

“You think I’m doing this because I want to?” he gasped. “Ignoring the family, devoting my every *bloody* moment to the Minister, making Mum— making Mum cry, like that?” Percy himself was crying, his eyes bloodshot when he looked up at Charlie. “Char, *please*, you know me. I’m just trying to keep everyone *safe*.”

“Safe from what?” Bill asked, suddenly right there at Charlie’s shoulder, firewhiskey abandoned. He had one hand on Charlie’s shoulder and one hand on Percy’s, and for a moment Charlie was twelve again and being told that Fred and George might have Dragon Pox but they were going to be *fine*, and it wasn’t Percy’s fault for catching it first, not at all.

“From everything!” Percy wept. “Fudge is running the Ministry into the ground and Dumbledore’s got his own fucking agenda that I don’t trust for a second, and everyone knows You-Know-Who is back and I *know* he’s got people in high places and I’m trying to weed them out in case Harry bloody Potter actually manages to kill him and we can finally start getting some actual fucking competent people involved, but until then the whole bloody family is under Ministry watch because our parents are right in Dumbledore’s pockets and I thought if I could get Fudge to trust me, I could keep him *away* from you, but you had to go and ruin it by taking your *fucking lordships* and now Fudge wants to keep an eye on you!”

This was all said in one long, hurried breath, and finished with a weak fist thudding against Charlie’s chest.

Charlie looked up again, his own horror mirrored in his older brother’s eyes.

“Fuck, Perce,” he breathed, running a hand through Percy’s short-cropped red curls. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Percy snorted, pulling back to fix him with a shrewd look. “It had to look *real*,” he insisted mulishly. “If Fudge didn’t believe I absolutely hated all of you and the headmaster besides, he’d never let me so close to him.” He blinked away tears. “Except I’ve just gone and cocked that up because now you’re going to go to Dumbledore about it and he’s going to try and get me to spy on the Minister!”

“Hey, hey, none of that,” Bill soothed as Percy began to cry harder. “Easy. Look, why don’t you sit down, I’ll make some tea, and then Charlie and I can tell you why we *really* took our lordships, yeah?”

Percy looked bewildered, and heartbroken, but let Charlie gently manhandle him over to the sofa.

Charlie mentally apologised to Sirius, who had been expecting them both to visit Grimmauld Place that evening to discuss the Wizengamot meeting. But he would understand; he’d been a big brother to a difficult little brother too, once. Even if things hadn’t ended quite so nicely for Regulus, in the end.

Bill got the kettle going, and Charlie offered Percy a handkerchief, rubbing his back until the shaking of his shoulders subsided.

The three of them had a whole lot to talk about, it seemed.