

The Gamekeeper

by richardgloucester

This is a story about friendship, and about coming to terms with loss. The new gamekeeper arrives to take up his post at Hogwarts, where he finds many memories waiting for him.

Disclaimer: all scenes and characters recognizable from the Potterverse belong to JKR, Warner's, whoever – but not me. I make no money from this.

The story is mine, however.

Heartfelt thanks to Annie Talbot and Machshefa for beta-reading.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"You're not obliged to take the position, you know," said the Headmistress. "It's a bit of a comedown after what you've been doing."

"Not at all. It looks like quite a challenge to me, and a slightly slower pace will be a welcome change."

"Well, if you're sure..."

"I am." He put out his hand to shake on it.

"Shall I show you your quarters, then?"

"It's fine, Hermione. I'll take a gander later. For now, though, I think I'd rather go down and..." He broke off.

"Yes, yes of course. Shall we see you at dinner?"

"Yes, okay. See you."

He didn't meet her eyes again. His mind was already at his destination, wondering what he would find. He shouldered his duffel bag and limped out.

*

It was odd to see the hut all shuttered up, the chimney bare of smoke, the vegetable patch already overgrown. It had been rebuilt after the war, exactly as it had been. Hagrid claimed it would upset Fang if the house changed, and refused all improvements. Under his care, the ivy and moss had swiftly moved to occupy the new stone and tile, until one would have to look carefully to see what was more recent. It seemed such an organic thing, such a natural extension of the forest, of the land, even of the sky. Much as Hagrid had been himself.

The new gamekeeper swallowed the lump in his throat and pushed at the door. The latch clicked. He smiled. Hermione had told him how the hut had sealed itself to everyone, but he'd bet himself that Hagrid had keyed it to him. He doubted that anyone really knew how much magic the old fraud had used, apart from him. There was that time.... No. Not yet. First he needed to see the place.

He stepped into the gloomy interior. It smelled stale and slightly damp, but beneath it were remnants of the well-remembered fragrances of tobacco and strong drink, herbs and hams drying in the rafters, odd liniments for the animals, wood smoke, and the sharp stink of the dog's basket. He opened the shutters and let the sun in to show a scattering of dust overlaying all the old dirt, ground in everywhere by an old man's use, indifference and frailty. Poor Hagrid. Always too proud to accept help. But the wood pile was well-stocked, and there was kindling ready in the grate – a last kindness from a man to whom kindness was like breathing, not what he did, but what he was. Even the teapot stood ready. *Sit down*, it said. *Take the weight off yer feet. Don' have ter talk, if yer don' want.*

*

"I take it you'll be staying here, then, and not up at the castle?" Hermione asked when she came down at dusk to find out what had become of him.

He was deep in Hagrid's big armchair, feet towards the blaze, an oversized cup in his hands.

"Yes, I'd prefer that, if you don't mind. It just seems... right." *The gamekeeper ought to be out on the grounds* he thought. *He ought to be able to hear everything breathe*

"Come up for supper now, though, will you?" She looked around. "We can send some elves down to give the place a clean."

"No!" he said, surprising himself with his own vehemence. He took a deep breath. "No. Thanks, Hermione, but I'd rather do it myself. Hagrid would have preferred that. And there's plenty of time before term begins."

He picked up his stick and went to hold the door for her.

"The leg gets a bit stiff when the air cools down," he explained. "Come on – I bet I can still get back to the castle quicker than you."

"Come on, then," she smiled. "Race you. The others are longing to see you again, Charlie."

*

He was pleased to be so freely welcomed by the staff, some of them the ones he remembered from his schooldays and the war, others new, like Neville, who had always been in line to take Pomona Sprout's position, or Katie Bell, now running the infirmary. He listened to their news, shared tales of his time in Romania, gave them what information he had about his family, and promised to look round the castle the next day. But it was a relief to return to Hagrid's hut.

He had accepted Hermione's offer of bedding and supplies, all of which he levitated easily ahead of him as he made his way stiffly down the path. The whole lot did take a tumble when his leg gave under him thanks to a rabbit hole, but as there was nobody to see and commiserate, he felt no shame at sitting for a few minutes to pummel life back into the muscles. Perhaps there was some of that rub Hagrid used to use when the occasional centaur showed up with a bad sprain. He always swore it worked wonders on anything and anyone. *Damn venom*. It hadn't stopped him from doing most things, but it slowed him down. He levered himself up and finished the journey, taking smaller, more careful steps.

The fire was still burning; the lamps were still lit. The windows glowed with a warm light. As Charlie pushed the door open once more, he could swear he heard an echo of Hagrid's voice offering a brusque and cheery greeting. He let the paniers tumble to the floor as he made for the huge bed and curled up in the centre of it, pulling a corner of the tattered patchwork quilt up to his chin. "Hagrid," he whispered, finally letting himself cry.

*

"Weasley Number Two," said the Sorting Hat. "Better stick with precedent, eh? And anyway, I can see you're a little firebrand, young Charles. *Gryffindor!*!"

Charlie had strutted more confidently than he felt down to the Gryffindor table to join his brother Bill. It was good to get away from know-it-all Percy and all the little kids at home, always running around and making a noise. He hadn't even been able to take advantage of being the oldest once Bill went to Hogwarts, what with all the babies underfoot, taking Mum's attention and making her forget him half the time. But now.... The castle was *huge*, all echoing spaces and long corridors, and there were so many other kids. He wouldn't be any more special here than at home. Oh, well. At least the food was good. Almost as good as Mum's, and there was more of it, too.

"Don't pig out, Chubs," said Bill. "You'll never fit through the portrait hole!"

