebrated at Audrey's parents in deference to Audrey's inability to see her own feet.

Audrey was sat on the sofa with her missing feet in Percy's lap, a book of baby names in her hands. They had only a few months left to decide what they would call their little girl other than 'Bump'.

"Do magical people have naming traditions?" Audrey asked, resting the open book on top of her stomach.

"No, my family don't. Although all our names are technically from the Court of King Arthur or British royalty, I rather thought that might be my Dad's inside joke. Well, except Ron, but I suppose there's only so many useable names. Some do flowers, stars, that sort of thing." Percy asked hands absently stroking her ankles which were always swollen recently. He had his own book open on the arm of the sofa and Audrey suspected it was another parenting manual recommended at their antenatal classes.

"Ooh, really?"

"It's supposed to be a way of marking your family easily, a pureblood trait but not one my family ever bought into. What about you?" Percy asked, closing the book and shifting slightly on the sofa to rub her feet more effectively.

"No, we're more a pick your favourite from the baby name book type. I had a thought, though."

"Oh?"

"I mean, I know she never came around, and I know you miss her…"

"No," Percy replied immediately, his hands stopping their action.

"Percy, at least hear me out." Audrey protested, floundering as she tried to sit up a little more.

"No. My mother made her choice." Percy said as he held out his hands so she could use them to lever herself upright.

"Yes, but," Audrey huffed out, a hand quickly clasping her stomach as Bump made a lazy summersault due to Audrey's movement and landed a foot into her kidney.

"Why?"
"Because she's your Mum?"

"And if our child is magical, aren't your parents going to miss out on more?" Percy replied pointedly.

"No, because whether she's magical or not, she'll have eleven years of loving grandparents who are going to accept her and spoil her rotten. No magic school can take that away. Look at Hermione, Helen and John. Also, I know it's not the done thing marrying Muggles, especially with your position. But, well, alright. Maybe not after your Mum, as in christening her Molly, because you are right, she has made her choice and it's a bit rotten the way it fell out. But, well, OK, now you've told me about your Dad, how about going along that route? Percy, I know it hurts you that she didn't come to the wedding and I know that in part it is my fault for being who I am, and I can't change that."

"It's not your fault, she's completely to blame, and I won't have you take it on yourself," Percy said sharply.

"I'm not really," Audrey reassured him. "But your Dad is gutted, you know. He's popped over once or twice to see us, and you've not been here, and well, I think he just wants to talk to someone. I don't think he likes the way she's thrilled about Victoire and is knitting up a storm and yet she didn't come to the wedding. I mean she didn't like Fleur in the beginning but better a part Veela witch than a muggle."

"Can you not see why I can't. She's awful. She doesn't deserve our notice."

"I can, but can you not see how much it might mean to your Dad that you aren't holding it against him? Look, the book says Molly is a diminutive of both Mary and Margaret, and that would follow your family's naming thing, wouldn't it? She doesn't have to be a Molly, but it's there. Our baby deserves two grandmothers, and if the best we can do is give her a name, then at least we gave her that. It might also heal the breach. She may never accept me, but if our daughter is magical, your Mum might accept her, and that's something, isn't it?"

"I don't think my Mum will ever deserve you."

Audrey shrugged. "I don't mind, not everyone gets in-laws they can cope with, and mothers-in-law are supposed to be a bit of a nightmare. Honestly, I think Fleur is a bit jealous of us really, your Mum actually speaks to her now, and according to Fleur, she sends food over to Bill whenever she can to make sure Bill is eating properly. I've no idea how Fleur hasn't told her to shove it yet. I don't think I would be as polite."

"She should accept you," Percy grumbled. "There was a war for equality for Merlin's sake. Two of them!"

"Magical equality, love. Us mere Muggles are mere Muggles," Audrey replied breezily.

"I work for the Minister for Magic!"

"Yes, and with that and thirty pence, you can buy a cup of tea. You're not going to change anything for Muggles."

"Three knuts actually."

"What?" Audrey asked, confused.

"A cup of tea, its three knuts in the Ministry canteen."
Her smile was warm. "So, you agree, then."

"I didn't say I agreed," Percy protested.

"No, but you are being impudent about the price of tea. It's the next step."

Percy's smile was lopsided, but no less warm. "I do love you, and I never ever will regret marrying you. I would prefer Margaret of the two, and you're right, it's a lovely idea to continue to increase my Dad's royal court. He will be delighted."

"Glad to hear it. So, Margaret, what about middle names?"

"As the bearer of Percival Ignatius Weasley can I protest and ask for something perfectly reasonable?"

"Well, I like the flower thing."

"At least it's not a constellation," Percy muttered.

Audrey screwed up her nose in thought, stroking her rounded stomach. "How many of them are useable?"

"Constellations? More than you think."

"Really?"

"Draco, Orion, Sirius, Regulus, Andromeda, Cassiopeia, Lyra, those I'm related to distantly."

"You're related to Harry?"

"Yes, I don't think anyone ever pointed that out to Ginny."

"You are getting rather distracted. We're picking names for our daughter, remember."

"What's your mother's full name? I've only ever heard her called Lizzy."

"Elizabeth Florence Stone."

"Florence?"

"Yes. Margaret Florence Weasley?"

"She'd have a pick then, of names and diminutives. 'Perce' is still my least favourite, and there's next to nothing you can do with Ignatius except forgetting you have it."

"Hmm, shouldn't she have something for herself, then?"

"I think there are a few letters of the alphabet we've missed out."

"Then it bears thinking on," Audrey said with a pleased smile.

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Margaret Florence Weasley was born on the 14th March 2002 in a Muggle hospital with her maternal grandparents' and paternal twin uncles waiting anxiously for news.

Percy came into the waiting room his face pale and a sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead. After stumbling over the news, the full import of labour not yet left the forefront of his mind, he gladly led
his family to the ward where his daughter was an instant hit. Fred and George had gone quite mad in
the hospital gift shop, and a swarm of balloons, flowers and stuffed bears were heaped upon the end
of Audrey's bed.

After Audrey's parents left Fred and George lingered pulling potions from pockets.

"Here," Fred handed them to Audrey. "Fleur sent these. They won't interfere with whatever the
Muggles have given you. Fleur swears, you'll feel better, and they won't affect little Maggie."

"Margaret," Audrey replied.

"Maggie," Fred said again giving her a look.

Audrey sighed. "She's just been born, give her time to grow into her name."

Fred hummed non-committedly.

George spoke up from the corner he had absconded with his new niece. "We'll take Percy home.
The Muggles have a tradition of wetting the baby's head, which John explained. Percy should get to
take part."

Audrey tried to look disapproving, but in truth she was tired and while Percy had been there as he
promised, she would quite like a bit of time alone to process the idea that she was now a mother and
had a child. "That sounds lovely if you'll give her back before you leave. You can't take her with
you, John did explain that bit, didn't he?"

"Yes," George said. "She's tiny. I mean, I've seen babies before, but we weren't that interested in
Ginny when she was born. Fleur had Victoire, but it was ages before we saw her. She's all brand
new."

Percy came over to George to stare at his daughter. His daughter. Being slated for Minister for Magic
was not as daunting as this. He held his hands out, and George relented giving up his prize. Margaret
yawned, her eyes blinking open, and Percy felt a rush flood through him as she focused on him.
"Hello," he whispered.

Margaret blinked, closed her eyes and went back to sleep. Audrey held her arms out. "Go," she said.
"I'm sure you need a shower and food. The nurse will be along shortly."

"You'll take the potion?" Percy asked. "Just to be sure."

"Yes," Audrey fumbled tiredly with the phial before Fred took it from her and removed the cork.
Audrey accepted it back and knocked the concoction back. It did not taste as vile as she feared.
"There, now, go."

Percy nodded, he approached the bed and dropped a kiss on Audrey, before handing his daughter
over to her mother. He gently stroked the bundle in her arms, reluctant to leave. "I'll be back in the
morning."

Audrey grinned already feeling the comforting tingle of the potion buoying her flagging energy and
easing the ache she had from labour. "Perhaps, now, go."

The three brothers left Audrey and her daughter. They were alone a scant five minutes before a
knock at the door, roused her attention from her examination of Margaret.

"Percy go," she said in a laughingly exasperated tone. "Honestly, we'll be fine, or did you forget
something?" Her words trailed off as she looked up at the door. Her father-in-law stood in the
doorway, looking around in fascination at the room.

"Arthur," Audrey said warmly, sadly unsurprised to see him alone. If she had held out for the birth of
her daughter resulting in an olive branch, it seemed she was going to be regrettably disappointed.
"You've missed Percy, Fred, and George, I'm afraid."

Arthur came into the room, a warm friendliness coming from him in waves the way it did from the
twins. "Oh no, I came to see her," Arthur said as he sat in the chair by her bed. "She's our newest
granddaughter, and I couldn't miss this. May I?" he held his hands out. Audrey handed Margaret
over to her grandfather, her heart quietly breaking for the man.

"Oh well look at you, aren't you just precious," Arthur burbled as he held her. "This is for you," he
said holding out a familiar phial. "It's to help with after giving birth. Molly took it after all of ours."

Audrey nodded, accepting the proffered phial. "Fleur sent some with Fred and George though only
one phial as we didn't know if I would have a reaction to it."

"It's very safe," Arthur said.

"Yes," Audrey replied. "But I'm not magical, and Percy wanted me to take only one dose until he
was sure I would not react badly to it. I've had some bad reactions to things while I was pregnant,
you see."

"Magical things?" Arthur asked curiously. "Percy didn't say anything, and the few times I saw you I
thought you were glowing."

"No, muggle things. Typical for pregnancy, my midwife assured me."

"Did you give your Mummy a hard time?" he asked the sleeping baby. "That wasn't very kind of
you. What's her name? I didn't ask Percy for the sex or name though I found out about the sex by
accident. I rather thought it might be a nice surprise not to know ahead of time," Arthur asked,
looking back up at Audrey.

"Margaret Florence Weasley," Audrey answered softly reaching out a hand to stroke her daughter's
clenched fist.

Arthur's look was warm as he met her eyes and Audrey felt a lump grow in the back of her throat.
"You carried it on," he said quietly.

"Yes. If she is to be magical, then she should carry her family name with pride. She has a family to
be proud of, no matter who she is." Audrey sat back against her pillows a smile on her face.

Arthur took up her hand, squeezing it. "Thank you," he said, looking down at the baby in his arms
blinking his eyes rapidly. Audrey reached over to the bedside cabinet, grabbing the box of tissues
and proffering it. Arthur took one with a small embarrassed laugh. "How long will you have to stay
in the hospital?" he asked after a moment when he'd gathered himself up.

"Not long at all, I could be home as soon as tomorrow if they are happy with everything. With the
potions I've been given, which have certainly helped, I don't think there will be a reason for me to
stay."

"Can I visit?"

"Of course you can, you're her granddad. Percy wants you in her life, he's not going to hold his
"Mum against you and stop you seeing her."

"I tried," Arthur confessed, rocking Margaret as she shifted in his arms. "I asked her to come with me tonight to see you both. Fred sent me a message, to let me know you had gone into labour, then when she was born."

"Percy was in the delivery room with me," Audrey explained. "I was pretty adamant he stayed by my side throughout it all, so he didn't have time to slip off and send a message. He did very well though, I think I nearly broke his hand at one point."

Arthur smiled. "I don't think there must be any difference between magical and muggle labour then because I distinctly remember Molly breaking my hand when Charlie was born."
You're a witch...

The doorbell went, and Percy got to his feet to answer it. To his surprise, Severus was stood on the doorstep. Dressed in black trousers and a dark woollen coat with his hair tied back from his face, Percy blinked at how well the headmaster carried off muggle.

"Severus welcome, please come in," Percy said, stepping back out of the way.

"Thank you," Severus, said with a slight nod of his head.

Percy indicated the front room and followed his guest through. "Let me take your coat. Tea? Or?"

"Yes, thank you. Tea will suffice," Severus answered, and Percy hustled off to hang up the coat and make the tea. Audrey smiled in welcome at Severus.

"You are well?" Severus asked.

"Yes," Audrey answered. "Tired but well, the potions Percy got for me helped a lot. The nurses commented on how well I seemed to bounce back."

Percy returned with the tea handing the cup to Severus before retaking his seat next to Audrey.

"I apologise if we missed your floo call."

Severus raised a hand negligently. "I thought perhaps your parents might be here, so I endeavoured to cause no suspicion. Your floo is in your cellar and while concealed from casual eyes explaining why I was in your cellar might have been ... interesting."

"Yes, I can see how it might be," Audrey said with a laugh. "Mum and Dad are coming over later."

Severus nodded. "I," he paused. "Perhaps Audrey, you are unaware, but Hogwarts has a Book of Admittance. Every child born who will eventually be invited to attend Hogwarts is listed within it. It's a magical process, possibly created by the founders themselves, although there is no evidence to support that claim either way." Severus took a sip of his tea. "As headmaster, I have access to this book. Indeed, it is a ritual of sorts for Hogwarts headmaster to periodically check the book. I happen to do so this morning as I do every Sunday morning. Your daughter, she is Margaret Florence Weasley?"

"Yes," Audrey, her voice suddenly hoarse. "She is...?"

Severus nodded. "Yes, she is listed in the Book of Admittance. Your daughter is a witch."

Audrey looked over at the tiny bundle in the basket next to the sofa. She was sleeping peacefully unperturbed by the discussion of her future going on around her. Audrey felt her eyes fill and blinked to stop the tears falling, it was good news her daughter would be part of her father's world. She smiled at Severus. "Thank you for telling us."

Severus shrugged laconically. "It's nothing you wouldn't have found out for yourself eventually once her magic manifested."

Audrey's response was interrupted by the whimper coming from the basket. A hand thrust upwards, Audrey reached into the basket to pick up her daughter. Smiling down at the bright blue eyes that blinked back up at her.
The doorbell rang again, and Percy got to his feet again to answer it. Audrey rolled her eyes. "This place has been like a train station for the last four days. Would you?" She proffered her arms.

Severus visibly froze for a moment before nodding. Audrey smiled handing over her daughter.

"You're lucky," she said, "Percy has barely let me hold her." Severus adjusted the baby in his arms and sat back in the chair. The blue, blue eyes blinked at him, and the tiny fist closed around the finger he proffered.

