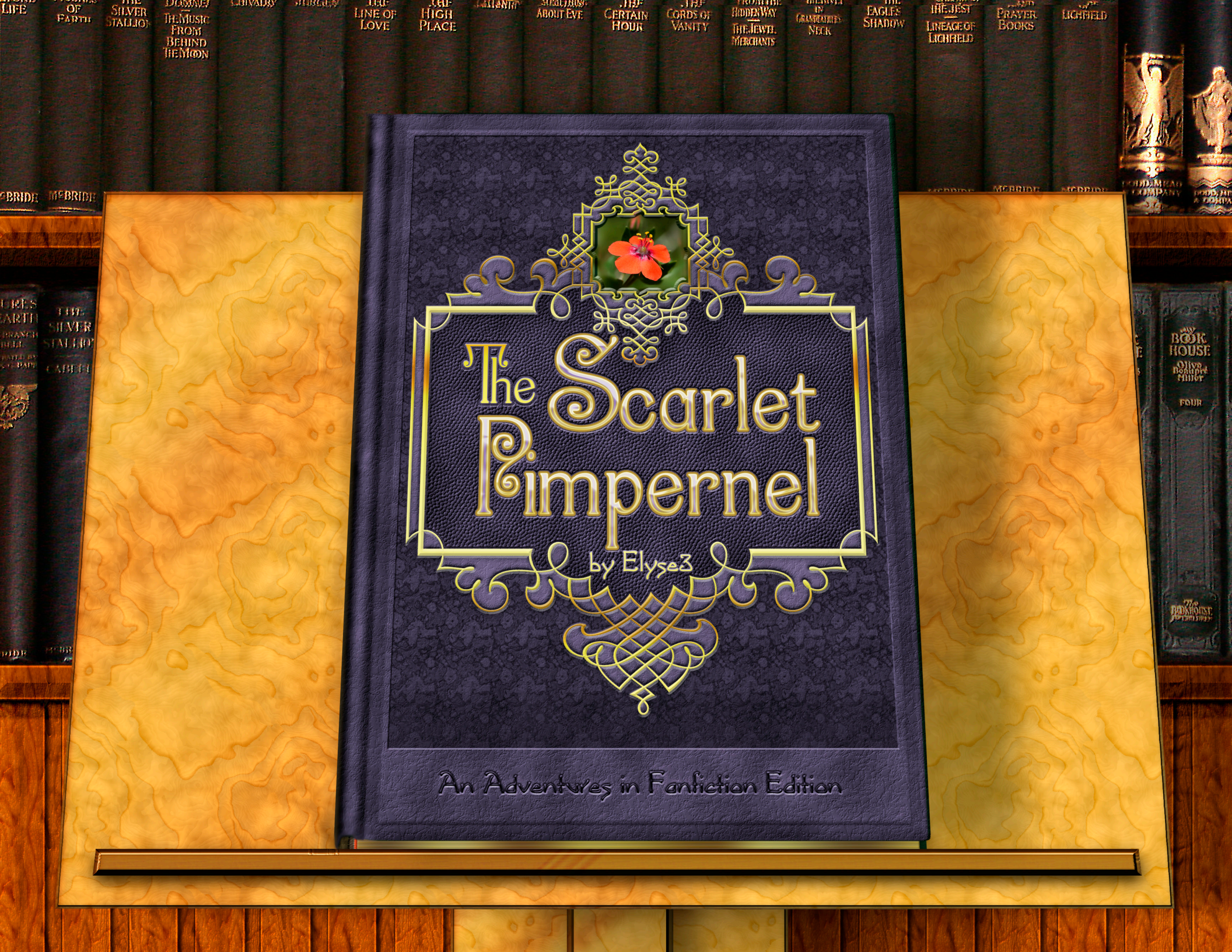
The Scarlet Pimpernel
by Elyse3
An Adventures in Fanfiction Edition

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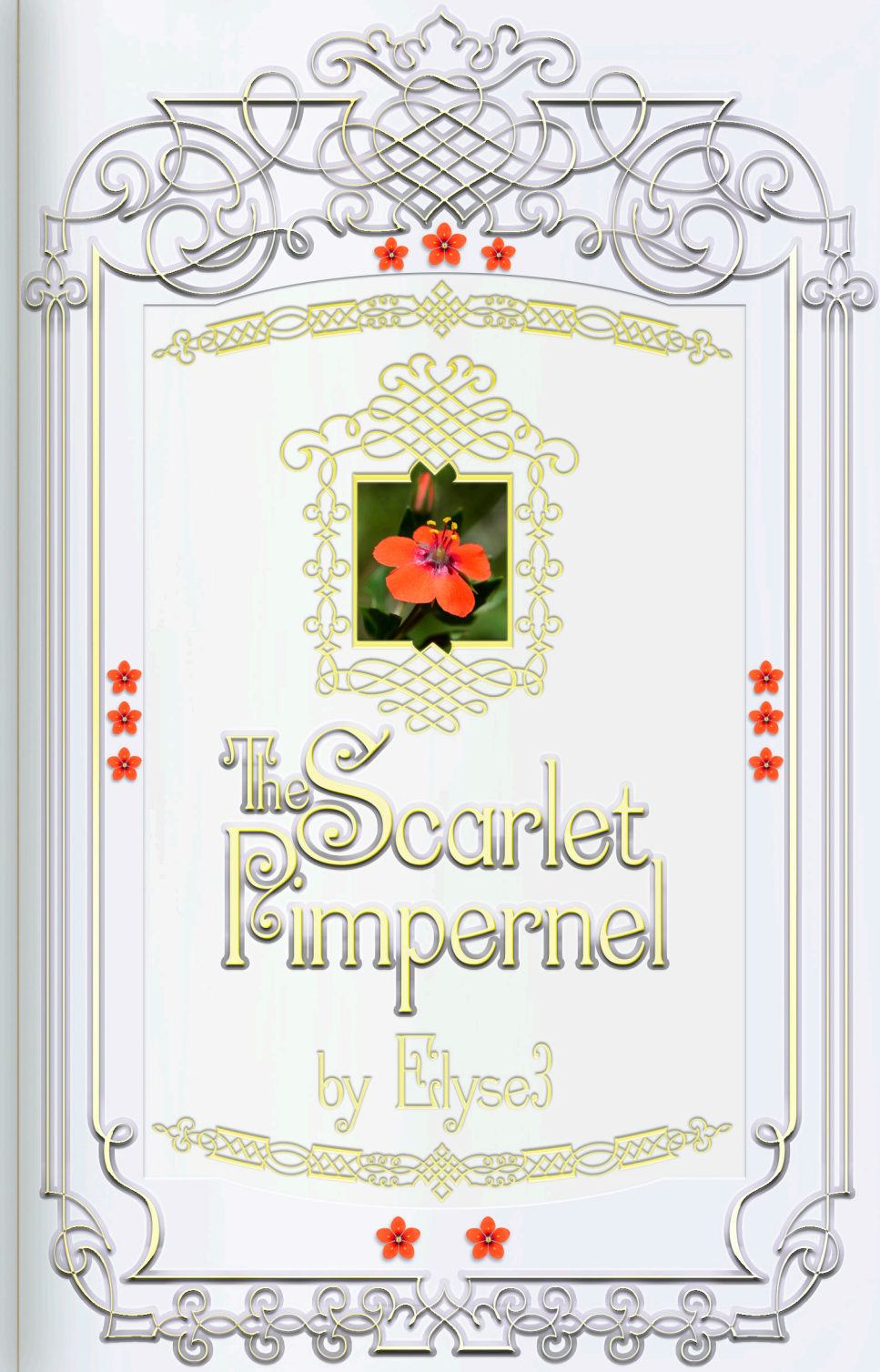


The Scarlet Pimpernel

by Edyse3

1

In Which Percy is Uneasy

PERCY WEASLEY *liked* paperwork. He *enjoyed* it. However, he was not quite sure he liked or enjoyed this *new* paperwork.

"You would entrust such a task to me, Minister?" Percy asked, pouring over the genealogy charts and questionnaires. He felt a vague sense of unease and moved his shoulders back to loosen the tension in his back. It didn't help.

Dolores Umbridge smiled (in a rather reptilian fashion, Percy thought, though he would never

speak something so disrespectful aloud) and pushed over another stack. In a syrupy sweet voice she said, "Of course, Weasley! We would *never* entrust such a *vital* task to anyone less talented."

Percy puffed up with pride. "Ah, well... "

"In fact, I think we ought to make you *Assistant* to the Minister."

"Yes, knock off the 'junior' for Weasley," Pius Thicknesse, Minister of Magic agreed, a bit vaguely, pushing his streaked hair away from his high forehead.

Percy was secretly thrilled that he was no longer known as 'Weatherby', despite the very rude owls attached to "Norwegian fertilizer samples" that his brothers still sent him occasionally. But the thought that he, Percy Weasley, at twenty-one, would be placed in such a position of authority, be given such a vital task! No one so young had ever risen so quickly through the ranks of the Ministry. Percy felt so swollen with pride it was quite a wonder his feet were still on the ground.

"Why, Minister, I —"

"Shush, shush, shush!" Dolores said, smiling so widely it was almost grotesque. "No need to thank us for recognizing your dedication to the Ministry of Magic. It is always a happy event when a pureblood realizes their true place and position. Now, it comes with a pay raise and a very nice new office with an enchanted window." She waved her stubby wand in her equally stubby fingers, and a piece of pink paper rose up, folded itself into a paper airplane and hovered over the desk. "This will take you to your office, Weasley. Can we, perhaps, trust you to take on this teensy-weensy task of all this paperwork? We need it all done in time for the hearings. Can we trust you to make sure no nasty, horrid person will be telling lies to our Ministry?"

There was something very wrong. Percy could feel it. It was an increase of the tension he'd felt for the past few months, an increase in the ache between his shoulder-bones, an increase in the

chill, metallic air.

'*Blasted dementors*,' he thought, resolutely scooping up all the charts.

"Of course," he said, not showing the unease he tried to shove out of his mind. He was Percy Weasley, keen (over-keen), ambitious, intelligent, eminently capable. He was good at paperwork and he reveled in the inner workings of bureaucracy. He liked his work more than anything else. He was detail-oriented, could spot innaccuries with ease, could nit-pick so well it would put even the most determined of editors to shame. That was why he had this job. That was why he *had* to do this.

"I am so pleased!" chirruped Dolores. "Now, why don't you see if you can check these thoroughly before lunch? Here —" presenting him with a stack of books and a set of dusty tapestries "— is everything you'll need. Now, let us do hope we can have the trials in time for everyone to go home and have dinner?"

"Of course," Percy said, with dignity. He waved

his wand at all the books and they followed after him to the office not more than ten feet away from the Minister's. He tried, with much difficulty, to get rid of his unease in thoughts of his new office (with his own window!) but the brief daydreams were hollow and the new office looked very much like his old one — just bigger, with nicer furniture, and a window. He did have a leather swivel chair now, though. Percy rather liked the leather swivel chair.

The window wasn't much good; it was raining. The weather was always bleak. The Magical Maintenance Department hated the new Minister (why the Minister never listened to Percy's warnings about discontent in the Ministry Percy never knew). He flicked his wand at the ceiling, where a large glass bubble flicked on, bathing the office in what felt like sunshine.

That was nice at least (as was the very comfortable swivel chair) and Percy could convince himself that he was comfortable as he spread out

the charts and the tapestries and the books, as he flipped through the questionnaires and marked up the paperwork. It was the work Percy liked best. He enjoyed fact checking, he enjoyed working on details. Research had ever been a strength and ever been a relief. It was comparatively easy and extremely enjoyable. Percy liked piecing together bits and pieces to make a whole, taking facts and adding them together to create a new understanding of the world.

The unease crept up upon him again and Percy flung himself into the last of the work, finishing well before lunch. He tried not to be disturbed by the names of the witches and wizards on the questionnaires and the charts — he knew a fair few of them. This one was a friend of his father's, that one was a cousin-by-marriage, this one was a student he had talked to when he, Percy, had been Head Boy, that one was... his ex-girlfriend, Penelope Clearwater.

Percy looked blankly down at the questionnaire,

with Penny's scrupulously neat writing. Mother, worked in the Muggle French Embassy, in the Foreign Aid Office; Father, owner of a rare books store, which he ran; and Brother, worked as an Anglican priest in Kent. Yes, all correct. But he couldn't —

All Muggle-borns, he thought uneasily, were condemned to Azkaban as soon as they walked through the doors to the courtroom. Could he really do that to Penny?

Percy neatly stacked all the charts and corrections to the side, intending to think more deeply on the subject before he was interrupted by another sudden thought. He had been uneasy earlier because this *must* have been someone else's job before. What had happened to them?

He was reasonably sure Dolores's personal assistant had checked the charts, but Percy decided to look it up regardless (which, he thought, a bit smugly, was the reason he was scarcely twenty-one and Assistant to the Minister). After making a mental note to suggest rosters that automatically

changed, pulled a roster of Ministry employees from his desk drawer and scanned it. He tapped his wand onto the name of Dolores's personal assistant ('Martha Austen') and felt enormously pleased with himself for thinking up a rooster that listed all official duties.

Ah, he had been right.

She *had* been in charge of fact-checking for the Muggle-born inquisitions.

Austen was a good name, a respectable, pure-blooded name, but, as his ex-girlfriend Penny told him, it was a very common Muggle surname as well, so Martha's parentage was completely up in the air. Percy had known Martha. She was a smart young thing who liked gossip and was passionately fond of Rita Skeeter. Percy had absently thought of asking her to dinner once or twice before realizing that, one, Martha had quite possibly the most irritating laugh he had ever heard, and two, Martha simply wasn't Penny.

Percy frowned. It seemed very unusual that

someone like Martha had given up part of her job.

He hadn't seen Martha in days, however. He had assumed she had fallen ill, which was an entirely dangerous assumption — Percy remembered Bertha Jorkins with the horror he felt when he thought he'd never see his Head Boy badge again — but he, Percy Weasley, *Assistant to the Minister of Magic himself*, would not take over Martha Austen's duties because of a cold or a bad hex.

Percy checked his pocket watch, trying not to remember that his parents had given it to him, tucked his wand into his sleeve for safe keeping (he had his robes made with a special pocket in the sleeve for his wand — he did like to have it close to hand), stacked all the charts and questionnaires and made his way down to the lowest floor. This really was very strange. True, he had a reputation for being over-keen and an absurd work-a-holic, but he had a Ministry to run (more or less — administrative details, which Percy reveled in, gave the new Minister

headaches). Surely this task was an unimportant one when they considered how frosty the French Ministry was. Madame Maxime had friends in very high places indeed and she had believed Dumbledore from the get-go. Then, of course, there was the Order of the Phoenix, and the Minister's burning desire to find Harry Potter — surely Martha could handle something as comparatively minor as fact-checking registered Muggle-borns's backgrounds... ?

"Sorry about this," said the security witch, on the last floor, just by the elevator, bringing Percy out of his thoughts.

"Hm?"

"I need to have your wand for inspection. Strange really, but I suppose some people transfigure themselves before they come in or something, so I have to check your wand. So, er, I'll need to see it."

"Oh, of course," Percy said, handing it over. "Can't be too careful, can we... er —" friendly

looking face, nose a little off-center, "Eloise? Not after that... infiltration. Disastrous."

"Oh yes, it was." She tapped his wand and muttered *'Prior Incantato.'* After she watched the smoky gray shapes of Percy's last few charms and spells flit about she handed it back. "There you go."

"Thank you, Eloise," he said absently, taking his wand back and burying his nose amongst his papers. "What a thorough job you're doing."

"And it isn't exactly *easy*," Eloise said, scratching absently at a spot the bubotuber pus had not removed. "The dementors are all over the place. Gives me the creeps." She shivered. "I hate having them around. Horrible, they are. Just *horrible*."

Percy tried for a reassuring smile. "They're for our protection. Now, have you seen Martha Austen around?"

"No, not for days, which is odd because we eat lunch together. She hasn't owled me or anything. You'd think she would. I did nip by her flat

yesterday, but she made it impenetrable after Dumbledore's funeral, so I couldn't go in."

"I shall have to report her absence," Percy muttered. Then, louder: "You are sure she isn't ill?"

"She'd send me an owl, I think," Eloise said, albeit dubiously. "I mean, I would think she'd send me an owl. Unless she's too *sick* to send one. But then she'd go to St. Mungo's, and I think I'm closest to her in the wizarding world, since her parents are Muggles, so St. Mungo's would owl me wouldn't they? I haven't had an owl from anyone in weeks though, so she can't be ill, can she?"

"Rest assured I shall look into it." With a swell of pride: "The Senior Undersecretary herself is waiting for these, you know. Top Ministry business cannot be kept waiting." He lifted up his documents, tucked his and back in his sleeve, and continued down the hallway and down the stairs. He braced himself against the unnatural chill of the dementors, the cold that sapped of strength, energy, the will to go on...

Percy thought grimly of his promotion and walked on, making quite an affair of putting away his wand and restacking his papers. If he ignored the dementors, absorbed himself in work he liked, kept his mind busy —

He dropped the top few sheets of parchment and one of the witches waiting on the hard wooden benches knelt down to help him with it.

"Ah, thank you... " Percy abruptly trailed off and looked up at the witch. "P-Penelope?"

The witch, in lime green robes with a crossed wand and bone embroidered on her chest, let the paper she picked up flutter from her fingers to the floor. "*Oh.*" Penelope Clearwater, her blue eyes wide, looked up at him, a faint blush spreading over her pale cheeks. "I — er, hello."

It is always awkward to meet an ex, and even more awkward when said ex dumped you particularly harshly. Percy thought he had reached levels of awkwardness hitherto unknown to any couple who had broken up badly in the

fact that one, he still happened to be more or less in love with said ex, two, said ex told him in no uncertain terms she was breaking up with him because he was working for the Ministry and here he was, working for the Ministry, and three, said ex was currently awaiting her inquisition into her Muggle-born status... which he, most likely, was going to have to attend, and for which he was currently carrying the paperwork.

This was not a good day.

"Miss Clearwater," Percy said. He picked up the papers very slowly, eyes on the floor. "It's... been a while."

"Yes," Penny said. Her hands were very cold when Percy brushed them accidentally. Her calm, pretty face was very pale and pinched.

Percy begun to feel absolutely miserable, the cold weighing in on him as surely as memory.

"You made your mother cry!" Penny shouted, her long, curly hair whipping around and hiding her face.

He felt taut and tight and utterly angry. He felt raw,

incredibly raw. "Penny, why do you keep revisiting this?"

"Because I spent an hour pouring her tea and patting her shoulder saying, 'Oh no, Percy's fine, he didn't mean it' and hearing that oh yes Percy you did and what's worse you think Dumbledore's an horrific liar and what's even worse you yelled at your father and refused to say anything to your family ever again." Her voice was low, sharp, wounding, and deadly, deadly quiet. It was always dangerous when Penny really started talking on a subject. She preferred to watch, to listen, to sit quietly and think. It was always an incredibly serious matter when she broke past her habitual reserve.

"Penny! Don't be unreasonable. Look, I have worked — really worked for years to get here. You should know *Penny! I ran the entire Department of International Magical Cooperation on my own for nearly a year. If you think I don't deserve this appointment —"*

Sharply: "Percy that's not it."

"Then what is *Penny?"*

She roughly grabbed her cloak off of the couch and turned her back to him. He could still see her hands tremble. "I hate you like this Percy. Listening to you about Crouch was one thing, but this? You — you're a moronic, overly ambitious, self-seeking individual with little to no sense of morality or family loyalty if it helped his career."

Nothing could hurt like that. His face hardened. "If that's what you really think of me, Penny — fine, fine! We all hold opinions even if they're crackpot theories about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named coming back and ruining —"

"Oh shut up, Weatherby," Penny said, whirling around at him, her voice taut and tight and horrible to his ears. Percy felt something inside him crumble, some deep inner wound that twisted and hurt so unbearably that he felt he could no longer stand. He couldn't look at her. "We're through."

And she was gone.

And Percy was utterly alone, as he was ever since then.

Percy, with some difficulty, pulled himself out of his thoughts and tried for his usual self-possession. "I am sorry that we did not part of amicable terms. I still think very highly of you and with our last meeting —"

"I believe I dumped you," Penelope said, very simply. She looked down, her mouth suddenly twisting, as if she'd tasted something bitter. "I called you a moronic, overly ambitious, self-seeking individual with little to no sense of morality or family loyalty if it helped his career."

"Very good memory," Percy replied, a little peevishly. And then, in an attempt to regain some of his dignity, he shoved his glasses up his nose and said, as pompously as he possibly could, "I suppose you regret that now."

Penelope looked up at him and appeared to think about this a moment.

"No," she said.

"Oh." Percy took the paper back from her, noticing Penny's closed, reserved expression. He

took the paper back from her and looked at it.

It was hers.

"You don't need to explain," she said, stonily.

"Penny —"

"Do excuse me, Mr. Weasley, but I do not think it is entirely within your rights to call me by nicknames anymore." She sat down on the bench and picked up her book, staring fixedly at a spot on the page. The Scarlet Pimpernel trembled in her hands. Percy thought she ought to give up the pretext entirely; it certainly wasn't fooling anyone.

Feeling rather waspish as well as incredibly depressed, he gathered up his papers and walked into the courtroom. His neck felt hot.

"Have you got the papers, Weasley?" Umbridge chirped, as soon as Percy walked in. "How very prompt! I just got in myself."

"Yes," he said dully, walking forward.

She exchanged a look with Yaxley, sitting next to her. Yaxley leaned forward. "Have you been down here before, Weasley?"

"No sir," Percy replied, focusing on the Patronus walking back and forth before Umbridge. It, he decided, was an utterly foul cat and it was with difficulty that he suppressed the urge to kick it.

"Oh, have the Dementors got you down?" Umbridge asked, in her syrupy voice.

Percy struggled to respond. "I am not used to so many at once. Ah... what happened to Martha Austen, by chance?" He repressed a wince. His voice sounded shaky, weak.

"She's in Azkaban," Umbridge replied, making Percy stop in the middle of the courtroom. "Her work was not quite... up to standard." Umbridge's smile sickened him. Percy forced himself to step forward.

"What have you got there, Weasley?" she asked.

Percy looked at his clenched fist. "Er... " He had unconsciously crumpled up Penelope Clearwater's questionnaire.

"Hand it over."

Percy did so, having been trained for years to

obey authority.

"Now, Weasley," Umbridge continued on, her voice so syrupy sweet Percy wondered why she wasn't diabetic, "why did you crumple up this questionnaire? Did the nasty Mudblood lie to us?"

Dolores Umbridge, Percy thought miserably, had an ability hithero unknown outside of his family, to make him feel like a naughty five-year-old. "No."

"Then why did you do this to Penelope Clearwater's questionnaire? I know you would not be... *disloyal* to the Ministry, so what is this filthy Mudblod to you? Did she misspell something? I know you dislike that."

Percy felt the back of his neck heat up again. "I was — she was my first girlfriend," he said stiffly, too proud to tag on that she had been his only girlfriend. He felt he ought to tag something on, but couldn't quite think of it.

"Oh, embarrassed, are you?" Yaxley asked.

Percy nodded quickly. He was embarrassed —

mostly because Penelope had completely rejected him, *again*, even though he was *Assistant to the Minister of Magic himself*, and partly because he had been caught trying to keep Penelope, however unconsciously, from coming to trial.

Umbridge looked quite surprised, either because she had not imagined Percy could debase himself to date a Muggle-born, or because she thought Percy had never had a girlfriend. It was more likely the latter, but Percy pretended it was the former, to salvage what was left of his pride.

"Did you never think to ask if she was a Mud-blood?" Yaxley asked, looking a little surprised.

"No," Percy said. "She was petrified by a basilisk in my sixth year, but Sir Nicholas was as well, and he has one of the most impressive pedigrees in wizarding society. I looked it up in *Hogwarts, a History* in my first year — distantly related to Merlin, you know. All the Hogwarts ghosts are pure-blooded. I was told The Grey Lady, the Ravenclaw Ghost, is somehow related

to Ravenclaw herself." He was babbling. Percy cut himself off by clearing his throat and making a great show of restacking his papers.

"Mudbloods," Umbridge said slowly, toying with her stubby wand, "can be so devious, can't they, Percy?" There was something sickening in her smile, in her voice. Percy felt ill. "I can call you Percy, can I not? I feel quite a *connection* with you Percy. How easy it is to make mistakes in the heyday of one's youth! Not that I ever did," she added, with a silvery little laugh. "But for a young man, it is so easy to be taken in by a pretty face." Percy nearly trembled with rage. Taken in? By Penny?

"He's clearly in shock, Dolores," Yaxley said, who was turning out to be extremely helpful by telling Percy how to behave. "Ah, I remember a Veela in my youth... "

Umbridge cleared her throat with a little 'hemhem' sound. "Is this entirely appropriate, Yaxley?"

"Er, no." He turned to Percy. "Can't believe

you tainted yourself, did you? Well, now you know better."

"Indeed!' Umbridge chirped, taking the papers from Percy. "It is a shock to discover that one has been so deceived, but you are a Weasley and... oh, such blood!" She clicked her tongue. "You are not the first Weasley to be deceived by the wrong side. Now you have recognized it and learned from it, yes?"

"Mm," Percy said, doing everything he could to keep himself from leaping up and throttling the senior Undersecretary and instead looking as neutral as possible.

"Now you can move on and find a nice *pureblood* girl, who can help advance your career. I will introduce you to one of my cousins for you know I am related to almost every pureblooded family there is." With a toad-like smile: "I shall put you in charge of the prisoners today. You can deliver them to Azkaban. That will cheer you up immeasurably, I'm sure."

Percy forced himself to look grateful, his blood pounding furiously through his veins. '*My life depends on this woman's trust,*' he thought savagely, trying to keep his control over himself, '*My life depends on this woman's trust.*'

"Thank you very much Dolores," Percy managed. "I really am shocked that I could be so — so *taken in*." He could not help the flash of real fury at that, the raging bitterness that leapt up to choke him. Hopefully it added to the verisimilitude. No need to punish Percy for being *taken in* — he was already angry enough at himself.

Umbridge smiled. "Of *course* you are, Percy."

"I... really!" he spluttered, before making a big show of taking a deep, calming breath. "Yes, well, I have a job to do. Miss Clearwater will get what's coming to her." Savagely, with an utter self-loathing he just managed to disguise as anger towards Penelope: "I shall make sure of it. It is my job, after all. I would not give it up for anyone."

Yaxley and Umbridge looked exceptionally

pleased with him and themselves.

"You will send word once the trials are over?" Percy asked, with a vague return to his usual pompousness. "I should so hate to miss out."

"But of course!" Umbridge exclaimed.

Percy walked out of the room, posture ramrod straight, chin tilted up, and shut the door behind him firmly. Once out he leaned against the door, sagging. He had to answer to all the memos still in his in-tray, the Minister always took his tea about now, they had an hour and a half until the latest press conference and their spokeswizard desperately needed the practice, there was that new bill he had to draft on when and where and why the Killing Curse could be excused, there was probably another dead body in the Atrium again that no one bothered to clean up, and — oh Merlin — in three hours he had to take Penelope Clearwater to Azkaban.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no... .

"It didn't go well?" asked one woman,

managing to look up off of the floor. "I've heard it never goes well."

"No, it never does," Percy said thickly. He desperately wanted to edit some statements, do something, anything reassuringly simple — rearrange a department, reorganize the security measures...

"It'll be all right in the end," said the woman, sounding thoroughly unconvinced.

"No," Percy said, glancing over to where Penelope stared at her book. "It won't."

2

In Which Percy Makes a Decision

PERCY SAT in his office, viciously attacking the interdepartmental memo on new security procedures. It already bore so much red ink it looked like a communist flag, not a document on random office searches and wand inspections.

At the very top of the paper he managed to cram a, 'You profess to have a complete understanding of wizarding security? Let me know when you have mastered contemporary English. I find that to be a much more pressing matter.'

He sent it zooming off into the bowels of the Ministry with a flick of his wand and, dismayed, discovered that he did not have any more work in his in-box. He got up and restlessly paced his new office, the swivel chair spinning about uselessly when he stood. Percy glared out the enchanted window.

It was raining. Magical Maintenance had been very upset at the treatment of the Cattermoles, Percy remembered; there had been tornadoes for the past week. At least it wasn't raining in his office, like in Yaxley's. Percy supposed it must be because he hadn't done anything to upset Magical Maintenance unduly. It really was better, he reflected, to keep the peace within the Ministry, to follow the laws and uphold them. He had always followed the laws to the letter; he was scrupulous about that. He had never done anything at all to go against his sense of right and wrong (based, as it was on the law, which was much better than being based on a feeling of what was good and what wasn't

— the law was so much clearer, so much easier to follow, so much more organized and perfect).

Rather, he had never done anything that went against his sense of right and wrong, that was, until today. Percy stood up and calmly, methodically walked around the room, giving his body something to do while he lost himself in thought.

Where did that thought come from? He had fulfilled his duties just as exactly and perfectly as he always had and always did. He had ensured that the evidence brought before Dolores Umbridge was factually correct, in order to that each accused member had a fair and impartial trial, as guaranteed to them by Wizarding law. He had in no way altered the evidence in a show of bias (aside from that unfortunate crumpling of Penelope Clearwater's questionnaire, which he hoped would not reflect badly on *her*). He had followed the letter of the law exactly in this matter. But, all the same, there was that sense of having done something wrong...

Percy mentally flipped through the annals of wizarding Law (he'd memorized them over the summer before his sixth year, in between writing long letters to Penelope and finishing his homework with exacting detail and precision, and had the perfect recall of someone who had not had a date in two years and spent his Friday nights reading case law).

Ah! That was what was bothering him. The Statute on Wand-Users of 1789, section one, clause two, subclause e, that explicitly stated that there should be no distinction between Muggle-born witches and wizards and witches and wizards that were born into pureblooded families in their right to own and use wands. The newest decree directly contradicted that and suspended full criminal trials of any crime that had a possibility of a sentence in Azkaban. Besides which, Percy remembered, Pius Thicknesse had told him to stuff the law up his — well, he wasn't going to think about it — and he didn't care that the entire Wizengamot must be

convened in order to pass a new law. He was the Minister of Magic and there was a war on — a war they had to win with every tool at their disposal, and the law was just one of them.

That was it. He was following a decree that hadn't officially become law. It wasn't law; it hadn't been passed and ratified according to procedure.

Therefore, Percy was aiding and abetting in *breaking the law*, since he was assisting in trials that were based on a decree which *directly contradicted a law*. He froze. He was *breaking the law*. For the first time in his life, he was not following the law.

Percy felt suddenly and overwhelmingly furious; he was angry at himself for being duped, angry at the Minister of Magic who forced him to break the law, angry at everyone and everything that had led him to do this — to knowingly break the law when he had split with his family almost directly in order to avoid it. He wanted to kick at something and settled for accidentally-on-

purpose knocking over his waste-paper bin and viciously throwing all of his rubbish back into it.

"I-hate-my-life," Percy snarled empathically, with each furious slam of crumpled paper. "single handedly running the whole-bloody-administration —" Percy had found more paper to crumple up and pelt into the bin "— and-now-this-stupidity-and-flagrant-breech-of-the-law!"

Percy irritably hoped all the charms he'd put on his office for the sake of security would hold, though at this point he was beyond caring. He was furiously angry. If the Aurors showed up, if the Minister showed up — Percy felt reckless.

Consequences be damned. The wizarding community was well-known for taking the law into their own hands and Percy was all about understanding and upholding the law.

This was — this was too far. He knew he'd chosen the wrong side when Scrimgeour died, when the Dementors returned, when they'd started registering Muggle-borns — but it was

far too late. He'd chosen and no one would accept him back. Before he could even try, they would fling mashed parsnip (or turnip, or potato, or anything that Fred had at hand) again and his dignity and pride would not permit him to go on after his overtures were rejected.

But... how could everything be so black and white? How could authority be wrong? How could authority make him *break the law*?

And how could he shut up *Penelope* and at least a dozen other people whose only crime had been an accident of birth in a wizarding prison surrounded by newly faithful dementors?

Something was wrong with the state, with the government, for this to happen, to make the laws meaningless, to persecute people for crimes no greater than an accident of birth. Percy felt the fury flare up again and had the vicious urge to destroy something...

He had to calm down. Percy forced himself to take a deep, slow breath. He had to be *rational* now.

There was no need to let emotions control him and his actions. He seldom let them except when he was too angry to remember anything but his fury.