The other kids near them laughed. Charlie went puce with embarrassment. Trust Bill to say that. Now he'd be labelled 'Chubs' for all eternity, just 'cause he was a bit on the round side and liked his food. Mum said he was sure to grow out of it. He frowned. Sod wonderful William. He speared another potato and shoved it into his mouth, chewing and swallowing to make a point, though it didn't really taste very good any more.

He lagged behind when the prefects took the new pupils to their houses, and then found he'd been left behind and didn't know where to go at all. He stood irresolutely in the entrance hall, wanting to cry but too proud to let it out. He did scream a bit when a big voice from high above said,

"Lost yer way, young Charlie?"

It was the gamekeeper, Hagrid. He'd been terrified when he saw the man at the station, but now he saw the twinkle in the beetle-black eyes peeping through all the hair.

"Yeah, I..."

"Mr Weasley! What are you doing here? Did you not hear the instruction to follow the prefects?"

Oh no! It was his Head of House, and he'd got in her bad books already.

"Oh, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid. "It's my fault, I'm afraid. I 'eard young Charlie here was fond of animals and I kep' him talking." Big fingers gave his shoulder a painful but reassuring squeeze.

"Yes. Well, don't do it again, Hagrid. Come along, Mr Weasley."

He resolved from that moment forward to become as fond of animals as he possibly could.

*

Morning light in his eyes woke him. Dust on the covers made him sneeze. Well, first things first he went to relieve himself, then swept out the grate and laid a new fire. Soon the kettle was on and he had heated a basin of water. Stripping, he stood on the hearth-rug and washed himself down. Then he unhooked the old frying pan from the wall and set some sausages to cook.

Over breakfast, feeling shrunken to his child self in Hagrid's outsized furniture, he looked around the hut again. He had opened the windows to let in some fresh air, and birdsong filled the space, mingling with the crackle of flames under the ever-ready kettle. It was hard to believe that this was his now. He recalled his first sight of the will, just after the funeral. It was simple, but all entirely legal, he was told.

"Rubeus Hagrid: Last Will and Testament.

I leave all my property and belongings to Charles Weasley. He knows how to use them."

That was it. He had also left a note addressed to the Headmistress, requesting that she offer his position as gamekeeper to Charlie before she went looking for anyone else.

The two envelopes were delivered to Hermione at breakfast one morning. After a long search, Hagrid was found lying in a sun-drenched clearing in the Forbidden Forest, looking for all the world as if he had just lain down for a nap. Fang's last successor had died years before, and he was alone.

Alone but for the Forest itself, thought Charlie, glancing through the window at the trees.

He wasn't sure where to start with the cleaning and sorting out it felt like such a terrible invasion of privacy. But it wasn't really, he supposed. Hagrid had trusted him to deal appropriately with the trappings of his life.

It had come as a surprise to everyone that the house and garden were his, too. Though the property stood within Hogwarts grounds, Dumbledore had somehow managed to confer ownership on the orphaned half-giant boy who had come to him for help, and now it had come to him in turn.

"Thank you, my friend," he murmured, stroking the arm of the chair and leaning his head back. He didn't need much. Indeed, he didn't want much. He'd spent his adult life living out of a bag, more or less, but now he had a place to set his feet and feel that they were on firm ground, and it was enough. "Thank you."

*

"What've you got there, Chubs?" said one of the older boys, pulling at his shoulder to turn him round. "Blimey! Where'd you find that ugly thing?"

Charlie was cradling a large, ungainly and unbeautiful puppy in his arms.

"Down near the lake," said Charlie, cuddling the dog defensively. It blinked sleepily, nuzzling into his chest. "I'm going to keep him."

"Can't have a dog," he was told. "School rules toads, owls and cats only, remember?"

"But he needs looking after!" he protested. "He needs feeding, and training, and..."

"Better go and ask McGonagall," Bill told him.

McGonagall was firm.

"No dogs, Mr Weasley. The rules are clear even for second-years."

Charlie bowed his head over the puppy, resting his cheek against its soft fur.

"And besides, how will you afford to feed him? The school can help during term-time, but when you go home...." Her voice was sympathetic.

"Can I... can I take him down to Hagrid?" he asked.

"Very well. I will arrange for you to be excused the first two lessons this afternoon. But mind you make up the work."

He hurried as fast as the puppy's weight would permit. It seemed so happy to be carried. He banged on Hagrid's door, and fretted when there was no answer. He waited. He had missed all his afternoon's lessons and half of the dinner hour when Hagrid returned from the Forest. By the time he had served all his detentions and was allowed out again, Fang was well-established in his new home.

"Must 'a been abandoned by his mum," Hagrid rumbled. "Poor little mite."

"What kind of dog is he, Hagrid?" asked Charlie. He was sitting by the basket, fondling the puppy's ears.

"Don' really know." Hagrid poured out some tea, and prepared a saucerful for Fang. "But I seen some big dogs roaming in the Forest from time to time. Min' you, he don' look completely like one o' them. More like a half-breed. Going to be a big 'un, though. Look at his paws."

*

Charlie took the dog basket outside and shook out the blankets, setting them to air on the dry stone wall round the vegetable garden. Something hard fell from between two ancient layers of wool right at the bottom and rolled away. Fang's old rubber bone. It was only when Hagrid's heritage had been exposed by the Skeeter woman that Charlie had understood why he was so deeply attached to the dog. There had been others since, but none of them had ever earned a photo on the mantelpiece alongside Norbert and Buckbeak.