"Well," a soft voice came from the doorway. "There's a sight for sore eyes." Minerva entered the sitting room with Percy on her heels.

"Minerva," Audrey greeted the witch. "We weren't expecting you."

"Oh well," Minerva replied. "I had to come didn't I, to see this little one. Although I am surprised to see you here, Severus. You're not having a change of heart about children, are you?"

"Miss Weasley is much more intelligent than the horde inside the castle Minerva," Severus said his voice pitched not to startle the child he held. "She has already mastered the art of silence."

Minerva harrumphed sitting herself down on the sofa.

"I came in my role of Headmaster," Severus added.

"The book?" Minerva asked, sitting up to peer at the bundle Severus was guarding.

"Indeed."

"Oh, how marvellous," Minerva said, looking at Audrey and Percy. "Now Severus, be a dear and hand her over. You've got a perfectly good cup of tea going cold there."

Severus rolled his eyes at the older witch and handed over the baby.

"If she is magical, will she still be able to go to school?" Audrey asked.

"Primary school?" Severus asked. "Yes. The muggle-born obviously manage in till their letter arrives, there is no reason that your daughter cannot, although there is a greater risk that she might accidentally slip and speak of the magical world. In the very young, it would be dismissed as fancy though as she approached the age for Hogwarts, it would perhaps raise more questions."

"What are the alternatives?"

"Home-schooling," Minerva answered as she cooed at her armful. "All of the Weasley children were home-schooled."

Audrey pulled a face. "I don't think I want to do that. She'd miss out on so much."

Percy laid a hand on her arm. "We can cross that bridge when we come to it. We've got four years yet."

"True," Audrey agreed "Although you know my Mum has already put her name down for St Bart's."

"I have one other piece of news," Severus commented. "Your reforms, they have been examined in depth by the staff, and a course of action has been put to the Governors. As of September, the Muggle Studies elective will offer students the opportunity to gain five GCSEs in English Maths and
"You're going to do it?" Audrey asked. "It's really going to happen?"

"On a trial period," Severus nodded. "This incoming third year will be the first to have the option. The numbers of students who have currently expressed an interest is reasonable. Whether that interest translates into students selecting the elective, we shall have to wait and see."

"Phil's niece, Suzanna, she'll be a third-year next year," Audrey said turning to Percy. "She'll get to take the course. Do you think she will?"

"I hope so," Percy replied. "If possible, I would like to be kept abreast of the situation in terms of take-up numbers and the like. I have earmarked a small amount of budget that could be funnelled to you, dependant on the number of students. It's actually a muggle government fund, the conversion rate means it shan't be a great deal of money, but I am hoping that I can push it through Finance Department and have the Ministry make up the difference. I doubt I'll get all of the deficit from the conversion rate, but I may be able to recover at least half."

"Well, that would certainly help the situation with the Governors," Minerva commented. "They aren't going to stop the changes, but they are keeping a close eye on it. The need for more staff has put a few noses out of joint. Finding out there's money in it might sweeten the pill."

"There is a small amount of funds available should you enter your results in the muggle league tables and show an improvement in the results of your student's year on year. There may, unfortunately, have to be some Ministerial interfering to gain this for you, however. The league tables use Ofsted scores as well as the results. Ofsted is the board that inspects muggle schools to ensure they are meeting standards, and well, the inspectors can hardly come to Hogwarts. Perhaps something could be finagled, I have a contact in the Muggle Worthy Excuses department, and while I am not so fortunate as to be in the position of them owing me a favour, they are reasonable people. We may be able to come to some arrangement. If I can get a copy of the Ofsted inspector's reports, Hogwarts may be able to fill in the blanks, and we can run the results in house. Perhaps not the most objective result, but that can't be helped."

"This is how politics works, is it?" Minerva asked drily.

Percy sent Minerva a knowing smile. "Not at all. There's usually a great deal more dishonesty involved. The results will serve a dual purpose. Not only will it net you funding, but it will be something to offer the parents of the students who are more familiar with the muggle educational system. I am certain that being able to indicate Hogwarts standing in the league tables would go a good way to allaying the concerns of the muggle-born parents."

"Yes, it would," Minerva answered thoughtfully. "I have been asked before by parents, but it has never been something we can address in a meaningful way. I am hopeful that when it comes time to make the visits to the muggle-born this year, the parents finding out that we are now trialling these GCSE's, will go some way to help them accept everything."

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**September 2002**

Audrey rechecked Maggie's arm. As much as she'd called her daughter her full name while carrying her, the twin's habit of calling her Maggie had caught on, and Audrey found her thinking of her as Maggie more than Margaret.

The rash that had appeared on her daughter's arm was getting worse. Moreover, it was quite clearly a
magical rash. Or if it wasn't, then little Maggie was going to cause a stir at the doctor's surgery. Her arm was turning green.

It had been the typical healthy pink but had slowly become sallow throughout the morning now it had a distinct tinge of green to it much like a bruise in reverse. Also, the skin was starting to dry out and become leathery despite the vast quantities of aqueous cream she had applied.

Audrey had no idea what could have caused it, but Maggie was exposed to a fair bit of magic between her enchanted toys, Percy's small garden of magical plants, and whatever came through the floo every day when Percy got home.

Audrey sighed in resignation. Leaving Maggie in her cot gumming a stuffed bear, happily oblivious to her colour changing arm, Audrey went to pack a bag. She put into it enough clothes for her and Percy to be away overnight, and for Maggie to be changed several times. The nappy bag was packed, and extra bottles of formula were thrown in on top. Audrey didn't know if Percy would be available, but she dug out the mirror from her handbag. Opening it, she clearly stated his name and waited.

Percy didn't answer. Thinking, Audrey wondered if she should call Fred and George or Fleur. Fleur might have more experience in mysterious magical illness, but she had her own. Fifteen month old Victoire and one month old Dominique were more than a handful meaning Fleur might not be able to take Audrey where she needed to go. The twins it was then. Audrey made the call and waited only moments for it to be connected.

"Audrey?" Fred asked in surprise

"Hello, Fred. I'm wondering if one of you might be free to take Maggie and me to your hospital. I've tried Percy, but he's not answering."

"Maggie? What's the matter with her?" Fred said in concern

"Her arm is turning green."

"Green?"

"Yes, it went yellow first."

"Let me let George know, and I'll be right over. I'll send an owl to Percy as well, so he'll know."

"Thank you, we really should get an owl, but the mirrors make it seem a bit unnecessary," Audrey said gratefully.

Fred was as good as his word, and less than five minutes later, they arrived at the entrance of St Mungo's.

"This way," Fred sad leading Audrey to the welcome witch desk.

"How may we help?" the witch asked.

"Hello," Audrey said. "It's my daughter, her arm turned yellow and is now turning green. The skin has become leathery as well."

The witch nodded. "How old is she? Has she ingested anything? Caught a stray spell? Accidental magic?"
"Six months and no to all of those," Audrey said.

"Name?"

"Audrey Weasley. My daughter is Margaret Florence Weasley."

The witch nodded, filling a form in swiftly. With a tap of her wand, it vanished from in front of her. "Paediatrics is on the fourth floor, the lift is that way," she pointed. "They're expecting you."

Fred led the way. She didn't need to ask why Fred knew the way to paediatrics having known Percy's brother for as long as she had. She rather assumed he had a frequent flier card. Letting Fred guide her steps gave her a chance to look around. The waiting room was a bit like an A and E reception only very different. Instead of bandaged bleeding people clutching a variety of injuries, it looked a bit like the circus had run straight into a radioactive experiment. Green was not the most interesting colour of skin. There was one wizard who appeared to have turned himself into some sort of metallic rainbow. The colours pulsed faintly making Audrey blink as she tried to make sense of it.

She nudged Fred and discreetly pointed as they passed.

Fred cocked his head in thought, giving the wizard a once over. "Colour changing charm with an extra swirl on the brightness charm. Not sure what he was trying to do, though."

"How do you know?" Audrey asked

Fred chortled. "I used something similar to George once when we were kids. Nicked dad's wand. George hated me for that, especially when the mediwitch refused to remove it and instead let it fade in an attempt to teach us to behave. Didn't work, but we did learn that there is an amazing number of shades of purple." Fred smiled with fond remembrance.

"What did he do to you?" Audrey asked, aware of the twin's method of retaliation.

"Charmed my shoes. Made me feel like I was walking in high heels for a week. Every pair of shoes that he could find. Tied to my magic somehow, so if I nicked his shoes, it would still work but not for him. Deucedly difficult that since our magic is nearly identical."

"Has anyone told you that you are both a pair of prats?"

"Nearly every day," Fred said good-humouredly.

"Is Maggie going to be ok?" Audrey asked, glancing down at the sleeping infant snug in her carrier seat.

"She'll be fine," Fred said, wrapping an arm around Audrey's shoulder and giving her a squeeze. "The mediwitches are top rate."

They entered the lift and got out on the fourth floor. Fred led Audrey to the desk where an elderly witch looked up. "Fred Weasley as I live and breathe. What have you done this time? Aren't you too old for paediatrics?"

"Mrs Hudson, you are a sight for sore eyes. It's not me or George but my niece." Fred gestured at Audrey and the baby carrier hanging from one hand.

"Ooh, niece, is it?" the witch stood and bustled out from behind the desk. "Oh, let me have a look at her." She threw a glance at Audrey, asking for permission. Audrey nodded, when the witch paused at the buckles holding Maggie in, put the carrier on the floor and released Maggie picking her up and
handing her over to the witch.

"Muggle is it?" the witch asked of the carrier as she cooed down at Maggie.

"Yes," Audrey said

The witch hummed. "Much better than some things we see." She gave Maggie her finger to grasp. "Perambulators the size of hippogriffs. And do they know how to steer them? No! Just because we can fix the holes in the walls with a spell doesn't mean they should put them there in the first place, does it precious? No, no, it doesn't."

Audrey stood by helpless as the witch ignored her in favour of her daughter. "Her arm?" she asked nervously.

"Oh, this? Nothing to be worried about. Someone is allergic to dragon's bloom aren't they, my darling. Yes, they are, but we'll have it right in no time." The witch went back behind the desk, reclaiming her seat. A twirl of her wand and an aeroplane memo went sailing down the corridor.

"She's baby mad," Fred said quietly. "Mum had to bring all of us when we came in, and well let's just say Mum wasn't complaining she had one less kid to worry about. Mrs Hudson can get the stroppiest of babies to settle. Ginny was putty."

"How is Ginevra?" Mrs Hudson asked proving she'd kept part of her concentration on their conversation.

"Graduated already," Fred said.

"Well, I say, doesn't time fly. I haven't seen her since you last got your foot stuck to your brother."

Fred blushed bright red. Audrey looked at him. "How did you?"

"You probably don't want to know," Fred said. "It was stupid, and we've never tried to modify that set of spells since."

Mrs Hudson chortled. "You two were a pair."

They were interrupted by a wizard in green robes coming down the corridor. "Mrs Weasley? Oh, Audrey! I wondered if it was you," Ted said with a welcoming smile. "Andromeda did say she'd heard you had your little one."

"Ted, I didn't know you worked here," Audrey said.

"Oh yes, not nearly as long as Mrs Hudson mind. You're in with an allergic reaction?"

"Err," Audrey said helplessly gesturing to Maggie who was contently gurgling at Mrs Hudson.

"Mrs Hudson, might I have my patient?" Ted asked with exasperated fondness.

"Oh, yes, yes. Of course Healer Tonks," Mrs Hudson handed over Maggie then turned to Audrey. "She's a delight you should be very proud. Are we expecting your husband?"

"I don't know. If we're here long enough."

Ted nodded. "The treatment will take a couple of hours, and I'd like to keep her for observation. One allergic reaction might indicate further allergies, and it's better we find out now rather than have you in and out every time she has a reaction. Mrs Hudson if you could tell Percy Weasley we're in room
"Oh, you're Percy's wife? Oh well, aren't you a love," Mrs Hudson gushed. "Percy always was one of my favourites."

Fred made a choking noise from beside Audrey.

"None of that young man," Mrs Hudson chided. "You and that brother of yours were trouble. Percy was such a sweet, polite boy. Always wanted to know if he could help me at my desk, and he did a good a job as anyone keeping you two out of trouble."

"Oh, umm," Audrey said as Ted walked off with Maggie obviously not interested in encouraging Mrs Hudson in her reminiscing or he knew the witch didn't seem to be stopping any time soon.

Fred caught up her arm. "Well, let him know where we are won't you, Mrs Hudson."

"Of course," the witch said. "Go on with you. You'll want to be with your wee one."

Audrey and Fred caught up with Ted as they entered a room. "You'll have to forgive Mrs Hudson," Ted said as he laid Maggie down on a padded table. "She has been here forever and remembers everyone, although even I remember the Weasley twins." He gave Fred the once over.

Audrey laughed. "Were you two really that bad?"

"They had their own room, we used to leave it empty just for them; they were here so often. Now, Audrey, Maggie here has been exposed to dragons bloom it's not a very unusual plant, but we don't see it very often. Was it part of a potions kit? You must be very careful to make sure you wash your hands properly after handling potion ingredient. A scouring spell is really the best way to make sure no contamination occurs. Percy needs to make sure he does it every time. Really that goes for you too, Mr Weasley if you are brewing then visiting, you must make sure you use a scouring spell."

"Percy doesn't brew," Audrey bit her lip worriedly.

"We use a scouring spell after each brew due to cross-contamination. Trust me when I say George, and I learnt that lesson early on. It wasn't pretty."

"Oh, a bouquet then perhaps? She's gotten hold of a flower, or the pollen has rubbed off in passing?" Ted suggested as he stripped off Maggie's t-shirt to examine her arm more closely.

"I don't have any bouquets in the house currently. We've recently planted up the back garden, but I'm not familiar with the plant. Do you have a picture?"

Ted was thoughtful. "Yes, it would be odd for her to have a reaction just to the air-born pollen, but still, I'll find the book." He swept from the room and returned with a coloured sketch and a small tub.

"Umm," Audrey said. "I'm not sure. But Percy should be here soon, and he'll know, he bought all the plants."