Well, so, he was breaking the law. What could he do about it? He as Junior — strike that — he was *Assistant* to the Minister of Magic. He was running the Ministry. If he left they would hunt him down — and he knew Dolores and Thicknesse too well to think he had any hope of survival once he'd been found out. Besides which, he didn't have anywhere *to* run. His family had always subconsciously hated him and no their hatred had come to the fore. No chance of being accepted back there...

He could... it was possible to try and... take the law back to what it originally should be. There was the chance that he could free the Muggle-borns in Azkaban. It was the right and just thing to do. They couldn't do anything really, that wasn't illegal.

Of course that hadn't stopped them before.

He would probably be dead as soon as someone

even guessed what he was thinking. He could see the tombstone and the funeral no one attended already. Any way out of this situation, out of the Ministry, led to certain death.

Come to think of that, it wasn't quite such a terrifying prospect anymore. Percy balled up another draft of the memo on interdepartmental security and slammed it into the waste-paper bin so hard all the other papers exploded out of it. Percy felt darkly pleased.

Had the split with the family been worth it?

Percy looked around the office and frowned. It had been up until Thicknesse took office. It had shocked him, but he hadn't much missed his family. He couldn't say he was entirely displeased to be without Fred and George's constant pranks and bullying, the shadows cast by Bill and Charlie, the arguments with Ron and Ginny, and his entire family's ability to accept Harry Potter as a surrogate son and not accept him, Percy, as a viable part of the Weasley clan. He certainly didn't

miss how his parents always had that unspoken expectation for him to be *perfect* without actually ever noticing him unless something went wrong and he had to fix it, or when Percy made them pay attention to him. He did miss Bill, though. He missed the elder brother — the only brother — who had actually liked him and considered him an actual human being.

However, Bill had swung by his flat shortly after mum had, and just after Penny had sent him several owls with all of the books he'd left at her place and Percy had been so bitterly angry and miserable that everyone was trying to force him to do wrong, to go directly against his conscience and *violate the law* that he'd snapped at Bill and they'd gotten into a vicious row — the first vicious row Percy had ever had with Bill.

Bill neither spoke nor wrote to Percy anymore, however. What was done was done. No one in his family wanted anything to do with him and that was fine. He was sure he didn't want anything to

do with them either.

But now he'd been forced into doing wrong so the whole reason for the split became null and void. He'd fallen into exactly what he tried hardest to avoid.

Percy was still too hurt to miss his family, though he vaguely realized he had wronged them just as much as they had wronged him. After a few moments of furious paper shredding, Percy grudgingly acknowledged that perhaps his job was no longer as important as his family. Or his friends.

His… he didn't actually have friends, now that he thought of it. There *had* been Oliver Wood, but generally they didn't owl each other during training season, it ended up being very bad for Percy's owl Hermes, who Oliver would, in the midst of his Quiddich madness, often mistake for a fuzzy Quaffle. Therefore, Percy reasoned, it was Oliver's job that kept Percy from his friends… friend.

So Oliver's job was more important than their

friendship, Percy supposed vaguely. Taken like that, his job did not keep him from anything at all. His family's hatred and Oliver's Quiddich mania did.

But Penelope...

Percy had to acknowledge that his job had cost him Penelope before and now it was costing him Penelope again. This time it was worse, though, much worse, because Penny would go to Azkaban and there was the completely terrifying and utterly horrible thought that she could die.

Penelope had always been and probably would ever be the only person to listen to him, to *understand* him, and, quite possibly, to be willing to go for a bit of a snog in an empty classroom just before her Charms class. There had always been times when Percy felt invisible, where he smarted for having done all the work, and more, and been completely ignored for doing so — which, Percy reasoned, was probably why promotions and honors meant so much to him and why he nearly killed himself with work each week — but with

Penny he was never invisible. He was always someone with Penelope, because she had loved him and he had loved her devotedly. Wrong tense — Percy still loved her devotedly.

He didn't love his job nearly half as much anymore.

And then Percy suddenly realized that he didn't love his job at all. There were some aspects he *enjoyed*, yes, like the new light and the very nice leather swivel chair and the lovely enchanted drawers of his desk, which made filing ever so much easier, but his favorite part of working in the Ministry had been before He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had really... come back from the dead or the grave or whatever state of being appropriate. Percy had enjoyed running the Department of International Magical Cooperation with a fierce kind of joy that he was not even sure could be called joy. It went much deeper, felt much more primal. It was his job, his triumph — he brought the same attention to dealing with the French,

the Spanish, the Americans, as he did to cauldron bottom thickness or broom regulations. He was meticulous and… perhaps a little pedantic, but he did the job and drove himself to exceed the expectations anyone had ever had for him. And when a treaty was signed, or a bill *he had written* made into law, made into something lasting and real that would start to change the world in its own small way — there was that heady delirium, that joy so fierce and so powerful that all other thoughts, all other emotions died away in that heart-swelling pleasure.

Did he really have that when he had received his promotion, earlier this morning? Percy, absently shredding up a wad of paper he picked up off of the floor, forced himself out of his current situation to look critically, analytically at the events of the morning (only that morning? It felt far longer). He had been proud, pleased. There was that feeling of expansion — or… swelling rather. He likened it to the behavior that

led to the 'Bigheaded Boy' badge he'd had until Hermione took pity on him and let him know so he could change it back.

It — it felt more like a swelling, truth be told, a momentary pleasure that flashed horizontal, like a nice sunset that faded away. It was not that vertical sweep of sheer *joy* that towered in his memory like ancient marble pillars.

Percy tossed the half-shredded, incredibly crumpled bit of paper back and forth between his two hands. It was a matter of detail, Percy thought, mechanically tossing the paper wad back and forth, just because he needed something to link him to the physical world while he thought. It really was. No one else really thought about these things (no one he knew, anyways, besides Penny), no one else (not even Penny) paid attention to *detail* as he did. No one saw how parts fitted into a whole, how each part had to work smoothly for everything else to even function, how much care one had to pay to each seemingly

insignificant detail because things often broke because something minor was missing or broken. Perhaps he could not command anyone's attention for extended periods of time, but he understood how things *worked*, he understood detail. It was better to know how to run something, he thought, moodily, than to have the credit for running it. It didn't stop him from wanting the credit, of course, for wanting the positions of power where he could and did control all the details he saw neglected and hated to see neglected. It angered him that people didn't care about those sorts of things, how they ignored the importance of each part. But it really was strange how people in positions of power forgot the *details* —

The details... Percy tossed the piece of parchment into the fire and watched it shrivel. Truthfully, no one but him ever paid attention to the details in the Ministry. Then, perhaps... a plan unfurled itself in Percy's mind and he shivered involuntarily at the thoughts swirling

around in his head. No one really understood the law like he did, after all, no one saw the mistakes he thought were obvious, no one else really noticed the discrepancies...

Theoretically, it was entirely possible to fool the Ministry. Very few people were above him — the Heads of Departments, Dolores Umbridge, and the Minister himself, but that was it. Percy knew each of his superiors thoroughly, down to how they took his tea (generally, because in meetings among his superiors Percy was the most junior, he had to go fetch tea for everyone else). They all saw the big picture very easily, they saw the whole of what everyone worked to achieve, but they never noticed if a detail went wrong.

Take Ludo Bagman for instance, who failed to notice when one of his employees had gone missing for months. Just look at the messy administration Percy kept forcing through their paces until they knew how to file and how to spell 'interdepartmental' correctly. There were

no longer any Mr. Crouches in the Ministry. No one took the same care with their work, no one saw the mistakes that Percy did.

Percy sat behind his desk in the swivel chair and idly spun his wand around.

He was an extremely accomplished wizard, after all. He had gotten every O.W.L. and every N.E.W.T. it was possible to receive. Memory charms were not so difficult after all, and if he fixed the memories of the guards at Azkaban, then the plan possibly, just possibly could work... It was difficult to do with *his* wand, though. He had helped draft some of the new security measures. If only the Muggle-borns still had their wands — he could use one and then give it to the Muggle-born who would Apperate away and go into hiding...

This was surely madness. He, Percy, break the law again? He, Percy, *Assistant to the Minister*, go against the Ministry? He couldn't pit himself against the *entire Ministry of Magic*. That was an incredibly stupid idea. People were arrested and

dying for much more minor crimes each day! Look at Martha. It was suicidal to go against the Ministry.

Not to mention particularly damaging to his career.

Ah, but then came the argument that he no longer cared about his career, followed by the argument that if he took people illegally put in prison out of prison, he was not breaking the law. He was fixing a miscarriage of justice and *actually* following the law, unlike the rest of the Ministry put in place to *uphold* the law.

Umbridge's toad-like (disrespectful, but true) face popped up into the flames and Percy flicked his wand, neatly sending all the wads of paper back into the bin.

"Are you there, Percy?"

Percy stood and walked to the fireplace, straightening his tie. "Ah! Dolores! How may I be of assistance?"

"We are quite finished," Umbridge said, with yet another smile that sickened him. "You will

escort the twelve prisoners to Azkaban, via the Floo network. Is that quite understood?"

Percy gave a short bow. "Yes indeed, Senior Undersecretary."

A swarm of questions popped into Percy's mind — the details, all the unmentioned details...

"Shall I make contact with the wardens?" Percy asked. "And what will happen to the wands we confiscated from the... new prisoners?"

"Of course. We put the wands in a sealed box for the wardens. When the prisoners misbehave the wardens take out the wands and break them." Umbridge laughed. "Clever isn't it! I am so very fond of it."

Percy forced a smile and added a bleak, 'ahaha'. He never really had gotten the hang of laughing. He couldn't really understand the point of most humor, actually. He tried, he certainly *tried*, but it was one detail that he could not grasp and it infuriated him as much as it wounded him; he never could accept the practical jokes his family

played on him as 'good fun' as a result.

"I shall let you hop to it, then. I'll have an escort waiting." Her face disappeared. Percy absently tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace and knelt on the rug.

"Azkaban," he enunciated, pushing his glasses up his nose before sticking his face into the fire. When he opened his eyes again, Percy looked into a stone room very sparsely decorated (except for a few stuffed, hanging heads of dead animals on the wall and a tattered curtain over the window), with a man in a black robe leaning back in an old wooden chair, his boots propped up on the edge of a very battered wooden table. Percy felt an instinctive twinge of dislike.

"Walden Macnair?" he called.

The man swung his feet off of the table. "Speaking. Who are you?"

"Percy Weasley, Assistant to the Minister of Magic," Percy said pompously, feeling the inherent flash of pride in the new title.

The man twisted his black moustache. "I'm on duty with Mulicber." His tone implied the question, 'Should I get him?'

Percy felt another twinge of discomfort. Mulciber used to be a *prisoner* in Azkaban. So had Macnair. "It is not necessary to summon him. I shall be escorting some prisoners to Azkaban."

"How many?" Macnair asked.

With a glance at the heads on the walls and a certain chill of foreboding, Percy remembered his plan and wondered just how much he cared about saving his own life. What was the value of his life to another's? Would he mind disgracing himself for the chance that a few would live?

It was the right thing to do — not legal on the surface, but every apparently legal action of the past few months had not been proper law, had contradicted the foundations of wizarding society...

He realized he had taken an uncomfortable pause and so he cleared his throat, made a decision, and said, as pompously as he possibly could, "There

were a few unfortunate accidents today. We have two prisoners that still need to be watched."

Macnair smiled nastily. "The others?"

Percy gave him a severe look. "Very well. The dementors got a little... excited. I will see you shortly. We will Floo over." He pulled his head out of the fire and brushed the soot out of his neatly parted hair. He could feel the blood rush through his veins, his heart pound in the sudden, all-encompassing fear. His head suddenly ached and it hurt to breathe.

His whole body seemed to remind him that he was alive, reminded him what it felt like to *feel*, to breathe, to live.

What had he been thinking? What was he doing?

He was *breaking the law*. The thought shattered in his mind and Percy sat, immobilized on the rug. He had *broken the law*. He had lied to a Ministry-appointed official, had deliberately mucked up the process of incarceration.

Pecry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

The law as good — it had to be. It was absolute and detailed and was put in place by those in authority to protect everyone from their baser impulses. It was what made the world make sense.

But, Percy thought, clenching his fists and almost breaking his glasses in the process, the world had not made sense from some time. And the new laws he read contradicted other laws, and the framework of the world, the entire structure that held up the magic and the witches and wizards began to crumble away under the weight of the contradictions, in the weaknesses of the laws that upheld it. The laws needed revision.

Perhaps, he thought, just perhaps, the laws were so far gone they needed to be reworked entirely. The old laws had to be upheld, supplemented by the new, or revised entirely based on principles so old even Merlin had known of them. Percy felt frightened at the enormity of his thoughts. Breaking the law, breaking the rules — there wasn't any excuse for it, was there? There couldn't be.

But if the laws were wrong, if they contradicted each other, if they no longer made sense and brought order — if the new laws weren't actually laws —

Percy clenched his fists so hard the rims of his glasses cut into his palms, abruptly bringing himself out of his purely cerebral inner world into the physical world in which he had to move. He had made a choice. He had picked a path. It was time to follow it. Was he a Gryffindor or not?

He adjusted his appearance in the mirror on the wall and picked up his wand. "You're a brave, talented wizard and you can do this," he told the mirror.

"Of course you are," the mirror said, snidely.

The mirror was going to have to go, though.

3

In Which Percy Breaks the Law

PERCY STEPPED OUT of the elevator, waited for Eloise to take his wand and then muttered, "Martha's in Azkaban."

Eloise gaped at him in shock, his wand falling from her fingers. They both knelt down to pick it up.

"Why?" Eloise breathed.

"Her work wasn't up to standard," Percy said, looking around quickly. "Eloise, I have often thought that you would be best suited to security

detail on the Floo network."

Eloise clearly had no idea what he was trying to say. "Very kind of you, but what about Martha?"

Percy pinched the bridge of his nose. "If you were on Floo detail I would be so happy to share more details of Miss Austen's wrongdoings and *imprisonment* with you."

Really, Hufflepuffs were so thick.

"What does being on Floo detail have to do with Martha?"

Percy gave her a long-suffering look. "All right Eloise, I will say this very plainly. I am going to Azkaban to deliver the prisoners." She looked at him blankly again. "Via the Floo network." No change in expression. "Which is how I will be returning."

"And if I was on Floo detail... oh!" Eloise looked at him in dawning comprehension. "Yes, I'll switch with Alexander — he can stand the dementors better than I can anyways. I keep remembering how I cursed my nose off when

I was younger." She shivered and handed back Percy's wand without checking it.

Percy felt immediately heartened. He had noticed Eloise had forgotten to check Martha's wand whenever Martha had imparted some particularly long-winded bit of gossip. This was a good thing to keep in mind. Percy took his wand, tucked it back in his sleeve, and strode down the corridor, trying to ignore the crying witches and wizards around him.

Umbridge, her cat Patronus dancing around her, smiled hugely at Percy. "Ah, Percy, two dementors will accompany you, along with Jugson. Here you are." She handed him the box of wands and Percy took it gingerly. It was almost dripping with magic. "And *here* is the paperwork. Have Macnair sign that he's received all the prisoners and their wands — I am sure you are well aware of proper procedure."

Percy nodded and tucked the paperwork into the inside pocket of his robes.

"Of course they are in chains — I do not think you will need to remove them, but if Mulicber greets you, you will. A simple 'finite incantatem' will suffice." Percy tried not to look at the glowing blue handcuffs and the chains that linked all the prisoners together. He had the sinking suspicion that they shocked the wearer if said wearer moved too quickly.

Yaxley came over with a small, twitchy wizard that Percy had never seen before. The wizard grinned at Percy. "I'm Jugson. Let's get the Mudbloods off to where they deserve, eh?"

"Quite," Percy said. He turned to see Penny glaring at him, her shackled arms around an elderly witch who sobbed uncontrollably. Percy looked away and stared at the ceiling as he walked over to the elevator.

He found Jugson next to him, still grinning greasily. "Pity we can't have a little... fun, eh?" He pushed the button to level eight.

"Fun?" Percy asked, as if it were an alien

concept. It *was*, come to think of it. He watched the prisoners pile in, the dementors ghosting along behind them like the horrible specters they were.

"Yeah." Jugson lowered his voice, which was entirely needless due to the level of hysterical sobbing in the elevator. "That one with the blue eyes — the quiet, contained one. I bet it'd be a pleasure to hear her scream."

Percy felt himself flush with rage. He pressed his lips together and tried to see past the haze of anger. Self- contained, self-possessed, he managed to look relatively calmly at Jugson. Curiously, without a hint of the rage he felt: "You... get your jollies from something like that?"

"It's a thrill, I tell you," Jugson informed him, with a leering sort of grin. Like most people, he just wanted to monologue. Percy decided to keep quiet and deal with it. "A well-placed Cruciatus Curse has its merits. Yes, I remember the first time I saw how —"

Percy tuned him out and pressed his lips

together. Focus on something else... .

Elevator rides were always an adventure, but... really, dementors? There had to be a more suitable way of transporting dementors. Having them on the elevator seemed a mockery of the daily commute.

"Our floor," Jugson said, shoving his way through the prisoners, to a marked increase of screams and hysterics.

Jugson's presence was an unexpected and thoroughly unpleasant flaw in Percy's latent plan. Originally, he had thought to step through the fire with the paperwork and, while Macnair initialed seventeen different places, stunned Mulicber and then whirled around to stun Macnair. It wasn't really a *good* plan, but Percy was not used to rule-breaking and had little to no idea how to go about it. It had really taken some firm decision-making to attempt an attack on an opponent who wasn't prepared and didn't have a wand. What was he to do now? Jugson's mere presence was bad enough,

but his homicidal tendencies —

His homicidal tendencies...

Percy managed to skirt his way past the dementors, with only a vague flicker of a horrible recurring nightmare he'd had as a child about some man who'd broken in and threatened to kill his family if he didn't take good care of his pet rat, Scabbers, and went over to Jugson.

"I was thinking," Percy said carefully, "that I should go in first to get the paperwork out of the way. After five minutes, you would send the prisoners through, along with the dementors, before following yourself. That would give me ample time to, ah... get rid of Macnair and Mulicber, and we could have the room and the prisoners alone — but, do mark me here, as a high-ranking Ministry official, I got the papers signed and then left, leaving the prisoners in the control of Macnair and Mulicber. I will not be and was not present at the moment of transfer because I Flooed back to file the paperwork. Do

you understand?"

Jugson's eyes gleamed. "Entirely. You will not see a thing."

Percy nodded, feeling sick again and hiding it. "Not a thing." He walked on quickly to the line of fireplaces, so Jugson could not see Percy's look of complete disgust and took a pinch of powder from the vase on the mantle. "Azkaban!" he cried, throwing the powder in and stepping into the flames.

He stepped carefully into the stone room he had seen earlier and took a moment to brush the soot off of his robes and the top of the box of wands.

"Weasley?" asked Macnair.

"Indeed," Percy said crisply, falling back easily on a pompous demeanor. He took the documents out from his inside pocket with a flourish and put them on the table.

"Paperwork?" Macnair asked dismally. "I finished the roster of prisoners for Dolores."

"Indeed," Percy repeated, pulling out one of the ever-present self-inking quills in his breast

pocket. He tucked the roster away, keeping Eloise Midgen in mind. Very pompously: "Now, you will note that the sheet says 'twelve', which is for the purposes of paperwork and mostly for the benefit of anyone from the Prophet who looks into the matter. We at the Ministry —" with a very smug tone indeed "— do need to keep things... tidy. It would be very careless to admit what had happened to our other prisoners. As for the last two..." Percy cleared his throat and looked down his nose at the surroundings. "Well, they have obviously seen too much. Jugson has volunteered to... help them forget this day's events. If you could loan him this room for the space of a half-hour, the Ministry would remember your services — and the Ministry pays back in full remembered favors."

Macnair looked rather cheerful at this.

"Sign here, here, next page, there, there, initial here and here, sign there, next page, there, there, there, initial here, final signature — thank you." Percy fanned the paper to dry the ink and then

tucked it back in his pocket.

"No chance Jugson would need a little... assistance?"

Percy suddenly hated Macnair and Jugson and the Ministry and everyone he had been working for since Scrimgeour died. It was with extreme difficulty that he hid the sudden, utter flash of loathing behind a peeved expression. "Ask Jugson. He's being entirely too authoritarian about the entire business. Mind you, you did not hear that from *me*. I daresay, though *I* of course said no such thing, that there will be something left in here for you to play with after a half-hour has passed unless Jugson is horrifically prodigal with the powers bestowed upon him." Percy sniffed to express his derision and checked his pocket watch. "Jugson shall be here shortly with our two remaining prisoners, so, if you do not mind... ?"

Macnair walked out and shut the door just as the first dementor and the first prisoner stepped through the fire place. Percy found it fascinating that the blue

chains (must be made out of light, no other reason to glow like that and send out sparks) extended into the fire and blazed like the tips of flame.

He waited silently and impassively as all the prisoners straggled through, but walked up to Jugson as he and the last dementor stepped into the room.

"The room is yours for the next half-hour," Percy informed him, taking him over to beside the fireplace. "Try not to make too much of a mess. I shall leave you now. Ah, the Floo powder is... " Right behind Jugson's head, exactly according to plan. Percy shook his wand out of his sleeve and pointed it at Jugson, who glanced behind him to see the Floo powder. Percy thought, '*Stupefy!*' furiously.

Jugson keeled over, which, for no reason Percy could determine, made the nearest few prisoners scream and increase their hysterical sobbing.

"Oh do stop with that nonsense!" Percy demanded, seeing the dementors swoop closer, their mouths opening. Happy thought, happy thought — goddamit, did he even have *any* happy thoughts?

His letter along with the Head Boy badge — '*Every teacher and staff member was unanimous in their recommendations of you for this position, and we know that no one could fulfill such a duty as well as you. Congratulations on your overly deserved recognition.*' — his mother sobbing and hugging him to her chest- his father beaming — "Oh how proud we are of you!" from them both — Penny's own letter, ink smudged and so excited for him Percy loved it despite, no, because of its illegibility — a feeling of finally, *finally* belonging...

"*Expecto Patronum,*" Percy snapped, pointing his wand at the dementors. A silvery hawk burst from the tip and swooped down on the dementors, beak open in a soundless screech and talons aimed at what would have been a face. The dementors drew back into the shadows of the office, the hawk flying back and forth, Keeping them back was so much easier now.

Percy pulled Jugson away from the fire and put out the flames on Jugson's robes with a bit of water

from his wand tip. '*Reparo*,' he thought, mending the scorched bit of pompously: "Everyone please stay quiet and calm yourselves."No one seemed to listen, except for Penelope, who stared at Percy with unfettered astonishment.

Several people broke into hysterical shrieks that Percy was going to kill them all, he was a Death Eater, he was Voldemort in disguise, etc. Percy was momentarily distracted (almost amused, truth be told) when one young witch began screaming that Percy was the next Dark Lord and planning to overthrow Voldemort because Percy was, in his own small way, attempting to overthrow Voldemort and the Ministry. He also found it interesting to think of himself as a Dark Lord (he was sure that not many had freckles and red hair, or would insist on having Evil Minions that could correctly follow his detailed filing system) and to recall how he *had* noticed in Prefects Who Gained Power that there were certain similar flaws and mistakes the Evil Overlord-types made.

He found it interesting that was, until said witch screamed into his ear that he could never take away her freedom, at which point Percy decided that it was much more important to make sure he was not deaf than to compile a list of Things He Would Do As an Evil Overlord.

"Alright, fine, go ahead and wail like a banshee," Percy snapped at the witch, who did so. He shot her an irritated look before taking Jugson's wand and sweeping over to the table. "Jugson's supposed to be torturing you all anyway."

This doubled the wails as someone misheard Percy and screamed that Jugson was going to begin torturing them. This led to a very heated debate Percy mentally labeled as 'What The Hell Is Going On?' wherein no one managed to establish anything beyond the very convincing opening argument of Oh God They Were All Going To Die.

He sat at the table and studied the box intently. The spellwork was needlessly complex — each counterspell and jinx had to be performed in exact

reverse order or the person breaking the charms would be blasted out of their seat. How irritating.

"Percy!"

Penelope's voice. Percy looked up at her and nervously pushed his horn-rimmed glasses up his nose. "Yes, ah, Miss... Clearwater? How may I be of assistance?"

She slammed her book onto the table to try and get everyone to shut up. It was a very convincing argument to end the part of the screaming match being carried out around them, though not the screaming being carried out in farther parts of the room. "Percy, what are you doing? Are you honestly going to turn us in? And... and why did you stun that other wizard?"

Percy felt irritated. "I should think that obvious. I am breaking you all out of Azkaban. Don't bother stopping the wailing. It provides a more than adequate cover and I am quite used to working with obscene amounts of background noise. I did grow up with Fred and George."

"You... are?" Penelope looked shocked, uncertain, hopeful. "Honestly, Percy, you are?"

"I am not," Percy informed her crisply, "so far gone as to wish to send the innocent to prison." He turned his attention back to the box, trying to recall what Bill said about counter jinxes and spells. Percy put his own wand back in his sleeve and picked up Jugson's, to examine it and determine its usefulness in breaking curses. It was much shorter than his own and he rather disliked it, though it seemed perfectly adequate. "Oh, *finite incantatem,*" he said, pointing at the chains. With another flick of the wand, he made the room impenetrable.

He closed his eyes in thought and then slowly began to unravel the fine cocoon of spells surrounding the box. It was not incredibly difficult once he pinpointed which spells there were. They were all fairly elementary and unimaginative, though they were time-consuming. Percy was quite dismayed to discover that a quarter of an

hour had passed by the time he flicked the box open. He felt oddly enervated and weak, and still nauseated from when Jugson had noticed Penelope.

He glanced around, suddenly aware of the hysterics had died down to a few muffled sobs from the most distraught Muggle-borns. It appeared that everyone was looking at him.

"Try standing on the table," Penelope said. "Everyone will see and hear you." She was smiling at him and Percy tried to smile in return; he was out of practice, however, and found that it was oddly difficult.

"It's alright." He raised his voice and stood, awkwardly moving back his chair. "Please form an orderly queue to get your wands; they are on the table here. Once you receive them, go down through the window — I shall levitate you if you cannot do it yourself — and Apparate away. You cannot Apparate or Disapparate inside the building. *Be careful*. Please limit your contact with anyone, and you are all to go into hiding in another country,

because, if one of you is found, I believe I shall lose my head." He thought up of a joke and bleakly added, "I am somewhat attached to it. Ahaha."

There were a couple of weak laughs in return

Unexpectedly, Penelope took Percy's hand and pulled him aside. Percy glanced down at their hands and noticed the raw, reddish welt around Penelope's wrists. "When did you get those?" he asked.

"From the handcuffs." Penelope looked at him searchingly, curiously, her hand still in his. As she peered up at him, Percy suddenly realized how tall he was. It was an odd sort of revelation and he further realized that he had worn himself out, doing this. Ordinarily he would not have thought of something so stupid.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Isn't it enough that I am?" Percy asked uncertainly.

"Ends and means are equally important."

"Very well." Percy cleared his throat, the back of his neck very red. "I, er — Ididitforyounowpl

easelet'sdropitandmoveon." He made an effort to break free of Penelope and go oversee the wand distribution.

Penelope had somehow grown a great deal stronger in the years Percy hadn't seen her. St. Mungo's must have very determined patients who disliked being held down for treatment. She looked surprised as he did, though, when she spoke. "You did, Percy?"

"And because it was the right thing to do," Percy added on quickly, having just come to the realization himself. With an effort Percy forced himself to say, however stiffly, "It is sometimes permissible to break the law if the law was broken to begin with."

Penelope stared at him in shock.

Percy felt the need to explain himself: "The laws... aren't working anymore. Every day I read through new ones that contradict the old. And — and going back there are laws that we've forgotten entirely. There's one law written in

1789 — influenced by the French laws and their Muggle counterparts, no doubt — that explicitly states that there should be no distinction between Muggle-born witches and wizards and witches and wizards that were born into pureblooded families, section one clause two subclase e — " Percy broke off to see everyone staring at him still. In his best Head Boy tones: "Have your wands? Please form an orderly queue by the window."

He was not entirely sure whether to feel offended or not when someone asked what he wanted in return. He glared at them from behind his glasses and they all wore the vague, guilty, confused look of prisoners set free. They really didn't know what to do.

"I would prefer not to die," Percy said, as no-nonsense as possible. "Now please do follow instructions, jump up on the window sill and levitate down, little to no communication with the outside world, go into hiding immediately, thank you — try heading to the French Ministry, or the

American Ministry. They will be issuing official statements against the British Ministry tomorrow, so you all will be safe there. If you can't Apparate please ask someone who can to help you."

Penelope was the last to leave. Percy was in a minor panic because he had five minutes before Macnair would come in — five minutes to clean up and modify Jugson's memory and get back to the Ministry and look like he'd been busy at his desk filing paperwork or setting fire to badly written memos for the past half- hour instead of breaking the law and imperiling his own life — and he felt he ought to say something to Penelope but he didn't know *what*.

"You really haven't changed as much as most people think you did," Penelope said softly, before standing on the tips of her toes and kissing him on the cheek.

Percy took her free hand (Penny grasped her wand so tightly in her other that Percy was quite sure it could meld with her skin). "I realize this

is probably the worst possible time, but you know I'm not... good at this... sort of thing, as I suppose you know, so, ah... if I don't die a horrible death or — or something, which seems very farfetched..."

"Why farfetched? Are you planning on doing this again?"

Percy flushed. "In a different way, maybe."

Penelope smiled at him again and Percy suddenly felt happy for the first time in ages. "Take the book I left on the table. My flat number's on the inside cover. You may find some books to help you there."

This really hadn't been the way he wanted this conversation to go. "Er, Penelope —"

"You can call me Penny again, Percy. I'll be in France." She pressed her fingertips to his lips when he would speak again. "I know, no contact, be careful — I'll get someone in the French Ministry to contact mum. Good bye Percy, and good luck. You're wonderfully brave." She replaced her fingertips with her lips for one all-too-brief

moment that brought up memories of abandoned classrooms and disappeared out the window.

Percy decided to kick one of the chairs over to express his general frustration with the world in general. He'd just meant to ask her to keep him in mind while she was hiding in France, while he was risking his life. And his limbs. And his sanity. And (oh dear oh dear oh dear) his career.

Really, asking her if they could get back together again was not such a terrible request. But no, he was probably doomed to a loveless life bereft of snogging (which Penelope had quite convinced him that he liked, back at the beginning of his fifth year), except for a Dementor's Kiss when the Ministry caught up with him for his spate of rule breaking. He then decided he might as well trash the office in the interests of verisimilitude and did so with gusto, before checking his watch, grabbing the book Penelope had left him, and hurriedly propping Jugson in a corner. He held Jugson's wand to Jugston's head and hissed, "*Obliviate!*"

The story came to him easily. "Percy Weasley left and you set about torturing the prisoners. Your disturbed mind can fill in the details. You accidentally killed all of them. Shocked that you murdered all twelve people, you transfigured the bodies into bits of broken wood and, having cast all the wands on the fire, blasted apart their box so that you would hide the evidence. You do not want the security detail to check your wand so you will go home and then practice transfiguring your teacup so that no one sees what you did with the bodies, since Weasley told you, just before he left, that he could cover everything but outright murder for you, but if you killed them you were completely on your own. Now, *enervate!*"

Percy shoved Jugson's wand back into his hand and then dashed over to the fireplace. He grabbed far too much Floor powder out of the jar, flung it into the fireplace and hissed, "British Ministry of Magic!"

He tumbled through just as Jugson rubbed his eyes and began to stand.

Thus, Percy Weasley, Assistant to the Minister of Magic *himself*, and the most highly ranking twenty-one-year-old in any sort of government in the wizarding world, tumbled head over heels out of the fireplace, knocking over the Head of the Department of Mysteries, who then caused a strange sort of domino effect the line of people waiting to go through the security check.

Percy had lost his glasses in his tumble and groped for them blindly.

"You alright?" Eloise Midgen asked, walking down the line to him. At least, Percy supposed it was Eloise Midgen. All he saw was a blob.

"Getting to be so," Percy replied, giving up entirely and Summoning his glasses with his wand. He picked up the book Penelope had left him and tucked it into his pocket, where it brushed against the roster of prisoners. "Do you have a minute?"

