**Metanoia**

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**Metanoia**

by [dnitegirl](http://archiveofourown.org/users/dnitegirl)

**Summary**

Percival had done everything for the greater good. It's a shame the world was more complicated than that.

-  
A memoir of the life of Percival Graves

**Notes**

Metanoia: 'The journey of changing one's mind, heart, self, or way of life.'

This fic is a character study of Original!Percival Graves's life starting from his childhood all the way until post movie. It will be 100% canon compliant with me trying to fill in the large blanks left by canon.

Major thanks to [dreamsandpocky](http://archiveofourown.org/users/dreamsandpocky) (aka [gravescredence](http://archiveofourown.org/users/gravescredence) on tumblr) for being my co-plotter and beta.
Percy loves his Momma. His Grandpa does not.

For as long as he can remember, which is not long considering he is the tender age of almost-seven, his Grandpa and his Momma have not gotten along. Which doesn't make any sense to Percy since his Momma is pretty much his favorite person in the whole world.

He sits next to her in her garden outside the Graves' family mansion. It’s a beautiful fenced in plot of land several yards away from the western side of the house. The colorful blooms of the flowers are a bright contrast to the rest of the dark building.

Momma always said this was the place she felt the most at home, among the grass, dirt, and plants outside. Not in the big estate where she feels like an outsider. Percy doesn't really know what she means by that. The house is where she sleeps. How can she feel like that when Dad, Grandpa and even Percy himself are there?

Even so, he wants his Momma to be happy so he sits out on the soil next to her, getting his nice clothes all dirty, trying to help anyway he can.

He can't exactly do magic yet. At almost-seven, he's not quite old enough to go to school and get his wand. Still, Momma tells him he can help anyways. In fact, she has her own wand pocketed, and instead holds a shovel, pushing it into the dirt, digging holes with no magic at all.

"Momma, why don't you just spell the shovel to dig for you? That looks like an awful lot of work."

She smiles back at him, a few strands of her curly red hair falling into her face, her cheek smeared with dirt. "It's more fun this way. The harder you work, the better you feel about the result."

Her voice always puts him at ease, warm and gentle, almost musical without singing. Recently he's noticed, as he's met more people, that Momma seems to speak differently from others. Some words sound different from the way Dad, Grandpa, and the people in the city say them. Percy asked her about it once and she explained it's because her mom and dad came from a different country, one across the ocean, called Ireland. Percy never met her mom and dad, or 'Gran' and 'Gramps' as Momma likes to call them, but Momma says really good things about them so he's pretty sure they have to be good people (no matter what Grandpa Graves says).

Percy, however, is confused by her answer. He pouts slightly but starts pressing his hands into the dirt anyways, trying to dig holes like she was doing regardless. "I gotta do everything the hard way cause I'm little and it just makes me tired."
She chuckles at him and reaches over to ruffle up his hair. Immediately he tries to flatten it back down. He liked the way his hair was before, thank you very much. "That may be true. But when I'm all done, it will feel like more like an accomplishment. Trust your Momma. I grew up doing it both ways and I found I liked it this way more. It's how I was raised."

Momma only ever spoke about her own mom and dad when the two of them were alone.

"Why'd Gran and Gramps teach you to do things the long way? Still seems like a waste of time to me." He isn't even halfway done with one hole at this rate.

Momma looks down, her smile faltering. There's a pause as she just stares down into the dirt. For a moment, Percy wonders if his comment has upset her, but she eventually responds, no sign of being hurt by Percy’s words. "Well, it's because my father is a No-Maj."

The term sounded familiar, but Percy still didn't know what it meant. Any time it came up around Grandpa Graves, Dad or Mom would quickly change the subject. Percy would always ask, as he was eternally curious, but no one would bother answering. Now had to be different though. It was only him and Momma in the garden right now, after all. "Momma, what's a No-Maj?"

She lets out a long tired sigh. "A No-Maj is a person without magic."

That actually has Percy scared for a second. "I can't do magic yet. Does that make me a No-Maj?"

Her sigh turns into a chuckle. "No dear. You'll get your wand when you go to school. Besides, we've seen you accidentally moving things around when you get emotional; all signs that you will grow up to be a great wizard someday."

The compliment has him grinning from ear to ear. Of course, at the time those events had happened, he had been scolded for misconduct even though it hadn't been on purpose. Lots of expensive things had been knocked over on accident, but now he is glad to hear it had all been for a reason.

Still though, he feels his question is unanswered. If he, without a wand, isn't considered a No-Maj, than what is?

Momma however, seems to realize he doesn't understand just yet, and explains more thoroughly. "A No-Maj is someone who, even if they go to school, won't be able to use magic."

"How can people not be able to do magic?" He presses further.

"My, you are curious today. It's hard to explain, but it'll all make sense when you're older." She stands up, brushing off her dress, so she can grab the flowers to plant. "Hey, speaking of which, don't you have a birthday coming up soon?"

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Percy doesn't get to see his Dad very much.

Momma has told him lots of times that it's because Dad has an important job to do, and it's not because his Dad doesn't love him. He believes her.

His Dad is an Auror, which means it's his job to protect people. Now, Percy isn't exactly sure what
he needs to protect people from, but he likes to imagine it's from monsters like the stories his Dad tells him sometimes before he goes to bed. Trolls, goblins, and other such beasts are really scary and he knows they are real. He hopes it's Dad's job to make sure people don't get gobbled up if they cross over bridges.

So, Percy misses him, but he understands, mostly.

His birthday is tomorrow and his only wish is that his Dad will come home in time. Momma says Dad was supposed to have been back by lunch time, but Percy ate hours ago. The remainder of the time has been spent waiting by the big door, alternating between sitting on the leather chair in the foyer, and pacing over the hard wood floors.

Birthdays are always better when Dad is around. When he's not, it's just lots of Momma and Grandpa Graves avoiding each other and not talking. Dad is the one who makes everyone get along and be on their best behavior.

In the meantime, Percy waits and waits, staring up at the tiled ceiling as he counts down the seconds. Momma would normally give him some company, but she's busy in the kitchen working with the house elves to make dinner. Percy, in his boredom and anticipation, finds himself nodding off in the chair.

After what seems like an eternity, the door swings open and Dad walks in.

Percy jolts up. He hadn't quite fallen asleep, but he had drifted enough for it to be quite a shock. Even so, it's a pleasant shock, and Percy scurries over to give him a hug. He latches onto his Dad's legs, not caring that his Dad's clothes are soaked and smelly. From the way Dad's dark hair sticks to his face, and the water drops that fog his glasses, Percy guesses that wherever Dad had been, it must have been rainy. All that mattered though, is that Dad is home.

His Dad kneels down, two large arms wrapping around Percy’s waist as he’s pulled into a proper hug.

"I thought you weren't coming." Percy says, his voice cracking ever so slightly.

The arms around him tighten a bit and Percy knows his Dad feels bad. "I'm so sorry. There was an attack in the city. It took a lot of people and a lot more time than any of us expected, but I made it. I wouldn't miss your birthday for the world."

"But you missed last year…"

With a slight frown, his Dad starts to untangle from their embrace, hands moving to rest firmly on Percy's shoulders. "I know, I know… and not a day goes by that I don't feel terrible about it. But my job is important. If I don't go to work, people get hurt."

Percy knows this well, as he's been told it hundreds of times. Dad tells him this, Momma tells him this, even Grandpa Graves tells him this. So Percy really does try to understand as best he can, but he still doesn't have to like it. "It makes me sad when you're gone."

Dad pats his cheek. "You'll understand better when you're older."

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The next morning, he wakes to the sound of knocking on his door. Momma and Dad greet him in his room, a tray of his favorite treats in their arms as they wish him a happy birthday.

Already Percy can tell it's going to be the greatest birthday ever.

He shoves a few of the pastries in his mouth and his Momma tells him to get ready as they’ll be taking a trip to the city. She and Dad then disappear out the door to grant him some privacy as he gets dressed.

Quickly, he throws on his favorite outfit, a simple but elegant suit made for someone his size.

They take the floo network into the city and Momma and Dad take him to all his favorite stores, no begging necessary: a quick stop by Sugar Sam’s Sweet Shop for a slice of Bandoffee Tart, then to the Tinkering Toy Emporium where Momma lets him pick from nearly any toy in the whole place, and finally to Golden Threads where Dad helps him pick out a new scarf.

The day eventually comes to a close, the sun goes down and it's dark out now as they make their way through the streets. Dad keeps a close eye on his watch and after a quick word with Momma, she takes his hand and tells them it’s time to go home. There’s a big dinner planned, and presents all waiting for him to arrive.

A simple trip back through the floo network and they are in the mansion once again. Momma and Dad head towards the dining room and Percy follows close behind.

Percy counts four chairs around the table, one for each family member. The center of the table is covered with food. Lambchops, fried eels, boiled potatoes, roasted carrots, and of course, Momma’s specialty Shepard's Pie. At one end of the table, there are 2 wrapped gifts and one envelope. He's bubbling with excitement, he simply can't wait.

The whole family goes to sit around the table: Momma takes her seat next to Percy, Dad, across from Momma, and finally, Grandpa Graves, who slowly makes his way to the head of the table. The sound of his scorpion-headed black cane clacking against the ground echoes through the room with each step. As always, Momma grows quiet as he approaches. Dad stands up for a moment and helps Grandpa sit. Old people have a hard time getting around, even with magic.

When Grandpa Graves is finally situated, he looks fondly at Percy. "Happy Birthday child, I hope you have had a good day."

Grandpa Graves is nice to Percy. He doesn't know why Momma and him don't get along. Still enthusiastic from the day’s activities, Percy practically bounces in his seat as he proceeds to tell Grandpa everything he did.

Once his story has run its course, Grandpa folds his hands together and asks him to calm down so they may eat. Eating first and then presents. It is apparently the polite way to do things according to Grandpa Graves.

Percy piles on his plate with far more than he can eat, which isn't his fault. It's definitely Momma and the cooks' fault for making so many things he loves at once. His plate can barely hold everything and a few of the potatoes even start to slide off onto the table. Trying to remember his manners, he carefully holds his knife and fork, cutting into the meat like he was taught, eating as quickly as possible.

Clearly his eyes were certainly bigger than his stomach as he soon finds himself stuffed with still half a plate of food to go.
Grandpa scowls at him and looks like he's about to reprimand the boy. Before he can, Momma, who has already finished her portion, seems to notice how full he is, and reaches over to take a few lambchops off his plate.

"Now Niamh, let young Percival finish his own meal." Grandpa scolds Momma. Percy puts his head down because bad things tend to happen when Grandpa starts talking to Momma in such a manner.

"Salonius, I think Percy is done eating. He's just been picking at his plate for the last few minutes. Besides, he got the last of the lamb and I wanted more. It's a win for everyone." She's smiling at Grandpa, but it's not the warm kind of smile she gives Percy.

That only seems to irritate Grandpa, who grips his silverware tightly. "Young Percival is growing up and he needs to learn to not be so wasteful. You're his mother. Stop encouraging such poor habits."

Momma looks like she's about to say something else, but Dad, as he usually does when Momma and Grandpa start talking back to one another, interrupts.

"Father please, it's Percy's birthday. I don't think it's a good idea to make him eat so much that he gets sick. How will he be able to enjoy his presents if he's so full he can't sit up straight?" The words are said in a happy tone, but even Percy knows it was to just stop the fighting before it started.

It seems to work because Grandpa relaxes in his seat before pulling out his wand. A present, wrapped in all black paper, floats over to hover inches in front of his nose. Percy grins and snatches it from the air. He wants to tear it open, but pauses knowing his Grandpa wouldn't like him to do so without asking.

"Go ahead. You look as if you will explode from the anticipation."

With the permission, he starts ripping at the paper. Inside is a book. 'Theory of the Magical Arts' the cover says. He's not quite sure what the first word means so he stares and puzzles over it. Flipping through the pages doesn't help either. There aren't that many pictures and a lot of words. Grandpa tries to explain though. "You won't be able to perform magic for a few years, but I figured you could get a head start by learning the theories behind it all. You are a smart child and I believe you will learn quickly."

The complement is nice, but Percy barely notices as he is still trying to make sense of what this book is even about.

Dad picks up on his puzzlement and pats his shoulder, taking the book from his hands. "I'll help you read it tonight."

If anyone can help him try and understand it, it's his Dad. His Dad is really smart. Sometimes Dad even tries to teach him wand gestures by putting Percy's hand over his own while he slowly casts a spell. Dad tells him it will build muscle memory for later.

Once Dad has put the book down, he takes out his own wand and a dark red package floats his way. This one gently lands on the table right in front of Percy. There's a simple gesture of encouragement from his Dad towards the package and Percy starts unwrapping it.

"My gift actually goes well with your grandfather's." His Dad explains as Percy pulls off most of the paper. Inside, is a simple pocket sized dictionary. That is a word he knows because Dad told him once if he didn’t understand something, he could just find a copy of this book and look it up. “I've charmed this version. Simply say the word you need to find aloud, and it will open itself to the correct page. Should save you quite a bit of time.”
Percy can’t help but try it out. Book in his hands, he blurts out the first word that comes to his mind. “Theory” and the book’s pages spread apart, rustle and turn, until the page Percy is looking at is the “Th-” section. Eyes scan down until he finds the word in question.

Beaming, Percy takes a moment to run over and hug his Dad before sitting back down.

Finally, he is ready for what he assumes will be Momma's present, but he doesn't see a box. Instead, what floats over to him is a green envelope. Percy stares at it in awe as he has never seen a present this small.

His tiny fingers work their way under the wax seal. It isn't the Scorpion crest he's used to seeing, rather there is a leaf symbol pressed into the wax. It comes open easily and Percy pulls out a postcard with a picture of a mountain and the words ‘Welcome to Montana’ scrawled across in big letters. Something isn't adding up here and he faces Momma quizzically.

Dad turns to Momma as well, but with a worried expression on his face. Momma doesn't seem to notice though and she begins to explain to Percy, "I thought a good present for a seven year old would be to take a trip to meet your other grandparents."

It's one of the first times Momma had brought up Gran and Gramps in front of the rest of the family, but Percy is too excited to notice. He's been on trips to the city quite a few times, but he's never even heard of Montana and he wonders if Gran and Gramps are as nice as Momma makes them out to be.

There's a silence as Percy examines the card, reading the back. Hand writing he doesn't quite recognize stares back at him, 'We can't wait to meet you Percy!'

The silence is then broken by Percy's father who says in a hesitant voice, "Niamh, I don't know if that is really such a good idea." Percy looks up from the card as he starts to wonder. Why isn't it such a good idea? Gran and Gramps are family, aren't they? So wouldn't it be nice to meet them? Especially since Dad and Grandpa constantly talked about how important family was. Dad stands up now, leaning across the table, trying to get the postcard from Percy's hands. It only makes Percy hold it tighter. Across the table, Grandpa Graves looks furious.

Momma shoos Dad's hand away as she wraps a protective arm around Percy. "They're his family too and it's about time he gets to meet them. Seven years and the only things they know about their only grandchild have been from letters. We've lived here with your father for years now so why is it so terrible that he gets to meet mine!?" Her voice starts calm but it quickly grows more and more frantic, her hand starting to grip Percy's shoulder a little too tightly.

Dad bows his head and he looks upset. "Niamh… I love you but you know wh-"

He's cut off by the sudden loud slam of a cane against the ground. Grandpa shakes as he rises from the chair and he appears angrier than Percy has ever seen him. "It's because your father is a filthy No-Maj! I won't have him and his ways corrupting my grandson. It's his duty to carry on the Graves line. I already have to put up with the fact that my son chose to marry a half-blood, but I won't let the damage go any further.” A crooked finger extends towards Momma. “You're lucky I even allow you to live in our home. You and your half 'mundus' blood could have ruined everything. It's practically a miracle Percival wasn't born a Squib!"

Percy shrinks back into his seat and tries to block out the fighting as he has grown used to doing through the years. Nothing Grandpa Graves makes any sense to him, but he hears his name coupled with another term and in a meek little voice asks, "What's a Squib?"

His Dad hushes him with a quick, but gentle "Percy not now…” and turns to face Grandpa. "Father,
please calm down. We can discuss this later. Not while Percy is supposed to be enjoying his birthday."

That only serves to make Grandpa even more furious. Instead, he snaps at Dad and points his wand at him accusingly. "Adalgott, shut your mouth. This is all your fault in the first place, fraternizing with her kind. No-Maj's and Wizards must be separate. It is the law for a reason. Your wife's existence in this country is a loophole and I, for one, am tired of our family name being shamed because of this."

Dad glances at the wand pointed at him and lowers down, shoulders slumped. Somehow this seems to upset Momma more than anything and she lets go of Percy and turns to yell at Grandpa. "My blood has done no such thing and my family has as much a right as anyone else to be here. I am no less of a witch than the rest of you because of the simple fact I am related to my father. Besides, he's a good man Salonius. A better man than you have ever been."

Before Grandpa can shout his response, Momma grits her teeth and commands Percy to go to his room. He's more than happy to oblige as he wants to be far away from the fighting. Leaving his gifts on the table, he scurries off to his room. Even with his door shut though, he can still make out the continued shouting from downstairs.

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It's too early for Percy to fall asleep. Besides, with all the shouting, he finds it impossible to relax anyhow. He tries though, as he's wrapped in his blankets and his head is sandwiched between two pillows in an effort to mute the noise from downstairs. A bedside lamp remains on so he can see what he's doing. Reaching into his bedside desk, Percy pulls out a long box. Inside rests a perfectly ordinary straight stick he found outside some time ago. Stick in hand, he reaches out and tries to remember the wand motions his Dad taught him.

Time passes and just as he nears running through all the spells he has learned, the yelling begins to fade. Moments later, there is a knock on his door. Percy returns the stick to it's container right as Dad enters, the book Grandpa got him tucked under his arm.

He seems really tired, though there's an attempt at a smile on his face and he moves to sit on the edge of Percy's bed. "I'm sorry your birthday ended like that."

Percy just curls into a ball, blankets bunched up in his hands. "Why does Grandpa hate Momma so much?"

Dad actually giggles slightly at that. "It's not that he hates her…” Though it doesn't even sound like his Dad believes that. "He just… She's not who I was expected to marry. Your Grandfather thought I should find someone from a distinguished family. A daughter of people he knew and trusted. Instead I go off to Ilvermorny and come back from my last year happily engaged to someone I knew he'd never approve of."

"But why doesn't he approve of Momma? Momma is really great!" Percy pouts, sitting upright from his spot on the bed.

Dad actually giggles slightly at that. "I think so too. But your Grandfather only sees her family history. Since her father is a No-Maj, he doesn't think he can trust her. A No-Maj born wizard
No matter what Dad says, Percy is convinced that he will never be able to comprehend it. "But Momma's not scary! And I don't think her Dad is either. Momma says he's really nice." Momma is good and it makes no sense why Grandpa can't see that.

"Unfortunately old people have a hard time changing their minds once its set."

"It's not fair though…" Momma shouldn't have to suffer because Grandpa is old.

His Dad nods in agreement. "It isn't fair at all. But that is just the way things are, the way they've always been, since before you were born. Sometimes the world isn't fair and we just have to deal with what life has given us." Dad pauses in thought and Percy almost feels a need to nudge him. "Anyways… enough of adult talk. How about I read to you a bit before you sleep."

Percy nods, glad for the change of subject. The more he learned about the differences between Momma and Grandpa Graves, the less logical it became. If he tried to sleep now, he'd just worry over it, so a story or a lesson is a welcome distraction.

The book is cracked open and his Dad goes through chapter one of the 'Theory of the Magical Arts'. The chapter describes the way magic works, how it feels as it flows through your body and how a wand serves as a tool to channel it. Percy might not be old enough to read the book, but the way his Dad explains it to him, it makes perfect sense. By the end of the chapter, Percy's eyes are heavy and he is nodding off.

Dad is quick to notice and retires the book on the bedside table. After lifting himself off the covers, he gently tucks the blankets around Percy, just the way he likes. Before moving to turn the light out, he whispers, “Good night Percy. I’m sorry you can’t go to Montana, but Momma and I will find something even better, I promise.” His words barely register with Percy who’s mostly fallen asleep.

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Weeks later, Percy learns that sometimes, breaking the rules is ok if it is for the greater good.

Dad left on a big mission for work two days ago, something bad happened over seas and it would apparently be awhile before Dad got to come home. Percy is used to that, though.

Grandpa Graves holes up in his study doing whatever it is Grandpas do. Percy isn't ever allowed in there and he definitely doesn't want Grandpa to yell at him so he never finds out.

Thus, for several days, it's just him and Momma. Mostly he's just been helping in her garden, but this morning, she wakes him up and tells him they are taking a trip instead. He also isn’t supposed tell anyone that they are leaving. Percy is okay with that. He knows what secrets are and when to keep them. Like that time he accidentally spilt pumpkin juice all over Grandpa's favorite chair and Momma helped him clean it up before Grandpa ever noticed.
She lets him get ready before leading them into the fireplace room. Her hand slips into his, holding it tight and then she tosses powder onto the wood as she says a location. Her voice is clear enough for him to hear, but the words are still said with some secrecy. The fire turns green and her hand remains in his, as they step in together. It's just like every time they made a trip to the city.

The next thing Percy knows, he's in a place he's never been before. It's unfamiliar, this new fireplace room. The space they've ended up in is considerably smaller than the one that they just left. It smells nice… like apples.

Percy blinks, his eyes adjusting to the warm light. He's inside a cluttered room, but it doesn't feel messy. In the corner is a rocking chair with a patchy blanket draped over the back. The center of the space has a plain wooden table far more plain than anything in the Graves mansion. A bowl of bright red apples rests in the middle. The walls are covered with paintings, but Percy is surprised to find that no matter how long he stares at them, they remain completely still.

Then his focus turns to two figures that move closer. He has never met them, but he has seen them before in pictures. There is an elderly man with a puffy beard, dressed in simple clothes, and an elderly woman in a loose dress with curly hair like Momma's (though hers is less red). Momma introduces them properly, even though Percy already knows who they are. These are his Gran and Gramps.

The older lady nears and Percy is nervous at first. He knows he isn't supposed to be here, but Momma brought him so it has to be okay. She kneels down to his height and reaches out a welcoming hand. "It's so good to finally meet you Percy. I'm Cliona Gallagher, your grandmother." Percy can't help but notice how similar her voice is to Momma's, the accent thicker, but still very much the same. The sound of it puts him at ease almost instantly. He takes her hand and shakes it, because that is how you are supposed to greet people.

She grins and gives him a hug before reaching back and gesturing towards the old man in the room. "That's Doyle, your Grandfather." His Gramps, the No-Maj that Momma has told him so much about and the man who Grandpa Graves has warned him of.

Percy can't help but realize this man looks happier than Grandpa Graves ever did.

Cautiously, Percy moves towards him, curious, because he's never met a No-Maj. Gramps looks down at him and Percy can make out a smile underneath his bushy facial hair. Slowly, as if not to scare Percy further, Gramps pulls him into a hug. His embrace doesn't feel any different from a Wizard hug, Percy makes sure to note.

After letting go and ruffling Percy's hair (which Percy doesn't like because it means he has to flatten his hair back down), Gramps tells the rest of them he's going to finish cooking.

Momma and Gran sit around the table and talk about their lives, mostly about all has happened over the last few months. Standing next to Momma, he wonders how often she comes to visit them. In hushed voices, Percy can barely make out them talking about the fight that went on during Percy's birthday.

Instead of participating in their talk, Gramps walks over and taps Percy on the shoulder, getting his attention. The man points back towards the kitchen and asks Percy to help him make a pie. He’s a bit bored at the moment, not wanting to talk about the fights, so he comes along.

Rather than the floating ingredients he's used to seeing in the kitchen, he sees Gramps pull out several bowls and bags full of flour and spices cover the counters. Apparently it won't be an entirely magic free pie, because Gramps tells him Gran picked the apples from the tree with her wand. Other
than that though, the rest of the work is done by Percy and Gramps' own hands.

The work is messy and reminds him of how Momma works in her garden. It takes a long time too. Rather than just flicking a wand and watching the ingredients come together, Percy and Gramps cut the apples, mix all the ingredients, and even watch while the hot oven bakes it. Everything about the process is foreign to him.

When the pie is done cooking, they all gather around the table. Gran distributes slices and everyone eats the pie Percy helped make. It's delicious and probably the best pie he's ever had so he can't help it when Momma's words about hard work making everything better ring in his head.

Afterwards, once Gran and Momma have cleaned up a bit with a flick of their wands, Gramps asks Momma if he can show Percy around. She sees no reason for him not to, so Percy proceeds to follow the older man on a tour through the house. It's a very short tour as the house is only four rooms: the main room they arrived in, the kitchen, and two bedrooms. The size is a far cry from the mansion, and Percy strains to think how two people can live in such a tight place.

The walls are wooden rather than the black and white wallpaper he is used to seeing. Every window, rather than be covered by a silken curtain, has a simple cloth blocking out the light. The two beds are tiny compared to the ones back in the mansion. Gramps explains that one of the bedrooms used to be Momma's when she lived here. It's hard to imagine her fitting in such a small area, but Gramps tells him it was back when she was the same size Percy is right now.

Gramps leads him outside. After no more than ten steps, Gramps chooses to turn back to look at the home as they exit. Percy takes his place next to him, finally seeing the building in it's entirety. It still looks as small as it did on the inside, but it looks quite comfortable. It's painted a light blue color and well-tended vines grow up the sides. A variety of plants and bushes and trees surround the home, or as Gramps has been referring it, the cottage, and Percy feels like he's back in Momma's garden.

"It's really nice Mr. Gallagher." He calls him by his formal name because while they may be related, Percy still doesn't know him well enough and it might be rude to refer to him as something so informal.

"I appreciate the compliment, little wizard." Gramps stands next to him, arms crossed proudly. "Built the whole place with my own two hands. Wouldn't let Cliona help. Felt it was the least I could do."

Percy's eyes go wide, his whole perspective on the cottage changing. "You made it all by yourself? That's amazing! I can barely dig a hole with my hands."

"What I lack in magic, I make up for in work ethic." There's a deep chuckle at that and Percy can't help but feel like he's missing a joke.

"What's a work ethic?" Adults really need to learn to explain their words around Percy because while he may be smart, there's still a lot he doesn't know.

Gramps brings a hand to his beard, staring off, like he's trying to figure out how to word it as so many adults do when he asks things. "Hmm, well, I guess it means how hard you are willing to work towards a goal. If you really want something to happen, you have to be willing to put long hours in to make it happen. There isn't always a magical shortcut."

Percy nods, letting the knowledge sink in. "You sound a lot like Momma."

More laughter from Gramps as he turns from the house, walking further away from it.

It's Percy's first time getting a good look at the surrounding area. Mountains tower above them and
continue far into the distance. Back in New York, Percy has seen mountains though they are nothing like these. It's beautiful, but Percy can't help but realize there's no one else around as far as the eye can see. No other houses, no cities or towns. The only other living creatures he can find, aside from his family of course, is a fenced in area filled with animals.

Picking up 2 big buckets with hay, Gramps heads towards the animals- goats, Percy realizes as they get closer. Gramps stops right at the fence and hands some of the hay to the few that have started to crowd around. Gramps gestures for Percy to join him, but Percy is hesitant to come so close. He's heard goats will eat anything they get close to and he would prefer his scarf uneaten.

Nosiness getting the better of him, Percy looks up at Gramps to ask, "Where is everyone else? It's lonely up here."

"Well, Cliona and I, we're outsiders. Wizards don't want us around because of me being, well… me, and we can't exactly go live amongst other muggles without fear of starting a new witch hunt. Not that it bothers us much though. We have everything we need right here on the farm between the goats and the apples. Besides, we still got to send your Momma to school and give her a good life."

Despite the fondness that Gramps speaks with, Percy still finds it ridiculous. "But my house is big enough for all of us, plus you and Gran. Why can't you come live with us?"

"I appreciate the offer, little wizard, but I doubt we'd do well in such a noble house. Cliona and I are simple folk. We like our life just the way it is." He gives Percy a pat on the shoulders, and while it is polite, Percy knows it means the conversation is over. "Alright. I think it's about time we get you back to your Momma."

They return to the cottage and Momma is asking him questions about everything Gramps showed him. He's happy to share, knowing after all she has told him, she really cares about his opinion. Time comes soon for them to leave and Momma brushes him off, making sure there's no loose leaf or blade of grass on his clothes. There can't be any evidence left of where they had been.

The two say their goodbyes and then Momma tosses the powder into the fire place. She gives him a quick reminder that this whole trip was secret and he was to never talk about it with anyone. Not even with Momma when they were home. However, as they step into the fireplace, Percy knows he won't be able to stop thinking about it nearly every day after.

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Years pass, though not fast enough for Percy. He is ten years old now, and while he may be older, he still isn't old enough to get his letter to Ilvermorny.

Less than a year was left though, and because of that, he could barely contain his excitement. His Dad and Momma had discussed everything he'd be learning through his first year at length. More Dad than Momma, though. Dad feeds his endless curiosity while Momma thinks there should be some surprises when he gets there.

Either way, he'll be beyond prepared.

Percy is true to his word and never speaks of his visit with Gran and Gramps. Despite that, it hadn't been his last trip. Every few months, Momma would tell him they were going to town, when instead they would appear in that small cozy cottage.
Grandpa Graves never seemed to notice. Maybe due to the fact Percy stopped asking about it, his curiosity sated. Grandpa likely thought he no longer cared, and thus the danger gone.

There is less fighting at home because of it.

However, after one such trip, Grandpa Graves asks to see Percy alone.

The message to meet Grandpa Graves outside his study shakes in Percy's hands. He's fearful at the idea of his secret having got out. Because what if he knew? Grandpa never asked him up into that part of the house before so the very request has him uneasy. How could Grandpa know though? Momma and him didn't do anything different this time.

So he makes his way up the eastern staircase, the opposite side of the house from where Percy slept. It opens up to a dark, dimly lit hallway, and he can see on the far end the entrance to Grandpa's study. In the middle, stands Grandpa, leaning on his cane as he stares up at a series of portraits lining the wall. The only portraits of whom he recognizes are of Dad and a man who looks similar to Grandpa but younger.

"Percival... do you know who these people are?" Grandpa asks with an imposing tone.

Percy shakes his head. "No Sir."

"These are your ancestors. Each of your relatives going all the way back to the very year our government in this country was founded. Each and every one of them a Graves and a high ranking Auror. Your ancestor, Gondulphus Graves, was the first." He points to the furthest one down the hall, the one closest to Grandpa's study. A regal man in old clothes stares back at him. "Of course your father and I are the most recent." He smiles proudly.

"And you, my dear child, shall follow in their footsteps, and your children, and your children's children. A long line that must be preserved."

Grandpa points to an empty spot on the wall next to the smiling portrait of his Dad.

That is the only comforting face he felt in the whole hallway. The rest stare with stern expressions, their eyes seeming to bore into him. Percy doesn't like it, the feeling of so many strangers watching him, the sudden weight of their expectations pressing on him. It's overwhelming and he wants to leave. But he knows he can't just walk away when Grandpa Graves talks. Respect was something he had long since drilled into Percy.

"S-so I have to be an Auror? Like Dad?" His voice trembles and he tries to focus in on the one smiling face in the room.

Percy loves his Dad, loves hearing about his job. It's an important duty and a respected career, but Percy never expected that he would be required to become one too. Dad always comes home looking tired and sad. Would that be Percy as well when he grows up?

"It has been what every Graves has been. Your father, myself, my father. It has been like this for generations. The Graves family has always been champions of the law."

That is when Percy looks down, suddenly very uncomfortable. The law. That was what Grandpa Graves talked about all the time, the law that means he has to sneak around just to see his Gran and Gramps whom he had grown to love very much. The law that had caused constant arguing and chaos throughout Percy's life. Percy is certain some laws are good, but others, ones like Rappaport's Law as he has come to know it... Percy is not sure he wants to be a champion of.
But he can't tell Grandpa that, because then Grandpa will want to know why. And why meant he would have to talk about all the sneaking. He had to keep up the lie for Momma's sake. If he slipped now, then the arguing would get bad again.

So Percy just nods.

The gesture seems to satisfy Grandpa. "Good child. I know it's quite a lot to take in, but it is how we have lived for centuries. I tell you all of this now because you will leave us for school soon to learn and grow. But I always want you to remember your roots. Remember where you came from. Do not stray from that and you will make us all proud."

The problem is that Percy does know. He knows exactly where he comes from, and half of him had been pushed aside under these laws. He wants to make his family proud, but part of him does not want to give Grandpa Graves the satisfaction. Deep down, he's already made up his mind to be everything his grandfather is not.

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The day he turns eleven, he receives his letter to Ilvermorny. An eastern screech owl flies into the house and places a letter stamped with the school’s seal into his hands. Percy is beyond thrilled. Of course he will miss Momma and Dad, but as Grandpa Graves pats him on the back, telling him he will do great things for the family legacy, Percy just silently waits for the chance to get away from the weight of his name. He’s ready to become his own person.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I hope you enjoy 9k words of Ilvermorny world building and Percy being a huge nerd. Cause that's all this chapter is.

- Again, thanks to dreamsandpocky (aka gravescredence) for being a huge help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It's harder than Percival anticipates, to leave his Momma's side.

Saying good-bye to Dad is easier. He loves his father, but because of Dad's work, long absences had become routine. But with Momma, it's a different story. For his entire life, eleven and a half years, he's been glued to her side, never being apart for longer than a day. So it hurts as they start the process of parting from one another at the bus station.

"I'll write to you regularly. These few months will go by fast, I promise. Christmas will come in no time." She attempts to reassure him as he clings to her.

Dad stands close, watching over his trunk packed with all his school items, as Percy holds onto the last remnants of his childhood. Leaving for Ilvermorny is often considered the first big step in a Wizard's life. A day ago, he thought he was ready, had his things bought and packed weeks in advance. Now though, it's hitting him that it will be several months before he has a chance to see Momma after this.

Finally, she nudges him off. Percy sniffs and wipes his face with his scarf. He didn't realize he had even been crying then. Such strong displays of emotion are typically foreign to him, but he supposes in this case, it's acceptable. Just so long as no one outside Momma or Dad saw.

Momma hands him a handkerchief and lets him know she loves him very much, but if he stand's here much longer, he'll miss the bus. There's a slight crack in her voice despite her smile. Her eyes look
like they're about to water too.

One more hug from each of his parents and he knows he has to leave. Percy takes a deep breath, swallowing all his emotions before turning around, pushing his trunk in the direction of the bus.

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His things get loaded on the bus, the trunk containing his clothes and supplies tossed into a compartment under the carriage. It’s crowded, the pack of children, teenagers, and their parents becoming thicker the closer he gets.

The bus itself is the regular means of transportation to Ilvermorny. Designed to resemble No-Maj buses of the time, it's a large wheeled double decker carriage pulled by two shimmering beasts who looked similar enough to horses to avoid any curious looks from the No-Maj population. Percy overhears someone talk about how soon, the bus will be outdated with the rate those No-Majs are playing around with technology.

As he enters, it’s a bit unsettling as the interior is a great deal larger than how it appears on the outside. Rather than the rows of seats he observed through the glass windows from the outside, the seats are now split into their own cabins.

Groups of children scurry in and out of them, most being bouncy and loud. The majority of these kids look older, but he can tell there are quite a few first years as well. He wonders if any of them will be his future housemates or classmates. He hears shouts of 'Hey! You! Come sit with me!' though none of it is directed at him. Not that Percy minds. In fact, he prefers it this way. All of these people are strangers to him, and at the moment, he thinks he’d rather be alone.

So he slowly pushes his way through the crowd of kids, eyes scanning the insides of each cabin as he looks for somewhere to sit. At this point, most of the cabins look full, 2-4 kids sitting inside, smiling and laughing. Percy is not in the mood for conversation, so he hunts for a cabin he can have to himself, one where he can reflect on his thoughts for the time being.

Eventually, he nears the furthest end of the bus where the packs of kids have started to fade and pokes his head in a carriage that contains no one.

Percy quickly enters, claiming one of the seats for himself, and relaxes. It will be just like home, when he shuts himself in his room to drown out any chaos happening on the other side of the door. A deep breath, and then he reaches into his carry-on and takes out the book he has been reading, 'Ilvermorny: A History'

There’s a knot in his throat that has been there since saying goodbye to Momma. He knows it’s a reaction to his rising feelings of homesickness, the ones he’s doing his best to ignore. Reading helps take his mind off it, transporting him to thoughts of the school and it's founders. It works because he barely notices the wagon begin to move as he reads a particularly interesting section about Isolt.

He's alone and likes it this way.

That is, until he makes out the thump of footsteps heading towards him, which only stop as he hears a knock on his cabin door. The door slides open and a kid his age, with warm brown skin, and short bushy hair stands in the entry way. He’s grinning and out of breath.
"Hey, is this seat open?" The boy asks, pointing at the bench opposite Percy.

Not wanting the first impression of himself to be a liar, he slowly nods. Even if he rather be by himself, it would be rude to say no. However, as the kid takes the seat, Percy raises his book back up as if making a barrier between them. He doesn't want to talk, doesn't really know how to talk to strangers. His mom had always been the one to initiate those conversations. So Percy hopes to avoid it as much as possible.

This kid, though, doesn't seem to catch that fact. Once he's settled in, he leans forward and holds out his hand. "Hi! I'm Orion. What's your name?"

Percy lowers the book very slowly, trying to not glare at this kid, Orion. "I'm Per-" but he actually pauses before giving his full name. He hadn't quite thought about how he should introduce himself. The nickname he had grown used to, the one his parents used, the one he knows himself as, mulls over in his mind. There is nothing wrong with it, but it seems like it'd be strange for people he is far from familiar with to use it.

"I'm Percival." He decides, shaking Orion's hand. His full name feels stronger, more magical. It's not too different, but it is a start.

If Orion noticed his moment of hesitation, he doesn't mention it. "Nice to meet you Percival. You a first year too?"

Percy- no, Percival nods.

"Wonderful! Know what house you wanna be? My ma and pops were both Thunderbirds. I know it's not really a choice, but hey, it's fun to think about it. Like me, I wanna be a Wampus cause they apparently win the house Quidditch Cup nearly every year. I'm a big Quidditch fan." The words come out fast and hurried and all Percival can think is that Orion talks a lot.

His sinks back into his chair, avoiding eye contact, still trying to focus on his book, not really paying that much attention to Orion. "Oh... it doesn't really matter that much to me." Which is true for the most part, with one exception.

"You know, with all that reading you're doing, you'd probably be real happy in Horned Serpent. Apparently their house is right next to the library."

That makes Percival groan. He'd prefer to not get Horned Serpent, the house of scholars. There is of course nothing wrong with the house from what he's heard, and he's sure he'd fit in just fine. However, it had also been his Grandpa's house, as well as three fourths of the Graves family line. It would be difficult to get out from under their shadow if he had to spend the next seven years following in their footsteps. "I just want my wand."

At the mention of a wand, Orion cheers and practically stands up in his seat. "Yeah! Hard to imagine that by tonight we'll finally have a wand we can do magic with!" Though when he notices Percival not sharing his enthusiasm, he calms down and settles in his seat. "Ok, I get it. You don't wanna talk. That's fine. Completely okay to be shy. Besides, I got my own company right here." Orion gives a strange giggle as he reaches into his pocket. Out comes a fuzzy orange and white mammal. Percival thinks it's called a 'guinea pig'. Orion holds the mammal up to his face and gives it ridiculous kisses. "Isn't that right Bugbear?"

And so Percival endures the remainder of the bus ride to school, face glued to a book he's having an impossible time concentrating on because the boy across from him baby talks to his pet incessantly.
Sufficed to say, this is not how he imagined his school years starting.

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Night has fallen by the time the bus slows down to a stop and Percival realizes they have arrived right at the entrance of a distinguished castle. It had been hard to see through the mists until just now, when the castle is plainly right outside his window.

A tall woman holds a lantern up, waiting for them outside the door. As the kids start climbing out of the bus, she ushers the first years to one side. The elder kids are allowed to gather their things and head on. First years, the lady explains, will have their belongings transported to their rooms once the sorting ceremony is complete.

Once all of them are off the bus, the lady does a headcount, and then leads them through a huge gate. They cross a courtyard, passing two enormous statues. Percival knows them to be Isolt and James Steward, the school’s founders. The crowd gapes at them as they make their way to a grand door. With a wave of the woman's wand, it swings open and the first years pile in.

They are told to wait in an entry hall, but Percival tries to stand on his toes to see into the next room. Unfortunately, with the crowd, it’s hard to make much out.

One by one names are called in alphabetical order and, after a few moments between each name, he can hear cheers come from the room the hall leads into. Percival can make out a few words, mainly the four houses. So they're getting sorted already.

"Percival Graves." The woman calls out. There are a few whispers at the sound of his last name around the room, mostly coming from a few of the more upper class looking kids. It makes him uncomfortable. As Percival parts his way through the crowd, his head is bowed, trying to not pay any attention to the sudden eyes upon him.

Once he reaches the end of the hall, he finally gets a good look at the next area. It's a huge circular room with four columns along the wall, equidistant from one another. A snake tail seems to wrap around one of the columns and it ends in a twisting statue of a Horned Serpent. Several feet from it is a similar pillar with elegant arrow patterns that lead up to a sculpture of the Pukwudgie. Then a column that appears guarded by powerful wings, a Thunder Bird statue perched proudly atop. Finally, paw prints lead up the last pillar, seeming to track the steps of the Wampus that sits above.

Next to each column, Percival notices a staircase, one that must lead to what's above. A few feet higher than each statue, the room is circled by a balcony, split into quarters. Peering down from the balcony, Percival realizes are the already sorted students and their housemates.

Only one other person stands with him on the bottom floor, a man, who bows as he approaches. "Ah, I did not know we were expecting a Graves this year. Welcome. Simply stand before the four guardians and they will select where you belong. Once they have chosen, head up their stairs and join your housemates."

Percival nods and follows the instructions. In the exact center of the room is a small circle gilded into the ground. As soon as he's inside its line, strange hushed voices run through his mind. There's a conversation but he cannot make out who is speaking.

"Oh no, he follows the rules far too much for me. Doesn't think outside the box enough."
"Hmmm, his mind though. So much potential. So smart, I can see the libraries worth of books he's already consumed."

"He has his parent's kindness. Wants to help people… but I don't know if he'll go about it the right way. I don't trust him."

"He could be so strong! His talent, he's got a fighter's spirit. He'll never back down. Truly admirable."

The eyes of the Wampus and Horned Serpent statues flash. The Wampus roars and the Serpent's horns glow bright.

"Oh! We have both a scholar and a warrior on our hands. What an interesting combination! You would be welcome in either of their houses." The man beside him says. Percival hadn't anticipated this, being given a choice. Wampus and Horned Serpent. Instinctively, his bias against his grandfather already wanting to tug him one way, but Percival knows still, this is not something he can take lightly. So he turns to each and hears them out.

Percival looks up, eyes meeting with the Horned Serpent's. A wispy voice that sounds so soothing tells him. "With me you could become so learned. Be surrounded by your peers. Rise above the ranks in my tower as your family has done in my house for centuries."

Then he turns to the Wampus where a much stronger, confident voice explains "But I see your passion. Your growing need to push back against all those who you feel have wronged the world. I can give you that. I can give you the strength you need."

It's all the explanation he needs. The two paths before him are the ones he has known he'd have to decide between for years, but Percy determined which one he would take when he was seven. The words of the beast ring in his head as he heads straight for the Wampus stairs. Right the wronged world. It resonates with him to his very core.

Of course he is a natural scholar, but that is something he will already be allowed to explore while in school, it would happen in its own time. Now though, now he feels like he's been given a chance to push himself in ways he has never been pushed. Percival will accept the strength offered and use it in great ways.

The Wampus house cheers as he joins them.

Moments later, Percival watches as the kid who spoke to him on the bus is also chosen by Wampus. He would have preferred to not be in the same house as Orion, but Wampus seems large enough. Surely, lots of other kids are joining this year so he doubts that they will be seeing too much of each other.

The rest of the sorting process is rather uneventful, that is until a young girl, Seraphina Picquery, walks to the center. She stands there for quite a long time, even longer than Percival had. The balconies of kids going quiet. All four statues react to her presence and the whole room knows this girl is special.

Horned Serpent gives a loud uproarious applause as she joins them.
Once all the first years are appropriately sorted into their houses, they break off one at a time and follow their respective leaders to a new room. Wampus is first as they had the most kids join their house this year.

Percival stares up as he enters. The room feels as though it’s at least 50 feet high, shelves covering the walls from floor to ceiling. Long boxes hover and fly through the air, and even as he walks through, he has to dodge out of the way of a few that pass.

He, as well as the rest of the Wampus first years, stand by as they wait for one of the adults across the room to motion them over. An elderly lady with a stack of white curled hair is the one who gestures towards him.

"Ah Mr. Graves." The woman says politely. "Years and years ago I had the honor of bestowing your father with his wand. Now it looks as if I shall do the same to you." After taking a moment to ponder over him, she waves her own wand, and five boxes float over to hover in front of him.

"Simply pick a wand that calls to you. If none of these pull you, I can always bring down more."

His eyes already focus in on the furthest to his left, the other four quickly forgotten. It's an elegant black wand, simple with touches of mother-of-pearl. He takes a small step towards it.

"Ah yes, that is an ebony wood with a Wampus hair core. 14.5 inches long and unyielding flexibility. Simply give it a bit of a wave and we will see if it responds to you as well as you do it."

_Finally._

He reaches out and takes his prize in hand. The weight feels right, natural, like it belongs here.

Quickly, he recalls one of the spells his Dad had taught him, one of the simplest spells he can think of. His hand moves in a perfect motion as the word 'Lumos' falls from his lips. A dazzling ray of light, though not too blinding as his father had warned him about that, glows from the tip of the wand.

The lady claps, excited as he manages a competent spell with the very first wave of his wand. Around him, children make glass shatter, stacks of boxes fall over. But not Percival. It already feels like second nature to him. He bows his head slightly, thanking her.

Before he can leave, he must wait for the rest of the kids to receive their wands as well. But time moves fast with Percival's attention completely on the black wand in his hands. He stops himself from attempting to cast all the spells he has memorized. There will be time for that later.

After the last kid finishes, an older student who proudly wears a large Wampus pin on his uniform, has the group follow him out. As they walk, he explains he's the head of house and that the Wampus dormitories can be a bit tricky to find.

He guides them through a series of winding tunnels. It's a maze that leads downward, Percival realizes. The halls are carved from stone, from the very mountain that Ilvermorny rests atop of. Wampus represents the body, and so they rest in the body of the mountain itself the head of house clarifies.

They pass through large caverns, some still natural, others shaped for certain purposes. One of which, the head of house explains, is for dueling. After several twists and turns, all of which Percival does his best to memorize, they arrive in what must be the Wampus common room.
A fireplace warms the space and several leather chairs sit throughout the room. Tapestries with their house beast line the walls. Despite knowing that the walls here are pure mountain rock, Percival would have never guessed had he not walked here himself. The craftsmanship is extraordinary, nearly reminding him of a level of class that would rival his home.

Two hallways branch off from this main room, through which the individual dorm rooms can be found. Above the fireplace, the head of house posts a list with each of their names. Beside each is a room designation. Two to a room and no, you don't get to choose, explains the head of house. Some of the kids who had already made friends make it known that they are unhappy, but Percival doesn't care much.

He grips his wand tightly. No matter what happens, he has this. Nothing can ruin his day. At least that is what he thinks until Orion waves at him from the inside of the room he is assigned.

"Hey Percival! Looks like we're roommates!"

Percival groans.

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Classes start up not long after. His schedule is simple, like all other first years.

Mondays and Thursdays he has *Magical Flora and Fauna* and *Practical Magic*, or as it is known in Europe, Charms class.

Tuesdays and Fridays he has *Intro into the History of Magic* as well as *Defensive Arts*. Apparently other countries refer to Defensive Arts as Defense Against the Dark Arts, but on the first day of class, their Professor explains that America believes in a more general, wide reaching education. Not everyone will face Dark Wizards, but everyone should know how to defend themselves nonetheless.

Wednesdays are reserved for Percival's least favorite class, *Flying*. He's quite vocal about his distaste, which seems to offend Orion on principle. Since his roommate speaks about wanting to try out for the Quidditch team eventually, Percival supposes he can understand why, but it doesn't stop Percival himself from finding the class an utter waste of his time. It's not that he finds the subject difficult, simply he just knows a broomstick is an outdated form of transportation.

They can't fly through the halls of Ilvermory where they will be spending most of their time and by graduation, they will have learned how to apparate. Really, there is no reason for it to be a required class.

Only a week goes by when Percival comes to the conclusion that there is no way he can focus in his dorm. He sits at his desk one night, trying to read his *Practical Magic* text, but as he gets half way through his reading on the Mending Charm, he hears a squeal come from the opposite side of the room. His head shoots to locate the source.

Orion lays on his bed, his pet guinea pig in his lap that he gently pats—pats that appear to do nothing to calm the squealing animal.

"Can you *please* get it to quiet down? I'm trying to study." He asks hunched over his book.
Orion picks up his pet so he can rub it against his face. "Sorry. I already fed him today and that's usually the only thing to work, so no promises." Another squeal from the guinea pig.

Percival is... not exactly an animal lover. The creature he had brought along with him was less a pet and more a family heirloom. On his desk, sits a glass cage containing an Emperor Scorpion, Horatio. Centuries ago, the scorpion had been enchanted so every few years, rather than die, it just sheds it's skin. It's an enchantment that also made the creature completely docile. Normally this would break the Ilvermorny rules of no magical creatures as pets, but apparently as Percival was a Graves, some exceptions had been made.

He doesn't exactly like it, but his Dad had asked him to bring Horatio along. He could have fought, but seeing as Percival didn't care for a companion animal anyways, there was no reason to.

Now he realizes bringing Horatio has been for the best. Orion's pet is a nuisance while Horatio sits in his cage doing... nothing.

More squeals from the guinea pig and he's had enough. He winces, recalling how easy it had been to focus in a large empty house. Sharing a room with another person, especially one who insisted on such an obnoxious pet truly grates his nerves. Gathering his books, he stands up and heads out the room. "I'm going to the library."

It's a rather long walk actually. Not only did he have to pass through the cavernous maze, he had to climb several stair cases and cross several lengthy hallways.

A few times he actually gets lost, but eventually he makes his way, learning to just look for Horned Serpent's tower. The library is situated at the very base of it since those thought of as scholars tended to take greater interest in books than most. Most not being Percival.

As he steps inside, he can't help but wonder what took him so long to decide to visit this place. The room is gigantic, at least ten times bigger than the library they had at home. Students and even some teachers sit at tables at various places between the shelves. Many of the tables are taken, but despite the number of people here, Percy can't help by realize how quiet it is. Everyone sits focusing on their reading. No mindless chatter or squealing mammals. It's comforting.

Percival finds an empty table near a corner of the room. Settling down with his book, he notices the girl from the sorting ceremony, Seraphina Picquery. She diligently works her way through her own book and Percival realizes that this is the sort of company he rather be around.

But it's too late at this point. He chose his poison. While he may have to put up with Wampus for the next several years, he at least seems welcome amongst this refuge.

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The weeks pass by, turning to months before he knows it. His first year, aside from various guinea pig based squabbles with his roommate, goes by without any struggle. In fact, he quickly finds there's so little struggle he finds it frustrating.

Percival wants to work hard, wants to give his years at Ilvermorny his all. But that turns out to be difficult unto itself when each and every one of his classes are incredibly easy. Everything covered in his core classes he was taught by his parents throughout his childhood. The textbooks he had read a year in advance. While he understands this year is supposed to be foundations, by the end of his first
month, he frankly finds it ridiculous.

He isn't learning. He's simply repeating facts the has long since memorized. While it's true he couldn't actually cast the spells until he arrived at school, he still had the motions and words all in his head. The additional presence of his wand does not increase the challenge either. If anything, it just gives his knowledge a concrete form as he casts spells.

Not even the classes he dislikes, such as flying, are particularly challenging.

He can't believe that this early into school he's already bored out of his mind. His teachers don't even have critiques for him past 'Just keep up the good work Percival'. The other students struggle so he can't even fault the professors. He wishes they could learn to work with the difference in skill levels instead of just being told nonsense like 'oh it might get confusing' or 'it might intimidate the weaker students'.

Why should he be held back for their lack of talent?

It's a mindset that doesn't exactly earn him many friends. Most find him arrogant, but Percival thinks nothing of the sort. He is here to learn and that isn't happening. He has a right to his frustration.

The day before midterms comes, and Percival feels silly for even trying to make himself study. After about the 5th time reading about the life cycle of Doxies, he closes his book and lets out a deep sigh.

"Pstt." Not many people spoke in the library, so Percival turned to the source of the noise. It's that Picquery girl, sitting in her normal seat, three tables away from Percival. The main difference now, is she looks at him with a knowing smirk. "If you're looking for something more challenging I suggest you try checking out year two subjects." She raises up the year two textbook for *Magical Flora and Fauna* before going back to her reading.

It's… not a bad idea. Actually it's a fantastic idea. If he's already ahead, why not stay that way? And he isn't the only one doing this, so he can't exactly get in trouble. If another first year can read the above level courses, then so can he.

By the end of his first year, only the Picquery girl is ahead of him in class rank.

It becomes a pattern that continues beyond his first year. Learn the grade above him, teach himself, constantly seek out a challenge.

Some of his teachers learn to welcome this and a few of his favorites would try to help him out, offer post class tutoring sessions that Percival could attend. Others attempt to convince him he is getting into dangerous territory by trying things they believe him not ready for. Of course, when this happens, it simply means that he focuses more on that subject in his own time.

While his peers complain over their schoolwork, huddled in the common room, searching for any excuse to get out of studying, Percival sits alone at a table that quickly becomes his in the library, It's a self-imposed isolation. One Percival quickly grows to crave. Even in his classes, when surrounded by the classmates he shuts himself away from, he manages to stay separate. Perhaps he could possibly gain friends by helping a classmate with their work, but that never happens. There is no point. He's just happy going about his own business.

There are only two students he seems to interact with on a semi-regular basis. As most his time is spent in the library, he and Seraphina Picquery grow somewhat of a mutual respect towards one another. They don't talk, don't have regular conversations, so he can't exactly call them friends, but Percival knows he does like her more than most people.
The other is his roommate, whom he gets used to being around. Even though Percival spends most of his time in the library, he still comes to their room to sleep after all. They continue to live with one another past first year because finding someone else who would live with him would be too difficult and Orion isn't exactly the worst roommate. The other keeps his space clean and he does eventually get decent at keeping his pet quiet (though Percival may have learned a noise dampening charm as well). They don't speak much. They don't have much in common. But still, it could be worse.

Orion is pretty much everything Percival is not. He's fun loving, seems to be friends with most of the school, and while his grades are nothing special, he shines at Quidditch, even making the team their second year. Despite his best efforts to rub off on Percival though, none of it works. Invitations to Quidditch matches are declined every time. As practically every Wampus attends the games, it's something that alienates him further from his peers. Orion accuses him of having no house pride, which is not a lie.

The Wampus must have made a mistake inviting him to its house. He's an outsider here in every way. He is not a fighter. The way his life is going, he's happy fading into the background, doesn't want to compete for glory in the way his housemates seem to crave.

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His second year happens to be when Percival inadvertently shines.

While their first year had been entirely fundamentals and learning the basics of spells, the second year is when classes take on their own identity. Defensive Arts perhaps has the biggest shift, something Ilvermorny prides itself on.

Integral to the curriculum of Defensive Arts is dueling. The course designer centuries ago thought that a the most effective way for students to grow at defending themselves was to duel their peers in a safe, monitored environment. Reaction time, creativity, observation- all things tested in perhaps the most high stakes manner possible in a school environment. As a result, dueling, though part of a class unlike Quidditch, had become just as respected and competitive amongst the Ilvermorny population.

Part of each term consists of a dueling tournament. Single elimination. The better one does, the more points for the class.

Two at a time are called up to the stage, a long raised platform, and a student stands on either end. It's random who faces who as Professor Clairoux simply pulls names from a bag. A few matches happen before him and Percival observes, watching every step his classmates make, noting how much time passes between the professor yelling start and the first spell firing off. Many hesitate; others fire too quickly, their spell fizzling.

Then comes time for Percival to be called up. His opponent is a large kid, nearly a foot taller than him, with a cocky smile on his face. Percival has seen him sleeping in class.

"Think you're so much better than us?" The kid scoffs. "You might be a real smart guy, but that ain't gunna help you in the real world. We'll see how smart you really are after I'm done with yah!"

Percival doesn't even bother hiding the roll of his eyes. Intimidation won't work on him, not when he knows how much more prepared he is than this kid. Of course there is the fact he has the highest grades in this class already, but Percival highly doubts any of his classmates also have a respected
Auror as a father. Over the summer, even though he had to leave his wand at school, Dad had given him quite a bit of dueling advice.

Percival and his opponent raise their wands and Professor Clairoux counts down from three.

"Expelliard-"

"Stupefy!" Percival interrupts with a fast motion of his hand, wand strikes out with a jet of light, and the other boy goes flying back.

Be quick is what his Dad told him. In school, the kids are bound to try to show off with fancy complicated spells. Be simple and fast is the most effective way to succeed.

His fellow students cheer, impressed, as his round has taken a fraction of the time of everyone else's. His wand is now pocketed as if it's no big deal and he pushes a strand of hair that got loose back into place. Are they surprised? , he wonders. Is it really so shocking that he's competent at this? Not that it matters. He steps down from the stage to join the crowd.

Percival watches intensely as he waits in between rounds. Most of his classmates' spell work is sloppy and he makes sure to take note of specific weaknesses, speed, and preferred spells of the potential people he could be going against next.

He has three more rounds, and while his other opponents are better than his first, his rounds don't last much longer. His second opponent, one he knows will be slow and lumbering, gives him time to cast a levitation charm, the crowd laughing as the kid's wand floats above his head. His third is caught off guard as Percival counters his spell, the look of confusion clear in his eyes. Percival takes the opportunity to call out 'Rictusempra!' and his opponent collapses laughing unpleasantly.

His final opponent is a girl with dark wavy hair. She's talented, a fellow Wampus. With her, he knows he has to be careful. They raise their wands and seem to both have the same idea.

"Stupefy!"

"Stupefy!"

But Percival is a split second faster. And she falls down, defeated.

With that, Professor Clairoux takes his hand, raises it high, and declares him the winner.

Once everyone has recuperated, been de-hexed and rested, they sit down for a lecture about what happened. The professor comments on moments he saw, missteps that some students made and why they failed. It's basically everything his Dad told him.

As the class concludes and everyone is dismissed, it's as if the entire class wants to come up and talk to Percival. His peers stare at him, some with jealousy, though there are quite a few who look at him with awe. Everyone had known Percival to spend all his time studying, but now he had a stage to show off exactly how skilled he actually was. He gains a few admirers.

The girl whom he faced in the final round makes an effort to introduce herself on their way back to the Wampus dorms. There's a light blush on her face. Her name is Luciana, something he never bothered memorizing despite the two sharing multiple classes, and she tells him how impressive he is, how he's so incredibly talented.

Percival knows this already and her conversation quickly bores him. It reminds him of how Orion constantly wants to talk about similarly useless things.
Before he can follow her into the common room, he starts to turn down a winding tunnel he knows will lead him closer to the library. Luciana seems disappointed by this, but awkwardly tells him to have a good night.

He doesn't want to go back to the common room, not if everyone will react similarly as Luciana had.

He soon learns that avoiding people seems to have the opposite effect he intends. His distance only causes rumors to grow. Now in all his other classes he can make out whisperings, especially amongst the girls. Apparently people from his Defensive Arts class have been sharing the story of his win to other classes. Students now sneak glances when they think he's not looking, murmuring his name when they think he isn't listening.

Percival wishes they'd stop.

He does his best to ignore his sudden followers. Now people come up to him, asking him for help. He's just happy that the Wampuses tend to stay away from the library. But each time he heads back to the dorms, every one of his year wants him to teach them.

He distracts himself as he usually does, by looking forward. Third year he will have room in his schedule to take a class he's been eagerly anticipating, No Maj Studies. Picquery apparently currently takes the class and she tells him she's learned quite a bit. Percival trusts her opinion.

As per usual, when he knows he's going to take a class, he heads to the library to check out the required textbook. The elderly librarian points him to the general learning section and he pulls it from the shelf with his wand and hovers it over to his table.

The textbook gets on his nerves. Just from the first chapter alone, he counts at least a dozen complaints that pop into his mind as he reads. For starters, it's coming from a very biased point of view, the history he has read from other books seeming to contradict any point this text is trying to make. It reminds him of listening to one of Grandpa Graves' rants.

However, he refuses to give up hope on the class based on a single textbook. After all, this class had been well endorsed. Its supposed to be more lecture and discussion based compared to other classes so perhaps the professor would share a similar perspective.

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In his third year, he recognizes his gut instinct had been correct.

The first day of class, Percival sits in the first row, eager to learn. Seats are filled with students he doesn't recognize, but unlike most classes, he actually cares about what their perspectives are.

Professor Gisborn walks in, making his way to a podium at the front of the classroom. "Ah, welcome all to No-Maj Studies!" He says excitedly. "I hope you are all ready to learn because today we are going to talk about-"

Percival raises his hands. The professor lifts an eyebrow at the interruption.

"Yes? What is it Mr…?"

"Percival." He introduces himself. "Before you get started, I was wondering how closely we would
be following the textbook."

"Ah, a good question Mr. Percival. We shall be following the book rather closely. 'Non Magic Folk and You' is a well-respected book. It will be treated as a good starting point for our in-class discussions." He smiles and Percival feels his heart drop. "Speaking of which, I need you all to turn to page-." 

"But… this book is terrible." He cannot help but interrupt once again, unable to comprehend on why a Professor would hold it in high regard.

"Excuse me?" The Professor asks, seeming confused by Percival's comment.

"For example…" Percival looks down and turns to page 7. "The only mention of James Steward, the No-Maj co-founder of our school, is simply…that. The contributions he made are completely glossed over. It fails to mention any of his accomplishments. He built this school with his own hands, he made wands." All facts he recalls from many of the Ilvermorny History books he had read. "He is a symbol of the good that No-Majs can be and yet he's barely mentioned at all. The rest of the book is just lists of reason why our kind should be separated."

The professor scrunches his face up. "Ah, well, see that was centuries ago, in the very early 1600s, before Salem, before Rappaport’s Law. Much has happened between now and then. Speaking of which, that is actually where I wanted to start our discussion today. Everyone turn your books to page 11."

For now, Percival settles down, doing as he's told, turning his book to that page. He still tries to hold onto a hope that the Professor is a smart man, though it wanes with every word out of his mouth as he goes into discussing the law that permanently pushed No-Maj and wizard kind apart for good. He's heard this all hundreds of times, his Grandpa Graves’s words practically coming out of this man’s mouth. How a No-Maj, Bartholomew Barebone, sought to expose wizards through trickery, something that all wizards thought would lead to their undoing based on the past. So much speculation treated as facts and it has never sat right with Percival. Not when his Grandpa said it, and certainly not now when Professor Gisborn says it.

His cheek hurts by the end of class that day as he bit down on it hard through several points in the 'discussion' to avoid shouting, starting an argument he was not quite ready to back up 100%.

The moment class ends, he rushes straight to the library to get his thoughts in order. He may not be quite ready now, but he will be ready to prove the professor wrong in time. First he needs to find resources that are indisputable.

He tries searching through his usual sections with no luck. It turns out in a wizard school, looking for books to prove the illogical discrimination against No-Majs makes no sense is very difficult. Even the section marked 'No-Maj Resources' just buys into the same separationist story.

Hours go by, Percival's frantic searching is useless. Books pile up all around him, each tried and failed attempts at looking for something, anything. The only thing he has to show for himself are books on the founders of Ilvermorny, but he had already used that example with no success.

He has to go deeper than that, find counter arguments to the points he knows will be brought up in class. Since it seems the teacher wishes to focus on Rappaport’s Law, Percival will take his arguments and dismantle them. He just has to find the specific facts to go along with what he knows to be correct.

"Ehem. Can I help you?"
Percival jumps slightly, trying to not stumble off the ladder he's on, as he hears a voice he doesn't recognize. A young woman with glasses looks up at him. He hasn't seen her around here before, which is saying something considering most of his days at school were spent here.

"Oh, sorry, I'm Miss Pendelwood, the new librarian. Old Mrs. Tombly fell ill over the summer and I am her replacement. Simply ask what you need and I shall do my best to assist."

In his two years here, he's never really needed the librarian's assistance. Finding course books was a simple enough task. This is different however. This time he knows he's getting nowhere on his own so he slowly steps down from the ladder. "Um, I was wondering if you knew where I could find a few books on what happened with the Rappaport Incident. And I don't mean the simple coursework texts. I mean works that cover the full story. First-hand accounts and such. I'm having some difficulty here as everything here is so one-sided."

She takes a moment to ponder his request, and for a moment he worries she will ask why. He doesn't want to get into a philosophical debate with a person who has offered to help him. But she soon nods. "Give me one moment. I'll go check the back sections. I think I remember seeing something like that. Wait here and I'll go check." She runs off and Percival does as she asks.

A few minutes pass and she's walking back towards him, a large stack of books in her arms. "Sorry that took so long. The last librarian had things a bit disorganized. I found more as well that might suit your needs." She hands over about seven books, most on Rappaport's Law. One is a collection of news articles from the time period, one is on Salem, and another is titled 'Observations on No-Majs'.

Percival can't believe he didn't see any of these during his initial search. After thanking the librarian, he carries the load back to his table.

The rest of the weekend is spent reading, jotting down excerpts he plans on bringing to Professor Gisborn's notice. These books are all perfect for his needs; the panic of the time period explained in such a way that it doesn't feel preachy. The causes of the hysteria explained in further depth from the other books like the one on Salem. Percival works harder now than he has had to his entire time during school. And he loves it, the chance to finally talk about something that has bothered him since childhood. He won't let a biased Professor take this away from him. Percival is right, and if he can't talk about the poor relations between No-Majs and Wizards in a class called No-Maj Studies, when can he?

He continues to work hard until the end of Sunday. Saturday night he didn't even sleep. He couldn't, not when his brain was focused on something as important as this.

Most just let him work away, but Picquery takes a moment to come see what he's doing. It makes Percival excited for a minute. Maybe she's just as interested in all of this as he is? But that hope gets quickly tossed away.

"I don't know what you're thinking, trying to argue with Professor Gisborn. I found his class last year to be incredibly informative." She leans against his table with her arms crossed. "Perhaps that is why you ended up in Wampus. You feel a need to pick unnecessary fights like this one. He raises great points in his class and if you would just listen, you could really learn a thing or two."

Percival clenches his jaw, taking some effort to ignore her. He expected better from Seraphina, someone as smart and well-read as she is, and yet she's still like the rest of them. Blind and unwilling to see the truth.

The next class finally comes around. Percival strides into class, armed with his notes and stack of books. His annotations and important page numbers are memorized and he's ready to argue any point
thrown against him.

As predicted, the discussion begins with Rappaports Law. Professor Gisborn apparently loves to discuss all the ways it keeps them separated. He lists them: no friends and no relationships; all of it is legally banned. "We cannot interact with No-Majs no matter the cost. It may seem harsh, but it is for the best. We must keep safe from their prejudices."

Percival cannot take any more of this. He raises his hand though he doesn't wait for the Professor to call on him. "But that prejudice only exists due to a lack of understanding. Most of them aren't even aware of our existence, and the fact that we are unknown to them only increases the fear they possess. Hiding just makes it worse over time."

The Professor looks at him sympathetically, as if he were peering down at some silly child. "You're young and innocent. You have yet to learn what happens when we don't hide, and that's ok. I might be jumping ahead in the course a bit, but I feel it must be brought up. The Salem incident is one such example. No-Majs' paranoia lead to them killing their own kind out of a desire to eradicate us."

As expected, Salem is brought up and Percival is prepared. "I've read plenty about Salem, I'm not stupid. If you want to tell me that James Steward is an outlier because he was around centuries ago, then I must say the same for Salem, which was only a few decades after his death. No-Majs have changed so much since then." He pulls out 'Observations on No-Majs' and turns it to a bookmarked page. "Over the last few years, No-Majs have grown less suspicious. Far fewer of them would accuse us of the 'Demonic' behavior they associated us with back in Salem's time. Perhaps now, they would even be opening to hearing about our world."

A slight boy with curly hair actually looks up at that. The rest of the class sits in an awkward silence, but this boy, while shy, seems to be receptive to his words. "I… think Percival has a good point there. I… don't think all No-Majs are bad either." Percival can barely believe what he's hearing. Someone finally agrees with him. He may not be reaching the Professor, but clearly some are open to hearing what he has to say, and that makes it worth the effort.

Professor Gisborn silences the student with a glare, the kid returning his gaze to his desk. "You don't know that for certain. Besides, even if there are fewer No-Majs like that, we still cannot risk our community opening itself to all. All it takes is one bad egg to destroy us, just as Bartholomew Barebone was close to doing years ago. If anything happened now, especially with the increased speed in which No-Majs can communicate with one another, we could have an even wider scale witch hunt on our hands!"

Percival's fist slams against the desk, his own irritation rising fast. "But you can't be sure of that either! How about we stop hiding from the problem like there is a ticking time bomb over our heads and instead work to fix it!"

"You are naïve! This law is keeping you safe! Why are you arguing with it!!!" The Professor's face is red as he shouts back.

Percival stands up harshly, his chair falling back with a slam. "Because the law is doing more harm than good!"

There is an eerie silence in the room after that. No one present dares to say anything until the Professor points a shaky hand at the door. "Mr. Graves, if you insist on disrupting my class, I must tell you to leave. Go until you have calmed yourself."

There is no more use wasting his time here. He's gotten his point out to those who want to hear him. Bags and books packed up, he storms out of the classroom.
Percival makes it down the hall, heading for… he isn't even sure. Normally he'd go to the library, but
he isn't in the mood to deal with Seraphina. No doubt she'd ask him about what happened and seek
to mock him for it. So instead he just aimlessly distances himself from the source of his anger.

Just as he's about to turn into a corridor, he can hear footsteps running against the stone floor, getting
closer. It's enough to make Percival stop and turn around. Sprinting towards him is that boy from
class, the only other one who had spoken up in his defense. As he nears, he slows down, clearly out
of breath, but Percival can make out a smile on his face.

"I wanted to thank you for everything you said in class." The kid huffs out, but his appreciation
seems honest. "I never expected anyone, especially not someone in your standing to ever defend No-
Majs."

So, this boy knows who he is? Despite that, Percival relaxes slightly and explains. "It's something
I'm quite passionate about actually. My family may go far back on my Dad's side, but my mom, she's
actually a half-blood. Which means I'm not actually a pureblood. Never been ashamed of it though. I
always have had far more respect for my No-Maj grandfather than I do my Wizard one."

The kid's eyes go wide at hearing him admit that. Come to think of it, over two years have gone by
in this school and Percival can't recall ever telling anyone that fact aloud. He isn't ashamed, far from
it, it had simply just never come up in conversation until now.

"I… um…. I'm actually a No-Maj born. Both parents." He stammers, clearly nervous saying it aloud.
"So it means a lot to me that someone would speak up for them. They aren't bad people."

"Really?" Percival asks, fascinated. "What's that like?" He's honestly curious because he can't recall
having spoken to someone like that before. Then again, since going to school, he actually hasn't
spoken to that many people. Already this conversation is more friendly than any he had with a peer
before.

"Well…" The kid's shyness from class returns and he looks down at his feet. "I didn't know anything
about magic at all until an odd letter came in the mail on my 11th birthday. My parents, well… they
still don't know. Their memories get altered a lot. They don't even know what I go to school for -
think it's some No-Maj academy instead." He lets out a tired sigh. "It's not that I don't want to tell
them, I just… I can't. It's against the law."

Percival takes in all this information. None of the books he read discussed anything like that. It's hard
for him to imagine what it's like being torn away from his parents like that, not being able to tell them
what was going on in his life. "That's terrible," He replies. And he means it.

The kid gives a sad smile, though his focus is still on the ground. "It's hard, but there really isn't
anything I can do about it, you know?"

In an uncharacteristic display of affection, Percival takes a step forward, moving closer to him. A
gentle hand reaches out and he places it on the kid's shoulder. "No one should have to live like that."

Finally, the boy's head raises up and he stares at Percival in disbelief. "I-If only that were true. I, um,
I'm Christopher by the way."

Percival removes his hand from Christopher's shoulder. For once, he smiles, feeling happy as he talks
to someone. "It's wonderful to meet you Christopher, I'm Percival."

Chapter End Notes
Come find me on tumblr at percegraves :)
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone's holiday season went well. I'm glad the stress is over and I finally have more time to focus on this fic, but it was inspirational for parts of this chapter. The next chapter is already completely plotted out so it should take less time to finish up.

This and the next chapter are a bit OC heavy, but I promise it will all make sense in time. For now I hope you enjoy the ride, aka this confusing time in a young Percival's life.

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As always dreamsandpockey (aka gravescredence) for betaing/putting up with me and this nerd every day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It isn't long before that boy, Christopher, becomes his closest acquaintance.

Despite the rocky start to his No-Maj studies class, Percival stays in spite of being given multiple opportunities to drop out. He won't let a terrible teacher succeed in ruining a subject he still finds interesting. Besides, it helps knowing there's a like-minded person in the class as well; makes him feel less singled out and gives him a bit of hope for the future.

The days the class gets particularly on his nerves, and Percival debates leaving in a dramatic fashion, he stops himself. Because if he leaves, then that means Christopher is on his own to face the wolves. He likes to think Christopher appreciates it.

One benefit to having the class however, is the moments when it ends. Professor Gisborn and the mindless students scurrying off, leaving Percival and Christopher to themselves, free to speak on whatever they want. The two often talk about whatever nonsense was brought up in class that day. Amongst themselves, they can criticize the teacher's arguments, point out whatever falsehoods were discussed.

They pretend to be good attentive students in class, learning to keep their stances on the issues to
themselves until after. Percival's opinions never change, but he gets quite skilled at hiding them, learning there is a right and wrong time to argue. It reminds him of the sneaking Momma and him would do when he was younger.

Christopher's company, though, keeps him sane. If he had to constantly suppress his logic he'd go crazy, and having an outlet to finally talk about No-Maj issues in a positive light makes him happy.

But even despite that, Percival honestly finds he just enjoys Christopher's company. Those moments when they walk out of No-Maj studies to wherever they are going next. Percival listens intently to everything Christopher has to offer; his perspective on the No-Maj world so utterly different to everything Percival had heard in the past. After all, until Christopher was 11, he was practically raised as a No-Maj.

It's honestly the first time Percival realizes he enjoys having conversations at school. He'd grown so used to shutting everyone out, feeling the rest of his peers had nothing to offer. Christopher though, despite being far from the best student, somehow became an essential part of his life at Ilvermorny. He's the first person Percival actually considers a friend.

He knows this, because he finds he wants Christopher's company beyond just the time between the end of class until when they turn into opposite hallways, taking them to their separate destinations.

The perfect opportunity arrives sooner than expected. A few weeks into the semester, Professor Gisborn tasks the class with a simple essay assignment. Well, normally it would be simple, but Percival knows if he puts his true feelings into the paper, he'd fail without a doubt. The idea strikes him that maybe Christopher and him can work together on it. Not to write the same paper of course, but they can bounce ideas back and forth, encourage each other so their papers can be at least passable.

As Percival does all his work in the library, it only makes sense to extend an invitation for Christopher to join him. With an unexpected amount of surprise, Christopher accepts.

The librarian, Miss Pendelwood, greets them as they enter. Ever since she helped him after class on the first day of No-Maj studies, Percival has grown to like her quite a lot. She's incredibly friendly and even offers Christopher an extra chair as they walk towards Percival's table.

Christopher seems nervous as they settle down next to each other.

"Relax. You look as if you've never come here before." Percival chuckles as he pulls out a few books from his bag.

"I… well, I came here once first year. But an upper year Horned Serpent glared at me and I never returned since." He looks around the room, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Are we allowed to even speak in here? Everyone is so quiet."

His caution only makes Percival lightheartedly laugh more. "Yes, we can talk. So long as we don't shout, I think we'll be fine."

He opens up the dreaded class textbook, 'Non Magical Folk and You', figuring the best way to write what Professor Gisborn wants them to say would be to pull examples straight from the book.

It sparks up one of their usual discussions, going through and laughing at how ridiculous the book is. Not to mention their mutual distaste for the topics they are required to write about.

Half way through a discussion on advancement in No-Maj technologies, they are interrupted by someone approaching the table. "Percival, you have company. What an interesting surprise."
Seraphina looks back and forth between the two. "And here I thought you were a loner."

Her words may be true, but right now, as she put it, he has ‘company’. And he would much prefer to give his company his undivided, uninterrupted attention. He gives Seraphina a forced polite smile and tells her, "I'm just particular about the company I keep."

She takes no offense at the comment and smirks, walking away. "Whatever you say Percival. Just don't let yourself become distracted, or you will never have a hope to pass me."

Christopher watches wide eyed as she leaves. "Was that Seraphina Picquery? The girl that every house chose?"

Percival gives a playful roll of his eyes. "Yes, she's here all the time, and that was actually her way of being friendly."

With her gone, they focus on their papers, continuing late into the night. Miss Pendelwood even comes by to tell them she's leaving for the night so they knew not to look for her if they needed any assistance. Fortunately, they had been able to help themselves for the remainder of their work and finish with no problem. Hours and hours pass, though it doesn't feel like it. Turns out, extended periods of time with Christopher simply fly by for Percival. They are finishing up their essays before he knows it, and he realizes he's never had this much... fun.

As they pack up for the night, an idea pops into his head. There's no reason why this has to be the only time they do this. They are in school, after all, and, while Percival doesn't need any help, he knows Christopher is not the best student on his own. Christopher hadn't been privileged enough to grow up with a magical family. He only hopes an invitation to help doesn't come across as insulting. And so he offers to tutor the other. An offer that confuses Christopher at first, but Percival assures him it's not an issue. It's the least he can do in exchange for all the stories and lessons on No-Maj culture Christopher has already shared. The explanation apparently works, because Christopher accepts, and they agree to meet regularly in the library.

Percival walks back to his dorm that night happier than he's been in a while. He expects to just calmly slip back and quietly sleep, but it turns out Orion has been up for quite a while as well. Orion looks up from his bed, his guinea pig nestled in his lap.

"Who are you and what have you done with Percival Graves?" The words are spoken seriously, making Percival very, very confused. But before he can ask about it, Orion cracks up laughing. "You're smiling. The Perce I know is grumpy all the time."

Percival scoffs, ignoring the nickname. "Am I not allowed to be happy?"

"Now I didn't say that. Whatever you're doing, keep at it. Smiling more will do you some good."

In spite of himself, Percival can't help but do just that. For once, Orion is actually right. Now, after spending all day with Christopher, he feels better than he has in a while. "Whatever you say."

Orion thankfully leaves him alone at that and Percival settles down. He rests his stack of books on his bedside desk, but he notices in the middle of the stack is a book he does not recognize. 'Fennywig’s Fables'. Percival doesn't check out fiction, preferring to stick to more educational texts.

He pulls it out from the stack and sticking out from the pages is a note. It has to be a mistake, someone must have gotten their books mixed up with his. Maybe Christopher left it... but why would Christopher be reading 'Fennywig’s Fables'? Percival knows he shouldn't be looking through stuff that isn't his, but maybe the note has the identity of whomever the book belongs to.
Carefully he unfolds it only to find that it's addressed to him?

'Mr. Graves

I have noticed you have a great interest in No-Majs and the politics behind their separation from the Wizarding World. I want to inform you that you are not alone in this. There are those out there who wish to tackle these issues as well. Before I tell you any more, however, I must let you know that this is to stay between us. Reply if you want to know more, slide a note into this book and leave it on your table in the library and I shall receive it. I want us to help each other out and I look forward to seeing your response.

-Signed an Interested Party

Next to the strange signature, is an even stranger symbol, a hastily scrawled triangle overtop a circle, a vertical line drawn through the middle.

He doesn’t recognize it and that only adds to the discomfort he feels looking at the message. Who had it been from? If it had been Christopher, then why the secrecy? If it had been someone from No-Maj studies, then why were they not more vocal in class? This had to be a prank. Someone trying to send him on a wild chase; trying to attack his strong beliefs by pretending to be an anonymous party. Percival won't fall for it. He'll return the book as per requested tomorrow, but he won't dignify it with a response.

For now, he just closes the book and lets himself drift to sleep.

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Christopher is grateful for the tutoring, Percival finds. The other boy's understanding of every subject increases and his grades improve. Still, Christopher won’t just sit by and accept his help and Percival finds that Christopher keeps trying to come up with something to give Percival in exchange. Of course Percival is content with just the company, but Christopher insists.

What he decides on is simple enough that Percival considers it a fair trade. Every so often after class or after tutoring, the other boy will drag Percival away from his books and they instead go off to explore the nooks and crannies of the castle, as well as the surrounding areas. Considering Christopher is a Thunderbird, his thirst for adventure not surprising.

Even though Percival ends up with less time on his own to study, he doesn't mind. Had he not been nudged, he would have found no reason to leave his usual haunts.

Christopher brings him over towards the Thunderbird dorms first, which are unlike anything he's ever seen. Rather than being within the main part of the castle like the other three houses, the Thunderbird dorms are towering treehouses woven into the forest just off campus. A suspended bridge links them to the rest of Ilvermorny.

While he may not be allowed into the common room or dorms themselves, it’s still a phenomenal experience to walk around the balconies outdoors. Not to mention, he does get to stick his head in a window or two. The wooden rooms look like hanging cabins and seem so welcoming. The closest comparison he can make is the cabin his gran and gramps lived in.

Christopher tells him what the typical Thunderbird is like, how they often go wandering into the
forest, trying to skate around the rules and guidelines put in place by the headmaster. While Percival supposes he can relate to some of that, he doubts he could put up with rambunctious kids wanting to run off getting into messes constantly. Percival is careful about where he bends the rules, and he is far too particular about his appearance to find much joy in forest hopping.

It's still nice to visit though.

As they go through, Percival compares and contrasts the Wampus dorms to Christopher's. Where the Thunderbird dorms are open and free, the Wampus dorms are sturdy and compressed. While you can see off into vast distances and feel the fresh air on your face here in the trees, the Wampus caverns are twisting and dark.

Of course, Christopher suggests that is the place they should go next.

He may not be able to take Christopher into the main areas, but the other is perfectly happy exploring the winding caves instead. Upon walking through one of the more natural, untouched caverns, Percival casts a simple 'Lumos' spell, brightening up the pitch black space.

Christopher's eyes go wide in amazement at the sight that illuminates before them. But rather than looking into the cavern, Percival's gaze is fixed on the other boy's wide smile. Percival finds it far more interesting than the cave formations.

They continue on like that for the rest of the semester, most of Percival's time spent with Christopher. It even becomes rare that a day goes by without them together. Their classes, even No-Maj studies, finish up with no problems.

Only when the holidays come around, does Percival truly realize how much he had grown to enjoy the other's company. The weeks away are the longest he's been separated from Christopher, and it's the first time he rather be around someone else when he's with his parents. Of course Dad and Momma are still wonderful, and he loves them dearly. But they aren't Christopher.

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Christmas comes and goes and Percival is quite glad to be returning to school. On the way back, he seeks out his friend on the bus. The two spark up a conversation easily, as if no time had come between them. Though, he doesn't recall Christopher's eyes being quite as fascinating as they are right now.

In their typical fashion, their conversation turns to discussing what the differences between No-Maj and Wizard Christmas are. What Percival finds especially interesting is, despite their lack of magic, the tales the No-Majs share are dripping in magic-based myth. If No-Maj parents would tell their children about a red-robed man flying around to deliver happiness, then surely they can't see magic as a wholly evil thing these days as they did in the past.

Overall, the holiday is surprisingly similar, despite the No-Maj version placing quite a lot of emphasis on a 'Jesus' character, the customs are the same. The idea of community coming together, eating a large meal, and even sharing presents.

"Speaking of which," Christopher states as they approach that subject, and he reaches into his bag and pulls out a wrapped box. "I got you something."
"Oh! You… you didn't have to." Percival stares at the box, a sudden feeling of guilt hitting him because for all his thoughts about the other boy over the break, he hadn't thought to get him anything. He accepts it though and starts unwrapping it.

Christopher smirks. "Hey, it's the least I can do. I was actually able to pass all my classes thanks to you, so you deserve it."

Percival gets the paper off the gift and pulls out a leather bound book, the words 'Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 1' are pressed into the front and the spine.

"Think of it as a reference book to the No-Maj world." Christopher explains as Percival starts flipping through the pages. "There are more books in the set, but I could only afford the one. Hey, maybe next year I can get you volume 2?"

Percival is speechless. This book is better than anything he could have asked for and the fact Christopher even thought to get him anything in the first place… He can't help but reach over and give Christopher a quick hug. He smells nice.

There's a light pat to his back, and he pulls himself off. "Sorry about that." He says feeling slightly embarrassed at his reaction, but that's how he reacted when his family gave him gifts, so Percival supposes it had just been a reflexive response.

"Don't worry about it, I'm just happy you like the gift."

"I don't have anything for you right now… but I'll figure something out." Percival says, holding the book tight.

Christopher shakes his head, "You don't have to. You've seriously spoiled me enough already."

Even so, Percival will find some way to repay him.

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The second semester of their third year begins.

No-Maj studies only ran the one semester, thankfully. Yet, Percival and Christopher wanted to continue to have a class together. They decide on Divination. It's not a class Percival particularly wants to take, but it's required some time before they graduate, and he figures it will be better with Christopher anyways.

Percival has never really been a fan of divination, or really anything that tells him how his life will go. After all, he has been aiming to fight against what his grandfather expects him to be his whole life. How is a crystal ball or tea leaves much different?

Or cards… as today is apparently a Tarot day.

Professor Weatherbee comes by each of their tables to do a reading. The class feels like it drags on forever, as the teacher can only read one student at a time. To make matters worse, Percival is one of the students that the professor gets to last.

At least this way he can listen in on Christopher's reading. Perhaps he shouldn't listen in, as he's sure
listening to someone have their future told is a breach of privacy. But he's bored and he doesn't exactly believe in this stuff in the first place.

He also doesn’t mind watching Christopher as the other listens intently to the professor explain the meanings as he turns over the cards. "The path you are presently on could lead you to a crossroads. A decision will have to be made, though it can break something currently very precious to you." The final card flipped over. "However, to protect what you have, your moral compass will be tested. Truly a difficult choice."

Christopher's expression flips from curiosity to worry, and Percival holds himself back from going up next to him to let him know it's all nonsense anyhow. But he doesn't have a chance, anyhow as Professor Weatherbee moves to sit at his desk, opposite Percival.

"Hello there. Sorry it took me so long to get to you. One of the ladies earlier had a very troubling reading. Anyways, let's begin."

Percival bites back a comment that nearly every reading with tarot is 'troubling' and just shuffles his deck, the cards rippling in his hands a few times. When he feels it’s adequately randomized, he places the deck down and slides three cards face down from the top. The three are placed in a row right next to one another in their appropriate positions.

Weatherbee explains the three will represent his path in life. The first being where he is, the second being the journey he will take, and the final will be the destination.

The first card is flipped over. The card is upside down; on it, a winged human steps into a pond. They would be looking back at him had their eyes not been closed. "Ah, Temperance Reversed. A common card I see in student readings. Here, in the present position, it means currently your life is out of balance. It could also imply you are prioritizing one class over another, or perhaps personal relationships are overshadowing your school work. Now this does not have to be a bad thing, it simply calls for some caution. I suggest you tread lightly or else the lack of balance could lead you in a poor direction."

And so the drivel begins. Already Percival stares at the card skeptically. His life right now feels perfectly fine. His school work has never given him any trouble and a family who loves him and a close friend. If anything, his life is more balanced than it ever has been. But he doesn't want to pull himself into an argument with yet another professor, so he just nods along.

The card in the middle is flipped over next. Eight golden cups stand in the foreground as a man turns away and walks into the distance. "Hm. Now this is interesting. Eight of Cups. Fitting it is in the 'journey' position, as this card often signifies reflection and change. However, it is not a particularly positive card. From this I can gather that the lack of balance in your life, if you chose to take the path you are on, will lead you through trials of disappointment. In the worst case, the imbalance will become too much for you to bare and you will want to shut yourself out from the world and walk away."

Percival's face remains neutral. None of this is a shock. Tarot is designed to scare the reader and make them reflect on their life. Practically every reading can be taken in such a negative fashion - as half the kids in the room look terrified from their own. Percival is just glad he knows better.

The final card is flipped, and Professor Weatherbee's eyes grow wide. "Oh… Oh dear." On the card is a twisted horned, winged creature with grotesque fangs. Unlike the beings in the first two cards, this one looks him right in the eyes, and while Percival may not believe in this mess, he feels uneasy. "Um, that is The Devil… in your destination position. Now, no card is inherently evil, but in your case, I can’t help but see it as a bad omen. This card often represents hopelessness, bondage, falling
into a deep pit of despair. It is deceptive though, often self-induced. I would interpret this, based on your overall reading to mean that the trials you face and want to walk away from lead you into the arms of the devil. It could be referring to an addiction or just a deep depression, or something else.”

Professor Weatherbee looks up at him, clearly worried. “I must beg you to be careful. This is not the path you have to take Percival. It is but one possibility. There will be bad in your life, but don't shut yourself out and be careful who you accept help from. The devil is not inevitable.”

Of course it isn't, Percival thinks, holding his tongue. Anything can turn out poorly in life. But Percival is smarter than that. He's always been careful. Besides, the present card was wrong, so why should the rest of the reading have any value. Still though, he cannot help but feel unsettled. At least with his reading over, so is the rest of the class.

Christopher runs to meet up with him as they walk from the room. "Well that wasn't very fun. You look like your reading went about as well as mine."

"Do you mean vague and foreboding?" Percival offers.

"Actually yeah, that is a good way to put it. Mine was about making a choice that will be hard and that could end badly. It would help if it told me what kind of choice and what it is I could maybe be losing. I don't exactly have much as is, so I can't afford to really lose anything." Christopher sighs, slumped over, as if he's pondering over his reading.

Percival shrugs. "Mine tried to tell me my life is 'unbalanced' or some other nonsense and I could end up going down a dark path. I don’t even think the first part is accurate." He reaches over to give Christopher a quick pat on the back. "Divination is extremely unreliable so I would not worry too much about it. The only reason they make us take it in the first place is to think about our future. Nothing is certain."