Hell's bells none of this cloth was worth salvaging. At the bottom it had compacted into a mass of felt. And the basket was only holding together thanks to a mortar of dirt and dog-hair. He'd have to burn them. Dammit he'd have to burn some of Hagrid's things. He straightened, his eyes pricking, and looked around for the best place. Oh, yes there in the corner was where Hagrid had his bonfires. Charlie's mouth remembered the taste of the potatoes Hagrid used to thrust into the ashes to bake. All gritty and ashy, and filled up with butter.

By the time Hermione and Katie came down with a picnic lunch, most of the furniture was outside and there was a respectable pile of broken bits and pieces, rags, and old cushions building up. Charlie was kneeling on the tabletop, scrubbing vigorously at stains, some of which he could have sworn he put there himself.

"If you're going to insist on doing all this manually on such a hot day, I'm surprised you don't take your shirt off," Katie said.

Charlie felt himself blush, though it was nice to be flirted with. He sat back on his heels.

"Can't risk it, love. The Headmistress here is a married woman. I don't want my bits hexed off by her husband on account of her lack of control."

"Shut your face, Charlie," said Hermione. Even at fifty, she had an infectious grin.

Charlie showed them what he was doing in the house.

"It seems really quite big without all the furniture," said Hermione, wonderingly. "The bed won't go through the door, I take it?"

"No he must have built it in here," said Charlie. "It'll be a bugger to move when I get to cleaning that part of the floor."

"Why *are* you doing this without magic, Charlie?"

"Well, for one thing, I think Hagrid would have preferred it. He worked with his hands. He rebuilt this cottage from a ruin when Dumbledore took him on, and he was proud of it. And for another, Mum always used to say you can't get to know a place until you've scrubbed every single inch of it."

"Frankly, I'd rather not know anywhere that personally," said Katie. "But I suppose you're right."

"I never realised there were so many cupboards!" Hermione was wandering around the walls, examining all the doors, curtains and screens placed over niches in the walls. "It was always so shadowy in here."

Charlie was glad she had the grace not to poke into anything. He managed a slightly stiff laugh.

"I don't suppose the school could lend me some armour, could it? I might need protection when I open them up."

*

"Yer shouldn't get into so many fights, Charlie," said Hagrid. He straightened from the locker under the windowsill with a blue-glazed pot in his hand. "Come on, then, show us yer bruises."

Charlie sometimes got frightened by his temper. He'd always got cross about things, but just lately, when he lost his rag, he lost it good and proper. There it was, out of him and raging, before he was even aware it was going to happen. He struggled out of his shirt and showed Hagrid the marks from his latest pummeling.

"If this is going to keep happening, I'm going to have to learn to fight properly," he said shamefacedly. "They just laugh at me and call me 'Fatty' and 'Softy Lardball', and..." He sniffed and tried to control his wobbling lip. "I'm just so bloody useless!"

"Now, there's no cause fer language. Brace yerself."

But there was no need to brace himself. Hagrid's great fingers were as gentle spreading the salve on his ribs as they were handling a baby bird.

"All that fire in yer," he said. "All that rage you got. It's part of growing up, Charlie. Yer not a kid any more. But fighting's not the way to go. Yer need ter find something that yer better at than them. And yer need ter get rid of some o' that energy."

"I'm good at everything," replied Charlie. "I always get the best marks. That's why they pick on me."

"Well what about Quidditch?"

"Quidditch?"

"Yer can fly, can' yer?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Jus' 'cause yer can't run faster'n them doesn't mean yer can't fly faster. Come on, now, get dressed an' tell me about them new Charms yer learnin'."

*

Charlie couldn't help misting up when he found the photographs. There were albums and boxes of them, stuffed into a deep niche by the fireplace. Some were very old indeed, showing people he didn't know, but he found some good ones of his parents during their Hogwarts days – blimey, his mum had been a looker! No wonder his dad hadn't stood a chance. And there were quantities of shots of Order members, Hogwarts staff, various animals, Harry, Ron and Hermione, Madame Maxime (stuffed into an envelope), and even a few of Hagrid himself, though he seemed not to have wanted to keep many of those.

In a thick, red-bound album, Charlie found a whole collection of pictures of himself. There he was with Fang, and here was another of him pretending to wrestle the long-suffering Squid when he was about twelve. And there was one of him with the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team in his fourth year. He was astride his broom, grinning all over his face as the seven of them celebrated victory.

Hagrid's suggestion to go to Madam Hooch had been inspired. She had tried him out, looked him up and down critically, said he had "potential" and signed him up to train with the team. He had quickly earned his place. Exercise and adolescence combined to transform him. He learned to channel his aggression, and his body changed and firmed. He barely noticed it until one of the girls, two years his senior, trapped him in the changing rooms. Word got round, and he never lacked for a girlfriend afterwards, when he wanted one.

The fading light alerted him to time's passing, and he reluctantly put the photos away. There would be time enough for that sort of thing.

His footsteps echoed in the empty house. There were no furnishings to absorb the sound. Even the mattress had gone on the heap outside after he'd had a chance to look at it closely. He would order a new one, but until it came, he had better sleep up at the castle. One last trip into the garden to set some protection Charms on the furniture just in case it rained, and then back into the house to pick up his pyjamas. He closed the windows.

"Good night, Hagrid," he said to the empty air as he shut the door behind him.

*

"But the textbooks all say that unicorns don't like boys and won't go near anyone who's not... um... you know," said Charlie, helping Hagrid treat the gash the creature had picked up somewhere. He hid his blush behind its neck, but Hagrid sounded amused when he replied.

"Yer don' want ter believe everything that's written in them books o' yourn," he snorted. "Wi' creatures, it's best to test out the theory, get to know 'em. Try and think about *why* some bloke thought it were a good idea ter write that stuff if it's not really true."

