

The Owl, the Spider, and the Orphaned Dragon

by kereia

Three months after the Battle of Hogwarts, Katie Bell's Quidditch team accepts an invitation to an exhibition match against the Vatra Dornei Dragons in Romania. When the appearance of a real dragon prolongs the match for a week, Katie soon finds herself caught in the sinister machinations of a smuggling ring while she juggles her responsibilities as a Chaser and her growing attraction to an old friend.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

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Chapter I

There was a dragon on the Quidditch pitch.

Crouching near the goal posts, it snapped at the Bludger which buzzed around its arrow-shaped head.

Katie had fled into the entrance tunnel along with the other players and watched as the Bludger suddenly changed course and zoomed in a straight line towards the tunnel on the other side of the stadium.

The dragon's wings flapped in irritation. A low growl rose from the depth of its throat, and smoke billowed from its snout. The coiled body stretched towards the entrance; scales ground against each other. Then, suddenly, the sky was full of lightning. Spells hit dragon hide as brooms circled overhead. The beast growled and roared, belching flame and smoke. Part of the spectator stands caught fire. The heavy scent of burning wood filled Katie's nose. Mighty wings beat the air as the dragon attempted to take flight.

The witches and wizards who circled it on their brooms renewed their attack, and a Stunner struck its vulnerable eyes.

Blinded and enraged, it flooded the air with fire. Its long tail lashed out, shattering two of the three goal hoops on impact. Talons gouged the ground.

Stragglers fleeing from the stands screamed in fear.

Just like the people surrounding her, Katie was rivetted by the spectacle before her. Watching the wild manoeuvres employed to evade the dragon's fire stole her breath away. Anxiously, she steadied herself against the broad back of the person in front of her, rose onto the balls of her feet, and craned her neck for a better view.

"Katie, we need some help." Someone placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back. When she turned, she looked into the determined face of Penelope Clearwater,

her team captain. The Romanian captain and two of his Chasers stood behind her.

"We are going to do something about those fires. Are you coming with us?"

Without hesitation, Katie pulled her wand out of her robes and nodded in agreement. "Of course, I am."

They rushed through the tunnel to the outside of the stadium where the spectator's entrances allowed access to the stands. Katie followed Penelope up the first set of stairs while the Romanian players ran past them to the next one in order to reach the fire from the other side.

"You know, when you proposed a friendly match between the Arrows and the Dragons, I didn't expect there to be any actual dragons involved," Katie panted as she reached the top of the stands.

Penelope only rolled her eyes. Her face mirrored Katie's mixed expression of anxiety and exhilaration. Wands raised, they bounded over the stands and extinguished the fires that devoured the wooden benches. The Romanian players met them halfway, and Goran, one of the Chasers, put a shield in front of the creaking construction to protect them against further danger.

Martha, the Romanian captain, smiled apologetically. "We were worried that they had built the new stadium too close to the dragon reservation."

The dragon's roar had dwindled to a low grumbling. Finally subdued by its keepers, it settled down, tail curling around its front paws. The great eyes blinked sleepily as it rested its head on the ground.

Wizards and witches swarmed onto the pitch; spectators, both excited and outraged, harried officials, and the remaining players of the Appleby Arrows and the Vatra Dornei Dragons crowded around the beast. Arguments broke out, and soon, a cacophony of sound filled the air.

"Do you think they're going to let us finish the match?" Penelope asked.

Goran lowered his wand, breaking the shield. "They have to."

"I don't think they can," Katie said.

"They can repair the stands in less than an hour. They only need to get the dragon back to the reservation. Look how many people are still here. It's not as if we don't have an audience."

"That leaves us with only one problem, then." Penelope and Katie exchanged a look.

"I'm sure they can replace it," Penelope said.

"They can't. It's against the rules."

"QUIET!"

The magically amplified voice interrupted their conversation and made everybody flinch.

"Will everybody please be quiet? Or do you want her to wake up again?" Movement swept through the crowd, and as one it retreated several steps. Loud arguments were abruptly quieted, only to be replaced by low whispers.

"I really want to know what's going on down there." With a flick of her wand, Katie Summoned her broomstick and mounted it. The others followed suit. After a short flight, Katie touched down next to the referee who stood surrounded by both Quidditch teams, an official-looking witch with her hair in a tight bun, and Charlie Weasley.

With a grin on her face, Katie stepped up next to her former Gryffindor team mate. "Looks like you lost something," she said, interrupting the heated conversation.