"Well in the meantime, we'll get Maggie's treatment underway. As long as she isn't exposed to it again. Now this cream needs to be rubbed into all of her skin and allowed to soak in, then repeated every half an hour for four hours. Just because she's here and has shown an allergic reaction I'll get a mediwitch in here to take a blood sample and to a full screening for any other allergies."

Ted continued rubbing the cream into Maggie's arm while Audrey removed the last of her clothes. The mediwitch arrived and with a quick spell had the sample vial filled. Audrey blinked. Maggie
hadn't seemed to notice, and she'd screamed the surgery down when she'd been taken for her inoculations.

Once Ted was satisfied the first covering had been done, he wiped his hands on a towel then cast a cleaning spell on his hand and Audrey's before incinerating the towel.

"You can put her nappy back on and her vest, the room will stay warm enough. There's no point in dressing her fully, you'll only have to take it all off again in half an hour. I'll be back to check on her progress and as soon as we've got the results of the allergy test. Mr Weasley can presumably remember where tea coffee etc. can be accrued from."

Fred nodded with a slight grin.

"Very well, I will leave you to it."

Audrey pulled a clean nappy out of the baby bag and Maggie's vest. Once she was covered again, she sat in the other chair in the room cradling Maggie. "You don't need to stay," she said to Fred.

"It's fine," Fred waved her off. "I'll stay till Percy gets here and if he's going to be an age, I'll get George to swap with me. No offensive Audrey, but you've no magic and Percy would skin us alive for leaving you to fend for yourself."

"But the shop?"

"Can manage without me for a while. Usually one of us is in the back room anyway. It's fine."

Audrey nodded relieved that Fred wasn't rushing off. She glanced at her watch to note the time. "So since we're in here for a while, care to tell me about the time you stuck your foot to George?"

Fred flushed. "No. I really don't. However, I will tell you about the time George gave me whiskers."

Fred entertained Audrey with tales of their childhood mischief until it was time to reapply the cream to Maggie. Once it was done, they settled back down, and Fred picked up his tales again expanding to cover the antics of some of his other brothers. He was in the middle of telling Audrey how Charlie had broken his arm climbing on the roof of the Burrow which he had been expressly forbidden from doing and how he and Bill had tried to pass it off as Bill throwing a quaffle really hard at his brother when the door open and Percy came in.

Percy crossed the room to Audrey in hurried steps. "Mrs Hudson told me Maggie had an allergic reaction. I'm so sorry. I was in a meeting, I came as soon as I got the owl."

"It's okay, Fred brought us here."

Percy turned to his brother. "Thank you."

"It's no problem," Fred said. "It's something to come back here, just like the old days."

Percy smiled. "I must admit Mrs Hudson was happy to reminisce."

"Oh yes," Audrey said. "She pegged Fred as soon as we came up, though she was quite taken with Maggie too."

"What did the healers say?" Percy asked, looking at his daughter with concern. Maggie was fast asleep in her carrier, oblivious to the drama she had caused.

"It's an allergic reaction to dragons bloom. I wasn't able to say for sure if we had one in the garden."
The book is over there with the picture in it. They've taken a sample to do a screening for other allergies she might have. We've got to rub cream into her every half an hour for the next four hours, of which we are one hour into."

Fred stood up from his seat, offering it to Percy. "You can stay?"

Percy nodded.

"Well then, I'll make my excuses then. I'll let George know, and we'll probably pop round in the next day or so to see how she's getting on."

"Thank you," Audrey said. "For everything."

"It was no bother," Fred said. "Might be good practice."

Percy looked startled. "I didn't know you were dating, never mind seriously."

"I'm not," Fred said, holding his hands up in mock horror. "But you know you're going to want a babysitter eventually, and at least you know I know where to bring her."

Audrey laughed at Percy shocked face. "Well, maybe when she's a bit older," Audrey said. Fred winked and made his exit leaving them alone.

Percy settled into the chair Fred had vacated eyes fixed on Maggie.

"What was your meeting?" Audrey asked.

"Oh, I was at Hogwarts."

"Oh?"

"Hmm, to go over a few details about the Muggle Studies course. There are thirty students on it."

"Thirty, is that a lot?"

"Well, its more than usually take the subject and while the majority is muggle-born and those students who have a muggle parent or close muggle relative, there are a handful of pureblood students. Mostly Ravenclaws, but that was to be expected. Severus has said that a couple of the fourth years who took the subject last year have asked if they can attend the classes. I think that they are going to consider it and let the students take the exams a year late with the third years. I'm not sure what that will do about taking it to NEWT level, but perhaps they won't want to. Or will complete the courses after they leave Hogwarts."

"That's brilliant news though, isn't it. That it's been such a success right from the off."

"Yes, and Suzanna has elected to take Muggle Studies."

"I'm proud of you, you know," Audrey said, picking up his hand and squeezing it. "You're making things better, fairer, and Maggie is going to be able to be whatever she wants to be, and it's down to you."
December 2002

It was an honest offer of a child-free day. A chance to run errands and make a start on the Christmas shopping. A chance to do all the things she'd been putting off. Like visit her vault and remove some pieces. She'd had a buyer passed to her by her uncle, they wanted something out of the ordinary and Audrey thought she had just the thing tucked away.

All of it she could have done with Maggie of course, except the rollercoaster ride to her vault perhaps, but it was just so much more difficult. Her attention was always on her daughter and what she needed.

Which made it incredibly enticing, the thought of being herself for a day, so much so that she’d practically bitten her Mum’s hand off when she made the offer.

When Fleur had called, Audrey had faltered, going so far as to ring her Mum to cancel. Explaining that Fleur, alone while Bill was on a work placement abroad, had asked to spend the day with her. Her Mum instead had offered to take on Fleur’s two as well. Fleur had been torn, as eager as Audrey at the thought of a day of being herself and concerned that leaving three very small children with one woman was asking rather a lot, especially when the woman in question was unaware of the magical nature of her charges.

Lizzy had convinced her, however. Fleur had flooed to Audrey’s before Lizzy had arrived and stepped out of the front door with Audrey, after Lizzy had assured her that everything was fine, and Audrey had her mobile phone should things get too much, with only the slightest misgivings.

They walked around the corner of the street, ostentatiously heading for the tube, but at a sheltered corner with no one around, Fleur grasped Audrey’s arm and apparated them to around the corner of the Leaky Cauldron on the muggle side. Audrey took a few moments to recover from the mode of transport she rarely took with good reason. Her first steps were a bit wobbly, but her balance soon came back to her, and she shot Fleur a reassuring smile.

“The bank first,” Audrey suggested tying her scarf tighter around her neck in reaction to the December weather. They walked arm in arm through the door of the bar and out to the Alley. They meandered up the cobbled streets discussing their latest news and who would be hosting who for Christmas. There was a general consensus that it would likely take an act of war to get Fred and George away from Maggie on Christmas Day and so they would probably be joining Audrey and Percy for Christmas dinner. Audrey's parents would be hosting their own dinner with her sister and would visit later in the day. Fleur and Bill would be hosting Fleur’s parents and her sister. A brief visit to the Burrow would be made on Boxing Day, long enough for the grandparents to see their grandchildren but not long enough to join in any sort of meal. The visit would mainly be for Arthur’s sake, who was stuck between disapproving of his wife’s behaviour and being unable to alter it.

“We’ll see him on Christmas Eve, he’s going to come over and give Maggie her present,” Audrey told Fleur.

They reached the bank and Audrey approached the counter. The goblin approved her key and waved her towards the doorway where the carts were. The journey made her nauseous, and she was glad she hadn’t got Maggie with her as she stumbled slightly. Fleur caught her arm, giving her a concerned look which Audrey waved off.
The door opened under the goblin's hand and Audrey's key. The small magical globes of light that Percy provided her with to light the inside of her vault shone gently. Audrey made a quick circuit around them checking for fade, making a note of those Percy would need to come and refresh for her. Fleur walked forward into the vault curiously poking about amongst the pieces of furniture.

“What do you have these all for?” she asked.

“It’s essentially overflow stock,” Audrey answered. “The wizarding world has genuine antiques kept in a condition that is nearly impossible to find in the muggle world. I buy it in your world and sell it in mine. Even with the exchange rate being what it is the amount of money that can be made is astounding. I keep it here because flooding the market with it would drive the price down. Also, because my Uncle, who technically owns the business, doesn’t know about magic.”

“Aren’t they full of enchantments?”

“Percy found me suppliers that strip out all the enchantments. Only the preservation charms remain. The cost of the item is dependent on how much effort it took, if the item had any hexes or curses applied. Even so, I haven’t yet found anything that hasn’t or won’t turn a profit when sold.”

Fleur looked interested. “How much does that usually cost?”

Audrey paused, looking over at her sister-in-law. “It depends I believe; the better services are more costly, but then the peace of mind is there. I don’t want anyone hurt. The biggest risk is that I’m a muggle and not everyone will work with me, and some don’t think the anti-muggle enchantments need removing. There’s trust that needs to be built, and it’s more difficult given that I’m not magical. I do alright here with the suppliers I have, so it’s not something I’ve actively pursued.”

“But you could buy more?”

“Well, furniture seems to be pretty steady, so maybe a little but not much. Curiosities and ornamental pieces there might be a market for. I’d have to brush up on my knowledge as I don’t know enough to truly launch into that area with confidence. Then there’s the jewellery market, which I haven’t really touched because according to Percy the hexes, jinxes, and curses tend to be that much nastier thus driving up the price of having them removed. I have some bits, though. That’s what I’m here for today actually.” Audrey beckoned Fleur over to the chest she was stood by. “We’ve a customer who is getting married in the new year and wants a tiara to be her statement piece.” Audrey selected three velvet boxes, opening them and turning them to face Fleur. “Nothing as lovely as the necklace and earrings you leant me, but I think any of these would do the job.”

“Yes,” Fleur agreed gently removing the tiaras and handling them carefully. I wore Bill’s Great Aunt’s tiara, it was beautiful.” Placing the tiaras back in their boxes, she withdrew her wand, casting a spell over each item.

“Fleur?” Audrey asked.

“I wished to check the work,” Fleur replied with a shrug. “If you are going to sell these,”

“I do have the paperwork if you want to look it over.” Audrey offered.

“Call it professional curiosity. These are clear of anything other than the preservation charms.”

“Did you do a lot of curse breaking on jewellery?” Audrey asked, closing the jewellery boxes up and placing them into her bag.

“Some, mostly in training. As you say, it can be tricky due to the wealth of things you run across but
Audrey nodded, indicating that she was finished, and they could leave.

Fleur followed casting a considering glance back over her shoulder at Audrey’s vault.

Once back on the surface, Audrey hooked her arm through Fleur’s. “Come on, where are we going next?”

“I would like to replace some of Bill’s things, he is hard on his tools. Also, Bill has asked me to post some things off to Charlie for him and I will need to buy his Christmas present so it can be sent at the same time.”

“Right let’s do that. I’m going to get the twins and Percy presents from the muggle side. What would your girls like? Dolls? Clothes?” Audrey looked conspiringly over at Fleur. “If you swear to keep it a secret, I can show you Ginny’s secret weapon against the twins.”

Fleur gave her an amused glance. “Isn’t that supposed to be a heavily guarded secret? I’ve heard Fred and George try and get the information out of her.”

“To be honest, it’s not, at least not in the muggle world and if they thought about it for even a minute, they could probably have worked it out. I think they just like the fact that she’s made an effort to get one over on them to try too hard.”

“Are you ready for them at Christmas? I cannot say that I am not almost a little jealous on behalf of Victoire and Dominique that Maggie has their devotion.”

“I think that might be more the Percy effect than any effort on Maggie’s behalf to be charming. They’re brothers, Percy is a little stiff, and the twins are a little reckless, they balance each other out. They accept the help he is offering, and he accepts that they demonstrate their love by being playful. Honestly, I’ve just sort of accepted that they will always be there in some form. They’ve all but imprinted on Maggie, and as long as everything stays the right side of playful, I’m not going to complain. I did consider putting a limit on Christmas presents considering what they did at the hospital. But I doubt they’d listen, or they’d find a way to get around it.”

“I did say almost,” Fleur pointed out wryly. “I do not think I could handle such exuberance all the time.”

As they completed their shopping, magical and mundane and started to debate lunch, Audrey felt her stomach roll. Stopping, so she could concentrate on breathing through the sudden nausea, she hoped she wasn’t coming down with some sort of winter virus. She leant on the wall trying to be casual about the sudden weakness.

“Audrey?” Fleur asked quietly.

“Sorry,” Audrey said wanly. My stomach is all over the place. I’m probably just hungry.”

Fleur cocked her head. “I do not think you are.”

Audrey lifted her head to look at her sister-in-law. “Oh?”

Fleur held out her hand. “Let’s find somewhere more private.”

Audrey took the hand and let Fleur lead her down a quiet side street. Glancing all around her Fleur
withdrew her wand and held it down by her side. “Take off your ring,” she instructed. Audrey complied tucking it securely in her jeans pocket. Fleur lifted her wand and in a careful motion, cast a spell. The spell surrounded Audrey and glowed yellow.

“What’s that?” Audrey asked.

“It’s a pregnancy test,” Fleur said simply.

“What?” Audrey asked. “Why would you…?”

“A hunch,” Fleur replied. “Your balance has been off all day, and you’ve been suffering bouts of sudden nausea. Victoire was like that for me.”

“So, it was positive?”

“Yes,” Fleur said with a growing smile. “You’re pregnant.”

Audrey slumped against the wall again, her own smile matching Fleur’s. “I’m pregnant? My cycle has been a bit all over the place, I can’t say that I’ve really kept track. Does your spell know how far along I am?”

“No, it’s a household charm, for that you would need to see a mediwitch.”

“I’ll make an appointment with the doctor. So, I’m pregnant.”

“Yes. But you should also eat. Will you tell Percy tonight?”

“I want to pick up a test on the way home. Not that I don’t trust your magic,” Audrey said reassuringly. “But it’s the muggle in me I suppose,” she laughed. “Unless I pee on a stick, I won’t believe it.”

Fleur shook her head. “We can get one of these tests easily?”

“Yes, any chemist we pass will have them. Come on, you’re right, I need to eat.”

