

Here Be Dragons

by shosier

As a little boy, Charlie Weasley cultivated a passion for dragons. But that little boy had no way of knowing where that passion would take him in life. These are Charlie's adventures – the ones only hinted at in canon. My story consists of vignettes of Charlie's life, with emphasis on those rare, brief moments when JKR mentioned him in passing, and few other gaps filled in.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 28

As a little boy, Charlie Weasley cultivated a passion for dragons. But that little boy had no way of knowing where that passion would take him in life. These are Charlie's adventures – the ones only hinted at in canon. My story consists of vignettes of Charlie's life, with emphasis on those rare, brief moments when JKR mentioned him in passing, and few other gaps filled in.

Author's note: this story is a spin-off from my other tale, "George & Annie: An Unofficial Biography." Though my intent is for this work to stand alone, a couple of the non-canon characters you'll meet here hail from there, in case you're curious. This story takes place throughout the canon years from books 1-7, then will go a bit beyond that. It is, for the most part, canon compliant. Thanks in advance for reading!

Chapter 1

October 1991

"Charlie's in Romania studying dragons, and Bill's in Africa doing something for Gringotts," said Ron. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Chapter 6*

Charlie's face had gone numb, and he sniffed his runny nose frequently. The rarified air was knife-edge cold, and whenever the sun occasionally peeked through cracks in the heavy cloud cover, he had to shield his eyes from the glare off the snow, even wearing his light-responsive tinted flying goggles. His fingers, nearly frozen, were wrapped around his broomstick.

On the job, he flew just above ground-skimming altitude along a mountainous ridge in Southern Carpathian range. When a steep drop-off suddenly opened up in front of him, he reckoned he'd reached his destination. Just to make sure, he touched down on a craggy overhang that looked down into the jagged valley below and checked his map of the reservation. A strong gust of wind buffeted him as he replaced the map in his pocket, sending snow swirling around him.

Perfect spot for a nest, he thought, the sharp, bare cliffs completely inhospitable to anything but a dragon's lair. His keen eyes searched the area below and the sky above, but marked no movement save that of the drifting snow. He listened, but only wind met his ears.

Merlin, but it was gorgeous up here! He'd only been in Romania for not-quite three months now, but it was everything he'd ever dreamed of. Stunning vistas like this one before him were everywhere he turned. Top it off with the fact he got to work with dragons every damn day, and life was bang on perfect for Charlie Weasley, rookie dragon keeper!

Dragons had always been his passion, ever since he was a little boy. Their power and majesty, their danger and mystery all drew him in. And now he lived and breathed them for real. He didn't think he could ever tire of it, no matter how tedious and menial the tasks the veteran keepers assigned him. Not even barreling dragon shit for export could dampen his enthusiasm.

The day he'd arrived at the Ridgebit International Dragon Reservation¹, he'd been assigned to keeper hut number eight along with a friendly Russian bloke named Sasha Vasiliev. They'd quickly developed a warm camaraderie even though Charlie was technically his trainee, being a few years younger and fresh out of school. They'd already slipped into an easy, low-key friendship based upon their shared interests in dragons, Quidditch, and other outdoor pursuits. Sasha was so knowledgeable about the dragon species kept here on the reservation even more so than Hagrid had been! and Charlie'd learned vast amounts from his partner already.

His job that morning was to keep tabs on a reported nesting female Romanian Longhorn as part of the reservation's breeding program. Her eggs were doubly valuable the shells were an expensive potions ingredient, and the babies within critical to the survival of the herd and valuable in their own right and therefore supremely tempting to poachers. Charlie's task today was to count the eggs and verify she was still sitting them.

As there was no way to scale the nearly sheer cliff face that plunged below him, he decided to hop back onto his broom and hover down for a look-see. Slowly, keeping as close to the rock face as he dared, Charlie descended.

Perhaps a dozen meters below the crest, the wall opened up into a shallow cave of sorts. He halted his descent when he reached the apex of the opening, leaned carefully over the side of his broom, and peeked inside. His quarry lay coiled like a cat, her nose tucked up under her tail. Her dark green scales made her difficult to see in the gloom of the hollow, but her namesake long, golden horns gleamed distinctly. Charlie's heart raced to be so close to her: she was a magnificent specimen!

And yet, he needed to get closer still. In the dimness, the bronze-colored eggs he could just barely glimpse within the circle of her body had a certain sheen to them, but he couldn't see well enough to count them accurately. Charlie skirted the edge of the cave's opening, sinking a little further down the cliff face.

He froze when she snorted awake, blinking her eyes open. Several tense moments later, during which Charlie had flattened himself against the rock, holding his breath and praying the wind wouldn't change direction on him and betray his presence, he heard the distinctive rumble that preceded inflammatory exhalation. He squeezed one eye past the edge of the opening and watched as the mother breathed gentle fire over her eggs.

Amazing! Bloody amazing! Charlie wanted to shout in his excitement. Daring to lean as far as his nose into the opening, he was in perfect position now to tally her clutch the instant the flames died down. *Three! Same as Sasha found last week. Oh, well done, my lovely girl! What a good mummy you are!* he silently praised her.

And then the beast's sapphire eye rolled, fixing itself with pinpoint accuracy upon him.

Charlie had precisely one second in which to think: *Uh oh.*

Mama Dragon roared in alarm, the sound blasting through the narrow valley, rebounding off the far rock wall. Charlie's skull rattled with the reverb. He took his leave of the irritable expectant mother, sailing off forthwith, rocketing up the cliff face. As soon as he'd cleared the overhang, he breathed a sigh of relief, confident the broody female wouldn't give chase, wouldn't dare leave her eggs long enough.

He marveled at the creature's stunning beauty, her terrifying fierceness, as he soared eastward, heading back toward the hut to file his report. Her eggs had practically glowed with heat from her fire, almost like metal. According to his calculations, another six months and they'd be hatching sometime during the spring thaw.

Out of nowhere, a deafening bellow nearly startled him off his broom. Another Longhorn going the opposite direction presumably the female's mate crested a ridge just as Charlie did. Charlie veered skyward at the very last second, managing to avoid getting roasted and flying straight into his gullet by inches.

The male rolled a backward somersault in midair, redirecting his course in pursuit of Charlie. His body thrumming with adrenaline, Charlie shot forward, randomly sinking and veering and climbing. For a brief moment, he considered attempting to Apparate to safety, then abandoned the idea. He'd always been crap at Apparition, and in a stressful situation like this, already on the run, he knew better than to chance it. Nor was a Disillusionment Charm an option: not only could dragons see through any magical disguise, they had an extremely keen sense of smell. Even if Papa Dragon couldn't see Charlie, he could smell him.

No spell was going to save him now.

Serpentine! Feint! Dive! Climb! his Quidditch-Seeker-honed brain commanded as his eyes scanned the horizon for hope of salvation. Unfortunately for Charlie, like many predators, a dragon on the hunt responded to movement. The more he darted and swooped to avoid the bursts of fire, the easier it was for his adversary to visually follow his course. And he could hear the dragon was gaining...

There! He zoomed toward a stand of trees, praying he'd get there before Papa Dragon overtook him. His only chance was to outfly the beast a few seconds longer and get lost in the forest ahead. Maintaining a flight path as random as a butterfly's, slicing through the air as fast as magically feasible, he tucked his head, making himself as streamlined as possible, and fled.

The dark evergreen refuge loomed ever larger ahead, and he let himself think he just might make it. Fifty meters shrank to thirty, and Charlie made a beeline for the trees, abandoning evasion for pure speed. Then a bloodcurdling scream erupted behind him, followed a fraction of a second later by a raging inferno that seared his left shoulder, arm, and side of his face.

Charlie roared in pain, momentarily blinded and disoriented. In the next instant, tree limbs clawed at him, tearing at his clothes and snatching him off his broom. He crashed to the ground, skidding through a snow bank for what felt like a mile but was actually more likely a few meters until coming to a stop, wrapped around the trunk of a tree.

He lay motionless for several moments, waiting for air to return to his lungs.

He was alone in the copse, thank Merlin. And alive, judging by the acute pain in his chest and arm. The dragon had veered away when Charlie had dived into the forest, unable to follow into the narrow confines of the thick stand of trees. The beast roared in frustration, though, his anger palpable.

He eased himself onto his back and caught sight of the furious monster as he circled around in the air above the copse for another pass. Perhaps twenty meters away from where he now lay, the dragon barreled toward the exact spot where his quarry had disappeared into the trees, then unleashed a punitive burst of flame. Charlie curled himself into a ball, chanting the spell Sasha had taught him that produced a fire-repellant bubble around him he hoped would stand the onslaught, but braced for failure. The dragon roared before turning around and heading back to his mate.

When a huddled Charlie finally unfolded out of the fetal position, the smell of smoke was thick in the air. He coughed, then nearly passed out from the resultant pain in his chest. Shakily rising to his feet, staggering a bit until he found his balance, he summoned his broom. He reckoned it wouldn't do to let a forest fire rage unabated, nor would his fellow keepers wish to attract the attention of any well-meaning Muggle fire brigades, though he doubted any were close enough to see this far into the reservation. Easing the broom between his legs, then easing it into the air, he hovered around the burning trees, muttering, "*Aguamenti*," to douse the flames.

Two hours later, Charlie limped into keeper hut number eight, woozy from pain and a possible concussion. The flight back had taken significantly longer considering how difficult it had been to stay on the broom, he'd flown at a firstie's pace, slow and steady. He reckoned he'd cracked a few ribs, and his left arm felt like it was still being subjected to a bath of pyretic breath. He stumbled into the little area where the first aid supplies were kept but managed only to collapse on his stomach on the small cot there, out cold.

It was after sunset when he came to. A neat little fire was chasing away the chill in the hut now, but the flickering light had jolted him awake with a stab of fear. He sucked in a breath, then cried out from the pain that action caused.

A low, deep rumble hushed him. "Why didn't you summon me back?" the familiar voice of his partner scolded him, his accent adding weight to the already heavy sound.

"Passed out... I think..." Charlie barely breathed, fearing to attempt anything more. He heard glass and ceramic clinking about as jars and pots were fished out of the cupboards, then a small vial was held to his lips.

"Drink," he was commanded.

Charlie shifted a little, opened his mouth, and allowed the potion to be poured in. He grimaced at the foul taste, which caused his burned face to hurt worse. Thankfully, the pain relief followed moments later, and he finally managed a real breath for the first time in hours.

"This burn on your back is bad," Sasha reported. "Your shirt must come off."

Resigning himself to try to obey what was certainly going to be a very painful request, Charlie began to lift himself off the cot. A second later, Sasha spelled his shirt away, Vanishing it into thin air.

"Don't do that!" Charlie cried angrily. He shot a glare at his new friend, then remembered Sasha was also his superior. He dropped his head abashedly. "I don't have that many shirts," he added by way of explanation. Winter was approaching, and he'd need all the clothing he owned during the alpine blizzards to come.

"You only have one skin, fool," Sasha scolded him. "There was not much left of the shirt, Weasley, and what remained was charred and stuck to the flesh. Because you didn't call me sooner."

Charlie nodded carefully, still finding the sound of his surname odd on the Russian's lips. In his accent, it sounded like Veess-lyee, with a sibilant, drawn-out hiss in the middle of the word. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Sasha dosed him with another potion. Charlie recognized its uniquely awful taste as Skele-Gro, confirming his guess about his possibly cracked ribs. Then Sasha gently cleaned the burns on his shoulder and face with soft, warm flannels. Next, he liberally smeared an aloe-based ointment over the wounds, the fiery pain in Charlie's raw skin instantly cooling on contact. When Sasha left the little cot's side to fetch some other necessity, Charlie found he immediately missed the soothing feel of his confident, skilled hands. He shivered slightly, the wet aloe chilling him.

"Will you learn from this, Veess-lyee?" Sasha grumbled. "A careless keeper is a dead one."

"I know! I know!" Charlie groaned. "There's no such thing as a lone dragon." It was a rookie mistake, and he was embarrassed by it. Still, he'd looked about him first just not well enough or long enough to locate her mate, apparently. He'd be even more thorough next time.

"Especially in clutch season," Sasha added sternly.

He now stood before Charlie, so tall that he had to crane his neck to meet his gaze from where he sat on the cot. Sasha held what looked like a poultice in one hand and a roll of gauze in the other, a jar tucked under his arm. It struck Charlie then how large Sasha's hands were. How he looked forward to his soothing touch again. It had felt so comforting...

Slowly, Charlie rose up from the cot, then turned around to present his injured back to Sasha. He added a little more gooey aloe salve to his shoulder, and Charlie caught himself leaning into the contact. The pain of his injuries, the tension in his body were both ebbing away wherever his hands touched. And in the chill of the room, half-undressed, Charlie felt the warmth of his fellow keeper's closeness.

Gingerly, Sasha laid the plaster on his shoulder burn, then began to wrap it with the gauze to hold it in place. One of the requirements of a keeper's job was to be able to perform both emergency and routine Healing protocols, as well as competently brew the potions and ointments to replace the hut's stores. Charlie had apprenticed with Pomfrey at Hogwarts for the past three terms for precisely this reason and had become reasonably proficient.

But Charlie granted Sasha was truly gifted at it. Never accidentally bumping or jostling his injuries, the man's hands had expertly treated and dressed his wounds. Already, Charlie felt little more than an occasional momentary twinge from them. He took a deep breath, feeling his ribs fully knitted together once more. He let his attention focus on the warm palms now smoothing the bandage into place, their pressure lulling him to relax. He felt the soothing comfort and warmth emanating from them and sinking into his stiff muscles, his weary bones. He felt... a soft brush of lips on the back of his neck?!

Charlie stiffened, suddenly fully alert.

He was surprised and... not angry, not offended, but... Well, *nothing* else, actually. He was further shocked by how the unexpected kiss caused an instantaneous yet non-negative reaction within him. He feared this a little why exactly *wasn't* he pissed off about it? It was presumptuous and inappropriate as hell... wasn't it?

"I don't know about you, but where I come from, blokes don't usually do that to other blokes," Charlie stammered, spinning on his heels to face Sasha.

Sasha returned his gaze. Charlie tried to identify what it was he saw in his eyes not fear, not anger, not sadness... just a piercing intensity he could not name. Then a tiny smile cracked the rugged, dark visage. "I promise you, Veess-lyee, that some blokes do exactly that in every corner of the world."

Charlie's mind began working at lightening speed. It occurred to him that Sasha had quite possibly just come out to him. He searched within himself *How do I feel about this? Sharing my home with a pouf?* His answer came quick and clear: still not angry, still not afraid, but... *curious?*

"A-are you... gay?" Charlie choked out awkwardly.

Sasha's face fell into disappointment. He turned to leave, muttering, *Da, golubóy.*²

"Wait!" Charlie reached out, grabbing his arm to stop him from leaving, noting in the process how Sasha's forearm was as thick as a tree limb and steely with muscle. He'd hardly managed to pick up more than a couple words in Russian since he'd arrived. Sasha's English was more than adequate, so there hadn't been the necessity to learn more but he knew that *da* meant *yes*.

Sasha halted, looking Charlie in the eye once again. In response, Charlie's heart sped up, his insides churned, and every nerve itched. He'd never felt this reaction this physical chaos to anyone before, male or female.

As a teenager in school, he'd felt sexual urges, but they were anonymous and amorphous, often as a result of a generic sex dream populated with sensation alone, rather than corporeal fantasies about an actual person or any specific individual attraction. That is, he might've felt them on rare occasions he'd had attention to spare, when he wasn't obsessing over Quidditch or occupied by his studies or prefect duties. He'd asked his older brother about it once this marked lack of sexual interest when everyone else around him seemed to be in lust's adolescent thrall and Bill had suggested perhaps he was just a late-bloomer and to never mind it. Charlie had gladly followed his advice and not spared it another thought since, assuming it would happen for him when he met the right girl (not that he was in any hurry to do *that*).

But now... all he could think of was that kiss. Not dragons. Not flying. Not pain. Not girls. He stared at Sasha's lips *That kiss...*

Sasha lifted off his shirt, cocking his head to the side, as if curious as to what Charlie's reaction might be.

All the bare skin between them, the faintly spicy, *delicious* scent that had suddenly been atomized into the air, only stoked the strange, stirring feeling further. Charlie licked his own lips, a hollow hunger now aching within, and found himself leaning a bit closer just to breathe it in.

Sasha lightly rested one large hand on his bandaged shoulder, halting his forward progress. Then he cupped the uninjured side of his face with the other hand, brushed his cheekbone with his thumb.

Charlie was mesmerized by the touch as well as the view, his eyes darting from Sasha's dark eyes to his soft, dusky lips and back again. The realization that he not only didn't mind Sasha's uninvited advance... but that he *wanted* even more of it... came as yet another surprise. He wanted another kiss. Wanted to feel that electrical charge jolt through his body again.

"Put your arms around me," Sasha dared him.

Charlie obeyed, awkwardly twining his arms around the other man's waist. Solid as any tree trunk, Sasha's torso was hard and muscled. Firelight glinted off the shiny scars on his skin, which was randomly dimpled with divots from older injuries and scabbed in a patch near the shoulder. Soft, welcoming body heat drew him even closer.

Sasha leaned forward and lightly pressed his lips to Charlie's.

Something savage within Charlie roared awake. Like the dragon that had pursued him that afternoon, it was vital and primitive, aggressive and insuppressible.

He kissed him back.

And out of the blue, Charlie was having a snog. His first ever, truth be told. He pressed against Sasha and gave himself over to the inner-dragon, consuming everything in his path, gorging on the charged attraction. The brush of his groin against Sasha's was both heavenly and insufficient he was as hard as he'd ever been in his life. When Sasha's pelvis began to grind against his a little bit, he felt dizzy with the rush of pleasure that resulted.

Charlie kept waiting for a sense of indignation, an angry revulsion, a shamed realization to set in. *Aman* was shoving his tongue in his mouth, groping his arse and rubbing his erection against Charlie's own. But all he could think of was how much he liked it. How he wanted to do the same thing. How he wanted *more*.

Sasha released his mouth and muttered something *"Hochy tebya."*³ Charlie assumed it was Russian because he hadn't a clue what it meant. Surely he hadn't lost his mind to the point he failed to understand English anymore, had he? Then Sasha kissed the spot where Charlie's jaw, throat, and ear met, nearly causing his knees to buckle, scattering his thoughts completely.

"What's that?" Charlie gasped a few moments later. He barely recognized the low, raspy moan coming from his own throat.

Sasha barely paused while devouring Charlie's neck with nipping kisses. "I said I want to fuck you," he growled in English against him.

"Oh..." Charlie mumbled, at last feeling a faint inkling of trepidation begin to war with the fiery lust within him. Was this the point where he would finally come to his senses? Or would he really allow another man to violate him?

Then Sasha sucked on the base of his neck, and instantly, lust was in the ascendant once more. Sasha continued gnawing on Charlie's throat and collar, making his way back up to suck on his earlobe. Charlie suppressed an urge to whimper. He stroked the hot, bare skin of Sasha's back, his palms rippling over rigid muscle there, hoping to disguise the fact he was holding on for dear life.

Sasha's lips brushed Charlie's ear while he whispered, "Want to suck each other off or fuck asses?"

Charlie wondered if something was getting lost in the translation from Russian into English. Not that he didn't understand the foundational mechanics of sex even gay sex at least in theory. But his mind was just too scrambled to fully appreciate the repercussions of the question just posed to him, even though the words were in English. *How am I supposed to know?* he wanted to ask. Instead, he stammered, "I-I... Th-that is... erm... I dunno."

Sasha pulled back and looked Charlie in the eye again, reading something there. "You have not done this before?"

Charlie minutely shook his head.

Sasha lifted one questioning eyebrow. "Not with a woman, either?"

Charlie shook his head again, even slighter this time.

Sasha took a full step back, pulling out of Charlie's embrace. "Virgin!?"

Charlie's arms drop to his sides. "I've never even really... erm... kissed anyone before," he mumbled, feeling smaller and colder and very silly for some reason.

Sasha heaved a big sigh. "Ah, Veess-lyee..." he groaned, running his fingers through his hair, then rubbing his eyes with his palms.

Charlie cleared his throat awkwardly, half mortified, half indignant. "Sorry, but... is this a problem, then?"

Sasha gave him a pained smile. "Not for me, no. Problem for you, I think."

Charlie was confused. He noted Sasha's English was getting stilted, his accent thicker and more difficult to decipher. Was this the reason he couldn't understand what was going on? Or what had just happened to stop it?

"You are not sure you want men before me? Before this just now?" Sasha asked.

Charlie shrugged. He couldn't recall ever really wanting another person, regardless of gender, before this moment. And now, he *wanted* so much from Sasha, so badly... it frightened him a little bit.

"So maybe just horny, yes?" Sasha pressed. "Maybe regret later, eh? Then, no... friends..." he said, waving a finger back and forth between them.

Charlie swallowed hard, reckoning he was beginning to understand the situation a bit better. Things were possibly moving too fast for Sasha, and probably himself, if he was truly honest about it. "I think we can still be friends... either way," he hurried to add, hoping the kissing might resume soon. Despite his minor misgivings, he was far from ready to wholly abandon the effort.

Sasha gave another sigh. With a thoughtful frown, he reached out for Charlie's hand. "Still... a first time should not be like this. Not hurry and rough. Not almost strangers."

Charlie closed his eyes and thought the sensation of Sasha's calloused, chapped hand entwined with his was the most wonderful thing he'd ever felt warm and powerful. Although not a sexual sort of touch, it was almost as good more like the comforting, healing touches from before. And while he wanted to argue Sasha's point, insisting he was ready and willing to participate, he sensed he had no reliable ammunition with which to fight.

"If you don't want to..."

"Yes," Sasha chuckled, "I do want to. But... later, yes? Better friends first."

"You want to get to know each other better?" Charlie clarified, just to eliminate the possibility Sasha was recommending they fuck other people before each other. The mere thought of which nearly slingshot him into a panic.

Sasha nodded. Patiently, with careful English, he echoed Charlie's words. "Yes. I want to get to know you better first. I want to know all about Veess-lyee." Then he grinned.

Charlie returned the smile, glad Sasha had not yet let go of his hand and broken all physical contact between them. "You can start by calling me Charlie."

"All right, Charlie."

Author's note #2: I freely confess the Russian I've used throughout this story came from online translation sources. I did make every attempt to consult multiple sources for confirmation. My apologies if it is inaccurate. I have also concluded that the transliteration from the Cyrillic to Latin alphabet leads to a surprisingly large variation in spelling of words, so please allow for some flexibility here.

1- [Harvey Ridgebit](#) is a canon character, albeit an obscure one, and not my own creation. (All the keepers you will meet in this story, with the exception of Charlie, are mine.) JKR invented the Romanian dragon reservation; I named it after its founder.

2- *Da, golubóy* = "Yes, gay." *Golubóy* strictly means "light blue" and is reportedly Russian slang for a homosexual male, according to [this website](#).

3- More Russian... *Hochy tebya* = "I want you," according to Savva.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 28

The 'rents come to visit, and Arthur shares some disturbing news.

Chapter 2

December 1991

* * *

...This would probably be the best Christmas [Harry'd] ever had. Ron and his brothers were staying [at Hogwarts], too, because Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were going to Romania to visit Charlie. Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Chapter 12

* * *

When he crested the final ridge, Charlie was ecstatic to see the lights on in the hut, reckoning the odds were now very good to excellent that a fire and food might await him there. His day had begun in the dark before dawn and was just ending now, well after sunset. As cold and tired as he was, he wanted nothing more than to quickly fill his belly, then burrow under a thick, down-filled duvet and let unconsciousness take him.

He blasted away the drift of snow that had blockaded the door, already built up since his hut-mate's recent return, then nearly stumbled inside when a gust of wind caught him at the least opportune moment. He righted himself and moved quickly to shut the door before too much blowing snow followed him inside.

"Look who shows up just when the food's ready," Sasha teased him from his post in the kitchen.

"Cold as yeti bollocks out there," Charlie huffed, stomping his feet as he headed toward the fire, intent on thawing himself out.

Something screeched and flapped, startled by the commotion he was making.

What the bloody...? Charlie wondered, peering up into the rafters directly above. The wings began to settle, and as the thing presented its backside, he thought there was something rather familiar about it. Charlie sprang backward just in time to avoid getting shat upon.

He'd've known that trademark move anywhere. "Errol!?" he cried, Vanishing the mess on the floor.

Upon hearing his name, the owl launched itself toward Charlie's outstretched arm. He wouldn't go so far as to describe the creature's action as flight more like barely arrested falling.

"Damned bird wouldn't let me take the message for you," Sasha grumbled, delivering two bowls of steaming stew to the table.

Charlie fumbled with the leather thongs, his fingers still stiff from the cold, then unrolled the scrap of parchment. He read the note. Then he stared at the words on the page, praying they didn't really say what he thought they said. "Bloody hell," he groaned. *This is just what I **don't** need.*

"Bad news from home?" Sasha's voice was full of concern.

Charlie swallowed, then nodded, wincing. "I'm *really* sorry, Sash, but... my mum's decided she's coming for Christmas."

~ * ~

January 1992

Charlie Weasley was the definition of stressed out.

Keeper hut number eight which was tiny to begin with had now housed five people for the last eight days. The weather was too harsh for his family to spend any

significant time outside, even if they'd been the slightest bit interested in a tour of the reservation. His mother had put her foot down the moment he'd offered to show them a dragon's lair he'd had in mind a nice, safe, Opaleye nicknamed Kitten insisting one son dangling himself as bait before dragons was quite enough, and she'd rather not offer up for sacrifice any more of her offspring or relations, thank you very much.

Consequently, they were going stir-crazy cooped up indoors, practically tripping over one another with nothing else to do. Charlie couldn't blame Sasha for escaping during long stretches of the day, despite the brutal conditions outside. Which really did say something about the state of things inside, he supposed.

It wasn't that his family was being mean or rude although his mum and Ginny had been at each other's throats the entire time. According to his father, this sort of behavior was par for the course over the past school term, now that Ginny was the lone Weasley child left at home. Molly constantly sniped at her daughter, haranguing her about every little thing left undone or done wrongly. And Ginny seethed in response, digging in her heels when asked to do anything, then doing it with willful incompetence when she finally acquiesced.

But they were all perfectly friendly and polite to Sasha, just as they would have been to any other stranger, if not to each other. They inquired about his family, his education, peppered him with the usual how-did-you-come-to-be-here sorts of questions. They asked him about his job, dutifully cultivating an interest for his sake. They asked him how Charlie'd been getting along, what Sasha thought of his future prospects as a dragon keeper.

Charlie didn't know why the last part felt so humiliating, but it did. Yes, Sasha was technically his superior but did his parents have to behave as if he were the only other adult in the building? Yes, Sasha had given him a good report, but did they have to ask him about Charlie while he was in the same room? He was twenty years old (as of nearly three weeks ago), dammit, and not a bloody firstie!

Possibly the worst part of it was that there was nothing specific that was driving him batty, no one incident he could point to that embodied how horrible this experience was. It was all just... *too much*. All the friendliness and togetherness was utterly stifling. Little quirks and habits that had been previously unnoticeable, lost in the white noise of general chaos that was the Burrow, now ballooned into neon-bright aggravations. His father couldn't read something without talking out loud, apparently, prattling on about whatever he was perusing at the time, be it a newspaper, research journal, or box of biscuits. His mother couldn't sit still, incessantly bustling about the cramped space, rearranging this and tidying up that, laying waste to the system of organization that had been in place in the hut for likely a century or more. But both thought they were being genial and helpful, rather than annoying and irritating, which made berating them an impossibility. And as bratty as her behavior was, Ginny was simply a ten-year-old girl, bored senseless and sick to death of being the sole recipient of her parents' attention.

Charlie could empathize with his little sister to a point. But he desperately missed being alone, craved the liberation of solitude. He missed being able to hear the tiny sounds of the mice in the walls, or the hiss of icy snowflakes hitting the glass windows, or a faint dragon's roar from miles off. He'd never realized before how the members of his family talked so damn much, drowning out every other sound, every little thought.

Most of all, he missed the quiet evenings spent with Sasha. Sitting in the dark with him, listening to the quiet crackles and pops of the fire, just peacefully existing in his presence. Not to mention they hadn't kissed or touched each other for eight days now, and Charlie thought he might go mad with longing. But his hands were tied he couldn't leave the hut, he couldn't kick his family out, he couldn't bark at them to just shut it already.

So he tried to bury his resentment. Tried to remind himself how much he loved his family, how important they were to him. He tried to hold in his mind all the memories of joyful holidays, the precious times together with his siblings and parents. And he tried very, very hard not to do anything that might ruin it.

But January third could not come fucking fast enough to suit him.

The sun set before five p.m. now not that the sun was ever seen in the dead of winter due to the constant heavy cloud cover. Sasha had returned to the hut from his keeper duties a few minutes ago and, after a quick hello, went straight to his room, "To do some paperwork."

Charlie ground his teeth in frustration. He wanted to drag him back out to the common area and make Sasha keep him company. Better yet, he wanted to hide out from his family in his room with him.

"Merlin's beard! I never knew dragons had hollow bones," his father rambled, looking up from his book and peering over his spectacles. "Did you know that, Charlie?"

"Yeah, Dad. I know," Charlie replied, suppressing the urge to grumble. *I've known since I was seven. It's my fucking job to know. They couldn't fly otherwise.*

"Of course he knows, Arthur," his mother scolded, echoing his thoughts in her own way. "Now, dear, where do you keep your milk? I thought I'd make a custard tonight."

"Don't have any, Mum," Charlie answered, straining to keep the snappishness from his voice. *You've been here over a week and snooped in every nook and cranny already. You would've found it by now.* "Sorry."

"None at all?" Molly sighed, clearly disappointed. "Oh, dear. I'd hoped you were hiding it."

"Sorry," he repeated, feeling supremely grumpy. "There isn't a dairy anywhere nearby."

Molly nodded and sighed again. "Your mutton stew's been lovely, dear. It's just that we've had it every night, and..."

"I think I'll have a shower," Charlie announced, abruptly jumping to his feet. He knew better than to give voice to his thoughts *if you don't like it, you can leave!* and chose to redirect his energy into something harmless. He forced himself to ignore the startled looks on his parents' faces as he marched toward the corridor at the rear of the hut.

A thick wall separated the two little dorm rooms and a shared bath from the rest of the hut. Charlie'd always assumed it was because they were a more recent addition, the personal spaces tacked on as an afterthought. The wall offered a bit more privacy, separating the more intimate living quarters from the larger common area. He shoed his little sister out of his room, smothering a flare of resentment that she'd been hiding from their parents just like Sasha, then strode into the bathroom.

He willed the warm water to relax him to no avail. He tried to relieve some of the frustration in a more direct, manual fashion, but it was no use. He simply couldn't wank while he could hear his mother's voice above the noise of the water. *Why the bloody hell is she still talking? What in Merlin's name is there left to say?*

He took his foul mood out on himself in another way, scrubbing his skin with the sort of vigor he'd prefer to employ while shoving everyone out the door. By the time he shut off the water several long minutes later, his flesh was glowing a bright pink.

Without the noise of the water, the hut was startlingly quiet. He noticed the difference immediately and assumed something was wrong with his hearing. Yet even after shaking his head and clearing his ears with his fingers, for some reason, the hut remained silent. Were they all napping? Had they gone out? Was something more nefarious going on? Wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, he crept toward his room, past Sasha's, intending to dress quickly and investigate.

Sasha looked up in the same instant Charlie looked in the open door of his room. Charlie froze, pinned for a moment by his intense stare. Then he straightened, meeting his gaze with one of his own, feeling his prick stir in response. Here he was, standing almost naked before this man he felt madly attracted to. It was so tempting to throw all caution to the wind! Fuck the patient waiting until they "got to know each other better!" Fuck hiding this from his parents! *Fuck me, damn it!*

A small, wry smile broke onto Sasha's face as he read Charlie's mind. *Esho net,*" he whispered in Russian *Not yet* then dropped his eyes back to his observation log.

Charlie couldn't decide whether to cry or punch a hole in the wall. He'd heard that phrase innumerable times over the past few months and was sick to death of it. Snarling like a Horntail inside, he went to his room to pout. He didn't bother turning on the light, preferring to smolder in the darkness, and furiously threw his towel onto the bed. Was he so easily resisted, then? Did he present no temptation at all? Why was Sasha always saying no?

He stood there, naked and fuming, until he shivered. Sighing and resigning himself to being miserable but slightly warmer, he bent down and opened his trunk to fish out some clothes.

"So dark in here..."

With no warning, Charlie was blinded by the brilliance of a light turning on an instant later. He spun around, lunging for his towel, scrambling to wrap it around himself.

"MUM!" he snarled.

Molly smirked, looking him in the eye as she bustled inside. "I only washed that bum for how many years?" she grumbled. "You think I don't remember what it looks like?"

"Don't you knock?" he growled. How many people had to see him naked yet totally disregard the view today?

"What are you doing here in the dark?" she countered almost accusatorially.

Charlie wasn't about to answer that question.

"Here you go, love," she said, sighing expansively and foisting a stack of neatly folded and fresh-smelling clothes at him.

"Thanks," he grumbled. "You didn't have to do this," he added scoldingly *I really wish you hadn't, in fact. I can take care of myself! Stop treating me like a child!*

"Put them away where they belong, Charlie," she directed him, giving him the infamous hairy-Molly-eye. "Bad enough you let all your dirty things pile up on the floor like that."

"I will, Mum," he snapped.

Molly fished something out from under her arm. "Oh, and I found these in with your clothes. They must've fallen into the wash by mistake. They're too big to be yours, love, aren't they? I suppose they must be Sasha's."

He recognized them immediately, of course. Charlie thought he might be ill, seeing Sasha's underwear in his mother's hands. "Ah, Mum, you see how we're total slobs around here..." he stammered, praying she'd buy it. Or that the floor would open up and swallow him whole. He found the latter option to be preferable, actually.

"That's for certain," she snorted. "No matter, I'm sure he'll appreciate clean pants as much as the next fellow." And then she bustled out. "Sasha, dear, I think I've got something of yours!" she called, toddling down the corridor.

Mortified beyond words, Charlie crashed onto his bed and buried his head under his pillow.

~ * ~

"Ah, Charlie, this is magnificent!" Arthur murmured, gazing up at a crystalline black sky, the stars making sharp points.

It was the rarest of things, actually. The storm that had been fretting and fussing for the past week had blown itself out, and the blizzard conditions had abated for a few precious hours. Charlie and his father had stepped out of the hut for a few moments, braving the sub-arctic temperature to take advantage of the view on this, the last night before the Burrow's denizens would return to where they belonged.

"I see now why you always say it's so beautiful up here in your letters," Arthur continued. "Frankly, I was worried you've been putting on a brave face for us."

"I love it here, Dad," Charlie insisted. The little valley that housed keeper hut number eight *his* valley looked preternaturally beautiful that evening. Starlight and snow-glow shared the same ghostly, indescribable hue, the edges crisp and hard against the soft black velvet of the night as they all twinkled at each other.

"Yes. I can see that now," Arthur said, his voice warm and fatherly.

Charlie watched as a meteor streaked across the sky, enduring its annihilation in blessed silence. *What a lucky way to go.*

"Now, before I leave, there's the other little matter," Arthur said. "Have you got anything to report, son?"

Charlie marveled at his father's abrupt change of manner, switching from doting parent to covert operator in a flash. It was hard to believe the often bumbling man who couldn't help himself from blathering inanely all week long was one of the most trusted members of an espionage ring. He couldn't decide which it said more about his father's devious level of cunning or the organization's dubious efficacy.

"Not much, I'm afraid," Charlie replied.

Arthur nodded. "Dumbledore said it might be a long shot," he mused aloud.

Charlie had been over the moon when Dumbledore had offered to write him a glowing recommendation to accompany his application to work at Ridgebit Reservation here in Romania. The old man had smiled and suggested that as his name carried a bit of weight, he'd be pleased to throw it around on Charlie's behalf. Then, when he'd gotten the job, Charlie'd been congratulated with an eye-twinkling pat on the back.

"Now, I wonder if I might ask of you the smallest of favors in return," Dumbledore had murmured smilingly.

And just like that, Charlie had been recruited into Dumbledore's information-gathering network. He hadn't minded, really. He'd been so pleased to have been handed his dream job, thanks to Dumbledore, that he was more than willing to repay him any way he asked. He was also happy to support the effort to fight against whatever Dark powers might still be lurking about. He trusted and respected the old man, just like his father did.

"Nobody's heard a thing about a very large snake,"¹ Charlie continued. Over the past autumn, he'd recruited Sasha to help him interrogate the denizens of a few pubs in some remote Albanian forest villages, since he didn't really know where he was going, nor spoke the language at all. He'd told his friend he was just doing a favor for an old professor who liked collecting folk tales about animals acting strangely, which was mostly true, he reckoned. They'd popped into the villages just for the evening, Apparating back to the hut afterward, having enjoyed a few beers for their trouble.

Charlie's father sniffed. "Not surprised the trail's gone cold by now. If he was ever there to begin with."

"Who's 'he?'" Charlie asked.

Arthur looked at him for a very long moment before answering. "You-Know-Who, Charlie," he said softly, and Charlie felt his gut clench in shocked fear. "Dumbledore's got it in his head that he spent some time in Albania."

"B-before he died?" Charlie stammered, still stunned by his father's revelation. Years of childhood terror, of nightmares long buried over the ensuing decade, rushed to the surface of his consciousness. *Must be mistaken. Can't be possible... notnow?*

Arthur hesitated, then reluctantly shook his head. "Dumbledore doesn't think he's completely dead, son." He turned back to gaze at the stars. "Thinks he might be hiding out somewhere, biding his time. And now that Harry's started Hogwarts..."

Charlie trembled with both cold and fear. "Th-there was an odd story, actually... about a bear. One old sod told me it'd gone on several flock-killing rampages while avoiding capture for a few years. People claimed it could disappear into thin air. Terrorized several Muggle villages in the meantime. But this bear was purportedly cornered and killed by a team of hunters four years ago. Besides that, there was nothing."²

His father considered this for a few moments. "Well, that's something, anyway. Might be significant, might not." He fished around in his pocket and handed Charlie a small crystal vial. "Get the story nice and clear in your head as many details as you can recall then put it in here tonight you know how to do that, don't you?" After Charlie nodded and took the memory collection vial, he continued, "I'll get it to Dumbledore. And then we'll see what he wants us to do next."

Arthur turned to look at the stars once more. "Well, your mum'll have my hide if we freeze to death out here," he said jauntily, back to his other self. "Best to head in before she gets out of sorts, eh, Charlie?"

Charlie nodded. "I'll be in in a minute, Dad."

He watched his father tromp back inside the hut. Then he looked out toward the southwest, toward Albania, far beyond the other side of the craggy peaks in the distance. His turbulent mind was exactly the opposite of the peaceful vista.

You-Know-Who? Here? Now?

1. According to [Harry Potter Wiki](#), it is unknown when Voldemort acquired Nagini as his familiar, but she was with him when he returned to England in 1994 (Goblet of Fire). It is my invention that Dumbledore knows of her existence at this point, as well as Voldemort's rumored Albanian location, and has set Charlie the task of gathering information about the snake.

2. According to [Harry Potter Wiki/JKR](#), what was left of Voldemort after his attempted murder of baby Harry spent his exile from Britain after the First Wizarding War in Albania, taking possession of various snakes. As you can see, I tweaked this idea a bit.

Chapter 3 - May 1992

Chapter 3 of 28

Norbert arrives in Romania, and a new door is opened.

Chapter 3

May 1992

* * *

"We could send Norbert to him. Charlie can take care of him and then put him back in the wild!"*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Chapter 14*

* * *

The setting sun burnished the low, grey clouds, tinting them with vivid red, orange, and apricot hues. The spring night to come promised to be mild, at least compared to previous wintery ones. So mild that Charlie'd worked up a sweat and shed his jumper as he'd mucked out Norbert's improvised stable while Sasha had filled the low trough with brandy. Norbert lay on his side nearby, staring dazedly at them. While Norwegian Ridgebacks weren't particularly fond of human flesh, they were as aggressive as they were precociously sparky.¹ Thankfully, even though the three-week-old beast was the size of a very large hog, he was yet small enough to be somewhat easily Stunned.

Charlie and Sasha had fashioned this enclosure to house the little Ridgie for the next year or so. Both the fencing and the shelter were made of flame-resistant stone, quickly conjured together in such a manner as to be easily enlarged to accommodate a growing dragon. Charlie and Sasha had set Norbert up in a protected area close by their keepers' hut in order to decrease the chances other dragons would go after an unparented juvenile for an easy snack.

A small group of Charlie's acquaintances had delivered Norbert to Ridgebit Reserve a little over a week ago. He'd met them as a student during his frequent visits to the *Ddraig Cymry*² Reservation in Wales and developed friendly working relationships with the staff there. The connections had been further cultivated since he'd begun work here, and the Welsh and Romanian reservations were now working cooperatively on an experimental hatchling-fostering program, trying to improve the genetic diversity of both their Welsh Green herds.

Normally, an immature dragon would spend its first year in the lair with its parents and siblings until reaching fledgling status at about a year old, whereupon its parents would teach it how to hunt. Until then, Mummy and Daddy would regularly bring kills back to the nest for their babies to peck at. Only once the dragonlets had achieved flight would they finally be nosed out of the lair for good.

Since their reservation didn't have a breeding pair of Norwegian Ridgebacks this year the only pair they did have had clutched last year the keepers as a group decided they didn't want to risk attempting the new fostering experiment with Norbert. As aggressive as Ridgies were, they were afraid the almost-fledglings would tear the much younger and smaller Norbert apart between them (they'd already killed the runt of the clutch last January), assuming the mother even accepted him into the nest in the first place.

Which left Charlie Weasley to play foster mum to "little" Norbert for the next twelve months, seeing as it was his old friend they were doing a favor for. Ghenadie Negrescu, the Head Keeper at Ridgebit, had made Norbert Charlie's personal responsibility above and beyond his regular duties, with instructions to keep careful records of everything he did and observed in the process. Sasha had gamely volunteered to help, and nearly all of the other keepers had popped by over the past few days to take a look. Most of them had shaken their heads in varying degrees of amusement, skepticism, and befuddlement at the project.

Leave it to Hagrid... Charlie thought with a quiet, wry chuckle. How the hell Hagrid had come into possession of a Ridgie egg was a baffling question. And one with no promise of an explanation on the horizon, either, as Hagrid was keeping decidedly mum on the subject. *Some blasted Scandinavian poacher, no doubt*, Charlie grumbled to himself.

When an unfamiliar snowy owl had arrived at keeper hut number eight almost two weeks ago with a letter from his youngest brother, he'd been surprised and a little worried. He was glad to read little Ron was making friends with Hagrid he missed the big fellow (whom he considered a friend first and an adult staff member of Hogwarts a distant second) and wondered if he'd been a bit lonely this year without his frequent company.

It had also been interesting to note that Ron had borrowed this particular owl from no less a personage than Harry Potter. His mum had already mentioned in her letters how Harry had taken quite a shine to little Ron, but Charlie had learned to temper most of what his mother gushed about regarding any of his siblings. After all, the way she talked, Percy was practically Merlin's second coming. And while Ron's apparent predilection for landing himself in trouble's way looked like it might rival Fred and George's some day, Charlie'd put aside those concerns and done what he could to help his little brother and old mate out of this current legality-skirting scrape.

Charlie's Welsh keeper friends had only just left that morning, returning to Wales with two newly-hatched Greens in the same clever transport crates suspended from chains dangling between their brooms they'd used to bring Norbert over. As nice as it had been to see them again, catching up on home-country news and sharing tales of dragon-related adventure that only fellow keepers could truly appreciate, Charlie was looking forward to a quiet hut tonight after having hosted guests for the past week.

Checking one last time on Norbert's vital signs before they left, Charlie paused long enough to vigorously scratch the little guy's haunches, careful to keep clear of the razor-sharp dorsal ridges. The poor fellow was sloughing his skin again, and judging by how often he could be seen rubbing himself against the stonework, the process must've itched like hell. Then he quickly hopped the fence after Sasha and cast a Rennervate on Norbert, who growled and snorted smokily in response.

"Why didn't you take a job on one of the British reservations?" Sasha asked as they made their way back to the hut.

"The MacFustys don't care much for outside help," Charlie explained. The Scotsmen and -women were understandably proud of the impressive Hebridean Black population they maintained, but they only liked to share them with the rest of the wizarding world on their own terms. And they certainly didn't deign to employ anyone outside their own clan.

"And I grew up with *Ddraig Cymry* practically in my own backyard. Made my dad take me loads of times when I was little. I was the youngest Junior Keeper on record there," Charlie boasted jokingly, and Sasha laughed with understanding. Every dragon reservation on the planet offered the same little parchment certificates and tin badges to every kid who dropped by the visitors' center. "But when it came time to make a decision, I reckoned I wanted to see more of the world, you know?"

Sasha nodded, picking up on what it was Charlie hadn't said. Like Sasha, Charlie had longed for bigger, better things than he'd had whilst growing up. Not in a material sense, but rather relating to opportunities for adventure and personal fulfillment. Much as he loved his family, it felt good to have the better part of a continent between him and them. Here, he had the freedom to be the person he wanted to be, unencumbered by smothering parental assumptions and expectations. He *liked* being on his own, working a demanding and risky job, facing the physical and mental challenges of keeping dragons.

Similarly, Charlie knew Sasha could have applied to work in one of the Russian reservations but had chosen not to. Only his choice to leave his homeland had rather larger ramifications his parents were keepers themselves in the Caucasus, and he'd been raised on the rez³ there. Sasha had turned his back on his childhood home in more ways than Charlie had done.

"Plus, Ridgebit Reserve is far more prestigious," Charlie added a little proudly. "I figured I'd try for the best first and consider *Cymry* a fallback. What about you?"

Sasha shrugged. "Figured Romanian was easier to learn than Chinese."

Charlie bit back a little smile, immensely glad Sasha hadn't wound up on one of the several Himalayan reservations instead of here *How lucky can I get?*

Several of the other keepers spoke a smattering of English, but none were as fluent as Sasha. It was the primary reason they'd been partnered by the Head Keeper, after all. Sasha had been teaching him both some Russian and Romanian over the past winter, and Charlie had been trying to use Romanian as often as possible, considering the majority of reservation business was conducted in that language. He'd mastered several key dragon-oriented phrases (*You are on fire*, and *Watch out for that pile of dragon shit*, were some of the earliest ones) as well as a few choice swear words.

Once inside the hut, Charlie lit the stove and began heating up the ubiquitous mutton stew and chewy bread every keeper subsisted on, for they shared the reservation flock with the resident dragons. He'd found it so delicious his first week on the rez. By November, he'd had to force himself to choke it down, he'd been so sick of it. Now, it was just what he ate, in the same way that water was what he drank and air was what he breathed.

As twilight deepened, the glow of the firelight grew. They seldom bothered with lighting the wall sconces unless they had a lot of recordkeeping to do. The furnishings in the common area were rudimentary: a table and benches for eating and paperwork, the med cot in the first aid nook, and storage lockers for both scientific and survival gear. Their dormitory rooms were so small that the bed, chair, trunk, and small table inside each left little room for anything else.

But what the hut lacked in size and luxury it made up for in coziness. While blizzards had roared outside all winter long, he and Sasha had holed up within, snug and dry. With the fire lit and the lights on, it was a bright and cheery place, the worn wood and stone appointments lending a charming effect that reminded Charlie of the best parts of growing up in the Burrow. And they'd lately fallen into the habit of transfiguring one of the table's benches into a comfortable old sofa for a few hours after dinner, into which they'd slouch down and relax at least as much as the state of things between them would allow for relaxation.

For Charlie and Sasha had been dancing around their mounting attraction to each other for the past six months, limiting themselves to long conversations in the dark and increasingly frequent snogging sessions in front of the fire. Frustratingly for Charlie, these activities were nearly always followed by solitary wanking in the shower or in his tiny dormitory. He'd waited patiently for months for Sasha to tell him they were ready, that it was time to take things to another level.

And now that they were finally alone again, just the two of them, Charlie was determined the wait was over. He'd make sure something more would happen between them tonight.

They ate their dinner with little speaking. The meal was neither rushed nor artificially drawn out, and the quiet silences that fell between them were familiar and companionable. Charlie bided his time, offering to do the washing up even though he'd done the cooking, too. He felt Sasha's eyes on him as he worked, causing a delightful tension begin to build inside him.

Charlie could honestly say he was glad Sasha had insisted on waiting. He knew beyond all doubt it had been the right decision. Or at least he could recognize it was true in hindsight Charlie granted it had been quite frustrating in the moment. But they'd followed Sasha's suggestion, spending the winter and spring getting to know each other better. He'd learned about Sasha's history, his opinions about matters profound and mundane, his dreams for the future, and Charlie'd shared his own in turn. He'd come to appreciate Sasha's lively wit, his patience, his unassuming strength and self-assurance. They'd built a trust and respect between them that could now serve as a foundation for something more than an occasional climax of convenience. Charlie didn't know exactly where this thing between them was going, nor was he ready to try to define it. But he was confident it was something significant. Meaningful. And quite possibly life-altering.

All that waiting and talking and learning had done nothing to quell his physical attraction, either. Had intensified it, in fact. In Charlie's eyes, Sasha's dark good looks had grown from ruggedly handsome to stunningly gorgeous. His powerful body had morphed from admirably fit to bloody magnificent. And the low, rumbling purr of his voice was nothing less than drop dead sexy.

With a flick of his fingers, Charlie sent the dishes floating back onto the shelf and turned to face Sasha. This time, instead of resuming their usual seats on the transfigured sofa and staring dazedly into the fire, Charlie took Sasha's hand and led him to his room. Without a word or moment of hesitation, Sasha followed.

Standing at the foot of his little bed, they silently undressed each other while they kissed in the dark. Charlie's fingertips tingled with excitement, efficiently working the buttons of Sasha's shirt, the fastenings of his trousers. As each article of clothing was opened, he slid his hands inside, grazing warm, firm flesh. Concurrently, Sasha's broad, strong hands worked their special magic on Charlie, stoking his anticipation with each firm caress. He imagined the air between them began to glow with their shared heat, their mingled desire.

Naked now, Sasha gently pushed him down to sit on the edge of the bed, then climbed up behind him. His hands on Charlie's chest, arms, and back felt warm and wonderful, both soothing and stimulating at once. Charlie leaned his head back, twisting to face him, and kissed him deeply, tasting him. He willingly surrendered the lead now that Sasha had finally agreed to give him what he wanted, whatever Sasha imagined that happened to be. Charlie trusted him to know better than he did himself.

Sasha edged backward, then pulled Charlie's shoulders until he lay back on the bed, his legs still hanging off the edge. His eyes had perfectly adjusted to the room's dimness now, and Charlie looked up at him from his new vantage point: his head between Sasha's knees as he sat back on his heels, smiling down at him. Then Sasha bent to kiss him, their heads twisting sideways to meet at a more agreeable angle. Charlie's nose was filled with the homey, mildly spicy scent of him.

Sasha kissed his way down his throat and chest, hovering above him on his hands and knees. His tongue toyed with his nipples, and Charlie lifted his head off the bed slightly to plant similar open-mouth kisses on Sasha's torso. Sasha played with his navel, dipping first the tip of his nose, then the tip of his tongue inside. Charlie copied him even as he chuckled a little at the ticklish sensation.

Sasha kissed along the trail of ginger hair that led from his navel to his prick, and the picture of what was about to happen became clearer to Charlie. He did the same, firmly establishing the you-lead-I'll-follow precedent, silently agreeing to the terms. He felt no qualms about what was expected of him, only eagerness to participate.

He wanted this. He'd wanted it for a very long time now.

Sasha showed him by example how to curl his hand around his long, dark cock, stroking softly with a loose grip. Like him, Charlie let his hot breath waft over the sensitive flesh, open-mouthed and tantalizing. A warm, wet tongue ghosted across the shallow slit at the tip of his penis, and doing the same, Charlie tasted a droplet of the faintly sweet, briny essence of his first lover.

Sasha sank down onto him, into him, and Charlie nearly came undone. The heavenly warm, soft welcome of Sasha's mouth was dizzying, the sensations of friction and suction so exquisitely disorienting that Charlie grunted with the effort it took to claw his way back to a modicum of self-control.

"Don't," Sasha whispered, pulling off of him with a long suck that made Charlie's toes curl. "Don't hold yourself back, Charlie," he said as if speaking into his cock, licking and kissing it tenderly. "You have nothing to prove. No judgment. Just feel good."

Sasha plunged downward again, and Charlie felt the head of his cock bump the back of his throat. He whimpered as he sought more, filling himself to overflowing with his lover, with his desire, with their mutual pleasure. Sharing what he felt. Giving what he received. His arms wrapped around Sasha's iron thighs, his hands gripping his firm arse, pulling him in deeper, closer.

He only wanted this. He only wanted more.

An explosion shuddered through Charlie, the likes of which he'd never felt before. Fountains of pleasure gushed forth, like he was hemorrhaging joy from every inch of his being. His consciousness melted away and his soul sang as if liberated from a lifetime of imprisonment, soaring upward and outward as if attempting to permeate the universe all at once.

"*Bozhe moy!*"⁴ Sasha cried out as he pumped into him. Charlie felt his partner's deep voice rumbling from his chest, absorbing the vibrations with his body. He opened his throat as wide as possible and drank in Sasha's pleasure, which only served to amplify and perpetuate his own.

Giddily intoxicated by his first taste of passion, Charlie lay limp and exhausted, used up and wrung out, utterly blissful. Sasha shifted himself around and lay next to Charlie, guiding him up fully onto the bed until their bodies aligned to enable the maximum amount of contact. Shortly thereafter, warm and relaxed, Charlie drifted off to sleep in his lover's arms.

1- Details from *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. This book is lovely and funny but, like the rest of canon, thin on facts when it comes to dragons. (Pretty much all of canon's input is summed up [right here](#).) In regards to these creatures, I stuck to canon wherever possible, but I've invented quite a bit of my dragon biology, basing it on an amalgam of dinosaur, bird (primarily raptor), and lizard physiology and behaviors.

2- *Ddraig Cymry* = "Welsh Dragon" in Welsh. JKR invented the Welsh, Scottish, Swedish and Romanian preserves' existences but left them nameless; the names are my invention. She also alluded to the existence of other preserves, and I have specifically located a few of them to fit my story.

3- "The rez" is a common phrase heard here in my neck of the woods: Arizona, USA. It refers to the various lands ("reservations") designated for occupation by Native Americans here. Charlie and Co. have adapted it for their own use in my story.

4- *Bozhe moy!* = "My God!" According to [this website](#).

Chapter 4 - August 1993

Chapter 4 of 28

Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun, but Charlie spends a hot desert night pondering a very important question.

Chapter 4

August 1993

"We will be spending the gold on a summer holiday in Egypt, where our eldest son, Bill, works as a curse breaker for Gringotts Wizarding Bank." *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Chapter 1*

Night had fallen, but the sun's setting had done nothing to abate the sweltering heat. The air was heavy and rank with the stagnation of eons, the streets encrusted with the filth of ages. Charlie's lightweight cotton tunic generously proportioned so as to facilitate capturing apparently nonexistent breezes clung to his sweaty skin. He followed Bill through narrow streets that were little more than footpaths there wasn't even room for the two young men to walk abreast and felt the day's scorching heat radiating from the walls, baking him as effectively as any oven.

Old Rhakotis not the misnamed Muggle tourist facsimile that was several hundred years younger was a profoundly ancient section of Alexandria reserved for wizardkind.

When Alexander the Great had decided to build his shining city atop a dilapidated little magical fishing village already centuries old by the time vain Alex had trotted in the salty denizens charmed themselves into a secluded quarter rather than dissolving into the sea or pulling up stakes and moving on. For centuries now, magical folk had perversely clung to this sun-baked, storm-ravaged slip of Mediterranean shoreline.

Why the misguided fools had done so was beyond Charlie. Sultry, stifling Rhakotis was a far cry from his cool, clear Romanian mountaintop, that was for certain. When he'd gotten the owl from his mother informing him of the family's *Daily Prophet* sweepstakes win and requesting his participation in the family holiday in flippin'*Egypt* in bloody *August*, for Merlin's sake his first instinct was to come up with a plausible excuse not to go. But picturing his mother's crestfallen face when she read the rejection had brought him to his senses and, ashamed, he'd written right off with his acceptance.

He'd begged off just eight days from work, however instead of the month the rest of the Weasleys had planned on and in a decidedly cunning move for a Gryffindor (but par for the course for a Weasley brother), had informed his mother he'd only gotten six. These two days alone with Bill before the rest of the family arrived were his own special treat a reward of sorts for putting up with the mob for another week. The two brothers hadn't spent any significant time alone together since Bill had finished school four years ago. But before that, they'd been very close, and the chance to rekindle a bit of that connection was what had ultimately motivated Charlie to come to Egypt.

They were forced to duck into a decrepit doorway in order to let a rather morose-looking donkey laden with yet another of his miserable life's innumerable burdens pass by on the street. An old witch or quite possibly a hag, Charlie allowed mumbled to herself as she dragged the poor beast along behind her. But instead of leaving as soon as the way was clear, Bill had grabbed his arm and pulled him further inside.

"The samak makly here's nearly as good as fish and chips back home," Bill assured him. "C'mon," he laughed when Charlie looked dubious, hooking his slender arm around Charlie's broad shoulders and leading him to an empty table.

"I assume you've received your monthly missive from Percy?" Bill asked teasingly after he'd ordered beer and food for them both.

Charlie rolled his eyes. Ever since they'd left school, Percy had taken up the duty of sending off pompous reports about the goings on at Hogwarts to his elder brothers. They came like clockwork on the first of the month. *Perce must be gearing up for a career in the Ministry already!*"I never thought I'd meet someone who bragged about Perce more than Mum does, but he's proven me wrong," he groaned.

"So the little berk's gone and made Head Boy," Bill mused.

"Like some other prat who shall remain nameless," Charlie needled him.

"That leaves you standing out like a sore thumb, innit?" Bill countered.

"I see a pattern developing, true," Charlie agreed. "First, swotty old you makes Head; next, I fail miserably to shake the aura of coolness about me and manage to avoid the disgrace; then Perce somehow convinces the faculty of Hogwarts that his arse-kissing acumen could possibly reach new heights. No way in hell George or Fred will manage to make prefect, much less Head, *presuming* they don't get expelled or accidentally kill themselves in the meantime I think we can agree on that bit. So I suppose that leaves it up to Ron and Ginny to test my theory of git-ness afflicting alternating siblings of our generation."

Bill merely chuckled. Their beers arrived and, still recovering from the hellish walk there, Charlie gratefully gulped it down.

"Mum must be over the moon about it, though," Charlie added, licking the foam from his upper lip.

Bill chuckled knowingly. "I remember when Perce used to be fun."

"And then he turned two," Charlie quipped.

The two brothers laughed, then a genial quiet fell between them.

"Heard any more about how Ginny's faring?" Bill asked softly after a few moments passed²

Charlie shook his head. "Dad simply says she's feeling a bit under the weather, and I've only got the one letter from George right after the end of term, which frankly left me with more questions than answers." George had been the only one of the family who'd told him anything close to the whole truth about the nasty mess Ginny had gotten herself embroiled in last year at school. Charlie was operating under the assumption that the basilisk bit was nothing but exaggerated rumor, but the rest of it was blood-chilling enough.

Bill nodded thoughtfully as the waiter delivered their food. "I suppose we'll find out for ourselves soon enough," he sighed.

Charlie sampled a bite, deciding the fish was very tasty. Then again, the fact he was eating something other than mutton stew might've simply put his palate on overload. "I was a bit shocked they were bringing her along, actually," he said, "considering it's so soon after all that awful business."

Bill swallowed his bite, chasing it down with a swig of beer. "She's the whole reason they're coming, berk," he said. When Charlie only lifted his eyebrows in curiosity, he explained, "There's a bloke here... a Healer of the mind, supposedly... who claims to be able to treat victims of possession. Sounds like a load of bollocks to me, but Dumbledore says he's on the up and up. He rigged the *Prophet's* galleon draw this year for Dad to win, and Hogwarts is ponying up the cash for the rest of the expense of treating her."

"I'll be jinxed," Charlie muttered, shaking his head in mild disbelief. "Do the others know? About any of it?"

Bill shrugged. "Hard to say. If Mum and Dad haven't told them, I reckon most of 'em are clever enough to suss out some form of the truth. I'm to take the lot of you around to see all the sights while Ginny sees this Mr. Mentu-Hotep fellow."

Charlie chewed another bite as he pondered this news. "George said the diary was some sort of memory storage device. But I don't understand how a memory of a person even one of You-Know-Who could be so powerful. I always thought of them as fragile little things. I mean, you have to take such care of them once they're collected."

Bill shrugged again. "Probably wasn't just a memory. Considering who likely created it, the diary-thing was bound to be rotten with Dark magic. Our poor little Ginny was just in the wrong place at the wrong time and got caught up in it, I suppose."

"Got in Mr. Malfoy's way, you mean," Charlie grumbled. The Weasley family, if not the wizarding world at large, knew precisely how the cursed diary had come into Ginny's possession. George's livid resentment about that part of the tale had come through loud and clear in his letter, even though the swear words he'd written had been blotchy with ink and nearly illegible.

Bill snorted in disgust. Their father had never discussed the matter with his children, but every one of them knew of the enmity between Arthur Weasley and Lucius Malfoy. Neither Bill nor Charlie had any interest in rehashing the details of such an old feud, however. "Heard anything more about bizarre animals in the forests of Albania?" he asked, only slightly teasing.

Charlie arched his eyebrows again. "How d'you know about that?" *Has Dad been blabbing it about? It's supposed to be a secret mission, for Merlin's sake!*

Bill smirked. "You're not the only one who owes his dream job to Dumbledore," he muttered³

Blimey! The old codger's got us all in his pocket! Charlie harrumphed. And seeing as it was Bill who was asking, he replied, "Actually, there was another string of bear

attacks this spring. Only this time, the beast seemed to be deliberately going after humans rather than livestock. Damndest thing, really." He paused, thinking. "You don't imagine they could be connected, do you? The diary getting activated by Ginny and another bloodthirsty bear coincidentally rampaging where Dumbledore thinks You-Know-Who might've spent some time hiding out?"

Bill gave a minute shrug and tiny shake of his head, lost in thought.

Charlie wondered if Bill was thinking back, like he was, to those dark, fearful days when they were little, when You-Know-Who had risen to power. How their mother had taught them to play Hide and Seek, insisting that there was only ever one hiding place: behind the false wall of the back of the hearth. The way to win the game, she'd explained, was to wait as quietly as possible until she came fetch them, no matter how long it took or what noises they heard beyond.

The older they'd gotten, the more often Mum had insisted on playing the game. The last time had been in the early autumn right after Ginny was born. Charlie could still feel the claustrophobic press of all seven of them stuffed into the cramped space. Bill had held the baby, and Charlie's job had been to soothe the usually tearful Ron, who was barely out of babyhood himself, holding his hand and whispering reminders of the treats that would await them afterward if they were patient and quiet. Time spent in the hiding place was the only time Fred, George, and Percy ever set aside their otherwise constant bickering.

None of them ever spoke of those times. Charlie reckoned it was likely the others were too young to remember it very clearly. Yet, judging from their meek cooperation at the time, they'd all sensed there was something more to the game than Mum was letting on. He wondered if he and Bill alone had ever pieced together the real purpose of the game or whom it was that had truly been seeking them.

Could it really be him again? Charlie wondered. Even as an eight-year-old kid, it had seemed preposterous that the evil wizard every adult feared to so much a name aloud could be destroyed by some odd ricochet of spell, leaving his toddler victim with nothing but a scar. No body was ever found. No reliable witnesses' reports existed. But so pervasive was the terror of You-Know-Who, he supposed, that people were willing to believe anything, so long as it meant they were finally free.

And if it is him, why is he hiding in backwoods Albania, bewitching animals to terrorize Muggles? he further wondered. *Is he doing all this because he has to, or because he wants to? Either way, why?*

"So, you enjoying life in Romania as much as I'm enjoying Egypt?" Bill chuckled, seemingly eager to change the subject again.

"Oh, yeah," Charlie agreed equally eagerly. "All six Fireball eggs hatched this spring... *six!* That's a reservation record, mind you. And Norbert that's the Ridgie of Hagrid's, you remember you wouldn't *believe* how big he's gotten. And he's only half-grown! But he's bigger than any other Ridgie any of us have ever seen. Ghenadie that's my boss he wonders if Norbert's actually a hybrid of some sort. Maybe got some Ironbelly in 'im..."

"Merlin, don't you ever give it a rest?" Bill laughed. "You're nearly as bad as Percy!" When Charlie smirked, he continued, "I was talking about *bachelorhood*. Not your damn job."

Charlie rolled his eyes and gave his nosy brother a half-smile. "It's nice to finally be out from under all the watchful eyes, sure," he said carefully.

Bill chuckled wickedly. "Go on, then. You're about to tell me all about the especial charms of Romanian witches..."

"Sod off," Charlie grumbled, offering his older brother a light kick on the shin. The room suddenly felt very hot, despite the refreshing beer and light breezes from the ceiling fans. "I'm not tellin' you a bloody thing."

The wicked chuckle returned. "Such a gentleman, are you?" Bill paid for their meal with a few exotic-looking coins, waving Charlie off when he attempted to contribute his share. As they rose from their table, Bill wound his arm around Charlie's shoulders again and murmured, "I've got something in mind for us tonight that ought to loosen that tongue."

Bill dragged Charlie through the doorway, and the brothers braved the blast furnace that was Rhakotis in August once more.

"Bloody hell, Bill! How do you stand this heat?" Charlie whinged as they wound their way through ancient, night-black pathways that more closely resembled warrens than public thoroughfares. He could barely breathe for it. He pictured himself instead plunging face first into a snowdrift to try to psych himself out of the current kiln-like misery.

Another wicked chuckle. "One attempts to spend the majority of one's free time unclothed, little bro. I highly recommend working up a nice sweat doing something pleasant, then just lying back and letting a breeze cool you."

His brother's laughing leer was beginning to make Charlie a bit nervous. *Just what is it he's driving at tonight?* he wondered. He hadn't remembered Bill particularly favoring bawdy humor before this.

"How is it you manage not to freeze your bollocks up there on your mountaintop, eh, Charlie?" Bill needled him further. "Snuggle up under a pile of blankets and curl yourself around a nice, warm bum, holdin' on to a pair of soft..."

"Enough fishing, Bill," Charlie warned him only to hear the grating laugh again.

"Come on, Charlie! It's me!" Bill laughed, punching him in the shoulder. Then he halted before a very dark, thoroughly intimidating edifice. "We're young, unattached, *unsupervised* Weasley men... and the night awaits!" he cried, spreading his arms wide as if to indicate the slummy ruin before them offered temptation of some sort.

Charlie examined the windowless place. Built of mud bricks blackened either by fire or simply the grime of centuries, a single torch flickered weakly beside a massive door. The door was painted with a rather eerie Eye of Horus, and Charlie found it difficult not to think the building was looking right through him. Tearing his gaze away from the unnerving glare, he read the large sign above the door. Of the half dozen languages painted on it, including French, Arabic, and hieroglyphics, "Den of Iniquity" was spelled out in gothic English script.

Bill marched confidently up and rapped on the door, which opened a moment later. Smoke and music poured out into the street from within. Charlie shot a questioning look at his brother, who laughed and dragged him inside.

A short, fat man in a gold-trimmed, white gellabiyah greeted Bill by name, seemingly pleased to see him. They were then escorted to a pair of curved, ornate divans, the cushions of which were so soft they created a sort of suction, holding a body in place. Bill ordered more beer and a shisha, both of which arrived promptly, delivered by two sashaying, scantily clad women.

"Relax, will you?" Bill admonished him, taking a hit from the shisha then passing the hose to Charlie.

"I am relaxed," Charlie protested, though confessed to himself it wasn't exactly true. The way the half-dressed women weaving through the room smiled and batted their eyes at everyone, including him, set him on edge. And Bill's unprecedented nosiness was somewhat alarming, as well. But by the third toke, Charlie noted his color perception had altered, and things began looking rather more rainbow-y than usual. He sank back onto the silk cushions, losing his train of thought for a bit, and enjoyed the floating sensation.

"What is this stuff?" he asked, mildly worried his hair might look the same cacophonous shade of orange as Bill's did at the moment. He consoled himself with the thought that at least there was far less of it on his head than on his brother's; Bill was sporting a ponytail lately. Charlie grinned at the thought of what their mother would say when she saw it.

"It's called Eye of Iris," Bill replied, his voice sounding dozy and on the verge of a giggle. "Are you flying yet?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes, I think I might be."

"Tether yourself here for a bit, then," Bill said, leaping to his feet. "I'll be right back."

Charlie watched his brother lose himself in the crowd. His eyes scanned the room, unsure of whether he was looking through refraction grating or a kaleidoscope. The curtains that seemed to hang from every nook and cranny looked like soft, inviting waves, beckoning him to dive in and get lost inside them. How could he have thought they'd looked tatty and dingy earlier? He took a drink of beer and couldn't believe how amazing it tasted, guzzling it like a parched man.

Right. That's enough of this stuff for me, he thought, resolving to stay away from the shisha for the rest of the trip. *Erm, make that visit,* he giggled, hopefully to himself. By the time he saw his brother approach, hustling a pair of gorgeous women with him, Charlie reckoned most of the psychedelic effects had worn off, leaving behind a general feeling of contentment and relaxation.

"Charlie, these are my friends, Lilith and Jasmine," Bill introduced them. "They're professional belly dancers," he boasted.

Charlie wrestled his way off the divan cushions and politely stood to welcome the newcomers, wondering if they indeed were "friends" of Bill's and if there was a remote chance those were their real names. One of them smiled prettily at him Jasmine, if he'd sorted the monikers correctly and moved to perch on the divan he'd been sitting on. Lilith and Bill sat on the other divan and instantly commenced canoodling. Not knowing what else to do, Charlie sat beside the other girl.

"How are you finding Rhakotis?" she asked politely, smiling.

"I haven't seen much of it... I've only just arrived today. It's a bit hot, though," he said.

The woman laughed lightly. "This climate must be difficult for your kind. You and your brother are so fair."

"Bill told you we were brothers?" Charlie asked, silently offering her a glass of beer from the pitcher on their low table.

She nodded and, as he poured, said, "He didn't have to, though. The two of you look very alike."

He handed her the glass, and after a quick "Cheers!" they drank. He gave Jasmine a friendly smile, wondering if to someone like her, all ginger Europeans like him and Bill looked alike: so different from the people she saw daily, they attracted attention like gleaming beacons.

Jasmine, on the other hand, stood out not because of her strangeness but for her beauty. Her onyx eyes sparkled as much as her beaded and sequined dancing costume, which was skimpy enough to reveal quite a bit of her rich topaz skin. Her curvaceous figure drew many admiring stares throughout the room. And while Charlie could appreciate her loveliness, it was in a manner similar to the appreciation he'd have for a nice painting or a glorious sunset or a well-made specimen of dragon. He recognized the inherent beauty of her feminine form, found it pleasing to the eye. He felt uplifted by the sort of perfection she evoked, proud on her behalf, as well as flattered to be in her company.

But he felt no desire for her, and he reckoned this set him apart from every other man in the room. While he had no instinct to recoil from her, neither did he have any wish to possess her. He alone seemed immune to her magnetism no distracting flashes of fantasy, no visions of things to do to her or have done to him by her, muddled his head.

Jasmine lightly rested her hand on his. "What are you thinking about?"

Charlie hoped his smile didn't look as awkward as it felt. "If you don't mind me asking, is Jasmine really your name?"

She smiled a little bashfully and looked away. "No, it's really Amunet, but foreign businessmen don't find that as attractive."

"Well, I'm no businessman, but I think it's a fine name," he assured her. "May I call you Amunet?"

She nodded, and instantly, her smile became softer, a little more genuine. "So, Charlie who's not a businessman, what do you do for a living?"

"Dragon keeper," he replied without hesitation, warming to this new subject. His comfort level rose with the prospect of discussing a subject near and dear to his heart.