Charlie looked down at her, blinked, and Katie noted with amusement that it took him a second to put a name to her face. Then, a smile made its way to his lips. "Looks like I found something," he replied.

"Well, considering the size of her, I'm sure it wasn't too difficult. Though, she certainly made the match more interesting."

"Don't tell me you were losing."

"We were leading ninety to eighty when your little lizard decided to join the game. She has good reflexes, but her manoeuvrability needs some work." Katie looked at the slumbering dragon. "Potential Keeper, I'd say."

"Ahem." The referee cleared his throat and regarded them with an air of amused sufferance. "Yes, well, the dragon's suitability as a Quidditch player notwithstanding, it can't stay here. We have a match to finish."

"We'll get her back to the reservation right away. The stunning spell isn't going to affect her for long. We'll also reinforce the charms on the reservation's perimeter. So, hopefully, this won't happen again."

"Well, I certainly hope it won't." The Romanian ministry official put one hand on her hip and regarded Charlie with obvious distaste. "You were told to reinforce those spells months ago."

Charlie held up his hands. "We did. I don't know how she managed to get through, but I promise you: we'll find out."

"See that you do." She tugged on her purple robes and squared her shoulders. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have to assure the generous guests whose money made the construction of this stadium possible that their investment was not as ill-advised as it would seem."

She turned and left them staring after her. Goran shook his head. "She is not so bad," he said. "But this stadium is very important to her. We have applied to host the next World Cup, you know."

"If she wants to add to Romania's prestige, she shouldn't have built the stadium so close to the dragon reservation," Penelope huffed.

Charlie intervened. "As far as I know, she didn't want to build it here, but she was overruled by the committee." He clapped his hands together. "Now, let's get Norberta back home before she wakes up."

They turned towards the dragon which had been secured with spelled ropes and sailing canvas. The tarp rose and fell with its every breath. The stands were already undergoing repairs, and most of the fire damage had disappeared. Ropes had been secured to broomsticks, and two of Charlie's colleagues, a young man and a tall, middle-aged woman, approached. "We're almost done. The sooner we get her out of here the better. We can't keep her eggs warm for much longer."

Katie looked at Charlie in surprise. "She's nesting?"

"Yes, which makes it even stranger that she flew off. They usually don't leave their nests at all until the young ones hatch." He shrugged. "During the early stages of development, spelled fire is a poor substitute for real dragon fire. If we don't get her back soon ..." he didn't finish the sentence.

"Ah ... Charlie, there *is* a small problem." Katie looked over her shoulder and motioned for the referee to join them.

"What kind of problem?"

"She swallowed the Snitch."

Charlie stared at her in disbelief. "You're pulling my leg."

Katie only raised an eyebrow.

Charlie burst out laughing. He regarded the dragon fondly. "Girl, when you cause trouble, you don't stop half-way, do you?"

The referee took the news with considerably less amusement. Mumbling under his breath, he pulled out a small booklet and began flipping pages.

"Surely, we can just use another Snitch," Penelope joined in.

Both Charlie and Katie shook their heads. "No, that's against the rules."

"But this can't be the first time that a Snitch was lost."

The referee cleared his throat again. "Well, strictly speaking, the Snitch is not lost, since we know where it is. And the game cannot end until the Snitch is caught."

"Well, it was caught. By a dragon," Goran said.

"Unfortunately, the dragon was not playing on either of the participating teams at the time of the catch."

"So what usually happens if ... let's say, someone in the stands catches the Snitch?" Penelope asked.

The referee look outraged. "Such a person would be immediately dismissed from the stadium and fined up to five thousand galleons for trying to disrupt the match. The Snitch would then be released again in the middle of the pitch."

"So what you're saying is that we can't resume the match until the dragon 'releases' the Snitch." Goran was not the only one who looked disgusted.

"What I'm saying is that the match will not *be over* until the dragon 'releases' the Snitch. The match will *resume* as soon as the goal posts have been repaired."

"Nothing stops Quidditch," Katie trilled with fake enthusiasm. Her expression serious, she turned to Charlie. "How long will it take for us to get our Snitch back?"