Charlie was doing a NEWT in Care of Magical Creatures – one of only three students who had continued the subject.

"And that's another thing," he complained. "They seem to expect us to treat the animals as, I dunno, *objects* or something. So, like, this creature's useful for that, and another's useful for something else, and you want to watch out for that one 'cause it's a bit of a monster and will bite your head off. They don't seem to want to actually understand anything. It's all fact fact fact, and not *why* it might want to kill you or cure you or tie you round a tree."

"Well, all that's useful if yer wan' ter go inter healin' and research and curse-breakin' and whatnot, but yer right, Charlie, it's not abou' understandin' 'em. There yer go, boy. Off an' find the herd, now."

They watched the unicorn test the gashed leg then slip between the trees without a backward glance.

"I think you ought to be teaching it," Charlie said.

Hagrid snorted.

"They'd never 'ave me! But..." He looked over almost shyly. "If yer wan' ter come and talk ter me abou' it, show me yer books an' stuff, then..."

"Would you, Hagrid? Really?"

*

Charlie set off on one of the well-remembered routes to see if there were any early mushrooms to be found. He had spent another morning on his knees, wondering whether what he was scrubbing off the floorboards was dirt or varnish. He had promised himself an afternoon of cupboards as a bribe for continuing to clean, as he was, frankly, getting rather sick of it but the cleaning needed to be done. His mattress would be arriving the next day and he wanted the floor finished before the bed was made up.

Moving the bed frame had been something of a revelation. He had eventually given up trying to budge it with his muscles. Even doing it magically had raised a sweat, and when he saw what was underneath, he understood why. Not only was there decades' worth of dirt built up around where the legs had been, leaving a chisel-solid square cup around each of four clean areas, but he had at last found his friend's clothes stash. And although he knew his mum would have made him take tongs to some of it, he made do with gloves instead.

Hagrid had never been over-fond of bathing, but most of the dirt had been honestly got, out-of-doors and working with the animals he loved so much. It grieved Charlie to see how he had hidden the evidence of his growing inability to care for himself properly. But he made himself sort through it all and turn out the pockets.

There was a surprising amount of loose change. He gathered it together and wondered what to do with it. A vast handkerchief, edged with delicate lace, and embroidered with the monogram "O.M." was a forlorn reminder tucked into what had once been the Smart Jacket. One of the little flutes Hagrid used to carve fell out of the pocket of his old moleskin waistcoat. Charlie stroked the waistcoat the fur was still in good condition; it would be a shame to get rid of it. He held it up and gave it a shake something crackled in the depths of a pocket. He rummaged gingerly and came up with a packet about a handspan in width, greaseproof paper wrapped around something flattish. He thought he might know what it was.

*

"What yer goin' ter do now, Charlie?"

The pair of them were sitting on the bench outside Hagrid's front door, enjoying the sunshine and the smells of a Scottish summer. Charlie leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

"I don't know, Hagrid. I really don't. It's all very well having good grades in my NEWTs, but the jobs..." He sighed.

"What?"

"Well, if it's at the Ministry, it's all 'oh, you're one of the Weasley boys' as though I'm part of some bloody job lot waiting to be fed into the bureaucratic sausage machine, stuck underground with a bunch of.... And anywhere else, every time they advertise anything to do with animals, it turns out they want me to cut them up. I won't do that."

"Hmph."

Silence.

"And there's nothing else?"

"Not that I've seen so far. I don't suppose you want an apprentice, do you, Hagrid?" He was only half-joking.

"It's not that I don't like yer, Charlie, but yer don't wan' ter get stuck at Hogwarts yer whole life. Yer a good-looking, intelligent young man there's a whole world out there waiting."

Pause.

"That's a thought."

"What is?"

"I could go abroad."

"Yer mum and dad won't like it."

"I doubt they'd notice."

Hagrid hrrrrmphed at that, but let it pass.

"Want some beer, Charlie? Got some home brew jus' finished."

"How strong is it? McGonagall had to pour me back into my dorm after your lemonade...."

They sat drinking and talking into the small hours, poring over an old atlas and discussing what opportunities there might be.

*

Charlie didn't unwrap the package until he got to the glade where Hagrid had chosen to die, and where he had been buried. The grave was still raw and bare, but the grass had begun to creep back over the edges of the mound. It was the first time Charlie had braved the encounter.

"There you are," he said, his voice sounding a bit queer in the still air. "I found some mushrooms, just where you said they always came first. Nice big, flat ones. They'll be great fried in bacon fat."

He looked round the open space. It was a little idyll. Hagrid was always such a romantic.

"Shall I bring you some flower seeds?" he asked. "Neville should be able to give me some of your favourites."

He paused again, his throat constricting. For a few moments, he found it difficult to breathe.

"I..." He cleared his throat. "I found something you probably wouldn't want to lose," he said finally, taking the flat package out of his basket.

With shaking fingers, he undid the string Hagrid had knotted so conscientiously and opened the paper to reveal a single iridescent dragon scale that shone oily black on one side but a nacreous, delicate rose pink on the concave inner surface.

Against his father's heartfelt wishes and his mother's increasingly shrill demands to change his insane plans, Charlie had leapt at the opportunity to work at the dragon

reserve in Romania. Before leaving, he had returned briefly to Hogwarts to see Hagrid.

"Are yer all righ', Charlie?" the big man had asked. "Only, yer look a mite funny ter me. I'd ha' thought yer'd be excited."

"I am! It's just... Hagrid, I can't tell my parents, because they're already in a complete strop about me taking the job in the first place, but..." He had stopped then.