They sat at a table in the restaurant, having sent the waitress off with their orders. Fleur gazed out of the window, her expression telling Audrey her thoughts were a million miles away. Audrey didn’t mind, her own thoughts were a little distracted. She was pregnant. She ran the calculation, even if she was only a couple of months along the gap between Maggie and this child would be roughly a year and a half. That was close to what separated her and Rachel, and they had a good relationship growing up. Similar in age that they were friends as well as sisters. It meant that her plans for going back to work might have to be looked at again. She’d been hoping that now Maggie was a bit older she’d be able to take her to sales. That might not be possible if she was pregnant again. The idea of being as tired as she had been at points in her last pregnancy and dealing with a fractious Maggie didn’t appeal.

“What will you do?” Fleur asked, bringing Audrey back to the present.

“What?”

Fleur twirled the stem of the wine glass on the table between her fingers pensively. “Things are different for you, yes? Muggles don’t homeschool their children, you expect to return to work.”

“Err, well, yes. Lots of families have two working parents. Once Maggie is three, she’ll be able to go to nursery. I’ve been talking to Helen and John Granger a lot. They’ve been through this before and
to be honest, as stupid as it sounds, I had it in my head that Maggie would go to nursery, get upset like kids will do and have the entire nursery floating on the ceiling. I know it sounds daft, but I’ve heard the stories about the brothers and Ginny growing up from Arthur, and from Percy and the twins and it didn’t seem that much of a stretch to be honest. Helen and John have had a bit of a job talking me down from a ledge. Percy has his own concerns because he doesn’t have any experience of the muggle school system, but I do think it will be best for Maggie.”

“Then you’ll return to work, once she is at school during the day?”

“That was my intention, well until about twenty minutes ago,” Audrey smiled. “What’s this about Fleur?”

Fleur sighed, leaning back in her chair. “I love my job. I left France, learnt English, yes, to pursue Bill, but also to become a curse breaker. I love my children. The expectation is that until they go to Hogwarts, I will be at home with them. Eleven years. I do not think I want that.”

“What has Bill said?”

Fleur waved a hand in negation. “His mother raised them. She stayed at home. That is what Bill knows.”

“It’s not really the same, is it?” Audrey asked, breaking off as the waitress laid their plates in front of them. Once she’d gone, Audrey picked up her knife and fork and continued. “Molly, for all her faults, had seven children practically one after the other. Bill was born three years after she left school, that’s what? Essentially twenty years with children underfoot. Being a mother was her career. If you want to work, is there something stopping you other than the expectation that you won’t?”

Fleur poked at her food. “Curse breaking requires you to go to the location. You can be away for an indeterminate length of time. The dangers aren’t to be underestimated either. Even a role within a team based in the country is hardly safe. Bill’s accident was at his desk.”

Audrey ate some of her food, hoping her stomach wouldn’t get upset. Cautiously she suggested. “Have you considered muggle schooling? Just until their letters come. That would let you do something.”

Fleur laughed sourly. “Would you be surprised if I said yes?”

“Maybe a bit,” Audrey replied, not liking Fleur’s tone. “I take it, Bill wasn’t keen.”

Fleur took an angry bite of her lunch, chewing it with as much emotion. “No, he was not. I am their mother. As if that is all I am.”

“Well, in fairness to Bill,” Audrey began cautiously feeling as if she was navigating a field scattered with land mines. “If you hadn’t met me, would you have considered anything else than staying home and homeschooling?”

“No, but I think I might have found myself unsatisfied. It’s just now I can see an alternative, I want an alternative. I do not want to just be a mother and yet I feel as if I am betraying my children saying they aren’t enough.”

“Ha! That I do have the answer for. It’s in one of my parenting books. Basically, you’re allowed to feel like that. It’s perfectly normal, and you aren’t allowed to beat yourself up about it. You were a person before your children, and you are still a person with them, it’s just, you know, people see the kids first.”
“Percy will let you work with no expectation you should stay home. He will let his children go to muggle schools.”

Audrey winced. “I’m not going to compare the two. But you forget that I’m not magical. I have my own expectations of marriage and children. We are constantly compromising because we are trying to blend two worlds which are very different. For all intents and purposes, you and Bill are operating within the same expectations.”

“My expectations have changed!” Fleur declared, stabbing viciously at her food. “He flooed last night, the dig has been extended. He doesn’t know when he will be home. This is not a problem because I am home. Home to look after his house, to be a mother to his children, while he enjoys himself, grubbing around in a tomb doing work he loves with no expectation of giving it up.”

Audrey took a long sip of her drink wishing she’d ordered wine. This was fast turning into a wine and ice cream conversation. The waitress approached the table to inquire if everything was alright with their meals and it was on the tip of her tongue to ask for a bottle, but Fleur answered with the expected pleasantries, and she left before Audrey could form up the words.

“Sorry, this is not—.” Fleur apologised.

It’s alright,” Audrey interrupted. “Honestly it is. I’m still in contact with my antenatal group, we get together once a month when we can. Once we’ve finished bragging about who’s grown the most it basically turns into conversations like this.”

Fleur smiled wistfully and said nothing else. They finished their meals and declined pudding in favour of coffee.

Fleur turned her cup in its saucer her face once again thoughtful. “You said that you needed trust to buy pieces to sell.”

“Yes,” Audrey said warily.

Fleur nodded slightly. “And that you sometimes had difficulty because you aren’t a witch.”

“Yes,” Audrey agreed.

“Then,” Fleur paused, catching Audrey’s eyes. “You could trust me? If you give me some pieces, I could remove the enchantments. You could have the pieces checked to be sure my work was good. Then, I could, I mean, perhaps if you needed, with a seller because you aren’t a witch, do this for you?”

Audrey propped her elbow on the table, resting her chin in her hand, scrutinising her companion. “You’re suggesting what? We set up a business together. I find the pieces I can sell; you help me where the seller will only deal with a magical person then clean them up, and we each take a cut of the profits?”

“That, that is more than I was thinking,” Fleur confessed. “I thought perhaps I could charge you for my services. Small pieces I could work on at home. It’s not about the money, especially. I want to do something. To use my skills, to still have something for myself besides my children. But a business? I, I don’t know how to do that.”

Audrey smiled at Fleur. “You’re right, we can start small. A few pieces of interesting jewellery or ornaments to start. I’ll speak to my Uncle, see what he thinks, and I’ll let you know. I was supposed to go on the trip to France in April, I suppose that might change depending on how far along I am, but, well, do you want to come with me? Maggie is staying with Percy. If Bill can’t have Victoire
and Dominque, could your parents? What are the limits on apparition? Could you make the trip each day from them to wherever I will be? Or perhaps find a local floo?"

Fleur looked at Audrey with a radiant smile. “You’d let me do this? To come with you on your trip. To help you?”

Audrey laughed. “I’m not letting you do anything. I’m accepting your idea, I’m willing to give it a try at the very least, of course I am. But yes, I am inviting you on the trip, that is if I do go, and if I do, I’ll probably need your help since I’ll be the size of a house.”
Wisdom Dispensed By Strangers

The Hart and Hind was a cosy pub off the beaten track, favoured by a select group of wizards and witches who spent their days in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic. It was a muggle pub and as such could boast a level of privacy that couldn't be found on the wizarding side of London.

The ceilings were low, the woodwork dark, and the brass bar rail and fittings shone like gold in the low light. The floor was covered in quarry tiles that might have claimed to be red at one point in their history. Now they were dark nondescript colour in the well-trodden paths around the bar, lightening as they reached the edges of the room. On a blustery evening in early January, the warmth of the pub shone like a beacon.

When a tall man in slightly odd clothing walked in through the door, he drew little notice from the patrons already ensconced in comfortable surroundings as the evening wound its way into the later hours, except a group on a table in a corner.

The man placed his order at the bar and glanced around the pub.

"I recognise that look," Phil said, waving over the man who could only be a Weasley from the hair colour, and Percy's eldest brother from the scars on his neck.

"What look is that then?" Bill asked as he approached the table of a wizard and two witches with his drink.

"That is the look that says Percy has done something and its made somebody else happy, and you're left feeling somewhat inadequate, and annoyed at him. Which I suspect, if you're like everyone else, is making you more annoyed."

"Alright," Bill acknowledged, taking a seat. "You might have a point. Know where he is? Audrey said he was here."

"Little Wizard's room. I'm Phil by the way, Helen and Heather." He waved a hand at the two witches at the table. "So, what's he done and whose problem has he fixed? I speak from the position of being the idiot who mentioned to Percy that his niece wanted to be a muggle vet, and would be taking her GCSE's alongside studying her OWLs. Low and behold not a year later Hogwarts rolls out education reforms that means she won't have to, and she can study for her muggle qualifications while attending a magical school."

"Ha, yeah but we know where he started don't we. That bloody marriage law." Heather, the blonde witch, leant forward over the table, pointing a finger at herself. "I was sunk if that came back. I'd been dodging it by the skin of my teeth as it was, no family name, no connections, and a little bird with suspiciously red hair managed to get that shit thrown out didn't he."

"Oh, come on, Heather," Helen joined in. "It's Percy, if he weren't such a good bloke, I'd have poisoned his tea by now."

"Bill, I wasn't expecting you. Remind me not to drink anything you bring me in future Helen," Percy said as he retook his seat.

"I'm not stupid enough to bring it to you myself. I'll have that junior secretary in Accounting do it. He lights up like the sun when you walk through. It would be pathetic if it weren't so bloody funny."

"I have indicated that I am, A. not interested. B. very happily married, and when all that failed, I told
him I wasn't gay."

"Ahh well he lives in hope doesn't he."

"Please, feel free to crush it for me."

"Ooooo!" Helen laughed. "I might, but you'll owe me one."

"I'll mark it in my ledger to be sure," Percy replied, rolling his eyes.

"You would as well you bastard," Helen snorted.

Phil turned back to Bill. "So, come on what's he done?"

Bill looked around the table of eager faces, then at Percy, who was calmly sat in this group of witches and wizards, waiting. "Fleur has decided that she isn't going to home-school Victoire and Dominique. She wants them to attend muggle school. She's also going back to work, if not with Gringotts full-time curse-breaking, then she and Audrey are setting up a business together."

Phil looked at Bill. "This is bad?"

"No. Yes. Fucked if I know."

"Ah," Phil said. "One of those problems." He turned to Percy. "So, what have you to say in your defence?"

Percy rolled his eyes at Phil's dramatics. "None of it was my idea."

Bill began to protest, but Phil held up a hand to stop him. "Hang on, gotta hear him out."

"Audrey and Fleur cooked this up between themselves. The business that is. While you were in Brazil, they met for a day out. Lizzy, my mother-in-law, took all the children. Fleur accompanied Audrey to her vault, which sparked a conversation regarding Audrey's expectations in returning to work and Maggie's schooling. It was the day we found out about Audrey's pregnancy. As Audrey told Fleur, I have no objections to either of my children attending muggle schools. While I have some reservations, they are related to my unfamiliarity with the system, not because I fear the standard of education or care. Audrey and I have a blended household, and she has every right to expect me to respect her way of bringing up our children."

"Fleur isn't a muggle."

"No, but she does have a career she is deservedly proud of. By sending the girls to school they are looked after, given an education, the opportunity to make friends, and Fleur gets to pursue something that makes her happy."

"Yep," Phil said. "You've lost this one mate. Sorry." He patted Bill on the arm.

"Phil," Percy said. "I'm not sure that is helping."

"Nah," Heather weighed in. "Phil's right. There's nothing wrong with going to a muggle school. I went, Phil's nieces and nephews went. It's stupid to say otherwise. It's school, not a prisoner of war camp. Hogwarts will be less of a shock if they're already used to being away from home during the day. Some of my dormmates when I went were horrendous. Couldn't cope with being away from home or around so many people all at once. Took them months to adapt."

"What about this business idea?" Bill asked, waving the server over and indicating he wanted
another round.

"Ah, well," Percy said, ducking his head slightly.

Phil started laughing. "I know that look," he chortled.

"Yes, thank you, Phil," Percy said repressively.

"Oh, go on, what've you done?" Helen asked, leaning forward in her chair with a delighted gleam in her eye.

Percy sighed. "Nothing more than register the business with the appropriate departments and gain the relevant permits so that they may start as soon as they like. The work Fleur is purporting to do for Audrey is not without danger, and I would be remiss if I did not ensure my wife's business partner had the adequate permits to carry out her work."

"Riggght," Heather started to laugh. "This would be Phil's department, wouldn't it? Phil, who happens to have a niece taking GCSEs at Hogwarts."

Phil grinned. "Nah, I'd have done it anyway without that. I like Audrey, and she lets me borrow Percy here when I need a wingman."

Percy spluttered into his drink. "I beg your pardon."

His reaction caused Helen and Heather to laugh as Phil grinned pleased with himself. "Seriously, his brothers got Trevor, Beatrice, and Suzanna their wands. I'd have to be pretty thick to miss the fact that when the department started drowning them with forms, they never missed a deadline and never miss-filed a single one. You kept them going didn't you, till Shacklebolt got in and the nonsense stopped."

"My brothers are very dedicated to their wand business, and it behoves me as their brother, to help them in any way that I can," Percy said stanchly.

"See," Phil said to Bill. "He says this shit, and you'd laugh, but the stupid idiot is serious. What can you do?"

"Ask him to get education reforms pushed through Hogwarts," Heather shot back.

"Well, exactly. What's the point having a mate with all the power if you don't abuse the hell out of it?" Phil declared grandly.

"My thoughts precisely," Percy replied, a smug grin hovering around his lips as he looked pointedly at Phil. Heather and Helen sputtered off into laughter as Phil realised Percy's meaning, his face morphing into pleased surprise.

"Although," Percy continued pointing at Phil with his drink. "I will repeat, I think you are celebrating too early with regards to the reforms. It's a trial period. Yes, she'll get to take her GCSE's but the work to ensure she can take her A-Levels is still incomplete. If she can't, then she'll be a NEWT down. We need to be sure that we aren't disadvantaging those students electing to take the Muggle Studies course. They need to be able to proceed through to NEWT level, then once they leave something has to be in place to support their transition into whatever world or career they choose. There are social and economic repercussions from this, and if they are not addressed, it runs the risk of having the whole lot thrown out. The work to ensure that Suzanna's year doesn't become a one time deal is still to be done. Drawing up the reforms for Hogwarts was six months work. I proposed when I suggested it to the Headmaster, that it would take four years to get the full support
in place for this to become a standard. I have seen nothing that dissuades me my initial estimate is incorrect."

