

Virgo

by scaranda

Written in response to Pittwitch's 'Seven Deadly Sins' challenge. This one is Lust v Chastity. Severus Snape is a man with modest ambitions: fame, glory, power, recognition, perhaps fortune too... and maybe someone worthy of sharing them with.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 5

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Severus looked up again. He couldn't concentrate properly, and he put that down to the way the damned egg kept knocking off the sides and bottom of the cauldron every few moments, instead of the fact that he had ground to an uncomfortable, not to say insurmountable, halt in his research. He had adjusted the cauldron this way and that every few minutes, to see if he could maintain a position that would allow the egg to float freely, and yet not keep bumping off the cauldron, but every time he just got himself settled again, it would begin, just once at first, a little knock as though to remind him that whilst he thought he had control over everything else in his life, he should not presume to have control over the egg.

Severus was beginning to come to the unacceptable conclusion that he was going to have to solicit help, from someone who would not only be willing, but would also satisfy the one criterion he couldn't satisfy himself. He hoped he could come up with a more tolerable candidate than the very one who had dumped the damned egg in his lap anyway, he snarled to himself, quite forgetting that it he was who had placed the anonymous request in the "Daily Prophet" lost, found and wanted column in the first place. No, no, it certainly would not do for that insufferable oaf Hagrid to know that it had been Lucius Malfoy, via Snape, whose Galleons had been passed under the table to him, not when Severus had taken such pains to be unrecognised.

He checked his notes again, to see if he could add more seawater, to give the egg a bit more room, reason having dictated that the more room the egg had, the less likely it would be to bump off the sides of the cauldron so often, but the notes were quite specific about cauldron size and water content and temperature to be maintained; he had done the calculations himself after all. If he wanted the damned egg to hatch, the baby inside it would have to think it was in a rock pool below its mother, in a wet seaside cave of her choosing. Severus sat back, hardly daring to believe that it hadn't knocked since he had reread the conditions for making a cauldron a surrogate mother. And then it gave another rattle, as though just to remind him of its presence, and stopped, and instead of the relief from the infernal, out-of-kilter knocking, Severus found himself almost holding his breath as he waited for it to happen again, but it didn't. He had an uncomfortable notion that it was deliberately trying his patience, or trying to converse with him, neither of which option appealed more than the other.

He dropped his head to his notebook, trying to find something to latch onto that would make him feel more in control of the situation he had thrust himself into, this mess of his own making. It wasn't as though he would gain financially if he made a dragon-pox antivenin, or receive an Order of Merlin, he thought sourly, or even the respect of the few he considered worthy of being called his peers. He was the expert anyway, the best; what mattered it that his theory remained just that, untested as it was untestable? Better that way anyway, now that Lucius had extracted a promise that Severus would keep any discovery he made a secret; what was the point of it all if he couldn't even satisfy his own needs, his own lust for fame and recognition? He should have resisted Lucius's constant whining, not to mention his threats of cutting him off

financially, and just let him bite his manicured fingernails to the quicks, as he waited for the rest of the ten year incubation period of the disease which had slain his father, to see if it would drag him off to the eternal fires of hell too. Another damned knock, a short sharp impatient rap. If the egg weren't careful he would dump it into the damn Chamber of Secrets and let it hatch there, he snarled to himself, trying to find his place in his unintelligibly angry scrawl of notes, and almost dropped the lot on the floor as he realised it wasn't the egg that had knocked, but some ungracious unsolicited visitor.

'Go away,' he snapped at the door, and the egg knocked on the side of the cauldron, and Severus had to suppress the ludicrous urge to accuse whoever his unwanted visitor was of waking the baby.

He pushed his mind in front of him, just to check it wasn't Lucius, and even before he flung the door to his rooms open, Severus had managed to refuse to acknowledge to himself that he was as surprised as he was, not quite pleased, of course, but not quite displeased either, at his caller's identity.

'Weasley,' he said, hoping the name alone would suffice as an insult. 'What do you want? I am busy,' he snapped, as a myriad of possibilities flashed through his mind in such a way that he had to stifle the urge to usher the dragon-keeper through the door like a long lost brother.