"Yer scared?"

"Terrified!"

"'S alrigh'. Yer wouldn't be normal if yer weren't. Now, let's go to the pub and yer can tell me yer plans."

Charlie fingered the scale, remembering the conversation as if it had been the day before, not almost four decades. Hagrid had been so excited for him, and envious of his opportunity. Charlie had left England feeling he had to make a go of it, simply to justify Hagrid's faith in him. The first thing he sent back was this scale, and he knew Hagrid had carried it almost every day ever since. If he had only remembered to put on the waistcoat before going out to make his peace with the world....

Charlie dug a hole in the mound with his bare hands, above where he thought his friend's heart would be, and laid the scale inside.

"There you go," he said.

*

Nothing could compare to Hagrid's rapture when he saw the dragons they brought for the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Not even his crush on Madame Maxime and Charlie heard enough about that during the first couple of days to make him wish that Hagrid had managed a First Love when he was young. He'd fallen, and he'd fallen hard. But oh! The dragons! He took to shirking some of his duties so he could spend as much time gazing at them as possible.

It was endearing, really. Most people, faced with the reality of a dragon, tended to abandon any romantic preconceptions pretty quickly. Hagrid just got worse. The stench, the poison, the violence, the fire, the sheer danger to him it was all part and parcel of the terrible loveliness. Seeing them afresh through Hagrid's eyes, Charlie came alive to their elemental, ferocious beauty in a way that had until then escaped him. They had exerted an inexorable fascination since the first moment he had seen them when he arrived at the Reserve, but never before had he really been able to truly feel that their elemental terror was their beauty. It was their nature, and in accepting it fully through the medium of Hagrid's unalloyed delight, he felt something in himself unlock.

It was the last evening before Charlie had to go back to Romania. He'd persuaded Hagrid to tear himself away from Olympe and spend it with him.

"I'd like to give you a present," he said after a while.

"But yer've already given me all them photos of Norbert an' stuff!"

"This is a bit different. I'll have to show you something, first."

Charlie stood up and moved over to stand by the fire. He started to take his clothes off.

"'Ere, Charlie! Don' do that!"

"It's okay, Hagrid. I want you to see this."

He stripped quickly, baring his skin to Hagrid's bright gaze, turning slowly in the firelight to show his whole body. His body, which was a mass of dragons. The largest tattoo covered his whole back, the tail snaking down and over his left buttock and twisting round his leg to the ankle. Its neck curved over his right shoulder and round, so that the head rested over Charlie's heart. Other dragons writhed over his stomach, hips, arms and other leg, in all colours and bearing traces of the iridescence of real dragon scales.

"What do you think?" Charlie asked bashfully.

"Bu'... bu'... Yer *beautiful*!" Tears stood in the bright black eyes. "Yer mother'll kill yer, mind," he added, sniffing.

"She's not going to know. We don't show them to just anybody."

Charlie laughed then.

"This it's a tradition among the dragon keepers. The tattoos are made magically, a new one for every species of dragon we work with, and we blend a little of the scale into the ink, to bind us to them. They seem to recognise it, and it makes them easier to work with."

Hagrid was still staring.

"Can I... can I touch them?" he asked.

"Yeah. These ones don't bite, I'm happy to say."

He allowed Hagrid to turn him so every single tattoo could be examined closely.

"Where's Norbert?" he demanded suddenly.

"Now, that's the gift. I cleared it with the other keepers, and we're agreed as you hatched and started to raise Norbert, you should have his tattoo. That's if you want it," Charlie added in the face of Hagrid's open-mouthed silence.

"If I *want* it?" The tears ran freely down into the enormous beard. "Bless you, Charlie Weasley!"

*

Charlie put the basket of mushrooms on the table and decided it was far too nice a day to spend time turning out cupboards. The vegetable garden was still in a shameful condition, and Hagrid would never forgive him if he didn't nurture the pumpkins to their full, monstrous proportions by Halloween.

He had to shrink the tools a little before he could use them, but once he got going, he found that there was plenty of produce under the weeds, and he wouldn't go short during the winter, even if he chose never to eat up at the castle. Mind you, it meant one hell of a lot of work, preparing everything for storage. Perhaps Mum... No, he wanted to do it himself, and he didn't want anyone else messing around in Hagrid's house. Which meant a return to the cupboards this evening, to find where on earth Hagrid had put all the jars, bottles, and other stuff that Charlie knew ought to be there but hadn't yet found.

He sat back on his heels and admired the barrowful of onions he'd harvested. Well, no problems, there. He'd plait them up and hang them from the rafters while he had some tea. And there were beans a-plenty, not to mention potatoes. Hagrid had been a talented gardener, to wrest such productivity from the land.

*

Madame Maxime looked tired when she and Hagrid showed up at the Dragon Reserve. She looked tired, dirty, and fed up. Gone were the furs and fine fabrics she had worn at Hogwarts now she was in robust outdoors gear, heavily worn and soiled. She nearly suffocated Charlie in a malodorous hug when he showed her the hot springs near the living caves.

"You 'ave saved my life!" she exclaimed dramatically. "Come along, 'Agrid you must find your way back to civilisation also."

They were looking for giants. Dumbledore had some mad notion that he could talk the giants into helping his side, or at least not hurting it, but in Charlie's opinion they were chasing shadows. It looked as though Olympe shared his view, though she didn't express it in the face of Hagrid's relentless optimism.

Hagrid was tender with her, considerate and loving in his idiosyncratic way, but he seemed oblivious to her doubts and unease. And his assumption that she would bear the discomforts of living rough with as much equanimity as he did was clearly mistaken. Charlie tried to drop a hint or two, but Hagrid was impervious, and Olympe took him to task for interfering.