But Amunet giggled skeptically. "You might be surprised how often I hear that exact answer from businessmen."

Charlie laughed. "If they knew how much unglamorous grunt work the job entails, they might come up with a better alias."

"What other career could be more dashing and adventurous?" she asked, smiling coyly.

"Considering how much time I spend barreling dung and collecting gorge pellets, I reckon just about anything," he quipped.

Amunet shifted closer, her thigh brushing against his. "If it's all muck and drudgery, then why do you do it?" she asked, beginning to sound like she believed him.

"They're such amazing creatures," Charlie gushed, unable to help himself. "So wild and elemental, you know? I can't remember a time when I wasn't fascinated by them. I've always known I wanted to work with dragons."

Amunet ran her hand up and down his arm, her dark eyes gleaming with reflected torchlight. "You must have some interesting stories to tell."

Charlie shrugged uncomfortably her caresses tickled in an irritating way. He hazarded a moment's glance toward Bill, noting things had gotten cozy indeed on the next divan. Lilith was now straddling Bill's lap; only his legs beneath her and his hands groping her arse were visible. "I suppose," he mumbled.

Amunet's gaze had followed his. She pulled her eyes away from the scene, then looked intently at Charlie. Lacing her arm through his, her breasts grazing against him, she murmured directly in his ear, "Perhaps you'd like to take me back to your room and tell me some? I'd love to hear all about the dragons."

Charlie affected a casual reach for the beer pitcher. To his relief, it was empty. "I'll just go get another, shall I?" he announced, gently disengaging himself from Amunet's clutches and heading to the bar.

He'd been there long enough to get the barman's attention when Bill joined him. "There a problem, bro?"

"Not at all," Charlie insisted.

"It's all right if you haven't done it before. She'll understand," Bill assured him under his breath in a voice that was suspiciously confident, his expression dripping with concerned understanding.

Charlie began to wonder if their companions were whores as well as dancers. Had Bill made some sort of arrangement with them? To get him laid!? Charlie chafed at his brother's nerve. "That's not it, and you're making assumptions you oughtn't," he growled.

Bill smiled cockily and his eyebrows shot up with revolting surprise. "Oh, ho, ho! My apologies, little brother!" he cried with a congratulatory clap on Charlie's back that he found supremely irritating, and he roughly shrugged it off.

"Some little Romanian minx caught your eye?" Bill needed him. "Or is it your heart she's got hold of?"

"Merlin's twitchy tits, Bill, will you leave off already?" Charlie huffed.

The bloody infuriating chuckle returned. "No matter, I won't force you to compromise your romantic ethics, if that's the case," Bill oiled with a wink, his fang earring jangling as he ran his fingers through his thick, shoulder-length hair, then tucked it behind his ears once more. Charlie deduced Lilith must've undone the ponytail. "But I'm not under any such enchantment."

"Is everything all right?" Lilith asked in a quiet, sultry voice.

At the same time, Charlie felt Amunet sidle up next to him. The grating music and the stuffy, smoky air in the room combined with the close press of bodies to make him feel trapped and suffocating. Sensing imminent disaster, he felt a strong urge to remove himself from the situation entirely.

As if noticing his discomfort yet completely misinterpreting his motivation, Amunet suggested, "Let's get out of here, Charlie."

Her slender arms lacing about his neck made him think of nothing but Devil's Snare. Charlie swallowed hard. "Actually, I'm afraid I'll have to beg off the rest of the night. I think I got hold of some hummus at dinner that was gone off." He grimaced and rubbed his stomach for effect, hoping to sell it.

Bill smirked at him skeptically. "Well, girls, looks like it's just me, then."

Somewhat surprised to see real disappointment on Amunet's face, Charlie gave her a brief hug and a peck on the cheek. "Maybe we can have our chat about dragons some other time, yeah?" he said with a friendly smile.

Amunet was unmollified by his gesture. Miffed, she stuck her hands on her hips and gave Bill an aggravated look. "Which one of us will it be, then, Bill?"

Lilith's eyes flashed. "He's already made his choice," she hissed, wrapping herself around Bill in a decidedly possessive manner.

Charlie felt his gorge rise to hear his suspicion so blatantly confirmed: they were whores, and Bill *had* engaged them for the purpose of relieving Charlie of his presumed virginal burden. He glared at his brother, but it was a useless gesture. Bill's attention had fully shifted to the women.

Bill held Lilith close but reached out to Amunet at the same time, smiling smugly. He kissed Lilith's cheek, then brought Amunet's hand to his lips to bestow another. "Don't be so cruel, ladies!" he cried theatrically. "How can you make me choose between heaven and paradise? Have mercy on a poor boy."

Charlie nearly laughed out loud at the most ridiculous line he'd ever heard, expecting Bill to get his face slapped for his trouble, if not jinxed outright. But to his surprise, the women merely exchanged a brief, questioning glance. Lilith shrugged, then Amunet nodded slightly. She took up a position flanking Bill, and both women beamed pleased smiles up at him.

Becoming increasingly disgusted by the entire situation, Charlie dumped a handful of coins on the bar. "Pleasure to meet you, ladies," he said sharply, then added, "See you later," with an angry nod to his brother. Then he spun on his heels and marched out of the building without a backward glance.

Charlie wandered through the streets for at least an hour, fuming, barely noting the heat anymore. He wasn't entirely clear why he felt so angry. It had something to do with Bill's behavior, that was for certain. His own reaction to the women was disturbing, as well. He headed in the direction he thought the sea lay, recognizing it might be unwise to return to Bill's flat in case the jolly threesome would end up there, and pondered his plight.

Charlie soon came to the conclusion that Bill's presumption, while extremely offensive, still boiled down to an attempt, however misguided, to do something nice for him. And while he wouldn't be thanking his brother for the favor any time soon, it was probably an overreaction to have a real row with him about it. Nor was Charlie the sort of person to nurse a grudge. Things would be back to normal between them soon—most likely by morning. Once they were alone again, anyway.

The thought of Amunet's fickle behavior tonight made his stomach turn in distaste. He reminded himself he had no right to judge her, though. He didn't know her, had no concept of what her life was like. The Romanian pubs he frequented were all populated with whores—he was not so innocent as to misunderstand their existence. Many of life's choices were difficult to make, often hairline distinctions between two suboptimal options. Who was he to blame Amunet for capitalizing on her beauty however she chose?

He'd reached the shore by then, and while the sand was still hot, the nearly constant offshore breeze helped ameliorate the heat. He sat down and stared out at the water, watching the lights of the Muggle boats pass by.

Why didn't I feel attracted to her at all? he asked himself. That Amunet was beautiful was unquestionable. That she'd been willing was also not up for debate. And yet here he sat, alone.

Is it because she's a complete stranger? he wondered. While Charlie was as easy-going and friendly a fellow as anyone could hope to meet, he found it difficult to connect with most people on any deeper level. When it came to sharing his inner thoughts or feelings, he was rather reserved—a trait people often mistook for shyness. And when it came to matters concerning sex—a subject he considered intensely private and personal—casual connections were abhorrent to him, cheapening something he'd come to feel was a precious, profound exchange. He realized it made him come off as a prude sometimes, but felt too strongly about the matter to alter his behavior.

He analyzed this idea, thought about the effort it would take to get to know Amunet. Beneath the beautiful exterior, hiding behind a lamentable vocation, might there not be a scintillating intellect? A kind and sweet heart? A fascinating personality? He realized with a small amount of regret that he would never know. After all, really knowing a person was certainly not the sort of thing that could happen over the course of an evening, or even a weeklong holiday. Sasha had taught him that. Even supposing he felt something drawing him to share anything personal with the woman, what would be the point? He would be long gone soon, and they would likely never cross paths again.

It was more than that, though. He strongly suspected that even if given a month, a year, a lifetime, he wouldn't choose Amunet to pursue. *But why don't I feel like even trying?* She was pretty, clever, friendly. Why hadn't he felt any kind of spark of interest in her? Or any other woman for that matter? Or any other person at all?

Why had he felt it with his friend, Sasha, and no one else?

He'd had these sorts of conversations with himself before. Was he attracted to Sasha simply because circumstances threw them together so often and in such intense situations? Was it down to a lack of experience or opportunity with women? Was this simply an experimental phase he'd grow out of eventually?

Last summer they'd shared a torrid affair, unable to quench a desire that had built between them throughout that first winter and spring they'd spent together. A madness had overtaken Charlie then, and Sasha had patiently tolerated his obsession, his single-mindedness, teaching him everything he now knew about sex in the process. The fire had mellowed somewhat over the following winter, settling into a comfortable, reliable companionship, if not routine. The passion was still there, just no longer celebrated every possible moment they had alone. Charlie had learned to let go a little, giving them both some breathing room.

And with that bit of distance came some mental clarity—which, as usual, led to introspection and analysis. Just what did Charlie imagine was going on between them? Mostly, Charlie'd responded with a shrug, uncomfortable with the possible answers, and told himself he didn't care one way or the other, and why not just enjoy what they had while they had it?

But now he was beginning to feel so much more confident in the conclusion he'd always felt at least faintly. There'd always been plenty of pretty women in the villages they'd visited on nights off—young or mature, sweet, saucy, or funny: there was something for every taste. And while most of the other keepers had one or more women waiting for them whenever they visited town, he'd never felt a single inkling of attraction to any of them. The excuse of "waiting for the right girl" was becoming flimsier by the moment.

So this is really it for me, then? he marveled internally, recognizing the significance of this revelation. *If not a woman like Amunet, then who?*

Maybe there is no right girl. Maybe the right person for me isn't a girl at all.

Charlie stared up at the sky, the stars washed out by the Muggle city lights. The always awe-inspiring Milky Way was invisible here. No cooling, comforting mountain air. No safe, companionable silence. No familiar, soothing voice. No gentle, reassuring touch.

No Sasha.

The earth shifted a little bit.

I'm gay.

The realization came not as a commanding, godlike pronouncement. Not a torturous evil curse. Not a sobbing, shameful whimper begging for forgiveness. It was a quiet voice. His own voice steady and honest.

And I think... I think I might love him.

1- I prefer to spell [Rhakotis](#) with a K, but it can also be spelt with a C. And yes, it really exists, but I fudged its age and magicality.

2- What follows is my own conjecture as to how an eleven-year-old girl, who spent most of a school year possessed by something as evil as a Voldemort Horcrux and nearly died in the Chamber of Secrets, managed to be right as rain in time for the following start of term. Mr. Mentu-Hotep is my invention, as is Dumbledore's rigging of the *Prophet* lottery that resulted in the trip.

3- Bill's declaration (as well as Charlie's in Chapter 2) of owing his job to Dumbledore is another pet theory of mine that will be developed a little further in this story.

Chapter 5 - August-September 1994

Chapter 5 of 28

Chaos at the World Cup leads to a debriefing with the Hogwarts Headmaster.

Chapter 5

August 25-26, 1994

Bill, Charlie, and Percy were already sprinting away toward the oncoming marchers; Mr. Weasley tore after them.*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Chapter 9*

Charlie, Bill, and Percy jostled each other as they erupted out of the tent, wands drawn. A flood of people ran toward the wood behind the campground, the flow of World Cup attendees gushing around tents and campfires. The three brothers looked at each other for an instant, coming to an unspoken agreement just as quickly. *We've got to do something.*

"This way!" Bill yelled, barely audible above the din.

"We're going to help the Ministry!" Charlie heard his father shout at the younger ones behind them as he and Percy ran after Bill. "You lot get into the woods, and ~~stick~~ *together....*"¹

Chaos increased as the brothers struggled and shouldered their way through the screaming, panicked stampede trying to go the opposite direction. High above, the sickening sight of levitating bodies loomed ahead of them. Out of the corner of his eye, Charlie saw Percy get knocked to the ground. Shoving his way through the human torrent toward his fallen brother, he shouted, "Perce!"

Percy scrambled out from beneath the herd of feet, protected from being trampled in the lee of a tent.

"You all right?" Charlie bellowed when he reached him.

Percy merely nodded, clearly shaken.

"Come on!" Charlie urged him, helping him to his feet. Arms linked this time, Charlie's broad solidity protecting Percy's taller but slimmer stature, the two of them fought their way against the deluge of humanity.

When the tide of bodies trying to get away finally stemmed, Charlie was greeted to a blood-chilling sight: masks, hoods, and robes milled about beneath their suspended victims, accompanied by horrible chanting and cruel laughter. Flashes of red caromed through the clearing, followed by screams of pain and people dropping to the ground at random.

Death Eaters!? Charlie shuddered, recalling the hideous costumes from photographs in newspapers stolen from the dining table in his childhood. But the scene before him was supposed to be impossible. They'd all been defeated! Imprisoned or killed! Their leader vanquished! He tried to swallow his fear, but his mouth was dry. His courage faltering, Charlie took several steps backward. *No! Not this. Anything but them.*

A spell sliced through the night mere feet beside him, sharp and wicked. The clinical malevolence of it made the hair on his body stand on end. To his right, Bill clutched his arm and howled in pain, jolting Charlie out of his terrified reverie.

"Bill!" Percy bellowed, lunging toward him as Bill staggered backward from the force of the spell.

Charlie cast a Shield around his brothers just in time to deflect another flash of red. He felt Percy reinforce it with his own spell a moment later. Roaring in fury, Charlie shot

a Stunner toward the cabal. One hooded minion crumpled, and Charlie's heart leaped with victory. *Take that, you bastards!*

But his retaliation drew more attention. A barrage of spells flashed, aimed directly at him now, and several whooshed by only inches away. He heard Percy shout another Shield spell, then felt its familiar, familial power envelope him. From within the protective field, he directed another Stunner toward the masked ones.

Aurors began appearing, Apparating behind the tents at the margins of the clearing, then running toward the melee as the three brothers fell into a rhythm of sorts, working together to incapacitate the attackers while shielding each other from offensive spells. Bill managed to get back on his feet and join the battle, but his aim was off, as he was holding his injured wand arm close to his body and trying to cast spells wrong-handed.

Charlie scanned the small clearing, searching for their father. "Where's Dad?" he hollered in the direction of his brothers, unable to find him.

"No idea!" Bill bellowed back before slinging another Shield, deflecting a garishly orange spell away from them.

"You kids get out of here!" a witch in a woolen dressing gown shouted. "Leave this to the professionals!"

"I'm with the Ministry!" Percy snapped indignantly as Bill sent a Hotfoot jinx into the riot.

Another attacker fell with a snarl, and one of the airborne Muggles a child lurched, plummeting several meters toward the ground, jerking to a halt just above everyone's heads. The Muggle woman shrieked, impotently reaching for her child as he tumbled earthward. The young boy screamed in terror.

"Defensive counterspells only!" a commanding voice bellowed as the team of Aurors took up their positions surrounding the rioters. "Secure the perimeter!" Then the man, thick-maned and bearded, began chanting an Anti-Disapparition Jinx.

The firefight intensified. Whether the rioters were emboldened by the lack of retaliation or made desperate by the sense of being surrounded and trapped, Unforgivables spewed forth with renewed vigor. Charlie, Bill, and Percy stood their ground, using Shields as best they could to deflect the damage away from the defenseless Muggles and each other. The air around him crackled with magic, and Charlie's skin prickled with it. One powerful blast hit his Shield head-on, the force of it filtering through with yet enough strength to shred his shirt.

Then an enormous scream, emanating from a thousand throats nearly in unison, welled up like a tidal wave behind them, beginning in the forest and moving across the field toward the fight. Green light began to overpower the orange glow of campfires and grey smoke of smoldering tents, bathing them from above. As the battlers became distracted, turning over their shoulders to look up into the sky, a jinx broke through the defense line, knocking the leonine man to the ground. A witch wearing an eye patch dashed to his side, Shielding him while checking his injury.

"The Mark!" a woman's voice screamed from within the masked circle.

Charlie looked up. A skull, ghastly and gruesome, leered down upon them from over the forest. A snake retched from the mouth, writhing and horrific as it hissed sparks. The hollow, black sockets, like singularities, seemed to suck every other photon of light into them, along with any sense of human happiness or hope. All his adrenaline-fueled fury was instantly replaced by a cold, gut-numbing dread.

All hell broke loose amongst the rioters as they abandoned any semblance of a united front. They bolted from the clearing, trampling each other in their haste and panic. The Muggles plunged to the ground, their screams of fear and pain unheard above the general melee.

"Halt!" Percy shouted at a hooded figure, burly and tall, barreling toward them. He stood with legs apart, his wand aimed at the man. But the oncomer tucked his head to his shoulder and rammed past Percy, knocking him to the ground once again.

"Stop them!" someone else shouted, but it was too late. Something must've happened to disable the Anti-Disapparition Jinx because the rioters began disappearing en masse with a chorus of loud pops.

"Let them go!" another Auror shouted. Charlie recognized the commanding voice from before. "Get a location and assemble in the wood. We want whoever conjured that thing!"

Every Auror who wasn't incapacitated disappeared in the next moment. Charlie, Bill, and Percy were left in the clearing with the Muggles, two injured Aurors, and the eye-patched witch who stayed behind to care for them.

"Perce!" Charlie ran to Percy, lying on the ground out cold, and met Bill at his side.

"Rennervate," Bill rasped, and Percy groaned as he came to. He rolled to his side, toward Charlie, who saw his younger brother's nose was bleeding and likely broken.

"Anything but your face hurt, Perce?" Charlie asked. When Percy carefully shook his head, the movement accompanied by another groan, he turned his attention toward Bill. "How bad's your arm?"

Bill had favored it throughout the fight, keeping it close to his body. "I'll survive," he replied, his voice hoarse from the pain. "What the hell is that thing?" he asked, nodding toward the sky.

Percy and Charlie both forced themselves to look at it. The sight inspired the most profound revulsion Charlie'd ever felt.

"Dunno," Charlie mumbled. *But it's got You-Know-Who written all over it, don't it?* None of them had to say what they were all thinking. Charlie glanced around. The Muggles weren't moving, and a cold fist clenched around his gut. *Please let them be all right!*

"Stay here," he ordered his injured brothers. "I'll go see what's next." Jogging over toward Ms. Eye-patch, he heard her ask, "You all right, Rufus?" as he approached, and the man on the ground began to ease himself up, nodding.

"Can we help my brothers and I?" he offered. "I'm a dragon keeper, and I know a bit of first aid."

Ms. Eye-patch sized him up, then said, "Best leave it to the professionals, young man. Can you Apparate to St. Mungo's? Tell them we need a team of mediwizards. Be sure to mention Muggles are involved."

Charlie nodded, disappointed. He'd been to St. Mungo's plenty of times before, of course there'd been a few Quidditch injuries his mum hadn't the confidence to patch up at home but the last thing he wanted to do was attempt to Apparate somewhere when people were depending on him. But he gritted his teeth, told his brothers what he was about, then spun on the spot.

He breathed an enormous sigh of relief when he managed to arrive at the welcoming desk's foyer, only knocking into a decorative philodendron whose broad, benevolent fronds gently helped to right him. After the green-tinged darkness of the campground, he squinted in the bright, institutional light of the hospital.

"There's been an emergency at the World Cup," he announced, dashing toward the Welcome Witch.

~*~

September 1, 1994

But Mrs. Weasley only smiled and waved. Before the train had rounded the corner, she, Bill, and Charlie had Disappeared. Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Chapter 11

* * *

Bill and Charlie stood beside their mother on Platform 9¾, watching as the Hogwarts Express pulled out of sight. It had been somewhat entertaining to bedevil their younger siblings over the past week, coyly alluding to the big "secret" awaiting them at school: the newly resurrected Triwizard Tournament. Their mother had, for once, condoned the baiting. Charlie assumed she'd hoped it would keep the little ones' minds off of other, more disturbing subjects.

Charlie didn't think her tactic worked. Ron and his friends had spent plenty of time at the Burrow with their heads bent together, talking in hushed tones about scars hurting and a "serious" person. The twins had also spent a good deal of time whispering together, though Charlie strongly doubted their discussions centered around anything besides how much mayhem they'd be wreaking on the school this year.

But the time for teasing and childish games was over. Before the last coach had left the station, the three of them nodded to each other, then Disappeared as planned.

They reappeared on Hogsmeade's drizzly High Street a moment later. The weather barely registered for Charlie—he regularly endured far worse in Romania—and Bill merely lifted the collar of his leather jacket against it. But Molly made a point of digging her enchanted umbrella out of her bag and waving them over.

"Come get under the Bumbershoot, boys," she commanded as it shot open with a snap.

"It's not that bad, Mum," Bill grumbled.

"I'm fine, really," Charlie replied, determined to hold his ground as long as Bill did.

"You'll catch cold from all this damp!" Molly barked. She fixed them with a you'll-not-argue-if-you-know-what's-best look, and grudgingly, the boys obeyed. There really was no point in resisting when she got this way, Charlie knew.

"That's not how you catch a cold, Mum," Charlie thought he heard Bill mutter under his breath.

The Bumbershoot enlarged itself to its maximum proportions, levitating above them, and Molly wrapped her arms about her boys, gathering her chicks to her bosom, as always. It mattered not that these particular chicks physically dwarfed her or lived completely independent, adult lives without her supervision now. They were under her watchful care at the moment, and she'd be mothering the ruddy hell out of them whilst they were.

They were met at the school gate by Professor McGonagall, who, as usual, stood ramrod straight in her somber robes, a voluminous pointy hat upon her head.

"Minerva!" Molly sighed, sounding relieved to see her. "Is Arthur here yet?"

Professor McGonagall nodded as she opened the gate. "Dumbledore is quite keen to see you all, Molly," she greeted them in her familiar brogue. Then she gave Charlie and Bill another prim nod of acknowledgement. "Gentlemen."

Charlie was pleased to at last find a person in Britain willing to at least address him like the adult he felt he was. His mother had alternately scolded or coddled him, his father had smiled weakly and winked whenever Charlie had attempted to broach a serious subject, as if to say *Let the grownups handle it, my boy*, and his siblings had been interested in nothing but teasing banter or keeping their own secrets.

Molly cleared her throat and, her stout little legs working hard to keep up with McGonagall's pace, leaned close. "I'm afraid I must warn you—Fred and George have been hatching something all summer," she murmured.

McGonagall's expression altered only in that one eyebrow raised. Charlie nearly laughed out loud.

Molly gave her a pained look. "It's a... a commercial enterprise this time, I think."

"Indeed?" McGonagall replied. Charlie imagined she sounded a little impressed.

Molly nodded worriedly. "I tried to put the kibosh on it at home—Vanished everything I could find—but I'm afraid it's rather difficult stopping them when they've put their minds to something. They'll take some careful watching this term, Minerva."

"Those two *always* require careful watching, Molly," McGonagall replied, her stern tone and expression belied by the tiniest quirk of amusement near the corners of her mouth.

Molly's shoulders sagged in defeat. "Yes, they do, don't they?" she sighed. Then she straightened up again. "Is Mad-Eye all right, then?"

McGonagall frowned worriedly. "We haven't heard from him yet today. Albus is expecting him at any moment, actually. We'll know more about what really happened once he gets here."

Charlie exchanged a knowing glance with Bill. They'd both read the article in that morning's *Prophet*, condescendingly implying that last night, one of Britain's greatest Aurors of all time imagined he was being attacked by dustbins. Granted, the old fellow might be paranoid, but who in their right mind wouldn't be, having lived through what he did during the war? Mad-Eye Moody had seen the worst You-Know-Who's supporters could throw at him and lived to tell the tale—the man deserved some respect, for Merlin's sake!

They made their way quickly up the lane and were hustled into the castle by McGonagall, who led them through the corridors and up the staircases with her patented no-nonsense efficiency. She commanded the gargoyle to open with, "Licorice allsorts," and the four of them rode the staircase into Dumbledore's office.

"Ah, my dear Weasleys!" Dumbledore cheered when they emerged into view. "I do hope you are well in spite of our soggy Highland weather." He gestured for them to take seats, and Charlie chose to share a small settee with his father, who'd greeted his family with his usual smile. His mother and Bill sat in two chairs closer to the warm hearth fire, a little behind him, and McGonagall stayed put near the stairs, as if standing guard.

"It was so good of you all to come upon such short notice. I fear my invitation may have sounded more like a summons," Dumbledore said as they settled themselves.

"Not at all, of course," Arthur replied on behalf of all of them.

"But I see we are one dear Weasley short?" Dumbledore noted quizzically.

"Erm, yes, well," Arthur mumbled a bit. "Percy is rather busy, you see, and didn't feel as though he could take time away from the office today."

Charlie thought his father sounded embarrassed by this fact. As if a summons from Dumbledore—and there was no mistaking the "invitation" as anything but unquestionably outweighed anything else.

"I suppose it is reasonable to assume the Department of International Magical Cooperation is rather a busy place at the moment," Dumbledore replied. "I'm pleased to know my friend Barty finds our young Percy so indispensable."

Oh, yes, **Weatherby** is so bloody indispensable. Charlie wasn't entirely sure why Percy had begged off coming today—not so very long ago, he would've swelled with self-

importance to be called into Dumbledore's office to give a report on the misbehavior of others. If nothing else, Percy excelled at obsequiousness before an authority figure. And, like the rest of them, Percy owed his Ministry position to Dumbledore's influence though whether he truly acknowledged that debt was now in question. But surprisingly, he'd mumbled an excuse into his teacup that morning at breakfast and, pretentious briefcase in hand, Apparated off before anyone could argue.

"Things have been a bit hairy throughout the Ministry lately," Arthur reported. "And all the half-truths and utter rubbish being published in the *Prophet* isn't helping things. I'd certainly like to know where that Skeeter woman gets her information," he added with a grumble.

"Indeed. But at the moment, we have rather larger fish to fry than Ms. Skeeter, I think," Dumbledore said.

"Quite right," Arthur replied, a little chastened.

"Let us begin with your eyewitness accounts, then," Dumbledore proposed in a manner that, while his tone of voice was kindly, brooked no dissent. "Arthur, why don't you go first?"

"They were Death Eaters, all right," Arthur said, plunging in. "About nine or ten of them, I think."

Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully. "More than I had expected, considering how many are currently residing in Azkaban."

"You think they're recruiting new members?" Arthur marveled, horrified.

"That would be a worrisome development," Dumbledore agreed calmly, his expression inscrutable.

Arthur swallowed nervously. "I suppose they just couldn't resist parading about before such a large, international audience. It started out as their usual sort of gathering: terrorizing innocent people, setting a few fires, flashing a few curses. They had those poor Muggles in their clutches, you know... Terrible, terrible," he lamented, shaking his head. "I sent Harry away from it into the woods to hide with my younger ones."

Dumbledore nodded once. He turned his gaze toward Charlie, then Bill. "And that was when you bravely joined the fray?"

Molly gave a muffled whimper when Bill nodded. "Charlie and Perce and I ran toward the disturbance. We got there just before the Aurors did."

"I imagine that was quite a shocking sight for you and your brothers," Dumbledore said quietly, a soft look in his eyes. "You were very young the last time these ruffians raised their cowardly heads."

Charlie nodded when Dumbledore's gaze alit on him. "They were in full regalia: hoods and masks included. Right out in the open for anyone to see. And those were Unforgivables they were casting about without a care."

"The Death Eaters have a rather appalling disregard for the sanctity of human life, yes," Dumbledore replied. "Believe me, Charlie, when I say how very sorry I am you had to see such a scene. The last thing I ever wish is to put any of you in harm's way."

Charlie shrugged, unsure of what to say. The situation was hardly of Dumbledore's making, was it? Nor was there any way to battle evildoers without being in harm's way once in a while. It was a risk he was willing to take.

Dumbledore's gaze moved back to his brother. "And then what happened?"

"We fought them off for a bit," Bill explained. "Between us and the Aurors, we had them surrounded. Probably should've gone on the offensive then, but we were worried about the Muggles getting hurt."

"And you were quite right to do so," Dumbledore assured. "It is clear their safety mattered not a whit to their captors."

Bill nodded, accepting Dumbledore's acquittal.

"Then somebody conjured that awful thing in the sky, and all hell broke loose," Charlie volunteered the fact he found most puzzling. "The bloody bastards couldn't run away fast enough at that point. But if that was their special signal, why were they so afraid of it?"

"Language, Charlie!" Molly scolded.

"That is a curious turn of events," Dumbledore agreed. "Unless one takes into account that every former Death Eater now free to assemble are those who've lied to the Ministry about their innocence and turned traitor to Riddle and their former comrades in order to avoid imprisonment. Should their leader ever show his face again..." Dumbledore paused as everyone else in the room involuntarily shuddered at the thought of You-Know-Who returning from whatever Purgatory he was currently confined to. "You're certain no one in the Death Eater's circle conjured the Dark Mark?"

"Positive," Arthur answered. "It was in the sky over the woods, at least five hundred yards away from the riot."

"Very curious," Dumbledore murmured, drawing the syllables out, his hands clasped together and his forefingers steepled against his lips.

"Rufus caught a *Crucio* to the chest, and his Anti-Disapparition Jinx broke when he went down, allowing the rioters to escape. But he ordered us into the woods to find whoever conjured the Mark, rather than attempting to pursue the Death Eaters," Arthur continued.

"I see," Dumbledore said. It was unclear whether or not he agreed with Head Auror Scrimgeour's command.

"Those of us with the Ministry Apparated on his orders, and, wouldn't you know it, I found poor Harry standing there, surrounded by nearly twenty wizards with wands drawn." Molly gave another whimper, but Arthur pressed on. "It took Darla and me a moment to talk some sense into everyone. But I mean, really, how could anyone have thought for even a moment that *Harry*, of all people..."

"It has been my experience that panicked people are seldom thinking at their clearest," Dumbledore said.

Arthur nodded. "Hermione told us she'd heard someone nearby saying the incantation, and when Amos Diggory went to investigate, all he found was Barty Crouch's house-elf cowering in some bushes, holding Harry's wand."

"How could a *house-elf* conjure that thing?" demanded Bill.

"It couldn't," McGonagall insisted, joining the conversation for the first time. "Only fully vested Death Eaters know how to cast that spell."

"But Dad, you said Harry's wand had definitely conjured the Mark," Bill argued. "That it spat out a tiny version of it under *Prior Incantato*. And the elf was in possession of it, so..."

"I admit, the evidence does look damning," Arthur said. "But the kids swear the voice they heard chanting the incantation was a deep, human one not an elf's at all."

"So Crouch's elf is innocent?" Charlie asked.

"Barty didn't seem to think so," Arthur sighed, his own confusion evidenced by a furrowed brow. "She swore she didn't do it. Then Crouch searched the area but couldn't

find any corroborating evidence or further clues. The poor thing was beside herself the whole time, wringing her hands and rocking. She was obviously terrified, but he was furious with her, Crouch was. Dismissed her right on the spot."

Dumbledore gazed off into the distance as Arthur spoke.

"Seems like an overreaction to me," Molly suggested. "Why wouldn't Barty trust his own elf?"

"This isn't the first time Barty Crouch's reputation has been tainted by association with the Dark Arts, Albus," McGonagall murmured softly.

Charlie found the comment cryptic, but his parents apparently didn't. They gave each other a significant look.

"Indeed," Dumbledore answered after a long, unnerving silence. "It would seem as though we have a rogue Death Eater on our hands, among other problems. One that has a bone to pick with the others. Whether it is an old foe we've lost track of or a new initiate is the most pressing question, to my mind." He turned to McGonagall. "Whom haven't we accounted for, Minerva?"

McGonagall pursed her lips and shook her head, at a loss to answer.

After another, shorter silence, Arthur spoke. "If they're recruiting new members..." he said leadingly, his voice tinged with real worry.

"It's time we officially resurrected the Order," McGonagall finished his thought aloud, as if she'd been waiting the entire time to voice precisely this suggestion².

"Perhaps you're right," Dumbledore replied, shifting in his seat and laying his gnarled, beringed hands on the desk. "It would not do to simply stick our heads in the proverbial sands of ignorance, pretending nothing is wrong."

McGonagall gave a sarcastic snort. Charlie thought he heard her mutter, "Idiot," and, "Fudge," along with a few other words under her breath.

"Quite right, Minerva," Dumbledore chuckled. "I shall make the necessary contacts with our prior allies, and" then he leveled his pointed gaze first at Bill, then Charlie before continuing, "perhaps we might do a little recruiting of our own. Any viable organization generally benefits by the influx of new blood."

Me!? Charlie squawked in his own head. *In the Order of the Phoenix!*? But before he'd even had the chance to splutter a protest or acceptance, his father pressed on.

"There's another thing I'm worried about, Albus," Arthur said. "This business about Bertha Jorkins' disappearance in Albania... I've got a bad feeling about it."

"Hmm. Yes," Dumbledore replied, frowning thoughtfully once more. "Dear Miss Jorkins is somewhat distractible, if memory serves," he murmured, pausing when McGonagall gave another snort. "How long has she been missing?"

"Nearly a month now maybe more. Ludo sent her off to Albania on some job or other."

"There's a pair of bumblers," McGonagall muttered. "Barely a Sickle's worth of sense between the two of them."

Arthur smiled wanly. "I know Bertha's a bit scatterbrained, and Ludo doesn't exactly have a head for details, either, but..."

"The timing and location of her disappearance is rather alarming," Dumbledore agreed. Then he turned his keen gaze to Charlie once more. "How fortunate for us that one of our own is familiar with the area and will be returning there soon."

And just like that, without quite realizing it in the moment, Charlie had been set his first mission as a full-fledged member of the Order of the Phoenix.

1- Direct quote from "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" by JK Rowling.

2- The precise timing for this decision is unclear in canon. According to [Harry Potter Wiki](#), the extant members of the first generation Order were contacted immediately after Harry's escape from the newly reconstituted Voldemort on June 24, 1995 and were organized into watching over Harry throughout the ensuing summer therefore some attribute this date as the Order's re-formation. For the sake of my story, I respectfully disagree. Dumbledore's actual quote in Chapter 36 of "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" delivered to Sirius as Harry lay recuperating in Hogwarts' hospital wing was: "You are to alert... the old crowd." In my opinion, this is vague enough to drive a tractor through. So I did.

Chapter 6 - October 1994

Chapter 6 of 28

Charlie sets out on his first official Order mission.

Author's note: Please mind the warnings. This chapter is quite dark.

Chapter 6

October 1994

The thing Wormtail had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Chapter 32*

Charlie and Sasha trudged through the thick Albanian forest without speaking, following a path that was little more than a game trail. The cold, damp air had a chilling effect, and Charlie shivered despite his vigorous physical activity level. The rain had held off so far, though the low clouds threatened to open at any moment.

He'd discussed the troubling developments in England the riot at the World Cup, a resurgence of Death Eaters with Sasha the moment he'd arrived back at keeper hut number eight rather than worry him with such alarming reports via owl. He'd also explained the history of the Order, his family's participation in it, its resurrection, and his own whirlwind induction.

"And you trust this Dumbledore?" Sasha had grumbled, brows knit with suspicion.

Charlie had nodded without hesitation. "He's a manipulative old bastard, make no mistake. But he's bloody brilliant. And You-Know-Who feared him more than anyone else."

"Giants fear dragons, yet this does not make either any less dangerous to you or I," Sasha had argued. "I would not trust one to protect me from the other."

Charlie had chuckled at his partner's cynicism, more than a little heartened by how concerned Sasha seemed for his welfare. He'd missed him horribly during the fortnight he'd spent in England, his misery further reinforcing his own conclusions of a year ago in Egypt: he had fallen in love with the burly Russian.

But, somewhat disturbingly, he had not found opportunity to tell him of his Egyptian epiphany during the subsequent year's time. Charlie knew it was wrong of him shameful and cowardly, even but such open sentimentalism was not their style. They could talk about almost anything else in fact, Charlie had learned more about himself and confessed volumes of such to Sasha in the time they'd spent together than at any other period of his history. No one else in the world knew him better. For this reason, he rationalized that Sasha ought to have guessed the depth of his feelings for him by now.

His pack was heavy (dragon keepers reserved weight-eliminating charms for serious jobs like loading full barrels of dung onto carpet transports or moving an incapacitated beast, not a silly backpack), and he shifted the shoulder straps slightly, adjusting its balance. They'd planned to camp overnight in the forest rather than Apparate to an inn, just in case they needed to stake out the mysterious cave they were headed for. Charlie hoped, if nothing else, they might uncover some evidence of the magical bear, new tales of which had continued to surface over the last year. He couldn't quite put his finger on how or why, but he maintained a strong suspicion that this bear had something to do with You-Know-Who.

The most recent tale these particular Muggle villagers had to share was a disturbing one. At some point during the summer just past, a dark change had come over a previously benign area of the forest near a cave. A few people "sensitive" types reported hearing sustained screaming, as well as feeling other unnerving sensations, like pockets of bone-deep cold or inexplicable gusts of wind. Over the six weeks since Dumbledore had set him the task, Charlie'd been able to suss out sweet FA about Bertha Jorkins' whereabouts, and this little local legend was the closest thing to a lead he'd managed to come across. The timing and location fit with her disappearance, but the rest of the details sounded more like a banshee issue than anything else.

From what they'd been able to learn from the locals, the "haunted" cave was a long day's hike into the forest from the village. Which meant they ought to be getting close. Sasha cast a quick Point Me charm, and they continued on their course.

A palpable change passed over them as they drew within sight of the cave's mouth. As if the color had been drained from the surroundings, the greys and beiges began to fade and bleed into one another, casting everything in a monochromatic hue of despair. The brisk air became malignantly colder, snaking tendrils of icy fear into his body.

Something Dark lay ahead.

"Feel that?" Charlie whispered, falling out of Romanian and back into English in his anxiety.

"Da," Sasha murmured. His dark eyes scanned the area, never resting in one place for more than an instant, his body tensed and ready for battle.

Charlie was reminded of old Mad-Eye's mantra: *Constant vigilance!* He granted such a notion was perfectly apropos of the moment and did his own visual reconnaissance. Nothing moved, no sound could be heard. The still silence only heightened the eeriness, though.

The men eased off their packs, stashing them under a nearby bramble. Wands out, they cautiously approached the cave. Charlie cast every revealing spell he knew, but detected no wards, no magical concealments. Whoever had cursed this place didn't seem to care who found it, making him doubt whether anything of value awaited them within.

They breached the mouth of the cave again, without sensing any magical repellants and crept inside. Immediately, the temperature plummeted further, fogging each breath. The clammy, dank air was stagnant within, and as they eased deeper into the darkness of the tunnel, Charlie felt an overwhelming sense of foreboding, of present evil.

"*Lumos*," he murmured, and Sasha did the same.

Deeper they ventured, tens of meters into the earth until the opening behind them resembled a dimly shining Knut. At this point, the ever-narrowing walls of the cave opened up into an unnaturally smooth-walled chamber. No bigger than an average living room, Charlie and Sasha stood in the sole entry and exit: they had reached a dead end.

"This is bad," Sasha said, directing his wand light at something painted on the wall.

Charlie cautiously stepped over a small mound of moldering rubbish to investigate. Throughout the little cavern, sinister-looking symbols had been splashed on the walls and ceiling. The paint was brownish under the wand light, and the artist had been hasty and heavy-handed in his or her application: drops had bled down the wall in ragged lines before the paint had dried.

"Watch your step," Sasha warned.

Charlie looked down just in time to prevent himself from stumbling into a pile of rocks. Upon more careful inspection, though, he determined the rocks were not in a pile at all, but rather laid out in a complicated mandala-like design.

"You recognize any of this?" Charlie asked.

Sasha bit his upper lip and nodded slightly. As a former Durmstrang student, he had far more familiarity with Dark magic than Charlie, not that he ever put any of this knowledge into practice.

"A sacrifice was made here. These symbols have to do with metempsychosis."

Charlie swallowed hard. The transfer of souls from one body into another, be they animal or human, made his skin crawl with revulsion. Judging by the remnant Dark pall on the place, the sacrifice was unlikely a voluntary one. But he knew what he had to do now.

"I'm gonna try something," he said.

Sasha pierced him with an anxious gaze, understanding immediately what he'd meant. "Charlie... don't," he warned.

"I have to try," Charlie argued.

"This is not the sort of thing to play at," Sasha scolded him. "I don't want you to risk it."

Charlie heard the concern bordering on bald panic in his lover's voice. He smiled with a confidence he did not have, attempting to reassure them both. "I have to try," he repeated.

Every school-age child in the wizarding world knew that not every dead soul passed through The Veil. But fewer understood that not every soul who stayed behind became a ghost. Only a minority actually managed to attain the semi-corporeal existence enjoyed by the Hogwarts' ethereal House mascots. And Charlie reasoned that if a sacrifice had happened here a *human* one for the purposes of one soul taking up a new home, then that could mean the recently evicted entity might be lingering behind... possibly with a story to tell.

Back in his school days, Charlie had enrolled in Divination purely because he'd heard it was an easy class to bullshit your way through. Master a few dramatic phrases, riff on some vague predictions of doom or great success that lay ahead in an uncertain timeframe, and you'd get your A no harm, no foul. He'd never in a million years have guessed that he had any aptitude for mediumship before that strange afternoon in Trelawney's incense-choked tower room when he'd accidentally slipped into a trance (*Damnably poufy chairs!*) and started channeling some ruddy deceased git who'd regaled the classroom about his Viking conquests. Trelawney had harassed him throughout the rest of his time at Hogwarts, the bug-eyed bint trying to force her "special tutelage" upon him in order to cultivate his "rare gift."

Only Charlie never really saw it as a gift. More like a creepy pain in his arse that he'd very much prefer to forget about. He thanked Merlin his parents had understood and not made him submit to Trelawney's extra lessons. On his own, in secret, he'd read a bit about how to make it happen on purpose just so he'd never inadvertently do it again.

"I don't like this plan," Sasha growled as Charlie began readying himself.

Charlie shushed him, then turned within. He calmed his heart and breathing, then, visualizing the pricking spot on his forehead becoming translucent, opened himself.

"Are you here?" he whispered, calling into the void beyond. "Speak, and I will listen."

A rush of frigid wind blasted upward from the floor, clawing at his clothes, his very skin. Something had arrived... or finally noticed his presence.

"Tell me what happened here," he invited in as soothing a tone as he could manage.

Sadness. Anger. Then the screaming began.

Charlie grunted, clamping his hands over his ears to no avail. Like a thousand throats wailing every note at once, the cacophony was painful. A pressure built inside his head, threatening to explode.

"I can't understand this," he pleaded, trying in vain to be heard over the cataclysm of sound.

A single voice shredded through his consciousness. *WHO ARE YOU?*

"No one to fear," Charlie tried to assure the entity, unnerved to hear English answer him. On a hunch, he asked, "Are you... are you Bertha Jorkins?" reckoning if the answer was no, he could quickly cut the connection and get the hell out of there.

His question was met with another round of agonized wailing which resolved a few moments later into the single voice shouting *I WAS BERTHA JORKINS.*

Bowel-churning dread filled him. Reluctantly, he asked again, "What happened to you, Bertha?"

He jerked backward as another rush of wind buffeted him, and suddenly, he lost sight of the cavern. Instead, he was meandering through the woods again the same woods he and Sasha had just hiked through. In his mind's vision, however, it was a warm and sunny day, and he was meandering without any sense of purpose, enjoying the beauty of the forest. For a few moments, a sense of innocent delight permeated him.

He heard a male voice behind him, calling out. He spun around, tried to find the source. A flash of red, then pain. Nothing but pain. Nerve endings in revolt, body writhing. He collapsed onto the ground.

STOLE MY WAND, Bertha's disembodied voice shrieked. *DRAGGED ME HERE.*

The view changed: Charlie was lying on the floor of the cave now, could feel the hard floor at his back through the cold filter of death. His eyes flickered open the tiniest movement brought a fresh wave of pain and he caught a blurry glimpse of a man, short and squat, wearing tatty clothes and a thoroughly haggard demeanor. He was talking to a hulking bear, bowing obsequiously, as if seeking direction from it.

A WIZARD AND HIS FAMILIAR, Bertha snarled.

Charlie got the sense Bertha recognized the wizard, but only superficially. He also doubted her assumption that the bear in any way belonged to the wizard. If anything, it seemed the other way round: the bear commanded the wizard, who groveled to do its bidding. Charlie's pulse quickened to think Bertha had been in the presence of the legendary magical bear he'd been hearing about for so long!

The pallid man seemed to realize Charlie/Bertha was awake and returned to crouch over him. Charlie saw a harried madness lurking behind the fellow's eyes, felt Bertha's rush of fear at the sight of him. Suddenly, he could no longer see or move.

The deafening screaming resumed.

BLINDED! IMMOBILIZED! THEY TORTURED ME. ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TOURNAMENT, she howled.

Rapid-fire jolts of pain wracked Charlie as Bertha recalled her agonies. In a part of his mind reserved for his own conscious thought, he tried to make sense of the tale. Who was this wizard? A gambler keen to cash in on insider information about the upcoming competition? Why would You-Know-Who care about such a trivial thing? This information suddenly cast serious doubt on Charlie's theory that this bear had anything to do with You-Know-Who at all. Maybe Bertha was right, and it was nothing but a familiar.

He was distracted from his thoughts by another vision that was not visual, but sensory. Still blinded and immobilized on the floor, he felt the hot animal breath of the bear on his face and neck, stinking of sour meat.

THOUGHT IT WAS GOING TO EAT ME, Bertha sobbed. *WISH IT HAD.*

"Are you certain she is an adequate vessel, my lord?" he heard the voice of the wizard ask.

Charlie flinched when nasty bear saliva dripped onto his cheek, followed by a great growl. Then the monster bit him, sank his teeth into his shoulder. Pain and blood gushed from his new wound.

TIME PASSED. DON'T KNOW HOW LONG. HE MADE A POTION, Bertha bawled.

Charlie gagged as his throat filled with something thick and bitter, sputtered and choked in an attempt to clear it. Then a new churning in his gut, low and near the base of his pelvis. His lower back ached, and he felt nauseous.

A RIPENING POTION, Bertha keened.

Charlie's mind began to spin, working out the ramifications. Assuming she'd correctly identified the potion... why had the mystery wizard magically forced Bertha into

ovulation?

He had barely a second to think before a new and terrible violation ripped through him. Still blind and paralyzed, fiery pain stabbed into a place between his legs, endured repeatedly over what felt like several days. In the midst of Bertha's fury and terror, he felt her sanity begin to slip away.

MY BABY, Bertha hissed.

Charlie shuddered at the horrible chanting in his ears, followed by magic Dark and wicked coursing through his body. Bertha's memory stuttered over miserable days indistinguishable from one another. She'd been repeatedly cursed, tormented with foul potions, barely kept alive. There was a mind-splitting pain in his abdomen as it swelled, then an internal squirming sensation confirmed his most horrific suspicion: Bertha had conceived something monstrous. She'd known it, too he felt her fear, her anti-maternal revulsion at the thought of what grew within her, her suffocating despair, her desperate craving for death.

NOOO! Bertha's caterwaul of protest reverberated in Charlie's skull, blaring through dimensions of reality and non-existence that had no business commingling.

Another potion seared his throat, and his body heaved with yet another unique permutation of agony. As he labored to give birth to unknown hideousness, unholy chanting resumed. The fire between his legs intensified, as did Bertha's screaming. The bear roared its last, and spurting blood scalded Charlie's skin. Then he felt, in the next instant, an obscene corruption infiltrate the thing struggling to get out of him.

The pain stopped with an alarming suddenness, and a silence that was as deafening as the screaming descended upon him. Bertha's soul had left her mutilated body then mutilation he could now observe in detail from her floating perspective. The dead bear lay on the floor beside her, blood gushing from the slit in its throat, pooling beneath her body. The bear's minion that disgusting, balding, buck-toothed rodent of a man held his wand in one hand, a malignant, bloody knife in the other. The husk that remained of Bertha Jorkins lay unmoving on the ground.

The knife glinted, then slashed Bertha's belly open. The wizard reached within her and began pulling out something black...

"NO!" Charlie bellowed, yanking himself back into the world of the living and slamming shut the door of his hyper-consciousness. He knew in the depth of his soul, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that no one who ever laid eyes on that thing Bertha had incubated that embodiment of evil incarnate would ever live to escape the cursed sight. Fearing for his own peace of mind, his very sanity, he fled.

"Charlie!" Sasha called after him.

"Run!" Charlie begged him without skipping a step. His eyes glued to the tiny circle of light ahead of him, he ran toward his only hope of salvation. The linings of his nose, throat, and lungs burned with the effort to haul in sufficient oxygen to fuel his escape.

He erupted out of the cursed cavern that now served as Bertha's tomb. Staggering a few meters into the clearing, he collapsed, shaking from both the physical effort and metaphysical trauma.

"Charlie!" Sasha cried as he knelt beside him. He grabbed him by the head and searched his eyes. "Tell me you are all right."

Charlie hooked his hands on Sasha's thick forearms, willing his body to absorb any strength or calm he had to spare. He stared into loving brown eyes, desperate to lose himself there, but the aftershocks of Bertha's pain, the abuse she'd suffered, flashes of the vile visions she'd shared wouldn't leave him.

"Please," he begged in a voice so terrified and hoarse he couldn't recognize it as his own. "Help me." He had to get this poisonous filth out of his head or he would go mad.

Sasha held him tightly with one arm and summoned his pack with the other. A delicate vial levitated out of it on command, hovering for a moment in midair. Charlie shuddered to think such a clean, innocent thing was about to be defiled with the most heinous desecration he'd ever imagined. He doubted the fragile-looking object could securely contain such evil.

Charlie gripped his wand, tried to hold it still against his temple, but was yet shaking too violently to maintain a decent connection, much less cast the spell. With a strong hand wrapped around Charlie's, Sasha gently but firmly steadied his wand. Together, they murmured the incantation that would completely remove the experience from his memory, rather than just duplicate it for the purpose of harvesting, and Charlie was incrementally soothed by Sasha's strong, low voice in his ear a welcome melody considering what he'd been subjected to moments ago.

He was slightly surprised as they slowly drew his wand tip away from his head, spinning the memory thread out like a magical spindle, that it glowed a beautiful silvery-blue, just like all the others he'd ever seen. He'd expected the horror to manifest itself in some visual way...

Charlie startled, as if jolting awake from a daydream. Sasha was holding his hand, which was holding his wand, helping guide a shining memory such a lovely, wafting thing! into a waiting vial, then capped it. In the moment's disorientation, he breathed in relief, even though he didn't understand why Sasha was supporting him so tightly. A haunting sense of generic unpleasantness was associated with the cave behind him he remembered their mission up to the point of approaching the entrance to it.

Logic led him to conclude, "It was bad, wasn't it?"

Sasha nodded gravely. "You very foolishly and bravely completed your duty. Now we are done."

Charlie tried to rise to his feet, embarrassed he needed Sasha's help to do so. Sasha guided Charlie's arm around his shoulders, slid his around his waist, then charmed their packs to follow as they slowly walked away from the cave.

"Why aren't you affected?" Charlie asked, curious as to why he felt so bloody weak and shaky.

"I only watched you work," Sasha replied gruffly, struggling to control what looked like anger and frustration. "I did not share your experience."

Although Sasha had chosen his words carefully, Charlie began to puzzle together what must have happened. Without knowing precisely why, he felt sure that they had found Bertha, and she was dead. Charlie spared one final glance at the cave behind him and offered a little prayer that, wherever she was now, the poor woman had found some peace.

Author's note: according to a reported JKR interview, Bertha Jorkins' death was used by Voldemort to transform Nagini from mere familiar into a Horcrux. In my opinion, a gigantic (tropical?) snake really doesn't belong in the clammy, cool forests of remote Albania. Instead, for the purposes of my story, Voldemort employed Frank Bryce's murder for the final Horcrux creation. Perhaps Nagini found herself a nice, warm English sewer to reside in during the interim while her master was in exile.

Chapter 7 - November 1994

Back at Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament, Charlie gets caught up in an emotional rollercoaster.

Chapter 7

November 1994

"Jus' thought she'd like ter see 'em," shrugged Hagrid, still gazing, enraptured, at the dragons.

"Really romantic date, Hagrid," said Charlie, shaking his head. Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Chapter 19

"Unii! Doua! Trei!"

"Ameti!" Charlie shouted in a chorus with five other men, the Romanian version of the Stunning Spell rolling as naturally off his tongue as the English had once done. In his three years living on the rez he'd become proficient, if not fluent though some of the guys still gave him grief about his accent.

Like a volley of fireworks, their spells burst into sparks upon contact with dragon hide, and the black beauty of a Hungarian Horntail sank slowly to the ground.

Sasha, Charlie, Milos Kopecky, and Fisnik Hoxha rushed forward, each carrying a large graphorn-leather cuff, heavy as a saddle and just as sturdy, and dragging lengths of goblin-wrought chains behind them. Skender Cojocar and Dobry Dudek lugged the significantly larger collar between the two of them. Working quickly, the men affixed the cuffs on her legs and collar round her neck.

"My mother runs faster than you do, lazy queer," Skender needled his work partner and hut-mate, Dobry.

"Who could blame her?" Sasha added. "Trying to get away from your ugly face..."

"That's rich coming from you, you blousy cocksucker," Dobry countered, aiming the barb squarely at Skender. "You've been gagging for it ever since I joined up," he added with a timely grab of his crotch.

Skender wrinkled his nose in distaste as the other men laughed. "Impossible. I couldn't find that toothpick you call a cock with a magnifying glass."

Everyone was laughing along with the teasing even Charlie, albeit through gritted teeth. He never sensed any underlying motive in such insults, even when they were directed at him or Sasha. This was simply an integral, if lamentable, part of keeper culture, this thoroughly institutionalized misogyny and homophobia. He consciously refused to take such things personally, but the atmosphere of intolerance certainly had influenced his and Sasha's unspoken agreement to never discuss their relationship with anyone else, to never publicly express an iota of affection for each other in any way beyond the accepted parameters of teasing banter and the occasional bout of friendly, drunken wrestling. As a result, he was confident none of the other men knew their secret.

"None of you has the balls of an ant," Charlie jabbed, joining in the fray. He checked the dragon's leg cuff one final time until he was satisfied with its security and that it wouldn't chafe her.

"Ants don't have balls," Fisnik snorted derisively.

"That's the point, you stupid twat," Dobry laughed.

While the rest of them began charming the stakes anchoring the chains into the ground, Charlie and Sasha fetched Lady Horntail's clutch. The three eggs were awkward to carry even nestled as they were in the large basket specially fashioned for the purpose. Charlie thought one of them looked a little smaller, a little duller than the others likely destined to be the runt. If the egg even hatched at all next spring, its stronger siblings would likely make a meal of it before long.

They laid the eggs between her forelegs as gently as possible, careful not to touch them with their bare hands and taint them with human scent, risking her rejection. Charlie paused then, close enough to look into her gorgeous amber-jewel eyes, which swirled and sparkled in an almost mesmerizing way as she focused her gaze upon him. He knew the phenomenon was common to all dragons the effect of the faceted spherical lens within her eye but he didn't often get an opportunity to see it up close like this.

Amazing! Beautiful! he marveled, longing to reach out and caress the smooth ebony hide. It baffled him how anyone could think these majestic beasts ugly, or evil, or even worse nothing but galleons on the wing. His blood boiled to think of the bands of loathsome poachers and black market dealers that prowled the rez, who saw these incredible creatures strictly as yards of hide, gallons of blood, and pounds of potions ingredients.

"All right, boys, let's wake our sleeping beauty," Skender announced, rattling Charlie out of his momentary reverie. As the ranking keeper present, Skender was in charge of their group here until they returned to Romania.

"Wanna give her a kiss first, Charlie?" Dobry called, puckering up and making noisy smooch-sounds.

"Slip her the tongue, mate," Milos added, crudely wagging his tongue.

Charlie offered them an equally crude gesture in response as he made his way swiftly toward relative safety. Once they were all beyond the magically demarked circular boundary the borderline of her firepower the Stunners were countered, and Lady Horntail groaned awake. Lovingly she sniffed her eggs, gently used her chin to nestle them closer to her chest, then warmed them with her body and breath.

A garbled, mournful shriek grabbed everyone's attention, including the Horntail's. On the far side of the clearing, the Chinese delegation still struggled to subdue the Fireball, who appeared to be inconsolable over the loss of her clutch, as well as frantically vulnerable with her impaired eyesight. Charlie hoped that idiot, Krum, hadn't done any permanent damage with his reckless Conjunctivitis Curse. What a shame if she had to be put down because of it! But if she didn't fully recover her keen sight, she'd be nothing but a blind target back in the wild euthanasia would be a mercy in comparison. If they hadn't all been sitting eggs, the three other females would've been circling already, sensing her weakness.

No matter what, he predicted Percy and his beloved International Magical Cooperation office would have a bugger of a time getting anything but glares and swears out of China for a good while. At least, if these keepers had anything to say about it...

"Let's go see what we can do to help, boys," Skender said, sympathetic to the Chinese keepers' plight.

Sasha turned to Charlie, clapping him on the shoulder as several of the Romanian delegation headed toward the Fireball's enclosure. "Why don't you go see your friend, Charlie," he urged. "We've got this covered."

Charlie smiled weakly. If the worst came to pass, and they did need to put the Fireball out of her misery, there were more than enough keepers around to do the deed.

Sasha knew how much he hated that part of the job, necessary as it sometimes was, and was trying to spare him the distress.

"Yeah, all right," he said. Spending an hour or so with Hagrid even when it meant consuming his rock cakes would be far preferable.

For as hard as it was to believe, Charlie was in England for a second time that year and at Hogwarts, no less. *And I'll be damned glad when this whole bloody Triwizard Tournament shite is over!* he grumbled to himself as he walked. Deciding to take the long way around rather than cutting through the Forbidden Forest, wishing to be respectful of the centaurs, he set off on a brisk pace, skirting the Forest's edge.

"Hold up, Charlie!" he heard a familiar voice calling from behind.

Charlie spun around. "Bill! I didn't know you were here!" he cheered as his older brother jogged to catch up. After a brief, brotherly embrace, he asked, "Are you here for the Tournament?"

Bill smiled and nodded his head as they resumed walking. "I piggy-backed it onto delivering a deposit. Clever timing, eh?" he said loud enough for anyone to hear. Both young men surreptitiously glanced around them. Seeing no one within earshot, they decided it was safe to continue their conversation. "And filing my report to the old man," he murmured under his breath, nodding slightly toward the castle.

"Me, as well," Charlie offered in a similar tone. He'd dutifully delivered the memory vial to Dumbledore the morning after they'd arrived with the dragons. "What's he got you after?"

"The usual," Bill replied. "I've got a few mates working in the London headquarters. Whenever I bring in a hoard, they let me have a quick peek at some accounts. The old man wants to keep tabs on certain people's finances, see."

"And?" Charlie prompted.

"Records show Mrs. Malfoy made a visit last summer to her personal vault," Bill explained.

"So?" Charlie asked, eyes narrowing upon hearing the familiar, detested name. "That can't be that unusual." The bitch was as rich as Croesus, after all. What were a few hundred galleons to her?

"The ledger noted Mrs. Malfoy made a withdrawal, but the account balance remained unchanged," Bill informed him. "Something came out of that vault, and it wasn't money."

"Ah, now that's slightly more interesting," Charlie mused aloud.

"But not the *most* interesting part," he whispered. When Charlie's raised eyebrows expressed his interest, Bill continued, "When Mrs. Malfoy returned later that day to visit her vault a second time, the security goblin asked her why she didn't just complete all her business in one visit. It's a routine sort of security question, but Mrs. Malfoy *lost it*. My mate who witnessed the scene said that at first, she started making an unholy stink that the goblins were mistaken, and she hadn't been there that morning. But when the goblins started asking more questions about what was withdrawn, she clammed up as if she realized the last thing she wanted was to arouse their interest."

"You think it wasn't her? The first visit?" Charlie asked.

"Unless somebody Obliviated her during lunch, which would be an interesting development in its own right, how could it've been?"

"What was it the thief took?"

Bill leaned close. "That's the most bizarre bit. According to the automatic account ledger and keep in mind these things are magically bound to the vaults by a bit of *very* tricky spellwork that's next to impossible to sneak around the either fake or forgetful Mrs. Malfoy withdrew... a wand."

"Whose? Hers?" Charlie pressed. *Why was she storing a spare wand in a Gringotts' vault?*

Bill shrugged. "Nobody knows. And that's the thousand-galleon question, innit?"

Charlie pondered the implications for a moment, but couldn't sort them straight. "What did Dumbledore make of it?"

Bill shrugged again. "You know how he is, playing everything close. He just thanked me for the information and told me to keep up the good work."

Charlie snorted. "Yeah, I got the same generic pat on the head," he said.

"I told you mine what's your story?" Bill asked, nudging him with an elbow.

"Nothing nearly as thrilling," Charlie replied. "Though I don't really remember the details, to be honest."

Bill shot him a baffled look.

"We found what we were looking for... sort of," Charlie explained. "Bertha Jorkins met an unpleasant end in Albania. Sasha said... said I begged him to help harvest the memory. I couldn't do it myself."

Bill tried to hide his shocked look by gazing out ahead of them. After mulling the information for a few moments, he asked in a low, slightly disapproving voice, "You involved someone else in this?"

Charlie bristled. "I trust Sasha with my life," he insisted. "And this isn't the Weasley chapter of the Dumbledore Fan Club. It's going to take more than just us to fight. *You-Know-Who*... if that's what this is turning into."

Bill gave him the facial equivalent of a shrug. "I suppose so."

They walked several more meters in silence.

"That was an impressive show. The champions, I mean," Bill offered, steering the conversation to more neutral, less secretive ground.

"Harry was brilliant," Charlie agreed. Based on what little time he'd spent with him, Ron's young friend seemed like a nice enough kid, considering. What the hell he was doing participating in the competition was a mystery, though. "But Krum's lucky he didn't get hexed into next month," he added. "The Chinese blokes are rightly pissed about what happened."

Bill chuckled, and Charlie recognized the hint of wickedness he'd noted in Egypt. "Did you see that sweet little bit of French pastry?" he asked with a wink. Then he stiffened dramatically, straightening his posture, and sang, "*Bonjour!*"

"She's only seventeen!" Charlie scolded him, appalled. Pretty as the Beauxbatons champion might or might not be, Bill had no business sniffing around a schoolgirl, for Merlin's sake.

Bill cocked an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed with his argument. "Might be eighteen. Either way, she's of age."

"But you're almost twenty-five!" Charlie cried. "She's Fred and George's age!"

"All right, *Mum*, no reason to get your knickers in a knot," Bill grouched. "Forget I said anything."

Charlie doubted his protestations had swayed his brother's interest in the Delacour girl, though. "I'm on my way to Hagrid's for a quick visit. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you joined us," he offered half-heartedly.

"I've got to get back to work," Bill sighed a little theatrically. "I'll Apparate to London from Hogsmeade, then take a Portkey to Memphis. All that bloody treasure won't find itself, bro."

"Well, it's good to see you again, anyway," Charlie said, offering a brotherly embrace.

"Yeah," Bill agreed, smiling and hugging him back. "You, too."

A moment after they parted, a thought occurred to Charlie: *Speaking of Mum's knickers in a knot...* "Hey, Bill, do me a favor, will you?" When his brother spun around but kept walking backward, Charlie called out, "While you're in town, send an owl to Mum and let her know Harry's all right. I promised her I would."

Bill cast an irritated smirk his way. "Do it yourself, git. I'm not a bloody house-elf."

"Have you forgotten what *really* happened to Auntie Muriel's crystal vase?" Charlie hummed smugly. "Perhaps at the post office, I might be overcome with the need to unburden my soul and send her an owl as well. Anonymously, of course."

Bill grimaced. "That's a low blow, brother," he growled. "Fine. I'll send your damned owl."

Charlie chuckled in his victory, minor though it was. But there was something about the sight of his brother walking away that struck him hard. "Bill!" he shouted.

Bill spun around once more, and impatient look on his face.

"Take care!" Charlie charged him.

Bill's expression softened. "I will. You, too," he called back before turning around and jogging off toward the village.

Charlie watched him leave for only a moment, then turned away, determined not to become maudlin about the situation. He wasn't the sort to idolize an older brother. Bill *definitely* had his faults, but he was a clever, competent wizard. Like Charlie himself, he'd demonstrated he could handle what the dangerous, adult world could throw at him. After all, Curse-Breaking wasn't an occupation just anyone could make a go of.

Charlie walked around a final bend of the Forest, and an enormous blue carriage came into view. Just a little bit further, and Hagrid's hut became visible. Charlie quickened his pace, eager to see his old friend again.

The hut's door flew open before he'd even had a chance to knock. "Ah, Charlie, it's good ter see yeh!" Hagrid exclaimed.

Charlie had a chance to brace himself so only gave a small grunt when Hagrid thumped him on the back in greeting, rather than stumbling and falling like he used to as a kid.

"Yer lookin' well!" Hagrid cheered as Charlie was hustled inside.

"I am well, thanks," Charlie replied. "And you, Hagrid! You look... well, you look positively spiffy, mate. Have you done something with your hair?"

Hagrid smoothed his beard a little nervously. "Ah, well, figured it was high time I started makin' meself more presen'able." His glance briefly fluttered toward his window, confirming Charlie's hunch from two nights ago that his friend was on the make. "Shall I put the kettle on?" he asked, doing exactly that without waiting for an answer.

"So, you're a proper Hogwarts professor now," Charlie said as he was handed a plate with a very heavy rock cake upon it.

"Can you believe it?" Hagrid chuckled. "Dunno wha' Dumbledore was thinkin'."

"Makes perfect sense to me," Charlie argued supportively. "I've never met anyone who knows more about magical creatures than you. And it's not just a load of book-rubbish, either. It's *experience*. I'm betting you're a fantastic teacher."

Hagrid snorted, but Charlie saw a pleased smile underneath the mad mass of beard. Then, struck by inspiration, he said, "Oh, tha' reminds me. I've got summat ter show yeh before yeh leave, Charlie." His eyes sparkled with glee. "I'll wager yeh've never seen *these* beauties before."

"What are they?" Charlie asked, his curiosity tempered with a healthy amount of wariness.

"I call 'em Blast-ended Skrewts!" Hagrid declared proudly.

Charlie picked up on the note of possessiveness in his tone. Familiar with Hagrid's abiding love for all creatures (the more dangerous, the better) and his fascination with hybrids, he put two and two together. "A new creation of yours?"

Hagrid beamed. "Crossed a Manticore with a Fire Crab, I did. And it was a trick ter get 'em together, lemme tell yeh."

Charlie couldn't believe the Ministry had given Hagrid permission to do such an ill-advised thing. "Who else knows about this?" he asked worriedly. He'd been happy to help his old friend out by taking an illegally-gotten dragonlet off his hands, but had no idea how or where to smuggle these dodgy-sounding Blasty-screws to safety, or whatever it was he'd christened them.

But Hagrid waved a dismissive hand. "They're just out the back. Usin' 'em as a special project for the fourth years."

Charlie decided to take this news as proof that the offspring of such an unholy union must be significantly less dangerous than either of their parents. He rationalized that if it was a student project, part of the curriculum, even then Dumbledore must be aware of them, at least.

Hagrid attended to the whistling kettle. While the tea was steeping, a nostalgic look came over him. "How's my little Norbert farin'?"

"Little Norbert's a full-grown, three-tonne brute," Charlie chuckled. Norbert had flown the coop, so to speak, to find a proper lair of his own just after Charlie had returned to Romania after the World Cup. The daily sight of the empty stone enclosure made Charlie a bit nostalgic, too. In their spare time this winter, he and Sasha planned to write up their experience fostering him for submission to one of the several dragon journals. If accepted, it would be Charlie's first foray into academic research. That was part of what made the Ridgebit Reserve so prestigious, after all: many of the keepers had research projects of their own.

Hagrid smiled, his black eyes a little misty. "Ah, 'e mus' be a sight. Wish I could see 'im."

"I'll try to get a snap for you," Charlie promised.

Hagrid gave him a grateful look. He blinked rapidly a few times, then rather self-consciously attempted to change the subject. "Quite a show this afternoon, eh?"

"Quite," Charlie agreed, unable to keep the hard edge out of his voice.

Hagrid nodded, understanding Charlie's meaning immediately and humming in sympathy. "Tragic accident, tha' was. Will she be all right, d'yeh think?"

Charlie shrugged. "Hope so."

After a respectful moment of silence, Hagrid continued. "Still, our Harry did a job of it, din' 'e? Tied for first now, 'e is."

"Both Hogwarts' champions did quite well today," Charlie said pointedly.

"Erm, right. You're absolutely right. Diggory did well, too," Hagrid added guiltily.

But Diggory held little interest for Charlie, either. "What the hell is going on here, Hagrid? How did Harry wind up in the tournament at all? I thought there was supposed to be an age limit?" *I thought the whole point was to protect the kid!*

"Dumbledore conjured that Age Line 'imself! An' Harry swears 'e din' put his name in, an' tha's the end of it!" Hagrid growled, vociferous as always in his defense of cherished friends and creatures (for they were more often than not one and the same, Charlie reflected).

"But if Harry didn't cheat his way in, then how... *owhy*... did his name get chosen?" Charlie pressed.

Hagrid's expression conceded Charlie's point was an excellent one. Yet he proffered neither an answer nor suggestions.

"Mum's beside herself, convinced it's a mad conspiracy of some kind..." Charlie said leadingly.

"She ain't the on'y one, then," Hagrid murmured. "Thought Minerva was gonna have kittens when the Goblet spat out Harry's name..."

They both laughed at the unintended pun.

"Rest assured, Dumbledore's keepin' his eye on it. And Moody's takin' Harry under his wing, as well." Hagrid coughed a little nervously, then leaned closer to Charlie and whispered in a conspiratorial voice, "He and I are doin' what we can to help Harry along through the trials, if yeh get my drift." He punctuated this confession with a knowing wink and tapping his finger to the side of his nose.

Charlie reckoned that, considering all the watchful eyes and protecting wands surrounding him, Harry was probably as safe as possible. Still, the situation bore careful monitoring. How many enemies might the poor kid have?

Hagrid handed Charlie a soup bowl-sized mug of tea, then drifted toward the hut's front window. Charlie suspected such dewy-eyed gazing had become something of a habit of his lately. Contemplating the view of a powder-blue behemoth of an Abraxan-drawn carriage, Hagrid spoke as softly, gently as the half-giant's voice could manage.

"I'll never forget tha' night I wen' ter fetch 'im. Ah, Charlie, it was madness the wreck of tha' house all around 'im. Poor little feller was beside 'imself, sobbin' for 'is mum an' dad."

Charlie had forgotten that bit of the tale: that Hagrid had rescued Harry from the Potters' demolished house in Godric's Hollow *Merlin, that must've been a horrific sight.* "I can't even imagine," Charlie mused softly.

Still staring out his window, Hagrid continued. "Yeh know, Charlie... as horrible as tha' night was... I remember feelin' somethin'... special... between me an' the lit'le feller. It was... well, it was nice ter hold a wee babe in me arms. I never 'ad before, yeh know... an' no one's ever trusted me enough wi' one since."

Charlie regarded his friend, marveling at the irony. Here was the biggest, strongest man he knew baring the softest of hearts, yearning for what most men did at some point in their lives: a family. "Hagrid..."

He gave a mighty sniff. "Lis'en ter me, goin' all soft," he chastised himself.

"Wanting something like that out of life isn't a weakness, Hagrid," Charlie countered, hoping to ease his friend's distress. "Just ask my dad if you don't believe me. Fatherhood is an act of strength, of courage, of optimism."

"Ha!" Hagrid blasted out a laugh. "Optimism! Yeh got tha' right, mate."

"That's not what I meant," Charlie protested.

"Ah, Charlie she's such a fine lady," Hagrid sighed, utterly lovesick. "Clever and refined and cultured. And then there's me, daft as a fwooper's..."

"There's you, clever and loyal, brave and honorable. And every bit as good as she is," Charlie insisted, even though his mind was reeling a bit at the prospect of Hagrid and the enormous woman he'd brought with him to see the dragons the other night. Though he supposed Hagrid might not have many other options, all things considered. It was certainly plausible she might feel the same. "You've got as good a chance as anyone else, I reckon."