"Thanks, that makes me feel better."

"Personally, I tend to dislike anything that tries to tell me how my life will go." His nose crinkles at the thought. "Consequence of my Grandfather telling me to be an Auror, like my father, and his father, and his father before him… So on so forth."

"What would you like to be instead?" Christopher asks. It's a simple question, but Percival realizes, it's something he's never actually thought about. "I mean, with your talent and brain, you could probably be anything you wanted."

He's silent for a moment, trying to think of anything. While he may be smart, his interests don't exactly correspond to a job. The only thing even related to his No-Maj interests would be an Obliviator… or an Auror. Both of which run contrary to his beliefs. "I… um… I don't actually know."

His answer actually makes Christopher chuckle. "Well that makes two of us. I barely even know what jobs wizards have. My family wanted me to take over the shop when I grew up, but that whole plan got ruined when it turned out I was a wizard I suppose."

"Who needs legacy anyways. We're our own people and we've got years to figure out what we want to do with our lives. I don’t know what the future holds, no matter what divination tries to tell us, but we'll make our own choices and be happier for it." He turns to give Christopher a hopeful smile. As he looks at the other boy, he realizes he has a hard time imagining any future without him.
It takes a while, but Percival does come up with a way to repay Christopher for the book.

Percival may have tutored Christopher all last semester, and while he improved greatly over all, there are a few skills he knows the other needs more work with.

The subject that his abilities are the weakest in, happens to be Percival's specialty, *Dueling*. With the midterm Dueling tournament coming up, Percival supposes there is no better time to help him. He will make sure that Christopher at least gets past the first round.

Instead of the library as usual, they meet up in the Dueling rooms close to the Wampus dorms. As the tournament is a few weeks away, the room is empty aside from them.

Percival has them step onto the raised platform. The only way for him to really gauge what Christopher needs to work on is to have a practice duel. Normally it is frowned upon as unsupervised students could get out of hand fast. But Percival is confident enough in his skills that nothing will go wrong.

A few spells are exchanged, Percival responding with only 'Protego' as Christopher tries 'Stupify' and 'Expelliarmus' with no success. All the while, he watches carefully, noting every detail of Christopher's casting.

There are quite a lot of errors, from what he can see. Christopher is slow, his pronunciation slightly off, his stance off balance, and his wand movements sloppy. It's daunting to see actually how clumsy Christopher is, but Percival is determined nonetheless.

Best to start with the basics. Simply describing what to do and showing him the motions won't be enough. Percival remembers the way his Dad taught him though, and he thinks, maybe that can work for Christopher too. He shares the idea, and Christopher figures it's worth a shot.

So Percival moves to stand right behind Christopher, wand hand reaching around him to place it atop Christopher's own. Slowly, he guides their hands through the 'Stupify' wand motion, Percival leaning into the other to make sure he can get this right. For some reason, his palm feels sweaty, and though it's a spell he's known since he was nine, he finds himself distracted, his focus slipping.

He wants to press his face into the crook of Christopher's neck and inhale. He wants to thread his fingers into Christopher's hair and stroke what he imagines to be soft locks. He wants to pull his arms tight around Christopher and never let go.

But he doesn't do any of that. No, he just stands there, frozen, hand holding his and Christopher's still and unmoving. His head is swimming though, all these thoughts so unlike anything he's ever felt before.

"Percival? Everything alright?"

Christopher's voice snaps him out of his odd trance and he lets go of the other's hand, finally taking a step back. "Huh? I... I'm fine."

Christopher scratches his head, laughing nervously. "Well you seem kind of off today. It's ok though. I know I'm bad."

"You aren't bad. You just lack proper training." Since when did his mouth start feeling so dry?
"Seriously. You don't have to work so hard to help me. We should take a break. You look like you need it."

Percival reaches up and touches his own face. Huh, he does feel a bit warm. Perhaps he is coming down with something after all. "Y-yeah. Alright. I'll see you later."

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The following nights, Percival has a hard time sleeping.

He tries, slips into his bed at reasonable hours, but even then his brain won't stop thinking. To make matters worse it isn't even about an academic subject, something he could at least feel productive thinking about. No. Percival's only thoughts late into the nights are increasingly about Christopher.

The first few nights, it's simple, just the events of the day spent with the other boy replaying through his head. Everything Christopher said, every expression he made, all of it, cataloged in Percy's mind. It's all pleasant and he enjoys remembering.

Then it becomes a bit more complicated. Remembering turns into reflection and each action Christopher did, or Percival did to the other is questioned. Thoughts like 'Why did he laugh when I said this?' or 'Was it odd when I patted him on the back?' fill the time he should be sleeping.

Questions lead to other questions and it gets worse over time. Percival realizes how much he likes touching him. Strange, as he won't let anyone who isn't his parents even come close, but any time he even so much as accidentally brushes against the other, he feels ecstatic. Why? He asks himself over and over again. Why does he react that way to him but not towards anyone else? Why is Christopher so distinct? Why does Christopher smell so pleasing? Why does he even notice how Christopher smells?

It's all driving him insane.

The worst night comes after a particularly cold February day. Christopher had expressed how chilly he was and Percival, being the good friend he was, offered him his coat and scarf. The other boy wore them for hours but insisted on returning them before Percival walked back to his room. That night, all he can think about is how well his jacket suited Christopher. The scarf that had rested against the other's neck, bunched up in Percival's hands as he holds it to his face, breathing in what scent had clung to the cloth.

That night he stops questioning, and instead imagines. He doesn't know where the thought comes from. Percival has never been a particularly creative person, but as he lays there on his bed, scarf pressed into his face, the idea of the scarf back around Christopher's neck crosses his mind. Except this time, Percival takes the ends in his hands and slowly pulls the other boy in. He nears, getting closer and closer… until his lips press against Christopher's.

Instantly, he shoots up out of bed, pacing around, breathing heavily, his heart pounding harder in his chest than it ever had.

No no no, this couldn't be happening. This overcomplicates everything, and he tries to find some reason to disprove the only logical explanation that comes through his head. But no matter how hard he tries, he realizes he has to accept it.
He's completely infatuated with Christopher.

It's the only thing that makes sense. The knot in his stomach when he's in the same room as the other. His constant smiling when thinking of him.

Percival hopes that pinpointing how he feels and the causes of it will make the symptoms fade away. Maybe he can finally get a good night's rest, then. Maybe he can go a day without feeling the confusing combination of ill, blissful, and anxious. Unfortunately, the reverse happens and every emotion he has becomes magnified.

Frankly, he finds himself pathetic

He wishes he could focus on more important things but the days are spent staring at Christopher; fighting the urge to reach out and touch him, offering to let the other borrow his clothes more often.

The nights are spent imagining everything that could be. Sometimes he lays in bed and holds onto his extra pillow tightly, just pretending it's him. He imagines kissing him and simply being in his presence without feeling like he's hiding something.

Percival acts as if nothing has changed on the surface, but internally he's screaming out. He knows he should say something because pressing these feelings down is doing him no good. After all, what if Christopher feels the same? However, he knows it's a question he can't just ask. He has to be certain of all possible outcomes or else he risks messing everything up. As Christopher is his only friend, there is far too much on the line to rush into anything.

Its terrifying, these feelings. He isn't used to letting emotions and desires take up such a large chunk of his being. Fighting them doesn't work; no matter how hard he tries they won't vanish.

For the rest of their third year, it’s all he can think about. Summer approaches fast and, while Percival dreads the separation, part of him hopes it will dull the side of him that needs the other. Maybe all he needs is a few months away, to clear his head before it overtakes him further.

It turns out the distance between them is not enough to help. If anything, his heart just aches every day they are apart. He tries to distract himself, spend some quality time with his family, but it’s nearly impossible to focus as he constantly thinks about someone who isn't there. Every moment spent wondering what Christopher is doing. If he could contact him, maybe it would be more manageable, but it turns out even sending an Owl to a No-Maj home is illegal.

Of course Momma notices he isn't acting quite himself recently. But even when she asks he doesn't tell her what is going on, brushing her off, informing her everything is fine. He knows she cares, but this is something he must work through on his own. Besides, he hasn't admitted his emotions on this matter out loud. It's something he doesn't plan on doing until absolutely necessary because if he opens up to anyone, there's no turning back. Seeking help and expressing how he feels will set in motion a series of events he will have little control over.

So he uses the time at home to get his thoughts in order, analyzing over every little detail in hopes of discovering a way to proceed. If this infatuation isn't going away, then he must do something about it. He does realize that perhaps, it isn't such a bad thing. Christopher is, well, he's wonderful. He's a piece Percival didn't realize he had been missing until they met. He's kind and thoughtful and spontaneous, all things he knows himself not to be. Even so, they get along perfectly and they bring out the best in each other. Without a single doubt in his mind, he knows Christopher to be his perfect match.

All that remains is finding an opportunity to tell him.
Percival's fourth year begins, but school itself becomes secondary.

In classes he just goes through the motions, doing the work with no issue, but his head is elsewhere. The only saving grace he has this semester is he doesn't share a single class with Christopher. While it's definitely disappointing, he knows any class they would have together would be completely wasted on Percival. At least this way he can force himself to try and pay attention.

He still sees Christopher every day regardless, the two continuing their routine of meeting in the library. It had long since become a daily occurrence when they're at school.

Even with the symptoms of his infatuation flaring up any time he's around the other boy, Percival outwardly appears normal. Or at least he thinks he does. If he appears off in any way, Christopher doesn't make any mention of it. Though he does catch Picquery looking at him oddly every now and then.

There is always a possibility of Christopher knowing exactly how Percival feels and he's simply waiting for Percival to work up the courage to say something. But equally likely is Christopher being completely oblivious. No signs point to one way or another and it does not make anything easier. If he just had an inkling of what went through Christopher's head when they are together, he could better figure out how to approach him with his feelings.

As it stands, months go by with Percival trying his hardest to find a moment to tell him. But no such chance arises. Either they are too focused on a topic that has nothing to do with personal emotions, or Percival's anxiety over the whole situation causes him to miss what few slivers of opportunity he has.

It’s incredibly frustrating that no progress has been made by the time the Hallow’s Eve celebrations roll around.

No different from every other year, every student and staff member gather in the main hall for a festive feast. A huge room is split into four, each corner dedicated to a specific house. So despite his desire to go over to the Thunderbird tables, he is stuck sitting next to Orion and Luciana in the Wampus section.

Carved Pumpkins float above each table, some students dressed in over the top outfits. A few of the younger students bob for apples while the older students sit at the tables eating. The food is all right, he supposes, all fresh from the month of harvest. Lots of corn, lots of pumpkin. Nothing too special.

He tries to remain interested in Orion's conversation instead of turning his head to stare over at the Thunderbirds in hopes of sneaking a glance at Christopher. Amazingly, he succeeds. Orion had just finished commenting on every bit of decoration, talking about how much better it was than the previous year, before he shifts to something that catches Percival's attention.

Orion puts down the ear of corn he had been nibbling on and says, "Now, this All Hallow’s Eve Fest is great and all, but you know what I can't wait for?" He gives a short dramatic pause. "The Wintertide Gala. I'm so glad we're old enough to go this year."

Several of the kids perk up at hearing that, Percival included. The Wintertide Gala is an annual event put on by Ilvermorny, only for fourth years and up. It’s something his parents have told him about many times, but he's never given much thought to.
"Ah, I know!" Luciana exclaims excitedly. "I already have a perfect dress picked out. Do you know who you are taking yet Orion?"

Orion grins at her. "Why, I will finally be asking out my favorite Pukwudgie, the light in my life, Abigail."

It was a Wintertide Gala tradition. Students asked other eligible students to accompany them, often seen as a romantic gesture. It is why the event comes up around his parents often, as according to them, it was where they fell in lo-

Suddenly, Percival knows what he needs to do. The answer to the dilemma he's been suffering from for months is right in front of him. All he needs to do is to ask Christopher to the Gala. It's a subject that won't feel too out of place as it is a large event coming up. And if Christopher tells him no, it will be alright. It won't be as if he's rejecting Percival himself, but instead, an invitation. If Christopher says yes, then, well Percival might have the best night of his life.

So while the rest of his house gossips over who is asking who, Percival tunes all of them out, planning on the perfect time to extend his own invitation to the boy he adores.

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A few days pass by after the Halloween Feast.

Every single moment of Percival’s time since then has been spent plotting, working on how and when to ask Christopher. Finally, he finds a good opportunity.

That Friday he and Christopher meet after class, as usual, in the library. It's a weekend so the other is less stressed, smiling as he looks forward to the next few days off. With Christopher in such a good mood and relaxed Percival knows that night will be his best chance.

They sit in the library, discussing whatever book they currently are flipping through. Miss Pendelwood had come by earlier and had given a few recommendations for reading material. The entire time, Percival can't calm down, his stomach churning. He's hyper conscious of the space between them.

It's late into the night when Christopher suggests for them to pack up. His nerves flare up and all he can focus on is the conversation he knows he needs to have in a few minutes. Those thoughts taking precedence over all else. Remembering his belongings being one of those things.

Percival offers to walk Christopher home. The night is cold after all. November hit and the temperature dropped, and some company would help make the walk outside to the Thunderbird dorms more manageable. It's a good excuse he thinks, and it even makes sense to offer Christopher his jacket.

They continue whatever discussion they were having in the library, Percival only half paying attention, until they get half way across the bridge to the Thunderbird dorms. Christopher stops, turning around.

"Alright. Thanks for keeping me company, and for the jacket, as always. You don't have to do that you know."
"I'd rather me be cold than you, besides I think I handle the temperature better."

Rolling his eyes with a chuckle, Christopher says "Whatever you say. Anyways, goodnight. I'll get your coat back to you tomorrow." And he starts to step away.

Percival takes a quick, deep breath, forcing himself to relax even though his heart is pounding. "Wait… There's… um… something I want to ask you before you go."

Christopher stops and looks over to Percival curiously. "Hm? What is it?" He flashes that smile Percival has grown to adore, and it's suddenly even more difficult for Percival to focus.

Nervously he bites his lip before taking a small step closer. Even if they are out in the open, this is a private moment.

"I-I…" He swallows, fighting down the lump in his throat. It's not like him to be so timid. So he closes his eyes and wills the words out. "I was wondering if you… um… if you wanted to go to the Wintertide Gala with me."

There.

It is out in the open now. Only when he's finished talking does he crack his eyes open to gauge Christopher's reaction.

Christopher seems amused? The way he looks at Percival is as if he had done anything else besides just ask a serious question. "I didn't think you'd be the sort of person to go to that. Do you have a date?"

That confuses Percival greatly. What was Christopher talking about? Had he not been clear? "N-no. I was hoping you'd go with me."

Now Christopher's expression falls, his smile twisting into his own confusion. "It is rather strange to go to the Gala without a date from what I've heard. I mean, I'm sure there are plenty of girls who would say yes if you asked. But me, it'll be harder for-"

"No! That isn't-" Percival takes a step back, rubbing his face. Getting worked up will not help anything. He needs to calm down, because clearly there is some miscommunication here and he just needs to be more precise. "I want to go to the Gala with you. There I want to dance with you, and only you. Christopher, I'm asking if you will be my date. I… I've wanted this for a while now."

There's a long pause. Percival stares at Christopher, hopeful and pleading.

Instead of an answer however, Christopher's head tilts as he asks, "What are you talking about? We're both boys."

"Your point?" Percival fails to see how Christopher's question has anything to do with the situation at hand.

Christopher takes a step backwards at that, his lip curling unpleasantly. Percival has only seen him look this distressed after a few of their more abhorrent No-Maj Studies classes, and he can't understand why this invitation is making him react in such a way. "My point? Percival… it's wrong… it's… it's unnatural."

"Unnatural?" Percival hasn't been this confused in years. "We're wizards, what do you mean it's unnatural?"
That is apparently the wrong thing to say as Christopher just steps back further. It hurts as Percival recognizes any chance of Christopher going to the dance with him are quickly fading. But even so, now he just wishes for Christopher to stop looking at him like he's something to be feared. Maybe he just needs to explain. "Christopher, that's just how I feel. It's ok if… if you don't feel the same. I just hoped…" He trails off, his throat clenching tight. His words only seem to make Christopher more horrified. Percival gasps to swallow down what he's feeling right now. "I'm sorry. Just pretend I never said anything."

Percival risks another step forward, but the closer Percival comes, the faster Christopher backs away. "Leave me alone." Christopher barks out as he hurriedly strips out of the jacket Percival let him borrow. "Just… just go away!"

It makes Percival freeze. "We…we're still friends, right?" Percival tries, begging, hoping. Hoping for anything positive in response because right now his heart is breaking and he needs something to hold onto.

"Stay away from me." Christopher sneers coldly and throws Percival's jacket in his direction. It lands on the icy stone. "I don't want to see you again."

With that, Christopher takes off running towards the treehouses.

Percival stares at the empty space where Christopher had just been. The frosty air sinks into his skin, but Percival isn't even sure he can feel it. He doesn't know what just happened. Everything collapsed in front of him before he could stop it. He thought he had all possibilities figured out, the worst of which being, Christopher would say no. That much he was prepared for, but he at least envisioned they'd continue as they had been.

But that isn't what happened. No, Christopher just cut all ties with him.

Inside, Percival feels empty. Numb. His mind tries to make sense of anything, reaching for some explanation, but it isn't happening.

Percival forgets to pick up his jacket and he turns back to the castle. His feet feel heavy as they drag him back inside the main building. As soon as the bite of the cold outside air against him is gone, he leans against a stone wall. Heavy breaths escape him. He's unsure how long he stands there in the entry hall, the world around him tilting. Nothing feels real. He's dizzy and nauseous and he can't take another step or he'll collapse.

What's going on? This wasn't how it was supposed to go, this doesn't make sense, nothing makes sense...

He shrinks in on himself and slides down the wall slowly until he's sitting on the ground, curled up and shaking. The world outside forgotten, and he just drowns in his own despair.

----

"Percival?"

He hears his name, but he's too detached to recognize the source. Whatever is calling his name is ignored. At the moment, he tries to pretend he doesn't exist. The only thing he wants is to go back in time and stop himself before he ruined everything.
"Percival…" The voice repeats.

There's a hand on his arm, gently shaking him and the connection makes his head snap up to look at the source. It's Miss Pendelwood.

"I meant to catch you earlier. You left some things in the library." She reaches into her own bag and pulls out a few books and his...wand? How could he have forgotten that? He doesn't feel like himself anymore. Actually, he doesn’t really feel anything. "I figured you would want them back."

With a cautious, shaky hand, he takes his wand back and stares at it with a vacant expression.

"Percival are you alright?"

Her voice is soothing and he opens his mouth trying to respond with a simple yes, but the words don't come out, his throat painfully tight.

"Come on, you must be freezing." He barely registers it as she gently lifts him up, a protective arm on his back, as she leads him through the hallways. He doesn't remember the trip, just the fact that soon they are back in the library.

She settles him down in a smaller room he doesn't recognize, her office she explains. All Percival does is hunch over in a cushioned chair, blankly gazing at the desk in front of him. A steaming cup is placed on the desk. Hot cocoa based on the color and smell. Miss Pendelwood encourages him to take a sip, and so he does. The warm liquid soothing his throat slightly.

"Why were you sitting in the hallway Percival?" She asks him, sounding concerned.

All he can offer is an empty shrug. He does speak though, his voice quiet and mumbled as he responds. "I… I don't know."

She raises an eyebrow at that. "Now surely there must have been something."

It's true though. He doesn't know what happened. Of course he can recall the series of events that lead to this point, but absolutely none of it makes sense to him so how can he even begin to explain to her? Instead of try, he swallows down another sip of cocoa before asking a question of his own.

"Miss Pendelwood, is it unnatural for a boy to ask another boy to a dance?"

At that, she gives a sad smile, reaching over to put a comforting hand on his. "No Percival. It isn't. That is just a No-Maj superstition."

"Oh…" He says, taking the information in, ruminating on it, trying to fit this missing puzzle piece.

Christopher is a No-Maj born, raised with their belief systems and everything. While he had always assumed Christopher had melded well with the wizarding community, perhaps he had been wrong all along.

If he had been wrong about that, then what else has he been wrong about this whole time? What if Professor Gisborn had been right? What if Seraphina had been right? What if Grandpa Graves had been right all these years? What if Percival had been so blinded by his love for his Momma and by extension Christopher that he had been twisting all the details in his head?

Maybe No-Maj and Wizard communities shouldn't be blended. Not if No-Maj's held such nonsense beliefs that another boy can't dance with another. For most of his life, he thought it had been the Wizard's separation from No-Majs that had caused him his greatest frustration. But he's now experienced the combination of a Wizard and No-Majs background, and the result is him feeling
more broken than he's ever felt before.

Fortunately, Miss Pendelwood doesn't pry further. She lets him take his time drinking the cocoa, and once he's finished, offers to walk him back to his dorm. As Percival doesn't trust his own legs tonight, he lets her. Her arm over his shoulder as she nudges him through the halls offers him some comfort in a way that reminds him of his mother.

When they reach the common room, she parts from him. "Goodnight Percival. If you ever need anyone to talk to, you know where to find me." And with that, she waves goodbye.

Once she's gone, Percival manages to stumble over to his room. Orion is, thankfully, already fast asleep. Percival collapses on his bed, curling into a ball as he settles down. His face feels wet and Percival wipes his cheeks. When did he start crying?

That is his last thought before he drifts off into the least restful sleep he's ever had.

Chapter End Notes

Please feel free to come bug me on tumblr at percegraves. I love talking about anything Percy related and I promise I don't bite :0
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

As promised, here's chapter 4, a bit earlier than normal. Originally this was a part of last chapter, but as you can see, things got out of hand. Percy's schoolboy drama is important though. So, here we have Percival being depressed, learning a lot about himself, and making poor life choices. I hope you enjoy!

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My Percy partner in crime (and beta/co-plotter) dreamsandpocky (aka gravescredence)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Percival doesn't leave his bed for days.

What reason is there to? It's a weekend so there's no class. He doesn't need to study. His only friend hates him now. Honestly, his life feels so empty and devoid of reason that lying in bed is the only thing that makes sense. Christopher had become such a huge part of his daily routine, had been the focus of nearly all his thoughts for over half a year. With Christopher rejecting him so thoroughly, Percival is left in shredded pieces.

Why did he have to go ruin everything with that one stupid question?

His back is turned away from his roommate's bed and the door, so the only thing he has to stare at is the stone wall. It’s better this way. This way he can at least pretend the world around him is as blank and empty as he is.

All he wants to do is sleep.

Sometimes when his eyes crack open, he can almost fool himself into thinking everything that happened with Christopher was a dream. For a few brief moments he lies awake, ignorant of the reality of the situation. But inevitably, every time, he comes to his senses and he crashes back down hard.

On occasion, his thoughts are especially cruel, and he imagines what he could be doing instead. How he could be laughing and smiling along with Christopher as they flip through a book together. How
they could be running around the castle in search of someplace not yet explored or, in some perfect universe, how he could be pressed against the other, brushing a loose hair out of his face before they share a kiss.

His eyes are wet after entertaining those thoughts.

He’d been so caught up in learning the flaws of the wizarding community, blinded by his feelings, that he had failed to notice the faults concerning No-Majs.

Why did he have to fall for a stupid No-Maj born anyways?

He had been doing just fine before the other wormed his way into Percival's life. Having no friends had been better than having his only one torn from his life. Why had he even thought it was good idea to lower his walls and let someone in close? He'd never have been hurt like this if had just continued to shut everyone out.

And so Percival continues on like so, cycling between sleep and deep painful reflection. He doesn’t even move much, just faces the wall. Parts of his body cramp from lack of use, but he's too mentally exhausted to do anything about it.

He can't tell how much time passes. There are no windows here to let the sun in, the only light being enchanted candles flickering. Nor is he aware how many hours are spent sleeping versus staring at the wall.

Does it really matter though? He's not missing anything. His whole reason for getting out of bed is gone. His heart is broken, and the belief system that has driven him since he was seven is falling apart.

So, again, he just closes his eyes and shuts himself down.

-

"Perce?" His eyes crack open at hearing the sound. Orion. "You're still in bed? I would have thought you’d be in the library or something at this hour."

Percival doesn't respond, just tries to fall back asleep before he gets dragged into a conversation he doesn't want to have. He's not in the mood to be prodded and interrogated.

"Actually, have you even moved? You were laying like that when I got up this morning… and yesterday morning… Usually you're awake before me." Orion starts to sound concerned, but still Percival doesn't stir. If he pretends the outside world doesn't exist, then maybe Orion will leave him alone.

No such luck, as he hears footsteps approach his bed. A hand touches his shoulders and he can't help but flinch. No, he doesn't want to be touched, doesn't want any contact.

"Perce, come on, get up. It's six o'clock. On Sunday. If you continue like this you'll ruin your sleep schedule for the school week."

Percival just attempts to shrug him off. "I don't feel well." He rasps out trying to just get Orion to stop talking to him. His throat hurts.

"Do you need to go to the hospital wing?" Orion asks, instead of moving away. "I can help you over there if you're sick."

Shaking his head, still not looking at his roommate, he murmurs, "Please just leave me alone."

Orion sighs. "Alright fine. If that's what you want." Percival hears some shuffling around from behind him and then the door shuts, the silence returning to the room. It's better this way.

-

Percival misses class. Not that he realizes it until later.

A knock on the door wakes him from whatever sleep or trance he had fallen into. Strange. Orion wouldn't knock. He doesn't answer, doesn't respond in any way, but still he hears the door creak open.

"H-hello?" A feminine voice asks hesitantly. It takes Percival a moment to recognize it without seeing her face, but eventually it clicks… Luciana. What is she doing here? "You didn't come to class today."

He gives a slight shrug in response, barely moving at all.

"That isn't like you. Orion told me you weren't feeling well so I brought you my notes. Just in case, since finals are coming up in a few weeks. I don't want you to get behind. Not that you would... but I just want to help any way I can."

Another shrug. Class doesn't matter. Not when he's so far ahead of everyone else. Although, recently with so much of his attention being devoted to Christopher these last months, he hadn't been quite as far ahead as he had been previously. With Christopher gone, it looks as if he'll get all his study time back.

It should be a comfort, but the thought is just another blow to his chest.

"Just put them on the desk…” He mumbles, reaching his hand up gesturing towards the desk. It's probably the most he's moved in days.

He hears her awkwardly come in, and then head back towards the door. "If there's anything I can-"

"Just go away." He interrupts and he makes out the sound of her scurrying away.

-

More time goes by.

Percival’s stomach growls, but at the same time, it's so clenched that the thought of eating makes him sick. When had he even last eaten? He doesn't even know that time it is, the hours have all run together.

-

A loud knock on the door makes his head jerk up to stare at the offender. Who the hell would do that when someone is-

Orion stands in the doorway holding a hot plate of food. He gives a small wave before walking over and putting it down on his bedside desk.

"I'm not hungry..."

Orion sighs. "Come on Perce, you've been here for three days. I don't know what's wrong, if you're
sick or I dunno." He shrugs. "Either way, you have to eat."

Percival just glares at him, body twisting around for the first time in days.

"Ok. Fine, I get it. I'll leave you alone since you insist on being such a hermit." He says and walks out.

When the other is gone, his stomach growls again. Clearly the smell of food causing him to react. Whereas Percival just wants to roll over and sleep, his baser instincts get the better of him. He gets his fingers on the plate of food, drags it close, and scarfs it down faster than any meal he's had in his life.

Not too much later, he slumps back over asleep.

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The next time he's woken up, is an extremely unpleasant experience.

There are hands around his wrists, yanking him and dragging him off the bed until he falls to the floor. Percival flails and kicks, but he's too out of it to even know if his blows land. Only when he's calmed down a bit does he realize this is his first time out of bed in three… (four?) days.

"Sorry to do that to you, Perce but someone had to do something." Orion smirks down at him, before pinching his nose. "Also, just so you know, you smell awful. Please go take a bath. And once you get done with that, I'm making sure Luciana drags your butt to class."

Percival's brow furrows and he stares up at his roommate with a piercing glare, but the other smiles and he knows there's no way Orion is letting him go back to bed. Even if he wanted to fight him, Orion is stronger than he is. If he had his wand, then Percival probably could overpower him, but his treasured possession is several feet away on his desk collecting dust…

Ok, maybe Orion is right.

After a deep breath, Percival tries to stand up, though it's more difficult than expected, his legs shaky from disuse. Orion helps him up though, making sure he can stay on his feet before stepping back.

"Thanks…" He murmurs to Orion. His roommate still remains close as he goes to grab his things, Percival unsteadily walking between his desk and drawers to pull out clean clothes, his wand, and whatever else he needs for the day. It's only until he finally heads out of the room that Orion gives him some space.

He makes it to the washroom just fine without Orion's help.

The first thing he does is look at himself in a mirror. It's unnerving because he can barely believe this thing looking back is him. It… he… looks awful. His hair is in complete disarray, his eyes are sunken in, red and puffy, and his usually perfect posture is slumped over and crooked. He wants to scream, but just like his legs, his vocal cords are weak from the lack of any use.

How could he ever have gotten to this state?

How could he ever let that… that backstabber get close enough to do this to him? Were all No-Maj
raised people like this? Are they all so terrible? His jaw clenches. No. He can’t start thinking like his Grandpa. Christopher is just one out of millions.

Shaking his head, he closes his eyes, and swallows his feelings down as best he can. He's better than this and it's about time he act like it.

He gets cleaned up and after a long bath, he finally feels a smidge more himself. As he makes his way to the common room he's immaculately dressed as he should be, every hair in the right place and he stands straight and tall.

When he gets there, Luciana pops her head up, smiling at him widely. "You look like you are feeling better."

Percival barely acknowledges her, still not caring to talk to anyone. She isn't his friend. No one is. His only friend abandoned him and he's not keen on gaining more any time soon. Even so, she follows close behind him and they make their way to class.

He's thankful he's never been known for being social. Luciana might be trying to talk to him more than usual, but everyone else just lets him be. It lets him fade back into the background of his class as if nothing happened. And that’s how he plans on putting this whole mess behind him, pretend it never happened. Without the source of his problems in any class, he can continue on as if he never met him.

----

That night, Percival returns to the library, trying to get back on a routine, return to normalcy before he slips back down any further.

Miss Pendelwood greets him as he enters. "Hello Percival, how are you feeling?"

Unlike everyone else he’s been around lately, he's comforted by her presence. Rather than ignore her or ask her to leave him alone, instead, he gives her a small, tired smile. "I've been better, but thank you for asking."

She nods. "Everything will get better in time. Trust me." And she lets him be as he makes his way to his usual table.

There are a few books stacked on the table, ones still there from when he was last here with Christopher. A small thing, but it hurts none the less. Their last bits of conversation threaten to creep up to the surface. All of it much clearer in his memory here than it was when he was in bed.

Sighing, he tries his best to ignore those thoughts, and he takes his seat. He had nearly two and a half years here without the other boy, he can make do.

He reaches for one of the No-Maj books Miss Pendelwood suggested. With his ideals as messed up as they are, he needs to research, clear headed, without influence from his damn emotions.

Right as he cracks open a book, he hears a voice. "You look terrible." Looking up, he sees Seraphina judging him.

Considering how he had looked this morning, and how he had felt over the weekend, he can't deny
it. Frowning, he responds, "I haven't felt well these last few days."

She hums, pondering his answer. "Well that explains why you haven't been here since Friday. No matter. Anyways, I hope you are feeling better now. It would be a shame to be sick before the big dance. I assume you are going?"

And so begins a conversation he doesn't want to have. Still, Seraphina isn't most other people and she at least deserves a response. "I don't think so… not anymore."

"Ah, I would have guessed you were going with that Christopher boy."

It stings, both the verbal reminder, and the idea that someone outside of himself imagined that very same situation. Things that could have been and never will be. But he must learn to accept the reality of the situation and detach himself before he lets it control him like that again. "So did I… things change I suppose."

Somehow, his answer seems to surprise Seraphina slightly, but she doesn't let it show for long. "No matter then. It's most likely for the best anyhow. Relationships are a distraction."

She's probably right. He nods as he thinks over it. With Christopher out of the picture, he can finally get back to the things that matter to him. He can focus in on what is actually important without anyone holding him back. Why should he waste his time distracted by others?

Seraphina walks away not long after, and Percival lets himself fade into the texts. Finally he feels himself relax as his brain for the first time in months thinks about facts and figures and theories instead of his personal life. He's missed this, and now more than ever, he needs the escapism.

He finishes up the section of 'No-Maj Law and Justice' and decides to reach for another book.

When he sees the title, he startles slightly. 'Fennywig’s Fables'

The last time he had seen this book had been over a year ago, back before he had fallen deeply into the mess with Christopher. And just like last time, he sees another slip of paper wedged in between the pages. He shouldn't… but his curiosity gets the better of him. Pulling the paper out, he reads yet another note addressed to him.

Mr. Graves

_ I'm sorry you had to find out in a very difficult way that No-Maj culture can be cruel. I hope this does not sway you from our cause however. No-Majs are misguided, this is true, but they just need a gentle hand to push them in the right direction. This is what those such as myself believe. I realize you never responded to my first note. You have every right to be suspicious, but let me assure you, my intentions are pure. Once more, if you are interested, simply slip a note into this book and return it where you found it. _

-Signed an interested party and an ally

Again, the same symbol rests next to the signature in thick black ink.

Percival grows angry as he reads this one, his jaw clenching tight. What? Is someone stalking him? Has someone turned him into their own personal pet project to find him and mock him when he's down? It's cruel. Percival balls up the paper and with a quick wave of his wand and a mutter of the word 'Incendio', the paper bursts into flames.
As the days pass and Percival tries earnestly to move on, he comes to the conclusion he needs to reorganize his life.

After a year and a half of friendship, the other boy had seeped into nearly every aspect of his reality. No matter how much he wants to pretend the other never existed, it’s next to impossible when everywhere he turns, he’s faced with another reminder.

Especially as the end of the semester nears, and thus discussions about the Wintertide Gala become more and more frequent. When people in his classes aren’t talking about the approaching finals, they laugh and gossip over Gala news such as who is taking who, and what they will be wearing. In any other situation Percival would easily tune out such inane talk but, in his current state, all it makes him think about is how differently he could be feeling right now.

So he needs to cut anything that reminds him of the other out. First he moves tables in the library, something that shocks both Seraphina and Miss Pendelwood, taking a table at the opposite end of the room. Then he pushes the furniture in his dorm around, making sure at least his side of the room is different from how it had been when he was moping.

As he does this, he starts going through his notebooks, trying to erase any possible mention of his problem. He goes through at least ten separate notebooks, editing and deleting large chunks at a time. But as he grabs an eleventh book, he realizes, this is not actually his.

Rather than the leather-bound journals he carries, this one is much more simple. At first he wonders if any of Orion’s things got mixed up with his own, but then he remembers… Luciana. That's right, she had offered to share her notes with him.

Well it's not like he really needs them, he thinks as he flips through the pages. He'd already jotted down his feelings on this subject a year ago. Oh well. It had been nice of her to try to help he supposes. Rather than hold on to something he doesn't need, he should at least be polite and return it.

Journal in hand, he leaves his room and goes to try and find her.

She's sitting on a couch in the common room, relaxed, idly chatting with a few other Wampus house members, ones that Percival has never said a word to. Even so, he approaches her, and their conversation dies down.

"Luciana?" She turns to look at him, surprised but not unhappy. Now that he thinks about it, this is probably his first time initiating a conversation with her. "I found your notebook in my things. I figured you might want it back." He holds the notebook towards her and she seems as shy as usual, just staring in awkward silence.

Finally she reaches out and takes it from him. "Oh! Thank you. I appreciate it."

He gives a curt nod in acknowledgement and starts to turn away. It's uncomfortable enough with these people he barely knows, no use wasting his time here.

However, before he can get away, there's a hand gently grabbing his sleeve. He raises a confused eyebrow at Luciana wondering why.

Her voice is shaky and nervous, nothing new from every time she talks to him. "Percival, I- I was planning on asking you this after next class, but since you're here already, I… um… wanted to ask if
you'd go to the Gala… with me? Orion said you've been feeling down lately, and I'm not going with anyone else… so I figured I might as well invite you? If that's ok…"

Percival notices her face is a bright red and he tilts his head, looking at her curiously, not believing he's even being asked this. "You… you're asking me to the Gala?"

She nods. "If that's alright. I won't be upset if you say no."

He stares at her, his instinctual reaction is to say no. The shock of her even asking stops him from blurtling that out. But for some reason, even as his head clears (perhaps because he hasn't been in his right mind recently) he stands there; a list of pros and cons weighing in his head.

On one hand, he has no feelings towards her whatsoever past the occasional minor annoyance at worst. He doesn't know much about her past the fact she's Orion's friend. If this Gala is such a big deal, as his parents have made it out to be, should he really go with someone he doesn't actually care about?

However, from what little interaction he has had with her, she is not the worst person. Luciana has shown to be kind, as seen by offering her notes to him in the first place. And while she might not be on Percival's level, she's still one of the more skilled students in their year. In the dueling tournaments, she goes far, and she seems like she pays attention during her other classes as well.

Then, another thought crosses his mind. A factor that has nothing to do with her but everything to do with his overall well being. Forgetting Christopher isn't working. Perhaps instead of trying to ignore the gaping hole left in his life he should at least attempt to fill it with something else.

So, against his initial feelings, he tells her hesitantly after a long silence "…okay"

"What?" She asks, her jaw dropping, and Percival wonders if she didn’t hear him.

"I'll go with you." He says nodding, getting more confident in his choice. "To the Gala that is. I've got nothing better to do that day anyways."

As soon as what he tells her seems to register, her shyness fades and a large smile blossoms on her face. Before he knows what is happening, there are arms around him. Percival's eyes go wide and he flinches. It doesn't last long though and she pulls away, looking embarrassed. "Sorry. I just got excited."

And she's back to being the timid girl he's used to seeing. He has no idea how to react to this. It feels as if he's just thrown himself into deep water and forgotten how to swim. What happens next? He has no idea.

For now, he just takes the small chance he has to step away from the conversation. "Alright. I suppose I will see you then?"

She perks up at that. Ok, so that had been the correct thing to say. "Yeah! I'll see you soon!"

Still not really knowing what he's signed himself up for, he walks back to his room. There's still plenty of reorganizing to do.
The last few weeks of the semester pass by rather uneventfully.

Orion is overjoyed when he learns that he agreed to Luciana’s invitation. His roommate goes on and on about how wonderful she is, that she's extraordinarily smart, and, if Percival just gives her a chance, she can make him happy.

Any time the other goes on such a rant, Percival shrugs. Even with Orion trying to convince him, he isn't entirely sure he made the best decision. But it's not like he plans on going back on his word.

Before and after classes, Luciana skips over to talk to him. His underlying feelings of annoyance don't wane, but he does grow accustomed to her presence and he does try to get to know her somewhat.

Turns out, she's not even from America. Rather she's from Mexico, something she's more than happy to tell him all about. While it's not anywhere close to as interesting as hearing about Christopher's background, it’s still a decent conversation to pass the time. Another topic she often brings up is the fact that, unlike him, she wants to be an Auror. This subject is one he skates around as he keeps his mouth shut about his opinions on the career. No need in starting a fight where it isn't needed. Instead, he shares tales of his father's adventures, to which, she listens eagerly.

Outside of the half-hearted discussions, Percival reads away in the library, growing accustomed to his new table. Finals approach and he makes sure he's refreshed his memory on the topics.

Even with the terrible turn his semester took, he still passes his classes with flying colors.

With classes over, the night of the Wintertide Gala finally arrives.

Percival prepares, putting on his best clothes; a three piece suit, the coat tailed and black atop a white vest, and a dark cravat around his neck. His hair is groomed perfectly and not a strand is out of place. It isn't as if he seeks to impress anyone but simply that he had been raised to hold himself to a certain standard for formal occasions.

Once he deems himself ready, he moves to meet Luciana in the common room. Her dress seems rather plain. At least compared to that of what he had seen his Momma in as well as the other ladies at the formal events he had been dragged to as a kid. It makes him wonder what sort of family she comes from, though, as soon as he has the thought, he hates himself a little bit. It felt like something Grandpa Graves would say.

He keeps his comments to himself, instead, accepting her compliments towards his own appearance. Her arm hooks in his and while he still doesn't appreciate being touched by others, he doesn't complain because this is the proper behavior. Arm in arm, they head towards the Grand Hall looking like a proper couple.

They arrive just on time, Gala attendees filling the room. It's crowded, especially as most of them are swaying to the sounds of the piano and strings. Lanterns float ahead, but the majority of the lighting comes from a grand pine tree in the middle of the space. Students dance around. The ceiling enchanted to make it appear as if it's snowing, though it disappears before it can reach their heads.

Along the walls are chairs and refreshment tables. Tiny delicacies and bowls of juice sit there waiting. Percival wants to grab a bite, but before he can make his way, Luciana tugs him into the crowd of dancers.

It makes him uncomfortable, standing in this swirling mass, but she takes him by the hand and he adapts. This is a dance. He's supposed to dance. There is no reason for him to feel awkward or out of
place here. After all, it's the sort of environment he was raised in. He knows how to act in formal settings likely more than most of these other students.

One of those people being Luciana who struggles through the steps of the dance she pulled him into. Rather than let her continue to embarrass herself, he takes her hand in his own and takes charge. His other hand goes to her waist and he leads her through the waltz, commenting on how to correct her posture and reminds her of the rhythm as they move.

*One, two, three. One, two, three.*

Repeated over and over again in his head.

It's hypnotic and he can almost tune everything out around him. They sway to the music, circling around the tree, and Percival aloof as his body moves without thinking. He starts to close his eyes and get lost in the motions, but just then he feels a body pressed against his. Immediately he lets go of Luciana and steps back.

"I need a break." He tells her. She looks disappointed but doesn't say anything as he goes over to the refreshment tables, and follows behind.

After making their way past the chaos of the other dancers, Percival grabs a cup of pumpkin juice and he can't help but smile as he eyes a slice of Bandoffee tart.

"It's been my favorite ever since I was a kid." He clarifies as Luciana gives a nosy glance. A rare instance of him opening up, and it appears to make her content. She grabs a slice as well and they settle down in the chairs.

Percival would be perfectly satisfied to remain here for the rest of the night. It's clear to him now that this would not be as momentous a night for him as it had been for his parents. However, he is making the best of it, relaxing as he eats the tart. If he just ignores the room full of people, he can nearly imagine he's at home. Just a few more days and he'd be there. Honestly, that sounds as if it's exactly what he needs. To go home, hug his Momma, and tell her everything that's been plaguing him lately. She'd know exactly what to say to make it better. She always has.

But then Luciana stands, grabbing his hand, forcing him away from his thoughts of home. "Come on, let's go dance some more."

While she appears eager and happy, Percival doesn't feel like moving. "You go on. Have fun." He tries to wave her away, but all it does it make her pout.

"But I came to dance with you."

Just as Percival opens his mouth to tell her she'd probably have a better time dancing with anyone else, Orion walks up to them. He's grinning as if this has been a night of uninterrupted fun. Looking back and forth between Percival and Luciana, he focuses in on him and acts offended. "Perce! What are you doing sitting down? This is a dance. Stop being such a bore and have some fun. Don't keep the pretty lady waiting!"

Orion is being so ridiculous that Percival cannot help but slightly chuckle. "Pretty lady? Then why don't you dance with her?"

It only makes Orion laugh as he scoots his way to the table. "What? Luciana is lovely but I have my sweet Abigail to entertain for the night. I'm just grabbing some refreshments for her."

Both he and Luciana watch as Orion slips back into the crowd, carefully balancing two cups in his
hand. It's difficult to not smile at Orion's antics.

Once he's gone, Luciana looks back down at him. "Come on Percival, this night only comes once a year. We don't want to disappoint Orion after all."

At that, Percival shrugs. She is right and apparently if he stays in that chair for much longer, Orion would endlessly nag him. So, despite his wishes, he stands and returns to the dance circle with her.

Soon he lets himself return to the tempo of the music, stepping perfectly in time. Thankfully, Luciana does not try to press herself against him again. Even though he has a hand on her waist and another clasped with hers, he's able to detach himself from the situation, his thoughts far away. The crowd isn't there, Luciana isn't there. It's just him, mind drifting to the comfort of home.

That is, until he catches a familiar face from across the room.

He stops in the middle of the crowd as Christopher makes eye contact with him, the rest of the world gone. He knows he should look away, but he cannot bring himself to.

Christopher looks… good. His hair is far more cleaned up than in ever was when he and Percival were together, the way Percival always wanted to make it, just sit there and gently brush out the tangles. The dirt stained school uniform he always wore is replaced by a simple, but elegant none the less, suit.

Percival wants nothing more than to walk across the room and hug him tight.

But then Christopher breaks his gaze. The other boy turning to a brunette girl and whispers something to her. She giggles slightly and he looks back up to glare at Percival spitefully. With the girl's arm entwined with Christopher's they disappear back into the crowd.

It feels like a dozen daggers just stabbed into his chest.

"Percival?"

Luciana's voice makes him snap back to reality, and he takes a deep breath, trying to remember what he was doing. Dance… right. He's supposed to be dancing. With Luciana… Not Christopher. Not with the boy who told him he never wanted to see him again, not with the boy who looked at him like he was a freak for simply wanting to share this night with him.

He feels sick.

"I- I need to get some fresh air." And he hurriedly leaves, Luciana following behind.

She takes his arm, which honestly he is grateful for. His head is swimming with the last conversation he and Christopher had so having someone to lean against makes it easier. "Come on, I know of a good place just for that."

Thanking her, he just lets her lead the way. Hadn't he gotten past all of this? What was the point of shuffling his life around in hopes of forgetting Christopher if one single look at him had him collapsing in on himself all over again? The only thing stopping his anger from growing further is the fact he doesn't want to let Luciana see how much that one glance is affecting him.

She leads them down a hall through the Wampus caverns. If she speaks at all as they walk, he doesn't register it. Everything outside his own head feels so surreal. It's hard to hear anything past the swirling combination of rage, sadness, and longing.
Before he knows it, she's brought him through a tunnel that leads outside; a balcony made from the opening of the cave peeks out from the mountain. A few benches and tables sit around, no one currently occupying any of them. From here, he can see the moon hanging high, blue light shining down on the scene.

Luciana tugs him over to the tall railing, put in place to keep anyone from stumbling off. She leans against it, and beside her, Percival does the same. With a sigh, he just stares off into the forests below. The December night is quiet and cold... cold like the last night he felt like this.

The silence of the night is broken when Luciana leans against him. "I had a really good time tonight. Thank you for coming with me."

He blames the cold for not pushing her away. Still staring out into the trees, he manages to speak. "I apologize for leaving like that. You can go back if you want. I'm sure someone else will want to dance with you."

Rather than move away as he expect, she nuzzles against his shoulder. "I'd rather be out here with you." Luciana shifts against him slightly and he can feel her eyes boring into him. "I like you a lot Percival."

That has him finally turning to gape at her. What? Why does she like him? They barely have anything in common. He isn't particularly friendly towards her... they don't exactly talk often... it's nothing like how he was with-

His thoughts get cut off as he feels a strange warmth against his face despite the cold. There's something soft against his lips and-

He freezes.

She... she's kissing him? That's what this is, isn't it? He doesn't move, doesn't react in any physical way. Time halts and he is left analyzing every single detail. After all, this is the first time this has ever happened to him, the first kiss he's ever shared with anyone. It's something he'd been lured into thinking should be special from all the stories Momma and Dad would tell him when he was younger. It's something he fooled himself into thinking would be a perfect moment shared with Christopher.

But that will never happen now. Not since Luciana just claimed that moment for herself. But, is that really her fault? He had agreed to go to the Gala with her, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't know the dances for most ended his way. Besides, it's not as if Christopher would have miraculously changed his mind. Percival may be an idealist, but even he can't fool himself into thinking that could happen.

So he sits there and lets himself attempt to enjoy it. Lips part slightly, but he doesn't get much further than that. He tries, but he can't. Not when she smells like overly sweet perfume instead of the pine and sweat he wants. Not when her lips are this soft and caked with makeup when he always envisioned ones that are rough and chapped. Not when her hair is down to her waist. Not when she is soft curves when he wants to press into hard, muscled lines.

Everything is so opposite to what he imagined this to be, and he jumps back practically shaking. "I'm sorry. I can't... This is wrong. I shouldn't be here.... I need to go." The words are all shoved together and he doesn't know what he's saying. Only that he needs to get away from her. He stumbles before taking off back through the caverns.
He needs to talk to someone. From experience he knows if he keeps whatever he's experiencing shoved down it will rip him apart from the inside out. He's done closing off away in his bed. That solves nothing.

He can't go to Orion. His roommate is far too good of friends with Luciana.

He can't go to Seraphina. With her stance on matters like this, she will just mock him.

It's not as if he can go to Christopher anymore…

So, after moments of wandering through tunnels in search of a direction, he finds himself in the library at Miss Pendelwood's desk.

As he approaches, she puts down the papers she had been working through. The smile she gives him fade the closer he gets. "Is everything alright Percival?" She asks, her familiar concern evident.

Percival nervously swallows and glances around the library. It's far emptier than he's used to, with both the younger students out for the holiday and most of the older students at the dance, but still a few remain scattered throughout the space. He doesn't quite feel comfortable sharing anything with strangers around. "Can we talk?"

She nods and closes what she was working on before standing, leading him into her office. He takes a seat at the desk, the same place he had when he was last panicked. And, just like last time, Miss Pendelwood prepares yet another hot cup of cocoa for him before settling down herself in a chair at the other end. "You look quite dashing Percival. Did you go to the Gala?"

"Yes…" He says shyly as he sips his cocoa.

"I take it something happened?"

There's a deep breath as he tries to get his thoughts in order, deciding how to share as best he can. "I attended the Gala with a girl from my house… I feel like I should have said no, but I went regardless. For the most part it was alright, I suppose, until I saw Christopher and panicked. Anyways, I ran away because apparently I'm a coward…"

"Don't be so harsh on yourself." She interrupts. "It's perfectly understandable you reacted as you did. Was that all?"

Percival shakes his head and continues. "Luciana… the girl I was at the dance with… she followed me, which wasn't terrible. She made sure I wasn't going to end up hurting myself on accident. But um… we got to a balcony and she… um… she kissed me." He reaches up and wipes his lips at the recent memory. "It was my first kiss, and it was a...less than pleasant experience."

Miss Pendelwood listens, taking in everything he says without judgement. Coming to her had been a good decision. "So out of everything, was it seeing Christopher again or the kiss that has you so upset?"

"I-" He actually hadn't thought about that. Each had been unnerving in their own way. Christopher had just been a reminder of things he had tried so hard to forget. What happened with Luciana though, it had been unexpected and, even though he tried to go along with it, something about it made his skin crawl. "Both I suppose." It's the best answer he can offer.
She ponders his answer for a moment, before offering, "Was it the fact you would rather have kissed him?"

At that, his face flushes a bright red, and he wonders how she even made that connection. But he supposes she saw them together in the library often, and with the questions he asked her last time he was upset, it probably wasn't that difficult. "I guess that's a large part of it, but still... I knew perfectly well she wasn't him, and yet I tried anyways. Something about it felt wrong. I even attempted to get to know her these last few weeks, and she is actually a kind person." He runs his hands down his face, feeling frustrated. "Even so, she was just so contrary to everything I had hoped for. I know I can't have Christopher, but am I just doomed to never form any lasting connections in the future?"

"Hmm, have you ever considered you simply might be only capable of being attracted to other men?"

"What do you mean by that?" Because no, he hasn't considered that. Until just now, he had only thought of attraction as an intense friendship so it wouldn't matter who it was with.

"Perhaps you might only be able to have feelings for men, while being incapable of anything not platonic with women." She explains further, and he starts to understand what she's saying, somewhat.

"You mean I might only be able to have what Christopher described as 'unnatural feelings'." He gives a sad mirthless chuckle.

She leans over and places a gentle hand on his shoulder. "What is natural to some might not be to others. Take magic, for example. Some people are born with it and live their lives surrounded by it while others are not and live their lives accordingly. One way is not better than another, simply different ways to go about life."

Percival scoffs at her words, "So based on your example, I must live my life separated by law from the rest of the world?"

That actually makes her laugh, "Alright, perhaps that was not the best example. Besides, you aren't alone. A very good friend of mine feels the same as you do."

"Assuming I even have this possible preference you bring up." He sips his cocoa.

"Well, if you still aren't sure, then perhaps you can find another boy to kiss, and see how you feel then." There's a playful wink in his direction. "You are a good looking young man. I'm sure you can find someone."

Her suggestion is absolutely ridiculous, but even so, he finds he does feel better about the situation. Cocoa finished, he stands and gives her a smile. "Thank you for everything Miss Pendelwood."

With that he walks back to his room. It is late, after all.

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Percival's dorm is empty when he returns.

At least this way he can have some time to reflect on everything. After getting changed out of his
formal clothes and into more comfortable sleepwear, he lays on his bed and stares up at the ceiling. Despite the awful way the night had ended up, he instead focuses on the advice that Miss Pendelwood had told him.

Is it possible that he's incapable of being attracted to women?

Of course he loves his Momma, and he considers himself close enough to Miss Pendelwood to open up to her in ways he refuses to anyone else. But... that's not quite the right thing is it? He's happy to have both in his life, but he knows the way he feels about them is drastically different to how he felt towards Christopher.

Luciana, well, he has firsthand experience of how that turned out. But his revulsion to her still doesn't quite make sense to him. After all, she had been one of the few classmates he could hold a somewhat decent conversation with. Even with that factored in though, it doesn't stop how wrong it felt.

Seraphina comes to mind and he instantly shutters the moment he entertains that thought. Intellectually they are well matched, but beyond that, he definitely doesn't want to think about it. Any of his other female classmates are quickly ruled out as well.

Ok, so maybe he isn't attracted to girls after all.

If that is the case, then how does he feel about men?

He can barely remember the names of most of his male classmates, nearly all of them just fading into the background as they had for years.

The obvious example rings in his head and he tries not to dwell. He knows too well what happens if he thinks about the other for too long, and he's already moped over the boy enough for one lifetime. Perhaps Christopher is just the exception, the only person he is capable of having any sort of feelings for.

The door swings open, tearing Percival from his assessment. Orion walks in, grinning as usual, still in his dance clothes.

"Ey, Perce, have a good time?" He gives Percival a quick wink before hopping over to his bed. He slips out of his own suit jacket and starts to work at the buttons on his vest.

Percival shrugs, turning back to look up at the ceiling. Sharing the details on how the night ended with Orion probably isn't the best idea. Orion would probably think him terrible for breaking Luciana's heart or something.

"Aw come on, don't be shy. I saw you and Luciana leave together early."

A loud groan escapes Percival. No such luck about pretending that part never happened. Great, now possibly the entire school assumed something so blatantly far from the truth. "I really don't want to talk about it."

Orion snickers at that. "Fine. I get it, I'll respect your privacy. But I will be asking Luciana about it later."

That makes Percival sharply glare over at Orion, ready to scold him for even suggesting that. But as he looks, the words die on his tongue. Orion works through the last few of the buttons on his dress shirt, the bare skin of his chest plainly visible. The sight makes him wonder...
Orion is not exactly unattractive. From all his work on the Quidditch team, he's very much in shape, something quite apparent from his current state of dress. Of course they had both walked around this room shirtless plenty of times, but before now, he'd never considered it. Usually he had either been annoyed by Orion or his pet, or his thoughts were too focused on another.

Now though, an idea crosses his mind, and unlike everything else he considered tonight, it doesn't make his skin crawl.

Percival sits up and keeps his focus on Orion. There's a nervous swallow as he weighs the option over in his head. He doesn't have any feelings towards his roommate, at least nothing close to what he felt towards Christopher. But still, there's really only one way to find out. Miss Pendelwood's suggestion rings in his head.

"Orion, can… can I try something?" He asks, anxious. "It might be a bit strange, but I think it's something I have to do."

His roommate seems confused, but after a moment, nods. "Sure Perce. Do whatever you need to do."

With that, Percival stands, crossing the distance between their beds. A gentle hand is placed on Orion's shoulder, though it's mostly to steady himself. Then, he leans in, eyes closing as he presses his lips against his roommate's. Orion startles for a brief moment, but he doesn't quite pull away. Percival takes it as encouragement, moving more into it, and Orion soon responds eagerly.

Orion's lips are rough against his. He doesn't smell like cheap perfume, rather the natural musk radiates from him unmasked. A hand slips to Orion's chest, Percival's fingers splaying out where the shirt had been undone, meeting flat, chiseled, defined muscle. Percival finds he like it.

About that time however is when Orion pulls back, breathing heavily. "W-wh… but… you… and Luciana? I thought…"

Percival shakes his head, because now more than ever, he knows that is something that would never happen. "No… No we're not." He lets out a deep sigh and rubs his face, sure his cheeks are bright red by now. "I… don't really think I'm capable of liking girls." Because that was what this experiment had been about, right? Well he had his answer. Even if he had no emotional attachment towards Orion, he knows without a doubt that he enjoyed that. His pulse is racing right now out of excitement, rather than the desire to flee as it had been with Luciana.

"Oh. I see." There's a silence after that and Percival feels his gut drop. A fear starts to sink into him, the possibility of another sharp rejection nears. Percival turns around, pacing over to his side of the room, his fear only growing with the silence. It's soon broken though with a groan from Orion. "Ughhh, I really shouldn't have encouraged that. Perce, I'm sorry. It's just that I'm dating Abigail right now and I really like her and, ugh, this whole thing is awkward."

Percival sits down on his own bed, gaze focused on his feet because the likelihood of him having just ruined his only pseudo-friendship left is quite strong. "I'll put in a request for a different roommate after the holidays. I apologize, I shouldn't have-"

"What? No, don't be ridiculous Perce. You don't have to do that." Orion lets out a loud sigh. "Look, I just want you to know I… uh… didn't hate that. If things were different, then I dunno. Maybe?"

He looks up at Orion bewildered. After all these years and he's realizing only now he's been taking Orion for granted. "If you're absolutely sure." There's a shaky smile as he explains further. "I won't try anything like that again, I can assure you."
At that, Orion chuckles. "I promise, I'm not offended or mad at you. If anything, I'm flattered. Besides, you're actually a good kisser, so it could have been a lot worse. I just feel bad for Luciana now! I was really rooting for you guys to end up happy together! Ah well. Guess my career as a matchmaker is over." He lightheartedly sighs as he slips under his blankets.

"At least you have Quidditch to fall back on." Percival tries a rare attempt at a joke, unable to help the slight smile as Orion laughs loudly at that. "Goodnight Orion."

"Goodnight Perce."

The candles in their room are extinguished, and Percival is able to fall asleep more relaxed than he had been in a long time. For once, something didn't go completely wrong.

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Two days later, it's time to head home for the holidays.

Considering everything that had happened within the last few months, he's in surprisingly decent spirits. Between his encounters with Miss Pendelwood and Orion at the end, his internal conflict had been greatly eased. Even so, he's overjoyed to finally be going home. He's missed his parents more than ever.

When he gets to the big house, they are waiting for him. First he hugs Momma, tighter than he has in years. Then Dad, who is thankfully home this year.

Soon, they all head into the dining room where Grandpa Graves sits in his usual chair. Momma had apparently been working on a big meal these last few days as the table is covered with his favorite delicacies.

They settle down and the expected 'how was your semester' conversation sparks up. Everything he wants to say he knows he shouldn't, at least not with Grandpa Graves there. As much as even thinking about Christopher hurts, he can't even begin to imagine what it would be like if Grandpa knew about him. No matter though, he can wait for Momma to talk about the important topics.

Dad asks about his classes and, as always, he responds that they are as easy as ever. Though he fails to mention the sliver of time where he could barely even drag himself to class. That isn't important. Instead he tells him about all the spells he taught himself, ones he looks forward to showing off next semester.

Grandpa seems proud at hearing this, but reminds Percival he needs to start taking classes that will aid him in his exams to continue on to the Auror Academy. All of it is just a normal conversation with his family, and even if Grandpa’s words are lost on him, he's at least happy to have the familiarity.

That is, until Momma smiles and asks, "So, this is your fourth year. Did you attend the Wintertide Gala?"

He nearly hoped they had forgotten about that. Putting on a false smile, he nods. "Yes I did." Because even if it had ended poorly, he still attended.

"Oh? Did you have a date?" His Dad smiles widely as he asks.
It's difficult fighting how uncomfortable this conversation already makes him. "Um... yes. I went with a girl from my house, Luciana. She invited me."

The whole family gets giddy at that, even Grandpa Graves. Before he knows it, every member of his family is flooding him with questions. Momma wanting to know what she looks like and how they met, Dad wanting to know how her grades are and if they study together, and Grandpa Graves asking about her family history.

All of it is too much at once, and they start to get on his nerves. Everyone is acting as if it is some true love scenario when they don't know a single detail about what actually happened.

So, in a lapse of judgement, he clarifies, perhaps a bit too much. "Yes, I went to the Gala with her, but I don't like her in the way you all seem to think I do." He should have stopped there, but for some reason, he keeps going. "Instead I went back to my room and kissed my roommate. I enjoyed that far more than when Luciana kissed me."

There's a sudden awkward silence around the table, and at first, Percival doesn't understand it. They wanted to know how his life is going, didn't they? Well he told them, and now all of them stare as if he had just grown a second head.

Momma is the first to speak up. "So, they have co-ed dorms now? My, so much has changed since we-"

"No, my roommate is a boy." He interrupts her, maybe a bit more rude than intended but they're all jumping to conclusions far too quickly.

Dad starts to look worried, just like all those times when Momma and Grandpa were about to fight when he was a kid.

After another moment of silence, Grandpa scowls at him. "And what is wrong with the girl you went to the dance with?" His voice is low and careful. Percival hears the warning in it.

Even so, he's grown to not care much about what his Grandpa thinks. "Oh, nothing in particular. I've done some thinking over the last several days, and I don't think I like girls all that much. No offense to you Momma." He turns to give Momma a playful smirk, but like Dad, she looks anxious and worried.

Grandpa shoots up from his chair threateningly, "Percival! You cannot engage in such behavior. Not when you are my only grandchild. It is your duty to carry on the family line!"

Percival simply shrugs and glares right back at his Grandfather. The years have rendered him invulnerable to both his Grandpa's taunts and wishes. Calculated and cold, he responds, "And what if I don't care about any of that?"

His words stun his Grandpa, the old man shakily falling back to his chair, eyes wide as if he cannot believe what Percival just said. After all, it's the first time he's admitted that out loud to his family.

No one seems to want to say anything, and even his Momma and Dad look at him with disbelief.

Eventually his Dad breaks the second silence. "Percy, you're only fifteen. There is still much of the world you haven't experienced yet. I feel like you may just be rushing to conclusions after a few confusing days. Perhaps you should take some time to think of the implications of what you are saying."

Did... did his father just take Grandpa's side? Percival slowly turns to leer at him, irritation quickly
rising. “You always told me you fell in love with Momma when you were fifteen. I don’t think I’m rushing into anything.”

“What your father means is that we just don’t want you to shut yourself away from future possibilities. We want you to be happy, and well, this could mean you’ll have difficulty having a family of your own. Yes it’s true we fell in love young, but your situation, if what you suggest is true… it’s different.” Momma says, her voice trying to sound kind and comforting.

Somehow, it feels more like a slap in the face.

His Momma, someone who has always let him know it’s ok to go against whatever pressure his Grandpa pushes on him, just practically sided with the old man. Percival stares at her, betrayal sinking in. He stands up, backing away from the table, gawking at his family as if they are strangers. Amazing how a short few years away could change things. A dark laugh escapes him.

"You both actually think I haven’t thought this through?" He looks back and forth between his mother and father. "Hypocrites, both of you. At least Grandpa has always been honest." With that, he turns to storm up towards his room. However, just before he goes to climb the staircase, he quickly adds, yelling so Grandpa Graves can hear him. "Oh, by the way Grandpa, you'll be pleased to know the No-Maj born boy I adored turned me down. Shame. I really liked him."

Before all of them can formulate responses, he stomps up the stairs, furious. His door is slammed behind him. Shouting can be heard in his wake, just as it had always been back during his childhood, but this time he doesn't wait for his mother or father to come up and tell him everything will be ok. Not when they're the reason for his rage in the first place. So he places a chair under the door knob, barring the room shut. If only he had his wand and he could spell it locked. Damn Ilvermorny's strict wand regulations.

So he tries hard to ignore the sounds coming from down below and, instead, sprawls out on his bed. Reaching into his bag, he pulls out one of the books he grabbed from the library before he left, just needing to read and shut out the outside world for now.

He drops it as soon as he sees the title… 'Fennywig's Fables'.

As always, he can see that ominous piece of parchment sticking out from the pages.

There's a gentle knock on his door, but Percival's focus doesn't wane from the book. Even though the sight of it has him uneasy, he still can't help himself as he picks the book back up.

"Percy, please let me in. I don't know what I said to upset you, but whatever it was, I'm sorry."

Disregarding the voice of his mother, he pulls the note from between the pages and unfolds it. As expected, it's addressed to him.

Dear Mr Graves,

I hope your holiday is going well. This will be my last time attempting to contact you. I'm sure my messages may seem somewhat of a nuisance but, I assure you, I only mean well. The opportunity to bring a likeminded individual such as yourself over to our cause is not one we can pass up as it is mutually beneficial. At least, I hope, you still believe in our shared ideals. There are so few wizards and witches who would be willing to hear us out. We are outsiders amongst outsiders in the world. I'm sure you can relate. If you wish to seek us out, then write us a response, place it in the book and we will find you. If not, then consider this goodbye.
The knocking gets louder but he pays it no mind, the words of the note taking his full attention.

*Outsiders amongst outsiders in the world.*

Those words stay with him and the author is right. He can relate, now more than ever. His family clearly doesn’t care about how he feels, even if they went for years fooling him into thinking they did. Grandpa has always wanted to shape him into a clone of himself. His father, now that he thinks about it, was never much better. Though his words might have been kinder than his grandfather’s, he still spoke up for the man, compromising with an extreme bigot. He framed the same pushing of the ‘family legacy’ as teaching, and Percival can’t believe it has taken him until now to realize it. And it seems like despite all her preaching when he was younger, his mother apparently isn’t that much different.

At school, he’s always known he doesn’t fit in. Orion may be kind to him, but outside of that, everything has been one negative experience after another. He shuts himself away because no one understands him. And even the one he thought he could trust gave him nothing but heartbreak and betrayal.

So, as he reads the newest note, he wonders, what does he have to lose? Even if they are nothing more than persistent tricksters, than how can they hurt him further than he already has been? Besides, he’s never considered the possibility that they could be honest. They could be reaching out a hand of friendship he’s always needed but pushed away and ignored.

Maybe it’s worth the risk.

With those he thought he could trust failing him, he needs more like minded people. He needs people who are willing to hear him out, and perhaps he can even learn from them. After what happened with Christopher, his views on No-Majs are convoluted. Based on this, and all the previous letters, they appear knowledgeable. If they are genuine, then they can help him.

From the other side of the door, he can hear his father calling out and his mother crying.

Percival pays it no attention as he pulls out his quill and parchment of his own. Slowly, he starts to write:

*Dear Fellow Outsider,*

*You have my attention. Tell me more.*

*-Signed, Percival Graves*

Chapter End Notes

You can find me here [percegraves](#). I figured out I accidentally had my askbox on my blog between this chapter and the last, but that has since been fixed! Stop by, say hi, chat with me about this fic/general Percival stuff! And even if you don't, thanks all for
reading :) 

Also I have faceclaims for my oc children! Most of them aren't quite the right age yet, but just imagine the actors as if they were 15.

Finn Wolfhard is Christopher

Michael B. Jordan is Orion

Selma Hayek is Luciana
For the rest of the break, Percival barely leaves his room.

Only three weeks until he can leave this suffocating house and go back to school. Right now that sounds more like home than this hollow mansion. At least there, he knows there are people who accept him. Perhaps he'll even find more once he learns who has been sending the messages. He had hoped for a more instantaneous reply, but no such luck. He wonders if it is a security measure, making sure the response was hand delivered back to the library table after Percival had time to think over it. Which, considering the secrecy and gravity of the contents, make sense to him.

But for now, he has to live through the longest three weeks of his life.

Every day his parents come by and knock on his door with an attempt to talk to him, but he doesn't want to hear it. He already heard their true feelings and nothing they say now can change that. Any well-worded response or plea for him to come out is just a lie, manipulation to pull him back into being the good little son they both want.

Grandpa Graves is unsurprisingly absent from the whole ordeal. Percival is sure his grandfather is looking up ways to disown a grandson.

On occasion, he makes his way downstairs for food or the family library to snatch a book, but only late at night when he's sure his parents have gone to bed. There are nights where he miscalculates,
and still passes them in the halls or the living room, but he doesn't say a word to them.

Momma will look over to him with tears in her eyes, and it is hard to ignore her, but he just tries to avoid eye contact and has to remind himself she doesn't really care. His Dad will tell her "Percy just needs his space", but Percival catches the sharp glares directed at him. Of course his father can't completely mask the anger he has towards his son.

And they wonder why he rather spend all his time in his room lately…

He doesn't even have his damn wand to keep him distracted over these weeks. School aged children are required to leave their wands on campus at all times until graduation. Another American law Percival is quickly growing to despise.

So the weeks move by at a snail's pace. Percival left to do nothing but hole away in his room. It's practically torture.

When the morning finally comes to go back to school, he awakens before everyone else. Rather than wait on his parents to accompany him back to the bus stop as they had every semester prior, he instead floos himself to the city and drags his belongings by himself. It feels like his first breath of fresh air in a long time.

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The first stop once he gets off the bus is not his dorm. No, Percival is too impatient, needing to get a response from the note writer as soon as possible. So he carries his heavy case all the way to the library. As the semester just started, the room is empty, something he is glad for.

He makes his way to his table, and takes out the copy of 'Fennywig's Fables' placing it carefully on the corner. All that is left to do now is wait for a response.

Tomorrow, he'll come back. For now, he better get back to his dorm before everyone asks him why he's carrying his luggage everywhere he goes.

Inside, Orion is just finishing up unpacking. A faint blush dusts Percival's cheeks as he remembers the night they last saw each other. He murmurs a quick greeting before laying out his luggage and putting it where it belongs.

Orion makes his way to Percival's side of the room and leans against his desk. "Welcome back Perce. Missed you on the bus, but I did get there pretty late. How was your break?"

It's something he rather not discuss, but this is Orion, who actually had a significant impact into why his break went as it did. Not that he's mad at the other. It wasn't his fault that Percival's family reacted the way they did. "It… could have been better. Let's just say I'm glad to be back at school."

There's a soft hand on his back. "I'm always here to talk if you need to."

Percival just nods in response. He's hopeful he'll have plenty of people to converse with soon. All he needs to do is wait for a response.

They talk a little bit more as Percival finishes unpacking. Conversation casual, focused on the semester ahead instead of the break. He's thankful Orion is perceptive about topics he'd rather avoid.
By the time Percival finishes it's late and they both agree some sleep is needed.

The next morning, before his roommate is even awake, Percival quietly gets ready for the day and immediately heads back to the library. The anticipation of a reply has been weighing down on him for weeks. He can't wait any longer or else he'll go crazy.

There on his table is the same copy of *Fennywig's Fables*. From a distance, he's disappointed, but the closer he gets, he notices it's turned around, facing a different direction. Sometime during the night, the book was messed with.

He hurries over, eager to find out if he's been answered, ready to see if he can finally move forward through this stale period in his life. As he expects, a new note sticks out from the pages. Pulling it from the book, he carefully unfolds it and reads the words scrawled on the paper.

'Dear Mr. Graves,

I'm pleased you have finally opened up to our way of thinking. Now there is only one more bit of secrecy to work past. You need to head to the 'Storybook and Tall Tales' section of the library. There I will be waiting for you, and we can finally work towards getting you to join us in our fight.

-Signed, a fellow outsider

Percival raises a curious eyebrow at the note. Well, he supposes he should get used to so many levels of secrecy when wanting to join revolutionaries. So the message is pocketed and he heads over to the place specified.

The shelves are hidden away in a dark corner of the library. With this section being all fiction, it's often unvisited by most students. Few of the students have taken to reading for leisure, most of them preferring to get out and be active. And then there are the students like Percival who, if it has no academic value, would rather pass. There's no use in reading over the tales he had read to him as a child.

Upon arrival, he sees Miss Pendelwood standing high up on a ladder, floating books over to stock and reorganizing shelves.

Looking around, Percival searches for whomever could be the mysterious note sender. But he doesn't see anyone other than the librarian. Perhaps he was too early? He had woken up even earlier than usual to rush over here. Had he been too late? Maybe the note sender had wanted to do this in the late hours of the night. Its frustrating there was not a meeting time listed.

Percival clears his throat, trying to get Miss Pendelwood's attention. "Um, Miss Pendelwood, have you seen anyone else around here recently? I'm supposed to be meeting up with someone."

The librarian tilts her head to look down at him. For a moment, she doesn't reply. Instead, she smiles and giggles at him.

"Ah, you are here earlier than I anticipated. My, you are eager, aren't you."

Percival tilts his head. "Um, what are you talking about? I'm just looking for-"

"Oh Percival… I'm the one you are looking for." She steps down the ladder and places a hand on his shoulder. "I'm the one who has been sending you notes."

Wait…
Miss Pendelwood, the kind woman who he came to in his times of distress, the librarian who listened to him when he couldn't speak to anyone else. _She_ was the one who had been writing to him this whole time?

He doesn't know what to think about that.

Miss Pendelwood removes her hand. "You look upset." She sighs. "I've never once lied to you, and I promise, every time we've talked, I've been nothing but sincere."

"Why? Why me? Is it because I've been an easy target? Because I've been overly emotional and vulnerable?" He rarely lets anyone close, well, no one but Miss Pendelwood, and right now he's feeling used. First Christopher abandoned him, and now Miss Pendelwood is taking advantage of his trust.

Her head shakes. "No, nothing so malicious. You first caught my attention when you were asking for books about your No-Maj studies class. No other students I've met in my time here have been so aware of the wrongs of the world. You have been one of the few to even question the order of things in this country. It just happened to be a coincidence I found you at troubling times. But I promise, I only ever wanted to help. And I still do. That's why I even reached out to you in the first place, to offer a helping hand, to let you know you aren't alone."

"And the secrecy?" He asks, only just relaxing now. "You could have just come out and told me."

"I tried… sending you the notes were the best I could do. I apologize for the roundabout way, but the organization I work for is very covert, you have to understand. I couldn't tell you in person until I was positive you were willing to hear us out. If word had gotten out that we were operating at this school, well that could have been very bad for us."

Percival nods, trying to comprehend what she's saying. He supposes he had acted rather poorly to her last few letters, especially if she had seen him burn the second one. No harm really had been done, and well… he doesn't know how he would have survived the last year without her. She had only ever been a positive force in his life, so why should now be any different? "Alright… Well I'm here now, I suppose. Whatever it is you have to say, I'm listening. What is this organization?"

She visibly brightens, smiling as he yields. "Unfortunately, I can't disclose the full details at the moment, but I belong to a group that believes in dissolving Rappaport's Law here in America, and the Statute of Secrecy on an international level."

His eyes go wide at that. Of course, he had hoped… but the letters had been vague, and he could only guess to what extent the writer meant by tackling No-Maj and Wizard separation politics. But here is the writer, herself, telling him directly that she wants to take apart the very laws he has hated since he was seven. Its everything he's wanted for most of his life, and he's being offered a hand into its implantation. He looks up at Miss Pendelwood as if she's just handed him a great gift, and he can't help but ask out of curiosity, "Are you their leader?"

She breaks into laughter, and well, it makes Percival feel a bit ridiculous. He's trying to understand everything he can right now, and he doesn't appreciate it, but he'll look past it. His ego can take a few blows. "Oh goodness no. Our leader is a great wizard. He's a very busy man who cannot afford to stay in one place as I do for very long. No, no. I mostly recruit and help organize our members in the Northeastern American area."

"I see." He says, shoving his hand into his pockets, head bowed slightly as he feels embarrassed for guessing wrong. Still, what she says makes sense. Even so, he seeks to change the subject. "So what now? If I am to be a part of this cause, then what can I be doing? How can I help? You can consider
me an ally."

"For now, Percival, just focus on your studies. I must discuss bringing you in on everything with my peers. Just knowing you are willing to join us is a great help all its own. When it is time for you to learn more, I will tell you. You aren't hard to find." There's a playful chuckle and she turns to leave. Before she walks away though, she quickly adds, "Please, keep everything we've discussed here between us. If even a sliver of information escapes, our cause could be compromised."

Percival promises he won't say anything and she leaves, carrying a stack of books with her, resuming her usual librarian duties. He tries to do the equivalent and go back to his table but when he cracks open his texts he finds he is completely unable to concentrate on anything aside from what Miss Pendelwood shared with him.

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The world around him continues on as if nothing happened.

For the most part, Miss Pendelwood goes about her business, acting as if nothing has changed, as if she hadn't given Percival a taste of what his life could be. But he supposes this is nothing new for her, that is who she had always been. Pretending to be a regular school employee while also plotting and working towards revolutionary ideas in secret is normal for her.

It's more difficult for Percival. He has to sit there and act like every other student, attend class, be somewhat social with his peers. It's incredibly frustrating, because it's as if the whole world has changed and he can't do anything about it.

If before it felt like nothing at school ever mattered, that feeling is now ten times greater. He's been given his purpose and it isn't anything related to any of this mess around him. Even so, he must act as Miss Pendelwood has told him. If she can do it, then so can he.

What is irritating, though, is his peers trying to insert themselves into his life.

Orion is friendlier than ever, which he isn't surprised by considering how last semester ended. Luciana, who he was content with accepting he would never see again, is more open around him and tries to include him more in campus life. After how he reacted to her at the gala, he's astounded she even wants to be around him. But apparently Orion had explained the whole situation to her.

She even apologized for kissing him, which Percival understands even less. That night she hadn't done anything wrong, just simply made a miscalculation. Percival wouldn't think ill of her simply because he did not share her attraction. He knows how that feels and wouldn't wish it on anyone. If anything it was him who should be sorry for leaving without an explanation.

Even so, that doesn't mean he particularly enjoys their company. He appreciates that they don't hate him after everything, but he's not a social person. So why is it that they are determined to incorporate him in their activities? He'd much rather keep to himself, as he had the majority of his life, and wait for Pendelwood to get back to him.

However the more he attempts to push them away, the harder they'll try to get closer. So he puts up with it so they don't pry too much into his personal business.

Months pass and he's nearly convinced his conversation at the beginning of the semester was a
dream. His fourth year is nearly over and still no word from her about being brought in on the cause.

Only when he's packing his things in the library for the last time that year does she finally approach him and tell him she needs to speak to him in private.

It's hard to keep the resentment off his face from being kept out of the loop for so long, but he follows her to her office nonetheless. To her credit though, Miss Pendelwood does appear apologetic. "Sorry it's taken me this long to get back to you. My colleagues have some hesitance about allowing you to join our ranks."

Percival slumps. It's been months, and this is what she tells him? "So that's it? You bring me in only enough to let me know about your existence and then push me away?"

"No, don't be so dramatic Percival." Her arms cross. "They just want you to prove yourself before moving further with us. Apparently my word alone isn't good enough."

"What is it you need me to do?" He's getting impatient after all and at this point he just wants to be actively doing anything.

"Hm, well, after talking things over with my colleagues, we believe a good, fair test is for you to find us a bit of information."

"That is… very unspecific." His eyes narrow.

"Patience, Percival." And she takes her wand out with a wave, and a book floats over to him. It hovers in front of him and the pages turn. "What we need is a bit difficult to find. Have you ever heard of the Scourers?"

Percival shakes his head. It's… rare for him to be unfamiliar with a topic.

"Very few people are. We don't even know that much past the fact that they are an important part of this country's history that a great deal of wizards have sought to cover up." The pages stop turning and Miss Pendelwood walks over and points to a specific passage.

His eyes skim the paragraph and he reads 'MACUSA’s primary aim was to rid the continent of Scourers. Twelve volunteers were recruited and trained as Aurors to do just that…' A list of names follows. Twelve names practically every child raised in this country knows by heart. One stands out in particular. Gondulphus Graves. The name of his ancestor.

He's always known the role of his ancestor, as his Grandpa has constantly reminded him, but he's never heard of any such connection to this group… the Scourers.

Pendelwood bookmarks the page and closes the book, handing it over to Percival. "So, while you may not know much about them, I have a feeling your family does. Talk to them and see what they know. Obtain any sliver of information they possess, a journal, an article, or maybe even a file… Whatever you find, bring it back to me and I will make sure you are welcomed. Quite a simple task, if you ask me."

It sounds like what the letter told him over the Christmas break and the idea of waiting a whole summer has him huffing. "So I am to get this information and bide my time until I get back to school before passing anything on?"

His irritation seems to surprise her. "Oh, well um…" She ponders for a moment before pulling out a quill and parchment. She writes something down and passes it to him. "Here is my address for where I'll be all summer."
He takes the paper from her and slips it inside the book. As he does so, it occurs to him that he hasn't actually spoken to his family in quite a while. "It may not be as easy as you are making it out to be. My family and I have not been on the best of terms as of late."

She sighs. "Do you want in or not?"

"I do… I do…" His jaw clenches, but he knows he's apparently on precarious ground as it is, so he doesn't argue further.

"Good!" She perks up. "Once you have them, meet me at my apartment in the city. I'll be waiting. Now run along. We both have quite a bit of packing to attend to." And with that, she waves him out of her office.

As he walks back to his dorm, the realization that he'll have to repair his broken relationship with his family weighs down on him. He doesn't want to do that. It's their fault, not his, that it's tarnished in the first place. But even so, he wants into this group so badly that at this point he feels he's willing to do pretty much anything.

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He's never been so anxious going home before.

In the past, he's always welcomed the chance to see his family again, even during times he rather be at school. Now he faces a combination of resentment, as well as a fear over the fact he must break his silence towards them. It twists in his stomach, but he just replays Miss Pendelwood's words over and over again in his head.

When he walks inside the mansion, both Momma and Dad greet him. It's a very calculated, automatic reception, and he wonders if they just hoped he forgot everything over the Christmas break. The air is too tense to say anything when he first arrives, so rather than address either parent, he strides past them, wordless, just dragging his luggage up to his room.

Miss Pendelwood gave him all summer after all, there's no need to rush this.

He gives himself a few days, letting himself grow re-acquainted to being at home instead of at school. During times like this, he realizes he actually does miss Orion and Luciana's constant insistence for his company. Being here at this mansion, hiding away in his room, it’s unpleasantly isolating, even to a recluse like him.

Eventually, he works up the courage to do what he promised. With the book Miss Pendelwood gave him tucked under his arm, he takes a deep breath and then makes his way to his dad's office.

Nerves steeled, he knocks on the dark wooden door.

"Come in." A tired voice calls from the other side.

Percival enters, opening the door slowly. His dad looks up, eyes wide as he realizes exactly who it is.

"P-percy. What brings you here? I mean… not that it's a bad thing you are here, I just…"
Equally as nervous and awkward as his dad, he makes his way into the room. Direct eye contact is avoided, but even so he nears Dad's desk. The book is pulled from under his arm and he grips it tight with his hands. "Um..." It's the first word he's said to his dad in a long time. "I was reading about the history of magic in our country, and this book brought up the Scourers? I'm... unfamiliar with the term but it also mentions our ancestor, so I was hoping you could explain it for me?"

Dad noticeably relaxes as he speaks. Percival does as well. The most difficult part about this whole situation is done. "That is... interesting. Most of the books you would find at school typically avoid discussing the Scourers. They are seen as a shame of our kind best left forgotten."

"It was just a small mention in this book." His voice is meek and he taps the book in his hands anxiously. "It didn't go into detail. Hence me coming to you." He risks a quick glance up and his dad is smiling.

"Well you came to the right person. Our family is actually quite tied to the history of the Scourers." And instantly Dad pauses. He continues, sounding unsure if he should even keep speaking. "I know you said you didn't care much for the family legacy. However, it is difficult for me to discuss this without going into details about that. The two topics overlap quite a bit, but I promise, I'm not trying to push you in any direction."

Dad sounds so sincere when saying that. Percival cannot help but feel a bit bad, and he wonders if his initial impression had been wrong. Looking at the ground instead of his dad, he nods and after a moment, asks. "How is our family connected?"

"Well, as I'm sure you've been told, our ancestor, Gondulphus Graves, was one of the first aurors in this country. What is less known, however, is the Scourers were the first threat our country faced." That much the book told him. "You see, back before MACUSA was founded, there were several wizard families throughout the country with less than pure intentions. There was no strict government in place, so these families ran rampant; going from taking the law into their own hands to outright causing all sorts of chaos for their own personal gain. They were loose cannons and, in most cases, only increased No-Maj fears towards our kind."

Dad stands and Percival watches as he goes over to a large black safe in the corner of the room, one that had always been there. A finger is pressed down on a sharp point and a drop of blood trickles down onto the metal. Soon, there's a click, and the safe pops open. After wiping his hand on his handkerchief, Dad reaches inside and pulls out a file. "Only our family has access to that safe." Dad explains as he settle back at his desk. "There's also a copy of this information at MACUSA, but some time ago, it was decided that old families such as ours should hold onto a piece our history as well."

"If there are several copies of this out there, then why do so few people know about them?" Percival asks, starting to become honestly curious.

"I believe the general consensus is that it would do more harm than good if people knew exactly how many dark wizards were in our country's past." His dad sighs and flips through the file. "Many of the Scourer families had a direct impact on our history. The Salem trials for instance... they were greatly worsened, and perhaps even caused by the Scourers who wanted revenge on other wizards for whatever reason. There were a few who even passed off innocent No-Majs as wizards for the sake of just collecting rewards."

Dad pulls out several papers and a few photographs from the file. There's what must be a centuries old newspaper clipping, headline shouting for the need to do something about this atrocity. Percival picks them up and reads through. All of this is evidence for everything his dad is telling him. The terrible No-Maj tragedy was caused by wizards.
"It's why they accepted volunteers to become aurors. Because someone had to hunt them down. Gondulphus and the rest practically succeeded, but then the remnants of the Scourers went into hiding. A way that proved quite effective was intermarrying with No-Majs."

"But… what about Rappaport's Law!" Percival cannot help but interject. Of course he knows Rappaports Law wasn't introduced until decades later, but it is still instinct. He may hate the law, but hearing of any open violation of it always interests him.

That actually makes Dad chuckle. "Interesting that you'd even bring that up. You see, Bartholomew Barebone, the cause of that whole law in the first place, was a descendant of a notorious Scourer family."

"Wait, so you are telling me that what caused the law that separates our kind isn't the fault of No-Maj's, but actually outcast wizard families?" Percival clenches his fist, barely able to believe all this. But he knows it's true. The proof is all in this file right in front of him.

Dad nods. "Um, essentially yes, but it is a bit more complicated than that. I doubt the Scourer descendants even know that they come from wizard blood but, either way, it is clear their ancestors impressed upon them a deep hatred for our society. Even now, we still run into rogue groups of them, trying to expose and harm us."

Still, even with Dad trying to explain further, the laws make far less sense to him than they did moments ago. Everything that idiot No-Maj studies professor had tried to drill into his head was based on falsehoods. No-Majs, while far from perfect, are not the malicious beings that the wizarding world attempts to make them out to be.

"But, as you can see," Dad adds, "This information could cause all sorts of panic, so that's why MACUSA tries to keep as much of it away from public domain. I shared with you because you are my son and I can never resist explaining the world to you, but it is best if no one outside hears of this. Conspiracies could run wild." He stands, and carries the file back to the safe, slipping them inside, and shuts the heavy metal door.

Despite his dad's warning, he feels more justified over joining this cause than ever. "Thank you for telling me all of this. It was extremely informative."

File hidden away, Dad steps back over to him. "Any time Percy." He pauses, before pulling him into a hug. "I just want you to be happy. That's all your mom and I ever wanted. I'm sorry…" He hears his dad sniff, though he cannot see his face. "Whatever it is we said, or did, I'm sorry. I love you and I just wanted you to know that."

Percival's throat feels tight, not knowing what to think. Part of him still wants to be mad at the man, but it's hard when right now he feels like a little kid again. Instead of thinking, he returns the hug, but doesn't say anything.

They stand like that for a while, silently hugging, and he's sure he can hear more sniffs and gasps come from his dad. Eventually, the arms loosen around him and Dad pulls back with a quick wipe of his face. "I really liked talking with you again. Missed you." And there's a playful ruffle of his hair like Dad would do when he was a kid. "I gotta sleep though. Work is early. I should be home at a reasonable hour tomorrow."

With that, his dad walks away. All Percival can manage to say in response is a quick "Goodnight."
Percival just stands there in the office, counting down the minutes in his head. He has to be sure that Dad is asleep, that he won't come back in and interrupt Percival and wonder what the hell he's doing. Ten minutes go by and he's sure he's waited long enough.

Stepping over to that same safe his dad opened, he looks it over, wondering how to get in. Of course, he had been watching Dad, who had said only their family has access to it. So he has a theory. Just as Dad had done minutes ago, he pricks his finger on a barb. A drop of blood drips down and touches the safe. There is a click and soon the safe opens. He smiles in celebration before sucking on his finger, making sure it is free of blood, and grabs the file. This must be what Miss Pendelwood wanted.

With his family asleep, he carefully tiptoes over to the fireplace room. His weeks avoiding his family over Christmas have apparently come in handy as he knows the paths to take, what floorboards to step on if he wishes to remain undetected. File in hand, he takes the powder and enters into the New York City Floo Network Central.

He had been advised against taking the network directly to Miss Pendelwood's apartment. You never know who could be listening in after all. So even though it may be late, he finds his way from the Floo Network Central to her apartment on foot, following the directions she wrote down for him.

It's no more than a few minutes' walk, but even so, it's night and he only hopes she isn't asleep. The apartment building is old and he cannot imagine living in a space so cramped. The whole place looks as if it could fall apart in an instant, and he's nearly afraid the door will fall off when he knocks. Fortunately it doesn't, but his knock is louder than anticipated. He just hopes none of her neighbors were woken up as well Patiently he waits for an answer. It takes a few moments. However, considering the time, this does not deter him.

He's right to wait because soon her apartment door opens, and Miss Pendelwood stands in the doorway, wearing a far more simple skirt and blouse than she does at school. She looks at him with skepticism. "Oh, hello there Percival. I did not expect to see you here so soon."

He holds up the file he took from his home, smiling playfully. "I believe you were asking about the Scourers?"