Charlie's smile had disappeared as well. "Dragons have a slow metabolism. Maybe a week. And with the charms on the Snitch that confine it to within two hundred feet of the stadium, we can't bring Norberta back to the reservation, either."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I don't know what happens to a Snitch once it's been swallowed by a dragon, but I can't risk it. If we move Norberta outside that perimeter, it might cause serious damage to her inner organs and may even kill her." He addressed his colleagues. "Darren, I need you to fly back to the reservation and let Stefania know what happened. She needs to organize the transport of Norberta's eggs. Ekaterina, we need to set up an enclosure outside the stadium. And we need to move fa-"

"Hold on. Now, just one minute here." The referee clapped his book shut with an agitated gesture. "You can't just set up camp with a fully grown dragon. You can see for yourself how many people came here to watch the match. It will be pandemonium. It's far too dangerous."

"If you have a better idea ..."

Martha and Penelope, who had wandered off to speak privately for a moment, rejoined the conversation. "The stadium wasn't completely sold out, and about a fourth of the people went home after the dragon appeared. You could set up the enclosure on the practice pitch; this way, you don't have to start from scratch. The pitch is behind the east curve of the stadium. If we keep that section of the stands free and put up additional Shielding Charms, we should be all right."

Penelope took over. "If we are going to keep playing for a whole week, we also need to bring in reserve players. We'll have to send owls to the Romanian and British ministries to help us organize this."

Silence followed this announcement. Quidditch didn't stop for anything. Not for bad weather, earthquakes, or erupting volcanoes. Certainly not for dragons. Once a match had started, it didn't end until the Snitch was caught. Those were the rules. And it was a matter of pride for every Quidditch player that no match had ever been aborted. There was no question as to whether or not they would quit.

The referee cleared his throat. "Yes, well. In that case we'd better get started." He looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I suppose that I better inform Madame Brecka." He turned away and started to look for some purple robes.

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In less than an hour, the goal posts had been repaired, and the spectators had been assigned new seats away from the east curve of the stadium. Once everyone had been informed of the Snitch's whereabouts, and all organizational information had been imparted, the Quaffle and Bludgers were released, and the match resumed its course.

Charlie heard the rising cheers from the stadium, but was too preoccupied with the tasks at hand to pay much attention.

Darren had returned only a few minutes ago, accompanied by three keepers from the reservation and a crate containing Norberta's eggs. Protective Charms and shields were erected to reinforce the boundary of the practice pitch, and Charlie waved his wand one last time to strengthen the wooden palisade.

Norberta restlessly prowled the confined space, her head swinging from side to side as she tried to gain a better view of the stadium. Her scaly legs where trembling slightly, and her wings lay limply on the ground.

"She still looks a bit groggy," Ekaterina said.

Charlie nodded. "Not for long. We should get her eggs in there, before the Stunners wear off completely."

They joined Darren and the others, and each of them heaved a jet-black dragon egg onto a blanket and carried it onto the pitch. Norberta growled from the depths of her throat when she saw them approach, but her reaction was slow, and her attention still fixed on the stadium.

Flanked by a protective detail of half a dozen witches and wizards, they ducked under the dragon's neck and carefully arranged the eggs in the nest. Then, watching from a safe distance, they waited for Norberta to breathe fire on the eggs to keep them warm.

Nothing happened. Norberta's gaze remained fixed on the stadium.

Charlie scratched his head. "Unbelievable. Since when are dragons more interested in Quidditch than their own eggs?"

He raised his wand, and a circle of orange flames rose around the eggs. In response, Norberta roared, and a jet of fire hurled his way. Charlie cursed and threw himself to the ground.

"Is everyone all right?" he shouted as he pushed himself back to his feet. Ekaterina dusted dirt off her robes, and Darren, who was still on the ground, mumbled an affirmation.

His gaze fixing on the annoyed dragon, he watched with a mixture of relief and exasperation as Norberta finally turned her attention to her nest and bathed her eggs in dragon fire. With the early September sun low enough to skim the treetops, Charlie sent Darren and most of the others back to the reservation. Darren would return with tents and supplies, so they could settle in for the week along with Ekaterina and five other keepers who would take turns to guard Norberta.

Conjuring a pitcher of water, Charlie took a few swallows and then dumped the remaining liquid over his head. The day had been hot and humid, and his robes clung uncomfortably to his skin. Combing his wet hair out of his face, he looked around, noting the tents which had sprung up around the stadium. Curious, he approached. As another uprising of cheers erupted from the stadium, he saw Madame Brecska standing in the middle of the group of tents, her bun coming undone, her wand swirling and flicking in the air as she marshaled a group of harried-looking wizards about.