"I don't doubt your numbers, Percy, I'm just saying what you have done is worthy of celebration."

"It's too soon to celebrate," Percy replied. "This isn't submitting a C23 form."

"A what?" Bill asked.

"License to research and perform experimental magic within a controlled environment," Phil replied automatically.

Bill barked a laugh. "Are you kidding? Those things are hellish to fill in, and they take ages to be approved. I completed one two years ago, and I've still not heard back."

"Really?" Percy said in surprise.

"Yes," Bill said. "We have an artefact that hasn't responded to the usual things. To actually get anywhere with it, we need a license to use experimental magic, hence the form. It's still sat in storage because we never got a reply."

"Well, I can't say I found it particularly onerous. I have to admit as I wasn't sure of exactly what Fleur would be required to do, I left the request pretty broad. I didn't want to accidentally exclude something she needed. I have seen the amendment forms, and they are a work of art. By the way, Phil, my compliments to whoever wrote that bit of redundancy within it."

"It is a thing of beauty, isn't it? Weeds out the idiots with zero effort on our part."

"Wait, you've given Fleur a license to do what?"

"Research and perform experimental magic in a controlled, approved environment, where it pertains to the removal and documentation of curses, hexes, jinks, household charms and other magics. That's what she'll be doing for Audrey after all, and she does have all the relevant accreditation. Although I have to confess, I upped the level of safety standard she has to adhere to in respect that I understand she wishes to work from home, and you do have two young children. She didn't seem to mind when I ran through it all with her."

"You mean Fleur has carte blanch to research and document? No one at Gringotts has that sort of permission. She could make headway through our backlog. Merlin." Bill slumped back into his chair.

"Well," Percy said. "She could, but you'd actually have to pay her to do so. The licence is for Fleur as pertaining to her role within their business. It's nothing to do with her previous role at Gringotts."

Bill looked slightly aghast.

"I'm sure her rates will be reasonable," Heather said with malicious glee. "Since you are family and have been so supportive."

"Why has my application taken two years if you can push one through for Fleur in less than five weeks."

"You probably filled it in wrong," Phil said. "We don't give permits like that to people who can't read. It's not really going to end well is it."
Bill spluttered indignantly as the rest of the table laughed.

"Since you're Percy's brother I can have a look for it on Monday and owl you. But if you have fluffed filling it in, you'll have to do it again. You did keep a copy of it, didn't you?"

"No, why would I do that?" Bill replied, puzzled.

"Because you have to fill it in again. It has been two years since you last did, so I am going to go with the guess that you can't actually remember everything about this thingamajig you want to meddle with," Phil explained with exaggerated patience.

"Bugger," Bill grumbled. His gaze dropped to his glass, swirling the contents clearly thinking. He looked up and caught Percy's attention. "Now you've given my wife every curse breakers idea of Christmas, what about this trip she is talking about? Are you telling me that wasn't your idea either?"

Percy shrugged. "Of course not, it's a business thing for Audrey. I assume Audrey would like Fleur to get an idea of what she does, the sorts of things that sell, and possibly explore some of the wizarding markets. I'm quite looking forward to it personally. I've already put in for the leave."

"You're going too?" Bill asked in surprise.

"No," Percy said slowly. "To look after Maggie. I'm going to take her to the zoo and the aquarium. Then there are the normal things that she does with Audrey, her playgroups and such. Lizzie and Rick see her on Thursdays, so I'll have to take her there as well. Without Audrey here, I'm all but expecting Fred and George to demand to be allowed to do something, probably outrageous, just for the reaction."

"You're taking a one-year-old to the aquarium?" Helen asked sceptically.

"It's supposed to help with her language development, and fish are very soothing."

"And aquariums are cool," Heather pointed out. "Can I come?"

Percy shot Helen a smug look. "Of course you can Heather. I'll stand you lunch, but you're buying the ice cream."

"Result! Let me know, and I'll get the day off too. We can go in my car if you like, then you don't have to apparate Maggie. She probably won't like it, and it will ruin the day if she's upset about it."

Bill huffed, leaning back in his chair. "Fleur said she'd take them to her parents if I couldn't sort something with work."

A collective 'Oooh' with accompanied teeth sucking came from the table excepting Percy.

"What?" Bill asked irritably. "My work isn't as predictable as an office job."

"Mate, we won't take offence at that if you don't take offence at this. What your Missus has said is clearly a test. And frankly, you're failing it hard. You're arguing about her getting a job which it sounds like your more than a bit jealous of, and staying home to look after your kids till they go to Hogwarts, and you're not even willing to do it for...?" Phil looked over at Percy.

"Two weeks," Percy supplied.

Phil winced. "Yeah, two weeks versus eleven years? You cannot let her take them to the in-laws."

"I'm not sure Fleur would do such a thing. Although I have to say your point has merit," Percy
nodded at Phil.

"You mean Audrey wouldn't do it, but that's because she doesn't need to," Heather said.

"I hardly think that I'm in any way getting this right all the time," Percy protested.

"I didn't mean that," Heather said waving her drink at him. "She's not going to do stuff like that, because you two have different viewpoints. You have to talk to make sure you both understand the magical and muggle thing. You can't get pissed off with each other when the other person genuinely hasn't got a clue what you're on about. So you have to do the bit most people miss out. Namely, sit down and explain stuff. Frankly, it sounds like a load of hard work, but that's beside the point. Bill over here isn't doing that with Fleur, is he? Yeah, well, there you go, that's his problem. He's assumed, and she's not on the same page, and it's not occurred to him there is a different page. There you go, solved. I'll be here all week."

"What's solved?" Bill asked swallowing the last of his drink and waving for another.

Heather squinted at him. "Did you not listen? You need to sit down and talk to her. Find out everyone's expectations and stuff. And yeah, you gotta put in for the leave for this trip. Where are they going?"

"France, to meet some of Audrey's business contacts and pick up stock for the Auction house," Percy said, picking up his new drink. "Either Audrey or her Uncle goes every year. Last year was the first time Audrey didn't go in a few years, so she is quite looking forward to it. It takes two weeks to travel the loop that takes you through the tunnel, to Paris, then down to the south coast via the east side of France, then up the west side and back to Paris before taking the tunnel home. I've been with her three times; it is an enjoyable trip. I believe Fleur will enjoy it. There is a plan for Audrey to meet some of Fleur's family."

"Sounds great, so you can't mess this up, can you," Heather turned to Bill with a severe frown which was offset by the slight wobble and inability to focus entirely.

"How much have you had to drink?" Bill asked.

"Well you've waved three rounds over, and we were well onto our something-th before you turned up. But my state of inebriation does not make me any less right Fly Boy."

"Fly Boy?"

"You'll have to forgive Heather," Helen said. "She goes full muggle on us when she gets drunk. While wildly entertaining, it leaves some of us a bit behind in understanding."

"Speak for yourself," Phil interrupted. "I happen to be very current on muggle culture, and I knew what she meant. Percy did too. She's right by the way. Fly Boy is working for you. I'd embrace it."

Bill looked over at Percy for help.

"You've got swagger, bravado. Some innate sex appeal to the opposite sex," Percy recited helpfully.

"Huh," Bill said then squinted at Percy. "How drunk are you?"

"I shall not be apparating home this evening," Percy confirmed with great solemnity.

"Percy gets proper when he's drunk," Heather said as if confiding a great secret. "That is until he can't get his tongue around all the twisty words."
"A man has a right to celebrate the impregnating of his wife," Phil said with a dubious air. "I don't think I meant it quite like that, but, anyway that. Oh, did I tell you that Michaels has got some spare tickets for the next game? Think Audrey will let you out again? Bit crap she can't come. Think she'd like Quidditch?"

"We could record the game," Helen suggested.

"Isn't that illegal?" Bill pointed out.

"Probably not if we used a muggle camera," Percy replied thoughtfully. "Odds are good they wouldn't even know what one is, never mind its purpose. I bet Rick has one he'd let me borrow. He might like Quidditch, even if Audrey doesn't care for it."

"What's not to like?" Helen protested.

"Well," Percy said. "Audrey finds witches and wizards riding brooms a point of humour which is endlessly diverting. I'm not sure a sport based around the concept would overcome that. I have tried to explain, but it falls on deaf ears. We should do it though, in case actual footage helps. It would be terrible if my children developed a fascination with the sport, and their mother was unable to join in with it. That sort of wedge could do untold damage to their psyches, and Audrey would never forgive herself."

"You're going to break international sporting laws to record a Quidditch match, and that's your reasoning? Untold damage to the psyche of your children? One of which isn't yet born. Am I going to have to bail you out of the holding cells?" Bill asked incredulously.

"No," Percy said with a slow, deliberate shake of his head. "Because we won't get caught."

"Merlin," Bill said, laughing. "Have Fred and George ever seen you like this?"

"No," Percy said with just as much solemnity as he finished his drink and waved for another round. "And it is your, your sworn duty, as an elder brother, that they never, ever find out. They are terrible, they don't need ideas." Percy shook his head again but a bit quicker this time, which caused him to wince.

Bill lifted his drink and used it to hide his grin. He'd never suspected Percy of getting drunk in a pub and plotting to break umpteen rules surrounding sporting events with company. "So," he asked, with a brief thought to how intoxicated he might be to be encouraging this. "Tell me. How is the camera going to operate in an environment saturated with magic? I thought muggle stuff didn't work around magic?"

He was instantly confronted with dismissive noises and gestures from the four other people at the table. Delighted, he settled in to discover exactly how the people who worked at the Ministry for Magic cut loose and plotted to break all the laws they upheld when sober.
Audrey was heading upstairs to check on Lucy, who was beginning to make whimpering noises through the baby monitor as she woke from her nap. Audrey hastened her pace as she heard the noises increase in volume, she'd only put her down to sleep ten minutes ago. At five months old Lucy still needed at least one nap a day despite her difficulty in settling down for them.

Audrey reached the nursery, her old bedroom her parents had repurposed for when their grandchildren visited, quietly she slid into the room. Leaning over the cot, she gently soothed Lucy until she slipped back under again. Just as she was leaving the room, pulling the door closed behind her, her mother's voice rang out in panic from downstairs.

"Audrey! Audrey! Oh, Christ!"

"Mum!? Mum?" Audrey ran down the stairs and back into the sitting room where she'd left Maggie and her Mum watching a DVD on TV.

Lizzy was standing by Maggie, arms outstretched as if to snatch her up, but fear held her frozen in place.

All around Maggie, the plastic tea set she had been playing with danced in a parody of the animation on the television screen.

Audrey didn't think, she crossed the room and swept Maggie up in her arms. Maggie turned to her a bright delighted smile on her face.

"Look, Mummy!"

"I see Maggie. I do, but love, can you stop it now, please. Can you put them down?"

Maggie looked at her sadly. "Stop?"

"Yes, love, let it go, make them sit on the table again, please. Can you do that?"

Maggie looked sadly at the dancing tea set and slumped a little. The plastic dishes clattered to the tabletop.

"Good girl," Audrey said, giving her a cuddle. "Are you a bit tired now? Shall we sit down and watch the video? You can have a nap if you want one. Mummy will stay here and talk to Grandma."

"Audrey," Lizzy interrupted shakily. "Is this something she can do? I mean, does? A lot?"

"Yes," Audrey said calmly sitting on the sofa, letting Maggie sit next to her. She stroked Maggie's hair, allowing her to lean upon her chest. She knew that Maggie would be tired, it was more magic than she'd seen her daughter display before and she'd always been tired and grumpy afterwards. Percy had reassured her it as just a little magical exhaustion, and a nap would set her right. After the second display that was. The first time, he'd been shocked then near panic as Maggie had slept nearly four hours solid. Only the second and third opinions of Arthur and Fleur had calmed him down.

"There's nothing wrong with her Mum," Audrey explained, keeping her voice calm so as not to upset her daughter. She gave her mother a warning look purposely, dropping her eyes to Maggie's
head then back to her mum. Ted had been clear that no kind of censure was to be given for Maggie's accidental magic, it was something to be treated as standard so that problems didn't arise later.

"But," Lizzy said with a helpless gesture to the tea set on the coffee table

"Look, I can explain everything. Shall I get us a drink, and I'll answer everything."

"Your dad still keeps whiskey behind the spaghetti jar," Lizzy replied.

"I was going to offer tea."

"Audrey, I do love you, but does this strike you as a tea sort of conversation?"

Audrey started to get up, but Lizzy waved her back. "You stay, she's nearly asleep. I'll get the drinks."

"Water please, Mum. Without alcohol."

I'm not going to water whiskey." Lizzy muttered as she left the room. She returned in short order with a tumbler of whiskey and a glass of water for Audrey. Audrey shot the tumbler an assessing look, was it the first or second?

"Less of that thank you," Lizzy said sharply. "So, she has ESP? She's like one of those kids on the science fiction shows that the government always locks up?"

"No, she's not," Audrey said, slightly appalled.

"How long have you known? How long has all this been happening? Why haven't you said anything? Well, alright, ignore that, but how are you even coping?" Lizzy paused to sip at the whisky pulling a face at the taste. "I really do prefer gin, but I can't take it neat."

Audrey rolled her eyes at her mother but forged on to answer her questions. "We've known since she came home from the hospital."

"Since she was born?" Lizzy interrupted. "She's been able to do that? How have we never seen it before?"

"No, Mum, let me explain! This is going to sound a bit mad, but Maggie is a witch. No, look, I know what you are thinking. I do. I really do, but the thing is magic is real. What Maggie just did was magic. A wandless levitation charm with an animation charm. Not that she knows that, or she has any control over it. It's called accidental magic when they are young like she is. She can't help it. It's not a bad thing, it's normal for her, she's not doing anything wrong. If she gets upset or overly tired or stressed or just happy and excited, things happen around her, and it's her magic responding to her."

"Audrey, love."

"Yeah," Audrey nodded at the hugely sceptical look on her mum's face. "I am aware it sounds nuts. That I'm probably giving you lots of reasons to book me into a padded room on the looney ward, but I'm telling you the truth. She's only two, as she gets older, these episodes will stop as she learns to control it. I'm not, by the way, magical. Not at all, none of our family are or ever has been. She got it from Percy."