The file is pulled from his hands and she flips through it, her eyes widening the more she reads. "This is... I can't believe this. MACUSA has been trying to keep all this information from everyone the whole time." He watches as she pulls out certain papers and listens as she comments on the various pieces. Percival does his best to add whatever commentary he remembers that Dad had told him.

Eventually, she closes the file, her skepticism now turned to awe. "You've done so well. Now, are you ready to officially join us?"

He's wanted nothing more for months so he nods eagerly.

"Good. Let me just gather my things and we can head over to our meeting place. They should still be up and working through a few things. Wait here for a moment." She quickly heads back into her place, and Percival stands in the tight hall, his hands in his pockets. Not long after, she rejoins him and takes his hand. "Now, hold onto my arm tightly and we'll be there in a jiffy." As soon as he does
so, she waves her wand and they are twisting, turning into the air. Apparition, he knows. His parents had traveled with him a few times using this method, but it's still uncommon enough to him that he stumbles and feels dizzy the moment they arrive at their location.

As he tries to regain his sense of balance, he notices Miss Pendelwood stepping over to a storefront, making a complicated series of knocks.

By the time he joins her side, a huge man opens the door. He's at least a foot taller than Percival and his arms, thicker than Percival's head, are pure muscle. It's quite an intimidating sight. The man looks down at Miss Pendelwood. "Linda, I thought you had gone to bed for the night."

Miss Pendelwood, Linda he guesses, doesn't seem intimidated at all. "Good evening Rothley. Something came up, and I have some information I believe everyone will be quite interested in."

Rothley nods, but then he catches sight of Percival and frowns. "This the Graves boy?"

"Yes, that's Percival." She explains. "He was instrumental in getting this information."

The large man continues to stare at him with piercing eyes. "I don't know... it's still risky letting someone from his background in on everything. Are you sure the boss would like this?"

She purses her lips. "He told me to find people I thought could aid us in our cause. He's already aided us." She gestures to the file. "Trust me, you won't be able to find anyone more devoted than him. So far, he's the only viable candidate I've found at Ilvermorny."

Sighing, the large man stands back and holds the door for them to enter. As Percival follows Miss Pendelwood inside, however, Rothley tells him, "I'm watching you Rich Boy."

The three of them make their way down a long dimly lit hallway. It doesn't make any sense from how the building appeared from the outside, it's narrow and stretches further than he thinks the building goes, but he's grown up around such odd feats of architecture. As he walks, he notes the carpet is worn down completely in some places, and the paint on the walls is chipped. Clearly whoever inhabits this building has no care for its upkeep.

They stop at door at the very end of the hallway, and this time Rothley performs a sequence of knocks. The door itself glows and Rothley opens it, Percival and Miss Pendelwood following him in.

The room is... smaller than he expects. It's cramped, lit only by a few glowing bulbs. On the far wall is a banner with that same symbol from the letters. There isn't much to the room aside from a large circular table that takes up most of the space. Fifteen chairs surround it, all of them occupied but two.

"Everyone, this is Percival, our newest recruit." Rothley says from behind him, a large hand grips his shoulder.

A mix of men and women, all at least 10 years older than Percival, stare up at him suspiciously. He raises a nervous hand and gives a small wave. None of them seem to warm up to him. They huddle in closer to one another whispering. He cannot hear them well, but he makes out talk of his age as well as his family.

Miss Pendelwood asks them to all quiet down. "I know you all question my judgement with Percival here, but I assure you, he's already done us a great favor. You see, he comes from a long line of aurors which means-"

"We know about his family, Linda. That boy's grandfather sent both my parents to prison when I was a kid for the crime of having No-Maj friends." A middle aged man snarls at her. Percival
flinches at the mention of his Grandpa.

Miss Pendelwood doesn’t seem bothered. "Percival is not his grandfather." He wants to defend himself instead of have her do so for him, but he also has a feeling this group would tear him apart before he even could get a word out. "He's helped out with our Scourer mission too. Got us classified information held by his family, which puts us months ahead of schedule." The file is tossed onto the table. "Believe me, our leader will be overjoyed to have him on our side."

While the group's attention is focused on the file, Percival turns to Miss Pendelwood. "So, the leader isn't here?" He can't help but be curious.

A few of the table members laugh, as they must have overheard him. "Our leader is never here." A rather young man rolls his eyes. "Only Linda and Rothley here have even met him in person. Most of us doubt he even exists."

Rothley shoots him down with a sharp glare. "Our leader is a busy man, something you clearly have no understanding of." Turning to Percival, he explains further. "You see, our group here is but one small sect in America. Our leader operates on an international level. He has a grand scheme in mind, and we handle the details to carry it out."

"Speaking of which…" Miss Pendelwood says, clearing her throat. "We can finally move forward now. It's time to get to work." She and Rothley sit in the two open chairs, and Percival is left to awkwardly stand.

The group begins to go over a general plan. They don't bring Percival in on the conversation, as he still counts as an outsider, he supposes, but he listens to as much as he can. Apparently, the current goal is to make the Scourers common knowledge. Get the information out to the press and spread it far. The reasoning for this? Well, the group believes it will make the general public more sympathetic to their cause by highlighting some of the corruption within the government. If more people doubt the way things are being run and feel as if the government is hiding things from them, it will be easier to gain more members to their cause. After all, they can't start enacting change until their group has grown.

When they get into the finer details of the discussion, Percival notices they pause before saying specific days, times, and locations and end up avoiding mentioning them altogether around him. He can't even voice a question without them shutting him down.

It's clear that for now, he is not wanted here. Awkwardly, he mentions needing to get back home before his family notices. Someone makes a comment about how he's running home to spill their secrets. Miss Pendelwood scolds them before standing up and gathering the file's contents.

"Here, I'll walk you out." She says with a kind smile and leads them down the hallway. "I'm sorry. I had hoped they'd be a bit more accepting of you."

Percival shrugs. "It's fine. I know my family. If I only knew us from my grandpa alone, I'd be suspicious too. I still want to help though. Even if they don't like me, I still believe in what you are doing."

That makes Miss Pendelwood chuckle. "Well I'm glad we haven't scared you away then. I'll talk to them more, see if I can't get them to warm up a bit to you. Hopefully, if this Scourer thing goes according to plan, then you might gain a few fans."

They leave the building and Percival turns to her. "Thank you for letting me come with you tonight. I greatly appreciate it. Finally I feel like I'm doing something."
She smiles and holds out her hand. "I'm glad. Now come on, I'll apparate you back to the station." He's a bit more prepared this time so it takes less time for him to stand up straight once they arrive. They say their goodbyes but, before he can walk away, Miss Pendelwood holds out the file to him. "I suggest you put this back where you found it for now. We don't want you getting in trouble."

He accepts it, tucking it back under his arm. "Are you sure you don't need it to accomplish your plans?"

Her head shakes. "No, I believe we have enough. Even just telling members of the press what we read should be fine. If we need it again though, I'll let you know. For now, head on home. I'll send you a letter when I talk the others into letting you join us again. Have a good night Percival." And with that, she apparates away.

He makes his way back home with no trouble. The file is returned, his family still asleep, and he sneaks back to his room as if nothing ever happened.

----

The next day, he sleeps in late. Usually he's an early riser, but being out practically all the previous night made him quite tired.

When he finally does wake, he's extremely restless. Unlike how he was throughout Christmas break, where he locked himself in his room to stay sane, he feels like staying in this room will drive him crazy. He's gotten a taste of what the future holds, and if feels impossible to remain still. His lack of wand doesn't help at all either.

So, also unlike Christmas break, he leaves his room during the day, stepping downstairs, and wanders through the house.

It doesn't help. The house proves to be both suffocating and empty all at the same time. Dad, he assumes, is still at work, Grandpa most likely is shut away in his study. Mom is… well he can't seem to find her either. Not that he particularly cares to talk to anyone. It's just that the silence is unnerving.

He's in need of fresh air he decides. So he steps outside and takes a walk down the many paths that surround their house. It's a nice day, the sun is out, and it's not too warm. His coat sways with the wind. All he plans on doing is just circle the mansion once, but then he's passing by Momma's garden, and he stops.

As she always had when he was growing up, Momma sits in the dirt, a shovel in her hands, and works away.

He knows he should just pass by, walk back inside. There's no reason to converse with his mom like he had with his dad last night. However, that doesn't stop him from making his way down into the garden. Just as he would when he was a kid, he settles down beside her.

It takes a while for her to notice him. When she finally does, she startles slightly. "Percy! I… didn't expect you here." She looks at him as if he were a ghost. With the way he's been hiding from the family, he supposes he can't blame her.

"I got bored. Went to take a walk and saw you out here. Figured I might as well help out." He gives her a careful smile before looking around for a second shovel.
"Oh. Of course. I'd like that." She looks like she's about to cry, and it reminds him of how dad acted last night. He supposes his disregard of them hurt them deeper than he anticipated.

He doesn't reply to that, and once he finds a shovel, they sit in relative silence, digging holes and planting more flowers. The only break from the quiet is the occasional instruction to grab a pot, or make a hole deeper. It's a strange return to normalcy after over a year if constant worrying and change. Of course it's right after he's made a step forward, his life finally progressing, when this strange interlude occurs. But even so, he feels more at peace now than he has in a long time.

He and Momma don't discuss what happened over Christmas break. But he can see it on her face that she wants to and is just holding it inside. They might be civil now, but there's still some tension. Percival doesn't bring it up though and neither does she. Perhaps it is for the best. Percival can move on with his life and let all the pressures and judgements of his family go unspoken. If no one talks about it, then it doesn't exist.

It’s the best option, especially now that Percival has far bigger things to think about.

When the sun goes down, Momma stands, holding out a hand to help him up. He supposes it is about dinner time by now.

Before they walk back inside, Momma hugs him and, just as Dad had, she can't help but tell him "I love you no matter what."

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The rest of the summer, surprisingly, continues peacefully.

Somehow both Momma and Dad have wormed their way back into his life and, even though there is still an elephant in the room, no one addresses it. He's glad though that the subject continues to be avoided. This way he can be happy and pretend things were like they were before he shared his preferences.

Grandpa Graves doesn't seem to feel the same as the rest of the family though. Even though he rarely sees his grandfather, as the old man actively avoids him, he can still feel the hate radiating from him the few times they are in the same room. He won't look Percival in the eyes, and he barely says a word to his grandson.

It pleases Percival. Though he may have cared about what his Momma and Dad thought, he's glad to see his Grandpa suffer. At last, he had finally gotten retaliation for everything the old man put his family through as Percival was growing up. If it wasn't for him wanting to avoid the subject around his parents, he'd constantly rub it in his Grandpa's face.

Despite the fact that his family life has somewhat settled, he still impatiently waits for more information from Miss Pendelwood. There isn't enough in this house to keep him occupied anymore without his wand, and he's long since exhausted the family library.

But all he can do is hope for a message. He sits by the owl perch often, just wishing for another letter to come in.

The first of June comes around and finally he sees a simple envelope with the only signifier for a return address being a simple letter P. It has to be from her.
Before any of his other family can see the letter, he runs up to his room and quickly reads it.

"Dear Mr Graves,

Finally got them to hear me out. As predicted, they opened up more when we were able to get in contact with a few of the paper publishers. Now, many of them still are wary of you, but enough of them have turned over to my way of thinking. Hope you can make it to our meeting the night of June 2nd. I've enclosed a map as well. Should help you locate us. Once you've committed it to memory, please dispose of this message. Can't have your family find a map to our secret hideout, now can we?

-P"

The next night, as he had the first time he snuck out of the house, he patiently waits for his family to fall asleep. As he makes his way through the floo system, he keeps reminding himself of the map. He had followed the instructions, making sure the message was burnt to ash before he left the house.

Just had to hope his memory was good.

He takes the turns he remembers on the map. Unfortunately it wasn't as close to the Floo Network as Miss Pendelwood's apartment was, but he's still confident he's going the right way. Her instructions had been clear, fortunately, and soon he arrives at that familiar storefront.

What he doesn't remember however, is the knock sequence to enter. All he can do is knock loudly and repetitively to wait for someone to let him in.

He's there a good ten minutes before Pendelwood pushes the door open. "Goodness Percival! I'm so sorry. I forgot about that part. I hope you haven't been waiting too long out there."

It's impossible to be mad at her so he just shrugs and tells her it was fine. Before they go back in though, she takes a moment to make sure he knows the code by heart to get back in for future reference. Just that act itself makes him feel more included.

Soon, they head back inside and make their way to the meeting room. He counts one more chair than last time. As they enter though, the members gathered around the table all look impatient. One taps his fingers on the surface. "About time. We were taking bets to see if you were going to make it."

Percival frowns, and just approaches the extra chair. Slowly, he takes a seat, as if the others would tell him it wasn't for him any moment. No one makes such a comment. "Sorry. I had to wait for my family to fall asleep."

A middle aged woman snorts at that. "Ohhh, poor baby. Had to wait for bedtime before he could join us."

"Shut it," Miss Pendelwood snaps at her. "Anyways, enough interruptions, back to work."

With that, the subject of Percival's tardiness is dropped, and they resume discussions on their important business. Percival still doesn't know what to do. No one has really explained to him his place in all this. Actually, he barely knows what anyone's role is here. Formal introductions are never done, so it's up to him to listen in and gather that information himself.

Everyone here comes from different walks of life, joined the cause for a variety of reasons: some are No-Maj born wizards and witches who are bitter towards the government for ruining their relationships with their families, some have had their lives destroyed by No-Majs and felt they never got any justice for it, some even have friends or are in love with No-Majs and wish the world was
different so they don't have to keep it a secret.

As far as he can tell, Miss Pendelwood and Rothley are the leaders of this certain group, though they take orders from whomever is leading the whole international organization. Several of the members are solely responsible for interrupting oblivations, a job Percival feels must be dangerous work. A few others deal with more secretive work, such as leaking anonymous letters to the papers in hopes some reporter will take interest in what they have to say. Two of the more frightening looking members, he finds out, specialize in dealing justice to No-Majs where aurors will do nothing.

Before he knows it, Miss Pendelwood is closing her books right as they finish up handing out orders for the time being. "Alright, that's all we can do for now." It does not escape his notice that once again, no one addressed him.

He can't help but feel irritated. Why even invite him to this meeting if all he was going to get was insulted by a few members and ignored by the rest. So he raises his voice, glancing around the room. "Is there anything I can do? I want to help."

All that gets him is dirty looks from most of the members.

Rothley turns to him. "Kid, I'll be honest with you. We don't even know if we can trust you. For all we know, you'll rat us out to your dear ol' Dad once you've learned enough about us. You're lucky we even let you in the door, something you can thank Linda for."

"I have no love for my family name." Percival states as if it is the most obvious thing in the world. His fists clench under the table.

The burly man actually laughs at that. "And no way to prove that."

"Then give me a way!" Percival practically shouts back, far more forceful than intended. He's not used to being doubted. There may have been people who have disagreed with his opinions, but no one has ever questioned his conviction like this.

Instantly the room goes quiet, Rothley and a few of the other members in deep thought. Miss Pendelwood however, looks worried.

"Rothley, please. He's just a kid. Let him finish school before we-"

"No, I want to do something. Let me help out." He interrupts her, refusing to be babied, to be treated like a child.

Rothley scoffs. "Hm, like the lady said, you are just a kid. What could you possibly do to help?"

Percival's nails dig into his palm, trying to avoid shouting again. He's already uncertain if these people even want to keep him around, so he shouldn't push harder than necessary. There's a deep breath as he thinks it over. All it had taken to get the file was talk to his dad… he's realizing that that is just the surface of what he has access to. "I can use my family to get more information. You all may mock my background, think it makes me a liability. But if I got you that much with just a file I only had to ask my dad for, then imagine what else I could do if I just tried harder."

"You know your insistence only makes you more suspicious…" It's as if Rothley wasn't even listening to the points he was making. Of course, leave it to some stupid adult who thinks they know better than him to brush him aside. "Look kid, we don't need you right now. Just go home. We got more important things to do than babysit you all the time."

It takes a great deal of self-control not to respond. Instead, he pushes his chair back, ready to huff out
of there in frustration.

"Wait." He stops, and sees Miss Pendelwood in deep contemplation. "Just wait outside the door for
now. You bring up some points I must discuss with my colleagues. Don't leave. We'll get back to
you soon."

It’s confusing. What had changed in that brief moment? Rothley telling him to go, Pendelwood
telling him to stay, but always, he will take Miss Pendelwood's words over any of these other people.
Besides, she's the only one who trusts him and seems to have any sense.

So he nods, and makes his way out of the cramped room and back out into the hall. Obeying, he
goes no further than that, knowing better than to leave the building. He can't help but be nervous as,
surely, they are discussing his future with the group at that very moment. Perhaps he had spoken up
when he shouldn't have. Despite this he remains vigilant by the door. This is not the first time he's
been forced to wait and likely won't be the last.

He counts the minutes as he paces up and down the hall, wondering what it is they are saying. A few
times he tries pressing his ear to the door, but he assumes a silencing charm has been cast. He gives
up all attempts at overhearing after a while, resigning himself to waiting once again.

Only when he has lost track of time, does the door open, Miss Pendelwood ushering him back
inside.

Rothley stands near the door, arms crossed. Percival cannot tell what he's thinking, no way of
judging how the conversation went by the look on any of the group members faces. Even Miss
Pendelwood keeps her expression blank and serious.

"We thought about what you said, and we think we have an idea." Rothley grumbles and pulls out  a
small box, though it looks absolutely tiny in the burly man's large hands. The box is passed to him,
and he can feel an almost buzzing sensation, like something inside is alive.

Percival accepts it eagerly. "Tell me more." Because they aren't turning him away. They are asking
him to stay and want to put him to use. Exactly what he's been waiting for.

"We want you to gain access to MACUSA. Find some way into the meeting rooms where the aurors
meet, and release this." Miss Pendelwood places a soft hand on his shoulder and gestures towards the
box. "This... may seem like we are asking quite a lot, but you said you wanted to help. It is
dangerous, but if you do this, we will be quite thankful."

Percival scratches his head, more curious what is in the box than the dangers Miss Pendelwood
warns him of. "I'll do it, but... what is it?"

"It is a little charmed invention of mine." Rothley explains. "Think of it as a fly on the wall. With it,
if you get it in a good location, we can listen in on their discussions. Doing this will give our cause
an incredible advantage. And if you decide to double cross us, we'll know."

There's no need to even debate it in his mind. Get into MACUSA, find a meeting room, release the
little fly. That actually sounds rather simple. Perhaps he should be intimidated, but considering it is
where his dad works, he doesn't feel too overwhelmed. "I understand and I won't let you down."
Clutching the box, he stands tall and determined.
It's the last time he sees the group that summer.

While he has to wait a few days for Dad to come home from a work mission, he doesn't mind. It gives him some time to think over how he'll go about it; can't be too suspicious, can't be too overeager. The box is small enough to hide in his coat pocket undetected, so at least there is that. The hard part will only be getting in the door.

By the time his dad finally gets home, he's got a plan worked out in his head. Once his dad has had plenty of time to settle down, Percival approaches him in the living room. His dad is sitting in the parlor around a warm fire.

"Hi, um, Dad? I know you just got home, but I was hoping you could take me on a tour of where you work? I'm going to be a fifth year which means I should start thinking about what I want to do. Maybe I could see what MACUSA is like so I can get a better idea of all my options."

His dad lowers down the paper he had been reading, his face lighting up at Percival's request. "Of course! We just closed a big case so it's a good time for you to ask. How about tomorrow?"

"That sounds wonderful" Percival smiles, though not for the reason his dad thinks.

----

The next morning, he wakes up early to join his dad.

The box is carefully stashed in his pocket and he brings a journal with him to jot down notes. Anything he can learn, no matter how simple, he records, believing Miss Pendelwood and Rothley will appreciate it. He wants to prove himself and not only is he doing what they are asking, but he is going above and beyond.

Dad leads him to a small building, not far from a huge flat plot of land. As they pass by it, Dad explains that their current headquarters is only temporary and that their best architects are in the process of planning a new building for them. It will take several years, of course, but everyone is excited.

They head inside the indistinct building and he's stays close to Dad. The building is full of people running around in fancy suits, all trying hard to look both busy and important. Dad takes it upon himself to introduce Percival to every single person they pass. Everyone asks him how school is going, if he's going to be a great auror like his dad after he graduates.

It's annoying but nothing he doesn't expect. He deals with each and every interaction politely, but avoids giving anyone a straight answer. After all, his excuse for being here is to figure out what he wants to do in the first place.

So Dad takes him through the building, introducing him to various staff members. He's lead through any place his dad is allowed to take him, from the Wand Permit Offices to the various departments. It isn't everything, but it's still more than he anticipated. Every detail is written down. Dad appears happier than he has in a long time, as Percival is taking an interest in his job. If Percival is honest with himself, he feels slightly guilty taking advantage of his dad's trust like this, but not to an extent to stop what he's doing.
Eventually, they come to a large meeting hall. The room itself is empty and the walls are lined with benches. On the far end of the room a set of red stairs lead up a rather ornate looking chair, a banner with the government seal handing behind it.

Dad explains to him that this is where the president, their aurors, and all the international council members meet. There's a brief moment when his Dad has his head turned and Percival knows this is exactly the sort of place Miss Pendelwood had to have been referring to. So he takes this opportunity to slip his hand in his pocket and break the seal on the box.

Something whooshes past his finger and, out of the corner of his eye, something no bigger than a small fly hovers over to the wall. As the room is large and the walls are dark, Percival doubts it will be noticed. At least he hopes it won't, not any time soon. Dad turns back around to ask him a question, and Percival nods as if he'd been listening intently the whole time.

Not long after, they leave, Dad telling him there isn't much more he can show him and they make their way back home. Percival thanks him though, lets his dad know how much of a help it's been. While it may have done nothing to help him figure out a job, he still thinks it will be enough to gain him respect amongst the organization. Now all that's left to do is hope he doesn't get caught.

The rest of the summer goes by without any word from the organization. He doesn't have any way of knowing if he succeeded or if they decided what he did wasn't enough. No letter comes from Pendelwood and, as always, he knows he just has to wait.

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It's not until school starts up that he hears anything else.

Miss Pendelwood approaches him in the library, in her hands is a single book. Upon seeing her, he immediately straightens up, attentive and listening. He's got no idea what she's thinking.

Did he do a good job? Did he do so poorly that he's no longer welcome?

He doesn't get an answer until they get to her office, away from prying ears.

"Sorry about the silence lately Percival." She says with an exhausted sigh. "We've all been rather busy since the end of the summer. Which I suppose we have you to thank for. All the information we've been able to gain since you helped us out? It's absolutely astounding." Relief washes over Percival, and he can't wait to hand her all the other notes he wrote down. Before he can even offer to let her know about that though, she's holding out the book in her hands to him. "I have a gift for you."

He blinks, not expecting this. "Oh, thank you." He turns it over, searching for a title.

"Oh it's not from me." She says and it only makes him puzzled. "This is an enchanted journal… Somewhere, in the possession of the person who gave this to you, is one very similar. Writing in it will transfer to it's partner, and vice versa; a way to communicate with people discreetly, if you will."

He's even more confused. "If not you, then is it Rothley?" She shakes her head. "Who else would even want to talk to me?"

"Well I suppose you'll have to open it to find out, won't you?" She says with a wink and walks
When she's gone, he runs his fingers over the leather bound book. A gift for him…

He cracks the journal open. On the first page, written in a beautiful script, he sees a message written down.

"Hello Percival, I've heard so much about you. I'm the leader of this organization. You may call me Gellert Grindelwald."

Chapter End Notes

For more wonderful Percy content from me, check me out on tumblr (percegraves)
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Alright this is about a week later than I had originally intended, but life happens I suppose. Last week was my birthday (I'm 23!) and this week my beta dreamsandpocky (aka gravescredence) is busy moving. Anyways! I've been super excited to get to this point in the fic and I hope you all enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it.

Keep in mind that the year is roughly 1904-1905, so Grindelwald would look more like Jamie Campbell Bower.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Percival stares at the lines, looking fresh on the paper as if he had written it himself. Fingers brush the words indented into the surface, like a quill scrawled them.

"Hello Percival, I've heard so much about you. I'm the leader of this organization. You may call me Gellert Grindelwald."

Their leader? The same man that Miss Pendelwood so often talked about with such reverence? The great wizard who is orchestrating their revolution? That is who is addressing him here.

He wants to respond right away, but he glances around and cannot locate a quill within this office. So for now, the book closes and he holds it tight to his chest as he makes his way back to his dorm.

The room is empty, which is for the best. Silence is needed as he ponders the best way to respond to the introduction in the journal. Introductions are critical, and a good first impression with such an important person could shape his life for years to come.

Simple. Yes. No need to over complicate this.

Even so, his response feels like the most significant thing he's ever written. That weight adds to his nerves, and his hand is slightly shaky as he puts the quill to paper.

"Hello Sir, it's wonderful to meet you."

It's far from his cleanest handwriting. The calligraphy is sloppy and ink drips in places. Looking it over, he's ashamed and only hopes their leader doesn't judge him for it.
For a moment, there is a brief worry that he will have to wait for a response. After all, that is how it had been with every step of this organization. One action followed by weeks of waiting. But before he can close the journal, he sees that same elegant script form under what he just wrote.

"No need to be nervous Percival. It's a pleasure for me as well. And please, just call me Gellert. While I appreciate the show of respect, there is no need for such formalities."

One moment he's not even sure if the organization likes him, and the next he's having a one on one conversation with their leader. Not only is he communicating with him, but he's also getting the closest thing to an instantaneous reply as he has ever gotten. It feels like a dream. Curiosity gets the better of him and he has to question this. It is too good to be true.

"If I may ask, why are you contacting me? No one besides Miss Pendelwood seems to trust me. I'm not even a prominent enough member to go on missions with the rest of the organization, much less be talking to you."

"I'd take Linda's word over anyone else's any day. She told me you have a great deal of promise and passion for our cause. That's rare in someone your age. You may not think you have done enough, but what you have done is greater than anything the others have achieved thus far. It's quite impressive. Besides, school is such a stressful time in a boy's life, and from what she has shared with me, you could use a friend."

He watches Gellert's explanation unfurl before his eyes, doubt growing more and more as he reads the forming compliments. Had Miss Pendelwood really been praising him that much? To Percival it certainly didn't seem like he had contributed enough to deserve such recognition. He owes her more than he expects.

"Thank you S..." Percival realizes his error and tries crossing out the S, quickly writing 'Gellert' next to it. "I wish I could be doing more."

"Ah, I understand that feeling all too well. But you have done plenty for the time being. For now, I believe your focus is best spent on your studies."

Although there is no one around, Percival groans out loud. He wonders the depth of what Miss Pendelwood has told Gellert, because if she had truly told him this much about his life, then this mysterious leader would know how absolutely bored he was. "This school doesn't teach me anything. Everything I've learned here, I've taught myself."

There is a long pause before he sees another message. However, he sees ink touch the paper every few seconds, so he knows his leader is thinking. Moments pass, and then the writing resumes. "If it is a challenge you want, perhaps I may be of assistance. I'll contact Linda and tell her to start working with you. Hand you a few books, run through some exercises, that sort of thing. Lessons of my own choosing, of course. While I can't be there in person, I believe I can be a competent tutor."

So, this great wizard not only wants to simply talk to him, but is now offering to teach him? If the rumors are true, then their leader could be one of the greatest wizards alive. There's no way Percival can turn down the chance to learn under someone such as him. He could try and teach himself from books all day long, but nothing can compare to someone so remarkable giving him lessons.

Still, he doesn't wish to appear too eager, and besides, he knows the time spent helping him could be used on better things. "If you have time. I don't want to be a nuisance."

"Nonsense. I want all my followers to be astounding wizards in their own right. Consider it an investment. Helping you only helps me."
“Thank you again. I won’t let this opportunity go to waste.”

“I didn’t think you would. Anyways, it may take me a few days to compile a list of books for Linda to hand to you. In the meantime, I would like for you to tell me what you already know. American education is foreign to me and I don’t wish to waste your time with topics you’re familiar with by now. By the way, this may be obvious, but please let no one see this journal. It could result in us getting in lots and lots of trouble.”

It makes perfect sense to him. After all, with everything Percival did over the summer, secrecy is becoming second nature to him. If he can go as far as working behind his family’s back, then he can keep a journal hidden. He adds a quick "I understand." as confirmation.

"Good. I must leave you for now. I’ll let you return to your life."

With Gellert no longer responding the rest of the night, Percival can’t help but feel suddenly alone. The conversation he had just had through the journal had been one of the most impactful of his life. He keeps reading over the words they shared repeatedly, as if he is trying to convince himself that their conversation actually happened. Even though there is a record of it right in front of him, he still has a hard time believing that their leader wants, not only to talk to a fifteen year old boy like him, but to tutor him as well.

A year ago, he was busy worrying if the boy he liked would reciprocate his feelings. And now… he’s moved on to greater things.

Before Orion returns, he manages to compile the list that Gellert requested. He logs down all the subjects and spells he is familiar with complete with a description of his proficiency. Of course, while he knows he still has quite a lot to learn, part of him hopes that Gellert will be impressed.

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As Gellert had said, about a week passes before Miss Pendelwood comes with a stack of books ready to help tutor him. Unlike all the other times, Percival finds he doesn’t mind this wait as much. It helps that Gellert continues to talk to him, just small friendly conversations here and there, but it’s nice to not constantly feel as if he is trying to prove himself.

It gives him time to get back into the regular motions of school.

Several of his classes are shared with his acquaintances. Picquery and Luciana both have Defensive Arts with him, as well as a few other classes. Even Orion appears in two of them. Whereas Percival would often spend classes in quiet reflection, having a few people who know they can talk to him cuts that down a great deal.

The classes with Picquery aren’t too bad. Most of the time they just discuss how ridiculously easy their classwork is, even if the professors try to scare them with the importance of their O.W.L.S. coming up later that year. Often they just walk to the library in silence, reading, minding their own business as they had since their second year. Seraphina is a kindred spirit after all.

Orion has never changed. He loves to talk; a fact that still irritates Percival (though he minds it less than he did in the past). The other boy has been good to him over the years, so Percival won’t shove
him away.

It doesn’t stop Orion from pushing his limits however. Especially as Orion has taken it upon himself to find Percival a date; a quest that Orion has decided is of utmost importance. Even if Percival continuously tells his roommate it’s something he wants left alone. He knows Orion is just trying to be a good friend and make sure Percival is happy, but Percival doesn't need that. He's already found what can make him as content as possible with his life, though, he can’t exactly tell this to his roommate. Secrets must be kept after all.

So he endures, brushing off any boy Orion suggests. Honestly, Percival doesn’t know why he keeps trying. After knowing each other for as many years as they had, he would have hoped the other was a bit more conscious with Percival's reserved nature. The likelihood of him clicking with some random boy he barely knows is next to nothing. No such luck however.

A distraction from that mess is not too far off though.

The first days of the semester have come and gone, Percival having somewhat settled into his regular routine. One night, while he's in his usual haunt, the library, Miss Pendelwood comes by his table and drops off a large stack of texts.

"I believe these are for you." She tells him with a knowing smile, and walks away for now.

Once she's gone, he pulls out the journal from the hidden compartment in his bag that he stores it in. After scrawling a brief note to tell Gellert he's received them, his leader lets him know the tutoring can begin.

He doesn't stop going to class, or even stop going to the library, as he has been known to do. Only a few times a week does he make his way to an empty dueling room, or another cavern if those are occupied, so he can practice what Gellert teaches. If he needs a partner for some of the spell work then Gellert has Miss Pendelwood join him.

It takes some adjusting to adapt to Gellert's teaching style. For one, not having Gellert physically there makes it a bit difficult. The remote lessons must be interpreted from written word, though, it's not impossible with Miss Pendelwood's assistance. Gellert is also willing to reword things in a more concise manner if Percival doesn't catch on. When his spell work doesn't go quite as it should, Gellert cannot simply tell him what he did wrong, and Percival must list out every step he took so that they can decipher what needs to be corrected. It may not be the easiest way to learn, but it's worth it. Gellert pushes him in ways no other teacher, not even his dad, has.

At first, the lessons are nothing too unusual. Gellert simply takes what he already knows and gives him more practical applications, letting him learn how to work them into the sort of unconventional tasks that a revolutionary group would do. For example, Percival learns a silencing spell can be used to muffle his footsteps if he needs to sneak into a location or how a levitation charm can serve as a distraction.

On occasion, Gellert even has him attempt what he knows without a wand. 'Don't become useless when you are disarmed.' While Percival understands the importance of it, the task proves far more difficult than anticipated and he can barely even make a pebble budge without the use of his wand. Gellert tells him to just keep practicing but, as it is currently, he's making no progress.

Eventually, once Percival has become quite a bit more comfortable with Gellert's instructing, his leader begins to incorporate more and more spells that he is unfamiliar with. It starts with more complex spells, beyond what is included in this institution's curriculum. Percival would know. He's
read through every textbook of all seven years. These spells though, some are in languages he's not used to, spells he assume must be common in other cultures. Some, Gellert lets him know, are creations of his own.

The further they veer from the Ilvermorny coursework, the more Percival notes that the magic Gellert has him dip his toes into is rather grey. None of it is particularly dark, but still they are the sort of magic that Professor Clairoux would warn them against. None cause particular harm to their target, but center around abilities to alter minds, senses, and capabilities. Gellert teaches him the counters, of course, before casting just in case he does something that would normally be irreversible when attempting it on Miss Pendelwood.

Before attempting any of these, he always raises his hesitance towards Gellert. This sort of magic has always held a negative connotation, and he can't shake that 'dark' implication when reading the words Gellert writes him.

But even so, Gellert calmly explains that the path Percival is on will potentially lead him into dangerous situations. There will be people they will be up against who will not hesitate to use these same curses, and even worse, against him. He should be prepared to not only know the counter, but to be able to strike first. What they learn in school is simply the very basics and, once he gets out in the real world, simple protection and disarming charms won't be enough. Besides, he's already been perfectly willing to bend the rules and even actively fight against the law, so how is this any different? It's not as if he's teaching Percival anything unforgivable.

Once Gellert explains, he does feel more at ease with the lessons and continues to absorb whatever it is his leader wants him to learn.

Spell work and tutoring is not all they talk about, however. They discuss everything from the cause and what it is that brought Percival to him to more simple matters such as how Percival's days are going. It's been years since he's had someone he's been this comfortable talking to, since someone understood him to such an extent. Of course, he had Miss Pendelwood. But he would always see her as almost a family figure. She still has to maintain the appearance of a school employee which means, when they aren't alone practicing, they can't get too close. Gellert though, even as Percival's mentor, is just so easy to talk to. He's the closest thing Percival has had to a friend since… well, since Christopher.

The journal, as a result of both the tutoring and just the joy of the company, becomes Percival's main focus throughout the semester. School itself is an afterthought (not that he learned much from being here in the first place).

Percival never decided what he wanted to do after graduating, and now he's understanding that he doesn’t need to be anything. This, following Gellert Grindelwald, is the path meant for him all along.

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The semester, as always, nears to its end.

Winter approaches, which means another Wintertide Gala. This is a fact Percival would have far rather ignored. Ever since the disaster of his first Gala, he has long since decided that it would also be his last. Besides, he has far more important things to think about these days instead of the social intricacies of his peers and potential relationships he knows will be meaningless.
Orion however, doesn't seem to understand that.

Even after months of telling his roommate he has no interest in dating anyone at their school, the other continues to tell him about various boys who would 'definitely be great for you if you just gave them a chance.' Orion must honestly think he's depressed again with how unwilling he seems to drop the subject. Percival always tries to push the topic away politely, commenting how he thought Orion's matchmaking days were over, or how he rather just focus on his schoolwork. However, it seems the other boy is truly relentless in his pursuit of making Percival happy.

It's a week before the annual dance when the subject finally gets out of Percival's hands.

As he does nearly every night, he's writing to Gellert before he gets ready for bed. He and Gellert are in the middle of a particularly long, in-depth conversation about the merits of a tongue tying curse over a simple silencing charm. Halfway through writing out an important sentence, Orion heads over and closes the journal while Percival is writing.

"Ok Perce, this is getting out of hand. For once, you should get your head out of a book and focus on your actual life. There's more to living than just learning."

Percival raises his head, staring at the closed book, scowling up at Orion. He is far from happy with his roommate right now. "Excuse me, I was doing something." His voice is a low warning.

Orion steps back, hands raised in defense before crossing his arms. "Hey, I'm just trying to look out for you. All I want to do is help."

His only response is a roll of his eyes. He wants to crack the journal back open, but he knows it's a bad idea with Orion standing right behind him. So instead, he takes the book in one hand and his ink and quill in the other and heads over to his bed. Hopefully Orion gets the hint he just wants to be left alone. No such luck.

"Yeah I know last year's gala didn't work out for you…" Orion starts explaining, less forceful this time. "But life rarely does the first time you try. You shouldn't discount something just because your first experience was bad. Last year, you ended up learning a lot about yourself, right? So really it wasn't entirely bad. If you give it another shot, actually talk to Douglas or even Preston, maybe you'd actually have a good time!"

"Doubtful." From the safety of his bed, he reopens the journal to the page he had been on. He'd been in the middle of a word when Orion had rudely interrupted. Beneath his last few sentences, he sees Gellert asking where he went. Percival doesn't want him to worry so he adds 'Roommate interrupted' as a quick explanation.

Before he can continue his argument on vocal inhibition magic, Orion approaches once again. "But how do you know if you don't try? I know I don't understand everything that happened to you last year, but you have to move on, meet someone, experience new things."

He has to stop writing as it's impossible to focus with the other hovering like this. It's obnoxious, a whole semester of this inconsequential topic that Orion cannot seem to let go. It has absolutely no relevance to anything important, and he's tired of Orion pushing this over and over again.

Against his better judgement, despite all of Gellert's pleas for secrecy, Percival cannot help but snap out, "Quit it Orion! I told you hundreds of times I'm not interested. I'm already talking to someone!"

The words are harsh and biting, and he does not intend for it to come out so heated. He's nearly about to apologize for over-reacting, sinking into the bed, but after a quick glance back at
Orion, he realizes the other is not responding how he expects. Whereas he thought Orion would look hurt, the other is smiling, eyes wide with curiosity. Percival can't recall having been so confused in a long time.

"Why didn't you tell me Perce? Who is it?"

"Who is what?"

Orion lets out a good natured laugh. "The guy you're talking to, obviously."

Percival's heart drops, his error was out in the open and Orion had picked up on it. "I… um.. He… he's no one." He stutter, words tripping over one another. This could be very bad. He had not intended for anyone outside of Miss Pendelwood to even know he was talking to Gellert, nor had he planned for an explanation in such an event as this. Even so, what else could he say?

"Doesn't sound like no one."

Orion's grin grows even wider. "I haven't seen you so flustered since… well, since that time you kissed me." At that memory, Percival is sure his face is turning red. "You don't have to be so secretive with me. If you had just told me earlier I wouldn't have been pushing all those other guys on you. I'm not going to judge you. You should know that by now. I'm just curious who you've been dating without telling anyone."

Oh… oh no. That's what he meant? Orion thought… that he was dating Gellert.

If he wasn't already in such a precarious position right now, he'd laugh at the very notion. Gellert, his mentor and his leader, a man who was most likely old enough to be his father, if not older (they never talked much about Gellert himself). That is who Orion thinks he is courting.

Percival raises the journal up to cover his face. It's not as if he can actually tell Orion that he has it all wrong by now. The half-truth is out there, that he's talking to someone that no one knows about. If he were to deny the claim Orion is making, well then he'd have to explain the full truth, which could get him in serious trouble. Behind the journal, he's panicking, trying to think of some way to explain this because he knows that Orion won't just leave it alone.

A web of lies starts to form in his head, and only then, does he lower the journal down and say as calmly as possible, "His name is Gilbert."

That alone seems to relax Orion, his roommate going back to sit on his own bed instead of hover around Percival. Still, he leans forward, clearly still curious. "Is he a student here? I don't think I know a Gilbert."

"I met him over the summer. He's, uhm, from Europe… so I don't get to see him much. That's why I'm writing all the time. We worked out a way we could still talk to one another."

That seems to relax Orion even more. "I met him over the summer. He's, uhm, from Europe… so I don't get to see him much. That's why I'm writing all the time. We worked out a way we could still talk to one another."

Ah the secrecy, the only true aspect of this whole conversation. "I… don't really think my family would approve, so the less people that know the better. Gossip about anyone of my standing is rather common." It would be bad if it got out that the Graves' heir is working with radical groups to change the law after all. Attempting to look as pathetic as possible, he turns back to Orion. "Please don't tell anyone about him. I promise you I'm happy, but it could be jeopardized if it spread around."
"Yeah, of course. You don't have to worry, your secret is safe with me."

Percival is definitely never telling Gellert about any of this.

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He's able to finish up the semester without any further interruptions.

Orion backs off on all further discussions concerning the Wintertide Gala, and while the rest of the students in his year are off having fun at the dance, Percival is content to stay in his room discussing spellwork with Gellert. Most would think him lonely, but he as all the company he needs.

Not only does he not go to the gala, but he also doesn't go back to his family over the break. This way he can continue his tutoring with even less distractions, and doesn't have to relinquish his wand for several weeks. His family understands too, though he isn't completely honest with them. His excuse to them is he wants to make sure he'll be fully focused since the O.W.L. examinations are coming up.

With most of the students and staff gone by Christmas time, Percival is free to more openly practice with Miss Pendelwood. Three weeks where he doesn't have to put up with anyone aside from his two favorite people to communicate with as he hones his skills. He couldn't be happier.

One subject that Gellert stresses he learns as soon as possible, is occlumency.

It's better to be protected, especially since he already has so many secrets in his head that would be terrible for not only him, but for the entire organization if they got out. So he agrees and most of his time over Christmas is spent with Miss Pendelwood, Legilimens cast over and over. There isn't really any risk as there's nothing he wants to hide from her. She knows the important things in his life already, so he feels safe even when she pushes past his pathetic attempts at stopping her.

Over time, though, with both her and Gellert's instructions, as well as various techniques he reads from texts, he does eventually become decent at blocking her out and even gets the basics behind redirecting her.

The constant activity makes the break fly by, and before he knows it, classes are starting up again. His peers flood back into the school.

Contrary to what he expects, Gellert and Miss Pendelwood actually suggest he become closer to them. Blend in, don't hide away. Apparently, people only grow more suspicious the more you conceal from them. A man with no friends is more suspicious than a man with dozens.

So he makes an effort. Over time he becomes more friendly with Orion and Luciana; lets them drag him to various school events. They even make him attend a quidditch game and he complains as little as possible. Orion's promise to secrecy does make it more bearable though, he has to admit. When Orion isn't begging him to talk to strangers, he's actually decent company.

As for Luciana, he still feels a bit awkward around her. Through Orion, it's not too hard to be friendly with her. And he has noticed that this year Luciana is putting more effort into her schoolwork so he often sees her along side himself in the library. When he questions this change in her habits, she reminds him O.W.L.S. are approaching, and she won't let anything stop her from her goal to be an auror. Admirable, he supposes, if he didn't have such a twisted view of said career.
Percival on the other hand, feels no stress from the exams. Even if he was concerned about future job placement, he is already years ahead of his companions. Only one other person in the whole school seems to share this sentiment, Seraphina. The two of them can’t help but laugh at the sudden rush of their classmates to the library this year. Whereas the library had become a refuge for both him and Seraphina years ago, it’s apparently turned into a house of stress for the rest.

He wishes she was less stubborn about her stance on No-Majs. He has a great deal respect for her, and it’s hard not being able to talk to her about his real thoughts. He likes to think her respect for him has grown as well. Even in one of their defensive art class duels he won over Seraphina and, rather than be upset, she just tells him it’s a shame he doesn’t wish to be an auror because he would make a fine ally someday.

The rest of the year is uneventful. With the exams looming over their heads, everyone is too preoccupied to cause any sort of commotion. Percival doesn’t even waste his time studying, not when there are far more interesting and important things for him to be learning instead. Miss Pendelwood tries to push him towards looking over the actual required school material but, after proving to her he's already has a superior grasp on it, she relents and they resume Gellert's tutoring.

Unsurprisingly, he finishes with a perfect score in most of his exams, and near perfect score in the rest. As always, only Seraphina out performs him.

With the end of O.W.L.S. it is also the end of his fifth year.

Unlike last year, he actually dreads the idea of going home. It makes sense, his last year was a mess and only served as a constant build of stress. This year though, between Miss Pendelwood and Gellert, it's been his best year so far.

He expresses his dismay about returning home to Gellert, which actually surprises the other. While Gellert understands how he would feel cut off from magic without his wand, citing it as a ridiculous American law, Gellert still doesn't know about the strained relationship with his family. After all, the entire time they've been in contact he's been at Ilvermorny, so Gellert never really got to hear much about everything that went on outside of that. Besides, he doubts his leader wants to hear about something as trivial his personal crisis.

Percival tries to summarize, just telling him that being the only child of such a prominent American family comes with a great deal of pressure. How, not only does he have the weight of the family legacy on his shoulders (a legacy so tied into the hated laws of the land), but how he's also expected to continue the family name when he can't see that happening in his future.

Gellert does seem sympathetic, but he does remind him that his position with his family is a valuable thing, and it would be unwise to just abandon them. However, he also lets Percival know that he won't be alone, that over the summer he'll have the rest of the organization and their meetings as well as the journal itself. The reminder sets his nerves at ease and he's able to go back home, as relaxed as he can be, the journal clutched tight in his arms.

Overall, his family is pleasant to be around. It's just like last summer, though, where, even though Dad and Momma make attempts to make him feel at home, it doesn't help the heavy tension that fills this house. No matter their efforts, he's still reminded of where he stands in this family any time he
sees Grandpa Graves.

His parents even slip up with their illusion from time to time. Despite their claims to just want him to be happy, he still feels hidden judgement within their lines of questioning. Momma will ask if he's met anyone, which he's come to understand as her trying to see if he's finally given up his silly attraction to men and found a nice girl. Percival just lets her know he's focusing on school.

Dad probes about his classes, wonders how exams went, and what his schedule next semester will be. Percival knows he's really asking, based on the hope in his voice, 'Are you going to be taking classes to get into the Auror Academy'. Sixth year is when their N.E.W.T. level classes start after all, as well as the time when Pre-Law is offered... all requirements for the American Auror Academy. Percival honestly responds with the fact that he doesn't know what he'll be taking. The answer always deflates his Dad's mood and shuts down the conversation.

Not that he particularly sees his dad over the break that often. Practically every other week, Dad's job pulls him away. More often than he's used to, Dad comes back battered and bruised. There's even a good three week period where, apparently, Europe needed some assistance with a rising number of Dark wizard attacks. His dad returns with a broken arm. From what he'd been told, the attacks are growing more and more common, the world becoming a more dangerous place. Dad tells Percival to be careful. Something is stirring and all the aurors across the globe are growing nervous.

After that conversation, Percival tells Gellert to be safe.

If Gellert doesn't respond for a few days at a time, he grows nervous, fearing for his leader's well being. But Gellert always gets back to him eventually.

Despite his current feelings towards his family, he still hopes for Dad's safety as well. Every time his dad leaves, Percival finds himself in the position of comforting Momma. She worries a great deal, more so than he's ever seen her do so before.

In the moments when he is so often left to his lonesome, he takes it as an opportunity to work on his casting without a wand. Gellert appears concerned about this at first, but, after some reminding on Percy's part, remembers that this is America and the 'Trace' so often cast on school aged European children is viewed as 'infringing on their rights'. So even though they take his wand, he's still free to push himself.

With nothing else to take his attention, he's able to focus far more into the late nights. His mind is clear and he's far less likely to try to reach for his wand. So, after following the meditation exercises Gellert had written down for him, he soon finds himself able to cause objects to hover off his desk. Basic magic, but considering his attempts at Ilvermorny had resulted in nothing, he's quite pleased with himself.

As he had the previous summer, he participates in the Organization's meetings once again.

Every few weekends, he heads to the city. Momma will occasionally ask him where he's headed, but he just explains he's off to meet a friend. Believable, considering he has shared with her his growing friendships with Orion, Seraphina, and Luciana. She never denies him going off on his own because as he is sixteen, she trusts him well enough to make reasonable decisions.
It takes a while to find their location at first. While he was away at school, their numbers had tripled
and so their old cramped room no longer suited them. Instead, they occupy a small abandoned No-
Maj theatre. Miss Pendelwood and Rothley, as well as a few others who have been climbing up the
ranks, gather on the stage while the rest of them, including Percival, sit in the first few rows of seats.
Despite talking to Gellert on a regular basis, it's still apparently not enough for him to rise to a more
prominent position. However, he also finds out that it's only Miss Pendelwood who even knows they
converse.

After his stunt with Rothley's fly, he can tell the majority of the members look at him differently.
There's a glint of respect in most of their eyes. There are still those that he assumes will never trust
him, but they are but a small fraction. Most now value his input.

It helps that he has a better idea of what MACUSA is up to than the rest of them based on what he
overhears from his dad. For example, intel on how his dad is away from the country, helping out the
Ministry and other European governments.

That just so happens to be the subject discussed during one of the most important and final meetings
Percival attends.

The meeting begins as normal, Rothley and Miss Pendelwood leading the discussion, trying to figure
out the best way to handle their resources. Percival is in the middle of arguing with an elder member,
trying to convince them that now is perhaps the best time for them to make a move. The aurors are
preoccupied and spread thin.

Right as the elder raises his voice to disagree, the front door swings open.

Everyone stops what they are doing and freezes. All the members of this branch of the Organization
are present that day, no one is absent, no one unaccounted for. So then why is there a grinning young
man standing in the doorway? Golden wavy hair falls into his face, though not enough to hide his
smirk. His eyes are sunken in and his cheeks are sharp, but still, he looks only to be a few years older
than Percival. Even through his shock, Percival cannot help but find him handsome.

Most of the room rises and pulls out their wands, ready to fend off the intruder. Percival sinks into his
seat knowing, at the moment, he's unable to defend himself.

Scoffing at them, the intruder takes a confident step into the room. The elder member, who Percival
had just been arguing with, speaks up and demands, "Who the hell are you?"

The intruder seems almost offended by the question and gives a quick wave of his hand. Beside
Percival, the elder member freezes in place. "And here I was hoping for a warmer welcome." His
voice is almost musical and harsh all at the same time, the accent foreign to him. His gaze turns up to
look at Rothley and Miss Pendelwood on stage. Perhaps most surprising is that he gives the two of
them a wave and they don't seem all that shocked he's there. "I suppose I should have let you know
I was on my way so you could prepare everyone."

Not even looking at the rest of the crowd, he practically struts over to the stage, ignoring all the
glares from the organization members. Murmurs of discontent can be heard through the theatre
though the man acts as if he can't hear any of it.

He joins the side of Miss Pendelwood and Rothley, who even scoot over to give him room. Once
there, he turns to finally address the rest of the room after taking a bow. Smiling pleasantly, he raises
his voice. "Hello everyone, it's wonderful to finally meet you all."

An angry protester starts to speak up, but with another wave of his hand, no more words come out of
her moving mouth.

"So rude. Please let me finish." And the smile returns to his face. The arguing halts after that. "My name is Gellert Grindelwald. You may all know me as your leader."

Percival gapes at him.

This is Gellert? This young man is who he had been in constant contact with for the greater part of a year? He can hardly believe it. All this time he had been assuming that the man had to be at least old enough to be his father, when in fact the man he had grown to admire was barely older than himself. Part of Percival wonders if it's an illusion, that their leader just makes himself appear far younger than he actually is. It would explain how attractive he looks, but Percival also knows that if Gellert wanted respect from this crowd, he would have appeared older. So it only makes sense that this is really him.

Miss Pendelwood turns to Gellert. "What brings you to us? I never expected you to come to America, much less to one of our meetings."

"Well, I was already in your country on my travels. So, while I was here, I figured I might as well stop by and see how everything was going. It is so rare I come across the ocean, so I couldn't let this opportunity slip through my fingers." Once again he focuses on the overall crowd. "So please, share, talk as you normally would. Get me caught up on how everything is going."

Rothley and Miss Pendelwood do most of the talking. After all, they seem the only two here comfortable in Gellert's presence. While Percival may have been communicating with Gellert himself, he still is stunned by his unexpected presence. There's quite a difference between simply writing back and forth and actually being in the same room. Gellert has such an imposing presence, just being close to him makes Percival both drawn to him and intimidated all at the same time. It makes him a bit light headed.

There's a brief moment where their gazes meet and Gellert smiles at him. A simple gesture, but it's enough to make Percival sink further into his seat, unable to think.

He's not the only one who seems uncomfortable in this moment, but everyone else is for different reasons. It seems the rest of them feel disrespected. Percival, however, is in awe.

Once the initial shock is over, they continue the meeting, though it's clear the atmosphere has completely changed. Whereas before they were vocal, ready to argue for their point of view for why they should hold back acting for now, now they all keep quiet. The few times someone besides Miss Pendelwood or Rothley speak up, Gellert shuts them down, telling them to stop being so cautious, to learn and listen how to utilize information such as that that Percival had offered. He tears apart their argument and makes them seem idiotic. Percival himself keeps quiet, too nervous to say anything.

After several minutes of this, Gellert glares down upon all of them, frowning. "Oh dear, I really expected better from you lot. What a disappointment." With that, he sighs, and steps off the stage.

At that, the disgruntled crowd works up again finally, shouts of "Who are you to criticize us?" and "You don't know anything about us you twat!" can be heard around Percival. Clearly none of them know Gellert the way Percival does. None of it seems to have any effect on Gellert though, and his head held just as high as when he walked in.

Only when he gets to the door does he stop. Once again, he looks up at Miss Pendelwood. "Linda, either find better operatives, or whip these imbeciles into shape. You know I don't take kindly to disrespect."
Miss Pendelwood gives a curt nod. "Understood Mr. Grindelwald."

"Good, now I'll be on my way. I have far more important business than to hear you all ramble on about nothing." Before he turns to leave however, his gaze shifts until he's making eye contact with Percival. "Come along Percival, I wish to speak with you in private."

Suddenly all eyes are upon him, their judgement weighing down upon him in a way he hasn't felt since he first joined. He can already hear their whispers and gossip pick up. Feeling he has no other choice, he rises from his seat, and goes to follow alongside Gellert. Before he exits though, Percival turns back to glance back at Miss Pendelwood, unsure if this is even all right. She smiles, nodding politely.

Gellert guides them down the dark hall. Both of them are silent until they finally reach the sunlight of the outside. In the fresh air his leader lets out a deep sigh, face turned towards the sky with his eyes closed. For a brief moment it looks as if Gellert is glowing, the way the sun shines through his golden hair. Percival, in a rare moment of weakness, feels inadequate standing next to him.

"I did not know so many of my followers in this country were such simpletons." Gellert's eyes crack open and he beams at Percival. With so little distance between them, it's hard to not be overwhelmed. "I suppose it was too much to hope for that any of them would be as exceptional as you are." Percival can barely believe what he's hearing, but currently, he's too dumbstruck to disagree. "Anyways, enough about them. It's wonderful to finally meet you in person. I apologize for my lack of response lately. I felt it safer if my journals were tucked away on my travels."

Now that Gellert's full attention is on him, Percival tries to appear dignified, and not like the pathetic fool he's turned into since this man showed up. Hands are shoved in his pockets and he stands straight and tall as he can manage. "It's fine, sir and I must say it's an honor to meet you as well."

"Please, how many times must I tell you, simply Gellert is fine." Despite the scolding Gellert smiles, something that proves to be infectious. His response more than anything reminds him that this is the same man he's been communicating with constantly, the same man he's shared so much with for the greater part of a year. Some of his nerves lessen when he understands that this is no stranger. This is Gellert, his mentor, his leader, and someone he could almost consider a friend. Gellert appears to catch onto his shift and guides the conversation in a more casual direction. "Are you hungry? I'm famished myself. On my way here, I saw a muggle restaurant not too far away and I am very interested in trying it."

The suggestion catches him off guard. "But that's… if anyone catches us there, if we get seen with our wands, or doing magic, we'll be arrested." It isn't like Percival to stress over such things, but he's never performed such an open act of defiance to the laws.

Gellert playfully chuckles and places a hand on his shoulder. The gesture calms Percival immediately and he nearly melts under the touch. "Now Percival, where is your sense of adventure?"

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This is a terrible idea. Percival thinks repeatedly as he takes his seat at the table.

The establishment is far more mundane than anything he's used to. Landscape paintings on the wall remain unnervingly still, light fixtures lit with No-Maj technology, he realizes, instead of a simple
lumos spell. Men in clean shirts and bowties hustle to tables carry what looks like heavy trays… a job that looks like it would be better suited for house elves.

A No-Maj, a waiter he learns, hands them each a menu before asking if they'd like anything to drink. It's Percival's first encounter with a No-Maj who isn't a member of his family and he doesn't know what to say. Would responding to the question be breaking the law? What if MACUSA had spies in here? Shouldn't he be more careful?

"Yes, I'd like a bottle of Prosecco for the two of us." Gellert answers before Percival can even get his thoughts in order.

The waiter writes that down before turning to look over at Percival. "Sir, may I ask how old you are?"

Gellert clears his throat, catching the waiter's attention for a brief moment. The instant the two make eye contact, Gellert waves his hand and tells him, "He's old enough I promise." And the waiter is nodding, walking off to get their order.

With the No-Maj gone, Percival leans in, and in a hushed, shocked whisper, practically hisses out, "You just used magic on the No-Maj!"

Gellert's hands fold on the table and the stare Gellert gives him is scrutinizing. "Your point? It was little more than a Perception charm. Besides..." He leans in as well, drawing closer to Percival. "I thought you agreed with me that the laws were absurd."

"I mean I do, but-" He slinks back to his chair, gaze focused on the table.

"No harm was done, and no one outside you or me will even know it occurred. So really, nothing for you to worry over."

Hoping he's not coming across as a nervous fool, Percival nods. He doesn't want Gellert to doubt his loyalty so he tries to calm down. "If you say so." His focus shifts to the menu in his hands. Unlike the atmosphere of the restaurant, the food itself seems surprisingly normal. It's amazing to see that their people have at least some common ground.

Not too much later, their waiter returns with a large bottle and pours some of the bubbling clear liquid into each of their glasses. They pass on their order, Percival stumbling over his words as he tells the waiter what he wants. It's frustrating... today he can't seem to do anything right, when usually, he's the most collected person in the room. Gellert probably thinks him a simpleton.

If the other does, however, he doesn't say anything. Instead, he picks up his glass and sips. After a moment, Gellert gives a dismissive shrug and frowns at the glass. "I've had better. Not that I expected Muggle wine to be any good."

Percival just stares at his glass. He's never had wine before. Well, he's actually never had anything stronger than a mild butterbeer. Of course, he knows his classmates sneak drinks in and out of the school. He's seen Orion come back to their room loopy and laughing but the idea of it never appealed to Percival. From what he knows about alcohol, he knows it dulls the mind and senses, a thought that terrifies Percival who seeks to be in control of his own self at all times.

"Go on Percival, it's just wine."

With Gellert's insistence, he can't say no. So the glass is lifted to his lips, bubbles rising up and tickling his nose. It smells sweet, and he takes a sip. It... does not taste like it smells. Percival cannot help but scrunch his face.
Gellert chuckles. "I take it you do not drink often?"

His leader's laughter is another blow to his confidence. "I'm only sixteen. I can't say I ever have."

"Oh really? When I was sixteen I was getting up to all sorts of trouble." More chuckles but Percival realizes it's not mocking. Instead, he's smiling pleasantly at Percival, and his assumption that Gellert is judging him falls away. "Forgive me, I should have asked before I ordered for both of us like that. I just assumed. You seemed so nervous and I thought it would help relax you a bit."

"It's fine. I'm just not used to it." Percival sighs before picking up his glass once again. He takes another sip and his reaction is far less dramatic. Perhaps he can grow used to the taste. "I'm not really nervous- more...caught off guard. Meeting you in person like this, well it's something I can't say I ever expected to happen." His fingers play along the stem of the glass, unable to read Gellert's reaction to his explanation. So instead, he asks, "Why are you in America anyways?"

Gellert is quiet, musing over Percival's question before saying finally, "I'm looking for something. But my lead turned out to be outright lying to me. So, here I am, empty handed with leftover time, hence me stopping here."

"Oh?" Percival perks up, curious. "What is it you're looking for? Maybe I can help?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. It's a secret." Gellert hums, twirling a Locke of his golden hair around a finger. "Anyways, enough about me. I'd much rather talk about you."

Percival doesn't expect that, but then again, he hasn't expected any of this. "Me? I think I've told you most everything you need to know about me. What else is there to discuss."

"Well, yes I suppose that we've talked extensively about the past and present. However, what I'm more interested in at the moment is your future."

He shrugs, picking up his glass. "I thought it was rather well established that I was going to help you."

"Yes, but that is a bit vague don't you think?" Gellert sips at his wine. "I was hoping to get into more specifics. Like a career. Think of it this way, Pendelwood on paper, is a librarian. That is her job and what everyone she meets knows her to be, even if she also works to recruit for me at the same time. I know some of those simpletons back there think they can just run off and live in a cave accomplishing tasks for me here and there as a lifestyle. I mean, they can, but all they will ever be able to accomplish is grunt work. You Percival though, you and I both know you are better than that."

Percival will chose to blame the few sips of wine he has had on the blush he feels creep up his cheeks. "Thank you, but I don't have even the slightest idea on what I want to do."

Expression neutral, Gellert looks him over, as if assessing him. "Well, I can offer a suggestion, though you may not like it."

"What is it? I think I'm willing to hear anything out at this point."

There's a brief pause, Gellert appears to be in deep thought, before saying, "You know how this time last summer you successfully infiltrated MACUSA with Rothley's little bug?"

Percival nods, unsure of where his leader is going with this.

"Though I believe they have since found the little bug and squashed him, it was still an amazing help
while it lasted." Gellert's hand rests on his face, words stringing together in his head carefully. "I was thinking… having someone on the inside like that, but on a more permanent basis, would be incredibly advantageous. Getting someone to make personal connections with this country's high ranking officials, getting someone to not only listen in on meetings but have a hand in them as well. Imagine how much influence we could have."

Swallowing down a large gulp of the drink, Percival sinks back into his chair. He's getting an idea of what this leads to, and he's growing uncomfortable. "But Si- Gellert, how would I factor into all of this?" Though he already has a pretty good idea.

"Now comes the part I doubt you want to hear." Gellert lets out a sigh, lips pursing. "I think you should be an auror."

The words are expected, but even so, they are like a punch to his gut. Percival bites down on his cheek to stop himself from interrupting. Protesting loudly and publicly in a setting such as this would be a poor idea.

So Gellert continues when Percival says nothing. "Work your way up their ranks, gain their trust, become my little fly on their wall, one that they would take a look at and see someone too trustworthy to squash."

Uneasy that Gellert would even suggest that, Percival shakes his head, as if that would erase the idea entirely. "Becoming an auror goes against everything I stand for. Taking that path… it would be like admitting defeat to every member of my family. Everyone would look at me and go 'Ah yet another Graves doing what he was born to do.' I don't want that. I don't want to just be another mindless member of society following the status quo." His hand tightens on the glass and his teeth clench.

"I know you hate that I even bring it up as an option." Gellert leans in, two fingers brushing Percival's hand, and he relaxes slightly, some of his growing frustration calmed. "But there are so few I would trust with this, and even fewer are in a place where they can take such a path. You are bright, and I expect nothing but greatness from you." Percival hates how tempting Gellert is making all of this sound. "It's a miracle I even met you at a point in your life, where this is even a possibility. I promise I'm not trying to talk you into anything. Just presenting ideas. Ultimately, no matter what you do, it is your choice. All I ask is you think about it. You have some time before going back to school and solidifying your classes."

Before Percival can even formulate a response, the waiter comes over and places their food in front of them. Instantly, Gellert moves back, hand back in his lap as if nothing had happened. Percival is grateful for the food and the distraction. He'd much rather eat right now then give Gellert an answer to that particular subject.

Percival gets a few bites into his meal, hunched over, silent, when Gellert talks again. "I'm sorry if I upset you…" Percival just continues to pick at his food. "Let's talk about something else then." He smiles. "You can't be the only student at Ilvermorny who feels the way you do about the state of the world. I know I had Pendelwood watching, but from her place she could have only seen so many people? Maybe you know someone else who could become a potential ally."

Only one person comes to mind, and it is just Percival's luck that Gellert has shifted the conversation to the single subject he finds more unpleasant than that of being an auror. However, Gellert asked, and so Percival feels it necessary to be as honest as possible, even if it requires thinking about the person he has desperately avoided thinking about for over a year. "I used to have a friend who I could talk to about practically everything. We shared a lot of the same opinions, did everything together… not anymore though."
As he speaks, Gellert's smile falters slightly, and Percival cannot help but wonder how pathetic he must look right now. Still, Gellert regards him with understanding. "I know what that feels like. A terrible anguish to happen to anyone. It may not be my place, but can I ask what happened?"

He should have expected the question, and while Gellert has given him an opportunity to avoid this topic, Percival wants Gellert to know everything about him. If Gellert was willing to put so much faith in Percival, then shouldn't Percival let him know as much as possible about him, to make better and more informed decisions? He never shared this before because he thought his leader wouldn't care, but perhaps Gellert was a far kinder man than he anticipated.

Before answering though, Percival stares at his glass. Empty… when did that happen? So he takes the bottle in hand and fills his glass back up to the top, before taking another large sip. Drinking was supposed to help with feelings was it not? "I… um… I asked him to be my date to a dance. See, I… uh… only like men… um… in an attraction sense. Have I told you that? I might have…" The words nervously tangle in his mouth and he can't believe he's saying them out loud. The last time he let someone know that fact about himself, he strained his relationship with his family.

Gellert doesn't look at him with dread like they had. "You told me you couldn't see yourself continuing on your family's line. Is this what you meant?"

Percival slowly nods.

"There's no need to be so embarrassed. I must admit, I have the same inclination."

Looking up from his meal, Percival's eyes go wide at the revelation. Gellert gives him a reassuring smile, and even though the room around him may be growing hazy, he feels more at ease in his leader's company than he has with anyone in a long time. For some reason, hearing that Gellert shared the trait that cause him so much grief, is an enormous comfort.

When Percival doesn't answer immediately, Gellert adds, "I take it your friend did not feel the same?"

As quickly as his mood had been lifted, it crashes down as he remembers exactly what they had been discussing. "N-no. When I asked him, he looked at me like I was evil. Told me it was unnatural and he never wanted to see me again. See… he was a No-Maj born wizard and…" He tries to explain further, but it won't come out. A lump forms in his throat and he's light headed. Instead, his eyes water and a tear leaks from his eye. It's a sign of weakness he hopes Gellert will overlook.

There's a hand on his. Warm, consoling fingers wrap around his. Percival can't help but sniff, and he hates that the act only makes more tears fall. "You don't need to say any more. I believe I have a decent idea what happened. There's another gentle squeeze to his hand before the other moves back and produces a handkerchief with the initials GG embroidered on the cloth. "Here, I believe you need this more than I do at the moment."

Percival accepts it and dries his face. "I apologize. I didn't think I'd get this upset. I'm not typically this emotional."

"Don't be. It is I who am sorry for you. I can barely believe there is a wizard out there who would deny you. But I suppose muggle ideology is so toxic that it has trapped the lowest of our kind. It's a shame you were caught in the crossfire." He sighs. "It is reasons like this that we must lead them, show them the right way and eradicate any such backwards thinking. This is just one of hundreds, maybe thousands of examples."

"I want to fix it all. I want to change everything that is unfair or doesn't make sense, both Wizard and
No-Maj, so that no one else has to be hurt by any of it." Percival looks up, eyes locking with Gellert's. "I'll follow you anywhere if it means accomplishing that goal."

"You are far too good to me." Percival wants to tell him no, that he's just doing the right thing, but Gellert is moving back and stands before he can say anything. "As much as I would love to stay here and continue talking to you, it is getting late and we should probably get you back home."

He wants to protest, wants to spend as long as possible in Gellert's company, but one look a window shows how dark it's gotten over the course of their conversation. Momma would probably get worried if he stayed away too long, and besides, Gellert is a busy man. So he nods and tries to stand up. His sense of balance, though, is thrown off slightly and he stumbles a bit. "I think I may have had too much wine."

Gellert laughs at that, but he puts a steadying arm over his shoulders. At the contact, Percival wants to just fall into his leader, to slouch against him and bask in his presence. "You only had two glasses worth. I suppose it means you should just be more careful in the future. Wouldn't want anything bad happening to you because you can't handle your alcohol." With Gellert's hand on his back guiding him, he's lead out of the establishment. With his head as clouded as it is, he doesn't realize that Gellert didn't even pay.

They go out into the street and his leader pulls them into a side alley not far from the restaurant. Briefly he wonders why they are here but Gellert tells him, "Please try not to vomit."

And with that, he feels the tell-tale signs of apparition, and they are standing outside the city's Floo Network Central. His stomach clenches and it takes a lot of willpower to not keel over and gag. He succeeds though and Gellert continues to hold him while he regains his senses.

After a few deep breaths, he peels himself off the other man, knowing they have to part. "Thank you for the meal." He swallows nervously, already missing the other. He wishes Gellert could come through the fire place with him, but he knows it's a ridiculous thought. "When will I see you again?"

"I can't say for sure. I don't know when my travels will bring me back over to the States, but I promise we will keep in touch. I'll be back to my journals soon enough and I will be eager to hear how everything is going for you."

"I look forward to it." He manages a smile, even if the thought of separating saddens him. "I suppose this is good bye for now?"

"I suppose it is." Before he walks away though, Gellert leans in and whispers, "Don't forget everything we've discussed today. I do hope you will consider my suggestion."

Percival shivers, too muddled to argue at the moment.

And with that, Gellert steps away and vanishes.

For several moments, he takes a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. Even though it was only their first meeting, he still finds he misses Gellert's presence greatly. There's no more reason to stay here though, and so he goes back through the floo network back home. Not wanting to see his family in his current state, he goes off to his bedroom.

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The following day, he fills out his class form.

All N.E.W.T. level classes as well as an Intro to Law and Government class. All of which are requirements to be accepted into the American Auror Academy, or the AAA.

His family watches as he fills out the form, marking the little boxes for each class with his quill. Dad makes no comment, but he can sense the pride radiating from him. Grandpa Graves is less subtle, commenting, "We shall deal with the other matter in time, but for now, you are back on your way to becoming a respectable member of my family."

Percival hates it all the same. But he bites his tongue the entire time and sends the form off with their owl.

Chapter End Notes

I hope from here on out, I'll be able to get chapters out every other Sunday. I'm aiming to get the next one out by March 5th. See you then! In the mean time, I'll be posting some edits and art inspired by this fic over on my tumblr. (percegraves).
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I goofed and this chapter was supposed to be short. Somehow it ended up as the longest one so far! Woops. More words for everyone to enjoy I guess. There's a lot of wrapping up loose ends here. I hope you enjoy it!

Beta'd/coplotted by none other than dreamsandpocky (aka gravescredence)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taking his first step into his Auror Prep classes is an incredibly uncomfortable experience.

When Percival enters, everyone's eyes are upon him. Those that don't know him personally are intimidated by his arrival. After all, he is one of the top students in their grade entering what he supposes is his birthright of a profession. Those that do know him well enough seem rightfully shocked, as he has often stated that he never thought the career to be a good fit for him.

But here he is, in a room full of aspiring Aurors, in an Into to Law and Government class. He expects this to be the start of his most despised course since No-Maj Studies.

At least there are a few familiar faces here. Seraphina, who has expressed to him that this is the best path into politics, and Luciana, who has often told him of her strong desire to defend others. So both of them being here is no surprise.

He takes a seat relatively near the two girls, and just hopes they don't question his presence too much. Once their initial shock wears off, both seem glad to have him there.

While he may not want to be here, he'll make the most out of it. Slacking off and skating by is not in his nature, and he'll put as much effort into this as he has any of his education and tutoring. If he has to take the path of an auror, then he'll be the best damn auror this country has seen.

It takes a while to adjust, though. The first few classes feel as if he's walking into a lion's den. So many of his true feelings must be repressed, but he learned a long time ago from his No-Maj Studies class how to get by without an issue. One difference, however, is he doesn't have a companion to
laugh about and discuss the lessons with afterwards.

He has Gellert though, who he writes to after every single class. But, rather than have an entertaining conversation, Gellert has him absorb the teachings. Not to warp his thinking, but to figure out the written laws of the land and think of ways around them. The more he knows, the better he can fight against it. Know thy enemy after all.

So, instead of tuning out the speeches of laws he despises, he listens. Takes in the different perspectives, makes sure he understands the intricacies and complexities of every issue.

One perspective he finds especially interesting comes from Seraphina. She gives a verbal report on how Rappaport's Law has personally affected her, how it has kept her and her family safe from not just Anti-Wizard Sentiments down in Louisiana, but also ugly 'racial prejudices' that exist in such a place. It's nothing he's ever considered before but, the more she speaks, the more he understands where she's coming from. It's a compelling argument after all and even Percival can't help but feel angry as he thinks how not only Seraphina, one of the smartest people he knows, but also Orion, the kindest person he's met, would be treated as second class citizens had they been born into the No-Maj world instead.

The idea bothers him to such an extent, that he even brings it up to Gellert later. Gellert explains that it is yet another example of ridiculous No-Maj bigotry, one that has no place in their world. Wizards should teach them the error of their ways rather than just let it continue unchecked. In time, they could stamp out such nonsense attitudes that plague No-Maj kind.

All things considered, he's able to make the most of the class, learn and branch out from what he's grown so used to. Everything here will help him adapt to what he must become for the years ahead.

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It turns out, that Intro to Law and Government is far from his worst class that year. While it may be an uncomfortable experience, Percival can handle it.

His N.E.W.T. level Defensive Arts class, however, a course he expects should be rather laid back, is hell for him.

The first day of class, Percival steps inside as usual, confident and ready for the year.

But the moment he heads into the room, he catches sight of none other than Christopher. Why was he here? How is he here? The last time Percival saw him, he was barely passing his classes. And yet here he is, sitting amongst all the future aspiring aurors and other overachievers. Life must be playing some cruel trick on him.

For the first several lessons, he avoids looking at Christopher, sits on the opposite side of the room. In the company of Seraphina and Luciana, it becomes possible to ignore him. It's almost like he can pretend the other doesn't exist.

Of course, it doesn't last.

Two weeks into the semester, he heads to class as usual, head down to hide from the gaze of anyone he wishes to avoid. He's not looking where he's going, just walks down the same path he has to Defensive Arts for the last six years of his life. Too deep in thought over a recent conversation with
Gellert, he manages to walk right into a solid body, stopped in his way.

Percival stumbles back, slowly lifting his head to look at the obstacle. It's Christopher, standing tall with his arms crossed. He looks furious.

"You are a liar and a hypocrite Percival Graves!"

It's the first thing Christopher has said to him in nearly two years.

Percival brushes himself off and stands tall. Even though Percival has changed over that time, become more knowledgeable about the realities of the world, the memories of their last conversation haunts him, and he fights the fear that threatens to bubble up. "What are you talking about?" His voice is controlled, but even still he avoids looking at the other boy directly in the eyes.

That doesn't seem to work for Christopher who tilts his head down to force eye contact. Christopher's eyes are angry and Percival can't help but be confused. Everything bad occurred a long time ago, why is he angry now? "Margarette saw you in the Law and Government class… thought you said you didn't want to be an auror." The words are biting and accusatory.

Of course, after all this time, this is what Christopher would want to talk about. The thing Percival didn't want to do, taken at face value. He can't reply with the truth, that no he still doesn't wish to take this path, that this is an unpleasant task, but one he's doing for the right reasons. So instead, he dodges the question all together. "What's it matter to you? I thought you never wanted to speak to me again?"

He used to be so good at reading Christopher, knew how to cheer the other boy up, to make him smile. Now all Percival can see though is an ugly expression directed at none other than him. "I'm just realizing now that all that talk back when we were friends, the ones about the laws being terrible… it was all just a failed attempt to seduce me, wasn't it? You never believed a word of it."

The fact that Christopher would even suggest that, it hurts. "Is that really all you think our friendship was?" He growls more to himself than anything, jaw clenching as he swallows the torrent of emotions, the sorrow, the longing, the rage that threatens to boil over and attack. It works, and he's able to look directly at Christopher and with a, sort of scary, calm add, "You're wrong. Every word I said in the past, I truly meant it. You're wrong. Every word I said in the past, I truly meant it."

Christopher lends out and grabs his wrist before he can get much further. "You know, you're right. There were several flaws in your thinking but clearly you changed the wrong ideas. I hope you're happy with the fact you're knowingly going into a profession that actively pushes the lies and oppression of No-Majs."

Percival glowers at the other and yanks his arm back. "Let me go."

The hand loosens and Christopher steps back, holding his hands up defensively. "Fine. But if you really meant what you said back then, you wouldn't be doing this." Christopher scoffs as he continues. "I guess it's good I freed myself from you so soon. Someone who just changes their values on the simplest whim? You would have just held me back."

He's rubbing his wrist, already starting to walk away. But Christopher keeps speaking and Percival can't take it. Stopping, he turns back around, furious and shouting. "Hold you back? Do you not remember all that tutoring I gave you? You wouldn't have made it past year three if it wasn't for me!"
"I've been doing just fine without you, you egotistical asshole!" Christopher shouts back, stepping into Percival's space.

Just as Percival is about to forego shouting all together, on the verge of snapping and going off on Christopher, he feels a soft hand on his shoulder. Whipping around, he turns to see Seraphina.

"Graves, just what do you think you are doing shouting in the middle of the hallway? We have a class to attend."

At that, realizing just how close he had been to losing his carefully maintained composure, he forces himself to calm down. Christopher huffs and storms down the hall in the direction of their class, a class Percival is looking far less to than usual.

Seraphina has her arms crossed, seeming as if she's still waiting on an explanation. "Isn't that the boy who used to be in the library all the time with you? What was that all about?"

Percival shakes his head. "It was nothing. He's no one. I… really don't want to talk about it."

She shrugs, not pressing further. "Anyways, let’s move along before we're both late." And with that, he makes his way to the class, unable to think about anything past that fight.

----

That night, Percival curls up on his bed, the argument with Christopher playing over and over again in his head.

It seems anytime he interacts with the other boy now only results in turmoil. At least this time, he's not questioning why. Oh, he knows why Christopher reacted the way he had. Percival most likely would have done the same had their situations been reversed. What a terrible thing misunderstandings are… and even worse is the fact he cannot correct it.

Maybe Christopher had been right. Even though it is a lie, a cover story, it still feels as if he's going against everything he's stood for his whole life. The path he's on didn't sit right with him when Gellert suggested it, and it feels even worse now. If this was truly what he should be doing, he wouldn't be so insecure.

So he messages Gellert after hours of tossing and turning, unable to sleep. Sitting up, he pulls his blanket over his head, making a dim light under the covers, just enough to see the journal. He starts to write. "Are you awake?"

A few minutes pass before he gets a response. Percival is too tense to do anything but stare at the paper until a reply slowly forms. "Yes actually. I just woke up. Isn't it rather late over where you're at?" Seeing the familiar handwriting, Percival already starts to calm.

"Can't sleep."

"Oh? What is troubling you?"

Even though it must have been hours wasted over-thinking the answer to that question, it takes only a moment to figure out how to word it. "I'm having doubts about this mission, working against what I've been fighting for all along. It feels wrong, hiding what I truly feel. I don't think I can do it,"
become an auror, if this is how I feel after barely even getting started. There's still time to figure out another path. There has to be a better way for me to help."

"Percival, calm yourself. I meant what I told you over the summer. Doubts are understandable, especially since the task before you is so daunting. But you are still the only one in a position to take this role, and I have so much faith in you that you will do a fantastic job."

He grips his quill tight, unhappy with the answer he's seeing. Why is all of this on his shoulders? He wants to please Gellert, wants to do him proud. But if just one conversation has him cracking… then how can he follow through with something that requires such a high amount of secrecy. Gellert is placing far too much trust in him.

"But what if I don't?"

"You give yourself far too little credit. Tell me, what made you question this?"

After their talk over the summer, he rather not say. Would Gellert find him weak if he admitted that Christopher still had some hold over him? Even so, he feels a need to be as honest as possible. "Christopher, um, the boy I told you about over the summer. He told me I was a liar and a hypocrite for taking this path."

"But you know he's wrong. Why should you care so much about the opinion of someone who hurt you as he did? It's not as if he truly cares about you."

He knows Gellert is right, but even so, the reminder hurts. Percival curls in even more on himself. If it were not for Gellert expecting an answer, he'd remain there moping all night. "I know… I know. But it still hurts none the less. I wanted to yell at him, to tell him how mistaken he was. I knew I couldn't though and repressing that made me want to lash out at him. Had we not been interrupted, I fear I might have. If bottling everything up now can cause me to nearly lose control like that, then am I truly the best person for this job?"

"He would have deserved it, though. Whatever you would have done would pale in comparison to the pain he's caused you. When you spoke of him over the summer, I could see the pain in your eyes. How you were able to stop yourself when he only caused more harm is astounding. In your position, I doubt even I could have held back. What you displayed is a sign of strength. So you may question yourself, but I still trust that you will do fine. It may be uncomfortable suppressing everything, but you can't expect to be perfect at a skill you are just developing."

"If you say so." Percival says, not so much in agreement, but he's in no mood to argue further. "It's just been so long since he's spoken to me, and the first thing he says after nearly two years of silence is to criticize me. I used to want to hold him and kiss him and imagined a future where we were inseparable. But he's only hostile now, and I just wish I could go back to pretending he never existed."

"I'd hold you right now if I could. But all I can offer is to tell you that he is worthless. He is nothing but a misled muggleborn sheep who holds on to outdated views and takes out his frustration on you. If he ever tries to belittle you like that again, you shouldn't just stand by and take it. You are better than him. You may need to hide your allegiances, but keeping so many emotions bottled up inside, it's unhealthy. It's good to release your frustrations sometimes."

That first sentence has him feeling warm, comfortable, protected. It makes him imagine what it would be like to be comforted by Gellert in such a way. A vision that he would not normally indulge, but now, it is welcome. When his eyes reopen though he sees the calls to defend himself, to fight back. It makes Percival uneasy. Raising his wand against Christopher, yes the other may
deserve it, but still it feels as if there is a part of Percival that only wants the best for him. So the only response he can come up with is, "Hopefully it won't have to come to that."

"Hopefully not. The less conflict in your life at the moment, the better I suppose. Still, it's bad to let others walk all over you. I'm just trying to provide some advice."

"I appreciate it." He thinks of something else to add, but he's afraid that he'll just mess up, say the wrong thing and anger Gellert. Discussing this though has made him feel better, and perhaps he can sleep. "Thank you for everything though. I think I'll be able to sleep now."

"Glad to help. Good night Percival."

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Despite certain obstacles, the semester moves along faster than usual. Having a goal in mind, a direction his life will take, it helps keeps him focused. Even if his aspirations are different from everyone around him, it is a goal nonetheless.

His N.E.W.T. level classes are also difficult enough to hold his attention, something that hadn't happened until this year. Of course, they are nothing compared to Gellert's lessons, but it is nice to not feel held back by his peers for once. Amongst them are the top students. None of them a slacker, everyone talented or a hard enough worker to make up for it.

Gellert's lessons haven't stopped, so he learns to juggle the two. Fortunately for him, Percival has long since grown used to spending every waking hour in the pursuit of academics. It's an easy shift. One difference, though, is that what he learns from both Gellert and his classes deal more into the realm of practicality than they had in previous years, so his time is split equally between the library and the caverns to practice in. Nearly every night he's in one of the other, working hard when all but the most dedicated of his peers are sleeping soundly.

Tonight is just one such night and he stands in one of the Wampus caverns. The dueling rooms themselves occupied by students preparing for their upcoming defensive arts midterms. In theory, Percival should be among them, but, as he has never lost a duel in his entire career here, he doesn't find a particular need.

Gellert has him running through drills, practicing a variety of spells. At the moment, he's pushing himself further on his *incendio* spell, managing the size and longevity of the fire. It may be basics, but important nonetheless.

A side effect of the repeated casting of *incendio* is that the cavern has grown hot and muggy. His shirt and coat long since shed, joined a pile of his other things off to the side. He's alone anyways, no company aside from the journal, so no one can see him unkempt.

It's for the best. Here in the cave there are no distractions. Percival can just pour all he has into making the fire hotter and hotter until parts of the fire grow turn from yellows and oranges and reds, to a mesmerizing blue.

He just watches it flicker from the tip of his wand, the sweat running down from his back nor the weight of the journal in his hands enough to distract him from the beautiful sight. The color is cool, but he knows it would burn worse than a normal fire had he touched it. Fire, the representation of passion, of anger… dangerous and contained all at the same time. This had to be why Gellert was
telling him to do this.

"Perce? What are you doing here?"

And with that, Percival's focus wavers and falters. In an instant, the flame vanishes.

Turning to see the source of the interruption, Percival finds himself looking at Orion. His roommate holds a broom, leaning against it as he stares back at him. Rather than the usual confident presence, Orion looks a bit awkward.

"Oh, I was just brushing up on some of my basic spells." He explains. Does it really make a difference if it is for class or for Gellert?

"Without a shirt on?"

Percival can feel himself flush. "You try casting fire charms for an hour in a coat." But he points his wand at his clothes and the shirt and coat float over his way. Ugh, he probably looks like a mess. But he redresses and just hopes Orion will forget about this or just never mention it again. "Anyways, I guess I should ask why you're here too?"

Orion pats his broom. "I fly through the caverns sometimes when I'm bored. With you and Luciana so busy these days, I gotta entertain myself somehow." He chuckles.

Rolling his eyes, Percival asks, "What about Abigail?"

"What about her? Just because she and I are together doesn't mean I have to cling to her every second. We like to give each other some space, makes the little moments we spend time together all that more meaningful."

"Whatever you say Orion…" Percival smirks. Leave it to Orion to be sappy, though he can't help but wonder if things are as good as his roommate is trying to make it sound.

"Don't even try to give me a hard time. You're the one who's dating someone all the way in Europe." One hand lets go of the broom and points at the journal in Percival's hand. "Speaking of which, how are things going with Gilbert? You've been so preoccupied with classes and writing to him that we haven't gotten a nice chance to chat."

It takes a moment to remember exactly what it is that Orion is talking about. When it clicks, Percival wants to run and hide. Ah yes, Gilbert… the biggest lie he's ever told Orion. Just thinking about it fills Percival with embarrassment. What had he been thinking back then? Seriously? Gilbert? Two letters off of his secret leader's name. He really hopes that Orion will always be good on his word and not tell a soul.

"Uhm… Things are going well?" He says, unsure at first, but then he thinks over all that he and Gellert have done since Orion last asked. "Really well, actually. We got to see each other in person over the summer. He made a surprise trip to America."

At hearing that, Orion perks up, excited, and skips over to Percival's side. "Come on, I want details! What did you guys do? How long was he there? Did he meet your family?"

There's so many questions at once and Percival barely knows where to begin. "No, he didn't meet my family. I told you before, they wouldn't approve." So he considers what to say instead. Perhaps something close to the truth rather than try and spin a lie that would go beyond his control. After all, Gellert does say the best truths are born from lies. "He came to the city and took me to dinner."

The fact that it was at a No-Maj restaurant is carefully omitted.
"It was just the one day?" Orion asks, sounding a bit disappointed for Percival.

“Well, yes, but it was a wonderful experience. We sat there, shared a bottle of wine and talked about the future. We were there until dark, and when it was time to leave, he made sure I got back to the floo station safely.” The more he recalls the events of that day, the more he finds himself smiling. It's not just for show either. That day he always will look back fondly on. "Told me he had a wonderful time and even gave me his handkerchief." Gellert hadn't asked for it back, so Percival held onto it, hiding it in his bag in the same compartment he stored the journal.

"Wait… so he got you drunk and that's all that happened?" A sly smirk creeps onto Orion's face. "Now, either he's a real gentleman, or there's something you aren't telling me Perce."

Of course there's something he's not sharing. That whole description had been an exercise in omission. But how would Orion even know th-

Oh… Oh no. Percival isn't naive. He's heard the gossip of the people his age, sneaking alcohol and making poor decisions, but those things never even crossed his mind until Orion even suggested it. The unwanted idea planted in his mind, and it digs its way into Percival's imagination as he thinks exactly what Gellert could have gotten him into while he was hazy from the drinks. Had Gellert wanted, he could have easily pushed him up against that alley wall instead of apparating away. Percival had already been putty leaning against him, so would he have even tried to move away in such a case?

But Gellert wouldn't have done so. Their 'relationship' outside the lie he sells to Orion is nothing more than professional. Gellert is his mentor, his leader. Even if he is interested in men, why would he be interested in a schoolboy like Percival? For some reason, that thought saddens him. So again, he asks himself if Gellert had advanced on him, alcohol or no, would Percival have rejected him? It crashes hard on him when he realizes that, no, he wouldn't. He would have eagerly embraced his golden haired superior and enjoyed every moment.

That isn't what happened though, so he frowns and shakes his head. "No… nothing happened."

Orion chuckles, a contrast to Percival's unexpected drop in mood. An arm is slung over his shoulder, pulling him into a half hug. "If you say so. But seriously Perce. Seems like you found a good guy and I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." He smiles, but still slips out of the hug. "I… um… realized I'm actually pretty tired? You can have the whole cavern to fly around in. I think I'm going to head to bed."

More snickering from Orion, but he doesn't question him further or try to stop him. "Alright. I'll see you in the morning. Odds are you'll be asleep by the time I get back. Goodnight!"

With that, Percival packs up whatever he had laying on the ground and heads back to the room. Holding Gellert's journal is an awkward experience as remembering all their conversations just makes the warm twist to his stomach grow stronger. Every step, he's cursing himself and it becomes clear exactly what it is he's feeling. It’s not foreign to him as he's experienced it for exactly one other person.

Not that he'll ever say anything to his leader. Percival has long since learned from experience that it’s best to shove these feelings down, never to see the light of day. He's already ruined one close friendship with being honest with how he feels.
The year continues, the stress from both the constant presence of Christopher and newly realized affection for Gellert just becomes something he grows accustomed to. They are omnipresent but he tries to not think about them. The more he practices, the harder he works, the more distraction he has.

That is, until their mid-term Defensive Arts dueling tournament.

Percival walks into the Dueling Hall confident as ever. After all, he's still never lost a duel, one of only a few students in recent years to be able to make such a claim.