"It ees necessary to do zis zing. I do not like it, but 'Agrid believes in it, and 'e ees dear to me," she declared. "I gave 'im my word."

True to her word, she stayed with Hagrid until the task was done. Then she returned to France, and in France she stayed. Hagrid sent postcards from every visit he made there, but the intervals between them grew longer. He came to Bill's wedding on his own.

*

"What's up, Charlie?" asked Hermione, getting up from the desk to greet him.

"I was wondering if I might send up some of the stuff from the garden for the elves to deal with. I can't find the entrance to Hagrid's stores anywhere, and until I do, I don't have enough containers or shelves to put them on."

"You sound a bit irritated."

"Just tired, I think. I could murder a beer," he said pleadingly, looking at her sideways with an appealing grin.

"That sort of behaviour shouldn't work, coming from a man your age," she mock-chided him. A few minutes later she joined him at the window with her own glass.

They looked down to where the cottage stood in the evening light, a wisp of smoke curling out of the chimney.

"It's hard to believe he's gone, isn't it?" said Hermione softly. "He was so much a part of Hogwarts. It's almost as though Gryffindor Tower had disappeared overnight, or something."

Charlie didn't reply immediately.

"I think... I think he was the only person who ever really understood me, you know. The only one who knew that Cheerful Charlie was just a face for the world to see."

She put a gentle hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"You were lucky, Charlie. He was a fierce friend."

*

The fight at the wedding was horrific. The aftermath was worse not so much in patching up the wounded, and closing the eyes of those who were dead, but for Charlie, the hardest thing to endure was the expression on his parents' faces.

Charlie had learned from the dragons. And one thing he had learned was to fight. He was fast, he was strong, and he was merciless.

And now his parents saw a stranger.

Their little chubby Charlie was a warrior.

He saw out the war and returned to the Reserve. He went back for Christmas most years, but stayed for as little time as was polite. His mother seemed to feel that he'd betrayed her, turning into something she hadn't sanctioned. Hagrid, on the other hand, was the same as ever. Charlie thought Hagrid had always known the way he'd seen through Fang in an instant to the lazy, cowardly heart within, or the way he'd known that Grawp could be gentled. Hagrid always knew what an animal really was.

*

Charlie hung the new curtains at the windows. With the whole place scrubbed and sweet-smelling, he felt he could be proud of himself. He still had most of the cupboards to assault, of course, but they were, taken individually, probably going to be fairly minor in comparison with the last two weeks' worth of hard labour. Hagrid's pots and pans gleamed on their hooks against bright stone, and the furniture shone with polish. The mismatched assortment of cups, tankards and plates now looked charmingly eccentric on the dresser. It was almost good enough to consider inviting someone in for a drink.

"This is nice!" exclaimed Katie, sticking her head round the door. "You've really perked the old place up!"

"Come in," said Charlie, climbing down from the window ledge. His leg buckled a little, but he caught himself and flexed it a couple of times. "I was about to make some tea."

"Got any biscuits?"

"No sorry."

"Good! Because I've brought you some as a housewarming present and here's something to ease your sit-upon after a hard day's work."

She pulled a brightly-decorated tin out of the bag she was carrying and placed it on the table. It was followed by a motley collection of cushions which, when returned to normal size, filled every available seat to overflowing.

"Hmmm. I might have overdone it a bit," she laughed. "What do you think?"

Charlie picked one of them up and admired the riotous colours and fine stitching of the patchwork.

"I think they're great, Katie! Did you do all this yourself?"

"There's not much else to occupy me in the infirmary during the summer, so I indulge the terrible secret passion. I don't like having idle hands, and it's nice to think the stuff'll be used."

Charlie tested his leg again and, satisfied that the spasm was over, busied himself with the kettle and cups. Katie made a tour of the cottage.

"Hey I didn't know you could carve!" she exclaimed.

Charlie blushed. She had picked up a half-finished sculpture of a squirrel that he had been working on in the evenings.

"Oh yeah. I'm not very good, though..."

"I wouldn't say that. You've captured a really cheeky expression there. He's lovely."

"Would you like to have him? When he's done, I mean," said Charlie, on an impulse.

Katie stroked the rough surface of the wood.

"I'd love to. Thanks."

Then the tea was ready, and conversation moved on to other things. She was easy to talk to, and Charlie was surprised to look up and find that the light was going out of the day. She seemed startled by it as well.

"Um, Charlie," she said as she was leaving. "If you want me to have a look at that leg sometime, just say the word."

*

He attended all the weddings. Ginny, then George, then Percy, and finally Ron. He even made the journey to see Hermione get spliced. He always came alone, which led to lots of the "When's it your turn?" kind of joshing that people seemed to find so amusing. Eventually, the consensus seemed to be that he was gay which he found amusing.

There were girls along the way; after a certain age, there were women. Some of them were fellow keepers at the Reserve, people who shared the danger and the isolation from any wider community, and who were content to express fellowship in many ways, no strings attached. Others were casual encounters during his periods of leave, nothing very serious, just a bit of fun, a chance to show off and pretend to be glamorous. But these occasions were few and far between. Charlie didn't really get much out of them.

He and Hagrid talked about girls, of course, when he visited England, or when Hagrid managed to get to Romania to see his 'baby'. They weren't the most rewarding of conversations. Charlie rarely had much to report, but even that little was an embarrassment of riches compared to Hagrid's love life. Hagrid would talk about his crushes, and sometimes about his longings, but he never seemed to act on them.