"Make sure we have enough beds for all the players. They are going to be exhausted. I want this section of the camp sealed off to everyone who is not a participant or Ministry official. Any spectator who wishes to stay can put his tent up on the other side of the west curve; that'll put them as far away from the dragon as possible. I want guards stationed at both ends of the stadium to make sure no one wanders anywhere near the enclosure. Oh, hello, Mr. Weasley."

Without breaking stride, she nodded in greeting and dismissed her audience. Charlie fell into step beside her, and they walked around the far curve to see another group of tents which had been erected among the willow trees.

A collective gasp from the stadium made them stop in their tracks. The following wild applause elicited a sigh from Madame Brecska. "I'd much rather be in there than out here."

Charlie offered a sympathetic smile. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to watch the match during the next week."

"Yes, well." She squared her shoulders and threw him an indecipherable glance. "How is your dragon? I don't suppose there is any potion or other concoction that would speed this up a little?"

Charlie shook his head. "Sorry, but we'll just have to wait. A dragon's magical nature alters all potions with which it comes in contact. There is a reason why dragon bile is so expensive. Potions rarely have an effect on them, and if they do, it's never the one for which the potion was designed."

Madame Brecska delicately wrinkled her nose. "Will that Snitch even be usable when we get it back?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

Grumbling, Madame Brecska surveyed the camp and imparted orders to the Ministry official who came up to her and had apparently been assigned to oversee this part of the organization.

"The reserve players of the Vatra Dornei Dragons who weren't already here have arrived a few minutes ago, and we expect the Arrow's reserve team to join us within the hour. After consulting with the team captains, we agreed on a six-hour rotation. That way, hopefully everyone will be able to get enough sleep, and we can avoid any serious injuries and accidents." She gave him a forced, if not unfriendly smile. "Now, tell me how things are progressing on your end."

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Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 2

Three months after the Battle of Hogwarts, Katie Bell's Quidditch team accepts an invitation to an exhibition match against the Vatra Dornei Dragons in Romania. When the appearance of a real dragon prolongs the match for a week, Katie soon finds herself caught in the sinister machinations of a smuggling ring while she juggles her responsibilities as a Chaser and her growing attraction to an old friend.

Chapter II

As the sun was setting behind the stadium, Katie was starting to feel the strain of the six-hour match. She dodged a Bludger and managed to catch the Quaffle, which Penelope had thrown her way. Seeing two of the Dragons' Chasers rushing towards her, she pulled into a steep dive and then threw herself backwards, spinning and zooming past the befuddled Chasers, until she saw Penelope waiting for her close to the goal hoops. She aimed and flung the big red ball at her teammate. The Quaffle's flight arched above one of the opposing Beaters, but fell short. Penelope stretched and angled her broomstick downwards, but the ball fell and was caught by one of the Chasers whom Katie had just passed.

Cursing, Katie pulled her own broom around just as the referee's whistle chirped three times in short succession.

"Oh, thank Merlin."

Along with the other players, Katie descended. Her legs were shaking and her arms ached. Pinning the broom between her legs, she shook her hands and moved her shoulders to alleviate the tension which had built there. Then she joined her teammates and apologised to Penelope for her poor aim.

"Forget about it. This is going to happen a lot more before this match is over." She threw her arms around Katie and Thomas Ashton, their Keeper. "Besides, we're fifty points in the lead. That's a good thing."

The reserve teams had taken their positions on the pitch and were about to kick off. Thomas smiled sardonically and patted his replacement on the back. "Good luck, mate."

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An hour later, Katie returned from her swim in the nearby lake. It had felt incredible to peel off the sweat-soaked Quidditch robes and soak in the cool, clear water. The

opportunity to take a deep breath and catch up on everything that had happened that day had been even better.

Ever since the dragon had swooped down and interrupted their match, everything had just rolled over her like an unstoppable steam train. There had hardly been any time to think; she'd been exclusively focused on keeping the match going. Only now that she had some time to herself did she realise that she'd have to owl her parents to let them know why she wouldn't be home until next week. Also, her dad's birthday was in five days. She would need to get permission from the Ministry to Apparate across international borders if she wanted to stop by for a visit.

Stretching her fatigued muscles, Katie put on the one spare set of robes she had brought with her and made a note to ask her parents to send her more clothes. Slinging the bag with her cleaned Quidditch robes over her shoulder, she set off through the woods towards the clearing in which the stadium was located.