Hagrid turned sparkling black eyes at him. "Yeh think?" He bustled over to the seat next to Charlie, sat down (disregarding an ominous creak from the furnishing), and leaned close. "Wha' should I do, then?"

"Do about what?" Charlie asked, fearful he knew exactly what Hagrid meant.

"To woo 'er, mate," Hagrid cried softly. "A handsome feller like you *dragon keeper* an' all must have loads of experience wi' the ladies."

Damn that stereotype! Charlie railed silently. He shook his head, quailing at being backed into such an awkward corner, but Hagrid was not to be deterred. "Gimme some advice, Charlie! I'm beggin' yeh!"

Charlie gritted his teeth, reminding himself that Hagrid had ever been a true friend to him. Surely there was *something* Charlie could say to boost his confidence in the matter. Praying that love was indeed universal, he offered the only reasonable advice that came to mind something he'd heard his father say more than once, in fact.

"Just be yourself, Hagrid," Charlie said. "If that's what she wants, then you'll both be happy. If it's not, then there's no point in wasting everyone's time, is there?"

Hagrid's expression softened, and he wore an almost rueful smile. "Ah, Charlie, yeh're right. I'm makin' meself mad over this, and for no good reason."

Charlie didn't want his friend to misinterpret his suggestion, though. He wasn't attempting to cushion Hagrid's landing, but rather to build him up. "She seemed quite keen on you the other night, mate," he offered.

Hagrid...*blushed!* He fussed with the hem of his tunic and cleared his throat. "Yeh really think so, Charlie?" he asked, a heartbreakingly plaintive note in his deep basso voice.

"Definitely," Charlie declared. "*Quite* keen, I'd say."

Hagrid chuckled like a schoolboy.

Before Charlie had time to marvel at the strange irony of a half-giant Hogwarts professor asking him advice about how to woo half-giant women a subject he could not possibly know less about there was a loud battering on the hut's door, startling them both. Hagrid hurried to the door, and Charlie was further surprised to see Fisnik there. He barged inside without any sort of acknowledgement to Hagrid and Charlie would have upbraided him for his rudeness if he hadn't blurted out in Romanian, "Come quick. Sasha's hurt."

Charlie leaped to his feet, shot through the heart. "How bad?"

"Wha's the matter, Charlie?" Hagrid asked, confused by the foreign tongue being hastily barked in his presence.

"It's my partner he's been hurt," Charlie translated, working to keep a note of panic out of his voice. "I've got to go, Hagrid."

"O' course, o' course," Hagrid said, concerned and understanding. "Hope 'e's all right."

But Charlie didn't wait for any further goodbyes and bolted out of the hut. "Where is he?" he demanded, slipping back into Romanian.

"They took him up to the castle infirmary," Fisnik explained.

Charlie took off toward the castle in a run.

"Just Apparate us, stupid!" Fisnik called out, running close at Charlie's heels. "You know where you're going, don't you?"

"You can't Apparate on the grounds here!" Charlie snapped without missing a step, cursing that very fact, for despite his piss-poor Apparating skills, he'd prefer to be splinched but with Sasha in an instant rather than minutes. When they reached the stairs to the entry hall, he slowed down just enough to ask breathlessly, "What happened?"

Fisnik was gasping for breath himself, yet managing to keep up and talk at the same time. "The Fireball... caught him with... her tail," he heaved. "Sent him... flyin'."

This information only fueled Charlie's panic. A direct hit from a dragon's tail? Even without spikes, the blow alone could snap a man's spine like a dry twig. *Please let him be alive*, he prayed.

Bounding up the stairs, they skidded into an almost deserted infirmary. "Sasha!?" Charlie called out, frantically searching the rows of beds as he jogged through the room, finding nothing but a couple of sleeping children and empty beds.

"May I help you?" a deep voice sneered from behind.

Charlie spun around to see his former Potions Professor. "Sasha Vasiliev. The injured keeper. Where is he?" he demanded in English.

A look of cold condescension met him. "Not here. Obviously." The words were drawn out slowly, cruelly.

Charlie shot Fisnik a questioning look.

Fisnik shrugged. In Romanian, he said, "Skender told Dobry and Milos to take Sasha to the castle and sent me after you. I took off..."

Snape glared at them as if offended by their rudeness. "I am here only as long as Madam Pomfrey remains at the champions' first aid tent, no doubt patching up Potter." Charlie noted he practically spat out Harry's surname. "No one else has interrupted the peace of this room since she left. Now do be so kind as to take your disruptive presence elsewhere, Mr. Weasley. The invalids present could do without it."

With a growled and insincere, "Sorry, sir," Charlie stormed out of the infirmary. *Fucking prick!*

"Now where?" Fisnik asked.

"The bloody first aid tent," Charlie snarled, barely reining in the urge to punch Fisnik, for lack of a more suitable target, and shoving him out of the way instead. By the time they reached the castle's exit, Charlie'd regained enough of his composure to apologize.

"Not necessary, mate," Fisnik assured him. "It's part of the life, isn't it? When Milos got gored by that Longhorn a few years back..." He visibly gulped. "Let's just say I know what you're going through."

A rational part of Charlie appreciated the fellow's sentiment. Dragon keepers were assigned a partner the moment they arrived at a reservation, and the keeper-partner relationship was one of the strongest bonds he'd ever encountered. Living and working together under such dangerous circumstances necessitated a life-or-death level of trust, an almost innate understanding of a fellow human being that few others could truly appreciate. There was a reason keepers jokingly referred to their partners as a "work-wife" and the relationship lasted until death.

But another, more thoracically located organ within him wanted to scream, *You have no fucking idea what I'm going through!* Sasha meant so much more to him that any professional partnership could define. Why hadn't he ever found the courage to tell him so?

By the time they reached the first aid tent, it, too, was deserted. The entire tournament pavilion had been emptied of people, the silence ominously deafening. Unable to quell his furious terror any longer, Charlie roared as he manually tore the cots apart, the sheets ripping with a mildly satisfactory sound, the pillows exploding in a feather-storm of fearful rage.

When he lunged for the main tent pole, Fisnik tackled him, wrapping powerful arms around him from behind before he could take the entire tent down around them. "That's enough," Fisnik warned quietly. "Don't make me use my wand."

Charlie struggled for a moment, then almost gratefully quieted down.

"This isn't helping anything," Fisnik added, slowly releasing him.

Charlie hung his head, panting from the exertion, nodding slightly in defeat. *Sasha, where are you?* he wanted to howl. A voice dark and cold whispered that if he wasn't in the infirmary or the first aid tent, it could only mean he'd been beyond medical help.

Don't leave me! he silently begged. *I can't survive without you!*

"Let's go back to the dragon enclosure," Fisnik suggested after he righted the first aid tent with a few flicks of his wand.

The enclosure was a far quieter place than when he'd left it. Almost somber. Like... *No! Not somber! Not like death!* Charlie fiercely corrected himself. *"The Fireball's finally quiet. Everyone's tired. That's all."*

Within the small crowd still gathered around the crimson she-dragon's area, Charlie spotted Skender's broad, grizzled frame. Running straight for him, he ignored every other sight and sound in the clearing. He barged into the group, rudely shouldering a few others out of the way, and interrupted him speaking with someone else.

"Where's Sasha?" he yelled.

Skender smirked sourly. "In your fucking tent, the stupid bastard. Probably bleeding to death from internal injuries."

"*WHAT!?*" Charlie nearly shrieked.

"Mr. Tough Guy refused medical help, insisting he could take care of himself," Skender growled, glaring in the general direction of the tent Charlie and Sasha shared. "Concussed motherfucker's probably passed out on his cot."

A few in the crowd chuckled knowingly. Yet another stereotype of dragon keepers this one with more than a grain of truth to it was their notorious "shake it off" attitude toward any injury short of decapitation. But this fact did absolutely nothing to relieve Charlie's worry. With a growl, he marched off toward their tent, ready to spit fire himself.

"You fucking *idiot!*" he shouted as soon as he burst through the tent flaps.

Sasha lay on his back in his cot, several empty vials scattered on the ground beside him. His arm was draped over his eyes. He did not move.

"D'you hear me, you son of a bitch?" Charlie bellowed, kicking his own cot. It crashed against the magically reinforced canvas wall rather than tearing through it.

"The entire fucking forest heard you," Sasha answered quietly.

Charlie quickly cast a Silencing Charm, then added a ward to prevent anyone from entering the tent and interrupting their row. "Why aren't you in the infirmary?" he demanded through clenched teeth.

"It's just a scratch," Sasha replied tersely.

"Don't peddle that shite with me. Fisnik said she caught you with her tail," he argued.

"It was a glancing blow, and Fisnik frets like an old spinster," Sasha countered. "Don't you start."

"You could have internal damage!" Charlie cried, involuntarily sinking to his knees beside Sasha's cot. The fact that he'd moved nothing but his mouth to answer belied the severity of his injuries. He wasn't thinking clearly probably a concussion, just like Skender said.

"Diagnostic spells were clear," Sasha maintained. "I don't need some dotty old school nurse fussing over me like a pampered kneazle."

A tiny part of Charlie wanted to laugh at Sasha's characterization of Madam Pomfrey. A larger part wanted to throttle him for being so damn stubborn. But the biggest part heard only the bit about diagnostic spells being clear, and he gave in to the urge to throw his arms around him.

Sasha grunted in pain, and Charlie gasped, recoiling. But Sasha grabbed his arms, halting his retreat.

"It's all right," Sasha said, his hand raking through Charlie's hair soothingly. "Just a little sore. I'll be right as rain tomorrow morning."

To Charlie's horror, he felt tears begin to well up in his eyes. He tried blinking them away. "Never do that again," he snapped, angry with himself for such a display of weakness, angry with Sasha for not being invincible.

"I don't plan on provoking a nesting female dragon again any time soon," Sasha snorted sarcastically.

Charlie grabbed his head with both hands and kissed him fiercely. "Never scare me like that again," he whispered hoarsely.

Sasha's hands squeezed his shoulders, a spark of fire glinting in his eyes. "Now you know how I felt in that fucking cave," he grumbled.

Charlie sniffed mightily, commanding himself not to cry, refusing to be further unmanned before him.

"What's gotten into you?" Sasha asked gently. "Why are you so upset?"

"I was so afraid you were..." Charlie choked, unable to complete the sentence out loud. *Hurt. Paralyzed. Dead.*

"I'm fine," Sasha insisted once again.

"But what if you weren't? What if I never got the chance to tell you...?" Charlie faltered.

Sasha's thumb brushed a tear off Charlie's cheek. "Tell me what?"

"That I love you," he whispered.

Charlie's favorite smile broke over his lover's face. "You think I don't know this, Charlie?" he murmured. "You think you don't tell me every day in everything you do? Don't be ridiculous. I'm not blind. Or stupid."

Charlie gave a little shake of his head. "I've never said it. And I should have. *want* to say it. Sash, I... I love you so much."

Sasha stared back into his eyes for several moments. "If the words make you feel better, then say them all you like. But *now* you, Charlie. You can't hide anything from me." Sasha gave his forehead a gentle kiss, then held Charlie to his chest. "You are mine. And I am yours. Nothing you or I could do will change this. I love you, too."

A partially stifled sob escaped Charlie, and the sound of Sasha's strong heartbeat filled his ears.

Author's note: In "Goblet of Fire" Chapter 33, the newly embodied Voldemort reaches into the robes Peter Pettigrew dresses him with and draws out *his wand* a thing he lost more than a decade before on the night he tried to curse Harry as an infant. How the heck did that happen? Well, according to [JKR Rumors/Wiki](#), Pettigrew retrieved Voldemort's wand from the wreckage of Potter's house and kept it hidden in an "undisclosed" location for twelve years. As he began living incognito as a rat within days after the fateful night, how did Scabbers/Pettigrew manage this?

Here's how I envision it: on the night of the Potters' murders, Peter gave Voldemort's wand to Narcissa Malfoy for safekeeping, trusting one of Voldemort's inner circle (and a fellow Death Eater?) to keep it hidden. After all, Voldemort himself entrusted her husband, Lucius, with the diary Horcrux (not that anyone else understood its true importance at the time) and her sister, Bellatrix, with Hufflepuff's cup, (though we don't know for certain when she came into possession of this). Living with the Weasleys as Scabbers over the ensuing years, Peter might well have put something together that led him to think Voldemort might not be as dead as previously thought.

After Peter's escape from Sirius, *et. al.*, in the Shrieking Shack, he dashed into the Forbidden Forest where he heard more rumors (from centaurs, unicorns, other rats) that Voldemort had made a recent attempt to resurrect himself (nearly three years ago, but still reasonably recent). Deciding his former master was likely his best bet for

survival, as a rat, he snuck into Malfoy Manor and stole a hair from Narcissa. As a wizard, he brewed Polyjuice Potion with said hair, then went to Gringotts to retrieve Voldemort's wand from Narcissa's vault (hence Bill's report to Dumbledore about the strange coincidence of two Narcissas in this chapter of my story). Now in possession of Voldemort's wand, Peter made his way to Albania to find him, with it hoping to buy his protection.

Peter was quite a busy little rat during the summer hols between "Prisoner of Azkaban" and "Goblet of Fire"! We know from canon (Chapter 1, "Goblet of Fire") that during this short period, Peter was successful in finding Voldemort *and* magically creating some horrifically creepy body in which to house his soul *and* in possession of Voldemort's wand which was used to murder Frank Bryce *and* had gotten his hands on Bertha Jorkins and her information regarding the Triwizard Tournament. (Whew!)

Jul-95

Chapter 8 of 28

Some days, you realize you'd've been better off staying in bed.

Chapter 8

July 1995

* * *

"Charlie's in the Order too," said George, "but he's still in Romania. Dumbledore wants as many foreign wizards brought in as possible, so Charlie's trying to make contacts on his days off." *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Chapter 4*

* * *

30 June, 1995

Dear Charlie,

Hope this little note finds you well, son. Weather is wretchedly hot and dry here I'm afraid we'll have to give up the garden as a bad job this year.

Has Bill written you with the big news? He's been transferred back to London now. Needless to say, we're terribly pleased to have him so near once more. Do try and plan a visit home soon this Christmas, perhaps?

Your mother wants to know if you remember where we stored your old Quidditch gear. She can't seem to find it, and we're hoping either Fred or George can fit into it and save us the expense of outfitting them both for the team this year.

Drop us an owl as soon as you can and let us know how you are.

Love,

Dad

Charlie smirked. Bill relocating back to London was an interesting tidbit, and he rightly suspected there was far more to this story than his father had let on. But the rest of it was nothing but inane drivel. *Molly Weasley not remembering a random domestic fact like where something was stored, no matter how trivial? Dad's testing the limits of plausibility there.*

Charlie tapped the worthless note with his wand and muttered a soft, *"Veritas revelio."* Instantly, the words on the page began to float and swirl about, the ink dissolving and rearranging into the message his father had really intended to convey. Continental distances like the one that separated him from his family were too great for Patronuses to navigate, so the Order had keyed some special parchment to recognize Charlie's magical signature alone, thereby keeping communications between him and the rest of the Order secret.

Charlie The worst of news, I'm afraid. Horrible tragedy at the Triwizard Tournament Harry was kidnapped during the final trial by You-Know-Who. Harry escaped, thank Merlin, but You-Know-Who's fully re-corporealized now and, according to Harry's testimony, has reassembled his minions. We've no idea yet what He's got planned, but reckon Harry likely remains a target. The Ministry's no help at all Fudge has stuck his head in the sand on this for so long that he's retaliating against anyone who tries to tell the truth or sound a warning. We're not at home this summer, so don't respond to this message or attempt to contact us unless it's an emergency. Dumbledore's got Bill back in England to keep a closer eye on things at Gringotts. He wants you to focus your efforts on supportive relations and recruitment if possible, rather than any more of that nasty bear business.

Stay safe, son.

Charlie tossed the scrap of parchment into the hearth and incinerated it. He stared at the flames as they quickly consumed the fuel, then watched the glowing embers die until a last gasp of smoke left the crumbling ash.

"Not good news?" Sasha asked softly, pressing a steaming cup of tea into Charlie's hand.

Charlie gazed out the window at a picture-perfect, rosy dawn breaking over the meadow. "Not good, no," he repeated, suppressing a shudder.

Sasha silently squeezed his shoulder, then left him to his thoughts.

Voldemort. He's back. For real.

By the time the sun rose fully on the warm midsummer day, Charlie, Sasha, and several other keepers were stationed on a large, elevated observation platform one of many on the rez peering out in every direction through Omnioculars. It was the height of mating season, and the keepers were attempting to track new dragon mating pairs. The quiet task of scanning the horizon did little to dispel the growing worry in Charlie's mind, however.

The thought of Voldemort returning to power filled him with leaden dread. The vision of his baby brother constantly standing beside his best mate Harry, offering little more to the Death Eaters than a ginger target, sickened him further. He tried to rationalize that, with the entire Order working to ensure Harry's safety, it might mean Ron would benefit from all that protection, too.

He was glad for the distraction when he spotted movement on the horizon. Spinning the Omnioculars' dials to bring the scene into better focus, he called out, "Western quadrant, section seventeen, heading southwest." On a portable desk situated behind him under a protected area of the platform, a Dicto-quill dutifully recorded his observation in an official reservation log book, automatically tagging the entry with a date and time stamp, as well as his initials as the witness.

As the view through the Omnioculars resolved, Charlie uttered a small snort of surprise upon recognizing one of the dragons in flight: it was Norbert, a body length ahead of three older males Charlie also recognized on sight. The little rush of semi-paternal pride he felt to see the young fellow again was tempered with wry sympathy. At a mere three years old, inexperienced Norbert wouldn't have an icicle's chance of catching a Ridgie female in her mating flight. *Poor fellow! Maybe next year, mate.*

He called out their identification codes, Norbert's first, as he was in the lead (for the moment, anyway). "NR-1992-c, NR-1989-a, NR-1989-d, NR-1986-a." Only one of the other three males had actually hatched on the Romanian reservation incidentally, the oldest. The other two had been brought in during the ensuing years for breeding purposes which they were in the process of fulfilling. The Dicto-quill scratched against the parchment of the log book, entering the data.

He was a little surprised the other males even tolerated Norbert's presence at all. By now, an adolescent male like him usually would have been put in his place by the older, more experienced males, either with an in-flight blast of fire, body-slam, or tail-whip. With another mild flush of pride, Charlie reckoned it might be due to Norbert's unusual size, which really was impressive. He could hardly blame the young fellow for giving it a go, after all. *Good on ya, Norbert!* he chuckled to himself.

After watching the three older males jostling for position behind Norbert for another minute, Charlie at last scanned the horizon ahead of them, searching for the female in heat leading them on. Then he did a double-take, unable to find her. *What the...?*

A thought occurred to him, and he sucked in his breath. *Could it be?* Carefully, he scanned the horizon once more, searching for confirmation. Sure enough, there was nothing but the four Ridgies in view.

Female dragons were generally a bit larger in size and a little faster in flight than males of the same species. But aside from these vague and unreliable distinctions, dragons had no external gender characteristics upon which to base a designation of male or female. Thus the sex of a newly hatched dragon couldn't be determined until his or her first mating flight...

"Merlin's rotten knob Norbert's a girl!" Charlie shouted. As the other keepers on the platform chuckled at his shocked exclamation, he marveled at the effect a mere name had on one's impressions. Even though he'd known on a technical level that Norbert's gender was indeterminate, the name Hagrid had christened the baby dragon with had led Charlie to unconsciously presume otherwise. He'd always thought of the dragon as a male.

"I'll be hexed!" Charlie chuckled as he watched the courtship unfold. The older male began fighting with one of the youths, the two of them blasting fire and bellowing threats. Meanwhile, the other young male ignored them, keeping his eyes on the prize ahead. Soon, Norbert and the young stud left the other ones well behind.

Apparently satisfied with the outcome of the race, Norbert slowed enough to allow the pursuing male to fly even with her. He then mounted her, performing the contortion of draconian copulation: his legs gripped her body, his long neck and tail wrapped around hers. Now fully supporting both their weights on her wings alone, Norbert began to lose altitude.

"Oi, go easy on her, you bastard," Charlie grumbled quietly as they plummeted precariously, and several chuckles answered him. Somebody murmured, "Proud papa," which was followed by more chuckles.

The amorous act itself didn't take long to complete less than thirty seconds, according to the timer on the Omnioculars. Then the groom disengaged himself and, trumpeting in a manner Charlie could only guess was alluring, beckoned his bride to follow him back to his lair. There she would lay her eggs in October, soon after the first snowfall, sit them until they hatched the following spring while he brought kills back to feed her, then they would share equally the rest of the parenting duties from there on out. Norbert would make her home with him for the next two and a half years as they raised their offspring together, then the two would part ways once the dragonlets finally left the nest, never to cohabitate again. As a species, dragons were notoriously non-monogamous.

He cleared his throat and, for the Dicto-quill's benefit, pronounced, "NR-1992-c confirmed female. NR-1989-d successfully mated with NR-1992-c."

The excitement of Norbert's revelatory mating flight soon faded and was eventually replaced as the most interesting event of the day when a lightning-fast Hungarian Horntail romeo out-maneuvered a small crowd of lumbering Ironbelly males to mate with a female Ironbelly. Wagers began flying fast and furious between the keepers as to whether the Horntail's lair was big enough to house her, whether the resultant hybrids would be viable, much less fertile, whether the nasty beasties wouldn't kill each other once hatched, and what the hell such an unholy union might look like. A behemoth with such wicked armor promised to be intimidating, to say the least.

That evening, Charlie and Sasha joined a large group of keepers at a tavern in one of the four magical villages that bordered the rez. Of the four towns Pitești (meaning "you hide", but not to be confused with the Muggle town of the same name), Rataciti ("the lost ones"), Nevazut ("unseen") and Comoara ("treasure") Comoara was the most populous. Each were busy little communities in their own right, populated and frequented by wizards and witches buying, selling, or bartering their wares, having largely escaped the economic effects their Muggle neighbors' experiments with communism. The cheeriness of the magical denizens contrasted sharply with their dour, depressed Muggle counterparts elsewhere.

The Comoaran tavern most frequented by the keepers Afumați (which meant "never sober" in Romanian slang) was certainly aptly named. The cozy log edifice with a sharply peaked roof was inviting and, whenever patronized by the local keeper population, generally rowdy. The owners, Marku Băian and his daughter, Ileana, were friendly and mostly tolerant of the boisterous antics of the keepers. Ileana, in particular, was pretty but sharp-tongued, serving as the object of many rebuffed advances and the source of a few broken hearts over the years.

Charlie and Sasha sat at a table away from the clamor at the bar, joining Ghenadie Negrescu, the Head Keeper, and his Hungarian partner, Zoltan Nagy. Ghenadie was in his early sixties, and his partner was perhaps a decade younger, but such distinctions were difficult to discern in their equally wizened faces. The exposure to years of harsh mountain environment aged keepers prematurely, and Charlie understood he was looking at his own likely grizzled future.

The four of them sat quietly, drinking their pints. Charlie watched as Ileana served shots of țuică, fended off a flirtatious Bohdan Grabowski, then scurried away from Laslo Petkov's inebriated attempt at an embrace. But while the rest of the keeper crowd laughed uproariously at the failed advances, Charlie couldn't even summon a grin.

"You're awfully preoccupied. What's got you so worried, young Weasley?" Ghenadie asked.

Charlie gave a halfhearted smile and small shrug, not intending to answer, but Sasha said, "He got bad news from home today. Probably about this Voldemort character, I'm guessing."

Charlie shot him an irritated look. *Why does he insist on saying the name?* He'd explained to Sasha everything about the Order and their suspicions about You-Know-Who ages ago, but hadn't yet shared the morning's news about the Tournament fiasco. Small wonder Sasha had correctly deduced what about the letter had triggered Charlie's distraction, and he'd been encouraging Charlie to go to Ghenadie with his Order concerns for a while now. But Charlie didn't like feeling pushed into it.

Ghenadie and Zoltan both stiffened at the mention of the name, and Ghenadie scowled. "I have not heard this name in many years. Why do you bring it up?"

Charlie felt the need to tread a bit more carefully now. The majority of the keepers on the Romanian rez had been schooled at Durmstrang, after all. Charlie had heard You-Know-Who had many sympathizers there, but Sasha could neither confirm nor deny the rumor. Still, if his mission was to recruit possible allies against him and his Death Eaters, he'd have to feel out everyone's loyalties at some point, something he couldn't very well do without declaring his own.

"My parents fought against V-Voldemort when I was a boy," Charlie explained, stammering slightly when he uttered the horrible name out loud. "They have reason to believe he was not destroyed but, instead, hid out all these years in Albania in some disembodied form or another. He's now returned to England, conjured his body once more, and reassembled his followers."

Charlie's announcement resulted in some grumbling from Ghenadie and Zoltan both. He wasn't sure what this signified, but decided to make the leap anyway. "My family and I are members of an organization sworn to fight against them. So, yes, I'm worried."

Ghenadie looked hard at Charlie for several moments, then sniffed. He took a drink of his beer. He looked at Zoltan for a few more moments. Then, he leaned against their table with one elbow, edging slightly closer to Charlie, and spoke in a low voice.

"When I was a younger man, a fellow I went to school with tried to recruit me and several others to serve this Dark Lord person, promising unlimited power and untold rewards to be reaped for loyal service. And I told him what I'm about to tell you now: why the hell should I give a toss? I'm my own man here, and I do as I please. That greedy bastard isn't my problem, and I don't fancy makin' him mine any time soon."

"Now, I understand you're family's involved, Charlie, and I respect your loyalty to them it's right and proper." Then he fixed Sasha with a pointed stare. "What you and any of my keepers do on their own time, on their own conscience, is their business. But I'm not stupid enough to join some crusade fought halfway around the world..."

"You think that's where it'll stay?" Charlie countered. "If he gets what he wants, takes Britain under his thumb, you think he'll be content with that? I don't need a damned crystal ball to tell you a megalomaniac like him is gonna set his sights elsewhere. And, no offense intended, but he's likely to assume a certain fellowship with Durmstrang alumni. It very well might bring him here next."

"That a threat?" Ghenadie growled.

"Don't be stupid, Ghenadie," Sasha countered before Charlie could reply. "Charlie's only arguing that such a dangerous madman is everyone's problem. Regardless of any ethical imperative, on a purely practical, self-interested basis, it would behoove us all to defeat him before he has the chance to gain any more power or allies."

Ghenadie sat back in his seat and gave a tiny nod of acknowledgment, conceding Sasha's point. Charlie shot his partner a thankful look, grateful he hadn't managed to land himself in any more trouble with his boss.

"That idiot, Karkaroff didn't seem to fare too well for as long as he was aligned with him, that's for sure," Zoltan offered.

"You mean the Durmstrang Highmaster?" Charlie's interest perked immediately he recognized the name from the Triwizard Tournament last year. He'd known, of course, that Karkaroff had been a Death Eater but not his role within them. He wondered if this might be information Dumbledore would be interested in.

Ghenadie snorted disdainfully while Zoltan gave a little nod. "Like Ghenadie said, Igor tried to recruit more followers amongst us. I don't think he was very successful, though, nor did this bode very well for him with his master. My impression of this Dark Lord fellow is that he's not a very pleasant one, or very good at taking disappointment in stride."

"Knowing Igor as I did, I suspect he promised his master rather more than he could deliver," Ghenadie chuckled morbidly.

"He did become quite desperate toward the end of all that, didn't he?" Zoltan agreed. "Still, the slippery bastard landed on his feet, eh? Managed to set up his own little fiefdom at Durmstrang, he did."

"He was my Curses Professor," Sasha grumbled. "And I wasn't the only one who hated his guts. I heard he made Highmaster the year after I left."

Charlie spared a sympathetic glance for Sasha. He knew his partner had been very unhappy at Durmstrang but little else about his experience there. Sasha disliked talking about his school days. "Karkaroff was a convicted Death Eater. Spent some time in Azkaban. He sold others out to buy his own release," Charlie said, offering what little he knew about the man.

"If what you say is true, and this Voldemort fellow is back, he might very well be indisposed toward our dear Igor," Ghenadie mused. "Karkaroff's probably holed himself up in his precious Durmstrang office, pissing himself at the thought."

Charlie took another drink before trying once more to persuade his audience. "Karkaroff or not, You-Know-Who is going to seek out influence here. Just like he did last time, he's going to come looking for support. And I don't think he takes no for an answer. One way or another, you're going to have to choose a side."

Ghenadie leveled a piercing look at Charlie. "Keepers take care of their own, boy. We'll fight to the death to defend you from attack, just like you'd do for any of us. That's our way. But if you're asking me to join some idealistic army to defend a bunch of foreigners from one of their own, no matter how mad or evil... the answer's no. I'll deal with the bastard when he's on my doorstep and not before. And then, by God, he'll regret the day he ever thought to cross a keeper."

"And who will come to our aid, Ghenadie, when that day comes?" Sasha pressed.

"We won't be asking for help," Ghenadie growled.

"Then we'll all be dead," Sasha argued, glaring right back.

"I'm not invincible, but rest assured I'll be taking several of them to hell with me," Ghenadie warned malevolently.

The pending confrontation was headed off when Ileana appeared with four new pints. "You look ready for a fresh round, boys," she said, then set the glasses on the table before each man without asking.

"Ah, Ileana, you're the light of my life," Zoltan chuckled, eager to change the subject. "Run away with me, doll."

"And what would Lizuca say to that?" Ileana countered, referring to a local woman that could loosely be described as Zoltan's girlfriend whenever he bothered to look her up, that is. Zoltan viewed romantic relationships in a very stereotypically keeper-ish manner: he participated in them only insofar as they were at his convenience.

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her," Zoltan teased back, daring to lay a hand on Ileana's hip.

Her hand darted out in a lightning-quick slap to Zoltan's face though Charlie couldn't detect any real anger or force behind it. Suffering such liberties was the price to be paid by a pretty barmaid, he supposed, and he strongly suspected Ileana viewed the situation similarly. As long as business was good and bills were paid, such behavior, while discouraged, was mostly tolerated.

The rest of the table laughed genially. Zoltan certainly didn't begrudge her, offering a wink and a smile that signaled he enjoyed such spunk from a lass. As she collected their empty glasses, Ileana yelled in vain at a small group of whores who'd just entered the bar to take their business elsewhere. Bohdan yelled back, insisting these women were his cousins, and he'd duel anyone who called them whores again. Everyone knew his claim for the preposterous lie it was, but Ileana only rolled her eyes, and the rest of the keepers in the bar laughed.

The rest of the evening played out as was typical. Four keepers slunk off with the four whores, a few others left to pay visits to their "girlfriends" or whatever other woman

they could finagle into bedding them for the night. A townie ribbed Viorel Iliescu about his name which meant "bluebell," and Merlin knew he'd been teased enough about it that he ought to be able to take the jibes a bit better but an all-out brawl ensued, wrecking several tables, chairs, and a vast amount of glassware before Charlie, Sasha, Ghenadie, and Zoltan managed to shove them outside and break it up. Ghenadie escorted the local yokel home while Zoltan marshaled Viorel back to the rez. Meanwhile, Charlie and Sasha offered to help Marku and Ileana clear up the mess.

Marku accepted their offer gratefully. "Ah, my quiet friends. I can always count on you two to keep your heads, yes? Not so hot-blooded, thank goodness!" He beckoned Sasha over to help him right the toppled furnishings and repair the broken ones.

Charlie made his way over to Ileana, who was sorting her way through a carpet of broken glass, filtering out the largest pieces. "Sorry about this mess," he offered.

"It isn't your fault," she sighed. She summoned two brooms and, while she charmed the larger fragments back together again, he began directing the brooms to sweep up the bits that were beyond repair. When she'd salvaged two trays full of reconstructed glasses, he helped her carry them back to the bar.

As she sent each glass back to its proper place in the cupboards, she said in an almost distracted manner, "My father's right. You and Sasha, you never cause trouble. Never chase after the whores like the others. What's your story?"

Charlie shrugged a little nervously. "No story. Just prefer quiet to trouble, I suppose."

Ileana gave him a measuring look that made him want to squirm. "Is it a broken heart you're nursing? Some stupid woman mistreated you in the past? Is that why you never take up with any of the bimbos here?"

Unsure of what to say, he just shook his head and shrugged again, riveting his attention to sweeping up the detritus of the fight.

But instead of quelling the conversation, his reticent behavior somehow drew Ileana closer. She squeezed his bicep, and her hand lingered on his arm until he looked at her. "I can see you're a private man, as should be expected from someone so quiet and well-mannered. I respect that." Then she pressed a soft kiss to his cheek and whispered into his ear, "If you ever want someone to help you forget whatever that bitch did to you, you know where to find me."

Charlie swallowed. Guiltily, he stole a quick glance at Sasha. Much to his chagrin, Sasha was looking right at him, a slight, patient smile on his face. And to his further mortification, Ileana noticed, too.

"It's okay," she murmured, stepping slightly away. "I understand. You're shy about this. No one else needs to know. But the offer stands, Charlie. Anytime."

Jan-96

Chapter 9 of 28

A smidgen of cloak and dagger between old friends.

Chapter 9

January 1996

* * *

"You're an Auror?" said Harry, impressed...

"Yeah," said Tonks, looking proud. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Chapter 3*

* * *

Charlie walked into a poorly lit Muggle dance club in Berlin. The flashing lights brought to mind a magical duel, setting his already frayed nerves further on edge. The dissonant music was grating, the loud, unnatural buzzes and chirps hurting his ears along with a thumping bass beat, the pulse of which he could feel in his lungs. A press of people bounced and gyrated around him.

He hated it.

He never would've been caught dead in a place like this on his own, but it's where his contact had wanted to meet Merlin only knew why. Gritting his teeth, he shouldered his way through the crowd to the bar and ordered two beers. Then he slunk into a far corner that offered a decent view of the rest of the place, took a seat on a couch of dubious cleanliness, and set the bottles of beer on a rickety little table before him.

After scanning the crowd for a minute or so, he recognized her the instant she came into view he'd've known that pink hair anywhere. He gave her a little wave, and she responded with a single nod of acknowledgement.

Nymphadora Tonks strode confidently across the room, brimming with a maturity and self-possession he was envious of. She was dressed to fit in with the club crowd, wearing a black Muggle-style trench coat that was cut to fall at the top of her thighs and belted at her trim waist, with tight-fitting black trousers and long, high-heeled black boots. He, on the other hand, wore his least-patched brown work trousers and a comparatively garishly colored crimson jumper his mother had knitted him last Christmas.

As she strutted toward Charlie, she smiled broadly at him in a way he found a little unnerving. Then, when she was right in front of him, she bent at the waist, slid her hand into his hair, and said softly through her smile, "Play along and put your hands on my hips."

And then she kissed him. Only it wasn't just a kiss. It was practically a snog on the lips with tongue and everything.

Startled, he did as he was told. It felt so very *wrong*, though like a wooden dummy to be kissing...*Tonks!?* They were cousins albeit distant ones as well as old school chums. Not to mention she was a... well, she *wasn't* Sasha.

It only lasted a few moments before she broke it off. Then she semi-gracefully fell across his lap to seat herself on the sofa beside him, leaving her legs draped across his thighs. In the process, she bumped the table, sloshing some beer.

"Ah, shit, Charlie," she groaned. "Sorry about the mess!"

Here was the first little flash of his clumsy old schoolmate he'd known, and Charlie nearly choked. *After coming on so strong, out of the goddamned blue, spilling a few drops of beer is what she's worried about?* "No matter," he stammered.

But before he had a chance to say anything further, much less demand an explanation, she pushed in for another go. Hand on his cheek, she turned his face to hers and kissed him again. *What the bloody hell?*

She held his head close even after she released his lips. Murmuring into his ear, she said, "Got your wand ready, Charlie? I'm being followed. Don't look, but it's the specky prat in the green jumper by the bar."

"Who is he?" Charlie asked, risking a glance despite her warning. Sure enough, a fellow fitting her description was boldly staring at them.

"All of us Aurors suspected of sympathizing with Dumbledore've got tails now," she said, caressing his cheek lovingly with her thumb. "Dunno if they're working for Fudge or You-Know-Who. But they're complete bollocks at Stealth, thank Merlin for small favors. Worse than me, if you can believe it."

"How did he track you here?" Charlie pressed, following her lead and talking directly into her ear. He began awkwardly rubbing her back like he'd seen other blokes do with girls at pubs. "In Berlin?"

"I had to take an *official* Portkey to get here proper permits and all. I'm even burning a personal day for this little holiday," she grumbled. "Kingsley wants it to look like I'm doing this on my own."

"Should we leave?" he said.

"Nah, this place is likely as safe as any for the moment," she replied, nuzzling his neck. "He's not stupid enough to make a move with all these Muggles as witness. Anyway, Kingsley and I think they've been told to observe, not interfere. As far as Specky knows, I'm nothing but a horny witch meeting up with an old school chum for a quick shag."

Charlie coughed a little at the lurid picture she'd painted. Her hand slid down his neck to rest on his chest, and she wiggled a little in his lap. "Do they know about the Order being back on alert?" he asked worriedly.

"Fudge or You-Know-Who?" she asked, running the tip of her nose along his jaw.

"Either," he said.

"Dunno," she replied. Then she took his head in both hands and stared penetratingly into his eyes. Rubbing her nose tenderly against his, she said. "You're dad's gonna be all right."

Charlie pressed his forehead against hers, closing his eyes and sighing, "Thank you!" in relief. He'd been worried sick ever since he'd gotten the word from Bill about the attack on his father at the Department of Mysteries.

"I saw him myself," Tonks assured him, stroking his hair again. "He's well on the mend, cheerful as always."

Charlie was inspired to kiss his old friend for delivering such happy news and did so, finally with some enthusiasm. He gave her a proper hug for good measure, too, and she laughed at his exuberance.

"How goes your mission?" she chuckled when he released her.

Charlie gave a little sigh of frustration, and she nestled her head against his shoulder, stroking his bicep. Speaking into her pink hair, he said, "It hasn't been easy to find anyone willing to commit to the cause. Most of them see it as not their problem it's too far removed from their everyday affairs. The ones who've agreed to support us are the same ones that go looking for a fight on their days off."

Tonks' arms wound around his chest, and she gave him a little squeeze. Looking up at him once more, she said, "We'll take what we can get. Beggars can't be choosers, I suppose."

"Sorry," Charlie moaned a little, feeling like a failure. "I'm crap at this business."

She kissed him once more, only lightly this time, then, pretending to nibble at his ear, said, "Don't be so hard on yourself, mate. Dumbledore's got people all over the Continent, and none of them are reporting much different from you. Just keep at it, yeah?"

"Really?" Charlie asked, pulling back to look her in the eye, desperately hoping she was wrong. He'd been counting on the others being more successful.

Her smile was genuinely friendly this time, less like a leer. "All we can do is our best, right?" They both glanced over at her tail, noting he was either bored or distracted, scanning the crowd. Charlie saw Tonks palm her wand and, using the little table as a shield, cast a quick spell in the git's direction. A few moments later, the git began quickly making his way toward the loo.

Tonks chuckled. "That's our cue. Let's get out of here."

"Where to?" Charlie asked.

"Your room, of course," she scolded him with a roll of her eyes. Apparently familiar with the layout of the club, she pulled him along behind her and they quickly exited a rear door into a dark, deserted alleyway.

Less than thrilled to be called upon to Apparate both her and himself to someplace he had only the barest familiarity with, he advised her, "Hold on, then," and spun them on the spot. Moments later, he was relieved that they arrived in their proper two pieces in his hotel room, and he managed to only bark his shin against the small dresser.

Tonks giggled lightly. "You Apparate like I walk," she teased him. Then she took a moment to survey his accommodations. "Erm... cozy," she offered as a reluctant compliment, the sort of thing you say when you can't think of anything nice.

He flopped into the small chair beside the bed and gestured for her to make herself comfortable. What the place lacked in amenities, he found it made up for in quiet and affordability. "Some of us don't have a posh Ministry per diem to throw about," he teased back.

Tonks expressed her low opinion of said per diem with a snort. She perched lightly on the bed, then nudged his knee with her foot. "You're looking well, mate. Very fit, in fact. Dragon-keeping suits you, I reckon."

Charlie gave her a fond smile finally, he began to see some of the fun-loving, playful girl he'd known at school. "And you look skinny. I reckon I could whip you into shape in a few months on the rez, though. Look me up when you get tired of all the cloak and dagger rubbish, and I'll put you to work barreling dragon shit."

"Skinny!?" she protested, nudging his knee harder. "I could take you in a heartbeat, Dragon Boy."

Charlie snorted dismissively. He had no doubt he could best her in seconds if it came to a strictly physical altercation. However, she'd always had a quick wand, even at school, and Tonks was an Auror now...

"Chicken," she dared him.

"I don't make a habit of teaching lessons to skinny bints, but I suppose I can make an exception in your case," he boasted.

"Go on, then," she baited him. "I'll even spot you the first spell."

As entertaining as the thought was, he didn't really fancy having to explain all the room damage that would likely result from even a playful wand duel between friends. "Some other time, perhaps," he yawned.

"If you insist." Tonks sat bouncily on the bed, making a few springs squeak. "Oh, *really* nice effect, Charlie!" she chuckled wickedly. "Shall I sell it for your neighbors' benefit? Ooh, I'd better, just in case Specky Git has tracked me here!"

Before Charlie had a chance to ask what she was on about, Tonks leaped to her feet and began jumping on the bed, eliciting louder squeaks. The headboard began thumping rhythmically against the wall. Her eyes twinkled evilly.

"Oh, Charlie!" she moaned loudly, grinning directly at him.

"Hush, Tonks," he hissed. The prospect of facing his fellow lodgers the next morning after this wasn't appealing.

"*Oh, Charlie!*" she keened, jumping a little faster. She giggled almost silently.

He feared for the bed's functionality after this onslaught. "Take it easy, will you?" he warned her, a little louder now to be heard over the noise. "Don't break it I don't fancy sleeping on the floor tonight."

But she ignored him completely, instead throwing her head back. "*OH, CHARLIE! YES! YES! GOD, YES!*" she bellowed at the ceiling, punctuating her words with several whimpering squeals.

Charlie folded his arms across his chest and smirked, unimpressed. "Are you *quite* finished now?"

Tonks heaved a large sigh as she sat back down on the bed. "Very satisfied, love," she said in a voice he still found overloud.

After a few quiet, somewhat awkward moments of not knowing what to say after such a performance, Charlie decided to broach the subject gnawing at him lately. "How are things really? Back home, I mean?"

Tonks wore a bitter smirk, understanding what he meant. "Fudge has been waging a smear campaign against Harry and Dumbledore, trying to discredit their warnings about You-Know-Who being back. The *Prophet's* full of snarky little comments now about how deluded and self-important the two of them are, trying to make them out as paranoid laughingstocks. Meanwhile, he really thinks Dumbledore's plotting some Ministry takeover or some such rubbish."

"How could anyone think that?" Charlie spluttered.

Tonks shrugged. "He's completely mad, Fudge is, fearing more for his own position rather than the public good. I suppose that's what power does to you."

"Disgusting," Charlie grumbled.

"Agreed," Tonks replied.

"What about the... the attack on Dad? What was that all about?" Charlie asked.

"There've been several break-in attempts at the Department of Mysteries since last summer," she explained. "We think You-Know-Who wants something inside."

"What is it?" Charlie interrupted her.

"Dunno," she said patiently. "Could be anything, couldn't it? Anyway, we've all been taking shifts guarding the entrance. Your dad was there the night You-Know-Who sent that nasty snake of his." She shrugged again. "You know the rest, don't you?"

Charlie's brow furrowed thoughtfully. "Bill said Harry saved him, but I still don't understand how. I mean, Harry was at Hogwarts, right?"

Tonks looked distinctly uncomfortable. "None of us understands it, mate," she whispered guiltily. "The only story I could squeeze out of your little brother was that Harry 'saw' the attack in a dream."

"You mean, he had a premonition?" Charlie attempted to clarify.

"No. Not prior to the attack. *At the same time...*"

Charlie swallowed, his confusion eclipsed by the bodily disconcertment he felt, echoed in Tonks' own spooked expression. "That's..." Then he faltered, unable to find the right word to express how perturbed he felt.

"Creepy," she offered. "I know. Rumor has it there's a... connection... of some sort. Between them."

Charlie didn't feel like contemplating such an unnerving concept. "Speaking of the nasty snake..." He fished through his rucksack for the memory vial he'd brought with him, then handed it to her.

"What's this?" she asked, examining the vial.

"Years ago now, Dumbledore wanted me to search for stories about a very large snake in Albania. I never found a single one. What I did find were stories of a few crazed bears, which led us to think that might have been how You-Know-Who survived for the years after Harry seemed to have destroyed him: by possessing these animals. At the time, this particular tale didn't seem to fit what I was looking for, so I didn't bother with it..."

"But now?" Tonks prompted.

"Now I think it might be important," he agreed. "Especially since we know You-Know-Who wants something Mysterious. I don't know *how*, exactly, but..."

"What's it about?"

"A while ago, I met an old Muggle woman who told me a local legend about a beautiful woman who came from far away to live in the woods there. The story goes that she was very wise but also very sad. She would disappear whenever anyone tried to approach her little hut and never came into town. People said she was a witch."

Tonks quirked a mildly curious eyebrow.

Charlie took it as his cue to continue. "One day, a noble warrior came looking for a woman matching her description. He claimed to be sent by the woman's great and kind mother, who was also very wise, and that she'd stolen a magical crown from her. His quest was to find the magical crown and reunite the daughter with her dying mother,

who wished to reconcile.

"The townspeople led the nobleman to the witch's hut, where they fought with magic. The woman refused to hand over the magical crown, nor would she return to her mother, who was on her deathbed. Bolts of lightning flashed upon their command; he must've been a wizard, too. In a rage, the nobleman let fly a cursed dagger that pierced the witch's breast and killed her. Then he wept bitterly over the slain woman's body, for he had failed in his mission for the woman's mother he had neither the daughter nor the magical crown to bring her and he fell upon his own dagger rather than face the shame of returning empty-handed. The Muggles buried the two beside the witch's hut, burned the hut to the ground, and laid a stone above the graves that remains there to this day. It's marked with a strange symbol carved into the stone I don't know what it represents."

"I still don't get it," Tonks said. "Muggles tell loads of stories about witches and wizards, most of them complete bollocks."

"I know, but this one's different. See, the old woman who told me this story claimed her father had told it to another Englishman almost forty years ago *That* bloke asked her father to lead him to the burial stone in question. He did and no one ever saw or heard from either of them again. She claims the Englishman murdered her father after he showed him the gravestone."

"Okay, that's weird, but I still don't"

"What if the Englishman was You-Know-Who before he became You-Know-Who?" Charlie hissed with excitement. "The timing would fit, see? Maybe that's the Albanian connection for him! Why he came here after the killing curse backfired he was already familiar with the woods. What if he came here the first time looking for that magical crown?"

"You think it really exists?" Tonks exclaimed. "Does he have it? What does this crown supposedly do?"

"Dunno. But even if it doesn't exist, even if he never found it, it's got to be a clue. If You-Know-Who went looking for this magical object, like he's doing again now, we've got to figure out why. If Dumbledore knows what they are, what they do, then it might give us information we can use to defeat him."

Tonks pondered this for several moments. Then, with a patient smile, said in a gentle voice, "Charlie, mate, I think you're reaching. These are some pretty flimsy coincidences."

"Maybe so," he agreed, the wind taken out of his sails a bit. "But just in case, I want Dumbledore to know."

Author's note: Yeah, so Charlie's got wind of a bit of the Grey Lady's story and passed it on to Dumbledore well ahead of DH. I just couldn't resist exploiting Voldemort's Albanian connection a little more. It seemed to me that Dumbledore had a pretty good idea of what Voldemort was using for Horcrux material by the time he let Harry in on the secret, so I let Charlie be the one who potentially inspired him (even if nobody specifically suspected Horcruxes yet at this point).

Jul-96

Chapter 10 of 28

A very big problem comes knocking on Charlie's door.

Chapter 10

July 1996

* * *

"Rotund and slower in flight than the Vipertooth or the Longhorn, the Ironbelly is nevertheless extremely dangerous, capable of crushing dwellings on which it lands. Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, Dragons: Ukrainian Ironbelly.

* * *

Charlie was so accustomed to hearing the random, faint roar of a dragon somewhere off in the distance that he no longer gave them any heed. Tuned the little exclamations peppered throughout the day and night out, for the most part. But the deafening bellow from just outside his front door that rattled the windows of keeper hut number eight did the job of jolting him awake from a midsummer pre-dawn doze.

He leaped out of his cot, reflexively shoving his feet into boots, and lunged to the tiny window of his back bedroom, confirming his sense that the roar came from the other side of the building when he found nothing. Snatching his wand off the bedside table on the way out, he scrambled down the narrow walkway hard on the heels of Sasha who'd just darted out of his own room a second before into the main room of the hut.

Just as they skidded to the largest window, another roar rent the air, sending a chill of fear down his spine that had nothing to do with the fact he was wearing nothing but boots and underpants. A very serious problem now stared them down from less than a hundred feet away: there, in the meadow, stood an enormous and evidently pissed-off Ironbelly.

"Queenie's out and about early today," Sasha quipped, his flippant tone belying his anxiety.

As if responding to her name, the ancient matriarch the oldest dragon on the reservation at fifty-two years sent a blast of fire at the hut. Both men dove to the floor just before the window burst under the pressure of the fiery onslaught. Shards of hot glass rained down on them while tongues of flame licked through the open gap. The wood of the sill caught fire.

"Think she's gone a bit off, don't you?" Charlie yelled as the crackle of another burst of fire broke over the hut. By the time it was past, the roof of the hut was ablaze. He and Sasha both crawled gingerly over the glass-strewn floor, ignoring the little cuts received in the process. They pressed themselves into the relative safety of the cold stone hearth, crouching.

"Time to summon some reinforcements?" he yelled. It was, for the most part, a rhetorical question, despite the legendary I-can-handle-anything attitude he mostly shared with the race of men who called themselves keepers. No one not even a Ridgebit Reservation keeper was cocky enough to imagine he could take on a dragon on a rampage on his own.

Both men grasped the little tubular amulet they each wore round their necks and murmured the necessary alert spell. Bewitched with a complex Protean Charm, the amulets worn by every keeper on the rez would respond by instantly heating up and vibrating, then conveying the identity and location of the alarm. It was a fail-safe distress call of last resort and the other keepers receiving the message would understand lives were on the line.

After a third blast of fire bathed the hut, the room began rapidly filling with heat and smoke. "We've got to get out of here," Charlie yelled, stating the obvious.

Sasha nodded, coughing a little. "Maybe head for Norbert's old stable," he suggested.

Another roar made Charlie reconsider attempting to return to his room for clothes before they left. Nor was the front door a viable option as long as one wanted to remain, well, *viable*. The ground shook as the next roar was accompanied by a violent tail-thrashing.

"Make a run for it?" Charlie asked, steeling himself for the twenty-yard dash that would follow climbing through the window above the sink the only rear exit that would come close to large enough to admit them. A flat expanse of dewy, sweet grass separated their hut from the little paddock they'd built to house Norbert as he'd grown. Constructed exclusively of stone, it would offer some protection he hoped. They'd be moving targets along the way, but...

"Don't be stupid!" Sasha growled. He threw his arm around Charlie and in the next instant Apparated them both to the far side of the shelter. It irked Charlie a little that he'd taken such a liberty without giving him a breath of warning Charlie still hadn't gotten very comfortable with Apparition, especially under duress but wisely realized now was not the moment to quibble.

From this relatively safer vantage point, they peeked around the corner, trying to determine what had provoked such ire from the dragon. Charlie searched for signs of obvious injury or disease but found none except for the fact she seemed hell-bent on destroying an innocent, defenseless keepers' hut. He noted her metallic grey scales were a bit dull with age but that was nothing new, and her scarlet eyes still shone brightly. Her movements were a bit stiff, maybe even a little tentative, but again, this was to be expected from a behemoth of her years. He doubted such behavior had anything to do with the fast-approaching mating season both genders could become quite tetchy as the annual rut approached, but the old dame hadn't produced a viable clutch in nearly a decade, according to reservation records.

And why is she here, of all places? Her current lair lay about halfway between their hut and the next closest one, which lay out of sight beyond a small crest to the east she was, for all intents and purposes, their neighbor. He was aware that the Ukrainian keeper who lived in nine hut, Fedir Shevchenko, had been keeping a proprietary eye on her lately, even going so far as to deliver a few sheep to her lair when he'd noticed she hadn't hunted the rez herd in a while.

Suddenly, two men on brooms winked into existence in the sky above. Boian and Flaviu Vaduva, Romanian brothers descended from a long and proud line of keepers, were the first to respond to the distress call, having Apparated on the fly. It was an impressive trick passed down through their family, but one they hadn't managed to teach anyone else despite repeated, genuine efforts. They flew in a high, wide circle, surveying the situation.

Looking for us, Charlie realized. At almost the same instant, Sasha sent a flare of sparks into the air directly above them, alerting their fellow keepers of their whereabouts. Flaviu the eldest brother darted quickly down to meet them while his younger brother continued to circle.

"What'd you do to rile Queenie?" he barked.

"Nothing!" Charlie insisted. "She woke us up!"

"Fedir swears she's grown as docile as a pussycat in her old age," Sasha snorted. "Perhaps she's in search of some cream?"

Flaviu grimaced, chagrined they'd be working to subdue her with no obvious explanation of her bizarre behavior. "So... what, then?"

"Redirect?" Charlie suggested. "Maybe we can lure her back to her lair with food, and she can sleep whatever this is off?"

Another roar rent the air, and the three men started when the ground shook in protest as she thumped her tail against it. Queenie let loose another blast of fire, and the hut was completely engulfed in flames.

"She doesn't look hungry or tired to me," Sasha added dryly. "She looks insane."

Flaviu nodded reluctantly. "Fedir's gonna be pissed," he grumbled.

"Draconis Delirias? Or just garden-variety senility?" Charlie wondered aloud. The former was considered a contagious disease, the most recent outbreak of which was thought to have been contained by the latest Tibetan quarantine. He couldn't imagine how Queenie could have gotten exposed to Mad Dragon Disease, but if she'd been infected, it would be very bad news for the entire reservation, indeed. They certainly couldn't risk its spread.

Flaviu shrugged. "Either way, she'll have to be put down."

Charlie swallowed the urge to argue the point and nodded reluctantly along with Sasha. He understood the logic of the decision if her madness was due to disease, they could not allow it to spread, and if her faculties were compromised from age, they could not risk her hurting any of the others or, even worse, flying off in a demented rage and exposing them all to Muggle discovery. Still, he hated the thought of ending the life of such a majestic beast for any reason.

"What've you got?" Flaviu asked.

"Nothing but our wands," Sasha grumbled. He hadn't managed to dress or rescue any other equipment from their hut before evacuating, either.

"You're bleeding," Flaviu added as if just noticing. "Go next door to nine hut, get yourselves bandaged up and dressed. The rest of us'll take care of this mess."

"It's not that bad," Charlie assured him, regarding the smattering of little glass cuts all over his body and discovering a myriad of little trickles of blood issuing forth.

"Fuck you," Sasha growled at the same time, taking Flaviu's suggestion as a personal insult.

More keepers began arriving, Apparating with brooms in hand. Several of the most senior keepers had weapons strapped to their bodies Goblin-made daggers and blades of varying lengths glinted in the pre-dawn light. No one was entirely clear about whether it was the alloy itself or the magic imbued within that made the weapons singularly effective against dragon hide: they only knew Goblin steel alone could pierce the scales. The weapons were dear beyond imagining it would be years before Charlie saved enough wages for one of his own, if he ever managed it.

Every keeper now assembling understood that to do battle with a dragon was to absolutely risk one's life. Dragons had precious few chinks in their bodily armor, and combined with their cunning, strength, and other various natural defenses, they made formidable opponents. No random mislocated wound or single, uncoordinated spell could bring a dragon down. *Avada kedavra* was off the table as the danger of the spell ricocheting off the dragon's hide was too risky. Not to mention death by A. K. was agonizing, and no keeper worth his salt would inflict unnecessary pain on the creatures he was sworn to protect (poachers, of course, were another matter entirely). No, the most common method of culling a member of the herd was to Stun it, followed by a quick beheading employing the magical blades at hand: swift, as painless as they could manage, and respectful of the creature's innate dignity.

Ghenadie arrived and immediately took to the air. In a booming voice that had been magically modified, he instructed everyone else to do the same, enabling each keeper to be heard over the cacophony of the dragon's roars and tumultuous fire now blazing. Coordinated communication would be key over the next few moments.

Now that the entire retinue of keepers on the rez had shown up, the Head Keeper ordered half of them onto their brooms, the others to remain on the ground. They all fanned out as quickly as they could, encircling the dragon, trying their best to avoid attracting her direct attention. Those in the air performed a complex swarming

maneuver, confusing her while keeping her gaze up and away from those on the ground.

Offering a final glance at his home for the past five years now engulfed in flames, Charlie dearly wished he'd managed to rescue his broom before it had been rendered into kindling. He was far more confident in the air than on the ground and felt he would be more useful to his colleagues there in this situation, for certain.

"We'll need everyone's focused effort at exactly the same time on a beast this size, boys," Ghenadie commanded from his position high above the scene. "On my mark! One! Two!"

But Ghenadie never got to three. Enraged by the sudden onslaught of annoying little creatures, Queenie turned her back on the blazing hut and demolished it with one sweep of her massive tail. Fiery missiles ranging in size from pebbles to boulders flew through the air like an explosion. Panicked spells shot through the air like fireworks, Shield Charms and *Reductos* and more flashed, collided, blasted and ricocheted, resulting in a tornadic swirl of magic, terror, debris and screams.

Time played an odd trick on his vision, and everything seemed to move in slow motion. A meteoric chunk of stone hit Costel Barbu square in the back, knocking him from his broom before Charlie could manage to scream a warning or cast a Shield. Charlie ran through smoke and burning wreckage to the spot he saw Costel fall, hoping against hope he'd not find what he expected. But Costel's mangled body lay still on the ground amidst the rubble, his lifeless eyes staring upward in empty shock. There was nothing left to do but mark the spot so they could collect the body for burial later.

Just as he cast the locating spell, he heard somebody bellow his name "Charlie!" and spun around, searching for the source. Was someone else hurt? He scanned the ground, finding nothing but the scattered, burning remains of his home. Then he looked up through the haze to find a human on a broom barreling down toward him.

"Charlie, hop on!" Boian shouted, bearing down on him at a furious pace, leaning over the side of his broom with an outstretched hand.

Charlie grabbed his friend's arm and leaped up at the same time, swinging round and landing astride the broom behind him. Boian shot upwards toward safety, affording Charlie an elevated view of the chaos. Everyone still in the air was attempting to collect whoever was left on the ground, men shouting names and directions to each other. From this perspective, Charlie realized that by virtue of having been stationed on the far side of Queenie from his hut, he'd been shielded by her very body from the worst of the destruction. The others, however...

Charlie saw a huge piece of stone sprouting legs beneath it and recognized the boots. *Sorin!* Sorin Albescu's partner, Bashkim Osmani, lay several meters away, impaled by a still-burning piece of timber. Sadly, disturbingly, Charlie's first thought was, *At least they died together.*

He scanned the destruction, searching for Sasha. They'd both been on the lee side of the dragon, but he hadn't seen him since the hut-chaos erupted. Before his eyes, several pairs of keepers winked out of sight as men Apparated those left incapacitated away to safety. Then a streak of bare flesh caught his gaze, and he watched in horror as Sasha bolted across a clearing toward Queenie.

"Sasha!" Charlie screamed. *What the hell is he doing?*

Boian called to his partner the Italian, Romolo Miele. "Fetch the Russian!" he ordered, pointing at the man dashing suicidally *toward* the dragon, rather than away from it. Romolo immediately dived down, calling Sasha's name in an attempt to get his attention. But Sasha waved him off and kept running, maintaining his course.

Queenie lifted onto her back legs and trumpeted her rage. Just below her lay another body and suddenly Charlie realized Sasha's intent.

"NO!"

A split second before Queenie slammed back down on all fours with an earth-rattling crash that would have crushed them both into human pulp, Sasha fell on the body and winked them both out of sight. Empty-handed, Romolo spun in midair away from the dragon, narrowly avoiding her blazing breath.

Charlie filled his lungs with smoky air and roared in relief and frustration.

"Regroup at 300 meters!"

Charlie recognized Ghenadie's voice. Immediately, Boian obeyed, zooming toward Ghenadie, who was hovering above the scene, surveying the disaster. Seconds later, thirteen men on seven brooms huddled in midair all that was left of the twenty-two that had answered the summons. Everyone looked at each other, knowing the same truth: it was unlikely the group of them was sufficient to take the giant Ironbelly down with Stunners. Nor could they wait for the possibility of reinforcements those who had Apparated the injured away were likely providing critical medical attention.

"We've got to keep her on the ground," Ghenadie informed them unnecessarily. "Looks like the fight's going to be hot and close, boys. Who'll take the first stab?"

"I will," Charlie said without hesitation. It had been his summons that had drawn them all here, led to at least three deaths and uncounted other injuries. He owed it to them all to end the battle as quickly as he could.

Ghenadie nodded once in acceptance. Without a word, Skender passed Charlie a blade. The lethal thing glinted in the rising sun, cold and grey as the Ironbelly's scales. Its weight was perfectly balanced in Charlie's grip, and he felt a surprisingly calm confidence settle upon him.

I'm ready. I can do this

While the rest of the group organized themselves back into the swarm formation to distract her, Boian and Charlie circled around behind the dragon. The pairs of men on brooms flew maddeningly quickly around her head, confusing her with their shouts and dive-bombing motion. Queenie bellowed in annoyance, her head jerking from side to side as she tried in vain to focus on just one broom, and took several steps backward.

"Ready, Charlie?" Boian asked.

"Ready," he replied, his voice even and steady.

Boian accelerated through the air, aiming straight for the back of the dragon's head, crouched low and tight against the broom. Charlie shifted his weight up from his seat onto the balls of his feet, balancing by lightly bracing his hands against Boian's back.

"Now!" Boian yelled. At the same time, in the last second before colliding with the dragon's head, he veered slightly to the right.

Charlie launched himself off the broom. The momentum carried him forward, and he crashed into the back of Queenie's head, high on her neck. Clinging to her, he saw Boian shoot up and away to safety.

They couldn't have timed it more perfectly, nor could he have stuck the landing any better: it was as if every probability vector had been magically aligned. But if he delayed from his purpose for even a second, it would offer her time to shake him off, and he would surely be dead. Then another man would have to risk his life attempting the same maneuver. His thighs tightly gripping her thick neck, her smooth scales hot against his skin, Charlie lifted the gleaming dagger into the air. With both hands gripping the hilt, he brought it down with every ounce of strength he could muster.

The trick with time happened again, and Charlie felt every second pass with crystalline clarity. He felt the Goblin-steel blade's point puncture hide, then bone, then sink into soft brain tissue. Mid-roar, the dragon's cry slid off-key, became a little garbled, then caught in her throat altogether. The muscles of her neck rippled as the news of the end traveled down it, on a mission to inform the rest of her body.

Forgive me, he silently begged her spirit.

She listed sideways, and his perception of time finally caught up with its actual flow. Shouts and a few triumphant cheers rang through the normally peaceful valley. Then her front legs buckled, and Charlie was nearly dislodged when she fell to her elbows a plunge of several meters. The shouts grew less celebratory, more urgent.

In the corner of his eye, he saw Boian swing around back toward him once more. Queenie's body gave up its resistance of gravity and began picking up speed along its sideways rush to meet earth once more. Charlie held on until the last millisecond, waiting for Boian to get close enough, then leaped from the foundering dragon anyway, praying the fall wouldn't snap his neck. Hurtling through the air, the ground rushing up to meet him, he felt arms wrap around his waist. Then everything around him went into a dizzying spin, and he thought how strange it was to learn that death felt sort of like Apparating.

Just my luck

In the next instant, the world-spinning around him stopped. He connected with the ground and tumbled along the soft grass for a few meters painful, yes, but this collision with earth was far less injurious than he'd expected. He heard a piece of wood snap *A broom?* and a moment after he'd stopped his own forward motion along the ground, another body collided with his from behind. The two of them lay still for several moments, getting their bearings, catching their breaths, allowing the full import of what had just happened to sink in.

Charlie twisted his head around to find Boian grinning back at him. "That was a spot of fun, eh?" the man chuckled.

Charlie squinted at the brightness. Sky was up, ground was below at least he had that bit of normalcy to cling to *Boian snatched me out of the air? Then Apparated on the fly? Reappearing somewhere safe at ground level to cushion the fall?* "Thanks," he rasped, his voice hurting his throat, amazed once again by Boian's Apparating talents. "I owe you."

"You know it doesn't work like that," Boian replied.

Charlie nodded. That was the keepers' way, after all. Keepers didn't owe each other favors they earned each other's loyalty by risking their lives for each other when it mattered. Bullshit like life debts didn't really apply here on the rez. How could they, when death was a daily occupational hazard and rescue was such a common occurrence? No one would ever be able to keep track of the balance sheet if they did.

The two men helped right each other. From this vantage point, Charlie recognized Boian had brought them to the little meadow before keeper hut number nine. Nine hut was significantly larger than eight, built far more recently and with several extra rooms to house visiting researchers as well as the usual pair of keepers. Up until a little while ago, it had been home to Fedir and Costel.

A low moan emanated from the hut, piercing the quiet of the valley.

Without a word, both men jogged toward the hut, steeling themselves for whatever horrific sight might await them on the other side of the door, ready to offer whatever help they had to give.

It took a few moments for Charlie's eyes to adjust from the brightness of the morning outside to the dimness of the hut within. But he recognized the low, soothing voice long before he could make out its owner. Sasha's shadowy shape hovered over a man laid out on the emergency cot, murmuring spells and dabbing salve onto his leg. From the smell, Charlie knew fire was primarily responsible for the injury.

"How can we help?" Charlie whispered as he approached.

Sasha looked up and met his searching gaze. Neither man gave voice to the relief they felt to see the other alive and whole: their eyes said it all. Then the patient groaned again, redirecting their attention to the more urgent need. Charlie recognized the lone Croatian keeper on the rez, Goran Kovač, lying on the cot.

"He'll be fine," Sasha reassured him, returning to his work on Goran's leg. It was a charred and bloody mess, but Charlie ultimately agreed with Sasha's assertion especially considering Goran was in Sasha's exceptionally capable hands.

Boian sauntered back into the room from the hallway that led to the dorms in truth, Charlie never noticed he'd left with shirts and trousers draped over his arms. "Stop prancing about like a couple of fags, you two, and put some clothes on," he teased, tossing them at Charlie.

Like usual, Charlie let the homophobic slur slide. He caught the items of clothing out of the air, then stared at the faded blue denim of the shirt, the still-bright red stars lovingly embroidered along the placket. He handed them back without looking at Boian. "Not Costel's things. They belong to his mother now."

Boian took them back solemnly, his smile gone. "You're sure?"

Charlie nodded. "With my own eyes, I saw him."

The three men bowed their heads respectfully and observed a moment of silence, commemorating their fallen comrade. By Charlie's count, at least three new graves would be added to the memorial garden at the visitor's center: Costel Barbu, Sorin Albescu, Bakshim Osmani. Good and honorable men, all.

Boian turned on his heels and headed back toward the dorms to return Costel's things to his room. His effects would be sent on to his kin his body would not. Tradition dictated that keepers were buried on the reservation, a protocol borne out of necessity and as a favor to the bereaved, for the remains of keepers were commonly left in such a state as would likely upset the family.

Charlie followed Boian down the hall as far as Fedir's dorm. As he fished clothing for himself and Sasha out of Fedir's trunk, he swallowed a lump that had begun forming in his throat, praying he wasn't donning another dead man's clothes. *What about Fedir?* he wondered, not knowing if Costel's partner survived the melee or not. He seemed to have a soft spot in his heart for old Queenie. If Fedir lived and didn't know already, he'd soon have a whole new agony of loss to deal with. *Poor bastard.*

When he returned to the front room, dressed in Fedir's trousers with the too-long legs bunched up at his ankles, he laid some more clothes for Sasha on the dining table. His patient, Goran, had either succumbed to a sleeping draught or passed out his head lolled on the cot's little pillow as Sasha continued to treat the wounds. Charlie rummaged through a few storage closets before he found the spare brooms in that moment, the thought of the loss of his broom, amongst all his other worldly possessions, hit him with a heavy pang. Then Boian rejoined them in the common room.

"Go back and see what you can do to help the others," Sasha directed them. "If you find Dănuț, let him know about Goran and where we are."

Much later that night or perhaps it was very early the next morning Charlie sank low into the conjured cushions of a transfigured sofa, staring out into the night from the window of keeper hut number nine, self-medicating his aching body and grieving mind with *moroz-vodka*¹. The icy sensation spread through his body and dulled the pain, both physical and emotional. All told, it had not been his best day.

He and Boian had obeyed Sasha's order and joined the other keepers at their work, borrowing spare brooms from the hut's cache. Boian had Apparated on the fly, as was his way, but Charlie had taken the longer, more scenic direct flight toward the column of black smoke, in no hurry to lay eyes on the charred and smoldering remnants of his home or the bloody mess that awaited them.

By the time he got there, the butchery of Queenie was well underway. Great slabs of meat were being hewed from the carcass, then transported to the icehouse on the nearest summit. Like dragons themselves, the meat was resistant to most charms (like those inducing cold stasis) and so had to be preserved without the aid of magic. Fresh meat had many medicinal properties including speeding the healing of cuts and contusions but dried meat had a reputation as a virtual panacea (his own Aunt

Muriel swore by her broth made of dried dragon meat, a cup of which she'd taken every day of her adult life). Smoking and salting operations of Queenie's flesh would be ongoing over the next few weeks.

Meat was not the only thing to be harvested from Queenie. While blood was collected only from healthy living individuals (usually adolescents), her hide would be carefully skinned from her body, scraped and prepared, then shipped off in rolls to tanners who specialized in crafting magical clothing and accessories. Most of her organs would be preserved, as well as the bones dried, and claws, teeth, spines, and horns collected, all to be ground into potion ingredients. The gastroliths in her stomach were prized by rune makers, and the spherical, crystalline lenses of her eyes would be smoothed and polished into the divination orbs preferred by the most discerning of sciers.

It was hard and necessary work, but Charlie found it gory and depressing. He understood that a keeper's duties called for regular culling to maintain the health of the herd. If not for the practice of harvesting the older, weaker individuals, the herd as a whole would suffer. And as the popularity and profitability of poaching attested, demand for dragon-derived materials would have long since exterminated the species; the keepers' carefully managed harvest methods were far more conservative and humane, and the profits fed back into preservation and study of the amazing creatures themselves.

Knowing all this did little to make the duty any more palatable for Charlie. He hated the sticky, slippery mess of it, the foul smell, constantly fighting off the urge to retch. His hands would be stained with Queenie's blood now for a week she'd linger under his fingernails for longer, probably.

There was far too much death, blood, and destruction in his brain, and he downed several more long pulls from the bottle, willing the bewitched alcohol to anesthetize it all. Poor Fedir was thoroughly rat-arsed in his room at the moment, having finally found a modicum of peace near the bottom of a bottle of *moroz* at least enough to afford him a few hours of sleep. As those keepers still on their feet had begun to butcher the dead beast, harvesting every part of Queenie just as they would've done with any other dragon whether it had died of natural causes or was culled for the good of the herd (which, in a roundabout way, he reckoned, she was), Ghenadie had broken the news of Costel's death to his partner of more than a decade. While the rest of them worked to collect all the precious magical ingredients, they'd listened to echoes of human howls and blasts of explosive spells in the distance Fedir venting his grief and rage on a Carpathian summit.

There were a few small spots of good news: Costel, Sorin, and Bashkim had been the only casualties. The three others who'd been injured all faced good prognoses aside from the usual accumulation of new scar tissue, no one would be out of commission for more than a week or so, most likely. Goran was spending the night on the emergency cot here in nine hut and would likely be ready to transport back to his own hut tomorrow. His partner, Dănuț Lupei, was sleeping nearby in one of the rooms usually reserved for visiting scholars.