The class gathers around the raised platform talking amongst themselves as they wait for Professor Clairoux to start the event. Percival stands next to Seraphina as she makes comments such as 'Please don't brag too much about your future win' and 'If we go against one another, please don't do anything that will be embarrassing and last several days. I won't be able to forgive you.'

Percival just lets her know that she is being ridiculous. While he'd never brag, and he's not known for using complicated curses, he still cannot help but be a little bit arrogant. Even so, her teasing has him in a good mood.

Until the professor pulls two names from the bag.

"And the first match will be, Percival versus Christopher."

He freezes, a chill washing over him and he can't move. Doesn't want to move to the stage. It's only when Seraphina wishes him luck and nudges him over forward, does he remember how to walk and steps up onto the platform.

By the time he gets up there, Christopher already stands on the opposite end. The last time Percival was here with him, Percival had been teaching the other. Christopher was clumsy, but still that silly boy he had grown to care for. Now though, he stands straight and tall, glaring over at Percival with a cold sternness.

No, this isn't right. He shouldn't be here. This was Christopher's worst subject, the same subject Percival tutored him in by literally holding his hand. That is what he should be doing, holding Christopher close, face pressed against his shoulder, never letting go. No fighting, no separation between them…

The professor starts to count down, but Percival doesn't register it. He's too lost in his thoughts to remember the reality around him.

Only when Christopher raises his wand does Percival remember exactly what they are doing. He attempts to make up for lost time, but the Professor's count is too quick, shouting "GO" before Percival is in position.

He's too far behind, his reaction time too stunted by his state of mind.

"Expelliarmus!"

Percival's wand goes flying.

The only sound that can be heard is the tap of the wood against the stone floor. The whole room goes silent, everyone, including the Professor, too stunned to say anything.
None more so than Percival himself. His hand twitches, unable to comprehend that his wand is gone in this moment. All his focus is on Christopher though, Percival staring dumbfounded at him.

Christopher sneers, triumphant and spiteful. No, this isn't the sweet boy he used to care so much for. Nor is he the frightened boy who ran away from him. This Christopher is harsh, unsightly as he looks down upon Percival. The mocking, the 'I'm better than you' plain to see even if it is unsaid.

Gellert's words run through his head. *You shouldn't just stand by and take it. You are better than him.* And Percival knows this. He is better. He doesn't need this pest in his life. He will not let this boy continue to ruin him and walk all over him any longer.

Years' worth of rage boils under the surface tired of being repressed over and over again. With a raise of his arm, it all comes out with an aggressive sweep of his hand and a single shouted word.

'*DEPULSO!*

Christopher, as if a battering ram hit him, is swept off his feet and flies over the crowd, before slamming against the cavern wall hard. When Christopher hits the floor, he doesn't move to get up.

The room gasps.

However, Percival isn't done. Not when Percival must crush him, hurt him until he understands exactly how much suffering he put him through, until he understands that it is not Percival with the wrong way of thinking. He deserves it.

Stepping off the stage, Percival shoves his way through the pack of students. Nothing will stop him from his goal. As he finally stands in front of the prone body, he opens his mouth, raises his hand once more, ready to break him further.

Before he can get the word out, a hand clasps over his wrist and mouth. "That's enough Percival."

Professor Clairoux commands.

At first, Percival struggles. He has to do this! Why can't Professor Clairoux understand that! But then, Percival realizes that Christopher isn't moving. Eyes go wide as he looks down at him, just waiting and hoping for him to get up. When Percival sees that isn't happening, he tries to shout Christopher’s name in some attempt to get him to stir. With the hand over his mouth though, that isn’t happening.

“Someone please get the nurse!” The professor shouts, pulling Percival away from the spot where Christopher lies limp on the ground. Luicana, he notices, runs out of the room at the professor’s order.

He’s dragged out of the dueling hall and into the hallway. The hand on his mouth falls away, though the one clutched on his wrist goes nowhere.

“Please, Percival. I need an explanation. Why would you do that to him? You honestly can’t have been that mad that you lost. Every time I’ve seen you, you’ve been calm and collected. I don’t understand.”

The answer to that question is too much for Percival to think about at the moment. Too many parts that confused and upset him, when all he can think about is the state Christopher was in.

“Is he ok?” Percival asks meekly instead.

“We won’t know for sure until the nurse looks him over.” Professor Clairoux sighs. "You know I
can't just look past this. Not such a public aggressive display."

Percival slowly nods.

"You are one of my best students but, even so, there needs to be an unbiased source to decide how to handle what course of action to take. I'll take you to the headmistress's office and we will go from there."

The whole walk there, Percival is silent. His main worry is still if Christopher is alright, but now the idea of his own well-being being affected becomes a very real concern. Would he be suspended? Expelled? How would that impact his future? Would they bar him from entering the AAA with a black mark like this on his record? What would Gellert say?

The professor has him sit outside the headmistress's office, trusting that Percival won't go anywhere. He won't. Not when he's paralyzed with fear for both Christopher and of his own future. He sits there on the hard wooden bench, curling in on himself. Time doesn't seem to pass by, Percival stuck in that one moment he already wishes he could take back. Just that one lapse of judgement and everything could be done for. He wants to write to Gellert to soothe his nerves at the moment, but taking the journal out here would be reckless.

Eventually, the door swings open and Professor Clairoux takes a seat next to him. He seems neither pleased nor upset with the conversation he just had, only tired. "They're gathering several staff members, those that know you and Christopher well enough to avoid making a rash decision. My hope is that, since this is your first offense, everyone will be understanding."

"What do we do until then?" Percival asks, looking down at his feet.

"We wait. Some teachers will have classes to finish. I'll have to postpone the rest of mine. It's been awhile since we've had such an unexpected outburst like this to deal with."

So 'unexpected outburst' will be what it is referred to. Somehow that underplays every bit of the situation. "I just…. I really hope Christopher is ok."

"I do too, for both of your sakes."

----

One by one, staff members walk into the office. Many of whom Percival recognizes. Several are his professors. Professor Clairoux is joined by Weatherbee, Gisborn, and a few others he does not know as well. It's not only teachers. A few of the other staff members, including Miss Pendelwood, pass by the bench.

Rather than the warm expression he's used to, she appears aggravated, frowning down at Percival as she steps into the office.

The last staff member to arrive is the nurse. If she is here, then clearly there had to be some resolution to Christopher's status. Rather than let her immediately step inside the office as the rest of the staff had, Percival stops her. "Mrs. Brigid, how is he? Is Christopher ok?"

The elderly lady peers down, seeming somewhat surprised at the question, as if Percival is the last
person she expects to ask such a thing. "He's unconscious. Most likely he's got a concussion. Several
broken bones as well. I've patched him up to the best of my ability for the time being, I was able to
get a few potions into his system." He can hear judgement in her voice. "I won't really know exactly
how well he is until he wakes up, but until then, his bones are mending as we speak. It will take a
few days, maybe a week or so for him to fully heal though. And even then, we must monitor him for
a few days after that."

"Can you keep me updated? I know it may not be my place to ask such a thing, but I feel terrible
about this." He won't be able to rest at night he knows until he gets confirmation that the other boy
will be fine. Knowing he's only unconscious though, is a step in the right direction and he allows
himself to relax slightly.

Mrs. Brigid sighs. "I'll do my best. You won't be allowed to visit him, but I'll make sure to let
Clairoux know and he can pass on the information to you."

"I understand."

"Good." With that, she steps inside the office, gesturing for Percival to follow. "I have a feeling
they'll need you in the meeting too." So they wish him to watch as they debate his fate. It's doubtful
they will let him speak up too. After all, his interpretation of the events can only be biased.

He enters the office and sees the staff members gathered in a circle. Some look bored, as if being
here is wasting their time. Others look at him with disgust. A few, stare at him sympathetically.
Percival cannot tell where Miss Pendelwood falls in this instant.

"Alright, you lot must know why you are here by now." The headmistress starts. She looks amongst
the bored. "This boy, Percival Graves, whom most of you should know, has committed a class 4 red
violation, deliberate harm towards another student. You all know the boy in question better than I, as
well as the victim, so it only makes more sense for you to be the ones to pass judgement."

Professor Gisborn, his old No-Maj Studies teacher, is the first to speak up. "Well I had the
unfortunate experience of having both boys in my class at the same time back when they were third
years. They often sat next to one another and were absolute hooligans, laughing during my class,
gossiping amongst themselves. It's not surprising to me that something horrible would happen
between them."

"I had them both in a class too, also their third year." This time it is Professor Weatherbee who talks.
"My interpretation of them is quite different from my colleague. It is true they were very close, but
they were both good students. Percival often helped young Christopher through many of our
divination exercises. I believe since he was a No-Maj born, he wasn't quite up to the level as the rest
of the class. So Percival took pity and was nothing short of helpful to him. To be honest it's quite a
shock to me that something horrible would happen between them."

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of the class. So Percival took pity and was nothing short of helpful to him. To be honest it's quite a
shock to me that Percival would do this."

A teacher he doesn't know steps in next. "Wait… if he attacked a No-Maj born, then perhaps he has
some repressed hatred for No-Maj's. The Graves family is well known for their distaste for their kind
after all. Percival here has proven to be dangerous and yet he's on the path to be an Auror. If he
attacked a No-Maj born in a fit of rage for something as simple as losing a duel, then we should take
action to stop this from escalating any further. He should be taken out of these classes before
someone else gets hurt."

There it is, the words he feared being uttered. Not only that, but they are surrounded by falsehoods
and Percival wants to interrupt, wants to shout how wrong the teacher is, but he's in no place to fight
here.
"Don't be ridiculous!" Miss Pendelwood snaps, more angry than he's ever seen her. "I've gotten to know Percival well over the years. He has no such hatred, don't make up lies about a boy you don't know while he's standing right in front of you." She lets out a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down slightly. "I may just be a librarian, but I have gotten the chance to see him out of class, when he's in a more casual setting. Mister Gisborn, Mister Weatherbee, you may have known the two boys throughout their third year, but I was there when their friendship fell apart."

Rather than immediately continue, she turns to Percival, as if asking for permission. It's a small gesture but he appreciates it. He gives her a slight nod.

She resumes. "Percival cared a great deal for Christopher. When he shared the extent of these feelings, Christopher shut him out and became cruel. Afterwards, I personally counseled Percival through a few rough times. While I was not there at the duel, what I assumed happened was years of suppressed anguish coming to a head."

As she concludes her speech, there's chatter amongst the room as to what to do with this new information. Some shout that it's proof he's unstable. Others combat this with claiming he's never had any anger issues before now. It's a constant back and forth and the congregation is going nowhere.

Finally, Professor Clairoux speaks up. "Either way, do we really want to tell the Graves family that their only son is not only banned from becoming an auror, but because he cast a wandless charm in a duel setting, one that doesn't even classify as dark magic, and just happened to hurt his opponent?"

The room silences at that.

"Let's all be honest with ourselves here." Professor Clairoux continues. "Percival is one of the most talented students we've had in years. It would be a travesty to not let him progress further in his studies. Look at him, he already feels awful enough about this whole ordeal as is. The first thing he asked me was not what would happen to him, but if Christopher was alright. He's punishing himself enough as is. I propose detention for a week or two, monitor him, make sure nothing else will go wrong. Any action further than that, I believe would be too extreme."

The headmistress listens along closely, seeming satisfied with Professor Clairoux's proposal. "Then that is what we shall do. If anything else along these lines occurs, then we will deal with it accordingly." She turns to Percival. "Consider this a warning young man. I suggest you heed it carefully."

Everyone is then dismissed.

Percival wants to go back to his room and curl up and just pretend like the events of this day didn’t happen. But before he can get far, he feels a hand on his shoulder stopping him and Miss Pendelwood's voice, harsh in his ear. "Meet me in my office. I need to discuss something with you."

She then hurries past him seeming quite unhappy.

For the first time since knowing her, he finds he doesn't want to seek her out. She's mad, he can tell. He's so used to her being a source of comfort, but he has a feeling this conversation will be far from it. Still, she is his superior so he obeys, and once all the staff members have scattered, he slowly makes his way to the library.

Hunched over, he's hoping to avoid the glare of anyone who may have heard what occurred. Without Professor Clairoux there to guide the students, Percival assumes that they left the room ready to gossip. News travels fast in this school and it's only time before everyone's opinion of him has shifted.
He makes it to the library, relieved to see no one he recognizes. Carefully he knocks on her office door and waits for a response.

"Come in." Miss Pendelwood calls out sternly from inside.

Percival creeps open the door, nervously stepping in the room. He's afraid to meet her gaze. The door shuts behind him. "You asked for me?"

She lets out a sigh and gestures to the chair for Percival to take a seat. "Would you care to explain why you did something so stupid and risky in a room full of auror aspirers?"

Sinking into the seat, he still looks at anywhere but her. There's a pot of water boiling on a table off to the side. Cocoa he assumes? He doubts he's in good enough standing with her to share cocoa. "Gellert… he told me to stop letting Christopher belittle me, to stop bottling up my frustration. Miss Pendelwood I know I screwed up, but I was just following Gellert's advice."

At that she raises an eyebrow. "Percival, I highly doubt he would tell you to be that idiotic."

"I promise you he did." He shuffles through his bag, reaching into the compartment where he stores the journal and pulls it out. The conversation in question is a few pages back. When he finds it, he lays the journal out in front on the table and nudges it towards Miss Pendelwood. He even stands and points at the paragraph where Gellert told him to not be pushed around. "I don't mean to use Gellert as an excuse, but still I don't want you to think I was going against his wishes."

Miss Pendelwood takes a moment to read over the page. He can tell she reaches the end because she leans back in her chair, her hand rubbing her head. "Oh Percival… that's not… I don't believe he meant it so literally."

Percival groans. So now she thinks him dumb. Wonderful. "Just how do you know? I've been talking to him regularly for over a year. I think I have a decent idea what he means."

"You are seriously asking me this?" Her eyes narrow, her irritation rising. "I have known Gellert Grindelwald personally for over six years. I met him before he had even begun to amass followers, I've been there for him since practically the beginning. I believe I have a better idea of what he's thinking than you do."

At that, he sinks back down into the chair. She has a point, but even so, he hates being told he's wrong. Especially when his possible misinterpretation of the information caused him to seriously injure Christopher. Rather than argue further, he humbles himself, asking instead, "Then what was he trying to say."

Miss Pendelwood seems pleased that he's not pushing the debate. "Well, from what I know of Gellert, he loves to speak in poetry and metaphors. I assume you shared with him all that happened with Christopher? I believe he meant you shouldn't let the other boy to affect you as he clearly done, that you should be able to talk back and not feel as if you are being trampled on. Physical violence though? Especially the sort that could result in ruining all of Gellert's plans for you? You can't possibly believe that was what he really meant."

Taking a moment to really think about it, he realizes she's right. Perhaps he deep down had just been looking for some excuse to cause Christopher harm. The realization causes him to shutter. "I'm sorry." He says out loud, to Miss Pendelwood, to Gellert, to Christopher.

"I'm sure Gellert will understand." She smiles as Percival lets it sink in how he is the one in the wrong here. "He may be a bit eccentric, but he is a very understanding young man."
Since she's finally… not angry at him, he can't help but get curious. "If you don't mind me asking, how do you know Gellert? I mean he always seems to be overseas while you're here at this school or in your apartment. You two seem close and I just wonder how…"

She chuckles a bit at his question, which he supposes is a good sign. "Well you seem to have gotten close to him too despite having only met in person the one time." A faint blush creeps up his face. "But if you must know, I met him during a trip I took across Europe back in my early twenties. My life had been going poorly. People I cared about had died in a horrible way. There would be no justice, this much I knew, so I thought the best way to get my life together was to get away from it all, rediscover myself. Instead I met Gellert in a bar in Switzerland. At the time, he was about the age you are now. Looked sadder than you do now too." It’s hard to imagine Gellert sad. When they met, he’d been one of the most joyful looking people he's ever met. "We were both sad lonely people, and perhaps that is what drew me to sit next to him. I shared with him everything that brought me there, and he in turn told me how he wanted to make a brighter future. We talked for hours and I let him know I would help him. He gave me hope when I had none."

He can relate. Through Miss Pendelwood, Gellert reached out to him every time he needed him most, had given him purpose in life. But there does feel like something she isn't telling him. "What happened… to the people you cared for?"

Another smile from her, but he can tell that this one is a mask. Clearly this line of questioning is making her uncomfortable. "I think that's enough for one day don't you think?"

He knows that means the conversation is over. With how his day has gone, he won't press his luck. Miss Pendelwood doesn't hate him and had been kind enough to share as much as she had. It has to be good enough for now. Putting the journal back in his bag, he stands to leave. "Thank you for all your help today. I'll speak to Gellert. You won't need to worry about me acting out again."

Waving her wand, a cup of cocoa hovers towards her, her attention now far from Percival. "Have a good night."

"Good night Miss Pendelwood." And he exits the library.

Rather than immediately head to his dorm, he decides to take an alternative route and stop by the hospital wing. It’s out of his way, practically on the opposite side of the castle from the Wampus rooms. He has no expectations, but it’s worth the effort to try and make amends.

Mrs. Brigid glares at him when he finally arrives. "No, he isn't awake yet. Besides, I meant what I said about not letting you see him. I cannot allow it."

"Well," Percival takes a nervous breath, "When he wakes up, can you please tell him I'm sorry?" It doesn’t feel like enough. Just two words all he can do to assuage the feeling of guilt plaguing him in this moment.

"Fine, but please leave." The nurse responds curtly, though not without a bit of sympathy. "I don't want to see you around here unless you are actually ill."

He wastes no more time there. It went about as well as expected All he can hope is the nurse to pass on his message. Maybe it’s selfish of him, but he needs Christopher to know he didn't mean to go that far. Some part of him still cares what Christopher thinks of him.

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Soon he’s back in his room. Taking a moment, he lets the events of the day finally sink in. He snapped and lost control. Gellert's misinterpreted messages may have had some part, but still, it was Percival who acted. It was Percival who let himself forget logic in that moment and blindly act on emotion. Not only had he severely hurt Christopher, but everything he had been working towards the last several months could have been taken away due to his carelessness.

Thanks to Miss Pendelwood and Professor Clairoux though, it seems as if he’ll face only minor consequences. Still, he knows he should face worse. He’s able to walk away freely with only a slap on the wrist while Christopher lays unconscious in the hospital. That doesn’t seem right.

As he tries to come to terms with everything, he writes to Gellert. After all, Gellert seems to have a good understanding of hardships such as this. So he takes his time, scrawling out every step of the event, making sure to let his leader know how sorry he is for risking everything like that.

Several minutes pass until he gets a response. It’s not what he expects.

"Why are you so sorry Percival? What you did, it's impressive and you shouldn’t feel so terrible over such a display of talent. You said it yourself that this happened during a duel, correct? Then the staff and your fellow students should expect this sort of event. You did nothing wrong. It isn't as if you attacked him in the open out of nowhere."

So… Gellert isn’t mad at him? Had Miss Pendelwood been incorrect? It still doesn’t sit well sit well with him. "But I put him in the hospital. I could have killed him."

"He will be alright won’t he? Look, I may have had my issues with my time at Durmstrang, but even they understood that what occurred during a duel cannot be held over a student's head. The fact that your teachers are making such a big deal out of this is baffling to me."

"I thought you would be mad at me. Miss Pendelwood said you would be after doing something so idiotic. They were ready to discuss denying me entry into the AAA."

"If that were the case, then it would be them that I would be mad at. Not you." Percival feels more at ease reading those words. "I suppose Linda has a point though. If Ilvermorny will chose to be so strict about this sort of thing, then it will probably be for the best to avoid any sort of suspicious behavior in the future. I have a feeling eyes will be on you, watching you carefully."

It makes sense to a certain extent, but it is still a vague request. So he asks for clarification.

"Suspicious behaviour? What exactly are you suggesting I stop?"

"A few things actually. Mainly, I believe I should stop mentoring you for the time being. Sneaking around to practice spells they don't know about is exactly the kind of behavior that could get you in further trouble. Actually, you should stop sneaking around all together until I tell you otherwise. This includes attending meetings over the summer. Until you graduate, it will probably be for the best if you just keep your head down and do as you are expected.

So Gellert may not be mad at him, but he's still punishing him worse than the school staff did. Without Gellert to mentor him, and the summer meetings to look forward to, he's essentially back at square one. "So I'm to just cut off all communications? How can I help if I can't be involved at all? How can I improve if no one is teaching me?"

"Oh don't be so overly dramatic Percival. We'll still keep in touch. I enjoy talking to you far too much. But, I told you before, the best way for you to help me is to join the aurors. You may not be
learning as much but it is a small price to pay for security. You don’t want to put your future into further jeopardy, do you?”

“No… I suppose not.”

“Then good. It's decided. Starting tomorrow, you'll be a good little school boy.”

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Percival listens, taking Gellert’s advice to stay out of trouble. Even if he doesn’t like it, it’s still the safest course of action.

First he endures detention, Ilvermorny’s only consequence. Detention is nothing but an annoyance. For a week, rather than attend class, he is required to sit in a room full of the worst sort of students in the school. They sit there in silence under a watchful eye of a professor who clearly doesn't want to be there.

But that's it. That's the extent of his punishment. It’s not like it's stopping him from pursuing what he rather be doing. Gellert had already done that when he decided to stop mentoring him.

He wishes he could just forget the whole event when his detention comes to a close but, as with everything else in his life, it can't be that easy.

When he finally rejoins the rest of his classmates, it’s clear that the outcome of the duel has warped everyone's opinion of him. Many seem scared of him. Others seem more impressed than anything. There is a rather vocal minority though, that praise him for hurting a No-Maj born. These people he hates the most.

Orion is shocked when he learns what happened, though he doesn't criticize him. Percival is appreciative. Ever since the duel, he's put himself down more than anyone else and he doesn't need any more condemnation.

Luciana, however, doesn't speak to him for several days. Likely, it’s only due to Orion that she doesn't completely write him out of her life.

Seraphina though, tells him what he did was quite an astounding display of talent, if a bit excessive.

Over time, Percival grows used to it. He adapts as he always does. Hearing his name in hushed whispers is nothing new and he'll ignore it as he always does. He's never cared what most of these people have thought about him anyways.

Weeks pass by and Percival only has his schoolwork to keep himself occupied.

Christopher never rejoins their Defensive Arts class, even after Percival gets notice from the nurse that he's been released from the hospital wing. Professor Clairoux explains to him that everyone thought it best to keep them separated. It's a blow to Percival's character, knowing that many of the staff deem him potentially dangerous, but he accepts it nonetheless.

Everything starts to settle over time though. With Percival keeping his head out of trouble, the gossip about him does start to fade eventually.
That’s how he continues on for, not only the rest of the semester, but the entire remainder of his school career.

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Seventh year is a blur.

Gellert still writes to him, though their conversations aren't as constant and lengthy with Gellert refusing to mentor him any longer. It doesn't take long for him to miss it. Especially since he knows he cares for his leader more than he should. Having such a great deal of their communications cut off hurts more now that he knows he's smitten for the other. Its an unspoken misery he endures, but at least contact with Gellert isn't completely gone.

Most of the other students have sought to avoid him more than usual after the commotion his duel caused. Orion though, as if knowing that their time together is soon drawing to a close, tries to pull him out of the library, out of their room, in search of some enjoyment that isn't school. Each time Percival declines. He won't have time for quidditch matches or pointless weekend excursions. Not when he's trying to stay out of trouble as is. The less he does, the less chance he has of screwing up further until he graduates.

It’s not too odd for him to decline at least. Having all N.E.W.T. level classes by his seventh year, it’s understandable that he would have no free time. Most of his fellow N.E.W.T. level seventh years have reached the same conclusion. Until they finish their exams and get their acceptance letters for whichever academy they want to go to. Everything else is an unnecessary distraction.

All he does is study. He's back to how he was his first and second years. Back when he shut everything out that didn't involve progressing. Back before he had Christopher, before he had Pendelwood and Gellert's organization, before he had Gellert speaking to him every day.

He doesn't give himself a chance to even ponder how lonely he is. Not when he just wants to focus on getting out of this school. He's been trapped here long enough, held back by their curriculum, by the values they tried hard to cram into him. After seven years of this, he's simply tired of it all and needs to leave. Each day that goes by is just counting down his freedom.

Finally, the time for their exams comes around.

As expected, they are effortless. Not so much for the rest of his classmates, but for someone who's poured every hour into preparing for them over the past several months, it’s to be expected.

Nearly a fourth of his classmates fail, half of his classmates barely scrape by. Both he and Seraphina pass with the highest marks. Luciana passes, though only slightly. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter, and it looks as if he'll be seeing both of them for the next several years.

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It’s strange to think about how the last seven years all come together and culminate in one long ceremony.
Once all the numbers come back, all the grades finalized, Percival ends his time at Ilvermorny as the second in his class. When he realizes how much extra work that results in, he wishes he had slacked off slightly more and ended third. At least Seraphina is left with more pointless busy work than he is. Her consequence for being top of the class.

It's supposed to be an honor. Both he and Seraphina will be the only two students who will prepare and deliver a speech during the graduation.

He's supposed to open the ceremony, to welcome and inspire his classmates into the next chapter of their lives or some other nonsense. His parents are ecstatic when they learn he'll be taking this role, but he can't understand the significance. Apparently it's important due to tradition, but Percival has never been one for tradition anyways.

Despite his hesitance, he dons the long robes all students must wear as well as the classic graduation cap (both, he frankly thinks, make him look ridiculous) and heads out onto the stage when that day finally comes.

Approaching the podium, he pulls out his written notes, trying to ignore the fact that all of his classmates and their families are watching. Public speaking has never been a talent of his. Somewhere in the sea of people are Momma and Dad, and so he tries to focus in on them. They are the only ones who really matter after all.

Before he starts, he gets all his thoughts in order, hoping the words he wrote would be acceptable. Gellert helped him, made sure that he managed the balance of sharing his true feelings while masking those that could get him in trouble.

One more deep breath to calm himself, and he begins.

"Welcome everyone to the Ilvermorny class of 1907 graduation. I'm sure many of you know me. If not, which would not surprise me as I spent all my time studying rather than socializing, then you may know of my family. I must admit, it is strange, going through school and having your ancestor appear in multiple textbooks.” There are a few chuckles which catches Percival off guard. Clearing his throat, he continues. “Even so, Gondulphus Graves has been far from the most influential Graves in my life. That honor goes to my parents.

It is through them I learned both to be accepting of those different than I and to fight against the injustices of the world. My family and I may have had our disagreements over the years, but it is these lessons they gave me that I wish to share with you all tonight.

Our country is undergoing an interesting era. This century is still young and we all must grow with it. The No-Majs are advancing far beyond what any of us could have anticipated, and our people are in the middle of constructing a new capital. The future is hopeful, that is, if we collectively work towards making it better.”

As he gets further, he grows more confident. All attention is on him and he’s finally able to share what he believes in without interruption. It may be censored down, but the heart of his message is still the same.

“No matter what field you chose to pursue, there are ways to make the world a better place. Whether you become a professor, a healer, an auror- there are always opportunities. It isn't difficult either. Simply accept those who are different from you, whether they are full blood or No-Maj born. If they are men who prefer the company of men, women who prefer women, or both. If they come from a rich old family, or from an immigrant family who comes from nothing. No matter what, accept them and be willing to embrace new ideas different from what we were all raised with. The world changes
and evolves with time and we must be willing to accept that as well.”

A few people in the audience stir uncomfortably. Good. It means his word is reaching out. Anyone who thinks otherwise cannot fight him here. They all must sit and listen as they are called out for their behavior.

“That brings me to my second point. Don't be afraid to fight against injustices. If there something out there working against the betterment of the world, then fight against it. Don't let terrible ideas spread. I'm becoming an auror, not because it's expected of me, but because I can help make a difference. I can help those in need as I have witnessed my Dad do throughout my whole life. But, regardless of your profession, it's not hard to fight. It can be as simple as reaching out and telling a young boy he isn't alone in the world, or as grand as risking one's life to stop a monster who wants to hurt innocent people. No matter how big or small, don't be afraid to work towards the greater good.

Thank you.”

With that, he takes a bow and heads back to join the rest of his class.

The audience cheers as he walks off, but Percival is just glad it's over. He's proud of the speech he gave but he doubts anyone will follow his words once the ceremony is done. Still, he did the best he could do.

For the rest of the ceremony, he zones out, only paying attention when it is time for him to walk across the stage. Hours pass, names are called. Even throughout Seraphina's speech, his attention is elsewhere. He's just ready for this whole business to end.

Finally they are all dismissed.

Seraphina and Luciana don't bother tracking him down, considering they will be seeing him for at least the next three years. Miss Pendelwood makes sure to stop by and tell him he's welcome to visit her apartment any time over the summer. The one who seems the most upset about their parting is, unsurprisingly, Orion. Without warning, Orion practically tackles him with a hug. It sounds as if he's crying as he begs Percival to not lose contact with him. Percival lets him know he'll try his best. He supposes it won't be too difficult to keep track of him as Orion was picked up by the National American Quidditch Team.

He doesn't linger for long. Fortunately, as he's made few connections, he feels less obligated to tell everyone goodbye.

Soon he's seeking out his family, ready to leave Ilvermorny for a final time.

-END OF PART ONE-

Chapter End Notes

By 'end of part one' I mean to say that the ilvermorny portion of Percival's life is over. He's growing up and will be moving forward. I have his life separated into about 6/7 sections. It will all be under this one fic, so we have quite a ways to go! This fic is a monster and I can't believe I'm already this far into it. I hope everyone is enjoying the
ride as much as I am!

I still mean to update every other Sunday, even if this chapter was a few days later than intended.

Please come and stop by my tumblr (percegraves). Say hi, talk headcanons, or even bug me to write faster. It's all welcome :)
Finally we can move into some post Ilvermorny parts of Percival's life! I've been waiting for months to say that. Sorry if this is once again later than I intended. I apparently suck at trying to stay on a specific schedule. I think I'll have to move back to just a general once every 2-3 weeks as far when I'll update. This might change again eventually, but things will be hectic on my end for the next 2 months or so. Don't worry though! I'll still be here writing my butt off. :)

Beta'd/coplotted by good pal dreamsandpocky (aka gravescredence)

Percival wishes he could enjoy his freedom from school.

He wishes he could be putting his wand that he can finally use outside Ilvermorny, to a more pleasant use. Instead, he stands outside on a cold, dark day in the desolate mountains of Montana, using it as an umbrella, shielding both himself and Momma from the rain.

Only two weeks had passed since his graduation, when Momma had received a letter in the mail from Gran.

Gramps, Doyle Gallagher, Percival's No-Maj grandfather, had died at the age of eighty-two.

Old age, it turns out, hits No-Majs faster than it does Wizards.

The funeral itself is small. Momma sobs on his shoulder while Gran is helped up the hill by Dad. A single grave rests at the top, Gramps' name engraved on the stone. A few words are said, mostly by Gran… a few by Dad who regrets not getting to know Doyle more. No one makes Momma say anything, not in her state.

Percival tries, opens his mouth, but no words come out. The more he tries to vocalize how he's feeling, the harder it is. Part of him is glad for the rain. Everyone else is crying in some form while Percival is still left to sort through his feelings. But even Dad is crying, his eyes red and watery
behind his glasses. Shouldn't crying be easy for him here too? He knows he loved his Gramps dearly. Right now though, he just feels numb.

It takes quite some time for it to sink in. He hadn't seen his Gramps much since he went to Ilvermorny, but even so, the man had left an impact on Percival. He expected with his new found freedom from the school, he'd have gotten far more time with him, gotten the opportunity to visit more often.

But all those future chances are gone now. Percival stands there cursing himself for not taking the time to go see him. He had the summers, he had his chances. However, his focus had all been directed towards Gellert and the cause. The only thing stopping him from criticizing his own behavior is reminding himself that everything he has done, everything he will do, is for people like his Gramps. In the world he wants to help build, they would have never been separated in the first place. He could have grown up with Gramps and Gran living in the Graves family mansion as if there was nothing strange about that all along.

His Gramps will never see Rappaport's law lifted, never live in a world where the Statute of Secrecy isn't hanging over their heads.

That more than anything saddens him.

But he will make it happen. Make it so the future is bright, make it so no more families will have to endure such a strong degree of separation. If he can’t do it in Gramp’s lifetime, then he will do so in Momma’s. He holds her closer, silently vowing that she would see a world where wizards and No-Maj’s could live together in harmony. The world that kept her separated from her own parents would be demolished and made anew.

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The funeral weighs over their heads for weeks.

His first few months since graduating Ilvermorny are spent at home. Momma holds onto him tighter than she has in years. At least he had been home for this tragedy. He can be here for Momma. Grandpa Graves is especially harsh to her and, since Dad has to work, Percival is glad to act as the buffer between them instead.

It’s the last summer he’ll really spend here in full after all. Since he’ll be attending the American Auror Academy, Percival plans to move to the city. Technically he could live at the mansion, but both his parents know he would do better living on his own. Of course they’d love him to stay with them, but he must leave the proverbial nest eventually, and it’s an opportune time since he’ll already have to adjust to city life as is.

Momma and Dad want to see him as much as they can before he leaves, however. Though he feels they should have gotten used to it when he left for Ilvermorny, he doesn’t mind indulging them one last time.

Especially for Momma. She’s already lost enough recently, so he lets her dote on him. On occasion she may treat him as if he’s ten instead of eighteen, but he never complains. It may be cliché but he knows he’ll always be her little boy, even if he stands a few inches taller than her by now.

Dad on the other hand, attempts to treat him as an adult, even if Dad can't help but look at him like
he's half his height. Percival suppose it helps that he is still technically following in his footsteps. It's easier for him to imagine Percival's future and offer whatever guidance he can. Not that Dad can advise him on his true purpose. He appreciates the effort, however.

As the years have passed, his relationship with his parents has repaired somewhat. Slowly he began to realize that even if they had been misguided, they still want the best for him. He may have been overly quick to judge them years ago, because ever since, they’ve been nothing but the caring parents he’d grown up with. Briefly he wonders if it would have been different had he actually ended up in a relationship, but they can’t exactly judge him for his secret one-sided attractions that they know nothing about. Perhaps this way is for the best, they can pretend he's whatever they want him to be, and he can live his life without interruptions.

Just over a month before it's finally time for him to join the academy, Dad locates a nice apartment in the city, one not too far from the Academy itself. It is only a few minutes walk from the construction site of MACUSA's new headquarters, so Dad knows where to look. What he ends up with is far too extravagant for a single student, but he won't argue the privileges that come along with being a member of an old, rich family.

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Moving proves to be an incredibly freeing experience.

For the first week, his parents help him move in, purchasing furniture and other necessities. Well over half of it Percival doubts he needs, no matter how much Momma insists. He's gotten by just fine living in a small dorm for seven years, adapting to a large apartment is… strange. Momma and Dad even offer to get him a house elf of his own. A tempting offer, considering cooking and cleaning have never been necessities he's had to take care of, but he also knows having another being around is not a good idea when he's going to be secretive as is. So they are surprised when he declines but he explains that if he's to learn how to live on his own he may as well do so fully.

His new home slowly shapes up. All furniture in its place, the kitchen stocked, the bookshelves lined with belongings he can now fully call his own. It’s no longer necessary for his parents to help with the moving process, though they tell him that they plan on visiting quite often. Percival just makes sure they give him some warning.

Three weeks remain before his first day at the AAA. He's just carrying his final box of trinkets inside, when he notices someone is sitting on his living room couch.

The only ones who have access to this place, as far as he knows, are his parents but they are back at the mansion.

No, the person sitting on his couch, grinning widely at him, is none other than Gellert Grindelwald. He nearly drops the box.

"I don't remember giving you my address." Percival says, trying to sound casual.

"Linda told me." Gellert replies, as if it's obvious, and he sits up straight.

The explanation is lacking, so he can’t help but press out of curiosity more than anything else. "Mind telling me how you got in? I thought my dad warded this place to the best of his ability, which
considering his position, would make it quite difficult to get past.” Once the question is out, Percival puts his box gently down on the floor before going to sit on a chair opposite the couch.

"Now, now, I can't go sharing all my secrets." Gellert chuckles. "But you should know from all my teachings now, that if anyone can get around an auror’s wards, it's me." He shrugs as if slipping past a seasoned aurors wards is some casual occurrence. Percival knows asking further won’t result in anything.

“Oh, perhaps a little more warning next time then?” Of course, he's overjoyed to see the other, just a bit shocked. The last time he saw Gellert was the summer before his sixth year during that one dinner they shared. He looks just as gorgeous as he had back then. "It's good to see you.” Percival tries to will away the blush he feels forming on his cheeks. "What brings you back to America?”

"I'm actually here for you this time," Gellert leans forward. "I'm sorry I missed your graduation. I wanted to stop by, but with so many government employees and aurors around, I thought it best to keep my distance."

"Don't worry about it. You most likely would have been bored out of your mind there." Percival chuckles, trying to relax in his leader's presence.

"Even so, I wish I could have seen you move on to the next stage of your life. Linda told me your speech was well received. Despite your hesitance, it seems like I've found myself a wonderful orator."

"Thank you. You helped me write that speech though, so I fail to see the significance." He sighs. "Anyways, I doubt you're here to simply apologize and talk about my graduation."

Gellert smirks, standing from his spot on the couch and strides over to where Percival sits. "Well, perhaps I just wanted the chance to congratulate you in person. I'm quite proud of you, after all. Seems my lessons have paid off." Standing beside him, Gellert reaches down, fingers brushing his cheek. Percival is sure his mind goes blank at the touch. "We should celebrate. It may be a bit late for your graduation, but there is still your approaching entry into the American Auror Academy."

All Percival can think to do is nod. Anything more complicated is impossible so long as Gellert is touching him.

"Good." With that, Gellert removes his hand and takes a step back. After Percival takes a deep breath, regaining his composure, he notices Gellert heading to the kitchen. "Come along then, Percival. I brought you food. Now quickly, before it gets cold."

Lo and behold, Gellert has 2 plates set up on his kitchen table, both filled with a substantial meal. Roast beef with carrots and onions atop a pile of creamy mashed potatoes. His mouth starts watering at the sight and smell.

"I remembered what you said you enjoyed and had it made just for you. Please, sit, enjoy."

He can't say no to Gellert, has no reason to want to. So he settles in, still trying to absorb the fact that Gellert is in his home on a random summer day with no warning. However, this should be no shock to him. After all, the day they first met in person was just as abrupt and unexpected. He supposes he should just get used to Gellert storming in on his life.

It takes a moment for him to will away the gnawing nerves in his stomach that come with simply being in the same room as Gellert. Apparently his damn infatuation would have him die of hunger as a response to him refusing to act upon it.
“Is it not to your liking?” Gellert asks as he just stares at his plate. “I tried to bring what you said your family cooked. I wanted you to feel as at home as possible.”

“It’s wonderful I promise. I’m simply taking it all in.” He smiles at Gellert before finally starts on his food. Had he waited any longer he worried he’d upset the other, and that is apparently stronger than his nerves. With food finally in his stomach, he eats fast, hungrier than he anticipated.

After Percival starts, Gellert seems satisfied and begins at his own meal as well. "Anyways, that reminds me, has your father shared with you what the first day at the AAA will be?"

Percival blinks, the question strangely specific. "Um, I mean, he's talked to me about the AAA itself, what the courses are like, told me how it compares to Ilvermorny. That sort of thing. Not much about the first day."

"I see. Well, according to some of my sources, the first day consists of an interview… well, I believe interrogation may be a better way to put it. It is a test to make sure those entering the academy are truly the right people for them, rather than some wolf in sheep’s clothing." Slowly Gellert's gaze turns up from his plate to Percival, his usual smile gone. "That won't be any trouble for you now, will it?"

Percival's hunger is suddenly gone, the nervous twist to his stomach returning. This time it's out of fear. Why hadn't he anticipated something like this? "I... wouldn't it depend on how the interview is administered? If they just ask questions, then I should be fine."

"And if not?" Gellert presses. "You should be prepared for far more than just simple questions. After we eat, we should practice. Make sure you can answer whatever comes your way with no worry."

The rest of the meal is spent in silence, Percival trying to relax enough to enjoy the food Gellert obtained just for him. With Percival overthinking though, it's very difficult.

Failure becomes a very possible outcome and Percival can only think about all the ways such an interview can go wrong. What if he cracked? What if they asked a question he has no idea how to answer? What happens if they learn his true purpose being there? All of it flashes in his head: the authorities swooping in and carrying him off to some cell he would never escape from, his family hating him, wondering where they went wrong, and Gellert being captured, all of his leader's so carefully thought out and well intended plans just crumbling.

No, Percival couldn't be Gellert's undoing. He'd never forgive himself.

By the time Gellert has finished his plate, Percival has only eaten half of his. He's just pushing his potatoes around with his fork when Gellert clears his throat. "Oh dear, I appear to have frightened you." Waving away his own plate to the sink, he stands and takes Percival's arm, tugging him up. "You can finish eating later. For now, we have work to do."

Gellert continues to tug him, leading him back over to the living room. After gesturing for Percival to sit down in a chair, Gellert moves behind him. Hands make their way to his shoulders, and soon, gently knead into his tense muscles. Percival practically jumps in his seat. "W-what are you doing Gellert?"

The hands don't leave, and one strokes his back almost soothingly. "Shhh, I'm simply trying to help you relax Percy." It's such a strange feeling. They didn't share any alcohol this time, but that same sort of light headed feeling is falling over him. He's anxious and yet he feels the tension falling away. His heart is pounding at how close Gellert is, but at the same time he only wants him closer. Something is stirring in him and he shifts uncomfortably in the chair.
As Gellert works though, it does get easier to loosen up. The more Gellert touches him, Percival feels like he's melting away into goo. Oh how he wishes this could be every day, Gellert's hands upon him, sucking away all the worries in the world.

An embarrassing sound resonates from Percival's throat, a long, needy moan.

Only when it's too late to take it back, does he realize what he's done. All he hopes for is for Gellert to think it's nothing more than an expected reaction to a massage. However Percival knows it's deeper than that. Even though he will never share his feelings for the man behind him, he'd be lying if he claimed that having Gellert's hands all over him was nothing short of heaven.

For now, he lets himself enjoy this, lets himself imagine Gellert treating him like a lover.

"Percy," Gellert says in that sweet honey voice of his. "I want you to look at me."

Without a second thought, Percival obeys, head turning to meet Gellert's gaze. Their eyes meet and he's happy to see that playful smile tug at Gellert's lips... it would be so easy to lean forward and meet them with his own. He won't but the thought is there, so tempting.

"Legimines."

A rush of memories and emotions all push up towards the surface.

Fears of failure, fears of his family's judgement, fears of letting Gellert down... Meeting Miss Pendelwood, joining the cause... For the Greater Good... Boyhood affection turned boyhood heartbreak. Heartbreak that has waned over time, as his affections for someone else grew... A wonderful meal, a request. No I don't want to be an auror... but I'll do it for you. Be your fly on the wall... It would be so easy to just lean in and kiss him...

Only then does he remember his training, what Miss Pendelwood taught him about building walls in his mind and shutting out intruders. He imagines a wall, tall and impenetrable, and the filtering through his thoughts finally stops.

"Oh dear. It seems we have quite a lot of work ahead of us." Gellert frowns and Percival knows he's disappointed him.

Lowering his head, he avoids Gellert's gaze. How much had Gellert seen before Percival was able to shut him out? He worries. "I'm sorry. You just caught me off guard."

Gellert lets out a long sigh and leans against the back of Percival's chair. "Now now, don't resort to petty excuses. It's unbecoming of you. With me placing so much faith in you, I must ask for you to take this seriously. There are only three weeks until they question you. That isn't much time. We better make the most of it."

Percival lifts his head to look curiously at Gellert. "What do you mean we?"

"Well I was planning on staying at Linda's for the night before returning back overseas. I had a trip to Africa all planned out, but this is more important."

"Wait... are you suggesting you... stay here until I go to the AAA?" Gellert staying here? In his apartment? That's a ridiculous assumption and he can barely believe he's even considering it.

"Yes, Percival, that is exactly what I'm saying." Gellert lets out a groan of frustration before stepping back and circles the chair Percival is sitting in. "This was just supposed to be a one day trip, but you are far worse off than I expected. I hope that won't interrupt any plans of yours because if you did,
I'm afraid you would have to cancel."

His leader continues to circle like a shark and Percival understands that even if he wanted out of this, he couldn't. It's becoming evident that he's reaching a stage of his life where Gellert's will takes priority. He's trapped Percival into this and he either fails or succeeds. It's far too late to back out now. There's no issue though. After all, Percival has been preparing himself for this for the last several years.

"It's fine. I'm glad the guest room will get some use after all."

Gellert seems pleased with that and stops right in front of the chair. At first, Percival assumes he'll make a comment about the lodgings, only hoping it's up to Gellert's standards, but instead, what he hears as they make eye contact once more, is a single word.

"Legilimens."

This time, he quickly remembers to build a wall, effectively shutting out Gellert before any one of his thoughts can be sifted through.

"Better… but you should know that you can’t just push people out. That's practically more suspicious than telling the truth." Gellert crosses his arms, glaring down at Percival, tapping his foot impatiently.

"Sorry… I’m trying. I promise. I’ll do better.

"Yes, you will." Gellert says with certainty, and Percival hopes he won't disappoint him. These next several weeks, he'll work harder and harder, doing his best… better than his best. Three weeks to become a master occlumens. To anyone else? It's a near impossible task. But Gellert believes in him. Gellert wouldn't be wasting his time with him if he didn't believe him to be capable. So there is no other choice than to be successful.

So Percival sits up straight, staring right back up at Gellert, confident for the first time since Gellert strolled into his apartment. He's ready. "I won't disappoint you."

That familiar smirk tugs at Gellert's lips at his change in posture. "I know you won't." Gellert hums as he leans down, reaching a hand out to brush Percival's cheek. "Legilimens."

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For the following three weeks, Gellert stays with him.

Gellert makes himself at home in the guest room. Percival lets him arrange the room however Gellert sees fit, so it isn't surprising when the furniture is shifted around. He even offers to go into town and purchase whatever amenities that Gellert desires. There reaches a point where he feels his instance to provide for his leader starts to irritate the man but, even so, he wants Gellert to be comfortable. The man is stuck here because of Percival's incompetence. This is the least he can do.

The whole situation never stops being strange for him. Adapting from only communicating with Gellert through writing, to suddenly having the man live in his new apartment takes quite a bit of time. Even so, once he overcomes the initial awkwardness, he finds the experience pleasant.

His biggest struggle is to not make a fool of himself. Maybe he's a bit clumsier than usual, maybe he
finds himself often losing his train of thought when talking to Gellert… He knows he's not acting normal, but if Gellert notices, he doesn't say anything.

With Gellert testing his occlumency skills at every opportunity, it becomes a priority for Percival to learn how to suppress his feelings for him.

Not that Gellert makes it easy. The man is a very tactile person, his hands constantly touch Percival, fingers brushing his, a hand resting at his back, loose strands of hair tucked back into place with fingers that are not his…

It has to be a European thing.

Because there is absolutely no way Gellert could feel anything for him. Percival is just his supporter, nothing more. If Gellert found out the depth of his own feelings, however, then it would be likely that Gellert wouldn't want to have anything to do with him. So, with Gellert constantly probing his mind, making sure those thoughts don't bubble to the surface is an act of self-defense.

Gellert could cast the spell at any time, after all, and he often made a game of trying to catch Percival off guard. After being woken up one day, still half asleep and groggy, to the progressively familiar spell, it’s clear his walls must be up 24/7 with no exceptions.

Attempts to surprise him are not all that his training consists of. Gellert helps push his creativity as well, a trait that Percival definitely lacks. He teaches Percival how to spin a story, to make it so believable that it must be true to all except those who know better. How to turn little truths into a web of lies, how everything must connect to avoid any holes in his cover.

Gellert also lays down basic guidelines, making sure Percival knows where the line is drawn as far as what details and truths give away too much. It helps, being told specifically what is the grey area he can play with, as well as warnings against what he can't. If he had to guess all on his own, he would have most likely screwed it up.

Together, they put together a story Percival can use consistently so he doesn't have to make everything up on the spot. It's one based on just enough truths so he can even convince himself sometimes it is the reality. Percival's ambitions and companions are changed, emphasizing instead a desire to help people and his connection to his family. The story reminds him of Gellert's assistance with his graduation speech.

Most of their time is spent together. Meals are shared. Neither of them are particularly good cooks, but Gellert is at least skilled at conjuring them meals from somewhere. If it wasn't for Gellert being here, he'd probably starve, or at least would have to rely off of finding food in the city. At least this way he can sort of pretend that he can fend for himself.

Of course, they don’t spend every waking hour together. Percival gives Gellert his space. The other has his own business to attend and he's often writing in other journals, Percival assumes are connected to more of his followers. Percival was never naive enough to assume he was the only one Gellert ever spoke to. On occasion, he does ask what Gellert is up to, how the greater scheme of things is going. With Percival no longer keeping contact with any of the group members outside of Gellert and Miss Pendelwood, he feels on the outside of everything. Gellert only tells him it’s nothing he needs to concern himself with. The less he knows at this point, the better. A caution Gellert tells him he must take.

That isn't the only thing that ends up separating them. Roughly once a week, Percival's parents stop by. They miss him and ever since Gramps passed, Momma has been especially sentimental, wanting to hold on tighter to him. At least she knows that when he starts at the AAA he won't have much free
time anymore, so she's getting as much time with him as possible now. Dad always joins her.

What this means for Gellert, is that they often have to scramble to make sure his presence is hidden. Most of the time they give Percival enough notice, sending an owl with the date and time of their planned visit, letting him shoo Gellert back to the guest room and clean up before their arrival.

Until their last visit, where the only warning they give is a simple knock on his door. He and Gellert had just been sitting around the table, eating while going through yet another round of occlumency training, when the knock comes. Percival immediately stands and shoves Gellert to the back. It's horribly rude of him, but Gellert laughs and goes along with it.

Not wanting his parents to wait or worry for too long, he hurries over to the front door after he hears the guestroom shut.

When he opens the entry door, he's greeted to the site of Momma holding out a tray of Bandoffee tart and Dad holding a box of what smells like a freshly cooked meal. Blinking, he takes the tray from Momma. Apparently they doubt he can take care of himself (even though it’s true).

"Sorry for the lack of warning. We just wanted to have a family meal before you go off to the Academy." Momma explains as she heads inside, Dad following her.

Dad goes to put the food down on the table, but stops to look down at the table. Only then does Percival realize his error. In his rush to get Gellert hidden, he forgot to do something about the two bowls they were eating from. Both of their chairs are skewed and its incriminating evidence that more than just Percival is taking residence there.

"Oh Percy, you should have told us you had company over. We could have postponed." Dad says gesturing towards the bowls.

Percival winces, he knows he's done for. They'll find Gellert and interrogate him and possibly more, all because of Percival's carelessness. Still he has to try to stop them. "C-company? There's no one here but us."

There's an unspoken conversation between the two that makes him nervous. Dad nods over at Momma and she steps further into the room, pulling Percival aside. Dad glances back over at them, Momma puts a hand on his shoulder. He’s lost to what is going on here. Why are they so serious all of a sudden? It was just an extra bowl left out. There’s no way they can figure out what he’s been up to lately just from that, right? Had Dad been spying? Percival tries to brace himself for whatever comes his way.

Momma’s voice is stern, but still filled with the love and concern that comes with being a parent. "Percy, it's ok if you have a boy over. You don't have to hide anything from us. We told you, we'll love you no matter what."

It’s the last thing he expects, and while it’s better than the alternative, Percival is mortified. No, not them too, assuming things that he can't have. He shakes his head and he's sure his face is red.

"How about you come home to the mansion tomorrow instead?" Dad speaks when it’s clear Percival is too embarrassed to respond. "Next time we'll remember to give you your space. You are an adult now after all."

Momma adds as Dad places the box of food on the table next to the bowls, "Keep the food. There's plenty for you and your company to share for at least a few days."

Then as quickly as they arrived, they leave.
Minutes after, Gellert steps out of the guestroom. "Well that was fast. What did they want?"

Gellert gives no sign of having overheard that conversation. After all, if he had then why would he be asking about what they were talking about? Another mess avoided. "They just wanted to drop some food off and invite me over for dinner someday soon."

The other nods, "Ah good. Of course you should wait until you've been accepted at the AAA. There have been enough distractions and we really should be getting back to work."

And so the last few days are spent polishing Percival's skills. He gets to a point where he can nearly even convince Gellert of some outlandish tales. In such a short time he's learned so much and finally feels as if he won't fail his leader.

The night that Gellert finally leaves, he assures Percival that he isn't worried at all. The first few days there might have been some stress, but he progressed wonderfully throughout these weeks. Before he leaves, Gellert presents him with a gift. A new journal.

"Yours was looking rather full so I thought it was about time for a new one." With that, Percival accepts, and Gellert is gone just as abruptly as he arrived.

Percival is left all alone.

It only takes a few seconds for it to hit him exactly how much he had grown used to Gellert's company. Even if most of their time had been spent probing Percival's mind, it still feels as if they developed a certain closeness. Suppressing his attraction helped, he thinks. He'd been able to act mostly normal around him and got to know him better than just the idealized image he had formed of Gellert in his mind when they wrote.

However, when Gellert is gone, and he lets his guard falter slightly, his romantic feelings come rushing back, intermingling with any observation he had picked up, and his infatuation suddenly feels stronger than it had prior.

In the clean new journal. Percival sees a single message, freshly written. His heart skips a beat.

"Good luck Percy. These few weeks with you have been quite wonderful. You've grown quite a lot in this time and I trust you'll do just fine. As always, I'll be sure to keep in touch."

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Finally the day comes for him to join the Academy.

He makes sure neither a thread nor a hair is out of place. His face is freshly shaved (stubble an unwanted side effect of aging), and his wand tucked into his best coat. After one last glance in the mirror, he is certain he looks professional enough for the part. All that's missing is the ridiculous hat and the ugly leather trench coat.

Rather than take a train or a bus as he had each year to Ilvermorny, he can simply walk up to the building that houses the Academy. It's only a five minute walk, Dad had ensured his apartment would be close by after all.

As he approaches, it looks like any other No-Maj structure in New York City. Nothing impressive
from the outside, nine stories high and the architecture blended in with the rest of the surrounding buildings. Percival wonders what is stopping No-Majs from just stepping inside.

Once in the building, the fact this is a wizard establishment becomes more obvious. The entryway is a large room with two hallways branching off on either side. On the opposite wall from him is a door dwarfed by a large circular seal. It looks familiar to that of MACUSA’s, featuring similar elements. Beneath the seal is a long desk, where a bored looking woman sits surrounded by paperwork.

When the door shuts behind him, she looks up, examining him through her glasses. "Name please?"

Percival slowly approaches the desk, hands shoved in his pockets. "Graves, Percival Graves."

"Alright then, let me locate your file." She waves her wand, and the stack of papers separates, shuffling through the air a few times before a single file goes to her hand. "Sorry for the mess. Everything gets a bit hectic on initiation day." The woman stands and pushes back from the desk, walking towards the door behind her. "Come, follow me."

He does so, stepping into a much smaller room beyond that door. All that occupies the space is a single table and two chairs. A man sits expectantly in one of the chairs, holding out his hand towards the woman. She hands the file off to him before heading back to her post.

A cup with a clear liquid rests in the center of the table.

"Please, drink, and we may begin."

Percival isn't stupid. With the libraries worth of knowledge in his head, he has a rather good idea of what is in that glass.

So it would be Veritaserum then, a powerful truth telling potion. Interesting. Immediately, he works to strengthen his defenses further. The facts he does not want getting out are tossed into a chest, locked up tight, wrapped with chains, and buried miles under the ground of his mind. Above it, there remains truths about himself but they shape into the story he constructed for protection. It forms until it is seamless, and it covers any sign of there ever being secrets he wishes to hide.

Without hesitation, he takes a seat in the empty chair and drinks from the glass.

As he does so, the man watches carefully, not looking away until every drop is consumed. Only then does he look down at the file in his hand and jots down a few notes. "So, Percival Graves…” He says reading the paper in front of him. "That is your name correct?"

Already he can feel the potion taking effect. His head feels lighter and it's like a soothing stream of water flows through his mind. It's cleansing and Percival knows it’s trying to tear down his walls, but he makes sure they hold strong. He opens his mouth to answer the question and the "Yes" rolls off his tongue, the truthful answer begging to be set free.

"Good to hear! I'm friends with your father." The man says cheerfully. "Anyways. Back to the questions. Now, were you aware of the fact that there would be an interview today?"

Already a question to test him… the potion has worked fast seeping into his system. He wants to lie, to say no, for that would be easier, but the word gets caught on his tongue. And he knows for the rest of the conversation, outright lying would be impossible. So he fortifies the chains around the chest buried in the depths of his mind. Certain memories need to be suppressed as if they never occurred.

"Yes…” He says to the question asked, and the interviewer seems surprised. Before the interviewer
can ask another question, Percival hurries to comes up with an explanation. He tells himself though that he isn't answering a question, that he's just stating facts. "You see, my family has been attending this institution for centuries. My father has shared a few details about it with me." Nothing he says is a lie. Dad has been discussing the school with him. And the interviewer did not have a chance to ask how Percival knew about the interview.

The man nods, writing a few more things down."Ah, that makes sense. Your family has done this institution proud over the years." The man flips through some papers, humming as he reads. "Second in your class, top duelist for several years in a row… no known handicaps… I suppose I can mark you as a pass for your physical and intelligence categories. Hmmm. Tell me, why are you joining us. Why do you want to be an auror?"

A question he anticipated, one he and Gellert worked through. It's quite a bit more difficult to figure out how to answer it under the Veritaserum, but Gellert has taught him how to lie with truths. It helps that the true answer is suppressed, a large weight pressing it down so it will not rise to the surface of his thoughts. It gives him a chance to think, to shape his thoughts. It is possible to fight veritaserum, he just has to be careful. "Well, my family always expected it of me. My grandfather stressed it as I grew up. However, I have my own interests, it's just fortunate for them that such interests happened to overlap. I think quite a lot about the laws of this country and I want to ensure the world is a better place. Joining your ranks. I feel is the best way for me to accomplish that."

The man nods. "A good answer. Most people are here for the prestige. It's nice to see you are here for more noble reasons."

Percival smiles. Noble… yes… clearly that is why he's here. "Thank you sir. Growing up as I did… I believe I've gathered enough undeserved prestige. I just want to make a difference."

"Well I will be glad to have a man like you in our institution. Welcome to the American Auror Academy Mr. Graves." The man grins before standing and holds his hand out towards Percival.

So that was it? That is the extent of their questioning? He blinks at the hand, shocked that that is the end of the questioning. It seems too easy, but even so, he stands and shakes the man's hand. "Thank you for the opportunity. I'll make the most of my time here."

With that, the man gestures to a door behind him. "Head right through there and you will be able to join the rest of the newcomers and pick up your student license. Have a wonderful day Mr. Graves. I look forward to working alongside you one day."

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It's soon apparent that only a handful of his peers at Ilvermorny passed the interview process. As he sits in the hall where they all gather, he counts the number of fellow auror initiates. Nine of them, including Seraphina and Luciana, he recognizes. These are his peers he graduated with from Ilvermorny. Ten more are strangers to him. He learns later that the rest are a mixture of older students who took a few years of schooling off or students from lesser known schools. Altogether, their auror initiate class only has twenty students in total.

Considering he knows there were over thirty from Ilvermorny who claimed to want to pursue this path, he's shocked that so many appear to have failed. Percival had thought that examination was almost too easy. If he of all people had been able to slip past the cracks of the academy's defenses,
then the rest of them must have been completely incompetent.

A small group, prestigious apparently for even being accepted, all guaranteed to get the best education this side of the Atlantic ocean.

The first person he messages with the good news of his official acceptance is of course Gellert. The use of Veritaserum surprises Gellert, but none the less, he congratulates him, letting him know that it takes a special sort of wizard to counter the effects of the potion. That if he can fight that off, then the rest of his time there should be a non-issue, so long as he remembers to never let his defenses waver. Occlumency will become natural to him in time.

The second people, are his parents. They are, of course, overjoyed and that night he heads back home for a family meal and celebration. Dad tells him he never doubted him for a second, but Dad had also been unaware of the struggle that Percival went through. The less he knows, the better he supposes.

He puts up with Grandpa Graves who is overjoyed, telling him that in a few short years they'll need to find a portrait artist to add his face to the hall upstairs. Silently he thanks his occlumency training for giving him the strength to not argue with him. Fighting Grandpa would accomplish nothing. Instead, he only wishes for Grandpa to live long enough to have to live under the new world order.

Overall, the meal goes well. Momma tries to get him to stay longer but the courses start up early in the morning so he has to be getting back.

Before he leaves however, Momma hugs him and he can hear the emotion in her voice. It sounds as if she's trying not to cry. "Another auror in the family." She sniffs and holds him tighter. "I'm so proud of you. But please promise me you'll be safe?"

Hugging her back just as tight, he consoles her. Even if he can't honestly guarantee such a thing, especially with his plans, he still tells her, "I promise."

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Percival is later to his first lecture than he would have liked. By the time he makes it to the room, most of the seats are occupied. There is one empty seat next to Luciana though, so he quickly heads over there to claim it.

As he settles down, she flashes a dirty look before going to look at her notes. At first, he brushes it off as he takes his books out of his bag, but she surprises him when she whispers accusingly. "I can't believe they accepted you after what you did to that boy during our sixth year."

It's nearly been two years since that happened so her resentment catches him off guard. "You, still hate me for that?"

"You nearly killed him!" She says in a hushed, harsh whisper. "Orion didn't want to hear any criticism of you so I kept quiet about it. But still, that should be the sort of thing that should bar you for here. I had friends who weren't accepted for less, and yet you can just stroll right up to the academy despite deliberately hurting a No-Maj born boy. Aurors are supposed to protect wizards, of all backgrounds."

Percival scoffs. "You can't tell me you seriously you believed all those rumors they spread about me
after that."

"I didn't have to. You forget, I was in the room watching it happen. It was an unfair and barbaric act. The look on your face right before you attacked him, it was terrifying. I know some of the teachers justified it as just part of the duel, but it wasn't a calculated tactic, it was an explosion of impulse and anger. The exact sort that should prove you are too unstable to be here. But I guess your family name trumps all of that."

He sighs, letting her rant. He's heard it all before but it's still surprising to hear it coming from someone he considered a part of his small group of...friends. Perhaps Orion had been trying harder than he realized to make sure everything didn't fall apart their last year together. "Are you done yet? Can I have a chance to explain myself? Especially since you've apparently been hiding your hate towards me to the point you wouldn't even ask me about it."

"Fine." She huffs. "But don't expect it to change my mind."

"Luciana, I hate myself most days for what I did. Please don’t act as if you think I’m perfectly fine and just manipulating the system.” He frowns, sitting up straight at tall, not letting her get to him. "Besides, why do you even care? It's not as if you even knew him. Calling him 'boy'? He has a name. Don't sit here and lecture me as if I hurt some innocent child when you know nothing about what happened. That 'boy' was the whole reason I was depressed throughout year four."

She raises an eyebrow at him, still unconvinced.

"He used to be my best friend until I told him I had feelings for him. To which he responded by treating me terribly. I know I overreacted during that duel, but do not presume I'm just some bigot. There was far more than just being a sore loser at play there."

After his explanation, she seems at least slightly sympathetic. Well, so long as she thinks he's not like his grandfather, it’s the best he can really ask for. "Sorry, you just… never opened up to anyone. Orion was your closest friend, and even then, he didn't seem to know you very well. We tried, but you just pushed us away."

"I've learned that usually letting people in close is just an invitation for them to hurt you." He says rather casually.

Luciana frowns. "That's… actually rather sad."

Just as Percival is about to disagree, argue that self-preservation is an important skill to learn, their lecturer walks up to the podium in front of the room. Time for conversation is over. Back to the world of writing notes and acting as if he's learning.

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His first year at the Academy proves to be rather similar to his time at Ilvermorny. It's back to book work, absorbing as much information as the instructors can cram down them just using textbooks. The practicality of most of it is gone. He's back to feeling like a first year.

The subjects are at least different. Instead of the general knowledge classes he's spent his last seven years consuming, everything is more specific, having to deal with learning the tools of the trade. Anything else, it is assumed they are a master at, considering the high bar set by their acceptance
The classes are divided into Combat, Potions and Antidotes, Concealment and Tracking, and Law.

Combat is the most familiar, as most of it overlaps with defensive arts. They brush up on their protective charms, but here, offensive is stressed more. Becoming an Auror, as everyone here knows well, is possibly among the most dangerous careers a wizard can choose. If they get through this program, then there is little doubt that they'll be in life and death situations. Lines are drawn still as to what is and isn't ok. Unspeakables are still out of the question, but curses and hexes are stressed more. For the most part, the idea of whatever it takes to get the job done is acceptable. This year there is less actual fighting, but instead they are asked hypotheticals, questions such as 'What would you do if there was a dark wizard threatening a family, but the only way to save them is to kill him?' Lecturers are brought in, Aurors who have been in such situations share their experiences. All of it to build some sort of ethical library in their heads.

Potions and Antidotes it turns out is Luciana's specialty. Back at Ilvermorny, they dabbled with potion work, but there was never a heavy focus on it. Percival could do it when it was required of him, exact measurements and calculations never bothered him, but still, he always would have preferred a more raw use of his magical abilities. Luciana apparently practices potion making in her free time, which came in handy being friends with someone as active as Orion. Her talents lie in healing draughts especially. Now that he thinks about it, Orion's injuries from his Quidditch matches always healed particularly fast. The healers at the Academy seem to have taken note of her as well.

Concealment and Tracking is mostly new information. There isn't a direct correlation to a class at Ilvermorny. Some of the specific skill sets relate to spells they learned, such as transfiguration (one of Percival's worst subjects) and silencing charms, but the focus is more on learning the basics of detective work. If anything, the lessons taught in these classes most remind him of all he had learned from Gellert. Learning concealment tactics is what his leader has stressed after all.

Law is self-explanatory. Learning laws and famous court cases, having it all shoved down their throats. Of course, they had their entry level Law and Government class back at Ilvermorny, but this class goes into far more detail. Exposing the more unsavory side of the career. Learning about such court cases that caused required obliviations to the parents of No-Maj born children, learning how upholding the Statute of Secrecy overshadowed the need to keep people safe, both Wizard and No-Maj kind, it was everything he had grown to hate.

As always, he seems to be the only one in the room who has a problem with it. Everyone else takes notes as if this is just something else to learn and regurgitate for later on. Percival nearly breaks his quill from grasping it too tightly in frustration. Seraphina, as always, thrives here, apparently having learned about much of this on her own even before coming here. It's incredibly frustrating. Especially since Law is the class that their instructors push the hardest on them this year. The class is a bitter pill he must swallow, but he makes it through.

He knows that even if everything he reads and hears just infuriates him, it's still important that he learns it. Many of these laws he knows he's already broken and now he knows that what he has already done would be enough to qualify him for exile or worse. The knowledge is frightening but he is aware that the more he knows about the inner workings of it all, the more he will be able to work around it.

Never does he let his true opinions be known. Gellert ensured that he would be skilled at exactly that. His own personal feelings will be resolved in the grand scheme of things. For now, he learns to hide in plain sight. To become that wolf in sheep's clothing they worried about letting in. When they ask him hypotheticals about how he would handle situations involving breaches of the Statute, he
suppresses everything and instead tells them exactly what they want to hear. A few times, his instructors even chastise him for being too unsympathetic. Personally, Percival thinks it's progress.

Whereas he mostly hid a lot of his true feelings during his time at Ilvermorny, it is at the Academy where he shapes a whole new persona for himself. The suppression of his beliefs is still there, but now he works to define everyone's impression of him. During the class debates and lectures, he leaves no question that he is a stern law abiding auror in training.

It is here, in these classes that he learns how to shape his mask and become the good auror boy that everyone expects.

Chapter End Notes

Again, I don't have a specific date as to when the next chapter will be out, but it will be sometime in the next 2-3 weeks. I'm really excited to get to the events in some of the chapters following this and I can't wait to get there so everyone else can enjoy too.

As always, thanks everyone for keeping up with this story! It truly means a lot and it makes my day any time I see a new comment.

Check out my tumblr (percegraves) especially my 'metanoia' tag where I post updates and reblog/post anything that reminds me of this fic.
I am so so so sorry for the wait. I did not intend for a whole month to go by between any chapters throughout this fic. This whole month has been hella busy and after next week, things finally start to calm down. Moving states is stressful business! On the bright side, I will be living with my super good friend and fic Beta dreamsandpocky (aka gravescredence) so hopefully she'll be able to keep me on track better in the future.

Anyways enough about me! On to the chapter :) Most of the MACUSA and Auror Academy ideas are pure headcanon. I used what I found on the wiki as a starting point. If anyone likes my ideas here about that, feel free to use them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Just because he's moved on to the Academy doesn't mean Percival has forgotten about former aspects of his life.

Most notably, he still keeps in touch with Miss Pendelwood. Unlike the journal communication he is able to do with Gellert, he and Miss Pendelwood correspond through a much more traditional owl. Their correspondence is also not as frequent, just a letter back and forth now and then every few weeks. They make sure to avoid anything incriminating in their letters, however, on the off chance something happens to Miss Pendelwood's beloved pet.

Their discussions are rarely in depth, often simply featuring Percival sharing in no detail how everything at the Academy is going and Miss Pendelwood sending him reading suggestions while discussing various students she talks to in the library. Enough to maintain contact, not enough to gain any valuable knowledge he could be missing.

Only in the summer, after Percival's first year has concluded, does anything of interest come up.

Fortunately, both the Academy and Ilvermorny have similar schedules. With Ilvermorny's summer break, it also means Miss Pendelwood will be returning to the city. Aside from a few visits he has planned to see his family, his summer schedule is quite open. Without the chaos of moving and no sign of Gellert randomly showing up at his apartment, this summer proves to be far more relaxed.
than the prior one.

So, before their school related responsibilities start up again, Percival takes the opportunity to visit her often.

After a few letters back and forth, it's decided they should meet up at Miss Pendelwood's cramped apartment rather than his massive one. At first, the suggestion seems ridiculous to Percival, but she explains it would be less suspicious. It would be far more likely for the comings and goings of a future auror's apartment to be monitored than it would be for a school librarian's. Perhaps it is a bit over cautious but it's better to be safe than sorry with their lifestyle. So they pick a day that works well for both of them, and Percival apparates from outside his apartment to hers.

It helps that it's not far and he's been to her place in the past so the travel is simple. Soon he's climbing the stairs up to her door and knocks. Miss Pendelwood greets him with a hug. "Percival! It's wonderful to see you!"

Her skinny arms wrap around him, squeezing tight before letting go. The action has him tensing up, the suddenness of the close comfort unexpected. Of course, he's used to it from his parents and he had grown accustomed to small touches from Gellert, but such open acts of affection from most others are still foreign to him, even if he does see Miss Pendelwood as a close and trusted fixture in his life.

"It's good to see you too Miss Pendelwood." He tries to smile, scratching the back of his head to fight away some of the remaining awkwardness from her greeting.

She just ushers him inside with a large smile on her face. "Please, please, you aren't at Ilvermorny anymore. I insist you call me Linda."

"But… um… you are still my superior. I should still show some sign of respect." He still has trouble not calling Gellert 'sir'. It's the product of being raised in a distinguished upper class family, he supposes. Honor and respect had been ingrained in him from a young age. No matter how separate he saw himself from that life now, he still has a hard time breaking entirely from it.

That makes her laugh, and she just leads him over to a small table with two steaming cups and a plate full of tiny sandwiches. "Nonsense. Gellert doesn’t insist on any such titles, so neither shall I. Besides, if anything, we are practically equals now. Each of us doing our jobs that he assigns as we work towards our true goals. You may still technically be a student, but you are still already doing important work for him, just as I still continue to recruit on his behalf."

Percival sighs, settling down at the table, wrapping his hands around a warm mug. Her famous cocoa. After a sip, he feels more at ease. "If you say so Miss Pendelwood."

"Linda." She corrects.

He chuckles slightly. "Fine then… If you say so, Linda." Taking a bite of a small sandwich, he ponders what to ask. They aren’t bound by the same restrictions they placed on themselves when sending letters, so now he can be as open as he wants. Maybe he can get caught up on the side of their organization he's been separated from. "Speaking of important work, how is everything going? I haven't gotten to go to a meeting in years so I feel so cut off from everything."

"Well, I'm still recruiting as always. There hasn't been anyone quite as interesting as you at Ilvermorny since you graduated, but I do feel as if I've been opening some minds. That's all I can really hope for, that when these children get out from under the constant scrutiny of school, that they'll be able to think for themselves as to how to make the world a better place, rather than to just rehash what their
parents and professors tried to shove in their heads." She hides a sly smirk towards him with her mug. "I can't expect everyone to be an instant revolutionary like someone else I know."

"I'll take that as a compliment." He may sound sarcastic, but he does appreciate her comments. It is nice, after all, to have a reminder that he isn't just one of many to her. She is special to him so it's nice to find the feeling is mutual.

"Aside from that, our numbers have been growing steadily outside of the school. It's been a good year. We still meet in that old theatre but the seats are filling up. Give us a few years and we'll need to find a larger venue." Her mug is placed down on the table and her fingers tap on the rim in thought. "I wish could tell you more than that, but Gellert doesn't want me to share too much with you. I suppose he's waiting for you to complete all of your schooling before you can rejoin us."

Percival frowns. It's not particularly surprising, but disappointing nonetheless. Two more years until he can finally do something. That's still a long time. "I guess I understand."

Always perceptive, she must have caught his disappointment because she changes the subject. "Enough about me and my work. Please, tell me how the Academy has been treating you."

Silently he thanks her. "So far so good. Only a year in and it hasn't been too different from Ilvermorny, though, Dad tells me that should change soon. We should be working more with MACUSA this coming year. Hopefully I'll be able to tell Gellert of something more than just the various laws we have to memorize. I update him every day, but so far there hasn't been anything particularly useful."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you'll be more valuable than the rest of us in no time."

"He stayed with me for a few weeks last summer, but ever since, it's been a lot of nothing." Percival blushes at the memory, the constant contact that he already misses dearly.

"Oh? How was that?" She asks, sounding genuinely curious. "I knew he planned to stay with me one night but he canceled at the last minute." Had Gellert not told her that he had been staying with Percival? He thought Gellert and Linda spoke often about him, but perhaps he had been wrong.

Staring into his still steaming cocoa, he ponders over those weeks. They had been tense, Gellert hadn't given him a single moment where he had been allowed to relax and drop his guard, but they had been some of the most productive and gratifying weeks of his life. A large portion of time where he felt he was actively working towards something important. Gellert had given him a goal and not only did he work hard, he achieved it. Those weeks he had been not only close to Gellert, but also could do him proud.

A smile tugs at his blush-dusted cheeks. "It was wonderful. Practically all of our time spent together was spent instructing me. At first it was strange, going from writing to living in the same space as him, but as I grew used to it, I didn't want to remember what it was like to live apart. He was incredibly patient with me, made sure I was grasping all the concepts he needed me to learn. I still can't believe we're almost the same age. He's impossibly talented and clever, that it's hard to comprehend. I feel so honored to even know him."

Linda stares at him knowingly. "It's obvious you care a great deal for our leader."

Under her sharp gaze, he shifts in his seat. "What? Is there something wrong with that?" He asks, timid. "He's our leader, we should care for him."

She chuckles. "Oh no, nothing wrong with that. He is a very clever and ambitious young man, after
all, who will do great things, not unlike yourself."

Percival shrinks in on himself at the comparison.

However her smile does fall slightly, and she grows more serious for a moment. "Just keep in mind for the grand scheme of things, he is our leader and very busy. I just ask you to be careful Percival, because I don't want you getting hurt."

Her words are like a riddle to him. Hurt? How could Gellert hurt him? Could she tell how he felt? After all, she had always been one of the more perceptive people he knows. "I… don't know what you're talking about, but I can promise you Linda, my priorities are in order. I know my place."

As if everything is normal again, her smile returns. "Good to hear. I promise I'm not doubting you. I'm just looking out for you."

"I appreciate it." And Percival finishes off his cocoa.

It's not the only times they meet up that summer. Over time, their discussions feel less like a business meeting and more like he's just chatting away with an old friend. Considering his general lack of honest and open friendships, though, it's incredibly welcome. She's one of very few people who knows him through and through. She's been a mentor, a figure of guidance, and now an equal companion.

He'll miss her when the educational year starts back up again but, as they discussed, they both have jobs to do.

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The second year at the Academy differs greatly from their first.

It's a welcome change, because no matter how much Percival considers himself an academic, years of constant study on subjects he hates grate on his nerves. Of course they still have their classes, still attend lectures, but no longer does that remain their primary focus.

Instead, every trainee is scheduled to do something akin to an apprenticeship with every sector of MACUSA that hires aurors. A few days out of each week, they go to their assigned sector and work with that department.

In most instances it's simply meeting who's in charge of what, seeing all the various paths auroring can take. This way each trainee can get a taste of what their future could be and determine if they'd be a good fit or not. However, they don't learn all the secrets of the departments and don't venture outside MACUSA's temporary headquarters either. They are still just students, after all, so actual fieldwork is out of the question. For now, they are simply there to learn and observe, doing little more than paperwork to help out.

At first they place Percival in the Body for Protection of Magical Species, which he quickly realizes is one of the last places he'd like to end up. Not only would his work there prove absolutely useless to Gellert but, on his first day alone, a nogtail nearly bit his finger off. He had never gotten along particularly well with creatures before but, after that, he is positive creature control is not the place for him.
Then there are the several departments clearly intended for only those who wish to have desk jobs, positions that only the most bureaucratic could possibly hold without going insane. This seems to be what most of the departments are, however. He didn't want to monitor floo networks or herb growth for hours out of every day. The most exciting and informative part of those jobs was knocking on offenders doors and demanding fines be paid. How could he help Gellert as nothing more than a tax collector?

Even so, no matter how mundane the information, he still sends it all to Gellert. Percival is getting a behind the scenes look at how MACUSA is run, letting him know far more than the average citizen. He makes sure to ask questions constantly and jot down detailed notes. No one would possibly find it suspicious, after all. He's supposed to be learning, and he's nothing more than a curious trainee who wants to find his calling.

It takes over a month before they finally put him somewhere where he actually feels like he belongs, somewhere he knows his talents could be put to use. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and more specifically, the Investigations Department.

Within this department, he asks the most questions, works the hardest, and shows the most interest. Gellert tells him it's where he'll be needed the most. If he's part of the Investigation teams, after all, then he'll most likely be one of the first to access classified information. Initially, the title of 'Magical Law Enforcement' has him wary but the more he contemplates the position, part of him becomes excited for certain aspects of his future career. As an investigator he'll get the opportunity to interact with No-Majs, to blend in with their world and really see what it's like.

His personal interest may be a surprise to himself but, to everyone else, it's expected of him. Especially since Magical Law Enforcement is where most of the Graves family line ended up. Grandpa Graves, his great grandfather, and even Dad have all worked for this department.

In fact, Dad still works there.

It's a bit odd at first and takes some time to get used to. MACUSA employees treat him with some familiarity that is not extended to a large portion of the other trainees. He knows it's only because of his dad. At least the apprenticeships are treated on a highly individual basis, so he doesn't have to put up with any pettiness from any other trainees.

The special treatment he finds somewhat irritating. He loves his dad and always enjoyed his dad's company, looked up to him all throughout his childhood, but here he's trying to blend into the background as much as possible. It could be worse, though. They could all hate him. At least this way he knows most of the people in his favored department like him.

Investigations usually accepts only the smartest and most dedicated to move further into their department, but Percival knows all it would take is one mention to his dad that he feels at home here and his position would be secured.

Not wanting to leave anything Gellert desires to chance, Percival does just that.

Before he knows it, his schedule is filled with more and more intern shifts within the Investigations department. It's a sign that both the Academy and MACUSA already have him placed. He may still be kept far from anything even remotely classified, but he knows it's a step in the right direction.
As each trainee shows more interest and promise in a certain area, the Academy takes note and caters what they learn in their instructions to that. So, once their skills are deemed passable in areas that they have less need for, they no longer have to attend those classes and are given more time in their specialization. It may be chaotic, but the method has been proven to produce great aurors for centuries.

So Percival is quickly moved out of subjects like Handling Magical Creatures and Potions and Antidotes, transferred instead to classes under the Tracking and Concealing umbrella. It's a welcome change. His time feels less wasted with busy work, and he can focus in on what is important.

Because of this, he sees less of Seraphina and Luciana, each of them going on their own paths. As time goes on, they share fewer and fewer classes, maybe only having one a week in common at most.

Even so, all of the trainees are somewhat close, encouraged to make tight friendships with those they will be fighting alongside when the time comes. Considering they are a small group too, that isn't hard to do.

It's easier to feel closer to these people than it was at Ilvermorny, anyways. At Ilvermorny any non-academic engagements felt like nothing but a distraction. Being cramped into a tight living space with several peers he had next to nothing in common with only pushed him further into a personal isolation for the most part. But here, they are all signing on for similar futures, their companionship feels as if it has purpose. Besides, unlike at Ilvermorny, he does not feel constantly forced into interaction. He can go home and not have to put up with a roommate begging for attention. Not that he had disliked Orion, but for a recluse like himself, too much of him became tiring.

Often, after their classes are done for the day, Percival will meet up with several of the other trainees. At first, it’s only because of Luciana extending an invitation that he joins them, but soon he realizes he actually appreciates the company. His usual companions, Miss Pendelwood and Gellert, are not always easy to get in touch with (which is not surprising considering they have important work that holds their attention) so lunch here and there with his future colleagues is welcome.

It does help build the trust between them too which, after all, is what Gellert wants from him. Work alongside them, form friendships so they’ll never question his motives. This is just as important if not more so than his academic work.

He thinks most of his fellow trainees like him.

It's hard to joke and fully relax around them, but he does his best. Whenever he offers an opinion or a small fact or even just talks about his days with the Investigations Department they seem to genuinely care about what he has to say. Perhaps it's the presence of Seraphina or Luciana that lets him open up just enough around the rest. His guard is constantly up, as it must be after all, but he eventually gets to a point where he feels at ease without letting too much show.

So long as he can hide the fact that he hates the ideals that many of them wish to embody, he finds he does actually like them in return. They are all extremely intelligent and hard workers, driven and focused. Maybe in another life they all could have been honest friends.

One fellow trainee in particular, Edwin, a potions specialist like Luciana, has taken it upon himself to befriend Percival especially.

He had been one of the few trainees who came from a lesser known school, and proves to be
incredibly curious about someone, such as Percival, who grew up within the Auror life.

Not that Percival minds. Edwin is enjoyable to be around. He's funny, easy going, and incredibly talented. There are even a few occasions he can get Percival to smile and laugh as well.

It comes as a surprise to everyone who came from Ilvermorny, Luciana raising a brow practically every time a light chuckle escapes him. Though, it even surprises Percival himself. It's been awhile since he could feel so comfortable, despite the fact he has to carefully craft everything he says about himself. He mostly credits his smiles and laughter to his growing talents at occlumency, but if he's honest, Edwin must take some of the credit. He has a way of making Percival feel included without the pushiness he experienced with Orion.

All things considered, he finds he likes Edwin.

As the year progresses, Edwin takes it upon himself to sit closer and closer to Percival every time the group meets up until they are sitting next to each other practically every time.

Percival doesn't think much of it, until one night in particular.

As usual, they meet up at the Dapper Pearl, a bar in the city not too far from MACUSA’s current headquarters. It's well known to the Aurors of the city, and treats them well. Even the trainees are treated with respect. The bar is a clean establishment with good food and drink, though no matter how much Seraphina begs him to try some giggle water, he'll always refuse.

Tonight though, only about six of their group shows up, less than usual. The bartender is happy, but it makes no difference to Percival, since his favorite peers are here. Two of his fellow Investigation department colleagues, twins Whitney and Pryce, sit across from him bickering as usual. Seraphina sits next to them, hiding her chuckles which she would later swear were induced by her favorite beverage in her hand. To Percival's left, is Luciana who tries to get the twins to calm down. To Percival's right, is Edwin.

Edwin is less talkative than usual, which only Percival seems to notice in the hectic rabble. The two of them are staying out of it anyways. Watching Luciana attempt to tame a wild force such as sibling banter is amusing enough. He's about to ask Edwin if anything is wrong, but as he turns to look at him, Percival can't help but note the other boy staring at him with half lidded eyes, swallowing almost nervously as Percival faces him.

"Are you ok?" He still asks, ignoring the strange look that quickly fades from Edwin's face.

Edwin's typical bright smile returns and he bumps Percival's leg playfully from under the table. "Yeah, course I am. It's just been a busy day."

"Isn't every day?" Percival says bumping Edwin's leg in return. Between the Academy and MACUSA, they are worked harder than practically any other students in the country.

"True. And yet we all make our days even longer to come here and see each other." Edwin pauses from what he's saying as the twins interrupt with an exasperated shout that they'll be heading home early. Everyone watches as march out the door. Luciana sighs, standing to move from her spot next to Percival, to sit next to Seraphina. She continues to grumble about the twins.

Percival smirks at the contrast between that and their conversation."Even so, I think it's worth it most of the time."

"Definitely." Edwin says with a nod. "Especially since the company is so wonderful." Percival feels another nudge against his leg, but however this one lingers. Maybe he should retract his leg, but the
contact doesn't bother him.

Luciana rolls her eyes, but grins regardless. "You are such a sap. Both of you are ridiculous."

They all continue like that, the four of them enjoying the night. For the most part, they avoid the subjects of work and school, but Luciana shares a particularly funny story on misadventures in their department. Seraphina stays pretty quiet, but it's clear she's having a good time.

Around an hour later, Seraphina puts down her glass of giggle water. "I'd love to stay here and continue the fun, but I have to be up early. The Department of Order and Regulations has a meeting in the morning." She nudges the rest of the bottle she had been pouring glasses from and nudges it towards Percival. "I think there's a little left if anyone wants to finish it. You know you want to Graves."

He pushes it back in her direction. "Never going to happen Picquery."

"Fine, be no fun." She laughs and waves everyone goodbye, leaving the bottle on the table.

Then it's just the three of them. It's rare that so few of them are out at once, but he supposes tonight is just a strange night.

"Hm… I wonder what her meeting is about?" Edwin asks, in the process, scooting himself closer to Luciana, and of course Percival.

Despite the fact that he's only left a few inches between them, Percival acts as if nothing is odd. "Who knows with all those politicians…" He tries to keep the distaste for that particular department out of his voice. The Department of Order and Regulations was filled with lawmakers and those who wished to truly have a hand in government. If it was the Investigations Department that tracked down potential lawbreakers, it was Order and Regulations that made said laws and determined the nuances within. Personally, Percival considered them to be the source of many of America's problems and, of course, that was where Seraphina, one of his closer friends, had chosen to specialize. Well, at least he had connections now.

"Now come on, they aren't all bad." Edwin bumps into his shoulder playfully.

Percival can feel himself blush at having Edwin so close, the other now actually pressed up against him. "If you say so." He replies more meekly than intended.

Luciana looks back and forth between the two of them, an unspoken dialogue running in her head. Then she too is standing up and excusing herself. "I… uh… just remembered I have some plants I need to water so I'll be heading home."

"So soon?" Percival blinks in surprise at her sudden choice to leave.

"Yeah, you know… plants… time sensitive issue. Anyways, you two have fun! Don't let me ruin the party." After a wink in their direction, she's gone.

There's a brief period of silence as Percival tries to make sense of what just happened. Luciana didn't seem to be acting like herself and she never had to head home in such a hurry to 'water her plants' in the past.

Before he can reach a conclusion, Edwin is clearing his throat, breaking the quiet. "So, it's just us two for the rest of the night I guess."

Percival shrugs, the motion causing Edwin, who is still pressed up against him, to stir slightly. "I
"It's kinda nice. Just having a one on one talk. We can get to know each other a little better this way."

That makes Percival ever so slightly nervous. The suggestion in itself is vague, but even so, when he works so hard to keep his true self hidden, it's hard to not interpret something like that as an attack. He pushes said nerves down though and in a perfectly innocent tone that would have made Gellert proud, he asks, "Sure, what do you want to know?"

Edwin hums as he thinks of what to ask. That alone makes Percival relax… so it wouldn't be an interrogation. Just curiosity. "Hm, well, are you a sports kind of guy?"

The question is so random that Percival cannot help but chuckle and shake his head. "What? No not me. Never saw the appeal."

Melodramatically, Edwin gasps as if Percival has said something to offend him. Percival knows he isn't serious though. He knows he's the odd one here, having been a rare Wampus to skip out on as many sporting events as he could.

"My roommate back at Ilvermorny, though?" Percival explains before he completely disappoints Edwin. "Quidditch was his life. After we graduated he even got picked up by the National team."

"Oh wow! Quodpot was always more my game, but I still love a good quidditch match. That really is something." Edwin says with genuine awe. It's strange to think that it really was impressive that he lived with someone who was basically a quidditch prodigy for years, and yet, Percival never thought much of it.

"I guess so." And then the conversation lulls back into a short awkward silence, not really knowing where to take the subject. So instead he nudges Edwin and asks, "Got any more questions?"

"Let's see..." Edwin says, tapping his fingers against the wood table. "Are you going to drink that?" And he points at the bottle Seraphina left on the table.

Percival shakes his head dramatically, "What...no! Not you too."

Edwin teasingly pokes him in the side causing him to jump slightly. "Aw why not? I know it isn't because it's alcohol. I've seen you drink plenty before."

He had gotten much better about holding his liquor ever since Gellert first had him try it. "Because I despise the ridiculous sound it forces you to make."

Ignoring Percival's wishes, Edwin reaches for the bottle and holds it out towards him. "Come on, just a little sip."

"Why do you want to make a fool out of me?" Percival tries to shoo the bottle away to no success.

"I want no such thing." Edwin smirks slyly. "I just want to see you relax a little. Besides, Seraphina isn't around so she can't exactly make fun of you for it."

Percival frowns, thinking it over, before snatching the bottle out of Edwin's hands. "Fine, just one sip, if it means you won't ever make me do this again."

"I promise." Edwin claps his hands endearingly.
With that, Percival drinks from the bottle, the cool burn goes down. As the liquid pools in his stomach, he feels the effects bubbling, and in seconds, he lets out a loud "HAH!" That fades into smaller giggles.

When he can finally control his vocal cords again, he turns back to the other with a slight frown. "Happy?"

Edwin doesn’t seem to notice his frown and leans in even closer, resting his chin against his hand, smiling bright. "That was… really cute."