Soon, the moon disappeared beyond the thick canopy of leaves above her. Katie pulled out her wand. "*Lumos.*"

As she navigated her way through vines and over roots, she could hear the sounds of the crowd mixing with the low growling of the dragon. Weighing the prospect of five hours of sleep against her curiosity, she decided to take a detour past the enclosure.

She found Charlie sitting in the stands. He had exchanged his wizard robes for a simple, white shirt and dark trousers and was leaning back against the bench behind him, his attention focused on the black-scaled beast that restlessly prowled the practice pitch. As Katie approached, a cloud of red fire shot from Charlie's wand toward the dark shadow of the eggs. The dragon roared, and with a look Katie could only describe as resentful, the dragon imitated her keeper and engulfed her nest in flames.

A moment later she was back to pacing at the near end of the enclosure, her neck stretching towards the stadium.

"I'm far from being an expert on dragons, but I think this one missed its calling."

Charlie jumped at the sound of her voice. "Oh, hey. I didn't see you come in. How's the match going?"

"Well, I think. We were leading by fifty points when I left."

"Shouldn't you get some sleep? You have to be back on the pitch in five hours."

Smiling cheekily, Katie sat down next to him. "Yes, Mum," she teased, eliciting a wry smile from him. "I just wanted to stop by and see how you're all doing." She waved towards the dragon. "So, where did you find this Quidditch enthusiast? She isn't a Romanian breed, is she?"

"No, she's a Norwegian Ridgeback. As to how I came by her..." He hesitated, then studied her closely. "Can you keep a secret?"

Her curiosity roused, Katie crossed her heart. "I promise."

Charlie leaned close to her. "Hagrid won her in a game of cards."

"He won a dragon in a game of cards?" Katie snorted. "Why am I not surprised?"

"She wasn't hatched, yet. He kept the egg warm in the fireplace; that's why she is so small."

Katie stared at him. Then she stared at Norberta. The only other opportunity she had had to observe dragons in real life had been during the Triwizard Tournament. And while it had been difficult to judge size from the safe distance of the stands, she wouldn't call Norberta small by comparison. As if agreeing with her, the dragon flapped her wings and reared.

Immediately, Charlie was on his feet, and without thinking, Katie pulled out her wand as well. But to her relief Norberta settled down again and trumpeted a forlorn cry into the night. Then she engulfed her eggs in fire and curled her body around the nest. The great head came to rest on her front paws and her eyelids fell shut. A deep breath, half sigh, half growl, issued from the snout before she fell asleep.

With his hands on his hips, Charlie regarded the dormant dragon. "You know, sometimes, when a dragon grows up among human keepers, it can be a bit negligent once it has its own eggs to care for. But this is getting ridiculous. I've never even heard of a case where the mother just took off and left her nest completely unprotected."

"Have you ever heard of a dragon who was obsessed with Quidditch?" Katie asked, half joking, half serious.

Charlie settled back on the bench and invited her to sit next to him. "No, but I've heard of a Common Welsh Green who thought it was a Shepherd's dog."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. It was about thirty years ago. A Muggle shepherd woke up one morning, found all his dogs eaten and a young dragon guarding the sheep. The Ministry was not amused."

Katie laughed. "So what was Hagrid going to do? Keep her as a pet?"

"He tried. Thankfully, Ron, Harry and Hermione talked him out of it. She is better off here, really. Although, I think I might be partially responsible for the Quidditch obsession."

"Why is that?"

"As much as I love my work here, sometimes I really miss playing Quidditch. So I asked around, and there is usually a good number of people who are up for a match whenever there is some free time. We chose one of the plateaus that was a safe distance from the nearest dragon nest, or so I thought, but one day I saw Norberta crouching on the cliff top some distance away. We chose a new playing field after that, but within a few days, she had tracked us down again."

"She never attacked?"

"No, she just watched. So after we'd moved to a new pitch for the fifth time, we decided to see what would happen, and kept playing. Turns out that we were a bit too close to the stadium at the time. We had just finished our match, when we heard the cheers from the crowd. And then Norberta took off and flew right through the perimeter spells, as if they weren't even there. You know the rest."

"And you have no idea how she got through the wards?"

Charlie reached for a basket Katie hadn't noticed before and extracted two bottles of Butterbeer. "No, but I sent a message with Darren that the entire perimeter has to be checked."