A quiet shadow shifted in the periphery of his vision. *Sasha coming to check on his patient* Charlie thought. He watched as the man he loved glided silently into the room, leaned over Goran's body on the cot, and checked his condition. Charlie felt little shimmers of healing magic lap against him as Sasha cast the spells silently.

"You saved his life," Charlie whispered. Nevertheless, the sound of his voice practically boomed in the profound silence of the mountain night *And I wanted to wring your neck for risking yourself to do it.* But he wisely kept this thought to himself.

Sasha's head jerked up, startled. "And you saved many more by your bravery," he replied.

Charlie blew out a noisy, dismissive breath, the *moroz* causing it to fog in the spring-warm night air. He wondered who'd told Sasha he was the one who brought Queenie down.

"You should sleep," Sasha said as he left the cot and approached him, his massive, Samson-esque body paradoxically catlike in its grace and silence.

"Wish I could," Charlie replied. He shifted slightly on the sofa to make room, and Sasha joined him there. Charlie theorized not for the first time that Sasha somehow exuded medicinal magic. His mere presence always calmed Charlie, soothed his hurts and eased his worries. *Yours is a truly amazing gift, my love*

"Tomorrow will be busy, and morning will come soon," Sasha said just before he took a swig of the proffered bottle of *moroz*.

"Funerals at dawn," Charlie said, relaying the pertinent information while tiredly running his hands through his hair.

The dead keepers' bodies would be interred in the memorial garden at the visitors' center as the sun rose over the mountains, eulogized by their Head Keeper and mourned solely by their fellows. Only after they were safely in the ground would Ghenadie send out the owls to the respective families, informing them of the sad news. The delay was necessary, preventing any family members from crashing the ceremony. *Keepers don't leave pretty corpses*, Charlie thought ruefully. *There's precious little left of Sorin as it is none of it recognizable.*

Charlie took a deep, fortifying breath. "Afterward, I get to go sift through the ashes of our hut to see if anything useful survived the fire."

Sasha snorted and voiced Charlie's own doubts: "There will be nothing left. Why bother?"

Charlie shrugged. "Ghenadie's orders. Maybe he thinks it'll give me a sense of closure."

Sasha hushed his chuckle so as not to disturb Goran. "Ghenadie's taken to employing psychology, now?"

Charlie chuckled as well. The idea was preposterous.

An anxiousness bordering on dread hung between them for several silent moments.

"Did he say what was to become of us?" Sasha finally asked.

"We stay here, at least for now," Charlie informed him. "I think he wants us to keep an eye on Fedir." After several more moments, he let the axe fall, adding, "Might last until he finds a new partner for him."

Nothing illuminated the interior of the hut but starlight. Even so, Charlie could feel the penetrating look Sasha gave him. Charlie knew without being told exactly what Sasha was thinking and feeling he was feeling the same sense of desolation at the prospect.

Merlin knows how long before we'll be alone together again.

1- *moroz* = "frost" in Russian (I hope).

Author's note: I took some liberties with and expounded upon JKR's list of magical uses for dragon products.

Dec-96

Chapter 11 of 28

It's Christmas morning, and Charlie gets far more than he bargained for.

Author's note: as a clarification to the warning listed for this chapter, a rape is discussed, not perpetrated. Graphic language is not used in the description.

Chapter 11

Christmas 1996

"Father says Durmstrang takes a far more sensible line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually learn them, not the defense rubbish we do...." *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Chapter 11*

Charlie's consciousness slowly surfaced from the depths of sleep. His body enveloped in warm softness, his mind relaxed by the prospect of a day off from work offered little in the way of impetus to actually wake up or move. His eyes blinked open anyway.

The spartan room was illuminated by the soft grey dimness of weak, dead-of-winter sunlight filtered through a thick layer of clouds and reflected by deep drifts of snow. The whitewashed stone walls, bare of adornment, were interchangeable with practically every other dormitory room on the rez a fact he found sublimely comforting. It made it easier to pretend he was home again.

He stretched carefully, slowly drawing taut the muscles of his legs, back, shoulders and arms with a minimum of movement or noise. A long, satisfying yawn burst forth in the midst of it. When he was finished, he burrowed back more deeply into the warm nest created by feather bed, down comforter, and body heat, looking forward to enjoying a rare and deliciously lazy lie-in.

"*S Rozhdestvom*," a deep voice rumbled softly as a warm hand slid across Charlie's belly.¹

"Happy Christmas to you, too," Charlie murmured contentedly, resting his hand on Sasha's forearm to hold it in place. He turned his head and accepted a warm, gentle kiss, languorous and indulgent, for once without fearing they might be caught.

Last night had been a little slice of heaven the perfect Christmas present, really, to actually lay in a proper bed beside Sasha again. After subsisting for the past six months on nothing but furtive, clandestine couplings held in random, remote spots around the rez in all sorts of weather, Charlie'd learned that making love indoors on a mattress was highly underrated. He was sick to death of hiding in caves too small to serve as lairs, knees getting scraped and bruised by rocks, or lurking in a forest, getting jabbed by sticks with his back pressed up against rough bark, feeling like a sleazy back-alley pervert.

Charlie rolled over and pulled Sasha into a tight embrace. "It's so nice to just be alone with you again," he sighed.

Their new fellow hut-mate, Fedir Shevchenko, had left the day before to spend Christmas with his family in Ukraine and was not due back for two more days. Charlie felt appropriately guilty for being so pleased Fedir was gone the man had done an admirable job of putting on a brave face and throwing himself into his work after losing his partner. But it was massively depressing to see that lost, hundred-yard stare come over Fedir's face whenever something reminded him of Costel. All the time thinking, There but for the grace of God go I.

"I know what you mean," Sasha agreed, nuzzling Charlie's earlobe. "With any luck, it won't be much longer."

Finding a new partner for Fedir, as urgent as the matter was, proved to be a daunting task. Ghenadie's job of hiring a new recruit wasn't made difficult due to a dearth of applicants no, it seemed as though every wand-waving broom jockey fancied he had what it took to lead the glamorous life of a daring dragon keeper. The trial came from separating those with a Knut's worth of real potential from the heaps of chaff. The idiots were relatively easy to pick out. It was the ones that had significant promise that you had to watch out for. Poachers would love nothing more than to infiltrate the ranks of the rez.

"What was it like... for you?" Charlie asked gently, smoothing Sasha's bed-mussed hair with his fingers. It was remarkably soft a gleaming dark brown to match his eyes.

Sasha shifted to lie on his back and stared at the ceiling. "To lose a partner is..." He paused, searching for the proper words. "A deeper guilt than you can imagine. It is a natural thing to blame yourself."

Charlie shifted slightly, propping his head up on his elbow to better gaze upon Sasha's face. "You never talk about him your other partner before me."

Sasha shrugged. "There is little to say. Wadim and I were partners, but we were not very close in most other ways. Anyway, he is gone now. Not good to speak ill of the dead."

"Tell me about him," Charlie urged, not precisely sure why he suddenly felt so curious. They'd known each other for five years now, after all, and he'd never been inspired to ask about Sasha's first partner before.

Sasha took a long, deep breath as he considered Charlie's request. "Wadim Gabor was what you English call a right old bastard," he finally said, his face carefully composed into an emotionless mask. "An old Romanian cur who'd just as soon spit in your eye as look at you. According to him, there was only one correct way to do anything, and that was his way. To ask a question was as good as challenging him to a duel."

"Sounds awful," Charlie sympathized, a certain Potions master coming to mind.

"I suppose I learned a good deal from him," Sasha granted charitably. "Too bad it wasn't a two-way street."

"What happened to him?" Charlie pressed.

Sasha pursed his lips. "We got into a firefight with a band of poachers one night. He caught an A.K. to the back."

"Fucking poachers never do anything honorably, do they?" Charlie grumbled darkly.

"Never," Sasha agreed, equally darkly.

"But it wasn't your fault," Charlie rushed to say. "He knew the danger. Shields don't work against that spell. And even you can't heal someone back from the dead."

Sasha nodded slightly. "This is all true. This is all logic. But those things are hard to remember when your partner is dead. This was a man I swore to protect with my own life... and yet, I live while he molds in the grave."

Charlie laid his head on Sasha's chest, knowing there was nothing he could say to alleviate the burden of survivor's guilt. He could only sympathize with his closeness. Sasha's arm came up to hold him tight, and his hand stroked Charlie's hair in a gesture of appreciation. They lay like this for quite a while, reveling in each other's presence, basking in the silence.

"I used to love how quiet the castle got once all the other students went home for Christmas," Charlie whispered, baring a little of himself as an offering of thanks for Sasha's opening up on such a difficult matter. "Don't get me wrong... I missed my family, sure. But it was so nice just to sit by myself. And listen. And think."

"My introverted philosopher," Sasha chuckled, tousling Charlie's hair in a way that made his scalp tingle. "Such deep thoughts beneath this ginger mop."

Charlie shifted to rest his chin on Sasha's chest and smirked at him, which only served to elicit a heartier chuckle, followed by a kiss on the forehead.

"What made you decide to do that the first time?" Charlie asked, unclear where all his sudden curiosity was coming from.

"What? To kiss you?" Sasha clarified. When Charlie nodded, Sasha shrugged. "I'm not exactly sure. I felt so comfortable with you, I suppose. Compared to Wadim, you were so friendly. And then, that night, you looked so... 'Vulnerable' isn't the right word... 'Open,' perhaps?"

"I'm glad you did," Charlie said with a smile.

"Me too," Sasha replied.

"When did you... know?" Charlie murmured, voicing the next random thought that popped into his head.

Sasha's brow furrowed. "Know?"

"That you were gay." Charlie gave a little mental gasp he'd never said the word out loud like that since he'd come to his own epiphany.

Sasha took a deep breath, and Charlie's head rose and fell with his chest. "What brings all this on?"

Charlie shrugged, wondering the same thing. "This... being alone here with you this morning... I've missed it so much. I guess I've just felt so... constrained... sometimes. Especially lately, since we moved into this hut. Don't you?"

"Such is the way of this life unless you want to come out to everybody." Sasha looked a little anxious.

Charlie bit his lip. "Sometimes I wish we could," he confessed. "But don't worry I know better."

Sasha smiled at him fondly. He threaded his fingers into Charlie's hair and caressed his cheekbone with the rough pad of his thumb. "I know you love me. And you know I love you. Why does anyone else need to be involved?"

"They don't," Charlie agreed. It was just a silly notion, after all. He told himself that things were fine the way they were.

"You know, my first year here, I thought every time someone called me 'cocksucker' or 'faggot' it was because they somehow *knew* my secret," Sasha said. "But now I know better. The labels they use for people like us... these are equated with all the other insulting names like 'pussy' and 'cock' and 'arse,' like 'shit' and 'piss': human genitalia and body waste. When people are so ignorant about love, what is the use to fight?"

Charlie blinked with understanding. The men they worked with were not bad people. They were very good people, in fact: loyal and honest and intelligent about many things. He didn't understand why they felt so threatened by the idea of homosexuality, but threatened they most certainly were.

"What did you do before me?"

Sasha wore a playfully suspicious grin. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Which is why I asked, git," Charlie snapped equally playfully.

Chagrined nostalgia flitted across Sasha's face. "I'd wait until Wadim would visit a whore in the village, then I'd Apparate into a little Muggle town nearby. There used to be a gay club there years ago."

"I cannot even imagine you in one of those places," Charlie chuckled with amusement, remembering his meeting with Tonks in Berlin. "How did you stand it?"

Sasha's smile morphed into a wince, then faded altogether. "It was a very lonely, empty existence. I am not a proponent of anonymous sex for this reason. Better to jerk off in the shower, I think."

Charlie stretched up to kiss him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

Sasha smiled. "It was not your fault."

Charlie shifted back down. "So, unlike me, you knew before you got here..." he said leadingly, redirecting back to his original question.

Sasha wore the guarded expression he always did when the subject of his schooling came up. "Yes."

Charlie wasn't sure why he felt the topic so important to discuss, but he desperately wanted to know about Sasha's romantic history all of the sudden. It certainly wasn't that Charlie'd imagined he was Sasha's first in fact, he'd been glad of Sasha's expertise and guidance in the matter, especially in the beginning. But there was something overwhelmingly intriguing about Sasha's mysterious past, so Charlie pressed on.

"Was there anyone... special... before?"

Sasha looked hard into Charlie's eyes, but Charlie didn't back down. *Share this with me! Please!* he begged with his eyes. *I can handle it.*

Then Sasha sighed, resigned. "At Durmstrang, schooling lasts ten years, not seven like at Hogwarts. We leave home when we are only seven years old. I've told you this before, yes?"

Charlie nodded. He'd thought it particularly harsh when Sasha had first explained the Durmstrang admission process. He couldn't imagine leaving home so young.

"At your school, you say you get divided up into houses," Sasha continued. "With other people like yourself. Because a hat tells you where to live, you go."

"The Sorting Hat, yes," Charlie agreed. "It was bewitched by the founders."

"At Durmstrang this is different. We are divided up into boys and girls only. Two large barracks, one all boys together, the other all girls. The beds are grouped by year, but even the littlest boys are in the same room with biggest."

"At my school, the teachers were very strict. If you did a thing wrong, you were punished. Not like your detentions my teachers used humiliation and pain. Embarrassing and hurtful spells. Yelling mean, insulting things. Beatings."

"Sash..." Charlie hadn't meant for this to be an exercise in traumatic memory. He no longer wanted to force the issue, not if it caused Sasha pain.

"I explain this so you will understand why I never told a teacher what happened. Why none of us ever told."

Charlie's mouth went dry, and his chest filled with leaden dread. *No! Don't say it!*

Sasha avoided all eye contact. "I lost my virginity at age thirteen. It was not my choice."

"Sasha!" Charlie hissed, horrified.

"I was not the only one," Sasha continued in a businesslike, detached manner. "It was a systematic thing. Some older boys would wake you up one night, pull you out of bed. You never knew when it would happen, only that it would. 'Initiation,' they called it."

"Other boys were treated far worse than me, initiated many times I was lucky I was built strong, and they feared me. When we got older, some of my classmates used tradition as an excuse to perpetuate the awful practice. Others, like me, refused to participate with unwilling partners. Instead, we sought comfort in each other. Secretly, of course such things were not openly tolerated at Durmstrang."

Sasha snorted with disgust. "Ironic, is it not? Raping another boy was nothing but time-honored school tradition, and the teachers turned a blind eye. But loving him was shameful, worthy of expulsion."

After another brief pause, he continued in a soft, somber voice, "The time here with Wadim... it was very hard. He was so much like my old teachers: never a kind word, never a gentle voice. Always punishment and humiliation. The other keepers were friendly enough, but I found no... *comfort* with them, you understand? I was terrified they knew my secret."

"Sash..." Charlie groaned, willing him to stop. His chest and throat and head hurt with the effort to hold in a sob.

"Charlie, it's okay. It was a long time ago. Yes, it was a bad thing that happened to me. But my school friends... we were there for each other. Helped each other through the shame and hurt. Taught each other that sex can be a beautiful thing as well as an ugly thing. A tenderness as well as a brutality. A union of equals rather than only a domination or submission."

Sasha turned back to him, a heartbreakingly tender expression on his face. "Then you came into my life. Always friendly. Always kind. Always good."

Charlie gathered Sasha to him, cradled his head in his arms. "I am supremely grateful to those school friends of yours," he murmured. "How you didn't all end up psychotic sociopaths is beyond me."

"I think the thing about seeing the worst life has to offer," Sasha said, "is that you appreciate something better is out there. If you learn to recognize and hate the Dark underbelly, you strive to always live in the Light. This is how I see things. Maybe I'm not making sense."

"You're making perfect sense," Charlie insisted. "Are you hungry?" he asked, desperate to change the subject.

"Yes, but the thought of leaving this bed is worse than the prospect of death by starvation," Sasha quipped, his jovial mood intentional and slightly forced. He pressed himself a little deeper into Charlie's arms.

"I can go get us something and bring it back here, if you like," Charlie chuckled, eager to put the horrific revelations behind them, too. Freya Eitelmann, Ridgebit Reserve's lone female keeper, had baked a loaf of stollen for every hut, just like she did every year. Charlie reckoned such a breakfast might be the perfect distraction.

Sasha's grip around him tightened. "No. Stay."

Charlie settled back down under the covers, nestled against Sasha, willing himself to be nourished by the warmth and love between them. But after several minutes and several more attempts to redirect his thoughts, he gave up and pondered the conversation anew.

Poor Sash! How horrific that his first experience of sex was by force! How does anyone recover from that? Why didn't anyone stand up to those arseholes? How could they all just let it happen, year after year?

Hang on... year after year? He said it was systemic... it happened to everyone? Does that mean...?

"I can hear you doing the math in your head," Sasha murmured.

"Sorry!" Charlie groaned. "But... do you think... they've all been subjected to it? What happened to you, I mean."

"I don't know when it started," Sasha replied. "Nor have I ever spoken of what happened since I left Durmstrang not until I told you this morning. But before you came, I was the youngest here by at least five years. Leotrim and Laslo were both at school for a few years when I was there. The rest... who can say?"

Leotrim Remzi, Viorel's Albanian partner? And Laslo Petkov, the Bulgarian? Charlie was stunned to consider the ramifications: the majority of the keepers on the rez all those from the eastern European countries had attended Durmstrang. There were only three of them, including himself, who'd been educated elsewhere.

Dear God... they all went through that? Every one? Charlie thought he might be ill.

Sasha shifted a little, then guided Charlie to turn around and face him once more. "I think this is why they all say those things about faggots and such. They don't like to remember what happened to them. The fear it makes them feel... their cruel comments and derision are their way of whistling in the dark, perhaps. They assume anyone who could enjoy love with another man must be a rapist, a monster, a bully. They can't understand how it could be any other way."

Charlie nodded very slightly. "But they're wrong."

Sasha leaned close and brushed a light kiss against his lips. "Very wrong."

Charlie held him tight. "I love you," he choked. "I don't say that enough."

"Never worry about this," Sasha soothed him. "I know it always."

Savva for confirming this spelling for me!

Jun-97

Chapter 12 of 28

It's not a Howler, but might as well be.

Chapter 12

June 1997

Snape raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore. "Avada Kedavra!"— Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, Chapter 27

26 June, 1997

Dear Charlie,

Sit down before you read any further, son. I've got the most terrible news to deliver today, I'm afraid: Dumbledore is dead. Murdered by none other than Severus Snape. The Order is compromised, and we are completely at loose ends. No one knows what to do.

But I'm getting a little ahead of myself. First: the battle. Some of the Order were patrolling the castle a few nights ago as per Dumbledore's orders. Malfoy's son somehow managed to sneak a gang of Death Eaters in using some sort of Vanishing cabinet or other – the details aren't entirely clear. Harry says You-Know-Who had commanded the poor boy to kill Dumbledore or be killed, but when faced with the actual task, he faltered. That was when Snape took over. According to Harry, Dumbledore was already in a weakened state, ill and wandless, when Snape cast the Killing Curse.

Let me assure you Ron and Ginny are fine. But Bill was also there patrolling that night and was attacked by a werewolf. He is gravely wounded but ought to survive without suffering the full effects, we think, as the brute was not transformed at the time. (I honestly marvel at the difference between this Greyback monster and our dear Lupin, I really do.) I will send you word again soon regarding Bill's continued improvement – your mum and Fleur are with him round the clock, and Poppy Pomfrey visits often.

We are operating under the assumption that Grimmauld Place is no longer safe. Do not attempt to go there for any reason. Consequently, I offered up our place as the new headquarters – your mum and I thought it was the least we could do. You should know the Burrow is now under a Fidelius Charm with me as Secret-keeper. There – that should do to bring you under it. I'm sure it goes without saying, but do destroy this letter, Charlie, when you've finished reading.

As much as it saddens me to write it, I must ask you not to discuss any of this with Percy. That fence has yet to be mended, though your mother and I are heartsore about the whole business. Did I tell you he's working in Scrimgeour's office now? I see him in the corridors every once in a while, but he pretends not to notice me. And as we cannot absolutely ascertain his... well, let us say his sympathies, rather than allegiance... we must guard against all possibilities of further infiltration, as remote as they might seem. I can't ever see him joining the other side willingly, but these times are as confusing as they are dangerous.

We're all simply gutted, as you can imagine. Dumbledore's loss has hit us all quite hard, most particularly in the traitorous manner by which it was delivered. Poor Harry's absolutely wrecked, as you can imagine. He's back at his mother's sister's place for safekeeping – at least until we can figure out what to do next. Dumbledore always insisted it was the safest place for him during the summers, and we're trusting in his prior plan for the time being.

Moody's stepped up as of late and taken charge of the Order, as it were. I respect the man immensely, but – well, he's no Dumbledore, is he? Where Dumbledore would've calmed us with careful reassurances, Moody's screaming "Constant vigilance!" all the time and whipping us into a right paranoid frenzy, expecting Death Eater ambushes at every bloody turn. Thank Merlin that hasn't come to pass yet.

I understand secrecy is our most valuable defense right now, but I wish to hell somebody could just explain to me what is going on and what needs to be done about it. We've got no plan at all aside from hiding ourselves and watching over Harry. We've no idea what the other side's doing or planning. Dumbledore's strategy, whatever it was, may well have perished with him. And who knows how much of his plan depended on trusting Snape?

Dumbledore's death leaves all our eggs in one very young, very vulnerable basket, I'm afraid. But who else have we got left to trust? Ron's being rather tight-lipped about it all, but he's assured me that over the past year, Dumbledore has taken pains to give Harry a good deal of special training. He let it slip that Harry's even been set a special task of some sort to complete. That was as much as I've been able to suss out of him, unfortunately.

Forgive your old dad, Charlie. I know I shouldn't let it get to me. Worse still, I don't wish to burden you with my worrisome weakness. There's hope as long as we've got Harry, isn't there? That's what I tell myself when I start feeling down. Dumbledore always set so much store by him, didn't he? That's got to count for something.

I'll write again when I know anything more. Stay safe, Charlie. Looking forward to seeing you at the wedding, son.

Love,

Dad

"You know, I've grown to really hate owls from your family," Sasha mumbled softly.

Charlie clutched the parchment in his slightly shaking hands. *What am I to do?*

Sasha reached toward the letter. Charlie instinctively crumpled it in his hands, held it to his chest. Sasha's hand darted back, and he wore a confused look.

"Sorry." Charlie's voice was the faintest bit hoarse. "It's not you. I'm being stupid. Give me a minute, yeah?"

Sasha nodded, then backed away, feigning casualness and understanding.

What am I to do now? he thought again. *Should I go home? Can I go home, even?* Charlie skimmed through the letter again, searching it for a summons to return to England, but the closest thing to it was his father's mention of Bill's wedding in a month's time. He consoled himself for a moment with the thought that if the wedding was still on, his father was telling the truth about Bill's likely recovery.

"Sash, I..." Then he faltered, unable to find the words. *Is this the effect of the Fidelius?* he wondered.

"Something bad has happened," Sasha said, both his voice and expression full of concern. "Is someone ill?"

Charlie shook his head. "Worse. A very important person is... is dead." The words rang hollow in his mouth. *Dumbledore is dead!* It was too devastating to be believed. *Whatever will we do now?* It was nearly impossible not to think all was lost.

Sasha looked perplexed. "A death... in your family?"

"No, thank Merlin," Charlie sighed. "This has to do with the... o-o-other... b-business," he said a little haltingly.

Sasha gave a single nod of understanding, such as it was.

"Something has ch-anged," Charlie said, becoming more and more convinced that the Fidelius was affecting him now. "You know that I trust you. But this... th-this is... my fam-mily's safety."

Sasha's dark eyes sparkled as his mind deciphered the clues quickly. "There is an enchantment on the letter. Helping you to keep the secret. I understand this now."

"I... I w-wish I could t-tell you..."

Sasha shook his head vigorously. "Destroy the letter. Now. What you've told me is enough. Your family's safety comes first – this is right."

Charlie shot him a look of gratitude. After reading the disturbing letter once more, he incinerated it, then Vanished the ashes.

Author's note: I know this chapter is awfully short. Please bear with me – the rest are much longer!

1-Aug-97

Chapter 13 of 28

Here's hoping the best man wins.

Chapter 13

August 1, 1997

...Bill and Charlie stood up at the front of the marquee, both wearing dress robes, with large white roses in their buttonholes... Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Chapter 8

Charlie looked at himself in the full length mirror, unable to recognize the man who'd left Romania yesterday. Deeked out in hired formal robes, a silly great flower stabbed into his lapel, the majority of his scars were well hidden, at least, but he couldn't move his arms too much for fear the seams would rip. He ran his hand through his now non-existent hair, thanks to his mother's overzealous haircut his sacrifice made on Bill's thick-maned behalf, the unappreciative bastard.

When he ran his hand over the bristly fuzz that remained for second time within the same minute, it occurred to him the action had become something of a nervous tid!! *bloody freeze this winter*, he thought ruefully, adding a mental note to pick up a few extra stocking caps before returning home.

The thought tripped him up for a moment. *It's true, though, innit? Home's Romania now.* As much as he loved his family, as many fond memories as the Burrow held for him it was no longer where he felt he belonged. This Devonshire farmhouse jam-packed with boisterous humanity was a lovely place to be from, and he wouldn't change his personal history for the world, but a comparatively desolate, remote Carpathian mountaintop was most definitely his destiny.

"Aside from the fact your misshapen head is more evident now without your hair to hide beneath, you look surprisingly good," Bill teased him, adjusting his own robes.

Charlie grinned at his brother through the mirror. "You know, when you asked me to be your best man, I assumed my primary duty would be to prevent Fred and George from ruining the ceremony with some idiot prank. Now I see they've already gotten to you." When Bill blanched, Charlie spun around and continued, "Trust me, you'll want to avoid any mirrors with that manky mug you look worse than a dragon's arse-end."

Bill smirked, realizing he'd fallen for a joke as Charlie spread his arms wide in a mock-effort to prevent him access to the mirror. "No time left to work up a decent glamour, I'm afraid," he added. "Might just as well wear a bag over your head, bro." With that, he summoned a pillowcase and held it out helpfully.

"Boys! Stop your bickering for once!" Molly screeched, a ginger bundle of tears and nerves barreling into the room. "At a moment like this, are insults all you have for each other?" She fussed over Bill's tie and clucked with disapproval when he flipped his long hair back over his shoulder.

"Can you loosen these sleeves any more, Mum?" Charlie begged plaintively, and Bill shot him a look of pure gratitude for redirecting their mother's attention away from him.

Charlie then received a mighty swat to the head for his previous barb, for Molly was still extremely sensitive about Bill's facial injuries far more than Bill was, thank Merlin.

"Oh, boys, don't you look smart!" Arthur gushed, poking his head into the room as Molly dithered over Charlie's robes, agitatedly wiggling her wand about his neck and shoulders. "Come along now, Molly. We've got to get downstairs and join the guests. Leave these boys in peace for a few minutes, will you? They've got last-minute bachelor-y things to discuss, and I'd imagine they'd rather not do it in front of Mummy."

Only after planting several wet kisses on them did she finally accede to Arthur's wishes, leaving Bill to magic away the smudged lipstick off their cheeks (a spell he seemed suspiciously adept at). At least Charlie could roll his shoulders a bit more freely now.

"So, you're getting married, I hear," Charlie chuckled once they were finally alone again.

Bill grinned happily. "Luckiest man on earth and all that."

"And to the Little French Pastry, no less," Charlie needled him, referring to his almost sister-in-law by the misogynistic epithet her future husband had christened her with the day he'd first seen her at the Triwizard Tournament. "I can't bloody believe you managed it, really."

I can't bloody believe you're marrying a girl seven years your junior, barely twenty years old Charlie managed to hold his grin steady despite his less-than-charitable thoughts.

Bill's gaze drifted off into the distance. "I can't really explain it, Charlie... what she does to me. I only know I can't live without it."

How's this for an explanation: she's part veela, you bloody git! Charlie wasn't sure where this font of inner surliness was stemming from. Surely it wasn't jealousy? The last thing he wanted to saddle himself with was a wife, no matter how pretty or clever. "She's a lovely girl," Charlie agreed, managing to avoid most of the emphasis on the word *girl*.

His brother picked up on it anyway. "Well, now that I'm all settled, we can start to work on your love life." Bill's grin became a bit less genial, a bit more feral. "The sister's too young, I grant you. But a few of the cousins might do..."

"I'll pass," Charlie cut him off, wearily disappointed that Bill chose to turn down onto that tedious path once again. "I have no desire to learn French. Russian and Romanian are quite enough, thank you very much."

"What, you don't speak dragon?" Bill goaded him. "'Cause your breath sure as hell smells like one."

Charlie feigned a lunge at his older, taller brother, who instantly fell into a defensive crouch, wand in hand. "A little jumpy, are we?" he taunted him for overreacting. "Wedding nerves?"

"Fuck off," Bill growled, straightening up and stuffing his wand back up his sleeve.

Charlie made a sweeping bow as a token of reconciliation, unwilling to truly quarrel with his brother on his wedding day. They were all on edge lately, especially after the fiasco that led to Moody's death a few days ago and Charlie berated himself once again for not being there to participate in the sortie, despite the fact he'd not been invited or even told about it. *If I'd only known, I could've gotten the extra days off! Why didn't they just ask me?*

Charlie embraced his brother, slapped him heartily on the back, then led him out of the room with his arm still around his taller shoulders. "Come on, then. Your child bride awaits," he grumbled through a forced smile.

"You think they've all gone barmy, don't you?" Fred said, only slightly the worse for wear after a champagne-soaked afternoon. He plopped himself down in the seat next to where Charlie had been sitting alone, surveying the reception festivities from the head table and growing increasingly sullen. "Well I, for one, couldn't agree with you more."

Charlie looked at his younger brother sideways. "What the hell are you on about?" he muttered, really in no mood for any twins' hijinks.

"They're all looking at life through rose-colored specs, everything distorted by *love*," Fred grouched, emphasizing the silliness of it all by wiggling his fingers and spouting twinkling dust from them.

Charlie snorted in disagreement. Considering all they'd survived the past year, the past *month*... who could blame anyone from seeking comfort in any corner? He'd give nearly anything to be back on his peaceful Romanian mountaintop with Sasha at the moment, and he'd barely been gone a full twenty-four hours.

But Fred quite possibly misinterpreted his snort. "I grant you Bill might be feelin' his years and all that, breathin' hard on thirty as he is. A fella his age wants a pretty face and warm body to come home to perfectly understandable," Fred blathered.

Charlie shot him an indignant scowl. *Breathing hard on thirty, indeed! We're in our mid-twenties, thank you very much* which was blithely ignored.

"And when you've got a shot at Fleur flippin' Delacour, well, pfft!" Fred was clearly impressed with his elder brother's savvy choice of wife which was reasonable, *considering they're the same age!* Charlie bristled once again.

"But the rest of 'em? Moonin' over this one and that one?" Fred cried, then made a very rude farting noise to express his opinion of the romantic entanglements of his siblings far more eloquently than words could've done.

"The optimism of love is nothing to sneer at," Charlie countered, perhaps a little too defensively.

"It's bollocks, plain and simple," Fred declared, downed a half-full flute, then belched. Waving dismissively toward the dance floor, he muttered, "I suppose the younger ones don't know any better, blind slaves to the surge of adolescent hormones as they are."

Charlie rolled his eyes. *If anyone's a slave to his adolescent hormones, it's you, bro*, he grumbled silently. No matter from whom the source, every owl his siblings sent recently usually made some reference to Fred's hound dog manner of late. He'd seemed to inherit the mantle of ladies' man from Bill, now that the eldest of them had been safely ensconced with a fiancée.

But Fred ignored him, as usual. "I mean, take Ron and Hermione, for instance."

"Ron and Hermione?" Charlie spluttered a bit. "I thought Hermione fancied Harry."

"You, me, and the rest of the world could be easily forgiven for making that completely logical assumption, mate," Fred chuckled. "But go easy on our ickle Ronnikins. Got a bit of a complex about that, he does."

"Poor Ron," Charlie commiserated, easily imagining how wearing it must be, constantly overshadowed by his very famous (or infamous, depending on who you spoke to) best mate. *That could turn into one nasty little love triangle, it could.*

"Yeah, well, as clever as she is, there's no accounting for the girl's taste. Best mates with flippin' Harry Potter, no less *and* she had Krum on the line there for a bit, if you can believe it. But no, those two pathetic gits have been fawning over each other for years now, even if they didn't quite realize it themselves. And now that Ron finally woke up to it... well, let's just say he's willing to overlook the fact that Harry's head's been turned by our very own baby Ginny, as it takes him neatly out of the running for

Hermione."

"Ginny!?" Charlie choked, scanning the dancing crowd until he spotted his sister swaying with a young, tall black boy. Sure, even he knew (absent as he'd been for a significant chunk of her life) she'd been nursing a crush on Harry when she was a little girl, but still? "But I thought... Harry's supposed to look like one of us today?" he hissed under his breath, giving the tall boy the hairy eyeball. Now he felt like a fool for delivering a quick pep talk to the red-headed stranger he'd run into at the loo, assuming it was Harry in disguise.

"Oh, he does, albeit *much* uglier," Fred sneered with wicked glee. "George and I thought about just using one of my hairs for the potion and telling everyone he's our long lost triplet, but Mum got wind of the plan and, well..." Fred shrugged no further explanation was necessary. "So I stole the hair meself this morning from a pickle-faced prick in the village." He nodded toward the prick-disguise in question, who proved to be the person Charlie'd accosted in the loo earlier, which was a small relief.

But Ginger Harry was being chatted up in that moment by none other than that Bulgarian Quidditch prick, Victor Krum.

Who the hell invited him? Charlie felt a flash of grudge-filled resentment toward the git responsible for the agony of a clutch-deprived mother. He thought fleetingly about extracting a bit of dragon's revenge for the debacle at the Triwizard Tournament, then just as fleetingly thought better of it. His mother would extract a fierce revenge of her own if he dared to cause a scene at the wedding reception. But then Harry/Cousin Barny looked daggers at the boy dancing with Ginny, and Charlie realized Fred might possibly know what he was talking about vis-à-vis the romantic entanglements of their younger siblings.

"At least Harry had the sense to put the thing on hiatus for a bit," Fred added. "I mean, with the state of things... and the fuckin' target on the bloke's back... it's the proper thing to do, really."

Charlie felt a tug of sympathy for his sister to have finally won Harry's heart only to lose it again to his sense of duty. "Poor Gin," he muttered.

"And then there's *George*," Fred growled, scandalized as he jabbed a finger toward the dance floor.

Charlie's eyes followed and found Fred's twin, his bandaged head reminding them all of the state of the world outside the reception tent, waltzing around a diminutive yet voluptuous young woman with short, dark curls and semi-exotic looks. He'd been with her and her alone the entire reception, but Charlie had never seen nor heard tell of the witch before this. Maybe she was younger than he and still at Hogwarts? "What about George?" Charlie sighed, growing tired of the conversation.

"He's gone *native*, man!" Fred cried, affecting shock. "Don't get me wrong Annie's very likely the only girl on the planet who could keep up with him, for all she can't do magic. I think the world of her, I really do. But still!"

"Hang on... she's a Muggle?" Charlie choked. "George brought a *Muggle* here to this?"

"Keep your knickers dry, Charlene," Fred goaded him. "She's known about us for ages; Annie knows how to keep a secret, trust me."

"Might've known the two of you would pull some stupid stunt like this," Charlie muttered dubiously under his breath, unconvinced. "Do Mum and Dad know the truth about her?"

Fred rolled his eyes. "Of course," he grumbled disgustedly. "Though George did need a bit of prodding to come clean, the ruddy coward," he added with a leering grin that nearly made Charlie shiver. "But they're both very predictably over the moon about her. See, Annie's parents scarpered off when she was born, leaving her to be raised by her Gran, so that's Mum taken care of you know how she loves to fuss over little lost lambs and such. And she's a Muggle, so Dad can't stop asking her about credit cards and batteries and hello-copties."

Charlie chuckled despite himself, easily picturing his father pestering the poor girl about everything to do with Muggles. "You're protesting a bit much. Sounds to me like you're jealous," he needled his little brother.

"Jealous!? Of 'im an' Annie!?" Fred spluttered a little too vehemently. "Now you're talking shit."

Charlie laughed again, delighted to see Fred squirm. "Maybe not of George specifically, although I'm reserving final judgment on that one for the moment. But you can't honestly tell me everyone doesn't crave the kind of security a committed relationship can offer."

"Security? Commitment? You make it sound like a stay in Azkaban, mate," Fred blustered. "I'll pass, thanks."

"What about love? Understanding? Trust?" Charlie pressed. "Just look at George, at Bill. You can't deny they look awfully chuffed."

"Yeah, George has been trying to sell me the same line of rubbish for months now. I suppose you've got some mountaintop bird, then, sucking up all your time, money, and attention like he does?" he said, sounding disappointed.

Charlie pursed his lips, gritting his teeth. *Has to be a woman, does it? Would any of his family ever understand? Would they ever accept the truth?*

"What's wrong with all of you?" Fred soldiered on. "I say what about variety? Adventure? Seeing what's out there and enjoying all life has to offer? Why the hell would you tie yourself down to one person for the rest of your lives? It doesn't make sense. Goes against biology, even."

"Now *you're* talking shit," Charlie parried. *It's not just about sex! And biology can be a fucking tricky bitch, trust me.* "Among many other benefits, being with someone you love eases your stress because you have someone to share your burdens with. Someone who understands you. Someone you can count on to always have your back."

Fred began to laugh. "Which is why Mum and Dad *always* agree on everything, innit? Sorry, mate, but you lost the argument right there. From where I sit, she's always ridin' his arse about every nitpickin' thing. Talk about stress! Who needs that?"

Charlie chuckled wryly, conceding Fred's point. No one could argue their mother wasn't a nag of epic proportions. Still, for all their father seemed henpecked half to death, no one could deny Arthur and Molly Weasley loved each other beyond measure. And he suspected Fred knew it.

"Wotcher, Charlie!"

Fred and Charlie both smiled a welcome at Nymphadora Tonks *Erm, make that Lupin*, he corrected himself as she slid into the seat to Charlie's right. Her hair fairly glowed, tinted her favorite shade of pink, which actually looked fetching with her nicely tailored, silvery robes. It was always a surprise to Charlie that rough-and-ready tomgirl Tonks could clean up so prettily.

"Never mind me, then," Fred grumbled.

Tonks narrowed her eyes at him. "I try, Coz. I honestly do."

"Speaking of cousins," Fred taunted with a demonic smile as a young Delacour cousin flashed a come-hither look his way. "I believe I've neglected my duties as gracious host long enough, sittin' here with you sorry lot."

Charlie and Tonks groaned in unison. Fred surreptitiously flipped them off as he sauntered toward the girl.

After several uncomfortable moments of quiet, "Listen, Tonks, I... I'm sorry about what happened to Moody," he stammered lamely. He'd known the old Auror had been her mentor of sorts, and they'd been close. Well, as close as a fellow like Moody ever let another person get.

"Thanks, Charlie," Tonks said, blinking her eyes a few times. "But let's not dwell on that bit. Not today, of all days."

Charlie nodded, understanding perfectly. He couldn't blame her for wanting to forget the tragedy for a while. "So, I hear congratulations are in order for you, as well," he offered.

"They are indeed," Tonks replied, beaming. She wiggled the finger bearing her wedding ring to better catch his attention, as if such a thing were necessary.

"Where is your old man, anyway?" Charlie asked as he scanned the crowd for Lupin, a little surprised they weren't together at the moment. Come to mention it, he hadn't seen them joining in the dancing much at all. Were they deliberately trying to lay low?

Tonks bristled. "Charlie..." she said warningly, her eyes flashing.

"I honestly didn't mean it that way," Charlie said truthfully, laughing lightly as he realized his unintentional gaffe. "But, now that you bring it up..."

"Oh, not you, too!" Tonks whined.

"He's thirteen years older than you, mate," Charlie muttered. "That's"

"My lucky number," Tonks growled. "And not another word on the subject, presuming you like your bits to remain where they are," she added when he opened his mouth. "Merlin knows I've gotten it from every quarter already, including Himself."

Charlie held his tongue, not wanting to provoke his friend. He just couldn't understand it, though: Lupin's and his brother's predilection for significantly younger women. As beautiful as little Gabrielle Delacour was and she was practically angelic Charlie'd felt like a fool partnering with her during the traditional dances as best man and maid of honor. She was eleven years old, for Merlin's sake: less than half his age, not to mention half his height! But their age difference was the same as that between Tonks and Lupin.

"Ask me to dance already, you great git," Tonks grumbled as she elbowed him, smiling a little grimly, as if determined to put a brave face on it all.

"Do I have to?" Charlie whined, supremely unwilling to face the awkwardness of the dance floor again.

Tonks helped convince him of the wisdom of her plan with a well-aimed Hot Seat jinx. He led her into the small crowd on the dance floor just as the tempo slowed. She rested her hands lightly on his broad, muscled shoulders; he rested his lightly on her narrow, bony hips.

"You'd be so proud of me, Charlie," Tonks said by way of striking up a conversation. "I've learnt to brew Wolfsbane now, and that's a trick, innit? I've even managed to cook up the latest batch without knocking over my cauldron once."

"That's excellent news, mate," he chuckled. He couldn't help thinking her smile looked more forced than natural, though not like a typical blissful newlywed, anyway. "How are things really?" he murmured.

Tonks heaved a great sigh and finally let the facial pretense drop. "He's been under such great stress for such a long time," she lamented, a worried frown furrowing her brow. "I wish I could convince him to lean on me more, to let me help him, but he never does. And he especially won't now."

She added the last bit in a mumble, but Charlie'd caught it anyway. "Especially now?" he pressed, his mind leaping ahead. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Tonks flushed, an abashedly pleased yet genuine smile bursting onto her face. "I'm up the pole, Charlie," she whispered in a giggle.

"A baby?" he stammered hoarsely.

"Hush! It's too early to make an announcement," Tonks whispered. "You're the first person besides Mum and Dad I've told."

What can they be thinking? Charlie marveled, more than a little horrified. *A baby? Now? And Lupin's a*

Tonks sensed his reaction and accurately deduced the reasoning behind it. She lifted her gaze and, with pleading eyes, scoldingly, leadingly said in an exaggerated voice, "Congratulations, Tonks! I'm so pleased for you both!"

Charlie caught a glimpse of a haggard-looking Lupin, his head bent close to Minerva McGonagall's, who also looked fretful. Charlie knew Lupin to be a decent man, a trustworthy fellow member of the Order, and he'd never begrudge someone finding love, but... *a baby?* Conceived of a werewolf father? Its parents committed to a secret order sworn to fight evil to the death? In the midst of a war whose outcome was now very much in doubt?

His mind tumbled over the import. It wasn't that he mistrusted Lupin Remus was a clever and responsible bloke, too. If he reckoned it was safe enough to try for a baby between the two of them... Well, Charlie was certainly in no position to argue. But Merlin's moldy socks, they'd both just participated in the most recent operation to rescue Harry! And she was *pregnant?* How could Lupin have allowed her to take such a risk? How could she, an expectant mother, so blithely disregard the danger to herself and her unborn child?

Charlie gritted his teeth. "How about good luck?" It was the best he could truthfully offer, considering.

Tonks, her eyes glittering wetly and her smile fading, said softly, "It'll do, I suppose."

She rested her head against his shoulder for the rest of the song, and Charlie held her close, comforting his friend and cousin. Even as a little girl, Tonks had always had a soft spot for a lost cause hell, she'd been on the Hufflepuff Quidditch team (those loveable-yet-perpetual-losers), hadn't she? and he supposed her marriage to Lupin was more of the same. He prayed her pity for a friendless werewolf wouldn't wind up leading to dire consequences for them both. For them *all*.

It was getting increasingly difficult, however, to delude himself about the situation here any longer. Dumbledore's death had thrown them all into a confused, chaotic spiral. Each of the Order's schemes were being anticipated and countered by the enemy, he assumed largely thanks to Snape's betrayal it was a miracle they hadn't all died in the attempt to rescue Harry.

He and Bill had had a long discussion the night before, once the festivities of Harry's birthday had died down: both concluding an all-out battle was likely inevitable. The Death Eaters would never stop until Harry and the rest of the Order were dead, that much was inarguable. Bill had confided as much as he knew about the state of things for certain as well as quite a bit of conjecture about Ron, Harry, and Hermione's secretive plans. Ultimately, he'd promised Charlie to do everything he could to look after the family, but pushed him in return to go all out finding new supporters for their cause elsewhere.

And now what? he wondered morbidly. *How many more missions will be ambushed? How long before the Ministry's fully infiltrated and Dad's caught spying? How long before one of us ends up in a duel against Percy? How long before Lupin's outreach to the werewolves fails utterly and they turn on him? How long can McGonagall hold Hogwarts safe from the Death Eaters' influence?*

How long before we're all picked off, one by one?

Please, God, let Harry be worth it! Let him know what to do to finish this!

Back home on his peaceful mountaintop, it was easy to pretend all this wasn't constantly bearing down on them. Busy with the work of the reservation, it was easy to push

aside thoughts of fighting against blood prejudice and Muggle persecution. Now that Fedir had been paired up with the new Romanian recruit, Nandru Ungur, and the two of them packed off to live in keeper hut number eleven, Charlie'd found it easy to forget about You-Know-Who and his minions and simply lose himself every evening in quiet communion with Sasha.

Tonks shifted within his embrace, her arm sliding off his shoulder, drawing his thoughts back to the present. Without missing a step of the dance, she took one of his hands from her hips, then threaded her fingers into his. It was at this point he felt a small object press against his palm.

"These are Portkeys, Charlie," she whispered into his ear, her cheek pressed against his. "Nicked 'em from the Transportation Office. They're specially keyed for visiting dignitaries to Hogwarts, left over from the Triwizard Tournament a few years ago: they'll transport any number of people from anywhere in the world right into Hogsmeade, see? About a dozen brass rings, if I remember right, all shrunken into this little mokeskin pouch."

Portkeys? For all the reinforcements I'm supposed to deliver? He didn't feel like confessing he'd had little if any success in recruiting additional sympathizers since the last time they'd spoken about it. Nevertheless, he minutely twisted his wrist, and the little pouch slid down inside his sleeve, unnoticed by anyone else.

"Thanks, Tonks," he murmured, feeling more than a little ashamed and unworthy.

"Don't mention it, mate," she said, patting his other shoulder lightly.

"I'll do my best," he offered, praying he'd prove everyone's trust well placed, resolving to redouble his recruitment efforts back in Romania.

"I know you will," she agreed. "We will, too."

Author's note: George's Muggle girlfriend, Annie, and her attendance at Bill's wedding is in reference to my other story, "George & Annie: An Unofficial Biography," also archived on this site. She is entirely my invention.

Nov-97

Chapter 14 of 28

Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus, especially on Charlie Weasley's watch.

Chapter 14

November 1997

* * *

"Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?" (Bellatrix) yelled... "You need to mean them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain to enjoy it righteous anger won't hurt me for long..." Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Chapter 36

* * *

Charlie peered out through the darkness, his senses on high alert: eyes on the lookout for movement, ears pricked to detect sound. The night was silent, moonless, and frigid, as befitted the Carpathians in November, and he was grateful for the warmth of the Shield-charmed balaclava his twin brothers had fashioned for him. He exhaled slowly in order to allow the Disillusionment Charm disguising him to dissipate his fogged breath before it gave his position away.

The Chinese Fireball's lair he and his comrades had staked out that night was suboptimal in many ways, clearly chosen by an inexperienced, low-ranking adolescent female: cramped with jagged walls, too near the ground, and a mouth cluttered with rocky debris. In other words, far too easily accessed by bipedal creatures on foot. She'd paid a heavy price for her ignorance and for the fact her life's blood was prized as an aphrodisiacal element to many purported sexual enhancement potions and fueled a brisk black market trade.

They nearly killed her... all so some impotent sods could get a boner! He ground his teeth once more, fuming at the injustice of it all.

It was something of a minor miracle Charlie'd found the poor creature in time, significantly weakened by a raging infection from her wounds. The fucking animals that had repeatedly bled her most likely Stunned her first (accounting for the various injuries from where her body had crashed un-Cushioned into the stone walls), then slit open the tender flesh of her limb sockets near her underbelly, just where the arteries were closest to the surface and the hide most vulnerable. Done expertly and no more than once a year at most, it was a relatively safe and pain-free method of harvesting dragon's blood.

Unfortunately, the health and comfort of the donor mattered little to poachers. Their latest victim had multiple wounds in all four limb sockets, every one of them now oozing pus. They'd left her with nothing more than a half-arsed Staunching spell to cover their tracks (which barely counteracted the Anti-Coagulation charm they'd used first it was a marvel she hadn't been bled dry just to line their pockets with gold). Merlin only knew how unhygienic the blade and collection vessels they'd used were.

This sort of illegal and inhumane harvesting of dragon-derived materials was precisely why the International Brotherhood of Dragon Professionals was currently lobbying for all such Class B Tradeable Goods to be limited to those obtained from certified sources namely, an accredited reservation like Ridgebit, where licensed keepers implemented respectful and responsible harvesting techniques. While Charlie doubted it would end all poaching efforts, he did hold out hope that requiring a magical stamp of certification on all dragon-derived products might make it easier to determine which of them were obtained legally. It would at least be a step forward in protecting the health and safety of dragonkind.

The poor thing was resting more easily now, anyway. Since Charlie's discovery, they'd kept her sedated with a specially concentrated Sleeping Draught, enabling them to treat her wounds with antiseptic salves and flesh-knitting unguents. They roused her once every other day, just long enough to consume a sheep carcass enriched with immune-boosting vitamins, antibiotics, and Blood-Replenishing Potion, then put her back under. The more she rested, the better her own body could fight off the infection and work to repair itself, as well as lessen the possibility of reopening the wounds.

A rotating team of keepers had been standing guard over the Fireball's lair ever since Charlie found her, not only to keep a vigil over her progress, but also in hopes of apprehending the vile criminals who'd hurt her, for there was no doubt they'd be back for more as long as she remained alive. Hoping to catch them unaware and to minimize disturbance to the recuperating dragon, the keepers had avoided warding the cave in any way. The non-magical surveillance of the lair had persisted now for a fortnight of freezing in the dark, laying in wait for the monsters to return.

Tonight, as they'd done every night but two, Charlie and Sasha stood sentinel, manning the highest lookout point on a ledge a little above the lair's entrance. Partners Boian Vaduva and Romolo Miele watched over a rampart nearer the mouth of the lair, and Flaviu Vaduva and Freya Eidelmann, the lone female keeper on the reservation, guarded the lower approach.

The Vaduva brothers bore a strong familial resemblance to each other, their three-year age difference long ago overwhelmed by their almost mirror-image dark hair, grey eyes, and bull-like physiques. Even their mannerisms were practically identical: each chewed on the inside of his cheek when thinking particularly hard, both laughed like braying donkeys. Most people relied on their noses to tell the two apart: long and aquiline, each had been broken at some time during the past, but healed slightly off-center. Boian's nose curved right, Flaviu's left. Interestingly, the brothers were partnered with two of the three non-Durmstrang graduates on the reservation. Charlie wondered if it was purely coincidence or yet another example of their penchant for taking risks.

Romolo, a Muggle-born Italian wizard, had been educated at the venerable *Liceo di Maghi* in Rome. Full-lipped, blue-eyed, tall, dark, and handsome, he fully deserved his reputation in the Romanian wizarding villages as a ladies' man. But as suave as he proved himself with the local witch population, he was as clever and daring in his keeper duties. Charlie had found in him a friendly, generous comrade with a devastatingly quick wit, but felt they had little else of significance in common besides being dragon keepers.

Freya, conversely, was something of a paradox. Tall and stout, she hailed from Germany's equally ancient *Entzücken-Schule*, hidden away for ages atop a Black Forest mountaintop.¹ She worked hard to eliminate all outward physical evidence of her womanhood: bound breasts, short-cropped hair (which was somewhat ironic, considering how many male keepers wore their hair in a long plait down their backs), a masculine demeanor and wardrobe: no visually discernable trace of femininity remained. Ghenadie admitted her hiring was intended as something of a practical joke, and Flaviu had endured an overzealous ration of shit from their colleagues for being saddled with a female partner when she'd first started work on the reservation. But she'd long ago proven herself in regards to all the typical keeper qualifications: excellent broom skills, physical strength and endurance, reliable teamwork, and more. Even so, she still often felt driven to go above and beyond. Usually the first to arrive and last to leave a job, Charlie wondered why she still tried so hard to impress everyone.

A quiet crack of distant Apparition broke the silence of the night, interrupting his thoughts. The echo of it amplified within the narrow stone gorge, making it difficult to triangulate an accurate position. Several more cracks followed. Charlie thought he counted six, the generally accepted minimum of wizards required to subdue a dragon. He hoped none of them had been Side-Alongs, or they'd be outnumbered.

Just when Charlie began to make out the approaching group tallying six and no more, thank Merlin. Romolo, on cue, cast a Sonorus Charm on himself and began mimicking the distress rumblings of a fearful, agitated, wounded dragon. Charlie marveled at how convincing Romolo's talent was: he sounded exactly like the young Fireball female would've if she'd been awake and aware of the poachers' return. The ruse was necessary; complete silence might've alerted the poachers to the trap awaiting them.

Six men with packs began the final ascent to the mouth of the lair, not bothering with disillusionments of any sort. Their brazenness fanned Charlie's loathing, and he felt a strong urge to attack in that moment. But he held back, reminding himself that they would soon be taught the folly of their ways. He, like the others, understood the official goal of the evening was to apprehend the perpetrators and deliver them to the local magistrate. But in a firefight, things could quickly devolve into a kill-or-be-killed situation. And Charlie'd be damned if he'd let any of his colleagues be martyred by a fucking lowlife poacher.

Flaviu and Freya, Disillusioned and therefore invisible, were now creeping up behind the poachers, wands at the ready, blocking the obvious escape route. The keepers had all cast special sound-dampening spells upon their boots, eliminating the crunching of their footsteps in snow, but Flaviu and Freya were also careful to hide the visual evidence of their presence by mingling their tracks with those of the poachers.

Romolo kept up the dragon distress call, luring the band nearer. Meanwhile, he and Boian slipped into flanking positions. Charlie and Sasha moved off together into the night, down closer to the lair's mouth.

Charlie didn't recognize the language the poachers were speaking as they passed by him, their voices hushed into whispers. *Which rules out any local suspects*, he thought. Despite the Disillusionment Charms, Charlie could sense the presence of his fellow keepers closing in on their quarry: the poachers were soon surrounded with nowhere to go but into the lair.

The keepers waited for the poachers to set foot inside the mouth of the shallow cave. At that moment, while the poachers busied themselves quietly assuming their positions, preparing to cast their Stunners on the dragon victim, the keepers quickly raised Anti-Disapparition barriers as well as wards to alert them in case enemy reinforcements were summoned. At the same moment that Romolo shouted in Romanian for the poachers to surrender, Charlie and Sasha both cast Shield Charms around the dragon's prostrate body and the keepers' perimeter, and Freya sent aloft a glowing orb to hang near the cave's ceiling, illuminating the proceedings like a searchlight.

Unsurprisingly, the poachers did not react to the interruption with calm or consideration. Freya's light blinded them, and they shouted in protest while trying to shield their eyes, unable to see who was accosting them. Then the orb split itself into six smaller orbs, each descending and settling atop a poacher's forehead like a beacon, making it nearly impossible for them to see beyond their noses, as well as marking their positions in the darkness. The keepers let their Disillusionment Charms fall away, the better to avoid friendly fire.

Whatever system of organization the poachers might have had, it seemed to disintegrate quickly into chaos, every man fending for himself. Flashes of random deadly force ricocheted off the walls of the lair as they blindly lashed out at the unseen keepers, and Charlie strengthened his Shield around the dragon, pouring his concentration into the spell. Sasha and Boian worked to Shield the other keepers while Freya, Romolo, and Flaviu went on the offensive.

Freya quickly disarmed one of the poachers. The clatter of a wand hitting the stone floor echoed through the lair, then incapacitated him with a petrification spell. At that point two others who'd apparently reached the limit of their bravery for the night bolted out of the cave directly toward the ring of keepers. One, either as a function of poor luck or clumsiness, stumbled over the body of his frozen compatriot—a delay that gave Flaviu a clear shot at him. The man fell with a shout, struggling against the coils of magical ropes binding him ever more tightly.

While the remaining three darted behind the cover of boulders inside the lair, the other ran careening down the rocky slope. Flaviu moved to take up the chase, zinging Impediments and Tripping Jinxes at the fellow. Charlie was confident the enemy would not get far. Flaviu would run him to ground before he left the boundary of the Anti-Disapparition Jinx.

A momentary standoff was reached with the final three poachers. While Freya's head-lights marked their positions with certainty, they'd each managed to wedge themselves behind large rocks or wall-outcroppings. From these positions, they cast hexes and jinxes that were steadily increasing in desperation, if not improving in accuracy. With Flaviu otherwise occupied, his brother Boian assumed command. Wanting to end the fight as quickly as possible, he directed the keepers to advance into the lair.

They split up into two groups. Boian and Romolo moved in on the poacher furthest from the others, nearest the drugged and sleeping dragon. Charlie, Sasha, and Freya took on the other two by virtue of their proximity to each other. Freya and Boian both started shouting for the poachers to surrender or face death, offering terms in several different languages: English, German, and Romanian, for starters.

Panicked shouts, none of which made any sense, and more spells answered them. A lethal green light lasered through the darkness.

Freya dodged the spell, countering it with a jinx of her own. The cowering poacher was blasted several feet backward, hitting the wall of the cavern with enough force to knock a troll senseless. Not one for doing anything less than thoroughly, Freya followed it up with a German version of the Stupefy spell, then disarmed and bound the now limp body slumped on the floor.

Charlie and Sasha aimed several hexes and jinxes toward the other poacher, attempting to flush him out into the open. Sensing he was well and truly trapped, the man seemed hell-bent on taking as many keepers down with him as he could. Shots of purple light so dark they were barely visible strafed the lair. To Charlie's horror, one of

them hit Sasha square in the chest. He froze as he watched the purple-black light spread instantly to cover Sasha's entire body, behaving like a liquid spilled over a flat surface. The form-encompassing light flickered faintly, resembling flames on an alcohol-soaked cloth, the likes of which Charlie'd never seen.

Sasha collapsed, howling in pain, tearing at his clothing. Never had Charlie felt so horrifically helpless.

"Greek Fire! Greek Fire!" Freya shouted, warning the rest and knocking Charlie out of his terror-trance.² "Boian! Sasha's been hit!"

Instantly, Boian left Romolo to finish subduing their Stunned poacher, dashing over to join Freya at Sasha's side. The Durmstrang graduate, more familiar with such Dark magic than the rest of them, knelt on the ground beside him, competently singing counterspells and performing a complicated wand movement over Sasha's writhing, bellowing body.

Heart pounding again after having stopped completely, Charlie launched himself over the boulder where the cowardly poacher hid, intent on nothing now but exacting vengeance. They collided with enough force to send them both hard to the ground. After rolling over each other twice in a battle for supremacy, Charlie managed to come out on top. He grabbed the man's wand hand and slammed it against the uneven stone floor, smashing his grip apart and sending his wand flying.

The man screamed in pain. He kicked out, trying to dislodge Charlie with his legs, but was unsuccessful.

How dare you hurt Sasha!? How many dragons have you killed over your pathetic existence? How many keepers maimed? Charlie could think of nothing but causing this miserable excuse for a human being more agony. He rammed his palm up against the man's jaw, throwing all the force of his body weight against the man's neck.

"That shut you up, didn't it?" he snarled as the man pinned beneath him squirmed for breath, clawing at his wrist. Charlie flicked a few Slashing spells randomly about the filth's body. "Shall I open a few arteries, hmm? Watch you bleed out right here on the dirt and stone?" He squeezed the flesh of the man's throat even tighter, gloating as his eyes began to bug out. "But if it's good enough treatment for dragons, it's far too fine a thing for you. Maybe I'll light a little fire of my own, eh? Roast your wretched arse and feed you to her?" His fist still curled around his wand, Charlie punched the man in the face, relishing the feel of his nose crumbling beneath the blow. "Nah, a rotten piece of shite like you'd only make her ill."

With one last push of effort, the man reached his arm above his head, palm open, summoning something. Charlie felt a surge of magic ripple from his enemy, saw movement in his peripheral vision. The man's wand flew into his open hand, and his fingers curled around it.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Charlie screamed, slashing his wand across the man's face.

Instantly, a euphoric rush chased all the fury, fear, and adrenaline out of Charlie's body from the core outward, down to the tips of his fingers, toes, and hair. A flash of green filled his vision, then went back to black. The body beneath him fell still, and lifeless eyes stared up into Charlie's face.

1- *Liceo di Maghi* = "Wizard's High School" in (approximate) Italian; *Entzücken-Schule* = "Enchantment School" in German. Once again, I'm relying on online translation sites.

2- I do not intend my description of the spell-version "Greek Fire" used by the poacher to represent *thereal* stuff used by the Byzantines (and others). That being said, the actual recipe for Greek fire is lost to us (though there are loads of guesses - see link below), and by the time of the Middle Ages, the term "Greek fire" was used to describe pretty much any incendiary weapon of war. So, who knows? Maybe it was magic! If you're interested in learning more, here's the Wikipedia link for [Greek fire](#)

2-May-98

Chapter 15 of 28

The Charge of the Army of the Light almost doesn't get off the ground.

Chapter 15

May 2, 1998

"They heard an uproar from the distant boundary of the school as what sounded like hundreds of people came swarming over the out-of-sight walls and pelted toward the castle, uttering loud war cries... And now there were more, even more people storming up the front steps, and Harry saw Charlie Weasley... [He and Slughorn] seemed to have returned at the head of what looked like the families and friends of every Hogwarts student who remained to fight, along with the shopkeepers and homeowners of Hogsmeade." *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Chapter 36*

When the enchanted Galleon noisily came to life, vibrating on his bedside table, Charlie wasn't surprised. He'd inexplicably been bothered by a strange, nervy feeling throughout the day prior: an odd sort of anticipation tinged with dread. As he wasn't the sort of fellow to put much stock in premonitions, he tried to chalk it up to the pervasive jitteriness he'd felt for a few weeks now - ever since the owl from his father informing him the rest of his family had gone into hiding back in England. But he hadn't managed to shake the feeling before going to bed and slept only fitfully for an hour or two.

Fred had given him the counterfeit coin at Bill's wedding after boosting its range and tweaking its alert response, assuring him that when (not if) something happened, they'd let him know using George's identical coin. He wasn't exactly sure why he'd kept it in his trousers pocket every day or on the bedside table each night since. Charlie hadn't really expected it to work, but here it was making a racket at 1:30 in the bloody morning on the second day of May.

He sat upright in bed and grabbed his wand. By the light of its tip, he watched the serial numbers on the coin's face morph into a message, brief but clear: **HARRY'S AT HOGWARTS! IT'S STARTING!** He didn't bother trying to work out why the hell Harry Potter would be stupid enough to turn up at Hogwarts. Nor did he trouble himself worrying about the validity of the message. Despite the coin's association with Fred, Charlie highly doubted he'd ever joke about something like this.

He dressed quickly, donning the protective gear he usually reserved for working up close with dragons. Then, after hesitating only for a few moments, he crept into Sasha's room, just like he promised. "Sash," he whispered, gently shaking his shoulder.

Sasha came awake in an instant. It's not as if Charlie even tried to hide how worried he'd been lately about his family therefore, Sasha immediately guessed the reason for being awakened. He sat up, blinked his eyes, then threw his legs over the side of the bed. "Give me a minute to get ready," he said without any further explanation from Charlie.

Charlie's love and adoration for him surged in that moment, tempered in equal measure by fear on his behalf. The thought of something happening to Sasha on his account made his gut churn. He perched lightly, anxiously on the bed, watching him dress for battle.

Sasha noticed his preoccupation. Once fully dressed, he knelt before Charlie, gripped his arms, and whispered, "Whatever may come, know that I love you always." He spoke in Russian, the language they reserved for sentimental exchanges between them because it was the one understood by the fewest keepers (besides themselves, only Fedir came anywhere close to fluency).

Charlie nodded, accepting a fervent kiss. He held Sasha close for a few seconds longer, praying that by some miracle, everyone would come out of this alive. That if they didn't win, they'd at least live to fight another day.

They parted, then stood. Tapping into a powerful happiness borne of their love for each other, buried yet nurtured deep within themselves, Charlie and Sasha conjured several Patronuses each (a small, misty herd of luminescent Welsh Greens and Ironbellies, respectively), sending them off to summon everyone on the rez to hut number nine. Fifteen minutes and a brewed pot of coffee later, all twenty Ridgebit keepers were crowded into the common room, dressed for battle and bristling with Goblin steel.

"Go on, Weasley," Ghenadie said, ceding the floor.

Standing at the focal point of the gathering, Charlie cleared his throat. "Well, most of you know the basic lay of things... How my family have sworn to fight against the cult that call themselves Death Eaters and the wicked maniac that leads them. Their grip on Wizarding England has tightened over the past months: they've taken over the government, and now hundreds of people, including my family, have gone into hiding or on the run to escape persecution."

Charlie paused. Every pair of eyes locked onto him. Several heads nodded with understanding he'd shared this much of the story with many of them before. Then he dug into his pocket and extracted the charmed Galleon, holding it aloft. "I've just received word from my family that the most evil wizard this world's ever seen has attacked a school my old school. There's no one there but children and teachers. They're not defenseless, but they need help. They need *our* help."

Grumblings rippled through the group at this news. "What sort of bastards attack children?" and, "Like to get my hands on a few of 'em," were muttered.

Ghenadie put his hands up for quiet. "Let me make something clear this is a call for volunteers. There'll be no disciplinary consequences for those who choose to go, but there's no reward in it, either."

"Oh, I reckon it sounds like there's plenty of reward to be had," Viorel Iliescu growled eagerly, cracking his knuckles, then grinding his fist into his other palm.

Ghenadie smirked patiently. "Yes, yes, who doesn't love a good fight? But the fact remains we've got a reservation to run here. I can't afford to lose more than... a dozen" The Head Keeper was cut off as the group rumbled their displeasure.

"Or I'll give you all the fight you'll want right here!" he barked sharply, and the group quieted down, though several disgruntled keepers shot him veiled glares. Satisfied with their acknowledgement of his authority, such as it was, Ghenadie continued. "Way I see it, as this thing's going down at that English school, those of you who've been there before get first dibs."

Skender Cojocaru, Dobry Dudek, Fisnik Hoxha, and Milos Kopecky all smiled happily, pleased that their tour of duty delivering the Horntail to Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament had earned them this unexpected boon.

"Those of you who can speak halfway decent English ought to get the next spots. Weasley, I'll let you be the judge of that."

Charlie swallowed a bit nervously, faced with so many glinting pairs of eyes, some pleading, some confident, a few mildly resentful. "Erm... Romolo and Boian..." The partners high-fived each other; meanwhile, Flaviu looked disheartened, accurately assuming Charlie wouldn't risk both brothers in the same battle. "Fedir, you've come a long way," Charlie said with a half-hearted attempt at a light chuckle. The grieving fellow had used the task of bettering his English to distract him from the sadness of his partner's loss or at least that's what Charlie suspected. He'd done an admirable job on both counts.

"And Nandru," Fedir said, urging Charlie to confirm the selection of his new partner.

Charlie paused thoughtfully. The truth was Nandru could barely understand twenty words of English, all of them dragon-related. But far be it from Charlie to split up a partnership, so he nodded. *Fedir can translate for him, anyway.*

Viorel grabbed his partner's arm, and the two of them stepped forward. "And us. That makes twelve," he insisted cockily.

"Holy shit, he can count," Romolo taunted him, and most of the rest laughed.

"A good group of men," Sasha murmured quietly next to Charlie.

Charlie nodded, grateful for both his counsel and support. Viorel and Leotrim knew only rudimentary English at best, but he reckoned their enthusiasm ought to count for something. Flaviu handed his brother Boian a dagger Charlie knew it to be a family heirloom as they said goodbye to one another. Those keepers who were staying behind clapped the backs and clasped the hands of those who would leave to fight, exchanging wishes for luck and promises to return.

Please, God, let them all come back home, Charlie prayed silently. *After last summer, we can't afford any more losses.*

Several pairs of keepers filed out the door of the hut then, and Charlie heard the quiet pops of Apparition as they returned to their huts for the remainder of the night. When only the Head Keeper and his partner were left, he bestowed a "Godspeed and see you soon," upon them all by way of benediction, then Apparated away.

Eleven pairs of eyes turned expectantly to him.

"We're yours to command, Charlie," Sasha announced, his mouth quirking with the faintest hint of a smile.

His heart pounding, Charlie fished Tonks' mokeskin pouch from his pocket, then pulled out two of the tiny brass rings. After enlarging them to the size of dinner plates, he replaced the pouch containing the rest of them back into his pocket. He checked his watch: it was nearly two a.m. here in Romania, which meant it was almost midnight at Hogwarts.

"When I activate these Portkeys, you'll be transported to the small village nearest the school. Unfortunately, I'm not entirely sure exactly where you'll be." *Assuming I'm not sending you into a trap...* But Charlie brushed that and all the other doubts that plagued him, for such fretting served no purpose now. The best they could do was get there as soon as possible, even if they had to fight their way into the battle.

"A few people in the villages here have promised to join us Sasha and I must go collect them now. I'll be sending them to you using more of the same Portkeys, so..." Charlie shrugged. "Watch out for them, and watch out for yourselves. I'll join you as soon as I can."

"We can handle ourselves," Skender assured him with a confident smile. He reached out and took the Portkeys from Charlie. "You can count on us, Commandant Charlie!"

"We'll curse first and ask questions later," Viorel laughed.

A few excited laughs peppered the group, and Charlie was heartened by the fact they all wore similarly confident, eager smiles. He reminded himself that these men were *dragon keepers*, had proven themselves brave and clever and strong repeatedly over the nearly seven years he'd known them.

"Good luck!" Charlie called out as he activated the Portkeys. An instant later, he was alone again with Sasha in the silent hut. Charlie stared at the empty space where his colleagues stood seconds ago, agonizing over his part in their departure. Could he live with the consequences if anything happened to his friends? Or the consequences to his family if they didn't answer the call?

"They will be fine," Sasha reminded him.

"I hope so," Charlie whispered.

"They volunteered," Sasha pressed.

"Yes, but for what?" Charlie replied.

Sasha pressed his lips together. "Come on, then," he muttered. Taking Charlie by the arm, he Apparated them away.

A dizzying moment later, Charlie found himself on a darkened village street. Over the next hour, he and Sasha repeated the same routine: they roused the point person of the village, who quickly gathered the other sympathizers and mercenaries averaging ten people each. Once assembled, Charlie delivered the same speech he'd given to his fellow keepers about You-Know-Who attacking Hogwarts, how time was of the essence, how the Portkeys would deliver them all to the same spot, where he'd be joining them soon. Pitești, Rataciti, Nevazut: all proceeded without a hitch, and Charlie'd memorized his little spiel by the end.

In the fourth and final village Comoara everyone assembled in Ileana Bălan's pub. Nearly four years had passed since that night when Ileana had offered herself to Charlie, and he still felt a bit awkward around her. She hadn't verbally repeated the offer since, treating him with the same sassy friendliness, the same dubious smile she showed to the rest of the world, but neither had she failed to pin him with an intent look or pass up an opportunity to incidentally brush her body against his. She was one of the villagers who'd agreed to join the fight, but Charlie couldn't help but wonder at her motivation for doing so.

She stole an opportunity again that night squeezing his hand for just a second when he passed her a Portkey and looking straight into his eyes and Charlie felt a stab of guilt. *What if she gets hurt... or worse?* He thought of facing her father, Marku, with the devastating news afterward. *Please, God, don't let anything happen to her.*

An hour and a half after he'd sent his fellow keepers off, Charlie and Sasha used the second-to-last Portkey themselves. Several moments later, he found himself conveniently yet quite surprisingly in Hogsmeade Station. He had just enough of an instant to wonder why everyone around him immediately clamped their hands over their ears before a head-rending scream ripped through the night.