Percival is sure his face is burning red at the compliment. He's not used to this sort of attention, but he isn't completely oblivious. He has a decent idea that the way Edwin is acting isn't typical between two friends. "Um… thanks?" He mumbles, still not really sure how to react to this attention.

"Here, I'll even things out." Edwin reaches back for the bottle still in Percival's hands, the other's fingers ever so slightly brushing against his own. A shiver tingles down his spine. The bottle is gentle tugged out of Percival's grasp and Edwin makes a show of drinking from the same glass that Percival's own lips had touched seconds prior.

Of course there's the obligatory loud laugh that comes with a sip of giggle water, but Percival is too focused on analyzing how he currently feels in this very moment.

He does enjoy Edwin's company, and, well, Edwin is not unattractive. He's clean cut, well-groomed with his strawberry blonde hair combed neatly, and has a sense of fashion that Percival definitely appreciates.

When Edwin places the bottle back down and returns his focus to him, Percival stirs uncomfortably. No, that hadn't been enough time to sort through everything running through his head. He needs more time to evaluate it all before he can act naturally around Edwin. Before the other can say anything, Percival speaks up. "I just realized that I should be heading home. It is getting late."

The flash of disappointment on Edwin's face doesn't escape his attention. "Maybe I could walk you back to your apartment? You know, make sure you get home safely?"

"I'm not a first year. I can apparate myself back to my apartment without an issue."

"Come on, I want to." There is a glimmer of hope in Edwin's voice. "We were having a lovely conversation and I would hate to cut it short. Besides, it's a beautiful night. The stars are out and we should enjoy the weather while it lasts."

He really should say no. Should just brush Edwin off with a 'See you tomorrow' to give himself plenty of time to think things through, but for some reason, staring at Edwin who stands there in anticipation for an answer, it makes it very hard to say no.

"Alright, Let's go then."

"R-really?" Edwin immediately brightens. "I mean, yeah that's wonderful. I'm ready to head out whenever you are."

They take a moment to fish out some change as a tip for the bartender before heading out into the streets. It is a nice night out, just like Edwin said. By this time the crowds of people on the streets have died down it's calm and the stars really do look lovely.

Side by side, they walk down the path back to Percival's apartment. While Edwin it seems would be content to cling to Percival the entire walk back, Percival makes sure to maintain at least a small
distance between them to avoid any odd looks directed towards them from the No-Majs. The walk is rather short, only a few minutes away, two blocks and a turn. It goes by quickly, Edwin leading a light conversation between them once again.

Percival doesn't stop Edwin from following him up the staircase to his floor. In fact, Percival only stops when he's standing right in front his door.

After a deep breath, he turns to face Edwin, hating the sudden anxiety building up. "So I guess this is good night?"

Edwin nods, biting his own bottom lip. "I guess it is. Before I go, I wanted you to know I had a wonderful time tonight."

He can't help but smile at that. "I did too."

It isn't unexpected, but even so, it takes a moment for Percival to register it when Edwin takes a step forward and presses his lips against Percival's in a gentle kiss.

The kiss doesn't last long, and really it's just a quick peck of lips, enough to give Percival a chance to move away if he wants.

But Percival doesn't. No, instead, he takes Edwin's jacket lapels in hand and tugs him closer, kissing him enthusiastically in return. For one of the few times in his twenty years, Percival listens to his body and not his brain, and his body has been starving.

His last experience with anything like this was when he was fifteen and confused and had no idea what it was he wanted. Luciana had kissed him and that had been a disaster, he had kissed Orion only to have that quickly stopped with the reminder that Orion had a girlfriend. This time though, nothing is stopping him and he can just let go and enjoy it.

Edwin responds just as eagerly, all too happy to deepen the kiss, placing a hand at Percival's hip, pulling him closer and pushing him back against the door all at once. A lengthy moan escapes Percival at that.

He can feel the warmth radiating from Edwin into him, can feel something prodding him from between Edwin's legs, and it just makes Percival want to roll up against him, a need for contact growing as his own pants feel tighter than ever. He can't help all the sounds he's making, the moans and the pleading for more in breaths between kisses.

Soon, the kiss is completely broken as Edwin goes to suck gently at his earlobe before whispering in a low lusty voice. "Maybe we should take this inside?"

Just like that, Percival's brain regains control.

He can't let Edwin into his apartment. Not without warning, with no preparation. With the way Percival is living, he can't just bring over guests as he pleases, not when so many of the books and journals lying around are proof of treasonous activity. Not when a virtual stranger could just pick up the wrong book and read every single one of his correspondences with Gellert throughout the years.

No. Edwin isn't worth it. Edwin is just some fun pretty boy he attends classes with who just happens to be a great kisser. In the grand scheme of things, he is no one. Percival cannot let someone insignificant even get close to having a chance of undermining everything he's been working towards for years. Edwin may be the distraction that his body craves, but Percival just has to remind himself that he isn't Gellert.
So even with his body protesting, Percival pushes Edwin back. "I'm sorry, I can't do this."

Edwin blinks, confused, but he stays back. "Did… did I do something wrong?" His voice cracks, broken and Percival really can't let this go on any longer.

Shaking his head, looking at the ground instead of Edwin, he explains as best as he can. "It isn't you." And with that, he hurries inside his apartment.

Once inside, he tries to calm down, but his heart is racing and there's still that damn unfulfilled need making him squirm. It's his body's way of fighting back, of telling him he shouldn't have let Edwin go.

He paces around his apartment urging himself to relax, but it's easier said than done. He knows he made the right choice, one glance at his dining table proves it as Gellert's journal lies out in the open. Regardless, he also can't help but think about how he could still be pressed up against another warm body in pure ecstasy.

"Damn it!" He shouts loudly to the empty room before storming back to his bedroom.

In his current state, he can barely think straight, knows that won't be possible until he finds some form of release. While he may be inexperienced, he isn't innocent. So after settling down on his bed, he buries his face in a pillow and lets a hand slip below his waistband.

He tries to keep his thoughts on Edwin. With everything still so fresh in his mind, it shouldn't be difficult. However, he can't stop it when they inevitably drift to Gellert. It is a fantasy after all, so of course his subconscious would reach for what he really wants. In his head, it isn't Edwin's hands all over him, it isn't Edwin pushing him back against his door.

Only after he's made a mess of himself, does he let the shame creep in.

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For several days following the whole fiasco, there are no issues. Percival is able to get back on track with next to no distractions. It isn't effortless however.

In situations like this prior, he would always consult Gellert. This time though, he knows that would be a poor decision. If he shared how close he had been to slipping up, then would Gellert still respect him? Percival would rather not find out. Besides, discussing this particular topic with his leader would rouse feelings he's already struggling hard to suppress.

No matter what he wants though, he cannot let anyone close. He knows this. It's the life he signed up for the moment he answered Miss Pendelwood's letters.

He actively avoids Edwin for the time being, needing time to work through everything running through his head. Fortunately, most of his classes have become so specialized that he won't see Edwin in them any time soon. For now, he can throw himself entirely into his coursework, letting that overshadow the more complicated matters in his life.

By this point, they are all relevant to the path of Investigations. It's nice, as most of it is a refresher of several aspects of magic that Gellert had already taught him. While several pieces of study may be repetitive, Percival doesn't mind. The academy teaches him new uses for a variety of spells and thus
expands his repertoire.

Certain spells in particular are stressed.

Obliviations, for example, a spell he already feels a deep distaste for, is one of the American Auror's greatest tools. Talking to Gellert when he gets home, though, makes it less terrible. Gellert lets him know that if he ever slips up, he better be a skilled obliviator. It's a spell that isn't only for No-Majs after all. What better way to hide than to erase memories of things he doesn't want people to see? They had learned the basic spell back at Ilvermorny but it was one he tended to avoid. Now he's learning all the nuances that come with it. It's a precise art. The better one is at the spell, not only the stronger and more potent the memory erasure, but it becomes safer, a certain precision required to take away specific memories rather than just rip away chunks.

Then there are the spells he's more than grateful for the refresher on. Spells that he had never had a good grasp on no matter if it was Gellert or Ilvermorny teaching him.

Transfiguration is another such spell that was important back at Ilvermorny. Percival has been good enough to get by, but he'd never considered it a particular talent of his. He thinks he should be better than he is on account of how often he pretends to be something he is not. However, at the Academy, he is able to improve.

One academic requirement that was not taught at Ilvermorny, is Legilimency. Gellert never got around to actually teaching it to him, even though he cast it constantly on Percival himself. The Academy, however, considers it essential to their education. It's far more difficult than he anticipated. Despite his familiarity with the spell, he proves to be very poor at it. He has difficulty accepting the ideas of others. His innate stubbornness is what prevents him from being a natural at the spell. Legilimency requires a certain finesse of being able to read people. Something Percival personally lacks.

Even with these difficulties and misgivings, none of these subjects are his biggest obstacle.

No, his true test comes when they have to learn none other than Occlumency.

It's only been a few days since his encounter with Edwin. The Investigations group, about five of the trainees including Percival meet in the Academy for their first class on the skill.

Entering the classroom, Percival thinks nothing of it. This should be his easiest class at the Academy yet. He's had the best tutor anyone could ask for in this particular subject so there is no reason he should worry. This will be nothing and then he can return home and perhaps even go back to thinking about how to handle some of the less pressing matters in his life.

It makes him cocky.

The instructor is a middle-aged woman, Auror Justina, a senior auror who is still active within the Investigations Department.

For the first half of the class, she lectures them on the basics, as if they are all new to this. He supposes it should be the case for most of them. Neither at Ilvermorny nor any prior time at the Academy have they touched this subject. Auror Justina goes on and on about building a wall, and blocking off portions of the mind. All of it, the basics that Miss Pendelwood taught him back in his 5th year long ago.

So Percival cannot help but zone out, taking this moment to think about how he should approach Edwin, preserve the friendship, but still deny the intimate connection he knows they both want.
It's only when Justina calls his name out, clearly impatient with him, that he realizes the lecture is over.

He immediately sits up straight and attentive, trying to recall exactly what the last thread of conversation was. At least it isn't something he has to ponder for very long.

"Well since it's clear you weren't paying any attention, perhaps you'd like to go first?" Justina calls out, her arms crossed.

Percival blinks, trying to comprehend what it is she's talking about. This is an occlumency lesson he realizes, so of course, she's volunteering him to be subjected to show what it is he can do. He may have missed the whole lesson but, even so, he is confident in his abilities in this particular area especially.

So without question, he nods and walks down to stand in front of her.

Once he's in position she looks him in the eyes with her wand raised and the incantation for spell he's grown all too accustomed to escapes her lips.

Percival is then sitting out on the freshly dug dirt with his Momma, the memory of helping her in the garden floating to the surface, strong, drowning absolutely everything else out. He's content here, happy with no worries at all.

It had been one of the first tactics Gellert taught him. Walls are suspicious as are blank rooms. Instead search out a memory so strong and yet perfectly neutral that no one would ever think to look deeper.

The spell subsides, Auror Justine's wand falling to her side as she takes a step back. Percival expects her to look pleased. After all, he fulfilled the assignment, had he not? Instead, she stares at him, brow furrowed and eyes wide. She looks amazed, and not in a good way.

"You've already had training?" She says with a tilt of her head, as if she doesn't quite believe it. Then Percival realizes his error.

The Academy expects them to know next to nothing about this and yet he's just displayed a higher level technique. Stupid! He should have played dumb. Kept to unstable walls. Kept to blank rooms with fractures. Instead he's just outed himself as knowing something beyond his education and now she'll expect an answer. There’s a brief flash of panic on his face as he scrambles to think of an excuse.

His dad teaching him would be the easiest explanation, but Auror Justina knows Adalgott well, has worked in the same department as him for decades. If he claims his knowledge comes from his dad, that could quickly unravel if she decides to question Dad in the future.

So instead he starts to explain it as just a basic curiosity. "I thought it would be important to learn on my own. I knew it was part of the curriculum and knew it was a requirement for aurors, so I read up on techniques."

He makes sure his mind is protected as he speaks, images of reading books flashing through his mind, just in case her Legilimency talents ran deeper than simple wand usage.

"You taught yourself occlumency on your own." Suspicious still wavers in her voice.

He shrugs as if it's no big deal, as if he's not being interrogated in this instant. "Found a few books on it back at Ilvermorny and I've been working on the mental exercises in my free time."
There's a pause as she looks him up and down. He hates this, being examined, knowing she's looking for a crack in the armor. But there won't be one. He can't slip up again.

Soon she's telling him to be seated before calling up the next trainee, but every now and then, he can catch her glare drifting back to him throughout the rest of the class.

It feels like it lasts an eternity. A slow crawl as the clock ticks in the background, every moment feels like torture. Auror Justina suspects something, this much he knows. The only solace is now that he is aware he won't let that suspicion run deeper. He won't let details escape. He's given a plausible explanation for his talents and while she may doubt it, there is no way for her to even connect the pieces to form the story that could actually condemn him.

Finally the class does end. Rather than hurry out of the room like he so dearly wants to do, he moves at his usual pace, giving no sign of even knowing she's wary of him. Instead, he just gives her the usual good bye he gives all his instructors and heads on his way to his next class.

The rest of the day he tries to not think on it. Combat Class lets him just enjoy the motions of spellwork as if nothing is wrong.

It's only when he's leaving that class, ready to head home for the day that he overhears something truly worrisome. In the hall on his way out, he sees Auror Justina speaking in hushed whispers to another staff members. She's face away from him, not noticing his presence, but he can still make out a few key phrases. "Adalgott's boy… occlumency skills… review his entrance exam."

Externally and internally he makes no sign of hearing them, but as he passes, eyes focused forward instead of on the gossiping duo, they immediately quiet.

Paranoia starts to creep in.

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Only when he arrives home that night does he get a chance to relax.

The rest of the class had been one of the most stressful experiences of his life. He had been completely singled out, interrogated with not an ounce of preparation ahead of time, and he could tell from the look on her face that she hadn't believed him.

After making sure his door is locked and his wards are holding, he grabs Gellert's journal from the dining room table and goes to sit in his study. There, he takes several deep breaths, letting all the negativity fade, just trying to convince himself it would all be ok.

Years of being able to blend in perfectly, of lying with such finesse that no one even question the façade he had made for himself… all wavering now because he'd been arrogant and distracted.

If there was even an ounce of hope of maintaining something with Edwin, without a doubt it's all gone now. From here on out, he must be vigilant. He can't take risks, can't allow any unwanted variables into his life. There is only the mission and he better start remembering that.

With hands trembling ever so slightly, he cracks open the journal and pulls out his quill.

Gellert must know what happened today and Percival hopes will be able to offer some advice.
"I need help."

Minutes pass before he finally sees words scrawl on the paper under his own writing. "It is unlike you to be so blunt Percy. What happened?"

"I think I'm in trouble. Today we were discussing Occlumency and I unintentionally displayed higher than expected proficiency. I thought I had talked my way out of the situation, but later that day, I overheard the instructor whispering in the hallway about me. I fear they will start looking deeper into the situation. He's trying to not panic, to not let his thoughts drift to every single scenario that would occur if he is found out.

Several moments go by before Gellert responds. "That is worrisome. I thought you would be better at recognizing what it is you should hide."

Reading those words makes his blood run cold. He's disappointed his leader. "I'm sorry. I'll do better. I promise. Just, please, how do I fix this?"

"It's alright to be scared. Treat this like a lesson, a warning to be more attentive and careful in the future. Now, if they'll be watching you even closer than usual, then we must make sure there is nothing for them to see. I doubt you'll like my first suggestion, but I believe we must cease communications for the time being. That is until you are sure that you have regained their trust. A few exceptions should be made in emergency and I believe an update every fortnight should be necessary so I know you aren't captured, but other than that, hide this journal. Keep it safe."

As Gellert indicated, the suggestion does trouble him, but Gellert has a point. The journal is the most incriminating thing he owns. If he can keep it out of the reach of any would be spies and minimize the risk, then his chances of getting through this episode will be far better.

"I'll do just that. Before I do so though, any other advice? I expect that they'll be scrutinizing every aspect of my life in the coming weeks. I'd like to be prepared for whatever it is they may do."

"Well you should start by perfecting your occlumency talents even further. I gave you all the tools you need to protect yourself."

Another idea that makes him doubtful. He hesitates, not wanting to question Gellert's judgement, but still, he must let his uncertainty be known. "Being skilled in occlumency is what got me in trouble in the first place."

"Oh Percy, did you truly not learn anything from my time with you? You can make them think whatever it is you want. Trick them, make them believe you are worse than you are. If they corner and interrogate you, then don't put up a fight. Play dumb, play innocent. Be creative."

"You have too much faith in my abilities." After his poor showing in the class today, he can only feel defeated.

"I have just enough faith in you. You will succeed because you must. You haven't let me down before, and you won't do so now"

As always, if Gellert tells him he trusts him, Percival cannot help but believe him. He lets out a deep sigh. "I suppose you're right. You are always right."

"I'm glad someone recognizes that. But that's enough feeding my ego for one day. Now, aside from those two pieces of advice, I suggest you continue your life as if nothing else is wrong. Changing anything would make it obvious you are up to something. Don't hide away, but don't put yourself in even more precarious situations. There is a balance you must maintain."
He thinks of Luciana, Seraphina, and of course Edwin who he hasn’t seen in days. Well, perhaps reconnecting and patching up some acquaintanceships could fill the void when he has to hide his connections to Gellert. Out of all of Gellert's response, Percival hones in on ‘no precarious situations’. Like the one he had gotten himself into a few nights ago… he scoffs. Gellert may not know about what happened, but Percival still feels lectured to, none the less, and it's much needed.

"Thank you for everything. I'll fix this mess, I assure you."

"I know you will. Good night Percival, I look forward to hearing from you in a fortnight."

And like that, he knows he's cut off from his most important connection, his only source to be himself. For now, he's on his own, left to navigate this difficult situation. Gellert's faith in him has not been misplaced before and it won't be now. Percival shuts the journal and cleans his quill.

There is much to do, and he better get to it before the wolves attack.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to chat with me over on tumblr. (percegraves)
The fear of discovery lingers.

Nothing in his life really changes throughout the remainder of his second year. No indication of MACUSA's suspicions on the surface. But Percival knows better.

They want him to let his guard down, hope he will be blind to the target on his back. His head is held high and he won't show any sign of being aware of their misgivings towards him. If they think him ignorant, the easier his life will be for the months to come.

In the meantime, Percival is isolated. With Gellert limiting their contact to just a brief update every two weeks, he has no outlet for his true opinions. Even getting in contact with Miss Pendelwood has become difficult. He endures, though. This loneliness is only temporary and, if it means security, then it will be worth it.

Even if his genuine connections are cut off, at least he isn't completely on his own. Despite that awkward night with Edwin, he's still able to meet up with his fellow trainees. It takes some time to fight the apprehension left over from that one encounter, but he does rejoin them after several weeks absent from their regular gatherings.

He expects an interrogation after fleeing from Edwin and vanishing for such a lengthy period of time. Instead, Edwin approaches him, not to condemn him, but to apologize for that night. He explains how he is sorry for how forward he was, and feels terrible for making Percival uncomfortable. While the gesture is nice, that isn’t why Percival had been avoiding the group. Not that Percival tells him that. Even so, he accepts the apology without questioning it and everything soon returns to normal.

The year passes, their classes come to a close. The watchful eyes upon him have found nothing, but he knows he has over a year to go.

Rather than hide away during the summer and enjoy a few months of relaxation, Percival asks his
dad if he can volunteer at MACUSA. It isn't a requirement, and potentially places him in a more
dangerous situation. However, he wagers that avoiding MACUSA altogether would be riskier. So
long as he avoids asking any probing questions, he presumes he will be safe. Besides, without
Gellert or Miss Pendelwood to keep him company, he'd be bored out of his mind without something
else to do.

The work at MACUSA is nothing exciting. Simply running errands and helping with stacks and
stacks of paperwork. The aurors and secretaries he works alongside still treat him with the same
amount of welcome and respect as they always have. Perhaps only select members have been told to
scout him out.

Dad for example he highly doubts has been given notice of MACUSA's suspicion of him. Percival
knows his dad would not have been able to keep such a thing from him. Dad shows no such sign
and is simply overjoyed to have him around so often, helping out and participating when he doesn’t
have to.

Percival never wavers, contributes just enough so he appears useful but not too curious and
ambitious. Even so, no matter how hard he carefully monitors his actions, he never stops being
paranoid. Being arrogant is what got him in this predicament in the first place.

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His third and final year is when his true test comes.

Their first year was book work, the second was slowly learning about the inner workings of
MACUSA. Third year, the trainees finally get to step into fieldwork.

As they are still in training, they aren't entirely independent yet. Instead, each trainee is assigned to a
senior auror, a mentor whom they will follow throughout the year. They may have gotten to know
several of the aurors within their department after their time in their second year, but in spite of any
connections made, each mentor is carefully chosen by some nameless committee. Their mentor could
be anyone but the trainees won't know who is assigned to who until the year begins.

It's the first day and Percival's schedule takes him to a small meeting room within the Investigations
Department. Five chairs rest against the far wall. By the time he arrives, two seats are already taken
by his peers. The twins Whitney and Pryce sit next to each other gossiping as Percival approaches.

"Do you think we'll meet our mentors today?" Whitney asks, not noticing Percival.

Pryce seems just as unaware of his presence. "I hope we do. Maybe they'll give us the same mentor.
The Academy didn't split our classes up, so it's possible."

Whitney laughs at that. "So you can get even more tired of my face brother?"

Percival clears his throat, announcing himself and thus stopping their conversation before they can
bicker. Both turn to face him. Pryce waves as Whitney pats the empty chair next to her. Apparently
that's where he'll sit then. Shrugging, he settles down in the chair. The other two, Percival guesses,
are for the remaining two Investigations trainees. Twisting in his seat, he asks the twins "I take it they
didn't really give any explanation for what we are supposed to be doing?"

Pryce shrugs. "We've been waiting for a few minutes and you've been the only one we've seen walk
in the room."

"You know these MACUSA types," Whitney adds. "Have to be all mysterious with everything they do."

Nodding, Percival leans back in his seat, hands folded in his lap. "That's true. Well, then I guess all we can do is wait." He makes himself comfortable, expecting to not move anytime soon.

The remaining seats are filled as the minutes pass, his other two colleagues as expected.

Only after they get situated, does the situation change.

A kind looking man enters the room next. Percival recognizes him as an auror who would often bring little gifts to the whole department. He stands in front of the five of them, not looking at anyone in particular. "Good morning young ones! This is always one of my favorite days of the year. The day where you all truly start your journey as budding aurors. I'm sure you are all excited, but I promise I'm just as excited as you." Percival resists the urge to roll his eyes. "Meeting the young one who I will help shape into the next generation of defenders of our country is always an honor. I wish I could train each and every one of you, but alas, the rules are the rules."

The man pulls a folded up sheet of parchment out of his pocket and reads it out loud. "Whitney?" The girl next to him sits up straight at hearing her name. The man smiles and holds his hand out. "It looks like we will be working together for the year."

Whitney quickly takes the man's hand and shakes it. "It's great to meet you sir!"

"It's wonderful to meet you too. Now, are you ready to get to work?"

She nods and soon they are headed out the door they entered. Pryce is excited for her, but even Percival can note the disappointment he has for being separated from his sister. In a rare show of compassion, Percival reaches over to nudge him. Once he has Pryce's attention, Percival offers "I'm sure you two will still see each other plenty. Maybe a little separation will do you both some good."

Pryce nods and sighs. At least Percival doesn't have to just sit there and watch him mope for long. A red haired woman whom Percival remembers walking into the Department bloody and scarred once approaches Pryce. Their exchange is less friendly than Whitney and the man's, but it's still respectful. There is still a handshake and she must have picked up on Pryce's woes, because there's even a brief side hug before they too walk off.

So that is how this works. Their mentor finds them and then they go off to truly begin their careers. Percival wonders who he'll be stuck with for the year.

Unfortunately, it seems as if he'll be the last to find out. The other two get their mentors, both of whom are pleasant aurors whom Percival recalls rather fond memories of. All of them actually seemed rather nice, so Percival only hopes the trend continues.

Percival sits there for at least half an hour alone, just waiting for time to tick down. Whomever his Mentor was, it seems they would be late.

He's practically fallen asleep in his chair by the time the door opens.

A man who looks to be in his forties walks into the small meeting room. He's a large muscular man, at least six feet tall with a face that appears to be frozen in a scowl, his eyebrows furrowed as he scans the room. Soon he's scowling down at Percival.
"Are you Graves's son?" The man asks, sounding bored.

This hulking man is to be his mentor? Unlike the other four aurors who had entered the room, Percival knows next to nothing about him. Either he is new, or he was out in the field anytime Percival came around the department. Judging by the scrutinizing stare, Percival is leaning towards the latter. Of course he’d be left with the wild card. Recalling the other four introductions with mentors, Percival stands with a smile and holds out his hand. "Yes sir, Percival Graves. It's good to meet you."

The man only glares at his outstretched arm, making no move to make further contact. "You will call me Conroy."

Realizing this man, Conroy, is apparently not as interested in a formal greeting, Percival slowly retracts his hand. So that's how it will be. No nonsense. Maybe this could be good. Hands shoved in his pockets, he stands tall. "I look forward to learning from you."

"We will see about that." Conroy crosses his arms and continues to stare down Percival. Even though Percival is by no means short, the older auror is still capable of looking down upon him. It's incredibly unnerving and Percival starts to realize that it’s most likely deliberate. Months had passed by and despite his own incessant paranoia, it had still been quite a while since he felt in any real danger. Now though, as Percival unflinchingly tilts his head up to meet Conroy's gaze, he can feel that prying gaze that he's known has been hidden around him all along.

"I'm a fast learner, I promise. I won't let you down."

Conroy sighs, barely acknowledging Percival, before turning around and heading towards the exit. With the little to no instruction, Percival stands where he had been for a few moments, awkwardly waiting. Only when Conroy gets to the door does he look over his shoulder at him. "What the hell are you waiting for? Come. Don't waste my time any more than you have to."

Already it's a challenge to keep his face neutral. If MACUSA wanted to find someone to get on his nerves, then they had succeeded. Percival had been expecting something like this though, had been mentally preparing himself for whatever MACUSA would throw his way to test him. With that in mind, he scurries after the man as if nothing is wrong.

Conroy keeps walking down the department's halls, not bothering to look behind him once more to see if Percival is keeping up. For many moments, there is no conversation, the only sound is their heavy footsteps echoing through the empty space.

Percival does not know where they are going, does not know what they are even headed to do. The other mentors had seemed more keen on letting their shadows know exactly what is going on, let them feel included. Conroy however, already acts as if Percival is nothing more than an annoyance. Thinking that it isn't too unreasonable or suspicious to want to know what is going on, Percival breaks the silence. "What are we going to be doing? The Academy didn't give us trainees much instruction, so I assumed you would be explaining in some detail what is going on."

Still striding forward, Conroy responds frankly. "Get used to it. You'll be spending a lot of time not being told what is going on. It's just part of the job."

That isn't helpful at all. Suspect or not, he's still a student, still in training, and yet he's given nothing to work with. He wants to protest and press for a straightforward answer. However, being rude, even if it’s a situation he would feel justified in, would only hurt him in the long run. So with each step, he tries to carefully word how to ask for actual clarity.
Before he can get his words in order though, Conroy turns into a smaller hallway and soon stops at a door. "We're here."

Percival blinks. "Just where is here exactly?" Staring at the door, he tries to look for some clue as to where he's been brought. All that he sees is a plain dark wooden door, just like all the rest in this department.

"My office. You best start learning where it is since it looks as if you will be spending a lot of time here."

Finally Conroy actually takes a moment to tell him something useful. The door opens and Percival follows him inside.

The office is larger than many of the other aurors' rooms. Even his dad didn't have an office quite this size. That doesn't make it cleaner though. Despite this room being giant, there isn't much open space. A desk dominates most of the area and cabinets and shelves full of boxes and trinkets line the walls. Aside from a path from the door to the desk, most of the otherwise empty space is filled with stacks and stacks of books, papers, and files. It's an absolute mess and just looking at it stresses Percival out.

Conroy walks down the apparent path to his desk and sits down at a great leather chair. Once situated, he reaches for a file on his desk and just starts to read it. There is no instruction to Percival, no offer for him to take a seat, nothing. It's like he forgot Percival is even there the moment he took his seat.

Not knowing what to do, Percival stands around awkwardly, pacing through what little walk space there really is. He doesn't even know if he can take a seat without being criticized. Some guidelines would really be welcomed. For several moments he just waits, hoping Conroy would realize that his shadow is doing nothing.

Minutes pass by and it becomes evident that that is not going to happen. Conroy just continues to go about his own business, practically blind to Percival's presence. Not wanting to stay here all day like this, he finally speaks up. "Is… there anything I can do sir?"

Not even looking up from the file, Conroy says offhandedly "You can… uh… organize that stack of papers over there." He raises a hand to gesture over to a large pile of papers on a chair in the corner. It takes a while to realize exactly which stack Conroy is referring to considering the entire room is covered in stacks of paper, but Percival does find the one specified. "Chronological order please."

Percival resists the urge to grit his teeth. Filing and paperwork has all he's been doing for the year practically. He had hoped to have a chance to actually get out of offices finally. But it seems that opportunity is not today. For now, he should just swallow down his irritation and be happy he has a task to do. Filing is at least better than standing around accomplishing nothing. It would also not be in his best interest to establish himself as a whiner from day one, so without question, he nods and does as he's told.

It's a challenge to get to that particular part of the office, but he manages. Standing next to the papers, he pulls out his wand and starts making smaller stacks in the air. Both he and Conroy are quiet as they get to work. It isn't so bad so long as he has a task to focus on. The task may be mind-numbing, but at least it isn't putting him at risk.

The first twenty or so papers he goes through is rather normal, but he notices a few of the papers in particular are blurred to his vision. He can still see the dates but the words jumble in his head. Staring at them is unnerving and trying to decipher them gives him a headache. They must have been charmed. Curious, he breaks the silence. "What is wrong with these files?"
Only after Percival speaks does Conroy raise his head from his work. It's hard to tell if asking the man a question irritated him. "Hm? Guess it just means those files are classified. Nothing you should concern yourself with. The dates should still be legible."

"The dates are the only parts legible." Percival clarifies.

Conroy scoffs at that. "Then why are you asking me? There isn't an issue then."

_Deep breaths_ Percival tells himself. Fighting is not a solution. He's adapted to less than ideal conditions before. This is manageable. He doesn't bother asking any more questions, just focuses on his own assignment and ignores Conroy as much as Conroy is ignoring him. That plan seems to work because the next several hours seem to fly by, Percival engrossed in the repetitive flow of making sure everything is organized.

He's barely able to get through half the stack when he hears Conroy stand and start to leave. The man only stops when he passes Percival. Turning to look down at him, Conroy asks, sounding honestly surprised. "You're still here?"

Percival blinks. Had he really been that much an afterthought that Conroy didn't realize he had been hard at work for hours? "Yes sir, I just wanted to finish-"

"Go home."

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For over a week, Percival just does paperwork. Mindless, boring paperwork.

He's sure his peers are off in the field actually getting to test their abilities and learn the ins and outs of the job while he's stuck in Conroy's office, straightening up and organizing mountains of paperwork. The only consolation he has is that he gets to avoid certain aspects of the auror life that he will never be comfortable with for a while longer. However, he can recognize when he's being held back. At this rate, the Academy and MACUSA won't deem him experienced enough to move on in the program. If he continues to be trapped in this limbo he'll never be able to fulfil the role Gellert wants him to.

When he checks in with Gellert next, even his leader tells him that this cannot go on much longer. Action must be taken.

Percival waits a few days after his brief chat, figuring out subtle ways to nudge Conroy without coming across as pushy or demanding. What he decides on is one day while working in the office, he just asks his mentor offhandedly, "When do we start getting into fieldwork?"

Within the next week, he's meeting Conroy outside Wand Permits and the man shows him how to follow a map and find unlicensed wand usage. Conroy goes through the process of tracking down one such wizard with him. It isn't anything particularly exciting, just apparate to the location of the offenders and hand them notice of a fine. After the first, Percival is on his own. All class D misdemeanors, any of the potentially dangerous wizards, had already been filtered out.

That isn't all that Conroy has him do, however. If he's stuck doing grunt work, than he rather be kept to Wand Fines. It is clear he has no such luck. His first actual challenge comes when Conroy tells him they'll be running Obliviations rounds.
Unlike with Wand Fines, this is a task that Conroy actually joins him in every time.

He can still tell the older man is unhappy having to basically babysit Percival. Every time they step out into the field, Conroy is incredibly impatient with him, constantly hovers and questions Percival’s judgement.

The initial Obliviation missions that he's sent on are simple, nothing that really conflicts with his morals. Percival doubts it's on purpose but he's thankful Conroy starts him small. His first is just to help his mentor modify the memories of a few No-Maj teenagers who saw a witch take off on a broom. The witch's broom was confiscated and she was disciplined, any recollection of the event taken from the No-Maj's minds. Nothing that would really strain either parties’ life.

He wishes that was the extent of it, just controlling careless incidences like that.

That isn't the case, though. It's only time before Conroy has him staring down the eyes of a crying No-Maj woman who's hidden relationship with a wizard had been discovered. Conroy has the wizard subdued, cursed him so he can't move while Conroy barks orders at Percival to just 'Obliviate the damn woman already'.

She begs him to not, that they haven't told anyone, that they've hurt no one. Their only crime is loving each other - just like his momma, just like his grandparents. Percival doesn't doubt she's telling the truth and he wants nothing more than to let her go and tell Conroy he won't do it.

But that would condemn him, destroy any chance he has at a future. It would be the warning sign he knows Conroy is looking for.

So Percival swallows down all his feelings, covers up the voice in his head telling him that this is wrong. Raising his wand to her head, he begins to modify and delete large chunks of years out of her life. 'Obliviate'

When it's all over, Conroy pats him on the back and tells him he did a good job. It's the only compliment Conroy has given him, but Percival is spending all his energy suppressing everything that he barely reacts. He must have impressed Conroy enough because the man doesn't even make Percival do useless paperwork that night. For once, he's allowed to go home for a much needed night to relax.

Only when he he's back home and has made sure all his wards are holding and that there's nothing that could be watching him, does he let the whirlwind of emotions he had been concealing escape. Sitting on his bed and curled in on himself, Percival's face is buried in his hands as he struggles to control his breathing. He's shaking and his mind replays the day's mission over and over again. All he can see is that crying woman's face and he cannot escape the fact that he had a hand in ruining her life. It's one thing to silently hate the laws as he sits in a classroom. It's an entirely different experience to live it, to have a hand in the cruelty of it all.

Even though he knows it wasn't his choice to cast that spell today, he still did so. He's aware that it was an act of self-defense, but he cannot help but feel like a hypocrite in this moment. To make it worse, he knows this is only the beginning. This is only the first mission like this of hundreds, maybe thousands. Will becoming what he hates be worth it in the end?

The only solace he has is knowing Gellert is out there, working to make the world a better place. He has to believe his work will only aid in that. If he doesn't, then the weight of what he may have to do it the future could break him. Percival gives himself this one night to suffer through the consequences of his actions. He allows himself to feel what he honestly feels, to hate himself for what deep down is
a betrayal of who he knows himself to be. Only tonight will he allow himself to experience the depths of his emotions.

After tonight though, he will close himself off. Any action he takes from here on out, he must accept that it is for the greater good. Any doubts or sentiments must be compartmentalized if he is to continue. He will be the cold, heartless machine that MACUSA wants its aurors to be.

The next day, he comes in ready to work.

The missions following are just as emotionally taxing. Obliviate a No-Maj-born's parents, ruin any chance of that family being whole again. Obliviate an old woman who's only joy in life was the little bowtruckle that kept her company. Obliviate a child's best friend when it was discovered they were a witch.

Each of these cases only result in innocent people getting hurt because of legal nonsense. None of them are the 'dangers to society' that MACUSA wants him to believe they are. With each case, he feels like the monster.

Still, he promised himself that he won't let it affect him. That is a promise he plans on keeping.

Conroy makes it difficult. During the missions, he's constantly harshly criticized. Any misstep or sign of hesitation is noted and Conroy is all too happy to snap at him. It makes a taxing job even more stressful. Since they started doing Obliviations rounds, his other work hasn't stopped either. All the filing and paperwork, as well as Wand Permit duties, are just piled on top of the job that's already straining him.

Percival is exhausted, emotionally and mentally.

Suppressing all the stress from the Obliviations would already be enough to drain him, but it seems Conroy won't let him have a goodnight's sleep either. The paperwork is never ending and his 'mentor' is unhappy with the pace so he insists Percival take home stacks of it that add up to hours of useless work. Percival is lucky to get four hours of sleep a night.

Any free time he had the previous year has vanished. As a result, he never sees his fellow trainees and can't even seem to make any time to see his family. He's too tired to do anything and in too precarious a position to complain.

Just one year of hell, he tells himself. He can get through this.

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One evening, after a particularly stressful round of Obliviations, Percival hears a knock on his apartment door.

For several moments, he tries to ignore it, to just focus on the paperwork at hand. He hadn't been home for very long, which means he still has a mountain of files to sort.

The knocks sound again, breaking Percival from his concentration. Rather than just sit there and let the knocking drive him crazy, he carefully puts the files down and goes to answer the door.

Luciana and Edwin stand in his doorway.
Before he can ask what they are doing, she grasps a hold of his wrist and yanks him out of his own home. Instantly, they are apparating.

"What the hell!" Percival shouts as he regains his footing. Once glance around and he realizes they are standing in front of the Dapper Pearl. "I have work that needs doing! Did you even shut my door?!"

Luciana smirks. "Relax, Edwin closed it behind us right after we apparated. I'm not sorry for kidnapping you. I don't know what it is your mentor has you doing every night, but we thought you deserved a break."

"Especially since it's your birthday." Edwin adds, gently tugging him to the entrance of the bar. Was it October already? Percival's sense of time is cloudy at best lately, one of sleep deprivation's many side effects. As they get closer to the light, Edwin blinks as he takes note of another such side effect. "Now I don't mean this as an insult, but you look terrible."

Percival slips his arm out from Edwin's grasp as he turns around to leave. "I don't have time for this." He grumbles, only to walk right into Luciana.

"Nope, you aren't getting out of this." Luciana sighs. "You and I both know what happens when you shut yourself out from everyone and it isn't a pretty sight. Now turn back around and go enjoy the party we're having for you. I'm sure your mentor will understand, and if he doesn't, well then he can go to hell. We all miss you." Pouting her lips, she looks at him with a melodramatically pathetic expression.

Percival rolls his eyes at her. "Fine. Just one hour. That's all I can promise."

Clapping her hands excitedly, she cheers. "Perfect! I baked you a cake and we got you presents and everything." She turns him back to Edwin and pushes him further inside the establishment. "Now, go follow the beautiful boy whose heart you broke."

Both Edwin and Percival groan out a "Luciana..." at that.

"What? I'm still upset my attempt at matchmaking didn't work." She grumbles. "You two could have been wonderful."

Edwin gives him an apologetic glance.

At least the topic doesn't continue much further as they soon arrive to a table in the bar. Seraphina and the twins sit around a modest sized cake.

Percival sighs and settles down in the chair right in front of the cake. It is supposed to be for him after all, if the twenty one candles are any indication. On the cake written in frosting is 'Happy Birthday Percy!' and a smiley face drawn underneath. He glares up unamused at the others as they sit down.

Seraphina pulls out her wand once everyone is situated and murmurs a quick 'incendio' and the candles all alight. "Go on Graves, make a wish."

"This really isn't necessary everyone."

There's a punch to his arm and he turns to see Luciana frowning at him. "Come on. Just enjoy something for once."

"Fine." He grumbles and does as everyone wants and blows out the candles. There's no wish, he's too tried to even think of anything even if he did believe in the tradition. "Happy?"
Everyone claps and cheers. Edwin starts to cut the cake and pass it around. Percival gets the first slice and goes ahead and takes a bite. He has to admit Luciana did a good job with the baking.

After everyone has a piece, they each hand him a small gift. Seraphina hands him a book on transfiguration, telling him he could always use the extra help. Edwin gives him a new quill, something he’s needed as of late with the amount of papers he’s been dealing with. The twins pass him a pair of boots, explaining it counts as two gifts. According to them, they are supposedly enchanted to muffle his footsteps. Luciana hands him a belt she made designed to hold all sorts of potions when he’s out doing missions. While he wants to explain to her that he hasn’t exactly had much time on the field, she interrupts him by telling him that isn’t all the gifts. A small box is placed in front of him.

“Orion didn’t want to miss out on your birthday again so he asked me to give that to you.” Luciana says as he opens the box.

Inside is two small slips of paper. On further inspection, they appear to be quidditch match tickets, both marked ‘VIP’. Nested in next to them is a folded note. Percival pulls the note out and holds it close to his face as he reads.

“Hey Perce! It’s been a while. I miss you pal. Hope everything is going well. Luciana keeps me updated with what it’s like over there with the aurors. Seems like a ton of work. Wish I could have been there, but we’ve been training hard this year. The veteran players say this is the best national team we’ve had in a decade! I know you’ve been busy lately, but I was hoping you could find a day or two to come see me at a game. VIP passes too! Even left you an extra in case you wanted to bring a plus one (Gilbert maybe?). No rush though! They are good for a few years for any game. Hope to see you eventually.

Your best roommate ever,

Orion

He appreciates the sentiment but he doesn’t know why Orion still insists on trying to maintain contact with him. They only lived together and never really shared anything outside of that. So he folds the letter and places it back in the box with the tickets and places it with the rest of the gifts. He turns to Luciana. “Tell him I said thanks.”

Luciana swats him on the back of the head. “Or you could write to him yourself.”

“Maybe later.” He has no such plans to.

Once all the gifts are passed out, they all settle into a regular conversation. Everyone laughing and smiling, sharing stories of their day. Percival stays out of the conversation itself for the most part. He’s practically falling asleep as the rest banter. His eyes start to close as Seraphina talks about her department. Before he knows it, he’s nodding off.

"Are you ok?” Edwin asks, nudging his shoulder. "You look like you are about to fall over."

Blinking awake, he rubs his eyes and yawns. "I'm fine. I just haven't had much sleep lately. My mentor has me working far too much.”

The twins lean forward. "What is he having you do?” Whitney asks.

"Paperwork mostly. I think Conroy hasn't filed any of his work in a decade based on how much there is."
"Is that all?" Pryce wonders, his face scrunched up in confusion.

Percival shakes his head. "I also get wand permit duty often and in the last couple of weeks I've been doing Obliviation rounds with him. Why do you ask?"

All of his acquaintances seem puzzled by this. Seraphina is the first to speak up. "But aren't you in the Investigations Department? The things you've described, those fall under the jurisdiction of lesser ones. Wand Permits is under Equipment Licensing. Obliviations is for the Obliviations Department, not Investigations though there may be overlap sometimes. And paperwork? That's for second years and secretaries, not aurors." Based on the irritation in her voice, he assumes she's offended for him.

What she says is practically confirming everything he has thought this year. Conroy is holding him back, presumably on MACUSA's direct orders. Still, he plays innocent. If he reveals his suspicions, then they'll want an explanation. He may consider each of them friends, but they are still not on his side. "I just thought that they were slowly pulling me into fieldwork, start small and eventually work up to bigger missions." He turns to the twins. "What kind of work have you two been doing? You're both in Investigations."

"Well, lately, the department has been making an effort to hunt down terrorists lately." Whitney says as if it is no big deal.

That makes Percival freeze.

A chill runs through him. Percival is self-aware enough to know that is exactly the sort of thing he's involved himself with. Terrorists. He knows that is what MACUSA would call Miss Pendelwood and Gellert if they knew the conversations Percival has shared with them. Talk of fixing the government, changing the world order. All ideas that are an attack on the foundations of MACUSA itself. If they are tracking down. If terrorists is what they are going after, then Percival knows he should be afraid. So he asks, wanting to know everything while trying to remain subtle. "Terrorists? Why that all of a sudden? Has something happened?"

Pryce nods. "Yeah, apparently ever since some stuff got leaked to the papers about scourers or whatever, MACUSA has been making a bigger effort to track down threats in recent years."

This is bad. Very very bad. His heart beats fast in his chest, but he swallows it down as he has learned to do so well recently. "Oh? Have they found anything?" He asks, voice perfectly even.

Whitney perks up. "Well my mentor and I, we managed to nab this guy who was trying to start a necromancy cult or something. It was really creepy. Skeletons were just lying on the floor and I'm pretty sure they were making sacrifices."

"Always with the necromancy story." Pryce grumbles. "The most exciting thing my mentor and I have gotten to do is stop a witch who was selling some high level poisons on the black market."

"Hey, that one was fun. I got to help you with that one." Edwin adds with a chuckle.

The banter continues with the five of them discussing various missions they've been on. Percival however is stuck in his head, still fearful for Gellert's Organization. Whitney and Pryce are only two students. It's still possible the rest of the aurors have discovered the theatre and found everything. With each passing moment, the nervous pit in his stomach grows.

"I think I'm going to head out. I still have quite a lot of paperwork to catch up on."

"Thank you for dragging me out tonight. This was very informative."

Everyone turns to look at him, sympathy in all their faces.
"Good night Percy. Get some sleep. It looks like you need it." Luciana says as she waves him goodbye.

With that, he tells everyone good night and apparates back to his apartment.

Rather than dive into the stack of papers, he triple checks and makes sure his wards are up, examining the papers for any unwanted surveillance enchantments. Only when he is sure everything is clear does he storm over to his bookshelf and pull out the journal. He has to warn Gellert.

"I know you told me to wait every two weeks before messaging you, but there is a potential emergency on the rise. I learned from some of the other trainees that MACUSA is cracking down on possible renegade hideouts in the city. The status of your hideout here is unknown to me at this moment, but I would take action now. Remove anything incriminating from the city before they find it."

"I see. It will be dealt with."

"Is there anything you need me to do?"

"No. I don't want you risking yourself further and the less you know, the better. I can sense your concern but let me assure you that everything will be fine. You have my word."

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A sinking feeling follows him for the days to come.

Now the fear of discovery is two fold. Not only does he fear for himself, he fears for the greater cause. All he can do is trust in Gellert and only hope he was not too late in warning the man.

It's practically impossible to focus as he sits in Conroy's office. At least the paperwork is a mind numbing enough experience so he can at least try to mask any anxiety.

For over a week, nothing changes even though Percival's situation seems even more dire.

Percival's dad finds him one day on his way to Wand Permits. Conroy's office had been locked which is nothing out of the ordinary. Simply, it means it's another day Percival is left to his never-ending tasks while he assumes Conroy goes on actual missions.

"Percy!" Dad exclaims. He's headed the opposite direction, towards all the meeting halls, but stops upon nearing his son. "It's so good to run into you. I haven't gotten to see much of you this year, which I must admit is upsetting since we're in the same building." Clearly Dad is not in too big a hurry if he can afford a conversation.

Percival just shrugs. "My mentor has been keeping me occupied these last couple of months. I've had no free time at all." He could barely afford an hour for his friends on his birthday, much less make a day to see his family. Judging from dad's reaction to seeing him, his family has missed him.

"That's right, you are in your final year. I have so many questions. Who's your mentor?"

"Conroy. Do you know him?"

"Yes..." Dad seems unsure. "He's a phenomenal auror, don't get me wrong, but I don't believe he's
ever had an apprentice before. How has he been treating you?"

"Well, it could be better." He sighs, offering a sliver of an honest answer. "Most of my time is taken up by paperwork and handling wand permit violators. That's where I'm headed now actually. The most exciting things I've gotten to do are obliviations."

"The year is halfway over and that's all you've done?" Dad asks in disbelief. "But you were accepted as an Investigations auror. I don't understand. How can you learn if your mentor isn't teaching you anything?"

Another shrug from Percival. "I don't know. I've just been hoping he's working me up to actual missions soon. He doesn't tell me very much."

"You should have been going on missions this whole time. How else are you supposed to be gaining experience for the job." Dad pinches the bridge of his nose, a sign he's thinking hard. After a few long seconds, his hand drops and he gestures for Percival to follow him. "Come. I won't just let Conroy ignore his job and continue to neglect you. I want you to come to this mission briefing with me."

"What? I couldn't… I don't think Conroy would appreciate it if I skipped my Wand Permit duties. That and he might get irritated if I start following other aurors around."

"It will be fine. You're my son and don't deserve to be held back like this. Besides, I'll talk to him and explain the situation." Dad smiles. "I've known Conroy for years. Even if he won't like it, he'll understand."

The decision is harder to make than it should be. If he goes, will he be accused of manipulating his father into giving him what he wants? But Dad's concern is wholly his own. No matter what happens, he knows Dad will look after him. And he wants to go. He's tired of being in the dark. These months have been nothing but waiting and hiding and he needs to move forward before he goes crazy.

So, after a moment of thought, he nods and follows his dad down the hallway to the meeting room.

They continue to chat, Dad curious how everything else is going in his life. Since so much has been taken over by Conroy’s work, Percival doesn’t exactly have much news to share. When that becomes obvious, Dad instead fills the conversation by updating him on how Momma and Grandpa are doing. Momma is lonely but overall fine (it makes Percival feel guilty, like he’s been inadvertently ignoring her these last couple of years). In less pleasant news, Grandpa Graves is doing wonderfully for someone his age. Why can’t Momma be the happy one for once.

Just one more turn, and they’ve arrived. Dad gives the door five knocks before he’s opening the door and entering. Percival comes slowly in after, still feeling as if he's intruding.

A room full of eyes fall on them. Dad must be late, the last to arrive since he stopped to talk to Percival along the way.

"What took you so long?" Percival hears none other than Conroy ask his dad. It's said in a far more light hearted tone than Percival is used to from the stern man. That fades though as Conroy's gaze shifts as he enters the room. "And just what the hell is he doing here?"

"He's going to sit in on this briefing is what he's going to do."

Conroy's face twists with irritation. "I don't believe I granted him authorization."
"Please, we've had plenty of apprentices in these meetings with us before. It's about time he actually gets real experience rather than the nonsense you've had him doing. So how about you do your actual job and let him stay."

He can feel Conroy glaring daggers at him, so he slinks behind his dad, avoiding the scrutinizing gaze. "Did he set you up to this? Did he come crying to his dad, begging to be included with the big boys?"

"You really don't know my son, do you?" Dad shakes his head. "I saw him and asked him how his year had been going and based on what he told me, I have reasons to be concerned. Now are we going to stand here all day arguing, or are we actually going to do our jobs?"

Conroy grumbles, but does settle back down. In this moment, Percival is incredibly grateful for his dad.

The other aurors do their best to ignore the argument. Percival takes a seat next to Dad, thankfully one secluded in a corner near the back of the room. He doesn't know exactly how many of these aurors share Conroy's suspicions of him, but he would prefer to keep his head down and out of the way.

His own fear is quickly pushes to the side as discussions finally begin.

President Dominic Corvin clears his throat, getting everyone's attention. "Now that that's settled, we can finally get started." The man clears his throat. "As you all know, we have made a great deal of progress in the last several months on ridding our country of threats. I believe it's about time we start to focus on the local space, to go after potential dangers hiding right under our noses."

At hearing that, Percival has conflicting feelings. On one hand, he can feel relieved that they haven't started sweeping through the city yet. On the other, he knows himself to be on that very watch list.

The man continues. "I believe our finest have located several suspicious locations within the city and it's surrounding regions. I have a list of these locations and will be sending a task force to each. As soon as this meeting concludes, I need each group to quickly get going. I don't want any delays. We want to be able to take out these locations quickly with no warning."

A scroll is flown over to President Corvin. Unrolling it, he starts reading out the list. Percival stands nervously next to his father listening to every word. It's this very sort of intelligence that he's been patiently waiting to have access to.

"First, there is a warehouse near Herald Square where we've seen long robed figures entering with what appears to be unauthorized charmed weapons. Adalgott Graves, you will be helming this mission. Go undercover, take your usual team, see what's going on. I want to know if they are smuggling or planning an army. Any questions?"

Dad shakes his head respectfully. "No, that sounds rather routine. There shouldn't be any issues."

"Glad to hear. Now, gather your team and go."

"Yes sir." Before Dad makes any motion to leave though, he instead turns to Percival, voice hushed.

"Alright, time to work. Hopefully they'll all be a little nicer to you. If Conroy continues to give you a hard time, tell me and I'll have another chat with him."

That makes Percival chuckle a bit even though he can feel the eyes of the other aurors around. Ignoring their judgements, he smiles. "Thanks Dad. Good luck on your mission."
"I appreciate it Percy." With that, Dad finally leaves, four other aurors following him out the door. Growing up, Percival always thought Momma worried just a little too much about Dad's work. But watching him go on even a simple spy mission, he understands. Chances are, Dad will be fine. He's been doing this for years, longer than Percival has been alive. Even so, he imagines all the ways it could go wrong and Momma's reactions throughout the years suddenly don't seem so dramatic.

Not that Percival has much time to ponder over this, because soon President Corvin is calling out yet another mission.

"This next assignment has even less to go off of than the first. Conroy you'll be in charge of this one. We've seen several civilians regularly walking into a theatre just off Broadway. Of course this wouldn't usually raise any red flags, but the theatre has been abandoned for the past five years. Not only that, but the doorway has a magical signature. None of our members have entered for fear of tripping any alarms. Your group will be the first to do any scouting here."

It takes a great deal of willpower for Percival to suppress any reaction to hearing that. He can barely believe it. The one location he feared them finding out about, but it's also in Conroy's hands. Now he could only hope Gellert had been given enough warning to take action.

"Understood sir. Who will be accompanying me?" Conroy asks.

The president ponders this for a moment before replying. "Take Auror Harriet and Auror Alexander with you. You three should be able to handle any surprises. Oh, and take your apprentice Percival too."

Both Conroy and Percival's jaws drop upon hearing that. Conroy, however, quickly covers with protest. "But, sir… your orders…” There's a quick glare over to Percival and his sighs. "Besides, you said we won't know what to expect. That can't exactly be a good place for an apprentice with a lack of experience to be."

"I believe Adalgott raised some valid points today. I understand your hesitation, but it's about time you see what he will do in the field." President Corvin then steps over to where Percival sits. His gaze feels even more heavy and searching than even Conroy's ever did. "Is that ok with you Percival? Are you ready to show us what you are worth?"

With an apprehensive swallow, Percival nods. "Y-yes sir. I won't disappoint you."

That's all President Corvin needs to hear. "Good. Now, all of you head out, I want reports back before the sun goes down."

Before Percival can truly process what happened, he's on his way to not only a location he's been to on several occasions, but also to his first mission.

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There is no time to be nervous.

Not as Conroy growls at him to hurry up, that they won't be waiting for him if he falls behind.

Percival had not exactly anticipated going on a mission from that meeting so he's left to run to Conroy's office and gather his hat and leather coat, the standard auror wear. Aside from the
Obliviation runs, he hasn't exactly had much opportunity to wear it.

It doesn't take him too long to grab them, but he does have to run with Conroy's threats of leaving him. He does return in time, out of breath and huffing. The other two aurors, Harriet and Alexander, look at him with sympathy, though they just follow Conroy out of MACUSA all the same.

Conroy shares an apparition landmark not far from the theatre that they should all recognize. It's less risky after all than apparating right to a location that in theory none of them have visited. Of course Percival plans on keeping quiet on exactly how often he has been to the theatre. Before they all depart, Conroy has them cast a disillusionment charm upon themselves. They don't want any No-Majs spotting them snooping around a supposedly abandoned building in broad daylight.

Once they've all made it to the landmark point, Conroy has them stand in formation, the man leading in front, Percival behind, and Harriet and Alexander after him. They are only a block away from their destination but with how slowly and cautiously Conroy is having them move, it feels as if it is twice the distance. To avoid bumping into No-Majs walking on the street, they cling close to the buildings.

Though it takes far longer than it should, they eventually arrive at the abandoned theatre.

"I think we're here." Conroy states uncertainly.

Harriet approaches the entryway door and holds out her wand. The wood reacts, glowing softly.
"Seems right to me boss."

"Any idea what it's been charmed with?" Conroy asks the witch who seems just as confused as he does.

Their caution is amusing to Percival, who fights the urge to smirk with every overly careful motion they make. Even getting past the front door is proving to be a task for these seasoned aurors while Percival had the knock combination memorized years ago. There's so much he knows and won't share, both for his own security, and because watching Conroy struggle is worth every moment.

Wanting to get a closer look, Percival takes a tiny step towards the door.

"Stop!" Conroy barks at him. He immediately halts. "We don't know what's behind this door, or if these bastards have it trapped. Do us all a favor and stand right where you are and don't move till I say otherwise. Your Dad may have influenced your joining us today, but if something happened to you, he'd probably kill me. So just be a good little shadow and stay out of our way. Understood?"

Paranoia it turns out, is quite entertaining when Percival isn't the one experiencing it. "Understood sir." He nods and does just as Conroy asks, not moving from his spot on the concrete.

It takes nearly takes twenty minutes for them to dispell the charm on the door. There's a small celebration from the team when they finally push the door open, worry free, a task that would have taken Percival twenty seconds.

Still, part of him worries when the door swings open. Percival would rather they not be able to continue, because now, the fear that Gellert had not gotten to the organization members in time is all too real. Had they given up here, then Percival could have gone back home and further warned his leader of the dire circumstances. That won't be the case though. Percival can only hope everything is cleaned out, that no one remains who could possibly recognize him.

With each impossibly slow step down the long dark hallway to the grand chamber, Percival's dread only grows. The only consolation is it makes him appear just as alert and watchful as all the aurors
around him. He's just as fearful as they all are, just for different reasons.

Traps are checked for every step of the way, but past the front door, there is nothing. The long crawl down the hall closes and soon, they arrive at the double doors, the last barrier before they come to the main chamber. Percival's heart pounds with every passing second. These next few minutes will determine his future as either a convict or a spy. As with practically every floorboard, it is overexamined too. When it is cleared, Conroy pushes the doors open with his wand, revealing the grand theatre.

It's empty.

There are no straggling members, none of the members Percival knows took residence inside this hideout... absolutely no one.

Conroy clenches his jaw. "I don't like this."

Percival tries to not relax, to remain at the same level of alertness and fear as the other three aurors around him. So he remains tense and wide-eyed, taking in the surroundings, searching to see if there was possibly anything that Gellert's crew could have missed.

It has been over three years since he was last allowed into a meeting, but he likes to think his memory has withstood the test of time. The building is just as abandoned and condemned as Percival remembers. Many of the auditorium seats falling apart, the stage missing some floorboards, the curtains ripped and moth eaten, the paint worn and chipped.

"Split up. We will cover more ground that way." Conroy orders. "Just stay on your guard. We don't know if anyone is coming back or if they left anything cursed just lying around."

"What should I do sir? Should I follow you or help with the search?" Percival feels a need to ask. As this is his first true mission, he doesn't know which would be less suspicious. Standing around watching everyone can't be the correct course of action. Especially not when he's already sick with nerves.

Conroy stops and thinks for a moment before letting out a sigh. "Look around, see if anything seems off. We don't know what we are looking for and don't know how much time we have so the more eyes the better I guess. Just don't touch anything."

He can barely believe he's been granted this much freedom here. Were Conroy's suspicions of him wavering?

The other aurors work their way through the room, carefully examining everything they come across. Conroy searches the seats, Alexander walks along the room's parameter, and Harriet steps into what would have been an orchestra pit years ago. It seems as if Gellert's followers have done their job well and cleaned out the place, so far at least.

Percival should at least look like he's doing his auror duties, however, even if he doesn't expect to find anything. While the others search the ground, Percival decides to work his way to the stage. It's one area he never actually got to see back when he attended the meetings, his position was never prominent enough to stand up here and give the orders. Stepping on the old creaking wood, he remembers where Miss Pendelwood stood, where Rothley stood, and, on that final meeting, where Gellert stood looking so golden.

He won't let them down.

The memory lingers in his mind as he walks towards the back of the stage, the areas hidden from the
view of the auditorium. Back here, it's dark, everything hidden by a blanket of shadows. Pulling out his wand, Percival lights up the space. The tip of his wand glows and everything comes into view.

He nearly drops his wand at what he finds.

Blinking and shaking his head, he makes sure he isn't imagining things. He takes a deep breath to make sure it's not just his paranoia. Because what he's looking at is a large banner hanging from the ceiling to the floor of the stage, and on that banner is Gellert's symbol.

How could they have left this of all things behind? He can't just leave it. The others could find it and who knows how many ways it could be used against Gellert? It may just be a banner, but it's a representation of their organization as a whole. They use it in letters, in signs... Percival doesn't think anything else has been found but he doesn't want to give MACUSA a starting point.

He has to dispose of it somehow. The banner is huge so figuring out a way subtly on the spot is nearly impossible. He could shrink it, but the very act of saying the incantation for a spell could give him away.

Before he can come up with a plan, he hears a creaky step from behind him. He's too late.

"What have you found?" Alexander asks, approaching the banner. Percival swallows a litany of curses the closer the auror gets.

"I don't know..." He lies. "It looks like some kind of banner. The symbol is unfamiliar to me." The most he can do at this point is try to distance himself from it and feign ignorance.

Alexander hums as he stares at the banner, looking just as unknowing as Percival pretends to be. Clearly he gives up trying to interpret it because he calls out to the rest of the aurors. "Conroy, Harriet, I think Percival found something!"

Soon their whole party stands in front of the hanging cloth. Neither Conroy or Harriet recognize the symbol either. "We'll take it back with us." Conroy says after it's clear no one can come up with anything useful. "See if anyone else has run into anything like it." There's a hand at his shoulder and Percival startles before realizing it's Conroy. The man gives him a rare smile. "You've done good."

"Thank you sir." Percival manages.

Harriet waves her wand and the banner starts to fold into a neat little square in the air.

As the fabric lifts though, everyone's focus shifts to what lies beyond. A simple wooden door hidden by the banner.

Instantly, all the aurors' guard raises once more, their wands at the ready. Percival joins suit, not knowing what to expect. He hadn't even known there was another room back behind here.

"Be prepared for anything." Conroy warns as he checks the door for traps. Upon finding no such thing, he slowly spells the door open.

A strong, unpleasant stench, like a terrible combination of blood and livestock, radiates from the opened doorway. Percival tries not to gag at the smell. Beyond that, he can hear low growls and weak squawks. Just what the hell had Gellert's people gotten into and why had none of this been dealt with?

Conroy takes the first step inside and the rest of them follow.
When they walk in, the smell gets stronger and the sounds get louder. It doesn't take too long to locate the source though. The walls are all lined with too-small cages, and inside each is a different creature. All are bound up, scarred and malnourished. There's a Fwooper with half it's feathers missing, a mooncalf with scar tissue where there should be an eye, a Jarvey with it's tail cut off, and many many more. Percival may not consider himself a fan of Magical Creatures, but seeing them all like this makes him sick to his stomach.

"What the hell is this?" Percival cannot help but say out loud as he takes in the cages around him. This couldn't have been Gellert's doing. Gellert had no use for creatures. But why were they here then? Why were they hidden behind a banner bearing Gellert's own symbol. He's stunned by what he's seeing and it's been awhile since he's felt this uneasy. He needs answers and he won't get them here.

"I think we found the purpose of this base here. Probably some sort of creature smuggling ring in the area." Conroy explains as if it's obvious. It still isn't adding up though. Percival knows that isn't what they did here. "Let's head back for now. I'll call in a team from creature control when we return. They'll know what to do with these poor guys more than us."

And just like that, they start to leave.

On their way out, Conroy walks alongside Percival, sympathy clear in the man's face. "Welcome to the world of being a real auror. Not at all glamorous like the papers make us out to be. I hate to tell you, but you never get used to it. You see some terrible shit on the job."

"I never thought it glamorous, but even so, I didn't expect to see that today. Why would they do such a thing?" He's still shuddering from the thought that people he trusted would associate with something like that.

"Who knows why bad people do bad things. Most likely greed and a lack of conscious. Creatures like those go for a hefty sum on the black market. But that's where aurors like us come in. We take out the bad people and make sure little guys like those won't be abused for the rest of their lives." Conroy sighs, slowly letting out a deep breath. "Alright, enough thinking about the bad. You did good today, kid. Guess I'll be taking you on a lot more missions from here on out."

Hearing that is enough to distract Percival from his momentary discomfort. "Really? Are you sure? You seemed hesitant even letting me go today."

"Well before today, there were a lot of things going on. Wasn't really sure what to think of you, and well I haven't ever had an apprentice before, so it's been complicated." Percival knows when he hears omission of information, but he's sure this is as close as Conroy will ever get to admitting his job was to observe him for any warning signs. "Anyways, I'll be writing a positive report on you. You deserve it."

He tries to not seem too excited at that, tries to find a balance as he thanks Conroy repeatedly. All the stress and overwork, finally he will be moving past it. He's never been so relieved, but he still calms that part of him with the images of the creatures trapped in the cage to temper his mood ever so slightly.

The small group soon exits and apparates back to MACUSA. They undergo a quick debriefing, sharing their findings, both the banner and the knowledge of the caged creatures.

It's quick, only taking ten minutes at most. When it concludes, Conroy lets Percival head home unburdened by any extra work for once.
Of course, Percival can't take a break, not when he has some unanswered questions for the day. Despite all of Conroy's kind words, Percival still remains overly cautious when he arrives home. With the way he checks for any potential surveillance bugs in his apartment, he can't help but think of the careful and methodical way Conroy searched the old abandoned theatre. Perhaps the path of an auror came more naturally than expected, even if his overall motivations differ.

Confident he's not being watched, he pulls out Gellert's journal.

For minutes he just stares at the paper, trying to word what he wants to ask in his head. There has to be a good explanation for what he saw, but still, he fears Gellert's answer will be something he doesn't like.

Hesitantly, he finally brings quill to paper.

"Gellert, today I come to you with good news. The aurors finally allowed me to go on a real mission. Luck was on my side because not only that, but it was also the first scouting mission of the old theatre. I still am in disbelief that this of all things was my first mission. You will be pleased to hear that your followers cleared out most signs of their work, but even so, there are a few things I saw that raised some concern."

Now for the more difficult part. He raises his quill for a brief moment, pursing his lips against the feather. When he's sure of how to say this without being accusatory, he continues writing. "The first being a banner that must have been forgotten. It's one that proudly displayed your symbol and I regretfully must inform you that MACUSA now has it under their possession. The second is something I still don't understand. Behind that banner was a room containing cages full of creatures in the worst sorts of conditions. I would like some explanation as it still makes no sense, no matter how I try to rationalize it."

His troubles are out on the paper, all worded in a way that still gives his leader the benefit of the doubt. He doesn't want to jump to conclusions. For now, his quill is set aside and he nervously paces around the room awaiting an answer.

He doesn't wait too long, because within the hour, words start to appear under his report.

"Ah, so much news. Where to even begin! Well let me first start by congratulating you. After all this time it looks as if those law men are finally giving you the respect you deserve. As for your concerns, you should really learn to start trusting me. My followers there did exactly as I requested."

Percival can barely believe that. How can such an obvious error be purposeful. And that still doesn’t explain the room of creatures. He is about to ask further and even touches the paper with his quill, but stops himself as more of Gellert's words form underneath.

"Before you think me incompetent or heartless, please allow me to explain. You see, had your team walked into a suspected area and found nothing, they would have only grown more suspicious, their security would have tightened out of fear of a breach. By leaving just enough behind, they won't look deeper than the surface. The banner, while significant to us, ultimately means nothing to them. And the animals? You should know I have no personal interest in smuggling. However it works as a wonderful cover story. I had some of my contacts in the area allow some international smugglers to hide their wares there. So now the aurors will associate the symbol and all activity at that location with simple smuggling rather than our true grander motives. Besides, I'm sure your shock and disgust with the situation was genuine. If anything it only helped seal MACUSA's trust in you. You should be thanking me."

Conroy's chat with him as they left the theatre is still fresh in his mind, and it only reinforces what
Gellert says. Even though what he saw was unsettling, he still can't find any fault in Gellert's logic.

"I suppose you're right. I apologize for doubting you."

"Don't worry yourself over it. I had not planned for you being one of the aurors to search the theatre, but let's both be glad it worked out for the best. You've done well for me Percy. Had you not warned me in the first place of their suspicions, that could have been far messier. Thanks to you, we didn't have to give anything up, and are in a better position in this country than we ever were. We aren't just hiding, but actively fooling them."

The praise starts pouring in and his heart flutters. Conroy's praise had been unexpected, but Gellert's will always mean so much more.

"I'm glad you told me to take this path. If it means protecting you and all you stand for, then it will all be worth it in the end."

"Glad to hear. I expect great things from you Percy."

"I won't let you down."

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That mission proves to have been the final true obstacle in Percival's way.

The next day, he walks into Conroy's office expecting the usual routine. Paperwork with maybe an Obliviation round or two. That isn't the case, though. Conroy, instead, finally starts to pull him into the true world of an Investigations auror.

In the several months remaining in Percival's time as a trainee, never again does Conroy flood him with the same old nonsense. Gone is the filing and tax collection, replaced by actual detective work. Conroy has Percival alongside him through nearly all of his missions, something that Conroy should have been doing in the first place.

Percival participates in everything. First they are left to track down the supposed creature smugglers and Percival ensures none of Gellert's connection to them leaks (though Percival is sure their memories had been altered in the first place.) Then they disrupt a coven of witches who had been seeking to create deadly cursed artifacts. They even track down a Wendigo before it can cause too much terror.

For the most part, Percival mostly observes on these missions, learning what to do and what not to do from his mentor. It turns out, Conroy is actually a great teacher. When the man isn't over analyzing Percival's every movement, he has a lot to offer. Conroy is one of the most respected aurors in MACUSA, after all. Percival may have been one of the top in his class, but even he learns new things every day that they are out together. Eventually, learning under Conroy proves second only to learning under Gellert.

Despite the constant excitement, Percival actually feels as if he's gotten some of his regular life back. His nights are no longer filled with hours’ worth of papers and he can finally get a regular night’s sleep. On days that he doesn't have intricate missions to join his mentor on, he can finally make time for his peers and his family.
Momma is overjoyed when he can join them regularly for dinner and Dad is pleased to see he's finally getting the most out of his education.

Gellert still avoids communicating with him regularly, but Percival doesn't mind. Everything might be better now, but he isn't a full auror yet.

The second half of the year goes by far faster than the first. Every day is exhilarating. He's moving and acting instead of sitting on his ass wasting time. While it may not be the sort of activism he truly wants to be active in, it's still better than the nothing he has been stuck with.

He manages to impress with nearly all missions, offering an insight that Conroy grows to find invaluable. Even though half of this year felt wasted, he makes the most of it.

The year concludes and despite how he was held back for a great deal of it, he receives the highest possible recommendations and can graduate from the academy with the rest of his peers.

Unlike at Ilvermorny, this graduation ceremony is small, but more prestigious. The room is modest with only enough space for those graduating, their families, and MACUSA’s aurors.

The only speech is given by the president, thankfully. No useless speeches from the students, nothing to waste their time. Simply they walk across as their name is called along with the department they are joining. With only a handful of them graduating, it goes by fast.

As Percival crosses the stage, he catches his family in the small crowd smiling proudly. This truly is an achievement. While he may not be here for the same reasons as the rest of his peers, he still feels a glimmer of pride. No longer is he an apprentice, no longer will he be at the bottom and pushed around and constantly scrutinized. Freedom is near. Soon he can be himself, follow his own agenda. He’s accomplished the first step in Gellert’s plans for him, now he can truly serve his leader.

With all the names called, they are each handed their new license.

Applause resonates throughout the room and with that, Percival is now an official auror of MACUSA.

-END PART 2-

Chapter End Notes

And with that, yet another part of Percival's life concludes. I'm pleased to say that Percival will no longer have classes. Thankfully. This boy is all grown up! The next chapter should be out in 2-3 weeks. It's one I've been very excited to get to, so you readers are in for a treat for the future.
Percival comes to the conclusion that being an auror is not quite as terrible as he originally anticipated.

Back when he was younger, these were the days he dreaded, the days he knew would come ever since Gellert gave him the assignment. He expected to only do things that went against his morals. Three years of training had even reinforced that conclusion, especially with the amount of obliviations he had been required to do alongside Conroy.

Unlike his time as a trainee though, it seems that actually being on the job means he's mostly given good work. Missions designed to help those in need rather than to reinforce the oppressive regime they live under.

Perhaps the fact his fear of being watched and examined ruthlessly is gone has helped him be more at ease with the job as a whole. No longer does he feel an underlying need to constantly prove himself as a trustworthy member of society. For years he put on a show at Ilvermorny and at the Academy, threading together a complex web in an attempt to deceive even his closer companions. His final year at the Academy may have been hell with MACUSA's finest scrutinizing his every move, but it had been worth it.

Everyone has fallen for the mask, everyone thinks him loyal through and through.

Still, it isn't as if everything he does is a complete lie. It's easier to fake his loyalty to the government when he isn't acting against his moral compass. Thankfully, the Investigations Department mostly deals with tasks concerning the Wizard world only. At least, that is what it has been for these first several weeks. He's stopped smugglers, tracked down kidnappers, and even stopped a sewer troll from rising to the surface. (Trolls apparently do not fall under the jurisdiction of creature control).
That fear and paranoia he had suffered from the previous year is replaced with a sense of pride. The work is incredibly dangerous, but his talents in combat were never just for show. He can defend himself better than even a few of the senior aurors, and not only that, but he has a sharp eye, often noticing things many of his companions don't, at least during missions that don't deal with No-Majs. He's fantastic at the job; a natural in fact, in his blood as so many of his superiors tell him. For once the comparison doesn't bother him too much. Not when the job grows to be more associated with his dad and less so his grandpa with every passing day.

In fact, working alongside Dad has become one of his favorite parts of the job.

For all his grievances against MACUSA, there will always be a part of him that will be comforted by the presence of his dad. They may have had their disagreements in the past, and he knows his dad would never approve of his true allegiances, but it's been these several weeks since becoming a full auror that he feels closer to him than ever before. Growing up, he'd always been closer to his mom, especially since Dad was away for days, sometimes weeks, for work. But now, Percival shares that job, even having the chance to attend missions, protecting people with him. As a child, he had always admired Dad for that, and now he has the opportunity to join him. Even if he questions the very job they do, Percival cannot help but feel a glimmer of joy when his dad, the man who taught him the basics of magic long before he got his wand, tells him how wonderfully he does.

This new sense of belonging comes at a cost, however. There are moments when he sends any intel he's gathered to Gellert that he cannot help feel slivers of remorse. Had MACUSA been the terrible thing he always envisioned in his youth, it would be easier. But since he's spent so much time amongst them, it's hard not to feel like he's betraying good people. His dad and the other aurors he graduated with (whom are the closest things he has to friends), all of them have their heart in the right place but each and every one of them is misguided. He just has to remind himself he isn't hurting them, just hurting the institution that has fooled them all.

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However, every now and then, there is a mission that reminds him exactly what he is fighting for.

Though the majority of his job has become much more palatable this year, the negatives still remain. Usually it’s the run of the mill obliteration mission. Those always make his skin crawl. But there are other occasions that take him by surprise.

One that sickens him was supposed to just involve breaking up a crime ring. Nothing out of the ordinary. A gang of outlaws just outside the city had an underground wand making business. Thinking they were smarter than they really were, they'd make and sell them under the table, bypassing MACUSA's strict regulations, both of the safety of the product and the safety of the manufacturers. Their wands had been so poorly made that several accidents had occurred. That was how they came to MACUSA's attention in the first place. Every one of those wands had been easily traced back to a single warehouse.

Percival is one of the many aurors sent on that mission. The security there is tight and a few of the aurors he's with end up injured in the initial battle. That proves to be the easiest part of the mission to Percival. The fight doesn’t last too long and the criminals are subdued. With the security out of the way, they are granted access to the large workshop. What they find is unexpected. Rather than gruff and scrounging adults, they instead come across a room full of children toiling away at these cheap wands.
They aren’t allowed to simply just free the children. First, they must be questioned like anyone else. Each auror goes to a different child, learning what they can. Communicating with children was part of their training, after all. In time, they learn that all of these children had been just homeless beggars pulled off the streets. Their parents dead or their identity unknown.

What horrifies Percival the most out of the whole situation is MACUSA’s protocol. Percival assumes they would at least try to locate any family these children have but, according to MACUSA, no one has filed missing children reports recently. So rather than actually attempt and help them, each and every child must have the whole event wiped from their brains and are sent off to an orphanage. A No-Maj orphanage where they will be monitored from afar in the 'off chance' that they are actually wizards. Of course, they’d only care about them if they were wizards...

Percival rarely feels as bad as he does when he must wipe years from a child’s mind, especially one who has already been through so much. It disgusts him that he cannot even promise them a better life. MACUSA’s laziness clearly trumps actually caring for children on the off-hand chance that they aren’t wizards.

That is what it has to be, laziness or cruelty.

Just in his few weeks on the job, he is witness to so many more examples of this.

If anything they encounter crosses over with the No-Maj world, their number one priority is upholding the damned Statute of Secrecy.

A couple comes in wanting to report being assaulted, beaten and their belongings stolen, but of course there isn't anything the aurors can do about it because the perpetrators were No-Majs. They can heal their wounds and mend their bones, but there will be no justice. The most that happens is a pair of investigators go to retrieve their items, but no further punishment will occur to the No-Majs.

Even just conflicts between No-Majs themselves, such as muggings or men hurting their wives, all things Percival observes in the city regularly, he can do nothing about. No matter how much he wants to raise his wand to help, he knows it could place him in a great deal of trouble.

He despises it. The only thing keeping him sane is the knowledge that he isn't an oblivator who must deal with this sort of thing every day.

Still, with every occurrence, he feels as if he isn't doing enough. He's had regular correspondence with someone who promises change, and while Percival knows that change won't happen overnight, he needs to have an active role before he starts to feel he's done more harm than good.

On one of his rare nights off, he pulls Gellert's journal from the shelf and after telling him any new intel he's learned, sends a simple request.

"Please, let me do something, let me help. Give me a task apart from just sending you reports."

Considering he had just given his record of the day, he doesn't wait long for a reply. "But my dear Percy, you do quite enough for me as is."

He frowns as he reads the words that appear. Perhaps Gellert just doesn't understand the problem. "I know my reports are of the utmost importance, but I feel so cut off from everyone. These past few years at the academy I realized the necessity of that. Now though, the aurors accept me, they aren't watching my every move. There shouldn't be a problem."

"Amazing that after all these years, you still maintain a certain degree of naivete. You should always assume that you are being watched." The response comes fast and Percival knows that isn't a good
sign. His leader is irritated with him, still doubting Percival after everything, but even so Percival won’t let this go.

"I think I’ve done well so far. You saw to it that they can't see into my head and I know how to avoid unwanted attention by this point."

There is a long pause before he gets an answer. It’s better than being shut down. At least it’s a sign Gellert is thinking it through.

"Fine… I suppose that after all your good work you do deserve a certain amount of freedom. You should discuss things with Linda. She is the one in charge of that area after all. Besides, she misses you and asks me how you are doing quite often. I’m sure you two can decide on some course of action to take. All I ask is you keep your face out of any of that business. Don’t you dare put everything you have achieved thus far at risk."

"Thank you. I didn't want to act without your permission. I can assure you I will be careful. After all, I only want to help you to the best of my abilities."

Their conversation fades soon after, Gellert simply reminds Percival of all the faith he has in him. Percival has a hard time comprehending that even after all these years that Gellert still holds him in such high regard when he barely feels as if he’s done anything for him. They haven’t seen each other in person for years, a fact that bothers Percival more than it should. He misses the man. Though they may have only been in the same quarters for a few weeks, he will always miss that brief period, a time when he could have an open conversation with someone.

Knowing he won’t get to see Gellert any time soon, his leader’s suggestion is a wonderful alternative. It's been over a year since he's gotten to talk to Miss Pendlewood due to the forced isolation he endured while in his training. Back at Ilvermorny, at least he had her company to pass the time. He’s missed her as well.

When it is clear Gellert is done responding to him for the night, Percival grabs some parchment and drafts a letter. He writes that they should discuss plans, meet up, all with Gellert's permission. Once completed, it’s sealed and sent off with an owl.

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It isn’t long before he and Miss Pendelwood resume their regular correspondence.

She is overjoyed to start hearing from him again. Their communication through letter is still done in code, but he understands it well enough. Her first letter back is full of praises, how she’s so proud of him, that without his insight, their whole operation could have been in jeopardy.

It’s overwhelming, but he accepts her gratitude. Even though Gellert had similarly thanked him, he still appreciates it. The reminder that he has already helped the cause in such a fashion is welcome, especially when he currently stresses over not doing enough.

They know to avoid any actual planning through owl and set a day for Percival to stop by her apartment as he did in the past. Important and friendly talks were best done in the privacy of someone’s home after all.

She greets him with open arms when that day comes. After ushering him inside, she pulls him into a
hug. It's is expected and he happily accepts. It's the first time he's actually seen her in two years, the longest they had actually been apart. Seeing her now makes him miss the days back at Ilvermorny, back when he'd been able to see her any time he went to the library. Now he feels as if he took those days for granted, but he won't any more. He will be careful with this freedom that comes with being an auror, if only to ensure that he won't shut himself out anymore.

When she pulls away from the hug, she chuckles softly. "Oh my, if anyone had told me I'd ever willingly hug an auror years ago, I would have thought they were lying."

"We both know I'm not a normal auror."

Miss Pendelwood pats his shoulder looking him up and down. "Still though, you've grown so much since I met you as a little third year. I'm proud of you. Besides, I think we can both agree that the world would be a better place if more aurors were like you."

Percival shrugs. "I'm not so sure about that. When I'm on the job, I'm not much different from everyone else. I do what I have to do to appear normal." Slowly, he lets out a long sigh. "To be honest, there's been a lot I've had to do that I'm not really proud of."

"What sort of things?"

He takes a deep breath as he thinks of each and every action that weighed on him. "Obliviating innocent people, tearing families apart, not being able to help those who actually need it... that sort of thing."

Her hand reaches down and takes his. "I'm sorry. That must be hard. I don't think I could do it. But I suppose that is why I just deal with school children and professors for the most part." She squeezes his hand lightly. "If you need someone to talk to, I am here."

"Thank you." He sits down at a small table, elbows resting on the wood as he rubs his face, trying to work out some of the tension he's had built up. "I suppose that is part of the reason why I'm here. Out there, when I'm having to play my part, I sometimes feel as if I'm doing more harm than good. I know sending information back to Gellert is helping the cause, but it isn't enough for my conscious. I had hoped that you would have some task, or some advice for me."

"Well, hmm... I suppose you could try and find small ways to help here and there. Perhaps when the other aurors have their heads turned, you should do what you can. Use subtle magic to help, lie about an obliviation. If I knew more about the job I would offer more specific advice, but I don't want to say anything to get you in trouble."

"Slowly he turns to smile at her. "I appreciate it. Gellert wants me to be as careful as possible so finding moments like that will be difficult, but it's a good idea. Just hearing someone encourage me is helpful. I doubt I'll have many chances, but I will try."

"Now, as far as helping further with the cause on a grander scale, I already have an idea." She ruffles his hair before standing and walking off.

Percival watches her go to a cabinet where she digs through a giant stack of papers. Moments later, she comes back to the table holding what looks to be several maps. "And what are those for?"

"You, Mr. Auror, are going to help us find a new location for our headquarters."

He raises an eyebrow at her before scanning over the maps. "I thought you would have found another location already."
After shaking her head, she takes a seat at the opposite end of the table. "No, ever since you and the other aurors raided the theatre, everyone has been too afraid to hold a meeting. I don't think any of them have been that close to being caught before, so until we have a confirmed secure space, I'm afraid not much progress will be made. I thought you of all people would be able to advise us on this since you know how MACUSA thinks."

“I see.” With that in mind, he gets to work, mentally crossing off locations as he goes.

They discuss all the needs Miss Pendelwood and the rest of Gellert’s gang requires. While he already has some idea, he’s been too separated from them in recent years. Thankfully Miss Pendelwood has always been at the center of it and has a better understanding than anyone. Percival on the other hand, knows places that are more at risk.

Anywhere near MACUSA’s headquarters vanishes with a tap of Miss Pendelwood’s wand, as is anywhere in the heart of the city. No obvious landmarks or known abandoned buildings either. After last wave of raids, they would be far too much a risk with the amount of criminals that had been found at those locations.

Eventually, Percival decides a location within the city itself should be out of the question. He waves his wand over the map and the paper fades to an overview of the state instead. Knowing how easy it was for aurors to scout out the city makes him too paranoid to honestly recommend a space within it. Instead they settle on a school in a small town in Upstate New York. Aurors were less inclined to be stationed at small No-Maj towns. So long as all the members of their organization could maintain a certain level of stealth, the school would be free and unwatched in the later hours.

He passes on a few warnings to Miss Pendelwood, but she thinks it’s a good choice. Percival still promises to listen for anything that could threaten the location.

By the time they settle, it’s late into the night and Percival realizes he should probably head home.

They share another hug and promises to keep in touch. She waves him goodbye and Percival leaves feeling more positive than he has in a while.

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Even though he's finally speaking with Miss Pendelwood again and helping her however he can, his first priority is still playing the part of a good auror boy.

For the most part, his missions after his visit to her apartment are all rather simple and don't strain his conscience. Of course that doesn't last, and one day he's assigned to a scouting team for a mission he instantly knows won't be pleasant.

The aurors had gotten an anonymous tip about a possible inter-magic couple living just outside the city. Before an Obliviation squad is sent out, a group of Investigators is dispatched to gather intel, both to make sure there isn't any danger for the oblivators and to make sure the claim is not unfounded.

Three aurors are sent, Percival joined by Whitney, one of the twins whom he graduated with, and Auror Harriet, who leads the mission. Honestly, it's a job that two aurors could do just fine, but MACUSA tends to err on the side of caution when dealing with Investigations missions. It's just supposed to be quick reconnaissance, none of them really anticipate being there very long.
They leave at night, knowing that there will be less No-Majs out in the open to see them as they go about their business. The trip to the house doesn't take long and soon they apparate onto the street outside the home.

It's a modest size building, two stories from the looks of it. All the homes on this street don't appear much different. Unlike in the city, there is plenty of space between houses, offering some privacy to these residents. Harriet makes a comment that this is just the sort of place an inter-magic couple would reside. A place they wouldn't be too bothered, but not so isolated as to completely shut them out. Percival holds in a comment that that isn't proof for anything. MACUSA is full of so many assumptions and judgements on people who just want to live average ordinary lives.

There's a quaint little garden outside, with a small stone path leading to the front door. After casting a quick sound-dampening charm, they head towards the house. Everything seems perfectly normal thus far on this warm summer night.

Harriet goes to knock on the door, but her hand stops right before touching the wood. Retracting it, she mutters, "Something is wrong." She steps back and gestures at the doorknob, the wood fractured and splintered around it, the metal bent out of shape. Someone must have forcibly entered from the looks of it.

"Maybe their door is just broken and they haven't had time to fix it." Whitney suggests.

Percival shakes his head. "If there really is a witch who lives here, don't you think she would have already fixed it?" While he attempts to point out the error of her logic, he also hopes that there is possibly some truth to what Whitney says. If what she said is true, then that could hint at a witch not being here at all and this is all some wild goose chase. No obliviations necessary.

"Quiet both of you." Harriet hushes them. "Either way, this isn't normal so you best be on your guard."

Not physically touching the door, Harriet nudges it with a gentle gust spell, something that would have no effect on a working door. The hinges creek and the door sluggishly opens.

The inside of the house is dark, Percival's eyes needing to adjust. Light slowly filters in from the open doorway and slivers of moonlight try to peek through what must be curtains. Though they can't immediately see anything, there is one thing that they all seem to notice: the smell. It's faint, but something here is putrid.

"Ugh… I wonder if they knew we were coming and got out of town. Something smells like it's rotting." Whitney cringes, pinching her nose.

"You really think that they'd leave so suddenly?" Percival wonders, blinking, still not able to get a good look at the room.

"It's possible, but let's not jump to conclusions." Harriet raises her wand. "Come on, let's get to work."

It's still impossible to see at the moment so they each mutter a quick Lumos spell and their wands light up just enough to get a good look at the room. Now that they have light, they can finally start the investigation.

From here, Percival gets a decent understanding of the home's layout. To their right is a decent sized sitting room. Ahead is a dining room and beyond Percival can barely make out a kitchen. To their left is a closed door. A staircase also dominates this entry way, leading up to a darkened second
"Alright. Since we don't have a good idea what it is we are dealing with, we should stay together for now. Let's clear the first floor before we move on." Harriet explains. Percival and Whitney nod.

It's a good plan. Usually in these sorts of missions, they'd split up and cover ground quickly, but considering the few outlying factors they've encountered, safety in numbers is a better bet for the time being. Considering this mission began as an anonymous tip, they are honestly walking in blind. For all they know it could be an ambush.

They first make their way into the sitting room. On first glance, it's a bit messy. Pillows on the couches are askew and a small table in the center of the room has quite a bit of clutter, newspapers piled up, books open to random pages. They each take a section of the room, examining anything for a clue. Harriet reminds them their first priority is to be on the lookout to see if a witch, in fact, lives here.

Percival takes note of a bookshelf on one wall and heads toward it. He steps forward, eyes focused on the shelf. His foot lands on something hard and sharp though and he jumps back. "Shit." He cringes, pointing his wand downward to make sure he's hasn't activated a curse or anything.

"What is it?" Harriet asks at his outburst.

On the ground looks to be a small metal box. Kneeling down, Percival gets a closer look. Holding his wand over it, the details come into focus and he realizes what he stepped on is a miniature train. "I think it's a toy…"

Harriet comes over and leans over the small train as well. She squints at it and frowns. "Great… they have a kid."

Those words make him flinch. Now he hopes even more that they don't find anything. He doesn't want to have a hand in tearing a family apart and ruining a kid's childhood. Biting his cheek, he stands and hopes this is all for nothing.

After spending more time in the sitting room, going through shelves and examining books, they find nothing else of interest and move on to other areas of the house.

The dining room only consists of a table with four chairs around it. Aside from a flower vase on the table, the room is otherwise empty so they just pass by into the kitchen.

The kitchen itself is nothing special, just an average place to store and prepare food that would be typical for No-Majs. A stove and a sink are standard. Based on the appliances present, this family gets their water from pipes rather than magic and fire comes from gas rather than a spark of a wand.

Surprisingly, the putrid smell that they had all noticed when walking in the house is actually less potent here than it had been in other parts. A bowl of fruit rests on the kitchen counter. Whitney goes to pick up an apple and even Percival realizes it looks perfectly fresh. A loaf of bread sits not too far away. Percival prods at it with his wand and notes that it isn't even stale.