Katie accepted the proffered bottle and took a deep swig. As the cool liquid ran down her throat, Katie closed her eyes blissfully. She had been so preoccupied that she hadn't even realized that she hadn't had anything to drink or eat since breakfast. At the thought of food, her stomach started to growl. The sound was answered by a low rumbling from the sleeping dragon.

While Katie blushed with embarrassment, Charlie chuckled quietly. He stood and gallantly offered her his hand. "Let's see if we can find something to eat. I'm starving, too."

They walked towards the camp where the Quidditch teams were housed, their conversation meandering from dragons to Hagrid to Hogwarts, and back to Quidditch.

"Two years out of school and you're already on the first team. You're doing well."

"Yes, and I love it. Although, to be honest, my promotion from the reserve team had more to do with the war than stellar talent. We lost Gerald McKeenan just before the Battle of Hogwarts." Katie took a deep breath, trying to escape the unwelcome memory. "Still, we were lucky. In that regard, at least. The Tornados were decimated. Most of the team was killed during a Death Eater attack."

She kicked a stray pebble across the grass. Most of the time, she could pretend that the shadow of war had disappeared with Voldemort's death, but every now and then she woke up in the middle of the night, remembering dreams full of masks and snakes and death.

Charlie's head was downcast, and Katie suddenly felt a lump in her throat as her thoughts turned to his dead brother. She halted and hesitantly touched his arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up any dark memories."

He grasped her hand in his and squeezed it gently. "It's alright. George has threatened to send everyone a parcel of exploding dragon dung if we keep moping around. He said Fred would be annoyed if he could see us." He took a deep breath and stared off into the forest. "The threat didn't really have much effect on Mum, though. She's devastated, blames herself for some silly things she said and didn't mean."

Katie fought the urge to hug him. While they were friendly with each other because of Katie's friendship with his brothers and the fact that they had both played on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, she didn't feel that they knew each other well enough to offer the intimacy of an embrace. During Charlie's last year as a Seeker, she had been no more than an over-enthusiastic spectator, cheering her team and hoping fervently that she would be allowed to try out for a position in her second year at Hogwarts. And the six-year age difference between them had prevented any closer acquaintance. In the end she settled for a sympathetic smile and squeezed his hand in return.

"I think all mothers are like that. But I'm sure, that with George, Ron and Ginny, and not to mention Bill and Fleur's baby to occupy her time, she will get better."

"I hope you're right."

The dining hall was located in a bright red tent which had been erected in the centre of the camp. When they ducked through the low entrance, a large room was revealed, housing a desk and multiple drawers and cabinets near the entrance, while the remaining three quarters were taken up by an assortment of tables and chairs, decorated with flower bouquets and candle sticks. A canvas flap to the right allowed glimpses of a large kitchen. Only two of the tables were occupied, one seating Madame Breckska and the Romanian coach, while the other one was host to Penelope and Thomas, who were just finishing their supper.

With a smile and a wave Katie greeted her teammates, but dropped down into the first available chair she reached. Charlie sat down next to her. They spent their supper in companionable silence, each occupied with his own thoughts, and it was not long after Katie's plate was clean that she bid Charlie good night and retired to her own tent.

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With the first light of dawn, around six o'clock in the morning, Darren returned to the stadium.

"We spent the whole night checking the wards. They're in perfect order. I have no idea how she managed to get through."

Charlie ran his hand through his hair and stared into the forest where the reservation stretched from the mountain peaks in the east across the Romanian forest. "That's impossible. There has to be something. How thoroughly did you examine the wards?"

"We could hardly check every inch of it, but if there were a breach big enough to let a dragon through, we would have found it."

Darren dropped down onto the bench next to him. Darren's gaze rested on the dragon. Norberta had woken early, and while she paid more attention to her nest than she had yesterday, her head frequently turned towards the stadium.

"There aren't that many possibilities. Either, we missed something, or there was a breach and it was sealed after Norberta went through. Or our wayward mother learned a new trick."

"If she could breach the wards on her own, she would have tried to get back to the stadium by now."

Darren concealed a yawn behind his hand. He blinked sleepily. "I'll go back and tell everyone to check the perimeter again, if you want."

Charlie lightly slapped him on the shoulder. "The only thing you'll do is get some sleep. It's Ekaterina's turn to watch Norberta, so I'll go and have a look for myself."

With a wan smile, Darren gave a mock-salute and hauled himself to his feet.