What the fuck is that!? Charlie wondered. When the noise died away a moment later, everyone dropped their hands.

"Some kind of alarm," Skender said, stepping up to deliver a report and answering the obvious question first. "It's happened now every time someone new's arrived. No one's responded yet."

A series of lightening-like flashes cast strobed shadows against the walls and floor of the station, followed by seismic booms that shook the earth even where they stood. While everyone else turned toward the castle, standing high on the rise above the lake, Charlie looked around the station, quickly confirming his heart-sinking tally. Fifty-four people... Not enough! It's not enough! He'd failed and failed miserably when it counted most.

Seemingly reading his mind, or perhaps simply sensing his mounting panic, Sasha laid a hand on his shoulder and gave it a light, brief squeeze. "We're ready, Charlie. Let's go help your family."

"We'll have to get there on foot," he announced to the group, reminding them all that Apparition onto Hogwarts grounds was impossible. "It's a bit of a hike around the lake and through the town to get to the castle. Once we're there, I'll try to find my father, or any Order member really, and things will go from there." The plan sounded so ridiculously simple and so improbably impossible, Charlie was embarrassed. The devil only knew what horrors the Death Eaters had in store for them, but if they didn't get moving, there might be no one left to reinforce.

"Wands out," he needlessly suggested. Taking his place on point, Sasha at his right, he led them out of the station.

They hadn't made it far only to the edge of the village proper, in fact before they were accosted by none other than Madam Rosmerta, proprietress of the Three Broomsticks, standing defiantly in the middle of the empty road. She was clad not in a nightdress, as would be expected considering the wee-ness of the morning hour, but in sturdy work clothes.

"What's this all about, eh? All these bloody alarms?" she snapped, angry and fearful in equal measure. "You lot lost? Or fancy a bit of looting?"

Charlie concluded her bravery or bravado, as the case might well be was bolstered by the fact none of his band of strangers wore the trademark hoods and masks of the enemy. Like many in Britain, Rosmerta had not officially declared a side in the conflict, preferring instead to exist quietly, keeping her head down and her boat steady to weather the storm, as it were. Still, she had slipped a few valuable tips along to a trusted Auror here and there over the past few months, according to his father.

Halting the group behind him, he approached her alone, slowly, with his wand down but ready. "I'm Charlie Weasley, Madam Rosmerta. Arthur and Molly's son. I've been away for a few years, but you might remember me from my school days." The English felt a bit strange on his tongue after so long, sounded equally strange to his ears.

She looked shocked for a moment, then peered a bit more closely at him. "Aye, I'll grant you're a Weasley, at any rate," she said, looking pointedly at his hair. "You say you're Arthur's son? That mean you're in the Order of the Phoenix, too?"

Shocked to hear her bandy about the name of the supposedly secret resistance organization, Charlie nevertheless nodded and smiled in a manner he hoped she'd find reassuring. "I've brought some mates with me... willing to do what we can to help the fight against You-Know-Who. Can you tell us anything about what's going on?"

Rosmerta's expression turned even more dour. "It's been awful, young Charlie open season on anybody who can't prove their proper blood status. The wireless, the bloody *Prophet* they own them all now, spewing out their rubbish with no one to say otherwise. We've been under this bloody dusk-to-dawn curfew for a month"

"Is that what the screaming was about?" Charlie asked.

"Caterwauling Charm," she sneered. "I bloody hate it! And those bleedin' louts take whatever they want... haven't paid a bill in weeks, and my hospitality's not the only one they've taken advantage of."

A loud explosion from the direction of the castle interrupted them, and Charlie flinched. "Can you tell us what's going *orthere*?"

Rosmerta cast an agonized look toward the towers of the castle silhouetted against flashing spells. "He's been here couple of hours now You-Know-Who," she hissed, speaking the name under her breath. "Demanded they turn over the little Potter boy by midnight. Judging by all that" she nodded toward the castle "I'm guessing they didn't comply."

Charlie's eyes quickly scanned the dark and silent homes of the town. "Are all the rest of the town up there fighting?" he asked, his chest tightening at the thought.

Rosmerta snorted. "They're all hiding in their homes, same as they've done for months now!"

Sasha gave a low growl behind Charlie's shoulder at the news of such self-serving cowardice.

"But we've got to help them!" Charlie cried. "They'll need all of us, every single one, if they've a prayer of even holding their own!" Rosmerta looked a little cowed by his criticism. Reconsidering his tack, for his goal was not to shame but recruit and encourage, he added a pleading edge to his voice. "Please, Madam Rosmerta! Help us help them! Surely there are friends of yours, neighbors and colleagues who would be willing to help defend the school! To take a stand for what is right!"

She swallowed anxiously, but nodded all the same. "Yes, yes I think so," she whispered, her gaze drifting away from him as she pondered whom to approach. "We'll all go belly up if something's not done, and soon..."

"We need more people, more fighters," Charlie prodded her. *The fifty or so I've brought will never be enough!* "As many as you can the entire town, if you can manage. I'll help you, if you think anyone will listen to me."

"Meanwhile, let us do what we came here to do," Sasha added in a quiet yet strong voice. "I'll take this lot up to the castle. I've been there before, and I know your father. I can translate whatever instructions are necessary. Trust me to deliver the help you promised."

Charlie gave Sasha a pained look as if trusting him was ever an issue.

Rosmerta nodded. "And you'd better leave me to this, young Charlie. Folks here are jumpy enough as it is. Some young stranger bangin' on the door in the middle of the night isn't going to help the cause any."

"Can you think of anyone else to contact?" Charlie pressed Rosmerta, the prospect of one lone witch knocking door-to-door leaving him discouraged. "Any other way to get the word out about the fight?"

Rosmerta shook her head slightly and shrugged.

"What about your other keeper friends?" When Charlie shot Skender, who'd sneakily joined the conversation, a confused look, he elaborated. "You know the blokes who delivered Norbert."

"*Ddraig Cymry!*" Charlie cried, the excitement of a new plan beginning to buoy his spirits a little. He hadn't been there for years, but he knew the Welsh reservation like the back of his hand, could name practically every keeper stationed there. "Of course! And Clan MacFusty as well might join!"

Charlie, Sasha, and Rosmerta gave each other significant looks, silently agreeing to shoulder the separate commands, understanding the dire consequences of failure or capture.

"I'll continue on up the road with this lot, then," Sasha said.

"I'll start on High Street, then move into the residential neighborhoods," Rosmerta offered. "I'll send everyone I can up after you, mister...?"

"Sasha Vasiliev, madam," he replied with a slight bow of his head. "But perhaps, as I am a stranger here, you might better give them Arthur Weasley's name."

Rosmerta nodded in agreement, then turned her back to them, marching determinedly toward the town.

"Good luck, Charlie," Sasha murmured softly. Then he added, "You know we can do this," by way of reassurance. Clapping Charlie on the arm, then turning and striding back to the Romanian contingent, Sasha began translating the latest plan for them in his booming voice.

There was nothing left for Charlie to do in Hogsmeade now that he'd delegated both reinforcement and recruitment. As strange as it felt to not be running up the hill toward where his family no doubt stood fighting against Death Eaters, Charlie instead watched his Romanian friends and coworkers head off into the battle instead. He glanced briefly at his watch and quickly calculated the local time 1:49 a.m. before Apparating away in the darkness.

Half an hour later, the entire staff of *Ddraig Cymry* had assembled before him. A few of the older gentlemen in his audience had known him since he was a snout-nosed little boy, lisping through a gap-toothed grin about how badly he wanted to become a dragon keeper when he grew up. He prayed they'd forgotten how annoying he must've been and would take him more seriously this time.

Standing in the visitors' center, surrounded by the memorial plaques (the names of which he could still recite to this day) and the interactive model of a Welsh Green dragon, he delivered the same speech he'd done now five times before, the only differences this time being it was in English rather than Romanian and included a mention of Harry Potter. He hadn't bothered with explaining the complicated and involved tale of prophecy and murder before this, and as a result, none of the Romanians fighting today knew (or gave a toss) about the Boy Who Lived. The thought of those fighting Romanians gave him pause, but he pushed through his lines anyway, sparing another quick, silent prayer for their safety.

The Welsh reservation's Benaig, Eiddig Morgan, stepped forward to stand beside Charlie, holding a tattered book in his hand. He commanded it to open to a specific page, then held it aloft for all to see. There, in broad but shaky primary-school writing, Charlie read his own name on the "Junior Keeper" registry. He gulped, wondering what this could possibly signify.

"Despite this young man's departure for mountains distant and unknown, he is, and remains, one of us." Eiddig closed the book. "Hogwarts is our alma mater, and she needs defending." He turned and placed his hand firmly on Charlie's shoulder, looking him directly in the eye. "*Ddraig Cymry* will answer the call, son."

A cheer rose up from the keepers *all twenty five of them!* and Charlie's heart soared with new hopefulness. After instructing them to Apparate to the school's front gates and report to his father, if possible, he added a warning about the Caterwauling Charm.

"I'm off to court Clan MacFusty next," Charlie explained as the corps prepared to Apparate. "Any thoughts?"

"Give old Kenny MacFusty my compliments," Eiddig offered with a warm smile and a wink, naming the head of the dragon-keeping clan. "And tell 'im I'll either see 'im at Hogwarts, or I'll see 'im in hell."

"I will, sir," Charlie replied. "And thank you again."

"Well, we cannot let the Romanians have *everything* that's rightfully ours, including a decent aggro, can we?" Eiddig needled him genially. "Now, off with you to that godforsaken rock!"

And with that, Eiddig winked out; Charlie was left alone once more. After a quick check of his watch 2:29 a.m. he, too, Apparated away. But instead of arriving at a windswept, craggy village in the Scottish Highlands, he found himself on a windswept, craggy island in the North Atlantic. Lamenting it was far too dark to get even a peek at one of the majestic Hebridean Blacks that inhabited the remote reserve, Charlie strode up to the chief's home.

The MacFustys proved even easier to convince than the Welsh keepers. All it took was him saying, "You-Know-Who's attacking Hogwarts," for them to rise up in arms. Considering the action a threat to Scottish sovereignty as well as common decency, the clan unanimously declared war upon the Death Eaters, gathering another twenty witches and wizards for the cause.

That's near a hundred of us, not including whoever Rosmerta's rallied in Hogsmeade he thought with mild relief, allowing himself to feel the tiniest bit optimistic about the situation.

Just before 3:00 a.m., Charlie and Clan MacFusty arrived in Hogsmeade. To his surprise, their arrival was not heralded this time by a scream, and he wondered who had managed to cancel the Caterwauling Charm. Did such a development bode well or ill? He'd just begun warily leading the Scots toward the castle when he noticed two figures hustling toward him from different directions.

The closer of the two turned out to be Madam Rosmerta. "I've got good news and bad. Which do you want first?"

She'd barely gotten the words out of her mouth when Charlie recognized the second figure. *Sasha!* His joy at seeing him alive and well was quickly tempered by the unhappy look on his face. He jogged over to where Rosmerta had waylaid him.

"Let me guess you've got bad news, too," Rosmerta greeted him sourly.

Sasha gave Charlie a meaningful look. "Not bad news. Just disappointing and hopefully temporary. The gates are closed: we can't get in."

Can't get in!? Charlie swore under his breath. All this running about recruiting people, and we can't even bloody get inside?

"Yes, well, there are other ways to get into Hogwarts besides the front gates." Rosmerta quipped, snagging Charlie by the arm and marching off up the street, hauling him along at a brisk pace. "Honeydukes and Zonko's both have basement tunnels, and rumor has it the hillside caves are riddled with passageways leading onto the school grounds. I'll let Ambrosius fill you in on that bit."

"Mr. Flume's joined us?" Charlie asked eagerly. "How many others?"

"All the resident shopkeepers on High Street are in," Rosmerta reported proudly. "We're all keen to get back a little of what's owed us, either in coin or flesh. We've spent the past hour running through the streets, banging on doors, rousing the citizens. All told, I think we've raised about fifty more."

"Fifty!" Charlie cried, immensely pleased. *That brings us to a hundred and fifty!* "Well done! Really well done!"

"What's the bad news?" Sasha asked, tempering Charlie's jubilation.

"You'll see," Rosmerta said with a scowl as they approached her establishment's rival in town, the Hog's Head Inn. But instead of leading him to the front door, they crept over to a side window. Following Rosmerta's nod of the head, Charlie peered inside.

"Bloody hell," he groaned. The public room of the Hog's Head was jam-packed with... *children!?* Possibly a hundred of them, all wearing their school uniforms. Groups of them were huddled together, wand tips glowing shakily and illuminating faces looking perfectly terrified. He certainly understood the motivation to remove the underage witches and wizards from harm's way, but... *How did they get here?* he wondered aloud.

"Excellent question, that," Rosmerta retorted. "Let's remember to ask if we ever get them to open the bloody door." While Charlie pushed his magic forward, detecting a strong barrier between him and the occupants within, she informed him, "The entrances are warded and no kid stuff, either, make no mistake. Someone else must be in there with them, but they won't answer the door, no matter what we've tried."

"Can't we just leave them where they are?" Sasha asked, voicing Charlie's own first thoughts, likely also impressed by the strength of the protective spell. "Surely here is safer than in the school."

"Their poor parents are likely worried sick," Rosmerta argued, wringing her hands. "And if... well, if things don't go the way we hope... We can't just leave them here to be held for ransom or... or"

"We need to get them home," Charlie agreed, swiftly coming round to Rosmerta's point of view. Turning to Sasha, he bid him, "See if you can find a way through the wards. We'll try the entrance again."

Sasha nodded curtly. Then, with his wand drawn, he began probing the magical barrier encompassing the building. Meanwhile, Charlie and Rosmerta hustled back around to the front door. She began pounding vigorously on the thick wooden door, shouting, "Children, please! Let me in! I only want to help you!"

Nothing but silence answered them. Rosmerta gave him a pleading look.

"Please open the door," Charlie called out. "We promise we won't hurt you."

Several more minutes of pounding and pleading from both of them produced nothing new. Sasha stepped around the corner then, shaking his head as he approached. "The wards are solid. I could break through, but it will take something very Dark and cause much damage."

"Shit!" Charlie spat, pounding once more on the door in frustration.

"H-how do w-we know you're n-not Death Eaters?" a tiny voice on the other side, almost too quiet to be heard, stammered.

"I swear we're not!" Charlie bellowed.

"Tell 'em you're with the Order," Rosmerta hissed.

"How the hell would they know anything about that?" Charlie hissed back. The entire point of having a secret organization was to keep the bloody thing secret! It went against his natural instinct to state such a claim aloud.

"Just do it!" Rosmerta barked. "We've tried everything else!"

A little hesitant but unable to argue the point, he called out, "I'm a member of the Order of the Phoenix!"

"Prove it," an adult male voice, quavering with either age or fear or possibly both answered him. "Prove you're with the Order."

Charlie took a second to gather himself, then cast another Patronus. He sent the ephemeral little dragon into the pub with a message to deliver. *I am Charlie Weasley, son of Arthur and Molly, a dragon keeper in Romania. My family are members of the Order of the Phoenix, inducted by Albus Dumbledore himself. I vow to do everything in my power to guarantee these children safe passage.*

Charlie felt a shimmery breeze waft over him as the wards fell. The door opened a moment later to reveal a short, rotund, bald man with an enormous moustache who he'd had never seen before. His light eyes were watery and his face rather flushed. "Forgive me, young man," he wheezed, "but are you by any chance related to a Miss Ginevra Weasley?"

"She's my little sister," Charlie replied hoarsely. *Thank God she's safe and sound at Aunt Muriel's rather than stuck here with this great bloody moron!*

"Ah, wonderful! What a lovely girl. A pleasure to make your acquaintance as well, my dear young man. Your distinguished Patronus certainly proclaims your worthiness. If Albus Dumbledore trusted you, rest his soul, then I"

"Horace ruddy Slughorn!" Rosmerta cut him off with a furious screech. "You've known *me* for decades, you great wheezy git! I've been banging my knuckles bloody on this stupid door for nearly an hour. Why didn't you let me in?"

Slughorn swallowed nervously. "One can never be too careful, Madam," he spluttered. "I have been charged with the safety of these students. Why, why, you might've been an enemy using Polyjuice to impersonate someone I knew! Or Imperiused!"

Rosmerta looked like she'd been slapped by his accusations. But Charlie didn't have time to sort out what was undoubtedly a deeper story. Checking his watch 3:30 already! they simply *had* to hurry. Glancing around, taking a quick inventory of the children, he noticed something odd about their uniforms.

"Where are all the Slytherins?" he demanded.

Slughorn swallowed his moustache twitching and looked away guiltily. "Most of them Flooded to their homes. A few of them... oh, dear... a few of them..." He coughed, and Charlie thought he might throttle the old fool if he didn't just say what had happened, already. "Well, they went to join up, I'm afraid," he mumbled quietly.

"You let those children join the Death Eaters?" Rosmerta gasped, horrified.

"You must believe me, I tried to dissuade them!" Slughorn cried.

Bloody fucking hell, Charlie snarled inwardly. "Why didn't you Floo the rest of them home, then?" he spat through clenched teeth.

"I didn't think it was safe," Slughorn wailed.

"It was safe enough for the Slytherins!" Charlie shouted, and Slughorn cringed.

"Please, sir, but Professor Slughorn's right about the Floo not being safe for the rest of us," a young girl decked out in Ravenclaw colors bravely offered up.

"The Ministry's shut down a load of the connections already, and they watch the few that are still open like hellhounds," a tall, spindly Gryffindor boy added. "Slytherin purebloods popping home are no cause for alarm in their eyes. But if they saw all of us streaking through..." He shrugged as if no further explanation was necessary.

"If we can't use the Floo, how the hell are we going to get them home?" Charlie grumbled mostly to himself, thinking aloud. Even assuming the adults present knew where each child lived, they simply didn't have the resources to Apparate each one of them home.

"Perhaps... perhaps we might send owls?" the Ravenclaw girl dared to speak up again.

"Owls?" Slughorn, Rosmerta, Sasha, and Charlie echoed, startled.

"None of them have terribly far to go, and if we used the fastest ones down at the Owl Post Office"

"Their parents could come fetch them," Rosmerta finished the girl's thought.

"Who'll babysit them until that happens?" Sasha asked. Another explosion from the castle rattled the windows of the pub, reminding them of the urgency of their task. "And where will they wait?"

Charlie thought for a moment. "We'll take them to the owl office and let them send the owls. Then we'll take them down to the station it's beyond the Anti-Apparition boundary, and as far away from everything else as they can get. Odds are every parent will have been there before."

Rosmerta nodded in agreement. "I'll arrange for some guards," she offered. "Some of our older volunteers are quicker with their wands than they are on their feet, if you get my meaning."

"A-and me as well," Slughorn stammered. "I feel it is my duty to stay with the children. To make sure they get home safely."

"Rubbish!" Rosmerta snapped. "You're hiding behind them, you old coward! Your place, *Professor* Slughorn, is back in the castle defending the school!"

"Madam!" Slughorn spluttered. "I was charged with the duty of evacuating these children to safety by none other than Minerva McGonagall. I must insist on personally seeing to it that each and every one of these children"

"Are now in the care of responsible adults who will ensure their safety until such time as their parents claim them!" Rosmerta argued, cutting him off. "Time for you to go and fight, Sluggo, old boy!"

"No!" Slughorn whined. "I must insist"

"Enough!" Charlie barked, disgusted by their bickering. He stabbed his wand in Slughorn's direction. "How many children are here?"

Slughorn gulped, eyes focused on the wandpoint brandished in his direction. "Eighty-four."

"You, me, and Sasha will take the students to the owl office," he said, glaring at the old fool. Then Charlie turned to Rosmerta. "Send me five chaperones and anyone who knows anything about the tunnels into Hogwarts." He turned to the children. "Gather your things. We're leaving." When a few of the younger children dithered, looking to their professor for guidance (none of which was forthcoming), Charlie bellowed an impatient, "NOW!" at them.

Five minutes later, with Charlie at point, Slughorn taking center (surrounded by children, interestingly enough) and Sasha at the rear, the students were bustling down the otherwise empty High Street of Hogsmeade. As they neared the owl office building, Charlie walked backwards so as to better address them. "We need to do this as quickly as possible," he lectured them. "Older students and prefects help the younger. Siblings: one owl per family. The fewer owls we send, the faster you all get out of here. Got it?"

Eighty-four wide-eyed, frightened faces nodded at him.

Within the owl office, Charlie was impressed by the students' comportment. All the petty bickering and status-grubbing that usually accompanied adolescent exchanges, all the teary blubbering expected from terrorized children was suspended in favor of diligent cooperation and genuine bravery. The Ravenclaw girl and Gryffindor boy that had spoken up earlier especially seemed to have found their strides, stepping into leadership roles and directing the other children, streamlining the process wherever they could.

"Don't you and Smithers live next door to each other in Swindon?" the girl questioned a little Ravenclaw boy standing beside a Hufflepuff with arms linked, who nodded. "Send one owl to your parents and instruct them to pass the message on to hers." Then she turned to the assembly. "All neighbors send one owl between them with instructions to share the information!"

Even so, it took the better part of an hour to send off fifty-odd owls. In the meantime, Rosmerta was as good as her word. Five elderly yet capable wizards and witches reported for chaperone duty: Pippa Puddifoot of tea house fame and Edeline Threading, longtime seamstress at Gladrags, looked determinedly protective if not ferocious, and the three cleverest tinkers in town Herbert Bangs, Will Dervish, and Albert Argyll all looked flushed with excitement at the prospect of such an adventure. Charlie reviewed with them the strategy, such as it was: protect the students while they waited for their parents to come collect them at the station.

Additionally, Rosmerta had mustered Ambrosius Flume, owner of Honeydukes; Bram Lundy, formerly Zonko's' longest-tenured employee before they'd closed a year ago; and lifelong Hogsmeaders Nairne Baxter and Glenna Muirwish all touted as leading experts on the secret tunnels connecting the village with the castle. Shortly after 4:00 a.m. *Four bloody a.m., already!* the last owl was sent and the group set off toward the station as quickly as they could manage. Along the way, just as Charlie and Sasha began putting their heads together regarding an alternate way into Hogwarts, a gruff voice distracted their attention.

"Look sharp, Phillips," Slughorn snapped at a chubby little firstie who had begun to lag.

"Oi, Slughorn," Charlie barked, suddenly remembering a question he'd been meaning to ask, "Join us over here."

With an oddly timorous manner for a great walrus of a man, Slughorn made his way toward Charlie. He looked monumentally reluctant to leave the company of the children it hadn't escaped Charlie's notice how he tried to look busy amongst them.

"How did you lot get from the castle into the pub?" Charlie demanded in as polite a manner as he could manage.

"Oh, well, yes..." the fat, sweaty man verbally flailed about. "There was a... a room, you see... on the seventh floor. Never seen it before, myself. In all my years as student and professor, I'd never known such a room was there. Quite an amazing thing, that." When he caught Charlie's impatient glower, Slughorn cleared his throat nervously and continued in a more focused manner. "There was a door, and a tunnel led away from it. Nice and level, it was, with proper steps. A little narrow for my tastes, though, I must say."

"And it led to the pub?" Charlie pressed.

"It did. Yes."

"Then we can use it to get back to the castle!" Charlie cheered.

"Oh, well, not precisely," Slughorn hemmed.

"Not precisely?" Sasha growled, glaring at him.

Looking massively uncomfortable once again, Slughorn only hesitated a moment before explaining himself. "Yes, well... some of the more reckless youngsters in my charge insisted on trying to get back into the castle. Only, they couldn't..." Slughorn's voice drifted into silence.

"Why?" Charlie asked through gritted teeth. *If this git did something to lock it up...*

Slughorn gulped. "I don't know why!" he cried. "It's just a painting of a girl now! The doorway, the steps, the tunnel all gone! Disappeared behind us, it did! Just imagine... what if we'd still been in the thing when it happened!"

Charlie nearly saw stars. Fury collided with frustration in a maddening storm. It seemed as though everywhere he turned, some new obstacle rose up in his path. Now that he'd miraculously gathered some semblance of an army, he couldn't even manage to join the fight!

"What about the other passageways?" he barked, turning to the Hogsmeaders in an effort not to blast Slughorn to smithereens.

"The one from Zonko's collapsed in the winter of ninety-two," Bram Lundy reported.

"Of course it did," Charlie snarled.

"I'm afraid we don't have much better news," old Ambrosius Flume added. "The one in my basement's been guarded by Death Eaters for a while now. As was the one that leads into Scrivenshaft's. They cursed mine six ways from Sunday before they left to join the fight at midnight, and I'll bet they've done the same to that one."

"The ones I know about are scattered in the hills beyond here," Nairne Baxter volunteered as Glenna Muirwish nodded. "They're guarded by Dementors."

They'd reached Hogsmeade Station then. As the chaperones took up sentry positions and the children settled themselves along the benches to wait for their parents, Charlie spun on his heels and marched several steps away from the group. "Is there no *fucking* way into the *fucking* castle then?" he fairly screamed, futilely punching the air with his fists, kicking out at nothing for good measure.

"Settle down now, boy!" Mr. Flume scolded him.

"Mind your filthy tongue in front of the wee bairns!" Ms. Muirwish cried, scandalized.

"Why aren't you asking Slughorn to open the gates for you?" Mr. Lundy asked. "He's Head of Slytherin House, after all."

Charlie froze. Slowly, he turned around. His eyes immediately found his portly quarry despite the man's attempt to make himself as small as possible he still looked like a giant among the children.

"You. Are. A. Head?" Charlie asked softly, his voice dripping with fury.

Slughorn didn't deny it. He just gulped. Again.

Forcibly bringing his breathing and rage under control, Charlie walked toward the man with a measured pace. "Please come with me now to the front gates," he said, his voice still retaining a lethal edge despite its lack of volume. "I have a group of people... an *army* waiting to join the battle, but they can't get in."

"B-but... the children need me," Slughorn protested in a tiny voice.

"Not as much as those fighters do!" Mrs. Puddifoot cried, indignant.

"Do your duty, man!" Mr. Argyll prodded him.

"Show some spine, you great prig!" Mr. Baxter chimed in.

"M-Minerva said..." Slughorn blubbered.

Charlie watched Slughorn's face as shame and fear battled with each other within the man. "We can't do it without you, Professor," he pleaded, taking a softer tack in order to promote one over the other. Charlie took his arm and began gently leading him out of the station, away from the safety of the students. "Don't let all this effort go for naught. Help me to deliver these fighters to Minerva. Show her your worth."

"There's no other way?" he murmured, reluctantly allowing himself to be led.

"So many have given so much to get us to this point," Charlie coaxed, picking up their pace toward the castle. Sasha and the local tunnel experts fell into step behind them, sensing what to do without being told. "They all need you right now. All that Dumbledore worked for might be lost without your help. Harry Potter himself is relying on you..."

"Harry? Relying upon me?" Slughorn echoed, a glimmer of interest sparking his eyes. "I tried to help him. Last year... I tried..."

"You're Head of *Slytherin* House, Professor," Charlie bluffed his way through a pep talk, understanding well how much better a motivator was glory compared to anguish or guilt. Now that he'd shamed him away from hiding behind the children, it was time to incite a more positive frame of mind within the man. "Clever and powerful. A recognized expert in your field. How else would you be a distinguished professor at Hogwarts? The very pride of Slytherin?"

The snow job was working; Slughorn's interest was piqued by the flattery. They moved at a decent clip now, coming up onto town. Charlie saw Rosmerta there, standing at

the head of another army of Hogsmeaders and MacFustys ready to join the fight.

"This is your chance to show the world that Slytherin is not just another word for greedy, self-serving bastard," Charlie cooed. "That Salazar's House can be as courageous and selfless as the rest. Use that cunning nature to bring a victory to the side of the Light. Be a rescuing hero, delivering all these reinforcements at the moment when they're needed most..."

Looking slightly mesmerized by what were no doubt delusions of heroic grandeur in his own mind, Slughorn nodded slightly. Rosmerta and her group fell in behind them. Charlie's arm protectively, leadingly linked with Slughorn's in a pretense of solidarity, they all marched quickly toward the gates.

The water of the lake was still as glass. Across it, the Forbidden Forest loomed blacker than the still-night sky. It suddenly dawned on Charlie that the noises of battle the booms of explosions and flashes of light that had permeated the night since he'd arrived in Hogsmeade had gone silent. Fear gripped him. *Please, God, don't let us be too late.*

They turned a corner in the road skirting the lake, and the gates loomed large up ahead. A group of people much larger than the fifty-two Romanians and twenty-five Welshmen he'd sent off to fight nearly three hours ago milled about in the road before the gates. Skender jogged forward to meet him on the road. "Please tell me you've brought a key," he called out in Romanian. "We didn't come here for pitch-side seats, you know."

"I might just have found a key, at that," Charlie answered in Romanian so Slughorn wouldn't understand him. "What's going on?"

Skender shrugged. "Been a bit noisy, but it all went quiet a little while ago. Haven't seen a soul human or creature on the other side of these bloody gates, and they're locked tighter than a virgin's knees. We've been trying everything we can think of to get in, but no luck."

Charlie also wondered what the silence signified, but now, so close to his goal, he pushed the thoughts away. They'd find out soon enough, with any luck. "Who are all these people?" Charlie asked as they closed the last few yards remaining between them and the gates.

"Parents of some kids still inside," Skender explained. "Older siblings, aunts, uncles. A few of them were already here when we arrived. The rest have showed up since as word of the attack spread."

Charlie looked around them. All told, considering his Romanian contingent, *Ddraig Cymry*, Clan MacFusty, the Hogsmeaders, and now the Hogwarts' students' families, they'd amassed more than two hundred people.

"Here's my army, just as I promised," Charlie purred temptingly in Slughorn's ear, switching back to English. The professor's eyes sparkled keenly, a marvelous, tempted smile pricking his mouth. "We'll join our forces together. You and I will lead them all to a glorious welcome. They'll sing your praises for a generation... but we've got to hurry."

"They need us," Slughorn murmured under his breath, staring at the closed gates before them. "The Army of the Light they need me."

"Open the gates, Professor," Charlie urged him.

Slughorn nodded, then drew his wand. An anticipatory hush fell upon the assembly as the professor approached the imposing wrought iron gates. He began chanting and waving his wand in a complex choreography.

Come on! Come on! Nearly there! Charlie imagined the winged boars atop the gates were shivering with the same adrenalized excitement he felt.

Several moments later, Slughorn fell silent and, looking as though he simply didn't know what else to do, laid his hand on the gates and mumbled, "Please, please open." A metallic groan, the sound of gears clicking, and an unearthly rush of wind filled the air in response. Then, the gates swung inward.

A moment of silent astonishment was followed by a great cheer. Then, at the head of the mighty Army of the Light, Charlie Weasley and Horace Slughorn dashed through the gates toward the castle. Nothing stood between Charlie and his family any longer.

Hang on! I'm coming!

1. Benaig = "Chief" or "Boss" in Welsh, as per an online translation site. Intended here to be the official title of the Head Keeper.

Author's note: Regarding the Battle of Hogwarts per canon, Horace Slughorn is last seen when he is dismissed by McGonagall on page 602 (US Hardcover edition of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows"), chapter 30, charged with gathering the Slytherin students and bringing them to the Great Hall. The students arrive there (and Pansy shows her true colors) but Slughorn is not specifically mentioned again until page 734, chapter 36, when he reappears alongside Charlie Weasley (who hasn't been mentioned since standing up for Bill at the wedding in Chapter 8) leading a large group of reinforcements into the castle (as quoted at the head of this posting) just before "dead" Harry leaps up and duels Voldie for the final time. This little chapter was my guess as to how Charlie managed to muster up all those folks, and why the heck it took him so long to show up.

Approximately half the named Hogsmeaders are mine, the rest (with a bit of tweaking on my part) belong to JKR.

P.S. I can't tell you how many times I accidentally typed "Slugworth" instead of "Slughorn." Ha!

7-May-98

Chapter 16 of 28

It's surprising what you can learn from a baby sister.

Chapter 16

May 7, 1998

* * *

The dead lay in a row in the middle of the Hall. ...Harry had a clear view of the bodies lying next to Fred: Remus and Tonks, pale and still and peaceful-looking...
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Chapter 33

* * *

Charlie sat in the Burrow's kitchen on a sunny, blustery afternoon in early May, watching his mother cook. Her bustling, efficient busyness echoed the energetic thrashing of the laundry hung on the line but in a more tempered way. The clothing snapped in a random, chaotic manner, at the mercy of the wind, whereas Molly harnessed her energy, putting it to work for her in a measured, more even rhythm. She darted to and fro, but always with purpose. Knives chopped, whisks stirred, pots simmered, and kettles boiled under her supervision. Dough rose and was pounded flat. Pies and loaves were set in the oven, baked, then removed, only to be replaced by the next tin or tray full of raw sustenance.

It had been four days since she'd left the kitchen for more than a few hours at a stretch, just long enough to take a little kip. As a result, there were piles of food everywhere in the kitchen: meat pies and roasts and stews and scones and jams and six kinds of potatoes and ten varieties of biscuits. Anyone who passed through the room risked getting an overloaded plate foisted upon them, and if they didn't accept a gentle invitation to sit and fill their bellies, they eventually succumbed to a tongue-lashing for neglecting their health so wantonly.

And still, Molly cooked more. She sent her husband and sons delivering it to other grieving families all over Britain. Charlie reckoned he'd Flooed the length and breadth of the realm over the past three days with armloads of ham and mutton feasts met by astonished survivors. She thanked Clan MacFusty with enough Lancashire hotpot to feed a Hebridean Black, and *Ddraig Cymry* was showered with her gratitude in the form of a deluge of Dublin coddle. Hogwarts staff members were each gifted with huge Battenbergs in their respective House colors. Mrs. Puddifoot and Madam Rosmerta were now in possession of enough crumpets, madeleines, and Victoria sponges to serve the entirety of Hogsmeade a high tea they'd not soon forget.

Molly had most recently focused her efforts on singlehandedly feeding the entire Ministry (skeletal organization as it was at the moment). Kingsley, Arthur, and a handful of trusted Aurors were beginning to tackle the mess left behind in the vacuum of power now that You-Know-Who and his lackeys had been toppled. Twice a day at elevenses and tea all available Weasleys were summoned to the Burrow's kitchen to collect hampers of cakes and scones or sandwiches and pasties and little crocks of baked beans, then sent off to roam the corridors of the Ministry, shoving it onto whoever could be found and made to eat.

Absently, Charlie wondered what she was conjuring all the extra crockery out of, for none of it looked familiar, nor had a single item been returned to the house. It occurred to him that every pebble and stick within *Accio* range had probably been summoned to the back door and transfigured into plates and spoons. The thought of all those bits of servingware eventually reverting back into heaps of stones and twigs in the Ministry offices made him smile a little.

It didn't take a genius to understand what was going on: Molly was exhibiting classic avoidance behavior. By throwing all her energy into the production of food a creative activity to counteract the destructive recent history she managed to hold her crushing grief at bay. She eased her own pain by attempting to ease that of others in a manner at which she excelled. *And who could blame Mum for trying to forget the load of shite all around us right now?* Charlie argued with himself. *Better to see her baking biscuits than crying her eyes out.*

Molly began assembling a tray full of tempting little treats: bite-size pastries and little sandwiches all cleverly designed to maximize caloric intake while minimizing the effort required to consume it. "This morning's tray hardly picked at," she mumbled to herself worriedly. "Got to keep her energy up for the baby."

The baby. Charlie puzzled again about the surprising news he'd gotten two days ago: he was due to become an uncle this autumn. According to the story he'd sussed out of his father, George had secretly married the little Muggle woman he'd brought to Bill's wedding, and they were expecting now. The situation truly boggled the mind; of all his brothers, he wouldn't ever have bet on George becoming a father first.

After all that trouble at Bill's wedding... After months of government-sponsored Muggle torture and blood-cleansing campaigns... How could they have been so reckless? To take a risk like that in the middle of a bloody war...

"What were they thinking?" he murmured under his breath.

"What was that, dear?" Molly asked.

"Nothing, Mum," Charlie replied, unwilling to broach the topic and risk the possibility of upsetting her. He couldn't exactly say what he was thinking *What if something had happened to George and Annie like it did to Tonks and Lupin? Their poor baby's only a few weeks old and an orphan already. At least Bill had sense enough to avoid that mess.*

"Oh, fiddle. You said something. Now what was it?"

Charlie reckoned his mother didn't sound particularly out of sorts. In fact, she sounded like perhaps she might like a spot of conversation. It was certainly plausible she'd been a bit lonely for company while she worked in the kitchen, mostly alone.

"It just seems a little... reckless of them, don't you think?"

"Reckless of who to do what, love?" Molly asked patiently, setting a teapot to steep.

"George and Annie, Mum," Charlie said a little sheepishly. "Getting married and having a baby like nothing else was going on. Doesn't it strike you as a little... irresponsible... considering?"

Molly paused, a thoughtful, sad look on her face. Then she gave a little snort. "You know, Fred thought the same thing. They had quite a row about it, him and George. But he came around eventually, and they were all friends again before..." She let the rest of the sentence drop.

Ah, shit, Charlie groaned to himself. He hadn't wanted to bring Fred to mind for her. "Sorry, Mum."

"Don't be sorry, Charlie. We don't have to agree on everything," she said, mistaking (or possibly deliberately misinterpreting) his comment. "And it's a good thing, too, considering none of you would exist if your father and I hadn't been just as reckless and irresponsible during the other war." She surprised him by managing a mildly impish wink.

"Good point," he conceded weakly, not at all sure he agreed.

"Trust me, there's never a perfect time to fall in love or have a baby," Molly continued. "There're always ten reasons to wait, and another ten why it's too late to start. But you can't let the rest of the world dictate those decisions for you. You marry whom you love. You start a family borne of that love. Some matters are better left up to the heart than the mind, dear."

Charlie thought about his mother's argument. She was certainly right about the falling in love bit: he could personally testify to the inconvenience of timing and individual selection. Before he'd met Sasha, he'd never in a million years have predicted that he'd meet the love of his life on a Romanian mountaintop at the age of nineteen. Or that it'd be a bloke. And it had taken a while for his mind to really hear what his heart had been telling him all along: he loved Sasha, body and soul.

When he didn't say anything, Molly patted his hand. "You'll understand some day, Charlie. Some girl will catch your heart, and you'll know just what I'm talking about."

And just like that, his thoughts skidded to a standstill. His mother smiled at him so knowingly, so lovingly, so wrong-headedly. The moment hung between them, and Charlie

balanced on the razor's edge. *Tell her now, this instant. Tell her you're gay. Tell her you love Sasha* But his mouth refused to move, burdened with the mountain of grief and stress of the final battle and their family's loss.

Molly sighed and looked away, and the moment was gone. With a flick of her wand, she began organizing two new plates full of food. "The baby will bring them both round soon. I just know it." She sounded so desperately hopeful, so intent on converting her wish into fact by saying it aloud often enough and with sufficient confidence.

His mother collected the tray in her hands, then nodded with her chin toward the now heaping plates coming to rest on the table before him. "Do me a favor and take one of those out to Ginny while I deliver this upstairs. That's a good boy, Charlie." And with that, she swept out of the kitchen.

Charlie dutifully set out across the back garden leading two levitating plates of sandwiches. As a particularly strong gust of wind buffeted him, he wondered once again how much longer he would be required to stay at the Burrow for propriety's sake. Sasha returned to Romania along with all the other keepers the day after the battle how he wished he was home with him now! Instead, he was stuck in the Burrow with Percy, Ron, and Ginny, who did little besides lazing around all day until bidden to do some trivial task (primarily delivering food or eating it) by their mother.

But as much as their sloth and self-indulgence irritated Charlie, much worse were the depressing glimpses of George and his wife. On the three occasions he'd run into one or the other of them on their way to the loo, the hollow, haggard look in their eyes had given him chills. And then there were the agonized screams at any time of day or night, whenever George had another nightmare. It wasn't so much that Charlie begrudged them their grief he just didn't want to see or hear it anymore. Bill was so lucky he had Shell Cottage to escape to!

He paused for a moment when, in the distance, he caught sight of the fresh mound of dirt and gleaming white headstone that marked Fred's grave in the family plot, only four days old. Unable to fight off the recollection, the memories rushed back to mind.

The family had purposefully kept Fred's service small there were far too many bodies to bury at once for any sort of proper occasion to be planned. Even so, George and his wife hung back several paces behind everyone else, clinging to each other, refusing to look anyone in the eye. They hadn't spoken a word, nor wept, either they just shuddered, huddling together looking shell-shocked. When the ceremony was over and Charlie finally turned to leave, the two of them were already well on their way back to the house. He'd watched as George staggered, and Annie caught him every time, unsure whether his wife was driving or hauling him back to the Burrow.

As painful as Charlie's own grief was over losing his brother, as heart-wrenching as it was to witness his parents' agony upon burying their child, the horrible empty, haunted look in George's eyes was more gutting than all the rest. Unlike Fedir, he wasn't even trying to work through it, much less hold himself together almost like he'd just given himself up for dead as well.

Charlie bodily shook off the gloomy thoughts and started walking again, picking up the pace this time, eager to put some distance between him and the awful memories.

The day after Fred's burial, as their mother persisted in pouring her grief into her cooking and their father responded to Kingsley's call to help reform the Ministry, Charlie, Bill, and Fleur had attended Tonks' and Lupin's joint funeral as representatives of the Weasley family as well as the Order. It, too, had been sparsely attended. Lupin had no one left to mourn him, and not a single Black relative had bothered showing up Charlie reasoned that if they'd somehow miraculously changed their minds about blood traitors upon the outcome of the war, they likely still didn't feel safe enough to show their faces in public. A few Aurors were there to pay their respects to a fellow fallen agent; that was it. Poor Andromeda Tonks, no young thing herself, had resolutely stood throughout the service while holding her infant grandson, who obliviously slept through the entire thing.

Tonks' baby barely a month old, at most. He'll never know his mum, never remember her outside of other people's stories and a few snaps.

Charlie was relieved to find Ginny lying on a blanket by the frog pond, sunning herself. Such a bright and cheery scene, so peaceful and beautiful, helped to dispel the dark thoughts that had been plaguing him along his walk. He plopped down ungracefully next to her and directed the plates to settle in their laps.

"Ugh," Ginny groaned half-heartedly before taking a bite. "Is Mum trying to fatten us all up?"

"You could stand a little more meat on your bones, squirt," Charlie teased her. Though the sentiment was no joke none of the adorable pudginess he remembered of her girlhood lingered on his little sister's frame, replaced now by a womanly yet wiry figure.

Ginny smirked. "Thank Merlin I'm not as fat as Annie," she joked morbidly.

Some of the gloom began to drift back into his mood to be reminded of his conversation with their mum. "You'd better not have her valid excuse for packing on the pounds," Charlie warned her, matching her morbid tone.

Ginny proceeded to stick her tongue out at him. "Mum says she's too big for as far along as she's supposed to be. She says it's twins. Most likely because she doesn't want to think George knocked her up before they got married." Then she took another bite of sandwich.

"What does it matter either way?" Charlie insisted, a little shocked to hear such things from his baby sister. "They're married now."

"That they are," Ginny agreed.

After Charlie chewed a bite of his own sandwich, he asked, "You really think they *had* to get married?"

Ginny smiled smugly, pleased to discover she was better informed about the situation than her elder brother. "Not a chance. Annie's got a bit of a chip on her shoulder about that." After a quiet moment of consideration, she added, "George is mad for her, anyway. Come hell or high water, they'd've ended up together."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, eating their sandwiches and gazing out across the frog pond. Charlie thought again about Sasha, how they'd gone through a period of infatuation early on in their relationship. He remembered those long days of working apart, only to rush back to the hut, so eager to spend the night together. How it had practically been impossible to be in the same room without touching each other, kissing each other.

It was different between them now, of course. At first he'd mistakenly lamented the passion had waned, that the fire had cooled and feared it would eventually die out. Later, he realized the heat had instead transformed into something substantive and enduring: love.

"She's really nice, you know. Before" Ginny paused, unwilling or unable to directly refer to the tragedy yet "she was loads of fun to be around. Always having a laugh, giving as good as she got. They both were."

Charlie nodded in acknowledgement. He'd never really met Annie; George hadn't gotten around to introducing them at Bill's wedding an understandable oversight, considering they'd been ambushed by Death Eaters before the night was out. But the rest of the family had echoed similar sentiments: Annie had the same sense of humor and generally anti-serious worldview that the twins shared. Or had shared.

"Speaking of sisters-in-law..." Charlie prompted.

Ginny wrinkled her nose. "Do we have to?"

Charlie chuckled. "I see your affection for Fleur hasn't wavered."

"I honestly don't understand what Bill sees in her!" Ginny exclaimed with surprising ferocity.

"She's beautiful," Charlie pointed out helpfully. *And young. And veela...*

"And snobby and critical and a general all-around bitch," Ginny sneered. "Bill is too good for her! He's nothing but kind and clever... How did he ever come to think he loved her?" After a very pregnant pause, she added softly, earnestly, "You think... you think she's got him in some sort of Thrall?"

Only the same Thrall that every attractive woman holds over a straight man Charlie thought. Ginny's confusion sounded suspiciously like a case of elder brother idolization. And while Fleur surely had her faults, her loyalty and bravery ought to count for something, too. She'd been in the thick of the battle at Hogwarts and comported herself courageously and capably. "Bill is as human as the rest of us," he reminded her gently. "He's got his faults, you know."

Charlie was answered by a skeptical look from Ginny that said, *If you say so.*

"What are your plans for the rest of the day, oh Princess of the Frog Spawn?" he teased her softly.

A fond smile broke over her face, and she weakly punched his arm. "Luna Lovegood's invited Neville Longbottom and me for dinner tonight. It's been ages since the three of us've gotten together. I just hope we can talk about something other than war stories."

"Neville Longbottom? Why does that name sound familiar?" Charlie wondered aloud.

"Because he's a hero," Ginny replied, her tone half-teasing, half-serious. "He's only the bloke who whacked off the head of that nasty snake that bit Dad."

"He's a friend of yours?" Charlie asked, his eyebrows lifting in surprise. Along with the rest of Wizarding Britain, he'd read the preliminary accounts about the young man brandishing the Sword of Gryffindor, pulled quite astoundingly from the Sorting Hat in the heat of battle, and killing You-Know-Who's familiar (which had also been a living Horcrux, interestingly enough).

"A very dear friend," Ginny answered, soft and serious. "When I first met him, everyone in school thought he was nothing more than a bumbling tosspot, myself included. But I soon learned Neville's got the most loyal heart of anyone on the planet. And it's amazing the kind of courage that comes from his sort of loyalty. When I think of all he did for the cause, standing up to Snape and the Carrows last year..."

Charlie was pleased and impressed by her astute observation about looking beyond first impressions of people, but her tone also piqued his curiosity. Just what had gone on at Hogwarts last year? "So, this Neville bloke... did you and he ever...?"

Ginny smirked. "Not hardly!" she snorted. Then, after a thoughtful pause, she added, "Don't get me wrong Neville's a dear, and I love him to death. Whoever he winds up with is one hell of a lucky bint. But... he's not who I belong with."

"It's still Harry, then?" Charlie ventured his best guess.

Ginny sighed and nodded, gazing out across the pond.

"So... what are you doing here? Why aren't you with him?" Nobody'd heard much of anything from Harry Potter since the battle. Rumors abounded regarding his whereabouts, but no public appearances had been made nor statements issued. In the face of the spotlight, under the weight of the adulation of Wizarding Britain, Harry had gone to ground. But Charlie reckoned that if anyone knew where the boy hero might be, it would be Ron.

Ginny scowled. "We broke up, don't you remember? Or, I should say, he dumped me."

Charlie quirked a scolding eyebrow at her petulance. "According to my sources, the split was not due to lack of affection."

"Your sources are accurate," she snapped bitingly. "He loved me so much he couldn't bear to risk me."

"Has something happened to make you question his sincerity?" Charlie pressed, puzzled by her bitter tone. He supposed it was possible Harry'd had a change of heart over the past few months. Had Ron informed her of such?

Ginny ground her jaw a few moments, possibly working to bring her legendary and somewhat Molly-esque temper under control. When she did finally speak, her tone was less acidic, though still indignant. "Even though I understand his motivation, I'm still quite angry about how he left me behind. He took Ron and Hermione with him they were too important to be kept safe, obviously but not me."

Ginny twisted around to face him, and her fists clenched. "I could've helped, too!" she cried. "I know a thing or three about You-Know-Who! But he never remembers that. He never thinks of me as an equal, no matter what I do to try and prove otherwise."

Charlie heard her hurt, loud and clear. "You could argue it proves how much he loved you, sacrificing his happiness in order to protect you. He knew you'd be safer away from him," he offered.

"Hogwarts hardly proved itself a haven last year," she sneered.

"He didn't know that," he argued. *Though he probably should have predicted it* Charlie mused to himself.

"Perhaps," Ginny conceded. "But when the going got tough, George didn't dump Annie. They fought against it together."

"Some might say that makes George the weaker man," Charlie argued, playing devil's advocate, for he wasn't convinced either fellow had made a wrong choice, just a different one. "The more selfish for risking Annie's safety."

But Ginny was having none of it. "You might just as easily argue it means their love is stronger than Harry's and mine. They stayed together through it all, weathering everything the world had to throw at them."

And they're together still, mucking through this latest round of shit. Charlie found himself inclined to agree with her. He could've insisted Sasha stay safely in Romania while he left to fight in the battle, but he hadn't. Truth was, he felt so much stronger with Sasha by his side, even in spite of his worry about him.

"What are you going to do about Harry, then?" he asked.

Ginny winced. "Nothing much, for the time being."

"Where is he, anyway?" Charlie asked, fishing.

Ginny dropped her eyes, and he knew he'd only be getting a half-truth from her at best. "If I know him, he's holed up somewhere Unplottable and inaccessible to anyone else, hiding from the world while he licks his wounds. He's got a lot to sort out, but he's not one to do so publically."

"Sounds like he could use a friend. Someone who knows him really well..." he suggested leadingly.

Ginny picked up on it and smirked. "Trust me, he's the kind of guy who insists on working it all out on his own," she said somewhat exasperatedly. "Asking for help *publically* isn't his forte." She squinted, looking out across the pond again before continuing in a tender tone. "No, he'll wallow and fester for a while in all that guilt and regret because he never lives up to his own inhuman expectations blaming himself for absolutely everything that went wrong. He'll work himself into a nice funk of self-pity. Eventually one of us will go round and kick his arse out of it."

"Meaning you?" Charlie chuckled.

Sullen, she muttered an obstinate, "We'll see."

Charlie expressed his disbelief with his eyebrows.

Ginny began picking at a loose quilting thread on the blanket. "I admit that part of me quite delights in his misery after what he put me through," she uttered a little reluctantly. "I was worried sick about him for nearly a year, not a bloody owl the whole time," she added, her umbrage rising. "I watched him fake his own death, for Merlin's sake!" she finally spat, fully furious. "Laying there at that monster's feet! Not a word of warning!"

Charlie pretended not to notice her wiping a traitorous tear from her cheek, or the loud sniff that followed. He looked away, feigning interest in some cattails waving in the wind, and gave her a moment to collect herself.

"But you've already forgiven him," he said once she'd calmed down.

Ginny blinked once, then sighed and nodded, caught bang to rights. "When he finally gets round to stewing about me... And it'll take a while before he gets to that point I know where I rank in his priorities... Knowing him, he'll tell himself I've moved on. Or convince himself he's not worthy of me because of all his faults and mistakes, never mind my own overabundance of the same."

"Then why not march over to wherever he is and set him straight?" Charlie urged her, disapproving of her bitter tone. "Save yourselves both a load of heartache?"

But Ginny just shook her head. "If I've learned anything over the past seven years, it's that Harry's got a process. His own way of dealing with things. Merlin knows I wish it wasn't so, but he can't be rushed. He'll get there in his own time."

Feeling sorry for the romantic tribulations of his baby sister, Charlie threw a supportive arm around her shoulders and gave her a sideways hug. Ginny gave him a flash of a grateful smile, then slid her own slender arms around his waist, resting her head against his shoulder.

"And when he does, I'll be there waiting for him," she added with a soft sigh.

October 29, 1998

Chapter 17 of 28

Ron gets a chance to speak his mind.

Author's note: I solemnly swear I am not intentionally being a pretentious prat by citing my own previous work here and in the coming chapters. I'm merely trying to set Charlie's story within a framework of my other story (like I did with canon up to this point) for the convenience of those who've read it. This *is* technically a spin-off, remember.

Chapter 17

October 29, 1998

* * *

"For the first time in ages so long ago no one could actually remember when it happened last the entire Weasley family would be assembled under the roof of the Burrow to celebrate Molly's birthday. Everyone, that is, except for the one they had lost, who would never again join them for any reason." George & Annie: *An Unofficial Biography, Chapter 42*

* * *

Charlie arrived in London Central Portkey Authority Station at midday on the day before his mother's birthday. The façade of the building at least, ever since the Secrecy Statute came into force in 1692 was enchanted to look like a rundown, abandoned factory of sorts. Every half-century or so, its appearance would be surreptitiously tweaked so as to resemble whatever design aesthetic was regarded as nondescriptly tasteless by the non-magical neighbors. Not that it was terribly necessary the Muggle-Repelling Charms associated with the building were so strong that no one who worked at the LCPA could remember the last time a Muggle pedestrian had wandered by. Behind the dilapidated mask, however, was hidden one of Christopher Wren's final and some argued most masterful Baroque works. Gracefully soaring arches swept alongside a vaulted central dome featuring a rather boisterous fresco depiction of a particularly pitched battle between Goblin rebels and heroic (perhaps exaggeratedly so) wizards in The Defense of Hogsmeade, 1612.

As other travelers were met by their British escorts, many clad in Ministry robes, on their way to points beyond, Charlie strode purposefully along the highly polished black-and-white checkerboard marble tiles on the floor toward the Apparition Departure Lounge, his bag slung over his shoulder, passing in and out of dramatically illuminated patches of sunlit floor. Before he'd taken the job in Romania, he'd never set foot inside the LCPA. But ever since, like virtually every other international visitor to Wizarding Britain, he'd passed through it on all but one of his ventures back to England the last one being something of an emergency visit and serving as the exception to the rule. But Charlie mentally shook his head to clear away any further thoughts about that depressing memory, determined not to arrive at the Burrow with any pre-assumed gloominess.

This time, unlike the previous ones, he planned to stay only two nights, promptly returning to Romania on Halloween. His boss, Ghenadie, was being more than accommodating by allowing him this extra time away in the first place, considering he'd unexpectedly begged off a full week after the battle. He'd stayed long enough then to convince himself there wasn't a damn thing more he could do to help the situation any further. Charging Ron and Percy to keep a proper eye on the situation and notify him or Bill immediately should anything take a turn for the worse, he left his superficially-functional-yet-emotional-wreck of a family in the hands of time or whatever Supreme Being might give a shit.

But here he was back again, ostensibly to celebrate his mother's forty-eighth birthday on the morrow. This particular anniversary held no special significance other than the fact that his family seemed to be really counting on his participation as well as at Christmas to come (Percy'd dropped that lovely little Dungbomb of a mandatory invitation in his most recent letter, the sanctimonious twit). He supposed these forced attempts at family celebrations were one of those "stages of grief" he'd overheard Ginny's friend, Hermione, yammering about last time he was home.

The LCPA Departure Lounge was a long, slender room whose walls were lined with what some Muggles might mistake for roofless confessionals, or possibly very ornate voting booths. At the furthest end of the hall, a large and, in Charlie's opinion, singularly ugly bust of Mumpsimus Pettifogger (some old arsehole of a Minister who'd

managed to avoid a conviction of embezzlement by the skin of his teeth, if memory served) sneered condescendingly at them from atop his pedestal. The statue seemed out of place in such an otherwise beautiful building. Charlie entered an empty Apparition stall, adjusted the balance of his pack, fixed the back garden of the Burrow in his mind, and vanished.

The late October day in Devon was chilly and damp when he arrived, albeit a good bit warmer than the Romanian mountaintop he'd left behind. Unwilling to get any wetter than absolutely necessary, Charlie jogged the few yards separating him from the rear kitchen door. He stomped and scraped his boots on the welcome mat for a moment, then pushed on through the door, calling out a hello.

But instead of his mother's welcome of a firm hug and peck on the cheek, a garbled shriek startled him. He jerked to find a wide-eyed, enormously pregnant woman standing alone in the kitchen, brandishing a knife in his direction. Taking an instant to glance around and confirm he was indeed in his childhood home it wouldn't be the first time he'd bollixed up an Apparition destination he reflexively palmed his wand, going over his options. *Disarm, Obliviate, then Apparate the hell out of here.*

Less than a moment later, the stranger dropped the knife to her side and clutched at her heart. "Oh, God, sorry!" she stammered, breathing a little quickly in her fright. "You must be Charlie."

Understanding dawned on him. "And you're Annie?" he said, sheathing his wand up his sleeve once more. He marveled at the difference in George's wife since he'd last glimpsed her nearly six months ago: she looked miles more cheery, thank Merlin though perhaps with just a hint of a lingering sadness haunting her otherwise remarkable violet eyes and her body was swollen like an *Engorgio* gone amok. A diminutive person to begin with, Charlie wondered how she managed to remain upright and not pitch forward.

She noticed him staring and smirked. "I'm not usually this fat."

Charlie felt a blush creep up his neck into his cheeks, and he lifted his eyes from her unnaturally distended belly to meet her gaze. "And I'm not usually this rude. Sorry, you're just... so..." He cringed then, baffled as to why his foot was so intent on shoving itself into his mouth at the moment.

"Whale-ish? Yeah, I've noticed," she giggled and what a warm, reassuring sound it was. "I keep telling George I'm now the second woman he's made miserable via pregnancy. First, your mum had the dubious distinction of gestating the git, and now me, stuffed to bursting with his progeny. How your poor mother went through this with three young boys on the loose already, *then* went on to have two more children, I'll never know."

Charlie chuckled along with her. "Are you saying she's a bit touched, our Mum?" he asked, feigning indignation.

"My working theory is she's masochistic," Annie whispered conspiratorially. "A real glutton for punishment."

"How d'you figure?" Charlie asked, smiling. "In my experience, Mum was usually the one doling out the punishment rather than being on the receiving end."

Annie snorted. "And living at the mercy of you lot a great platoon of willfully uncivilized ginger boys wasn't punishment enough? Your mother has a get-into-heaven-free card, in my opinion."

Charlie laughed out loud, deciding the rest of the family was right: Annie was a pisser. "Saint Molly of Devon, patron of nagging and hovering. Sounds about right."

"Or maybe she's working through some serious karma from a past life," Annie offered, grimacing theatrically. "Like she wore the pelts of baby animals for clothing or invented pantyhose or something."

"Me and my siblings are divine retribution for sins against mankind?" Charlie quipped, warming to the banter. "Interesting theory? and yet profoundly insulting at the same time. Well done, you."

Just then, Annie winced and gasped, clutching her belly. "Oof this one's a ninja already."

"Sorry I gave you a fright," he said, suddenly realizing such a thing was probably not beneficial to her condition. He lobbed his pack toward the staircase, whereupon he sent it zooming upward toward his usual room, and gave her the once-over, checking for any signs of real distress.

Annie's eyes widened slightly at the sight, then she turned around to resume her sandwich assembly he'd interrupted. "No apology necessary. This is your home I'm the stranger here," she insisted.

Charlie took a seat at the table, a little confused by her reaction. Fred had told him she was a Muggle, but surely she'd seen loads of magic since living in the Burrow these past months? *I mean, her own husband's a wizard! It can't be that rare an occurrence, can it?*

Right on cue by which Charlie meant several minutes too late Ron came thundering down the stairs, calling out, "Everything all right, Annie? Did I hear you scream just now?"

"Just fine, Ron," she hollered back, a fond smile on her lips. "Don't bother on my account!"

Striding into the kitchen anyway on alarmingly long legs, Ron gushed with relief. "Ah, good. Didn't fancy having my stuffing rearranged by everyone if anything happened on my watch."

Annie rolled her eyes at the implication she needed minding. Or maybe it was the insinuation that Ron was the man for the job that miffed her.

"Well, seeing as I'm all the way down here, might as well top off the old tank," Ron hinted, patting his stomach and eyeing the sandwich makings with delight.

"Your watch, eh?" Charlie scolded him, causing Ron to spin around in astonishment. "Which you were sleeping through, no doubt."

"Charlie!" he exclaimed in happy surprise, greeting him warmly with a sideways hug and enthusiastic clap on the back. Now several inches taller than his older brother, he looked down into Charlie's face wearing an irritatingly smug smile.

"Have a seat, you two. These are just about finished."

Annie waddled over to the cupboard and stretched up on her toes to reach some plates. Just as Charlie was about to offer to fetch them for her, a stack of three began levitating off the shelf, then floated down to the counter next to the sandwiches. Annie watched the moving plates with a carefully blank expression, her arms folded across her chest. Then, glancing over her shoulder in the general direction of the table, she muttered, "Thanks."

Interesting, Charlie mused. *She didn't ask for help, and when Ron did it anyway, it irked her.* He wondered if it was a matter of pride or jealousy on her part and continued to ponder this aspect of wizard-Muggle relations while the three of them fell to eating the sandwiches. He and Ron sat at the table, but Annie stood leaning against the counter, insisting sitting was more uncomfortable on her back.

"Is there any tea?" Ron asked. Or, at least, this is what Charlie assumed he'd said around a mouthful of food. The utterance admittedly sounded more like, "Fiss-air n-nee dee?" and was accompanied by a rain of crumbs.

Annie's mouth wore a little quirk of resignation. "There will be once you hocus on the cooker for me."

Charlie kicked his monumentally insensitive little brother under the table. "Make it yourself, you lazy little shit!" he chided him, scandalized. Before that moment, he hadn't

quite realized how helpless Annie might feel in the house, unable to operate any of the magical appliances. *Merlin, how does she stand it? Forced to rely on others to do absolutely everything...*

To his credit, Ron slunk shamefacedly off the bench. "Sorry, Annie. Didn't mean to imply you ought to make it for us. Thought maybe Mum left a cold pot around somewhere."

But Annie only chuckled, waving Ron off and bestowing the same patient smile upon him their mother often did. "No, really, I'll do it." Then, to Charlie, she said, "You must not've ever sampled the muck Ron attempts to pass off as tea."

Ron laughed jovially. "I can at least sort out the hot water," he said as he filled the kettle from the tap, then turned on the stove. Once the kettle was ensconced upon the heat, Ron began assembling another sandwich for himself. "Oh, Charlie," he said over his shoulder, "remind me to give you your medal before you leave. It's up in my room."

"Never mind," Charlie grumbled. *If I'd wanted the damn Order of Merlin, I'd've come back for the ceremony* What the hell use did he have for a bloody medal that would only serve to remind him of the worst day of his life? "You keep it."

Ron snorted, sharing a similar disdain for such pomp. "Got one of my own, thanks," he said. "Still, there's one good thing about it: Percy's sore that he's the only one in the family now without one," he added with a malicious snicker.

Charlie couldn't help but join him, knowing Percy had his Head Boy and prefect badges framed and hanging on his office wall at work. It was a sublime bit of poetic justice that Little Mister Rule Minder had no Order of Merlin (any class) to display in pride of place next to them, while his habitually misbehaving brothers and baby sister each had one shut up tight in a drawer, most likely buried beneath underpants and holey socks.

"I suppose I should probably head over to the Hill, then," Ron sighed, putting the finishing touches on his second or was that third? sandwich. "The Taskmaster'll have my hide for being this late as it is."

Annie giggled. "Hang on let me make you some sandwiches to take to him," she offered.

Ron stood by thoughtfully, watching her work. A moment later, he said, "How about I send him back here to you instead? The two of you can enjoy a romantic lunch alone for once." He grinned rather proudly, thinking he'd cleverly disguised switching chaperones as sensitivity.

"I can handle an afternoon on my own, Ron," Annie sighed, seeing right through it. "And anyway, he'll want to stay there, considering he's been waiting two days for those doors to arrive." After a meaningful pause, she added very softly, "You know how he gets."

"I'll come with you, Ron," Charlie offered. As friendly as she seemed, Charlie didn't fancy spending the afternoon with what amounted to a pregnant stranger. And she clearly preferred to be alone.

After taking their leave of Annie, Charlie and Ron set off walking across the meadow toward the subject most often mentioned lately in owls from home. In the middle distance ahead of them, the new house George had spent the past four months constructing rose up out of a low hill. A post-modern assemblage of concrete and glass window walls, it did bring to mind the idea of a mole tunneling out of the ground, just like Ginny'd described in her letter she'd been very pleased they'd chosen the name she'd suggested for it: Mole Hill. It didn't look like any wizard's residence he'd ever seen, but perhaps that was down to the fact he'd not seen one built in this century. Or constructed to accommodate a Muggle.

Charlie speculated on what had inspired George to build a house barely a stone's throw from the Burrow. While he could certainly understand the motivation to move out of his parents' house he'd done the same thing as soon as he was able why on earth had George chosen to remain so close at hand? Was it a sense of duty to their parents? Had the loss of his twin damaged his confidence? War wounds sapped his ambition? Was it instead a sadistic craving to stay in close contact with what had to be terribly painful recollections? Could his Muggle wife be behind the decision somehow?

"What did she mean, 'You know how he gets?'" Charlie asked.

Ron set his jaw. "George's better days are those spent keeping busy."

This, he could understand. *Poor fellow.* "Where's Mum?"

"Visiting Andromeda Tonks, checking in on baby Teddy, I suppose."

The reminder of Tonks' death brought a fresh wave of sadness, and he wondered how her little baby was doing. It was never far from the surface, back here: all the loss and grief. Fred, Tonks, Remus: so many neighbors and friends and family now gone. At least in Romania, he didn't have to face it every day the worst anyone there had brought back from the battle were a few scars. But Charlie was resigned to dive into it now, letting his family vent their feelings if necessary.

"How are you faring, mate?" he asked, resting his hand lightly on the young man's shoulders, steeling himself to commiserate.

But Ron leaped at the opportunity to switch topics. "Excellent! Really bang-on excellent, man. Remember how I wrote you about me and Harry's plans to become Aurors? Well, Kingsley's agreed to waive the NEWT requirements for us. Which means we'll get to start the training next summer!"

"Isn't there still a separate entrance evaluation?" Charlie asked.

"Just a formality, according to Kingsley," Ron said, waving off his concern. "But Hermione's insisting we study for it properly. Merlin, it's just like fifth year all over again with her."

Charlie grinned with wicked glee. "Ah, yes, about that... Ginny tells me things between you and Miss Granger have gotten quite cozy."

To his delight, Ron proceeded to blush furiously. "Ginny ought to keep her mouth shut if she knows what's good for her. People in glass houses and all that."

"That doesn't sound like a denial, bro. In fact, it sounds suspiciously like a confirmation," Charlie needled him.

Ron smiled despite himself. "Yeah, well... Hermione's really... something, isn't she?"

Poor fumbling, tongue-tied Ron, Charlie thought with no small amount of sympathy. His appellation of "something" given to the young woman he'd heard others refer to as "the brightest witch of her age" left a bit to be desired. *Or maybe it's more accurate to award my pity to Hermione for putting up with him* He clucked his tongue scoldingly. "So this is what's come of all that gallivanting about hither and yon last year... with no supervision whatsoever...?"

"It wasn't like that!" Ron protested surprisingly vociferously. "We thought we'd be killed at any moment!" he spluttered.

"Some people would've recognized that as a perfectly opportune moment to make a move, git," Charlie chided him. "Capitalized on the tension, you know. 'This could be our last moment together, my darling...'"

"Yeah, well, I'm not like that," Ron snapped.

"Not observant, you mean? Or completely lacking in the balls to risk it?"

"I wouldn't take advantage of a situation like that!" Ron blustered, his face tomato-red with fury. "And the next arsehole that implies it"

"I know you wouldn't," Charlie cried, chuckling to convey he was backing down. "You're a very decent fellow, Ron. I'm only winding you up. Relax."

After the proper amount of bristling indignation, a slightly guilty smile broke over Ron's expression. "I'm not saying I didn't wish it sometimes," he confessed softly. "That something would've happened between me and her then. Might've made all that stress a little easier to bear."

"More likely it would've made the situation ten times more stressful," Charlie argued. "You were much cleverer to wait. Both of you. Now you know whatever it is you've got between you isn't borne out of desperation."

Ron's agreeing smile was more than a tad rueful. "Funny how all that time, I was alone with my best mate and the girl I wanted more than anything for every hour of the day and night, but I don't think I ever felt more lonely and depressed." He looked up from the ground and out in the distance, squinting slightly in the drizzle. "It was really bloody awful, Charlie," he said so quietly it was practically a whisper. "Sometimes... at night... I dream I'm back there in that wretched tent with that fucking Horcrux around my neck, and I can't breathe. I really think it was trying to kill us. Or maybe just me. It nearly did, I reckon."

Charlie was let off the hook to come up with something to say because they stepped up to the new house's door. It didn't seem to matter to Ron, however, who barged right in without knocking and called out, "Oi, George, I've brought Charlie with me!"

"Welcome to Mole Hill, Charlie!" George called out from upstairs, his voice echoing in the mostly empty great room. He was maneuvering a door onto its hinges a tricky job even when employing magic. "Now wipe your damn feet, both of you," he tossed off over his shoulder.

Charlie looked around, taking in the house. The majority of the interior consisted of the vaulted-ceilinged great room he and Ron were standing in. At the farthest end was a half-finished kitchen lacking fixtures, appliances, or doors for the cupboards. To his right, a row of door-less rooms supported a balcony with a waist-high wall above them, from behind which another row of rooms boasting newly hung doors branched off. At his back, an enormous stone hearth took up the entire wall from floor to ceiling. To his left, the wall consisted of windows that looked out upon the meadow, the Burrow, and the woods beyond. A rich-looking hardwood floor gleamed below.

Charlie was amazed at the quality of materials and level of taste on display. Nothing was ornate or pretentious, but the appointments conveyed a sense of style and class he'd never suspected of his jokester younger brother. Natural stone, wood, glass, and concrete came together to blend into the surrounding Devonshire countryside seamlessly, welcoming a person into the clean, uncluttered comfort of the house. Unlike the lovingly worn and oft-repaired Burrow, there was nothing in George's new place that was patched or recycled or held together with a spell and a prayer. In fact, Charlie sensed no magical fields within the construction whatsoever. *How odd...*

"Where did the money for all this come from?" Charlie hissed under his breath in Ron's direction.

"The Wheezes, bro," Ron replied equally softly. "George is fuckin' loaded."

"There it is!" George cried, a pleased smile on his face as he swung the properly hung door several times. Finally finished with his task, he jogged down the spiral staircase that deposited him on the ground floor near the kitchen.

"Annie sent food," Ron informed him, tossing a trussed-up tea towel full of sandwiches and biscuits at him.

"I'm starving," George groaned. He caught the bundle and immediately tore into it. "Good to see you, Charlie, mate."

"I'm afraid I gave your wife a bit of a fright when I arrived a little while ago," Charlie admitted, accepting a brisk clap on the shoulder from George and offering him one in return.

"I knew I heard something!" Ron laughed.

"This one was supposedly keepin' an eye on her from upstairs in his room," Charlie rattled his little brother out gleefully, pointing an accusing thumb at him.

"No surprises there," George muttered. "He is, quite literally, a complete wanker. *Constantly.*"

"Shut it," Ron grumbled.

"I'm talking all hours of the day and night," George pressed. "I'm amazed his poor little prick hasn't fallen off yet from all the abuse."

"I said shut it!" Ron growled, punching George in the arm.

"Have a look at his palms, Charlie," George chuckled, fending Ron off with a well-directed shove. "The only reason the right one's not completely furry is because all the hair's been worn off."

"You can build your bloody house all by yourself, then," Ron yelled. "I'm not helpin' you any more, you bastard!"

"Oh, no, not that!" George whined dramatically. "Whatever will I do if you stop showing up after noon, once most of the day's work is finished already?"

Ron stomped off in a fit of pique, knocking George with his shoulder as he passed.