4

In Which Percy Reads a Novel

PERCY ENDED UP grabbing Eloise by the arm and buying her an overpriced coffee in the Ministry cafeteria. It was crowded with people getting their afternoon tea, affording Percy and Eloise the safety and security created only by large crowds trying to extend their tea break to much longer than it should be. "She's right here," he said, showing her Martha's name on the roster of prisoners before putting the roster into his inner pocket. "She's in a low security

cell. Unpleasant, but it could be worse."

Eloise Midgen had to stave off tears, her knuckles very white around her coffee cup. Percy felt extraordinarily tired and vaguely glad that Eloise had forgotten to check his wand again.

"Why'd they arrest her?" Eloise asked. "She didn't do anything wrong."

"Most didn't," Percy said, without thinking. He glanced around quickly, suddenly terrified. "Ah, I mean... anything that one would previously consider wrong," he added, for the benefit of the wizard smoking a foul looking pipe in between sips of the cheap red wine the cafeteria served. "Under laxer administrations that is, with... less intent to uphold flagging standards of moral decency." The wizard beside him looked highly suspicious. Percy thus stood and grabbed his coffee with one hand and Eloise's upper arm with the other. "Ah, done with your coffee?" Percy asked, propelling Eloise out of the cafeteria. "Let's go back to my office and you can brief me there on the security

measures at Azkaban. Really, two jailers seems excessive when there are so many enemies to the Ministry running about unchecked. We have dementors there for a reason... "

Eloise, once more did not catch on. Looking furious, she snapped, "What on earth are —"

"My office is impenetrable, the cafeteria is not. If anyone asks we're continuing our chat on the fantastic job the Ministry is doing on promoting moral standards because I've taken a fancy to you."

"You fancy me?" Eloise asked, zeroing in, of course, on the most important part of Percy's explanation.

He sighed heavily. "Look, Eloise, do you know what an alibi is? I am giving one to you." Rather pompously: "It's an excuse to avoid blame, and the Latin adverb meaning "in or at another place" mainly used in law proceedings, generally to clear a person of a guilty charge by virtue of the fact that they were not there at the time. It has since become a synonym for 'excuse' and in

this case, is your excuse for the reason that you are coming to my office is that I cannot confess my burning adoration in public, instead of the real reason of my leaking confidential Ministry information to you. Quiet in and around the elevator, please."

Eloise spent the time waiting for the elevator scrutinizing her cup of coffee while Percy made polite and pompous chatter with the new Head of International Games and Sports. Once they arrived in Percy's office, and Percy had cast all the charms necessary to ensure privacy, Eloise once more displayed her amazing ability to zero on in the important matters at stake.

"So... you *don't* fancy me then?"

Percy sat down at his desk and cleared his throat. "Eloise, you are a lovely individual, but, no. My er... girlfriend... " Percy realized this was a completely unconvincing lie and hastily added, "All right, shedumpedmeandIhaven'tmovedon, but that is entirely beside the point."

"You had a girlfriend?" Eloise asked, incredulously.

"Now really," Percy said, nettled. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Yes."

Percy fought the urge to slam his head repeatedly against his desk. "Eloise, I did not ask you up here to talk about my love life."

"But it's so much more pathetic than mine! It gives me such hope and really, I don't mind at all. Everyone feels lonely sometimes. It's perfectly okay to talk about things like this. I mean, men are very reluctant to share their feelings so I understand all the dancing around it you're doing, but —"

"Your best friend," Percy snapped, "is in prison for no reason at all. Let us focus on that."

"Oh, well... "

Percy took the moment to drink his coffee and glance at his in-tray (which was suspiciously empty; he had the feeling most of the memo-writers were weeping in their cubicles).

Eloise fidgeted.

"Do you… have any questions, Eloise?" Percy asked.

"So you really don't fan —"

"About Martha!" Percy informed her, very loudly.

"Oh, well, then. What's going to happen to her?"

"Well, she'll stay in prison and hopefully not die of depression." Percy reached into his pocket for the roster and touched the book Penelope had left him instead. He pulled it out and scanned the back cover before becoming lost in thought. "You ought to stay on Floo detail, Eloise."

"Why?" Eloise asked, turning back to the subject that so fascinated her. "Is it because you fancy —"

"No, it's because I've got a cunning plan to — pray tell me why are you still looking at me like that, Miss Midgen? Were you even listening to the summary of my admittedly pathetic love life?"

"Well, yes, but she dumped you… how long ago?"

"Time…is…*irrelevant*!" Percy snapped, turning rather red. "Eloise, I appreciate your interests in my concerns, but, really, I must insist… "

"Well," Eloise said reasonably. "You ought to tell me why I should put in for Floo detail. I can't think of any reason why you would except that you fancy me and are too afraid to admit it and that seems really likely. Look, it's alright to embrace your feelings some times, Percy. You always were a bit of a stodgy Head Boy, you know. You ought to embrace —"

"Oh alright, fine, yes, it's because I fancy you and am afraid of my feelings," Percy nearly snarled. "Happy now?"

"Oh very," Eloise sighed. "So you want to see me each day as you come into work —" Percy decided that he was going to stick to Apparating into his office each day "— and as you leave. That's really sweet of you, Percy."

"Ahaha," Percy replied bleakly. "I do try."

"When should we go out to dinner, then? I know this really cute —"

"Er, you see, that's the problem," Percy interrupted. "I — well, I'm… running the

Ministry of Magic at the moment. Most days I… actually don't have time to eat." Sadly, it was true.

"So those are the only times you can see me — oh." Eloise's friendly face beamed at him.

Percy allowed himself the comfort of faceplanting onto his desk and not moving afterwards. "Yes, rather a hopeless business."

"Aren't you clever!"

"Mmph."

"It's all right to acknowledge feelings," Eloise said kindly.

"Mmm."

"I'll go see about the transfer then. Can you make sure of —"

"Yes," Percy said quickly, lifting his head with the sudden light of hope. "Yes, and you'll be there each time I come back from my… duties outside the Ministry. Like when Dolores has me go to Azkaban, right?"

"Of course," Eloise said, still kindly. "I mean, I don't really fancy you much, but you're still

rather nice-looking even with the glasses and the fez you wear in to work —"

"Fezes," Percy replied cooly, "are very fashion-able."

"— thank goodness you don't wear it 'round the Ministry, and I mean, you *like* me, so I'm sure I can like you and I do feel sorry for you, so why not?"

"*You* are dating *me* out of *pity*?" Percy demanded. He, *Assistant to the Minister of Magic himself*, the most high-ranking wizard under the age of twenty-two in *Europe* and possibly the entire wizarding world, with a record amount of N.E.W.T.s that surpassed even his brother Bill's, twelve O.W.L.s, for which he had to use a *time turner* and got express permission from the entire Ministry of Magic, former Head Boy and Prefect, was getting a pity date from Eloise Midgen, whose claim to fame was that she once hexed her nose off because her acne was so severe?

"Pretty much," Eloise informed him chipperly. "I am sorry about it, but that's the way it is and I always thought truth's much better than anything

else. But I could grow to care for you, I'm sure —"

Percy, suffering from this bitter blow to his pride, rubbed his temples and told himself that death wasn't really so bad, was it? See, worse things than death exist, so he really shouldn't be so worried about helping Muggle-borns escape the country. It was actually a very brave thing to do — an honorable, upright thing — leading very quickly to death, yes, but still more or less a good idea.

"Right! So I'll go ask now. See you in a bit!" Eloise blew an air kiss at him and Percy managed a weak grin.

As soon as Eloise waltzed out the door (forgetting to shut it), Percy groaned and hit his head against the desk several times. It was not particularly productive, but he hit himself softly enough that it didn't hurt.

The book! Yes, lose himself in reading. Good plan.

The book happened to be The Scarlet Pimpernel and, Percy remembered, one of Penelope's particular favorites.

The book took place during the Muggle French Revolution, which Percy knew about only because Penny's mother was extremely enthusiastic about it. As far as he could remember it, the French Revolution had started out as a popular uprising against an ineffective government that had driven the country into the ground and promoted unequal representation by letting a minority of nobles rule with very little interference from the other 98 percent of the population. There had been a magical equivalent, Percy remembered. A group of young students, who had daringly used time turners to attend both the muggle college of Louis-le-Grand and the daringly new, Muggle Enlightenment-affected Beauxbatons, had begun a campaign for equality among all witches and wizards and an end to the Statue of Secrecy. They and all the working classes witches and wizards, who couldn't afford Beauxbatons, rose in an open revolt against the pureblooded echelons ruling France and managed to establish

a new, daringly republican government.

As far as Percy understood, the Muggles had set up a republic too, several years later than their wizarding counterparts, and those Muggles had come into much more opposition than the wizards had. In the wizarding world, governments generally left each other alone, with polite, formal meetings to give each other just enough information to keep from global warfare. One country's government did not generally meddle with another's.

The Muggle world seemed to be more connected, which had baffled Percy quite a bit when Penny had tried to explain the concept of 'European History'. Instead of sending polite letters noting the new change in government, the other countries had gotten very edgy and (in Percy's opinion) completely overreacted by going to war with France.

Then, of course, the situation in France got horrifically bad — the country was still bankrupt from the previous government, most of Europe was at war with them, the people were still starving (they had been before, Percy remembered belatedly. Most of the riots and things leading up to the big overthrow of the government had happened because the peasants were starving and couldn't afford bread), they had no way to pay to defend their country, all their nobly-born officers had fled, and spies were everywhere — making the leaders and the people panic. Percy generally supposed that this was why it was called 'the Terror', but Mrs. Clearwater would just look at him sorrowfully and shake her head when he expressed such an opinion.

Percy flipped open the book to the title page and stared at Penny's neat, precise handwriting on the bookplate. Just under her address she had written, 'Rife with historical inaccuracies and thoroughly royalist, but a wonderful novel and my favorite book as of age twelve, which is very old indeed. I wish I could meet a Sir Percy.'

Intrigued at Penelope's apparent girlhood wish to meet someone named 'Percy', and the character that could have inspired this liking, Percy opened the book and began reading.

It was a good book, albeit a little girly, but since the main character happened to be a French actress Percy grudgingly accepted it. The story revolved around said French actress, a pretty, proud, clever, charming, and entirely unobservant woman named Marguerite. She was the wife of Sir Percy Blakeney, a baronet (which Percy had to look up in his dictionary since there were no titles in the wizarding world; all he got was that it was some sort of non-noble hereditary rank). Percy was rather disappointed by his fictional namesake at first. Sir Percy was a rather stupid fop who was rich, idle, and incredibly inane. Marguerite had married him on the grounds that she thought that there was more to him than the rich fop (he was extremely courteous and good-natured, after all), but it

became very evident that Marguerite, though hailed as rather intelligent, had appallingly bad judgment. Aside from her horrible marriage, she had another past bad judgment to haunt her; she had turned some Marquis and his family in to the government and this had apparently earned her the enmity of the entire French nobility.

Percy, personally, couldn't see what all the other Frenchies were fussing about. Marguerite had clearly done her duty to her country, and Percy similarly could not understand Marguerite's horror when a French Ministry member asked her to help find some bloke named 'the Scarlet Pimpernel' who, with some sort of 'League of the Scarlet Pimpernel' kept mucking up the legal proceedings by disguising themselves and freeing prisoners of the State. Surely it was her civic duty to do so?

But apparently the Terror had gotten so out of hand that the people the government arrested were more-or-less innocent. Percy remembered Stan Shunpike with horror.

The French Ministry member, Chauvelin, eventually gave Marguerite an ultimatum: help us capture this 'Scarlet Pimpernel' blighter or we kill your brother. Percy considered it very bad form to make governmental affairs so personal, but continued on with the reading. Marguerite accepted the bargain, since she really wasn't keen on seeing her brother die, and did as commanded. By pretending to faint onto a known League member during a party, Marguerite managed to discover that the Scarlet Pimpernel planned to be in a certain room at midnight and further, who he planned to spring from jail next and when he planned to do it.

After that, Chauvelin went to wait in the room (a quarter to midnight it was empty but for a snoring Sir Percy) and Marguerite went home to have a long overdue chat with her husband about how she really wished he wasn't so useless and why they hated each other. Sir Percy turned out not to have a room temperature IQ after all and

just turned out to be very quiet and reserved and proud — without much intelligence, true, but he wasn't the idiot Percy Weasley had disliked at first. The source of their marital problems turned out to be Marguerite's bad judgment and her husband's inability to communicate, as Percy had suspected. Sir Percy had gotten very upset with Marguerite turning the Marquis in to the government and Marguerite had refused to explain her actions on the ground that a. if he loved her, they shouldn't matter and b. she had thought she was doing the right thing at the time (though she later realized that it wasn't the right thing after all, since the Marquis's entire family got their heads chopped off). Sir Percy had never bothered to tell her before that that was why he no longer loved her and had not thought to ask again, later, why she did what she did. The excuse came out (revenge — the Marquis had beat up Marguerite's brother) and the two appeared to make up, with Sir Percy going off to find Marguerite's brother, who was

presumably in prison as a hostage.

Marguerite then wandered around the house, wondering why her husband appeared to be stupid when he actually wasn't. The answer came rather quickly when she found a ring with a scarlet pimpernel on it — her dolt of a husband was actually the Scarlet Pimpernel! Apparently the complete failure of his love life had driven her husband to feats of derring-do and life-threatening danger. He had just been pretending to be nigh on developmentally disabled to fool everyone into thinking that he, that idiot Sir Percy, could never be the Scarlet Pimpernel. It had appeared to work out very well too, until he got a bit overexcited at the thought that his wife still loved him and ended up dropping secret rings everywhere. It really was all in the details, Percy thought irritably, before returning to the book and reading on.

Marguerite dashed off to France, as she had turned the Scarlet Pimpernel into Chauvelin and

really didn't want her husband to get captured and killed. Chauvelin surprised Sir Percy in an inn where they both ate dinner for a bit and Marguerite, hiding behind the curtains, wondered why the hell they were sitting there eating dinner. Sir Percy, however, made what Percy Weasley considered a very clever escape. Sir Percy dumped the contents of a pepper mill into his snuff box and politely offered some to Chauvelin, whom Percy had noticed had a habit of taking snuff whenever he got the chance. Chauvelin, rendered immobile by sneezing, could thus do nothing as Sir Percy snuck out and rescued his prisoners. Chauvelin set out to follow Sir Percy, with Marguerite following Chauvelin in the hopes that she could ruin any sort of silent assault on the Pimpernel's hiding place by screaming loudly, which she did. Of course she was then taken prisoner and tied up with an old Jewish cart driver whose carts had been stolen by Chauvelin (without the proper requisition forms! Dreadful!). Then, completely furious that Marguerite had ruined

the attack, Chauvelin abandoned her and the cart driver on a cliff-side. Percy personally thought that was a *tad* irresponsible, but personnel probably couldn't be spared and Muggles didn't have magic to make people stay put.

All hope seemed lost when — ta da! — the cart driver pulled off his wig and was none other than Sir Percy himself! Sir Percy and Marguerite made up and walked off into the sunset together.

Percy closed the book thoughtfully. A bit sappy, but amusingly so, and an overall enjoyable way to pass what remained of the afternoon before he went home. Besides which, Sir Percy turned out to be an intriguing character. Percy himself quite appreciated Sir Percy's quiet attention to details (the snuff!) and had to credit the wisdom of covering one's tracks so completely that absolutely no one would have guessed it was him if he didn't go about dropping rings all over the place.

Besides which, it was a remarkably clever idea, creating an alter ego so wildly different from

one's true self, creating a larger-than-life figure to hide behind.

"Oh, Percy!" Dolores Umbridge exclaimed, knocking on the doorframe. "Are you busy?"

Percy put the book into his desk drawer and straightened his glasses. "Not at all Dolores! Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Would you be so kind as to send the summons for those nasty little Mudbloods who haven't reported in for questioning?"

Thinking very quickly, Percy assumed a very dignified air and replied, "But of course. You know, I feel worlds better after today — would you think it an undue liberty if I asked if I could help more with this unfortunate Muggle-born situation?"

Dolores's smile seemed to split her fat, flabby face. "Percy, I have been *waiting* and *waiting* for you to say something like this. I am *so pleased* to hear of your interest."

"We all must do our part to let the right side prevail in this war," Percy said, almost carefully.

"Indeed we must! I assume you wish to work administratively in this area?"

"Well... I had hoped to reprise my role today. There is something so cheering in seeing all those unworthy wandless members of society receive just what they deserve at the hands of the Ministry!" Percy found that he was quite good at doublespeak and couldn't help looking pleased at how easily it came to him.

It was fortunately misinterpreted. "But of course, Percy! I don't think the Minister can spare you to take the prisoners over every day, but perhaps you can inspect Azkaban from time to time."

"I should be delighted at such an opportunity," said Percy, very seriously.

"I am so glad you think so," Umbridge simpered, flicking her wand and causing a small stack of paperwork to float onto Percy's desk. "See you tomorrow, Percy."

Percy nodded and turned to the paperwork, flicking through the parchment summons. It

would really be just *so easy* to charm each one so that only the name of the person summoned need be changed. Percy set to work on the charm, quite happy in the secretarial spells he so loved before realizing that he now had a very definite chance to save several innocent people from Azkaban.

Percy quietly altered the dates (instead of being summoned tomorrow, Friday, Percy changed it to a Monday) and set his wand down. He then very carefully pulled out a quill from his shirt pocket and several pieces of parchment from his desk drawer.

After several attempts at altering his own handwriting, Percy eventually came up a charm that changed his handwriting into something that looked like some odd combination of shorthand and the type-face of The Daily Prophet.

In scarlet ink, he wrote:

The Ministry will arrest you as soon as you appear in court. Flee the country with your family as soon as you can. Tell no one.

Your friend at the Ministry,

After a moment's thought, Percy added on underneath, '*the Scarlet Pimpernel*'. He sealed each bit of paper with red wax and a stamp he'd charmed to look like a scarlet pimpernel, tucked it inside the folded up summons, and sealed said summons with purple wax and the Ministry seal. As he stacked up all the messages to head off to the Ministry Owlery Percy felt a sudden onrush of fatigue and loneliness.

The Scarlet Pimpernel had a League. He had, what, an owl and some clever secretarial spells? He did have Eloise, unfortunately, but no sort of friend who would actually understand his plans.

But really, who would want to risk their lives in such a blatantly suicidal mission?

The answer came very quickly and Percy scrawled out a note for Hermes to take regarding possibly meeting up for a drink Friday evening. He sealed it with red wax and on the front wrote 'To Oliver Wood'.

5

In Which Percy and Oliver Meet

PERCY WALKED INTO London's most popular wizarding bar outside of THE LEAKY CAULDRON, THE GOLDEN SNITCH. He felt extremely out of place in his pinstripes and was suddenly very glad that he left his fez at home. It was a mistake to come, it was a mistake to involve Oliver...

It really was a mistake, he thought. Someone had been twitching in the center of the Atrium today and everyone had ignored him. Percy

had cautiously asked Umbridge about it, on the grounds that the twitching wizard interfered with the flow of business and probably violated some sort of safety code which Percy had pretended to know, and Umbridge had only said, "He was married to a mudblood."

Percy had turned then, to look at the man in the center of the floor, but the man had died and Magical Maintenace dragged his corpse away.

It was dead frightening, especially when a report made its way across his desk about the occupants of Azkaban, and most of them were, like Percy just realized he was, blood-traitors.

The Muggle-borns died.

It was the first piece of work that Percy had left uncompleted. Ever. Without any intention to come back and finish it and, oh God, authorize it.

Oliver Wood, keeper for Puddlemere United sat at the bar, still in his Quiddich robes (Percy doubted if Oliver ever took them off) and looked around rather curiously.

"Hello Oliver," Percy said, awkwardly taking a seat in the bar.

"Are you really Percy Weasley?" Oliver asked. "Quick, what did I do the night my greatest ambitions at Hogwarts were realized?"

"You cried for an hour straight and then went to sleep holding the Quiddich Cup."

Oliver nodded. "Right, your turn."

"Er, alright. On our first day on the train, what did we both get violently sick on?"

"Some Cockroach Clusters one of the Slytherin prefects gave us. We thought it was peanut brittle."

Percy smiled. "Good to see you again Oliver."

"Have to say," Oliver said thoughtfully, looking at Percy over a glass of Firewhiskey, "I was surprised to get your owl. We... haven't really talked or anything in years."

"Well... we are friends, aren't we?" Percy asked, hearing the defensive tone in his voice and hating it.

"Yes," Oliver said, albeit dubiously. "Do you

want anything?"

"Er, I'll take a gillywater." Percy adjusted his glasses. "You alright?"

"Yes. You?"

"Oh, fine."

There was a pause as the bartender slid Percy's drink to him.

"I've been reading up on Quiddich," Percy added on anxiously. "Congratulations on your last match. I'm told you perfected the... the Double Eight Loop, to the extent that you saved the Quaffle even after that... move where the Beaters hit the same Bludger at the same time. The Dopplebeater Defense."

Oliver's face lit up immediately. "Why yes! But you know, it's really all down to balance on the broomstick. You see, the problem with most Keepers is that they keep wanting to go to Starfish with Stick — you know, where you block the most goals by hanging off their broom with one hand and one foot, but it's damn tricky to

get out of that and maneuver around the pitch. So what you really have to do is make sure that you're balanced enough so that your hands are free at all times —"

Oliver continued on, extremely happily. Percy listened with relief. As loathe as he was to admit it, Oliver was probably the only friend he ever had. Both of them bored everyone else around them to tears or badly faked suicide by their ability to ramble endlessly on their particular areas of interest. In their first year they had easily figured out a system where they would take turns; one of them rambling, the other listening and occasionally, if they could actually follow the other person's speech, ask questions. Generally, Percy asked questions and Oliver would get a somewhat glassy-eyed stare and ask about homework he didn't understand.

Before Oliver got too deeply into the topic of how one had to adjust to the natural imbalances in brooms (except for the Firebolt and he'd give his

right arm for one of those but Puddlemere United was always underfunded), two intimidated young witches interrupted them.

"Oh ex-excuse us," one of them, being pushed forward by her friend, stammered. "Are — are you Oliver Wood? Of Puddlemere United?"

"Why, yes I am. A pleasure, ladies." Oliver grinned and even Percy managed a small amused smile.

The girl barely contained her shriek and rounded on her friend. "I told you Susan! I told you!"

Susan stepped forward and breathlessly blurted out, "Ohmigosh, we had posters of you all over our dorm in Hufflepuff and I heard you were in Gryffindor but that's really okay the Hufflepuffs and the Gryffindors have always gotten along well and do you have a girlfriend?"

Oliver looked thoughtful. "Actually, I'm not sure at the moment."

"R-really?" the first girl said, looking like she was about to wet herself in excitement. Despite himself Percy found himself grinning. He turned on his bar

stool to watch how Oliver handled his fangirls.

"No. I was going with a Healer, but she was Muggle-born and I... really don't know what happened to her."

Percy's smile faded slightly. "A... Muggle-born Healer?"

"Yeah. I think she dumped me, but I'm not sure."

"I would never dump you!" Susan cried passionately.

"Glad to hear it," Oliver said pleasantly before turning back to Percy. "I mean, it started off really well. She was in Ravenclaw a year below us — I'm sure you know her, I think she was a prefect — and followed Quiddich pretty closely. I was always ending up in St. Mungo's with minor injuries, so she'd be the one to look after me. So I asked her out to dinner for a bit and *I* thought things were going well. She said she liked listening to me talk about Quiddich. Fantastic listener, she was. She came to all my games, you know, even the ones when I just sat on the benches." Oliver

looked rather proud of this. "But before she disappeared we started rowing and she got pretty shirty with me."

"About what?" Percy asked, automatically. He'd been talking with Oliver so long that his questions and attentive look were automatic. Inwardly, Percy felt horrible. A Muggle-born Healer... well, there were plenty of Muggle-born Healers around and Penny certainly couldn't be the only supportive, good listener. Granted, there really was no one who could listen like Penelope. She focused her whole self on just being there, listening to you speak. And then there was the way she smiled, as if she'd rather not do anything else but just sit and listen...

"Er, well, truth be told, it was always over one thing. I kept asking her if she wanted to ride my broomstick —"

Percy inhaled his glass of gillywater and just as quickly exhaled it all over the surface of the bar. "You... *what?*"

"Well, she said 'no'."

The girls 'aw'ed at him and began indignantly declaring the unknown Healer girlfriend as a horrible, despicable woman who didn't deserve him.

"Er, thanks," Oliver said. "Do you want my autograph?"

The girls rushed off and returned with several cocktail napkins and an ink-less quill. Oliver looked at Percy with a raised eyebrow and Percy, still coughing a little, searched his pockets until he pulled out several quills and a bottle of ink. Satisfied with their autographs, the girls left.

"You... alright there, Percy?"

Percy managed to catch his breath and wheezed, "Yes, yes, quite. You — you asked her what, exactly?"

"If she wanted to take a midnight ride on my broomstick," Oliver said, just as impertrubly as before. "I'd gotten it as a tip from our Seeker. 'Nothing so romantic,' said he, 'than flying around on the pitch late at night, just you and

her and the stars.'"

"Oh," Percy said weakly. "Did — did you explain that to her?"

"Well… never got the *chance*, you see. Whenever I mentioned it she got this horribly closed off look and said, 'No, Oliver, I haven't known you long enough' which is bizarre because she's seen me on a broom and I wouldn't drop her."

Percy took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Er, Oliver. There's something called a euphemism. Have you ever heard of the term?"

"Euphemism?" Oliver repeated, looking frankly puzzled.

"Yes. It's the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant to the listener, from the Greek *euphemismos*, directly translated as 'use of a favorable word in place of an inauspicious one' from *euphemizein*, as translated to 'speak with fair words' from *eu*, or 'good', and *pheme*, or 'speaking', which is from *phanai*, or 'speak'."

Oliver stared at him blankly. "What does it have to do with broomsticks?"

"Oliver," Percy protested, very much pained. "You were once a teenage boy. You grew up in a wizarding family. If *I* know what the euphemism means, surely you do." At Oliver's blank look, Percy shoved his glasses on and sighed. "Oliver, let us use our brains and *think very hard* about it. If you ask a witch if she'd like to ride your broomstick… "

"If she'd… oh!" Oliver looked dumbstruck. "She thought I was asking… that?" His voice cracked a bit at the end of his question."

Percy, very pink, nodded tersely. "*Yes*, Oliver."

"Oh." Then: "Well no wonder she was so tetchy when I kept asking. I suppose it also makes more sense now that she kept saying, 'No means no, Oliver' and then dumped a flagon of pumpkin juice on my head."

"Quite." Percy felt moderately better.

"Percy, one question though."

"Yes?"

"How on earth did you know something like that?"

Percy was silent for a moment. "You know Oliver, I'm not entirely sure. I blame it on having five brothers, one of whom was Bill."

Oliver grinned and they fell into a comfortable silence. Feeling secure enough to think Penny was safe (for the moment) and he still stood some chance of winning her back, Percy asked, "What was her name?"

"Penelope Clearwater," Oliver said promptly.

Percy paled and covered by sipping at his gillywater. Oliver was a very good sort of wizard, he thought miserably, but wasn't the brightest torch in the dungeon. He never recognized anyone unless they were somehow involved in Quiddich. Of course he wouldn't connect Penny, Percy's one and only girlfriend (and, quite possibly, the love of his life) with Penelope Clearwater, the Muggle-born Healer who listened well and

followed Quiddich. Oliver didn't even remember the names of anyone else in their year. Percy was surprised that Oliver still recognized *him*.

"Oh, hey, you work in the Ministry," Oliver exclaimed.

"Assistant to the Minister," Percy interjected automatically.

"Then you'd definitely know where Penelope is."

Percy looked around the bar uneasily. This was an extremely good opening, but he hadn't quite wanted it to come just yet. He still felt horrifically edgy from work at the Ministy that day. Everyone had definitely suspected something when the only Muggle-borns in the dungeons had been picked up by amateurs in search of a few quick Galleons. "Yes, er... look, I can get thrown in Azkaban for this, but, er... " He lowered his voice and leaned forward. Oliver leaned forward as well, looking intrigued. "She's... safe in France at the moment. I can't say anything else."

"Why not?"

"Because I shall get a less than friendly kiss from a Dementor. So, please."

Oliver Wood stared at him. "How d'you know?"

"Saw to it myself," Percy whispered. "Look, you know now, so let's talk about this later." The whole point of the evening had been to talk to Oliver about this, but Percy suddenly found himself wildly terrified and highly suspicious of everyone around him. He knew how many unnamed people the Ministry paid to spy on the wizarding population. Chances where someone would listen in on their conversation and Percy would very quickly find himself in a prison cell or (which was even more likely) face to face with a dementor who would very happily eat his soul. And what was he doing bringing Oliver into this? Percy could very well throw his own life away. No one would miss him or really care that he was gone, but Oliver? Oliver was *liked*. He was an actually good person. No, Oliver was much safer not knowing and not getting involved.

Oliver kept staring. "Perce — *you*..."

"Neither the time nor the place!" Percy interrupted, as the bartender scooted over to them. "Ah, yes, I think I shall need a napkin." Percy gestured to the bit of the bar he had baptized with his gillywater. "Thank you, sir."

"Perce, you —"

"It's incredibly dangerous, Oliver, don't bring it up now," Percy said very quickly and loudly enough to drown out Oliver's hissed 'sneak people out of the country'. The bartender was still at the other end of the bar, looking for napkins, good... "Well, I'm famished, are you hungry? You ought to be, playing Quiddich all day. Fred and George were human rubbish bins after each practice. The amount of food they could shovel into their mouths at any given time was truly astonishing."

Oliver took the hint, albeit reluctantly, just in time for the bartender to mop up the spill with the bar rag. "How are Fred and George?"

"I really couldn't tell you. My family's cast me

off for working in the Ministry."

"But you just said you were sn —"

"Well, yes I am," Percy said softly, as the bartender moved away, but not very far away, with the now gillywater-soaked bar rag, "but I'm still working in the Ministry and they don't know how I use my coffee breaks."

"Yeah, but you're taking complete strangers —"

"Into my heart," Percy said loudly, as the bartender appeared just a tad too interested in their conversation. "Yes I am Oliver! For I have seen the error of my ways and wish only to spread love to all the world."

Oliver stared at him again.

"Pretend I'm drunk," Percy ordered, as he downed his gillywater. "We'll Apperate someplace safe." Louder: "Yes, I heard this fantastic song the other day called 'A Wizard's Staff Has a Knob on the End' and in the spirit of universal brotherhood, I feel I ought to sing it."

If Oliver had not understood why Percy was

pretending to be drunk, he knew well enough that Percy's singing voice was the stuff of nightmares. And not the strange ones with talking cabbages, but the really terrifying ones where Snape force-fed you poisons or you were hit repeatedly by a bludger and *could never play Quiddich again*. Oliver still had nightmares about Percy singing in the shower from their days at Hogwarts and woke up screaming to try and drown out the sounds in his head. He had never been so glad when he heard that Prefects had their own bathrooms at the beginning of fifth year. "You — you wouldn't really *sing*, would you Percy?"

"Just watch me," Percy said, shoving his glasses up his nose and taking a deep breath.

"Right, you're too drunk to be in public," Oliver exclaimed extraordinarily quickly, grabbing Percy's arm and dropping a galleon on the bar. "Let's go."

They Apparated to Oliver's four-room flat, which was littered with so much Quiddich gear and memorabilia it looked like the backrooms of

Quality Quiddich Supplies. The couch even had prints of goal posts on it.

"So, what's happening?" Oliver asked, faintly puzzled.

"Just a moment," Percy said, pulling his wand out of his pocket and making the flat impenetrable. "There we are." He looked around, feeling suddenly exhausted. "You really don't want to know what I've been doing."

"Yes," Oliver said pointedly. "I do. I might also point out that I've played Quiddich for the past four years, whereas you sat behind a desk writing memos." He flexed his arms in a vaguely threatening way that was extremely effective.

"All right. I'm secretly smuggling Muggle-born out of the country. I've done it twice now and I don't plan to stop until they catch me."

"Why?" Oliver asked.

"I suppose I don't have anything else left to live for," Percy said philosophically. "One cannot be happy with the perfect filing system all the time,

after all. My family's cast me out and I don't have a girlfriend, so... "

"So you've chosen a life of filing and incredibly dangerous subterfuge against the Ministry when you've run out of paper clips?"

Percy contemplated this a moment. "That seems to be the gist of it, yes. I must say, I am so very pleased to hear you use the word 'subterfuge' correctly. I didn't know you knew it."