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The Vatra Dornei Dragons had taken the lead. High above the Quidditch pitch, Katie raced after one of the opposing Chasers, who had soared upwards after the Arrows had tried to corner him with Parkin's Pincer. With a look over her shoulder, she saw Penelope close behind her. Her team captain gave her a signal, and they parted ways, approaching the hovering Chaser from either side, trusting their teammate to cover the area below.

Then everything happened very fast. The Dragon's Chaser rolled and let himself fall backwards, pulling his broom into the dive with him. At the same time he threw the Quaffle directly past Penelope's back. She tried to twist and grab the ball, but the abrupt violence of the motion almost unseated her. Katie pulled into a sharp curve and tried to reach both the Quaffle and her teammate, when a Bludger smashed into her temple.

At first there was no pain, only darkness which snuffed out lights and colour. Disoriented, she tried to lock her legs around her broom as she had practised so many times, but she could not feel her body at all. There was an odd rushing sound in her ears, and she dimly realized that she was falling.

Then, sight and feeling returned as suddenly as it had left her. The first thing she saw was the rapid beat of wings above the treetops. Gradually, the flags on top of the stadium, the stands, the multicoloured robes below faces of all shapes and ages came into focus. Two shadows raced across the forest to the east.

She hung upside down from her broomstick, which was falling fast towards the grassy ground.

Realising that she could not have been senseless for more than a few seconds, Katie tried to hold on to her broom and slow her descent. But when she moved pain exploded in her skull, and her fingertips slipped from the handle. Then, Penelope and the Romanian Chaser caught her around the waist, and accompanied by shouts and relieved applause, they landed on the pitch. A mediwizard awaited them. Despite her weak protests and resistance, Katie was examined.

"The skull is intact. She only has a concussion. You'll be alright in no time, dear."

Katie gulped down the acidic blue liquid which was unceremoniously dumped into her mouth. Coughing and sputtering, she stood up. "Good, because my rotation isn't over for another hour." She was about to reach for her broom when the dizziness overcame her. She swayed on her feet until Thomas steadied her.

The mediwizard waved his wand, and a floating stretcher appeared in mid-air. "It's only a mild sleeping draught, Ms. Bell. You'll be up again before you're due on the pitch at two o'clock this afternoon."

Katie tried to argue, but the brief burst of anger she felt was rapidly swallowed by the lull of the sleeping draught. The last thought she had before oblivion claimed her was that she needed to talk to Charlie about the dragons she had seen outside of the reservation.

* * * * *

Stefania, his second-in-command, came tearing across the lawn as soon as she saw Charlie land.

"Two of the hatchlings are missing," she said without preamble. "Alexander and Lore's team looked in on the Ironbelly behind the peak. She was tearing up a storm when they approached. Smashed trees and rubble everywhere. They had to stun her. We don't think they can have been gone long. We're just putting together a search party."

Charlie clenched his jaw and fell into step beside her. His face was grim.

For the first couple of months after they hatched, dragons never wandered far from the nest. Even though the canyons in the Carpathians were best described as labyrinthine, it was unlikely that they had simply gotten lost during the short absences of their mother when she was hunting. Especially when only the day before a full-grown dragon had escaped the reservation. The only explanation was that someone had taken down the perimeter spells to smuggle the hatchlings out of the reservation.

"We need to check every nest throughout the reservation. And we have to inform the Ministry. Whoever did this tried to do it before. Let's hope yesterday was a failed attempt."

"Whoever did this put the wards up fairly quickly after Norberta escaped. It was the first spot we checked. And we looked at that one thoroughly."

The search party that was to look for the hatchlings had already been assembled by the time they reached the main building. Lore met them at the entrance, her broomstick in one hand, a cage housing a tawny owl in the other. Attached to its leg was the letter for the Ministry.

"I'll just carry her beyond the wards. I'll be back shortly."

Within minutes, the remaining keepers were split up into pairs with orders to count both eggs and hatchlings of all dragons who dwelled in the Carpathians. Almost a hundred broomsticks rose into the morning sky. Joining the search party, Charlie touched down by the Ironbelly's lair next to Stefania and two of the reservation's trackers, Nadja and Roman.

Alexander was waiting for them a good distance away from the dragon, which had shaken off the effects of the Stunning Spell and regarded them warily with its deep red eyes. Seeing the debris of splintered timber and man-high boulders obscuring their path, Charlie raised his wand, intending to clear the way, but Alexander stopped him.