"Where are you off to now, Princess?" George called out after him.

"The loo, if it's any of your business," Ron snapped.

"See what I mean?" George laughed, elbowing Charlie and wiggling his eyebrows. *Constantly!*

Ron gave a frustrated growl and slammed the door to the bathroom behind him.

"I suppose I ought to go a little easier on him," George reluctantly admitted once Ron couldn't hear. "He has been a help, really." He set the lunch bundle on the kitchen's quartz countertop and took another bite of his sandwich. Summoning two bottles from a small ice chest nearby, he popped the tops off, then offered one to Charlie, who was more than pleased to accept. "But it's just so hard to resist," George added once he'd washed the bite down with a slug of ale. "He practically begs for it. Almost more than Percy, even."

Charlie snorted his disbelief.

"I said, 'Almost,'" George laughed.

"It's really good to find you smiling and laughing again, bro," Charlie said with a smile, cheered beyond measure to see a little of the old George he remembered. He instantly regretted it, though, as George's smile became pained. An awkward silence fell between them, and Charlie wanted to kick himself for reminding him of Fred's absence.

He tried a different tack. "So, you're gonna be a dad soon."

"Why does everyone find this fact so alarming?" George complained, but good-naturedly so. "I'm a good-looking, hard-working, respectable bloke. Married a nice girl and started a family. Nothing outlandish about that. Biological imperative, pure and simple."

"But... it's *you*," Charlie teased lightly. "Not only is it bloody near miraculous you've found a woman who'd have you not that I'm completely convinced she's not Confunded but the fact that you've managed to reproduce is... well, it's a little terrifying, to put it bluntly."

"'Terrifying' is a bit harsh," George chuckled.

"Believe me, I'm not the only one who finds the prospect of miniature George Weasleys more than a little daunting," Charlie goaded him gently. "Male or female versions. And unleashing *two* of them onto an unsuspecting world at once? That's nothing less than diabolical."

"I'll second that notion," Ron agreed, rejoining them. "What's the job this afternoon, Boss?"

Looking a little skittish at the prospect of hours spent in the company of two brothers, George hemmed and hawed a bit, scratched his head, then directed Charlie and Ron to proceed hanging the downstairs doors whilst he drove into town *yes, drove*, Muggle-fashion in an old rattletrap of a farm truck so rusty it simply had to be held together with magic to check the status of a few more furnishings on order.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Charlie grumbled, "Damn. That's my fault. I said something stupid while you were in the loo, and now I've run him off."

"What did you say?" Ron asked.

"Just that it was nice to see him smile and laugh again," Charlie lamented. "Which of course made him think of when he wasn't, and why he hadn't, and I'm a complete arsehole for bringing it up."

"Don't beat yourself up about it," Ron insisted. "Truth is, George doesn't deal well with people yet. Aside from Annie and Lee Jordan, he can't tolerate any other company for very long."

"Why do you think that is?" Charlie asked, worried such anti-social tendencies didn't bode well at all.

"It's the twin thing. That's what Ginny and I reckon, anyway," Ron suggested.

"You mean, it hit him harder because he was so close to Fred, being his twin?" Charlie asked, not quite following.

"There's that, sure," Ron agreed. "But... we think it goes a bit further than that." When Charlie shot him a completely baffled look, he explained, "Don't you ever catch yourself, for just a fleeting instant once in a while, looking at George but thinking, *Oi, it's Fred!*?"

"Fucking hell," Charlie mumbled, astonished by Ron and Ginny's perceptiveness. *I never thought of that.*

"Must be, tryin' to move on and live your life, all the while lookin' exactly like a dead man," Ron agreed. "Gin and me figured it out when Angelina Johnson came to visit a month or so ago. Dunno if Fred ever mentioned her to you, but they had a bit of a thing in school for a bit. Anyway, she just kept staring at George like he was a ghost or something. Gave us all the willies for a while after that."

"No wonder he doesn't like company," Charlie marveled. *Poor George*, he thought yet again.

"Yeah," Ron said. "He's sloggin' through it and it's understandably harder on him than the rest of us. I think if he didn't have Annie... and the twins to come... to keep him going..." He shrugged.

His conclusion coincided with Charlie's impressions as well. "And Mum and Dad?"

"They're doing really well, considering," he said after a thoughtful pause. "Mum keeps herself busy watchin' over us all." Then he rolled his eyes. "She cannot bloody wait for those babies to get themselves born," he grumbled. "And the rest of us can't wait, either. We're counting on 'em to take up all her attention," he added with a wistful sigh of anticipated relief.

Charlie chuckled. "And Dad?"

"Spends a lot of time at the Ministry," Ron answered. "Kingsley's really relying on him lately. He comes home tired, and I think he'd honestly rather be back in his little Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, but he's pleased to help wherever he can."

"How are your friends doing?" Charlie asked. "Harry still hiding out from the world? Anybody track him down yet?"

"It's no secret to any of us he's holing up at Grimmauld Place," Ron replied casually. When Charlie shot him a look of surprise, he laughed, "Oh, well, I guess it was a secret from someone."

"Why the hell would anyone voluntarily live *there*?" Charlie marveled aloud. He'd only been to the former headquarters of the Order a few times and remembered it a foreboding, gloomy place.

"Well, I suppose because it's his, and it's free."

"It's *his*?"

"Yep. Sirius left it to him in his will. There was a while this summer when Harry spent a lot of time in Sirius' old room. I'll admit I was pretty worried about him then. But it was just a phase, thank Merlin, and he shifted out of it after a couple of weeks."

"I never knew," Charlie mused. How had Harry bonded so closely with his erstwhile godfather? When had they found the time to get to know one another so well?

"Anyway, we're keeping an eye on him," Ron continued. "Hermione's studying for NEWTs, keen to prove she's not riding on Harry's coattails. And Harry's not taking the exams but studying right along with her just to have something else to think about, I reckon."

"And you?"

"I keep myself occupied. I help George here, building the house. Oh, that reminds me don't tell Annie it's nearly done. He wants to surprise her."

"Got it," he chuckled. *That certainly sounds like the George I grew up with. Any opportunity to pull a prank...*

"I've gone into work with Dad some, too," Ron offered. Charlie quirked a surprised eyebrow, and Ron smirked. "He lets me help sort through the piles of damages claims and restitution requests. I'm getting pretty good at sussing out who's honestly been wronged and who's padding or fudging the claims. I figure it's good practice for Auror training."

"But mostly you're just lazing about, enjoying some supposedly well-deserved time off," Charlie needled him. "Still sponging off your parents at home."

"Not for much longer," Ron insisted. "Harry and I plan to get a flat in London after the first of the year."

"I thought you just said he's already got a place."

"Yeah, but that's hardly homey, is it?" Ron retorted. "Not exactly a place you'd want to bring a bird back to, if you get my drift."

"Meaning your little sister?" Charlie exclaimed scathingly. "The two of you are on the make for a bachelor pad, to which you'll be luring Ginny and Hermione?"

Looking mildly uncomfortable, Ron winced a bit. "I think the window of opportunity for objecting to that closed a while ago. Not that Ginny wouldn't've hexed everyone's bollocks well off if we'd tried. And Harry's a decent bloke."

"Still sounds pretty squicky to me," Charlie said, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

"It's just a flat!" Ron protested. "Not some den of iniquity!"

Charlie harrumphed, a rather unpleasant Egyptian memory suddenly brought to mind.

"And this is Ginny and Hermione we're talking about. Clever, self-respecting women intent on making something of themselves beyond being the tart of the moment featured in the gossip columns on Harry's or my arm."

Charlie was rendered a little gobsmacked. *Tarts? Gossip columns?* He began to reconsider re-subscribing to the *Prophet* just to keep tabs on his younger siblings' comings and goings.

"And yeah, there've been offers," Ron snapped, apparently thinking he was heading off the inevitable derogatory comment. "Harry gets more, of course, but I get a couple of owls a week from sluts and other daft bints keen on hooking up with a famous war hero. And Harry and I are unanimous about them: *no thanks!*"

"What does Hermione think of all these offers?" Charlie asked, still more stunned than anything else.

Ron's face darkened. "It took some work, but I've finally convinced her she's got nothing to worry about."

"Good for you, Ron," Charlie said earnestly.

At first, he shot an irritated, skeptical sneer back, but once he realized Charlie's seriousness, grinned a little bashfully.

"So, you and Harry are set on becoming Aurors. What about our Miss Granger?"

Ron shrugged and shook his head. "She can't see anything beyond her NEWTs," he sighed, exasperated. "She doesn't know what she wants to do with her life yet she only knows she wants to prove herself on these bloody exams. That she's the best, and she got there on her own merits. That what we fought for the idea that pedigree matters for shite was unequivocally proven true *by a Mudblood.*" He hissed the epithet in a hoarse voice, despite being rather worked up.

"I can see her logic there," Charlie counseled carefully. *There might even be two or three wizards in existence swayed by her example though it's doubtful.*

"Thing is, anyone who knows Hermione at least, everyone with half a brain who'll be working with her wherever she ends up will realize how clever and talented she is in about two seconds," Ron argued. "But pureblooded, bigoted gits the likes of Malfoy will never accept it, no matter how well she does! They'll just claim it proves the tests are worthless or that she cheated. And I hate to see her set herself up for that!"

"That's a good point, too," Charlie conceded, considering it echoed his own opinion. "She'll have a rude awakening if she's banking on people's hearts being turned by some exam scores. But when it comes down to it, her achievements will still stand whether or not idiots like the Malfoys recognize them. And if she doesn't realize that now, she will eventually. I guess I'm saying your best bet is to be supportive now... and sympathetic later."

"I suppose," Ron sighed.

"And in the meantime, it wouldn't hurt you to apply yourself to studying like Hermione and Harry are doing," he suggested. "It won't reflect greatly on you if you can't pull your own weight through the Auror entrance exam or training program... Don't set yourself up to look like Harry's pet project."

"Look, I'm not idiot enough to think Kingsley's waiving the requirements on my account, and neither is anyone else," Ron argued. "Of course it's for Harry but why shouldn't I take advantage of it? Wouldn't it look stupider to say no? Or insist on enduring the agony of taking NEWTs when I don't have to? I don't see the point in wasting my time proving I can recite Gamp's Law or the eleven uses of dragon's blood"

"Twelve," Charlie interrupted him reflexively. "Everybody forgets oven cleaner."

Ron rolled his eyes, then continued, "My point is, that shite means fuck all when it comes to being a field agent. I want to start Auror training as soon as possible, and I'll throw everything I have into it, make no mistake. And the sooner I start, the sooner I get to hunt down the bastards that persecuted me and my friends, that forced my family into hiding, that killed my brother and tortured my schoolmates. Some of them are still out there, and I want to bring them to justice!"

For the second time that afternoon, Charlie was somewhat gobsmacked. "That's why you want to be an Auror? *Not because it sounds cool? Or because Harry wanted it?*"

"Course it is," Ron retorted. "Why else?"

Why else, indeed? He clapped his little brother on the back, sizing up the kid he mostly remembered being a scrawny, whinging pain in his arse. Ron was still quite slim lanky, even but tall and solid now: *a man*, he confessed. With apparently a clever head on his shoulders and a true Weasley heart beating in his chest.

"Good on you, Ron."

Author's note the second: The International Statute of Secrecy and Goblin War dates and info are per JKR, not my imagination. Christopher Wren, however, was a real Brit architect/polymath/genius (and presumably Muggle) whose own career happened to coincide with them in the most convenient manner.

27-Dec-98

Chapter 18 of 28

What is it they say about backdoor friends being the best?

The Burrow was filled to bursting. Six Weasley siblings with spouses and significant others in tow, a set of nearly two-month-old twins, and a pair of beaming patriarchs had crammed themselves into the living room around a Christmas tree that morning. George & Annie: an Unofficial Biography, Chapter 43

On his first full day back in Romania after spending Christmas with his family at the Burrow, Charlie stood at the sink, filling it with sudsy water from the tap, wearing nothing but pants. Keeper hut number nine wasn't nearly as drafty as eight had been, even though it was at least twice as large in order to house visiting researchers. He assumed it was because nine was built probably two centuries or more after eight had been. Number nine's much more modern and efficient heating system, coupled with some strangely mild December weather (for the Carpathians, at least there were still several feet of snow outside the door), permitted a bit of laxity in regards to clothing.

Not to mention a general holiday laziness pervaded the hut; Charlie and Sasha hadn't bothered dressing for breakfast, nor were they in any hurry to do so. Duties were a little lighter during the winter anyway, what with the dragons less active and for the most part confined to their lairs, sitting eggs. Poachers never took a day off, of course, but no sign of anything untoward had been reported since before Charlie'd left for England. Perhaps even filthy poacher scum preferred to spend Christmas with their families.

A very warm body sidled up behind him, a hard chest pressed against his back, and arms with diameters resembling tree limbs wrapped around him. "I missed you," Sasha murmured, his lips brushing against the back of Charlie's neck. Rough stubble scraped the sensitive skin there, sending chills down his spine that lodged rather more heatedly in his groin. It wasn't the first time he'd heard the sentiment that day, but he never tired of being welcomed home.

Charlie spelled the breakfast dishes to finish washing up by themselves. Placing his wet hands on Sasha's warm, dry ones, he smiled. "I missed you, too." It was very possibly the understatement of the century. Words couldn't really express how much he hated being separated from Sasha for any reason.

Sasha turned Charlie around until they faced each other. As Charlie's hands settled on the firm globes of his gorgeous hut-mate's arse, Sasha pulled him close. He nibbled on his earlobe, then planted hungry kisses down his neck to his collarbone in his patented get-Charlie-instantly-hard move. As usual, it worked.

Charlie spun them both around. Pressing Sasha's backside against the sink, he murmured, "Brought you back a present," then kissed him, coaxing his tongue out to play.

"Is it hidden in here?" Sasha rumbled low, his hand working itself under the waistband of Charlie's pants and curling around his aching erection.

"No fair peeking," Charlie mock-scolded him.

He began kissing his way down his partner's bare torso, slowly sinking to his knees. He'd memorized every divot, every raised scar along the way all components of perfection in his opinion. Sasha's skin was still a little shiny and mostly hairless an after-effect of the Greek Fire curse nearly a year ago and still felt a bit tight and itchy, according to him. Charlie'd been given the agonizingly pleasurable task of massaging him with a special healing salve every day since.

"Close your eyes and hold out your hands," he teased.

"I'd rather watch," Sasha chuckled, and Charlie reckoned it was nearly the sexiest sound he'd ever heard. Sasha's fingers slid into Charlie's hair. "And touch."

Charlie gazed up into his lover's dark eyes. "Suit yourself." Nuzzling Sasha's navel, lightly kissing the rock hard bumps of his abs, he gently tugged on the hem of his pants, drawing them down tantalizingly slowly. He was rewarded with an impatient moan.

Charlie left slow, soft, open-mouthed kisses along the path from navel down to pleasure as his hands roved Sasha's body, eliciting more moans. Then he tortured his love with teasing, fairy-light kisses along the velvety soft skin of his rigid shaft, fingertips tracing the miniscule seam of flesh on his perineum, palm grazing against bollocks.

"Charlie..." Sasha breathed.

He licked his lips, then brushed them, barely parted, from side to side across the sensitive head. He breathed in the scent of his lover's arousal, heavy and musky and masculine. Opening his lips wider, he let a soft exhale waft over the straining cock, and the tip of his tongue edged past his teeth, seeking out contact.

A loud banging against the front door startled them both. "Wake up, you lazy wankers!" a feminine voice bellowed. "Sasha! I need to speak with you!"

Charlie and Sasha shared an instantaneous look of mutual panic. Was there any chance they could just silently hide and she'd go away? Was there any chance she hadn't looked through the window and seen them already?

More pounding was followed by, "I know you're in there!"

Charlie leaped to his feet, calling out, "Just a minute!" Sasha hauled up his pants in the same second, and together, they scrambled out of the kitchen, back down the hallway that led to their dorm rooms.

"I'm coming in to warm up at the hearth," Freya Eitelmann announced. "It's bloody cold out here."

From his room, Charlie heard the pop of Apparition, followed by the stomping of feet and clapping of hands in front of the fire. Freya's forwardness puzzled him the weather wasn't all that bad, considering what they usually endured. Why was she using it as a ruse to get inside their hut? What was so urgent that she needed to speak about with Sasha? Why had she shown up in the first place?

His heart somewhere in the vicinity of the back of his throat, Charlie hurried to dress. Shoving his legs into trousers, feet into socks and boots, arms into shirt then jumper, the process took a minute, at most. Despite his quickness, he found himself trailing Sasha back into the common room.

"Why are you here, Freya?" Sasha asked as he strode into the room, failing to suppress his irritation.

Charlie held back a step, watching her warily over Sasha's shoulder. *Mouth shut, eyes open*, he counseled himself.

"There's no need to take that tone," she sighed, looking as frazzled as Charlie had ever seen her. Not in her presentation, so much nothing about her clothing or person was disheveled. But her manner was uncharacteristically... twitchy. "You can always pick up where you left off after I'm gone."

Icy dread gripped his bowels, and he froze. *She saw something!* Before Charlie could recover from her damning insinuation, much less speak, Sasha's otherwise expressionless face leveled a stony glare at their visitor. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said softly, warningly. "And neither do you."

Freya threw up her hands. "Oh, get over it!" she scolded them, exasperated. "Trust me, I've got a much bigger problem than your secret that isn't."

"What secret?" Charlie and Sasha asked accidentally in unison.

"This isn't why I'm here," she huffed through gritted teeth. Then she leveled a challenging stare at them both. "But it hasn't exactly escaped anyone's notice the two of you

don't bother with the ladies. Seven bloody years is an awfully long time to hold out for Miss Right, mates. But nobody's quibbling about it, are they? This *really* isn't an issue."

Not a secret? Everyone knows? Charlie's mind careened through the implications as his stomach plummeted to the floor. *They all know but... they don't care?* It really seemed like too much to imagine, much less hope for, and the surreality of the conversation led him to surreptitiously pinch himself. *Ouch!*

Freya began pacing in front of the fire, arms folded across her chest. "I assure you, as long as you continue to keep it private like you've been doing"

"Privacy is so much easier to maintain when colleagues aren't barging into one's home unexpectedly," Sasha snapped, interrupting her.

"I hardly make a habit of this!" she protested, spinning on him. Her arms were now ramrod straight at her sides, fists clenched. "When have I ever"

"Make certain that you don't," Sasha growled, unfazed and eyes flashing.

Charlie grabbed his arm, silently urging him to stand down. Freya didn't seem to be looking for a confrontation about their sexuality she seemed rather aggravated the subject had come up at all, actually. No threat of exposure had been implied; in fact, if her declaration was correct and everyone suspected already, the point was moot.

He took another assessing glance, during which she stretched and rolled her neck in a decidedly agitated manner, he decided she looked like a woman at the end of her rope. "Freya, you wanted to speak to Sasha about a problem you're having?" Charlie asked in a calm, firm manner, reminding them both of her stated purpose. Freya nodded, then she and Sasha visibly relaxed a little.

"Everyone have a seat. I'll make some tea."

Charlie busied himself in the kitchen, directing the kettle to fill itself at the tap, then heat itself on the cooker while he fetched tea from the little pantry. While he worked, Freya wrung her hands in her lap, staring at them. It was unsettling to see her so keyed up, for she usually cultivated an aura of unflappable confidence. *What is she so damn upset about?*

"You grew up on a dragon reservation, didn't you?" she finally asked.

"This is your emergency?" Sasha retorted, vexed and disbelieving.

"Just... please! I need to know how it was for you," she practically begged.

Like Charlie's, Sasha's brow furrowed. Perhaps he, too, was starting to notice Freya's odd behavior. "Yes, I was raised on the Circassian Reservation in the Central Caucasus Mountains."

"And what was it like for you?" she repeated.

Sasha shrugged. "It was unremarkable."

Charlie noted Sasha's reflexive stonewalling reaction to questions about his past. Considering what horrors and unhappiness lay there, he couldn't really blame his partner. It was unfortunate that his habitual reserve was interpreted by their fellow keepers as either a sense of superiority or mistrust, depending on who was complaining.

Freya pursed her lips, frustrated by his reticence. "Why did you leave?"

"My mother sent me to school," he bit out. Charlie felt a little twinge in his heart, knowing what an old wound that was for Sasha, but kept his expression carefully neutral.

She expressed her tried impatience with a flat look. "Why didn't you go back after you finished?"

Sasha took a deep breath, then let it out in a sigh. "I did not see much of a future there."

"Why?" she pressed.

Charlie delivered the tea then. Once everyone was served, he pulled up another chair, pointedly seating himself equidistant from the two of them. Just because Freya knew or thought she knew about them didn't mean a public display of affection was in order. Not to mention her distress, not their relationship, was the focus of the moment.

Sasha took a drink from his cup, the tiny vessel dwarfed in his hands, then stared into it like he was attempting to read the still submerged dregs. "The Circassian Reservation was originally a tribal territory," he explained. "My father's people had a very long history of dragon keeping before the goal of the profession became preservation of the species. They guarded the land not for the safety of the dragons there, but to ensure their own exclusive access to them it functioned more as a game preserve than anything else. Over the centuries, the Caucasian Razorclaw's population was decimated by a combination of overharvesting and a particularly ill-timed epidemic of Wing Rot. As you know, the breed was officially declared extinct in 1906.

"In exchange for a healthy breeding population of Ironbellies and Horntails, my father's people allowed their land to become a reservation and agreed to abide by the International Brotherhood of Dragon Keeper's professional guidelines. But this decision was not made out of any sense of stewardship it was merely the only way left to cling to the only livelihood any of them had ever known."

Charlie wondered why Sasha was attempting to hold Freya off with a history lesson that she'd no doubt learned in school, just as he'd done. Apparently, she was too.

"But what was it like for you as a child?" she asked pleadingly. "Do you have any fond memories of it at all?"

"Why don't you ask Flaviu or Boian?" Sasha hedged a little suspiciously.

Freya stared at her cup. "I already have," she mumbled softly. When she raised her head, she set her teacup down with an air of resolute acceptance. "I'm sorry to have bothered you about this, Sasha. I'll assume from your avoidance of my question that your childhood, like that of the Vaduva brothers', left something to be desired."

Sasha sighed heavily, at last either tired of resisting or convinced his colleague truly needed an honest, forthright answer, and the sound made her pause hopefully. "The Circassian Reservation is very small; we were very isolated to begin with, you see. Like it is here, the keepers who worked there seldom married, and the bastards they spawned were typically raised in a few distant magical villages surrounding the reservation."

"But not you," she prompted.

Sasha shook his head. "My family was the exception to that rule, yes. While my father was alive, my mother lived with him in his family's ancestral home on the reservation. We lived there together until my mother insisted I leave for proper schooling."

"And you were glad to go?" Her voice was quiet, almost agonized for some reason.

"I never doubt my parents loved me," Sasha said, sounding faintly guilty to Charlie. "But I had only busy adults for company. Looking back, I remember being lonely much of the time, but I did not quite understand this feeling for what it was then."

Charlie thought his answer was a very neat avoidance of the question. He knew that Sasha was very conflicted about that time in his life. As a lonely little boy, the prospect of going to school with so many other children had thrilled him, and he'd been eager to leave the rez behind. To say Durmstrang hadn't lived up to its promise was

misleading to the extreme the experience had nearly broken his heart. Sasha tried not to feel betrayed by his mother, who'd knowingly sent him into that harsh environment, but was not always successful.

"Will you tell me about your parents?" Freya asked.

"My father, like his ancestors, never left the rez for more than a night at a time once his father came to town to claim him at the age of ten. He learned his craft from his father and uncles, just as they did before him. He was a simple man, but steadfast and decent. As I said before, he loved us and did his best to provide for us. He is in no small part the reason I am a keeper today."

"And your mother?" Freya looked almost hopeful. "Was she a keeper also? Is that how they met?"

Sasha shook his head again. "Mother is Belarussian," he said carefully. "She met my father when she came to the reservation to do research. At Durmstrang, she studied Potions and Alchemy she is quite adept. She wanted me to have more options in life than my father had thought wizarding school was the best path for me to take and he somewhat reluctantly agreed."

Charlie smothered the urge to wince, well acquainted with what had happened to Sasha at Durmstrang and how miserable he'd been there. And Sasha's mother, Sofija Vasilieva, was more than "adept" in alchemy: she was a brilliant scientist, having developed the current protocol for extracting the flame-retardant dried mucous found on dragon gorge pellets and subsequently reconstituting it into a liquid form used to render treated clothing almost impervious to flame. He was a little surprised no one else at Ridgetbit seemed to have figured out the connection, but since Sasha rarely spoke about his life before coming to Romania, he supposed their ignorance wasn't all that difficult to understand.

Sasha set his empty teacup down next to Freya's. "You are pregnant," he stated rather than asked.

Charlie nearly did a spit take to hear him say it out loud. He supposed it was no great leap of intuition, really. His own conclusions about the motivation behind Freya's interrogation had been drifting in that direction as well, but never in a million years would he have voiced his suspicion.

Freya didn't speak. She didn't move her head, not even to look up. Instead, her shoulders jerked in an effort to smother the sob that threatened to escape.

For the second time that morning, loud pounding on the door interrupted them.

"I know you're in there! I've been everywhere else!" Flaviu Vaduva, Freya's partner, bellowed from the other side of the door.

"Put that away!" she cried as Sasha leaped to his feet and spun elegantly toward the door, wand drawn.

Sasha smirked, but had already thrown a ward upon the door for good measure. "State your business, Vaduva," he called out.

"Goddamn it, Freya, talk to me!" Flaviu howled.

"You want us to get rid of him?" Charlie offered.

She shook her head resignedly. Quickly gathering her composure, wiping away a stray tear from her cheek, she straightened up in her chair. "I've gotten what I came here for. And I've imposed upon you long enough."

"Nonsense," Charlie insisted. "If there's anything else you need"

"**OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR NOW, WEASLEY!**" Flaviu snarled. "I swear to every god, if you've done anything already..." Something very large crashed against the warded door, and the force shuddered through the rest of the building.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, let him in before he hurts himself," she groaned dejectedly.

Sasha released the ward, and the door flew open. Flaviu tumbled arse over teakettle into the room. But instead of getting to his feet, he scrambled over to Freya. "Please tell me you didn't!" he cried.

"I told you I wouldn't do anything rash," she said coldly, glaring at him.

"Oh, thank God!" Flaviu sagged against her. "Promise me you won't! Swear it!"

Charlie began to consider what was becoming a very obvious conclusion. *Flaviu's the father!?*

"I will make no such promise!" she cried angrily. "It's my body. My life."

"It's my *child!*" Flaviu growled, confirming Charlie's suspicion outright. When Freya rolled her eyes, he shoved himself up to his feet, away from her. "It's at least as much mine as it is yours!" he shouted.

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law, as the proverb says," she sneered.

Her hostility was somewhat surprising and made Charlie think she must be under enormous strain at the moment. While Freya could be short with people, it usually stemmed from an innate sense of efficiency. He'd never experienced vindictiveness from her, nor considered her the type of woman who could be categorized as bitchy.

Charlie took Sasha's forearm and gently pulled him along as he crept backward out of the room toward the dorms, intending to give the couple what modicum of privacy they could. Unfortunately, a creaky floorboard betrayed their escape.

Flaviu spun around, pinning them with his panicked gaze. "Help me convince her!" he pled to his fellow men.

"Yes, by all means stay," Freya snapped, "and listen to his ridiculous ideas, all of which will ruin my life."

Reluctantly, Charlie and Sasha held their ground.

Flaviu turned back to her. "If I could carry it for you"

"A pointless argument for a man to make," she snapped. "You cannot. As I said, this matter affects *my* life, *my* career." After a short pause, she continued in a quieter, almost fearful tone. "Ghenadie told me when he hired me that if I ever got knocked up, he'd sack me!"

"That was before he knew you!" Flaviu argued. "He knows your worth... we all do now. He wouldn't sack you." He knelt again, forcing Freya to look at him. "And if he tried for this, we'd mutiny," he swore.

It was a false boast and Charlie suspected everyone in the room knew it. Freya had certainly earned the respect of her fellow keepers, but whether or not any of them would lay their own jobs on the line for her... especially now that she was pregnant... Well, being a keeper was a damn dangerous job, even when you were "off" duty.

"My worth," she agonized. "What is my worth if I can't do my job?"

"You have value beyond being a keeper!" Flaviu insisted, and the rest of them nodded and made sounds in agreement.

But Freya only glared back at Flaviu. "Don't you dare lie and say something manipulative like you love me. At least fight fair about this," she growled.

Flaviu straightened up but remained on his knees. "Not love. No," he agreed. "But there is respect... and genuine affection..."

Charlie suspected the list was about to get longer, but she was having none of his mildly flattering spin. "Bah! There is convenience. We fuck not because you are particularly attracted to me, nor I to you. You're just... there. And me the same."

Charlie was somewhat surprised to see Flaviu approach her with a tenderness he'd never witnessed from the man before. He gently took Freya's head in his hands and tilted it to look at him. "Why do you always belittle the connection between us?" he asked softly. "So what if it isn't a madly passionate affair? Why does it have to be anything more than it already is for us to have this baby?"

"Because I don't want it!" she said, battling a sob by clenching her teeth. "I've told you and everyone else a million times over I never wanted to be a mother."

Flaviu went from tender to pissed off in record time, and he shoved himself away from her again. "So don't be!" he barked. "But I want to be a father! And this is my chance."

"You can't honestly tell me you couldn't find some cunt in the village to bear you a bastard," she bit back bitterly.

"Is that what this is about? Illegitimacy?" he spluttered. "You want to get married? Fine. I'll marry you."

Freya clutched at her temples. "You don't understand!" she yelled. "You're not listening to anything I say!"

"Then make me understand!" Flaviu yelled back. "Say something that makes sense!"

Charlie was made terribly uncomfortable witnessing their row. While his parents had frequently argued, often quite loudly, they'd always at heart been respectful of each other's point of view. He supposed that was the difference between a couple in love and one that wasn't.

"Easy for you to say," she shouted. "You don't have to give up a decade of your life for this!"

"Nor do you!" Flaviu countered equally loudly. "That's what I keep telling you! You don't want to be a mother? Fine. Then don't. Let me raise the child."

"You can't," she spat, unimpressed. "Not by yourself. Who will care for it when you and I are working from dawn to dusk? Or all night long? You can't even feed a baby, Flaviu, much less raise it. This is madness."

"I'll hire a nursemaid," he countered. "From the village."

"Will you go live with her and the baby at the end of the day, then?" she demanded. "If so, then how will you work? You know as well as I do how often we get called out at night. Or do you imagine she will live with us? What village woman would ever agree to live in a keeper's hut? Especially one with another witch already in it? Do you see how stupid this plan is now?"

"We'll work something out," Flaviu insisted, undeterred by Freya's logic. "Maybe the baby can stay with her, and I can stay with you..."

Sasha shot Flaviu a withering look. It was easy to see what he thought of the manner in which his bastard cousins were raised: living with harried mothers, barely scraping by while seeing their absentee fathers only on the rare occasions when they dropped into town on leave from the rez. It certainly left something to be desired.

"What's the point of having a child if you're just going to ship it off for someone else to raise?" she cried.

"I don't know!" he roared. "All I know is I want my son!"

"And if it's a girl, will this tempest be for naught?" she hissed, furious. "Where will you ship her off to?"

"Of course not. I will cherish a little girl as much as a boy." His quiet yet fervent and unhesitant assertion was undeniably heartfelt, and brought Freya up short. He sensed a weakening in her defenses and, instantly adapting his tactics, pressed his advantage. "Please, Freya," he begged quietly, plaintively.

"Being a keeper means everything to me, Flaviu," she said, meeting his quiet plaintiveness with her own. "It's all I ever wanted. It's what I was born to do. It's who I am. How am I supposed to give that up?"

"I'm not asking you to give anything up," he insisted.

"Aren't you? You won't treat me any differently when I'm pregnant out to here?" She held her arms out in a loop before her stomach as demonstration, pausing to let the all men in the room think about the repercussions. "I am your partner, sworn to risk my life alongside yours."

The look on his face silently conceded her point. "Maybe while you're pregnant, yes, you should take it easy. I could work with someone else for a while. Boian and Romolo, perhaps..."

"And after the baby comes... what am I to do then?" she asked, tearily, bitterly vindicated he'd finally seen how things would inarguably be changed for her. "You say you want to raise it without me, that you'll hire help. Am I supposed to just pretend I'm not the child's mother while you and some other woman or string of women raises it? While I stand aside and watch?"

"But you just said you didn't want to be a mother," Flaviu countered weakly as Freya's arguments began to sink in.

"Will we lie to this child, deny my own kinship?" she pressed, her voice hoarse with sadness. "Or tell it the truth, that I never wanted it but its father guilted me into having it? Which of these alternatives is the lesser of two evils, do you think?"

Flaviu's whole body sagged with the weight of her argument. "I don't know."

Freya's tears flowed openly now. "Never mind the rest of you will think me either a heartless bitch or a stupid, unlucky whore, no matter my decision. Even if you can make some arrangement for the child to be cared for by a nanny of some definition... this is not a family, Flaviu! A dragon reservation is no place to raise a child! Parents are supposed to put the welfare of their child first."

"Your solution is to end its life before it's even begun," he moaned angrily, tears coursing down his own cheeks as well. "How does this promote its welfare?"

She simply shook her head, unable to answer.

Charlie's heart ached for them both. An unfortunate accident as conscientious as Freya was, he had no doubt precautions had been taken but must have failed now threatened to ruin both their lives. He couldn't see any solution to the quandary that didn't involve heartbreak for everyone involved.

"Give it a little more time, Freya," Flaviu counseled. "Maybe... you might give this a chance. Maybe you might change your mind. Maybe you might fall in love... no, not with me, but with our child. Maybe we might make an odd little family together, the three of us."

She shook her head, skeptical but too tired to fight any more. "You have such a fond remembrance of your own childhood here?" she asked dubiously.

His expression darkened. "We don't have to repeat all those mistakes."

She snorted disdainfully. "No, we can make new, even worse ones."

He knelt before her again, his hands resting on her thighs. "Our family will be unique, this is true. But that doesn't mean it will fail. Not if we try, really strive to do the best we can."

"It's too much." Freya buried her face in her hands. "I liked how things were between us."

He stroked her hair gently. Softly, sadly, he said, "Freya, for God's sake... we can never go back to that. Not after this."

"I know!" she wailed, throwing back her head and refusing to look at anyone. "I'm damned no matter what I decide!"

Flaviu tried to soothe her, but she pushed his hands away. "If I choose to terminate this pregnancy now, you'll never forgive me," she lamented bitterly, finally looking him in the eye. "And with a partner who hates me, I might as well quit. Then what chance will I have to get another keeper job at any other reservation, eh? Think Ghenadie will write me a glowing recommendation?"

Flaviu swallowed, unable to muster an honest argument.

She looked away again. "And if I keep this baby, I give up my life here. My work. The only thing I truly love in this world."

"You might gain a new love, Freya," he urged. "That of a mother for her child." Gathering her into his embrace, holding her not lovingly, but as a sympathetic friend (not that any fellow male keeper would have tolerated such intimacy), he murmured, "I swear I will do everything in my power to enable you to continue as a keeper... as my partner. I'll take any oath, make any sacrifice. I promise you I won't ever leave you or our baby behind."

After a very long, tense pause, Freya gently disentangled herself from him. Her face still tear-streaked and splotchy, she was nevertheless for the most part composed. Her voice resolute and calm, she said, "I will think about it."

2-May-99

Chapter 19 of 28

Charlie begins to see Percy in a new light.

Chapter 19

May 2, 1999

It was nearly midnight when Annie found Charlie and Percy seated on some steps leading up to the castle. She was relieved, yet mostly unsurprised, to find them both sober and far removed from the festivities. Percy wasn't much for parties that didn't involve schmoozing with Ministry officials, and Charlie always made himself scarce around strangers, she'd learned. George & Annie: an Unofficial Biography, Chapter 45

The hour was getting quite late, and Charlie was tired. Walking across the gently sloping lawn below the partially reconstructed castle, he contemplated for a brief moment the option of Apparating back to his bed at the Burrow, then reconsidered the wisdom of this plan when he remembered his mother was there, very possibly waiting up for him. Considering she'd just witnessed the birth of her third grandchild that very afternoon *A girl, no less! Bill certainly caught the brass ring there* he knew what lay in store for him. And while he was pleased both for Bill and his mum the arrival of a healthy new member of the family helped counteract some of the sadness of a day otherwise spent memorializing many so recently lost he had no desire to be harangued again about finding a wife for himself and settling down. Molly had been relentless yesterday, badgering him about the marital status of his old schoolmates.

The day he'd just spent on Hogwarts' grounds had been a long and emotional one as it was: he'd endured as an official representative of the Order, the Ridgebit Reservation keepers and Romanian contingent of fighters, and a friend and family member of more than one of the heroic dead the first of what was no doubt many annual memorial services to come. The ceremony itself was fine, managing to avoid much of the self-congratulation and pomposity politicians usually inflicted upon the audience at such things *Trust Kingsley and McGonagall to maintain a respectful, solemn attitude, thank Merlin*

Not that what had come afterward was remotely solemn. The first anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts, as it had come to be known, would not soon be forgotten, and not just because Fleur had gone into labor during the service and ended up delivering the baby in the castle's hospital wing. George and his cohorts had outdone themselves putting on a proper wake for their lost friends, replete with mountains of food, rivers of booze, music, and dancing.

But the garden party was slowly winding down now. The band was packing up and collecting their fee; the stage had already dissolved into nothingness. Charlie had just taken leave of Hagrid, whose hut was hosting several large, hirsute, drunken gamekeepers keen to swap tales of hunting adventures and show off magical menagerie scars. Most of the party stragglers remaining were Weasleys sitting in a little knot off to the side with their mates, periodic bursts of their laughter still punctuating the celebratory night.

One lone figure caught his eye, however. Making his way toward the familiar fellow seated on some steps carved into the steep pathway that led from Hagrid's hut toward the castle, he summoned two fresh bottles of butterbeer from what was left on the tables.

"Why aren't you celebrating with the rest of them?" Percy greeted him, his tone jovial as his chin jutted out toward the group of their siblings in question.

Charlie held out one of the bottles to him, and Percy accepted it with soft thanks. "Just between you and me, that lot makes me feel a little old," Charlie wryly confessed. As time went by, he seemed to have less and less in common with George with his wife their twin sons having been taken home by Arthur several hours ago and Ron and Ginny with their friends and significant others. He very much wanted to chalk this fact up to their age difference rather than anything else.

Percy only chuckled.

"And you?" Charlie countered.

Percy's smile now took on a slightly pained aspect. "Just between you and me... that lot makes me feel more than a little unwanted," he offered, mimicking Charlie's wry delivery but adding a whiff of bitterness. "And before you protest otherwise, don't bother. I know that in the space where logic resides in their minds, they've accepted my apology if not totally forgiven me. But that doesn't mean any of them particularly wish to spend any time in my company."

"Perce... it was four years you were gone," Charlie counseled. "It'll take time for things to get back the way they were." If anyone knew how much distance affected a relationship, he did.

"Heaven forbid we resume that," Percy muttered. "I don't particularly miss playing the wet blanket to everyone else's picnic. And you mustn't misunderstand me; I'm not whinging about the lack of welcome. For the most part, the feeling's mutual. Nor do I blame them one whit."

"Would you rather I leave you alone?" Charlie offered, perfectly willing to respect his brother's wishes for solitude. He set it great store by it, himself, and would never begrudge someone else's desire to be alone. "I won't be offended, honest."

But Percy patted the stone step he sat upon. "Pull up some gneiss and take a load off," he said in a friendly tone.

"When you say things like that, is it any wonder people think you're a prat?" Charlie chuckled, easing himself onto the step.

"That was a very humorous and clever comment," he insisted, and Charlie was mostly sure he was only pretending to take offense. "And I refuse to dumb myself down to the insipid average. Nor do I include you in that morass," Percy quipped just before taking a long drink from his bottle.

"Leave my arse out of it, thank you very much," Charlie chortled.

"So, they make you feel old, do they?" Percy needled him while keeping his eye on the younger members of their family.

"Amongst other things," Charlie sighed. After a thoughtful pause, he added, "I've been gone for so much of their lives... They've changed so much... grown up, really. I know they're my family, but..."

"They're strangers," Percy said, completing his thought. "You don't know them, and they sure as hell don't know you. I understand you completely."

Perhaps not completely, Charlie thought, his secret-elephant tapping him on the shoulder with its trunk.

Percy considered his bottle. "Speaking of feeling old... have you ever wondered about the age gap between you and me? How we're four years apart while everyone else is two years or less?"

Charlie shrugged, not very clear on where Percy was leading the conversation. Perhaps his brother had been tipping a bit too much? "Not really. I mean, there *was* a war going on." *Small wonder if things got a bit too hairy for a while to consider trying for a baby.*

"I've spent some time in the Department of Vital Records and discovered something rather... interesting." Percy now picked at the bottle's label, and Charlie felt decidedly leery of what was coming next. "Does the name Richard Leander Weasley mean anything to you?"

Charlie shook his head, then a flash of recollection hit. "Wasn't Mum's dad called Leander?"

Percy nodded. "Well, you were not quite two years old at the time. Bill was nearly four, but that's still awfully young," he said in a hushed, leading voice.

"What?" Charlie pressed, recognizing he was being baited. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear what was coming, but he didn't enjoy being led along for naught, either.

Percy sighed. "Mum had a miscarriage," he said softly. "Between you and me. I never knew before I stumbled upon the stillbirth certificate. I've been wondering ever since if you or Bill remembered anything about it."

Charlie shook his head again, still trying to absorb the startling news. *I suppose it makes a kind of sense, timing-wise. And I can understand why neither Mum nor Dad ever wanted to discuss it with us.* "Why were you nosing about in vital records?" Charlie asked, suddenly suspicious of what, he wasn't quite sure.

Percy snorted. "There've been an awful lot of things I've done that nobody knows about." He took a very dramatic drink from the bottle.

It wasn't any mystery what he wanted. "I'm listening," Charlie said, humoring his brother.

But Percy seemed to have thought better of his confession and demurred, shifting the subject slightly. "You'll probably think that what I'm about to say is blasphemous, but sometimes I curse the day Dumbledore came into our lives," he confessed, glaring at his bottle. "In fact, there are moments when I'm quite pleased the Machiavellian old pouf snuffed it."

"I won't argue the old codger was manipulative, but I don't think his sexuality had anything to do with it," Charlie countered, gritting his teeth. He wasn't sure why his brother's casual use of the slur irritated him so. Merlin knew his colleagues certainly employed much uglier terms than "pouf," and he generally let those just roll off his back.

Percy donned his wry smile again. "Quite right. His being gay had nothing whatsoever to do with his being a plonking arsehole."

Over the years, Charlie had discovered that most people fell into one of two diametrically opposed camps regarding Albus Dumbledore: one focused exclusively upon his illustrious contributions to wizarding society, the other harped upon his many personal faults. As a member of the Order, Charlie could see the merits of both arguments. Dumbledore was an incredibly powerful wizard and unquestionably devoted to fighting evil, but harbored the nastiest penchant for keeping secrets and hoarding information to the point of playing God he'd ever come across.

"I like to think he was doing what he thought he had to in order to win the war," he offered. "Such an exceptional enemy required exceptional tactics. *Including exceptional sacrifices.* His thoughts turned to one name amongst half a hundred carved on the marble monument just around the corner *FREDERICK CYRUS WEASLEY.*

"True again," Percy replied, scowling. "No matter how many lives he ruined, it was all for a good cause. One that we've celebrated today. All of us here are much better off, surely."

There was no mistaking the sarcastic bitterness in Percy's voice. Aside from George and their parents, Fred's loss had seemed to hit him the hardest, which was a bit surprising, considering the brothers' history of bickering incessantly. *Perhaps it's got something to do with the fact Percy witnessed it firsthand? Then again, so did Ron, and he seems to have bounced back comparatively well.*

"I miss Fred, too. But casualties are unavoidable in war, Perce. He did die fighting for a good cause."

"I know," Percy sighed.

After observing a considerate pause out of respect for the dead, Charlie asked, "What did Dumbledore do to you that was so terrible? He got you an awfully good job for a

kid right out of school."

Percy narrowed his eyes, thinking back to that summer four years ago. "Yes. Like my elder brothers before me, I ostensibly owed Dumbledore for my entry-level Ministry position. Not my father, who was a tenured Ministry employee, or my stellar academic record, but Dumbledore, my Headmaster." Once again, his voice was tinged with bitterness.

"I didn't enjoy the way he made me feel beholden to him for it. I'd earned everything I'd ever gotten in school all on my own: my grades, my OWLs and NEWTs, being Head Boy. So, at the time, it was rather easy to convince myself that maybe his string-pulling had very little to do with my success on the job that perhaps my scholastic reputation and achievements were what had earned me my position in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, after all. And when Crouch promoted me so quickly, entrusting me with his directives and ceremonial duties during his absence, such things admittedly fed my suspicions."

"Your cauldron bottoms project must've really impressed him," Charlie offered, gently teasing him with the old family joke.

Percy smiled wryly again. "Yes, yes, it was asinine of me to take the thing so seriously. Who gives a toss about cauldron bottoms, eh? Only... potioners do, actually... quite a lot. For their personal safety as well as that of anyone who consumes or uses their products. The whole investigation was launched because several of our best brewers had been injured in freak accidents linked to shoddy equipment. I don't apologize for caring about that or for being diligent and thorough in my assignment. Is it really too much to require of cauldron manufacturers to exercise some basic efforts in standardization and quality control?"

"No, I suppose not," Charlie agreed, a little chastened. Funny how he'd never thought of it that way before. It had always been so easy to view everything Percy'd done through the lens of pleasing authorities and cherishing rules for their own sakes.

Percy rubbed the back of his neck. "I was mortified after the fiasco at the Triwizard Tournament when I learned how our enemies had used me to get to Harry," he said, his voice hard and full of regret. "I suppose Pettigrew and his master counted it as a stroke of luck to discover a Weasley was available to manipulate, relying on me to favor Harry over the other champions when I was a judge, ensuring he'd make it to the Cup-Portkey."

His voice took on a self-accusatory tone. "I know I should've been more skeptical when Crouch tapped me for so much responsibility when I had so little experience and seniority the man never once got my name right, for Merlin's sake but I was so sure he was giving me an opportunity to prove myself worthy of his trust!" Then he became defensive. "And I'd only known Crouch for a few weeks before he'd been Imperiused. It's not like he ever ordered me to do anything unethical or illegal while he was supposedly ill and sending me directives from home. It was an honest mistake!" Percy argued as if on trial once more.

"To be perfectly blunt, I've always wondered how you managed not to get sacked over that," Charlie confessed.

Percy smirked. "The inquiry committee was about to recommend that very thing, dear brother," he grumbled. "I panicked and went crawling back to Dumbledore, begging him to intercede on my behalf. He offered to owl a few of the committee members, certain he could get my punishment softened down to an official reprimand."

"That seems like a decent thing for him to have done," Charlie suggested, wondering why Percy's scowl was deepening.

Percy's nose twitched with distaste. "That's the precise moment the old dragon's claws sank all the way in," he growled softly. "Dumbledore suggested to me that, in the near future, Fudge would be making a grab for power and launching a campaign to discredit him, fearing for his position. He recommended that I do whatever it took to get into Fudge's good graces and stay there.

"I told Dumbledore I would never work for someone I respected so little as to spy upon him! That I would never betray my employer's trust, that no position was worth stooping so low. He then warned me that perhaps his own influence amongst the inquiry committee might not be as solid as he'd hoped, and that I might better rethink my career in the Ministry, just in case."

Charlie squirmed a little in discomfort. He'd never had an occasion to think twice about anything Dumbledore had asked him to do. To his knowledge, neither had Bill. But he could certainly understand why Percy had balked at outright spying. That Dumbledore had used such a heavy-handed manner to impel Percy to compromise his ethics bothered him a great deal.

"All I've ever wanted out of life was to devote myself to public service," Percy confessed. "I firmly believe that the thankless task of a civil servant is also a noble one that society would grind to a halt without such organization, no matter how trivial it seems to those on the outside looking disdainfully in." His eyes narrowed. "The old bastard had me up against the wall, and we both knew it.

"I did what he wanted slunk back to Fudge with my tail between my legs but the bubble of Dumbledorian admiration had quite burst for me by then. I dropped his name as frequently as I could within Fudge's hearing but in a consistently disparaging way not that this was any great stretch for me. I told anyone who would listen that despite our family's long connection with the Hogwarts' Headmaster, I wanted to be my own man. Again, this was hardly a falsehood.

"Fudge fell for it hook, line, and sinker. He'd made me a Junior Assistant by the end of that June. As expected, our esteemed Minister began pumping me for information about Dumbledore immediately. And as instructed, I fed him whatever he wanted to hear." Percy rubbed his temples, his tone a guilty twinge.

"Fudge was an unmitigated arse," Charlie offered by way of absolution. He had no real idea what had become of the fool since leaving office, nor did he care.

"That's what I kept telling myself at the time," Percy ruefully agreed. "Kept rationalizing away all the lies, trying to convince myself that Fudge deserved to be duped by someone he trusted rather than convinced of the error of his ways, that the subterfuge and sabotage was all for a greater good.

"Then Dumbledore insisted I raise the stakes. He'd heard some rumor that I was under suspicion, supposedly. He told me to prove my false-loyalty to Fudge by severing ties with the rest of you, arguing that to do otherwise would leave me open to accusations of being a double agent. Which was, in fact, exactly what I'd fucking become."

"Are you bloody serious?" Charlie spluttered, stunned by the revelation. The most divisive event in the history of their family had been at Dumbledore's bidding?

Percy glared out at nothing across the expanse of lawn. "Thing is, Mum and Dad were never made privy to that little detail of The Plan. I never meant for the row to go as far as it did. I tried to warn you all about Dumbledore's manipulations, hoping one of you would question him about me and find out the truth I was forbidden to reveal. Of course I'd known Dad was right all along that Fudge hired me in hopes I'd funnel information about Dumbledore and his supporters, including all of you. I'm neither barking mad nor a complete moron!"

Percy drew a deep breath before he continued. "But such was my reputation amongst you that none of you questioned my actions or trusted my motives."

"Not true," Charlie insisted, an upwelling of guilt threatening to choke him. "Mum did. She kept telling everyone that none of it made sense. That you wouldn't just abandon us without a reason. But we didn't listen. I'm sorry for that, Perce. Really sorry."

Percy looked at him through the corner of his eye. "Don't get me wrong I'm not blaming any of you, really. Nor do I imagine I'm such a consummate actor as to have so convincingly pulled off a complete reversal of personality. I'd been a pompous arse to you all for so long, why would you expect anything different, much less give me the benefit of the doubt? But I never would have said those things to Dad... Never imagined Dumbledore wouldn't have somehow let you all know what was really going on..."

Percy blinked fiercely for a few moments, gathering himself, before continuing the story. "I was there at Harry's trial, you know Fudge brought me along as a scribe. I was so worried for Harry, but I couldn't let it show or else risk my position. Then Dumbledore swooped in, made his usual speech, got the charges dismissed, and swooped out, leaving us all agog in his robe-billowing wake. I'll never forget waking up that morning to his Patronus, reminding me not to acknowledge him, or Harry, or... or Dad.

"I hated every moment of that wretched autumn and winter that followed the trial," Percy growled. "I funneled information to Dumbledore mainly about Umbridge's mission and her connection with Fudge. But I began to wonder then if some of what Fudge was spewing might not have been on the mark. That perhaps Dumbledore was acting for his own gain, maneuvering in his own grab for power, or at the very least working to shore up what he had. Having experienced firsthand Dumbledore's manipulations

and secrecy, some of Fudge's accusations rang rather true."

"Is that why you sent that shitty owl to Ron, warning him away from Harry?" Charlie asked. "You really believed Fudge was in the right? *How could you? Knowing Harry's testimony about You-Know-Who returning was true?*"

"Partially," Percy admitted. "I did suspect Dumbledore of ulterior motives at the time. But I also knew the scope of Umbridge's orders that she was sent to ferret out Dumbledore's supporters, Harry first and foremost among them. I was more worried about what might happen to Ron if he was standing right next to the target, you know?"

Charlie nodded, having come to the same conclusion more than once during the war in regards to Ron's seemingly dangerous friendship with Harry.

Percy continued, "I was also aware that, along with everyone else working in Fudge's office, my correspondence was being spied upon at that point. The man was beyond paranoid, and I knew my making a last ditch attempt to turn my own brother away from Dumbledore's pet would help substantiate my faux-loyalty."

"Admittedly, by that time, I was rather cynical about both sides of the coin. Fudge, while possibly accurate regarding Dumbledore's motives, was completely off the mark regarding his denial of You-Know-Who's return and the danger posed therein. And Dumbledore was asking a hell of a lot of me. I hated the necessity of my never-ending duplicity, hated how much pain I'd caused you all, and blamed him for it. I wasn't sure either of the two devils deserved my respect, much less loyalty."

"But you did it," Charlie said, suspecting Percy was owed a debt of thanks he'd likely never get. He found his respect and admiration for his brother increasing quite a bit that evening.

Percy took another long drink. "I learnt several very valuable lessons that autumn the most important one being the discovery of who really gets things done within a government. Department Heads and other such high-ranking personages like to think they're responsible for the world turning round on its axis, but in my experience, they at best only direct the decisions being made, and that's only on a good day with every aspect in perfect alignment. But those of us low- and mid-level grunts, us bureaucrats and yes, I know the word is synonymous with 'git' we cogs in the machine are what drive it forward... or bring it to a standstill." His eyes twinkled wickedly.

"Aha," Charlie chuckled. "I think you might just be a Weasley after all, mate."

Percy snickered somewhat proudly. "I also discovered the value of fraternization during those months," he then added in a decidedly impish manner more befitting a younger twin brother. "Spending time with my peers had never really interested me much before. I'd always preferred to be in the presence of my superiors and therefore make the most of the opportunity to learn from them. When I started socializing with the other younger assistants in the office, I was mainly driven by loneliness. But I quickly realized how much information could be gained from them."

"How very cloak and dagger of you," Charlie quipped.

"Not nearly so," Percy insisted. "There's nothing terribly clandestine about meeting a few blokes at a pub for a bit of disgruntled chatting over a pint or two. Or commiserating over a long, tiresome week with a pretty girl on a Friday evening, blowing off a little steam." Here, he paused to add a smug wink. "But if a fellow kept his ears open, occasionally he'll learn a tidbit or three."

"Well, now, that certainly sounds like a life of hardship," Charlie needled him, taking a stab at lightening the mood. "Booze, mates, and women, you poor wretch. You've just described what nearly every bloke I know looks fondly back upon as his heady days of young bachelorhood."

"I suppose it was some small consolation for the loss of my family," Percy said softly. "Some of those people I still count as dear friends today. But I would've traded the entire Ministry to have been back in all of your good graces." He took a long, thoughtful drink. "It nearly killed me to send Mum's jumper back unopened that year," he said. "Worst Christmas ever, hands down. Spent the entire time alone in my flat, pathetically drunk and wallowing in my misery, ruining the day I ever got caught up in Dumbledore's horrible web."

"Sorry, Perce," Charlie offered, patting his brother's shoulder. He suddenly felt very guilty for his years of avoidance of such family celebrations. He was the sort of man who preferred solitude and quiet, and despite his mother's annual invitations, he'd never bothered returning until last year. But Percy's pseudo-self-enforced separation had clearly affected him deeply.

Percy took a deep breath and straightened up. "The thing that really put me off Dumbledore was when Dad got attacked by the snake right after the hols. I was absolutely livid that the ruddy old ponce had risked Dad's life on a mission right there under my bloody nose. I'd known absolutely nothing about the Order taking it in shifts to guard the entrance to the Department of Mysteries. I couldn't believe the bastard's temerity, expecting me to blindly trust him and do his bidding when he didn't trust me with the smallest clue about anything else going on! And then... and then he forbade me from seeing Dad at St. Mungo's, insisting he was in good hands, and my mission was too important to compromise," Percy spluttered.

He took an angry drink from his bottle and continued in a slightly calmer manner. "When Umbridge summoned us to Hogwarts late that winter, I'll admit I was somewhat eager to see Dumbledore get a bit of comeuppance. And when it came to light he'd been creating an army of students and put Harry at the head of it"

"You know that's not how it was," Charlie corrected him. "Ron said the idea for that came from Hermione, actually."

"So what?" Percy snapped. "You were a prefect! You know how Dumbledore was like, forever anticipating every problem that ever arose in that blasted school! You cannot tell me our beloved Headmaster didn't know it was going on, and he did nothing whatsoever to dissuade those children from putting themselves in unsupervised, significant danger. The whole thing made me seriously reconsider what the hell Dumbledore thought he was playing at. Maybe Umbridge and Fudge, as odious as they inarguably were, might've been right about him."

"But they weren't," Charlie insisted.

"No, they weren't," Percy sighed, visibly deflating as he agreed. "I realized my own folly when You-Know-Who attacked the Ministry. If nothing else, my faith was renewed in Dumbledore's ultimate goal, of not the entirety of his methods. I'm ashamed I ever put any stock in anything Fudge ever said or did. He was a weak, greedy man, and I hope to God I never let something as empty as power corrupt me like it did him."

"You won't," Charlie assured him. "We bloody well won't let you."

Percy smiled in wry appreciation. "How very comforting to know."

"You landed on your feet after that debacle, as well," Charlie mused aloud. "One might say you've an uncanny knack in surviving your superiors."

Percy winced. "Once again, I suspect my surname had everything to do with Scrimgeour keeping me on. Now don't take this the wrong way, but some of what I said about Dad's reputation in the Ministry was true: back then, he was viewed as something of a harmless, non-ambitious bumbler in the best of lights. But he was also regarded by most as Dumbledore's man, through and through. Scrimgeour was an Auror, for Merlin's sake it wasn't hard to imagine he planned to keep an eye on the Hogwarts' Headmaster through me."

"Caught in the middle of it all once again," Charlie grumbled sympathetically, thanking God he hadn't been asked to do anything like it. He'd've gone mad in Percy's shoes for any number of reasons, certainly.

"I was used to it by then," Percy claimed bitterly. "And anyway, the stakes were undeniable: You-Know-Who was back, and it was up to the Ministry to stop him. Unfortunately, Scrimgeour had no better plan to do so than Fudge. I, too, can manage to look furiously busy whilst doing absolutely fuck all."

Percy stared off in the distance. "Dumbledore summoned me to meet him in person that summer. At some Muggle teashop in York, of all places. Told me to wear a disguise. He looked ruddy awful then, with that gruesome dead hand of his. He warned me that You-Know-Who would undoubtedly launch a coup d'état, more likely

sooner than later. He suggested that I was in a perfect position to observe the Death Eaters' machinations from within the Ministry. I argued my position sounded rather precarious in that case, thank you very much, and I'd prefer to tender my resignation beforehand. But he simply chuckled as if I were making a particularly childish joke. He recommended that I do whatever it took to hold my place within the Minister's office, no matter who might occupy it.

"And what am I to do then, if You-Know-Who's successful in his bid to become Minister?" I asked him. "Improvise, my dear boy," he laughed. "Percy shook his head. "Ruddy bastard," he grumbled.

"So, what did you do?" Charlie prompted.

"I *tried* to mitigate some of my boss' more egregious mistakes, for one thing. Sometimes I wondered if Scrimgeour's solution to the Death Eater problem was simply to lock everyone up. I managed to keep a few innocent people out of Azkaban, but my efforts certainly were a drop in the bucket compared to the number going in on flimsy if not thoroughly trumped-up charges. But he didn't make it terribly easy to do the man was at least as paranoid as Fudge, though for different reasons. Turned out he was right to think those around him would be his undoing."

"Poor bastard," Charlie muttered.

"Yes, well, while his heart was arguably in the right place, Scrimgeour was inarguably riddled with faults," Percy said. "He was constantly interrogating me about all of you, convinced you were hoarding vital information regarding the key to defeating You-Know-Who. What did I know about Harry? Or Lupin? Or Dumbledore? Was McGonagall second in command, or Moody? How did Hagrid figure in? I'll wager he had just as many Aurors tracking suspected Order members as Death Eaters."

"Fucking hell!" Charlie exclaimed softly, remembering his meeting with Tonks in Berlin. *Though that was during Fudge's reign, not Scrimgeour's*, he corrected himself. It was sad to think the Head Auror he'd fought alongside with during the riot at the World Cup had made such a poor Minister of Magic.

"I presume you were informed of our ill-fated visit to Devonshire at Christmas that year?" Percy snickered.

"I was," Charlie returned wryly. All his siblings' reports had detailed Scrimgeour's harassment of Harry in an effort to bolster his own reputation, as well as Percy's less-than-fully-heartfelt welcome back into the Weasley fold. His mother's owl was the only one that included even a smidgen of happiness to have seen Percy again.

Percy snorted. "What an unmitigated debacle that was," he muttered. "The only good thing to come of it was that my chilly reception finally convinced Scrimgeour of my pariah status within the family. He eased off his constant interrogations of me after that."

The two brothers were silent for several moments before Charlie quietly said, "We missed you at Bill's wedding."

"I doubt that very highly," Percy replied tersely, then sighed. "I certainly would have preferred to be there with you all that day, no matter what a row it would have stirred, rather than where I was."

"Where were you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I was *there*," Percy whispered, a long-buried wave of remembered fear sweeping back to haunt him. "In the bloody office when they hauled Scrimgeour away. They came charging in, wands drawn they wore no hoods or masks, but there was no doubt in my mind who they were. They dragged him off in chains *in bloody chains!* and no one ever saw the poor bastard again.

"They held us there for hours. We were hostages, for all intents and purposes no communication was allowed in or out. A few of us later sussed out that everyone else in the Ministry that day was either one of their own or Imperiused. It was some kind of miracle Kingsley managed to warn you at all."

Charlie knew that whatever part of the tale would come next, they'd be venturing into territory no Weasley ever spoke very candidly about. The months that stretched between the wedding/coup and the final battle had been dark, trying times filled with fear and constant risk. Ginny and her friends had led a mutiny of sorts at Hogwarts, Ron and his mates had lived hand to mouth on the lam neither of them discussed the events freely with others. The remainder of the family had all had their own Order missions: sabotage, reconnaissance, recruitment, various other sorties even the comparatively innocuous-sounding job of hosting meetings and preparing refreshments would've earned Molly a cell in Azkaban (if she'd been captured alive, that is).

"It was as bad for you as it was for the rest of us, wasn't it?" Charlie asked softly.

"I wouldn't go that far," Percy replied equally softly. "I was never hunted, never harassed, never persecuted like the rest of you. I was a pureblood wizard ensconced in the puppet Minister's office as a Junior Assistant. I was being watched but no more so than anyone else. Nobody believed anymore that I was affiliated with the Order especially none of you."

After a moment's pause, he said, "That was probably the worst part about Dumbledore's death for me, anyway. He'd been my only remaining connection to you all, tenuous as it was. There I was, sitting in Thicknesse's office, practically in the center of it all... and I had no one left to deliver my information to. No way to warn any of you what was coming."

Percy seemed to shake off the sense of melancholy then and replace it with determination. "So I did what was left to me: I cultivated my reputation for blindly following the letter of every law and encouraged my cohorts to do the same, effectively mucking up many of our government's more disgusting decrees within the molasses of our bureaucracy. We secretly coordinated our efforts to 'lose' critical files for weeks on end and blame each other until the web of deceitful finger-pointing was so tangled they lost their way, chronically mis-scheduling appointments and meetings, generally making asses of ourselves when it came to getting forms completed and documentation registered."

Charlie found himself grinning, envisioning the chaos caused by Percy's efforts. "Well done you," he chuckled.

Percy smiled a bit, too, recalling his little rebellion with pride. "A few of us concocted a plan to appropriate some half-blood birth certificates that were no longer being used, if you get my meaning, to help out desperate folks who could put them to much better use. It's next to impossible to forge one completely, but you can nudge a few of the facts when you know an excellent forgery spell... You know, I really must thank George for that some day."

"I'm sure he'd be pleased, but... how...?" Charlie marveled.

"I caught those two at it back in school forging new excuses and hall passes out of recycled old ones and made them tell me how they did it. At the time, I was more concerned with discovering a way to distinguish the counterfeits from the valid ones, but the spell proved its worth to me that year, make no mistake."

"That was a heroic thing you did for those people," Charlie praised him, easily imagining how the falsified pedigrees prevented families from being rent apart, enabling schoolchildren to continue their education. "You should be proud."

But Percy, instead of puffing up like usual whenever praise was directed at him, shook it off. "We could never keep up with demand. I worried that if we produced too many, we'd attract suspicion and put everyone in jeopardy. We took only the direst requests. I still feel horribly about all the people we said no to back then."

"But you were being sensible," Charlie argued. "If you'd been found out, then no one at all would be helped."

Percy smirked. "Sensible... or cowardly? I could have risked more. *I should* have"

"You can't let it eat you like this, Perce," Charlie counseled. "You did far more good than you give yourself credit for, I'll wager."

A quiet settled between them then, and both men drained their bottles of butterbeer in the silence.

"Did you do things you were ashamed of? During the war?" Percy asked very softly.

"Not ashamed of, no," Charlie replied honestly. "The stuff Dumbledore asked me to do... none of it ever resulted in a crisis of conscience. But then, I was so far removed from everything the entire time. Maybe he set me the simple task of recruitment because he reckoned that was as much as I could handle. You, on the other hand, he had much higher expectations of and for good reason."

Percy grimaced. "But you didn't fail miserably"

"Neither did you!" Charlie insisted. "And believe me, it was some kind of miracle I delivered what few reinforcements I managed despite months' worth of lead time."

"But you pulled through during the critical hour! And you don't have a mountain of regrets piled up behind you in the process."

"Everyone has regrets, Perce. If not about the war, then something else."

"Even you?"

"Even me." *And no, I don't want to talk about it, so don't ask* The unfortunate situation with Ileana walking a tightrope of trying to maintain a friendly relationship while she continually pressed for something more or his failure to tell his family what Sasha really meant to him: none of these things ranked high on his list of things to boast about.

Time to change the subject. "I've always wondered how you managed to turn up at the battle the way you did."

Percy smirked. "It started several months prior, actually. See, the Christmas before the battle proved nearly as depressing as the first one I spent apart from you all. I was morosely ruminating on the insignificance of my war effort, my life in general. I wondered how much longer we would be able to keep on with our petty little resistance several of my friends and co-conspirators were under investigation, a few of them had disappeared completely. I was beside myself with worry about you all, especially Ron, and yes, even for my own miserable hide. I eventually dragged my maudlin carcass out of my flat, out of London altogether, and somehow found myself leaning against the bar of the Hog's Head."

"Here in Hogsmeade?" Charlie confirmed.

Percy nodded. "The very one. In what was very nearly a drunken stupor, I confided to no one in particular what a damn shame it was to be an informant with no one left to report to. And in a prodigious stroke of luck, the estimable Mr. Dumbledore hustled my sodden arse into his most moderately dingy room, sobered me up, and offered to act as my liaison to what remained of the Order."

"Hang on... Dumbledore?" Charlie cried softly, worried for his brother's sanity. "You saw his ghost?"

"That would be Dumbledore the Younger," Percy chuckled. "I am speaking of Aberforth, not Albus. And a very clever, very brave fellow he is, I must say. He instantly believed me when I explained what his brother had asked of me, bless him. And we both agreed that my reputation as a turncoat would otherwise taint my information if anyone in the Order suspected I was the source. So he agreed to be my go-between, in effect laundering my inside information."

"Well, fancy you with all your Black resourcefulness on display," Charlie playfully teased.

"Mustn't forget my dogged Prewett determination," Percy quipped. "Let's give credit where credit's due."

"I suppose so," Charlie laughed.

"Anyway, our arrangement lasted throughout the winter and spring leading up to the final battle. I'd pass along what I knew about Death Eater targets, any particularly worrisome new legislation, some possible weaknesses. In return, he kept me abreast regarding the safety of my family and promised to notify me when anything major developed, for we both assumed that, at some point, Harry would have to make a stand and fight."

"The prophecy," Charlie murmured.

Percy nodded. "I know it sounds ridiculously sentimental, but when I finally met up with everyone in the castle that night present company excluded, of course I was so overwhelmed with joy to simply lay eyes on them all again. I begged them to forgive me for ever doubting Dumbledore and for allowing them to think I'd turn my back on them even for a moment. And then Fred... Fred was the first to welcome me back. Can you believe it?"

Charlie nodded, but only because he'd heard that bit from several different witnesses to the reunion. "Have you told any of them? What you've just told me?" He suspected Percy hadn't otherwise, he'd expect their younger siblings to treat him far better. Regardless, he'd personally be making a point to demand it of them anyway, ignorance notwithstanding.

Percy shrugged. "Mum knows... well, not all of it... but a fair portion."

"You ought to tell them," Charlie suggested. Then he scolded himself for butting his nose into Percy's business like an overbearing elder brother. *And you've set such an excellent example of transparency and trust, haven't you?*

"The subject's never really come up," Percy stated, indicating that particular avenue of conversation was over. "And I don't plan on ever broaching it, really. I'm glad to have spoken with you about it, but you must believe me that I never intended to do so. What's done is done and best left in the past especially in my case. No use rehashing it over and over. Let's not turn into grizzled old war veterans who have nothing left but reliving those days. Let's move on."

"If you say so," Charlie conceded reluctantly.

"Speaking of moving on... I think George's better half is looking for some help dispersing the last entrenched remnant of the party," Percy chuckled.

Charlie turned to see their Muggle sister-in-law striding toward them with a clear purpose. "And she thinks we're to be the brute squad?" he grumbled teasingly.

"Speak for yourself," Percy quipped. "I'm obviously the brains of this operation."

Charlie snorted. "Brawn does not equate a lack of intelligence," he protested whilst flexing his arm and chest muscles menacingly. "I suggest you mind your manners, you Bowtruckle-necked parchment herder."

Percy rolled his eyes. "Is that what impresses the witches on your little mountaintop? You'll have to try a little harder here in civilization, brother. Your lizard-brained humor leaves a bit to be desired, I'm afraid."

Charlie laughed, enjoying a bit of brotherly banter. He couldn't remember a time when Percy just let himself play along instead of taking every teasing word deadly seriously. Whatever it was that had happened to him... to them both... to them *all* during the war, he decided the changes were by and large for the better. The whole experience certainly clarified one's priorities, if nothing else.

"Thanks, Perce," Charlie chuckled. "It's been really good catching up with you."

Percy's teasing sneer softened into a real smile. "Me, too, Charlie. Me, too."

Aug-99

Chapter 20 of 28

Charlie has officially hit his limit.

Chapter 20

August 1999

* * *

"What about you, Charlie? Ever going to spend as much time with a woman as you do a dragon?"

Charlie shook his head with a smile. "Not likely," he laughed. "Dragons have better dispositions, I find." This response elicited more guffaws and a few murmured agreements. George & Annie: An Unofficial Biography, Chapter 46

* * *

With an aggravated flick of his wrist, Charlie gathered up his clothes that had lain scattered on the floor. They folded themselves in midair, queued up, then arranged themselves in his satchel. He *could* keep things tidy when he was of a mind to not for nothing he was Molly Prewett Weasley's son but was a pure slob at heart. He wondered if this aspect of his nature signified anything more than petty, adolescent rebellion against her on his part.

Displeased to have brought his mother to mind once more, he redoubled his packing efforts. Toiletries were the next victims of his pique. One at a time, he caught them as they zoomed toward him from the bathroom. When his razor nicked his finger, he grouchyly swore to grow a beard in retaliation.

"Going somewhere?"

Sucking on his cut finger, he glanced sideways to see Percy saunter into the room they'd shared for the holiday. An offshore breeze billowed the canvas sides of the magical tent as his brother sat on his cot.

"That'll cost you a shiny Galleon or three," Percy mused aloud when he didn't reply, leaning back and looking more smug than concerned. His knitted hands cradled the back of his head.