As it happened he didn't need to bother. The belligerent redhead had placed his two large hands on Snape's shoulders and had shoved him back into the room. 'Stop picking on Ron,' he hissed, grabbing an uncomfortably large fistful of Severus's robes, just under his chin. 'Or you'll have me to answer to.'

Snape dragged himself free. 'Kindly keep your hands to yourself, Weasley,' he growled, wondering amongst other things, why Charlie Weasley was in his rooms instead of in Romania, and why his own nether regions had puddled in alarming warmth at the physical contact with a former pupil, one whom he recalled only as a redheaded befeckled upstart, and not as the swarthy weather-beaten man before him. He only remembered his mouth was still open, when he felt it snap shut. 'And I do not pick on your brother,' he went on, belatedly reminding himself to gather his wits from where he had allowed them to be scattered.

But Charlie Weasley seemed to have lost whatever fleeting interest he had had in Snape, and indeed his brother Ron's assertions that his Potions Master was picking on him. He was looking across the study to where the cauldron sat rattling away on top of the ring of fire Severus had so carefully conjured for it. There was something reverential in Weasley's look, something almost religious in its fervour that made Severus wonder if the condition he had almost been tempted to ignore, more for its inconvenience than from any true belief that he could fool the egg, were indeed true. He knew that some Muggle branches of Christianity required their priestly acolytes to be abstemious, and found himself wondering if it also required them to be unspoilt, if not only their future pledges but also their past records were taken into account. That rather left him wondering if Charlie Weasley's adoration of his dragons were as religious as he had been led to believe it was required to be, and if so, if he were a virgin, a thought Snape pushed firmly to the back of his mind, stopping only to tag it as 'useful information which may be needed in the future'.

'Is that... is that a...' Weasley trailed off, as though to mention the name of the only hermaphrodite dragon in the known world was sacrilege, and Severus fancied he only just stopped himself from genuflecting. 'Is it?'

'Is what?' Snape replied blandly, enjoying his moment of superiority. 'Try to be more succinct than your brother.'

Charlie seemed to remember himself suddenly, as though reminded of why he had seen fit to come to Snape's door, and drew himself up. Snape thought he looked a touch dangerous, perhaps even deliciously so. Weasley's eyes flitted back to the cauldron though, to where the egg had begun to knock somewhat insistently against it. He crossed the room and knocked the side of the cauldron back, without as much as wincing at what must have been the enormous heat of the pewter, leaving Severus feeling slightly inadequate, as he wished he had hidden the dragon hide gloves he had to use for handling the hot metal.

'Where did you get it?' Charlie asked, looking up from the odd physical conversation between his knuckles and the egg, which was now rattling the sides of the cauldron in a way it had never rattled at Snape.

'It was a gift,' Snape lied smoothly, but it sounded a lot better than saying he had placed a tacky advertisement in a newspaper, and bought the egg from Hagrid in a Knockturn Alley pub, with Lucius Malfoy's gold.

'From an admirer?' Weasley enquired, with an annoyingly arch look that Severus couldn't quite understand. 'Or someone who wants you dead and doesn't care to soil his own hands?'

'Let us go back to your brother's impertinences, shall we?' Snape replied, steering his way to more comfortable ground.

But Weasley wasn't to be sidetracked, or re-sidetracked, as the case was. 'Is it genuine?' he asked, knocking the side of the cauldron again, to be rewarded seconds later by what Severus could only describe as a sleepy knock back. 'How have you managed?' he went on, transferring his awe from the dragon egg to the man who held it under whatever power he held it. 'A baby, an egg from the *Draco Virgo Intacta*,' Charlie breathed, as though he were referring to some deity known only to the men who knew dragons.

Carpe diem, Snape thought rashly by his own standards, as they were on Latin anyway. 'Not without a little difficulty, Weasley,' he admitted, hoping the man opposite would take that as honest assessment, instead of the failure it was likely to be, unless he got help from someone who knew his dragons, someone like Charlie Weasley, he thought, bringing himself round in a neat circle. 'In fact, it is perhaps opportune that you happened in to see me.'