"Percy? It's heredity?"
"Yeah, Percy is a wizard, and he was born into a magical family, one of the oldest magical families in the country. He went to a magical school, he has a magical job, and is actually on track to become the Minister for Magic."

"As in a Government Minister?"

"Yeah."

"And you believe him?"

"Yes." Audrey gave her a lopsided look and gestured at Maggie, who was now dozing against her chest. "The thing is, I've known for years. Since we got engaged. Percy told me everything before he proposed. And I promise you I took it about as well as you are. But I accepted it, him, knowing that Percy is a wizard. He wasn't supposed to tell me, but he didn't want to lie and ."

"Oh, Audrey…"

"Mum, it wasn't like that. You know Percy, he's the same person you happily watched me marry."

"Yes, but Maggie was born exactly nine months later, dear."

Audrey bristled. "I was not pregnant on my wedding day! We were engaged for years before we got married! You've just seen Maggie surrounded by a floating, dancing tea set. Which stopped when I asked her to stop. Why is this so difficult?"


"What if, well, let me call Percy. Can he come into the house? It's considered rude usually, but you need proof, and he can provide it."

"I'm not going to refuse him entry," Lizzy replied. "I'd like this all explained properly, but he's still your husband and the father of my grandchildren."

Audrey groped for her handbag from where she had left it by the side of the sofa, pulling it onto the half of her lap that wasn't covered in a toddler. She fished her mirror out of her bag and flipped it open one-handed. "Percy Weasley," she said clearly.

"What are you doing?" Lizzy asked.

The mirror connected, showing Percy's face. "Audrey?"

"Daddy," Maggie roused at the sound of her father's voice.

"Yes, it's Daddy," Audrey said, smoothing her head back down. "Mummy just needs to talk to Daddy."


"Percy, I need you to come to my Mum's."

"Why what's wrong?"

"Maggie levitated her tea set and made it dance along with the video she and my Mum were watching."

"She's fine. She stopped when I asked her to, but Mum…"

"Oh. Oh yeah, give me five minutes to tell Kingsley and move a couple of things, and I'll be right there."

"Can you come directly into the front room?"

"Yes, if that's alright with your Mum," Percy agreed hesitantly.

"It's fine, I asked. I appreciate your difficulties, and I don't have a rabbit handy."

Percy smiled at the reference. "I'll be right there. Tell Maggie, I'm proud of her."

Audrey nodded then snapped the compact closed, cutting off the connection. She chucked it back into her handbag and put the bag back on the floor by the sofa.

"Video conferencing on a compact mirror?"

"Not quite, but yes. It doesn't use telephony, it runs on magic. It is linked to a select number of similar mirrors that other people have. Percy wanted me to always be able to ask for magical help should I need it or if anything happened to him. He's going to appear in a minute."

"What did you mean when you said you didn't have a rabbit?"

"When Percy told me he was a wizard, I didn't believe him. For much the same reasons you don't believe me. He turned his wine glass into a rabbit. It was just a wine glass out of the cupboard, he put it on my lap and turned it into a real-life rabbit. I think I screamed a little. I can't remember, but yeah, it was a moment."

"Audrey, I don't understand. How can you believe in magic? That Maggie is a witch of all things? It's just not…"

There was a muffled crack that made Lizzy jump and heralded Percy's appearance.

"Daddy?" Maggie's head popped up, on seeing her father, she wiggled out of Audrey's lap and ran across the room to him.

Percy scooped her up. "Hello, lovely, Mummy tells me you've been a clever girl."

Maggie nodded her head her smile bright she pointed to the tea set. "Dancing, Daddy."

"Yes, the plates were dancing. Mummy told me."

"Again, Daddy?"

"No, not right now lovely, maybe when we get home. I've come to talk to Grandma. May I sit?"

Percy asked of Lizzy.

"What? Oh, yes," Lizzy said. She'd been eyeing Percy's robes and not paying a lot of attention to the conversation between him and Maggie.

Percy sat beside Audrey, shifting Maggie on to his lap where she promptly wrapped herself up in the drape of his robes.
"You weren't hiding outside or something?" Lizzy asked abruptly.

"No. Wizards can apparate ."

"Teleport," Audrey broke in, at Percy's look, she shrugged. "Our word is better."

"I was at work when Audrey called on the mirror. I ap-teleported here as I said I would once I had told my boss I needed to leave. I've got an hour before I need to be back at the office."

"And teleporting is normal?"

"Yes," Percy said. "All magical people are given lessons on how to do it at seventeen. It is considered rude to teleport into someone's house without direct permission, which is why Audrey asked if I might."

"Right, I'm just. Lost. Really, really, lost."

"It's alright," Percy reassured her. "The first thing is that magic is real, and there is nothing wrong with you or Maggie. Maggie is a witch. It is likely that if it is genetic, then she got it from me. However, very little is understood how magic manifests. There are magical children born of non-magical families who have no history of any magical child in their ancestry. It could be that Audrey would have always had a magical child, but her chances of doing so greatly increased when she agreed to have a family with me."

"And that's it? Magic is real, and I'm supposed to accept that? Carry on as if nothing has happened?"

Percy exchanged a glance with Audrey. "There are very few options open to you at this point."

"Options?"

"Well, I could have a team come in and take the memory of Maggie's magic from you. You wouldn't remember her doing it nor any of the conversation afterwards. Then every time she displayed magic around you, the process would be repeated. This would continue until Maggie could control her magic. Or, because we don't know how many times Maggie might display her magic, we can take the memory from you and reduce the amount of time Maggie spends with you to decrease the risk of repeat displays and repeated memory loss. Or you can accept that Maggie did something you aren't comfortable with and stop seeing her without the memory being taken. Or you can accept that Maggie is a witch and that this is part of her life."

"You'd take my grandchild away from me?"

Percy looked calmly at his mother-in-law. "Lizzy, I do not want Maggie to grow up without her Grandmother, but her happiness goes before everything else. She will realise that her magic is what you are afraid of, and she will respond to that. How I don't know yet, but I will not stand to see her hurt. If it is too much for you, then I'd prefer we made the break when she is young enough to get over it."

"Or I just accept it? Accept that you are some sort of wizard, my granddaughter is a witch, and my daughter kept it all a secret from me."

"To put it baldly, yes."

"This is insane. Have you seen a doctor? Has Maggie? If she's been able to do this from birth?"

"She's not ill, neither am I. I do understand that this is difficult for you. It's not part of your world and
adjusting to this is challenging, especially when you can't talk about it to anyone who doesn't already know. Audrey and I will always answer any questions you might have, and we have some books that might explain the differences in raising magical and non-magical children should you wish to read them."

Percy withdrew his wand, keeping his eyes on Lizzy. Maggie made an encouraging noise at the sight of his wand. "Daddy, do magic?" She reached for the wand, but Percy deftly moved it out of her reach catching hold of her hands and blowing raspberries on them to make her giggle.

Audrey held out her arms. "Come here, love. Daddy is going to show Grandma some magic. You don't want to get in the way."

Maggie obligingly crawled over to Audrey and settled on her lap her eyes on Percy.

Percy waved his wand, and the tea set tidied itself up, laying itself out for five to take tea. Cups sat on saucers with spoons, the sugar bowl and small milk jug placed in the middle of the ring. Another flick and the cleaning charm whisked around the room, making the room notably cleaner in its wake. The box of toys kept for Maggie, who had emptied them all over the floor, packed itself away neatly and closed with a thump making Lizzy jump.

Lizzy looked over to Audrey. Audrey smiled encouragingly. "It's big, I know, but it's not that bad."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

Audrey bit her lip. "Because I wasn't supposed to know. Magical people are governed separately, they have different laws. The Statue of Secrecy is what keeps us muggles finding out about magic."

"Muggles?"

"Non-magical people."

"Right."

"Magical people aren't supposed to tell muggles about magic. Breaking that law is a lifetime prison sentence with no parole. If they had discovered that Percy had told me he would have been sent to prison. I couldn't risk that, so I didn't tell anyone. Honestly, it wasn't exactly difficult not to say anything, you wouldn't have believed me without proof, and I couldn't give it to you. Just before the wedding the current Minister of Magic, Percy's boss, gave us, well, me, a document that grants me Informed Muggle status going back to ninety-eight. Basically, it's a legitimate way of getting around the law without Percy getting into trouble for having told me. Once Maggie was born, and she was magical, the rules change slightly anyway."

Percy picked up the thread of the conversation. "Because Maggie can't control her magic, it is expected that muggle parents will discover that magic is real. In a mixed marriage like ours, it means that I could tell Audrey I was a wizard. In a non-magical marriage, most of the time from what I understand, the parents just cope as well as they can until Hogwarts – the magical school, sends out the letters and the teachers go around to all the Muggle-born and explain to their parents."

"So, it's common then, these mixed marriages?"

"No," Percy said. "They are the opposite. That isn't to say they don't happen, but due to the necessary secrecy most magical folk look for relationships within the community."

"How big is the magical community?"
"About one per cent of the population in the UK," Percy replied. "We haven't had a consensus in some years, so the numbers are approximate. We've had two major conflicts in the last thirty, which hurt our population numbers."

"Conflicts?"

"Yes, a wizard tried to seize control of the government back in the seventies. It was a rather dark time. A lot of people died before he was stopped in eighty-one. Then at the beginning of the nineties, he resurfaced and started to rebuild his power base to try again. He was killed, and his group of followers were arrested or killed alongside him in February ninety-eight. A number escaped justice, and we have been largely successful in rounding them up."

"You got engaged in February ninety-eight."

"Yes. The decisive action against Riddle was drawing closer. My future was uncertain, it wasn't perhaps the best course of action for Audrey's sake to ask her to marry me then. Explain magic was real, then have her find out that the magical world was at war and I might be killed in the final confrontation, but I have to say she took it very well."

Lizzy looked appalled.

"Percy," Audrey hissed. "It wasn't that dramatic Mum," Audrey said. "I was never in danger. And the final fight was over in five or six hours. I spent the entire time at a safe house in Scotland well away from the action which was taking place in Devon."

"Your family, they are like this too?"

"Yes, my brothers, sister, parents."

"Everyone that came to the wedding on Percy's side was magical, Mum. The dress, you know how we didn't think it could be fixed? I had it mended by magic."

Lizzy sat back in her chair. "I don't know what to say. No offence, Percy, but I've always thought some of your family were a little odd, but I didn't expect this."

"Some of my family, my twin brothers for example, spend more time in the muggle world than others. They are more familiar with it."

"Mum, do you want to go?"

"Go? Go where?"

"To Diagon Alley, we can go if you like. You can't go without Percy or someone else magical, but you could see it then. See that it's not that different."

"You've been?"

"Yes. Percy, would you do me a favour? Nip home and get the wedding album."

"Of course," Percy said. "Do you mind if I leave from the hall?" he asked Lizzy.

"You're going to teleport? Yes, it's fine."

Percy stood up and left the room the crack of his disapparation reverberating in the hall.

"How long?" Lizzy asked. "How long before you got used to it because I'll be honest Audrey, this is
all really strange to me, and you're sat there as calm as can be."

"Do you remember the Grangers at the wedding? The dentist that went to live in America?"

"Vaguely."

The pop of Percy reappearing came from the hall.

"Come sit here, Mum. The Grangers are non-magical like us. But their daughter Hermione is a witch. They didn't know that when she was young, all the things that happened around her were because she was a witch. She pulled books from shelves, mended favourite toys that were broken by accident. Made clothes she didn't like tear or shrink. Helen and John took her to doctors like you suggested because they were worried. The doctors found nothing wrong with her and the episodes became fewer. Then when she was eleven, they found out she was a witch and all that that entailed. It's normal for you to struggle with this. I struggled with it, but it's part of Percy, who he is, and it's part of Maggie too."

"Why have you got your wedding album? I've seen it before." Lizzy asked as Percy handed over the book and scooped Maggie up from Audrey's lap. She went willingly, cuddling into his chest, her eyes drooping with tiredness.

"You haven't seen this one," Audrey said. "Magical photographs are different from ours."

Audrey lifted the cover of the album showing the first picture which was of Audrey and Percy walking down the aisle together towards the photographer.

"We hired a young photographer who was also muggle-born so he could do both sets of pictures."

Lizzy was struck by the image, the two of them arm in arm radiantly happy, walking towards the edge of the picture. Audrey turned the page. The wedding pictures all moved, the photographs of Audrey getting ready with her mother. Percy talking to his family. The guests arriving. Audrey arriving. Percy fidgeting at the top of the aisle. The moment that Audrey entered, and Percy turned to her was captured. Audrey ran a finger over the image, smiling softly at Percy, who smiled back.

Lizzy took the album flicking through them until she stopped once more with a sharp intake of breath. "I remember this, it was so perfect. We couldn't believe that you'd managed to choreograph it and keep it quiet."

Lizzy was looking at the picture of their first dance. Percy waltzing Audrey around the floor then joined by Harry and Hermione, Mr and Mrs Granger, Severus and Minerva, Kingsley and Tonks, Andromeda and Ted. They had all come on to the dance floor at the same time. Percy had brought Audrey to a pause then each couple had resumed dancing each moving off at the exact same time as the others. The picture showed the swirling couples rotating around the dance floor for a minute before it started again.

"It wasn't choreographed per se," Audrey confessed. "Percy's brothers make a product called Dancing Shoes. This was the first mass test run before they moved into production. This image is actually now quite famous," Audrey said with a smile. "They used it for their marketing."

"Dancing shoes? But you were wearing your wedding shoes."

"The shoes come as two pairs a practice pair that makes your feet move in the steps until you get them memorised. Then you can put the 'going out' pair on, and as long as you take the right steps at the right time once the enchantment is started, they are just like regular shoes. If you try to make a misstep, they correct you. That's why we all looked so perfect; the spell starts on the same step for
"So, you can't dance like that?"

"Well I probably could," Audrey said. "I practised a lot, it's probably embedded into my muscle memory, but that's what the shoes aim to do you see. The enchantments wear off by which point you should have it memorised."