Aside from that, the kitchen is messy. Dishes are piled up in the sink waiting to be cleaned.

"Well, I think the theory of them leaving is becoming less likely." Percival determines.

Whitney wrinkles her nose. "Then what is causing that smell."

Harriet is quiet on the subject though, seemingly lost in thought. After going through cabinets, they
find a few items that could be interpreted as potion ingredients but nothing concrete.

With the kitchen examined thoroughly and no strong evidence for the case of a witch or wizard residing here found thus far, they return to the entry hall. Percival wishes that could have been the end of it but he knows that won't be the case. They've barely scratched the surface of this place.

Meeting back in the entry hall, there’s only one door left down here. The door is opened, but rather than another room, it is a simple closet, coats hanging. Nothing magical.

The staircase looms, steps leading to the darkness above.

Looking up, Percival knows it means they still have half a house to cover. The more private areas, of course. If they were to find anything, it would be in one of those rooms. He sighs, more obvious than intended.

Harriet must have caught it because she makes eye contact with him. "Don't worry. We're almost done. Upstairs and that's it." Then she turns to Whitney. "You stay down here." Harriet orders. "Search here for anything we could have missed while Percival and I head up. That alright with you?" She asks looking back at Percival.

He nods. "That is fine." He supposes it's better if he's the one to go instead anyways. Being at the forefront of scouting, he can better influence decisions if he finds something he doesn't like or feels is in someone's interest not to share.

Plan in place, they split off, Harriet leading the way up the stairs. If not for the spell muffling their steps, he's sure the wood under their feet would creek. Instead, another sense overwhelms him as they climb higher. Unlike when they moved to the kitchen earlier, the foul stench worsens.

Half way up, he has to start pinching his nose to stop from gagging. "Ok, seriously, what the hell is that?" He whispers harshly from behind his hand.


How she doesn't have to pinch her nose, Percival has no idea. He shuts his mouth though. After all, she does have a point.

They make it to the top of the stairs and finally the space is visible from the glow of their wands. The light reveals a small hallway before them, just a balcony with three doors, one on each wall. Notably, the door on the right is slightly ajar. Harriet tilts her head in that direction and Percival follows her towards it. From the dirty look she gives him, he knows he must lower the hand on his nose and he tries to not get too nauseous from the smell.

She waves another muffling charm on the hinges of the door before slowly pushing it open.

Every ounce of Percival's will power is needed to not turn around and vomit right there. He fights through the worst thing he's ever smelled in his life, a scent he only identifies as Harriet raises her wand to dimly light the room. He should have run away when he had the chance.

The room features a large bed. Flies buzz around the space, but concentrate on the two figures lying under the blankets. The face of the figure closer to them is... well it's unrecognizable. All that remains is a horrible mess of gore and blood, bits of skull are visible and Percival has never seen anything more horrifying. From the blood soaked hair and dress, Percival realizes this must be the witch they had been sent to investigate.
Next to her, lies a man just as unnervingly still. His face is intact aside from a dripping red dot on his forehead. He stares up at the ceiling with glassy, dead eyes.

All of this Percival takes in from a moment's glance. That's all he can manage before his revolt has him bolting from the doorway to rest against the balcony railing, trying in vain to breath in untainted air. Percival pulls his scarf over his face in a poor attempt to filter it out.

The scent of death. That's what they'd noticed the moment they had walked in. The whole time they'd been in this house, searching for some sort of proof of magic, the owners had been rotting in their bedroom.

While this isn't his first mission, this is the first time he's seen death on the job. The work of an auror is overflowing with danger and terror, so really it was only time before he was witness to such a scene. Even so, that knowledge doesn't make this easier.

From behind him, he hears Harriet clear her throat. He'd turn around to face her but he doubts he can bring himself to look back for the time being. "I… um… I think I can check that room by myself Percival. I won't make you go back in there. Once I finish, I'll go downstairs and let Whitney know what we found. Could you check the rest of the rooms up here instead?"

"Y-yeah." Percival nods, glad she is understanding. "That seems reasonable."

"This might be unpleasant to hear, but also keep in mind that there is a strong possibility they had a child. If you discover a third body, just… let me know and I can handle that too."

The reminder of that fact has him shivering. "Do you think whatever did this could still be here?"

"Judging from the smell, I'd say those two have at least been dead for a day or more. I doubt the culprit is still around, but you are right to remain cautious. Don't let your guard down and please, if you see something, tell me. While the circumstances of our mission have changed, we still have our initial objective. Learn if she was a witch or not. However, we need to let MACUSA know this is no longer an obliviations assignment. Most likely, this will be reported to the No-Maj authorities in the morning."

"Why the No-Maj? Why can't we handle it?" He asks, not knowing the protocol for this sort of event.

"Well, for one, even if she is a witch, the man is still a No-Maj and beyond our jurisdiction. Aside from that, based on their injuries, I assume they were killed with a No-Maj weapon. I can't be completely sure until I do a more thorough search, but if that's the case, then our only job now becomes ensuring the No-Maj's don't find anything that would lead them to believe this isn't just another No-Maj murder. So if you do happen to find something, disenchant it."

Of course, actual justice is beyond them for the time being.

Clenching his jaw, he nods. "Understood."

"Good. Once you've cleared those rooms, meet us back downstairs." And with that, she goes back inside the room that Percival doesn’t even want to think about.

He's on his own now. The conversation with Harriet may have calmed his nerves slightly, giving him some relief from the gory mess in the bedroom. However, it also put some things into perspective. Innocent people here were murdered and yet they apparently can't even try to find those responsible.
For now, Percival will do his job, do as he's asked and look for any sliver of magic. At least the No-
Majs will be notified. But part of him wonders if he could get away with being purposefully careless,
if he could leave behind something subtle where the No-Majs understand there was more at play here
beyond their world.

With that in mind, he keeps his head down and goes into the room adjacent to the bedroom.

This room appears to just be a simple bathroom. As in the kitchen, the standard No-Maj appliances
occupy the majority of the space. Percival checks the medicine cabinet, the only place that could
really hide anything within this room. Inside is the typical No-Maj remedies, but pushing aside a
bottle reveals what could be nothing else but a homebrewed potion.

He may not be a potions expert but one look at the color and consistency makes him think it’s a
wound repairing one. He'd attempt to sniff to get a better idea, but Percy doesn't think removing his
scarf from his nose would be a good idea this close to the bedroom. For now, he slips the tonic into
his bag, knowing that no matter what else he finds now, at least he has some evidence of him
actually attempting to help.

With nothing else of note in that room, he moves on to the last unchecked area in the house. The
bathroom door is shut behind him. If they plan on letting the No-Maj authorities search the premises,
then it would make sense for them to leave the house like they found it to the best of their abilities.

Percival stops in front of the door. If Harriet was right about there being a child, then this would be
their room. That in mind, he prepares himself for the worst and turns the door knob.

The door creaks open, Percival less concerned about stealth than he had been earlier. Upon
illuminating the room, he realizes his assumption had been correct.

Inside, a wooden horse sits on the floor. More trains lay scattered, the rest of the set from the one
downstairs from the looks of it. Pictures of zoo animals are hung on the wall, moving ever so
slightly, the animals grazing or pacing. More evidence of a magical household. He doubts they ever
would expect visitors up here so they'd be less concerned with hiding.

A bed that is too small to fit anyone larger than a child is also present. He is hesitant to raise his head
to look at the bed for fear of what could be, but he does so anyways. Percival lets out a sigh of relief.
All that is on the bed are bunched up blankets, white without a single drop of red.

Even so, he's still cautious and takes a slow step into the room.

Something further into the room shifts and rustles.

Percival's wand snaps up, pointing in that direction. The sound of thumping comes from a closet in
the far side of the room and it cracks open every so slightly.

The killer? Could they have been hiding out here the whole time?

Percival won't be caught off guard and he sees something try to emerge from behind the door. He's at
the ready and the defensive spell is already on his lips. "Stupi-"

He stops himself though when he sees exactly what his target is. What he sees poke its head out, is
not a bloodthirsty killer. No, what he sees is a small head of black hair and two big eyes staring at
him. A child…

From across the hall, he hears Harriet shout out, "Everything ok in there Percival?"
He isn't prepared for this.

Yes he's glad that this kid is alive, but suddenly everything is far more complicated. The obvious answer is to let Harriet know the child is here, that this wasn't a complete massacre, that somehow this kid escaped and is safe. But this kid's parents are still dead. Protocol on this sort of event, based on Percival's experiences, is far from the best option to consider. An orphan would just be shoved into an orphanage. The fact that this kid could be a potential wizard wouldn't change that. This family had clearly cut any ties they had with the wizarding world so chances of a living wizard relative claiming any connection is incredibly unlikely. Nor would MACUSA even consider letting a potential wizard into the hands of a No-Maj family member. The only way Percival imagines this proceeding if he tells Harriet about the kid, would be the boy being oblivated and carried away from any possible connection to this family that must have cared about him. Besides, it's not like MACUSA will be sweeping this house further, not if they are just going to let the No-Maj authorities take over.

All that considered, he turns to shout back at her "Sorry! It was just a mouse. I got nervous."

"A mouse? I think you can handle that by yourself. I still have a lot to do over here, but if you need me to come in there I can."

"No, no, everything is fine. I've got it covered." And with that, he charms the doorway, not letting any other sounds escape this room. He casts it so outside noises are able to filter in so Percival can be alerted if the others need him, but he doesn't want Harriet hearing him approach this kid.

Looking back at the closet, it seems as if the child has ducked back inside.

Percival approaches bit by bit, not wanting to spook the poor kid any further. He kneels down right next to the closet but doesn't go to open it any further.

"H-hello." He tries to sound calm and pleasant, but his nerves are getting the better of him and he finds himself shaking, his voice wavering.

Still, its enough for the door to crack back open, and those two big eyes looking back at him once more. Here, this close to the kid, Percival is able to get a better look at him once more. Here, this close to the kid, Percival is able to get a better look at him. At least he's pretty sure this kid is a boy, judging from his hair and clothes. Based on his height and build, Percival assumes him to be around three years of age. A teddy bear is squished tightly under the boy's arm and he uses its paw to wipe at his clearly wet eyes. Sniffing, he mumbles out, "You aren't Ma. Where is Ma?"

That question alone has Percival cringing. It's a reasonable question, of course, but Percival knows he can't answer it honestly. Not in this moment. Instead, he tries to shush and calm the kid down, making an effort to remember his training. "She isn't here." It’s the best he can do for now and then he attempts to deflect the conversation. "H-he, what's your name?"

The kid just starts crying harder. "Where is she? Where’s Papa?"

Don't think about the bodies... Percival shudders, taking a deep breath, trying to keep himself calm enough to handle this. "My name is Percy. Please, you don't have to be scared. I'm here to help."

The sniffing slows and Percival takes that as a good sign. Still he pouts and holds his bear even tighter.

"I like your bear. He's done a good job protecting you this last day, hasn't he?"

He slowly nods and Percival smiles. It seems like progress is being made. Maybe he can get actual answers from him and better understand how to proceed.
As of now, they are still working off of assumptions. Percival is here with someone who was in the house when everything happened. He just has to hope the kid will be able to speak with him. "Why are you in the closet? This is a strange place for a little boy to be."

"Th-there was a monster." He replies, looking down at his feet.

"A monster?" Percival asks. Harriet had suggested it was a No-Maj, but if she was wrong than perhaps MACUSA really could get involved. "What did this monster look like?"

"I don’t know. I just heard big steps out there. Then there were lots of bangs and I got scared and ran here. I wanted Ma to come back and tell me everything was ok." The more the child speaks, he shakes and cries and hides behind his bear. Percival feels terrible for him. Just even trying to imagine himself in such a position is enough to make him choke up.

"It’s ok, I would have been scared too." At least he now knows that the kid didn’t see anything. So an actual beast becomes less likely. Percival supposes a faceless monster is the best way a child could rationalize all of this. This poor kid…

"A-are Ma and Papa ok?"

Percival frowns, not able to look at him as he tries to figure out a way to answer that kindly without lying.

He must not provide an answer fast enough because the kid starts sobbing again. "They aren’t are they…"

Damn this kid is perceptive. "I'm sorry." Percival says, not knowing how else to respond. Before he can cry out anymore though, Percival places a hand on the boy’s shoulder, the only thing he can think to do to get the boy to calm even slightly. "I promise, I'll make sure you are ok and taken care of. You have my word." He makes sure to make eye contact, letting the boy know how serious he is.

Percival doesn't know how much time he can really sit here talking to the kid though. The longer he stays with him, the greater the chance Harriet or Whitney will come looking after him. So that means he needs to hurry this conversation. "Now, for that to happen, I need you to be very quiet and still. There are some people out there right now who aren't bad, but they don't want what is best for you. I want to make sure you have the best possible future though, and for that to happen, I need to get them to go away. Do you think you can stay in this closet for just a little bit longer?"

The boy pulls his bear up to his face. Percival can tell he's thinking it over hard. It must not be often three year olds have to think about something so serious. Eventually he does nod.

"Good. Now, I need to go away for a little while too, but I promise I'm not abandoning you. I just need to make sure everything is safe and that they won't come back up to take you away. Remember, just stay here and everything will be alright."

At that, Percival stands and watches as the boy closes the closet, leaving it just like how it was when Percival walked in. He just really hopes the kid is patient because he won’t be back for over an hour at least. They will have to return to MACUSA and report their findings.

Before leaving the room, Percival disenchants the paintings, erasing the presence of magic in the area. Once that is done, he removes his charm on the door and heads back downstairs to join the rest of their team.

Harriet and Whitney are waiting downstairs for him. Whitney looks visibly shaken. Percival supposes Harriet just shared the fate of the family with her. As he steps down, Harriet looks at him
expectantly.

"Did you see anything? You didn't call me over to look at a third body… so did they have a kid?"

Percival shrugs. At least he considers himself an expert liar by this point so the story comes easily. "I found a Nursery, but no bodies. I did a thorough search of the room and nothing, not even a drop of blood. I wonder if whoever killed the parents took the kid with them or if the kid managed to escape and run away."

"Shit." Harriet frowns. "It's been over a day, that kid could be anywhere by now. Not your fault though. Did you find anything else?"

Reaching into his bag, he pulls out the potions from the medicine cabinet. "These were upstairs behind some bottles in the bathroom. Also there were some enchanted paintings in the nursery. I handled it."

"Good. I found the woman's wand. It was on the nightstand." She holds it out. Just a simple piece of wood. No one who wasn't a Wizard or Witch would have noticed anything strange by it. "I was just telling Whitney about my observations from the bodies. From what I can tell, their injuries were the result of gunshots. Considering the more brutal treatment to the wife, I am guessing this was a No-Maj attack caused by a paranoid fear of witches. Something tells me that we weren't the only ones to receive this tip about the couple. What Whitney found though, makes everything far more interesting."

Whiney pulls out what looks to be a leather wallet. "I found this in one of the coat pockets."

Reaching inside, she pulls out a paper identification card and holds it out to Percival. He takes it and reads 'Immanuel Barebone. Resident of New York State.'

"Barebone? Like the Scourers?" He's caught off guard, not expecting such a high profile name to come up in this investigation.

The name makes him hesitate, though. Few names were as associated with anti-wizard sentiments in their history, but even so, the Scourers did used to be wizards. If a Barebone married a witch, then perhaps it was a sign of progress. Even so, the name is easy to remember at least. Immanuel Barebone, the name of the boy's father.

Harriet nods. "It's odd that he'd be married to a witch knowing that family's history, even more so that a witch would run away with him. I guess love makes people do crazy things. We haven't found any information on the woman, but if she was married to a Barebone, I'd would think any of it would be false anyways. Did an expert job of hiding until now. She would have had to know that this was basically treason." She sighs. "Still, she didn't deserve this. No one does."

They all stand there in a reflective silence. Percival is appreciative they can at least be respectful even if they didn't agree with her actions.

"Ok then… Whitney and I did a second sweep down here while you were still upstairs and made sure nothing was left behind. I think we are done here."

They nod in agreement. Percival would definitely prefer to get out of here as fast as possible. They just need to get through the debriefing and he can head home and get to work actually helping that boy. Not wasting any more time, they apparate back to MACUSA's headquarters.
Harriet handles the majority of the debriefing with Percival and Whitney adding in the details of what they witnessed when separated. Percival is careful to make sure his story aligns perfectly with what he told the other two, that there was no one, no sign of anyone dead or alive in the nursery. MACUSA’s higher ups seem to believe him without question.

The request for No-Maj authorities to be informed of the murder is met with suspicious glances at first, but Harriet explains they searched the house top to bottom for any obvious signs of witchcraft. Presenting the woman's wand and describing exactly why she believed it was No-Majs who killed them to help her case.

As the mission turned out to be a homicide rather than the simple scouting mission that was expected, the debriefing lasts for over an hour. The whole time Percival stands there just itching to get out so he can do some good. MACUSA says they will be waiting until the morning before slipping the No-Maj Authorities an anonymous tip of their own, so Percival is at least glad to have some time to figure things out.

Whitney and Harriet don't blame him for immediately wanting to leave afterwards. The day has been exhausting for all of them, after all.

On his way home, he stops by a late night news stand and picks up an address book. He’ll need it to figure out how to proceed.

He wishes he could relax when he finally arrives. Not tonight though, not when there's a scared kid waiting on him.

Pulling out the address book, he flips to the 'B' section.

*Barebone, Barebone…*

Percival's finger traces down the page until he finds it. Just two names in this section. The first is, of course, Immanuel Barebone. The address is different from the house the aurors found his family in, but that isn't surprising if they were already in hiding. It's smart and Percival finds himself even more saddened by their loss.

The other name is one he doesn't recognize. *Mary Lou Barebone.*

He can't imagine the Barebone name is common, especially with this few of them in the book. Even so, he goes to his extensive library within his apartment and with his wand, waves over a few No-Maj books on genealogy and a directory or two. Some research is required of course. He can't just send this kid to someone based on surname alone.

After a while, he thinks he has a decent picture of her. According to one book mapping out the lineage of families, Mary Lou is Immanuel's second cousin. Not a close relative, but a relative nonetheless. From the occupation directory, he learns she's a church volunteer, feeds starving children on the streets, that sort of thing. So, he supposes that even if they weren't close, Mary Lou Barebone should be the sort of person to allow a small orphaned child into her home, related or not.

Even more confident in his decision now, he writes her name down on a sheet of paper and shoves it into his pocket.

Now to just hand this over to the boy.

Before Percival leaves his apartment once again, he gathers a few items. First are a couple of cookies
Momma baked for him. While delicious, there are too many for him to eat alone and thinks that they’d be better appreciated by a boy who has been trapped in his room for a day at least. He grabs a cup for the same reason. Something tells him the boy didn’t have access to food and water in there.

Making sure he has those items and that paper, he apparates back to the house.

He's glad for the cover of night now more so than earlier when he was with the rest of the aurors. Stealth now means much more than potentially having to obliviate a No-Maj or two. He knows the night won't last much longer, though. The sun would start to rise in an hour or two, which means he won't have too much time to waste. He'll want to be long gone by the time the No-Majs show up, after all.

Knowing what awaits him inside, he pinches his nose and then heads straight to the boy's room. He has no more business anywhere else in the house.

When he enters, he closes the door behind him. No sign of the boy so Percival just hopes he's still in the closet. His warning to stay in here was just as much to protect him from sights that may scar him for the rest of his life, as well to keep him away from the aurors.

So Percival steps over to the closet and gently knocks, not wanting to startle the kid.

No answer.

He knocks again, speaking in hopes that the boy just didn’t realize it was him. "Hi… it's me Percy. Sorry it took me so long to get back."

Still no answer and Percival starts to worry that he wandered off. Needing to be sure though, he turns the closet door knob and pulls it open.

Inside, curled up on the floor is the small boy sleeping on a pile of blankets, his bear held close. It's an endearing sight and it almost makes Percival want to just let him rest. However, there are important things he needs to discuss with the kid, so he kneels down and softly nudges his shoulder.

The boy's eyes crack open as he starts to stir awake. Groggily, he yawns out, "Papa?"

Percival frowns. Of course the boy in a sleep addled state would jump to that conclusion, but it doesn't make him feel any better about the situation. "N-no. It's Percy, remember? I'm sorry… for waking you up."

Blinking, the boy sits up, his daze fading. "Oh…" Percival can't help but notice the realization in his eyes, the disappointment plain to see. "You were gone a long time." He mumbles, rubbing at his eyes.

"I know, I know. It took me longer than I expected." Twice as long actually, but he had hoped the boy's sense of time wasn't solid enough to realize that. Not wanting to focus on that, he instead shuffles through his bag and pulls out the items he packed. "Are you hungry? I brought something for you to eat." The bag of cookies is held out to the boy.

Cautiously, the boy leans in to examine it. His stomach growls and apparently he decides that he is. He starts to eat slowly at first, but his hunger must have caught up to him because he starts scarfing the cookies down.

While he eats, Percival takes the cup and points his wand inside. "Aguamenti" And a stream of water pours from the tip and into the cup. Once it's full, he holds the cup out to the boy too. "You must be thirsty too."
The boy's eyes go wide. He must be more awake by now. "You have a stick like Ma!"

His honest wonder makes Percival smile, even if it is a bittersweet statement. "That's because I'm a wizard, just like how your Ma was a witch. This is my wand."

The kid's expression shifts, pouting, looking suspicious. "Ma said wands are only for emergencies." The word comes out as babble, clearly still beyond this boy's vocabulary. Without any context, Percival wouldn't be able to understand. "Is this an emergency?"

Percival thinks it over before nodding. "Yes, I'm afraid so." Sighing, he remembers the real reason he's here and pulls out the slip of paper he wrote on. "That reminds me. Do you know any of your other family or even just your parents' friends?"

The kid shakes his head, trying to drink the water at the same time.

"Well, I believe I found a cousin of your father."

"W-what's a cousin?" The boy asks nervously and Percival has to remind himself he's talking to a little kid.

"A cousin is like… a sister, but further away."

The boy blinks clearly still not understanding.

Percival shakes his head, knowing he doesn't have time to sit here and explain the complexities of genealogy to a three year old. "It's not important. All you need to know is her name is Mary Lou and she seems like a very nice lady. I think you should go live with her."

The boy curls in on himself. "But I don’t know her. Why can’t I live here? Papa and Ma would be sad if I left."

Closing his eyes, Percival takes a deep breath trying to avoid getting frustrated. Of course the boy can’t comprehend the permanence of the situation. "I would imagine they want you to be happy. And you can’t be happy here, not when your parents are gone."

"But… but they are gunna come back, right? They aren’t ok now, but they’re gunna get better and come back and everything will be ok again." He starts babbling, talking faster and more frantic with every word.

"No, they aren’t they’re never coming back. Your parents are dead, that means they are gone forever."

The kid breaks into tears.

No, no, no. That isn't what he wanted at all. "Please… Please stop crying…” Percival stammers, panicking. "Please, this is important. There are going to be people here in the morning and you need to tell them that Mary Lou is your cousin." Still the kid cries far too much to even listen to him.

"Calm down, please." Percival sucks in a breath, attempting to calm down himself and figure out this situation. Taking the paper he wrote the woman's name on, he places it in the boy's hand. "Here… just hand this to the police when they arrive."

He sniffs, but accepts the paper. It gets crumpled up in his tiny hand and he uses it to wipe his face. Percival stares at it, thankful that the ink doesn't smear.

Percival lets out a sigh. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you sad."
Sobs fade to soft whimpers as the boy grabs his bear. His gaze focuses on the ground, apparently trying to ignore Percival.

He knows he should do something. It would be cruel to let the boy just remain like this all night. "Maybe I can make it up to you? When you got scared or sad before, what did your parents do to make you feel better?"

"...They read to me." The boy's words are muffled into the bear.

Percival smiles and nods, happy to just get a response. Standing, he ruffles the boy's hair. "I'll see what I can do."

Stepping away from the closet, he walks around the room trying to find a place that the kid's parents would keep books for the kid. Back when Percival was young, he had his own little bookshelf, so he thinks that this kid might have one similar. Lo and behold, opposite the bed is a small ledge with books lined up.

All appear to be child appropriate. The first book he pulls out is entitled 'Grimm's Fairy Tales'. Percival flips to a random story and skims through it. His eyes go wide at some of the savage story points and determines that that wouldn't be a good option for this particular instance. He doubts the boy wants to hear about witches being shoved into ovens or grandmas being eaten, not when his parents have just died.

He places that book back onto the shelf and sees a smaller one next to it that seems like a better option. "Peter Pan" The title makes him smile and after a quick flip through thinks this will serve just fine.

Percival returns to the closet, book in hand and sits back down. Holding it up, he asks if this particular story is alright. The boy nods and to Percival's surprise, cuddles up next to him, head pressed into his arm. At first, Percival freezes it, not expecting the contact, but he isn't going to push him away. Not when the kid needs to latch on to something.

With both of them comfortable, he starts to read. Reading out loud isn't a regular occurrence for him, but he does try. Pauses are added and he tries to sound dramatic when it's appropriate. It helps a lot that he's actually enjoying the story, able to imagine himself in the role of a boy who didn't want to grow up.

By the time he finishes, he looks over to discover the boy is fast asleep against his arm. It's amazing he can look so relaxed in a time like this.

He doesn't want to wake the boy, but he knows he can't stay here. Not with the No-Maj authorities coming in the morning. Slowly, he stands, managing to slide him off without disturbing him too much. It helps that his bear is still in the vicinity, the boy curling around it to fill the empty space.

This next part, Percival wishes he didn't have to do. Normally it would be against his conscious, but in this case, it is important. Wand pointed down at the boy's forehead, Percival whispers, "Obliviate Minimus". He doesn't want to take the full memories away, just muffle them enough so when the boy wakes, this encounter will seem like a vivid dream. His presence in the boy's life will become so foggy that he shouldn't be able to recall what happened so Percival won't have to worry about this whole plan backfiring on him. However, enough should remain so that this whole terrifying night will be a little less terrifying in his memories.

With that, he removes any trace of him being here and makes his way back to his apartment.
When Percival gets home, he's tired and exhausted. It's been a long night after all.

The first thing he does is go to his wash room and try to scrub off any remainder of the scent of death. While it may be late, he can't stand the very idea of it clinging to him or his clothes while he sleeps.

Usually, he's able to relax in the water, let it soak away the tension from a stressful mission. Tonight though, that isn't happening. All he can think about is that boy and his parents. That little kid's life was ruined and Percival only hopes that he made it even slightly better with his efforts.

Even as he climbs into bed, despite being awake for nearly a full day by this point, Percival tosses and turns for what must be an hour. Closing his eyes only brings the image of the two bodies to mind and it’s impossible to relax. The longer he lays there, the more unlikely sleep seems. Sunlight has already started to poke through the curtains.

Lying there is getting him nowhere so he climbs out of bed and heads over to his desk. Maybe some late night reading or even just writing out his thoughts might help.

He reaches up for a book, but his vision is a bit blurred from his sleepy state and his hand nudges something, knocking it off the shelf. Blinking, he leans in to see what it is.

Orion's gift from his birthday.

Even though he already knows the contents, he cracks the box open and sees the joyful note and the two Quidditch tickets staring back at him.

For the first time in all his years knowing Orion, the invitation is tempting. After the night he's had, Percival thinks he needs a break.

Chapter End Notes

:) Sorry not sorry
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I do this a lot but I am really sorry for the gap between this chapter and the last. I thought this would have been a quick one to write, but as always, real life gets in the way. Worry not though! I have absolutely zero plans to leave this fic alone. This and next chapter have been events I’ve been waiting a very long time to get to and I hope you all enjoy reading as much as I did writing!

Also I went back and made a header for every chapter! I plan on making one for every chapter from here on out. :)

(Thanks as always to dreamsandpocky (aka gravescredence on tumblr) for being my co-plotter and beta)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ever since that mission, Percival has difficulty sleeping.

When he closes his eyes at night, his thoughts always drift back to that couple laying in their bed, brutally murdered. Their fate is everything he is fighting against. The lack of acceptance and fear-born prejudice from No-Majs. The absence of justice and only judgements and victim blaming from MACUSA.

It weighs on him with every passing day, and the memory of the scent alone is enough to make him nauseous when he should be resting.

The days following aren't much better than the first. His head is stuck in that abandoned house and he needs something to break his routine.

With each passing night, the Quidditch passes sitting on his desk space in his apartment become more and more tempting.

He's the furthest thing from a fan of the sport, but Orion has always been one of the closer things he
has to a friend. Even if Orion has been a better friend to Percival than he has to Orion. If anyone can get him away from his clouded thoughts and out of the crushing weight of the world, if only for a short while, it's his old roommate.

However, Percival is so far removed from the Quidditch world that he has no idea when the next game is, let alone which one Orion would be participating in. An owl is sent off, thinking there is no better person to plan this excursion with than Orion himself.

A response arrives a few days later. While Percival expects over-dramatic excitement, this is far more than he could have possibly anticipated.

"Dear Perce,

Have you not been paying attention to the news at all? America has qualified for the World Cup this summer! You do know what the World Cup is, right? The one this summer? The most important Quidditch match every four years, the one that only 16 countries qualify to participate in? That's the one and I'm going to be on the team! I can barely believe it! I can't think of a better time for you to use those passes I gave you than this event. They'll cover the whole occasion, however long it goes. Should just be a week but it's hard to judge with Quidditch sometimes. Either way, it starts the first of August. You should definitely come and be my good luck charm, if you can manage the time off. I'll make sure you're all set up if you can make it. And feel free to bring a guest!

Hope to see you soon,

Orion McKnight."

Even Percival has heard of the World Cup before, though he's never even considered attending. It's probably one of the largest gatherings of wizards across the globe and that alone has been enough to keep him from partaking in years past.

But maybe that sort of change of pace is exactly what he needs. He can distract himself with worrying about the claustrophobia of crowds rather than the thoughts of two dead bodies and an orphaned child. Maybe seeing so many people living and having a good time will be enough to stop him from focusing on death and everything wrong with the world. He could use a bit of hope.

However, he doesn't immediately send a response to Orion. A few precautions must be taken before deciding to attend an event out of city that apparently averages around a week or longer.

His first priority, as always, is to message Gellert. A week is a long time to leave his post after all. So he copies down the dates and writes them in his journal, looking for permission to leave during that time before committing to anything.

Of course, Gellert wants an explanation.

"A friend from Ilvermorny invited me to attend to the World Cup this year." Percival writes back in clarification.

"I thought you hated Quidditch." The words on the page scrawl back in response. It's not surprising considering Percival is rather vocal about his distaste for the sport.

"Normally you'd be correct, but my old roommate is on the team and sent me two VIP passes. Figured I might as well use them." He elaborates further, just letting his honest answer flow into the paper. "Besides, auror work has been... stressful lately. A break would be welcome." Percival just hopes it doesn’t come across like he’s lazy, that he doesn’t care about the work they do.
"You have been working hard for me. Perhaps you are right. A vacation might be good for you. Get out of the office and gloom and gain some perspective." That is not the response Percival expected. But before he can wonder about how easy this all seems, he's distracted by another question forming. "Two passes? Who else are you taking."

"Actually, I don't know. Orion told me I could bring a guest if I liked, though I had not planned on taking anyone else. Perhaps I could use one pass now, and use the other if the opportunity comes up later." He hadn't fully thought this through considering he didn't even know if he could go in the first place. He didn't exactly have many friends, and less that he could think of spending time in close quarters for a week with.

"Well, I could join you, if you would like." Gellert writes.

Percival takes a moment, staring at those words, trying to make sure he's reading them correctly. It's far from the refusal he imagined. No matter how many times he rereads it, however, he can't come up with anything other than the fact that Gellert just invited himself to join Percival at the World Cup. The thought alone of seeing Gellert in person again has a blush creeping up his cheeks. "You... want to attend a Quidditch game with me? I thought you wouldn't want us to be seen together in public. Something about breaking our secrecy and wanting yourself to remain anonymous."

"I actually have business planned during the World Cup. I already had the intention of attending, but a VIP pass would make everything far easier. Besides, I'd disguise myself, nothing for you to worry about."

Business? Did that mean Gellert has something planned for the cause? Even though this event is supposed to be a break from everything that has been troubling him, he's still curious. "What do you have planned?"

"So curious, Percy. Well if you must know, I am hosting a few meetings with my followers. There will be representatives from most of the subsects across nations. Usually international gatherings are seen as suspicious events. Not so much when everyone is busy celebrating."

That makes sense to him. Maybe if he lets Gellert attend with him, he can be included in on those meetings. Unable to think of any negative outcome from the idea, Percival writes back, "Alright then. You can come with me. I'm sure Orion will have our rooming taken care of. I'll keep you updated and see you then?"

"I look forward to it Percy."

Only once Percival has shut his journal, does he realize this means that Orion and Gellert will be meeting. That could be... bad. It's too early to tell though.

With Gellert being okay with the idea, his only obstacle that remains is with MACUSA.

There turns out to be no issues there. Giving a few weeks' notice in advance helps. Apparently, many of his co-workers and superiors find his workaholic tendencies to be unhealthy, and after everything he's shared with his closer acquaintances, even Seraphina agrees that some time off will do him some good.

Luciana wishes she could come along, but she's already used up her vacation days to visit Orion previously. She is glad, though, that they'll finally get to spend some time together.

Everything in order, he lets Orion know he'll definitely be attending, and with some hesitance, admits he's bringing a guest.
The wait until the event is welcome. Percival has something to look forward to rather than just going through the motions of a job that unsettles him.

Thoughts of getting to see Orion again after all these years are comforting, a return to the familiar structure he had back at Ilvermorny. Even so, that is nothing compared to the elation he feels when realizing he's going to have Gellert's company once more.

Time passes slower than he would like.

Days are counted down one by one.

Plans are fleshed out and finalized. His separate worlds meeting makes him nervous, but his excitement overshadows any fear.

Percival goes through the motions, goes on missions, does what he's told. At least nothing has been as terrible as the Barebone mission. That much he's thankful for.

The waiting though, comes to an end. The day he leaves for the World Cup arrives and he’s already packed for the week, bag full of clothes suitable to the weather. The Cup apparently takes place in Norway this year so he made sure to put on his heaviest coat.

So he sits in his living room, anticipating the arrival of his traveling companion.

A knock on his door resonates through his whole apartment. Percival's heart speeds up because that sound can only mean one thing: Gellert is here.

Scrambling, Percival hurries over to the door. He takes a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down and to keep his thoughts clear of anything he shouldn't be thinking towards the man. Confident anything embarrassing is buried, he opens the door.

Gellert, looking as golden as ever, waves at him. "Ah Percy, it's been a while, hasn't it."

Immediately Percival brightens. He is everything Percival wants, this handsome grinning man that will lead the future. "Too long. It's good to see you." Stepping to the side, he gestures for Gellert to enter.

Gellert walks in, closing the door behind him. After placing his bag down, he turns to look Percival up and down, brows furrowed? "What on earth are you wearing?"

Blinking, he peers at his own clothes. What is wrong with his fur lined cloak? How has he embarrassed himself already? "The tournament is in Norway. I was under the impression it would be cold."

"You have never been out of America, have you?" Gellert asks, snickering. "The weather isn't that much different between here and there. It is still summer after all."

That's right, Gellert had attended Durmstrang in the Northern most reaches of this country. If anyone would know the weather, it'd be him. Percival feels a bit silly now. "If you say so." He pouts. "Hold on a moment, I need to re-pack." His wand taps against the handle of his bag and the clothing inside
shifts and changes into something more suitable. Then he sheds his outer layer and lets it glide past Gellert to hand itself on a coat rack.

"Are you ready now? We don't want to keep your Quidditch friend waiting."

Percival looks over his things once more. Clothes, packed. Wand, pocketed. Just need to do last scan of the room. When he looks back to Gellert, he realizes something isn't quite right. "How about you? You still look like yourself." While he would be more than happy to stare at Gellert's face all week, he is under the impression secrecy is important and precautions need to be taken.

"Don't worry, I've already handled it." Gellert says. "I charmed my appearance so that those who know who I am, see me as I am. Those who do not know me will see an altered version. The differences aren't drastic, but enough so that no one untrustworthy would be able to place Gellert Grindelwald at this event in the future." He shrugs casually. "Considering my purposes, I need my followers to recognize me but no one else."

That all makes sense, and if it means Percival gets to enjoy the sight of him, then he won't complain. "You always think of everything."

Gellert smirks and holds his bag up. "When planning a revolution, one must always be careful. I'm ready to leave whenever you are. Following your lead."

Percival realizes that he is the one with the directions, but even so, he feels a glimmer of pride.

Orion left instructions on how to get there in his last letter. Simple and easy to follow.

Luggage bags in hand, they head out of the apartment.

Their first stop is within the city. Apparate into an uncrowded alley and take the first door on the left.

Gellert scoffs at the dingy alley. "Terrible how we are reduced to slipping into the shadows, even to attend such a dignified event."

Percival frowns but even though they are alone in the alley, keeps his voice low and muffled. "You know I agree with you more than most." But that is all he says on the matter before pushing the rusted unmarked door open.

Inside, the atmosphere is completely different. Crowds of people pack this large refined chamber. It would remind him of MACUSA if not for the variety of occupants. Wizards and Witches scramble by excitedly, rich and poor alike, some by themselves and many crowds of families of all different ages holding hands. Children scurry behind their families waving around flags featuring the American team's colors.

Off to the side he can hear people shouting bets for who they think will win. The pride for America here is enormous.

All these people around however, makes Percival nervous. He's never felt particularly comfortable in crowds, but with Gellert around, he feels especially on guard. The other times he's been with Gellert, they were alone or surrounded by ignorant No-Majs. This is the first he's been around fellow wizards when at Gellert's side. It feels risky, like they could be caught at any moment, even though Gellert has disguised himself and they haven't done anything wrong. If he's honest with himself, the risk is exhilarating.

Gellert, though, is smiling. "I look forward to the days where people can be this enthusiastic wherever they so choose."
How can Gellert confidently say things like that in a crowded room? Talk like that was how a person could end up on MACUSA's watch list. But no one seems to notice it, everyone is so preoccupied with their own business.

"Maybe, though I never understood the appeal of sports."

Shaking his head, Gellert tsks at him. "You should at least try to develop an appreciation for such a long running cultural pastime. It's events like this that make being a wizard truly special."

"I'll try, if only for this week." He smiles, if only to not come across as a complete bore to the other. "Come on, let's figure out where to go."

Through the crowds, he can make out a sign reading "Portkeys to Quidditch World Cup this way!"

Pushing their way to the opposite side of the room, they come up to a man who asks to see their passes. Percy presents the two tickets and they are lead to a far nicer, less crowded hall. At the end, sits a small dish full of shining golden coins.

Percival raises a brow at the coins, but Gellert wastes no time in picking one up, instantly twisting and vanishing. With a playful roll of his eyes, Percival reaches down and picks one up too.

The portkey activates and Percival is reminded as to why he dislikes this form of travel. It's like a long drawn out apparition. His body feels as if it's being siphoned from a funnel from one country to another and it's all beyond his control. The coin is grasped tightly in his hand as he stretches and squashes. The pressure and motion is unkind to his stomach and he can only hope it will be over soon.

Before he can think another thought though, his feet touch a grassy ground and he stumbles forward, only to have arms around him to stop his fall. "I imagine you don't take cross country portkeys often, do you?" Gellert asks, amused, voice low in his ear. It's enough to distract him from his uneasiness for the time being.

He doesn't have a chance to fight away the blush dusting his cheeks though when yet another voice distracts him further.

"Perce! I'm so glad you finally made it!"

Gellert pulls away from him and Percival is met with the sight of Orion practically jumping up and down, over-excitement radiating from him. Percival would never say it out loud, but he missed Orion's constant enthusiasm. It has been years since they've seen one another and he takes a moment to really look at his old friend. It's apparent the years of intense training have affected him. He's more muscular if that is possible but even so, his personality is still as cheery as ever.

A smile tugs at his own lips and he pats Orion's shoulder. "Thanks for the invitation."

Orion chuckles. "I had to give you some excuse to come see me, right?" Percival doesn't argue that. He knows how true it is. Before he can comment though, Orion's gaze shifts to the man standing next to him. "Ah, you must be Gilbert. Perce has told me a lot about you." Orion ends with a wink.

Gilbert

Oh no…

No, this couldn't be happening. Percival pales. Of all the names to hear, this is the worst possible
outcome. Orion thinks his guest is the ever elusive lie he's fed him for years.

And, well, he isn't entirely wrong. 'Gilbert' had been the mask to keep Orion from knowing the truth about Gellert. But that lie right now means that Orion thinks they are together in ways that Percival can only have him in his dreams.

He should deny it now, stop the madness before it can begin. Words, however, are beyond him in this instant.

Gellert turns to lift a questioning brow at Percival, but when Percival doesn't offer an explanation, he turns back and smirks at Orion, amused. "Why of course, it's lovely to meet you."

"H-hey Orion, how about you show us around? It would be nice to put our luggage down." Percival finally jumps in to intervene. It's too late though, the damage has been done. For now, all he can try to do is hold off the inevitable conversation where Orion will turn Percival into a fool.

Orion takes a look at their bags and nods. "Of course! It's a little ways away but it's a good camp spot. Your tent has already been set up."

They follow Orion's lead. As expected Orion does most of the talking, filling them in with information about the tournament itself, how he's amazed to be participating in something this grand of scale. Most of what Orion shares sounds as if it's in a completely different language. Gellert though, seems to follow along with the sports talk just fine.

Percival, however, just nervously walks behind them, watching them talk about quaffles and chasers and bludgers. He rather them talk about Quidditch instead of Gellert himself. The more they avoided that subject, the better for Percival in the long run.

As he's currently left out of the conversation, he finally takes a moment to really absorb his surroundings. It's absurdly crowded. The tournament itself began a few days ago, and with it came the swarm of eager witches and wizards from across the globe to cheer on their favorite teams. There are tens of thousands of people gathered for the occasion. Thousands of tents set up in a normally unoccupied space form a maze. How Orion knows where to go, he has no idea.

It's overwhelming, but Gellert had a point. It's truly amazing to see so many of their kind coming together, walking around in the open, wearing whatever they feel comfortable in, robes, pointed hats, everything that would get one heavily fined if one walked down the streets in New York City.

As they walk, Orion must notice Percival's lack of participation in the discussion, so soon he slows down until he's standing next to him. Quidditch is replaced with queries on how Percival's life has been since they graduated.

It's a rather dull sugarcoated topic but he indulges his friend.

Somewhere between sharing stories of his meetups with the other junior aurors and the stress he endured under Conroy, they arrive at a far less crowded row and stop in front of a large red and navy blue tent.

"And here we are, your home for the next week. VIP tents. You aren't far from the team tents but not to worry, you'll get quite a lot of privacy here." Orion says with sly smirk. Percival wants to crawl into a hole and hide.

"How thoughtful." Gellert replies. "We appreciate it."

With that, Orion leads them inside.
As expected, the tent is far larger inside than it appears on the exterior. That would be the only way so many wizards could fit in this location, after all. It is quite comfortable, easily fitting the three of them. The space feels even larger than his New York apartment. From the looks of it, it's practically a fully functioning home. Thick curtains and large wooden columns serve as walls to separate the rooms and each room appears fully furnished, complete with decorative picture frames featuring smiling Quidditch stars waving out at them as they walk inside.

Orion tells them this is nearly the same setup that the teams got. He takes the time to point out details as he shows them around, such as a bookshelf for Percival and a kitchen and pantry if they get hungry. It's far nicer than he anticipated. To the average wizard, this sort of setup must have cost a fortune. He really should appreciate this.

But, his appreciation turns to dread as Orion leads them down a curtained hall and into a chamber with a single queen-sized bed.

His heart drops.

"I hope this is alright." Orion explains. "When I assumed you were bringing Gilbert, I thought you'd prefer the one big bed. Didn't want to ask about your bedroom habits. I'm glad I guessed right, but if it's not to you guys' liking, you can always shrink or split it if you need." He pats Percival on the back, looking smug and smirking over at Gellert. "Perce here was second in our class at Ilvermorny. He's very talented and you should be very proud of him."

Percival contemplates if his auror training could finally be useful and wonders the logistics of what it would take to obliterivate this event from all of their minds. Orion, he probably could do so with no problems. Gellert though, the very thought of messing with his mind makes him feel terrible. So he backs down from that line of thinking and just stares at his feet, trying to think of any other way out of this situation.

Gellert though, seems both confused and highly amused by everything. "Don't worry, I know I'm quite fortunate to have Percy in my life."

The floor looks more and more interesting with every passing moment. Carpet rather than the dirt expected from camping, intricately woven. There really is a lot to admire. It's a shame he can't just look at it the entire trip.

"Perce, there's no reason to be embarrassed, you guys have been together for years."

Swallowing down his nerves, he slowly raises his head, trying to not appear mortified though he's rather sure he's failed. "Uh…um… yeah… of course." He really hopes Gellert isn't looking at him right now.

Orion beams, seemingly satisfied. "Alright. I'll let you two unpack and get settled in for the time being. You two deserve some alone time. I've got to go practice anyways! Our first game is in the morning after all. Afterwards, we should meet up again. Hopefully we will be celebrating!" With that, Orion turns to head out of their tent, leaving him alone with Gellert.

For several moments, there is silence. Percival cannot bring himself to look at Gellert after that encounter. His leader is probably furious with him, twisting what connection they have into something closer than he deserves to hope for.

However, when Gellert does break the silence, there is humor in his voice. "So, Percy, what exactly did you tell your little friend about me?"
He knows that there's no escaping this now. Rather than try and weave an even more complicated lie that would most likely fall apart, he supposes it's finally time to own up to the original lie in the first place. The only thing that has him not running out of here in a hurry is the fact that it was clearly just a way to cover up Gellert's true identity. The truth of his feelings can still remained buried under this cover.

Taking a deep breath, he starts to explain. "Well, um… it's complicated, but, I can assure you he knows nothing about the cause. You don't have to worry about that." Percival starts to pace around the room as he tries to piece together the story, his memory coming back to him. "This started years ago, back before we even met in person. I was my 5th year at Ilvermorny and when Miss Pendelwood passed on your journal to me, writing to you became all I cared about."

Gellert nods, clearly recalling that time well.

"Orion was my roommate throughout our schooling and he noticed how little I wanted to leave my room, to leave my quill and journal. He assumed it was just continued depression from my previous year and had been constantly trying to get me to court some of the boys in our class. I had no interest in that of course, but he kept pressing. I snapped and said something that sounded like the person I was writing to was some… uh... secret lover." He can feel his cheeks burning. "When realizing it would solve two problems at once, I decided to let him believe it and elaborated on the story. So… um… he thought every time I wrote to you I was writing to a far off suitor."

Gellert is quiet for a moment, clearly still taking the tale in. When Percival finally looks up, Gellert is shaking his head. "Oh Percy, I'm disappointed in you."

Percival stiffens, the words like knives through his chest. "I- I apologize. I was just a stupid kid at the time. It never meant anything." Fists clench and he just waits to be scolded. He's clearly overstepped his boundaries here.

"What? I think you misunderstand me. The story itself was a smart idea." Gellert pauses, before cracking up with laughter. "But Gilbert? Really? Could you honestly not think of a better name at the time? That is barely different than my own name. I do hope that your creativity has improved since then."

Though the laughing is light-hearted, Percival still feels mocked. "You can't possibly be serious."

"Cheer up" Gellert pats him on the back. "This could make everything easier. A good alias is important and if we play it right, it could prove to be a wonderful cover story."

He can't help but relax under the warmth of Gellert's palm. Even so, he is still unsure about the whole thing. This lie is too close to what he wishes is true. But if Gellert thinks it smart, then there really isn't any reason they shouldn't continue the charade. "I guess that makes sense." He sighs and glances over at the bed. "But if we are going to discuss this further, then can we go into another room? It feels a bit awkward here."

Gellert shrugs, but gestures for Percival to lead the way out of the room.

They end up in the sitting area of the tent, Percival on a comfortable couch and Gellert across from him, legs crossed on the chair. As if they were discussing the weather, Gellert speaks. "Go on, tell me all I need to know about this 'Gilbert' character you've constructed. I need to know so I don't say anything contradictory or leave holes in the story."

One more sigh and Percival begins listing the facts. Overall the story was vague, as he made it a point to brush off Orion any time he asked. Any time he couldn't answer Orion's question, he simply
responded that it wasn't his business. But there are certain points he does remember sharing. Such as how they met between year 4 and 5 when Percival would sneak out of the house. How they didn't often get to see each other in person as Gilbert was European but each moment they spent together was wonderful. Distance though wasn't enough to come between them and they kept up through their journals practically daily.

Gellert at least seems to admire all the lies based in truths and adds to them. Gellert turns Gilbert into a German relic hunter, someone constantly traveling. His favorite color becomes blue, the color that Percival's scarf had been the day they met. Small and large elements are added until Gilbert becomes someone real enough for Gellert to play, at least for the week.

It's actually quite an enjoyable experience and Gellert looks like he's having fun. He's grinning and laughing and he brightens with every detail he brainstorms. That alone makes Percival more than happy to continue this ridiculous farce. Even so, discussing all of this with Gellert, the other content to play the part of Percival's beau, it makes his chest flutter. He's glad for the distance between them. If they were closer, he'd probably make a fool of himself.

Eventually, the conversation does shift. They have more to plan than simply the persona Gellert will assume, such as their schedule for the next day.

The Quidditch match is the first thing in the morning. Despite Percival's lack of interest in the sport itself, watching Orion is supposed to be his primary reason for being here. Presuming the match won't last through the night, they will have the rest of the day ahead of them. Even in the off chance the match goes on too long, Gellert will still need to leave to attend a meeting. That is why he came, after all, for a rare meeting with his international sects.

From the sound of it, it seems as if Gellert plans on leaving Percival's side, which there isn't anything wrong with, but the thought of it makes Percival uncomfortable. He knows it stems from his attachment to his leader, but there is logic behind not wanting to be left out of this particular meeting.

"Can I join you?" Percival asks, hopeful. "If it's something for the cause, then it would make sense for me to attend as well." He knows his role at MACUSA is important, but even so, sitting in on a meeting comprised of Gellert's followers from, across the globe sounds like a dream.

Gellert however seems unsure. "Percy, I know I've explained to you that the less people who are aware of your allegiance to me, the better."

"But I could transfigure myself like you are now. It could be useful. If I know more about your plans, about the intricacies of the cause, then it might help me with my espionage."

There's a moment of silence, Gellert puts his hand to his chin, contemplative. Percival just sits there, waiting. Soon Gellert sighs. "Not at the meeting tomorrow. It's just a general check in." He pauses again though, still thinking it over. "However, we have several planned through the week, so perhaps you may join me during one of them. You are right, it might do you some good."

"I'd like that." Anything to help, to know his work with MACUSA is worth all the effort, would mean so much. He wants to be more useful to Gellert, he wants to know he's finally making a difference.

"I am curious though as to why you are so insistent on getting involved in work again. I thought this trip was supposed to be a break for you." Gellert muses. "Speaking of which, you never told me what prompted this sudden need for a break. It's quite unlike you."

Percival just shrugs. "Auror work has been wearing on me lately."
"Anything in particular?" Gellert leans forward. "You have a tendency to obsess over work and rarely complain, so something tells me it's more complicated than simple exhaustion from the job."

He frowns. "It's a long story."

To his surprise, Gellert stands and walks over to the couch, taking a seat right next to Percival. "We have plenty of time."

The words are soothing, but he can't help but tense. Percival had hoped to never really share the specifics of what he saw. Yet, if anyone would understand him, it would be Gellert. "A few weeks ago, we were sent on what was supposed to be a simple scouting mission. Gather intel and determine if Obliviators should be called in. We received an anonymous tip about a suspected inter-magic couple, a Class A violation of Rappaport's Law. Just the sort of unsavory work I detest." He toys with a loose string on his scarf. "But as you know, I keep my head down and perform my duties. Or I would have, had someone not gotten there before us. When we entered, the first thing we noticed was the smell. I still can't get it out of my head all these weeks later."

Gellert just sits and lets him tell his story without interruptions.

"We searched the house and found nothing, until we got upstairs. The couple was dead in their bed. The woman, her face was… maimed beyond recognition." The memory makes him shiver. "My supervisor said it had to have been a No-Maj who had done it. I... didn't think they were capable of such horrors. But with that gun and anti-magic sentiments, they could kill any of us." Sucking in a breath, he turns to Gellert who looks at him with sympathy. "They had a kid who was hiding. I was able to save the kid, but, the fact that there is a monster out there who could destroy a family like that has eaten at me every day since."

When Percival finishes his tale, Gellert reaches over to place a comforting hand atop his. "Deaths, especially such violent ones, are always impactful to those who are there for the aftermath. I wish I could promise that will be the worst of it, but in your line of work, that is unlikely. However, my vision for the future will put an end to tragedies like that." There's a gentle squeeze and Percival feels some of his tension lessen. "It won't be overnight. Many muggles still harbor a deep seated hatred for our kind. To make matters worse, with their technology, they are rapidly advancing and becoming increasingly more vile. Just look at how they treat their own kind, murdering each other in horrible ways every day. Eventually they will reach the point that they'll be beyond even wizard control, unless we act soon."

He hunches his shoulders and holds Gellert's hand tighter. Gellert's words terrify him. After what he's witnessed, he knows it to be true. Yet MACUSA would rather ignore the problem and let it fester.

"Just remember, when you see horrors such as that, we are actively working to put a stop to it, to make the world a better place. It will get better." Gellert pulls his hand back after one more reassuring squeeze.

"Thank you." Percival says with a soft smile.

"With all that in mind, you can just focus on having a good time for now." Gellert stands up from the couch and walks over to the pantry. "Let's eat and get to bed. We both have to be up early."

Percival nods. Gellert is right. He is always right.

They don't stay awake for much longer. After dining on whatever they can find in the pantry, they change into clothes more suitable for sleeping.
When they get back to the bedroom, he remembers that as it is, they are still sharing the one bed. "Maybe we should split it in half? Orion did say that was ok." Percival offers, just standing in the entrance of the room as Gellert saunters in as if nothing is off.

"Oh no no no Percy, have you not learned anything about disguises by this point? It must be as convincing as possible." Gellert chuckles as he climbs under the covers on one side of the bed. Seeing as he has no other option, he takes his place on the opposite side, careful to leave plenty of distance between them. Despite his own complicated feelings at being in a bed with the man he’s loved for years, he feels more relaxed than he has the last several weeks when trying to sleep.

Instead of the memories that kept him up in recent nights, now he just has to crack his eyes open and see Gellert, looking far more angelic than any human should be, resting right next to him. Tonight he sleeps better than he has in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is entirely outlined and I promise there won’t be a month long wait!
When Percival wakes the next morning, his first thought is that Gellert is no longer in the room with him.

It shouldn't upset him, not when he knows he's already pushing his luck this whole trip. Sighing, he sits up in bed and gets ready for the day. *Quidditch*… he wishes he could be more excited. Watching players fly around and throw balls back and forth though is not exactly his idea of entertainment. Still, he'll try his best for Orion's sake.

Dressing and getting ready for the day, he heads back into the tent's sitting room.

Gellert leans against a post and holds a half-eaten apple. "I was wondering when you were going to wake up."

"We aren't late, are we?" While he might not be in a hurry, he still doesn't want to miss the entire game. Explaining to his friend that he overslept through one of the most important matches of his life is not how he planned on this trip going.

Gellert shakes his head. "No, I'm simply an early riser. You are just on time, though we should start making our way to the stadium soon enough."

Percival agrees, and after making sure he has their tickets, they apparate to right outside the stadium. It's hard to miss it, the giant oval shaped structure has loomed on the horizon since they arrived. From there, they stand in a line until an usher guides them to their correct seats.

Even Percival can tell these seats are fantastic. Rather than be lead down one of the hundreds of rows of seats, he and Gellert are instead brought to a lined off box. It isn't too high up nor too close to the ground, rather it is perfectly in line with the hoops. Another benefit is the lack of crowds he can see that it must be suffocating on the other side of the box. Fans holding up American flags, their faces painted with MACUSA’s seal, holler and cheer excitedly as if they aren't packed tightly.

While others file inside the box with Gellert and Percival, it is by nowhere as close to crowded as it is
outside of it. Percival makes a mental note to thank Orion after the game for keeping his sanity in mind.

Percival takes his seat first, pleased to find the chair is cushioned. Gellert settles into the seat on his right, sitting tall and dignified. Their seats suit Gellert quite well because Percival cannot imagine his leader on the other side of the box with the rambunctious Quidditch fans.

The box slowly fills up as they wait for the starting time. He and Gellert just sit there, chatting as if they were simply close friends. They stare out into the rest of the stadium and Percival finds the sheer number of people gathered here to be overwhelming. When he offhandedly mentions that to Gellert, the other slips his hand into Percival's.

Percival practically jumps at the contact. His reaction does not discourage Gellert though. Instead, their fingers are threaded together and Gellert leans in to whisper, "We are supposed to be a couple, remember?"

Nervously, he nods, trying to think about anything other than the warmth from Gellert's hand seeping into his, or the thumb rubbing soothing circles on his skin.

An announcer's voice booms suddenly throughout the stadium and Percival has never been more grateful for the start of a Quidditch match.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! I'm pleased to welcome you all once more to the 1910 Quidditch World Cup! This is the final of Round of 16 where Spain will be facing America. Will the newcomers in America make their mark in Quidditch history or will Spain, the current cup holders, prevail? Either way, you lot are in for some high class Quidditch viewing!"

The stadium fills with applause unlike anything Percival has heard before. Nearly everyone in the box with them claps and cheers. Gellert though, only smiles, his hand still clasped with Percival's.

"Now let's introduce the Spanish National Team!" Suddenly, a swarm of what appears to be glittering stars dashes out throughout the stadium. Squinting, Percival realizes it's hundreds of glowing nymphs. They fly and hover, shifting until they form several hoops through the air.

Then, seven golden robed figures shoot through the hoops in a line, looking nothing more than a blur of golden light illuminated by the creatures. One by one, the announcer calls out the players names, though Percival is too entranced by the nymphs to really register them. The nymphs in the hoops start to follow behind the players until they are all gathered on the left hand side of the stadium, taking their place behind the goal posts for the time being.

Once the air is cleared and some of the cheers subsided, the announcer speaks up once more. "And for the first time in over half a century, I give you the American National team!"

Instantly, fireworks shoot up into the sky with a boom. They burst and Percival rolls his eyes as the overfamiliar seal of MACUSA forms. The fire, though, continues when it should have dissipated; twisting and shimmering until five burning shapes circle the stadium. When they pass by their box, Percival blinks, seeing that they are living birds… phoenixes.

"Beautiful…" Percival cannot help but murmur.

Once they pass by, Percival notices the hand in his is grasping his fingers far too tightly, just on the edge of being painful. "Gellert?" He asks, to get the other's attention. Gellert's expression is unlike any Percival has seen in him. Gone is the near permanent smirk and his jaw is clenched as tight as his hand as he glares at the birds. "Are you alright?" Percival asks again in concern.
With the birds further away from them, he feels Gellert begin to relax. "Sorry, I just had a poor run in with one such beast on my travels. I am not a fan."

Percival wants to question Gellert further, but it’s clear that he doesn't want to speak much on this subject. That, and the announcer speaks up again, pulling Percival's attention to the red and blue uniformed figures shooting into the stadium. He only catches the name of one player, but it’s the only name that matters.

The crowd roars as the announcer bellows out, "ORION McKNIGHT!"

A wide smile tugs at Percival's lips. Orion deserves all the attention and affection the spectators are pouring out for him. Pulling his hand out from Gellert's hold, he stands and claps for him along with everyone else. This is why he is here, after all. Not for the game, not for Gellert, but to take a break and visit his old roommate after a long absence.

The American players are little more than a blur speeding towards the opposite side of the stadium. For a brief flash, he's able to get a good look at Orion's face, looking far more concentrated than Percival ever remembers seeing him when they were in school. As he passes, Percival claps harder when he sees the #1 embroidered on the back of his uniform.

The cheering soon settles down as players from both sides take their positions. Percival uses this time to retake his seat, hand slipping back into Gellert's. This may be a façade, but he's going to enjoy it as long as it lasts.

Four balls speed up into the air, and with a loud whistle, the game begins.

Percival has no idea what he's watching. Players zoom back and forth, red and blue against the gold and orange. A ball is passed back and forth until he sees it land right in Orion's arms. Another American joins along his side and they start to cross the field. They fly low, to the point Percival has to crane his head downward just to watch.

The ball, the quaffle from what he can make out of the announcer's hurried rambling, exchanges hands constantly from Orion and his teammate as they hurry closer to the hoops.

A black ball suddenly hurls towards them, aiming right for Orion, but at the last moment, he ducks down, quaffle in hand. His teammate is hit with a loud 'CRACK'. Amazingly she doesn't fall from her broom, though she does slow down considerably.

Orion's speed doesn't waver. If anything his pace quickens. He keeps racing forward, untouchable. Percival thinks he's nearly going to hit one of the poles of the hoops, but Orion sharply turns, shooting upwards. Still flying up, he tosses the quaffle with all his might. Percival's eyes can't keep up, but the announcer yells, "McKNIGHT SCORES!"

The American portion of the audience roars with applause. Orion looks as if he can barely believe it, but a familiar goofy smile returns to his face as he takes in all the cheers.

Gellert turns and leans in close to Percival, murmuring, "Your friend is very good."

Percival grins wider, happy for his leader's approval.

The players soon retake their positions. With a blow of a whistle, play resumes.

Unlike with the start of the game, the golden robed Spaniards hurry and push play to the other side of the field. With all focus on the offensive Spaniards, Percival cannot help but lose track of Orion, which also means Percival's attention wanes in the game.
Next to him, Gellert at least looks like he's having a good time watching. Percival finds it easier to watch Gellert rather than the game itself. With Gellert's focus on the players, Percival just takes this opportunity to look him over without fear that Gellert will wonder why he's staring. He wonders what it would be like to trace the lines of his face. Would his cheeks be as sharp as they look or would his skin make them warm and soft?

Percival shakes his head. He shouldn't think like this, not with Gellert right next to him. The action betrays him and Gellert is turning towards him rather than the game. He raises a curious eyebrow. "Anything wrong Percy?"

"No, nothing…"

Thankfully Percival is saved by explaining himself further as the announcer exclaims, "AND SPAIN SCORES! We are tied ladies and gentlemen!"

With his attention back on the field, he notices Orion looking frustrated. He hovers before retaking his position, heading near their box.

Before he passes, Gellert scoots close until he's pressed right up against Percival, resting his head on Percival's shoulder. "In case your friend decides to look over." Gellert hums as if he didn't just cause Percival's heart to beat faster.

It becomes near impossible to try and pay attention to the game at that point. It's already hard enough normally as he barely understands what's going on. When he wants to see if Orion holds the quaffle, he gets distracted with the warmth of Gellert spreading into his shoulder or from soft curls of golden hair blowing gently in the wind.

The game continues on like that for several minutes, each second both heaven and torture. His hands rest in his lap, trying to keep calm. Instead of the game, instead of Gellert, he focuses on his breathing, trying to match the rhythm of it to Gellert's own, until their chests are expanding and shrinking at the same time. Every now and then Gellert mutters a comment or two about the game, and even though Percival has no clue what he's referencing, he still offers a sound of agreement.

He's nearly falling asleep, having managed to relax himself to a certain degree, when the announcer shouts, more excited than ever.

"AMERICA GETS THE SNITCH! AMERICA WINS!!"

Percival, confused, looks over to Gellert, who has peeled himself off of Percival's shoulder finally. "Wait, I thought they were tied? The game is over?"

Gellert just chuckles, stretching from being in that position for an extended period. "You really don't know much about Quidditch do you? The snitch is worth 150 points. The game only ends when either team's seeker catches it."

He only finds himself understanding the sport even less than normal. "Then what is the point of the rest of the game?"

"I don't argue with the creators of one of our oldest pastimes. I'll admit longer games are more interesting, but I am glad this one ended quickly. Business to attend as you know."

Percival shrugs, just accepting he'll never grasp why so many people love this sport. "When will you be leaving?"

"I think I'll just apparate to our meeting place from here. I determine when the meeting starts, so the
quicker I arrive the better." Gellert stands up. Around them, people are filing out in droves, those with families walking, many just apparating away.

"Oh… alright. When will you be back?" Percival asks with a sigh.

"Percy, please don't sound so sad. It's quite unflattering. You came here for your Quidditch friend, not me."

"I'm not sad." But his denial feels somewhat forced. He'd always choose spending time with Gellert over anyone else, given the choice. "Orion will be gone with his team I assume. I just need to figure out what to plan, when to expect you back, what to tell Orion if he's done celebrating before you return."

"If you say so. I should be back at the tent before sundown." Gellert reaches down and cups Percival's cheek. It takes a great deal of willpower to not lean into the touch. "You may tell him that your precious Gilbert wished to take a walk around the camp site."

Gellert pulls his hand back and Percival frowns. "Are you still sure I cannot attend this meeting with you?"

"Absolutely positive, my little spy. Now is not the time." With that, Gellert vanishes into the air.

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Now alone, Percival apparates back to the tent.

He has no reason to linger at the stadium, the only other person he knows in the entire place is Orion. Nor can he expect Orion to entertain him since, last Percival saw, Orion was whisked away into a celebratory crowd the moment the American team won.

The loneliness doesn't bother him however. Most of his life has been spent in self-imposed isolation. Some time away from Gellert might actually do him some good, give him a chance to collect his thoughts because he knows he's incapable of thinking clearly with Gellert nearby.

Pushing past the tent flap, he works to make himself feel at home. First he grabs an apple of his own from the pantry, biting into it with a loud crunch. It's quite satisfying. He hadn't eaten anything before they left, so that, along with the fact his heart had been pounding madly through most of the game, has his head feeling light.

He settles down on the couch, laying stretched out. It is just him, after all; no need to be polite and leave room for a guest.

It isn't too bad, being here by himself. Really, he should be focusing on why he took this break in the first place. This is for relaxation, which this tent is cozy enough to provide, not pining over Gellert and agonizing over work. He should enjoy his time away from all the stress and for once in his life not worry about the state of the world and stop pondering over the future.

He finds it incredibly boring…

The moment Gellert invited himself, he should have known that would be all he could focus on for the entire week. Sighing, he takes another bite of his apple.
The way everything turned out may frustratingly be not what he anticipated, but he knows, if given a chance to redo it, he wouldn't trade Gellert's presence for the world. Even though he is overcome with a strong sense of anxiety to not make a fool of himself every time he is around his leader, he cannot ignore the underlying joy and giddiness when they are close.

But they are barely a day into this week long trip and already the entire thing is proving to be an exercise in self-control. He shouldn't have allowed this 'Gilbert' thing to go on as it had, should have denied it as soon as he heard the name pass Orion's lips. Clearly he loves to torture himself.

Still, regardless of the risk that came with developing the details of their fake relationship, Percival cannot deny that it has granted him a certain level of closeness with Gellert that he could not have otherwise. Just thinking about the few moments they've shared thus far for the sake of fooling Orion has his heart fluttering. As if by some genie granting wishes, he's been given this brief period where he can at least pretend to have what he's wanted for years, something he knows he can never truly have. That fact is something he will never hold against Gellert, though, as the man is the face of something far greater than him. Percival, however, will enjoy it while it lasts.

He's hopelessly in love with perhaps the only person in the world who truly understands him, a man he has gladly devoted his life to despite the impossibility of his feelings ever being reciprocated. A man who is not only a genius, but someone working towards the betterment of everything. A man who is so handsome, he's as golden as the sun itself.

Percival's eyes close, his imagination running wild. This may be the only time this whole trip he's alone. The realization has a terrible idea sneaking into his mind. He shouldn't entertain it, but he's lonely and bored and everything is so fresh in his memory.

Shoving shame aside for the time being, his free hand trails lower, slipping inside his waistband. The Quidditch match had nearly driven him crazy. Through the entire event, Gellert had held his hand. A small occurrence, nothing more intimate than what Gellert does on a normal day, but the memory of Gellert's fingers threaded with his own is still fresh in his mind. Those long, gently calloused, fingers... That's what Percival thinks about when his own wrap around his cock. He sucks in a breath.

Gellert had leaned against him, his warmth seeping into Percival, close enough so if Percival had only turned his head ever so slightly, he could have captured Gellert's lips in a kiss. What would Gellert's lips feel like? They always looked soft from a short distance. It is easy to imagine, initiating a kiss as Gellert presses into him, though he knows Gellert would quickly take control. Gellert is confident like that...

Percival lets out a soft moan as he starts stroking himself. He may be alone, but still, he lacks the privacy of his own home so he brings his other hand over to muffle the sounds. He still holds the apple though, the juices of the fruit rather than his hand pressing against his lips. It only makes him think about that morning, waking up and seeing Gellert munching away on an apple casually as if they hadn't just shared a bed.

He envisions the apple offered from Gellert, taking a hungry bite as Gellert stares at him just as hungry. The apple soon cast aside and Percival instead licking the sweet juices from Gellert's fingers. Gellert would smile as he always does. His smirk wouldn't be judging, just appreciating as Percival offered himself completely.

Percival's grip becomes more firm and his strokes quicken as he thinks of Gellert taking his arm and pulling him back into the bedroom they shared. His hips hitching as the Gellert in his mind kneels in front of him, tugging his trousers down and takes Percival's cock into his mouth. Keeping quiet is
quickly forgotten and he whimpers and pants at imagining a soft, damp heat enveloping him. "Please Gellert."

Gellert would keep him steady, all the while he would continue to bob his head, still somehow looking dignified despite the action. Only Gellert could debase himself in this way and yet have complete and utter control. It’s not to thoughts of soft lips and a skilled tongue that have him over the edge. No, all it takes is the idea of Gellert pulling back, taking him in hand, and smirking at him knowingly, that has him crying out.

Shame only creeps back in after he's made a complete mess of himself.

Gellert is off discussing the future of the world, and here Percival is, betraying his trust.

Taking in the rumpled state of his clothing and the other evidence he cannot control himself, Percival lets out a loud exasperated sigh. "Get yourself together..." He mutters as he rustles around for his wand. "Scourgify..." The main source of his embarrassment vanishes.

He sits up and straightens his clothes as best as he can. Thankfully he doubts Gellert will be returning anytime soon. That should give him enough time to regain some dignity. What he needs is a distraction before he becomes even more pathetic if at all possible. The bookshelf appears to be the only source of entertainment. At random, he pulls out a book. 'Quidditch: A History through the Ages'. Not his favorite subject, but it will do for the time being.

Book in hand, he sits at the table and tries reading.

He can't focus though, thoughts drifting between anger at his own lack of self-control, and curiosity to what he could be missing at the meeting. The latter doesn't make him want to obliviate himself, so he lets his mind wander.

Gellert hadn't let him join. Initially the thought hurts, being shut out from all his dreams and goals, but he understands. Especially after his own lapse of control here, he understands. He's supposed to have the mental fortitude to be a spy working in the shadows. How can he participate in secret meetings when he can't even restrain himself when left alone for under an hour.

He should be glad to have the connection with Gellert that he has. There can't be more than a select handful of Gellert's followers who have been writing back and forth with him for years, and he's the one Gellert chose to stay with through this entire event.

Even so, Percival selfishly wishes for a larger role. He needs a greater understanding of the big picture.

With what he's been doing at MACUSA, he can't be helping much. Small scale mission reports could only give Gellert so much. Perhaps small personal stories to sway people to their side and point out ways MACUSA is incompetent. But nothing more than is already public knowledge. He fails to see how it all works into the grand scheme of things. Percival cannot help but feel his skills are wasted there. He could be doing so much more if Gellert would just let him act rather than just observe.

But for all he knows, he could be doing more than the rest of them… He has no benchmark for how much he's giving compared to everyone else. Shut out from all the meetings, even on a local level, he has no idea what Gellert has planned.

He shouldn't complain. He can't, not when Gellert reminds him constantly how important his role is. Hopefully after the meeting Gellert allows him to attend, he will finally know his place in everything.
Gellert promised, and frankly, he cannot wait. Finally he will have a chance to see the global side of everything and meet with those who agree with Gellert, who agree with him, on how the world's problems should be addressed.

The dull Quidditch book is set aside and Percival stands. While he may not be able to participate in the current meeting, he can still prepare for the next. Gellert did tell him he would need to transfigure himself to attend, so in the meantime, he should brush up on those skills. It wasn't often he got a chance, and he could use it, considering he was far from a natural.

Time is lost track of as he becomes engrossed in his practices. He's able to adjust facial features, to sharpen or soften his face. Height and body mass are easily changed. The difficulty comes into play when he gets to his hair. Its more intricate than most parts, the thousands of strands on his head not wanting to work together. The most he can manage is with a shift of the shade, but anything beyond that is frustrating him.

He's about a foot taller than normal and about 50 pounds wider when he hears a tap on the tent. Quickly he does away with the transfiguration and goes to answer it.

Orion is standing on the other side, looking confused. "Sorry if I was interrupting something. You're ginger." He gestures to Percival's hair.

"Oh! Thought I fixed that." Percival taps his wand to his head a few more times until his hair returns to it's typical black shade. "I was just brushing up on some auror stuff."

Orion only seems more lost. "Why would you be doing that? Thought this was a vacation for you."

Great, now he has to explain his way out of this. "Gilbert wanted to take a walk around the campsite. I was too tired to go though so I stayed behind. Got bored and decided to figure out some work stuff while I wait for him."

It's flimsy, but Orion chuckles. "Same old Perce. I'm glad to hear it's not just me you avoid in favor of work."

"How about you?" He carefully changes subjects. "I thought you'd be off celebrating your big win?"

"Heh, well that's what the team has been doing for the last hour or two. We all decided we should stop for now considering we still have to play tomorrow. Can't have too much fun until after we win the finals." Orion says with a confident wink.

Percival nods. "Makes sense to me. What brings you here then? Shouldn't you be resting and preparing."

"I am! I got one more strategy talk to get to today. But first I wanted to extend an invitation to you and Gilbert. Abigail and I are going to start a campfire over by our campsite once it gets dark. We'd love to see you there."

Percival snorts. "Abigail? You two are still together?"

"Of course we are Perce! Don't act so surprised. If you and Gilbert can survive the years together being so far apart, then our love has no reason to not have endured."

"If you say so." At least Orion's over-dramatics when it came to his love life never changes. He can't help but smile.

"So mean." But Orion is still laughing. "Anyways. Gotta go. I'll see you tonight right?"
"Yeah, we'll be there."

With that, Orion scurries off.

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Only when the sun starts to set does Gellert return.

Percival cannot resist asking what the meeting was about, but Gellert won't tell him any in-depth details past the fact that it was 'very productive' and there is still 'much to discuss' for later. It's not what he wants to hear, but Percival sucks up his disappointment. The last few hours had been spent coming to terms with being on the outside of things for now. A little more of the same is nothing he can't handle.

Orion's invitation is extended to Gellert not too long after he arrives. If Gellert didn't want to tell him about the meeting, then Percival might as well talk about his own plans for the day. Part of him hopes Gellert will find some excuse not to join. It would lower the chance of anymore ridiculous embarrassment over the whole 'Gilbert' thing. However, Gellert simply tells him a campfire sounds like good fun.

Percival tries to avoid pouting as they walk to Orion's campsite. It’s difficult, though, when the entire walk Gellert insists they go over details of their fabricated story to make sure that it is foolproof and as convincing as possible.

When they are close enough to see Orion in the distance, Gellert leaves less space between them as they walk. Still out of earshot from the others, Gellert leans in, whispering against his ear, reminding him that he should stop sulking, that they have parts to play.

Is this a test? Is that why Gellert had been taking this far too seriously? Gellert's own way of seeing exactly how well he could act his way through an uncomfortable situation? This whole fiasco suddenly makes more sense.

He lies every day for a living. He can get through this the same way he gets through every day at MACUSA. If he can convince an entire government of high ranking aurors that he is one of them, then making Orion believe he is in a completely legitimate relationship should be nothing. The fact he wishes this lie is actually true should make it even easier.

Confidence rising, he reaches down and threads his fingers with Gellert’s casually. He buries the memory about what those fingers inspired earlier that day just as he would with occlumency. Nothing is odd about this, nothing this innocent will cause any unwanted desires.

Orion waves as they arrive. He's situated on a small bench pressed next to a pretty red-head that Percival remembers from school, Abigail. Percival had met her a few times at Ilvermorny, though none of those encounters were particularly memorable. She was nice, sweet and quiet, but ultimately unremarkable. What made Orion dote on her to such an extent, Percival would never understand. "You made it! Please take a seat." Orion keeps one arm around the cheery lady, the other gesturing to another small bench next to them.

Gellert settles down first, patting the spot next to him. Percival takes a breath, telling himself 'Just play your part.' Taking his seat, he scoots just as close to Gellert as Orion is to Abigail. Having an example of a perfectly normal couple across from them is a blessing. Gellert's hand rests against the
small of his back and Percival is quite proud of himself for melting into the touch rather than freezing up. As if in reward, Gellert gently strokes small circles on his back.

"Don't act so surprised. I told you we were going to be here." Percival snickers.

"I'm just giving you a hard time. Anyways, I believe some introductions are in order." Orion points at the woman pressed against his arm. "Gilbert, this is Abigail, my lovely long time lady. Abigail, this is Gilbert, Perce's long time European fellow."

Abigail waves. "It's wonderful to finally meet you Gilbert."

Gellert, with impeccable charm, winks at her. "Likewise." Percival shouldn't feel the small bite of jealousy that creeps up on him. It doesn't last though, not with Gellert's hand still stroking his back. "Congratulations on your win." He says, attention shifting to Orion. "That was some very impressive broomwork."

Orion perks up at the compliment. "Thanks. I'm just glad it ended quickly. If we have a long drawn out game, I'd rather it be in the finals. Did you ever play?"

"No." Gellert shakes his head. "But I do have a certain appreciation for the game."

"Hey, maybe you can rub some of that off on Perce!"

Percival clears his throat. "I'm right here guys…" The last thing he wants is Orion and Gellert conspiring against him.

Gellert chuckles, a strange feeling with the other still pressed against him. "Don't worry, my dear. I'd never make you do anything you didn't want to do." Then, there is a peck of lips on his cheek.

His cheeks are burning and he's glad for the glow of firelight to mask the blush he's sure covers his face. He can't freeze, though. Not when he's sure Gellert is testing him. Reaching up, he cups Gellert's cheek in his hand, just as Gellert had done to him several times before. His cheek is sharp with just the slightest hint of stubble and there's a twinkle in Gellert's eyes. This had been the correct move to take. "I know, you are too good to me." And his hand drops back to his lap.

Abigail giggles. "You two are cute."

Orion looks back and forth between them. "So, I never got all the details. How did you two meet?"

"It's a long story." Percival says shyly. The story, though, is one of the easier things to think of considering they spun the tale just last night.

"Now Percy, I think there is plenty of time to share. Your friend is curious." Gellert reaches a hand out at the fire. The flames crackle and follow the motions of his hand, twisting until a figure can be made out within.

"If we must then." Percival hums with some amusement. Just as Gellert had, he reaches out to the fire and another figure forms, making sure to leave some distance between the shapes.

Abigail lets out a delighted squeak at the sight.

"You see, I am a relic hunter by trade. I travel around the globe, hunting for artifacts, heirlooms, anything important that wouldn't be missed in various countries." Gellert's fire figure is suddenly surrounded, small symbols and icons dancing around him. "I had heard of a small one hiding away in America, one owned by a prominent family. I figured there would be no harm in asking for it."
A tiny scorpion appears in the flames as well and scurries over to where the fire Percival stands, tapping his foot. "I'm sure you remember my pet, Horatio."

Orion is filled with wonder as he watches the story play out in front of him. At the mention of Horatio, he grins widely. "Yeah, course I do! I had to feed the little guy sometimes."

Gellert laughs. "Not surprising considering how awful this one is with animals."

Playfully, he swats Gellert's shoulder. Under normal circumstances, he'd never be this familiar with his leader. "You are too cruel to me."

"You still don't deny it Percy." And he couldn't because his terrible track record with creatures is one of the few truths they are feeding to Orion.

"Anyways..." Percival redirects. "Gilbert tracked me down the summer between our fourth and fifth years. I was off in the city, pouting over something my family said when a handsome stranger approached me. I don't know how he found me, but he has always been clever."

The story continues in the flames, Gellert's figure closing the distance between them. Rather than pay any mind to Percival's puppet though, he fixates on the shape of the small scorpion. It's amusing to even consider that Gellert could be more interested in useless Horatio over all the rest that Percival had been eager to give. Chuckling to himself, he takes a moment to look at Gellert next to him, wondering if the other man found it just as entertaining.

Gellert stares concentrated on his fire-puppetry. For a moment, Percival is caught off guard, nearly forgetting what he is doing. The man is far too handsome in the firelight, the orange glow flickering against his hair, his cheeks reddened as they are brushed by the warm light. His eyes sparkle with every motion of the figures in front of them.

The fire pops and Percival remembers where he was. Nervously, he swallows before continuing. "But of course, I couldn't just hand Horatio over. I might not care much for him, but he is important to my family. They would have been very upset."

"A small loss." Gellert admits with a shrug, and he too turns, meeting Percival's eyes. "It's alright though. I found something far better."

Should he say something? Is there anything he's forgetting from the script? It's hard to think with Gellert staring at him, his eyes twinkling. But he can't look away. As of now, there is only the fire and Gellert radiant and so very close...

Closer even... leaning in...

Gellert kisses him.

Everything stops.

It's a soft kiss, a gentle brush of lips, but it's still a moment he's dreamt of for years and years. It still feels like a dream. There is only them and Gellert initiated this. Percival just returns the kiss, pressing back into it before he Gellert pulls away. This is just a play they are putting on, is it not? Just a role to slip into, nothing wrong with that. Except it's more than just pretend when Percival has yearned for this for ages.

Holding Gellert close, he keeps kissing him. And Gellert responds with an equal passion. Did Gellert want this as much as him? That's what he will allow himself to think as their mouths part, letting the kiss deepen. He's wanted this for so long and it's been worth every moment of waiting. He can hear
himself moaning, but that is nothing compared to the feel of Gellert against him, the taste of his mouth. To all of his senses, Gellert is perfection and he will keep this moment of heaven in his possession for as long as he can.

"Ehem…" Someone sounds out, but Percival can barely hear it. Frankly, he doesn't care, not about anything that isn't the man he is pressed against.

But then Gellert is pulling away, pushing Percival off gently with a hand so he cannot follow.

Blinking, he regains his bearings. They're still at the campsite. Orion and Abigail are right across from them. A nervous glance up shows they are sitting eyes wide in shocked.

Percival risks a glimpse at Gellert and he feels sick. Gellert's usual composure is there, but Percival can make out the hint of a sharp judging glare. "Percy dear, remember we have company."

Fuck

Again he looks back and forth between Gellert and Orion and he wants to hide away and forget everything that had happened. He messed up. He messed everything up. He pushed further than he should have and how can Gellert ever trust him again? Percival can't even follow a simple task.

Still Gellert stares at him as if everyone is waiting for some sort of explanation.

"I'm sorry." Percival's voice cracks and wavers even though he tries his hardest to keep it under control. He wants to run away back to the tent, but he knows he can't. A dangerous combination of fear and damnable arousal is pumping through his veins. "We're just apart so often that it's hard to remember how to behave when we are together."

Thankfully, Orion laughs, breaking some of the thick tension. "Perce, it's fine. I'm just glad you're happy."

"Um… enough about us. How have you two been?" He tries to push the conversation away from what just happened and, for the most part, it works. Orion goes off on a happy rant about the state of his life, talking about all the trips he and Abigail have gotten to take while on Quidditch tour. Percival wants to be a good friend and listen but right now, he's buried under his own thoughts.

How can he not be when he knows he's just given himself away? Gellert is smart enough to put what happened together with how Percival has been acting. It's only because they aren't alone that Gellert hasn't disciplined him yet. But he knows it's coming. Percival just destroyed all he's worked towards because he had been greedy. Gellert had already been holding him an arm's length away from helping with the cause. This had to be the final straw of Gellert putting up with his nonsense. He wouldn't blame Gellert though. How can he be a spy working against an entire government when he can't even control his own damned feelings?

Percival is ashamed of himself.

Gellert converses with Orion and Abigail as if nothing bad just occurred but Percival knows better. He offers a few sounds to the conversation every now and then, but he isn't more conscious to the rest of them than that. On the outside he tries to sit upright and collected bit internally he is falling apart.

It's both a blessing and a curse when Orion tells them it's getting late and he and Abigail should be getting back. Orion gives them a wink before they leave Percival and Gellert to themselves. Gellert extinguishes the fire as Percival prepares himself for the worst.
"I'm sorry" Percival breaks the silence as soon as they step inside the tent. He has to explain himself, a last minute plea before Gellert can cast him out on the spot. "I… didn't mean it. I don't know what I was thinking. It was just a lapse in judgement. I swear to you nothing like that will ever happen again." He is frantic, words practically slurred together.

His head is bowed, and he buries his face in his hands. Shame has overtaken him and he's just waiting for Gellert to lash out at him.

Percival is fifteen all over again, standing outside the Thunderbird dorms, trapped in those few moments before Christopher broke his heart. He's collapsed in on himself, just waiting for yet another huge portion of his life to draw to a close. He has no doubt Gellert will do the same, cast him aside and leave Percival to pick up the pieces alone.

But it never comes.

Gellert is frighteningly quiet and takes a step towards him. And another. And another. It would be easier, he thinks, if Gellert just yelled and put him out of his misery. But Gellert just comes even closer.

With no answer, Percival has no choice but to look up. He's scared but he needs some sort of read on his leader. Gellert's expression is neutral. Percival can't tell what he's thinking and he's not good enough at legilimency to read any deeper.

Gellert closes in until he's guiding Percival backwards.

Percival gasps when he feels his back hit one of the thick wooden columns keeping the tent up.

Gellert smiles. Not the malicious smirk he expects, but a gentle reassuring grin. He reaches up and cups Percival's cheek and Percival has never been more confused in his entire life. "Oh Percy, you don't have to be so nervous. It's alright."

"Wh- I don't understand. Y-you aren't mad at me?" He's trembling under Gellert's touch. Something isn't adding up here. There has to be some sort of mistake.

"Mad? No, no…" Gellert shakes his head and Percival still waits for the other shoe to drop. It never comes. Gellert's thumb just swipes along his bottom lip and Percival whimpers. "I am a little annoyed at you for almost breaking your cover, but considering how long you've harbored feelings for me, I suppose it was to be expected."

Percival's jaw drops. "You… you've known?"

"Of course." Gellert leans in, tenderly brushing a hair back from his face. "I've been inside your head. Did you really think your early attempts at Occlumency were enough to keep me out that well?" He laughs, though not judgingly. "You did get better though."

"This whole time…you've known." The revelation is still processing. He has no idea how to feel right now. All these years, even before he took a single step inside the Auror Academy, back when
Gellert had been staying in his apartment for weeks, he knew Percival had been hopelessly in love with him. That knowledge is overwhelming and he feels sick and unsettled yet warm and comforted all at the same time. He's know all these years and hasn't cut ties with him. But there is still something left bothering him. "Why didn't you say something before now?"

Gellert shrugs. "I thought it would be rude to use such private knowledge, don't you think? Especially since you tried to keep it hidden. I rather you waited until you were comfortable enough to share such details with me."

Percival nods slowly. It does make sense and, thinking it over, he appreciates how Gellert handled it. He knew and didn’t treat Percival any differently. "So, it… doesn't bother you that I want so many things that I have no right to ask for."

"Perhaps if you were any of my other followers, but I've grown quite fond of you." With that, Gellert takes another step forward, closing any distance between them until Percival feels Gellert pressed right up against him.

"Gellert, I-" That's all Percival gets out before Gellert kisses him.

His first instinct is that he has to be dreaming, but he's never felt so much in his dreams past pure arousal. Now it's so much more complicated. He's warm and confused, overjoyed and afraid. Gellert is solid and real against him.

Cautiously, Percival kisses back, unsure of how it is Gellert could want him, and unsure of himself. It isn't as if he's had much practice kissing but he'll try, just hoping he isn't so terrible that Gellert will walk away.

That doesn't happen, though. No, Gellert keeps him close, taking control of the kiss. Gellert is gentle, not too overwhelming. His movements are still with the same confidence Percival has grown to admire from the man. He holds Percival steady, a hand on his cheek and a hand on his hip. Percival is grateful, his legs feeling wobbly, like he'd collapse if Gellert were to move away.

He's trapped here between the tent post and Gellert in a blissful moment and he doesn't want it to end.

A curl of Gellert's hair falls between them, tickling Percival's face. It makes him giddy. With a shaky hand, he reaches up to tuck those strands behind Gellert's ear. Gellert smiles against his lips appreciatively.

Gellert leans back, breaking away for a moment, but still stands pressed against him. He looks over Percival and he can only guess what is going through his leader's head right now.

After another quick peck of lips, Gellert chuckles and takes Percival's hand in his own. Then Gellert, still smiling, tugs him away from that spot and into the bedroom.

What is Gellert doing? Because there is no way it can we what it seems. The scenario he imagined earlier was just fantasy… this is real and he has been lucky enough to be kissed by Gellert. Any more than this is just insanity.

But, Gellert lowers him to the bed, Percival shaking. He wants this so much. Gellert climbs atop him, sloting himself between Percival's legs. The man looks down, staring at Percival, a hungry look in his eyes. To be the subject of that gaze sends both a thrill of excitement and apprehension through him.

He has no time to think any further about it. Gellert presses their hips together with slow roll. Just
like that, any doubts he has fade away as a needy moan sounds from his throat.

Gellert smirks, leaning down to press a line of kisses along his neck. Not knowing what to do, Percival lays there, overwhelmed by the attention. What had he done to deserve this?

Fingers find his tie, working it loose and Percival watches as it gets flung to the floor. There's another quick kiss and Gellert starts to undo the buttons on his shirt. Only then does his brain catch up with his body, logic taking over for a brief moment. This is too much, too fast and he can't keep up.

"Wait-" Percival gasps out, reaching up to still Gellert's hands. "I've never… um… I haven't done this before."

Gellert looks honestly surprised at that, but clearly takes his words into consideration, hands move away from the buttons on Percival's shirt. "Really now? I find that hard to believe for someone as handsome as you." The words are practically purred and Percival is weak.

"I've had offers before, but there were never you."

"Oh Percy." Gellert kisses him tenderly and Percival melts. "You have waited so long for something you thought could never happen. I'm lucky to have someone as devoted as you are."