"Subterfuge has to do with tactics," Oliver explained patiently. "Tactics have *everything* to do with Quiddich. Of course I'd know it. But Perce — really? You've been smuggling Muggle-born out of the country?"

"After I break them out of Azkaban, yes. It's actually beginning to sound more dangerous now that I'm talking about it... ah, there's the blind terror kicking in, just as expected." Percy collapsed onto the couch, put his head into his hands, and suddenly thought that it would be quite horrible to die. "Oh God, I'm going to be

dead by Tuesday."

"No you're not," Oliver said heartily, sitting down next to Percy. "I'm sure you'll live until Friday. They'd want you to work a full week."

"You're as good as a Cheering Charm," Percy replied. "Look — I... I had an idea on how to go about covering my tracks. If Muggle-borns keep breaking out, they'll get suspicious." He pulled out The Scarlet Pimpernel from an inside pocket of his robe with trembling hands. "If I... create an... well, some sort of hero. Read this when you get the chance. In it, a Muggle named Percy develops this other persona — the Scarlet Pimpernel — and springs innocent prisoners from jail. Oh I've gone mad, I shouldn't get you involved in this. What was I thinking?" Percy cried, utterly in torment. "Oh God, I'm going to die. I've completely jeopardized your safety by doing this. Oliver I'm so sorry —"

"Whoa, calm down Perce," Oliver said, leaning back against the couch. "Deep breaths."

Percy followed his advice and then shuddered. "I — sorry. I've been under a lot of stress recently." Bleakly: "I haven't gotten more than four or five hours of sleep a night for.. oh it must be half-a-year now."

"You do seem run down," Oliver commented, meditatively. "I mean, this really doesn't strike me as something you'd do, Perce. Coming up with an alter ego named after a flower and breaking the law by breaking prisoners out of jail when people get killed for saying He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's name out loud and completely going against the Ministry when it controls everything and choosing a path that leads pretty directly to death... "

"Well now you make it sound like blatant stupidity," Percy retorted, though he was too tired and anxious and dispirited to put any real venom into it.

"That's pretty much what bravery is, Perce. Now, you're on an excruciatingly dangerous, self-appointed mission that reeks of death and danger

and that is really unlikely to lead to any route but certain death and *you didn't ask me to help*?"

Percy tried to come up with a coherent response. "Oliver, I appreciate your determination, it's always been a very dominant quality of yours, but sometimes people ought to draw lines between 'determined' and 'decision-making capabilities of a spastic whelk'."

"You can't go at it alone!" Oliver roared. "You'll need me to help!"

"Oliver, let us let Mr. Brain into the decision-making process right now. You're not at the Ministry. Do you know what part of my job is now? Telling the Minister who has been killed and who has been arrested and then writing up an official statement. I spent nearly six hours today compiling the list and causes of death- for which the Ministry is almost directly responsible — and now I have to take on the work of six or so employees, because I'm the only assistant or secretary left alive. I have to hide the fact that the

government is *slaughtering* their population from the rest of the wizarding world, too, which is probably going to lead to the French invading and killing me first. Oh and my work increases each day because the Ministry employees are dying off. Death Eaters can kill at will now. I got the memo yesterday. Badly spelled, of course, so I sent it back, but eventually they'll find a dictionary and then we really are in horrific trouble."

"Like we aren't now?"

"You don't *get it*, Oliver! One day you'll walk into the Ministry and someone will be laying there, dead, in the middle of the Atrium and no one will do anything about it because they're so frightened. And you don't know who to trust any more or what even to think because the Ministry changes its policies so quickly and all I can really do without risking death is to ensure that when our doom arrives it's spelled correctly! Anything else would land me in Azkaban. This? This will lead to my death without any trial or witnesses.

I'll just poof, vanish some day, having been crucioed into insanity and then killed only when they're done playing with me. I can't ask anyone else to take the risk."

Percy was breathing heavily by the end of his rant and he ran a hand through his neatly-parted hair. Oliver took a moment to think; quite the rare occurrence when it didn't have to do with Quiddich.

"Well," Oliver said slowly, "you're not asking me. I'm telling you I'm helping you and there isn't a bloody thing you can do to stop me. I'm determined, you know."

"You're not helping."

"You'll go crazy without me. I'll make sure of it."

"No."

"Yes."

"I — fine. I'm not responsible for your death." He would feel so, regardless.

"Well, we just won't die, then," Oliver said pragmatically.

"What?"

"Not dying is very easy," Oliver said, pacing. "I have frequently not been dead. Now, to continue to do this, you need the right team. To get the right team, you need the right people. Now, how did this bloke you modeled yourself on keep his cover?"

"He pretended to be an idiot. *I* do not have that luxury."

"No, so you need to make the prime suspect someone… someone so idiotic no one could believe it, but not so idiotic that it's a complete impossibility."

"Oliver, I think I once tried to explain to you the concept of 'impossibility' and the equally important concept of 'contradiction', but… " Percy trailed off.

"Alright, so, let's change tactics."

"No," Percy said thoughtfully. "I think you're actually onto something. Come on, let's go."

"Who do you know," Oliver asked, "who's enough of an idiot to do this?"

6

In Which Percy Recieves a Letter

"GILDEROY, YOU HAVE VISITORS again!" said the Healer in charge of the Janus Thickey ward trilled, before turning back to Oliver and Percy. "He hasn't gotten visitors in two years, you know, so sad because he's such a sweetheart, isn't he?"

Oliver appeared to be eating his fist in an attempt to keep from laughing.

"Visitors!" Gilderoy Lockhart exclaimed, beaming toothily from his bed. "Ah, and I expect you'll

be wanting my autograph? Lots of people want my autograph, you know. I put it on pictures and people just write in for them. They write in for them all the time." He frowned. "I wish I knew *why*, but since they want them on the pictures, I imagine that it's because I'm so dazzlingly handsome. On a mission from your girlfriends, boys?"

"Mmph," said Oliver, around his fist.

"Not exactly," Percy translated diplomatically. "But here, I... brought you a new quill." He rummaged through his pockets and managed to find a novelty peacock feather quill Dolores had given him for his birthday. Percy had been in the habit of carrying it around with him on the off chance that he could force the ugly thing off on someone else.

"Thank the nice man for bringing you a present, Gilderoy!" the Healer Strout gushed. "Your old quill was getting so tatty, too."

"Ah, such loving support from my fans!" Lockhart exclaimed, taking the quill and beaming with

pleasure. "Just when I've completely mastered joined up writing too! They let me write letters from time to time now. People seem very happy when I write them letters, though I can't say why."

"Your astonishing good looks?" Oliver suggested, barely keeping himself from a round of hysterical laughter.

"Why, yes!" Lockhart agreed. "You must be right! Sometimes they say that I wrote books, but I don't remember ever writing books."

"They must've just meant your picture was in them and your fantastic smile told hundreds of stories." Oliver appeared to be choking on his laughter now. Percy glared at him over his glasses. Oliver had been saving up that one for years, ever since Percy had gotten irritated enough at Lockhart's forcing him to play a vampiress seduced by Lockhart's dreamy smile to rant and imitate Lockhart in the safety of their dorm room. Oliver had been quite struck with some of Percy's phrasing and Percy was quite sure he'd

seen Oliver writing it down in the cover of his copy of Quiddich Through the Ages.

"My, you are clever," replied Lockhart. "That really does make the most sense, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Percy said diplomatically. "Now, Prof—Mr. Lockhart, we've come to read you a story."

"First thing on Saturday morning, a nice story!" gushed the Healer, summoning them armchairs. "Lovely, isn't it Gilderoy?"

"Oh yes, it is," Gilderoy replied, beaming like a six-year-old on Christmas. "It is wonderful to have such loyal fans to wish so for my entertainment."

"Mmpf," said Oliver, apparently trying to swallow his fist to keep from laughing.

"Well, yes, of course," Percy interjected in a business-like tone, as the Healer bustled off to go tend to her other patients. "Now, this book is called *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and I daresay that you will enjoy it."

With that, Percy, with some assistance from Oliver, who ended up liking the book immensely

and having great fun acting it out (Oliver always had liked Gilderoy Lockhart's classes, now that Percy thought about it), passed the morning reading THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL to Gilderoy Lockhart.

Once he had finished, it was rather clear, though, that his master-plan of having inspired Gilderoy Lockhart by tales of derring-do needed some work.

"Sir Percy has wonderful taste in clothes!" Lockhart gushed, showing, once more, the Hufflepuff ability to zero in on important details. "I prefer lavender suits myself, but a man who knows his laces is set for life."

"Mmpf," said Oliver, around his fist.

"I am glad that you enjoyed the book," Percy replied, pulling out a new paperback copy from the inside pocket of his robe. "This is for you, Mr. Lockhart, as a present."

"For me!" Lockhart gushed. "You shouldn't have!"

"But we did," Oliver said.

Percy handed over the book, thought quickly,

and smiled. "I am glad you enjoyed the reading, Mr. Lockhart. Do have a pleasant day."

"You forgot the autographs for you and your girlfriends!" Lockhart exclaimed, a little peevishly, as Percy and Oliver made to leave. "Look, I wrote a message *and* my name in joined up writing. You oughtn't to waste them."

"Mmph," said Oliver, since Percy slapped his hand over Oliver's mouth.

"Thanks, but we haven't got girlfriends," Percy translated.

"Ooooh," the head witch said knowledgably. "Come on, Gilderoy, leave them be. I'll explain later. I'm sure that they will come visit you, won't they?"

"Mmph," said Oliver.

"Yes, of course we will. Come on, Oliver." Percy steered his friend out into the corridor.

"So," Oliver muttered, "Gilderoy Lockhart is going to help us out, how?"

"I'm getting to that," Percy replied, adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses. "Oliver, I need you to

do something... a little bizarre for me."

"What?"

Percy told him.

Oliver stared. "How do you come up with these things, Percy?"

"I use my brain. You ought to try using it for something other than Quiddich every once in a while."

Oliver sighed. "Alright. How do we go about doing this?"

"Well," Percy said hesitantly. "It does require a bit of shopping on our part, and I do need to work on spells to change appearances, but after a spot of practice it should go off flawlessly."

"Ho ho ho," Oliver said weakly.

"That's the spirit," Percy said briskly.

Shopping actually turned out to be much more difficult than they expected. Neither of them was particularly good at lying or at disguising themselves or their intentions.

Neither of them actually knew how to buy

clothes, either.

They knew the general principals (you buy what fits) and both had Methods of buying clothes (Percy generally told Madame Malkin that he worked in the Ministry and gravitated towards things with pinstripes; Oliver told Madame Malkin that he was a Quiddich player and bought clothes that hid bloodstains).

After a thoroughly exasperating evening in Diagon Alley, they both gave up and went home to sleep and, in Oliver's case, think about Quiddich, and in Percy's case, ruminate on his failures.

Before he did that, however, he flipped through The Scarlet Pimpernel and decided to pop by Penny's flat. He missed her terribly and he still remained terrified — terrified for her safety, terrified that he had somehow lost her (and to Oliver! He liked Oliver; Oliver was his only friend, but Oliver did not have the brain capacity to understand anything that was not Quiddich!) terrified of everything that had gone wrong, that

could go wrong, and would go wrong.

He Apparated into her flat and sat in the middle of the floor with the lights turned off for some time, until the panic moved away, until the generalized terror faded and he could see details again. It was going to work. Oliver was good at play-acting, Percy noticed everything and was scarily organized —

It was a good plan. It was going to work.

Percy waved his wand apathetically and the lights in the apartment came on, to reveal a neat, tidy apartment, tastefully, but sparsely furnished. Percy thought it was actually much better furnished than his own apartment, which had a very clean and well-kept bed and bath (the two parts of his flat that he actually used regularly) but otherwise had no furniture whatever except for bookcases.

Penelope had bookcases; more even than Percy, all perfectly organized and (yes!) alphabetized. Percy suddenly remembered why he loved

Penelope Clearwater quite as much as he did.

He browsed the bookshelves, minorly fascinated at the juxtaposition of Muggle and magical texts. Penelope's father owned a rare books shop and it showed. Percy opened a window to air out the place (he just let in the city smog — Percy, who almost never went back to his own flat, had forgotten how dirty cities were) and began browsing the shelves for the rest of the Scarlet Pimpernel books. He skimmed through a few — adventurous, fun reads — and picked a few to take home with him to help him come up with tactics.

After a few moments, Percy saw Hermes swoop into the apartment and land on the back of Penny's couch.

"Oh, hello," Percy said, in minor surprise. "I didn't send any letters off."

Hermes automatically stuck out his leg and Percy untied a thick scroll. "I suppose Penny has some food in the kitchen?" Hermes hooted, as if to say, 'Well, it's the least you can do.'

Percy crumbled up several biscuits he found in a box in one of the cupboards and filled up a small bowl with water before allowing himself to look at the letter.

It was addressed to him in Penelope's scrupulously neat handwriting.

Dear Percy, it began,

I found Hermes delivering mail and lured him away from his flight back with a chocolate croissant. I hope you won't be too terribly offended by this unorthodox change in his diet.

I'm having a lovely vacation. You know that I've always been fascinated by the French Revolution in 1789. Did you know that there was a Muggle counterpoint?

It's really quite astonishing to compare the two.

It still all hinges on Maximilien Robespierre, who was the first wizard to use a time tuner in an academic setting, to attend both Muggle and Magical schools. He really was a fascinating character. Historians seem completely divided about him; that is, when they remember him. He was either a Grindelwaldian tyrant who wanted to end wizarding society, or he was one of the most progressive and intelligent wizards France has ever seen. I think the thing to remember, though, is that he was obsessed with doing what was right. He

reminds me of you a little.

I visited his hometown of Arras and was quite shocked that there was absolutely nothing to commemorate him. I think that's the way of all true heroes, they search for the right and only the dedicated few remember them.

Robespierre, for example. In his lifetime, he was known as the 'Incorruptable'. He fought to end the death penalty and extend equal rights to all people. He composed most of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and most of their constitution (still in use today!). However, it got to a point where absolutely everyone

was against France. The people were starving, the crops were failing, Austria had invaded, the nobility, whose feudal privileges had been abolished, were angry and raising an army. It was a terrible situation and they tried to make the best of it. They ended up executing all the enemies of the state, but there were so many and everyone was in such a panic that the executions went wildly out of control. Robespierre then made himself into a focus for the hatred and the terror. He chose to become a symbol of the Terror and the government that created it, and then deliberately allowed himself to be

killed.

Robespierre ended the Terror with himself.

I hope you never have to do anything like that, Percy.

In any case, I just want to say that you are an amazing person. I will probably be really hard for you, going against the Ministry, but you always do what you think is right, regardless of what anyone else thinks. To that end, I'm sorry about our break-up tiff. You were doing what you thought was right, which I hadn't really realized at the time. Of course, I did what I thought was right too, so we still would have reached a bit of

an impasse regardless.

By now you've probably found the sequels, you overachiever. I know you'll do what's right, regardless of what happens, and you'll have everything so meticulously organized everyone will be amazed at the revelation of your "secret plans". The books will help you, I hope. I doubt I have anything else of use, though I might have some World War Two books from my father (it was around the same time as Wizarding War with Grindelwald, though you probably know that). I can't tell you where I am, except that I'm safe and across the Channel, and I don't think

that we can contact one another again. However, I've told the French Ministers about what's happening in Britain. They're quite aghast and very willing to help export since there's such a dreadful backlog. Your sister-in-law's mother can help you. Show her a picture of a specific flower and she'll know who you are and will help you. I'll take care of the packages on this end. I know plenty of people willing to take in a bundle of British goods; my mum's side of the family still lives here, after all.

Percy, I hardly know what to say. I haven't so much as spoken to you in years

and now this. You are much better than everyone, including yourself, ever gives you credit for. I know you can do this, Percy. I believe in you, for what it's worth. You are a kind, decent man and there aren't many of those in the world.

Be careful. I hardly need to say anything else because I know you've got it all under control. You are wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.

I clipped out this article about tax laws and pasted it, in the off-chance you'd be interested, or in case anyone managed to break through my spells and read your letter.

There then followed about two feet of parch-

ment devoted to the most boring section of tax laws in the French Constitution.

The end was the best bit though.

Don't change, Percy. You're absolutely fantastic the way you are.

All my love,

Penny.

Percy felt the urge to do something very romantic with the letter but, being Percy, he merely folded it up and put it in the pocket of his sweater vest. He made sure Hermes had had something to drink and then began writing a letter to Madame de la Coeur.

He had a lot of work to do.

7

In Which Percy Avaunts with a Spoon

PERCY WAS WORKING through lunch yet again. Unfortunately, the food in the cafeteria today was hot soup, which, alas, was not the easiest thing to eat while drafting interdepartmental memos.

He nearly growled with frustration, the spoon sticking out of his mouth as he scanned a memo and stalked to the door of his office. After removing the spoon from his mouth he looked for his secretary before remembering

that she had mysteriously vanished two days ago.

Sticking his head out into the corridor, he bellowed, "Have someone prepare Donalds for his interview with *The Prophet* this afternoon and make sure that they do it *now*!"

Some terrified peon sprinted down the hall to the elevator and Percy closed his door with a feeling a general mulishness against humanity in general.

He then attempted to attack his soup with all the ill-will he had for the world that day, but here is nothing that foils a plan like hot soup. He fanned his burning tongue and thought nostalgically of how he had never burned his tongue on his mother's cooking. He was tempted to put aside his memos for the stack of books he had taken from Penny's apartment (The Scarlet Pimpernel turned out to be a book series; a very *long* book series), when he heard a voice.

"Is this Percy Weasley's office?" someone asked.

"Yes," Percy said, puzzled. He stood, still

holding his spoon, and looked into the fireplace. "What can I do for you?"

"I need to call in the favor," Macnair said, looking sheepish.

"And?"

"There's been an... accident here at Azkaban; one of the prisoners has died."

"Of what?" Percy asked, silently summoning a piece of parchment and a quill.

Macnair looked shifty. "That would be what I need the favor for."

Percy sighed. "Let me report to the Minister and I shall be over shortly to sort this whole affair out."

Macnair disappeared from the fire with a little 'pop' and Percy, dropping spoon, ink, and quill into his pocket, pinched the bridge of his nose. In the name of Merlin, wasn't it bad enough that the Muggle-borns were in prison, without having to worry about bored jailers?

Sliding his wand out of his sleeve, he tried to

come up with some way to transport his soup with him before realizing, with a sudden shock, that he was the Scarlet Pimpernel and this was a perfect opportunity to carry out his plans. He managed to come up with a spell on his spoon, so that when he wanted his soup he could just wave his spoon and say, 'hot soup' in order to have it appear in front of him. Percy was very proud of the spell as he dropped his spoon into his pocket and pulled out the notes Gilderoy Lockhart had written in loopy, scarlet handwriting:

They seek him here, they seek him there,
The Ministry seeks him everywhere.
Is he in heaven? Is he in hell?
That demmed elusive Pimpernel.'

Percy sealed these notes with a blob of red wax charmed to look like a scarlet pimpernel, before tucking them into the inner pocket of his robes.

He then locked up his office and dropped in to tell the Minister that there had been an "accident" at Azkaban and he was going to go and fix it.

"Of course," the Minister said absently, flipping through piles of paperwork. "You know our official policy when it comes to Azkaban?"

Percy hazarded a guess. "All is well and missing prisoners do not exist?"

"Exactly." He waved Percy away and Percy felt at the same time sickened and exhilarated. This was the moment to effect a mass break-out such as never had been seen. He had been planning to break out the prisoners for over a week now. He'd created passports and shipped them to mostly the French Ministry, since it was the only one where he knew he'd be trusted if he asked for help, but he had no idea that he would manage to break everyone out all at once. But to do that he needed —

Percy Apparated into Oliver Wood's apartment and began ransacking the place for some sort of schedule, quite surprising Oliver, who ended up

merely being asleep in his bedroom.

"Sorry," Percy said, "but I'm going to break out all the Muggle-borns in Azkaban. You had better come along."

Oliver stared at him, bleary-eyed. "What day is it?"

"Thursday. It's half-past twelve so you really ought to be up."

"Well excuse me, but your Ministry has canceled all Quiddich games until further notice and I couldn't drown myself in the shower no matter how hard I tried, and, whoop de do, one does not get much sleep doing these secret missions of yours."

"Come, come," Percy scolded crisply. "Less time playing Quiddich means more time for you to help me out. Besides, I got much less sleep than you did. I was with you the whole time *and* I came into work promptly at seven."

"Yes, well, you've developed a tolerance against not-sleeping. I haven't." Oliver groggily pulled

himself out of bed. "What're we doing?"

"We're breaking out the Muggle-born prisoners from Azkaban and leaving a note in each cell. I counted — we do have enough. You were very convincing."

"Shut up," Oliver grumbled, still not over his rude awakening. "I'll come."

Oliver dressed according to Percy's instructions and, with a few minor spell modifications, ended up looking like a member of the Obliviator squad.

"Perfect!" Percy said, very pleased with himself. "I say, I am getting very good at this. I've been disguising myself to go send out warnings via owl, but I didn't think that anything came out of all the practice. This really is rewarding."

Oliver looked at himself in the mirror in bewilderment. "Have to hand it to you, Perce. You could've been an Auror."

"Someone has to take care of the details," Percy replied modestly. "We have to Floo in to Azkaban, now. Just... follow my lead. I've got everything

planned." He explained as much as he could before they popped back into the Ministry and then Flooed over to Azkaban.

Macnair stood sheepishly in the stone room, looking askance at the ground. He looked immeasurably relieved when Percy cleared his throat, assumed Super Pompous Prat mode, and said, "Alright, I've come with an Obliviator. What can we do for you?"

"This way," Macnair said, walking out.

"Stick close," Percy muttered to Oliver as they walked through the cramped, narrow stone corridors. "You remember the plan?"

Oliver nodded, his hand, in his pocket, clenched around his wand.

Macnair waved away an absolutely enormous heard of dementors to reveal a much shaken Mulicber, who opened up a cell with a flick of his wand.

Martha Austen lay in heap in the very center, not moving, not breathing.

Percy paled and stepped back. "What did you *do*?"

"Well... you know how it is. You get bored.

And then the dementors get attracted by the excitement, and... " Macnair shrugged. "She's dead, or as good as dead."

Mulicber grinned sickly. "Macnair said that you'd deal with it. Right? You can make the problem go away?"

Percy nearly boiled over with anger and felt Oliver beside him stiffen and start forward. Percy grabbed him by the arm. Oliver shot him a glare but Percy gripped his arm very tightly in warning. "Oh yes, I'm sure we can."

He released Oliver. "Now!" Percy slid his wand out of his sleeve and whirled on Mulciber. "STUPEFY!" Mulciber flew backwards, skidding to a halt in front of the group of dementors. Percy summoned him back and banished him into Martha's cell.

"Oh bugger off, you lot," Percy said, very rudely, to the flock of dementors, just in time to see Oliver woosh back, unconscious, and crumple into a heap in the middle of the hallway.

Percy looked down at him. "Oliver... what can

be said?"

Oliver, being unconscious, did not respond.

Macnair stomped forward. "What the hell was that?"

"I have to dispose of the body," Percy said. "There cannot be witnesses."

"You could have just *asked us to leave*," Macnair said.

Percy pretended to be greatly astonished. "Oh… really? That is… sort of against regulation, but… "

Macnair looked genuinely surprised at that. "The Ministry has regulations about this sort of thing?"

Percy gave him a Look. "Obviously. Where would the Ministry be without regulations for everything? Witnesses must be stunned and then have their memories modified. The problem thus ceases to exist."

"If you weren't on our side, you'd be damn frightening," Macnair replied, turning.

"Glad to hear it," Percy said. "Stu —"

"Wait, wait," Macnair replied, holding up his hands. "I thought that we established that I

didn't need to be stupefied."

"You can't just go against proper procedure like that!" Percy exclaimed in his most pompous, outraged bureaucrat tone of voice.

"I don't like having wands pulled on me!" snapped Macnair.

"Look, you asked me to come in and make the problem go away, so you have to follow along with procedure!" This wasn't working. This really wasn't working. New plan, new plan, new plan, new plan —

"Procedure? How can you go on about procedure when it makes you attack innocent people?"

The irony really just was too much.

"Exactly. STUPEFY!"

Macnair blocked it, which lead, very much against Percy's plans, to a duel.

Macnair was very quick and he was vicious. He fought dirty, which appalled Percy, who had no idea what to do in response. Even Fred and George could not have prepared him for this —

He blocked Macnair's spell and ducked as another whizzed over head and blasted apart part of the stone wall.

"Just give up!" Macnair roared. "I don't have any quarrel with you, except that you want to stun me!"

"I do have a quarrel with you, though," Percy said, shooting a non-verbal Jelly-legs curse that Macnair blocked. "Waste of resourses, I think, is the only phrase you'd understand."

"You *stupid* bureaucrat!" Macnair shouted, swinging his wand down in a powerful arc that made Percy tumble backwards, into a wall.

"Ow," Percy said, sprawled on the floor and grabbing for his glasses before they flew away. The prisoners had stirred themselves out of their terror and apathy and looked out of their cells at him in wordless supplication.

Macnair stepped on Percy's right hand with a heavy boot and prized Percy's wand out of his fingers. "God. I know you like the rules, but this is ridiculous. I'll vanish the prisoner myself." He

lifted his foot to kick Percy in the side (it was excruciatingly painful and Percy held his sides and curled up into himself) and stomped off down the hallway.

Through the haze of pain Percy managed to get one thought through his head. He must not let Macnair do this. He could not let him do this.

This was wrong and against every law — written and unwritten. It violated *natural* law, it was wrong and he, Percy, was the Scarlet Pimpernel and he had to stop it…

Percy dragged himself to a standing position against the wall and shoved his glasses on. His torso was on fire and his head ached and he was sure, suddenly very sure, that he was going to die, but he forced himself to stand up and began to lurch down the corridor. He plunged his hand into his pocket, looking for anything he could find to help him —

He pulled out his spoon and waved it feebly at Macnair. "N— no — no — y-you can't do — do that. Stop!"

Macnair turned in surprise. "... the hell?"

Percy gained speed and confidence. Personal pain was immaterial! He was the Scarlet Pimpernel! "I said stop!"

"The hell? That's a spoon! What do you think you're going to do with that?" Macnair had his wand pointed at Martha—

"No, stop that!" Percy shouted, avaunting with his spoon.

"Are you dueling me with *a spoon*?" Macnair asked incredulously.

"No," Percy replied, a bit smugly. "Hot soup."

With that, it appeared right in front of Percy — on Macnair's head. Macnair screamed in pain and dropped his wand, giving Percy ample opportunity to take Macnair's wand and then stun him. Percy took his own wand back and, after healing himself, tucked it back into his sleeve.

Oliver proved very easy to revive, and limited himself to only a few obscenities when Percy chided him for having "such bad reflexes one

would never think you played Quiddich".

"Oh shut up. How do you suggest we break these people out of their cells? Also, this beard itches." Oliver took his wand and waved it at himself, taking on his normal appearance.

"Oh, I came prepared," Percy replied, almost chipperly. "Look." He pulled out a thick booklet of papers from his pocket and flipped through the pages. "The counter-spells to the locks. Even *you* should be able to do these, Oliver."

"It's really strange to hear you trying to make jokes."

"I am *trying* at it. I don't think I quite grasp the concept of humor."

"No, no you don't. But that's okay. Our friendship does not rely on your ability to make or understand jokes, which is probably a good thing."

"You can always cheer me, Oliver. Remarkable ability of yours."

Percy and Oliver moved carefully through the prison, Percy performing the counter-spells and

Oliver helping the prisoners stand up and walk out. Percy claimed the privilege of placing each note down precisely in the middle of each cell.

"How are we getting them all out?" Oliver asked, as they (i.e. Oliver) helped the last prisoner into the jailer's break-room.

"There really aren't all that many of them," Percy admitted, feeling the adrenaline rush of victory dim. "It's really horrible, Oliver. Everyday Dolores sends a very long letter to Azkaban of the Muggle-borns who it's alright to kill or... or *experiment* on, to see how they *stole magic* from other wizards. I still don't know what happened to everyone. I'm just supposed to mark that they died in captivity, like the prisoners were all just animals in a zoo."

Oliver gawked at Percy. "Wait, really, Perce?"

Percy pushed the door open so Oliver could put the unconscious prisoner inside. "Yes." With that, Percy turned to the crowd of people. It was really disheartening to see them all huddled in

groups on the ground and slumped against the walls like people already dead.

"Alright. We're going to organize you all into groups. Look, everyone; you're free. You have passports waiting for you in the offices of sympathetic Ministers in the French Ministry. You need to be really careful, though. The Floo network is under constant survelience so, er... "

"Oliver?" Oliver prompted, in an undertone.

"No, no! You need a code-name! It's how they *do* it in the books."

"Osric Tattington," Oliver supplied.

"Er, yes. Osric here will help you reach the edge of Azkaban and Apparate away. You will wait until I return with your wands and then go out in groups." Percy pulled a sheaf of papers out of an inner pocket and handed them to Oliver. "This may be rather difficult for you, Oli — er... *Osric*, but get everyone into groups while I go unlock the wand box."

"Alright," said Oliver, dubiously. "Are you

going to help get them out?

"Me? Oh, no. I can stay... perhaps forty-five minutes more before Dolores gets suspicious, but then I really have to get back and deliver this." He held up one of notes, beaming. "After all. I'm getting very good at double-speak."

One of the prisoners stumbled over to him, dragged her tattered robes more tightly around her shoulders. "Please, sir — we — we're really free to go?"

"Yep," said Oliver. "We've broken you out."

The witch turned to Percy, peering at him through a mat of tangled hair. "And who are you, then, to risk so much for strangers?"

"Me?" asked Oliver. "I'm just your average, dashing, heroic Quiddich star. No need to thank me."

"And you?" the witch asked Percy, completely ignoring Oliver.

"Me?" asked Percy, much astonished. "I'm the Scarlet Pimpernel."

8

In Which Percy Is Successful

"I FOUND THIS at the scene of the crime," Percy said, dropping the note onto Dolores Umbridge's desk. "A bad poem in loopy handwriting. It doesn't make sense at all! I'm outraged — I'm — I'm *incensed!* Their accident at Azkaban? They *lost all of their prisoners*! That two grown wizards could be locked in a cell dressed up as Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff while some mad poet makes off *with all the prisoners in Azkaban* is absolutely

ludicrous! Why the — the — the —"

"You have permission to swear," Dolores said, looking murderous as she picked up the note.

Percy did so.

"For someone who seems so stodgy and by-the-book, you can be surprisingly creative," Yaxley commented, a little too brightly. Umbridge glared at him like some sort of toad about to eat a particularly vexing fly.

"Shut up Yaxley. We just lost all the prisoners in Azkaban." Mutely furious, she read the poem to herself, her lips moving along with the words.

"What does this even *mean*?" Yaxley demanded, snatching the note from Umbridge's short, pudgy fingers and scanning it. His scowl deepened as he went on and Percy had to press his lips together very firmly to keep himself from smiling or laughing.

Very severely, Percy said, "It is *nonsense*. We are clearly dealing with some *loon*."

Umbridge pursed her lips. "We must have someone put out a notice in the newspaper. We

shall ask for information about a... what is this flower at the bottom?"

"A scarlet pimpernel," Percy replied. "I looked it up."

"Well, ask if anyone knows of a madman escaped from Azkaban who thinks that he's a small red flower. Mulciber and Macnair will be relieved from their posts. This is crazy. Percy, see if you can get anything out of the other Ministries on an influx of British witches and wizards."

Percy nodded and then let Yaxley delegate the task, which meant that it went to the most incompetent employee still alive and working in the Ministry, there was absolutely no rehearsal of what needed to be said, and the interviewer (who had not gone through a background check and was a secret Harry Potter supporter) found out so much more than Dolores Umbridge intended that she broke her tea cup and saucer over Yaxley's head. The article became the next morning's headline.

Who is the Scarlet Pimpernel?

By: Alice Woodward-Bernstein

Today there was the largest breakout from Azkaban in wizarding history, led by a wizard known only as 'The Scarlet Pimpernel'. Every prisoner in the low level security wards in Azkaban successfully escaped this morning, with the same note in their empty cells:

''They seek him here, they seek him there,
The Ministry seeks him everywhere.
Is he in heaven? Is he in hell?
That demmed elusive Pimpernel!'.

"We are hard at work to find out the identity of this madman," said a spokeswitch for the Ministry who refused to give her name. "For his own safety and for the safety of others, we request that you contact the Ministry immediately with details, any details, really, about this, er – about this man's mad antics and stuff."