A small price well worth the cost to escape this nightmare Charlie grumbled to himself. Percy was right: he'd have to pay a rescheduling fee to get his Portkey switched to an earlier departure, but he really couldn't be held responsible for his actions if he had to endure another round of his mother's matrimonial scolding or another conversation centered around currently the most amazing things on Earth: babies. Drooling, squalling, leaking, shitting infants had completely taken over the minds of at least half the adults present on this godforsaken campout on the Devonshire seaside.

"Don't care," he muttered.

Percy checked his watch. "At least wait until tomorrow morning. It'll seem less petulant on your part."

Charlie whirled around on him. "I'm being petulant, am I?"

An amused smile quirked Percy's mug. "Rather."

Charlie shoved his satchel out of the way and flopped onto the bed. Running his hands through his hair in frustration, the recollection of his mother's voice rattled through his head once more: "Isn't it about time you transferred back to *Ddraig Cymry*?" she'd asked in her typical commanding way. "Now that all this war effort nonsense is over, there's no more reason for you to stay so far away any longer."

"No, Mum," he'd sighed for the hundredth time. For some reason, she refused to understand that while Dumbledore may have gotten him the position for ulterior reasons, Charlie'd accepted it with the intent of making it a permanent career. Romania had never been a temporary move in his mind. He wished she could take some pride in the fact her son worked at the largest, most prestigious dragon reservation in the world instead of constantly nagging him to return to a backwater in Britain.

"My life is at Ridgebit," he'd said firmly. "*Ddraig Cymry* is great, but it would be a professional step backward."

"However will you meet a nice girl to settle down with there?" she'd whinged.

"Romania has witches too, Mum."

That was the one that had cut the deepest, he reckoned. He'd bit his tongue rather than tell her the truth *I'm not interested in women, see*. For ages now, he'd rationalized that she'd had enough stress, enough grief in her life without him adding to it. And now that Bill and George had started their families, now that Ron's and Ginny's weddings were foregone conclusions, she'd made it clear how very disappointed she was in his failure to accomplish either goal. More than ever before, he was convinced at this point that the truth would completely wreck her.

"Did you hear the news about Morna Everwort and Simon Hexall getting married? Wasn't she in your year at school?" his mother had pressed just moments ago, her aim transparent.

"A year behind, I think," he'd answered through gritted teeth.

"Well, there you have it, don't you?" Molly had huffed. "You're not getting any younger. All the good ones are going to be taken soon."

"I'll try to remember it's a race, Mum," he'd sassed on his way out of the room. He granted his exit had been childish, but when a grown man's mother insists on treating him like a disobedient child for not saddling himself with a wife and family, she ought to expect precisely that sort of reaction.

"She's pulling out all the stops this go," Charlie grumbled to his brother. "Why can't she just leave it be?"

"Because she cares too much," Percy countered. "She's our *mum*. She only wants to see us all settled and well cared for. You've no good reason to get so wound up about it."

"I can take care of myself," Charlie insisted, feeling like a pure toad for behaving so peevishly. After all, his mother's love was as unquestionable as her maternal badgering was predictable, and he strongly suspected most of his indignation better ought to be directed at himself rather than her. He simply had to tell them all about Sasha at some point, didn't he?

Percy sighed with what sounded like both sympathy and exasperation. "Look, if you want her off your back, try telling her a bit of what she wants to hear."

Charlie's defensive hackles rose. Just what was Percy driving at? "Which is?" he growled.

"Just tell her that you're putting yourself out there. That you're dating but simply haven't found the right girl yet."

"Is that the line you've been feeding her, then?" Charlie snapped, half angry at Percy's intrusiveness, half fearful he'd somehow guessed his secret before he'd gathered the courage to come out. "Or doesn't she bother haranguing you to get married already?"

"For Merlin's sake, man, why do you think I brought Bridget along with me to this?" Percy confessed under his breath.

Charlie's eyebrows shot upward in surprise. "I assumed you were... erm... well, why did you, then?"

The sly smile on Percy's face was something new to Charlie's experience entirely. "Don't get me wrong Bridget's a lovely girl, and I thoroughly enjoy her company."

The smug, leering expression made it clear precisely what aspect of her company Percy was referring to, and Charlie felt a little queasy at the thought *Perfect Prefect Percy? Playing the field?* He wondered for a moment if he'd somehow fallen into a bizarre alternative reality that made every logical thing no longer make sense.

"Who's to say something might or might not happen between us at some point in the future?" Percy continued with a nonchalant shrug. "But for now... we have an understanding."

Charlie was really confused now. *An understanding? What's that supposed to mean?* Back in his day, it meant going steady, at the very least.

But Percy rolled his eyes either at his elder brother's stupidity or anachronistic expectations. "It's strictly casual. All the girls I date... as well as most of the blokes I know... we all treat it the same way. There's no cause to live like celibates, by any means, but what's the rush to settle down?"

Certainly some part of Percy's argument made sense not that they could ever employ it with their mother: there was no arbitrary urgency to marry and start a family, and this was especially true in Charlie's case. The part about casual sex in the meantime was worrisome, though. Charlie granted he harbored somewhat old-fashioned ideas when it came to commitment and sex certainly compared to the free-wheeling, love-'em-and-leave-'em notoriety of dragon keepers but he hoped Percy was taking precautions to prevent any harm coming to himself or his partners.

Percy lay back on the bed once more, looking perfectly content, staring at the canvas ceiling. "Bridget's done an excellent job this weekend keeping Mum off my back, don't you think? I owe her something nice for this. Maybe a nice bouquet of blue roses... or dinner at The Runcible Spoon, perhaps..."¹

"But you want to, eventually? Settle down? If not with this girl, then with some other?" Charlie asked hesitantly.

Percy shrugged. "Sure. Eventually."

"But I don't!" Charlie whispered conspiratorially, wondering just how far he'd let this confession go. "Not ever!"

Percy shot him a look, completely taken aback.

Okay, perhaps not the full confession, then. "I'm really pleased for the rest of them, honestly. George and Bill especially seem very happy. But Merlin's knobby kneecaps, all they talk about is babies and mortgages and such! If I hear one more story about how many nappies they go through in a day, or a week, or a month, I'll bloody scream." His infant niece and twin nephews were admittedly entertaining in small doses, and he was glad for his brothers' domestic bliss after so much tumult during the war, but seeing their lives focused exclusively on those tiny tyrants, everything else turned upside down, only reinforced his own staunch commitment to eschew procreation.

"Can't argue with you there," Percy conceded. "They do drone on about all that rot, don't they?"

"Ron and Ginny are hardly better," Charlie whinged. "As if the two of them spending every moment literally wrapped around their current romances isn't bad enough, Mum coos and cuddles them so. She's so bloody eager to induct Hermione and Harry into the family right and proper."

Only twice did he manage a semi-interesting conversation with any of them about Auror training or Quidditch, subjects he found far more engaging than actual engagements proved to be. Percy and his girl had nattered on about assorted Ministry arcana, which he wouldn't know anything about even if he cared.

"Forgive me for interrupting what I'm sure is a truly stupendous rant you're about to launch into, but you sound a tad jealous," Percy needed him.

"That must be it," Charlie snorted. He shoved his satchel to the floor for no purpose other than to punctuate his little snit. "You've got me bang to rights there, Perce."

Percy laughed. He rose from his bed, then, to Charlie's surprise, sat down next to him and laid a brotherly hand on his shoulder. "It'll happen for you one day, Charlie," Percy counseled him. "When you're ready."

He looked down at the slender, soft hand on his shoulder, looked at his slim, pale brother who'd never done a day of physical toil in his life. Never had Charlie felt so out of place, so misunderstood, so uncomfortable in what should have been a familiar and welcoming setting: surrounded by his family. He knew in his heart that they loved him or, at least they loved the person he used to be, the person they thought he still was, even if they didn't know the man he'd become. He knew they only wanted his happiness, even though they couldn't recognize (or wouldn't believe) he already had it.

What the hell am I doing here?

"Thanks, Perce," he sighed, unwilling to argue the point. What was the use? They couldn't comprehend his desire for a life of adventure and risk working with dragons, couldn't appreciate his love of quiet and need to be left alone what on earth could ever convince him they'd understand his love for Sasha?

No, his mind was set. He couldn't keep taking all this time off from work. Ghenadie hadn't complained about it yet, but that mattered little. Spending the week at the Burrow after the war was unavoidable, the subsequent long-weekend trips back for his mother's birthday and Christmas were in some ways expected and excusable, the three days in Britain in observation of the battle's first memorial appropriate. But that should have been enough: as far as he could see, everyone was now moving on after Fred's death. There was no more call for him to be here so much.

That's it then. No more trips back here. He'd only come for this family seaside reunion because George had practically twisted his arm about it if it had been anyone else doing the asking, he'd have refused. Resolved now that his future absences would be the best for all concerned, he decided to heed Percy's suggestion and wait until morning to leave. *I'll tell them something about being called back, then make my excuses at Christmas. And hopefully, that'll be the end of it.*

1. Totally stole this name from a restaurant I loved in college. [Click here](#) to visit their website. Also, naturally [blue roses](#) are a sort of Holy Grail for Muggle rose breeders

roses lack a blue pigment gene.

2000

Chapter 21 of 28

A nosy visiting researcher gets on Charlie's nerves.

Chapter 21

2000

"There are ten breeds of dragon, though these have been known to interbreed on occasion, producing rare hybrids."*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, Dragon*

"Newt Scamander is completely full of shit," Dr. Merlin Miller grumbled.

"How so?" Charlie asked. He still found the fellow's name so very odd. But the American half-blood had explained his astonishing given name by comparing it to the popularity of Jesuses amongst Hispanics all over the world. It had been bestowed upon him by his Muggle father and witch mother in tribute rather than with blasphemous intent.

"He's so typically, myopically Euro-centric," Merlin said. "More than half of the magical species he deigns to recognize are of European origin or so he claims, anyway. The rest of the world accounts for only forty-six percent of his ridiculous book!"

"It is a British book intended for a British audience," Charlie reminded him. Merlin's criticism of Scamander's seminal work was a common one heard in international circles. And while he couldn't really quibble about the statistics, it was also well known how overly sensitive American wizardry tended to get whenever they felt slighted.

"Scamander never could stand any dissent or criticism which is why he blew his first job mediating house-elf issues *Fantastic Beasts* is just more of the same. He left a minimum of a dozen magical draconians out"

"You and I both know there are massive arguments on what constitutes a draconian species," Charlie countered, leaving off arguing about the house-elf jab. Nobody who knew anything firsthand about Scamander's first Ministry position would say a word to contradict his assertion he simply didn't enjoy office work. *And who could blame him?* Charlie silently opined. But conspiracy theorists had plenty of other hypotheses, including the one Merlin was spouting.

But Merlin cut him off before he could complete his argument. "Wait a minute... I stand corrected... He refers to them as 'rare hybrids,' so I suppose that covers it, eh?" He rolled his eyes. "The idiot just chose to pretend they don't exist. Sticking your head in the sand when confronted with a problem seldom solves it."

Charlie struggled to quell a smile at the sight of the vociferous little man. Slight and pale the very embodiment of a stereotypical effeminate intellectual Merlin looked so very odd decked out in what he referred to as his "clean suit": gleaming white coveralls and a medieval-looking hood that covered him from head to shoulders with only a balaclava-like opening for his face. In addition, he wore a bizarre helmet with a clear faceplate that dropped down while he was working. Latex gloves and elastic-edged fabric coverings for his shoes completed the ensemble. He'd explained the get-up was necessary to protect his samples from being contaminated, but to Charlie, he looked for all the world like a skinny, scientific knight-errant armed with a micropipette instead of a lance.

Their discussion was taking place in a similarly odd building of temporary construction. About the size of a large shed, the exterior walls and roof had been hastily constructed of fireproof stone. Inside lay a second, slightly smaller room entirely constructed of a hard, clear plastic. Merlin stood before a stainless steel contraption he referred to as a 'laminar flow workbench,' laden with myriad little plastic tubes. A table nearby held an assemblage of Muggle electrical equipment, more racks of blood samples, and other Muggle scientific accoutrements (with not a cauldron in sight). Charlie sat on a stool on the opposite side of a divider curtain made of soft plastic, his hair, clothes, and skin covered with disposable paper versions of Merlin's outfit.

"How would you classify Flame-Lizards and Fire-Breathing Serpents, then?" Charlie asked, genuinely interested in the fellow's research. He'd been working closely with Merlin for nearly a month now, helping him to collect blood samples from every dragon on the reservation. Ridgebit boasted the world's most extensively documented population (nearly a century of records were housed in the visitor center) as well as the most varied collection of species: truly a gold mine of data for a dragonologist.

Merlin paused from his work for a moment to gesture toward his metal and plastic boxes with blinking lights. "This has the potential to tell us not only how all extant dragon individuals are related to each other, better enabling reservations like yours to prevent genetic bottlenecks, but also how each species is related. And it'll shed light on the even bigger questions, too. Are dragons actually living dinosaurs? If not, from which ones are they descended? And how are Flame-Lizards and Fire-Breathing Serpents related to them?" Excitement and enthusiasm bubbled in his voice, and he patted one of the machines proudly. "I don't know the answers yet... but I will." He turned to look at Charlie. "This is ground-breaking work we're doing, Weasley."

Charlie nodded. It really was a fascinating project. In addition to the ten recognized breeds of dragon, ten more species of Flame-Lizard and three kinds of Fire-Breathing Serpent existed in various mountain ranges worldwide. Significantly smaller than true dragons ranging in size from rhinoceros- to alligator-proportions Scamander had simply (and very controversially) ignored them all. Theories abounded regarding what these species truly signified. Some claimed they were related to dragons based on their reptilian features and fire-breathing abilities. Others insisted all were distinct clades of magical reptile, theorizing flammable exhalation was an example of convergent evolution.

Flame-Lizards, for the most part, looked and behaved like small dragons, albeit with a huge range of unique adaptations. A birdlike mouth (Russian Beaked), a bifurcated, arrow-tipped tail (Persian Twin-Tail), pseudo-hair (Mongolian Maned), and chameleon-like camouflage ability (Pacific Crested) were just a few of the astounding variations. Charlie had long been particularly entranced by the Yucatánian Crowned, a venomous creature bearing a topknot of feathers that one wizarding ethnobiologist posited served as the basis for the Aztec's Quetzalcoatl myths.

But Fire-Breathing Serpents were an even trickier set of beasts: while the Anatolian Short-Leg and Indian Hooded varieties still bore vestigial, tiny legs along their serpentine bodies, the Australian Rainbow Serpent was completely legless. All three slithered along the ground on their bellies, but the Anatolian was fully winged and capable of flight while the Indian had a large cobra-like neck hood that enabled it to glide through air and water both. How were these three creatures related, if they were at

all?

He shifted his focus back on the little scientist. "Tell me again what those contraptions do," Charlie prompted him, never tiring of hearing the barely-credible explanations.

Merlin placed his hand on a small appliance perched on the table beside him, an expression approaching paternal pride on his face. "This is the Eppendorf Mastercycler, a DNA amplifier. Using the polymerase chain reaction, or PCR, it makes vast numbers of copies of each sample organism's signature DNA." Then he pointed at a cabinet-sized machine next to the table. "And this is the Applied Biosystems 3700 capillary sequencing machine. It decodes the DNA base-pair sequences using gel electrophoresis."¹

The words sounded perfectly magical to Charlie. After all, Merlin mixed tiny droplets of dragon's blood a well known potion ingredient mixed it with some other reagents in tiny plastic tubes (not with mortars and pestles or cauldrons, though), stuffed them into these Muggle gadgets, pushed a few buttons, and *voila!* Some lights flashed while the machines hummed, then out popped the answers on another foldable, lighted screen Merlin called a laptop.

"And this was all your parents' idea?" Charlie asked.

"Not quite," Merlin replied patiently. "My mother always fostered my interest in magical creatures growing up, and my father strongly encouraged me to pursue a college education." He paused, smiling to himself. "They met at Harvard, actually. My mom and dad." Then he grew serious and focused again. "They're both supportive of my attempts to partner non-magical research techniques with magical subjects, but my research is entirely my own."

A quiet settled then. Over the hiss of the ventilation system, Charlie listened to the sound-suppressed racket of the generator outdoors, supplying this little room with the necessary electrical power to run the machines. He watched Merlin work with an economy of motion and an almost feminine grace, rapidly transferring tiny drops of stuff from one container to another.

His name, his research, and the Muggle electrical equipment weren't the only intriguing things about Merlin Miller. Charlie's mind had boggled when, after moving his personal gear into a guest room in keeper hut number nine, having known him and Sasha for less than half a day, Merlin had boldly announced over a bowl of stew that he was gay (not that it had been any great revelation the man gave off a strong, clear vibe at all times). Moreover, his tone of voice had practically dared them to make an issue of the declaration.

Charlie couldn't imagine what had inspired the man to be so open, so forward, *soreckless!* Every single keeper on the rez had a minimum of five stone and half a foot on Merlin: bigger brutes than he had been pounded to a pulp for making a veiled accusation, much less a confession. Nor did he come off as terribly magically adept his mind was brilliant, to be sure, but his wandwork left a bit to be desired. Why on earth would a pansy like Merlin advertise the fact he was a pouf inviting contempt at best, physical harm at worst when he had no real means of defending himself?

Ever since Freya's assertion a year and a half ago that "everyone knew" his and Sasha's secret, neither man had detected any difference whatsoever in any of their colleagues' behavior toward them. Neither Charlie nor Sasha discussed the issue with anyone else before or since, and no one had broached the subject of their relationship openly. In short, since no part of her claim had been substantiated over the ensuing time, they'd assumed she'd simply been mistaken (deciding that, considering the situation, she had no real reason to lie).

Even so, he'd immediately wondered if the decision to house the poncy researcher with them had been something of a comment on the situation! *I'll not have the likes of him sleepin' in my hut! Shove all the fags in there together...* Though upon further consideration, Charlie decided it was equally if not more likely because Merlin spoke nothing but English.

Merlin's voice penetrated Charlie's distracted thoughts. "Can I ask you a question?"

Charlie looked up to see Merlin passing through the soft plastic curtain divider. Once they were on the same side, he began removing his protective gear which only made him appear even smaller. "Of course," Charlie replied, beginning to divest himself of the disposable garments he'd donned earlier.

Merlin shrugged out of the hood and hung it up. "Why do you tolerate all the homophobia here?"

Despite Merlin's casual tone, Charlie went on full alert. Had any of the other keepers harassed him about being gay? "It doesn't mean anything, really," Charlie assured him, mentally making a note to keep a closer eye on the little fellow just in case any of the Ridgebit blokes got a little tetchy. He didn't seriously think any real harm would come to the man, but he was terribly small and weak-looking...

"Which doesn't mean anything: their disparaging remarks... or your self-respect?" Merlin countered, slipping out of his coveralls.

Charlie froze, stunned. "My self-respect?"

Merlin turned around to face him. "I'm not blind. I've seen the looks between you and Vasiliev."

Looks!? What looks!?

When Charlie did nothing but stare silently back at him, Merlin continued, "There's no reason to feel so ashamed of yourselves. It's a natural, biological difference, no matter what you were told growing up."

"I'm not ashamed of anything," Charlie growled, bristling. He had long since gotten over any personal qualms with being gay. He was who he was, and the happiness he'd found with Sasha far outweighed any reservations he might have otherwise had. He'd accepted his sexual orientation ages ago.

"Then why do you put up with it?" Merlin demanded. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."²

"Injustice?" Charlie snorted, feeling somewhat awkward to be put in a position to defend his colleagues for this, of all things. "Everyone here insults everyone else no one's singled out. It's nothing but harmless words. If you can't take it, then you sure as hell don't belong on the rez."

"Harmless words, huh?" Merlin parried. "That's the typical defense of closet bigots and racists the world over."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Charlie snapped. The men of Ridgebit weren't bigots and racists. He'd known them for years, knew what sacrifices and accomplishments made them who they were. Courageous and honorable men, all.

"Then why don't you and your lover come out to your open-minded and accepting coworkers?" Merlin dared him. Hands on his hips, he looked comically brave, stepping up to Charlie and going nose to chin with him. "You hide your true self because you're afraid of them, Weasley. Just another fag scared into the closet."

Charlie's first instinct was to throttle the man standing before him, so brazenly accusing him of cowardice. To grab him by the throat and slam him against the plastic wall and tell him precisely where he could cram his presumption. Any other keeper would've done far worse. But Charlie swallowed the urge just as quickly. Instead, he took Merlin by the shoulders and gently but firmly pushed him a step backward, reinstating his personal space once more.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Charlie repeated. He couldn't defend his colleagues' use of the words, their seeming intolerance, nor would he try. But the men themselves were decent, loyal blokes, clever and honest and dependable. He refused to stand by while Merlin Miller, this pencil-necked, coddled, come-lately intellectual, derided them.

"Then explain it to me," Merlin said, folding his arms across his chest. "Explain to me how 'fag' and 'queer' are really just terms of endearment. How those homophobes are

really supportive and understanding once you get to know them."

Charlie set his jaw. The truth was that he struggled to identify the boundary between keeping private things private and hiding his essential self. If anyone had asked him point blank, he wouldn't have denied the truth but he probably wouldn't have answered with anything but, "Mind your own fucking business," either. Not that he was afraid of potential reprisals: he was more than capable of defending himself.

It didn't help that he'd become convinced that telling his family or colleagues would simply lead to unnecessary stress on them. His mother didn't need yet another heartbreak, another reason to worry, another disappointment. And the network of trust and tradition amongst the keepers was already so taxed by the presence of Freya and Flaviu's infant daughter. It was such a big change to adapt to already, this temporary juggling of partnerships and scheduling (as well as the physical existence of a baby in a keeper's hut!) he couldn't imagine his fellow keepers being flexible enough to accommodate an openly homosexual relationship between two male colleagues on top of it. Mutual trust and reliability meant everything to the men who laid their lives on the line every day for each other. Charlie couldn't justify such selfishness on his part when the distraction could prove fatal to others.

Especially when he knew the 'fag' and 'queer' comments signified nothing truly malicious, even when directed at him or Sasha! That the men who bandied those words about had been raped as children, and their disparagement of homosexuality had nothing to do with him or Sasha as individuals and everything to do with their own trauma. He was confident his colleagues respected them personally and professionally, and counted several of them as dear friends in turn.

In short, what sense did it make to rock the boat? He had nothing to prove to this stranger and everything professionally and personally to lose.

"I'll explain this much to you," Charlie said softly, calmly. "My personal life is my own affair, and my relationship with you *strictly* professional." He stepped around Merlin and walked toward the door.

"You can't hide yourself forever!" Merlin called after him. "You owe it to the rest of us to come out."

Charlie paused in the doorway. Over his shoulder, he said, "You don't know me, Miller. And I sure as hell don't owe you a goddamn thing." Then he walked out into a cold rain.

"Wait! Weasley!" Merlin jogged outside to catch up.

Without altering his stride, Charlie said, "Tomorrow morning, seven a.m, we'll take you to get the next Horntail sample you wanted."

"But"

Charlie halted and spun around on his pursuer. "Not another word about it," he murmured warningly. "Not to me, not to anyone. This discussion is over. Are we clear?"

Merlin's shoulders sagged and he nodded, disappointed. "It's your decision. I'm not a blabbermouth. But I wish you'd reconsider"

But Charlie spun on his heels and strode off, fuming.

Author's Note: Ten species of dragon throughout the entire world all but two of them Eurasian seemed to me to be a rather paltry show considering all the magnificently remote mountainous regions of the world, many of which have spawned remarkably similar legends of dragon-like monsters amongst indigenous people. I just couldn't resist adding a few more. [Giants, Monsters & Dragons by Carol Rose](#) very much sparked my imagination here.

1. Admittedly, Merlin is very well-supplied, but all these Muggle gadgets and protocols did exist in 2000 and still do today, though they are much smaller, faster, and more efficient now. [PCR](#) and [DNA sequencing](#) details can be found by clicking on the hyperlinked words if you're interested. And I now want [a clean room](#) of my very own (for absolutely no good reason).

2. Quote from Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963*

2001

Chapter 22 of 28

You know what they say about all work and no play...

Chapter 22

2001

"...[T]he giddy delights of becoming a gay wizard." JK Rowling, Harvard Commencement Address, June 2008¹

Charlie led the way into the empty lift car and moved to the rear, Sasha a step behind him. They both turned and stood shoulder to shoulder as more people filed in after them, decked out in various styles of dress robes that often denoted their nationalities. The International Magizoology Colloquium, held this year in Kathmandu, Nepal, had attracted hundreds of attendees from all over the world, and nearly a dozen of them now pressed into the cramped space of the hotel lift.

"Seven," Sasha said, joining the chorus of riders announcing their floors to the magical mechanism that drove the car.

Charlie didn't mind the crowd too awfully, though. A lift ride was always short, and any excuse to press a little closer to Sasha was a welcome one. As interesting as that evening's keynote speaker had been, his attention had largely been captured by the devastatingly handsome Russian seated beside him at the dinner table, rather than an account of the latest attempts to domesticate Occamies (a noble effort, considering wild ones' silver-shelled eggs were being poached at extinction-threatening levels). Then, as now, the scent of Sasha filled Charlie's nostrils, the warmth of his body radiated through him as if his partner were a miniature bipedal sun. Little flashes of fantasy mingled with memory in Charlie's mind, tantalizing inspiration for what might come to pass later when they were alone.

Charlie and Sasha had been invited by the IMC's organizers to present their multi-year longitudinal study of Norbert(a)'s fostering experience as recently published in the *Annals of the Magical Reptilian Research Society*. Now nine years old, Norbert was due to make her third mating flight later that summer and had managed to produce three healthy, thriving Ridgies in the meanwhile the first completely human-fostered and subsequently wild-released dragon on record to do so. She was also a granddum: her first clutch had produced a single female egg, and NR-1996-e had produced a little female of her own, NR-2000-j. And while neither Charlie nor Sasha particularly enjoyed public speaking much, the invitation to travel to such an exotic locale and participate in such an illustrious conference (all expenses paid!) and brag about their draconian pride and joy was simply too great a temptation to pass up.

Professional prestige and scientific study were the furthest things from Charlie's mind at the moment, however. As the lift rose, stopping at nearly every floor, their fellow passengers disembarked in singles or in pairs, leaving those remaining to redistribute themselves and acquire more personal space. Charlie pointedly yet surreptitiously made no such adjustment counting on the crowd ignoring whatever was behind them and caught a hint of a wicked, knowing smile from beside him.

"Is an Occamy the same thing as a nāga?" a young black witch whose brightly patterned dress marked her as Central African, piped up in English, offering the question to anyone who would answer.²

When no one else responded, Sasha kindly explained, "There are many similarities between the two creatures, but an Occamy is entirely feathered, whereas a nāga is scaled."

"And a nāga can swim as well as fly," Charlie added. "It's considered a Fire-Breathing Basilisk. An Occamy isn't capable of either swimming or flame." He wondered for a passing moment how Dr. Merlin Miller's research on the genetic relatedness of extant draconian creatures was going he hadn't heard from the fellow or seen anything published by him since he'd left Ridgebit last autumn. The evolutionary relatedness of the two species sounded like just the sort of thing he'd be interested in, though.

The young woman's brow furrowed thoughtfully as if she were trying to picture the two animals, and she nodded slightly.

"If you'd like to learn more, the best place to start is Ganguly's *Magical Bestiary of the Indian Subcontinent*," Sasha offered.

"Excellent illustrations in the new third edition," Charlie concurred, noting with mild surprise that his English had picked up a faint Romanian accent. He wondered if his Romanian had done the opposite and finally lost its Anglo-clunkiness.

"Thank you very much, gentlemen," the witch said with a smile and a polite tilt of her head. "I will surely do as you recommend."

By the time they reached the seventh floor, Charlie began to wonder if the scrumptious Newari cuisine he'd filled his belly with at every meal for the past three days contained some form of aphrodisiac, and might it have a cumulative effect? Having grown increasingly horny throughout the lift ride, for no good reason he could determine other than his proximity to Sasha in an enclosed space, he struggled to smother the urge to reach out and touch him. His partner's arse was practically magnetic at the moment.

Or maybe it's a Pavlovian response, Charlie mused, watching Sasha shoulder his way past the remaining passengers when the lift had reached their floor. Each of the past three nights had been spent going at it like they had during their first summer spent together in old keeper hut number eight. And now that all the conference activities had finished for the evening... He followed a step behind his partner, politely bidding the African witch goodnight.

Charlie and Sasha strolled side by side down the hotel's corridor like nothing special was about to happen, like he wasn't dying to caress every square inch of his partner's body. Sasha's hands were stuffed into his trousers' pockets; Charlie's were clasped behind his back (reckoning it was as safe a place as any to store them one could keep hold of the other in case of mutiny). Their pace was casual, their silence companionable. Just two colleagues heading back to their separate rooms after a long day of conference seminars not looking anything like a pair of lovers eagerly dashing toward an interlude of intense passion.

Another couple a man and a woman strolled down the hall in the opposite direction. Their arms linked, the woman cooed up to the man as they approached, and the two of them shared an intimate smile. Charlie felt a flare of jealousy as he fell back to walk behind Sasha, making room for them to pass. He reminded himself that when push came to shove, even if the corridor had been deserted, he and Sasha wouldn't have walked down the hall together like that: draped over each other, maximizing bodily contact in public. Still, it rankled that it could *never* happen, that to do so would be to make a spectacle of themselves, that the pressure to abstain from all such public displays of affection was so great, thereby sparing any onlookers the terrible awkwardness of witnessing two men in love.

But then he averted his eyes to better prevent himself from glaring at the offending couple and his gaze came to rest on Sasha's perfectly masculine form: the broad shoulders Charlie ached to hang from, the deep canyon of a spine whose ridges Charlie dearly loved to run his tongue along, the magnificently firm arse he adored holding in the palms of his hands. These blazing, purified thoughts chased away the baser ones, and Charlie found himself biting his lips to prevent a feral grin from spreading across his face.

For some perverse reason, Sasha paused in the corridor before a large picture window, delaying their mutual gratification. Withdrawing his hands from his pockets, he set them on the railing just below the windowsill. As Charlie did the same, their pinky fingers grazed each other, and a jolt of fire ran through his body as they looked out over Durbar Square.³

Ancient and deeply magical, the wizarding portion of Kathmandu was hidden within the palace complex, accessed by stepping into a hidden alcove in Taleju Temple and falling through the enchanted wall there. From where they stood, a collection of triple-roofed buildings interspersed with domed and spired stupas spread out before them. Brilliantly painted Eyes of Buddha peered out in all directions like so many sentries, and rainbow-hued strings of prayer flags fluttered in the evening breezes. In the far distance, well beyond the lower, greener, rounder mountains, snow-capped and jagged Himalayan peaks attempted to pierce the moonlit sky.

"You are even more beautiful than this," Charlie barely breathed, so quietly that if Sasha had been standing another six inches away, he wouldn't have heard the declaration. The Russian language that had felt so clumsy on his tongue when he'd first learned it nearly a decade ago now felt smooth and natural. "The most beautiful thing I have ever laid eyes on."

"And you are my madness," Sasha murmured in reply. His head tilted ever so slightly toward Charlie in acknowledgement, and, gazing down at their hands instead of the vista, his little finger began to stroke Charlie's, heaping fuel on an already explosive fire burning within. "My lovely insanity, afflicting mind and body and soul."

"I need you so much," Charlie confessed in a whisper. It was no revelation in the nine years they'd spent together, such devotion and dependence as his was impossible to disguise. He'd gone so far as to confess it upon multiple occasions, even though the words were supremely redundant.

"I cannot live without you," Sasha said. As he dragged his gaze up from their hands to boldly meet Charlie's needy stare, he felt the heat of it rake upward along his torso. Sasha's dark brown eyes were now bottomless pools of black desire, and Charlie longed to plunge in head first.

"Say that you love me as much as I love you," Charlie quietly commanded, his heart pounding fit to burst. Sasha's expressive lips had hypnotized him now, and he stared slavishly at them, his will entirely sublimated to his hunger.

"You know I love you, Charlie," Sasha said, his soft smile adding sparkles to his eyes. He hooked his little finger around Charlie's and took a step backward, pulling him away from the window. Still walking backward, maintaining eye contact, he murmured, "Let me show you how much."

Sasha discreetly dropped Charlie's hand and spun around to face forward, the better to hasten toward their rooms at the end of the corridor. He looked gorgeous wearing his impeccably tailored robe the color of a midnight sky, with tiny flecks of silver woven into the fabric that glistened when the light hit them just right. Eschewing the fur-collared and -cuffed style popular with most Durmstrang alumni, Sasha had gone with a more modern, minimalist western European cut that perfectly set off every delectable bump of muscle on his body. Nor had Charlie's been the only appreciative eyes in the assembly room that night: several witches had batted their eyes and cast come-hither looks Sasha's way during dinner looks that had gratifyingly gone ignored.

The corridor was empty when they reached their adjoining rooms. Sasha murmured the password spell at his door, spun around as he flung it open, and the two of them collided, crashing through the threshold as the door shut behind them. Charlie's back hit a wall as Sasha's mouth claimed his, and the two of them seemed to be in competition to see who could hold the other more tightly. Heavy breathing and an occasional muffled moan were the only sounds to be heard for several minutes.

"You look like a moonbeam," Sasha murmured like low rumbling thunder as he nibbled Charlie's ear, making his knees go weak.

Charlie's robe was made of a pale grey silk in a traditionally English fashion, but he'd foregone the usual tassels and gaudy spangles commonly favored by British wizardry. Instead, a row of simple yet elegant mother-of-pearl buttons ran down his torso from his chest to waist, where the front of the robe cut away to reveal trousers of the same cloth. The paleness of the silk set off the warm tones of his summer sun-kissed and befreckled skin, the vivid red of his hair.

Sasha began to sink slowly to his knees. On his way down, he bit each of the buttons off one by one and spit them out like so many watermelon seeds. They clattered to the floor, to be *Accioed* and reattached tomorrow morning. With Sasha's help, Charlie shrugged out of the robe, and it fell in a heap on the floor at his feet. Then Sasha worked his trousers open while Charlie ran rough thumbs over his tanned cheekbones.

Charlie and Sasha had never had much use for buggery. They'd tried it a few times, of course. And while the sensation of burying himself to the hilt into his very own hot, tight Russian was admittedly heavenly, the converse of having a deliciously long, thick cock repeatedly rammed up his bung hole left something to be desired. It fucking hurt, in fact. What was the sense of causing the one you loved so much discomfort, they both wondered, when there was mutual enjoyment to be had via so many alternate avenues? Sure, numbing charms and lubes and other accoutrements could be employed, but that was a hell of a lot of unnatural interference with what should be, in their minds, a spontaneously enjoyable expression of trust and intimacy rather than an I'll-get-off-whilst-you-endure-it sort of experience. And so it was frothing, fondling, and fellatio for these two, in as many varied and inventive ways as could be devised.

What is it about hotel sex? Charlie wondered as a soft, wet, almost unbearably exquisite heat enveloped him. Why was it that a simple change of venue, a mere unfamiliarity with the décor managed to make the routine sex one had with the same long-term partner feel so much more passionate? Was it the hint of elicit-ness, the delicious savor of doing something one ought not to be doing in a place one didn't truly belong? Could it be a whiff of exhibitionism might not a stranger overhear them crying out in the throes of love and know *exactly* what it signified?

"So amazing," Charlie moaned breathily, his fingers sliding into Sasha's feather-soft hair. And when Sasha hummed in reply, the vibrations rippling through his lower body, something bestial twisted within Charlie. Fearing he was on the verge of fully losing control, he pulled Sasha back up to standing and kicked his feet out of his boots and trousers.

The urgency to strip Sasha of his clothing, to press as much flesh together as was humanly possible was nearing a frantic level. Charlie's and Sasha's hands interfered with each other's attempts to work open the garments without ripping them. In the end, Sasha gave up and roughly yanked the half-open and tangled robe up and over his head, flinging it across the room in his haste and frustration, then hopping out of his trousers. The men stumbled and spun clumsily toward the bed, crashing into it and each other.

Once horizontal, however, a subdued yet still ardent calm settled upon them. Arms and legs entwined, fingertips kissed and mouths caressed heated skin. The entire night lay ahead of them, demanding the mad, headlong dash of a moment ago be abandoned for a more measured, steady stoking of passion.

Now fully recovered from the effects of the Greek Fire curse, Sasha's body hair had finally been completely restored. He'd hated the long and uncomfortable healing process, and while Charlie'd enjoyed a few aspects of his lover's temporarily smooth skin (as well as the daily job of massaging in the healing salve), he much preferred Sasha's natural level of hirsuteness. He fairly reveled in it now, his hands delighting in petting the soft forest on Sasha's arms, chest, and torso.

Charlie caressed his lover's neck and shoulders, revisiting the familiar landscape of scar tissue and muscle he'd memorized years ago. He ran his tongue down the ridge of a long-healed gash across his chest, a pathway favored for its proximity to a nipple, tasting brawn and raw masculinity seasoned with a dark, brooding sensitivity. Meanwhile, his lover's hands explored his own body, eliciting waves of electric ecstasy and goose flesh.

Closer and closer together they melted, edges blurring, individualities fusing. Perspiration and breath blended as flesh glided along flesh, coaxing pulses to race and throats to moan and groins to throb. Lips and eyes and palms feasted upon skin, arms and legs clutched, pelvises grinded together.

Charlie began to doubt that his mind was registering his body's pleasure alone, convinced that a single human being couldn't produce so much euphoria was it possible to be so in tune with another person as to feel his bliss, too? When the moment of mutual climax hit him with a seismic force, it rattled bones and tore through flesh and mind both, leaving him weak yet sated, fulfilled yet drained, centered yet tethered to something outside himself. His consciousness drifted off then, contentedly floating in the brackish delta between sleep and alertness.

Nearly a quarter of an hour later, rousing from a brief doze and feeling chilled, he glanced at Sasha's little traveling clock. The time was nearing the very wee-est of the morning hours if he crept back to his own bed now, he might be able to get back to sleep in time to make it worthwhile before they had to wake for the final morning's meetings.

"Don't," Sasha whispered as Charlie began to stir. His arm hooked around Charlie's waist to emphasize the command.

"Sash, you need your sleep," Charlie scolded his insomniac partner. They almost never spent an entire night together any more. Keeper hut number nine frequently hosted visiting researchers they rarely had the place to themselves. And Sasha was an extremely light sleeper, waking at the little disturbances that were unavoidable when sharing the small beds of the hut and seldom falling back asleep easily. Topping this all off was the threat of being caught by another, possibly less understanding and discreet colleague than Freya.

"I need you more," Sasha argued, pulling him closer, holding him tighter.

Charlie didn't argue. He laid his arm on top of Sasha's instead. "A little while longer, then," he yawned.

"No," Sasha insisted. "All night."

"Sash..."

"I want to wake up beside you," Sasha murmured, nuzzling Charlie's stubble-rough cheek. "Or better yet, in your arms. Just once, I don't want to care about what someone else might see, or what they might think. We're thousands of miles away from everyone who knows us."

"And we're surrounded by strangers who still might talk," Charlie countered. "What if somebody here comes to the rez for research?"

"What if I said I don't care anymore?" Sasha grumbled. "What if I said I was sick of hiding? What if I said *wanted* the world to know I love you?"

Charlie patted his arm. "Then I would say you had too much to drink at dinner, love," he chuckled.

Sasha raised his head. "Are you ashamed of us? Of me?"

Charlie pulled away and rose up on his elbows. "Don't even joke about that. You know better," he scolded.

Sasha flopped onto his back, pressing his palms into his eyes, sighing deeply. "A lifetime is a very long time to pretend a lie."

"It's been less than a decade," Charlie offered, unsure if this fact helped or harmed the situation.

"Longer, for me," Sasha said. He reached out for Charlie, who shifted to nestle himself against his body once more. "Are we really going to keep up this stupid game forever?"

"No, only as long as you'll have me," Charlie parried, attempting to inject a bit of levity into the conversation.

"These are the same things," Sasha assured him, planting a kiss on the top of his head.

"I just don't see any way around it," Charlie said, replaying all the arguments in his head. The keepers all depended on each other, trusting one another with their very lives. "If we give the others a reason to fear us, or mistrust us no matter how invalid"

"People could die, I know," Sasha sighed, voicing their recurrent excuse, the boulder in their path they never could manage to find a way around. "I can't help but wonder, though... would it really be so divisive? Look how everyone is so supportive of Freya and Flaviu Ihrin's nearly two years old now."

Charlie thought about it. It was true that the disruption of Freya's pregnancy was less dramatic than anyone could've predicted certainly not the career-ending catastrophe she'd feared. And arranging for the child to be cared for while the two of them worked had been a challenge, but they'd recently found a reasonably workable situation by hiring a local cousin of Flaviu's for the job. For the most part, their child now barely registered a blip in the reservation's operating protocols.

Then again, Ihrin was hardly the first bastard child of a keeper, and Flaviu and Freya's relationship, such as it was, fell well within the boundaries of acceptable heterosexual normalcy.

What *would* happen if they boldly declared their love for each other to the world? Would the other keepers accept them with a modicum protest then quickly move on, like they had with Freya? Or would they be shunned for breaking the ultimate taboo amongst keepers, these manliest of men? Would they be persecuted? Driven off the reservation? Would they lose their friends, coworkers, careers?

And was the status of things now so very bad? When did they ever wish they could kiss or embrace in front of an audience? Would they spontaneously begin calling each other pet names, verbally flirting, dancing around homosexual innuendoes in public upon coming out? What exactly would be gained by telling everyone?

They'd never been asked point blank, and Charlie suspected that neither of them would, if pressed, lie in denial. But they were private people to begin with, after all, preferring a quiet sort of intimacy. Aside from the occasional itchy conscience about the technicality of lying by omission, Charlie was, by and large, perfectly content with the way things were. They were left to live and work and love in peace what more could they realistically ask for?

"Are you really willing to risk it all?" Charlie asked softly.

Sasha's slow, deep sigh was far more eloquent than any verbal reply could have been.

1. JK Rowling's copyrighted speech can be found in its entirety [here](#). Regarding the quote I used preceding this chapter, I could not have lifted it with less regard for context, and for that, I apologize profusely to Ms. Rowling.

2. The Occamy is JKR's invention, as far as I can tell (*Fantastic Beasts*). The [nāga](#) belongs to both Hindu and Buddhist mythologies, with some tweaking on my part.

3. [Durbār Square](#) is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And what location could be more magical than Kathmandu, Nepal?

12-Dec-02

Chapter 23 of 28

Charlie wakes up to a different kind of birthday surprise.

Chapter 23

December 12, 2002

"You have no romance in your soul, little bro," Charlie chided Ron...

"And you do, I suppose? Hiding out on a mountaintop with a herd of dragons brings out the love poet within, eh, Charlie?" Ron retorted.

"Leave Charlie alone. Even dragons need love, too," Bill scolded him jokingly. *George & Annie: An Unofficial Biography, Chapter 52*

On the morning of December 12, 2002 in the pitch-dark of precisely 5:07 a.m. Charlie was awakened by an astonishingly fantastic blow job already in full swing. Barely conscious and certainly not in full control of his faculties enough to belay the (hopefully not embarrassingly quick) imminent orgasm, Charlie moaned and shuddered his completion mere moments later. Still gasping in recovery, before he'd even managed the chance to ask, *Thanks, but what the hell was the Welsh breakfast for?* Sasha's head emerged from under the comforter and grinned.

"Happy thirtieth birthday, Charlie," he murmured quickly, then kissed him on his way out of bed.

Charlie managed a grunt in reply, his head still spinning a little.

A few moments later, Sasha bounded back into his room leading a small parade of packages. "I know you don't want me to sing to you," he chuckled as the gifts lightly settled onto the comforter above Charlie's lap.

"Thanks anyway," Charlie agreed, laughing. Among Sasha's many talents, carrying a tune was not one of them.

"Open the one from your mother first," Sasha suggested as he snuggled back down under the comforter.

Charlie obeyed, unwrapping yet another homemade balaclava (her traditional birthday present for him), this one knitted in a dark navy yarn, soft yet sturdy. He was pleased by such a practical gift and planned to wear it immediately already the wind outside was howling as the latest Carpathian blizzard cooked up its worst.

The next package this one from George contained half a dozen Muggle paperback fantasy novels and several colorful pictures of dragons made by his twin boys. George and his Muggle wife usually sent Charlie a few books each year, and he'd amassed quite a collection now of the fantastical dragon-themed stories. Despite the fact he lived and worked with the real thing, he'd generally found the Muggle stories quite entertaining (Muggles could prove surprisingly imaginative, he'd discovered).

Ginny sent an overlarge box of Honeydukes sweets populated with Fizzing Whizbees, Jelly Slugs, and Pepper Imps: all his childhood favorites. He popped an Imp into his mouth, then pulled a startled Sasha in close for a literally fiery kiss. Both men parted laughing, the residual smoke exiting their ears and nostrils.

After several more moments spent playfully thus, and with a sticky residue left on a nipple or three resulting from a thoroughly inappropriate use of a Jelly Slug, Sasha reached out for the final package: a slim, brown-paper-wrapped article whose proportions very much resembled a wall calendar. "Are you avoiding this one for some reason?" he needed him.

Charlie smirked. In truth, he would've liked to ignore it, tossing it directly into the bin where other similar gifts from past years had gone. But Sasha, for some perverse reason, wouldn't let it drop, pestering him to open it. Reluctantly, he tore into the paper.

As expected, his brothers had once again renewed his subscription to the Witch of the Month Club. Charlie made to pitch the calendar toward the bin, but Sasha summoned it back. As he slowly flipped through the months, the almost completely disrobed ladies pictured therein began seductively removing the final vestiges of their scant clothing. Charlie looked away, knowing with dread that another dozen skin mags would follow during the ensuing months.

"Why do your brothers do this every year?" Sasha asked softly.

"Because they're fucking gits," Charlie growled. Then he elbowed his frowning lover. "I told you there were benefits to being an only child, and this is one of them. No stupid presents from idiotic brothers for you."

"But why *this*?" he pressed.

"They think it's terribly funny," Charlie offered, grumbling. All of them were married men now even Percy, his last fellow holdout against the institution of matrimony, had finally caved and taken a bride September last, leaving Charlie the sole remaining Weasley bachelor.

"What is funny about looking at naked strangers?" Sasha asked. "It's sad, if you ask me. I feel sorry for the families of these women exposing themselves for money."

"You're preaching to the choir, love," Charlie said, extremely unwilling to debate the contentious relationship between pornography and feminism at the moment.

"Do you think it might mean something more?" Sasha asked carefully. "Something a little... malicious?"

Charlie understood the question he was really asking: *Do you think they know our secret?*

"My brothers dearly adore taking the mickey out of everyone, but I don't think they ever mean any real harm." Charlie sighed as he fell back onto his pillow. "They imagine that I'm terribly lonely here, and that this sort of thing is what I ought to pine for."

"They've been listening to your mother too much," Sasha said.

"Yes, well, she does have a habit of constantly bangin' on about things and can be rather difficult to tune out," Charlie granted.

Sasha gave the facial equivalent of a shrug, conceding Charlie's point. Then he smiled smugly. "Ready for your present from me?"

Charlie smiled back. "Thought I already got it," he chuckled.

Sasha shook his head. By some sleight of hand and a well-placed Disillusionment Charm, he then produced a sizeable package from under the covers that Charlie hadn't noticed before. When Charlie accepted the foot-and-a-half-long thing from him, he recognized its solid weight heralded something significant.

"What the hell is it?" Charlie wondered aloud, poring over the leather-clad box, looking for clues but finding none.

"Open it and see, fool," Sasha pushed impatiently.

Charlie gave him a stern, searching look. Something told him Sasha had gone overboard this time.

Sasha rolled his eyes. He pointed at the little brass hinges, then mimed the lid opening with his hands. "It works like this, little one," he encouraged patronizingly, as if to a very young child.

Charlie shot a weak glare his way but did as he was told. Then he gasped at the sight of a gleaming dagger resting upon black velvet within. Made entirely of what he strongly suspected was Goblin steel, the blade was a modified hourglass shape that came to an unquestionably lethal point. The pommel resembled a fancy, winged *W*, and the hilt was split open, the negative space reducing its weight without compromising its strength. A decorated black leather sheath lay alongside it like a lover.¹

"Oh my God, Sash," Charlie breathed, running his fingertips along its length. He'd only ever dreamt of owning an actual Goblin blade, and this specimen... Well, it was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

"Do you forgive me now for your rude awakening so early this morning?" Sasha teased him.

"I don't know what to say," Charlie choked, stammering slightly, feeling the sting of tears welling up in his eyes. As overwhelmed as he felt, he couldn't escape the conclusion that, since Sasha earned an only slightly larger salary than he did (based solely on seniority), he must've tapped into his recent inheritance from his mother to purchase such an expensive gift.

Sasha's arm wrapped around Charlie's shoulders. "Promise me you'll use it in good health."

Charlie nodded, still unable to speak, then allowed Sasha to pull him closer in a sideways hug.

"I'll just go start the coffee, shall I?" Sasha announced a few moments later. He exited the room then, and Charlie knew, regardless of the pretense, that he'd been left alone to discreetly compose himself.

Breathing deeply, Charlie summoned self-control. There was no question he'd never be in a financial position to reciprocate Sasha's gift, so the best he could do was prove himself worthy of it. He dressed quickly, layering shirts and jumpers, long johns and lined trousers, doubling up his socks within his dragon hide boots in preparation to face the cold outside. Then he carefully threaded his belt through the slits cut into his new knife's sheath, marveling at the weapon's balance and lightness as he holstered it at his waist.

Sasha wore a pleased smile to see him wearing the dagger when Charlie joined him in the kitchen. Coffee, toast, and some warmed-up mutton stew awaited him on the table. "It looks good on you," Sasha said over the rim of his mug before taking a drink.

"Thanks," Charlie managed to say without becoming overemotional again. He meant to say more, but Sasha waved him off.

"It was my pleasure," Sasha replied.

Charlie knew that would be the end of it, so he tucked into breakfast.

"And now, it is my regrettable duty to inform you that your presence is required at Afumați tonight at eight p.m., whereupon you will be subjected to a surprise party in your honor," Sasha said with sympathy ringing clear in his voice. "Please don't take your fury out upon the messenger."

"Ah, fucking hell," Charlie groaned, letting his spoon fall into his stew, splattering the table.

"Sadly, I was unable to spare you from being subjected to this torture," Sasha said with a wince. "Which is largely the reason for your happy wake-up head I wanted you to enjoy at least some part of your birthday."

"Why does it have to be *there*, of all places?" he grumbled.

"Who do you think instigated the stupid idea?" Sasha retorted. "It sure as shit wasn't any of us."

Charlie pushed the bowl of food away, his appetite sapped. The prospect of attending any sort of party, much less as the guest of honor, was so far down on his list of favorite things to do as to be invisible. Top that off with the knowledge that Ileana Bălan would be the hostess for the evening, and Charlie's stomach twisted in nervous dread. She'd been pouring on the meaningful glances and come-hither body language for the last four years, convinced there was some metaphysical destiny meant for them because he'd "saved" her during the Battle of Hogwarts. Yes, she'd gotten herself backed into a proverbial tight spot, and he happened to be the closest available wizard to come to her aid, but that was all there was to it. They'd dispatched the Death Eater together as equals, but she'd insisted on telling anyone who'd listen how she owed her life to him ever since.

"My guess is you'll be getting quite a present from your girlfriend tonight," Sasha needled him.

"Don't you start," Charlie snapped. It was bad enough that the rest of the keepers teased him about Ileana's soft spot for him. This party promised to make the situation ten times worse, at minimum. "That settles it I'm not going."

"She's already strong-armed the rest of them with threats of calling in their bar tabs if they don't show," Sasha warned him. "None of them has the balls to piss off Ileana. And if we have to be there, you can bet your sweet ginger arse we're dragging you along with us."

"Fucking hell," Charlie groaned again, sounding utterly defeated this time.

Charlie went about his morning work in something of a distracted haze. He flew on his broom from lair to lair, making his usual rounds. He checked on several mating pairs, confirming the number of eggs being sat. He checked the ground beneath the openings for fresh scat, verifying that each female's mate had managed to bring her a successful hunt recently (if not, a few sheep from the reservation's herds would be delivered that afternoon). All the while, he ruminated on the events of the morning.

Sasha's gift was almost too much to absorb. As much as he loved the dagger, as moved as he was by his lover's generosity, he had to admit it irked him that he could never hope to match it. The balance between them hadn't been this one-sided in a very long time not since Charlie had been an inexperienced neophyte in the ways of love, in fact, had he felt so beholden. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that such had never been Sasha's intent, though: he'd only meant to express his affection with the artful weapon, not impress his superiority.

Next on his rounds, Charlie happened upon an empty lair of a virgin adolescent dragon out for a hunt. Touching down just inside the mouth of the lair, he began quickly scouting the interior for any useful shed items: bits of claws, horns, scales, the occasional tooth these and more could be collected and sold as potions ingredients, funding the reservation's efforts. While he searched, his thoughts turned down another troubling avenue.

Ileana's party loomed like a gallows before him. And the most infuriating thing about the situation was that he quite liked her as a friend. She was witty and genuine and, underneath the sharp exterior, nursed a kind and generous heart. He'd truly enjoyed their conversations only, they apparently meant something completely different to her than they did to him. He'd been very careful never to flirt, assiduously keeping to topics completely devoid of innuendo, but still she pressed ever closer, smiled a little too brightly, her looks lingered painful seconds too long. No matter what he did to gently discourage Ileana, she saw and heard only what she wanted to.

Unwilling to inadvertently lead her on any longer and seemingly unable to correct her misimpression without fully coming out to her, he'd spent the past year avoiding her entirely. Whenever the others invited him to join them at her pub, he found an excuse to stay away. Much to his chagrin, they frequently reported back the next day how she'd asked after him. He'd subsequently endured several rounds of teasing from them about his jilting her or stringing her along, frustrating him further.

What the hell am I gonna do tonight? he lamented. There'd be no avoiding her at the party, that was for certain. And it didn't take a divination orb to predict there'd be hell to pay, either from her or from his coworkers. Or both.

And then there was the inanity of his brothers' thoughtless gift. It was a double-edged sword, he supposed, that they knew him so poorly: the distance between him and his family (both literal and emotional) made it that much easier to shield them from the sordid details of his secret life. Then again, this was his *family* that he'd grown so distant from, so much so that they didn't even realize this most fundamental thing about him.

But that's exactly how you wanted it, idiot? he chastised himself. *Can't have it both ways, can you? You have to be open and honest with people if you expect them to understand anything about you.*

But what if that understanding drives them further away? he fretted. *Crushes them with disappointment? Hurts them?* This was the muzzle that forever held his tongue in check. What if declaring his sexual preference the most private thing about a person, in his mind destroyed his already strained relationships with his family, ruined his crucial relationships with his colleagues?

So where does that leave you, then? A thirty-year-old, gay-but-closeted dragon keeper whose family keeps trying to fix him up with women, hounded by a troublesome barmaid suffering a misguided crush

The skitter of small rocks tumbling down the slope behind him caught his attention, and he spun around just in time to get hit with a disarming spell. His wand clattered against the floor of the lair. Charlie's eyes searched the empty space before him, unable to see a figure or detect any ripple of Disillusionment. His hand reached for his dagger.

A voice rang out, unrecognizable and unintelligible, and the world went black.

1. A picture of Charlie's dagger (called "The Neptune Blade") can be found [here](#).

December 12, 2002 Part 2

Chapter 24 of 28

Vengeance proves cold and sharp.

Author's note: Please mind the chapter warnings. A Dark trial lies ahead for Charlie.

Chapter 24

December 12, 2002

"Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and, above all, those who live without love." Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Chapter 35

"Wake up, you miserable cocksucker," a voice growled. The Romanian words were choppy and heavily accented definitely not that of a native speaker. It was also deeply masculine.

A *foreigner*, Charlie thought as he slowly came to, every one of his senses timid and shaky *A man*.

A swift, hard kick to the ribs punctuated the command, making it all the more difficult to obey. Charlie grunted the only acknowledgement he would offer to the pain and slowly gathered his limbs under him to rise after his breath returned. It was at this point he realized the floor beneath him was rough stone.

"Fancy meeting up with *you*, of all the filthy, cock-sucking dragon-lovers," the man snarled. A foot on the back of his neck shoved Charlie back down. "I said wake up, not get up, you fucking moron."

"Do I know you?" Charlie rasped, rapidly blinking his eyes in an attempt to make the world stop spinning, trying to make out what he could in the dimness surrounding the glare of a glowing wandtip. He thought he registered rough stone walls around them judging by the echoes of sound, but the ceiling was nothing but darkness, too high to see. *A cave, perhaps?* It didn't feel like the adolescent's lair he'd been ambushed in, but he tried to wordlessly summon his wand anyway. Nothing happened.

"No, I don't imagine you know me," the man hissed malevolently. "But I sure as hell know you." The man increased the pressure on the back of Charlie's neck, throwing his not insignificant weight behind him. "And I know what you did."

What I did? Charlie began connecting the most obvious dots and assumed his attacker must be a poacher. "Thieves like you get exactly what they deserve," he parried. "You should've chosen a more honorable profession."

"You speak to me of honor?" The man snorted haughtily. "From where *I stand*," and he paused to press his foot against Charlie's neck even harder, threatening to choke him, "you are in no position to pass judgment upon me." The man laughed, and the diabolical sound chilled Charlie to the bone. "But your day of reckoning has arrived, cocksucker."

The pressure on his neck eased, and Charlie filled his lungs. In the next moment, he was hauled up into a seated position on the floor his attacker was strong, he'd give him that much. The man shoved him against a rock wall, cracking his head, and he saw stars.

"Don't imagine this will be quick or painless," the man sneered, his hand curling around Charlie's throat and his stinking breath making him want to gag. "Mercy isn't really my forte."

Charlie reached up with both hands, throwing all his weight behind the effort and grabbing for the man's arm and chin to force him off. But another shouted spell followed, and Charlie's entire body went rigid with pain.

When the spell was lifted, after what seemed like minutes but in all likelihood was only seconds, Charlie tasted blood and realized he'd bitten his tongue. The nerve-agony had been very similar to the Cruciatus Curse he'd felt at Malfoy's hand years ago at Bill's wedding, and this time, just as he had done then, he'd kept silent. Charlie'd been blessed with not only a high tolerance for pain, but also a dogged determination. He refused to give this lowlife poacher the satisfaction of hearing him cry out under torture.

In his weakened, wandless state, however, Charlie knew better than to think he could physically overpower his adversary at least, not at the moment. His best hope was to bide his time, conserve his own strength, probe for a weakness, then lure him in close. Surreptitiously, his hand crept toward his waist, praying the knife was still there.

A cold chuckle. "Looking for something?"

Charlie's heart sank to discover the knife was gone from his belt it really had been a futile hope his attacker had left him armed, he realized but was careful not to let his disappointment show.

"An awfully pretty thing, this," the man gloated, and a glint of steel pierced the darkness. "Who'd you have to fuck to get it?"

As Charlie's eyes began to adjust to the low light, he managed a better look at the man. He wasn't terribly tall, but bulky, exuding a general aura of unkemptness. He smelled bad; hygiene was clearly not a priority. In other words, a quintessential poacher.

"I'll wager your arse was sore for a while, anyway," he sneered, looming over him.

"Why are you here?" Charlie demanded, ignoring the homophobic slur and stalling for time. It was no great mystery why a poacher was skulking around a dragon reservation, after all. He eased himself back up into a semi-seated position, crooking his neck to look around.

Another chuckle. "Let's just say vengeance wasn't what I was in the market for, but I saw a bargain I simply couldn't pass up."

Something solid Charlie presumed it was the hilt of his dagger crashed into his temple, knocking him back to the ground. Blackness telescoped his vision down to a narrow tunnel, and the walls spun around him again. He was yanked by the shoulder and twisted onto his back. The man straddled him then, his entire weight pressing down onto Charlie's diaphragm, making it hard to breathe, and the man's knees pinned his arms, crushing them into the ground.

"Such a pretty, nasty thing," the man oiled, drawing the point of blade from Charlie's cheekbone to chin.

Charlie cursed himself for flinching, and the man laughed gleefully.

"That's more like it, bitch," he said, and Charlie felt the knife tip press into the soft flesh under his jaw. "I'd hate to go to all this trouble for nothing."

More cuts along his jaw and collar followed, none of them terribly deep, but blood dripped down behind his ear and neck, and each slice burned. His arms had grown numb

and his breathing a bit labored, but Charlie summoned all his strength, simultaneously kicking out with his legs and heaving his shoulders up in an attempt to throw the man off him.

It worked partially. Caught off his guard, the man half-fell, half-rolled off of Charlie, and a metallic clang announced the knife had fallen out of his grip. Charlie and the man both lunged toward the sound. Unfortunately, Charlie's reflexes were not quite as sharp as usual, and the man recovered the knife an instant before he could get there. Charlie had only another instant to try to scramble to his feet before another painful curse hit him broadside.

Through the agony, he heard the man shout into his ear, "Come on, you waste of your mother's cunt! Can't you put up more of a fight than this?"

When at last the curse was lifted, Charlie was left panting and bleeding on the floor. His vision wobbly, he forced his mind to cling ferociously to consciousness. Every extremity was on fire, and a welling nausea threatened to unman him.

"Not so tough all alone, are you?" the man growled. "All you dragon-loving pussies are alike, cowering together like so many sheep." He jerked Charlie's still throbbing right arm out away from his side. "How often does your mother weep with shame over her cock-sucking son, eh?" Kneeling, with both knees pressing into either side of the elbow joint, he forced his fingers into Charlie's, spreading them apart. "Give me her address. I'll send her this to remember you by." Then, with no warning, the blade came down, severing the smallest finger just below the second knuckle.

Charlie swallowed a howl of pain, breathing hard through it instead. His body and three remaining limbs strained and fought against the man's weight. The man backhanded Charlie with a fist, heaved himself up to standing, then landed a vicious kick to his gut, knocking the wind out of him.

"You are nothing but a filthy" kick to the ribs, "cowardly" stomp to the thigh, "-piece of shit!" The declaration was punctuated by a kick to the lower back.

Disarmed, bloody, and beaten nearly senseless, unable to work out any conceivable way to best his attacker alone, Charlie reluctantly decided to try summoning reinforcements. Cradling his mutilated hand, blood dripping from the missing finger, his other fingers felt around for the leather band from which the distress amulet hung. While his attacker paced, ranting about the contemptibility of dragon keepers as a race, Charlie feebly worked the leather thong between his fingers, fishing the amulet up and out of his layers of shirts. When they closed around the little metal tube, an audible sigh of relief heaved out of him, and he hoarsely exhaled the activation spell.

In the same moment, the amulet was ripped out of his hands, and a sharp jerk snapped the leather thong, tearing another wound into the flesh around his neck.

"What's this?" the man growled. "A little love token?" The man looked at it for a moment, then cast it aside. "Reckon I've already got a nice memento of this little visit," he sneered, and the knife glinted again.

Charlie didn't know whether he'd managed to activate the amulet before it had been ripped away. But he didn't have long to worry. Only a moment later, the hilt of the knife crashed down on the base of his skull, and the world went black once more.

Charlie had no idea how much time had passed while he was unconscious it might have been minutes or hours. He was careful not to move and therefore alert his attacker he'd come to. Instead, he listened carefully for any sounds that might tell him where the man was or what he was doing.

But it was all for naught. "I know you can hear me now, you pussy," the man snarled, his voice frighteningly close to Charlie's ear. "And if you think you're getting off this easy, think again."

Charlie was hauled to his feet, which were immediately bound in the spot by magical means. His wrists, too, were immobilized behind his back. Still woozy, Charlie listed to one side, nearly falling over before the man caught him by the arm and jerked him roughly back upright.

A bolt of green light cut through the cave's darkness, the glare of it nearly blinding him, missing Charlie by centimeters and grazing his captor's ear. The man howled in fright and pain.

"Surrender now and I might let you live!" a voice screamed.

Charlie's head jerked up. *Sasha!?* Then a wave of magic hit him from behind in the next instant, severing all direct contact with reality. His arms and legs were loosed now; it felt as if he was floating in a pool of blessed numbing bliss, looking at the outside world through a protective bubble, his pain-wracked body finally relaxing into comfort. A beautiful voice in his head ordered him to attack the interloper, promising him permanent deliverance from pain once he did. He looked out through the glass of his anesthetic-aquarium to find his quarry and saw a man who looked naggingly familiar.

Charlie's body took three involuntary, halting steps forward before his soul regained control. *It's Sasha! Sasha!* Even Imperiused, he could never bring himself to harm the one he loved best in the world. *No! Not Sasha! Won't hurt Sasha!*

Pain unlike any he'd felt before brought him to his knees, punishment for his disobedience. Shaking with the effort it took not to pitch forward, Charlie fought against the urge to scream. Even so, a soft keening sound escaped his throat.

"**CHARLIE!**" Sasha bellowed, horrified.

A dark purple light *Greek Fire!* Charlie hissed inwardly, recognizing the spell shot toward Sasha, who dove out of its path. His captor then released him from the Imperius-like curse and immediately yanked Charlie back to his feet, jamming the dagger up against his throat and taking cover behind his human shield.

"Drop your wand or he dies!" the man shouted.

"Let him go or you die!" Sasha screamed back.

Freezing in the winter's cold, his clothing sticky-wet with blood and chilling him, Charlie peered out into the darkness through the eye not yet swollen shut. Sasha stood before him there was nothing besides himself in the cave behind which to take cover with wand aimed at the little bit of his captor visible over Charlie's shoulder. Panic and regret filled him to see Sasha so vulnerable, and he cursed himself for activating the amulet.

The standoff lasted several eternal moments. Charlie barely even felt the knife pierce the skin under his jaw there was so much more pain everywhere else but Sasha hissed, grimacing.

"Stop!" Sasha cried. "Whatever you want, it's yours. Just don't hurt him anymore!"

The man snorted. "What makes this one so important to you?" he demanded. "He your lover?"

For an instant, Sasha's eyes left the poacher and connected with Charlie's. He saw the fear mingled with fury there, tainted with desperation. *No!* Charlie tried to shout, fearing Sasha's resolve, knowing what it meant, dreading his intent of self-sacrifice, but his throat only burned with more pain rather than producing sound.

Sasha looked back at the poacher, then nodded once.

No! Tapping a hidden source of strength, Charlie struggled to break free. An elbow connected, his attacker grunted, and the knife sliced deep across his collar. Grabbing a fist full of hair, the man reasserted his grip. Hooking his leg between and around Charlie's, he jammed his thigh up into Charlie's groin. "There's plenty more where that came from, whore," he spat into Charlie's ear.

The attacker directed his next words back at an agonized Sasha. "I knew it!" he yelled. "You're all a bunch of cocksuckers! Drop your wand, faggot, or your bitch is dead!"

Sasha spread his arms open wide. The resigned look in his eyes telegraphed his thoughts *I refuse to deny my love for you with my final breath.*

Don't! Charlie silently begged him, shaking his head before his captor yanked his hair tighter, immobilizing it. *Don't do this! Save yourself!*

Sasha's wand clattered onto the stone floor below. "It's true," he said in a calm, level voice, his gaze locked onto Charlie's rather than their mutual enemy. "I'm a cock-sucking son of a bitch, and I love you, Charlie Weasley."

"You shameless sons of whores," the man snarled. "You disgust me."

"No," Charlie croaked, watching Sasha take two horrible steps closer, his hands empty and arms held high in surrender.

"I love him more than my own life," Sasha declared, his voice strong and crystal clear, taking another step.

"No!" Charlie moaned. In his pain-induced delirium, his vision wobbled, and he imagined he saw movement in the darkness behind Sasha, but he chalked it up to wishful thinking. They were alone and about to die, and Charlie could think of nothing to stop it. This was all his fault.

The man laughed disdainfully. "So very touching. You both make me want to puke."

"I love him," Sasha repeated, inching ever closer.

The man suddenly realized the threat of Sasha's approach. "Not another step," he growled. Charlie felt the knifepoint at his back now, just below the ribs. "Or the bitch gets spitted right before your eyes."

"Let him go and take me instead," Sasha offered.

"I won't let you do this!" Charlie hissed.

"No!" the man barked. "The redhead's the one who killed my brother. For that, he'll pay with his life."

Finally, a clue! Charlie searched through his memory. He'd battled countless poachers over the years, but had only ever killed one: the beast who'd unleashed the Greek Fire curse on Sasha back in 1997.

"You've been misinformed," Sasha said. "Charlie doesn't kill. But I do. Perhaps it was I"

"You lie," the man snarled. "My men... the ones you sent to prison... they told me what happened. I'll believe them before I believe a lying cocksucker like you."

"I'm telling you they're mistaken. It was a heated battle, curses flying everywhere. Might've even been friendly fire... Maybe they lied to you to save their own hides."

"Shut up!" the man screamed, agitated now. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"One keeper's as good as another," Sasha pressed. "My life settles the debt. Let him go."

"It was me," Charlie's voice grated out, refusing to allow Sasha's offer of trade. "I remember it. I killed your motherfucking piece of shit brother."

His captor snarled, and the point of the knife twisted against his back, tearing through the layers of clothing. But to Charlie, the pain was welcome now. Any sacrifice was worth giving Sasha a few more precious seconds to live, perhaps escape. "How about I make you a deal, cocksucker?" he sneered, addressing Sasha alone. "After I kill him, I'll cut his dick off for you to keep."

"I swear to you and every god in heaven and hell, if you harm another hair on his body, I will rend you into a thousand pieces with my teeth," Sasha growled, his voice low and malevolent. "Now stop hiding behind him and fight me like a real man."

"As you wish," the man replied.

Searing pain ripped through Charlie's body as the knife plunged into the muscle of his lower back, tore through his gut, and the point emerged out his belly. His mouth dropped open in a silent scream, and his eyes rolled skyward.

"*Kólash!*" the poacher screamed, and the now familiar dark purple light shot from his wand¹

"*Moartea!*" half a dozen voices, including Sasha's, shouted into the night, and lurid green flashes filled the cave²

"I love you," Charlie breathed as he sank to his knees, praying Sasha heard him amidst the chaos that had erupted around him. Then his world went black and silent yet again an instant before he hit the ground.

1. *Kólash* = "Inferno/hell" in Greek (according to online translation source).

2. *Moartea* = "Death" in Romanian (according to online translation source).

Dec-02

Chapter 25 of 28

Charlie's the worse for wear, but Sasha's nerves are completely frazzled, and something's gonna break.

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution." Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, Chapter 17

* * *

Charlie drifted in and out of consciousness mostly out over the next several days (he wasn't entirely sure how many, exactly, had passed since his birthday). Many of the healing potions he was plied with in the meantime in particular, all those meant to knit his body back together caused at least as much discomfort as the analgesic ones relieved. But his mind was blessedly calm, likely prevented from reliving the recent nightmare by another of the cocktail of potions. During his brief periods of lucidity, however, he'd noted a few interesting observations.

First: he was recuperating in his own little bedroom in keeper hut number nine. The desk's top had been cleared of his usual work and was now crammed full of pots of unguents, bottles of potions, and rolls of gauze, and the desk chair was permanently occupied by Sasha whenever he wasn't hovering over Charlie's bed, that is, tending to his injuries. A small brazier had been brought into the room, rigged with an elaborate flue that diverted the smoke outside while filling the interior with luxurious warmth.

Second: he was clad in nothing but bandages, but they were quite extensive and offered a surprising amount of insulation even during these coldest days of winter. He largely did not mind his nudity, for while his mind occasionally registered others' voices, he never saw or felt anyone touch him but Sasha. For this, he was profoundly grateful.

Third: the slightest movement hurt, but Sasha's skilled hands had lost not one iota of their magical healing abilities over the years. It felt so wonderful to be in his care that Charlie was tempted to prolong his recovery by as many days as possible just to revel in those tender caresses. Simultaneously, he desperately wanted to ease away the agonized, fretful expression that had taken up residence on his partner's haggard face these days, so he resolved to forego such sensual selfishness and get up and about quickly.