Hands glide down Percival's sides and he shivers. "To you, it's hard not to be."

"Let me take care of you. After all you've given me, you deserve it." He leans down and runs his tongue along the shell of Percival's ear before whispering, "I'll be gentle."

How can Percival possibly say no to that? Not when the object of his desires is offering everything he could want. He tries to think it over, wonders if there could even be a downside, but nothing comes to mind. Resolve steadying, he gives Gellert a nervous nod.

Gellert smirks, and starts to undress him.

One by one, layers are peeled off. Gellert's hands slip into his clothing, tugging and pulling until Percival is completely exposed.

With how prim and proper he typically is, he cannot help but feel shy. He reaches for the blankets on the bed to cover up with, but Gellert pushes them away. "My dear, there's no need to hide. Not when I want to get a good look at you."

Percival relinquishes at that, and tries to relax as Gellert traces his body. Gellert murmurs all sorts of compliments as he focuses in on various parts of his form. Never has Percival been a fan of empty praise, but when it's Gellert telling him all these wonderful things, his heart flutters in his chest. He won't stop him, not when Gellert is looking at him like some precious thing.

Gellert's hands drift lower and lower, ghosting against his stomach and thighs. He's hard, there's no hiding that fact, even if it makes him feel dirty. Part of him wonders if he can just close his legs and get Gellert to go back to kissing him instead of staring.

That thought doesn't last long. Any protest vanishes as Gellert's fingers wrap around his length. Slowly Gellert strokes him and it's better than anything he could imagine. Percival bites into the skin of his hand, needing to muffle some of the sounds he's making. All the while, Gellert murmurs soft words of comfort, the whispers send a chill down his spine.

Gellert takes his wrist in hand, tugging his hand away from his mouth. Percival gasps out loud, unable to keep himself under control, especially not as Gellert rubs his thumb along the tip.
Gellert holding his wrist to the bed, there's no way left for him to conceal how much he's feeling right now.

He isn't trapped like that for long. After a few more strokes, Gellert moves back, finally removing his own clothing in a few fluid motions. Percival gapes, not hiding as he watches the display in front of him. The man is grace incarnate, looking no less the charismatic idol even when completely undressed. He's in good shape, skinnier than Percival, but muscled in all the right places. Percival envies how confident he is, even naked.

Reaching up with an unsure hand, he touches the exposed skin. Gellert had explored him so why should he not be able to do the same. His own fingers glide along Gellert's pale skin, admiring the smooth planes. But soon he uncovers several raised lines, healed scars, many on his chest, some on his back, one particularly large one on his shoulder. It feels like an invasion of privacy as he traces the lines, but Gellert doesn't stop him. He sucks in a breath, but let's Percival touch him. Percival will relish all the little noises he makes.

His gaze soon slips lower. He can feel his face growing redder, but he's curious.

Gellert chuckles, distracting him with yet another kiss. This time though, their bodies press together, no barrier of clothes separating them. Skin is against skin and Percival is sure he's sweaty and smelly from being outside next to the fire. Gellert however, unbothered by the mess that is Percival, smells heavenly.

Gellert shifts slightly, their cocks brushing together. A needy whimper escapes Percival and unthinking, he rolls up against Gellert.

A hand wraps around their cocks, holding them close. Gellert strokes them at the same time and Percival needs this, needs anything Gellert can give him. Moans stream from his lips but he isn't the only one making sounds. Unbelievably, Gellert, the man always so composed, is practically as disheveled as he is.

They become more and more vocal, but before Percival completely loses himself, Gellert's hand loosens.

"Why'd you stop?" Percival whimpers. It's impossible to disguise his disappointment. Gellert's hand doesn't leave though. Instead fingers slip lower, past Percival's cock, brushing an area Percival never considered before.

"I want all of you Percy." Gellert hums. His fingers are suddenly slick, the tip of one pushing just barely inside Percival.

He tenses at the intrusion. This is far more than he anticipated, but isn't all of this?

As if sensing Percival's hesitance, Gellert stills his hand, but does not pull it back. Gellert presses a soft kiss to Percival's forehead and Percival calms slightly. "Do you trust me?"

Of course he trusts Gellert. He always has, always will. Looking Gellert in the eyes, he nods. "I do."

Smiling, Gellert pets his hair. "Relax, I am not going to hurt you." With that, Gellert pushes his finger inside him more.

It's uncomfortable at first. There's a slight amount of pain but nothing he can't handle. Gellert asked this of him and he would gladly give the man the moon if he just asked. Gellert stretches him, slipping that finger in and out of him. The more Gellert works, the less it hurts. He becomes more accustomed to the sensation and soon he's relaxed enough for another finger to join the first.
The strangeness of it fades. Gellert's fingers twist and press at something. Percival cries out at the sudden sensation and all Percival knows is he wants more. "Please… do that again." His voice cracks, unsure of what it is he's asking for.

Gellert just chuckles, and rather than give Percival what he asks for, he removes his fingers instead. Before Percival can protest, Gellert shushes him. "Patience my dear." A moment later, hands wrap around Percival's knees, and he's lurched forward. Legs are thrown over Gellert's shoulders and he can only stare up awkwardly at the other man.

"What are you-" Percival tries to ask, but then something much different from a finger pushes in. It's thicker but somehow doesn't hurt. Gellert is inside of him, and the realization alone excites him further. "Oh…" His thoughts are interrupted because Gellert starts to move.

Above him, Gellert stares down with heavy eyes and flushed cheeks. He's just as lost in the moment as Percival. He doesn't stop moving, just keeps brushing that same spot that had Percival crying out earlier, but everything is even more intense now.

Its overwhelming. Gellert is here with him, giving him all the pleasure he thought he'd never have, something he never allowed himself to indulge in. Rather than the distance he thought was just a part of their relationship, Gellert is granting him a deep intimacy, a certain closeness no one else has ever shown him. Would this be how they always will be in the future? The possibility of that has a joyful tear trailing out of the corner of his eye.

He tugs Gellert down into a hungry kiss, wrapping himself completely around Gellert's body. Tonight, Gellert is his and he is Gellert's. His leader, his lover, kisses him back and he's never felt more free in his life.

All it takes is Gellert to thrust once more, and Percival can't hold back any longer. A pressure builds and builds and Percival arches back, breaking the kiss as he's overtaken by a wave of pleasure, climaxing.

His whole body feels warm and heavy after that. Gellert still isn't quite done though, but Percival doesn't protest as Gellert continues to thrust inside him. It only takes a few more movements before Gellert slumps on top of him, equally satisfied.

For several long minutes, they are quiet, laying pressed against one another. Percival content to bask in the afterglow as long as he can.

"I must be dreaming" Percival hums to himself.

Gellert chuckles and Percival can feel the vibrations of his chest. "I promise you this is no dream."

He hadn't meant to break the silence, but it's too late to change it. "Then why? This all can't just be because I kissed you?"

Gellert just nuzzles into the crook of his neck, still amused and blissful. At least Percival's questions hadn't ruined the night. "So curious. Why, you ask? I told you. Because you deserve it. You've been so stressed and tense lately that you needed a night of relaxation. Besides, you've desired me for years and yet I've neglected you. Consider this my apology."

"What about you? It's no secret I've harbored feelings for you, but what do you feel for me?" The question is hesitant. He needs to know the answer, needs some sort of clarification. Either way, the reply won't hurt, as the only thing he truly fears is the man abandoning him. But Gellert has made it clear that won't happen. He just needs to know what to expect for the future.
"I hope it's clear that I like you. Your mind is sharp, you are full of passion, and of course, you are very, very handsome." Gellert tells him with a cheeky smile before stealing another quick kiss. Then his expression sombers slightly. "But if what you want is a standard storybook romance, I'm afraid I can't offer that. My heart will always belong to my work, but that doesn't mean we can't enjoy each other's company to the fullest."

Percival nods, laying his head on Gellert's chest. The answer is realistic, grounding him in a fantastic situation. It's not an admission of true love, but it isn't rejection. He can still be here in Gellert's life and get everything he wants. "I would never ask any more from you. I don't want to be a distraction. All I've ever wanted is to help and support you any way I can. I just want to be by your side."

Arms wrap around him, pulling him close against Gellert. "I very much want that too Percy."

They share another kiss, slow and sweet.

Percival belongs here, in Gellert's arms. He drifts off to sleep, content in Gellert's embrace.

Chapter End Notes

So that happened. If you have any questions/comments/things you want to yell at me, feel free to leave a comment!

Also I will be focusing on Inktober this month, so most likely, the next chapter won't happen until November. November though, I plan on getting a ton done for this story! It is National Novel Writing month after all, and this is a novel~
I'm back! As I said in some replies to comments for last chapter, the end of 2017 was rougher than what I expected. But everything finally calmed down on my end and I could concentrate on writing again. Of course this chapter ended up being one of the most difficult to write, go figure. The result ended up being something I'm very proud of, so thank you all for sticking with me through that unintended hiatus, and I hope you enjoy~

As always, thanks to dreamsandpocky (aka gravescredence on tumblr) for being my co-plotter, beta, and really great roommate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Percival is warm, body heavy and lazy from a good night's sleep. He remains in that half state between sleep and wakefulness longer than usual. He’s too comfortable, doesn't want to move and start his day, as if the events of last night could fade away.

Something shifts next to him and his eyes crack open.

Gellert leans over him smiling, and presses a soft kiss to his cheek.

"So last night wasn't a dream." Percival murmurs, thankful.

"No, my dear, it was all very real." He lays a hand on Percival's chest. Even though Percival is sure he's still covered in the sweat and other proof of their actions last night, Gellert doesn't seem to mind. Gellert kisses him again, slowly, and Percival doesn't think too much about how his own breath must be dreadful. He can overlook the current state he's in if it means spending more time with Gellert.

The kiss doesn't last long. Gellert sits upright, sliding over to the edge of the bed. While the separation is disappointing, Percival uses this opportunity to stare at the man who, aside from a few blankets, is still undressed. Gellert doesn't seem to mind him watching. Even though he’s still shy, Percival will indulge himself so long as Gellert allows it.

Gellert gestures with his hand and clothes fly from his case to his fingers. "Let's get cleaned up. We
have a busy day ahead of us."

Perhaps, if Percival asks, they won't have to leave just yet. So he pouts, making a display of his disappointment. "I was hoping we could stay in bed a while longer."

Gellert rolls his eyes. "And here I thought you wanted to attend one of our meetings?"

Percival shoots out of bed, needing to make himself presentable. He cleans himself as best he can, getting dressed in a hurry. How could he have let the meetings slip his mind? He was finally going to be included in the grander scheme of things, and yet he allowed himself to become so sidetracked. Damn it, he hopes this doesn't affect Gellert's opinion of him. At least Gellert had been the source of his distraction.

Once they are both up and ready, Percival asks, "How long will this meeting last? Not that this isn't more important, but I am hoping to attend Orion's game tonight."

"I understand. He is your friend after all. Worry not though, we will be done before then." He turns to look Percival over. "This may be a strange request, but could you transfigure yourself? It would be better if you attend disguised. Considering your position, the fewer people who know of your allegiance to me, the better. That includes those on our side."

Percival nods. "Of course. I've been practicing anyways." He pulls his wand out and makes several alterations. His practice from yesterday still fresh in his mind, he does his best to replicate it. Hair lightens until it has an orangish tint. His body grows, both height and weight, rounding out his sharp features.

When he's done and unrecognizable, he smiles at Gellert, gesturing at himself. "Well, how do I look?"

Gellert hums, walking around Percival to get a complete look. "It will do. But please don't get stuck like this. I much prefer your normal face. You are far less handsome like this." Percival blushes, Gellert's compliments from last night coming to mind. "Now, you'll have to make up your own story. It would be for the best if you were still an employee of MACUSA, but everything else is up to you."

"Don't worry, infiltration and cover stories are what I excelled at back at the Academy. I won't let you down."

"Says the one who thought Gilbert was a suitable code name for me."

"I've gotten better since then." Percival grumbles.

Gellert just laughs, linking arms with Percival. "I believe you." And Gellert apparates them away.

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They reappear far away from where they had been staying. Before them is a circular tent, teal patterned fabric holds the structure. Rather than be in a neat row like the tent they are staying at, this one is rather secluded. Other tents are close by but it's nowhere near as packed. From here, the stadium is a dot on the horizon.
It makes sense. Less prying eyes, less curious glances as to why so many would people enter and exit this seemingly random tent.

"Are you ready?" Gellert asks, pausing at the entrance.

Is he? He hasn't taken part in anything like this for years. Up until now, he'd been cut off; his only contacts having been Miss Pendelwood and Gellert himself.

But this is what he wants, what he's wanted more than anything else, even more than Gellert's affections. To have a hand in shaping the future, to make a difference. The path to that lies beyond this curtain.

He nods and Gellert pushes past the thick striped curtain and gestures for Percival to enter. His heart pounds in his chest, but he ignores it and steps inside.

It's dark. A few candles light the space, a harsh contrast to the morning brightness outside. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust. Blinking a few times, he lets everything come into focus.

A round table fills the space. Dozens of people sit, some around his age, some older, all from what looks to be vastly different backgrounds. One thing they all have in common is that every single one focuses on him when he walks in, glaring daggers. Great, the last thing he wants is another group of people he's forced to prove himself to.

"And just who are you?" A well-dressed young woman inquires as she stands up tall. She's shrewd, face scrunched in a condescending manner. Around her neck is the triangular symbol he's grown to associate with Gellert.

"Relax Veliona, he's with me." Gellert reassures from behind him and the woman sits down. "This is my American contact. He's been kind enough to let me stay with him for the week, so please be polite."

And just like that, with Gellert's blessing alone, the tension in the room fades. Taking this opportunity, Percival gives a small wave, trying to appear friendly and not intimidated in the least.

"Hello." He says, voice pitched up ever so slightly, another subtle alteration to his persona. "I'm Philip Ghallager." The first name he makes up on the spot. The last name feels as natural as his own. His mother's maiden name, the side of his family that first sparked this crusade in him.

Several pleasant greetings spark up around the table and Percival already feels comfortable. He may not be using his own name, but he's long grown used to keeping pieces of himself hidden.

"America you say?" A bearded kind looking man speaks up. "Your country just beat mine in the Quidditch match yesterday." So this man was from Spain it seems.

"Oh, sorry about that." Percival wonders if that is even the right thing to say. He’s heard some people can get quite worked up over Quidditch, but this man doesn't seem too upset. "Your team played well." He doesn't know if they did or not, just reached for whatever phrase seemed polite.

The man smiles. "Not to worry. No harm done in a fair sport."

"I think you have it worse in the long run Philip." The woman, Veliona, chimes in. "I've heard America is a dreadful place to live. The rules are so strict over there. You can't even be caught wearing anything resembling a robe. I can't imagine something so stifling." She shudders, fingers toying with a sparkling feather on the brim of her hat.
Percival nods in agreement. "It is. MACUSA is in a constant state of paranoia, like we'll be overrun by a new No-Maj witch hunt if we don't spend the rest of eternity hiding away."

Veliona looks confused. "No-Maj?"

"Oh, sorry. Non-Magic folk. I forget we all have different words for it. We've become so isolated from one another that it's resulted in quite a few differences in our vocabularies." A few of the members chuckle at that.

The bearded man however frowns. "Well your country's fears might not be so unfounded. Witch hunts are horrible affairs. Granted, hiding shouldn't be the solution, but they are right to be afraid."

"I still think fearing them is preposterous Erídano." A different man scoffs, his voice distinctly French from what Percival can tell. "They are but ants beneath our feet. It should be the other way around."

"Deimos, not all of us can hide away in country sides, living in mansions ignoring the outside world." Erídano counters.

Introductions continue for a little while longer. They offer Percival a seat which he accepts. He gets to know a few of them decently well.

The French man is Deimos Malfoy, from an old pure blood family. He comes across as arrogant, but Percival grew up around many people with similar attitudes. Deimos’s opinions on No-Maj's are harsh, thinking them inferior, but Percival can curb his annoyance at some of Deimos's remarks since he is a part of this group that seeks to change the current status quo. Most of his family lives in England, a country unrepresented in this room. Gellert mentions his contacts have become invaluable. Percival can accept that is why Gellert puts up with the nonsense coming out of his mouth.

The woman, Veilona Draganova, he learns is from Bulgaria. A model and fashion designer of all things. From what Gellert tells him, she attended Durmstrang alongside him. She doesn’t appear to care about No-Majs one way or another. From what Percival can tell, she only desires a bigger audience.

The bearded Spanish man is Erídano Castelle. Percival finds he likes him. He's kind and seems to respect No-Majs, unlike some other members. His respect though appears based in fear, going on about how No-Majs may be weaker, but they outnumber wizards greatly and it’s only time before they make up the difference. Once upon a time, this fear based attitude might have gotten on his nerves, but with what Percival has experienced in the last couple of weeks, it becomes harder to disagree with him.

Others talk but these three dominate the conversation, asking him the most questions. He may not give full answers, but he does his best, content to share and see different perspectives. He may not agree fully with any of them, but all of their goals still line up. They all wish to put an end to the Statute of Secrecy. That just goes to show how great a leader Gellert is for bringing them all together.

"Alright, I'm glad you all have gotten to know one another." Gellert interrupts after a while, having just let them banter and become comfortable with one another. "Philip has been working with me for years. I'm pleased to see you all accepting him." Gellert pats his back and Percival does his best to not melt into the touch. "But we have important business to get to." He speaks with such a commanding voice, and it's impossible to look away from the man.

All eyes on him, Gellert pulls himself up onto the table until he's standing in the center. Unlike the
one meeting years ago where Gellert appeared before the American sect, no one here looks angry at the show of authority. Everyone here knows the man and gives Gellert the respect he deserves.

"Now that I have your attention, I would have liked to begin with a speech about how wonderful everything is going, how much progress all of you have been making in your respective areas, whether it be getting more to join our cause, espionage, or stirring up chaos." A few proudly nod, including Percival. "However, none of that is what I am here to address today. Instead I have an announcement to make and I feel many of you may not want to hear it. It pertains to everyone and will inform the path we shall all take in the coming years."

Silence. No one interrupts, just waiting for him to continue. Percival has heard nothing about an announcement, but he has been cut off from everything else until now. He doesn't seem alone in his surprise, though. Around the room, heads tilt, brows furrowed in anticipation.

"I have had a vision!" His voice booms through the space. "As some of you know, I am gifted with the sight. Recently, I've been plagued with flashes of the future. Death, violence, horrors beyond what many could imagine, all of which my Inner Eye has shown me. It has been getting more frequent too. These last several weeks I have pieced together what I've witnessed and it is clear to me that war is on the horizon."

The room breaks into whispered chaos at that. Many asking hushed questions of hows, whos and whys. Percival stumbles on the revelation that Gellert just claimed to be a seer. It is a bold claim, and had anyone else said it, Percival would have immediately dismissed it. He's always been skeptical of things that profess they can tell the future, believing nothing is ever set in stone. But when it comes to Gellert, saying so with such conviction, he wants it to be true.

The chatter doesn't stop. A panic spreads, fear evident. Voices raise, stumbling over one another, clashing just making the disorder grow.

"Relax everyone." Gellert coos above it all, and just like that, order returns. "It won't be a war between wizards. Everything I have seen points to infighting between the muggles. From what I gather, tensions have been brewing between their nations and will continue to do so until it snaps. The result will be unlike anything the world has ever seen."

"And why should we care about a little non-magique conflict?" Deimos quips. "If they kill each other, is that not better for us in the long run?"

Percival gapes at that. Such a callous attitude and Percival can't believe it. He wants to say something, wants to call him out, tell him how these are still human lives he's talking about. But the words jumble in his head and he can't respond in time.

"You have not seen what I have seen." Gellert retorts. "Do not underestimate the size of what is before us. We as a people may not be caught up in their ridiculous political games, but we cannot ignore what is to come. Muggles, regardless of their simplicity, make up for it in innovation. We've seen the seeds of it, discussed among us. In only the last few decades, they've discovered how to create light, how to fly. Imagine what they could be capable of if they put all their focus into destruction."

"S-so, we should try and s-stop them from fighting in the first place, right? B-before their technology can become even more m-monstrous." Erídano stutters, trembling as he speaks.

Gellert shakes his head. "A seer's vision will always come to pass. We cannot stop it, but I feel we can use this foresight to our advantage."
"Advantage?" Percival can’t take any more. This is all too much to handle. He expected talks amongst like minded people, and while he has found some of that, being thrust into a war they can do nothing about is ridiculous. Percival may believe in Gellert, but he cannot help but have doubts about this situation. "How are we supposed to find something good in so much horror if what you say is true? What can we possibly gain in not only the death of countless people, but also the advancement of their awful weapons?"

Gellert looks at him with sympathy. "I know this is overwhelming. But I only ask you trust in me. I am not without a plan." He sighs. "What we as an organization have lacked for years is numbers. While it is true we have been growing over time, our message has not gotten out to the wider public. Most of our work has been secret, putting ourselves into positions of respect and power. All of this so that when the time will come to share our beliefs, more will flock to us because they trust us. But the time has never been right for that. Until now, that is. You see, it would have been difficult to convince the masses why there needs to be a change."

He pauses, taking a moment to turn and look at every single person present. “We in this room are the exceptions. We are the minority who knows there is something inherently wrong with the current system. But the rest? They are comfortable. Grown used to their small circles, grown used to hiding away as society has forced us to do for centuries now. They know no different. But, I feel this war will be the spark we need. While our kind may not take part, this will be proof we cannot let the muggles remain unchecked for much longer. The destruction my visions have shown me is inescapable. Cities burn and landscapes wrecked. I know it is frightening. No one fears what lies ahead more than I. However, for change to truly occur, something drastic must happen."

Another silence falls.

"So, what will you have us do in the meantime?" Veliona probes after a while.

"For now I want us to observe. I don’t know when all of this will begin, but I want us to prepare for anything. Those of you with contacts in the muggle world, I want you to keep an eye out for any shift of the current climate. Pick spies you trust entirely. I want none of this getting out. I fear it would cause a panic and people would meddle. From my experience, meddling only makes things worse."

From there they discuss the details, elaborate on possible courses of action. Percival doesn't speak much, none of this sitting right with him. He only listens, observes, still trying to make sense of it all.

People will die and they won’t do anything about it. No one else here sees anything wrong with that.

He doesn’t know how he feels.

The meeting soon draws to a close. Gellert assigns many of the members specific duties, leaving them with a sense of direction. But not Percival. He feels just as aimless filing out of the room as he did before it started.

He waits for Gellert by the exit, the man wrapping up a few things before they can leave. As he stands there, many of the members shake Percival's hand on their way out saying how good it was to meet him. Despite everything, at least he knows he's welcome amongst them all.

After Gellert has finished, he takes Percival's hand. "Now I know that was a lot to take in, but I believe we still have a quidditch game to attend."
If Percival thought the last game was hard to follow, this one is near impossible.

It isn't due to any drastic change with the game itself, aside from America playing against India instead of Spain. The stadium is just as full, the weather wonderful. There is no external reason at all. But Percival's head is so muddled from the meeting, that he can't even focus in long enough to even try to understand the sport.

He and Gellert arrive into their boxed seats just in time for the announcer to start up his speech. Percival just nestles in, getting comfortable, pressing himself against the man's side. Gellert's arm loops over his back.

Percival tries to pay attention. He really does. But the moment that fireworks boom as the teams arrive, his thoughts fracture.

The explosions are loud, the chaotic sea of shouts and hollers, pleas and demands of victory. It engulfs him and he wonders if this is what war is like. Two sides screaming for superiority as if it is triumph or death.

He flinches as a bludger goes flying, knocking an American player off his broom hard. All these players devoted their lives to this, for what? For a trophy? For bragging rights? Is it worth it? The pain, the broken bones, the possibility of death? Lives wasted away to represent a nation...

In his lifetime, he can't recall a war from either Wizards or No-Majs. At least nothing close enough for him to pay attention to. Maybe before he was old enough to understand, there may have been something he missed, but as it stands, the only basis he has for how war works is from histories and novels he's read through. Then, even the historical accounts felt so far removed from himself that they felt like fantasy. Now though, he's trying to imagine a war playing out before his eyes.

The red blurs of the American uniforms are like streaks of blood. All he can think of is a dark bedroom, the stench of rot from days left out in a warm summer, features marred and unrecognizable from No-Maj guns, and a child without a parent. This but multiplied on a scale far too huge for him to even comprehend. It makes him sick. Had it not been for Gellert's arm grounding him to reality, he would not have been able to stand it.

"Are you alright Percy?" Gellert asks.

"I'm fine." He lies, taking a few deep breaths. Gellert doesn't press, which Percival is thankful for. He doesn't want to explain himself again considering how uneasy he is with the whole situation. He'll be fine. At least for the time being.

This shouldn't bother him. Gellert already explained how it won't even be their war, that they are to have no part.

Even so, Gellert would not have stressed it to the point he did at the meeting unless they were to have some place within it. The orders would be against meddling, but observation is different. If they were to spread tales of the horrors of war, it would only make sense for them to end up in the thick of it to gather as much information as possible.

Then there is still the possibility that what Gellert had claimed may not come to pass. The man might truly believe he is a seer, but Divination in whatever form is infamously unreliable. He's not even sure which would be preferable, Gellert to be wrong, or a war to come to fruition.
So much speculation. He can't let himself become too caught up in it all. Not when he can't be sure what the future holds.

"AND AMERICA GETS THE SNITCH!"

The words jar him back to the world around him. Blinking a few times, it's like waking up from a nap. He catches sight of Orion overjoyed, making loops around the stadium with his team in celebration. Orion always had a talent for being at his happiest while Percival is a mess.

"Looks like we'll be attending more games." Gellert chuckles. "I know how much you are looking forward to that."

Percival sighs. "It's alright. I'm just glad Orion can be happy."

That makes Gellert laugh harder. "Self-sacrificing as always, my dear. We best be getting back."

Percival nods, but he's still only half here.

In a blink, they are back at the tent. Gellert coolly hangs up his coat, so calm and casual. "You've been quiet all day."

Percival just shrugs. "I spoke some. It is just a lot to take in."

"If something is bothering you, you can talk to me." Gellert offers, moving into Percival's space, taking his hand.

Closing his eyes, and sucking in a breath, he admits, "I don't think I can do this."

Gellert is quiet for a moment, going still. "What do you mean by that."

Percival gives his hand a soft squeeze and sighs. "I joined you because I wanted No-Majs and Wizards to co-exist. All of this..." He waves with his other hand. "Letting No-Majs die, encouraging fear to only grow. It doesn't feel right."

"Oh Percy. I know it's hard." Gellert strokes his fingers with the pad of his thumb. "I know it makes little sense. But in the grand scheme, all of this will be for the greater good. Right now, there's so much that is incompatible with our people. You know this. We've discussed how damaging and backwards so much of what muggles believe is. If we want a world where we can co-exist, we must tear everything down first."

Percival's hand slips out from Gellert's grasp. "Well why can't we do that and help them at the same time. Show the No-Maj's how dangerous their beliefs are by showing them how much better it can be. We could be a positive influence rather than just wait for them to blow each other up until there is nothing left..."

"I was not lying when I said we cannot interfere in their conflict without making it worse." Gellert narrows his brow.

Percival's hands clench, irritation rising. "And how do you know? Because you claim to be an expert on seers all of a sudden?"

"If you have enough faith in my claim there will be a war, then why not have similar faith that I know the best course of action." Gellert huffs, arms crossing. "You've never doubted me before now."
He… has a point there. Tired, Percival slumps down on the couch, drooping over. "Sorry… you’re right. I know you wouldn’t lie about something so serious."

Gellert moves next to him, stroking his back. "It's ok. I wish you could have come in at a less crucial moment. But, it may be for the best you saw how complicated it can all be. From here on out, everything will get much more difficult. The more we make ourselves known, the more we spread our word, we will encounter opposition from all sides. They may force us to raise our hands and do things we would never do otherwise, but all of it will be for a better future.” He leans in closer. “If you don't think you can handle that, then I'll understand. You can slip back into America where you can continue your life as an auror with no complaint. I'd miss you, but if you want to continue to be by my side, I need to know you are willing to do what is needed when the time comes. I need to know, even if you cannot see where my plans are going, that you will still trust me enough to know I won't lead you astray. What do you say?"

Percival sits there, still, and takes in every word carefully. Gellert would just let him go? He imagines both paths. One where he walks away, goes back to a hollow life, trying to make a difference here and there where he can but he knows alone, it will be nothing overall. By this man’s side though, he sees himself surrounded by carnage, knows if Gellert’s path leads to war, that is what would await. But if he goes that direction, there will always be a light at the end of the tunnel.

"Thank you for the opportunity, but I don't think I can turn back now. Not after coming so far with you." He cracks a small smile. "I… think I just need time to let all of this sink in. But I promise, no matter what, I trust you."

Gellert strokes his cheek. "Good. Letting you go would be one of the hardest things I've had to do."

Percival kisses him.

It's soft, passionate all the same. Gellert yielding, kissing back with the same fervor. They sit there like that, pressed close because Percival has imagined a world without this man and he never wants to consider it again.

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The next few days are a blur.

It's been an exhausting trip. Constantly being around crowds proves draining. It isn't surprising though. Any invitation from Orion would have this result.

Gellert understands and unless they have a game to attend or a meeting lined up, they spend most of their time holed up in their tent.

They don't leave the bedroom much.

It's nice, more than nice, being with Gellert in such an uncomplicated way. Laying together, no layers between them, Percival can just melt away for several blissful moments. Outside, he's overcome by too many thoughts, the weight of the world and the future crushing him. Here though, its as if all of that is washed away. Gellert touches him and he becomes the only thing that matters. What is in this room is perfection, and if this can be perfect, then everything else will follow. Not that he needs to worry about any of that when Gellert pushes him down into the blankets.
They don’t spend all of their time there, though. No matter how much Percival has grown to crave Gellert's company, they still have responsibilities.

Gellert still holds other meetings. Despite his underlying discomfort from the last one, Percival accompanies him. At least there aren’t any more huge revelations on what the future holds, but the talks still only focus in on the coming war. He has yet to grow comfortable with it, but it is starting to set in.

No one here seems particularly pleased with what Gellert has claimed will happen, but none of them would argue. At least he isn’t the only one with doubts.

Deimos still thinks it’s ridiculous that they should convince wizards to care about the affairs of No-Majs. Erídano still fears the No-Maj's advancing even further. Veliona seems irritated that they should just let careless No-Maj hands destroy places they wish to rule over in the future. Others in the group agree with those three in varying degrees.

Percival appears to be the only one bothered by No-Maj deaths, but he keeps quiet.

Regardless of their differences and of their own opinions, they can at least all agree that despite everything, they all trust Gellert. That unites them and rather than argue with everything wrong with the plan, they can discuss it like civilized people. They can logically break down what they think will happen and prepare their spy networks for anything.

After these assemblies, Percival starts to feel more at ease.

There aren’t many other distractions during this period. It turns out that even though they keep winning, the American Quidditch team doesn’t have to play every day. Days that America doesn’t play means that Percival has no reason to make his way over to the stadium. It would be a waste of his time to watch something he doesn't care about. Especially when not going gives him even more opportunities to be alone with Gellert.

He attends all of Orion's games, but doesn’t stick around afterwards. Not when he's restless and impatient as is, stuck watching a game he's only minorly invested in when he instead could have Gellert on top of him.

Maybe he should feel bad for apparating himself and Gellert back to the tent as soon as America catches the Snitch. It should be a cause for celebration as it means America will move onto the Finals, but Percival frankly doesn't care.

Quidditch is such an afterthought when all he wants is to pull Gellert's clothes off and straddle him.

Gellert doesn’t mind too much and lets Percival carry them back into their bedroom.

From there, it's all a haze. He lets Percival undress him and he undresses Percival in turn. Their movements are frenzied, clothes flung all over the room, Gellert all too happy to feed Percival's needy mood. His hands fist into Percival's hair, holding too tight, but Percival moans with desire all the same. He's frantic in Gellert's lap, whimpering as Gellert pushes up inside him, holding his hips still, guiding his motions. Percival rocks in Gellert's lap, each little motion giving him a spark of pleasure. Gellert's teeth scrape against his neck, a low threat that thrills him. Those teeth nibble down, not hard enough to break skin, but enough to leave indentations.

Holding him close, Gellert moves to turn them, to lay Percival down on his back…

But just then, he hears the unmistakable sound of tapping against the tent curtain.
"You… better answer that." Gellert grumbles, rolling off from on top of Percival.

Percival wants to scream. "Give me a moment." He huffs.

The tapping continues. Gellert raises a brow and just gestures towards the entrance.

"Fine…” He takes a deep breath, composing himself before sitting up right, hunting around for any clothing to wear.

"Before you go, you may want to tie a robe around your waist." Gellert snickers, pointing at his obvious arousal tenting his pants.

Face bright red, he does just that. He mutters a quick thanks as he goes to answer the interruption.

Orion stands at the tent entrance looking far too happy than anyone has a right to. But his happiness dampens upon seeing Percival glower. "Oh, uh, hi Perce. Sorry… is this a bad time? I can come back later."

"Um, kind of? It's fine though.” He sighs, running his hand through his tangled hair. Ugh. He could still be back inside with Gellert instead of filthy and close to the open air, but the damage is done. To keep his irritation down, he reminds himself Orion didn't interrupt on purpose. "You have my attention."

Orion eyes him suspiciously and chuckles. "If you say so. Anyways, I wanted you to know after the game tomorrow, whether we win or lose, the team is throwing a big party. It's been over a century since we made it to the finals match so either way it's cause for celebration. Wanted you to know you have an invitation, you and Gilbert that is."

Percival can't think of a reason to decline. What else did he have to do, aside from stay in with Gellert and continue to let the man have his way with him? As tempting as that thought is, going would be better in the long run. He'd never live it down if Luciana found out he ignored Orion to spend time with some man she didn't know about. "We'll be there. I haven't had much opportunity to see you much this whole trip, so of course I'll go."

At that, Orion droops. Is he... sad? Why is he sad? He thought Orion would be happy to hear him agreeing to go. "Sorry about that. When I sent you the invitations I thought I might have ended up with a lot more free time, but when we aren't playing, we are practicing, talking strategy, that kind of thing. I knew our team was good this year but I didn't realize how good. Which don't get me wrong, is fantastic! I just don't want you to think I've abandoned you."

Maybe Percival should feel bad. An average person might, since Orion was his entire reason for coming here, at least at first. But, with Gellert here taking up so much of his attention, he hasn't thought much of Orion. It makes little sense for Orion to feel bad when the feeling isn't mutual. So Percival shrugs it off. "Don't worry about it. I've been keeping myself entertained just fine."

Orion laughs, perking up again. "Yeah I'll say. Gibert has been keeping you plenty occupied at that."

Percival blushing but smiles wide regardless. "Shush." Only days ago, this subject would have caused him to hole up with embarrassment. But Orion joking around with him now only feels like a reminder how real this has all become and he can't help but be in a good mood. "But seriously. Don't worry about how I feel. This is your big week. Tomorrow's the day you've been looking forward to your whole life."

"Yeah, it is." Orion pulls him into a hug. At first Percival startles, but soon just accepts it.
"Good luck tomorrow." Percival says honestly.

"Thanks Perce. Means a lot that you're here. Alright. I'll let you get back to your man." And he lets Percival go. Waving, he walks away. "See you tomorrow!"

"See you tomorrow." He's still smiling, even as he heads back inside to Gellert.

Percival relays the information, but other than that, they speak little. He sheds his clothing once more and slips back into the bed alongside Gellert. They don't leave for the rest of the night.

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"I'm surprised you still wanted us to come considering how little interest you've had in the last several games." Gellert hums as they take their seats inside the stadium one final time.

"I came all the way here to see him, not you, believe it or not. You just happen to be a wonderful bonus." He takes Gellert's hand in his own, having become more confident in his affections over the course of the week.

If he thought the last couple of games had elaborate ceremonies, this one overshadows all of them.

"Welcome wizards and witches to the game you have all been waiting for!" exclaims the announcer. "The final match of the 1910 Quidditch World Cup!"

The crowd roars in reply, even more energetic than Percival thought possible.

"Who will win? Will it be the fierce contenders from the great country of Australia? Or will it be the dark horses from America?" With each country called out, flags wave in support. "Only one way to find out! Now to introduce our players!"

And as with the games prior, players shoot onto the field one by one as the announcer calls their names with an unmatched enthusiasm, far more than Percival has ever seen in his life. The phoenixes from the American side return as well, though the light show is at least three times as large.

As the players, including Orion, strut through flaming hoops, Percival leans into Gellert. "I'll never comprehend how the announcer can be this excited. After over a dozen of these games, he still maintains that same level. It's rather silly, don't you think?"

"You'd be astounded at how crucial a good presenter is. It's through his charisma in which he excites the crowd. And it's the crowd that excites the players and thus results in them playing harder than they would otherwise. So essentially he's the conductor to this whole show. It may appear to be about the players, but he's the one who leads it all. Figurehead he may be, but it's through him they get all their information."

Percival remains doubtful. "Only you could make something as ridiculous as a sports announcer seem so important."

"I do not exaggerate. I admire anyone who can command a crowd of this size."

Percival doesn't have time to comment further because said announcer calls for the start of the game. "And they are off!"
Blurs of coats and brooms fill his vision. He promised himself that for Orion's sake he will try harder to follow along, at least more so then he did the last two games he watched. At least he has picked up some cursory understanding of how everything works by this point. It grants him a greater respect for the team he is supposed to be representing.

The American team is good. Aggressive and focused and they move like a well-oiled machine. Orion leads the charge and the team, aside from the seeker and keeper follow suit. Barely a minute passes into the game when America first score.

He may have been cynical about this entire thing, but he takes a moment to try and see it from Orion's point of view. He hones in on Orion's overjoyed expression as the crowd applauds.

The players stop existing as simple fodder for the crowd's whim. Instead, Percival sees his old friend among teammates Orion trusts enough to be with him in a moment he's looked forward to since childhood.

Orion is lucky. He can be here, making his dreams a reality, surrounded by people he not only trusts, but also supported by a stadium full of people who support his vision. Victory is in Orion's sights and Percival envies him.

Not out of jealousy of the attention, but Percival wishes his goals could be so close to completion, to have everything so clear before him.

But Orion has been openly making progress towards his dreams for over a decade. Percival knows he's just getting started.

From there the game continues.

It's a closer game than the rest he's seen. Score for score is exchanged and the snitch out-maneuvers both team's seekers.

Orion nearly takes a hit, a bludger aiming right for him, but one of his teammates, a beater, comes to his rescue in an instant.

So much blind faith that Orion has to have in his teammates for this game to work. Percival imagines how terrifying it must be, how easily he could be caught off guard and plummet off his broom. But he doesn't. Stays upright and scores once more. Having someone he trusts to have his back every step of the way and not lead him astray, Percival admires that.

It makes him appreciate the man sitting next to him even more.

Percival leans in and presses a kiss to Gellert's lips. He'll always be grateful for this man. In all his years of knowing Gellert, he has never mislead him. The future may be frightening, but he has to believe Gellert knows what he's doing. Everything will turn out fine. Percival needs to stop worrying and instead prepare for when the time comes.

The war looming on the horizon, like the game playing before them, may be pointless in the grand scheme of things, but if it can bring this many people together, people from across the globe, then perhaps Gellert is right. People may get hurt, people may devote their lives to something so trivial, it may become so chaotic and terrible, but it still can sway this many people cheering for the same cause. If that is the case then, perhaps whatever suffering awaits will be for the greater good.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE IT LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! AMERICA GETS THE SNITCH. AMERICA WINS!"
Perhaps impossible dreams can come true.

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All that remains, is to celebrate the victory.

They take some time to let the crowds die down. Using the opportunity, they go freshen up and change into something more formal.

Gellert looks… good. Not that he isn't usually, but upon seeing him in such a close fitting outfit, Percival is tempted to turn down the invitation to the party. He sighs. If only he didn't promise his old friend he would be there.

Arms linked, they make their way to the festivities.

It takes place under a large open air tent not far from where Orion’s campsite had been. As they near, it’s hard to believe the party has just begun. It a large crowd, hundreds at least, and everyone in attendance is rowdy and happy, and more than likely intoxicated.

"Everyone seems to be having fun." Gellert comments with a smile.

Several partygoers wave the American wizard flag proudly and Percival realizes these are not simply supporters of the team, but his countrymen. This sort of atmosphere may not be what he usually flock towards, but the sight delights him. "I think everyone is getting it out of their system now. To have this scale of an event back home, especially outdoors, it would often result in a team of Aurors coming to break it up."

"You sound as you speak from experience."

Percival shrugs. "You know my job. Do things I don’t approve of."

Gellert chuckles low and leans in to whisper. "Careful my dear, don't want someone to catch you saying such treasonous things."

"I'll be fine." Percival bumps into him playfully before joining the crowds.

It doesn't take long for him to locate Orion. His old friend, still clad in his quidditch uniform, regales a crowd of fans with tales from the game. Percival stands at the edge of the group and soon, Orion looks up and waves him over.

"Go talk to your friend, I'll grab us some drinks." Gellert nudges him toward Orion before he heads off in the opposite direction.

The small crowd parts as Percival makes his way to his old friend.

“Everyone! This is my old roommate from my Ilvermorny days. Invited him myself.” Orion clasps his hands on Percival’s shoulders, presenting him to his fans. “Now I know he looks like a nerd, but deep down he’s a big scary auror, and even deeper down, he’s as soft as a puffskein."

The crowd laughs and Percival gives an awkward wave at the unexpected introduction.

“Alright. Everyone, skedaddle. Go have fun. Go drink. Plenty of booze to go around.” More
laughter but they all listen to Orion and head off. Soon, they have no extra attention on them. Orion seemed to remember his discomfort with social situations. With everyone else gone, Percival gets his full attention. “I’m so glad you made it Perce!”

“Well I told you I would make it, didn’t I?”

“That you did. Still, I’m glad you came.” Orion beams and pats him on the back.

“Congratulations by the way.” It doesn’t feel like enough considering the scale of Orion’s accomplishment, but its the best Percival can come up with. I’m sure you’ve heard that a lot in the last few minutes, but I doubt it gets old hearing it.”

“I don’t think it ever will. Pretty sure this is the best day ever. Keep thinking I’ll wake up at any moment.”

Percival chuckles. “I know the feeling.”

“If only Luciana was here, then it really couldn’t get any better” Orion wistfully sighs.

“She’d be here if she could. She was jealous that I had enough holiday days built up to even take this trip. But I’ll let her know she was on your mind in your victory haze.”

“I’d appreciate that. She’s come to most of my other games, but still, nothing like the World Cup.”

There is one loose end bothering Percival that he does need to address while he has the chance. "Speaking of Luciana, you haven't told her about my relationship with Gilbert, have you?"

Orion shakes his head. "Nah, not yet. Last time I checked, you wanted to be all secretive about it.”

Percival nods, thankful. "Good. It's just… well, you know, with her being an auror too and all, news would travel fast around MACUSA, and I still rather my dad not find out?"

"Still?” Orion scoffs. "Perce, you are in your twenties now. Who cares what your dad thinks? It's your life.”

If only it could be that simple. Ironic though that now he knows his dad would accept him. It's just Gellert himself they could never understand. "It's complicated."

"What isn't complicated with you?” Orion grins though.

Gellert returns in that moment, passing a small glass over to Percival. He accepts it and sips at it. "We were just talking about you.”

"Only good things I hope.” Gellert hums and Percival finds an arm curling around his waist. Percival relaxes into it, enjoying this while he can.

Conversation continues between the three of them. It flows easier than Percival can remember with Orion. Unlike previous conversations, Percival feels less like he’s hiding and telling lies. Orion is one of the few he can at least be this open around, he realizes, and Percival is grateful.

When Percival sets his, now empty, glass down, Gellert takes his hand and tugs him away. "If you don't mind, I would like to steal my beloved away for a dance.” Percival flushes at the term of endearment. He knows Gellert is just playing along, that his feelings don't run as deep as Percival's, but he will treasure it regardless and lets Gellert take him wherever he wishes.

The music is perhaps too energetic for a slower dance, but Gellert's hand clasps in his own, the other
resting at the small of his back. Percival matches him, hand on Gellert's shoulder, and they join the rest of the dancers. They move to the tempo, but still stay close to one another swaying and stepping.

For a long while, they don't talk. Just move. He will relish in every moment they have left. With the Cup drawing to a close, so must this intimate time he's gotten to share with Gellert. He wishes every day from now on could be like this, waking up beside Gellert, spending all their time together. He can't have this elsewhere, this open show of his affections. Their eyes meet and Gellert is looking at him so tenderly and Percival allows himself an instant to pretend that Gellert reciprocates his feelings.

"I'm going to miss you." Percival confides.

"I know." Gellert pulls him in even closer until they are against one another. "I shall miss your company too, but it isn't as if you won't see me again."

Pressing his face into Gellert's neck, Percival breaths the other in. "Still, parting from you will be difficult after all we've done."

"Worry not my dear. We shall still keep in touch. You have a place in our future." Percival can feel every word from Gellert's skin and he loves it. His voice dips lower, but Percival can hear it all the same. "But I have much preparing to do for the future. With the coming war, everything is about to get quite difficult."

Oh the future. The war, all of this he knows and has thought of far too much by now, but in this moment he doesn't want to think about it.

Instead of reply, he presses his lips to Gellert's.

Worry is for tomorrow after they have parted. Preparation is for when he can stop fooling himself that everything in the world isn't always as perfect and right as it feels when he's at Gellert's side. There is much to do, but not for today.

He doesn't even think he can ever be fully ready for what awaits, not with everything before them so unclear.

But one thing is certain.

He trusts Gellert with all he has.

-END PART 3-

Chapter End Notes

With that, the World Cup finally concludes.

Thank you everyone for your comments last chapter. They really helped get me writing again. Seriously guys, your comments mean a lot.

(Also this chapter was written Pre-CoG... Any similarities to the scene where Gellert is sharing his war prediction is purely coincidental!!)
So I had a large chunk of this chapter written, but ended up decided it wasn’t working and rewrote the whole thing. One problem with doing too much research is it makes your writing feel too stiff. Don’t be like me kids and don’t research. I think I fixed it though lol. I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“I take it to mean just more than the assassins?” Percival frowns, taking another look at the paper, skimming through the columns. Page after page after page focused in on the situation at hand. Predictions of how this will warp Europe abound; All of it seeming to reinforce the stall owner’s theory.

“Let’s just say I’m glad we live on this side of the Atlantic. I’d hate to be a Serb right about now. All this mess from boys who were barely more than students. Just goes to show I guess, can’t keep a people down too long with them strikin’ back.”

It makes Percival wonder. The assassins were likely revolutionaries in their own eyes. They were just taking what they believed to be the necessary steps to improve their people’s lives, risking themselves for some greater future. Thinking of it like that gives Percival an odd respect for them. Were they misguided? Perhaps. Percival could never condone murder. But the reasoning behind it, with Austria’s overtaking their country, Percival can’t truly judge their desire to fight for freedom.

“I suppose you’re right.” He decides to keep his sympathies to himself. “Better to read about it, then be involved.” He folds the paper, tucking it under his arm. He pulls out a No-Maj coin and flips it over to the stall owner. “Thank you as always.”

The stall owner smiles as he catches the coin. “Hopefully the news is better next week. I’ll see you then sir.”

“See you then.” With that, Percival heads towards a nearby alley, apparating away.

The months following are calmer than he feels they should be.

Gellert agrees with his theory that this is the beginnings of the war predicted. Beyond that though, there’s no news, no order to act. Just to stand by and observe the events playing out.

MACUSA does what they do best and ignores the talk of the No-Maj world. It bothers Percival every time he reads a No-Maj paper and learns of the rising chaos, only to arrive back at work as if nothing monumental had been going on. Few of them bother with the papers as is, and if they do at all, it's only to look for any hints that may directly impact the wizarding world itself.

He tries to not get too annoyed. Gellert had told him that this would be a No-Maj war only and frowned upon any proposed Wizard interference.

Instead, he swallows his irritation and throws himself back into his Auror work.

In the few short years since he had gotten his Auror license, Percival had become rather respected among his peers. Only a few months after he had returned from the World Cup, he had received the first of many promotions. He’d risen through the ranks faster than his fellow investigators too, though they didn’t appear too envious. No one could question the fact that both his combat and subtlety skills were far beyond what many possessed at his age, and it turned out he had a knack for leadership as well.

No longer a junior investigator, MACUSA now trusts him enough to lead missions.
Percival welcomes the responsibility. He’d long since mastered compartmentalizing whatever issue he might have about various missions he took, knowing in the long run, it will be worth it. And in times like these, where he could not participate in the greater scheme of things, it is good to have a distraction.

When MACUSA offers him and Luciana a mission to untangle a web of imperioused wizards in Oklahoma, he is glad to take it. Anything to take his mind off the constant edge of MACUSA ignoring No-Maj struggles.

The mission itself goes fine.

Luciana works well at his side and despite her Healer specialty, she can hold her own. They make a good team, always have. It takes a week for them to find and take down the witch responsible and to help all her victims settle back into their normal lives. All in all, a success.

It is returning from the mission, that events start to spiral out of control.

Upon entering MACUSA headquarters, everyone is distracted, gathered in little groups whispering amongst one another. He and Luciana share a confused glance as they head to the debriefing room. Passing through hallways, they notice several of the employees aren’t focused on their work. No. Instead, they crowd over one another looking at the latest copy of the New York Ghost.

Percival manages to lean over and see the headline.

“BRITISH MINISTER FOR MAGIC PASSES ANTI-WAR INTERVENING LEGISLATION”

Chills run through him. He can’t believe a wizard paper acknowledges the war between the No-Majs even exists. Moving closer, he tries to get a better look at the article itself, curiosity building.

Before he can read the finer print, Luciana nudges him. “Come on, we can hear about what we missed later. Let’s just get this debriefing over with.”

His fingers itch to grab his journal, to write to Gellert. But he holds it in, nodding to her. Moving away from the paper reading crowd, he instead follows Luciana down the hall.

A week’s worth of mission debriefing takes a great deal of time, and he does his best to pay attention, recalling details with Luciana filling in the blanks. His focus drifts more than he would like, however. A side effect of his mind wandering to thoughts that had been plaguing him for years. A war is happening, one he has feared since Gellert shared the knowledge of it during the World Cup. All of it is going on and the information is out there. Percival has tried his hardest ignoring it, but now that it’s finally creeping into the wizard papers in any fashion, he can’t stop himself now.

Luciana glares at him a few times throughout the debriefing. Its deserved. His self-control should be better than this by now. He shouldn’t even be worrying about the news and even wanting to look into it feels counter to what Gellert suggested. It’s a sobering thought that keeps him on track.

By the time the debriefing is over, Luciana suggests they get a well-earned drink at the Dapper Pearl. It’s a post-mission ritual by this point so he doesn’t complain.
The pub is as welcoming as always. Aurors off-duty taking up much of the space. It’s more crowded than usual, and he can’t help but see a few copies of The Ghost being passed around.

Luciana huffs, her arms crossed. “Why are they so busy! A week in Oklahoma and we can’t even relax when we return.”

Percival frowns, but he shares her frustration. Though his is increased after seeing the papers still being discussed. He can’t be too curious, he tells himself. That is a can of worms he should avoid getting involved with. Putting that aside, he scans the room, looking for open seats. To his relief, he spots Seraphina and Edwin at the bar and enough standing space beside them.

Edwin catches his eye and waves them over.

There’s just enough room for the four of them. By the time they approach, the bartender already has their regulars prepared. Thanking him, Percival makes himself comfortable, sipping his whiskey and leans against the counter.

“How was Oklahoma?” Edwin wonders once they have their drinks.

“Flat and uninteresting.” Percival deadpans.

Luciana chuckles. “It’s good to be home.”

“Everything has been odd since you two left for your mission,” Seraphina mutters. “You missed quite a lot.”

“We noticed everyone crowding over the newspapers.” Percival looks out at the room, newspapers clearly visible in people’s hands to help his point. “That wouldn’t happen to be related?”

“It is indeed.” Seraphina’s lips curl in distaste, unhappy with the state of things. “I don’t know if you’ve heard about a No-Maj conflict overseas?”

He purposefully pauses, not wanting to be the first to answer. It’s unclear exactly how much information, if any, he should let on that he knows. Something tells him Seraphina would not approve of him keeping up with the No-Maj papers.

Thankfully Luciana addresses the question before he’s expected to. She looks puzzled by it, head tilted slightly. “No, can’t say I have. Since when have we started paying attention to what the No-Majs are up to, overseas nonetheless?”

“Normally I’d agree with that sentiment, but unfortunately it’s looking like our brethren in those areas are making it very difficult to do so. Apparently, there have been enough wizards sneaking into the No-Maj army ranks that the British Minister for Magic actually had to pass a law to put an end to it. It’s ridiculous.” Seraphina rolls her eyes, tapping her finger against the glass of her drink. “I can’t understand why England’s ministry even had to forbid people from entering that asinine No-Maj war.”

Luciana stands there, processing all the information. Percival has to give her credit. For several month’s worth of news crammed into a few sentences, she does a good job picking up on it. “Hm, well I suppose the Wizard / No-Maj relations are a great deal more complicated over there. If the conflict is large enough, I wouldn’t doubt if there were people joining up simply because family or loved ones became involved. Additional laws might seem ridiculous to us, but I think it’s a good idea that the British Ministry is laying down some boundaries before some witch or wizard does something that can’t be easily hidden.”
Seraphina lets out an exasperated sigh. “You’re probably right… Even I tend to forget how lax the other ministries tend to be. It’s a wonder they haven’t had to worry about a possible breach of the Statute before now.”

“Still, it has to be difficult for some of those wizards overseas. I overheard that some of those countries are even forcing their people to fight. Imagine being married to a No-Maj who is dragged away. Wouldn’t you want to join too to protect them?”

Seraphina just rolls her eyes. “Edwin you are too nice for your own good. I just see it as another reason that Europe should have implemented something like Rappaport’s law decades ago, taken our lead for once.” She turns to Percival. “What do you think about all of this? You’ve been rather quiet.”

It was only time before they pressed him for his opinion on it all. Silence only works for so long. “I don’t think it’s any of our business. It’s a No-Maj affair and should be kept that way.” The answer slides off his tongue, well practiced. While it may not be what he feels is best, it is what Gellert thinks, so it comes easily.

“Oh my Percival, you sure have come a long way from your Ilvermorny days.” She probes. “I remember when you would have rushed to any No-Maj’s defense.”

Percival narrows his eyes. There is no way she could see through him. “It’s been a very long time since I thought like that. Fieldwork has really opened my eyes to how the world really works. I’m not that stupid naive third year anymore.”

Edwin perks up at that. “Third year at Ilvermorny? How different could you have been back then?”

“It’s not important,” Percival grumbles. Even more so than the topic of war, this is something he would rather avoid discussing at all costs.

“I guess you didn’t know him back then Edwin…” Seraphina muses, ignoring Percival. “He used to have a bleeding heart. Caused an uproar after getting into an argument with the No-Maj studies teacher about not being open-minded enough or something. A few of us were even surprised when Percival here told us he was going to be an Auror. I guess some things really can change.”

“They can.” Percival agrees shortly. He wants this conversation over.

And the conversation does shift, but not the direction he would like. Instead, Luciana and Seraphina use this opportunity to gang up on him and share all sorts of embarrassing stories of him from their Ilvermorny days. He supposes he should just be glad they have enough tact to avoid mentions of Christopher.

The night must eventually close, and thankfully stories at Percival’s expense with it. They bid one another goodnight before heading back to their homes.

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That is only the beginning.

It’s clear even just from his passing glances at the No-Maj and Wizard papers, that the war in Europe is quickly spiraling out of control. The war spreads beyond its original battleground in Belgium and
France, and soon it's as if no corner of Europe is free from the conflict.

Even so, he just has to trust that Gellert has everything under control. A widespread conflict is what they want after all, right? Something so big that the wizards can’t just ignore it like they do everything else.

The Wizarding World still tries their hardest to do just that. More laws passed to keep them separated from it all so they can go on pretending like nothing is happening.

That peace of mind doesn’t last.

Percival walks into work, expecting more of the same. However, the moment he walks inside, an alarm blares. Looking up, he sees the exposure threat meter at level 4: Danger, higher than it has been in a long time. His heart pounds. Something is finally happening.

As per protocol in case of such an alarm, Percival makes his way to the meeting chamber.

All the mid to higher level Aurors gather inside. President Dominique Corvin stands at the head of the room with Percival’s old mentor, Conroy, the newly appointed head of Magical Security, standing beside him.

He also catches sight of his dad, who gives him a small smile, as well as his usual companions who stand with their respective departments. Percival goes to stand with the Investigation Department, sliding in next to his dad.

“Hello, there stranger.” Dad teases him, quiet.

“I’ve been busy and you know it.” Percival retorts, but with an air of lightheartedness.

“Still, stopping by and having lunch with your mom and grandpa every now and then wouldn’t kill you.”

“Momma knows I love her.” But before Dad can address the part about Grandpa Graves, he quickly adds. “Any idea what the meeting is about? I saw we are in a Level 4 Threat period.”

Dad frowns but doesn’t press his query any further. “No idea, but we are bound to find out soon.”

It isn’t long before the president clasps his hands together, the sound echoing through the chamber, all chatter ceasing. To the now silent room, he speaks. “I am sure you are all wondering why you are gathered here. Well, we have obtained some interesting information from our contacts in England. There has been a large group of English Wizards who have defied Minister Evermonde’s orders and have joined the No-Maj war effort.”

The room breaks into hushed worried murmurs, shock and fear spread through the room.

Percival, remains tight-lipped. He doesn’t know what he thinks. On one hand, this means the dangers of this war aren’t going ignored by a portion of wizards large enough to make the international communities uncomfortable. However, Gellert had warned about any interference. It hurts his conscious to think that good wizards and witches seeking to aid No-Majs could ultimately be hurting the cause. Gellert had said this war was necessary to prove a point and desculminating it would be counterproductive. He needs more information before he can form an opinion.

Again President Corvin claps and the room quiets. “Now then, we didn’t call for this meeting just to fear monger. No, we seek to solve our problems and protect the Statute of Secrecy at any cost. I know their war is a European affair. No-Maj America appears just as determined to avoid getting
involved as I wish the wizard population would. However, we cannot just sit by and hope that events will turn out our way. Not when we have so much at stake. I propose we send a small task force to discover what is going on over there in France. Perhaps this force could even convince these Brits to see the madness in their actions and just go home.”

“Why is this suddenly our responsibility?” one of the Aurors asks. “If this is a British breach in law, then why don’t they handle it? They can send their own task force.”

It’s Conroy who answers the Auror. “They have, but unfortunately to no effect. It’s our hope that if we show them our outsider’s point of view, they’ll come around.”

“Yes.” President Conroy confirms. “We have waited by long enough. Defending the Statute is an international responsibility.” There are murmurs of agreement throughout the room. “This is the mission and it is of utmost importance. We need a pair of skilled, competent Aurors who would be able to blend in with the warring No-Majs.”

A few of the senior Aurors step forward, each already volunteering themselves. President Corvin shakes his head at them, however. “Unfortunately, due to the high need for subtlety, younger Aurors are needed. An older man would stick out too much. Instead, our estimations would place the Auror needed somewhere between twenty and forty.”

Auror Harriet clears her throat. “Sir. I may have a suggestion. Percival Graves, I believe is a perfect fit.”

Percival freezes. He cannot have heard that correctly.

“I must concur with Harriet,” Conroy says, right at the President’s side. “I mentored him. He’s smart, resourceful. He has a knack for combat and has a good eye for noticing details others might miss.”

No… they could not actually be considering him. It’s insanity. A mission as high profile as this, one he would hope to avoid more than anything? He’d be an awful choice. Why not Alexander or Harriet herself? Both were older than Percival but still in that age range and both had far more experience. Anyone but him.

A hand touches his shoulder and Percival jumps, tense and shocked. He sharply jerks his head to find the source. It is his dad, looking at him with concern. “Are you ok?” he whispers.

Percival tries to hide how he feels, tries to act collected and calm, but he knows Dad sees right through him. Hard not to when he’s sure he’s pale and his eyes are wide with what he now realizes is fear. How does he feel? Is he just surprised? Irritated? Or is he actually afraid…? If he does go, he will not only be defying Gellert’s orders of no interference, but he will also be thrust into exactly what he has feared for years now… the war looming over his head.

‘I’m fine.’ He mouths back to his dad, even though at this moment he feels anything but. It’s doubtful that his dad falls for it, but there isn’t any time to convince him otherwise as all eyes in the room focus in on Percival. They expect him to say something. Opening his mouth, he tries for a confident response, but there’s a lump in his throat. He takes a moment, breathing instead, before smirking, feigning having everything under control. “It’s an honor to be nominated, sir.” He addresses President Corvin. “But I don’t think I’m your man. There are plenty of other Aurors here young enough, but with twice the experience of myself. Besides. I haven’t been overseas, not on a mission at least, so I’d just make a mess of all that navigation.”

Conroy gives Percival a fond smile. “Sir, Percival here is just being modest. If you look at his records, he really is impressive. He’s already accomplished more at his age than some of our more
senior Aurors. In the past few years, he’s even lead a few missions. While it was Harriet’s idea, I really must recommend him.”

President Corvin thinks this over for a moment, weighing everyone’s argument. After a while, he gives a small nod. “It’s decided then, Percival, you will be our man in charge of this venture. Now that that’s determined, we must decide on a healer to accompany you.”

Percival is going to be sick. The information sinks in. Conversation continues around him, but he’s too focused on the fact that he will be going to war and there is nothing he can do about it. He will be forced to be surrounded by terrible No-Maj technologies, to witness horrors he can only guess at. All to do a task he would never agree with personally, to tell a group of wizards to stop protecting people in the name of the fucking Statute of Secrecy. This is a nightmare.

“Why exactly can’t I accompany Percival?” It’s Luciana’s angry voice that breaks him from his thoughts. Her fists clench as she steps forward.

“Unfortunately, for this particular mission, we feel male wizards are best suited to the task.” President Corvin sighs.

“And why exactly is that? I’ve been on dozens of missions alongside Percival, kept him safe and healthy. We’ve known each other for years and we make a great team! You rather put him with someone he barely knows on an extremely dangerous mission, just on the account that I’m a witch and not a wizard?”

The president shakes his head. “It is nothing personal. Simply, No-Maj’s would find a presence of a woman in such conditions quite odd. Especially if you two have to hunt throughout the No-Maj forces to locate the wizards. I’m sorry but No-Majs still have backwards rules about what ladies can and cannot do.”

“I could transfigure myself.” Luciana presses.

“We don’t know how long the mission will end up taking. An extended transfiguration could prove risky and result in unwanted complications if your spell ever dropped. Luciana, you are very talented, but I’m afraid you aren’t a suitable candidate for this particular mission.”

Luciana deflates. “If not me then who?”

All eyes turn to the boy standing next to her. Edwin looks apologetic. “Sorry Luciana, I guess I’m being volunteered instead.”

She sighs, bowing her head in defeat. “Well, I guess if I can’t, then you are the next best choice.” And she rejoins the crowd, frowning but not too upset.

Why she would even volunteer to begin with has Percival baffled. Percival would switch places with her in an instant if he could get away with it. She should be glad they denied her request. Who in their right mind would willingly enter a war zone?

“Wonderful. We have our taskforce.” Corvin declares. “That is all for today. Everyone else, you are excused. Percival and Edwin, stay for further instructions.” Raising his hands up, he gestures for Percival and Edwin to come to him.

Under the cover of Aurors leaving, Dad pats his back. Voice still low, he offers words of comfort. “You’ll do fine. I can tell you’re scared Percy, but Conroy wasn’t lying. You really are one of the best wizards MACUSA has. I couldn’t be prouder of you.”
Another rush of emotion swells inside him, not fear this time, but adoration. He may hate the situation he’s found himself in, but even so, the words comfort him. “Thanks, Dad. That means a lot.” It’s enough for him to push past his woes for the time being, and he makes his way through the crowd to stand next to Edwin, right in front of President Corvin and Director Conroy.

Edwin is paler than usual and Percy gets the feeling he isn’t the only one uneasy by this assignment. Still, they both stand tall and Percival pushes his doubts to the back of his mind for the time being. It’s too late to argue their place in the mission now, so they can only listen as the President and the Director go through the details.

They won’t be leaving immediately. Instead, they have a few days to prepare and plan. Conroy hands each of them a thick file full of all sorts of No-Maj information, maps, train schedules, and army procedures, as well as what sightings their British contacts have found. At least he and Edwin will have time to go through it all and build decent cover stories. It seems that even though they’re supposed to be tracking down a large number of wizards, the mission will still take them deep in No-Maj territory.

Wizards he can handle. No-Majs on the other hand, terrify him.

But Edwin will be there with him, serving as a healer. Edwin and him have always gotten along, and at least MACUSA realized that sending Aurors into a war zone is insanity without some form of plan in case something went wrong. While he might have preferred Luciana, he still trusts Edwin enough to keep them safe.

The talks continue for quite some time, making sure that he and Edwin understood most of what they need to know. There was still a great deal of reading to do when he got home, but by the end of it, he and Edwin have a general idea of a plan.

Director Conroy dismisses them, and Percival doesn’t wait around to talk to Edwin afterward. There will be plenty of time for that in the next day or so.

For now, he has much bigger things to worry over.

He has to tell Gellert everything.

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No response.

At first, this isn’t a cause for concern. It’s common for Percival to write to Gellert in his journal about something important, only to have to wait until the morning for a response. Gellert is a busy man after all and in times such as these, he’s sure to have more than enough on his plate to worry about than to reply to Percival immediately.

So Percival doesn’t stress about it for the rest of the night, instead reading his way through MACUSA’s briefing.
But morning comes, and the most recent thing written in his journal is his own words, the warning about the mission.

“MACUSA is stepping in on the war in Europe. They discovered an entire squad of British wizards who sought to aid the No-Maj war effort, which I’m sure you already knew. In an effort to stop them, MACUSA has decided to send me of all Aurors to do their dirty work. I am torn. On one hand, the Wizards who have entered the fight are by nature of their actions, are helping our cause, working counter to the statute. But on the other, you told me that it will be for the best if we leave the No-Maj war alone. Either way, I don’t think I can get out of this mission. Should I just go along with what MACUSA wishes? I need your guidance.”

Sighing, he closes the journal for the time being.

In the past, Gellert would have warned him that they couldn’t communicate. Weeks or longer worth of absences usually in the name of protecting Percival’s identity, but even then, Gellert had been there to listen if he had important news relevant to their goals.

Not this time.

In fact, the last time they really talked was when this mess of war had just started. He hadn’t heard from Gellert since. Of course, Percival had been endlessly curious as to what exactly was going on, but until now, he hadn’t had a reason to message him, nor had Gellert initiated any sort of conversation. He had thought Gellert had just been busy with the start of the war, and Percival understood that. Percival knows that in the grand scheme of things, he is just a minor player.

Yet, he realizes he’s being pushed in over his head into something Gellert would want to hear and he gets nothing in response.

Gellert can’t just be ignoring him, can he?

Perhaps he is just busy, away from the journal and will get back to Percival in a day or so…

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Another day passes without a reply. Percival’s panic rises and it becomes a chore to focus on plotting with Edwin. Without Gellert’s instruction, he has no direction. He’s at a crossroad. MACUSA has given him freedom with how to approach this mission. and He’ll be in charge and, if he needed to, could likely sabotage the whole thing. But without Gellert’s guidance, his only option is to follow MACUSA’s plan as normal.

If Gellert is just tired of him, wouldn’t he know by now?

It seems incredibly unlikely. Not with how close they became during the World Cup. In fact, until the war itself had broken out, they remained in constant contact. His leader had even managed to make his way to America on multiple occasions. Nothing had appeared off then, Gellert even initiated a kiss upon each visit.
By the third day, he gives up hope of a response. MACUSA has him on a time limit and he can’t just keep waiting around.

Edwin and him are to leave the next day. Once they have wrapped up the details of the mission as well as they can, Percival hurries home for his own final bit of preparations.

The most likely explanation is Gellert hasn’t gotten his message. Perhaps something had happened to Gellert’s journal. Perhaps Gellert had been off on a mission of his own with no way to contact him in return… or… perhaps something terrible had happened to him.

The thought has him shuttering. Worry floods him but he cannot let it take hold. The worst case scenario is not what he should be acting off of. In such events, he wouldn’t be able to do anything regardless, so in the spirit of looking forward, he acts on more optimistic theories.

Upon arriving at his apartment, he doesn’t bother sitting down for the day. Instead, he heads straight to the fireplace. He takes a handful of Floo Powder and tosses it inside, shouting “Ilvermorny Library Office.”

Stepping into the crackling green flames, he blinks as his eyes adjust to a dark room he hasn’t been to in several years.

“P-Percival! Is that you?”

Percival brushes off soot from his coat before looking up at Miss Pendelwood’s wide surprised eyes. He smiles at her pleasantly, “Hello Miss Pendelwood. Sorry for the unannounced arrival. I didn’t have any other options.”

She huffs, still calming down from her shock. “I thought we discussed this. We can’t have any obvious communication. What if I had had a student in here?”

He just shrugs. “Good thing you didn’t then, and if you had… well, let’s just say I would have been happy to have a positive use for an obliviation charm for once.”

His words don’t put her at ease, but rather than pester him further, she just goes to grab two mugs. “What is it then? I suspect there’s a good reason you couldn’t just send an owl?” Cocoa ingredients pour into each mug, both of which are soon steaming.

“Don’t you think I’m a little old for cocoa?” It had been years since he drank anything so sweet.

“Nonsense dear. I insist.” She hands him the warm mug.

He shakes his head at her but accepts the drink none the less. “I leave on a particularly important mission for MACUSA tomorrow, but I need to get in touch with Gellert. He hasn’t answered my messages.”

“I see. I’ve been having some difficulty myself. The last I heard, he was making preparations for that war you and him told me about. It seems like an awful business, but I trust he knows what he’s doing.”

Hearing that gives him conflicting feelings. It helps to know that he isn’t the only one of Gellert’s followers being ignored, but it also increases the likelihood something happened to him. Percival
takes a sip of the cocoa, knowing well it would help soothe his nerves. “I don’t know when I’ll be back. This mission MACUSA is sending me on, it’s related though, and I need to update Gellert on what it is I’m doing. I’d write to him, but wherever he is, I don’t think he has access to his journals.”

“I thought the same.” She agrees and takes a seat behind her desk. She rummages around until she pulls out a few pieces of parchment and a quill. “I can try my best to pass on whatever information you need while you are gone. It’s not a guarantee, but my attempts will be better than nothing.”

Percival will be forever grateful for having Miss Pendelwood in his life. He sits in the chair across from her, making himself comfortable as he would during his school days. Her quill hovers over the parchment expectantly, and Percival starts listing every bit of information he wants to reach Gellert. All of it, from the details MACUSA had passed to him about the possible location of the British Aurors, to the goal MACUSA wants him and Edwin to achieve. He has her even include the doubts and lack of direction Percival feels. Anything he would want to tell Gellert himself, he trusts Miss Pendelwood more than anyone to pass it on as discreetly as possible.

By the time they finish, she has a stack of pages full of classified information. Her quill lowered, she goes to roll up the parchment, packing it up, so just any wandering eyes would have no idea what it held. After letting out a tired yawn, she smiles. “My, that was far more than I expected.”

Percival chuckles nervously. “Sorry, I didn’t anticipate that would take so long.”

She shakes her head. “It’s no worry. This is my job after all.” She pauses for a moment before sighing. “I promise you, I will try my best to get this to him as quickly as possible. But even if he does get it, I don’t know how much, if any, help he can be once you are in the thick of it. Gellert may be a brilliant man, but he isn’t a miracle worker.”

“I know, but I rather him be aware of what is going on. I just…I hope I don’t mess anything up while I’m over there.” He slumps in his chair.

“Oh Percival, this must all be incredibly daunting.” Leaning over she takes his hand in hers. “But I know whatever you chose to do, it will be the right choice. You’ve always been so smart and talented. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders and Gellert has taught you well. All that’s left is to just trust your instincts.”

She has a point. It may not be the neat instructions he would have hoped for, but it’s enough to guide him. Through years of being close to his leader, he should know how to approach this more than most. After all, he had even been one of the few to be first told about this war. The answer may not be clear now, but he can adapt and carry out Gellert’s will.

He stands. “Thank you. It’s been a pleasure talking to you as always. You’ve been a great help.”

Before he can make his way to leave, she hurries over to hug him. “Be safe.”

Percival returns the hug. It’s a rare gesture for him, but in this case, he’s glad for the comfort. “I’ll do my best.”

They must part eventually. He has to get back and sleep after all. Tomorrow is a big day and he needs to rest. It would be suicide to enter a warzone unprepared. They share goodbyes and he makes his way back through the fireplace.

While Miss Pendelwood may not have been able to offer guarantees, she still gave him peace of mind. Just knowing she will be trying to help as best as she can, makes him feel less singled out and alone. If she is able to make contact with Gellert, then all the better, and hopefully he will have an
ally and instructions.

Until then, Percival just has to have the confidence in himself as he heads off to war.

Chapter End Notes

If you enjoyed, review if you have a chance. I always appreciate it. :)

Today is the day.

Percival slept poorly to put it lightly. Years worth of foreboding weighed down on him and the lack of reply from Gellert only made it worse. Nothing soothed the fact that he will be going to war.

Groggy, with an ever present pit in his stomach, he pushes himself out of bed. He throws on his usual auror wear and forces himself to eat a few bites of bread, no matter how much his stomach protests.

Prepared as he can be, he apparates to an alley not far from the Woolworth building. With one more yawn, he stands up straight and disciplined before walking past the owl sculpture and into MACUSA’s now-current headquarters. He’s arrived in the early hours of the morning, before most of the other aurors and office workers. It’s not by choice though, Conroy wanted them present hours before they departed.

He makes his way to the designated meeting room, Conroy’s new office. It’s cleaner than Conroy’s last, as the man’s promotion to Director of Magical Security must have curbed some of his more untidy habits. Gone are the mountains of paperwork, and the floor is surprisingly uncluttered.

Edwin smiles at him as he enters and Conroy gestures at an empty chair. To Percival's surprise, they aren’t the only ones in the room. Two younger men stand off to the side, each with their arms piled with clothes and other unrecognizable objects.

“Graves you are just in time.” Conroy clasps his hands together. “We can begin.”

Percival takes the seat and uneasily looks over at the two young men. “Sir, I mean no disrespect, but I thought we were done with most of our preparations.”
Conroy nods. “As you should be. But one more recap won’t hurt, and you two can’t go to France looking like that.”

Edwin crinkles his nose. “I thought the idea behind picking Percival and I was that we already looked the parts. If we are going to have to transfigure ourselves anyways, then why not just have picked Luciana in the first place.”

“You two won’t be transfiguring anything, well at least not your persons. To fit in with the No-Maj soldiers, you need to look like them. How they dress, how they style their hair. The smallest detail could break your cover, so let’s do our best to avoid that.”

The pair of men step forward and hand Percival a heavy load of ugly brown and khaki cloth. After holding each piece up, he discovers he has a jacket, trousers, boots, a hard metal helmet, and countless straps and pouches. It’s all appears complicated and uncomfortable. Percival frowns. This is what he’ll be stuck wearing for however long this asinine mission will last.

“America doesn’t have a uniform, so our informants provided these. I know you aren’t used to wearing anything like it, but you’ll have to adapt. Before you two get dressed though, we’ll need to do something about your hair.” As Conroy explains, the two men near, each now holding scissors and other barbers tools.

Percival’s eyes go wide. “Are you sure sir? What’s wrong with our hair?” He’s had his hair cut the same way for the last several years and he’s grown attached to running his fingers through the strands in times of stress. Beside him, Edwin chuckles, clearly not as distressed by this.

“It’s still a bit too long for what they have over there.” Conroy scoffs as Percival shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “Relax Graves, we won’t shave all your hair off.”

The man standing next to Percival with scissors appears deceptively pleasant. “We’ll mostly just take a bit off the sides.”

Knowing he can’t argue further, Percival closes his eyes and lets the man cut piece after piece off of his hair. When a mirror is held up so he can see, Percival shoves it away, not wanting to look at the travesty that has most likely become of his head. If he’s lucky, then the helmet will cover the mess through most of the mission and he can fix it when they return home.

With that over with, they dress into the stiff fabric of the uniforms. Percival sighs, resigning himself to the fact he will just have to get used to it.

“Just one more thing.” Conroy adds, before reaching behind his desk. Percival pales. In Conroy’s hands are two long guns. He should have known they would have to carry these No-Maj death machines. “You’ll need to bring these with you. Rifles I believe they are called. These two have been modified so they can’t actually fire, but we have however, added in a slot for you to store your wands discreetly. We couldn’t find a place for wands of your length on the uniform itself, so this was the next best place.”

Percival takes the modified rifle cautiously, as if it would explode in his hands at any moment. Edwin does so with less fear, but still holds it awkwardly. Percival doesn’t care that the contraption has been disarmed. The very idea he has to carry one is maddening.

Conroy takes a moment to show them how he thinks the rifles should be held, at least so they don’t make a fool of themselves once they are surrounded by soldiers. With that small lesson, he has to admit, he and Edwin finally make convincing enough soldiers.
Their portkey still isn’t set to take them for another hour at least. It gives them one final chance to run through the steps of their mission. With everything so chaotic in France their final destination is unclear, so the portkey will take them as far as Paris. MACUSA’s informants placed the greatest concentration of potential magical activity somewhere in Northern France. Maps and train schedules have been painstakingly memorized. They will be working off the assumption that the wizards won’t be far from No-Maj fighting, but beyond that, it will be up to Percival to locate them. The odds of locating them may seem small, but that isn’t what Percival is worried about. Locating hidden or missing people is a talent of his, something he’d do on a normal day. It’s doing so during a war that has Percival uneasy.

Once they’ve gone through the plan three times, Conroy produces a plain vase and places it on his desk. “Just a few more minutes. Enough to get in a few more orders. Remember, your primary job is to uphold the Statute. The ideal path is for you to make a convincing enough argument to get those Brits to go home. If that doesn’t work though, we can’t expect you to subdue an entire camp by yourselves. No, if it doesn’t work, you will need to stay and monitor them, make sure they aren’t getting our whole world into trouble.”

Percival swallows. “And how long will we be required to stay?”

“At least until we can be sure they won’t irreparably expose us to No-Maj kind.”

It takes Percival a great deal of self control to not snap, to keep his boiling anger on the inside. That could be weeks, that could be months, it could be longer. The time frame is so vague it could only mean permanent placement. A few days, or even a week, Percival thinks would be bad, but manageable. This way though, if they can’t be successful ‘asking nicely’, they’ll be stuck in a warzone with no end in sight. His stomach churns, whether from lack of sleep or anger, it doesn’t matter. All he wants is to run.

There’s a hand on his shoulder. Edwin. The other auror looks at him with understanding. “Well we better make a convincing argument to start with then.”

Percival nods hesitantly, but the words ring in his head, giving him some hope that they can leave as soon as they arrive.

Conroy is pleased with Edwin’s optimism. Looking down at his watch, he reminds them they have about five minutes before the portkey will activate. And that is his final piece of advice. With that, he excuses himself, leaving Percival and Edwin alone in the room.

For a moment, they sit there in an awkward silence. Percival is just forcing the courage to follow orders and it takes him so much energy.

“You ok Percival?” Edwin breaks the tension. “You don’t look so good.”

Percival laughs dryly, trying to brush it off. Now is not the time to show weakness. Not when he’s going to be the one in charge. Suppressing the true source of his anxiety, he reaches for something he can openly complain about. “In these clothes and with this haircut, I can’t imagine why.”

Edwin rolls his eyes. “Oh come on, it isn’t that bad.”

“Easy for you to say, they didn’t shave the sides of your hair off.” Edwin had gotten away with just a trim and a neat combing. The amount of Percival’s black hair to the amount of Edwin’s blonde hair that had been scourgified away was telling.

“You’re overreacting. I think you look handsome.” Edwin closes his mouth instantly and looks away.
His cheeks are pink. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

Percival raises an eyebrow. “Why not? Considering the alternative, I’ll take the compliment.”

Edwin shrugs. “I just don’t want you to feel uncomfortable being on a mission alone with me.”

Now Edwin wants to bring this up? “Edwin, it’s been years. I’ve never felt uncomfortable around you then and I think we’re going to have bigger things to worry about in the near future.”

“If you say so.” Edwin still looks ill at ease.

“Trust me, I know. In about sixty seconds, we are going to be deep in No-Maj territory. A kiss from years ago is the last thing I’d be worried about. Especially when we’re about to be in the midst of a war.” Percival sighs. Perhaps he should open up a bit more. “To be honest, I’m afraid. This assignment terrifies me. But it isn’t because I’m working with you.”

“Thank you… for telling me that.” Edwin is still flushed. “I’m scared too. But it helps, knowing I’m not off putting.”

Percival smiles. “Good. Now that that’s cleared up, we can focus on the mission.” And Percival places one trembling hand on the vase.

Edwin nods, a bit more relaxed looking, and puts a hand on the vase as well.

Seconds later, the portkey activates.

Once the initial unpleasantness wears off, Percival blinks, letting his eyes adjust to the new environment.

It’s dark. Darker than MACUSA was.

Something bumps into him. Percival jumps, scrambling to defend himself.

“Oh sorry.” It’s only Edwin. “Where are we?”

Exhaling, Percival attempts to calm down. “I don’t know, but I can find out.” He snaps and the room is dimly illuminated.

It’s smaller than expected. No-Maj brooms and mops hang on the walls. By their feet are empty buckets and rags. A storage space from the look of it. There is a door inches away from where Percival stands.

“Why would they take us to a closet first?” Edwin mumbles.

Percival shushes him and closes his eyes. He isn’t annoyed, but he needs to focus. He can make out a variety of muffled sounds from beyond the walls. Crowds of people talking, echoed footsteps, and most distinctly, the whistle of a train.

He has to hand it to MACUSA, for all his issues with them, they aren’t completely incompetent. “We’re at the station already. I guess they did it this way so we could still be discrete but not worry
about missing the train.”

Edwin still seems confused. “Won’t it be suspicious for two soldiers to walk out of a closet of all things?”

“That’s right, you’re not an investigator. Sneaking around doesn’t come naturally to you.” Percival reaches behind his back to remove his wand from the hollow rifle it was currently stashed in. The movement is cumbersome in this tiny space and it only adds to his frustration that they’ll have to carry these stupid things around everywhere they go. If Conroy expects him to store his wand inside it through this entire mission, he’s insane. It takes far longer than it should to get his wand out, but he manages. “Stand still.” And he performs a series of complicated charms, disillusionment, No-Maj concealment, magic dampeners. “There. We should be able to walk undetected for the most part now. At least until we need to ask for directions.”

“I’m starting to wonder if I’m even needed for this mission at all.” Edwin grins as he says so, but Percival doesn’t want to start this with his mission partner feeling useless.

“There will be more than enough room for your specialty when we actually get to our destination.”

Edwin shakes his head. “I hope not. The more useful I am, the more hurt you are.”

He has a point, but Percival doesn’t want to dwell on it. “Either way, we still need to get there.” With that Percival stores his wand once more before dropping the lumos spell. “Just follow my lead.”

He grabs the doorknob, but pauses. The moment he turns it, there is no going back. Beyond this door is a war unlike anything the world has seen before.

But they have a mission. As much as he would love to abandon it, he can’t run from his responsibilities. He still has a duty to Gellert to maintain his Auror cover, nor will he leave Edwin alone in a war torn France.

Slowly he pushes the door open. Light creeps inside, and the world is exposed to them. Sure there’s no one directly in front of the door, he steps out into the bustling train station. People from all walks of life hurry from one end to another. Women in elegant dresses with a hoard of children, men who pathetically stagger by on crutches, working men in suits, all of them scurrying in the busy station. Many chat amongst themselves, but Percival cannot make sense of the language most of them speak.

Their train is set to leave soon. They just need to figure out which one.

Percival scans the room for any sign that would lead them in the correct direction. The lists of locations and directions are all in French and it only succeeds in giving him a headache. But, before he can get too frustrated, Edwin nudges him and points at a group of men wearing the same uniform as they are.

The group heads towards a platform where he reads ‘Nord Train’. Voice low, Percival murmurs. “I hope that says North. It’s worth a shot.”

He hurries over to join the group, Edwin following close behind. Percival is careful to avoid bumping into any of the No-Majs, keeping the concealment charms intact. Quietly and precise, they continue tailing the group all the way to the train itself.

The group slows as the ticket master reads each and every one of the No-Maj’s slips, but Percival and Edwin walk on as if they aren’t even there.

The train is packed. Already, most of the seats are taken, mostly men dressed in the same uniforms as
them, some by men in blue. His doubt about this being the correct train dissipates. Unlike on the
platform, Percival can actually understand some of the conversations around them. At least
MACUSA gave them uniforms for English speakers. Wanting to be as out of the way as possible,
Percival leads them further in, looking for a space they can remain unbothered. His disillusionment
charm capabilities only go so far.

Eventually, the trickle of soldiers stops. While the train may be crowded, it isn’t completely full.
Percival manages to find enough room and settles in next to a window with Edwin next to him.

It isn’t long before the train starts moving. It starts at a slow chug, pulling out of the station, gradually
picking up speed.

Edwin pulls out a map, pointing at Paris with one hand, his other tapping at a space closer to the
Belgian border, and near the actual fighting. “How long do you think it’ll take us to get there?”

“I guess it depends on how fast these contraptions move. It doesn’t look far, but still I’m in no rush.
We get there when we get there. I doubt those British wizards are going anywhere.” Percival doesn’t
want to think about it. Frowning, he turns to press his forehead against the window, taking in the
sights as they leave the station.

Thankfully, Edwin doesn’t bother him after that. Perhaps Edwin knows him well enough by now to
know he would rather have this time alone to collect his thoughts.

Or perhaps Percival’s attention has drifted far enough that he doesn’t notice it if Edwin does try.
They start to pass by crowds and streets and buildings, all of it hypnotising. It looks nothing like
New York, the architecture different, old and elegant. It’s lovely, enough to take his busy, anxious
mind off the task at hand. Visiting here would make a great trip, when there’s no war, no work…
just a moment where he could enjoy the history and beauty around him. Perhaps Gellert could even
join once more. They could spend a week or more without worry, just enjoying the sights. That is, if
Gellert is alright.

Soon, the train finds its way out of the city proper, and opens up into the countryside. Fields and
farm stretch on and on as far as his eye can see. It’s idyllic, hills like waves. The train rocks gently,
rhythmically.

Percival’s eyes droop, his tiredness catching up to him. The calm of the moment swallowing him and
he doesn’t fight it as he drifts off.

“BOOM”

Percival jolts up, torn from the calm he had found himself in. His heart pounds.

Was the sound a dream?

Judging from everyone around him, no such luck. The majority of the soldiers, Edwin included, look
as terrified as he feels, their eyes all wide with fear.

“W-what was that?” Percival trembles, partially from sleep gogginess, partially from panic.
Edwin shakes his head. “I don’t know. The soldiers— they’re saying it’s artillery or something… So many explosions. It was so loud, but so far away. Like a million fireworks going off at once.”

It’s rather hard to believe the sound had been off in the distance, but after one glance outside, he realizes it’s true. Their speed hasn’t slowed and whoever runs the train shows no sign of stopping. No, the explosions may not be around them now, but they are hurtling towards them. This train is sending them directly into danger.

Under the thundering booms, Percival can hear gasps and whispers amongst many of the men around them. It’s chaos and his groggy sleep addled mind has a difficult time keeping up with everything around him. The frantic whispers only compound his rapidly increasing worry and his head is swimming. Why is he here? Why did MACUSA sign him up for a trip to hell?

“EVERYONE CALM THE FUCK DOWN!”

A mustached middle aged man in a decorated Khaki uniform stands in the train’s corridor, stern and red faced.

“If you cannot handle a little artillery fire, then I will kindly escort you off this train myself and charge you for treason. I know some of you men, this is your first trip out to the trenches, but let me be the first to tell you, you better start getting used to it.”

After that, the mood is somber. No one talks, the distant explosions being the only sounds. No one else dare talk for fear of incurring the decorated man’s wrath once more.

Percival nervously swallows and tries to direct his attention back out the window. The landscape however, no longer holds the same calm it did before he fell asleep. The rolling hills are less green. Trees and flowers gone. The formerly blue sky, now tainted with dark smoke rising up on the horizon. Flashes of light can be made out within the smoke, in time with the booms.

He has to look away before it gets to him. They haven’t even arrived and he wants to be far away from here as possible.

There’s a nudge on his arm and he stiffens.

“Sorry.” Edwin murmurs. “I just thought of an idea.”

At this point, Percival will take any distraction Edwin can offer. “What is it?” He does his best to appear collected, though he doubts it’s convincing.

Edwin reaches into his bag, shuffling into the cavern that was far larger on the inside than it appeared. “I was hoping to save this for a later time,” A small glass vial is pulled out, inside is a golden liquid, splashing around as if it was alive. Felix Felicis, liquid luck. “I was only able to finish one vial before we left, but, after hearing all this, we might need the extra boost earlier than I expected. Your call though.” Working with Edwin, a potion expert, is proving to be a blessing in disguise.

Percival looks at the jumping liquid in deep contemplation. That one vial would be enough for each of them for a few hours maximum. He takes one more look out at the darkening sky before nodding. “More luck can’t hurt. We don’t know what we’re expecting once we’re in the thick of it. Instruction past us getting off this train is vague as is. That potion could point us in the right direction and keep us safe all at the same time.” It could even possibly make this mission a short in and out trip, but somehow Percival doubts their luck can extend that far. Felix Felicis may seem like a miracle potion, but really, it has its limits. “We’ll each take a sip once we arrive.”
They sit in anticipation for several more minutes on the train. There isn’t much more they can discuss in terms of plans or anything. At this point, it will be up to wit, skill, and of course, luck.

Eventually, the train slows, rolling until it rests, still at a station. This is their stop. From the window, Percival gets a decent look at what surrounds them. It isn’t another bustling town like he expected. No, this place looks hastily put together. Just a single building next to a train track, dirt roads leading to and from. It’s hard to see what is outside, but he can make out dozens of No-Maj vehicles, and stacks of various supplies, none of which Percival can put a name to, unloaded from the trail.