Upon further questioning, the witch added

that the Ministry really "didn't have a bloody clue" who the Scarlet Pimpernel was, if he intended to strike again, or what his plans were. The Scarlet Pimpernel had apparently been rescuing prisoners for some time, for when a high-level Ministry employee went to inspect the prison of Azkaban, he found a stack of notes from the Scarlet Pimpernel that correspond to an incredible number of missing prisoners. In fact, every prisoner put in Azkaban since Minister Fudge resigned had been rescued by this hero, unknown except for his device of a little red flower. The spokeswitch further stated that the Ministry "had no idea what was going on" and had "no idea whatever" that the Scarlet Pimpernel had been rescuing witches and wizards for so long and had been so successful in doing so.

Percy could not have been happier and found himself actually smiling. The discussions in the elevators and the corridors over the mysterious

"Pimpernel" filled him with a glee he was at pains to describe. It spurred him on to disguise himself with increasing frequency to sneak out to the Owlery and send warnings. He even found it within himself to send notices to all his brothers and his parents (albeit as the Scarlet Pimpernel) that they were under extraordinarily grave suspicion from the Ministry and their best bet was to go into hiding. He even included the name and contact information of a few of the witches and wizards in the French and Spanish Ministries whom he knew to be particularly anti-Death Eater and ferociously egalitarian. These notes, of course, were so heavily warded that Hermes looked dizzy when he flew off with them, but it was a necessary precaution. He had to admit that it hurt when he snuck into his father's office and saw that his father had banished him from the family picture, it had hurt unbearably, but he reread he letter Penny had written him and it almost, almost made up

for the fact that his family still hated him, and would always hate him.

Everything seemed to be working for him as it never had worked before. He had managed to completely obliterate any type of a paper trail from his last rescue by virtue of the fact that he had put himself in charge of the investigation of his last rescue. There was an ease at turning the circumstances facing him to help his mission. He was overjoyed when Dolores, furious at the continuing articles criticizing the Ministry, sent him to France to ask if they would kindly send them any information they had about the Scarlet Pimpernel (they didn't answer any of Dolores's letters).

He had never been to Paris before and hoped, vaguely, that he might see Penny again. However, he planned, just as he always did, and put away all thoughts of private life. The Scarlet Pimpernel was much more important than Percy Weasley. As soon as he arrived in the elegant foyer with the

tasteful wrought iron decorations interspersed with still-growing greenery, a wizard in navy-blue pinstripes whisked Percy to a comfortable, stylish office, where he was to wait for Madame de la Coeur.

He did not have to wait long.

"Monsieur Weasley!" Madame Delacoeur exclaimed, swooping down to kiss him on each cheek, entering as soon as her assistant shut the door. She was wearing a very low-cut set of patterned white robes and Percy suddenly found that he could see just *how* low-cut the robes were.

"Er, yes," Percy replied, turning as scarlet as his signature flower.

"Come! Sit down!" They did so and Madame de la Coeur smiled at him again. "I have been reading your letters — the ones you signed with the little red drawing."

"Er, yes, um." Percy cleared his throat, thought of Penny (bad! Bad!) then thought of the time he saw Argus Filtch pop out of a birthday cake in

honor of Dolores Umbridge's birthday.

That worked.

"Madame de la Coeur, I would prefer it if you did not let anyone know I was — er, that I sign with a scarlet pimpernel. That needs to stay a secret."

"But of course." She smiled winningly and it was back to that horribly awkward birthday party once more. Percy was sure Mrs. Norris had been in the cake, too.

"I took on the flower to hide my identity and protect my friends and family." Ha, like he had friends and family? Oliver didn't count, since he was as much a part of this as Percy was. "If it is known that I have been illegally freeing prisoners, then... " Percy trailed off and frowned. He was revealing far more than he intended to reveal. Even the most minor detail could be dangerous once spoken aloud.

Madame de la Coeur smiled at him again, leaning forward to listen, and Percy was struck with a sudden admiration. He had to hand it to her.

She was incredibly clever at using all resources at her disposal to glean details and she knew very well that every detail counted, no matter what it was.

However, Percy was very well-versed in playing the Ministry bureaucrat without a thought in his head that hadn't been regulated and filed in alphabetical order at least three times.

"I received your letters as well, Madame."

"Then you will understand my surprise when my department received your later letter."

"I do have to cover my tracks," he admitted. "I may as well say now that anything I sign in my own name has been written by Dolores Umbridge. Only the letters I sign with the flower are legitimate correspondence."

Madame de la Coeur pursed her red-lipsticked lips together. "Alright. The plans seem to have worked so far. Will you continue to do as you have done? The Ministers we agreed on are willing to continue with their assistance."

"Indeed, Madame."

"As to compensation...?"

"Madame, if Voldemort succeeds in fully taking over Great Britain and killing off Harry Potter, and thus the resistance movement centered on him, you will need all the able-bodied witches and wizards you can find."

She did not appear to be fully convinced and she leaned back in her chair, arms crossed almost directly underneath what passed for the collar of her robes. Percy stared at the spot in between her eyes on her forehead and refused to look down.

It was very difficult and Percy had to force himself to remember the time he'd walked in on his parents — urgh.

That did it.

"So you can offer us nothing?" Madame de la Coeur inquired, sounding rather put-out.

"Madame, I am offering you a chance to continually do the right thing. There has never been and will probably never be an issue quite as clear cut as this one. Will you allow France

to go down in history as an unfeeling villain who abandoned thousands of innocents to their deaths at the hands of an evil dictator?"

"Britain abandoned us when Grindelwald took over. Actually... " She paused and Percy had to look down. Madame de la Coeur disappeared behind her desk for a moment and then came back up with a copy of The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore. Percy had been meaning to read it for some time now, to see whether or not the Ministry should suppress its publication, but Dolores had read through it and said that it might dishearten Harry Potter and his supporters to see that Dumbledore was only mortal after all.

She put the book on the table and flipped through the pages until she got about half-way through. "Ah. Here it is. According to this, your hero, Dumbledore —"

"He never really was mine," Percy said mildly. "He was rather a liar. Oh, and he caused my family to disown me. That was mildly upsetting."

"Ah! So you *are* brother-in-law to my Fleur!" Madame de la Coeur sent another dazzling grin in his direction. "I had wondered. There really are too many Weasleys. Now, Dumbledore knew about what Grindelwald did over here. Grindelwald conquered all the countries in Europe, united them under his empire, and imprisoned those who rebelled. He planned on revealing us to the Muggles and ruling over them in some sort of 'benevolent dictatorship'. Everyone, of course, hated the idea of revealing ourselves to the non-magical world, so Grindelwald killed and imprisoned thousands. Yet for five years of this brutal oppression, your government only issued nastily worded notes. And why? Because, as young men, Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald had fallen in love. In respect, Grindelwald never attacked England, and Dumbledore never attacked Grindelwald."

"But after those five years, Dumbledore

defeated Grindelwald," Percy interjected. "It was a fairly epic battle."

"But how can you be sure he was not planning on joining his lover?"

"I can't. But the fact is, he *didn't*. Regardless of what Dumbledore was, he chose the love of his country and of his countrymen over the one great love of his life. He sacrificed the personal for the public. We aren't asking *you* to sacrifice anything at all here. I ask you only to let in innocent Muggle-borns unfairly imprisoned and give them safe haven."

"And to provide them with some means of livelihood."

"If you let them starve your humanitarian efforts would be a bit pointless."

Madame de la Coeur upped the charm considerably. Filtch, his parents, the dorm shower after Oliver...

"But you must realize," purred Madame de la Coeur, "that this is terribly expensive."

"Then have the escapees work for you," Percy replied. "Once they are in your employ, the British Ministry cannot recapture them without causing a world war."

She pursed her lips. Filtch, his parents, the shower, *badly spelled memos* —

"Alright. But!" She raised a manicured finger. "You owe us."

"Agreed," Percy said, shaking her hand and pointedly not looking at her chest.

"You are very strong-willed," she said, amused.

"I would be dead if I was not." Percy dropped her hand. "May I say then, that you refused to listen to reason? You can tell your higher-ups that the British Ministry's demands were absurd and damaging to the French economy."

"Agreed. Ooh, say that I broke a carafe of wine over your head. I've always wanted to have done something like that." She poured wine over Percy's head to add to the verisimilitude, but Percy balked at having glass fragments in his skull.

"You dodged?" Madame de la Cœur suggested. "I flung the wine at you and you dodged before the bottle followed."

"Oh, alright," Percy said, as Madame de la Coeur smashed the bottle against the wall.

"You refuse to see reason?" Percy shouted, flinging open the door, to the shock of the Ministry employees very pointedly not listening outside Madame de la Coeur's office.

"Get out!" she cried, bosom heaving. Filtch, his parents, the shower, badly spelled memos, and (oh God) *Dolores Umbridge naked* — ew. His libido must have died entirely at that one.

"Get out! We will never ally ourselves with Voldemort! Vive la France!" Madame de la Coeur chased him to the fireplaces, wand outstretched. It took talent to run that quickly in stilettos. She burst into the French National Anthem, causing everyone else to do the same.

"Good luck," she whispered, as Percy grabbed Floo powder and flung it into the fireplace.

"I'll need it," Percy admitted. "The British Ministry of Magic!"

Madame de a Coeur blew up a corner of the fireplace and Percy jumped into the fireplace to general cheers from everyone in the French Ministry.

"Well?" snapped Dolores's voice, as Percy pulled his glasses and robes askew and tumbled onto the floor of the Atrium. Eloise looked at him in mute astonishment.

Percy staggered upright, pretending to have difficulty remaining vertical as opposed to horizontal. Dolores shoved past several other Ministry members to get face-to-face with Percy.

Pretending to have difficulty focusing his eyes, Percy staggered forward. "Would — would not listen to reason. Very vicious, the French. Bad waste of wine."

With that, Percy managed to trip over his own feet and collapse face-down onto the floor of the Atrium. He was very glad that no one could see his grin.

9

In Which Percy Questions

AFTER FEIGNING unconsciousness until Dolores dumped a bucket of water over his head and sent him to St. Mungo's, Percy let himself relax back onto his hospital bed and read more of the Scarlet Pimpernel books, their covers transfigured into PREFECTS WHO GAINED POWER.

"Hey, Perce," Oliver said, dropping into a chair by Percy's bed. "Apparently the nurses alerted me as your next of kin."

"That's really quite strange," Percy said. "I'm not quite sure why they would."

"Because your family disowned you?" Oliver suggested.

"Well, there is that."

There was no denying that he spent a ridiculous amount of time with Oliver. They had taken to disguising themselves visiting the Muggle families of freed or imprisoned Muggle-borns. Both of them were pure-blood and found doorbells strange and fascinating, which probably clued off the families as to the purpose of the visit. Percy made sure that when they visited, though, they missed meeting up with the Ministry officials who, as Percy had scheduled, would appear precisely one hour after Percy and Oliver started examining the doorbell and poking at the lawn gnomes to see if they would move. Oliver tended to be much better at impersonating Muggles, however, so if it was absolutely unavoidable to miss Ministry officials, Oliver got the happy task of leading said officials on a wild goose chase, allowing

the Muggles to get away.

Oliver had almost as grand a time of it as Percy had dabbling in international politics.

"So, the, erm, Davenports are having a good vacation?" Percy asked carefully.

"Enjoying themselves a lot," Oliver replied, showing that he could, on occasion, have some form of discretion. "Some minor issues with the… airport security, but nothing that couldn't be cleared up. What happened to you again?"

"My French aunt-in-law threw a carafe of wine at my head."

"Jeez, Perce. Your family *hates* you."

"You don't have to *rub it in* like that, Oliver."

"Any better, Mr. Weasley?" asked a nurse, bustling over and smiling awkwardly at Oliver.

"I'm sure he's much better now that you're here," Oliver said, with a grin that would have shoved Gilderoy Lockhart off the cover of 'Witch Weekly'. "I know I am."

"It's so nice to see how much you care about Mr.

Weasley's medical attention," the nurse replied, smiling at the two of them quite calmly now. Oliver looked rather put out. Percy, for the first time in what felt like centuries, grinned without caring that people could see him.

"I would quite like a cup of tea, if you don't mind," Percy said.

At that point in time, Eloise burst into the room, sobbing.

"Oh, hi Eloise," Percy said, with a slight stirring of guilt. He hadn't really thought much about Eloise since he'd recruited Oliver. "I'm sure you remember Oliver Wood? Oliver, this is —"

"Eloise!" exclaimed Oliver, having, quick shockingly, picked up her name from Percy's previous comment. "How are you?"

Eloise sniffed valiantly. "I'm — I'm much better than poor Percy-kins!"

Percy winced. Penny had just called him 'Percy'. She hadn't been much into nicknames. "Honestly, I'm fine. Tea and a bit of bed rest and

I'll be ready for work again."

Eloise completely lost composure at that point in time and threw herself over his lap.

"Oh, I say!" Percy protested, rather feebly, before realizing Eloise had been honestly, truly upset over him. It was... strange. He patted her on the back. "There, there."

Oliver attempted to eat his own fist again to keep from laughing.

"Could you make that three cups of tea, then?" Percy asked the nurse.

The nurse appeared to be quite grateful for an excuse to leave, and took her time fetching the tea. Percy began to think that she'd had to Floo China for the tea-leaves when she reappeared and disappeared again almost as quickly.

"There, there," Percy told Eloise. "Have some tea."

Eloise did. Oliver appeared to prefer his fist to a nice cup of Earl Grey.

"You remember Divination?" Eloise asked, brightening as soon as she took a sip. "I used to

love Divination. Did you?"

"I always liked Charms and Transfiguration best," Percy replied. "Or Potions." Hard, practical sciences. Divination was so horribly imprecise. It took him ages to try and get a good vision going and even then he didn't get a precise date. It was horribly irritating.

"Mmph," Oliver said around his fist.

Eloise looked at him. "Is he okay?"

"He's just suffering from chronic stupidity. Always had it. Nothing to worry about, Eloise."

"Oh," said Eloise.

"Mmph," said Oliver.

"You were saying?" Percy asked politely, sipping his tea. He did so enjoy tea. There was something very reassuring about it. Tea never pretended to be anything other than it was.

"You remember telling your fortune out of tea-leaves? Oh! That reminds me. I thought you might do with some cheering up, so I brought you some Tarot cards and a crystal ball." Eloise beamed at

him. Oliver made strange choking nosies.

"That was… really far too kind of you, Eloise."

He then sat through about an hour of Eloise reading their tea leaves (would you look at that? Percy was going to have a son. Soon.), reading the Tarot cards (mortal danger, mortal danger, oh! Look at that! Percy was going to have a son again), and peering into the crystal ball (Eloise insisted that she saw Percy with an infant and then hinted that in order to have an infant, he really needed to get married first and was that giving him any ideas?).

Percy tied to ignore her insinuations. He really didn't expect to outlive the year, with the way things were going. He was careful and meticulous, but who was *he*, really, against the front for Lord Voldemort? If Percy let himself think about it, he would be extraordinarily surprised that he and Oliver were still alive. When Percy couldn't avoid the thought, he pulled another all-nighter to make absolutely sure that their tracks were absolutely

positively obliterated and then made sure that everything was set up for Oliver to make an escape the moment it became necessary to do so. Percy had plans for his own escape as well, but making sure Oliver's was air-tight was much more important to him, for some odd reason. After that, Percy would write long letters to Penny and then burn them. All in all, it made for a very dismal evening before he went back to simultaneously running and subverting the Ministry.

"I see a white dress for me," Eloise said, in a tone of considerable satisfaction. "And a bouquet of lilies. See anything, Percy?"

"Not yet." Percy gamely cleared his mind and stared vacantly into the crystal ball. Several moments later, the vision hit him.

Penelope appeared to be crying as she listened to the radio.

"And we gave a big shout out to the Scarlet Pimpernel, whoever he —"

"Or she," interrupted Angelica Johnson.

"Or she," continued Lee Jordan, "May be. Best of luck to you, mate. Keep up the good work. If anyone has a way to contact the Pimpernel we've got lots of people who could use his — or her — help getting out of the country. If not, remember, Royal still has some Muggle passports out of the country."

"Correct," came the deep, booming voice of Kingsley Shaklebolt.

"So, three cheers for the Scarlet Pimpernel, whoever he is! Or she is!"

There were cheers and Penelope, sitting behind the counter, just behind the shop till, lifted her head out of her hands. Her face was puffy and her eyes were red, as if she had been crying, but she was grinning so broadly that Percy couldn't understand it at all.

"And now, just know Harry, wherever you are, that we're all behind you. We know you'll succeed. This is Potterwatch. Tomorrow's password is 'Pimpernel'."

Penny turned down the volume on the radio, still grinning absurdly as a tall Frenchman walked in, face obscured by all the boxes he carried.

"You missed Potterwatch," she said, still ridiculously happy. "Oh, he did do it."

"That's alright," the man replied in French, setting them down. He was handsome — much handsomer than Percy — and Percy felt vaguely jealous. "I'll catch it next time. How's that Pimpernel guy doing?"

"He is doing fantastically," Penelope replied, likewise in French, beaming. She slid off her stool and came around to unpack the boxes. She looked absolutely beautiful in Parisian couture, her skirt swinging about the tops of her knees enchantingly. "What are these?"

"We're using them to smuggle passports," the man answered. "It's, euh... I have no idea. Mother couldn't sell them."

"Men are all the same when it comes to clothes. I don't suppose you find fezes very fashionable?"

"What?"

"Never mind." She slit open a box just another man walked in the door. Percy recognized the man as the newest British ambassador.

Penelope picked up a dress from the counter. "I think this would look marvelous on the mannequin in the front — I'll go ask Madame." She clacked into the backroom and emerged with a round, smiling witch with curly dark hair spilling down to the shoulders of her expensive-looking robes.

"Ah! Monsieur Rosier!" cried the witch, holding out her hands. "I am happy to see you as always. Can I help you?"

Penelope slid unobtrusively back to the stacks of boxes and began folding.

"Yes, Madame," Rosier said, taking her hands and allowing himself to be kissed on both cheeks. "Your employee — your new one. She happens to be British, as I am sure I have told you."

"Her mother is a Frenchwoman!" Madame protested, still good-naturedly. "Of course she isn't."

"She went to Hogwarts."

"Pah. Means nothing."

"She has to come with us."

Madame's round face was worried.

Penelope spoke up then. "I cannot, Monsieur. I made an Unbreakable Vow when I entered the shop."

"What?"

"For Paris fashion week. All the serious designers have their employees make an Unbreakable Vow not to reveal any secrets or leave employment until the line is finished."

Madame caught on quickly. "Yes — true. I really would have her go, but it is fashion week and she is a fantastic seamstress — which I knew when she entered the shop. I can't possibly let her go until she finishes the shawls. Nothing like hand-charmed embroidery this season. Here, show him."

Penelope very quietly pulled out a massive length of white fabric and spread it out over the counter. It looked to be half- finished and filled with intricately embroidered flower designs.

"You see? Absolutely stunning. But so very time consuming!"

Rosier sighed heavily. "You know I can deny you nothing Madame. Alright. But as soon as that shawl

is finished, she really must come with me."

The Frenchman took Rosier by the arm. He positively towered *over the British ambassador in a completely ambivilant non-threatening way that was none-the-less incredibly terrifying. Very pleasantly: "We have to get Mother's line out now. If you would be so kind...?" he showed Rosier the door and Rosier recognized it and went through it in a hurry.*

"Looks like your cover is blown," the man said.

Madame sat pensively behind the counter. "He will find out we lied about the Unbreakable Vow. You ought to head to the countryside."

"I'm the only liason in Paris," Penelope said dispiritedly. "I have to be here."

"But if you finish..." Madame plucked at the shawl. Percy noticed, with a secret thrill of delight, that the flowers were all scarlet pimpernels.

"I will not finish, then. Draw the curtains, Luc." Penelope pulled up a stool and, taking a needle out of a drawer, began to painstakingly pick out the stitches.

Luc came back and looked over Penelope's shoulder.

"Brilliant."

"Thank you."

Percy pulled back slowly and shook his head. He never really liked Divination; it felt an awful lot like spying. It was so imprecise, too. How could one be sure that they were seeing the future?

"Did you See something, Perce?" Eloise asked eagerly.

"Er," said Percy. "Oliver won a Quiddich match. Looked like he was playing for England in the World Cup."

"You think they'd bring it back?" Oliver asked, full of hope.

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly. Just as soon as all this is over."

"You think it'll be over soon?" Eloise asked.

Percy didn't know how to answer.

He went home that night and slept badly. He re-read Penelope's later and drank a few more cups of tea. He dumped out the tea-leaves before he could see what they wanted to tell him (even

tea wasn't what it appeared to be these days), and forced himself to eat, since he had been surviving on coffee for the past few days. He went to a Muggle store that was open all night and bought bread and butter and jam. He had loved it when he was younger and would've gotten sick on it if he hadn't always shared with his younger siblings. He sliced the loaf into thick slices and liberally spread butter on it. He then unscrewed the jar of black-current jam and spread it on thinly, so that the butter showed through. After the first few slices, he made one for Hermes, reread his letter, and wished dreadfully for Penny.

He missed her with an almost palpable ache that had absolutely nothing to do with eating too much bread with jam and butter. He sat on the middle of his normally pristine bed, with crumbs of bread and bits of melted jam and butter all over the duvet, and stared out the window. He was probably going to love Penelope until he died. It was just one of those things.

Percy had been falling in love with her since he was fifteen. Was he really at all surprised that he would stay in love with her? Generally speaking, the wizarding world had a very small dating pool. You grew up knowing you'd marry someone you met at Hogwarts, unless you went into the diplomatic service or something and married abroad. Percy had always, in some distant corner of his mind, wished to be married. He wanted, painfully wanted, everything that his father was too lazy, too idiosyncratic to work for. Percy would have a job that meant something, with a large salary and plenty of power and influence. He'd have a big house, big enough so that if he wanted to be alone he could sit with a book and not be bothered by anyone else, not ever. He wanted one child, or possibly two, but no more than three. He would love them all equally and take them into work and never, ever let the middle child feel alone and unloved. He would have dinner parties with Ministers and heads of state and then smile

down the table at his wife, who had a career of her own, instead of staying home with the children, and she would smile back at him because he had given her everything she had ever wanted, not because she loved him and thus learned to make do with very little other than love.

Percy brushed the crumbs off of his bed as he finished off the loaf and the butter and the jam, and crawled under the duvet. He had come very far from the dreams he'd had as a child. He lay alone, in a scarcely used apartment and was probably going to die soon.

Sleep came only slowly after that, so Percy went into the office at nine-thirty.

Dolores Umbridge was waiting. "Recovered, Percy?"

"Yes, Dolores. Apparently Madame Delacoeur missed my head by inches, so no glass shards in the skull."

"How *horrid* of her to break a carafe of wine like that!"

"It was apparently a good vintage, too," Percy interjected mildly. "Quite the pity. I thought the French were oenophiles. Did you need me to do something?"

"Yes! The Auror department's finally traced the Scarlet Pimpernel's handwriting." Dolores smiled. She had really horrible smiles. "I'm sending you with an Auror."

"To?"

"To visit Gilderoy Lockhart, of course."

Percy smiled. He loved it when he out-thought Dolores Umbridge. Some days she really was as dense as a neuron star. "I'll get on it."

"Hello," the witch in charge of the Janus Thickey ward. "I suppose you're back to see Gilderoy? Where is Oliver this evening? You know, Gilderoy almost remembered his name! Didn't you, Gilderoy?"

"Ollie!" Lockhart exclaimed happily.

Percy managed to retain the dignity that came with being the most powerful twenty-one-year-

old in the wizarding world and Assistant to the Minister of Magic himself by thumbing through his notes and mentally marking grammatical mistakes. "Yes, well, Ollie — I mean, Oliver is off flying somewhere and I have come on *official* Ministry business today."

"Might we have a private word?" the Auror asked, conjuring up three chairs.

"Of course," the Healer agreed, sitting.

Percy sat, took off his glasses, and polished them with a corner of his robes. "I am sorry for this, but some fan of Mr. Lockhart has, er... been interfering with Ministry business, so we have to ask some questions."

"Oh it really is no problem," the Healer said. "I've been reading the papers. The Scarlet Pimpernel is it?"

"Yes." Percy sighed. "Unfortunately."

"One of his fans gave Gilderoy the book," the Healer said, with in a memory gap that Percy didn't even have to cause. "He does so adore it.

Sir Percy is his favorite character. Why, even the Longbottoms are starting to get a kick out of it. We think. Frank smiles when he hears Gilderoy reading it and seems to have taken a shine to cravats. Alice — well, Alice is Alice. We were going to have a little costume party to celebrate everyone's interest."

Percy cleared her throat. "That may not be entirely appropriate anymore."

"Oh? No, I suppose not. What a pity, though. I think it could have done some real good."

The Auror spoke up next. "How long has Mr. Lockhart been obsessed with the book?"

"Hm... " The Healer tapped her chin. "It must be a month now. He's been copying down the poem ever since he got the book. We encouraged it because it helps him with his hand-eye coordination and his memory skills. His writing has really so improved!"

"What has he been doing with the copies of the poem?" the Auror asked.

"Sending them to his fans for the most part. He keeps a stack of them in the table by his bed."

The Auror sighed. "Does he keep a record of his fan letters?"

"No. That is a little bit beyond him and we are so short-staffed here; there really is no one who can be spared to do that."

"This is a very well-run ward, however. I suppose the security is very, ah —"

"Oh yes! If our patients ran off they would be such dangers to themselves."

The Auror sighed again. This was going to be a very long day. "Alright. Might we have a word with Mr. Lockhart, then?"

"But of course. It is almost time for his tea, but we can put it off."

"Good." Turning to the bed and pulling out a note: "Do you recognize this, Mr. Lockhart?"

"Yes, it's mail!" Lockhart held his hands out for it. The Auror gave it to him and he opened it eagerly. "Oh, this is a poem!"

"Do you know what it is?" Percy asked.

"Oh yes!" Lockhart said, beaming toothily. "It was in that book. I wrote it down because I can do joined-up writing. Then Father Christmas asked me to write it over and over again in scarlet ink — because lilac ink is so special I can only use it for autographs — and then took them away. I'm a good boy, though, and I shall get lots of presents!"

The Auror next to Percy held her head in her hands while Percy nodded at Gilderoy. God bless Oliver, and his inexplicable talent for play-acting. Percy had never seen a more convincing Father Christmas.

"Father Christmas took the poems away, then?"

"Oh yes! The elves were all busy, you see, and I'm the best joined-up writing writer in all of Britain. Father Christmas told me so himself!"

"I see," Percy said very seriously.

"Yes, and I have been sending off all my poems to my fans. I do get such a large amount of fanmail. It is difficult to keep up now that I send

a picture *and* a poem, but anything for the fans!"

"Yes, of course."

The Auror looked close to tears but managed to ask, "And... how many fans to you have Mr. Lockhart?"

"At least fifty who write in regularly," replied the Healer, drifting by. "Ever since You-Know-Who has come back, Gilderoy's books have been shooting off the shelves! He gets so many letters now, don't you Gilderoy?"

"Oh, yes!" Lockhart exclaimed, beaming toothily. "And I always make sure that I include lots of poems for them to pass out to their little friends. Father Christmas will be so pleased with me!"

The Auror had to leave the room.

Percy smiled. "I am glad that you have been writing so. Oliver and I have been, er, fans of yours since our sixth year at Hogwarts."

"How long have you been partners?" Lockhart asked.

"Er... about... six months now," Percy said

honestly, though he had no idea what on earth *Lockhart* was talking about.

"My nurse explained it. Some wizards like other wizards. That's alright."

Percy nearly choked. "What? No, Oliver and I aren't — no. We aren't... *that close*."

"I was hoping you'd been partners since your sixth year," Lockhart continued on, with an interesting defiance to any sort of logic whatever. "That way, my books would have brought people together!"

"Um," said Percy, whose first date ever *had* stemmed from Lockhart trying to set up Penelope with Rodger Davis (Percy had pretended to be her boyfriend in order to keep her from having to snog Davis, and he later turned out to be Penny's real boyfriend after all). "Well. I really must be going. Good bye, Mr. Lockhart. For your sake, I hope you never recover your memory."

Percy Flooed back to the Ministry, where Dolores, too edgy to do her own work, waited for

him by the fireplace. "Well?"

Percy hazarded a guess. "Well, it looks like some fan of Mr. Lockhart's gone off the deep end. He's been writing the letters, but there is absolutely no way he could have gotten out of the hospital. Besides that, he's been sending off those letters to every single one of his fans. A simple copier charm could make endless amounts of the rubbish poems. We're quite... "

He trailed off and stared at a figure lying in a heap in the middle of the Attrium.

"She had suspicious connections to Mudbloods," Dolores said, with a thoroughly unpleasant smile. "Then she resisted questioning. But we're really at a dead end?"

"You could take some Aurors off of finding Harry Potter to find the Scarlet Pimpernel," Percy muttered, slightly shaken. There was something about the figure — she looked horribly familiar.

"Hm. I'll go and see about it." Dolores walked off, leaving Percy to struggle through the crowds.

He'd have to go past the body to get to his office, how awful, especially since she —

Percy stopped dead in his tracks.

"Eloise?" he asked, horror-struck, as he approached the body everyone else avoided in the center of the atrium. He turned her over and saw the friendly face, now horrifically pale, with the nose off-center.

"I... I didn... didn't tell 'em... anything," Eloise whispered, struggling to sit up.

"No, don't strain yourself," Percy said, pushing her hair out of her face. "Are you gravely injured?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Come on, we'll Floo to St. Mungo's. No, Apperate. Are you feeling well enough for Side-Along-Apparation? They've got wards up in the waiting room, so we'll have to walk up to the display window —"

"No... use," Eloise whispered. Each word seemed to cost her a great deal of effort. "They've... got that... too. No use. I... know... too... much.

Let... too many... things... slip, they... said. Didn't... tell 'em... "

"Tell them what?" Percy asked, latching desperately onto something, anything.

"You... are... the Sc... not saying... I know... though." She tried to smile. "Don't... know... why... I'm... not... dead... yet... "

"You'll —" Percy tried to say, 'you'll be alright', but there was really nothing farther from the truth. "The curse is probably slow acting," Percy replied instead, feeling abjectly miserable. "To put you in the maximum amount of pain. I'm so sorry Eloise. I didn't think anyone but myself would —"

"Oh shut it," Elose murmured, her voice no louder than the hiss of water as it was poured. Percy looked down at her numbly.

"You... you did fancy... me... right?" she breathed, so softly that Percy had to kneel down completely and put his ear by her lips.

"Yes, Eloise," Percy said. "I did."

"Oh good." And with that, she fell silent

and still. Something inside of Percy froze and crumbled. He sat back, his knees pressing down painfully into the cold linoleum floor.

Without really caring what anyone else did or said, Percy attempted to pick her up.

"Let me give you a hand," Oliver said, appearing from seemingly out of nowhere. He had muscles from Quiddich that Percy certainly hadn't gained from too little sleep and all his mountains of paperwork. Oliver picked up Eloise as easily as if she were a rag-doll.

"I heard they caught onto Gilderoy Lockhart," Oliver said, looking very shaken. "Came as soon as I could. And — and Eloise?"

Percy couldn't look straight at Oliver. "She was friends with a bunch of Muggle-borns. She — she guessed at what I was and resisted questioning. The Ministry probably thought she was harboring Muggle-borns and..." Percy trailed off and gestured at Eloise, flopping out of Oliver's arms.

They Flooed to Eloise's house. Once they were

through, Percy flicked his wand and caused the entire Floo network to shut down. Obsessive memo-reading and twelve O.W.L.s could come in handy.

Percy took the rest of the day off. He transfigured Eloise's work robes into a long white dress and then went out and bought a huge bouquet of lilies. Eloise's parents and sisters cried through the funeral that night, then took their Portkey to Spain, as Percy suggested.

The rest of the night, he and Oliver sat together on Percy's unused couch and drank white wine the color of Eloise's dress. They didn't say anything because if either of them talked, they just *knew* that they would ask each other if they were going to die.

Neither of them really knew what they would say in response.

10

In Which Percy Acts Like a Pyromaniac

SEVERAL WEEKS LATER, after several daring rescues in Eloise's name and a lot of perfectly delightful meetings with frustrated Aurors, Percy got called into Dolores Umbridge's office.

He had no idea why Thicknesse was there, too, but Dolores looked vaguely uncomfortable in a way that boded little good for Percy.