"Why don't you tell her?" Charlie once asked, sick of hearing the litany of Madam Rosmerta's perfections.

"She'd jus' laugh at me," sniffed Hagrid, maudlin after a few beers. "'Sides..." Then he blushed and fell silent.

"Besides what?"

"I were told, when I were young I could... I could...*hurt* a girl."

"What, you? Hurt someone? Never! I mean, how " Then it was Charlie's turn to blush. "Oh."

So Hagrid had been a virgin when he and Olympe.... No wonder it had hit him so hard. He never made an issue of it, but he was such a lonely man. Always different. Always an outsider. Always dismissed.

Charlie redoubled his efforts to see Hagrid on a regular basis, and to write as often as possible, and to share as much of his life as he could.

"Who's this 'Ling', then?" Hagrid had asked, just a few years back.

"Oh, she's on secondment from the reserve in China. Got some innovative ideas about breeding programmes..." He tailed off when he saw the amusement in Hagrid's eyes and gave him an answering grin. "Oh, all right then, she's... she's... perfect."

*

The start of the new school year was approaching and he had gone up to the castle early to discuss the Care of Magical Creatures syllabus with Hermione. He was so early, in fact being used to rising with the sun that she made him stay for breakfast before she would even have the subject broached.

"No work before the first three cups of tea," she chided.

So Charlie was tucking into a hearty fry-up and chatting amiably with the Headmistress and the Matron when the post arrived. Everyone was surprised when a graceful stork swooped in with the owls and dropped a large, fat envelope in front of him. For a moment, he let it lie, though his mouth went dry and it was only with an effort that he swallowed what he was half-way through chewing. Then he picked up the packet and silently left the table.

Back at the cottage, he slit open the envelope with his old pocket knife and slid the contents out onto the tabletop. Photographs. A second baby. Ling, smiling happily with her husband and their children in front of their house at the Chinese dragon reserve. The baby, kicking vaguely in a crib.

Charlie's mouth compressed as he felt a familiar stale anger wash through him. He went to lean his hands against the mantelpiece, letting his head hang down while he rode the wave of emotion. It was his own fault. His own fault that he had never spoken. That he had never asked her, even after six years together. That she had drifted away from him. That she had found someone else. That they had decided to remain "good friends". He had thought himself too old for her, and too foreign, when she was so attached to her homeland; Georg was older still, and had been more than willing to up sticks and move to China.

*

The day she told him they were leaving, he was turning the eggs in a batch which were being artificially incubated. Her news had caught him off guard and he wasn't paying attention when one of the eggs suddenly cracked and the hatchling sank its needle-sharp fangs right through the protective trousers he wore.

By the time the delirium had abated and the venom was banished from his system, she had gone. And he was left with a gammy leg that made him unfit for most of the active duties of a dragon-keeper.

Then it was Hagrid's turn to patiently endure his tales of woe and maudlin ramblings, to commiserate over Charlie's injury and the tedium of administrative work.

"At least yer've had a good long time working wi' em," he said, the Christmas after it had happened. "Think of all the stuff yer know, and all them tales yer can tell. I know 'ow about' writing a book?"

"I'm no writer, Hagrid," Charlie said morosely. "Never mind why don't you tell me about what you're doing, for a change?"

"A'right' then," Hagrid huffed impatiently. "Well, I been working on improving the Thestral herd a bit, varying some of the bloodlines an' all. An' then there's some of the pigs an' chickens for the school kitchens that're doin' well on the new feed..."

Hagrid was extremely knowledgeable about such things, and soon Charlie had felt distracted and cheered by the conversation. There was more to life than a broken heart in your fifties, after all.

*

Hagrid's journals were proving to be fascinating reading. No-one could have accused him of being methodical in his records, but he was thorough, and his observations were both minute and very shrewd. Having found the journals, with their day-by-day entries, Charlie was spending an hour or two each evening reading through and finding out about the planting of the vegetable garden, treatment of various sick animals, experiments with the ingredients of commonly-used salves, how much beer one could get down at the Broomsticks for a dozen best eggs, who would buy ogre-strength moonshine, and so on.

He commandeered a stack of parchment and began sorting and transcribing Hagrid's wisdom and practical experience.

There was information on the Thestral herd dating back decades, with bloodlines, records of illnesses and treatments, training practices...

Charlie shook his head. Hagrid was the one who should have written a book. And it was time he, Charlie, tracked down the herd so he could get enough of the creatures ready to pull the carriages in two weeks' time.

Early the next morning, he picked up an empty knapsack and his stick, detoured to the castle to collect a few parcels of raw meat, and set off down the forest tracks towards the areas where the Thestrals generally roamed.

It was a perfect day for such a walk, hot and sunny enough to give a lava-like glow to the clearings with their jewelled butterflies and brilliant flowers, and to make the gloom of the usually murky pathways a welcome and enchanted twilight, punctuated by birdsong and the buzz and chirp of insects. Charlie amused himself along the way by identifying the tracks in the damp earth under the shadows fox, badger, deer, the larger cloven imprints of the unicorns, the centaurs' long-legged paces churning up the mud from where they had cut across the path. No sign of the Thestrals as yet, but they sometimes ranged a long way, and in any case it didn't much matter as he was enjoying the walk.

Not paying much attention to where the paths were taking him, Charlie was surprised to find himself at the entrance to Grawp's Glade.

Hagrid's brother had claimed the place where he had first been chained as his very own. Charlie remembered Hagrid howling with laughter as he recounted some of the more vigorous negotiations Grawp had conducted with the other forest-dwellers over ownership rights, and in particular the centaurs' indignation "Too angry even to spout all that airy-fairy planets and portents stuff!" while Grawp sat by, drinking his beer calmly and looking as though pitched battles were what everyone had to go through as part of the house-building process.