Soldiers begin to stand and file out. Now is their chance. Edwin uncorks the potion and passes it his way. Percival takes a small sip, half a vial’s worth before passing it back. Edwin makes a toast with the vial before he presses his lips against the same glass and downs the remainder. Its a motion that reminds him of a moment years ago in calmer times, as they shared the last of a bottle of gigglewater.

It only takes seconds before Percival can feel the potion run through him. All the chaos and fear mellows to the back of his mind, still present, but no longer his only thought. The constant thunder of the bombs fade and he can actually think. It’s as if a cool stream passes through his thoughts, leaving only clarity in its wake.

He knows what they need to do. “I’m dropping our disillusionment charm.” Percival murmurs, feeling more confident than he has, perhaps ever. The moment no soldiers are looking in their direction, he does just that. Edwin doesn’t question it at all, and with a similar assurance, gathers his things. Percival does the same and they file in line, exiting the train just like every other soldier on board.

Now outside, he gets a better look at his surroundings. Not only are things being loaded off the train, but men, groaning in pain, blood seeping through their uniforms, and in some cases, screaming as they clutch on to a a gorey stump, are carried back on. Percival grows pale at the sight. The only thing still keeping him standing tall and collected is the potion he just consumed, a soothing voice in the back of his head telling him to just ignore it.

Instead, he focuses on the growing crowd of still standing soldiers in front of him. They break off into groups, heading towards a stack of supplies or towards a more decorated official. The loud man from the train earlier continues his previous occupation, and barks orders at everyone.

Percival glances over at Edwin, about to suggest they stand still for now. But Edwin still stares at the dozens, maybe more, injured men that are lifted up into the train they just left. Edwin’s fingers twitch on his false rifle, near the compartment his wand is held. “So many people… I don’t think the No-Maj’s even know how to handle half those wounds. I… I could… it wouldn’t be too hard to-”

Putting a steadying hand on Edwin’s shoulder, Percival says, voice hushed and low, “You know we can’t break cover. Not here.” His own words are textbook MACUSA, but Edwin’s still surprise him. He hasn’t heard another auror be so open about aiding a No-Maj. Could his better nature of being a healer overshadow MACUSA’s indoctrination?

Before he could ponder this any further though, the loud decorated man approaches, stern as ever. “Report to your stations privates.”

This is it, his infiltration talents on display. Most wizards, especially American, would have no idea how to react when a No-Maj spoke to them. For Percival, this is what he does best. “Sorry sir, we are new volunteers. We’ve been transferred out here recently.” The cover story had been rehearsed over the last few days in case they needed to blend in.

Whether it be the potion or his own charisma, it seems to work. The man looks down at them with
less disdain. “Ah, no matter then. Let me see your paperwork and I’ll guide you to your assigned
platoon.”

Percival pulls a slip of paper out from his bag. To him and Edwin, it would show nothing. To any
No-Maj who looked at it though, it would be whatever it needs to be.

The man looks it over before handing it back. “Ah Private Graves and Private Hawthorne, it says
you are to report to platoon 7.” He turns and points at another clean cut, decorated man who stands
near a covered truck. “Lieutenant Harris, you have some fresh meat coming your way!” And the
man waves them off towards the Lieutenant. He seems rather young to be an officer, dark curls fall
onto an unwrinkled face, but who is Percival to question the No-Maj military.

The new man, Lieutenant Harris, looks far less stern than the one who barked orders. He pleasantly
as they approach. “Welcome aboard fellows. Don’t mind the Major, he can be a bit cruel sometimes.
I believe you pair are our last to arrive, so I suppose we can get going now.” He steps up into the
back of the vehicle, which Percival can now see is loaded with soldiers sitting on benches on either
side.

Percival follows him up, with Edwin climbing in right behind him. There are around a dozen men
seated inside, but there’s still enough room for them to settle in as well. It isn’t long before the truck
starts to move.

The soldiers already occupying the vehicle look at them with amusement. “Just who do we have
here?” One of them, a larger man, says snidely.

“Be nice William,” Lieutenant Harris quiets him. “These boys are new volunteers.”

Another one of the soldiers laugh. “Welcome to the meat grinder then! Hope you didn’t sign on for
fame and glory.”

Lieutenant Harris snaps at the man. “Tim, I will have you on latrine duty if you keep it up.”

The voice in the back of Percival’s head tingles, telling him to speak up. “It’s fine. We aren’t here for
any of that. It was just the right thing to do, joining up that is.”

Everyone gasps the moment he finishes. The soldier, William, leans in and asks, “You American?”

“We both are.” Edwin adds.

William is shocked. “I can’t believe it… maybe it’s a sign that things are finally are changing if you
Yanks are getting involved on the right side!”

Percival shakes his head, not wanting to spread a hope they are not here to provide. “Sorry to
disappoint you, but I think Edwin and I are exceptional cases.” According to the No-Maj papers
back home, America had staunchly declared itself neutral. Telling these men anything otherwise
could have a reaching impact on the war, when they should be leaving as feint a footprint as
possible. It was not only MACUSA’s orders, but what Gellert had told him all those years ago.

Most every man inside the vehicle slumps at that. Perhaps America’s place was a sore subject.

Lieutenant Harris though looks at them with respect. “It’s a start at least. Perhaps you two can be a
good influence on the rest of your country. Better two Americans than none at all I say.”

The soldiers all voice their agreement.
From there, the chatting is less difficult to navigate, the focus shifting off of them and back to how Percival assumes these men must talk amongst themselves normally. Percival throws in a comment every now and then, thinking it would be suspicious if they just remained silent. Edwin though, keeps to himself. Percival supposes the other wizard has had less interactions with No-Majs than he has, so this whole day has probably been a shock to him, even beyond the ever present reminders of their situation.

As much as it surprises Percival to even think it, perhaps this whole mission won’t be such an awful thing. It’s so rare he’s granted opportunities to sit amongst No-Majs, to talk and get to see their perspectives on everything. Already, his idea of the gun carrying No-Maj is shifting. These soldiers don’t fit the cruel, bloodthirsty monsters he had associated with it. They joke, they share stories of family back home. Many are even younger than he is. Past their smiles, Percival can even see they are just as frightened as him. It’s obvious they’ve grown used to trying to hide it.

Soon, the Lieutenant claps, getting everyone’s attention. “Alright boys, we’re nearly at the trenches.” He looks over at Percival and Edwin specifically. “I don’t know what sort of training the pair of you went through, but I want you to be aware that no matter how thorough it was, you won’t be fully prepared for what’s to come. I have a few rules for you, and a few refreshers for everyone else.” All the men nod. “First and most important… Keep your heads down. I don’t care how curious or tempted you get, make sure there’s a wall of earth between you and the German sightlines. The instant you decide to poke your head up, a sniper will pick you off like that.” He snaps, and Percival can’t help but jump slightly. “Second… try your hardest to not get separated. It’s a maze in there, but if some of the higher ups get a whiff of anyone not being where you should, well, lets just say you best have a good excuse.”

Everyone shifts uncomfortably after the speech, the direct reminder of what awaits them a sobering experience. Percival’s stomach clenches. The potion could only keep his fears subdued so much, even if it should temporarily keep them safe from whatever horrors awaited. The image that had haunted him for years comes to mind, the witch with her face a mangled wreck, victim to weapons like those that surrounded him. This would be worse, far, far worse than that one instant. Just seeing the injured as they exited the train, more than he could imagine… All of it awaited them.

He wishes he and Edwin could have a chance to speak in private, to see if Edwin really comprehended the dangers they were about to be in, but it was still too crowded in here and casting a charm unnoticed would be too risky.

Instead, they just sit, continuing to listen to Lieutenant Harris. He moved from speeches to handing out specific orders to each man. When he gets to them, Edwin and Percival just nod along, as if they understood perfectly the words they barely could comprehend. Despite the fact that Percival hadn’t minded the No-Maj company, he still knows they won’t be with this group very long. Not when they have their own mission.

The vehicle soon comes to a stop and Percival catches a few of the men mutter prayers.

“It’s time” Lieutenant Harris stands, and jumps out of the vehicle, breaking into a run. All of the soldiers follow close behind, Percival and Edwin included.

Chaos ensues. Percival, hurries, keeping up with the pack as they rush forwards, into a passageway carved in the earth. His feet no longer touch grass, rather dirt and mud. The walls are dirt and mud too, wooden beams and filled bags letting the walls reach upwards and above their heads. The pack funnels inside and its cramped and claustrophobic and it feels like any minute now it could all collapse around them. The booms of the artillery are louder here than they were on the train and it pounds at his head, but also rattles the barriers that keep them from getting engulfed by the earth.
It’s overwhelming and the further he moves forward, swept up by the sea of people, the more the potion nags at the back of his mind telling him to stop. He slows and tries to let everyone pass him. He heaves a breath and looks back up. Edwin… In the madness he had lost track of the other.

Frantically, he searches turning his head from side to side, eventually calling out to him, “Edwin!” He has to shout to be heard over the nearby explosions. He couldn’t be left alone here, not already.

There’s a tug on his arm, and before he knows it, he’s yanked into a nook branching off of the main passage.

“I think we lost them.” Percival feels a rush of relief as Edwin lets go of his sleeve. “Something tells me we aren’t headed the same way as those No-Majs.”

Percival nods. “I got that impression too.”

Another pack of soldiers march past them and they both hold their breath, avoiding discovery.

When the coast is clear, Percival raises his wand and reapply the disillusionment charm. There’s no sense in being in the open so No-Majs can criticize them for being out of line. They are here for a reason and should avoid getting roped into the No-Maj conflict as much as possible.

“Now what?” Edwin wonders once they are hidden.

“Now we search for any magical signatures. In theory the only ones we should come across are our own and that of any wizard that shouldn’t be here, our target.” Percival closes his eyes and murmurs a quick incantation. He’s done this before, all MACUSA aurors were taught this particular skill. He simply needs to reach out, and feel the air, searching for any spark of magic. It was the same theory that went into MACUSA’s detection maps and the British Trace cast on youngsters. So long as one is far enough removed from magical activity, it is an effective tool.

Edwin is the first source he notices, but Percival is talented enough to look past him. To do so requires far more focus though, and the conditions surrounding them at the moment make it incredibly difficult. At least Felix helps him find that necessary clarity, and after a minute or so, he feels something. Faint, but still there.

“It will be a bit of a walk, but we are in the right vicinity.”

Percival doesn’t find this revelation particularly soothing. This is not an area he would ever chose to remain in for a lengthy period of time. But it seems he and Edwin have no choice, and with that, they make their way further into the trenches.

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It takes them quite a while to even figure out where they are going. In fact it feels like they are wandering aimlessly.

Their only guide continues to be the detection charm. After some trial and error, they figure out a system that finally leads to some progress. Every so often, they pause, alternating between who casts the detection charm and who keeps watch. Each cast they, make they become somewhat confident they are headed the right direction.
Even with the magic and Felix Felicis aiding their steps, navigating the trenches isn’t easy. These dirt paths are mazes and its impossible to see more than a few feet of the path ahead. They are winding, zigzagging through the earth. Some tunnels lead to elaborately constructed rooms built into the ground, others lead to just stacks and stacks of supplies. Some lead to nothing at all.

The whole network is incredibly intricate, and if it weren’t for certain factors, Percival would be enormously impressed.

Instead, it’s impossible to overlook the conditions these men live in. There’s still the ever present hammering of artillery, shaking the ground, but the further they walk through these paths, that isn’t the worst of it. While they can still hear the firing and explosions, the areas they step through don’t seem to be the targets of this onslaught. It’s a small mercy though, overshadowed by other concerns. The longer they walk, the more apparent that it’s incredibly cold. Percival can’t help but shiver every time they stop. Then there are the rats, dozens at a time scurrying along the edges of the mud, worming their way into the supplies, the food these men eat.

Worst of all, is the smell. Layers on layers of awful odors, human and rodent waste building to a nauseating mixture. But even that can’t mask what Percival finds the most revolting. Infection, rot, gore, death… it takes him back to an eerie house in New York, two bloated bodies in a bed. It’s at its most foul when they pass by a wound dressing station. Screams in pain mix with the rotting smell and it’s everything he fears. Even Edwin, who has seen worse than he could imagine on the job, looks incredibly uneasy in that moment. They even pause to give Edwin a moment to compose himself.

His head is swimming and he can only force himself forward, hoping that it will be better when they find the wizard camp. Knowing they are getting closer is a much needed blessing.

They’ve been walking for what must have been an hour or longer, when finally, Edwin’s detection charm registers a potent charm on a solid, empty wall, far away from much of the No-Maj activity. He gives a soft, tired smile as he lowers his wand.

“After you.”

They’ve made it.

Finally after treking this long, they can finally work towards negotiation, and desperately Percival thinks, going home.

He hopes at least.

This could just as likely be the beginning of a very long stay in France.

For now though, he attempts to be optimistic. No sense in setting them up for failure by expecting the worst.

Percival’s ebony wand motions as he says clearly, “Revelio”.

Just like that, the solid dirt wall shimmers and vanishes, leaving another line of trench ahead of them.
Passing through the barrier is a surreal experience.

The first thing Percival notices is the sound, or lack thereof. For a brief second, Percival nearly thinks he has gone deaf, that the brief stay surrounded by artillery had been enough to damage his ears that badly. But he can still make out the sounds of his footsteps as they head further in. The barrier apparently not only kept No-Majs out, but the thundering roars they are causing.

Unlike the rest of the trench lines they had trudged through, this hidden path is clean, tidy, free of rats and debris. Whereas the other trenches had been crowded and crooked, the path they walk down is straight and empty. It’s just several minutes of heading in a straight line, pulling them further away from the No-Maj trenches.

It’s strange, empty and lonely. But more than welcome after an hour on the No-Maj side.

Only after crossing what feels like a mile long line, do they finally see a turn.

Passing a corner, the space before them immediately opens up. A small makeshift settlement comes into view. Percival stops and takes a moment to just observe. Everything is still dug into the ground dirt trench walls encircling the camp, but rather than be limited to the tight lines the No-Majs had been limited to, the area is open. Overhead, parts of the sky shimmer. A protective barrier. Tents, not too different to those Percival had stayed in during the World Cup, cover the majority of the space. Missing is the supply stashes the No-Majs had relied so much of, no sign of the standard weaponry and ammo they had seen scattered throughout the trenches they just left.

All signs that yes, this is where they have been searching for. He would be certain, if not for the fact that from where they stand, he can see no signs of anyone present.

An uneasiness creeps over him. Where is everyone? Were they too late?

Edwin voices similar concerns. “Do you think they all left? I mean, they couldn’t have, right? They wouldn’t leave all their tents behind… that’d be a huge waste."

Percival agrees, some of his initial worries calming at Edwin’s observation. “Good point. I think that we should look around, see if we can’t find any hints as to where they all went.”

They do need answers and just standing here isn’t going to solve it. Percival takes a step forward, with Edwin following close behind.

“DINGDINGDINGDINGDINGDING”

A deafening sound fills the area the moment Percival’s foot touches the ground. Percival feels a rare instance of stupidity as over a dozen POPS of wizards and witches surround them on all sides. Each has their own wand drawn, pointing directly at him or Edwin. He should have known they’d have security, damn it.

Whispers ripple through the crowd, ‘muggles’ ‘no, look, wands’ ‘obliviate?’ all audible under the alarm. Percival raises up his hands defensively, one still holding his wand, but balanced on his thumb as to be as least threatening as possible.

A wizard steps forward, his hair dark, and he looks younger than them by a few years. Despite his age though, he looks collected, confident, and rather threatening. “Who the fuck are you two?” He looks them over, eyes going from the wand in Percival’s hand to their clothing.

Percival thinks over how to respond for a moment. Felix, still in his system, tells him honesty is the best course of action for the time being. Behind him, Edwin has his own wand raised, ready to act,
but Percival shakes his head and Edwin lowers it. They need to be calm and reasonable if they are to have any chance of cooperating.

“My name is Percival Graves, and this is my associate, Edwin Hawthorne. We’re here on behalf of MACUSA.”

The dark haired man sneers. “Of course you’re America. Let me guess. You’re high and mighty government thinks we’re being ridiculous and wants us to cease and desist our operations here. Well that won’t be happening.”

The circle of wizards are just as disgusted, like all they need is the word from the dark haired man to expel Edwin and himself from the area. He needs to be careful.

“It was your own Ministry that decreed no one should interfere. MACUSA thought that it should be enforced, considering its the international Statute of Secrecy at risk.”

The man shakes his head. “I suppose for you lot, it’s only the Statute at risk. You would think like that, safe and sound across the ocean. For us though, our homes are in danger.”

“But this is France, not England.” Edwin interrupts. “Just because your country is fighting, doesn’t mean you have to as well.”

The man fumes. “You clearly have no comprehension of what has been going on, of what the Muggles are capable of now. The Germans, they’ve figured out how to travel by air. They’ve been bombing London, a city where we live and go about our lives. Do you think we want to have our hand forced like this? No. But they’ve been inadvertently striking Wizard homes and workplaces and it’s gotten to a point where we can’t just stand by. This war needs to end quickly, and if that means us aiding where we can, then so be it. We won’t be talked down by a couple of foreign errand boys.”

Everything the man says weighs harder and harder down on Percival. It all makes sense and if he had been in their position, he can’t say he wouldn’t have done the very same. He can’t blame them when their reasoning for action is something Percival has feared, has known would happen for years. No-Maj technology finally reaching a point where Wizards can’t just ignore it. He hates having those fears justified.

And MACUSA would have him ignore all logic and ask these strangers to do the same. How can he ask them to leave when he cannot reasonably come up with an explanation? Even having taken Felix Felicis, he knows there will be no lucking his way out of this. It isn’t a miracle drug and can’t move the unmovable, especially when his heart was never really in the task in the first place.

The conclusion slowly sinks in, that the path home quickly is lost. Somehow he thinks MACUSA knew there would be no convincing them. That grates at his nerves more than the fact that these wizards won’t leave.

He wishes dearly that he and Edwin could just turn a blind eye and leave these people to fight for what they believe in. But MACUSA already rubbed it in their faces how that wasn’t an option.

They can’t go home. If they do, Percival would lose years of progress gaining MACUSA’s trust. And that’s to say if he could even convince Edwin to leave in the first place. Percival closes his eyes, trying to suppress the dread as he realizes there’s only one path forward.

“You seem like a reasonable man, Mr…” He pauses upon realizing the gap in his knowledge.

“Scamander, Theseus Scamander.”
“Mr. Scamander.” He says, respectfully. “Your position makes sense, and you are correct. MACUSA cannot particularly relate. I, on the other hand, am sympathetic. However, you must understand that Edwin and I cannot simply return home empty handed. If we do, or fail to report back at all, they will send a larger team of aurors, far stricter and crueler than us.”

“Is that a threat?” Theseus growls.

Percival shakes his head. “No, you misunderstand me. I simply wish to offer a compromise.”

The British Wizards start whispering amongst themselves. He can already hear the calls of protests and obliviations before he even made his offer. Beside him, he can see Edwin’s hesitance, but he knows Edwin trusts him enough to make an informed decision for the both of them.

“What do you possibly have to offer us?” Theseus says after some dissent amongst his group.

“I propose you let Edwin and I stay here within your camp. We won’t ask you to leave, but we can serve as advisors, making sure your group isn’t doing anything too wreckless that could endanger the Statute. I mean, so far your operation hasn’t done anything that would put us at risk, but I believe MACUSA and likely your own minister would appreciate some minimal oversight. That way we can report back to MACUSA and let them know nothing is amiss. In return, we can assist around your camp and no larger faction of aurors will show up and shut everything you have done here so far.”

Theseus mulls over the offer, still irritated, but definitely having come to the conclusion that there isn’t anything in particular he can do about it. Percival wants to add how he doesn’t want to be here, that he agrees with everything they are doing, but he keeps his mouth shut.

“I have one condition,” Theseus grumbles, clearly hating to admit defeat. “Before either of us agree to anything, it’s only right that you see exactly what we are fighting for. I don’t think you can hold us to the Statute without having seen what the muggles are going through.”

Edwin steps forward. “We didn’t apparate right outside your camp. We just came from those trenches so I think we have a pretty good idea what they are dealing with.”

A few of the other wizards laugh at that. Theseus shakes his head. “You walked through the reserve and support trenches. That is nothing compared to the front lines.”

Edwin frowns and glances over at Percival. He doesn’t say anything, but Percival understands the unspoken question, ‘Will we just let them boss us around like this?’

Percival just looks away, back at Theseus. “Lead the way.” Is he nervous? Yes. But they are being given an opening and it would be foolish to not take it. Besides, the Felix Felicis should last long enough to get them through it.

They are lead back the way they came, stopping right before the hidden passage. Theseus casts a disillusionment charm of his own. He smirks right at Percival as he does so. “See, we do try to maintain some level of secrecy here already.”

“It’s a start at least” Percival grumbles.
Not bothering to respond, Theseus, heads through the wall that separated their campsite from the No-Majs.

Percival follows and its jarring. All the sound filtered from whatever barrier they had erected comes rushing back. Silence to a cacophony in an instant. Had it always been this loud? The sound of gunfire and artillery pounding against his eardrums... he has to take a moment to regain his barings. Edwin seems to have the same problem.

Theseus just keeps on walking. “Come on now, if you two insist on staying, you best get used to the noise.”

Gritting his teeth, he stands straight and keeps following the man. Even if Theseus is growing more and more on his nerves with every second.

As they weave through the trenches, Theseus keeps talking, commenting on various aspects of the No-Maj war effort. He mentions small ways the wizards have helped them out, repairing broken or damaged items, purifying water supplies, all while the No-Majs have their backs turned of course. It does please Percival to hear they have been aiding in small ways, but it’s off putting how Theseus is rubbing it in their faces.

Theseus takes them back past the makeshift hospital and pauses. His arrogant manner fading a bit as he watches a stretcher bearer run past, carrying a bleeding man. “Do you know the statistics of how many men become casualties in this war?” He asks. When neither Percival or Edwin answer, he promptly adds. “Thousands daily. Thousands of men who are killed or returned home maimed in some way.”

Edwin’s eyes go wide at that. “But… that’s so many people. How can they keep it going for this long?”

Theseus sighs. “We have no idea. It seems like the Muggle governments are perfectly content to throw lives away like nothing rather than stop all this senseless fighting. I don’t even think they know what they’re even fighting for at this point.”

Percival had prepared himself for those numbers, having read enough No-Maj papers to have a decent idea of what was going on. But it looks like the reality is even worse than he anticipated.

Edwin though, is completely caught off guard, his hand twitching towards his wand as he stares off in the direction the stretcher bearer ran.

Putting a hand on his shoulder, Percival calmly tells him, “I know it’s terrible, but remember our orders.”

It takes him a moment, but Edwin eventually nods.

With that, Theseus snorts, but continues leading them through the winding passages. “Come on, we’re almost there.”

It’s only a few more turns. Soon, Theseus stops and gestures for them to go on ahead. The action seems incredibly suspicious, but they are in no position to argue.

He takes a few steps forward, and immediately wishes he hadn’t.

If he had thought the trenches they had trudged through before this were hectic, this is nothing but pure chaos. The sounds here are louder if at all possible and everyone is running around in a panic.
He only has a few seconds to register what is going on before all hell breaks loose.

It starts with an explosion, a cloud of dirt and wet and slivers of wood.

Percival is knocked to the ground by the force. His ears are ringing, like someone has shoved wads of cotton inside them along with a shrill bell. He coughs, but he can barely hear that much. Eyes slowly open and it’s still hard to see as the cloud of dirt is still settling. Crawling, he tries to push himself up, but before he can manage, his fingers touch something warm and wet.

His hearing slowly creeps back in, and there are muffled cries and screams, orders being barked. All of it still sounding distant. Blinking, he tries to look past the dirt, to see what he’s next to.

Cold glassy eyes stare vacantly upward, his face somewhat familiar… one of the soldiers from the drive over here. Percival thinks his name is William.

His hands still feel wet though, what could be causing that? His eyes dart downward, looking for some explanation. He lets out a silent scream as he finds the source. His hands are in a pool of blood, oozing from what would have been William’s lower body.

Percival lunges back, hitting the weakened dirt wall of the trench. That explosion had been so close. Oh fuck. He breathes in heavily, heart pounding painfully in his chest. He could have died. He was so close.

He needs to get out of here.

But he can’t just leave Edwin. Shit… Edwin. Percival scrambles, trying to find his companion, but the dust is still too thick to see past. Beyond caring that a No-Maj could see at this point, Percival raises his wand and blows the dust away, clearing the air. He can’t see anyone standing, and he panics.

“Edwin!!!”

A few moments pass before he hears. “I-I’m over here.” A huge gasp of relief escapes Percival and he hurries over to where he can finally see the other wizard.

Edwin kneels over a body, someone bleeding, broken, but, unlike poor William, breathing. On second glance, Percival sees it’s another No-Maj from their journey, Lieutenant Harris. Slowly, skin is stitched back together as Edwin gestures with his wand, softly murmuring an incantation. The part of Percival that has been shaped by MACUSA, the man he’s supposed to be in front of other Aurors, should chastise Edwin, order him to stop, that using magic on a No-Maj is contrary to their whole mission here.

But that had never been who Percival really is.

So Percival lets him be, and points his wand skyward with a whispered “Protego”. An invisible barrier falls over them and he’s now as guilty as Edwin. Really, it was only a matter of time before he finally acted according to his better nature.

They stay there, Percival just letting Edwin work on saving a life. No one approaches them, the No-Majs in the area having either died already or ran to seek shelter. The bombardment continues and a few times, Percival struggles to keep his shield up. But the shrapnel and debris is deflected so long as he remains wholly focused on keeping the charm steady and strong.

Soon, Lieutenant Harris coughs, heaving a panting breath as he returns to consciousness. He sits upright and whole, trembling hands going to where the gash in his gut had been healed. “W-what….
I thought… It hurt so much. Am I dead?” He looks over, eyes wide with shock as he makes eye contact with Edwin. “Private Hawthorne? Are…. Are you an angel?”

Percival scoffs before he can think better of it. “No, he healed you.” It’s a statement that should have been fine to say around a No-Maj, but not when it makes Lieutenant Harris stare at him, right as Percival still channels the shield charm. The man gasps in shock.

“Percival, we need to obliviate him.”

Another rain of shrapnel, Percival grimacing as he fights off yet another shockwave. As it subsides, he glances down at the Lieutenant, the man scared and confused. “No…” He says after a while. “He’s barely conscious. I doubt he’ll remember this encounter as is. Besides, erasing parts of his memory may do more harm than good. If we slip up, take too much away, then… well, this is not the place for such errors.”

Edwin raises an eyebrow at him. “You are… a lot more relaxed about this stuff than I expected you would be.” He sighs. “What should we do with him instead?”

“Put him to sleep. We can take him back to the No-Majs and they can check him over.”

Nodding, Edwin does just that. He picks up the unconscious Lieutenant and carries him out, Percival following, shielding them until they reached a safer section of the trench. Once he is confident no more shells will reach them, he leans over to help carry the No-Maj.

“Percival, I… I don’t think I can ignore any more injured people we come across.” Edwin’s voice is soft and scared. “Please don’t repeat this to anyone, but I don’t think these Brits are in the wrong.”

That makes Percival pause. He stands there, processing what Edwin says. Edwin is ok with defying the statute, defying MACUSA’s orders… had already done so. Perhaps he was in more like minded company than he expected. “I can’t really blame you. These are exceptional circumstances.”

Edwin exhales. “I thought for sure I was going to be lectured or something there. But, thanks for understanding.”

They leave Lieutenant Harris in the care of the No-Maj field medic before making their way back to the Wizard camp. So little time has passed, but it’s as if everything has changed. No longer would they be slaves to upholding the Statute in unreasonable circumstances. Edwin was right, these British wizards may really be onto something.

It may be contrary to what Gellert told him those years ago, but he finds himself listening closely to the advice Miss Pendelwood gave him just one night ago. He has to trust his instincts, and right now they are screaming at him to do the right thing and help wherever he can.

Chapter End Notes

We are finally getting into territory with this fic that may start overlapping with possible knowledge from Crimes of Grindelwald and other future films. Lets cross our fingers that it won't be Jossed too much! If not, I'll be trying to work with any new info we may get. Thanks for sticking with this fic through all this time :)
Here's a quick sketch of Edwin I did a few months ago! [x]
Thank you all for sticking with me all this time. I started working on Metanoia right after I saw Fbawft, so it's almost hard to believe Crimes of Grindelwald gets released this week. Also, as of me posting this chapter, it has been 100 years since the end of World War 1.

May 1915,

Dear Percival and Edwin,

Things have been rather boring around here without you. Seraphina is not much a conversational partner without you to poke fun at Percival. Nor do the twins possess half your talent as an investigator. Without you Edwin, things are less cheery. I’m sure you two have seen far more excitement than any of us, though I am unsure if that is a good thing. At least you two are together. Percival, you keep each other safe, and Edwin, keep each other positive. I’ve seen the reports you’ve sent back… horrible stuff. It’s awful that the president determined you two can’t come home for the time being. But the work you are doing must be having some impact if it’s so important you have to stay. I suppose the Statute is the most important thing after all. I only hope all that senseless fighting will calm down soon. I miss both of you dearly.

Your friend,

Luciana

Percival finds himself smiling as he reads. This has been the first friendly letter he’s seen since being away for nearly two months. Before Luciana’s words, the only contact he had from back home had been reports to and from MACUSA. Aside from that, they have essentially been exiled. Their portkey back remains deactivated and an ocean and a battlefield separate him and Edwin from familiar territory. Percival can only wait until those uncaring bureaucrats at MACUSA finally realize how unreasonable they are being.

Until that impossible time comes, it’s just good to hear back from home.
Percival folds the letter, slipping it into his uniform pocket to show Edwin later. He and Luciana had always been good friends, and Percival thinks the positivity will do the other some good. Their time here has been far from easy.

Leaning over, he gives the messenger owl a gentle pat, flattening down some of its feathers. He even tosses a trench rat its way as a treat. While Percival may not have an innate fondness for beasts, he can at least appreciate the journey this creature took. Overseas trips have to be incredibly taxing and this owl had taken many for him. Theseus had lent him the owl during his stay, not out of the kindness of his heart, but to ensure Percival kept MACUSA far away from the war effort.

Percival had done just as Theseus wanted. Every two weeks, he worked on a carefully worded report, writing enough to sate MACUSA’s curiosity as to what was going on within the war camps, but strategically leaving out anything he knew they would disagree with. Fortunately for Theseus, Percival had years of experience withholding information from MACUSA.

While this may not what he had in mind while learning under Gellert, he is thankful he gained the skills to keep away from the watchful eye of MACUSA. The distance is to his advantage too. Here, he’s freer to help as he wishes. The war itself may be hell, but he could finally make a difference in a real way.

He places the bird back inside the owlery and goes to find Edwin.

The first place he checks is their shared tent, but Edwin isn’t there, nor is he anywhere else within the camp. Percival circles the area twice, ducking his head in the supply tent, looking inside the general barracks. Still no Edwin. Where could he have gone…?

Just as he’s about to check their tent a third time, he catches sight of Theseus instead. Percival approaches him and asks, “Scamander, you haven’t seen Edwin around have you?”

Theseus’s face scrunches up. Even after these months, the younger man still hasn’t warmed up to him. “He didn’t tell you? That’s surprising. I thought you two were supposed to be a team.”

Percival frowns. “I wouldn’t be asking if I knew where he is.”

“Last I heard, he was headed into the muggle trenches. Something about offering aid after a bad attack.” Theseus sounds annoyed, which, despite his clear distaste towards their presence here, confuses Percival.

“I thought you encouraged help for the No-Maj… muggle… whatever. You can’t be that mad that he’s doing just that?”

Theseus shakes his head. “I’m not mad. More perplexed as to why a MACUSA Auror who came here to police us is bending our routine and regulations to go out and break the Statute. You’ll have to forgive me for being suspicious.”

“So, you really don’t understand even after you abandoned us in that front line trench?” Months later and it is still a sore subject for both of them. “I don’t think it’s you who has any right to be suspicious.”

Theseus looks down. “I’ve told you many times before. I am truly sorry. I had no idea that sector would be hit directly at that moment. All I intended by my actions that day was to show you the severity of the situation, nothing more.”

They had argued about this several times through the months. Did Percival think that Theseus actually tried to kill them? No, but it had been too close for Percival to just forget it. Especially when
he’s all but trapped here.

“Still, giving us the benefit of the doubt every now and then would be appreciated.” Percival sighs. “But, you do make somewhat of a good point with Edwin. He shouldn’t go out there alone and unprepared. I’ll go check on him.”

Theseus says nothing more, just nods slightly and lets him pass.

Percival stops at the barrier between their camp and the trenches. They haven’t had access to any Felix Felicis since the day they arrived, so navigating the trenches requires even more preparation and care. The usual disillusionment charm goes on first. Yes, he still wears his uniform as a disguise, but it’s best to avoid any lengthy interaction with a No-Maj if he can help it. Then he applies all the protection charms he knows. It takes a great deal out of him and even more to maintain his concentration to keep it all up, but he’d rather be overly prepared than dead.

Unlike his first time through, Percival has grown used to the maze of trenches. Theseus had included him and Edwin on a few of the routine patrols, which let them learn their way around. As a result, he is now able to make his way directly to the field dressing station, on foot, unfortunately, as apparating is still far too risky.

The day is clear and it’s finally warming up with Spring. There isn’t even a gust of wind to create the chill he’s grown used to. It’s less crowded at this time too, making it easier to navigate. All considered, it’s a pleasant day for the trenches but, even so, Percival can’t fight a sense of foreboding.

The station is utter chaos.

Dozens of men lay on stretchers, faces red, most gasping pathetically for air. A few claw desperately at their glassy red eyes. Some lay still, unmoving, skin a pale green, their lips a ghostly blue.

At the center of it all, Edwin stands hyper focused and determined. He holds one gasping man’s head steady, trying to pour a bubbling blue potion down his throat. The No-Maj medics stand by their own patients, all just letting Edwin work. The man’s breathing soon evens out, and Edwin hurries over to the next and repeats the process.

Percival remains at the edge of the tent, watching, not daring to distract Edwin. Not now, when the other is doing his best to save struggling lives. It doesn’t matter to him that Edwin is clearly using magical means to aid these soldiers. If he shared Edwin’s talent for healing, he would be doing the same. MACUSA would tell him to stop Edwin, to let these men suffocate, but to him, lives come before secrecy.

Only when all the still breathing men have been tended to, does Edwin finally look up from his patients. He wipes the sweat from his forehead with a clean rag, letting out a sound of relief. Opening his eyes, Edwin finally notices Percival and freezes.

He looks away as if ashamed, hands suddenly twitchy like they are grasping for some sort of explanation. Percival just waits for him. They couldn’t have this conversation across the tent. It would be better to have some privacy.

It doesn’t take long for Edwin to relent, and he quietly makes his way over to Percival. “I’m not ashamed of helping these men.” Edwin says with the same determination he had administered the potions.

“I wouldn’t ask you to be,” Percival replies, arms crossed. “You did good work. But I do wish you
let me know you were coming here. I had to find out from Theseus of all people.”

Edwin sinks in on himself, resolve slipping. “I didn’t have much time to think about it. I was informed that people were dying and I hurried over as fast as I could.” Softer he adds, “And I was afraid of a possibility where you tried to stop me.”

“I thought I made it clear that I supported you helping the No-Majs.” Percival rubs the bridge of his nose. Was his reputation really so stern that Edwin couldn’t believe him? “I suppose it doesn’t matter. What happened here? Who told you to come?”

Edwin stiffens further. “It was... um... Lieutenant Harris. After we saved him on the front lines, I’ve been keeping in touch with him. Not giving too much away, but still, I’ve learned so much just... *talking* to a No-Maj.” He swallows as if waiting for a punishment that will never come. Percival is surprised, yes, but that is a conversation for another day. “He informed me there had been a... well, they are calling it a gas attack. It’s something new. The Germans apparently used it further North, but I guess it’s spreading through their forces now. Harris said his people still are working on a countermeasure but until then...” He looks behind him at the men, most now breathing, but it is clear a few didn’t make it. “Horrible stuff. Makes the victims suffocate on their own lungs. I swear, the No-Majs are getting closer and closer to dark arts. I’d say this had to be a creation of a Dark Wizard, but not one of these men had a trace of magic on them.”

Chills run down Percival’s spine at the description alone. He looks over at the likely dead men, overcome with sympathy. That had to be a horrible way to go.

However, it seems that thanks to Edwin, the majority of the men in this station will live. That much is a miracle. “I’m glad you were here then.”

“If you didn’t come here to chastise me, then why did you come?”

“Oh, of course.” The letter. It had nearly been forgotten amongst all the events. But after this trying time, he’s just glad to bring something good to Edwin. “We finally received mail that wasn’t half-assed praise from MACUSA.” Percival locates the neatly folded letter from Luciana and hands it over.

“Really?” Edwin perks up, face brightening upon reading the words in Luciana’s careful, flowy handwriting. The longer he reads, the more conflicted he looks. “If she only knew what I’ve been doing, she’d probably think I’m a disappointment, playing as loose with the Statute as we have.”

Percival shakes his head. “Edwin, you are the furthest thing MACUSA has from a disappointment, regardless of what the higher-ups think. If anything, I’m sure Luciana would respect you if she heard all the things you’ve done here. She may be a very by the books Auror, but I also know her well enough to know she respects doing the right thing; which, you have done continuously since arriving. I know my respect for you has only grown since we were sent on this mission.”

Edwin smiles softly at that. “Thank you, that means a lot. I just... all I want to do is help people. And if that means going against MACUSA’s wishes then so be it.”

Percival starts to wonder. In these few months, Edwin had only done what he thought to be right, not letting anyone, MACUSA, the British wizards, or even Percival himself get in his way.

Perhaps Percival didn’t need to be so lonely within MACUSA, keeping everything to himself. Perhaps Edwin would want to hear that he isn’t the only one in America with an idealist’s mindset.

If only Percival could get in touch with Gellert. He’d ask, insist even that someone like Edwin, full
of heart and optimism be let in on the grand scheme. If Edwin is willing to keep secrets from
MACUSA now, Percival trusts him to know everything.

But he can’t be completely sure of what Gellert would say… can’t even be sure if Gellert will ever
get back to him. So until then, he places a comforting hand on Edwin’s shoulder. “All I ask is you be
careful. Don’t run off like this again. If it involves doing the right thing, I’ll support you entirely. Just
trust me.”

Edwin pauses, taking in Percival’s words. “I will.”

That resolved, Percival looks back into the dressing station. Medics still check on the breathing
patients and drape the dead in a white sheet. Next to the stretchers where some lay, bottles of empty
potion still remain.

Percival grimaces. “I’ll need to obliviate these people. Too many witnesses. It’s different when it’s
one person, but these are dozens of soldiers, most with sound minds. If it gets out that there’s a man
distributing miracle cures, then MACUSA could learn we’ve been lying to them.”

While Edwin appears uncomfortable from the observation, he doesn’t stop Percival from pulling out
his wand and altering the No-Maj’s memories.

For all his new found freedom, Percival still has to give MACUSA something, obliviating only when
he feels it necessary. He never obliviates Lt. Nathaniel Harris, which Edwin is grateful for.

The next several months are monotonous. Dangerous and just as bloody, but Percival comes to find
that one can grow used to even that. They don’t stay in the same place, often picking up camp and
move where the war zones are more active every couple of months. More and more wizards join and
Percival pulls some strings to hide the mass numbers that come. Their one camp becomes many and
they learn to adapt to every change the war offers. But still, the tasks remain the same, and
battlefields and trenches tend don’t vary much in appearance no matter what part of France they are
in.

He just does his part, helping out the war effort, all while waiting for some news. Just something
from MACUSA that isn’t ‘keep working’ or anything at all from Gellert.

______

February 1916

Auror Graves,

It has come to my attention that it has officially been a year since you and Auror Hawthorne
undertook this mission. In this time, you have done good work. Considering the daunting task, it’s
truly admirable that you have maintained secrecy to the level you have. Your experience overseas
has been invaluable and the pair of you are held in the highest regard. However, as this war shows
no sign of stopping, I still cannot provide a timeframe for you to return home. Good luck. We await
your next report.

Signed,

Director Conroy
Percival’s knuckles grow white as he grips the paper. His blood boils.

A year. A whole fucking year of doing their dirty work and this is what he gets. No thanks. No nothing except the promise of being stuck here even longer.

Good work or not, he wants to go home where bullets aren’t flying every time he leaves the camp. He wants to go back to a place where seeing the wounded with limbs missing and guts outside their bodies are not common sights. The overall state of the war hasn’t changed either so really how much good is he doing? Edwin is saving lives and yet the bloodbaths continue on repeat. Percival may be putting up shields and wards but even those don’t last long to the sheer intensity and prolonged force of an artillery barrage

So he remains stuck in a hellish limbo not knowing when he can see the light.

The letter goes up in flame.

"Must be bad news if you of all people are that angry."

Percival startles, letting the letter’s ash fall to the dirt. He turns and sees Theseus holding a rolled up letter of his own.

"Just more of the same. I'm stuck here while they continue to sit back and do nothing. You would think, after a year, they would finally show some sympathy." Percival shakes his head. "I don't know why I even thought to get my hopes up."

Theseus makes a face and at first, Percival thinks he's being mocked. But instead, he sits next to him, looking at Percival with compassion. "I will never understand America. I don't know how anyone puts up with their policies over there. Everything sounds horribly strict and hypocritical. They deny the war more than anyone but won't let 2 of their most talented come home. You think you would have proven to them by now that we aren't seeking to break the statute."

How desperately he wants to say he agrees. It's on the tip of his tongue, to renounce everything he's claimed to fight for, to let the mask fall off. But not today. He may be pissed off, but he isn't feeling risky. "It's... complicated. I'm sure they have their reasonings."

Theseus studies him, looking hard like he's trying to crack a code. "I'll say it again. I will never understand America or Americans." He opens the owlery and pulls out his personal messenger owl. Once the letter is secured to its foot, Theseus lifts it up to take flight.

"Who's that for?" Percival’s curiosity getting the better of him.

"My younger brother. He's off on the Eastern Front. I hear rumors they're trying to utilize dragons of all things in the war effort over there. I doubt it will work, but I suppose if anyone can do it, it's Newt."

"I am going to pretend I never heard that. I might be able to hide many things from MACUSA but dragons are stretching it."

Theseus actually laughs at that. "I suppose that's a good point. A couple thousand wizards joining up has nothing on a dragon or two. Speaking of... does MACUSA have agents in all parts and sides of the war or are you just the unlucky two?"

Percival ponders the question, trying to remember if MACUSA had ever referenced the greater war.
"I... actually am unsure. When I joined, the only issue was your group. I don't know if there's been as widespread a threat to the Statute since. Aside from the Eastern Front of course, but no one ever believes the Russians anyway."

Theseus laughs even more. "For such a strict and controlling group, you Americans sure are short-sighted." Another chuckle. "Wait here a moment. I'll be right back."

Percival just sits on the dusty ground, leaning back against the owlery cage. How had his life gotten to this point? All his efforts proving himself to an organization he hated backfired. Gellert is still nowhere to be heard from or seen, and Percival's direction gone with him. Where had he gone wrong?

True to his word, Theseus returns, 2 bottles in his hand.

"Authentic British Firewhisky. You looked like you could use some." He offers Percival one of the bottles.

"Thanks." He means it and takes a sip. The burn down his throat is welcome.

Theseus settles down beside him, leaning against the owlery cage as well and drinks from his own bottle. "Sometimes I wonder how it ever got to this point. Muggles getting so bloodthirsty they start a war that covers nearly the entire globe. Advancing so fast it becomes difficult to keep up and adapt to the new ways they learn to kill one another. Professor Dumbledore never prepared us enough for this."

Percival just stares out in the distance. From here they can see the smoke and flashes from the front. It's too much, and he doesn't want to think about it. Not now. He downs another large sip. "Who's Professor Dumbledore?" He asks.

"You don't know who Professor Dumbledore is? Professor Albus Dumbledore? He's only the best Defense Against the Dark Arts professor Hogwarts ever had. Taught practically everyone here."

Theseus beams with pride.

"Well, that's your problem. You all only learned how to defend against Dark Arts. If you had a more rounded American education, such as Defensive Arts under Professor Clairoux, you might have been better prepared." Despite everything weighing him down at the moment, he still finds himself smirking, sipping whiskey as if everything is ok.

"You are an arse." Theseus elbows him, but he's laughing too.

They sit there, drinking and sharing stories from back home. Everything outside might be crumbling and falling apart, but at least now, he has a sliver of normalcy.

Hours later, Percival is sobered up and laying in his tent.

Night falls and Edwin returns from his daily routine. He looks tired and exhausted as always, his uniform covered in blood that is not his own, but cracks a broken smile upon seeing Percival still awake.

Percival hates to be the bearer of bad news, but it's only fair Edwin knows what is going on, that he knows how much MACUSA is forsaking them.

Of course, Edwin slumps at the report. Any false smile he had fades fast.

It would be cruel to let Edwin stand there and focus on the negatives, to let him just go to sleep with
that as the freshest thing in his mind.

So Percival does what Theseus did for him, and offers a distraction. A distraction for both of them if he’s being honest.

It is just a kiss at first, a silent offer. *(Perhaps Percival isn’t as sober as he thinks he is)*

Edwin doesn’t question it. Accepts it even, and then they are kissing like they would have been back in the academy had things been simpler.

If Percival’s thoughts start drifting to Gellert, he doesn’t stop himself. Part of him suspects Edwin isn’t thinking of him either. This isn’t about anything deeper than it should be. It is just about two men seeking comfort in the worst of times.

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*July 1916,*

*Dear Percival,*

*I cannot imagine being in your position, cut off from everything; away from here, not knowing much of what is going on back home. I suppose most of the letters you get discuss how missed you are and such. I thought you would appreciate some updates. I’ve been granted a spot on the council, which is an honor I do not take for granted. There have been minor annoyances popping up, such as a woman who has taken to standing on street corners, trying to preach the dangers of witchcraft. She’s been placed on a watch list but I doubt anything will come of it. Don’t worry about your absence though. Several of us won’t let you be forgotten. When you inevitably return, it will be as an important auror who stood between a war and discovery. The work you and Edwin are doing is a necessary evil, as terrible as it is. The No-Majs can’t possibly keep fighting each other much longer, so I look forward to the day when you return. Everything is so dull without you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Seraphina Picquery*

Rain dots the paper as he reads, words only remaining intact due to whatever enchanted ink Seraphina had used. Not that he cares. It’s hard to care about anything these days, especially any mindless news from back home.

He’s tired. Tired of this war, tired of MACUSA, tired of everything. The last few weeks have been more draining than any he’s experienced in a long time.

The artillery fire never stops, the No-Majs somehow keep it up for weeks at a time. It’s gotten to the point where some of the noise and rumble of the ground creeps past their shields, making it difficult to ever truly relax and rest. All of it a constant reminder of the death and destruction outside.

With the increased amount of firepower, it also means their shields get weakened faster. Thus they rotate shifts at a hurried rate. No one gets more than a few hours of sleep at most. Despite the large influx of wizards joining them, it’s still difficult to keep up with everything. This war has covered so
much ground that a couple thousand wizards get spread thin very quickly, camps have divided, leaving fewer wizards per area.

While Percival has had his own struggles, Edwin has had it worse. Healers are fewer than they would like out here, and even fewer have developed Edwin’s new found love for No-Majs. As a result, Edwin has barely had a break if any from his healing duties.

No-Majs have been falling like flies, and Percival knows Edwin uses all his effort to save as many as he can. Everyone he can’t visibly weighs the other down.

That isn’t even the extent of what Edwin has been doing either. As more and more wizards join, it’s apparent many of them have no business being here. Too many come cocky, barely out of school. They don’t listen to words of caution and rush out to play the hero. Either their survival instincts kick in at the last minute, or they learn they aren’t invincible in the worst of ways. Bullets, shrapnel, and gas all hurt an unprepared wizard the same as a No-Maj. Edwin treats the lucky ones.

“Graves,” An older wizard calls after him. “You’re up next.”

Percival groans and shoves the soaked letter into his bag. He pushes up from the ground, wincing as his fingers cake themselves in the mud. Of course, he’d end up on a rainy shift. “What’s it like out there?” He asks, letting the falling rain wash the layer of mud away.

The wizard shrugs. “Unpleasant, but when is it not? At least the shooting has slowed since the rain started up.”

“Little blessings I suppose.” But Percival doesn’t mean it. He hates doing rounds when it’s pouring. While it may be somewhat safer, everything becomes so much more tedious.

Still, he won’t complain. He knows his duties. Everyone must do their part, and this isn’t the worst he’s had to put up with. Standing tall, he sucks in a breath. Having the right mindset could make the difference between Edwin pulling a bullet out or coming back unscathed.

First, he circles the camp space, finding areas where the shields have grown weaker and repairs them. Wards are strengthened making it harder to detect their location, illusions and repellents are put in place to keep out any No-Maj away. Alarms are reset to ensure anyone who doesn’t belong, wizard or No-Maj alike, can’t wander in. As much as he wants to cast an umbrella charm over the whole space, he knows he can’t. Too risky as it could give their location away.

How he wishes they only had to worry about keeping No-Majs out. That much would have been easy. But the longer the war has gone on, the more apparent it has been that wizards haven’t just joined alongside the Allied forces. Just as the British and French wizards have been looking after those from their homeland, so have those from Germany. Not that Percival could blame them, but it makes everything far more difficult.

With their campsite tended to, and personal protections and charms cast, he makes his way into the trenches.

It’s raining hard, the sound of the downpour mixing in all too well with the ratatat of the guns, distant thunder almost indistinguishable from the firing of another artillery shell. The moment his foot crosses the barrier, he steps into a deep puddle. With a sigh, he points his wand at the ground, carving out a drain deep into the earth. Flooding, while an annoyance to Percival, is as much a danger to the soldiers who walk these paths as German gunfire.

From there, he continues through his usual route, repeating the process wherever the water has gotten
out of control. Soldiers pass by as he does so, none paying him any attention thanks to the disillusionment charm.

The trench walls have collapsed in various places as well. Another hazard caused by the weather. For these instances, he makes sure no No-Maj is in eyesight before murmuring a quick ‘Reparo’.

Every few minutes, he does as he did upon his first arrival over a year ago and sees if he can detect any magical presence. Since learning of the growing German wizard presence, Percival and the others have kept an eye out for signs of their activity. They haven’t found anything too malicious yet, annoyances mostly, but they’ve learned to always be alert.

While in the middle of dispelling a surveillance spell left by one such wizard, Percival hears a familiar voice coming down the path.

“I still can’t believe the Corporal sent that entire platoon to their deaths.” Nathaniel Harris mutters, hushed and angry. “You’d think he’d learn that sending men to charge across No Man’s Land exposed never works.”

“You know he never will.” Says another man, more carefully. “Them higher ups don’t care about any of us.”

Percival finishes up the dispelling but keeps an ear open on their conversation. Curiosity gets the better of him. The other voice is familiar too, Tim, Percival recalls. One of the other soldiers under Harris’s command.

The pair doesn’t get much further in their conversation. The moment they come round, Harris pauses, gaze focused right on Percival. The No-Maj could see him, even through his charms… an unwanted side effect of not obliviating him Percival thinks. Damn.

Quickly hiding his wand, he dispels his own charm before Harris can confuse his companion. He does so just in time.

“Ah, Graves, it’s good to see you in one piece. It’s been a while.”

Percival nods. “It has been Lieutenant.”

“Captain actually. I was promoted not too long ago.” He smiles a tired smile that had become all too common. But even that shifts back to the anger he spoke with earlier. “Many of us were.” He shakes his head. “Is it still Private for you? Edwin is never exactly clear on the structure of your… organization.”

Percival knows Lieutenant… Captain Harris remains in communication with Edwin, but he never thought much about it until now. Edwin may not have shared enough to the point of causing an international scene yet, but still, he really should keep an eye on it before it gets too out of hand.

None of this worry he lets show. He stands as casual as a soldier in a flooding trench can be. “Just Graves is fine. Our organization doesn’t follow the same military titles as the rest of you.” The soldier next to Captain Harris bristles at the lack of rank, but Percival gives him no mind. “Forgive my eavesdropping, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.”

Tim steps forward, defensive. “And what of it? An outsider like you would be better off keeping out of our business.”

Captain Harris raises an arm and Tim begrudgingly backs down. “It’s alright. He may be an outsider but I trust these Americans with my life. I wouldn’t be here without them.” He turns back to Percival.
“Do you remember the Major who assigned you to my platoon? Large, angry mustached man?”

Memories of the stern man yelling at everyone on and off the train come to mind. Percival nods in recognition.

“Well, that man was Major, now Colonel Henderson. Since his promotion, power has gone to his head. Even more so than before.” Captain Harris glances around, making sure there are no more prying ears. “He isn’t even a general and yet he struts around like he owns the place. Of course until the action gets remotely risky and he slinks back off to the sidelines.”

Tim, wariness vanishing, adds. “Claims he’s just following the orders from those in charge, but I dunno. Things have always been bad but it feels like it’s only gotten worse.”

“So many of the soldiers I knew, my friends, men I would gladly call brothers, have been killed, following orders that no sane man would give.” The Captain pauses, jaw clenched. “I’ve seen men charge straight into barbed wire, machine gun fire mow down men on an open field. If these really are the orders coming from the top, then everyone has lost their goddamn minds. Nothing is ever gained, no one ever learns. We’re just cannon fodder to lunatics.”

Percival gapes. He had heard things were bad, but he had thought the bloodshed to be standard for any type of warfare. If what Captain Harris said is true, then the No-Majs are being led by the worst kind of people. Carefully, he can’t help but probe further. “Why do you all stay with such an unjust system?”

The question catches both men off guard. Apparently, neither is used to such a blunt question.

Captain Harris is the first to compose himself. “I take it you mean aside from the fact that we would be court-martialed and shot for treason?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.” Could things really be so bad to these men? Are their only choices truly to follow insane orders or face deadly consequences? This is worse than he could ever imagine.

The Captain continues. “I know this all must seem like madness to you as an outsider, and I agree wholeheartedly. But you have to understand, we British love our country. I have a great deal of pride in England, and I could never just abandon that no matter how terrible it gets. It’s just those in charge who are the problem.”

That has Percival wondering… Theseus and the rest of the wizards in the British camps act the same way. Did they really have to be separate? If everything is truly so horrible under No-Maj rule, especially to No-Majs themselves, then could they be open to letting someone else come in and fix that mess? “I have a hypothetical question for you two. If you could just change your government overnight, I don’t mean by losing the war, but to something completely different, would you?”

They take in Percival’s question, the Captain’s face furrowed, lost in thought. After a long pause, he slowly nods, as if ashamed at his own answer. “If it meant ending so much suffering, then absolutely.”

Tim nods as well, relieved after hearing Captain Harris’s response. “Yeah, if it’d mean a return to a little sanity, then it’d be worth it.”

Hope tugs at Percival. It’s small, just two representatives of a whole people, but it’s something. If two No-Majs are open to the possibility of change, then more could exist. The utopia Percival had dreamed about since childhood is possible. Some good could come from this horrible war.

“Thank you for being honest.” Percival smiles but changes the subject before they question his
motives. “I just hope we can all move on from this sooner rather than later.”

Captain Harris nods solemnly. “I completely agree. I’ve lost enough friends and then some. I just wish I could do more for my men.”

“I see why Edwin likes you so much.” Percival tries to offer some sympathy. “You both want to help everyone.”

Harris shakes his head. “I’m not as good at it.” A sorrowful sigh escapes him. “Well, as much as I’d love to stay and chat, Tim and I must report back to the Corporal. Stay safe Graves.”

“Good luck out there.” Percival lets them pass.

He resumes his usual tasks, but now, he has much to think about. Before, he never focused on No-Majs as separate from those that rule them. Are all No-Majs so bad? No, despite the war around him, he’s learned enough to know they are just as powerless in an unjust system. There are good people amongst them, all they need is a point in the right direction and someone to lead them to a better world.

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September 1916,

Dear Percy,

Not a day goes by that I am not thinking about you. I miss you dearly my little Percy. Your dad has tried to tell me to not worry, that MACUSA wouldn’t have sent you over there for so long if you didn’t know what you were doing, but it never puts my mind at ease. In all his years of being an auror, he was never sent away for nearly two years. I know MACUSA thinks they know best, but it’s inhumane, keeping you away from your home, from your family, all for the sake of their stupid Statute. I wish I visited you more often, that we saw one another before MACUSA sent you to France. But none of us could have predicted what that war became, nor how stubborn MACUSA would be about it. No matter what happens, just know I love you more than anything. Please stay safe.

Love,

Momma

P.S. I hope the package of sweets made it.

Percival’s heart aches with every line. He hasn’t written to her once since arriving in France. Why hasn’t he written? Why has it never occurred to him? Is he really that terrible of a son?

As specified, the letter came with a small sealed metal tin. Unclasping it, underneath a beautiful flower-patterned cloth, lay a batch of homemade banoffee tart.

His eyes water.

After all this time during the war, of being ‘too busy to visit’ when he had been home, she still remembers his favorite treat.
An anxious pit has grows inside him, making hunger impossible, but still, he treasures the gift all the same. He reseals the tin for later, but not before removing the cloth and tucking it into his uniform pocket, a reminder of home to carry with him.

The thoughts of home and his momma don’t go away for the rest of the day. It should be a comfort, but instead, it hangs over his head, a reminder of everything he’s missing and how nothing ever changes here.

Today is just supposed to be a routine patrol day. Nothing special or complicated, just the standard patrol around the camp and trenches. Usually, he’s able to go about his business, focused and efficient. It’s hard to concentrate though after having read that letter. He’s distracted, head swimming with a million thoughts. He thought he had gotten used to the grime and muck, of the ever-present danger, of just being away from home. Clearly, he had just been lying to himself if all it takes is one letter to remind him how much he hates it here.

Rather than focusing on where fortifications should be tightened, he’s running over everything he’ll say to Momma when he finally gets back home. He’ll be a better son, visit every week. He’ll even put up with his aging grandfather’s nonsense to do so.

A distant cry of distress interrupts his thoughts.

He’s in an emptier section of the trench close to the front lines. The sound is a sob of pain, coming, not from the underground levels of the trenches. No, this sob can be heard above, past the front… which means it has to be a soldier stuck in No-Man’s Land.

He pales. As terrible as it is, they’ve had to grow used to ignoring such cases. Even Edwin has had to admit fetching such wounded men is too dangerous, at least during a day with clear skies, a day like today. Wizards have lost their lives in the past attempting to rescue those unfortunate men.

Percival should just pass by, tell those assigned to night rounds of the soldier in hopes the man would still be alive by then.

But he doesn’t.

He heads toward the cries.

Whether it be sympathy born from his sudden rush of sentimentality, thoughts of how that soldier likely has a family for him waiting at home, has a mother of his own who wants to see her son, or whether it just be a stupid lapse of judgment, he finds himself on the front. He hurriedly casts protections and an invisibility charm, and starts climbing over the top.

In all his time in the war, he hasn’t gotten a good look at No-Man’s Land. Wizards have kept to the sidelines, for the most part, aiding where they can in the shadows. Here, out in the open, he can see why the No-Majs fear this contested area so much.

It’s hell. An apocalyptic wasteland. Nothing is alive as far as he can see. The earth is a wreck, scarred with shell holes, barbed wire stretching across like a botched attempt at stitches. Bodies lay unmoving, sinking into the ground or grotesquely propped up on the wire. This is what the end of the world will look like, Percival is sure of it.

He can’t take it in for too long though. Invisible as he may be, he’s still wide open to stray bullets out here. Keeping low to the ground, he keeps moving, trying his hardest to drown out the sound of gunshots and find the source of the cries.

The further out he moves, the louder the sound it gets. Running from shell hole to shell hole, he
keeps searching. He’s getting close.

He’s in the middle, right between the German and the Allied fortifications. How did this soldier get all the way out here? He can’t recall an offensive maneuver being attempted within the last day.

But he’s too far to turn back and he knows the soldier has to be near.

“Please! Please help!” The pained plea is finally clear.

Percival scans the immediate area. The soldier has to be here. Just one shell hole over. He makes a run for it, slipping in the mud, but letting his momentum slide him all the way into the pit.

It’s so hard to see anything out here, with everything covered in upturned earth. But he can make out a uniform, a helmet glinting in the sun. Percival lets out a relieved sigh and drops the illusion, making himself visible. “It’s ok. Help is here.”

He reaches down, ready to make an attempt at apparating him and the obscured soldier.

But his hands touch nothing. There is a helmet and supply bag, and even a uniform yes, but not the injured man he came out here to rescue.

Before Percival can draw any conclusion, there is a flash of red light, and everything around him goes black.
Percival blinks heavily as consciousness slowly creeps back in. Shaking his head, he fights away the fog of sleep. He needs to wake up. Where is he? From his position, he is in a chair. His wrists itch uncomfortably, ropes restraining him to the chairback. He can’t panic, not until he has a better idea of the situation. Eyes finally open and he does his best to take in his surroundings.

The room is small, dark and dimly lit from both sides by a glowing unnatural bluish light, distinctive of a Lumos spell. His captors have to be wizards. Eyes adapt to the space, and Percival realizes he isn’t alone. Three soldiers surround him, all in grey uniforms, each muttering to each other in what must be German. None of which he can understand.

He needs to get out of here.

One of the Germans glances over at him, a twisted smirk on his face. Percival struggles, tugging at his binds. He needs hiswand. Where is his wand?

The smirking German takes a step closer. Percival will let him be cocky, to think Percival is helpless. “Where am I?” He asks, turning towards all three as best he can.

None offer a reply.

“What, do none of you speak English?” Percival muses in an arrogant tone.

They look between each other, confused. No matter, Percival isn’t asking for conversation. Rather, he’s plotting out where all three are, distracting them as all his concentration flows into burning the ropes at his wrists.

One pulls out his wand and turns to the others, saying yet another phrase Percival cannot comprehend. He looks irritated and nears, ready to strike.

The soldier lifts his wand, an incantation at his lips, but Percival is faster. The ropes fall to the ground and Percival darts back, casting a protection just in time. A red stupify spell bounces off his hasty shield charm. Wand or not, Percival is more than capable of defending himself.
All three men look shocked.

With the opening they have given him, he shouts “Expelliarmus!” with a tugging motion of his hand, and their wands fly into his grasp.

One of the men turns, heading for the door. No, Percival can’t let him escape. He thrusts one of the soldiers’ own wands towards the runner and with a flash of red, the man falls hard against the ground.

The other two still try and scramble away, neither clearly possessing a talent with wandless magic, but Percival subdues them just the same. They fall in a pile right before the door, leaving Percival alone with three unconscious bodies.

Finally.

As one last precaution, he runs a quick series of tests in the room, making sure no one is watching or listening. Only when they come back negative, does Percival feel safe.

He slumps down on the dirt floor, his back against the wooden wall and takes a deep breath. His whole body trembles as his predicament finally sinks in. From what he’s gathered, he’s across enemy lines, all alone. No Edwin or Theseus, or any of the other wizards he’s grown used to counting on as of late. He doesn’t even know where his wand is. That somehow feels like the biggest blow. The ebony wand had always been at his side, only ever away from him during the holidays at Ilvermorny.

His first thought is to simply cast a summoning charm, but it would be too risky in a war zone. Despite their importance, wands are fragile, wooden with no chance against a stray bullet. He can only hope his captors took it with them.

Kneeling next to the unconscious bodies, Percival meticulously goes through their belongings, checking every pouch, pocket, and bag. The more he checks, the more frantic he becomes, tossing belts to the side, removing boots.

They don’t have it. Fuck.

A sinking feeling bubbles up inside of him, his head swimming at the thought of never getting his wand back.

But he can’t let himself fall victim to the panic attack threatening to consume him. Now is not the time. Rather, he should put all his focus into getting back where he belongs. Standing up straight, Percival composes himself and gets his bearings.

He isn’t wandless, quite the opposite. In fact, he holds three. Giving each of them a bit of a wave, he tests each out, seeing which flows the best with his magic. He settles on the longest of the three, a gnarled spiked blackthorne. Visually, it couldn’t be further from his elegant ebony, but practically, it feels the closest.

Knowing these men could wake up at any time, Percival snaps the remaining wands in two. Based on how they attempted to run, Percival is essentially crippling them for the remainder of the war.

Now, he can plot his escape.

Under the thin metal door, Percival feels chill air blowing by every few moments; no light, though. If he left now, he would be in the open, under the cover of darkness. Honestly, the circumstances were better than one would expect. His first priority is to get far away from any German wizards. He can
worry about getting back to the British camp later.

Pressing his ear against the door, he listens out for any sign of activity. Footsteps, and from the sound of it, they are moving closer. Gripping the blackthorn wand, he moves to the side of the door, waiting in anticipation. He will not be caught off guard.

The steps get louder and Percival raises the wand. Any moment now.

With a creak, the door swings open, and a figure steps inside, pausing at the unconscious men.

Now is his chance, the spell is on tip of his tongue. But then the stranger speaks.

“Oh my, this is a mess.”

Wait. Percival knows that voice. He gasps, because no, it couldn’t be.

The figure turns around, Percival having given himself away, and he is looking right at Gellert Grindelwald.

The wand slowly lowers in Percival’s hand as he fully takes in Gellert’s appearance. His hair is much shorter, cut and shaved at the sides like Percival’s, the top slicked back. Gone is the black robe like coat, replaced with the same German No-Maj uniform as the unconscious wizards on the floor. Despite it all, he looks as handsome as ever.

Gellert stares at the wand though and raises a questioning brow. “I know this must be confusing for you, Percy dear. Unfortunately my plan did not go as smooth as I hoped. These imbeciles were supposed to retrieve me before you woke up, so you would have a familiar face to greet you.”

No, this is all too convenient. He wakes up behind enemy lines, defends himself, only to see his leader, a man he adores, who has been absent from his life for too long. It’s far too good to be true.

Auror senses kick in and he holds the wand back up. “Revelio”

Only for nothing to change.

Gellert smirks playfully. “I assure you Percy it’s—”

But he’s cut off, Percival, unable to help himself from crossing the distance between them, pulls Gellert into a strong hug. “It’s been two years.” He stammers. “Two years with no contact, no...nothing.” He holds Gellert tight, as if the man would drift away again if he loosens his grip even slightly.

There’s a pause before Percival feels the hug returned. Gellert’s arms wrap around his back, one hand stroking his shoulder. “I know, dear. When the war finally hit, everything became so chaotic. By the time I had a chance to get back to you, much to my horror, you were swept up in it as well.”

Since he came to France, Percival hasn’t felt as safe as he does now. He buries his face in the crook of Gellert’s neck, underneath the grime, he still smells all the same. Even so, Percival can’t help but feel a twinge of irritation. “You could have sent a message, instructions, anything…”

“I know you are smarter than that,” Gellert hums, unbothered. “As soon as you joined the British camp, it became much more difficult to communicate with you. I couldn’t send an owl without fear that anyone would intercept a letter, nor could I send a patronus or visit in person since I had no idea when you would be alone.”

Gellert just shrugs. “It was the only safe way to get in touch with you. I tried to come up with an alternative, but I had to ensure your secrecy.”

Percival could still think of other ways, but it already happened. He won’t spend his first moments seeing Gellert being mad at him. He takes a moment, closing his eyes, calming himself down. When he opens them, he has a renewed sense of focus. “What do you need me to do? I doubt you went through all that effort without reason.”

“Yes, yes, but there is no reason to be hasty. You have only just arrived. We can discuss the particulars of my mission for you later.”

“Gellert, it is wonderful to see you again, but I should get back to my camp. While I’m more than happy to do whatever you need of me, I imagine my group will be looking for me come nightfall.”

“One day won’t matter too much. Stay the night with me. We can take our time, get caught up on the two years we’ve been apart. And then discuss the future.” He takes Percival's hand and entwines their fingers. Leaning down, he presses a kiss right on Percival's knuckles. "Then once you are well rested, I will return you to a place you may easily find your camp from.”

Part of Percival wants to protest. He thinks of Theseus, of Edwin, panicking as it becomes clearer that he won’t be returning anytime soon. But he’s never been able to deny Gellert. For all he’s put into this war he wanted no part of, he deserves to spend this one night in Gellert’s arms. “Okay. That seems reasonable.”

“Good. I missed you.” An arm drapes over Percival’s shoulder and Gellert leans in, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Percival smiles sheepishly, leaning into the touch. It’s easy to forget men are dying by the hundreds right outside when he’s here with Gellert. One arm rest against his lover’s back, his other grips the not-right wand. Feeling the off weight reminds him of the most pressing issue. “Do you know what happened to my wand? I couldn’t find it anywhere in here.”

“They didn’t take it with them when they retrieved you?” Gellert asks in surprise.

“No, I even searched them before you arrived.” Percival gestures towards the unconscious forms.

Gellert scrunches his face. “Those idiots couldn’t do anything right.” Somberly, he bows his head. “I am sorry then. I have no idea where it could be.”

Percival still can’t accept the possibility his wand is gone. It’s an extension of himself. He can’t just forget about it. “Can we not go back and look for it? We could look where they captured me. If it’s not here, it has to be there or around there, right?”

“It’s not safe Percy. To go back out there and spend the time wandering No-Man’s Land, searching for a black wand in the dark, is akin to looking for a needle in a haystack, while artillery and machine gun fire rain down. I know it’s terrible to hear, but really, you need to wait at least until this part of the battlefield has calmed down. I’d hate for anything to happen to you.”

As much as he despises to admit it, the warning makes sense. Even with magic and tracking, it would be near impossible to find it in the ever changing landscape of No-Man’s land. Percival deflates.

“You must be starving.” Gellert says in a voice Percival has grown to know he’s purposely changing
subjects. “Let’s get out of this dingey room and grab some food. It’ll be good to get your mind off the things we cannot change now.”

Slowly, Percival nods. His grip tightens on the blackthorn wand, knuckles going white in frustration. Gellert is right. He can’t do anything, but letting his emotions get the better of him in a warzone is dangerous. “Fine. I don’t even know how long I was out. I could use a meal.”

“Wonderful.” Gellert beams, and points his wand at Percival’s wrists.

Percival yelps as thick cords tug his arms behind his back, restraining him.

“Sorry, dear. While I had them bring you here on my orders, we still can’t have the rest of the camp thinking you are my guest rather than my prisoner. To them you are still an enemy. I’m sure you understand though. Secrecy and roleplaying should be second nature to you at this point.” Gellert even tugs the blackthorn wand out from Percival’s clenched hand and tucks it into his own belt instead.

Percival grumbles. “Still, some warning would have been appreciated.”

Gellert just laughs and places a guiding hand on Percival’s back. Pushing gently, he leads him past the metal door, stepping over the three unconscious bodies who still litter the ground.

“Should we do something about them?” Percival asks.

“No, I’ll let the other guards know about the mess you left in there. They can handle whatever disciplinary action needs to be taken. I’m not the one in charge over here.”

Gellert guides him up some wooden stairs embedded in the dirt. They had been underground, not dissimilar from the No-Maj trench network. A campsite opens up. Brown and sand color tents lay in rows, dozens of them. There’s a flurry of activity, men scurrying in and out, several patrolling around the site.

Two such guards approach as they come into view. One raises his wand suspiciously, the other gestures at Percival, grunting words Percival cannot understand.

Gellert, in that same language, casually responds. He points back at the cell they just came from and then jerks Percival forward. He mutters more of an explanation in harsh tones, and points over to a far tent.

One of the men rushes down the stairs they just came from, the other just glares at Percival and nods. Whatever it is Gellert said to them, the guards will apparently let them pass on through.

Percival keeps his mouth shut and does his best to look furious at the situation. He’s supposed to be a prisoner, not a man guided by his lover. Gellert makes it easy to pretend though. His grip on Percival’s arm is painful and he continues to yank and tug him. Percival stumbles a few times and he’s sure his arm will bruise later. But he knows Gellert doesn’t mean it. It’s just all an act.

They arrive at a tent on the far end of camp. If not for the muted colors, grime covering their clothes, and all around uncomfortableness, it reminds Percival of the time they spent together during the World Cup. The thought alone has his chest flutter in a way it hasn’t for years.

Once inside, Gellert casts a barrier on the tent entrance, and finally undoes the incarcerous spell that had bound Percival’s wrists. “Welcome to my little home away from home. Unfortunately, it isn’t much, but we all must make due with what we have in times of war.”
Percival gasps in relief, rubbing at where the magical ropes had held him. “It’s fine. I’ve grown used to similar accommodations.” Looking around, he takes in the single room, just as utilitarian as Gellert described. It’s lit with the same eerie lumos sort of light from the cell. A bed takes up a large portion of the space, though it still looks like two bodies would have to squeeze to fit on it. A trunk rests at the foot of the bed, a bit of cloth hanging out. In the corner, there’s a writing desk stacked with books and parchment.

All in all, it’s far smaller than what they had at the World Cup, and even smaller than the tent he shares with Edwin. Not that he’s complaining, simply he has grown to associate Gellert with things grander than his own.

“Please, have a seat. I assure you the bed is quite comfortable.”

Percival takes the offered spot, relaxing into the cushions. Before coming to France, he would have never soiled sheets with clothing as disgusting as his uniform, but such civility had been one of the first things he had to abandon if he wanted to keep his sanity. Tiredness creeps in. Being knocked out in that cell chair was far from restful and the adrenaline from his escape attempt is wearing off. His eyes shut, though they don’t stay that way.

A clink of ceramic plates has Percival alert again. One had to be this attentive to the smallest sound in the trenches.

Gellert chuckles. “It’s just me.” He hands over the simple plate. “I believe I offered you a meal.”

“Yes, of course.” Percival holds out the plate steady, giving Gellert the chance to conjure a bit of food. A roll, slice of cheese, and a bit of jerky shimmer into existence.

“I wish I could provide you something more substantial, but unfortunately with the war, good food is more and more scarce thanks to the Muggles.” Gellert sits down next to Percival before conjuring a similar meal on his own plate. “All of Europe is a mess.”

Percival picks up the bread roll, pleased to find it’s warm and fresh. “We’ve encountered similar issues in our camp. I don’t mind though.” He gives Gellert a soft smile before taking a bite.

They just sit comfortably together as they eat. Any distance between them closes and Percival feels Gellert pressed right against his side. It’s simple but he feels more at home now than he has in years. His leg brushes against Gellert’s and Gellert playfully bumps his foot against Percival’s.

Between bites, Percival’s curiosity gets the better of him. “Gellert, forgive me if I’m overstepping my boundaries by asking, but why are you here? I was under the impression you wanted us to keep far away from interfering on the war itself. You never let me in on your plans.”

“No, not at all. After what you have been through, I suppose you do deserve some sort of explanation. I, along with many of my other followers, have been recruiting, getting our message out to whomever we think would be willing to hear. After all, the wizards in these trenches are seeing first hand why the muggles cannot go unchecked any longer. By building comradery with them, they will have grown to trust me and be on my side when the time comes.”

Everything Gellert says makes perfect sense. The topic even reminds Percival of something he had been meaning to ask Gellert for a while now. “An auror I came with… Edwin, he’s a healer… I think he’d be willing to join our cause.”

“Really now?” Gellert hums. “After all this time you never thought about recruiting anyone else. It is a lot to risk your position like that. What makes you think he should be privy to everything?”
While he appreciates Gellert’s caution, Percival still remains confident in Edwin. “He was ready to break the statute even before I was. Considering how brainwashed most MACUSA employees are, often ready to ignore No-Maj’s in need, it means a great deal.”

Gellert strokes his chin. “How about this. We wait until after the chaos of the war passes, and then I shall speak to him. Until then, continue to hold off mentioning anything to him, just so we can be sure. Is that fair?”

Percival nods eagerly, thoughts of finally having a confidant at MACUSA filling his head.

“Good. I look forward to meeting the boy.”

From there, they swap stories of what they have been through. Percival talks more about Edwin, of Theseus, of his experiences in the trenches, and even of Captain Harris. Gellert talks about some of the men he’s met on the German side, and a few of the more gruesome sights he’s witnessed. All in all, the war doesn’t seem much different no matter which side one is on.

When they’ve finished with their small meals, Gellert pushes off from the bed and takes their plates. “We best be getting back to business.” He places them down on the desk in the corner and returns with a stack of newspapers. “I don’t know if you’ve seen any of these lately.”

“No I haven’t. MACUSA never sends me one.” Percival goes through the papers. There’s an assortment from the New York Ghost, the Daily Prophet, and even the French and German wizarding papers. Percival taps the blackthorn wand against the ones he can’t read, until the letters shift into something he can understand. Gellert gives him time to skim through them all, reading various news he’s missed out on.

Though there’s one thing that stands out above all else. Not one of them mentions the war.

He goes through them multiple times, searching for any article or just vague acknowledgement. Nothing. The American one isn’t surprising. But the British one…? the French? France is being torn apart, and yet they appear just as eager to pretend everything is fine.

“They can’t be serious.” Percival shakes the paper. “People are dying out here, wizards included. This is insanity.”

Gellert nods solemnly. “I know, it’s frustrating. No matter how awful things become, they stick their head in the sand.” But then Gellert stands up straight, tall, and determined. “I have been working on a plan to remedy this though, force them to stop ignoring such tragedy.” More quietly he adds, “But I doubt you will like it.”

“What is it? You know I want to help any way I can.”

“If you insist.” Gellert goes back to the desk, and pulls out a large rolled up paper. With a swish and flick of his wand, it unravels, leaving a giant map floating in the center of the tent; it’s of France, the trench lines shimmering. “I’m sure your group has taken notice of us doing surveillance.” Gellert waves his hand and the lines shift, the map moving, zooming in. “This is where we are right now.” He points at a space on the German side of the lines. His finger trails down, what would only be a few miles away. “And this is where your camp is.”

Percival watches closely. At least Gellert is using the German intelligence for a better purpose.

Gellert moves the map slightly South, still along the trenches, but to an area Percival knows to be a quiet sector, much less contested than the areas the No-Maj’s have been concentrated in. He points at a spot nestled between two calmer stretches of trenchline. “A small town is situated here, one entirely
of wizards and witches. It’s not marked on any muggle maps, and they’ve managed to keep hidden away from the fighting despite being so close to it. They, like so many of the other French, still pretend the war doesn’t exist, even though it is quite literally right at their doorstep.”

Percival tries to take it all in, attentively following along.

Then, Gellert, with a calculating, emotionless voice says, “I believe we should bring the fight to them, lead the muggles to that area. They can’t keep pretending they are safe if soldiers are pouring through their streets.”

Percival goes cold. “But… innocent people live there. That can’t be right.”

“Their complacency makes them just as guilty as the many soldiers who are here against their will in my eyes. The world we live in is not fair or reasonable. Not yet. Until then, we must be willing to go to certain lengths to make it so.”

This is too much. Standing, unable to sit still at Gellert’s heavy words, Percival paces through the tent. “This is crazy. Even if I wanted to do this, how would I even go about making the No-Majs do anything. We don’t have any power over their armies.”

“You’ve seen so much horror and yet you still remain as innocent as ever.” Gellert looks up at him curiously. “You know we have ways of making muggles do whatever we want them to. Nothing can truly be called unforgivable if it’s for the greater good.”

How can Gellert ask him to do this so casually? To bring the worst of humanity to an unsuspecting village just living their lives. His head is swimming right now and he can’t even think of a response.

“Think of it this way.” Gellert says calmly, placing a gentle hand on his back. “They need to know they aren’t safe. Ignorance is no way to live. It’s only a matter of time before a stray shell or cloud of gas comes their way. This way, we have control of the situation. We should act before that choice is taken out of our hands. I know it’s hard to accept. But revolutions never start without difficult decisions.”

Percival just stands there, stiffly, unmoving.

A hand comes up to stroke Percival’s cheek. “You can have some time to think it over. There isn’t a rush. Not yet.”

Even with Gellert touching him, he can’t relax. It feels like Gellert has placed the weight of the world on his shoulders. He sees the logic behind Gellert’s proposed plan, but even with Gellert’s reassurance, it feels wrong. If he does what Gellert asks, then people will get hurt. But there’s already so much suffering around them. In the grand scheme of things, could it possibly make anything better? Destruction for a good cause… can he bring himself to be the one responsible?

The rest of the night, Gellert doesn’t push any further. The potential plan still stews in Percival’s mind. Even as they settle into bed that night, Gellert whispering calming words in his ear, he can’t rid himself of the visions of bloodied, civilian bodies weighing on his conscious.

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For the first time in months, with Gellert around him, Percival sleeps deeply enough to dream.
If only his dreams were peaceful.

He’s in a field littered with barbed wire. His hands are blood-coated despite the downpour soaking his clothes. A sunrise breaks through the clouds in the distance, and he dearly to go towards it. He tries to take a step, but the blood congeals, tightens around his wrists and shackles him to the spot. Water rises around him, mixing with mud, and he’s sinking down deeper and deeper, drowning.

He gasps for air, jolting awake.

“I was wondering when you were going to get up.” Gellert hums against him, still undressed from the previous night.

“What time is it?” Percival heaves a breath, shaking slightly.

“Half past noon I believe.” Gellert nuzzles his face into Percival’s shoulder.

Percival shoots up. He hasn’t slept that long since he joined the war effort. It was hours past what he would have wanted to sleep. Edwin and the rest are likely panicking. “Why didn’t you wake me? We need to get going.”

Gellert shrugs, propping himself up lazily. “You needed the rest. Don’t be irritated when I’m only looking out for you.”

“It’s fine.” He mumbles unconvincingly and starts looking for his clothes.

Gellert stops him with a stroke of his cheek, looking into his eyes. “Relax Percy. It will be alright.”

Percival sighs. “If you say so.”

They both dress, taking the time to buckle up all the straps of their uniforms. Once Percival has everything in order, Gellert tucks the blackthorn wand into Percival’s belt, a unwanted reminder of his missing ebony.

“Have everything?” Gellert asks, threading their fingers together.

The instant Percival nods, he is pulled out of himself, twisting into the air with a snap. Only when he blinks and finds himself in a muddy area, does he realize Gellert has apparated them.

Percival pats himself down in a panic, making sure they landed in one piece. Apparition in this environment had proven to be incredibly risky. More often than not, any wizard attempting to apparate from within a trench has come to Edwin with signs of splinching. He’s uninjured though, amazing considering Gellert apparated them together.

After taking several deep breaths, Percival gets a better look at his surroundings. This place is familiar to him. It’s a dug in spot of land, an abandoned British trench line far from the front. Percival has come through here several times on his patrols, only a few minutes walk from their campsite.

“This is where we must part. I trust you can make it back to your people from here?”

“Gellert,” Percival says unsure of himself. “If I need you, how can I get in contact again?”

“Hmm.” Gellert thinks, before reaching into his pack. He pulls out a small silver symbol, the triangle with the circle and line dividing it, the same symbol Percival has long since associated with the man in front of him. “Take this, and if you have need if me, truly need me, then hold it tight and I will come. However I doubt it will come to that. You know what it is I’ve asked of you, and you are
smart and resourceful. The only issue I imagine you will encounter, is your own hesitance.”

He places the cold symbol in Percival’s palm. It doesn’t feel reassuring. “You have far too much faith in me.”

“I think I have just enough. When it comes down to it, you will do the right thing.” Gellert pulls him down, and places a soft kiss on Percival’s forehead.

Then he’s gone, apparating away, leaving Percival all alone.

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It only takes a few minutes for Percival to get back to camp.

He makes his way in, disabling the alarm to avoid a grand entrance.

So much has happened to Percival, and yet, the entire time he’s been gone, it seems as if nothing has changed. Everyone hurries around or focuses on whatever task they’re involved with. It’s eerie how normal it is.

In the middle of camp, a group hovers over charts and maps, loudly debating about various plans. The closer Percival gets, he can make out Theseus amongst them, his back turned.

Percival clears his throat.

Theseus swings around, looking right at Percival, eyes wide with disbelief. “You’re alive!” He gasps. His face breaks into a grin, and unexpectedly, pulls Percival into a tight hug.

“It’s only been, what, a day or so?” Percival lets out a humorless chuckle and returns the hug, awkwardly patting Theseus’s back.

“Yes, but you didn’t come back from patrol. People out here rarely return from being missing. What happened?”

Percival had anticipated this question and begins a mostly accurate account of what befell him. He relays information of his capture, of waking up surrounded by German wizards, and his fight for escape. After showing the blackthorn wand however is when he alters the story. Gone are any traces of Gellert, and he replaces it with a long arduous journey searching for safe passage back home.

Theseus buys every word of it. “Merlin, that’s awful. You must be exhausted. Normally I’d ask you to debrief a little more, give us all the details of that German camp, but I feel that can wait a bit. I need to get back to this meeting anyways. So go rest up. If you can though, please go stop by the infirmary and see Edwin before you do. He’s been worried sick.”

They say their goodbyes, Theseus rejoining the crowd of official looking men. Percival, not actually feeling tired at all, follows Theseus’s instruction, and heads to the infirmary.

Its nearby, within their camp, only a few feet away from the tent Percival and Edwin are staying at. While he thankfully hasn’t needed to come here often, Percival is familiar with the station. Canvas drapes over the outside, enclosing the larger on the inside space. Despite the increased room, it remains rather comfortable. This infirmary is a far cry from the No-Maj Field Dressing Station.
There’s far more clutter, yet the area doesn’t feel messy, instead it’s like a lived in home, warm and inviting. There’s no foul scent of bile and rot, and whatever unpleasant odors remain are masked by the floral scent of potions brewing in Edwin’s bubbling cauldron.

Five beds take up most of the space, not stretchers, but sturdy framed beds complete with soft mattresses. Three of them are filled, two with dozing patients. The third occupied by a dazed looking man, his leg missing and bandaged at the knee. Next to him, Edwin stands, slowly pouting a smoking liquid into his mouth.

“I know, I know. Skelegro tastes terrible. But it’s unfortunately one of many things you’ll need to drink if you want to get that leg back.” Edwin says in his soft, perfected bedside manner.

Percival doesn’t bring attention to himself, just lets Edwin work for the time being. Only when the amputee closes his eyes and softly snores, does Edwin look up.

Edwin drops the empty Skelegro bottle, the glass thudding against the carpeted floor. “Percival… you… I thought…” Edwin’s voice wavers and his eyes water.

Percival closes the distance between them and places a comforting hand on Edwin’s shoulder, squeezing enough to be reassuring. “It’s really me.” Edwin relaxes somewhat under his touch. “Kind of a long story though. The short of it is I got captured, but fought my way back to safety.”

Edwin sniffs. “I should have had more faith in you. But you didn’t come back, and I was so afraid I was going to be out here by myself.” He swallows and takes a deep breath. There’s a quick glance over to the unconscious wounded in their beds before he adds, “I even asked Nathan to keep a look out for you. Maybe he would-”

“Nathan?” Percival interrupts. The name jarrs him. There’s only one person he can even think of with a name remotely similar to that. “You mean Captain Harris?”

Edwin flushes, hunching over, suddenly finding the dropped bottle very interesting. “Y-yes. I thought he could help us have eyes where we don’t normally.”

Percival knows he is changing the subject, but Edwin’s frantic emotional state is something he had hoped to avoid. And this, the name, Edwin’s reaction, Percival feels a need to press further. “Since when are you on such informal basis with him? I was under the impression those No-Maj soldiers were quite strict on that sort of thing.” Practically every time he overhears soldiers talking, he always hears rank and formality, as if their title became part of their name itself, especially when dealing with officers.

“I don’t see how this is relevant to the conversation.” Edwin snaps.

That is all the evidence Percival needs to know something else is going on. Edwin had never been so short with him before. For a long moment, Percival studies him, formulating his next question in his head, as everything clicks into place. “Edwin, I mean no ill by this, nor do I mean to pass any judgement, but do you have any feelings for Captain Harris?”

Edwin’s eyes go wide and he freezes, like a deer under the gaze of a predator. He opens his mouth, says nothing, before closing it again. There is no attempt at an explanation, no denial, just the fear at having been caught plain on his face.

“Oh Edwin…” Percival sighs sympathetically.

“I haven’t… I haven’t acted on anything if that’s what you are worried about.” Edwin stammers finally, his voice cracking as he collapses in on himself.
“No, it’s ok. I’m not mad at you.” He hates that Edwin is so terrified in his presence. Years of social conditioning must be weighing the other down, Percival’s former role in the system making him a natural enemy in Edwin’s eyes, despite all Percival’s work to prove otherwise. “Really it’s understandable considering the circumstances. You two have spent a great deal of time together. But, he doesn’t know?”

Edwin shakes his head.

“I doubt you want to hear it, but I would like to pass on some words of caution.” Edwin makes no move to interrupt him, completely avoids eye contact with Percival, so Percival continues. “Just, be careful. The No-Maj world is still so different from our own. They tend to hold some rather narrow views on what two men can do together.”

“Nathan is a good man though!” Edwin blurs.

“I never said he wasn’t.” Percival says carefully. “He even says the same about you. I only bring this up because I don’t want you to be blindsided and hurt. If you want to act on it, I won’t tell anyone, I won’t stop you, and I’ll wish you all the best. Just be aware of the reality of your situation.”

Finally, Edwin seems to relax, if only slightly. “It’s not fair you know. These Brits are free to be with whomever they want, but MACUSA restricts something as good as love.”

Percival shrugs casually. “You aren’t wrong.”

Edwin looks at him as if he’s grown a second head. “You never cease to amaze me with how accepting you can be.”

Percival gives him a small smile. “There’s a lot about me you don’t know.”

“How Percival wants to tell him everything right then and there, about Gellert, about his life long desire for a better world, but he holds his tongue. Gellert told him to wait until the war is over and he will. “Maybe I’ll tell you one day…”

Edwin nods, not insisting on any answers. They stand there, quiet for many moments, the only sounds being the snores of patients and the cauldron bubbling. Edwin swallows before finally speaking again. “Thank you for understanding.”

“Well, we can’t exactly control who we fall for.”

Edwin surprises Percival, finally looking up at him with a small, awkward chuckle. “I did always like tired looking dark haired boys.”

Playfully, Percival pushes his shoulder, and thinks that they’ll be fine.

Inevitably, Percival’s thoughts trail back to Gellert, and the assignment. The lives and well being of so many innocent people placed in his hands and he still doesn’t know if it can ever be worth it. But talking to Edwin, hearing his struggle, it puts everything back into perspective for Percival, reminds him that things can’t continue as they are. Something has to be a catalyst for change. Percival is just unsure if what Gellert wants him to do is the right way to go about it.

Chapter End Notes
Yet another long wait, I know. Fortunately, Crimes of Grindelwald didn't affect this fic as much as I had feared though! Thanks everyone for sticking with me for this long. If you're still reading, I love and appreciate you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!