"Percy," Dolores said, clearing her throat. "I think I may have made a teensey-weensey little

mistake about you."

"Yes?" Percy asked. Not good, not good, *not good!*

"You haven't really had time for my dinner parties, I've noticed."

"Er," said Percy.

"Now now, Percy, at first I thought it was embarrassment over the whole Penelope Clearwater debacle but how was I to know about your... little secret?"

Percy honestly had no idea where they were going with this. If they knew he was the Scarlet Pimpernel, he very much doubted they would quiz him on his dinner party attendance. Besides that, he really didn't have any secrets. Granted, having an alter ego and a secret mission to undermine the Ministry of Magic itself sort of topped the list, but, still. What were they going to pin him for? Dolores had left when he took Eloise's body back to her family, and everyone else had been very busy Not Looking at Eloise. His family had fled the country — was that it?

Everyone knew that Percy didn't speak with his family; it couldn't be that...

Thicknesse gave Percy an awkward smile. Worse and worse. "You know Percy, it really doesn't matter as long as it's a pure-blood."

Percy blinked.

"Oliver Wood comes from an excellent background," Dolores Umbridge ventured.

Percy stared. Did they really...?

"There's no reason to be ashamed," Dolores continued on. "I checked up on you in St. Mungo's when you had to leave early —"

"Terrible headache still," Percy murmured.

"— and they listed Oliver Wood as your next of kin. Now, Percy, he's a... Quiddich player, true, but that's still a respectable career, and he's pure-blood. I suppose that nasty Mudblood put you off women altogether, but at least it turned you back to your proper social level. That's all we can ask, really. Now, I'm having a dinner party on Friday. Would you *and* Oliver like to attend?"

Did everyone think he and Oliver Wood were sleeping together? Percy felt his ears turning red at the very thought. "Er, I'll, er... ask him."

"Oh, he doesn't go in much for dinner parties?" Dolores asked. "Well, see if he can make the effort, just this once. We're all very impressed at your work, Percy, and you ought to take more of a role in international politics. I've got everyone *important* over for lamb this Friday." She gave an unpleasant laugh.

Oh, if she only *knew* his role in international politics...

"I will, er, see what I can do to convince him," Percy ventured, albeit rather timidly. "Oliver's, not, er, fond of dinner parties at all. I'm not sure he owns a set of dress robes. I'm sure Madame Malkin can make something for him by then."

He avoided looking at anyone else that day, but they *would* come up to him and tell him that hey, it was perfectly fine if he was, well... you know. Everyone was very supportive, particularly as

Oliver was just as pure-blooded as Percy was. Percy was humiliated and extraordinarily glad that the rest of Europe had cut off all diplomatic ties with Wizarding Britain. At least Penelope wouldn't think he preferred Oliver Wood to her.

Percy dealt with the situation by being unusually vicious about memos, and, while Dolores was out, sending an anonymous letter to The Daily Prophet and the better quality European papers on just how far from the law the Thicknesse administration had become. He then left large posters of the Pimpernel poem on the doors of each and every Muggle family they sent into hiding or sent off to the mainland. The best part about the posters, Percy thought, as the Aurors shame-facedly tried to hand them over to Dolores, was that once someone took them down, the posters stuck to you.

Even if you changed clothes.

Or went to St. Mungo's.

Or tried to sand-paper it off.

Percy felt rather proud of himself, brainstormed for a bit, and then managed to convince Oliver that, if they were really going to do this, they had to go to Dolores Umbridge's dinner party. Oliver wasn't very keen on losing his considerable female fan-base but agreed to go on the grounds that, when they made a very bad attempt at pretending to be a couple in The Golden Snitch, Oliver got swarmed with young witches who were all very determined to convince him that "Percy was just a phase".

Thus, they found themselves stepping out of the fire-place into Dolores Umbridge's long, fussily decorated hallway.

"I don't like my robes," Oliver said, tugging at the sleeve of his maroon dress-robes. "I can't play Quiddich in them."

"So you want to play Quiddich with Dolores Umbridge?" Percy asked, a touch acidly.

"I'm in withdrawl, Perce, I swear. D'you know how long it's been since I got knocked off my broomstick by a bludger?"

Percy guessed.

Oliver scowled. "Dammit. How is it you knew it up to the minute?"

"It's a frightful talent. Now look, do you remember what I told you? We're here for a very specific reason, Oliver and I need you to remember that."

Oliver sighed. "It's better than the red suit, at least." He grimaced at several kittens gamboling about on porcelain plates. "This is so —"

"Lovely, isn't it?" Percy asked loudly, as Dolores Umbridge came to greet them and usher them into her cramped, frilly dining room. "Stop slouching Oliver."

Umbridge, with a very amphibian-like smile, introduced them to the heads of the Great Wizarding Families and most of the heads of departments and their spouses. Percy found it rather satisfying to be introduced first, with Oliver awkwardly introduced as "Percy's... particular friend". Percy had always hoped

someday to be more popular than his Quiddich Captain roommate.

Dinner was a bleak and nauseating affair, full of forced and awkward conversation. Percy counted frills when he wasn't asking polite and appropriate questions at the proper intervals in monologues but had to give up when he reached three hundred and sixty-two frills and seventy painted pictures of kittens. Oliver ended up trying to eat his fist after giving up on the lamb and on trying to follow the conversation. Percy wished for Penelope again. He was sure she'd be able to follow the conversation. Of course, Penelope was Muggle-born, and everyone at the table would gladly eat her instead of the lamb.

Percy shuddered and pretended it was because of the sorbet.

It made Percy realize again, that Eloise was dead and if he wasn't careful, Percy would be dead too. He nudged Oliver under the table.

"Sorry, Ms. Umbridge," Oliver said, with a grin

that would have knocked Gilderoy Lockhart off the cover of 'Witch Weekly'. "Where might, I find the, ah...?"

"Oh, down the hall and to the left."

"Turn right," Percy muttered. Percy had managed to find a floor plan of Umbridge's house in the Ministry records. "Bedside table, heard her mention it."

Oliver returned five minutes later, looking completely unconcerned. Percy raised his eyebrows and Oliver tripped over his own feet, knocking the treacle tart onto the Minister of Magic himself. As Oliver apologized volubly and rubbed the treacle deeper into the Minister's robes, Percy hexed everyone's drinks.

Percy cleared his throat and feigned deep embarrassment. "Thank you very much for dinner, Dolores, but I'm afraid we must be going."

"So sorry about the treacle tart," Oliver said again.

"Come on Oliver." Percy scooted out his chair and, as he passed by Dolores muttered, "This is

why we don't go to dinner parties."

Dolores nodded, with a simpering expression of sympathy. "Of course." She picked up her glass and sipped from it delicately. Percy pressed his lips together to keep from laughing, but pretended to duck his head out of embarrassment.

"As always, you are the soul of understanding. Come on, Oliver." Percy and Oliver ran out, just as Dolores Umbridge turned green and fought to keep down her dinner.

Sometimes it paid to have Fred and George as brothers.

"Got it," Oliver said, grinning, as soon as they tumbled back into Percy's flat. He held up a key.

"Fantastic!" Percy said, beaming and taking the key from Oliver. "Friday evening, we move. Dolores has got the files of every single witch and wizard under suspicion in her office."

Oliver sprawled on Percy's couch. "I'm glad we're doing that."

"Why? Do you want a cauldron cake? That

dinner was awful." Percy rooted around in his cupboards and wondered why he never seemed to find the time to go grocery shopping.

"Well, because — because we're not going to last long, are we?"

Percy stared at the back of his cupboard. "I'm surprised we lasted this long."

"Yeah. I'd... rather go out with a bang, you know?"

"Might as well, since we have to." Percy pulled out a package of cakes and tossed it to Oliver. "Well, we're covered for now. Everyone thinks our big secret is our torrid love affair. It's better than death, isn't it?"

Oliver tore open the packaging and split the cake in half. "Yeah. A lot of things are better than death. Perce, you any good at divination?"

Percy took the smaller half of the cake and took a bite. "I got my N.E.W.T. in it. Why?"

"I'd like to know what to tell my parents. I can't figure out if it's better to tell them that we're...

dating... or if I've been smuggling muggle-borns out of the country."

"Oh the tragedies of your life," Percy said, around his mouthful of cauldron cake. "What d'you need a vision for?"

"Depends on how long I have to live," Oliver replied, examining his cake. "If it's going to be just a couple of weeks I might as well tell 'em the truth. If not, I ought to protect them. You're almost lucky you don't have to worry about that, Perce."

"I suppose." Percy dug around his closet until he found an abandoned crystal ball, left over from cramming for N.E.W.T.S. "It always takes me ages, though."

They sat and stared at the crystal ball until Oliver fell asleep. Percy stared on, until he could see something at last.

They were both ragged and weary and smudged and bruised and bloody. They were sitting on a rock by the lake at Hogwarts. Well, no, Oliver was stretched out behind future-Percy.

"I honestly didn't think it could happen," Percy saw himself say, as he held his head in his hands. "I really didn't."

Oliver didn't say anything and Percy was suddenly, horribly afraid that Oliver was dead.

Percy shook the crystal ball until it told him something, anything else.

It was the French shop again, Penelope behind the counter.

"Mademoiselle Audrey, are you done with that shawl yet?" Rosier asked, turning abruptly from his conversation with Penelope's employer.

Penelope shook her head and dismally showed him the shawl. "Six-elevenths of the way through."

"Look how complicated this is!" Penelope's employer said. "Audrey has been doing such a lovely job, hasn't she? The flowers all form the petals of increasingly larger flowers. Lovely, isn't it?"

"You'll come with us yet, Mademoiselle Audrey."

Penelope ducked her head until he left the shop.

"I hate that guy," said the handsomer-than-Percy-

Frenchman. "Let me hex him —"

"Luc-Esprit, don't you have dummies to enchant?" Madame demanded. The Frenchman sulkily went to the back-room and reappeared with bags full of faceless heads.

"At least turn on some music, eh?" Luc-Esprit asked.

Madame turned the radio up just in time to hear Lee Jordan say, "— at Hogwarts! This, ladies and gentlemen, is the Battle for Hogwarts! We will keep you posted, but Harry Potter is at Hogwarts and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is there too. This looks like the final showdown. Contact Aberforth Dumbledore in Hogsmeade if you want to be a part of this momentous occasion, or if your children are at Hogwarts. All students under the age of seventeen are being sent home. Stick by your wireless sets witches and wizards and we will tell you what happens as it happens. This is live from Hogwarts. This is really it, folks. This is the Battle for Hogwarts."

The three of them huddled around the wireless, Penelope picking out each individual stitch in the darkened shop,

with the windows closed and the doors locked.

Percy came out of the trance with a jerk. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. The battle for Hogwarts? It didn't seem real. Voldemort at Hogwarts, really...

He was troubled all throughout the next day and ended up locking his door so that he didn't get any memos.

This didn't stop Dolores Umbridge from knocking on his door. "Percy, a word?"

"Yes?" Percy asked, looking up from a disguised Scarlet Pimpernel novel. "How can I help you, Dolores?"

"The key to my file cabinet is missing."

"What?" Percy asked, schooling his expression. "The — *that* key? To *that* file cabinet?" In a feat of what he considered rather good theatrics, he broke his quill in half. "*That key*?"

"Yes, *that key*," Dolores said, furious.

"Where did you keep it?" Percy asked, adding a convincing note of hysteria to his voice. "If

it's *that key* to *that file cabinet* you kept it in an extremely safe place, I imagine —"

"I kept it at home, in my bedroom," Dolores snapped. She turned to Percy with sudden suspicion. "How long have you known Oliver, Percy?"

"Since I was eleven," Percy replied, feigning confusion. "Why?"

"He... wouldn't have *sympathies*, would he?"

No no no no no no no no no. This was bad. This was really, really, really bad. Percy couldn't care less if he lived or died, but Oliver —

"Why would he?" Percy asked, trying to look deeply puzzled instead of deathly terrified. "I heard — well, didn't other people go into that part of the house? I overheard Avery saying there was an unfortunate run on the loo after we had to leave... "

"Percy," Dolores said, with a sickly sweet sort of patience, "no one doubts your loyalty, but you have, in the past, made very, very bad judgments when you choose which *people* to be loyal to."

"That is true," Percy replied, in all honesty.

"But Oliver? I don't think so. He only cares about Quiddich and er... well, other... athletic... activities. Why would he ever care about Mudbloods?"

"You tell me." Dolores pressed her lips together. "I advise you, Percy, to make sure you can trust Wood. After all, there was that Mudblood girl." She turned to leave, but paused in the doorway. "Whatever happened to her?"

Percy stiffened. "Jugson. And Macnair. Then a dementor."

He could hear the grin in her voice. "Ah. Perhaps you do know how to deal with betrayers after all."

Percy stared at his desk until she closed the door behind her. He then very calmly undid all the complex charms on the hidden drawer in the leg of his desk, and withdrew a package containing a passport, an airplane ticket, a wad of Muggle money, and a key. He hid the key in the inner pocket of his sweater-vest, right underneath his pocket protector.

After flicking through some old memos, Percy fiddled with his fireplace and tossed in some Floo powder. He spun into the Leaky Cauldron, and Flooed all over England until he was dizzy before eventually landing in a tea shop a mile away from Oliver's flat. Percy enchanted his appearance, his wand shaking in his hands, and Oliver's apartment. "Pst! Oliver! It's Percy!"

"What's my dream present?"

"A Firebolt. Now please, I —"

"Hang on, ask me a question! You can't be too careful."

Percy sighed,. "I don't have time for this, Oliver. Fine. What's my favorite filing system?"

"Alphabetical."

"Can you hurry up now and open the door?"

Oliver blearily did so, his hair rumpled and his pajama top misbuttoned. "Come in, then."

"Here." Percy thrust the package at Oliver and shut the door. "Take this. You're going to America."

"Hunh?"

Percy took off his glasses and rubbed his face. "The Ministry suspects you, Oliver. You've got to go."

"What are you —"

"Tonight if possible, Oliver."

Oliver stared. "What about you, Perce?"

Percy's hands shook so badly he dropped his glasses. "You don't need to — they don't suspect me, Oliver. Not a jot. They just think I've got terrible taste in romantic partners."

"Perce —"

Percy managed to pick up his glasses and put them on. "Oliver, people like you. I'm... well, I haven't any family that'd acknowledge me and you're the only friend I've got. If I... if I can do this one thing, if I can end this... " He managed a smile. "I've always lived for myself. Maybe I can... make up for it, a little."

"Perce... you're... signing your own death warrant here. There's no way you can get out of this one alive if you're working on your own. As soon as

you unlock the cabinet, the alarms'll go off —"

"— giving me just enough time to destroy all the files. I calculated precisely, Oliver."

Oliver glared. "Without me to stave off security, *as we planned,* how can you be sure?"

"Because I refuse to die leaving something undone," Percy said, with something that might pass for a smile. "You know me, Oliver. I may not be a master dueler, but I move quickly and efficiently and I'm a good hand with a defensive spell."

"I'm not leaving," Oliver said, fiercely. "You can't make me."

"Oliver, you're my only friend," Percy replied. "I've given up nearly everything for ambition and then I gave up everything else to be the Scarlet Pimpernel. Please don't ask me to —"

"I'm not *asking* for anything," Oliver said, disappearing into his bedroom. "I'm *telling* you that we're doing this tonight as soon as the human toad leaves her office."

"Oliver! You can't — look, you have no reason

to throw away your life —"

Oliver, pulling a clean shirt on, pointedly turned on the radio. "What was that? I couldn't hear your stupid protests."

"Oliver, you're not coming."

Oliver turned up the radio. "Still can't hear you, oh mighty Pimpernel!"

Lee Jordan's voice suddenly cut through the bad pop music. "— and Harry Potter broke out of Gringotts on a dragon and is flying towards Hogwarts! This is it, people! It's down to the wire! If You-Know-Who wins —"

"Shove it Lee," said Angelina Jordan. "He's not going to win. Potter can defeat him."

"If he doesn't, though," Lee said uncertainly.

Percy and Oliver shared a look and Oliver turned off the radio.

"Either way you look at it," Oliver said, "I'm going to die. This is our last chance in more ways than one. If — if You-Know-Who wins, then we'll never be able to do this again and I'll be stuck in

America, where they don't even play Quiddich."

"We can only hope that most of the Ministry will be at Hogwarts." Percy tucked his wand into his sleeve. "Dolores always leaves at five-o-clock. It is four-fifteen right now. I imagine she will leave for Hogwarts soon, but we ought to wait. Got everything in order?"

Oliver wrote a letter to his parents and Percy warded it. Percy thought about writing a letter to his parents too, but gave it up as a bad job. It wasn't like his parents would read it.

Percy checked the clock on the wall. "Four-fifty-three. Let's go." He lit a fire and tossed in a handful of Floo powder. "The Ministry of Magic!"

He stumbled out into the Atrium, Oliver close behind him. Percy was unaccountably nervous as they moved through the deserted building and nearly dropped his wand out of his sleeve.

"Calm down, Perce,' Oliver said, scanning the hallway. Percy dismantled the security charms once he'd gotten his nerves under control.

"S-sorry. Alright, this is her office." Percy fiddled with the spells and they slid in. The painted kittens on plates gamboled about sickeningly and stared at them.

Oliver shut the door and locked it with as many spells as he could think of. "Alright. Now what?"

Percy nervously adjusted his glasses. "We destroy as many files as we can, then see if we can get to Hogwarts in time for the big show. She's got a box of Floo powder on the mantel; go to the... " What was it he'd heard in his vision? "The Hog's Head."

"Sounds like fun," Oliver agreed. "I'm ready to indulge my inner pyromaniac."

Percy carefully turned the key and pulled out the drawer. "*Incendio*!" Several of the files caught alight and Percy furiously pulled out drawers and lit their contents of fire. The filing cabinet, blast it, was enchanted and of course set off an alarm, and tried to shut itself to put out the flames.

Oliver pulled the drawers out in an astonishing

feat of brawn over brains and dumped the files into the fireplace. Percy blasted each file again and again until the flames blazed brighter than a fireworks display.

Someone started hammering on the door. The spells were going to break —

Percy pulled out the last armful of files. "Oliver, go!"

Oliver flung a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace. "*The Hog's Head*!" He disappeared in a roar of emerald green flames and Percy feverishly set alight the remaining papers.

"I KNEW IT!" Dolores bellowed, finally breaking down the door with the help of an entire security team. "I knew — Weasley?"

Percy pulled the key out of his pocket and tossed it to her. "Found your key, Dolores. You know, they seek him here and seek him there, but the Scarlet Pimpernel was sitting in an office two doors down from you the whole time. INCENDIO!" Without stopping to see if he'd hit Dolores, or if

the office had caught fire at all, Percy dumped the whole box of Floo powder into the flames.

"The Hog's Head!" he shouted, jumping in and whirling out of the Ministry.

'*Goodbye Scarlet Pimpernel*,' Percy thought regretfully. At least he managed to make a joke before he plunged right back into certain death.

It was, in all likelihood, the first joke he'd ever made. It could also have possibly been the last. Percy shivered as he stumbled into the HOG'S HEAD and ran up the passage into Hogwarts.

It was time to see if there was anything *Percy Weasley* could do.

11

In Which Percy is Deeply Miserable

IT TURNED OUT that Percy Weasley could do a lot on his own. In fact, he did so much he didn't remember most of what he did.

There were flashes that he could recall. As soon as he reached the pub, he saw Aberforth gesturing madly up the stairs and shouting about how his pub wasn't an Underground stop. Percy obligingly ignored Aberforth entirely, bounded up the stairs two at a time, and crawled through that blasted portrait

until he fell out and realized, with a sudden surge of panic, that he couldn't see anything.

Everyone had gone, he was too late! Just like he'd been with Martha Austen, just like he'd been with Eloise —

But it turned out that for one glorious, glorious moment, when he blurted out anything and everything that came to the top of his head, he wasn't at all. Because in the room, his mother and his father and all his brothers and Ginny engulfed him and he was so overwhelmingly grateful that he finally *belonged* with them and he had a sister-in-law who liked him and laughed with him and said she had heard very good things about him from her mother —

— and then everything blurred when he turned Pius Thicknesse into a sea urchin and, in wild, almost uncontrollably good spirits, shouted, "Hello Minister! Did I mention I'm resigning?"

And Fred, Fred whom he'd always looked out for, who had always teased him and pulled

pranks on him and seemed to hate him turned to face him with an actual, genuine smile and said, "You're joking Perce! I haven't heard you joke since —"

And then Percy was too late again.

Fred was suddenly silent as he disappeared under the debris of an explosion and Percy flung himself on Fred, to keep him from getting hurt, but it really was too late, because Fred was dead and — and Rookwood had caused the explosion —

Percy stepped on the sea-urchin as he raced after Rookwood and he was lost in the haze of hate and grief and danger —

And he never could remember what happened, but he was pretty sure he'd caused Fred to die. It was almost a gap in his memory, just because he couldn't handle remembering it.

Once the battle was over, his memory picked up again.

Percy sat against the wall, holding his glasses in his hands, his knees up against his chest, his

vague, unfocused gaze directed at the ceiling. This way, he couldn't see. He didn't really want to see. He had seen everything he had wanted to see and then some.

He was tired — so very, very tired — and everywhere he hurt, inside and out. He tried to content himself with the knowledge that Penny was safe, that Voldemort was really, actually gone, but he couldn't quite wrap his mind around it.

All he knew was that Fred was dead.

There was a sudden absence within him, a blankness and emptiness he couldn't describe. He felt vacant. There was nothing and he could neither see nor hear nor feel anything at all. Just this blankness, just this emptiness.

"Hey Perce." Bill's voice.

Percy, head tilted against the wall, glasses off, did not even see a blob supposed to be Bill. He didn't move or speak.

"Can I sit next to you?"

Percy scooted over a bit.

"You okay?"

Percy thought about this. "No. I don't think so."

"Oh, okay —"

They were silent for a moment and then Percy said, "You know, it really wasn't all my fault."

"What?" Bill asked.

"The rift. It wasn't my fault. I've been putting a lot of thought into it. I mean, yes, I was a prat, no one's doubting that, but it wasn't my fault. It was really a logical sort of promotion. I'd been very competently running the entire Department of International Magical Cooperation since Crouch disappeared, after all."

"Wait, really?" Bill sounded incredulous. "You honestly ran an entire department when you were eighteen, Perce?"

"Mm-hmm," Percy replied. "I've been running the Ministry since Scrigemeour disappeared. And for most of the time when Fudge was in office. The man did not understand the necessity for a good filing system. You know, it hurts a little

when you say 'really' in that tone of voice. Did everyone just think I was *stupid* and pompous?"

"Er —"

"Bill, that was a rhetorical question. It means that you don't answer it."

"I know, Perce, but —"

"I really don't want to hear an answer to that. I know the entire family has hated me. Everyone's always hated me except for mum. I suppose, after eighteen years, everyone just couldn't control it anymore. I'd dealt with it for long enough and everyone was tired of hiding it so — boom." Percy shoved his glasses back on and, with an unsteady hand, pushed himself up the wall to go walk away. "I never belonged and it hurt to find that out because I'd always wanted to belong, but I just don't. So I think I'm going to go now."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Away from the family. I know everyone wanted me to die instead of Fred. I wish I had." He wasn't upset as he said it, only

resigned. He walked off, half-hoping Bill would stop him.

Bill did not.

Percy walked around the Hogwarts grounds down to the lake, where no one noticed him and he was not noticed. He sort of hated this invisibility. Just a few hours earlier he would have gloried in it, been smug over the fact that no one noticed him, that by being himself he provided the perfect disguise. Now...

Well, everything had changed.

You-Know-Who was dead.

So was Fred.

Percy sat down on a rock by the lake and stared at nothing until he heard footsteps. Percy half-hoped it was a Death Eater; the idea of mindless battle was strangely appealing.

"I heard about Fred," Oliver said awkwardly, sitting next to Percy.

"I saw him die," Percy said idly. "It was very sad."

"I thought so." A pause. "I don't know what

else to say."

"We can just sit. I don't mind."

So they sat on the rock and watched the ripples on the pond. Percy could not tell how much time passed, since he felt so blank inside.

Eventually Oliver laid down on the rock. "Will you be okay if I sleep?"

"Go ahead. You're safe. I am the Scarlet Pimpernel after all."

"True," Oliver said, with a yawn. "I'm knackered."

"Sleep on, the entire League of the Scarlet Pimpernel." He held his head in his hands and closed his eyes. "I honestly didn't think it could happen. I really didn't."

Oliver was already asleep. Percy picked a branch off the ground and began to dig in the sand in front of him. He was starting to wonder why his family hadn't come to look at him before deciding that yes, they really didn't care. Just as he had thought. Just as he had said to Bill. He was right.

For once, Percy hated being right.

He drew a line in the sand. At least things had been alright between him and Fred before Fred died. At least there was that.

Percy started to dig a moat around the rock.

"Percy, where have you been?" cried a female voice. Ginny. Percy really didn't want to see her. At least she wasn't Ron, though. Ron had always hated Percy, even more than the twins.

Instead of replying, Percy continued to dig his moat.

"Harry — Harry's woken up." She was so happy. How could she be so happy? "He really did it, Perce. I knew he would. Budge up."

"No, you'll wake Oliver." Percy whipped his stick around to hold off Ginny. "Look, he's the only person in England who can actually stand my company and who would actually care if I died, so I'd rather not wake him when he wants to sleep."

Ginny snorted. "You are a git."

"Go to hell," Percy said aimicably, neither

looking at Ginny nor moving his stick. "Go very quickly on a thestral."

"Your insults are crap."

"Yours would be too if you saw Fred die and if you hadn't any hope of Harry — you are dating Harry, now, right? I can't keep track of your love life — ever talking to you again and you knew that despite all you'd done, all the people you'd saved, you knew that mum and dad and all your siblings hated you and wished that you had died instead of Fred. Now bugger off, you manky bint." Percy suddenly felt the blankness replaced with indescribable anger, searing through him, clouding his judgment, his senses. He threw down the stick, not caring at all if he hit Ginny, and stormed off.

He had to walk around the lake several times to shake off the urge to kill something. His anger and resentment just flared up again when he saw his father standing near Oliver's rock, waiting for him with his hands in his pockets. Percy's

father saw him and began walking towards him.

"Percy, I —"

"Sorry, still alive," Percy said acidly. "I do apologize."

"Percy, what?"

"I know you hate me. I went into your office after I sent you the note to go into hiding —"

"That was you?"

"— and you banished me from the picture. You made my image leave the family picture in Egypt. That's alright, though, because I knew you hated me since you said that I was promoted to spy on you — *you*, a minor, bureaucratic official that the Minister really didn't care about at all. I suppose it really didn't matter to you that I'd run *an entire department on my own*. No, not a consideration at all. Percy is just a power-hungry moron, too focused on a position to ever actually be worthy of the role he filled. Everything's my fault, anyways, because God knows the twins could never have done anything wrong and

their constant bullying was justified, and you, of course, are always completely right. And I don't blame — no, that's wrong. I do blame you for it. No *father* should ever hate his son that much. No *father* should ever exile a son for actually having a worthwhile job and having the talent and dedication to do a good job at it."

"You really felt like this?" his father asked, looking crestfallen.

Percy thought about his a moment. "Yes. Entirely." He then turned around and sat on the rock, next to Oliver. Oliver slept like the dead. This was good.

Actually no, the situation was horrible and Percy wanted to be the Scarlet Pimpernel again, because the Scarlet Pimpernel was dashing and heroic and had no family, only his name and a League and a just cause. Percy Weasley had — had —

Percy didn't know and the thought was so overwhelming he had to hold his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," his father said, finally.

"You are lying," Percy said. "I understand why, but you are lying all the same."

"Percy, please look at me."

Percy didn't, and felt vindictively pleased.

"Percy — look, you were always different from all the others. You were the good boy, you were the hard worker, you were the responsible one. Your mother and I trusted you. We knew that you would do a good job of looking after the twins, of keeping Ron and Ginny safe... we never — you were an adult, Percy, since you were five. I suppose we never really thought that you were a child, that you had those sorts of — that you ever felt that you weren't a Weasley."

"You," Percy snapped, in the most vicious insult he could think of, "will never notice the details. You're even worse than mum about it."

His father was very quiet and very sad. "I know. And I'm sorry for that, Percy."

They were silent for a very long moment.

"I thought if I apologized, everything would

be alright," Percy said to the sand. "But it isn't, not really. I needed to be forgiven, yes, but I need to forgive you lot too, much more than I ever needed to be forgiven, because, after all, I'm asking forgiveness for two years when you're asking for twenty, and I don't think that I can do that. I don't think I can ever forgive you all for it. Even Fred and he's dead and I'm sorry that I can't, but I really can't."

The silence was beginning to grow oppressive. Percy looked up, finally and saw his father with his face in his hands.

Percy, exasperated, still furiously angry and suddenly, terribly guilt-stricken, stood up and walked over to his father. He couldn't think of anything to say. He would have liked to have said, 'Oh, sorry, I've gone a bit too far' but he thought about it for a long time and decided that he really hadn't. He'd said exactly what he was thinking and had not exaggerated at all. Percy knew he was many things — most of them terrible — but

he had never been a liar.

"I'm sorry, Percy," his father said finally, in a voice that trembled. "I'm so sorry."

Percy stuck his hands into his pockets and looked out at the lake. "And I'm still sorry. I just don't know if I can ever believe that you're sorry, too."

"It's going to be hard," his father admitted. Percy didn't look at him. He had the odd feeling that he had made his father cry somehow and he felt guilty and vindicated and so horrifically confused that all he could remember was that Fred was dead and nothing was ever, ever going to be the same. "But you're a Weasley, Percy, and we all want you to know that."

Percy thought about this a moment. "No. That's a lie again, but if you believe it, then I can only respect your willingness to think of the best in people."

"What happened to you?" his father asked, sounding so small and so miserable and so sad that Percy had to bow his head and stare at the

sand beneath his shoes.

"A lot of things, father," Percy said finally. "I watched friends die. I saw the law broken. I had everyone I ever cared about abandon me. I risked my life on a daily basis." He gave a Gallic sort of shrug; his talks with the French Ministry were rubbing off on him. "I grew up."

"I wish I could have spared you that." His father put a hand on Percy's shoulder. Percy stiffened, but the hand stayed. "Percy, part of the reason that I was so involved in the first war was to protect all of you. I wanted to make sure that you would grow up in a safe world, a good world, where you wouldn't see people die in front of your eyes."

"A little late for that," Percy muttered, though not loud enough to be heard.

"I wanted your life to be better than mine."

Percy gave a curt, quick nod, shook off his father's hand, and picked up a rock. Percy weighed it in the palm of his hand before aiming and flicking his wrist so that it skimmed over the

surface of the lake. "I know. You did your best."

He felt his father's smile and Percy hated him for thinking that this could be solved so quickly, that Percy's forgiveness was so easily attainable. It meant that his father still did not realize he had done anything wrong. "Thank you, Percy."

Percy picked up another rock and sent it skipping over the water. His father came up next to him, picked up a rock, and did the same. He had taught Percy how to do that, on one of those rare, free afternoons, when the twins were asleep and Bill and Charlie weren't injuring themselves, and Percy finally just had his father to himself.

"Someday," Percy said. "Things won't be the same. They won't ever be the same, but they may eventually be okay. You will never understand and I will thus never be able to forgive, but we may approach something close to understanding and forgiveness. We'll come very close. It's not now, though. I know you tried, but I still can't forgive you yet for failing. Maybe someday."

He sent a rock skimming over the lake and it disappeared into the shimmer of the sun on the water. "But that's very far away, you know. I know I've done wrong, but no one else will admit that they've done wrong and they need to."

"We love you," his father said.

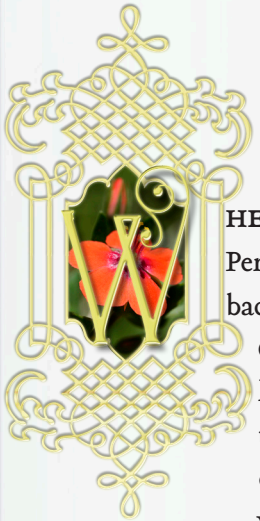
"Please don't lie," Percy said.

"I never will to you," his father promised. "I haven't done much for you Percy and I know — you must at least grant that I am beginning to know — that you needed a lot more than we ever realized. But I can give you that promise and I will never break it."

"I'll give you the benefit of the doubt," Percy replied, with a careful wrist flick. The stone whizzed across the rippled surface of the lake until it disappeared into the sunset.