"That's, that's quite clever." Lizzy looked at her empty glass. "I think I need another." She made to get up, but Audrey put a hand on her arm as Percy summoned the bottle from the kitchen. It floated over to the sofa where Audrey plucked it out of the air and unscrewed the cap pouring her mother another measure.

"Did that,"

"Yes," Audrey said. "It makes you a little bit lazy being able to summon things from around the house, but it's amazingly convenient when you lose your keys or Maggie's hidden the TV remote."

Lizzy tasted the whisky cautiously as if she wasn't sure it was safe. She pulled a face at the taste again then slumped back into the sofa. "What am I going to tell your father? I can tell him, can't I? because I don't want to keep secrets from him, in fact, I won't."

"You can tell him," Audrey soothed. "He would find out much the same way as you have anyway."

"You said its heredity," Lizzy said carefully. "Does that mean...?"

"Yes, in this case, Lucy is also a witch. She probably won't display any magic until she is about Maggie's age or later, but it has been confirmed that she is also magical," Percy replied, answering the unfinished question.

"Right, so both of them."

"Yes," Audrey agreed. "Both of them."

"Your Mum, this is the reason, isn't it, because Audrey isn't magical. That's why isn't it? Why she won't have anything to do with you."

"Yes. I cannot explain to you how extensively her behaviour hurts both of us. Audrey has done nothing to deserve her censure, and I cannot reconcile her behaviour with the woman who raised seven children to not discriminate," Percy said his expression solemn.

"Arthur is struggling with it. He's at a loss with her. We've tried to get her to talk to us, to work it out. It's torn the family apart really. Fred and George won't speak to her, Ron avoids going home. Ginny moved to the States and uses the distance as a reason not to speak to her. There's only Bill who is still trying, and Fleur thinks its residual guilt," Audrey told her mother.

"Well, that's just ridiculous. Why should it matter if you can do this magic stuff or not? You love each other, you're both responsible people, you've got a good life together, and both your children are happy and healthy. Does she know? About Maggie and Lucy being magical?"

"She is aware that we have children, but it was made abundantly clear when Maggie was born that unless she accepted Audrey fully, she would not be welcome to see her granddaughters. It is likely that she is aware they are both magical, it hasn't been kept a secret from my family," Percy explained.

"She isn't willing to come around at all? Not even a little bit? That seems almost unreal. Is her
attitude so unusual though, I mean, you said your situation wasn't common, although that doesn't excuse her in any way."

"The magical society has always suffered some discrimination against those from a muggle background by those from a magical one. Children from pure muggle families only find out about magic at the age of eleven when they are invited to attend the magical school. They enter the magical world with as much information as they can glean from books and the like, it can make the transition quite jarring. The Statue of Secrecy ensures our separation, which means there is a lot of ignorance on the magical side when it comes to the muggle world and the people who live in it." Percy hugged Maggie to him as he explained. He kissed the top of her head before continuing. "The magical world as it were, could be considered by the muggle-born as behind the times, antiquated if you like. We use candlelight, quills and ink. We have nothing that resembles the internet. We don't have electricity, so many of the modern conveniences that come with it are unheard of. Magic can do so much, so it is unsurprising that our paths have diverted as much as they have. Both Maggie and Lucy will have the advantage of straddling both worlds. Like those of similar family make up before them, they will have the option of which world they live in, or if they too may live in a world like mine and Audrey's, where they have the advantages of both. If they choose to, they will be able to take their GCSE's while studying at Hogwarts and they will have the option if taking their A-Levels as well as their magical qualifications."

"Maggie and Lucy, will they go to this magical school?" Lizzy asked.

"Yes, their names went down for it at birth, that's how we knew they are both witches. The Headmaster informed us, you've met him, Mum, Severus. Minerva is the Deputy Headmistress. It's a boarding school in Scotland."

"Boarding school? In Scotland? Isn't there something closer to home?"

"The magical community is not so large, and Hogwarts is one of the preeminent schools in Europe. Legally, they are required to attend a magical school as citizens of magical Britain."

"There's a school in France as well Mum, it's the one Fleur went to. They don't teach subjects that you need to take your muggle exams though."

"Fleur? She's a witch too?"

"Yes,"

"How many other people have I met that are like this?"

Well, as I said, everyone that Percy invited to the wedding was magical, so you've met quite a lot really."

"So, Fleur's children, they are witches too."

"Yes."

Lizzy sighed heavily. "Well I suppose, if you're sure, I'll just have to wrap my head around it all. I think you might have to help me tell your father though. Can Rachel know?"

"It, it might be best if we wait till Maggie does something in front of her. When the muggle-born do the unexplained in front of their family, the urge is not to talk about it, which feeds into keeping the magical world a secret. I'm honestly not sure where we stand and crossing the line with the Statute of Secrecy is not something to be brushed off lightly," Percy said hesitantly.
"So if Maggie does something, you can explain to the family, but otherwise it's a trick of the light, and there's nothing to see here?"

"Yes," Audrey said. "That's pretty much what I've been planning on doing."

"What about nursery? Primary school?"

Audrey shrugged. "We roll the dice and see what happens. She might never have an accident. It might be fine. Or she'll do something, and everyone will scramble to find an answer that isn't Maggie is a witch. We'll tell her when she starts school, she's not to tell anyone. It's a lot to ask, but with a bit of luck they'll think she's an over-imaginative child."

"Well, there's a few of those about so I suppose it's not the worst idea."
Lucy was just over two when her magic manifested. She was in the front room, playing on the floor with a set of blocks. Audrey was helping her build castles, balancing the blocks in illogical places to make turrets and crenels.

The sun was coming through the front windows warming the room and bathing the alcove shelves in a warm beam of light. In the patch of sun, an egg-shaped rock bigger than a tennis ball sat on a small cushion.

Lucy's gaze fell on the rock and seemed to fix upon it. Audrey noticed the direction of her daughter's gaze but couldn't see what had caught her interest so wholly from her spot on the floor.

Lucy let out an excited squeal of sound as she climbed to her feet, her hands outstretched towards the shelf. Audrey watched bemused wondering what her daughter wanted.

Lucy let out another excited squeal of sound thrusting her hands further forward. The rock shot off the shelf into Lucy's outstretched hands. The power of its arrival knocked her back onto her bottom. Lucy didn't seem to notice at all. Her attention was on the rock in her hands. She cradled it close to her body, her face bent to it, her attention fixed upon its smooth, shining surface.

Audrey was about to reach for Lucy to check her fall and catching the rock hadn't caused any injury as well as congratulate her daughter on her first bit of magic when Lucy's words stopped her short.

"Hello."

Audrey did a double-take when Lucy's greeting was answered with a cheep.

The rock wasn't a rock. It was a phoenix egg. The phoenix of a famous wizard. A phoenix who had retreated into its egg nearly ten years previously. For eight years they had been custodians of the egg.

At first, Percy had taken it to every meeting, party, dinner and conference hoping that someone would tempt the bird from its egg. After two years, when everyone in their circle had come into contact with it, Percy stopped taking it. He was worried about it being stolen or damaged and decided that if Fawkes wanted a new companion, then he'd have to hatch first. It seemed Fawkes had taken him at his word.

"Fawkes," Audrey said softly to the chick that was emerging from the egg onto Lucy's lap.

Fawkes bright black eyes were fixed on Lucy, Lucy was equally fascinated by the whole process, uncharacteristically sitting still while the chick got its feet under it. Finally free of the eggshell, Fawkes spread his skinny little wings, its chick fuzz damp and stuck together. Lucy reached out a gentle finger to stroke Fawkes head.

"Hello," she said again.

"Careful Lucy," Audrey whispered. "Gently. You need to be gentle."

Fawkes bobbed his head under Lucy's finger, then when her hand retreated, his plumage began to gently flame.
Audrey had a moment of panic thinking the bird was going to burn Lucy then set the house on fire in short order. By the time she had unfrozen, Fawkes was no longer on fire, and his plumage was dry. He was the bright orange and reds of flames; his tail was still short and stubby, not like the pictures Percy had shown her when he first brought the egg home.

Lucy giggled madly, reaching out to touch Fawkes again. The chick allowed it but shuffled in place after a moment or two.

"Alright, Lucy, that's enough, let get Fawkes a bed, shall we? He probably wants a nap, being born is hard work."

Audrey grabbed a doll blanket from the play box and made a makeshift nest out of it on the coffee table before carefully holding out her hand to the chick.

Fawkes looked her over before taking wobbly steps and falling into her hand. Gently and carefully, Audrey transferred the chick to the blanket nest.

Fawkes settled down and tucked his head under his wing. Lucy scooted up to the table edge, her eyes fixed upon the sleeping bird.

"Lucy, you mustn't touch him again, alright? He's small, and you don't want to hurt him. Mummy is going to see if we can find him something for a better bed."

"Sleep with me, Mummy."

Audrey nibbled her lip. She really wasn't well versed in magical pets and if Fawkes would want or need to be near Lucy for the foreseeable future. "If he will sleep in a birdcage until he's bigger, he can sleep in your room." She got to her feet and held out her hand to Lucy. "Come one. I think Daddy left an owl cage in the cellar. We can go get it and find somewhere to put it in your room. Fawkes will be alright for now."

Lucy happily followed Audrey to the cellar door and down into the back half of the cellar. Amongst the collected detritus was an owl cage. It was a big brass thing that would dwarf the chick, but the loop in the top meant it could be hung from the ceiling and not need to be placed on the furniture.

Audrey took the cage into the kitchen to give it a wash. Once clean, she took the cage and Lucy up to Lucy's bedroom to choose where it should be hung. Lucy picked a spot by the window and seeing no reason not to agree Audrey nipped downstairs to get the tools. Twenty minutes later, the cage was hung, and the chick transferred to his new home. Audrey sat on Lucy's bed while her daughter stood on it next to her, peering into the cage to see her new friend.

Audrey shook her head once. She had no idea what Percy was going to say about this. Or Maggie, for that matter, when she got home from school. They had never gotten around to getting a cat when Percy had first suggested it. Now with a bird in the house, it seemed like a recipe for disaster. Perhaps Maggie wouldn't want a pet as well, or maybe she'd settle for a guinea pig or rabbit. Something less magical and more explainable.

When Percy returned home, he was somewhat surprised to be met at the floo. Audrey was usually upstairs with the girls and would greet him once he had put away his satchel and hung up his outer robe.

"What's wrong?" he asked, reaching for his pocket wondering if he'd missed a call on his mirror.

"It's Lucy, her magic manifested today."
"It did?" he asked a pleased smile growing on his face. "What did she do?"

"She woke Fawkes from his egg."

Percy felt his smile falter as his brain took a minute to understand what Audrey had said. "Fawkes? The phoenix, Dumbledore's phoenix?"

"Lucy's now," Audrey responded. "They've been all but inseparable since he hatched in her lap just after lunch. I've hung the old owl cage up in her bedroom for him to sleep in, but Percy, I know nothing about keeping birds, especially not magical birds that grow as big as swans. I mean he's going to dwarf her, and we're going to have a swan sized bird living in the house! It will be like having a dog flying around at head height. It's going to be a complete nightmare, but I can't take him away from her. Her magic woke him up, that's got to be something, hasn't it? In magical terms that's important, isn't it? She summoned the egg right off the shelf, and he hatched in her hands."

Percy dropped his satchel on his desk and hung up his robe. "Yes, it is, we can't separate them. We're going to have to register him."

"With the vet?" Audrey asked with a laugh that verged on hysterical. "How the hell are we going to explain that?"

"No, with the Ministry. He's a class XXXX magical beast, if he's chosen Lucy, then he'll be with her until she dies. Usually, and I don't mean to say that domesticated phoenixes are common because I only know of two and one of them has apparently bonded to our youngest daughter, but usually when their chosen witch or wizard dies like Dumbledore did, they fly away, vanish, do whatever phoenix's do for the rest of their lives. That's what made Fawkes such an odd case. He didn't vanish, he chose to stay in his egg. They can take years to incubate, so it wasn't harmful to him to do that. Now he's hatched, after his burning days he'll only be chick sized for a few days before reverting to his normal size."

"Well, currently he's about the size of a blackbird. He was about the size of a sparrow when he hatched, but he's been eating fruit and salad like it's going out of fashion, and he's grown a bit. Which is good actually, because he was a bit too small for me to be comfortable with Lucy handling him. She wouldn't mean to hurt him, but he was tiny."

"I don't know how fast he will grow," Percy said helplessly. "I never thought I'd see him hatch if I'm honest. I thought perhaps I'd just look after his egg for the rest of my life. I can owl Newt Scamander again and see if he has more to offer in terms of what we can expect in rates of growth. Since he hatched rather than burned, perhaps he will have to grow like a freshly hatched phoenix would the first time. Swans take a year to grow to full adulthood."

"We need to go upstairs. They're watching the telly, but you know the peace never lasts."

Percy followed Audrey up the stairs his mind running over the things he would have to do in the morning to make sure Lucy could keep her phoenix. "Do you think he'll want a new name? I don't know who called him Fawkes first."

"Well, I've been calling him Fawkes, and he doesn't seem to mind. We can't let Lucy name him, she'll call him something daft like 'biscuit'. I think Fawkes will do."

"I may have to take them both with me in the morning to sort everything out," Percy said as they entered the sitting room.

On the sofa sat close next to each other, the two bright red-haired heads of his daughters were bent
over, concentrating on something in Lucy's lap. A wool blanket was bunched up on her thighs and from within the folds glinted the jewel-bright red and gold feathers.

Fawkes was watching both girls his head tilted. He warbled, and Maggie giggled, feeding him half a grape. Once he'd swallowed it, he made the sound again, and Lucy fed him another half.

"Who trained who?" Percy asked quietly with a laugh.

"Shh!" Audrey said, smothering her own giggle. "I think it was a team effort."

Audrey indicated she would be in the kitchen and slipped away. Percy approached the sofa drawing the attention of its occupants.

"Daddy!" Maggie said wiggling free of the sofa, throwing herself at his legs, hugging them with her arms and her chin tilted up at him. "Look! Lucy has a bird!"

"Yes, she does, and he likes grapes,"

Maggie giggled again nodding her head. "Yes. We did sums at school today, Daddy."

"Well, that is very impressive. Will you show me?"

"Yes. Do you want to say hello to Lucy and Fawkes first?"