"Don't. I cleared the space surrounding the lair, but she came to really fast and nearly roasted me alive." He motioned to his singed robe and hair. "She gets really tetchy when she sees a wand."

Thin trails of smoke billowed from the dragon's snout. Its enormous grey body was angled parallel to the stone wall behind it. In between the beast and the mountain lay the nest. A high whining could be heard every now and then, and each call was answered by another puff of ever-darkening smoke. A rumbling vibrated through the dragon's body, a sound pitched so low that it was easier to feel than hear it.

"The remaining hatchlings are all right. I hid in the woods for a while, just to see what she would do, and she kept looking southeast. Judging from her agitation, I think she's been debating whether she should go after the thief, but she doesn't want to leave her nest unprotected. So I think southeast is where we should start."

They searched the whole morning and into the afternoon. Within the borders of the reservation they found plenty of evidence of a large object moving through the forest. Low-hanging branches hung broken, only tenuously attached to a few scraps of bark. The path meandered beneath the thickest stretches of canopy, avoiding clusters of firs and pines as well as the numerous clearings spread out so close to the tree line.

Beyond the wards encircling the dragons' habitat, the ground fell to a low plateau which tapered out into several meadow-covered hills. Thus shielded from sight, there had been no necessity to stay among the trees. They spread out and circled the vast area below.

Three hours later, Charlie found what he'd been looking for. Sending up red sparks with his wand, he marked his position and landed next to the shattered remains of a wooden crate. The edges were singed where the planks had broken along with the Fireproofing Charm. Claw marks were scratched into the hard ground. Vegetation was sparse at this spot, and the canvas of grass was frequently broken by moss-covered stone.

Stefania was the first to arrive beside him. "This doesn't look as if he let them out intentionally."

As they surveyed the space around them, Nadja and Roman inspected the tracks around the crate.

"No, my guess is he Stunned them before he put them in the crate. They woke up prematurely, made a ruckus, and forced him down."

"Do you think he managed to Stun them again?"

Nadja shook her head. "I can't say." Roman crouched on the ground, his hand dusting splinters from a set of deep scratches. He and Nadja exchanged a look. "The crate came down pretty hard. It depends on whether it was cut loose, or pulled the broom down with it. If the thief was injured or even temporarily down for the count, then both of them could have gotten away."

"So our best-case scenario is that we have two hatchlings on the loose. And they're too young to find their way back on their own." Charlie took a deep breath his gaze sweeping the forest to the south, behind which the Quidditch stadium was located. "All right, in this terrain we need more teams to coordinate our search. Let's head back, get some rest and something to eat. You've been up all night. Maybe the others found out something that'll help us."

But only bad news awaited them on their return. Four eggs had been stolen from four different nests along the eastern border of the reservation.

"Two Longhorns, another Ironbelly, and a Horntail. And no evidence of who took them."

Charlie bit down on the curse that rested on his tongue. Filled with anger, he balled his fists. It was no secret that a lot of gold was to be made with the illegal trade of dragon eggs and hatchlings. If not sold as pets or guard animals to families whose overflowing bank vaults were matched only by their arrogance and determination to tame or train an exotic animal, they were slaughtered before they became fully grown. Their hearts, blood, hides, livers, claws and horns were then sold as potion ingredients which, while far cheaper than what could be legally bought, still brought a vast amount of profit.

When Charlie had been sixteen, he had seen his first real dragon. It had been a defining moment in his life, for after spending two weeks of his summer holidays at the reservation in Wales, he had decided to forego a Quidditch career in favour of becoming a caretaker and student of these magnificent animals. The thought that six of his charges were now missing, and at the mercy of scrupulous black market machinations, made him sick with fury.

To make matters worse, aside from a few high-ranking Ministry officials in the Romanian Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, only the senior dragon keepers knew how to take down the perimeter spells preventing the dragons from leaving their assigned habitat. There was always the possibility that an outsider had achieved the required knowledge through bribery, but the apparent ease with which the thief had evaded the routine patrols across the reservation as well as the frequent checks on the nesting mothers was suspicious enough that he couldn't rule out that someone he knew might be collaborating with the smugglers.

Charlie let his gaze drift around the people who surrounded him, the people who were waiting for him to decide how they should proceed. But before he could say anything, Alexander called out from the back of the crowd.

"Has anyone seen Lore?"

Stefania looked at two of their interning keepers. "She was supposed to join you at the nests by the river after she'd sent the letter to the Ministry."

The taller of the two shook his head. "She never showed up."