12

In Which Percy Meets Teddy Lupin



When Oliver woke up, Oliver, Percy, and Percy's father walked back into the castle and into the Great Hall. Percy's mother rushed at them and crushed Percy to her chest. Percy felt her tears cascade down his head, as if he were being anointed with holy oil for kingship.

"I missed you, Percy," she whispered, holding him tightly.

"He sent us the notes, Molly," his father said.

"You were right. Percy sent us the notes with the flower on them."

Percy's mother squeezed him yet tighter, sobbing.

"Excuse me," came a cool, aristocratic voice. "I am looking for my daughter."

Mrs. Weasley turned to look at the newcomer, dragging Percy around with her.

With a hint of almost icy amusement, the woman added on, "Since you have apparently just found your offspring, I hoped you had some idea where mine went. My grandson needs his mother." The soft background noise of baby coos and gurgles confirmed this fact.

"What is her name, dear?" Percy's mother asked kindly.

"Nymphodora Tonks Lupin."

"Oh, *dear*," said Mrs. Weasley, releasing Percy at last.

Percy straightened his glasses and his shirt and sent a glare at Oliver, who was once again

attempting to swallow his own fist to stifle his laughter.

The woman speaking had the sort of cold, impassive beauty of Narcissa Malfoy, who had often attempted to subtly manipulate Percy into freeing her husband. It was a very tactile prettiness that could change to please the beholder and if Percy hadn't been able to pull himself back by thinking suddenly of Penny, Lucius Malfoy probably would have been out of jail a very long time ago (he had to admit, however, that Narcissa Malfoy had been very clever in pinpointing the one person who knew how to help her husband and for trying so hard at it).

"What are you saying?" asked Mrs. Tonks. "Has she been hurt?"

"Yes," Mr. Weasley said heavily.

Mrs. Tonks paled and began to almost sway on the spot. "Take me to her. Take me to her now."

"I- oh... you poor dear," said Mrs. Weasley, going over to her.

"Where is she? Where is Nymphadora? Where is my daughter?!"

"Charlie," their father said suddenly. "Charlie, catch the —"

Charlie dove and caught the baby just as Mrs. Tonks caught sight of her daughter and Remus Lupin lying, dead, side-by-side, on the tables.

Andromeda Tonks screamed as if trying to force the grief up out of her chest and into the open. She took her hair in thick double handfuls and sank to the ground, howling horrifically. Percy had to look away.

"Shh, shhh," said Percy's mother, wrapping her arms around her. "It'll be alright."

"Everyone! I've lost everyone!" Mrs. Tonks buried her face in his mother's thick bosom, her howls undiminished.

Charlie held out Teddy Lupin at arm's length and looked at Percy in worry.

"What?"

"He smells."

"Charlie, you grew up with five younger siblings and you have no idea what to do with a smelly infant?"

"Hey, you took care of everyone, not me. I was out chasing gnomes."

"Give him here."

Percy took Teddy away. Teddy had orange hair quickly fading into turquoise and was so focused at the business at hand he seemed only mildly peeved at his grandmother's wails. Percy looked up to see everyone bowed in various attitudes of exhaustion, of grief, of numbness, trapped in private inner worlds where no one else had a place.

He and Teddy were alone in this. Teddy finally opened his eyes, beaming at a job he apparently thought was very well done. His eyes were the exact same shade of hazel as Percy's.

All of a sudden, Percy had an intense and overwhelming feeling of camaraderie, a connection so deep it seemed to surpass all levels of comprehension and shoot straight into his heart.

Teddy gurgled and Percy, holding his breath, decided to take him down into Professor Snape's old office, on the grounds that it was the closest and absolutely no one would bother them there.

"You need to be changed," Percy said, holding him very carefully and taking him out of the hall and the noise of sobs and wails and moans and cries, away from death. It was dark and cool, and staved off Percy's incipient headache. "Come on now, I'll take care of you. I am the Scarlet Pimpernel, after all, and I help the helpless."

He'd known the spells for so long it was automatic — unbutton, get rid of the manky old nappy, wipe, powder, new nappy, rebutton, there!

"Are you feeling better now?" Percy asked Teddy. "I'm sure you are." To keep Teddy from crying at the loss of his grandmother, Percy helped him fake-walk all over Professor Snape's desk. Snape was dead, after all, and probably wouldn't object.

Oliver walked in and raised an eyebrow.

"Disturb a play-date, did I?"

"Oh, hardly. I'm teaching Teddy how to walk."

"I never pegged you down as someone who'd be good with babies."

"I did grow up with four younger siblings, Oliver." Percy smiled at Teddy's gurgles of pleasure. "You never really forget, you know. I always loved taking care of them. Then they stopped liking it."

"Makes me glad I'm an only child," Oliver said, with a passing attempt at levity. He sat down on the edge of one of the tables. "You know, never thought I'd be back here. Makes me wonder what it is I ought to do next."

"Play Quiddich?" Percy suggested.

"Yeah, but... it's suddenly just dawned on me that there may be *more to life than Quiddich*." Oliver looked absolutely horrified. "What if people stop caring about Quiddich, Perce? What then?"

"Well, what if people stop caring about filing systems and international policy?" Percy

countered. "We both have rather limited skill sets, you know. Actually, no, we don't. We expanded our horizons rather a lot during the war. We could take to the stage. Entertain the troops and whatnot. Everyone wants a laugh... "

He trailed off. Fred was still dead.

"Yeah," said Oliver, staring at his folded hands.

"I — er... we ought to see if Mrs. Tonks has any of Teddy's stuff." Percy picked up Teddy and cradled him with an ease born of considerable practice. "Want to come?"

"Yeah," said Oliver, slightly awkwardly. They both thought, at the exact same time, that it would be utterly terrible to be alone.

Percy tried to smile and ended up saying, "You're an awfully good League, Oliver."

"You're a good Scarlet Pimpernel," Oliver said back gamely. Then, like every pair of British twenty-somethings vaguely ashamed of their feelings, they avoided eye contact and pretended that the moment had never happened.

"How do you hold a baby like that?" Oliver asked, as they walked up the stairs.

"Oh, it's easy. Here, stand still." Percy arranged Oliver's arms and carefully gave him Teddy. "Now, support the head — *head* Oliver. There! Careful, Teddy's not a Quaffle."

Oliver looked supremely awkward holding Teddy. "He's *small*."

"And also alive and breathing, Oliver, and I'd prefer if he stayed that way. Do be careful."

Oliver took a couple of awkward steps with Teddy. Percy thought it looked almost… well, *funny*. "I'm going to sit down here before I drop him," Oliver said, sitting down almost laughably slowly.

"I'll go see if I can find his things, shall I? If he starts crying, just rock him."

"Rock him?" Oliver asked, completely bewildered.

"I'll go quickly then."

The next two days passed by in something of a sleepless blur. Andromeda Tonks was in no fit state to care for an infant, so Percy holed up in

his old Hogwarts dormroom with Teddy. He adored Teddy. It shocked him how easily and how simply he'd fallen in love. It was wonderful to have someone to protect and take care of, who actually and honestly loved him back for it.

After Percy had made up a bottle for Teddy's breakfast, someone knocked on the door. Percy cringed. He'd been avoiding his family because he was relatively sure they still hated him, Oliver was in the hospital wing for the mysterious gash on his leg that still hadn't healed —

A House Elf appeared in his bedroom with a crack.

"Oh, hello," Percy said.

"Owl for Master Weasley," the House Elf said. Percy stared at him blankly before removing the empty bottle from Teddy's mouth and handing it to the elf in exchange for the letter.

"Thank you very much, I am most obliged," Percy replied tiredly, opening the letter with one hand.

It read:

Percy Weasley —

The Ministry of Magic won't let us in. Since you are the only high ranking Ministry official left, we would appreciate your assistance.

— Kingsley Shacklebolt, temporary Minister of Magic

"Well Teddy," Percy said, folding the letter up and sticking it in his pocket. "Time to go." With that, Percy walked out of the castle, off the grounds, and disappeared with a slight '*pop*' to an alleyway just by the entrance to the Ministry. He was entirely unsurprised to see a small group of bedraggled witches and wizards standing forlornly by the toilets.

"They won't open," one witch said miserably.

"Of course not," Percy said, shifting his grip on Teddy. "It's after hours. Ever since Harry Potter and Ron and Hermione and all of them broke into the Ministry, the building goes into lock-down after five." Teddy gurgled restlessly. "Right you are Teddy! Much better security measures. Would someone be so kind as to burp him while I attend to this? Thank you."

Percy handed Teddy over to a cooing witch and tapped the sign twice with his wand. "*Dicco*."

The sign said, "Ministry of Magic closed after hours."

"Percy Ignatius Weasley seeks entrance."

"Again?"

"Head start on paperwork."

The sign beeped several times and finally slid back.

"Ah, thank you," Percy said, before making the sign blow up. Without much thought, he charmed the security spells to become visible and began to slowly dismantle them. He always knew that his obsessive memo reading would come in

handy someday. "No, oh, these are actually quite simple... *diffendo*, there, now... ah, there we are. Watch out a moment for those flying daggers — *protego!* And... counter that, and that and ah, good, we're in with very little trouble. All the really difficult spells and curses are on the top floor. Pray let me go first. Thank you."

Percy flushed himself down, followed by Kingsley Shacklebolt. Somehow, Shacklebolt was holding a screaming Teddy Lupin.

"Oh, here, give him back to me. He always gets fussy when I'm out of sight, even to use the bathroom or shower." Percy held out his arms.

Shacklebolt handed Teddy over gladly, waiting for the five others who slid in after him.

"All right, step only on the white tiles, and be very careful about it. Mind you the tiles must be *pure white* or else said tile *will* explode and you *will* be in a lot of pain. No, I'm afraid I don't know why Ministry security is this needlessly complex, sorry. There aren't any defenses on the

lift, however. I suppose we ought to be grateful for that. Oh, dementors are probably lurking here. All the extra dementors are."

As soon as he said it, they came swooping down. Percy's hawk joined Shacklebolt's lynx along with what looked like a rabbit and a chameleon.

"Don't be alarmed, stay on the white tiles! Thank you."

They made their way to the lifts with relatively little inconvenience after that and crowded in.

They were silent as Percy pushed the button to the top floor. Percy took the opportunity to burp Teddy again before they reached the top floor and the lift doors slid open. "Now, I feel I should warn you that they have probably altered security enough not to admit me, so we'll have to go through the entire tedious defensive system. I do so apologize for the inconvenience."

"Who seeks admittance?" a cool, feminine voice asked.

"Percy Ignatious Weasley."

"Name not cleared for admittance to this floor," the voice replied tonelessly.

At that, a dementor bore down on them, and Percy's hawk (born out of the memory of Fred laughing and pulling him back into the family) drove it off into the shadows. Then the very carpet seemed to rise up to swallow them —

"*Diffindo*," Percy said indifferently. "Shh, shh, calm down Teddy. I'll tell you a story, how about that? Let's see, once upon a time there was —"

At that moment a quartet of banshees, harmonizing horribly, swooped down on them. "Oh shut up," Percy said irritably, making a cutting sweep across their throats with his wand. "I'm trying to tell a story here." They began clutching at their throats, looking furious. "Now, once upon a time there was a witch who had trouble doing magic. She was very unhappy about it so she sent her cats... ah!" He transfigured the banshees into kittens and they sat at his feet, looking very puzzled indeed. "She sent her three

— well, usually it's three, but we've got four here, so — her four cats out in the world in search of something to help her use her powers." Percy made a circular motion with his wand and then a flicking motion, causing the kittens to group together and go zooming down the hall. An iron curtain fell in the middle of the hallway once the kittens skidded past. Percy walked up and tapped it with his wand. "*Dico*."

"Password?" the curtain wished to know.

"Lord Voldemort."

The curtains began to part and Percy Vanished them both. "You see? You can only Vanish them when they part, which I thought was clever, particularly since, if you do not Vanish them, the curtain closes after you and you cannot leave. And the password I thought quite ingenious because the Ministry would know immediately if someone was trying to get into the top floor. Now, to the story. Oh, hang on. *Protego*." The walls began to fall in on them, but remained

stuck around Percy's shield charm. "Now we just have to wait a few moments before the hallway realizes it can't eat us. Well, the first cat went out into the world and brought her back a crystal ball. The witch looked into it and could see vague shapes of things to come and which had not yet passed. It was very powerful magic, but hard to understand. Oh, look, here are the kittens again."

The walls gave up and slowly creaked back to their proper position.

"Thank you. Now, the second cat brought back a broomstick, so that the witch would be able to fly above the earth and see all. She could fly very, very fast and go very, very far — and, oh, one moment. *Wingardium Leviosa* — you might wish to do the same, the floor's going to drop out from underneath you in three... two... there it goes. The witch could fly all over and reach the tops of the highest trees, but flying was not very useful on its own. Hang on, I can probably jam the mechanism so the floor will come back. Oh,

you might wish to shield yourselves, too." Percy, trailed by the banshee kittens, floated down the hall, shifted Teddy so that his left hand was free and pulled a quill out of his shirt pocket. He inserted the tip into a minute hole half- disguised by the wallpaper and jiggled it in until something inside the wall clicked. The floor slowly rose up to meet them.

As expected, however, came the barrage of curses from all of the walls. Percy left the others to deflect them as he began to tweak with the system and dismantle it. "Now, the third cat came... well, I suppose we shall make the fourth cat come back (*incendio*- there, that should take care of one wall) with a wand, won't we? So... the third cat (duck, Minister), came back with... er (oh, *protego*) a quill. And, er... with the quill, the witch could er... she could write down her thoughts and think up of new spells. And, er, well, I'm not very good at (*protego* again and... ah ha! Clear shot! *Aguamenti*! I almost forgot, it's

the four elements to dismantle each wall, one at each) — I mean, I'm not very good at imagination and such so the gist of it is that knowledge is very powerful indeed, though it's limited a bit without practical application — oh, good shot burying the wall in earth, whoever that was! The fourth cat came back with the wand and as soon as the witch picked it up, she felt as if she had found a part of her arm that she didn't know was missing. So the moral of the story — ah ha! *Ventus*! There we are, all done. So the moral of the story is that each branch of magic has its power, but most of it comes from the wand. Lovely, isn't it, Teddy?"

Teddy drooled in what seemed to be reasonable contentment and Percy, beaming and tucking away his wand away in his sleeve, turned around to look at the assembled witches and wizards by the lift. "All done. I think we shall be quite safe n —"

Percy, however, had not counted on Dolores Umbridge still being in her office. Particularly when he'd blown it up before leaving. With a wild

screech of rage she flung the door open, leapt out, and grabbed Percy around the neck.

"How — how dare you?" she demanded, her wand prodding at his windpipe. Percy felt a minor chill of terror — the sleeve of her bright pink cardigan covered Teddy's face. "You — you of all people, who swore such *loyalty* to the Ministry? No," she shouted at the group as Kingsley Shaklebolt moved forward. "You lift your wand and I shall kill him! It would be doing a service to the state after all he's done! After this *betrayal!* Percy, you have *broken the law*."

Percy suddenly realized that he no longer cared. To hell with Dolores Umbridge and sucking up to the Minister and the Heads of the Departments — he was just as capable as any of them had ever been!

"You aren't at all protected," Umbridge whispered, her voice unctuous and horrible. "You have violated the law, Percy. I will make you invisible to the world. No one will ever know any of your accomplishments, no one will ever know your

failures. You simply will not exist. You haven't a prayer. You haven't anything to defend yourself."

This, however, was not strictly true.

Percy had always been in the habit of stowing his wand in his sleeve — a detail which, Percy thought rather smugly, Dolores had just *never noticed*. While she was speaking, Percy very quietly slid his wand out of his sleeve into his hand.

"All bad children must be punished, Percy," Dolores hissed. "And the best way to punish you is for everyone to forget that you exist. Don't think I haven't noticed how desperate you are to be noticed, to be praised. Always relying on other people to make you happy. Well, Percy, let the punishment suit each person. You will never, ever be remembered by anyone." She pulled back her wand to curse him.

In that moment, Percy realized that he really was no longer scared of being forgotten, because no matter what happened, Penny would remember him, at least, just like she remembered all her dead

French revolutionaries, forgotten by everyone else, and so would Oliver. He also realized that he was still a Gryffindor and Gryffindors didn't take such guff whilst in pursuit of right. He spun out from behind her wand and, whipping his own wand out of his sleeve, lowered it at her chest.

Dolores's expression was almost comical. "Where did you...?"

"You never really noticed the details," Percy replied, pained. "And I should just like to mention that Ministry decrees that are not ratified by the Wizengamot are only considered law when they supplement existing laws, so really, *you* broke the law. Oh, did I mention I was the Scarlet Pimpernel? I don't recall if I did or not, so I thoght I'd mention it again. Tsk, tsk, not noticing the *details*, Dolores. Just like you didn't notice this." He waved his wand and a jet of sea-green light blasted out from the wand tip, engulfing Dolores, who shrieked and clutched at herself. Percy watched as she shrunk and screamed until

she suddenly lost the mouth and internal bits necessary to scream.

Really, it was always the in the *details,* Percy thought, bouncing Teddy up and down to keep him from crying. Everyone was deathly quiet.

"Oh I say!" Percy exclaimed. "I think I made a joke. Was that a joke?"

"Er, yes," someone said.

"Well now! I'm getting to be quite the comedian."

After a few moments, Kingsley Shaklebolt asked, "What is she?"

"A sea cucumber," Percy replied brightly. "I transfigured the Minister of Magic into a sea urchin. I thought it appropriate to keep with a nautical theme. Did you know, sea cucumbers aren't actually vegetables? They are echinoderms, a type of marine animal. I'm very fond of echinoderms. Look at the sea cucumber Teddy!"

"You're in a very interesting mental state right now, aren't you, Percy?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Oh indeed sir," Percy replied. "I haven't slept

since... what day is today?"

"Couldn't tell you."

"Oh, I don't know either, which is why I don't know when I've last slept. Do forgive me, sir. Do you want to touch the sea cucumber Teddy? Be careful, it's rather slimy and warty."

Percy crouched down and guided Teddy's chubby little hand to the top of the sea cucumber. "Feel it? Disgusting, isn't it Teddy?"

Percy looked up and suddenly realized how silent everyone was.

"You," Shacklebolt said very slowly, "just dismantled the entire security system for the Ministry of Magic and transfigured Dolores Umbridge herself into a sea cucumber in between telling a children's story."

"And burping Teddy," added Percy, who liked to make sure things were as accurate as possible. "No Teddy, don't squeeze the sea cucumber like that, it'll explode, I think. Let go Teddy."

"Just who are you again?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Oh, I'm not quite sure," said Percy. "I'm the Scarlet Pimpernel, or rather, I used to be. Now I'm just Percy Weasley and he's rather a prat. Ew, Teddy. I *told* you not to squeeze so hard."

13

In Which Percy Hides in a Couch

PERCY EVENTUALLY slept, once his mother could convince him that she'd taken care of him and his brothers and sister, and thus was perfectly capable of taking care of dear little Teddy. Percy slept for nearly two days. When he woke up, he almost felt happy, until he realized that Fred was dead.

He crawled under the covers and didn't talk to anyone for a week. He answered the owls the Ministry sent him, and he spread papers all

over the floor of his old room, almost-happily organizing the entire wizarding world when he wasn't taking care of Teddy or lost in grief. His parents left trays in front of his door. Percy picked at them and ventured downstairs only to sneak up bottles of milk for Teddy and bottles of white wine for himself.

Oliver came over every morning, and they sat together and didn't say anything.

Once the week was over, Percy actually came down for a meal. He was indescribably grateful that everyone else had eaten already and he only had to suffer through a Chat With His Mother. It was a small price to pay for a hot meal.

"I'm so sorry, Percy," his mother said, her eyes filled with tears. "We did wrong by you, I had no idea —"

"Don't eat that, Teddy," Percy said, conjuring up a high-chair and putting Teddy in it. He wondered if Madame Malkin made little sailor suits in pin-stripe. "Oh, thanks for picking up all

of Teddy's stuff from Mrs. Tonks, mum. It was awfully decent of you."

"Oh, *Percy*," his mother said, even more tearfully than before. "Never a thought for yourself!"

"Oh no," said Percy. "I have plenty of those. It's just that if I think about them now I'll remember that Fred's dead and I've made a royal mess out of everything. Is there any dinner left over?"

"I was about to make you a tray." His mother set a bowl of soup down in front of him and then hurriedly sliced and buttered an entire loaf of French bread. She even put jam on top of the butter, just like Percy liked, spreading it just thin enough so that Percy could see the butter underneath. It was so- so amazingly comforting that she remembered it (she *never* remembered things like that) that Percy had to feed Teddy before he could look at her again.

"You know Percy," his mother commented, in a too-bright tone of voice. "I was — I was thinking, dear. You seem to have taken to little

Teddy Lupin and you were so awfully lonely — Mrs. Tonks is in no state to take care of him, the poor dear, checked into St. Mungo's just after you got called away to the Ministry. I don't think — that is, I'm sure she wouldn't —"

"Yes mum?" Percy asked, sitting down to his own meal. He took a bite of bread. It was wonderful.

"You could… you could adopt Teddy, you know."

The thought was almost too wonderful to contemplate.

He stared at his mother.

"You could dear! I asked about it. You're so responsible and Mrs. Tonks certainly can't care for him, and you'll never be lonely, dear, and I — oh, I always thought Bill would have them first, but I would so love grandchildren. I asked your father about it and he's got the forms all filled out already; it just needs a couple of signatures and some — some personal details about yourself, and it's all set."

Percy felt himself smiling. He held out a finger for Teddy to grasp in his own smaller, chubbier ones. "Well Teddy? What do you think?"

"Dadadadadada," Teddy gurgled.

Percy was honestly and truly delighted. He felt happy for the first time since Fred died. "Alright."

His mother rushed out and got the forms immediately, so thrilled at being able to finally do something for him she managed to push through the adoption the next morning.

Since the entire Ministry was in shambles, the hearing just turned out to be Percy showing up for work and chatting with Kingsley Shacklebolt over a tea break (and a bottle break for Teddy; Percy still didn't like being parted from him).

"So," Shaklebolt said. "I'm pretty impressed that you reorganized the entire Ministry last week. By owl, no less."

"Thank you sir," Percy said, scarcely paying attention to a word Shacklebolt said. "I, er… I'm sorry to spring this on you, sir, but, er… "

"Name it, kid."

Percy, beet-red, pulled out the adoption forms and handed them over. "Sir, I've been — well, my mother's been visiting Mrs. Tonks and she's — she's really lost it, sir, and I've been looking after Teddy ever since the Battle and I am awfully fond of him. I mean, he really doesn't have anyone else." Percy stared at Teddy, lying in an enchanted carrying cradle that had once belonged to every Weasley since Bill. "I mean, I know we're busy, sir, but mum managed to find Mrs. Tonks lucid enough to sign, and I... " Percy trailed off and fiddled with his cufflinks. He hated asking people for *anything*.

"So... you turn out to be the Scarlet Pimpernel, dismantle the entire security system of the Ministry in between telling a bedtime story, and give us a fully functioning government... and all you want in return is to adopt an orphan who has no claims on you because the only relative who could care for him has gone insane?"

"I would like to keep my job, too," Percy tagged on, rather meekly. He still couldn't quite look at Shacklebolt and stared at his coffee cup instead. "I'm told Harry Potter's Teddy's godfather, so of course, Harry ought to — I mean, if he wants to adopt Teddy I will —" it was hard to speak around the lump in his throat "— I will withdraw my claims, but... "

"He may have saved the world, but he's still seventeen. There is no way I'm entrusting a seventeen-year-old Hogwarts drop-out with an infant."

Percy looked up and couldn't keep himself from beaming. "You — you mean it, sir?"

Shacklebolt signed the papers. "There you go. You're a father. Officially."

"Thank you, sir," Percy said, reverently.

"Furthermore, you're now Deputy Minister of Magic. If some lingering Death Eater resistance gets me, I wouldn't want the Ministry in anyone's hands but yours."

Percy stared at him in abject astonishment. "I — really, sir — it... "

Shacklebolt waved away his thanks. "Don't. Now, what exactly did you do that has the French Ministry singing your praises? Madame Delacoeur *and* her personal assistant talk about you almost more than they mention Harry Potter. I mean, half of Europe is, after that Daily Prophet article, but the French have always hated British Ministry officials."

"Article?" Percy asked blankly.

Shaklebolt Summoned a copy of the newspaper. "You made front page yesterday."

Percy stared in shock at a picture of him working at his desk. Picture-Percy looked absolutely exhausted and did not look up from the piles of paper-work on his desk. It must have been a more recent picture. The newspaper headline informed him that, 'Ministry Offcial Percy Weasley the Mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel; Quidditch Star Oliver Wood and Author Gilderoy Lockhart Assisted'.

"Well," Percy said awkwardly.

"I bet you've been staying with your parents for a bit," Shaklebolt said, grinning. "Molly's probably hidden the new mail, to keep you from having some sort of fit."

"Er," said Percy.

"I'll file this myself," Shaklebolt continued on, taking the adoption forms. "You take the rest of the day off and get Madame Malkin to make you something we can parade in front of foreign dignitaries. Potter refuses the publicity junket, after all."

"Er," said Percy.

He did as he was bid, and got some nice playclothes for Teddy, along with a little set of pinstripe robes. Percy then left Teddy in the care of his mother, who valiantly hid all the owls flooding in.

"I think I'm going to go see Oliver," Percy said, a little dazedly. "Oh, mum. I'm Deputy Minister of Magic. Youngest ever, you know. No one under thirty-five has ever gotten the position before."

"Go and celebrate with your friend, dear!" his

mother urged, shooing him out of the kitchen, where she'd hidden most of the owls.

"Er, right," Percy agreed.

Percy didn't really tell Oliver anything, except that he, Percy, had adopted Teddy. Oliver told him that they were on the front page. They stared at each other rather awkwardly.

They then decided to get completely smashed, because they couldn't figure out what else to do.

Two hours later, Oliver and Percy were thoroughly sloshed. Percy had, before the firewhiskey numbed his brain enough to make him feel incoherent and disinclined to speak further, said something to the effect that it was too hard to deal with all the pain of loss and the necessity of rebuilding so much. You had to numb yourself to it to make it bearable.

Oliver had then poured a shot of firewhiskey down his throat, thus ending all rational conversation for the evening.

"God that was intense," Oliver said, a bit

blearily, sliding his glass across the bar for Aberforth to refill. "I'll have another."

"Your what, eighth this evening?" Aberforth inquired, pouring Oliver another glass none-the-less.

"Eleventh," Percy corrected, because he liked things to be accurate and precise and he had a mind for details.

"I shouldn't give this to you. You planning on Apparating out? You bloody youngsters. When I was your age —"

"Goats," Percy interrupted, since he had had access to all the files in the Ministry of Magic for quite some time now.

Aberforth promptly shut up.

Oliver sighed heavily. "What's it — wazzit been? It's Friday, I know that, 'cause we always get drinks on Friday. When was the — the thing? With the... " Oliver trailed off and made strange hand motions.

"Battle?" Percy asked. He hadn't been drinking as much as Oliver.

"Thathing," Oliver agreed. "Feels like a long time — an'— an' 's still as raw an' — an' hurts as much as it did before. I mean- I mean... " He tried to think. "Should be *happy*, us. Front page. Good deeds. Still can't play Quiddich yet." Oliver waved his empty glass around clumsily, his famed Quiddich skills failing him. " 'Nother."

"What's got you so depressed?" Aberforth asked, pulling out the firewhiskey and snatching the glass from Oliver.

"Aside from the total destruction of nearly everything familiar?" Percy inquired dully, laying his head down on the grimy countertop, too tired to care anymore. "Well, most of our friends are dead. It's just me and Oliver now, innit Oliver?" Oliver made a noise that might possibly have signified agreement. "Everyone else we knew in our year from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff and Slytherin are dead — as are most of the people we knew who were not in our year. Oh, and I'm rather stressed because I'm

taking care of an orphaned infant and running the Ministry now. All the other senior or high ranking members are dead." He flung up a hand dispiritedly. "Huzzah."

"My ex-girlfriend has a new thingy," Oliver added.

"Boyfriend."

"Yeah."

"It was only to be expected," Percy replied, dully, his head on the surface of the bar, one hand still wrapped around his untouched second glass of firewhiskey. "Besides, she dumped you... you never told me an exact date. Must be months."

"Wuzz — wuz got you so depressed?" Oliver asked. "'M th'one who's lost the, lost the —"

"Girl."

"Yeah."

Percy closed his eyes. "Well, I did see my brother die right before my eyes. And my family still hates me, I think."

"Oh yeah, tra— tro—

"Traumatizing."

"Yeah, that. Gred and Forge... they were like... they were like twins. Cause they were." Oliver held up two fingers. "Best two... hang on... " With some difficulty Oliver pressed a finger down. "Bes' two Beaters I've ever played with. Brilliant lads. Like they could- could. Er. Read."

"Not many people knew Fred and George were literate," Percy said, rather sadly. "I taught them, did you know? I taught them to read and they used to enchant my books to chase after me. They were supremely talented, now that I think of it."

"Yeah," said Oliver.

"I don't think I ever really appreciated them," Percy said sorrowfully. "I think I may have been born without a sense of humor."

"That's really sad. Gonna drink that?"

Percy slid the firewhiskey over to Oliver, who missed catching it.

"'Sodd, innit?" Oliver asked.

"Yeah," Percy agreed. "I've gotten almost

everything I've wanted and I'm not happy. I think there really was one thing I honestly, truly, wanted, and never got. The fact that I got everything else just made it more... painfully clear."

"Wazzat?"

"I've got the position I've always dreamed of and I think I'll probably make Minister of Magic by thirty at the latest and I've got, quite shockingly, a son, so there's that family I wanted once I'd gained power, but... well, I always thought I'd be married. Or at least... engaged before I went and had children."

"Problem is —" Oliver said, shaking his finger at Percy. "Issat— issat you dunget— dunget out."

"No, I don't get out," Percy agreed, a little sadly.

"Drink up," Oliver advised.

Percy obeyed, which meant that he completely forgot the rest of that evening.

When he came to the next morning, Percy found himself on the couch of Oliver's flat, holding a Quaffle like a teddy bear. He had lost

a shoe somewhere, his glasses were askew, his tie was around his forehead, and his robe was on backwards. He rather wished he could have remembered what he had done the night before. "Oh *Merlin*. What did I do with Teddy?"

He shot up and quickly realized what a *bad* idea it was. His head ached horrifically, every part of him was stiff —

Oliver shuffled by blearily and sat down beside him. "Hey, how long do you think I've been attracted to Angelina Jordan?"

Percy tried to think. "Fifth year. I think. After she scored that goal that won the game against Slytherin."

"Ah! Of course." Oliver flopped back against the couch, tugging his bathrobe tighter. "That could explain why she's in my bed right now."

"Oh God, Oliver, that's far too much information! She used to be Fred's girlfriend!"

"Yeah, which is why I'm wondering why the hell she's sleeping in my room. I mean, there are

some things you just don't do. I woke up on the floor of my bedroom with Alicia Spinnet, so I don't think —"

"God." Percy flopped over onto his side of the couch, shielding his face from the light. He was quite desperate to shift the conversation away from Oliver's love life. "Who the hell has Teddy right now?"

"I dunno. Who'd you leave him with before coming out to drink with me?"

"I can't remember!" Percy wailed.

"Not so loud, please?"

"I've given myself a headache too, no worries."

"So, think I may be over Penelope Clearwater," Oliver said, after a bit.

"Well, if you're sleeping with Angelina Jordan *and* Alicia Spinnet, then probably," Percy said, trying to keep the hope out of his voice. "You said she's got a boyfriend, so... erm, looks like she's over you too." And me, Percy thought miserably.

"Well, we can all move on, and I can assure my parents that I'm really not gay."

"Did your parents think we were sleeping together? I was in the Ministry the other day and someone asked me if I was really snogging you in my off-hours."

"Hunh," said Oliver. "Well, I am devilishly attractive."

"Yes, but I fancy *women*, Oliver."

"There would have been nothing wrong with it if you'd fancied me," Oliver said.

"You're not a woman, Oliver."

"True, Perce. However, when's the last time you had a girlfriend?"

Percy made a vague hand-gesture and wished he'd picked up a couple of hang-over spells from Bill. "Two years ago? I was going to marry her, you know, but she walked out on me. Worst week of my life, that. Girlfriend leaves me, parents disown me, siblings try to kill me, most of my friends ignore my very existence... "

"Oh."