"Yes, please."

Percy let Maggie go and carefully took her seat next to Lucy. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, carefully pulling her gently into half hug. "Hello Lucy, would you introduce me to your friend."

"Fawkes, Daddy."

"Yes." Percy lifted a hand a finger extended and ran it gently over the elongated neck and back of the bird. He was warm, his short tail feathers nearly hot. "He's very special, Lucy, you're very lucky he chose you."

Lucy looked up at him with a beaming smile, and Percy knew that somehow, they were going to have to make living in a muggle semi-detached house with a phoenix who would, as Audrey said, grow to rival a swan in size, work. Merlin only knew how they were going to explain it to Lizzy and Rick.

Percy kissed Lucy's cheek. "Love you, Lucy-Loo. Look after Fawkes while Maggie teaches Daddy to do sums."

Percy left the sofa as carefully as he sat on it, holding out a hand to Maggie, he asked her. "So, these sums you learnt, think you can teach me? I think they might be useful."

Maggie giggled and went to get her school bag as Percy dropped into the armchair. Bringing it back, she scrambled on to Percy's lap pulling out the worksheets she had brought home.

As Maggie told him all about her lessons and showed him how she could do the examples, Percy found his eyes land on Lucy from time to time. Fawkes had been fed the rest of the grapes and was now sleeping on Lucy's lap, his head tucked under his wing in the blanket nest. Lucy was gazing at him with a look of wonderous delight on her face.

When Audrey came back into the room to tell the girls they had to go and get ready for bed, he lifted
Maggie from his lap and crossed the room to Lucy. "Let me take him, Lucy," he said quietly, waiting until she had nodded at him before carefully scooping the bird and blanket up in his hands. Letting the girls go up the stairs first, he followed Lucy into her room and opened the door of the owl cage, gently placing the bundle in the bottom of it. Fawkes woke up as he was placed down, so Percy left the door open.

Percy went into his and Audrey's bedroom stripping off his work robe waistcoat and tie, rolling up his sleeves and slipping off his shoes in favour of his slippers. He ran the bath for the girls and listened as they chattered at each other. While he supervised the bath, he heard Fawkes trilling from Lucy's bedroom. The sounds were climbing and sliding down a scale but seemed to indicate no sound of distress. Cocking his head Percy listened, the sounds started to warble a little, and Percy realised that Fawkes was teaching himself to sing.

Audrey stuck her head around the door. "Everything alright? I sneaked a look through the gap in the door. He's not in any distress."

"Phoenixes sing," Percy said. "I think he's just giving his voice a warm-up."

"Oh," Audrey said. "Are we going to have to chuck a sheet over his cage at night to make sure he sleeps?"

"I don't think so. They are intelligent birds. He'll presumably settle to our routine."

There was a loud pop making everyone jump and turn to the windowsill where it came from. Flapping wildly, Fawkes hovered just above the windowsill a bizarrely smug expression on his face.

"What the…?"

"Oh," Percy said. "Umm, they can apparate as well, although I didn't know they could do it so young."

Fawkes settled onto the windowsill tucking his feet under him. He shuffled his wings and stretched his neck so he could peer down at the bath where Lucy was.

"He can already fly?" Audrey said.

"Well it doesn't seem for very long, but I suppose small flights will help his flight muscles," Percy said with a shrug. "We might have to carry him back to Lucy's bedroom."

"Right," Audrey said with a sigh. "And he couldn't be a cat because?"

"Sorry love,"

"Not your fault. Will you have to take Lucy in tomorrow?"

"Yes, do you have the egg still? It might help to explain where we got him from."

"Yes. I put it to one side in case it was useful for potions or something. It's in a Tupperware box. Want a hand? Dinner is just warming through in the oven."

"I've got it. Go sit down, I'll be down as soon as the stories are done."

Audrey nodded and left him to it.

In the morning, Percy got ready for work then as Audrey got Maggie for school, he went into Lucy's room and helped her dress. He handed her over to Audrey to supervise teeth cleaning and hair
brushing while he went downstairs to make breakfast for everyone.

Audrey brought Fawkes downstairs with her and for want of a better plan let him perch on the back of Lucy's chair while she ate her breakfast.

"I'll see if Lucy and I can go and get some perches for him today from the pet shop. Are you sure he'll be alright just eating fruit and vegetables? There's nothing he needs vitamins wise?"

"I'll owl Newt once I get back to my desk. We should be finished by the time you get back from dropping Maggie off. If you aren't, I'll take Lucy to my office, and if you just call me when you get in, I'll ask Kingsley if we can use his floo or I'll bring her back to the atrium floos."

"Why is Lucy going to Daddy's work?" Maggie asked.

"Daddy has to take Lucy and Fawkes to work to be registered so he can stay with us," Audrey explained.

"Can I go?"

"You've got to go to school, Maggie, I need you to learn some more sums to teach me. But as soon as I can I'll take you too," Percy told Maggie kindly.

Percy stood from the table, dropping a kiss on Audrey's cheek and one on Maggie's before holding his hand out to Lucy. "Come on, Lovely. Let's get Fawkes registered then you can go shopping for him." Lucy jumped down from the table, and Percy swept her up into his arms. "Right you've got to hold Fawkes, Lucy. OK? We're going to go through the floo, and you need to hold on to Fawkes and me very tightly."

Lucy nodded, so Percy scooped the phoenix off the back of Lucy's chair and summoned his things from the kitchen before heading to the cellar stairs. Holding on to Lucy, he removed the grate that closed the floo, shrunk his bag and put it into his pocket and took a handful of the floo powder from the jar. He ignited the floo and with a determined 'The Ministry for Magic', they vanished in a swirl of green flame.

Percy stepped smoothly out of the floo at the Ministry for Magic and moved to one side. Stopping, he checked he had both his passengers and they were no worse for wear. Lucy was clutching him sniffing into his neck. Fawkes was making distressed cheeping noises where he was squashed between the two of them. Gently, he got Lucy to sit up in his arms. "It's alright Lucy-Loo it's over now. It's not very nice, Daddy's sorry, but we had to come to get Fawkes registered."

"I don't like it," she sniffled.

"I know, but look, we're here now."

Lucy looked around her with wet, unimpressed eyes. Fawkes trilled at her, and her attention dropped to the bird. A small hand ran over his feathers, and he chirped soothingly at her. A small smile twitched her lips upwards, and Percy let out a breath of relief.

Searching in his pocket with his free hand, he handed over his handkerchief. "Wipe your eyes lovely." When Lucy had smooshed her face into the handkerchief, he took it back from her then held it over her nose. "Blow," he said with a smile. She complied giggling as he playfully pinched her nose. "Come on then, let's sort all this out. Mummy will be waiting for you to get back so you can go shopping."
Percy strode towards the lift, ignoring the glances they garnered. He stepped into the elevator and took up a position towards the back. The elevator wasn't very full which Percy was glad of, and they travelled to level four. Percy stepped off the elevator and made for the office of the Head of the Creatures department.

Percy knocked on the door and was bid to enter.

The wizard behind the desk in the office looked up in surprise. "I'm sorry, I thought you were my secretary. Are you lost?"

"No," Percy said, closing the door behind him. "I'm Percy Weasley, this is my daughter Lucy. I've brought her to register her pet."

"We don't need you to register kneazles, its taken care of when you make the purchase," the wizard said dismissively.

"I am aware," Percy said drily. "Lucy's pet isn't a kneazle." Percy cupped Fawkes in his hand and brought him out so that the wizard could see him. "It's a phoenix, and I believe that as per the regulations regarding beasts classified as XXXX, he must be registered with your department."

The wizard blinked dumbly at him.

"The registration of my daughter's pet," Percy prompted him.

"Yes, of course. There are some forms." The wizard shook off his stupor a wave of his wand had a filing cabinet drawer opening, disgorging a roll of parchment and snapping shut. The parchment unrolled and settled on the wizard's desk.

"Might I take a seat?" Percy asked, pulling out the seat in front of the desk and sitting in it settling Lucy on his lap and handing back Fawkes.

"Oh, yes, of course. Right, full name, please. Yours and your daughter's."

"Percy Ignatius Weasley, Lucy Cassia Weasley."

"Where did you find the phoenix?"

"I have been in possession of the egg since September ninety-eight."

"Egg?"

"Yes," Percy reached into his pocket and withdrew the Tupperware box. "My wife saved the shell after Fawkes hatched."

"Fawkes?" the wizard did a double-take.

Percy sighed. "Yes. After Mr Dumbledore died, I was one of the first people on the scene along with the Minister of Magic. Obviously, I knew of Fawkes and went to check that enough provision had been left out for him until something could be organised. I found his egg in a pile of ash on the tray of his perch. I took the egg."

"You should have reported it at once to my department."

"Which I would have done, had Mr Dumbledore not have a living relative."

The wizard subsided. "Ahh, yes, carry on."
"I took the egg with me to notify Mr Dumbledore's next of kin. When his brother declined to keep the egg for himself, I asked him what he wished me to do with it, and he told me to keep it. I consulted a Magi-zoologist regarding the care of the egg. Yesterday my daughter summoned the egg from its place, and Fawkes hatched for her."

The wizard's quill was moving across the page, recording everything Percy said. When it had caught up, the wizard read over it and nodded. "Very well. You'll need to read over this and sign it. As your daughter is so young," he paused

"Two and three months."

"Yes," he looked at Lucy, who was humming gently at Fawkes, running a finger over his back. Fawkes had his head cocked and eyes fixed on her as if he was listening intently. "I will have to run a quick diagnostic spell on the phoenix to check his health, but it seems undoubtedly there is a bond there."

Percy nodded, pinching the parchment between two fingers and flipping it around so he could read it. Happy it was an accurate recording of what he said he slid his pen from his pocket and signed it before flipping it back over to the wizard.

"Do you want a copy?" the wizard asked.

"There's no need," Percy said. "I have access to the archives should I need a copy I can get one."

"Oh? I'm sorry, just what is it you do?"

"Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic."

The wizard gulped. "Ah, very good. Now, umm that diagnostic? Then you can get on your way. Wouldn't want to keep the Minister waiting."

"No," Percy answered, repressing his smile. "Best not to."

Percy lifted Fawkes onto the desk where the wizard cast him another glance before casting a spell on Fawkes. Fawkes chirped disgruntled, and Lucy reached for him. "Daddy!" she protested when she couldn't reach. Percy scooped Fawkes up and handed him back to Lucy.

"It won't have hurt him," the wizard assured Percy. "Probably just felt a bit cold. They run hot phoenixes."

Lucy was petting and crooning to the bird who was fluffing up his feathers. Percy watched as the bird shuffled a little then his feathers flickered with flame. Instinct made him catch Lucy's hands to keep them away, and he felt the momentary thrill of fear of having fire sat on his lap even though Audrey had told him no harm had come to either of them the day before.

"Well," the wizard said as Fawkes shook himself, extinguishing the flames and trilled happily. Percy let go of Lucy's hands, allowing her to touch the bird again.

"Yes," Percy said drily. "Is there anything else we need to do?"

"No," the wizard said. "You're all done."

"Thank you for your time," Percy said, settling Lucy and Fawkes before standing again. He turned to the door and left the office. He reached into his pocket, withdrawing his mirror and calling Audrey. She didn't answer indicating she was around muggles still, so Percy set off for his office.
hoping Kingsley wouldn't mind a visitor.

Kingsley was surprised but gave permission for Lucy to use his floo when Audrey was at home to receive her. In the meantime, Percy settled her on his knee at his desk and pulled some parchment to her and handed over a quill and inkpot so she could draw. Fawkes was put on his desktop, and Percy kept half an eye on the bird as he walked over the desk investigating. Percy left his mirror out, waiting for Audrey to call him and pulled a report forward to read.

Kingsley cleared his throat, breaking Percy's attention from his report. A quick glance told Percy less than ten minutes had passed. "Yes, Minister?"

"Nothing in particular," Kingsley answered. "She's cute as a button."

Percy glanced down at Lucy, who was scrawling an inky mess across his parchment. "She's heavier than one," he said, tightening the arm around her waist briefly.

"That's really Fawkes?" Kingsley came forward.

"Yes, you might recall you suggested turning him into an omelette."

Kingsley barked a laugh. "Yes, something like that wasn't it. Didn't think I'd see him again, to be honest."

"You aren't the only one."

Percy's mirror rang out, interrupting what he was about to say. Percy flipped it open.

"Sorry," Audrey said. "The mums were going on and on, and I couldn't get away. I'm home now if you want to bring her through. Did everything go, OK?"

"Yes, everything is done. I'll bring her now." Audrey nodded, and the screen went blank. "If you don't mind?" Percy asked Kingsley.

"Not at all. You don't want to have to take her all the way back through the ministry when my floo is just here."

Percy took Lucy's quill and collected up Fawkes carrying them through to the floo. At the sight of the green flames, Lucy's face fell, and she buried her face in Percy's neck. "Sorry, Lucy-Loo," Percy whispered to her. "It won't be long. You keep hold of Fawkes for me." Percy ignited the floo and stepped into the flames calling for home. He stepped out the other side with Lucy once again sniffling.

"Oh, Lucy," Audrey said, holding out her arms. "Come here. Was it not very nice?"

Percy transferred Lucy to Audrey catching Fawkes in the cross over and setting the bird to perch on the back of his office chair. He swished his wand to remove the soot from their travel and closed and locked the floo putting the grate over it.

"I'll be back tonight at the normal time I think," Percy said, stepping forward to kiss Lucy and Audrey. "She was very brave about the floo though it wasn't very nice."

"Go on, you best get back. Thank Kingsley for letting her stay, and I'm sorry if it interrupted your morning."

"It's fine no harm done she was happy to stay on my lap and draw for ten minutes." Percy stepped backwards and apparated away to the ministry.
Audrey rubbed a hand up and down Lucy's back, soothing her until she had quietened. "Come on, let's get ready to go out and see if we can find Fawkes some nice things." She scooped the bird up and took them all upstairs.

End Notes

I received a few requests to further delve into Percy and Audrey's story when they appeared in Escape. I had things drafted up about the pair already, and there are a couple of other things that struck me I could expand on. If anyone is familiar with my FFN account they will have seen this before, but I thought I should post it here too. As always, the usual disclaimers apply.

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