At this moment, as Charlie straddled the boundary between asleep and awake, he became aware of an unusual variety of voices. What sounded suspiciously like a hushed argument was taking place right outside his door.

"What is she doing here?" he heard Sasha growl accusatorially.

"I'm through with being told to wait until he's better," a feminine voice hissed angrily. "I want to see him now."

"Should have known *you'd* be the one to bring her," Sasha snapped.

"She's worried," Boian protested weakly.

"We told you he was doing fine," his partner, Romolo, said, sounding defensive. And then he added, "And I told you this was a bad idea," under his breath.

"I want to see for myself," the familiar woman's voice insisted.

"Go home," Sasha demanded. "He's not ready for visitors."

"I'm not some mere visitor!" The woman's voice was growing louder, easier to identify.

Ileana!? Charlie blinked open his eyes upon finally recognizing her voice, now fully awake, only to find Sasha bodily barring the doorway to his room.

"And just what do you *imagine* you are, then?" he snarled.

Ileana stood toe to toe with the hulking mass that was Sasha. She wasn't a petite woman, but Sasha fairly towered over her. "If you would ever get out of my way, we could find out!" she barked. "You've interfered with us for years, Vasiliev, and I'll be damned if I put up with it another minute! Stop holding him back!"

Charlie heard the sounds of a brief scuffle, but Sasha stood unmoved in the doorway. He was stunned, though, to hear Ileana's misconception uttered aloud *She blames Sasha for my avoidance of her? What the hell?*

"Why do you hate me so?" Ileana whined. "What have I ever done to you?"

"Ileana, come," Romolo commanded softly. "We'll tell Charlie you were here, that you wish to see him. When he's ready, we'll come fetch you again."

"No!" she snapped. "I know better! You'll never bring me back because Vasiliev will forbid it, and you will do whatever he commands. I'm not leaving until I see Charlie!"

"No," Sasha said simply, definitively. "I will not allow *you*, of all people, to disturb him."

"Why do you continue to stand between us?" Ileana asked, crying with frustration now. "Are you so jealous of his happiness? Maybe if you stopped spending all your energy thwarting him, you might find a love of your own."

"As usual, you spout nothing but foolishness," Sasha retorted. "Go home, woman."

"He needs me!" Ileana cried. "He needs someone who loves him to care for him now! Let me in!"

"He is in my care," Sasha rumbled. "I don't need any help."

"But I love him!" Ileana yelled.

"You don't know the first thing about him," Sasha snapped.

"Charlie is mine!" Ileana howled.

"He is *mine!*" Sasha thundered. "And I will not suffer your misguided advances any longer."

A heavy, silent pause fell. Charlie held his breath, terrified. Throughout his convalescence up to now, he and Sasha had not spoken about what had happened in the cave. Sasha offered nothing aside from information about his course of treatment and soothing words of comfort. But as spotty as his recollection of those final moments was, Charlie had nevertheless pieced together that his captor had not been the only witness to their mutual declarations of love during the standoff. And now, the anxiety that had been held at bay for so many years blossomed into full-blown fear.

They all know! Freya's assertion, if it hadn't been true before, was most certainly valid now. What would happen to them? Would they be cast off the reservation? Were the other keepers just waiting for Charlie to heal before evicting them?

"What are you saying?" Ileana asked, finally breaking the ominous silence.

Sasha growled through clenched teeth, his voice low but firm, "Go. Home."

"For years now you've thrown yourself after a man who doesn't want you," Romolo added slightly more gently. "Why not try to find comfort in the arms of one who does? Boian, take her home."

"Ileana, please come with me," Boian pleaded, heartbreak and longing plainly evident in his voice.

Charlie winced. It had been all too easy to forget that while Ileana's attraction had been an aggravation and embarrassment to him, Boian had suffered an equal but opposite frustration. How maddening it must have been for him to have watched this woman's futile pursuit of his colleague, unable to get her to notice his own affection for her.

"The two of you?" Ileana hissed, ignoring the others' pleas. "You fuck each other!?" A second's pause. "And the rest of you... you do nothing about this?"

Charlie's heart pounded.

"What century do you think this is, you ignorant bitch?" Romolo sneered. "And what business is it of anyone else's if they do or not?"

Charlie's innards twisted and soared at the sound of Romolo's protective tone.

"Leave her be," Boian grumbled. "She's understandably shocked. Remember how you felt when you first found out?"

"Oh, how long?" Ileana whimpered, heedless of the others. "How long have I been such a fool? When did you poison him against me?"

"People are born this way or the other," Romolo informed her, sounding more sympathetic to her now. "You never had a chance, girl."

"And love is not a poison," Sasha added, quietly furious.

"Love!?" Ileana spat. "You call what you do with each other *love*!?"

Sasha straightened, rising up to his full, imposing height. "I do."

"As do I," Charlie announced, emboldened by his colleagues' no, his *friends'* defense.

Sasha spun around and took several rushed steps toward the bed, face contorted halfway between an angry scowl and concerned frown. "I feared all this racket would wake you," he fretted, apologetic and accusatory at the same time.

Ileana ducked a morbidly curious head into the doorway. Her sneer of disgust instantly transformed into sympathetic horror at the sight of him, bandaged nearly from head to toe.

"I'm sorry, Ileana," Charlie said, steeling himself to bear his penance, no matter how inadvertent his sin. "I should have said something sooner. I never meant to lead you on or to hurt you. I wanted us to be friends."

Tears openly coursed down the woman's face now, stabbing at Charlie's conscience. She shook her head slightly. "I'm sorry, too," she choked, then turned and walked quickly out of the hut.

"Ileana?" Boian called after her, clearly torn but remaining rooted to the spot.

"Go after her, fool," Romolo ordered him. "Take your chance while it's still there, before she sets her sights on the next unattainable bastard."

Boian cast an apologetic glance Charlie's way. Charlie nodded in encouragement, then bolted after the sobbing woman he'd been pining over for years.

"How are you feeling?" Sasha asked, staring at him intently.

"Fine," Charlie lied, waiting for the resulting pain in his head to ebb.

Sasha snorted, unconvinced, while Romolo laughed. Sasha rummaged through the collection of potions on the desk, pondering Charlie's next dose.

"You look like hell," Romolo chuckled, standing at the foot of Charlie's bed.

"He's been dragged through it and back again," Sasha snapped defensively.

"Don't get your knickers in a knot, doll," Romolo teased. "I never meant to imply you aren't a capable nurse."

"Feel free to take your silly bullshit somewhere else," Sasha retorted tiredly. "I have more important things to deal with."

"Erm, we just saw the pub keeper's daughter run out of here crying," Freya announced from the doorway.

"And the smitten puppy chasing after her," Skender added from beside her. "What gives?"

"How wonderful," Sasha grumbled, scowling as he fussed gingerly with the bandage around Charlie's head. "More sources of contagion have arrived."

Charlie smiled weakly at him.

"Ileana had a rather enlightening morning," Romolo informed the newcomers.

"Ahh," Freya sighed, understanding the implication a bit too immediately for Charlie's comfort. "Poor girl."

"The barmaid got what was coming to her," Sasha growled warningly.

"Damn," Skender lamented, "you mean we just missed the catfight between Sasha and Ileana over this sorry carcass?"

"Out!" Sasha roared. "Every single pestilential one of you!"

"Who had this month in the pool?" Skender asked, oblivious to the mortal peril he was wandering into. "Was it Viorel?"

"*Pool*!? What pool?" Sasha snarled as Charlie coughed and spluttered in shock, then hissed in a breath when his belly erupted with pain.

Propelled by Sasha's murderous glare, Romolo grabbed Skender by the arm and bodily shoved him out of the room. "We're leaving," he declared. "No need to hex us."

Freya rolled her eyes. "Idiots," she mumbled.

"And you need what?" Sasha demanded, turning his fury on her.

"No call to be so touchy," Freya scolded him, uncowed. "I promised Flaviu I'd look in on our Charlie today, is all."

"Mission accomplished," Sasha grumbled, reining himself in. "Now leave."

"Vasiliev, how goes it?"

Freya and Sasha both straightened up at the sound of the Head Keeper's voice, and Charlie made a pathetic attempt at the same. Ghenadie stood in the doorway now, arms folded across his chest.

Sasha cleared his throat and delivered his report to their superior. "Seventh rib, basilar, and zygomatic skull fractures have all been restored with Skele-Gro, but bruising and soreness remain. I strongly suspect he's still concussed, but the bed rest and ginkgo should correct that eventually. Contusions are all dosed with topical briony. Facial and neck lacerations are being treated with inula and calendula paste, as well as the severed digit; the lingual perforations appear to be healing fine on their own. The abdominal wound is responding well to *Oroxylum indicum*. I'm continuing a course of Blood-Replenishing Potion as well as a decoction of yarrow to counteract fever and boost the circulation. A combination of spikenard and chir pine oils seems to be alleviating the worst of the curse-induced neuralgia."

Charlie'd experienced every one of the injuries, but Sasha's detailed listing made them sound even more daunting.

"Prognosis still good?" Ghenadie asked gruffly.

Sasha nodded. "I think he's out of the woods," he sighed. "Time is the only thing left to try."

"How long?"

Sasha shrugged. "Weeks, at the very least. More likely a month or two."

"Sash, don't exaggerate," Charlie half-scolded, half-pleaded. He really hoped he wasn't as bad off as all that! "I can work through the aches and bruises."

Sasha turned to him, frowning. "Aches and bruises are the least of my concerns. Critical abdominal trauma is. Charlie, you *were* stabbed in the *back!*" He spun around again to face Ghenadie. "I shouldn't have to explain to either of you how grave such an injury is. Internal organs were seriously damaged. If he starts back to work too soon before they're fully healed"

Ghenadie held up his hands in surrender. "Weeks, it is. No sense in rushing forward only to harm yourself again and wind up back here. We'll wait."

"Back to work?" Charlie pressed for confirmation. "That's it?"

Ghenadie raised an eyebrow. "Unless you're thinking of retirement at the ripe old age of thirty?"

"No! I mean... erm... I want to keep working... here, with all of you," Charlie stammered. "I just thought... I mean, I was worried about..."

"Don't let a few scrapes scare you away from the job, Weasley," Ghenadie scolded. "We've had extra teams of patrols in the area lately, and no one goes out alone now for a while, but everything's been clear. No further sign of trouble."

"He means the pouf business," Freya chimed in softly, mildly amused. "I suspect he thinks we're only waiting for him to be healed enough to run them both off the rez."

Ghenadie pursed his lips, his eyes narrowing in irritation. "What kind of trolls do you take us for?" he grumbled. "I grant you Kopecky is as stupid as he looks, but none of us is blind."

No one's blind. They all see now. Charlie frowned in confusion. What exactly was Ghenadie saying? Were their years of deceit about to be punished?

Ghenadie bent over the bed and laid his hand gently on Charlie's shoulder. "Son, we've known you for eleven years. Far as I can tell, you've done nothing to be ashamed of during that time." He squeezed Charlie's shoulder lightly while turning to look at Sasha. "Every last one of us is proud to call you both our brothers."

Ghenadie moved toward the doorway, then paused. "As long as nothing changes, nothing's changed," he added over his shoulder. "Heal swiftly, Weasley, and never mind about silly things."

Charlie stared at the ceiling, his jaw clenched and his nose twitching in the effort not to tear up. *They all know. They really all know. And nothing's different!* And yet the apparent stasis was not a stagnation, but rather a positive, optimistic sort of thing: nothing had changed, but everything was different. No more dread. No more pretending. No more hiding. Charlie couldn't believe the feeling of lightness in his chest.

"That's my cue to leave, isn't it?" Freya said, stepping lightly out of the room after Ghenadie.

They listened to the last of the visitors leaving their hut, two pops of Apparition followed by profound quiet. Some coals softly tumbled into ash within the brazier, and the walls creaked with a blast of wind. Sasha shut the door to better keep the warmth in the room, and the latch connected with a tiny *clink*.

"See what trouble you stir up when you wake?" Sasha scolded him teasingly but no less worriedly as he slowly, tiredly turned around to face him. "Now go back to sleep or I'll drug you."

"In a bit," Charlie replied. "Let me process some of what just happened first."

Sasha nodded reluctantly. He selected a vial from the desk, relocated the chair closer to Charlie's bedside, then took a seat, straddling it backwards. Holding out the vial, he commanded, "Drink."

Charlie gave the suspicious vial a hard look.

"It's only yarrow," Sasha sighed. "You're due for another dose."

Charlie took it in his good hand his right was bandaged so much it resembled a flipper and drank it down. Sasha took the empty vial back, tucking it into his breast pocket.

"Where is it?" Charlie asked. When Sasha looked puzzled, he clarified, "The dagger. Is it lost?"

Sasha's face grew stony. Then, after seeming to debate with himself for several moments, he reached under the bed then quietly laid the birthday dagger, clean and perfect once more, on the bed beside Charlie's leg.

Charlie looked at it for a long minute, so lovely and lethal, then curled his unbandaged left hand around the hilt. It still felt as though it had been sculpted specifically to fit his palm. It was strange to think that this very thing had caused a good deal of the damage done to him: his own weapon turned against him.

"Tell me... what happened... after?" He remembered nothing between the moment he'd been stabbed and coming to in his bed sometime afterward.

Sasha looked Charlie in the eye, then at the dagger, then at the wall before answering. "We Apparated you back here." His jaw pulsed as he ground his teeth.

"We' meaning 'you,'" Charlie clarified.

Sasha did not contradict him. "I did what I could to stabilize you. You lost a lot of blood." His voice became halting, with odd pauses. "The wound... in your belly... it was too

much for me." He sniffed. "Ghenadie summoned a proper Healer from Comoara to attend you."

Charlie snorted at the word *proper*.

"Don't scoff," Sasha scolded. "Master Healer Costache charmed your belly back together. This kind of magical healing song is beyond me. Hours, he sang it over you as beautiful as any aria..."

Sasha's face screwed up tight, and he bowed his head just as a sob escaped. "That filth used my gift to hurt you! And I couldn't make you better!"

Charlie let go of the knife to take Sasha's hand. "Sash... none of this is your fault."

Sasha bent further until his rough, whiskered cheek rested against the back of Charlie's hand. "When I saw you there in the cave and you were a bloody fucking mess, let me tell you I thought I would go insane. I couldn't stand to see you in such a state, in so much pain," he confessed, angry and tearful.

Sasha stood abruptly and paced over to the desk. "If I'd only gotten there sooner..." He gripped the edges of the desk, rattling the pots and vials there. "If I'd killed that abomination the moment I arrived..."

"You saved me," Charlie insisted. "There in the cave and here in this room. Don't ever imagine otherwise."

Sasha pulled a deep breath into his lungs, closing his eyes and nodding slightly, patronizingly, unwilling to argue. He bent his head and glared at the medicinal potions. "I meant every word I said back there," he whispered, the lack of volume dispelling none of the fervor of his words. "I love you more than my life. I would gladly die for you a hundred times over."

"You think talking so lightly of your death does anything to comfort me?" Charlie rasped, wishing he could grab Sasha by the shoulders and shake him. His tone had some effect, though, causing Sasha's head to jerk up and a confused look to settle on his face. "How do you think it made me feel to watch you risk yourself on my account? When you surrendered your wand to that creep, I wanted to kill you! Why didn't you wait for the rest of them to arrive before you ran in there like a bloody idiot?"

"This is what a partner does," Sasha cried, startled and defensive. "What every keeper knows is expected of him."

"And are we nothing more than colleagues or partners?" Charlie challenged him.

"Are you saying I should've let you die?" Sasha asked, barely restraining himself from snapping at his patient.

"How would you feel if the roles were reversed?" Charlie countered.

Both men regarded each other thoughtfully for several moments.

"This is a paradox," Sasha conceded.

Charlie nodded slowly, but his head ached in protest nonetheless.

"And we are at an impasse," Sasha said.

"It would seem so," Charlie agreed. He knew Sasha was thinking the same thing he was: life on the Ridgebit Reservation was full of risk, and neither man would ever voluntarily give up the careers they loved. Nor would either one admit to seriously reconsidering whether to ever activate their distress amulets again not if it meant risking the other's life.

Tiredly, Sasha rubbed his eyes and face with his palms. "You're healing well," he said by way of changing the subject. "Headed toward a full recovery. Which means I'll not have to owl your mother about this, thank God for small favors."

Charlie smiled weakly at his joke, suppressing a shudder at the thought of Molly Weasley fussing over him, then yawned genuinely the past hour of alertness had taken its toll, and he felt as exhausted as Sasha looked. "At least I got out of that bloody surprise party," he mumbled, closing his eyes.

Sasha's subsequent belly laugh felt like a tonic to Charlie's soul, and the brightness of it stayed with him as he drifted off into a deeply restful, healing slumber.

Author's note: a special thank you belongs to "Gray's Anatomy" (the book, not the TV show) and the incredible website motherherbs.com for Sasha's medical and herbalistic healing knowledge.

Jun-03

Chapter 26 of 28

Another Weasley invasion.

Chapter 24

June 2003

"And that doesn't seem unusual to you? That you've never seen him with a girl or heard him talk about one?"

..."Maybe he just hasn't met the right woman yet, is all," [George] offered.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe he never will," Annie replied.

"That's a harsh thing to say!" he cried, surprised by such a callous comment coming from Annie. He had expected her to be far more sympathetic to his brother's plight.

"Not at all!" she exclaimed defensively. After a short pause, she continued somewhat hesitantly. "George, you know that not everyone prefers a companion of the opposite sex, right?" George & Annie: An Unofficial Biography, Chapter 54

* * *

"Nea Charlie spune, 'Atingeți stomac:"

Twin boys and their equally ginger toddler sister began rubbing their stomachs, giggling with pride in their cleverness for understanding such a special new game. Charlie had begun it to keep them occupied while Granny Molly finished the washing up in the kitchen nearby. Grandpa Arthur dozed in a chair in a far corner while their mother, Annie, bathed baby Harriet Jane in a little tub on the dining table.

"Nea Charlie spune, 'Atingeți urechii:"

The children stuck grubby little fingers into their ears, then looked at Charlie expectantly.

"Nea Charlie spune, 'Atingeți barba:"

After a surreptitious glance at Sasha, who'd begun stroking his closely-trimmed beard upon command, little Merrie began petting her own smooth, freckly cheeks, giggling.

"Not fair!" little Arthur cried.

"We haven't got beards!" his twin, Fred, protested.

"Does that mean I win?" Sasha cried, making a show of being delighted.

Merrie clapped her hands and babbled something that sounded congratulatory.

"You can't tell us to touch things we haven't got!" Art insisted, fists on hips.

"No more telling us to flap our wings or twitch our tails either, Uncle Charlie," Fred added, the epitome of seriousness.

Charlie sighed dramatically. "Very well, bossy fwoopers. How about this, then?*Nea Charlie spune, 'Roti!"*

The three children eagerly spun themselves senseless. Two-year-old Merrie toppled first in a heap of giggles, only to be rescued by Nea Charlie and planted onto sofa cushions. Her almost five-year-old brothers collided with each other soon after, laughing raucously at Sasha's mincing performance of an ungraceful pirouette, very much resembling a dancing bear.

"Demolare Sasha!"

Charlie's diminutive minions obeyed, launching themselves at Sasha in a futile attempt to knock him down. As expected, his partner stood solid as a tree trunk as the children dangled from him, the tent ringing with their laughter.

"I win!" he announced in a booming voice. "He didn't say, *Nea Charlie!*"

Emerging from the children's bedroom, George signaled to catch Charlie's attention. He pointed at the children, then closed his eyes and laid his head on his hands, miming sleep.

With a nod of acknowledgement, he said, *"Nea Charlie spune, 'Sa adoarma."*

The three children whined disappointedly when Sasha closed his eyes and began to snore loudly whilst standing up.

"If you behave a little less like hyperactive jarveys and a little more like proper human children, perhaps Uncle Charlie will play again tomorrow," George mildly scolded them as he herded his reluctant offspring toward their bedroom.

Charlie nearly laughed out loud to hear George, of all people, attempt to correct anyone's behavior. "So says the king of all hyperactive, foul-mouthed jarveys," he chuckled low.

George shot him a smirk for being so helpful.

"I want to play *'Acesta dragon este* next time," Fred announced, summoning his little Romanian Longhorn model from underneath Grandpa Arthur's chair, which uttered a high-pitched growl in protest.¹

"Look, mine's still red," Art exclaimed proudly as they ducked into the bedroom at last.

"You call that red? It's hardly pink," Fred contradicted him from behind the canvas wall.

"Beds. Now," George ordered patiently, repossessing the dragon toys and sending them back out of contention onto the dining table for the evening. Once the room divider flap fell, the common area grew significantly quieter.

Charlie and Sasha sank into the small sofa near the open front flap, sipping from bottles of butterbeer, the better to catch a few breezes. They'd joined the camping Weasley family for dinner that evening, as the Chinese researchers staying with them in the keeper's hut tended to take over the little kitchen there at mealtimes with their woks and such (not that dinner in the tent with four adults and four children under the age of five was anything less than chaotic). Plus, Molly had brought along a full pantry of foodstuffs (all very cleverly squirreled away in a ridiculously small knapsack a charm of Hermione's doing, he'd been told), apparently unsatisfied with her previous experience with Charlie's culinary efforts. She'd outdone herself that evening, as expected, making a delectable shepherd's pie and rhubarb crumble with fresh cream for dessert.

Gazing at the incongruously ruddy Longhorn models, Charlie found it a little unnerving how easily George's twin sons had magically altered their dragon toys' appearances on command. He'd begun the game of using descriptive words about the toy creatures in order to teach them a bit more Romanian another thing they picked up alarmingly quickly only instead of correcting his error when he'd described the dark green dragons as being red, they'd simply changed them to match his description. He'd never expected the children to wandlessly turn the damn things different colors! He'd read the reports of their precociousness in letters from home before this, but had always chalked it up to typical proud grandparents overzealously bragging about their little dears... until that impromptu demonstration, that is.

George had been disturbingly insistent about bringing his family and their parents here to Romania, more than once dropping the guilt-laden line that since Charlie refused to come to England to see them anymore, they'd have to go to the mountain themselves, so to speak. But as anxious as Charlie had been about the invasion (and guilty for being caught bang to rights by his brother regarding his avoidance), the visit had been going splendidly: George's family had been eager to explore the reservation, and Charlie'd been pleased to show it off to them. He supposed it also helped immensely that their guests had brought their own accommodations with them this time, rather than attempting to cram into the keeper's hut.

Even so, Molly had done her utmost to badger, scold, and shame Charlie into a marriage of his own at every manufactured opportunity. It was only slightly funny how she'd included Sasha as a target this time, prodding him to drag Charlie out to the local pubs and scare up some female companionship together. Considering the relatively recent showdown between Sasha and Ileana, Charlie was impressed by Sasha's ability to shrug Molly's comments off, for the most part. But just like she'd done every time Charlie came back to Britain, just as she'd done in every letter she'd ever owled him, Molly had expressed her continuing deep disappointment.

"Don't let her get to you," Sasha had counseled him innumerable times over the past few days.

"I'll try," Charlie had sighed in reply, usually massaging aching temples as he did.

Charlie was jolted out of his unpleasant reverie when he noticed Annie making a determined beeline toward him. "Take her for a second, will you?" she pleaded, foisting the towel-wrapped six-month-old he almost shared a birthdate with into his arms.

"Erm... but..." Charlie glanced around, thinking surely someone else was more qualified for the job. But his mother was still in the kitchen tidying up, his father asleep, and his brother busy putting the other children to bed.

"Please, I'm desperate for a wee!" Annie whispered, fairly dancing on the balls of her feet. "I'll be less than a minute, I swear!"

Before he could verbalize an answer, his face must've telegraphed his reluctant acquiescence, for Annie darted off in the direction of the tent's loo. He looked down at the nearly weightless bundle of rosy-cheeked baby now filling his arms, and Harriet Jane turned her muddy-blue eyes up to him. Gnawing wetly on her own fist, she made a few quiet sounds of enjoyment, perfectly contented.

Instantly, Charlie was thrown back in time to his own boyhood, taken over by memories triggered by the sight of her! *was nine years old when Ginny was this age* he marveled, recalling the last time he'd held a baby. He and Bill had often shared the duty of hauling their baby sister around while their mother was occupied with household chores. *She looks so much like Ginny did: those big eyes, soft little wisps of ginger hair on top...*

He shifted her slightly while careful to keep her fragile head and neck supported, improving both their comfort levels, and she kicked out against the towel with enthusiasm, grinning toothlessly. His curiosity got the better of him, and he gently stroked Harriet's head, his roughened fingertips grazing the pulsing spot atop her skull, astonished by the silken softness of her. *Such a pretty little thing!*

He heard a quiet, mostly smothered snort. A quick glance at Sasha made Charlie smile: he was utterly gobsmacked at the sight of his partner cradling an infant so expertly. "Want a turn?" he chuckled.

Sasha lifted his wide-round eyes from the baby to him, his gaze half alarmed, half amused. "No, thank you," he replied politely.

"I'm done!" Annie called softly from the loo door over the sound of running water.

Charlie turned to see her dashing back toward them. "No hurry," he assured her, smiling easily. "I haven't dropped her yet."

"Come back to Mummy, Janie, love," Annie cooed, reaching out for her with a grateful smile.

Then Charlie accidentally caught sight of his mother looking at him from the kitchen, wearing a wickedly smug smile, and his heart froze *Oh, shit*, he thought, *This isn't good*. Hastily handing the baby off to her mother and making a quick promise to meet up again the next day after breakfast, Charlie and Sasha both took their leave before Molly could say a word.

Walking back to the keeper hut beneath a stunning jewel of a twilight sky, Charlie thought back to that afternoon. He'd taken George and his young family over to keeper hut number three to meet Flaviu and Freya and their daughter, Ihrin, who was almost four. George's children immediately set to romping about with little Ihrin, forming an unfettered, joyous friendship despite the language barrier and age difference between them. Nearby the hut was one of the last remaining snowbanks of the summer, and the children's game of chase ultimately devolved into an epic snowball battle between the two families involving all four parents, everyone laughing uproariously by the cataclysmic end.

"Is there something wrong with us that we don't want this?" Charlie asked Sasha, honestly curious.

"Want what?" Sasha asked warily.

Charlie glanced over his shoulder back at the tent. "Growing up, you'd never meet a more immature, frivolous git as my brother George used to be," Charlie explained. "He and Fred were constantly goofing off, playing pranks, never taking anything seriously."

"He still seems very lighthearted and fun-loving to me," Sasha suggested, smiling.

"Oh, he is," Charlie conceded. "But it's different now. Tempered, somehow. Not quite so driven or reckless." *He's more gentle. The teasing's not so hard-edged anymore. He's learned when to ease off...*

"You think perhaps the loss of his twin caused such a change in him?" Sasha offered.

"It certainly affected him deeply," Charlie agreed, recalling that awful melancholy period George and, to a lesser extent, his wife had suffered after Fred's death. "But *this* change—the one from anything-for-a-laugh court jester to devoted husband and father—began well before Fred was killed. That can't be the only explanation."

Sasha shrugged. "What does it matter the why or how? He seems contented to me."

"But that's exactly what I'm talking about!" Charlie said. "He's so brazenly happy with his home a mere stone's throw away from the Burrow, tied down to a wife and four kids and joke shop, despite Fred's being gone. Is that what being married does for you?"

"You and I both know the world is full of miserable marriages," Sasha replied. "I suspect such happiness as your brother's has more to do with being partnered with the right person, in doing what he feels called to do. He and his little wife are very well suited, and you've said the joking business was his destiny from a young age. His children are therefore an extension of that happiness, an amplification of it rather than a burden."

"Do you ever wish for any of it, though?" Charlie pressed. "Marriage? Fatherhood?"

Sasha stared up at the brilliant midsummer sky. "I have never felt sexually attracted to a woman—is this the validation you're seeking, love?"

"That's an evasion, not an answer," Charlie grumbled.

Sasha huffed. "It's something of a moot point, isn't it? Considering my confession." After a brief pause, during which time they'd reached their hut, Sasha asked softly, "Are you unhappy without those things, Charlie?"

Charlie thought for a moment, standing just outside their door. Did he want children? A run-of-the-mill, "normal" job? The thought of either left him feeling cold, unmoved. He was pleased for George's happiness, but not jealous of it. "No."

Sasha laid a strong hand on his shoulder. "Did holding that baby make you wonder if you'd made a wrong choice to be with me?"

"That's not it at all," Charlie assured him. "I honestly don't want what George has a wife, a family, a business. But I'm wondering...*why* don't I? They seem so happy, George and Annie. All my brothers and sister. Even my mum and dad. The world considers such a life the best one can aspire to certainly the norm, anyway. If I told my mother that I was getting married tomorrow to some woman any woman she'd be over the moon with glee.

"And yet... I can't. I just can't. I cannot pretend that any of that is what I want." He paused. "Does that mean something's wrong with me?*Is Mum right after all?*

Sasha's thumb lightly stroked his neck. "There are so many ways to find happiness in the world, Charlie," he said. "The things that make me happy flying on a broom at breakneck speed, working with four-ton monsters..." He gave Charlie's shoulder a little squeeze. "Being with you..." he added in a whisper, and Charlie reached up to rest his hand on Sasha's. "These are things that would make many other men flee in terror. But that doesn't make my happiness wrong only different."

"I like that I make you happy," Charlie murmured, feeling a nearly overpowering urge to kiss him. *And you make me ecstatic*, he thought to himself, grateful he'd learned not to blather such drivel, if not stop thinking it.

Sasha gave his shoulder another momentary squeeze, then pulled his hand away. But Charlie caught it before Sasha could completely turn away. "Come be with me tonight," he whispered.

After a moment's pause, Sasha answered, "When the others are asleep, I'll come to you."

The waning moon poured its light over the landscape as it rose shortly before midnight. Charlie relaxed on his bed, having kicked the sheet off, enabling the evaporation of sweat to cool him. Sasha stood instead by the little open window, his chin resting on his arms folded on the sill, attempting to catch any errant breezes.

Charlie drank in the sight of his moonlit lover, practically glowing like some spectral demigod biding his time here on earth before ascending to heaven where he belonged. Ridges of muscle rolled and flexed as Sasha stretched, arching his back, then extended each leg backward in turn. Charlie knew their time together that night was growing short any minute now, Sasha would kiss him goodnight and return to his own room to sleep.

Suddenly, Sasha chuckled softly. "Don't look now, but your brother is fucking his wife up against Miller's old shed."

Charlie shifted his position on the bed to peek out the window. The tent was visible in the moonlit distance, but no light illuminated it from within: all its occupants were likely sleeping. In the foreground, an oddly shaped shadow-figure in constant motion (which might or might not have been rhythmic) pressed up against the stone wall of Merlin's temporary research shed that no one had bothered to dismantle yet.

"They're just kissing," Charlie offered, unwilling to look very closely.

"No, I'm pretty sure they're fucking," Sasha laughed quietly. As if to prove him right, a breeze wafted a few passionate moans and cries their way, soft but oddly arousing.

Charlie gave him a semi-gentle shove with his foot. "Stop watching it, perv!" he protested weakly.

Sasha took a step away from the window, then tugged Charlie up off the bed. They stood together in the middle of the room, kissing because it was impossible to resist, barely touching because it was too hot to do anything more.

"The little woman... your brother's wife... She is not a witch?" Sasha asked between kisses.

Charlie shook his head slightly. "Muggle."

"Say this word again?" Sasha asked with a chuckle.

Charlie laughed, supposing Sasha was right: the word did sound silly. Nor was there a Russian term that meant the same thing. "Muggle."

Sasha gave him one more long, lingering kiss, then shrugged. "She is... sharp-eyed."

"You think she has The Sight?" Charlie pressed, surprised.

"No, I mean she sees all that is here, and a little underneath besides. Very clever, I think."

Charlie paused, straightening up, Sasha's words sobering him like a bucket of water. "You mean...?"

"I mean that if you do not wish her to know about us, you and I must be very, very careful," Sasha cautioned. "No more mistakes like yesterday morning."

Charlie winced with the memory. Preparing to leave, both men ready to head off on their separate duties, Charlie'd caught himself tossing off, "Love you," in Russian to Sasha. It was nothing but mindless habit, but Charlie'd realized his error the moment the words left his mouth. They'd both frozen with awkwardness before remembering none of the Weasleys could understand it.

But the Russian phrase *Lyublyu tebya* sounded similar enough to the English one to have pricked everyone's interest. Charlie'd noted the look shared between Annie and George. Then his mother, seemingly oblivious, had innocently asked, "What's that, dear?"

Thinking quickly, Charlie'd explained, "It means, 'Be careful out there,'" which, in retrospect, was practically honest. Sasha had then said it deliberately, levelly, back to Charlie in order to sell the lie before walking out the door.

Thinking back on it, there was something so deliciously deceitful about that moment, so thrillingly daring to have accidentally exposed their secret for just that shining second. That tantalizing, titillating flash of truth had made his heart pound for minutes afterward.

Is that what it feels like to come out? he wondered. Having never actually made an announcement to that effect to anyone before, he didn't know. Everyone who knew the truth about their relationship had worked it out on their own rather than been told. For several seconds, Charlie toyed with the idea of coming clean to his family. *Mum, Dad, there's something you should know about me...*

And then, just as quickly, the urge faded. A flash of his mother's disappointed, tearful face, head bowed and back turned, was all it took to quash his fleeting inspiration. How else could she possibly respond when confronted by a decade of lies, the ruination of all her hopes and dreams for her wayward bachelor son?

"I'll be more careful from now on," Charlie promised, stealing one more kiss before Sasha quietly stole out of his room.

1- I suspect you can deduce the meaning of each of the Romanian phrases Charlie uses in his version of the "Simon Says" game. *Aceasta dragon este* means "This dragon is." All the Romanian is from [this translation site](#). Hopefully it isn't too terribly wrong.

And thanks again to Savva for her help with the Russian phrase.

Aug-04

Chapter 27 of 28

Good luck stuffing this particular cat back into the bag.

Chapter 27

August 2004

"Are you going to say it out loud to me?" she said gently. "Want to practice?" Annie gave him her most encouraging smile.

He looked at her curiously for several moments. Charlie's brow furrowed, then a small, amused smile grew on his face. He leaned down just a little bit, for he was the shortest Weasley brother, and whispered in her ear. "I'm gay." George & Annie: An Unofficial Biography, Chapter 57

"What have I done?" Charlie agonized as he stared out into a vast, sparkling grey infinity that was the moonlit Atlantic Ocean. How lovely it would be to chuck all this dread weight into its depths and let the bottom feeders dispose of the mess. How had he let things get away from him so badly at the pub tonight?

"Nothing so catastrophic," Sasha murmured, his voice concerned and comforting. He stood by Charlie's shoulder, hands clasped behind his back, looking out at the sea. He'd followed him when he stalked off toward the shore instead of returning to his tent like everyone else after they got back to the family's traditional August Devonshire beachside campsite.

"You don't think?" Charlie grumbled entirely sarcastically. His hands were stuffed inside his pockets, and his finger worried itself into a nascent hole in one of them, enlarging it. His toes burrowed into the still-warm sand, and he wondered if he could slowly dig himself into a grave that way.

He'd pulled some stupid stunts in his day the incident with the Ashwinder nest that burned down the Burrow's old wooden shed was a perfect example but this one truly took the cake. He still wasn't entirely sure how it happened. One minute, he was dancing with his brother's pregnant wife in Muggle pub on the Devonshire coast the next, a ridiculous confession had tumbled out of his mouth. At the moment on the dance floor, it seemed a reasonable thing to do. A harmless little confidence. Tempting, even, to lighten just a tiny bit of the secrecy load. Now, it felt like nothing less than Pandora's box gaping open.

"If nothing else, you can rely on her to hold her tongue," Sasha countered. "I think she's proven she can keep a secret."

Charlie snorted. As true as Sasha's argument might be the woman had certainly managed to keep an impressive collection of secrets in her time it was a moot point. "She wants me to tell all of them. Starting with George tonight."

Sasha sighed deeply, considering their predicament. They both knew Annie well enough to understand there was no threat behind the suggestion blackmail wasn't even on the radar. Nor was she the loose-lips sort Annie wouldn't accidentally spill the beans, either. No, the trouble would come in a far more insidious manner. If Charlie told his family the truth about him and Sasha, all hell might break loose. But if he didn't, he got to face Annie's disappointment, her knowledge he was a coward.

"You really think he doesn't know already?" Sasha asked. "Discretion is one thing, but... he is her husband."

Charlie raked his hand through his hair. "Probably," he confessed, cracking open a whole different can of worms. He suspected that part of why it felt so easy to say the words out loud to Annie was that he knew, on some level, that she'd guessed the truth already. And if she had figured it out on her own, of course she'd have discussed the matter with her husband, George. Not that George was a blabbermouth, either, but if the two of them had sussed out the truth... what were the odds any of the rest of them hadn't? Just how far had the knowledge spread? How many people were secretly disgusted by his hypocrisy? How long had they borne witness to his cowardice?

Charlie let his head fall back and gazed up at another twinkling infinity above him. "Run away with me? Let's just forget about all this rubbish and go back home," he begged half-heartedly, knowing it was safe to do so. Sasha would understand that, as tempting as the thought might be, Charlie was man enough to face what was coming to him.

His low, growly chuckle was as comforting as a warm fire in the midst of a blizzard. "Do you really think it will come as a shock to them?"

"Are you saying I'm such a great poncy pouf, then?" Charlie protested wryly.

The chuckle grew into a soft laugh. "I'm saying your family are clever people. And if they don't have their suspicions already as to why their brother remains a bachelor..."

Charlie sighed. "Yeah, but it's not the same as an actual confession, is it?"

"Perhaps not," Sasha granted. The closest they'd come to a public announcement was a few slips of the tongue during two heated, stressful situations. Even among the other keepers, their relationship was only vaguely alluded to, if acknowledged at all. Everyone seemed to tacitly agree to ignore the issue, for the most part.

And even if all their coworkers knew, even if all his siblings knew, it wasn't the same as *his* mother learning the truth. Charlie's gut clenched at the prospect.

"You ever tell your mum?" he asked in a hushed voice without looking at his lover, sparing him the indignity of his morbid curiosity. Sasha hadn't wanted to discuss much of anything that had happened when his mother died a few years ago, and Charlie hadn't pressed for information.

"Not even on her deathbed," Sasha sighed, his voice heavy with regret. After another moment's consideration, he continued, "We were never that close, as you know. It's not so much that I'm ashamed I didn't tell her... More like I wish we'd had the kind of relationship where it would have mattered. We were little more than strangers by the end."

So no help there, Charlie lamented selfishly, half-hoping Sasha would've shared some magical phrasing that helped him face this particular hurdle. Then another thought occurred to him. "Oh, but what about you, then? This affects you as well. If you'd rather I not"

"Oh no," Sasha laughed, interrupting his gutless rant. "You'll not use me as an excuse." After Charlie huffed his frustration, he added, "Anything that is important to you is equally so to me. Tell them if you want, or if you feel you must. I do not fear their reactions."

"Because you're so much braver than I am," Charlie grumbled, hating how true it was. He kicked a clod of sand in his pique, feeling like the absolute lowest of flobberworms for dragging Sasha into this, for not proclaiming without hesitation how much he loved him, how proud he was Sasha had chosen him to love.

"No, not braver," Sasha corrected him. "Only because I see how much they love you, Charlie. In the end, I truly believe this love will overcome any other objection they might have."

"I really hope you're right," Charlie prayed aloud.

Sasha's large, calloused hand curled around the back of Charlie's neck, and a wave of calm coursed through him. Charlie closed his eyes to better focus on the soothing sensation. "You don't have to face it alone," Sasha offered.

For a moment, he pondered which would be worse: Sasha witnessing Charlie's bumbling his way through coming out to his brother, or facing the firing squad without him at his side? It was impossible to decide, and Charlie once more wished he could be anywhere but here. A disgruntled herd of dragons suffering a bout of explosive diarrhea would be preferable to deal with.

"I'll do it on my own," Charlie sighed eventually. "You go get some rest."

"The *moroz* and I will be waiting up for you," Sasha promised, smiling and clapping him encouragingly on the shoulder. "We'll get rat-arsed together either in celebration or commiseration, eh?"

Charlie nodded. Taking a deep, lung-filling, mind-clearing breath of sea air to steel him, he strode off through the sand toward George and Annie's tent, trying to think of what to say when he got there. The words had practically blurted themselves out with Annie on the dance floor of the Muggle pub would they do the same tonight in their tent? She'd urged him to tell George promised to play along and pretend he hadn't already come out to her insisting his brother would be "easy" to tell this way.

Easy, hell. If this was fucking easy, he'd hate to see what she thought was difficult.

Annie wanted him to tell the rest of the family, too. The thought of which made him queasy. Charlie felt cornered now, a feeling he most assuredly did not relish. Began feeling resentful, even. Who the hell did she think she was, anyway?

Your very kind, very understanding, darling of a sister-in-law, he scolded himself. *Absolutely your favorite, berk* All the women his brothers had married were, for the most part, good-hearted, loving wives and mothers. But compared to the often grating conceit of Fleur, the pervasive haughtiness of Audrey, and the occasional intellectual distance of Hermione, he'd found Annie's down-to-earth, playful sarcasm to be the easiest company.

Reminding himself that Annie had been perfectly encouraging and accepting when he'd made his confession, he picked up his pace, wanting to get this thing over with as soon as possible. She hadn't even batted an eye at the word, for Merlin's sake! But it wasn't Annie he was marching to face it was George. His flesh and blood. Would he take the news as calmly?

Oi, George, I'm a pouf. How d'you like them apples?

He thought about telling the others. How would Bill react? Or Percy? What about Ron?

Ginny? Oh, God, he could never face Ginny. Never discuss anything remotely connected to his sex life with her. Never ever ever. Didn't matter she was twenty-three years old, married to Harry and expecting her first child. She would forever be his little baby sister, eternally pure and innocent.

He stood at the tent flap for a full minute, frozen by a last-second attack of nerves. But he reminded himself that he owed Annie this. He forced himself to recall how just a few nights ago, standing right in this very spot, he'd overheard her defending his life choices to his mother when she'd been bitching yet again about his lack of matrimonial prospects. Then he remembered Annie's heartfelt words to him on the dance floor just an hour ago.

"Charlie, George and I spent a long time hiding a relationship from the rest of the world. I know how miserable it feels not to be able to share the one you love the most with the ones who love you. Can you honestly say you want to do that forever?"

She had him there, didn't she? Damn.

"Charlie!" she cheered in a hushed voice when he finally pushed through the tent flap. "Come in. We were just having a spot of tea."

Annie put the finishing touches on a pot, and George reclined in his seat at the head of the table. The rest of the tent's occupants consisting of their four children and their good friends, the Jordans had all gone to bed. Annie busied herself arranging the tea things and pouring a cuppa for each of them.

Charlie nervously downed his first cup in three gulps. Annie poured another. Charlie downed it, wishing something a bit more fortifying had been added to it, then cleared his throat. And said exactly nothing.

In an effort to fill the awkward silence, George quipped, "If you've come for a chat, I should tell you I'm forbidden from discussing Quidditch for the rest of the holiday by this one," nodding his head toward Annie. In an instinctive move, she lightly boxed his remaining ear for his trouble while he ducked and grinned.

"That's probably for the best," Charlie countered. George had been yammering on about the topic all night at the pub, which had led Charlie to ask a bored-out-of-her-gourd Annie to dance, which had led to... "You seldom have an opinion on the subject worth expressing."

"I've been telling him that for years," Annie said with a roll of her eyes.

The tense mood was gentled by their soft, easy repartee and laughter, and Charlie was reminded why he'd been motivated to end his self-inflicted banishment from Devon. Spending time at Mole Hill with the warming banter of George and Annie and their noisy little family had made him feel welcome again.

"I'm here to tell you something" But his tongue froze to the roof of his mouth like he was about to blab a Kept Secret. Then Annie gave him an earnest look accompanied by the slightest nod of her head. *Go on, Charlie! You can do it!* But I don't know how."

George's eyes gleamed keenly, and he rubbed his palms together with anticipation. "Ooh, am I finally gonna hear the story about how you lost your little finger?"

Charlie's expression darkened, displeased to be reminded of that horrible day not quite two years ago. "No."

During the long pause that followed, George's theatrical disappointment morphed into reserved concern. "Whatever it is, it can't be that bad, bro."

"You don't know that," Charlie warned him.

George heaved a tired sigh. After rubbing his face, he said, "Usually people this hesitant to approach me want money for something. Are you bankrupt? Considering whoring yourself unless you get a loan from me?"

"NO!" Charlie retorted in a strangled voice, trying like hell not to shout at the idiot out of consideration for sleeping children. What the bloody hell was he thinking? Just what had Annie told him to expect tonight?

George grinned triumphantly. "That's a load off. With that ugly mug, you'd be starving by Thursday."

"Fuck off," Charlie grumbled with an irritated smirk, realizing he'd been taken for a fool by the legendary prankster once again.

"You do look awfully serious, though," George chuckled. "Is it criminal charges? Are you on the lam? Looking to hide out in my cellar until the coast is clear?"

Charlie responded with a deadpan, "No." Annie shot him a look of amused empathy, giggling under her breath. "And you watch too much damned Muggle telly," he grumbled at his infamous brother. "And did I mention fuck off?"

George shrugged, taking a drink of tea.

"Can we be remotely serious about this for a moment?" Charlie said, hating himself for sounding so much like their mother.

George wasn't about to let it ride, either. "Oh dear. This sounds dire, indeed," he needled him. "If you've lost your sense of humor, the only explanation possible is that you must be terminally ill. Have you got some nasty dragon virus and come here to say your final goodbye to us?"

But by the end of his little sarcastic speech, his tone had suddenly sobered.

"No," Charlie answered, his voice equally soft. I'm not ruined, not ill, not dead is that what he's trying to get me to realize? He glanced at Annie, her violet eyes softly glittering in the low light, her smile supportive.

"Oh, I get it now," George said, a wry smile on his never-serious face. "It's the worst of all possible scenarios, isn't it? You're ecstatically happy and in love. Please, tell me it's anything but that!" he bemoaned facetiously. Casting his voice heavenward, he cried, "I prayed this day would never come to pass!"

Charlie rewarded him with an unimpressed snort. "You really are intent on being an arse about this, aren't you?"

"Just spit it out already, why don't you," George grumbled impatiently.

"It's not that easy!" Charlie snapped.

"Says you," George snapped right back, looking somewhat pissed off at this point. When Charlie didn't respond immediately, he grouched, "Well, I've certainly labored under a very false impression about your profession. Funny how people say dragon keepers are the bravest men alive."

"George..." Annie scowled warningly.

But George ignored her. "And I know you can yammer on like a bloody Fwooper, swearing like a mad Jarvey the entire time. I've been in a Quidditch locker room with you, remember? Never heard a pep talk drawn out so long. Christ, you'd just go on and on, in love with your own voice, nobody able to get a word in edgewise"

"Will you shut it already?" Charlie growled through clenched teeth.

"Just say the bloody words, then," George growled back.

"I'm gay, you fucking git," Charlie snarled.

Annie stared at them both, her mouth slightly agape and her eyes as wide as the saucers on the table. George, with his lips lightly pursed, gave a single nod of acknowledgement. Only a second later did Charlie realize what had just happened. *That underhanded, manipulative little shite! I would have said it on my own, dammit!* Still, there was no doubt in his mind George had known exactly what Charlie was trying to confess and had tried to ease the passage in his own twisted, diabolical way.

He chewed on his tongue for another moment before grumbling, "Aren't you going to say anything?"

George smirked. "Jolly good for you?" he sneered.

"Oh, *fuck* off. Really," Charlie muttered as George and Annie began to chuckle.

"What d'you want, a medal?" George countered, ducking as Charlie cuffed him.

"I'd like to see what that one looks like," Annie giggled. "Something sparkly and colorful, I hope."

Charlie groaned, laying his head down on the table to hide his smile. This really was too silly for belief.

"I reckon it's just par for the course, innit?"

"I'm not sure I want to hear this," Charlie said warily, peeking over his arms at his brother.

"Look, the way I see it, we've all taken what the rest of the world views as a misguided turn down the promenade of love," George explained, resuming a semi-serious expression. "Bill married someone who is, in very technical terms, not fully human. Gin married nothing less than the savior of British wizardry; Ron wed the very embodiment of a political gadfly; I snagged a Muggle; and Perce committed the worst sin of all for a Weasley: he married rich and titled. Explain to me how you think your situation is so very special compared to such infamous company, eh?"

Charlie responded with an eloquent snort. George did have a point, oddly enough. Perhaps his love for Sasha wasn't all that out of the ordinary, in comparison.

"Thing is, we all married for love, didn't we?" he continued. "Not pedigree or power or prestige. And I reckon that puts us head and shoulders ahead of the rest of the pack, no matter how mad the pairings look on paper."

"Oh, well said, love," Annie cooed, planting a gentle peck on George's cheek. "And cheers for categorizing we freakish Muggles on par with non-humans. Your candor's always appreciated."

"I barely even scratched the surface of your freakdom, love," he countered with a leering grin and a wink, his arm sliding around his wife's waist. "I can keep a secret, too."

Annie kicked her husband under the table as Charlie cleared his throat. Such blatant displays of affection in public always made him uncomfortable and a tiny bit jealous. "I'll never marry though, will I?" he said, steering the conversation back to the crisis at hand. Such was the lynchpin of his mother's perpetual distress, after all.

But George only shrugged. "What does a stupid ceremony and piece of parchment prove that your words and actions don't?" he pressed, giving Charlie an intent stare. "A promise is a promise, a bond is a bond, no matter how you look at it. And unless I'm much mistaken, your commitment runs deep. Feel free to correct me if I'm wrong."

Charlie merely scratched at the stubble on his cheek, saying nothing. There was something very disconcerting about how accurately George, of all people, saw the state of things between him and Sasha, how perfectly he'd just summed up the situation. Charlie chalked his disorientation up to the fact that George never seemed like himself if he wasn't wreaking mayhem or taking the piss out of someone.

"Thought so," George grunted. After a pause, during which his expression morphed from Wizengamot-serious back to a far more familiar smirking smart-arse, he grinned tiredly. "That it?" he yawned.

Charlie checked his watch, noting it was after midnight already. "I suppose."

"Brilliant!" he said, slapping his thighs. "I'm knackered, and the kids'll be up at the bloody arse-crack of dawn, so that's me off to bed. Check you tomorrow, then?"

"Right." Dismissed, Charlie rose from the table and made for the door.

Annie darted over to meet him, and he heard George clearing up the tea things behind them as she hugged him, eyes glittering proudly. "You did brilliantly, Charlie!" she whispered in his ear before he left. "Well done!"

As Charlie made his way back to his own tent, looking forward to the prospect of a bottle of soothing *moroz* and a quiet conversation awaiting him there, he began to think that maybe this wasn't the end of the world after all...

25-Dec-07

Chapter 28 of 28

A secret no more.

Chapter 25

December 25, 2007

* * *

"All right, then let's teach them a lesson," Annie said, beaming with devious anticipation.

"This is going to be brilliant," said George softly, a devilish smile gracing his features. He reached out for her hand.

"Happy anniversary, George," she said, barely above a whisper, smiling at him lovingly.

"Happy anniversary, love," he replied in kind, kissing her hand. George & Annie: An Unofficial Biography, Chapter 66

* * *

Charlie watched as the last flicker of emerald flames died in the enormous hearth of Mole Hill, signaling another departure. George and Annie's home had hosted half a hundred people that Christmas day in celebration of their tenth wedding anniversary. Originally intended to be a surprise party thrown by their dear friends, Angelina and Lee Jordan, in true George and Annie fashion, the two pranksters had ferreted out the secret, turned the thing on its ear, and surprised the surprisers to almost everyone's great amusement.

All the attendees were by now familiar with the dramatic tale of their marriage: young and impetuous and madly in love, they'd defied the Death Eater sham of a Ministry and married at the height of the Second War, a pureblood wizard and a lowly Muggle. Fewer people were acquainted with the full circumstances of the situation: namely, that Annie's grandmother, who'd raised her since infancy, had been on her deathbed at the time, and the secret ceremony had taken place in a hospital room in Ottery St. Catchpole, fulfilling the old woman's dying wish to see Annie settled in life. It was for this reason, Charlie knew, that Annie would be spending Boxing Day tomorrow visiting the local village cemetery, paying her respects to her Gran on her Death Day, as was her tradition.

After resisting the entire family's nagging and pestering of him for ages to celebrate Christmas in Devonshire, Charlie had finally relented five years ago and accepted George's invitation to stay at Mole Hill... and brought Sasha along for good measure. George's family had been so welcoming that he and Sasha had come back every year since. As chaotic as it was to be guests in a household of five rambunctious children, their stays at Mole Hill had been blessedly devoid of the sort chastisements Charlie had grown accustomed to when staying at the Burrow.

In fact, ever since his visit to Romania, George had made a point of expressing consistent support and vocal (albeit vague) defense both of Charlie's choice of vocation and his lack of matrimony, especially to their mother. Growing up, Charlie had always felt closest to Bill, but in the last few years, Charlie had grown far closer to George and his wife than any of the rest of the family. So much so that three years ago, after it had become patently clear they'd figured it out on their own already, he'd actually come out to them.

And what a relief it had been! The lifting of the onerous burden of secrecy had been nothing short of miraculous. George and Annie's blithe acceptance, fervent support, and frequent coaxing had inspired Charlie to share the news with his other siblings. Over the ensuing years, he'd gradually come out to the rest of his brothers and sister, the announcement generally meeting with little surprise while Ginny, Bill, and Percy all confessed to have had prior inklings, Ron had been utterly gobsmacked, to put it bluntly but also loving, warm acceptance. So much so, in fact, that he'd begun to feel rather silly for having put it off for so long.

Only one bulwark of ignorance remained: Charlie had yet to inform his parents. "Never mind, you'll find the right time," George was fond of saying, but thankfully hadn't pushed the matter. And while Charlie knew his brother was right, knew also he had to tell his mother and father eventually, he just never seemed to find the right moment or the right words.

"I had a chance at going back out into the field this year, you know," Bill offered, drawing Charlie's attention back to the conversation. "Scrounging up treasure in the Yucatan this time," he added wistfully.

Bill, Percy, Charlie, and Sasha all stood in a small knot out of the way of the rest of the bustle. A platoon of young children was gathered around the table and breakfast bar, the rest of the adults fluttering about the business of getting them fed. Now that all the non-Weasleys had left, only thirty occupants remained, consisting of Arthur, Molly, their six children, spouses, grandchildren, and Sasha.

"Sounds brilliant! Why didn't you take it?" Charlie asked.

"Fleur wouldn't have it," Bill lamented. "Says the kids are too young for me to be gone so much." After a mournful sigh, he added, "She's probably right."

Charlie thought such a sacrifice of personal and professional fulfillment seemed a shame and a hell of a lot to ask, but he kept his opinion private. Unlike himself, Bill had a wife and three kids to consider in such decisions, after all. Nor could Charlie imagine growing up without his dad there at home every night and on weekends. He reckoned Bill likely owed that to his family, too. But he still exchanged a surreptitious look with Sasha that said, *Glad we'll never have to bother about that, eh?* Sasha's return glance agreed.

"Speaking of promotions... word in the Ministry is that Harry's due to make Head Auror within five years, possibly before the decade's out," Percy murmured.

Charlie's gaze found the subject of Percy's latest gossip sitting with Ginny, Ron, and Hermione, each with small children in their laps, trying vainly to coax them to eat rather than play with their new Christmas toys or fascinating older cousins. "He's not even thirty yet!" Charlie spluttered quietly, wondering how Ron, a fellow Auror, would be

taking his best mate's promotion when it came.

"Since when did common sense ever influence a Ministry appointment?" Bill snorted. "Those are mutually exclusive terms there, brother."

"I said it's definite, not imminent," Percy pointed out. "And our Harry's proving himself more than capable of the job."

"But he's only been a full Auror for, what, five years?" Charlie argued. "This goes a bit beyond fast-tracking a promising career, Perce."

"Borders on reckless pandering, if you ask me," Bill added. "Thought Kingsley was above this sort of rubbish."

"Regardless, short of a massive scandal in the interim, it's practically a done deal," Percy said. "Ministry Headships are very much about projecting an image of competence that's inarguable and Harry has the public's confidence and support right now. Kingsley's clever enough to use it to advantage. That's how good Ministers keep their positions. And if Harry manages to bungle something badly enough between now and then the probability of which I highly doubt then Kingsley will be perfectly justified in sacking him upon the altar of public hue and cry."

"I suppose there are worse blokes for the job," Bill granted grudgingly. "He's a good kid with a clever head on his shoulders and an honest heart, at least."

"Getting tired of being passed over in favor of the young upstarts already, you old fart?" Percy needled him.

"Fuck you," Bill grumbled. "Thirty-seven's hardly old!"

"Compared to your Goblin colleagues, perhaps," Percy teased. "I suppose you'll just have to slog through years more of sitting at your posh desk in your corner office wearing Tating's finest dress robes to work. However will you cope?"

Bill mumbled something that sounded like, "Bloody Azkaban."

"Maybe Fleur will let you out to play when Louis starts school," Charlie jabbed, clapping his brother's shoulder and receiving a glaring smirk in return.

"If you behave properly in the meantime and ask nicely, that is," Sasha added, chuckling. "Speaking of young upstarts your sister had a remarkable season this year," he offered. "Holyhead finished third in the standings this year, didn't they?"

Charlie grimaced at what was a sore subject to him. "Why in hell Harry let her play pregnant" he began grumbling, only to be prevented from launching into a proper rant on such irresponsibility by Percy and Bill laughing. "What!?" he demanded.

"You have a remarkably antiquated understanding of how a spousal relationship operates," Percy chuckled.

"What makes you think Harry tells Ginny what to do?" Bill added, laughing.

"Since when has *anyone* been able to tell Ginny what to do?" Percy agreed.

Charlie conceded that their headstrong sister seldom listened to wisdom or reason when her mind was set. "Still, that was bloody dangerous," he muttered. As if on cue, Ginny stretched and scratched her now very swollen belly.

After the children's meals had been tended to and they'd returned to the upstairs rooms to play with each other's Christmas toys, the adults distributed themselves upon the living room furniture. A warm fire glowed in the huge hearth, the fairy-lit tree twinkled cheerily, and a brilliant moon illuminated the meadow on view outside the window-wall. The very youngest children had settled into their parents' or grandparents' arms and drifted off to sleep.

It was at this point that Percy brought out an obscenely old bottle of Ogdens' the Firewhiskey contained therein was older than their parents and likely cost more than Charlie earned in a month. *Percy's got Cavendish tastes now*, he thought a little uncharitably about the wealthy, ancient wizarding family his brother had married into. His wife, Audrey, was a nice enough lady, but it had been patently obvious all day how uncomfortable she'd been spending it here at the Hill, slumming with the over-exuberant peasants.

When everyone but Ginny had been handed a glass, Arthur raised his. Beaming proudly down upon his prodigious family, he offered, "To our darling Annie and George, whose marriage we celebrate today has singlehandedly produced one-third of our grandchildren!"

A round of "Hear, hear!" and laughter followed. Charlie quickly checked the math in his head, and realized his father was almost accurate. George and Annie had birthed five out of the fourteen-member new generation, not including the one gestating in Ginny's belly at the moment.

"The pleasure of that was all Annie's, I assure you," George quipped with his patented devilish grin, then grunted when his wife's sharp little elbow caught his ribcage.

"I only wish I'd had your school to ship mine all off to, Annie, dear," Molly added, shooting a glare at her vulgar son before taking a dainty sip of Firewhiskey.

"Yes, they might've been properly civilized, then," Fleur twittered.

While Molly made a point of laughing charitably, the rest of the family smiled weakly at the jibe, only just willing to give Fleur the benefit of the doubt and not take offense at her misguided attempt at a joke. Except for Ginny, that is, who scowled at her least favorite family member.

"That pleasure is indeed all mine, Molly," Annie replied warmly, most likely in an effort to redirect. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

Charlie gave his sister-in-law a tilt of his head in admiration. *I stare down dragons every day, but I'd never survive an hour doing what she does* she recognized. The thought of wrangling a great herd of children all day long, most of them not even her own, struck dread in his gut. But brave Annie had taken her daycare a step further, transforming it into a proper school and trying to cram real knowledge in their snotty, whinging little heads. *Made of stronger stuff than me, she is*

Ron perceptively filled the last remnants of an awkward void with another toast. "Here's to Annie, who's somehow managed beyond all odds to keep George out of the clink thus far."

"A minor miracle, certainly," Percy added.

"I resemble that remark!" George spluttered for comic effect.

"May your lucky streak continue, old girl," Charlie chimed in above the laughter.

Another round of drinks were downed before Harry took the floor. With little Albus draped over his shoulder, fast asleep and drooling on his jumper, he raised his glass. By his expression, everyone could tell this would be a serious rather than humorous toast.

"As a younger fellow, I didn't have many functional adult relationships around me to learn the trick of how it's done. If I'm any kind of husband and father" Harry paused, smiling wryly as James howled in protest about something from upstairs, "and this is debatable, as evidenced by my offspring..." The group laughed, then he continued, "But if I've managed the business in the slightest, I reckon it's due in no small part to all of you, but especially you, George and Annie. You've shown us all that with a ferocious dedication to each other and a sense of humor, a marriage can survive anything the world can throw at it, including children."

"Well said, Harry," Percy cheered, offering his glass.

Ginny smiled warmly at her husband before turning her smile onto the couple of the moment. "Well, I suppose I have you two to thank for my wedded bliss, then," she said, absently stroking her belly.

"Gah," Bill pretended to retch, while Ron and George jammed their fingers in their ears, humming to distract themselves.

Hermione rolled her eyes at their immature antics, then presented her glass. "To Annie and George, may the decades to come bring you even more joy than the first one has done."

No one could improve upon her sentiment, so the glasses were drained in silence. Fleur and Percy gathered them up, gently sending them aloft across the room to lightly settle themselves into the kitchen sink.

"Now, Charlie, just you take a good look at all this around you," Molly started in on him with a scolding tone. "Have you done anything yet about"

"Ah, Mum, give it a rest for once," Bill chided her, scowling weakly.

"Well, it was a nice moment, there for a moment," Ron grumbled, patting Hermione on the knee and smiling wryly. "I thought your toast was very nice, love." His wife smiled gratefully back.

"You two seem to think you've got all the time in the world," Molly said, ignoring the rest of them and fixing her slouching, delinquent quarry with an intent stare the sort that used to make Charlie's guts squirm in anxiety whenever he'd done something wrong as a boy.

"Oh, Molly, not now," Annie pleaded softly.

"But I'm going to tell you what no one else here will," Molly announced like a prophetess of yore, ignoring everyone's pleas. "If you're not careful, you're going to end up old and bitter and alone!"

"For Christ's sake, leave him be, Mum!" George thundered, leaping to his feet. "For bloody once in your life"

"George!" Arthur spoke sharply, giving his son a warning look.

"This is my house, dammit," George muttered, refusing to sit back down but dropping his angry glare to the floor. "There's a reason he stays here instead of with you, and this is it."

"And he's my *son*," Molly said in a voice that was at once indignant and anxious. She turned almost pleading eyes to Charlie. "Why won't you listen to any of us? If you won't take my word for it, then listen to your brothers and sister. Just look at how happy they all are, Charlie! Don't you want the same thing?"

Charlie swallowed hard. It was excruciating to face his mother's gaze, but he forced himself to do it.

"I only want you to be happy, love," Molly insisted, employing the soft-yet-stern tone she'd used when discipline was about to be doled out.

"I am happy," Charlie answered, slightly hoarse. "Why won't you believe me?"

Molly skeptically pursed her lips. "I want you to find love, Charlie. All the success in the world means nothing without someone to share it with. You simply can't be happy without love, and I'll never believe you until then."

Charlie straightened up and took several steps toward his mother, which landed him in the middle of the small circle of his family. He hadn't envisioned doing this so publically practically on a stage but here he was. And he'd be damned if he suffered her scorn, her pity, or whatever other misguided emotion for another moment. "I found it, Mum. I am in love with someone."

"*Ti mozshesh etogo ne delat'...*" Sasha murmured, his voice deep and anxious. *You don't have to do this...*

Charlie glanced at him over his shoulder, just to make sure this wasn't Sasha's way of asking him not to. But Sasha's expression held no fear, only concern for him *Pbra*, he replied softly. *It's time.*

In the meanwhile, Molly's face now lit up with pleasure. "Oh, Charlie! How wonderful! Who is she? When can we meet her?"

Aside from Molly's gushing, the only sound in the room was the fire crackling in the hearth. Charlie imagined everyone else was holding their breaths, waiting for him to light the fuse. He blinked, filled his lungs, and sparked it. "He."

After a long moment, Molly cocked her head slightly. "Pardon?"

"He, Mum. Not she. And you've known him for ages."

Molly's smile faded slightly in confusion. "I don't... follow." She looked at Arthur beside her, who only looked back blankly.

"It's Sasha, Mum," Charlie said, gesturing clumsily behind him to indicate his meaning more clearly. "He and I... I love him."

His mother's gaze darted over his shoulder at Sasha, then back again to him before it dropped a little, unfocused. "But... I... It's not...?" Molly stammered.

Charlie steeled himself for whatever horrified reaction would come next. "I'm gay, Mum," he said, his voice a little harder than he'd intended. "Do you understand?"

"Gay?" Molly echoed weakly, shaking her head slightly.

Charlie gritted his teeth. "It means I prefer"

"I know what the word means, Charlie," Molly said abruptly, cutting him off. Her eyes began to well up with tears. "When?" she sniffed.

"What do you mean, 'when?'" Charlie asked.

"When did you...? How long have you...?" she stammered.

"I've known for a long time," Charlie confessed, turning to look at Sasha. "Nearly since we met."

"Years," she groaned in an agonized whisper, clutching at her husband's hand as he reached out to put an arm around her. "Years of secrets!"

Charlie couldn't fully smother his wince. She might as well have slapped him and shrieked *Liar!*

She looked around at everyone else's faces. "And you all knew?" She sucked in a horrified breath with the realization she'd been the last to learn the awful truth. "Oh, you all knew!" The tears began to roll down her face. "Oh, Annie! That night in the tent years ago, when you warned me to hold my tongue... Is this what you meant?"

"It's not anyone else's fault, Mum," Charlie insisted. "It wasn't their place to tell you. It was mine. Blame me."

"Blame you? Blame you?" she spluttered. Her eyes darted toward Sasha.

"No!" Charlie declared, his sharp tone causing her gaze to snap back to him. "Not for that. I am the way I am, and no one's to blame. Not you or Dad. Not Sasha. It just is." He knelt before her, watching her hands in her lap, opening and closing in mute shock, knowing the death knell was unavoidable now. *Might as well get it over with* "I'm never getting married, Mum. I'll never have a family. And I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment to you."

"Oh, Charlie," Arthur sighed tiredly, shaking his head slowly.

"Disappointment?" Molly frowned.

"I know you hate everything about what I do," Charlie muttered. "You hate where I live. You hate my job, what I've done with my life. Nothing I do measures up."

"No, Charlie," she whispered. "That's not true!"

"Isn't it?" Charlie snorted. He took a deep breath. "I wish I could convince you that I'm happy. I wish my happiness could be enough for you." He shrugged, at a loss to continue. "I'm sorry."

Molly reached out for his hand. "No, *I'm* sorry, Charlie. I'm so sorry I made you feel this way... That I could ever be disappointed in you... That you couldn't tell me the truth!"

"I'm not ashamed of anything," Charlie explained. "I just didn't want to worry you any more than you already were. I didn't want to hurt you any worse than you'd already been. Especially after Fred..." Charlie had to pause as his throat nearly closed, unable to finish his sentence.

"You compare this with Fred's death?" Molly cried softly. "Oh, Charlie!" She gathered him up to her bosom, stroking his hair like she'd done when he was a child. "Oh, my Charlie! No! No!" She held his face, stroking his cheeks with her thumbs as her eyes and face glittered with tears. "This is *not* a loss! You live! You love! You are my son, and no matter what, I will always love you!"

"But you're disappointed," Charlie pressed, "that I'll never be like the rest of them." He jerked his head in everyone else's general direction.

"Oh, love, I admit I'm disappointed *for* you that you'll never know the kind of joy in having a family of your own like your father and I have done but I'm not disappointed *in* you," Molly argued tearfully. "Charlie, love, I'm... I'm *so proud* of you! Of all you've accomplished! As proud of you as I am of all my children! And I'm gutted that you'd ever think otherwise."

"That goes for both of us, son," Arthur added softly.

Charlie looked into his father's wrinkled, smiling face. Warm and serene, Charlie found comfort in his father's quiet acceptance, drew calm from his mild manner. But his father's wrath or heartbreak was never much in question.

Next, Charlie searched his mother's warm brown eyes... and finally saw it there, the sight he'd let himself forget, evidence of the thing he'd told himself she could never feel for him once she'd known the truth: love. He'd lived for so long convinced she could never understand, fearful of being yet another son responsible for breaking her heart, that he'd never let himself believe the outcome could be otherwise. But here she was with her arms around him, smiling lovingly back at him, and the last constrictive shackle that had bound his conscience all these years snapped apart with an almost audible twang. He was finally, totally free to be himself with everyone who mattered.

Molly gazed deeply into her son's warm brown eyes the ones that looked so much like her husband's and a thought occurred to her. Tapping into the portion of mischievousness she'd inherited from Leander Prewett (which she'd passed on in substantially enhanced measure to George and Fred), she tweaked Charlie's nose.

Charlie jerked back, startled. "Mum!?"

"Charles Septimus Weasley, I ought to wring your neck," she scolded him playfully, delighting in the little gasp their audience gave. "Here I've been worried for years that you were rotting away with loneliness." She pursed her lips in mock irritation and looked at him askance, but she allowed the corners of her mouth to turn up in a smile, and knew the twinkle in her eye would give her away in a moment if it hadn't already. "And all this time, you've been happy as a gnome in a potato patch, haven't you? If you'd only told me you were in love from the beginning, you might've saved me all this trouble." She smoothed her skirt, then picked an invisible bit of lint from his shoulder.

"I suppose," Charlie chuckled, still in a bit of shock. "Sorry, Mum."

"Sorry, indeed," Molly huffed. "See that it doesn't happen again, you." Then she pulled him close for one more hug, kissed the top of his head, and tousled his hair. "Ah, you boys!" she sighed. "It's always something, isn't it, Arthur?"

"They've always been a handful, dear," Arthur agreed.

"Well, I'm glad *that's* over with," Ginny sighed theatrically. "Can we break out the leftover treacle tart now, Annie?"

Charlie turned around to face everyone else, noticing Ginny hastily wiping her cheeks. Several others had telltale glittering eyes, too. He stood up, his eyes linking with Sasha's, who was beaming back at him with an expression of pride and love that made Charlie's own heart soar.

"Is food all you ever think about, you great cow?" George laughed at his sister, attempting to diffuse the solemn mood in his typical way: with a teasing insult.

"You're one to talk," Annie countered, wickedly patting her husband's little pooch of a stomach.

"And I'm eating for two, so bugger off," Ginny grumbled.

"Language, Ginevra!" Molly snapped as the warmth of the family's laughter evaporated the last remnant of tension.

Author's Note: I'd like to thank everyone who's read, and especially those of you who've reviewed, this story for your support and inspiration throughout its posting. In particular, special thanks belong to Feisanna, whose request for more of Charlie and Sasha's tale whilst reading *George & Annie* helped nudge me in this direction, and to Savva for all her generous help in hammering out the proper Russian phrases. So many of the admins and authors and readers here at TPP have helped mold me into the writer I am today, so I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for all you've done!

FYI, I'm very excited to soon be releasing an original work of fiction, *Old Enough to Know Better*, about a fanfiction writer who falls for an actor who plays her favorite fictional character. It's a fun, steamy, dramatic contemporary romance that I hope you might like. The e-book will be available December 2011 on Smashwords, Amazon, and Barnes & Noble. It will also be available in printed form at CreateSpace.

If you're interested in learning more about this and other upcoming releases, including reading an excerpt, please visit my website www.shanynhosier.com, and sign up to receive future newsletters.