They were silent.

"You know, I bet you could get girls now, Perce," Oliver suggested. "I mean, Scarlet Pimpernel and all. Almost better than being a Quiddich star."

There was really only one girl Percy wanted. "I suppose."

"Why are you still moping?"

"I'm hung-over. Badly hung-over."

"Oh."

There came a sudden, loud drumming on the window, sending Percy and Oliver into groaning convulsions.

Alicia Spinnet shuffled out of Oliver's bedroom, a sheet draped about her like a toga, and opened the window. She sent them both looks of withering scorn as she shuffled back into the bedroom. "Gits."

"Not so loud!" lamented Oliver.

Percy buried his head under a couch cushion.

After a moment, Alicia shuffled back out of the bedroom and slammed the door behind her. "Well?"

"Well what?" snapped Oliver.

"Aren't you going to read your letter?"

"No!"

Percy buried his head further into the couch. "*Gits*."

Oliver groaned. "Just read it if you're going to open it, Alicia!"

Alicia was evidently feeling rather vindictive. She went into the kitchen and banged open all the cupboards and drawers and began searching through all the dishes, apparently under the impression that owls liked to roost among the stemware. "When is the last time you went grocery shopping, Oliver?"

"Mrs. Weasley feeds me. Look, when a bloke charges into deadly danger and continually throws himself in the way of mortal peril, he doesn't have much time to nip down to the stores to pick up chips and cucumbers!"

"Well, *be that way*." Alicia did another rattle-through of the kitchen. Percy's forehead met the springs of the couch in his attempts to stifle the

noise. "Here you are, birdie. Eat two-week-old bread because Oliver is a *git*." The owl hooted far louder than it needed to before flying off. Eventually, Alicia got around to opening the letter. "Oi, you *gits*, listen up. Dear Mr. Weasley and Mr. Wood, Potter has refused to attend a council meeting with the heads of all other magical governments, so I humbly request your presence instead. Go get some dress robes and show up in— in time for tea today? Yours cordially, Kingsley Shaklebolt? The hell?"

Percy pulled himself out of the couch like a leviathan rising from the deep.

Oliver still lay sprawled against the couch, pinching his nose to stave off a headache. "Perce," Oliver opined, sunk in deepest gloom, "we're doomed."

"Pretty much," said Percy.

14

In Which Percy is Happy

PERCY COULD NOT entirely say he was looking forward to tea with all the heads of magical government. All his life he had striven towards this kind of recognition, but he somehow couldn't feel smug about it. It could have something to do with his headache, or the fact that he felt like something small, furry and possibly lethal had crawled into gullet to die there and was now in a state of advanced decomposition.

It might also have had to do with the fact that when he got home, Harry Potter was there.

Percy rubbed his aching forehead as soon as he glanced inside the front door. His head hurt too much to try Apparating again, and so he tried to make his way through the kitchen as unobtrusively as possible.

He was entirely unsuccessful in this, as Fleur and Bill were in the kitchen. Fleur was feeding Bill off her plate, and turned to beam at him as he walked in. "Ah, *le petit espion de ma maman!*"

"*Bonjour*," Percy said tiredly. "Hallo Bill."

"You all right, Perce?" Bill asked, swallowing his steak tartar. "You look like you've been through hell."

Percy blinked. "Haven't we all? Been through hell I mean. You look very nice as always, Fleur."

Fleur beamed at him again. "Ooo, you English can be charming! *Maman* says there is a press meeting for you today! Informal, of course. A, euh… tea?"

"Yes," said Percy, still rubbing his forehead.

Bill suddenly snorted. "Percy! I don't believe it! You're sloshed!"

"No," said Percy, a little nettled. "I *was* sloshed. Now I'm hung-over."

Now, really, Percy thought, Bill's grin was just *obscene*. It wasn't fair having two older brothers if one of them was Bill.

"I didn't think you had it in you," Bill exclaimed warmly. "Perfect prefect Percy — completely *smashed!*"

"Is it so hard to believe I have a social life?" Percy demanded. "Don't answer that!"

Fleur got up very gracefully, stretching her arms overhead like a ballerina. "Not at all, *mon frère*! Beeel, 'elp your brozzair!"

"Yes dear," Bill said automatically. Percy supposed this boded rather well for Bill's married life. Fleur waltzed over to pour a glass of lemonade, leaving Bill to poke his wand into Percy's forehead and mutter things.

After a moment, Percy's headache lifted somewhat. Fleur gave him the glass of lemonade as well as a smile so dazzling Percy felt dazed.

"Th-thanks," Percy stammered, once he regained the use of his tongue.

"Eet ees important to stay, euh... ze word is 'igh-drated? Yes, *hydrated*."

"I'm sorry I missed your wedding," Percy said, as a tacit peace offering.

Fleur and Bill looked at each other a moment. One raise of a blonde eyebrow and Bill gamely slung an arm around Percy's shoulders. "It's my fault, really. We didn't send you an invitation."

Percy tried to look nonchalant.

"Beel!"

"What?"

Fleur hit him on the shoulder and turned to Percy, holding out her hands. "'Ow is leetle Teddy? Ah! I am forgetting! Beel and I 'ave our own, euh... particular news to share." She quite smugly placed a hand on her torso. "*Monsieur le*

Scarlet Pimpernel, I would be more zan 'onored if you would be my leetle girl's godfather."

What was it about Fleur that made Percy feel like he'd been repeatedly hit in the head with something heavy? "I — I'd be her uncle —"

Fleur tossed her hair. "And godfather."

"I'm — I'm sure — you would want someone — someone else...?"

Very quietly, Bill said, "Perce, to tell you the truth, if something ever happened to me or Fleur, I'd want you taking care of our child."

"Our daughter," Fleur corrected.

"You seem sure of that," said Percy, still reeling.

Fleur tossed her hair again. "Why should I not be sure? In my family, there are daughters first."

"Oh, alright," Percy said, his head still mildly aching from a blood alcohol level of unbelievable heights. "If — if you're sure."

"Vairy sure," Fleur said warmly. She kissed him on both cheeks. "*Bien*! Go up and wash your face and put on... " She tilted her head to the

side, as if trying to figure out a polite way to say 'something that does not smell of booze and vomit and would make a hobo ashamed of wearing'. "Somezing... somezing presentable! Zair weel be lots of photographers, you know."

"Oh, great," said Percy. "Photographers."

"Bright flashes of light everywhere," Bill said, squeezing Percy's shoulders and releasing him. "You'll manage Perce. You always do, and do a hell of a lot better than the rest of us."

If Percy hadn't at that moment discovered the pressing need to vomit into a rubbish bin, it would have been very touching. As it was, Bill very kindly gave Percy a paper napkin to wipe himself off, and Fleur got him a glass of water.

Thus fortified, Percy left the kitchen to make his way upstairs, entirely forgetting that he had to walk into the living room to get to the stairs.

He entered the living room to the sound of bright, cheerful conversation — all of which died away as soon as Percy walked in. The rest of his

family sat around the room, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger more entrenched in the little group of familial normalcy than Percy had ever managed to be. He took one quick look around the room and then looked upstairs.

"Sorry," he said, very stiffly, and went to the stairs as quickly as he could.

"No, no, don't be sorry!" his mother exclaimed, grabbing Percy by the sleeve as he walked by. "Percy dear, are you alright? You look... "

"Went out with Oliver last night," Percy said shortly.

"Really?" asked Hermione Granger, with some surprise.

"We were in the same year," Percy replied, feeling rather peeved. "As of right now, Oliver and I entirely represent Hogwarts class of '94. Everyone else is dead."

"*Told* you," Ginny said, in tones of insufferable smugness.

Percy ignored her. "Where's Teddy, mum?

His mother looked worried. "Upstairs, taking his nap, Percy."

"He behave alright?"

"Teddy was — was a *tad* fussy."

"He always cries when he doesn't know where you are," said George, rather suddenly. "Suppose he thinks you'll go the way of his mum and dad."

"Yeah." Percy fiddled with his unbuttoned sleeves. "Er. I'll be going then. I'm off to work at four. I'll take Teddy with me."

Ron and Hermione were having some sort of heated argument in the corner, which Hermione resolved by stepping on Ron's foot. She stepped forward. "Percy, I'd just like to say that it took real courage to do what you did."

"Er," said Percy.

Hermione had apparently written some sort of speech as a sop to a somewhat guilty conscience and ploughed on. "It was very brave of you to be the Scarlet Pimpernel and to dismantle the Ministry from the inside."

"Hm," said Percy.

"We all —" with a particularly nasty glare at Ron "— greatly admire you for this. You did what was right, regardless of the consequences. And, well, *yes*, you did sell-out for power and position, but you eventually figured out the right course of action and recovered so spectacularly that it has changed the lives of hundreds, if not thousands of people."

"Oh," said Percy. He wished she would just stop already and let him go to Teddy.

"You are as much a hero as Harry," Hermione continued on, determinedly cheerful. "Isn't that right, Ron?"

Ron said nothing.

"That was very kind, Hermione. Thank you." Percy wondered that the rest of his family did not speak then entirely ceased to wonder. It was more of a wonder that they spoke at all while he was there.

"We are proud of you," his mother said tremulously.

"Very," tagged on his father.

"I've got to go," said Percy. This was unbearable.

Harry turned to him, glasses gleaming. "Er, Percy. It was — yeah. Must've been tougher than camping out in a forest for ages, being in the Ministry the whole time."

Percy gave a little bow and continued towards the stairs. His ears heated up; his entire family was looking at him and, and —

"Hey, wait up!" said — was it Ron? Percy turned to look. It couldn't be *Ron*. Ron, out of all of them, hated him the most. Ron, who hated him for achieving what Ron never could, Ron who hated Percy for trying to look out for him, Ron who had been the first to blame Percy for anything and everything. Percy was — well, Bill's spell must not have kicked in yet. He was mistaking Charlie's voice for Ron's thanks to what felt like cotton wool stuffed in his head from the excesses of the previous evening.

No, it *was* Ron, red to the roots of his hair.

"Perce, you, er... you don't have to leave you know."

"Kind of you," said Percy, "but you're wrong there." He turned to make his way up the stairs again.

"Percy!"

Blast it, Hermione Granger this time. Generally he liked Hermione, who was sensible and bookish and a good deal more intelligent than your average Gryffindor, but he just wanted to go into his room and — and set something on fire, possibly, and then get the hell out of there and back to the Ministry. Percy turned again, though his kept his expression bland.

Hermione shot a dark look at Ron. "Ron, I think you have something else to say."

Ron muttered something under his breath.

"Okay," said Percy, going up a stair backwards. "I'm going to —"

"We don't blame you," said George, rather suddenly.

Percy blinked. "What?"

George was very pale under his freckles, but he looked at Percy resolutely. "We don't blame you for Fred's death. That's why you've been hiding in your room, isn't it? Because you thought we blamed you."

Percy gripped the banister. "I — nothing of the sort —" He wanted very much to protest it, to say George was lying, that he would never have expected it from his family, but that would be a lie. Percy trailed off.

"You really were the Scarlet Pimpernel?" asked Harry.

Percy inclined his head. The bones of his knuckles would poke out of the skin soon.

Harry grinned. "You're alright, Percy."

"Yeah," said Ron. "You're alright."

Percy could think of nothing to say and so looked at the carpet. He was a little surprised he hadn't broken the banister yet.

"You're more than alright," George said quietly.

"So are you lot," Percy said finally. "Now,

if you'll excuse me, I have to go reestablish the British Ministry of Magic's international reputation."

"You don't change a bit Perce," Ginny called, as Percy went up the stairs. He was glad he was no longer facing her; she would not see him wince.

"Nah, that's where you're wrong, Gin," said Ron. "He changed a lot."

And Percy was absurdly glad.

He even sang as he showered, which made him fall into the bad graces of everyone once again (Percy had a voice like a tone-deaf frog stuffed through a marble grinder). He dressed in his new pin-striped dress robes, tied a very neat cravat (Mr. Crouch would have been proud enough to remember Percy's name), and dressed Teddy. Though it was nice to think he could go downstairs and use the fireplace to Floo out to the Ministry, Percy didn't want to chance it and instead Apparated over to Oliver's.

Oliver, predictably, was still trying to get

dressed. He had some difficulty with this because Alicia was busy being sick in his bathroom and Percy was relatively sure Angelina had hidden Oliver's shoes out of spite.

"With Alicia Spinnet!" Angelina spat out. "*Alica Spinnet*!"

Oliver held his head in his hands. "Good God woman, I'm too hung-over for this! What the hell do you have against me?"

"Hallo," Percy interjected rather hastily, stuffing a pacifier in Teddy's mouth. "Oliver, ready to go?"

Oliver looked at him blearily. "Percy, I don't have any shoes."

"I'm sure you do. Have you checked your closet? How about under the bed? Your shoes always end up under the bed."

"*And Percy Weasley*, Oliver?" Angelina roared. "You're an item with Percy Wealsey and you seduced me *AND* Alica?"

"Why does everyone keep thinking that?" Percy asked, nettled. "You know, Oliver, I think Ginny's

told everyone she knows we're together too."

"What good is being a Quiddich star and a world-renowned humanitarian dare-devil if everyone thinks *you're gay for your best mate*?"

"Probably not very much," Percy replied. "Sorry about all this Angelina. This is Teddy Lupin and I adopted him yesterday since his parents are dead and his grandma's become a nutter. Neither of us is gay, as far as we know, and yes, yes, Oliver is a git for taking advantage of you when you were still emotionally vulnerable after Fred's death and for now ruining your friendship with Alicia —"

"— because Alicia's liked you for *ages*, Oliver and how d'you think she felt when she heard you were a homosexual *and* attracted to *me* instead of her?"

"Confused?" asked Oliver. "I'd be confused."

"Look, here's a pair of shoes," said Percy, pointing to behind the umbrella stand. His head was beginning to ache viciously again. "Oliver, it's a quarter to three. We really have to go. I still haven't figured out the wards Shacklebolt wants

to put up in the Ministry, so if we just Apperate to the Ministry lobby —"

"Oh no you don't," Angelina said savagely, leaping at the shoes.

"*Accio* Oliver's shoes," Percy said wearily, pointing his wand at them. "Come off it Angelina. There is a time and a place for violent, emotional confrontation and it is *not* when I'm hung-over and going to be late for tea with the heads of magical Europe."

Angelina still did not see any reason for Oliver to leave when she wasn't finished yelling at him, but Oliver disappeared with a faint 'pop' as soon as he got his shoes on.

"I hate my life," Oliver said, once Percy had appeared next to him in the lobby. Teddy gurgled appreciatively. "Hate it. Where are we supposed to —"

"Scuzi," said a pretty, rather Italianate woman with a very charming smile. "You are in the papers! Oliver Wood?"

Oliver suddenly seemed to be much happier with

his life. "Why yes I am. Oliver Wood. You are?"

"Rosina. You are a hero!"

"Why yes, yes I am," said Oliver, grinning at her, hangover entirely forgotten. "In need of rescuing, miss?"

"In the conference room in fifteen minutes," Percy said. Shacklebolt was waving at him from across the lobby. Percy walked over.

"Hey kid, glad you made it. Ah, and with the adopted son too!"

"I couldn't leave Teddy two days in a row," Percy said, a little shame-facedly. "Look, he has a pinstriped robe."

"And isn't he a *darling*!" exclaimed Hestia Jones, stopping next to them. "Cootche-coo!"

Teddy obligingly turned his hair violet for her.

"What is required of me, sir?" Percy asked, rubbing his temple with his free hand.

"Sit through a bunch of long, dull speeches, smile for the cameras, then say a word or two for the papers."

"Must I?" Percy asked, rather dismayed. He felt rather shocked at his own dismay. When had *he* ever been reluctant to talk to reporters? Oh right, when he drank too much and got pounding headaches. *That* was when he didn't want to talk to reporters.

"Sorry kid. We'll keep it short. Just say you did what you had to do, thank a few people — oh and make *sure* you particularly thank the French Ministry of Magic, since they ended up convincing Spain, Germany *and* Italy about offering Muggle-borns political asylum. Don't forget the United States either."

"Why?" asked Hestia, looking up from Teddy. "They didn't do much."

"No, but they'd be very upset if you pointed that out," Percy replied. "They came in eventually, you know."

"You have the makings of the Head of International Magical Cooperation," said Shacklebolt, clapping Percy on the shoulder. "Or a Minister

for Magic. Try not to usurp me until I've saved up enough for retirement."

"Oh, of course sir." Percy rubbed his forehead again. "I'm not sure anyone would *want* a twenty-one-year-old Minister for Magic."

"If they knew what you could do, kid? Trust me, they would. No one's in the conference room just yet, so why don't you go in and write out a few words?"

This seemed to be a very good idea to Percy and so he went in, conjured up a high-chair for Teddy and began mentally composing some sort of speech. He couldn't think of anything at first and stared around the conference room. He had been seated at a high trestle table at the front of the room. There were circular tables for each Ministry before it, with placards inscribed with the name of each country, as well as a long buffet to the side of the room, full of tea things. It was really rather nice.

'*My fellow witches and wizards, I thank you most*

sincerely....' No, too formal.

'*I'm hung-over at the moment, so I'll keep this short* —' No, that was a definite end to all his good publicity.

'*I would like to thank everyone here, particularly Oliver Wood, who is not in fact my boyfriend, but is my best mate.*'

Teddy spat out his pacifier and began to wail.

"*Scourgify*," Percy said, pointing his wand at the pacifier. "Oh come now Teddy, why are you upset? Oh! You must be hungry. I *knew* mother would forget to feed you. Let's see what we can find... " Percy, balancing Teddy in one hand, managed to transfigure a rose from the floral display into a bottle. He filled the bottle with cream from the tea-service, which seemed to do the trick.

A very pretty witch in lilac robes walked in with an armful of papers. She seemed very —

"Penny!" Percy exclaimed, so surprised he nearly squeezed Teddy.

After a moment, she turned and looked at him. "...

Percy? Percy! No one else calls me Penny, and I had to legally change my name to protect my parents, and I… you… have a child?" She checked the impulse to hug him and looked suddenly self-conscious.

Percy blushed. "He's not mine. I mean, well, actually he — ah… I didn't expect to see you here. I mean it's — it's beyond fantastic to see you again, Penny. How are you?"

Penelope laughed. "I go by Audrey now. I was never very fond of Penelope. I am doing *very* well, my Scarlet Pimpernel! The Department for International Magical Cooperation has appointed me the temporary head of relations with France. Percy, I heard you were made Deputy Minister of Magic?"

Percy flushed and set down Teddy's now-empty bottle. "Well, er… yes." In a very awkward backtrack, Percy held out Teddy. "This is Teddy Lupin. I adopted him a few days ago since his parents are dead."

"You… adopted him?" Penny — Audrey asked, setting down her papers.

It suddenly dawned on Percy that he was a single father at twenty-one. He remembered, with a surge of overwhelming guilt, Eloise Midgen coming to see him in the hospital and predicting he would have a son. Martha, Eloise, Fred, everyone in his year aside from Oliver, the horrible list of the dead, the weight of those names in the supplement to The Daily Prophet, the surge of guilt for being alive when much better men than him were dead… It was little wonder Percy forgot the question entirely. "Er. Sorry. Repeat that?"

"Did you adopt Teddy here?

"Yes. His parents are dead and his grandma is, er… "

Shockingly, P — Audrey kissed him on the cheek.

"Er."

"Can I hold him?" she asked, pushing back her long curls of brown hair. Percy handed Teddy over and it tore at him to see how happy and natural Audrey and Teddy looked together. "Oh, aren't you a darling? Hello Teddy. Has his hair

always been aquamarine?"

"It was violet a few minutes ago." Percy fiddled with his cufflinks. "Er. Penny... Audrey... I don't think that I've ever really thanked you."

"For what?" she asked, bouncing Teddy. "Oh, aren't you just adorable?"

"Well, for all your help. If you hadn't... er... knocked some sense into me, I'd still be working for the Ministry and cringing my way through each day. Oh, and for loaning me your books." He fiddled with his cufflinks. "It was almost like having you here. Well, almost. I... I missed you."

She looked up and beamed at him. "Percy, I never turned off the radio, just in case they said something about you."

Percy felt himself blush again.

"Audrey!"

Percy turned. Goddamnit, it was the handsome Frenchmen from the visions.

"Luc-Esprit!" Audrey lit up, switching to French. "What are you doing in London?"

"Silly!" Luc-Esprit exclaimed, a smile similarly lighting up his goddamn handsome face. Git. "I came to see you, of course. Introduce me to your friend, there."

Percy began busily rearranging the tea-service.

"This is Teddy Lupin and this is his adopted father, Percy Weasley." Audrey's hand was very soft on his shoulder. "Percy, this is Luc-Esprit. His mother hid me during the war."

"Allo," said Luc-Esprit. "Eet ees a pleasure to meet ze Scarlet Pimpernel."

Percy turned and bowed, so he would not have to take handsomer-than-Percy-charming-accent-in-English-goddamn-bloody-git-Luc-Esprit's hand. "Likewise, er... Luc-Esprit."

Luc-Esprit then solemnly shook hands with Teddy. Percy furiously distributed the copies of the memos Audrey had brought in. He had never before understood the traditional hatred between France and England but oh Merlin did he understand it now. He was quite willing to

cause an international incident if need be. Percy felt that he could stage a far too convincing nervous break-down to mitigate it.

"Ah, Monsieur le Pimpernel!" exclaimed Madame Delacour, sweeping in. She looked magnificent in her low-cut, bright red robes and kissed him so enthusiastically Percy couldn't speak for several minutes afterwards. "Jean-Claude, get a picture!"

Percy was too dazed to smile, but that did not seem to matter much. Everyone seemed overwhelmingly glad to see him and crowed with delight when Percy stammered out 'Thank you, you are too kind, without your help Voldemort would have won' in any and all languages he could think of. Never having been much of a polyglot, his French managed to turn into Italian which turned into some bizarre form of Catalan which turned into Mermish and then Hungarian and then possibly a French patois with a Russian accent and Greek grammar. Percy was very

ashamed of himself, but since Oliver showed up and could barely speak in English, he eventually felt quite at home with his incoherence.

He couldn't help feeling overwhelmed. He could barely enjoy the scone set before him, as he had, in his effort to please the German minister, who had poured him a cup of tea, burned his tongue on the too-hot Darjeeling. Teddy was passed around, to the adoration of the witches in particular and Percy was always looking around anxiously to try and find him. A half-hour passed in such a strange, disjointed fashion, in such a babble of languages Percy was surprised when Kingsley Shacklebolt announced in clear, comprehensible English that Percy Weasley, a man who needed no introduction, had a few words to say.

Nonetheless, Shacklebolt gave Percy a long, almost embarrassing introduction and turned the most commonplace events in Percy's career into examples of heroism. It baffled and pleased Percy at the same time. He could see nothing heroic in

adopting Teddy (though Shacklebolt obviously did), or in rushing to the Battle of Hogwarts (he ought to have been there sooner), or in being the Scarlet Pimpernel (which anyone would have done in his position, though he was very pleased at how well he had pulled it off). Percy was most baffled by the mention of Teddy, however; Percy adopted him simply out of a desire to love and be loved in return. He didn't see anything particularly noble in that. Shacklebolt lauded Percy's sense of humor (Percy wasn't aware he had one), his sense of courage, his bravery, his incredible competence —

By the time Shacklebolt had finished a long list of compliments, Percy was bright red and tongue-tied. He stood up, cleared his throat and said, "Ah, er."

This was not a very good beginning to any kind of speech, and an even worse one to a speech he had yet to write.

"Ah, I... I really don't deserve such praise. I

was... I made a sort of stupid choice when I was younger, and picked my job over everything else. I mean, at that point my life was falling to pieces and my family hated me, so I don't think I can be entirely blamed, but, er... I made a bad choice and I hope everything I've done can in some way atone for it. It isn't much, but I offer you all the Scarlet Pimpernel — and I thank you all very sincerely, because without all of you, I would never have been the Scarlet Pimpernel. I would have just been Percy Weasley, a junior assistant in a corrupt bureaucracy. So — so thank you very much. Especially to Oliver Wood, and to the French Ministry and, er... to Spain, Italy, Germany, the United States... " Percy glanced around at the placards on the tables, avoiding looking at Penelope, who sat next to Luc-Esprit, and read off all the names he could see. "So — so thank you all. Thank you very much. The Scarlet Pimpernel didn't really do anything but help unify everyone who would have done their bit and helped change

the world for the better without him."

Percy dropped into his seat and stared miserably at his plate as everyone started to applaud.

The Deputy Minister for Spain then took pity on Percy and asked him if he had written the regulations on cauldron bottom thickness. Percy replied that he had, and spent a much more satisfactory five minutes discussing the necessity of international regulations and periodically renegotiating trade agreements. After that, everyone seemed to have praised his alter ego quite enough and allowed Percy to be Percy.

It was with incredible relief, however, that he noticed Teddy had begun bawling. He grabbed the screaming infant, who was changing the shape of his nose with alarming rapidity, and raced out for an emergency diaper change. Percy spent the next twenty minutes hiding in the bathroom, alternately beating his head against a wall and entertaining Teddy.

When he realized he had to face reality, Percy

reemerged and was polite to all the heads of state who seemed very happy to think that they represented countries that would have done the right, humanitarian thing even without Percy to urge them onto it. Percy was always painfully aware of Audrey as she moved through the room, Luc-Esprit trailing around behind her like a shawl.

"I'm starting to feel sorry for Harry Potter," said Oliver, though he looked at his pretty Italian with remarkable contentment.

"Mm," said Percy.

Oliver glanced at him. "Perce, what's the matter? You look like Voldemort killed your puppy and then ate it in front of you."

"Thank you for that graphic description, Oliver."

"Anytime."

"I just... who am I, without the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"Percy Weasley," Oliver said, giving him a funny look. "You don't deal well with hangovers, do you, Perce?"

"Not really, no," Percy replied miserably.

"And... I am sorry to have to say this, Oliver, but I need to tell someone, but... you see the witch in the lilac robes? I'm madly in love with her."

Oliver turned and looked at her a long moment. Then he smiled over his shoulder at Percy. "Well then, do something about it. You're the Scarlet Pimpernel, aren't you?"

"Not anymore," said Percy. "What's Percy Weasley?"

Oliver clapped him on the shoulder. "Oh, I dunno. My best mate? One of the most sodding brilliant and barmy people I've ever met? The Deputy Minister of Magic?" Oliver looked around. "I think you ought to say something soon, though. The French delegation had the bad taste to leave in the middle of my inspiring little speech there."

Percy bolted from the room.

"Hey, kid, slow down," said Kingsley Shacklebolt, stopping him midway down the hall. "What's the rush?"

"I need, er... the French delegation... didn't... thank them enough... "

"Kid, you did more than enough today. I don't think they'll hold it against us."

Percy looked despairingly into the lobby. He was so close!

Hestia Jones smiled at him. "Are you feeling alright? You look a little overwhelmed."

"I suppose I am," said Percy, looking down the hall.

"I wouldn't blame you," replied Shacklebolt. "I hate to ask you, but there's —"

"Excuse me, Minister," Percy interrupted, earning himself a puzzled look from Kingsley Shacklebolt and Hestia Jones. "I need a — a personal... "

"A personal day?" Hestia supplied. "Here, let me hold Teddy. Who's a good boy now, hunh?"

Percy handed over the baby, who gurgled happily. "Er, no," Percy replied, "more like a quarter of an hour. Is that permissible, sir?"

"What for?" Kingsley asked.

Percy tore his eyes away from Audrey. "Well sir, I should like to take a quarter of an hour to convince my ex-girlfriend to take me back because I fully realize that I'm a fool, and then have a small nervous breakdown in my office. I'm very precise, sir. I really shall only need fifteen minutes."

Kingsley grinned. "For you, I'll make it thirty. You did single-handedly dismantle the entire security system of intensely complicated curses placed over the Ministry in between telling Teddy Lupin a bedtime story. You got style, kid."

"ThankyouverymuchMinister," Percy blurted out before speeding way and scampering through the crowd. "Penny! Hey, wait! No, don't leave yet, please!"

Very soon Percy had the attention of most of the people in the Atrium but not, alas, Audrey's.

"Penny, please! I really rather do need to talk to you and it is a matter of some imp — oh, er, Audrey!"

Audrey turned and Percy very suddenly realized that Luc-Esprit stood right behind her.

"Er, Audrey," Percy said, a little stiffly. "I, er... I

would like a word."

"I'm in a bit of a hurry," she replied, pushing her hair out of her face. "Can it wait?"

"No, not rea —"

She turned away. "I really am sorry, Percy, but —"

"I was a fool!" Percy roared, since that declaration had worked very well in the past. "I was a pompous prat who — who became so blinded by his own ambition he failed to see that it had led him down paths he shouldn't have followed!"

Audrey slowly turned to face him and Percy could tell by her expression that she really was starting to *listen* to him again, and he felt so encouraged he rambled on.

"Look, please hear me out and please don't stop me because if I do stop I won't be able to start again and I really need to say this. Audrey, I was a complete and utter git for what I've done but I realize it now and I'm sorry. I — I was horrible and I apologize. Worst of all, I was a damn fool to work so hard that I drove you away, and an ever greater

fool not to tell you that — that… er, Audrey, I've been falling in love with you since I was fifteen and you know I'm rubbish at Valentines and poetry and feelings and all that, but you make me want to be better than I ever thought I could be. The only reason I did turn back to what I knew was right, though it was dangerous and difficult and quite deadly, was because the thought of you losing your life due to this — this evil would have made my life meaningless. You — you bring out the best in me, Audrey, even though no one but you ever believed it existed — not even me. And I was such a damn fool never to tell you, and an even worse fool never to tell you just how much you mean to me and how much I care for you and I was the biggest git in the world not to tell you that the morning of the day you broke up with me I'd gone out and bought a ring — and, and that's what I used my entire bonus for, when I got the promotion to Junior Assistant to the Minster. And I know that it'll be a really long time before you

can trust me enough for me to go and get the ring out of the vault at Gringotts but I love you madly and please take me back and please don't leave to go back to France, because I really do love you more than anything else in my life, even Teddy and my job. And please take me back."

During this spiel, somehow everyone had fallen very quiet (possibly because Percy was still shouting a bit) and Percy had, in the midst of fiddling with his cuff links, lost both of them. Audrey stood and looked at him with the same grave, calm, interested expression that Percy so loved and which meant she was honestly, truly listening.

"Please?" Percy asked, a little pathetically.

He was startled to see tears slide down Audrey's cheeks before she ran over and flung herself into his arms. "Oh *Percy!*" And suddenly she was kissing him and everything was right and wonderful and Percy remembered again how fantastic snogging was. How had he ever forgotten how much feeling, how much pleasure

came from the relatively bizarre way people pressed their lips together? And there was such an unexpected and almost explosive joy in clinging to someone, in feeling their hands in your hair or around your neck or on the sides of your face and being close enough to feel their tears run down your cheek as if they were your own.

A few people wolf-whistled and some idiot attempted to start a round of clapping, forcing Percy to give Audrey one last kiss before lifting his head up and looked around in mock severity.

Audrey pulled back breathlessly. "I was really just going to get a new roll of film for Jean-Claude, so he could take a group photo before everyone Flooed back in five minutes. I wasn't going back to France at all."

"Oh," Percy said, looking down at her and feeling incredibly stupid. With a return to his usual gravitas, Percy replied, very gravely, "Well rest assured that the breadth and depth of my devotion does not change based upon your destination."

"And you *mean* it too, don't you?"

"Er, I would rather you did not have doubts on the subject Audrey. It is rather important."

"Oh I have missed you!" Audrey cried, kissing him again and causing Percy to quite ignore whoever it was trying to start the clapping up again.

"I love you," Percy said simply.

"And I love you," Audrey replied, kissing him again. "My own, elusive Pimpernel."

"I'm not that elusive," Percy replied, angling for another kiss.

"No," Audrey said, with a brilliant smile. "But you are my own, brave Sir Percy and I love you for it."

And Percy was wonderfully, incandescently happy. For there was everything perfectly in place, every detail as he had planned and wished for, with the exception of one that he had never really understood until now, never really planned for, but always secretly wished for after reading it in the book —

He certainly wasn't a knight in shining armor

or anything like that. He was Percy Weasley, and he was the Scarlet Pimpernel.

And, for the moment, it was possible to be both at once.

And, better than being either, he was *loved*.

And he was happy.

The End

Colophon

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