The house itself was a lot like Hagrid's, though on a larger scale, and without the garden. There were skins stretched out on racks to dry, but the place was closed up and there was no smoke. Grawp was evidently on walkabout. He did that sometimes, often staying away for months, but he always came back and resumed the quiet, contemplative manner he had learned to adopt when humans were about. Dropping his pack and settling on a sunny bench to rest and eat his lunch, Charlie wondered whether Grawp even knew that Hagrid had gone. Hermione had not been able to find him to tell him the news, and he had not come to the funeral. Charlie sighed. It would be his task to tell the giant that he was alone in the world.

The Glade was a peaceful place, an oasis of light in the dense forest. But what made it truly extraordinary was the architecture. Hagrid had spent hours showing his brother pictures and books, slowly bringing him round to an idea of how people would expect him to live and behave if he were to be accepted in no matter how small a way. Little by little, Grawp developed patience with the teaching and began to show an interest. Then one day Hagrid brought him a book he wouldn't let go of, and he had to go back and apologise to the Headmistress McGonagall, back then and the Librarian, and pay for a replacement. Hermione, ever the curious one, and a long-time favourite of Grawp's, was intrigued to know what it was. Hagrid had described to Charlie how the pair of them went to find the giant, found him absent, and eventually tracked him down quarrying rock from an escarpment deep in the Forest's interior. When Hermione had asked what he was doing he, never loquacious, simply pulled the book from his pocket and opened it to a picture of Stonehenge.

"Grawp make."

It had taken even Grawp a few years to complete the circle round his cottage, but eventually it was done. He refused help, but was content to have an audience while he worked. Charlie was privileged to witness the placement of the last stone, and Hagrid's tearful pride in his brother's craftsmanship.

What would Grawp do when he found out?

Charlie sighed.

*

"So, everything's ready for the carriages and boats, is it?" asked Hermione, ticking things off her list at the staff meeting. "And you have everything you need for the CoMC classes?"

"Yes everything's sorted. Though you might want to note that three of the boats will need replacing before next year. They'll do one more trip, but it's string and magic holding them together."

She sighed and scribbled quickly on the sheet of parchment headed 'Budget Notes'.

"And what about the snake infestation under the Quidditch stands?"

"Dealt with."

"Thank you, Charlie. Now Neville..."

Charlie sat through the rest of the meeting feeling unaccountably nervous about the start of term, two days hence. It was almost as bad as when he had left for Romania. Here he was, nearly sixty years old, and his hands were as sweaty and shaky as any teenager's whenever he thought of September the first. He wiped them surreptitiously on his trousers while Binns droned on about classroom supplies.

"Don't go looking fer problems, Charlie," he seemed to hear Hagrid saying. "Jus' take it steady an' do yer best. Yer'll be fine."

He made his way down to the cottage again. It looked very different now, less cluttered, much cleaner and lighter. Still Hagrid's, but his, now, too. He still had work to do outside, of course, but his living space had become a home. What was that thing they had done together when Grawp finished the Glade? Oh, yes they'd filled three glasses of beer, poured a little on the ground in the entrance to the henge, again at the threshold of the cottage, and then finally on the hearthstone.

"Home," rumbled Grawp.

"Home," repeated Hagrid and Charlie.

And they drank.

Charlie drew himself a mug of beer from the small barrel he'd set up in the corner. He took it out and splashed a little in the garden gateway, then on the doorstep, and finally on the hearthstone.

"Home," he said, and drank deeply. "Thank you, Hagrid."

As he lowered the mug, he heard a click that seemed to come from the back of the wide closet where he kept his broom and walking stick. He pushed it open and saw that

the back of it was standing proud at one side. He hooked a finger round and pulled. It was a door, and behind it was an open hatchway down into the ground. A ladder poked up.

"What the...? Hagrid, you sneaky old git," he chuckled. "You always did use a lot of magic on the sly!"

He grabbed a lantern and climbed down into what proved to be a large, stone-lined cellar, larger than the house, full of shelves upon shelves of stores, remedies, bits and bobs of equipment such as Hagrid had left everywhere on his property, and, in pride of place a still. A magnificent copper and glass still. Six bottles were neatly arranged in a line next to it, with a card attached to one. Charlie picked it up.

"Cheers, Charlie!" it read, in shaky but unmistakeable handwriting.

He sat down on the floor, crying and laughing in equal measure. Typical Hagrid. What a man. What a friend.

*

Three weeks into term, one of the second-years came to Charlie with a couple of barely-fledged raven chicks she had found.

"I don't know how to raise them, Professor Weasley," she said. "Would you take them? I don't want them to die!"

He settled them in a down-lined box near the fire, where they would be warm, and braced himself for an intensive feeding programme. Katie, Neville and Hermione found him at the task when they came down.

"Will we still be...?" Katie asked, bending over his shoulder to see the chicks.

"Yeah, sure hold still, you greedy gubbins! these two'll be okay for an hour or so while we do it. Grab the glasses, would you?"

They trooped out to the garden, where the pile of old and broken stuff from the cottage had now reached an impressive size.

"Well, here goes," said Charlie. "Incendio!"

They stood watching the bonfire until well after dark, talking about Hagrid and sipping at the surprisingly mellow hooch from his final distillation.

"I think he'd be really pleased with everything you've done here," said Hermione.

"I think so," Charlie replied. "Come on. I've got a stew on the fire. No claws or anything like that in it, either. What do you think about putting a few beehives in the garden, by the way?"

*

The End

1/12/2008