Snape narrowed his eyes in thought as he watched Weasley seem to come to some sort of decision. He was walking an uncharted path he didn't care to walk, and apart from the uncomfortable certainty he had that Charlie Weasley knew that, he was beginning to wonder if he would leave himself open to being made a fool of too, something he had done altogether too often in his past. There was one thing he hadn't failed to notice, apart from the extreme discomfort of having Charlie Weasley just so close without being able to obtain any relief from his presence, and that was the undeniable fact that since he'd arrived the damned egg had settled, almost as though it were content that someone more attuned to its needs had arrived. No, he hadn't fooled the damn egg at all, it had just been marking time until someone better came along; Severus just hoped he had fooled Weasley better than he had fooled himself.

Charlie Weasley sat back, musing to himself over what he had heard. He was little bit tired of the second brother syndrome anyway, of living under the shadow of Saint Bill: he who deigned to allow the sun to shine from his arse each morning, if the gospel according to Molly Weasley were to be believed. He wondered what she would think if he ended up with an Order of Merlin for finding a cure for dragon-pox; not much he supposed wryly. It would be a case of her whispering to her neighbour at the ceremony something along the lines of: "That man, the one who is receiving the Order of Merlin; his brother is a curse-breaker."

'That's madness,' he objected in a way he thought Snape would expect, tossing back the last of his Firewhisky, and tipping the bottle to refill his glass, pretending not to notice Snape's raised eyebrow. 'You can't raise a baby dragon to adulthood, and expect it to allow you to milk it.'

'There is no such thing as can't, Weasley,' Snape replied, replenishing his own glass, and Charlie suspected it was more to demonstrate that he could drink any man under the table and back again, even before lunchtime, than from any real desire.

'But why a Virgo?' Charlie asked, as though he hadn't already guessed. 'Why not something less restrictive... like a Hebridean... or a Black Caspian? I could get you dragon milk... at least, I think I could,' he lied, carefully closing his mind down from the little push he felt from the scowling black-eyed man across the table.

'It has to be a Virgo,' Snape replied evasively.

Charlie thought he sounded gratified that he had confirmed his suspicions about the specific criteria that applied to handling the *Draco Virgo Intacta*. He smiled to himself at that; that fact that whilst Snape knew quite a lot about dragons, he certainly didn't know quite as much as he thought he did, and not nearly as much as Charlie did. 'Has this something to do with Abraxas Malfoy having caught dragon-pox from a Virgo?' he asked, squinting across the Potions Master's table.

Snape seemed to sigh to himself; as though he supposed it was only to be expected that even a Weasley would eventually make the connection. 'Abraxas Malfoy is dead,'

he replied.

'I'm quite aware of that, Severus. I was in Romania, not Mars,' Charlie replied. 'But Lucius isn't dead. And I also happen to know, as I'm sure you and Lucius do too, that the incubation period of dragon-pox from a Virgo can be as long as ten years.' He smiled across the table at Severus, who seemed to be gamely pretending that he hadn't noticed Charlie had used his given name. 'Old Lucius getting nervous?' he pushed, rather intrigued by the man opposite him.

'Not for himself,' Snape replied, and Charlie didn't think he was wrong in thinking Snape had thrown a little of his caution to the wind. After all, he appeared to have already decided to enlist Charlie's help, something Charlie was feeling quite pleased about, for more reasons than he cared to admit just then. 'He has his family to consider though,' Snape added.

'Crap,' Charlie replied. 'The only thing Lucius has ever considered is his own reflection.' He gave Snape a long look. 'It was Malfoy who gave you the Virgo egg, wasn't it?'

'Only indirectly.'

'Have you any idea of what is going to be involved in raising that thing?' Charlie asked, nodding to where the egg seemed to have fallen asleep. 'That's assuming it even hatches. You have been talking to it, I hope, haven't you? It seemed a bit lonely when I came in.'

'No, I don't talk to it,' Snape replied eventually, just in case the egg would tell Charlie as much. It was one thing to lie, as Severus could do as glibly as the next man, but quite another to be caught out. He was unsure of just how long he had been looking at Weasley's blue-green eyes; they were the colour of shallow seawater washing over sand, and neither reminded him of a green-eyed woman nor a blue-eyed man, both of whom he spent most of his few unguarded moments trying to forget anyway.

It was Charlie who broke the contact, something that made Snape uncomfortable, as though it confirmed the scrutiny had been too long, or perhaps just too intense. 'How long are you in the country for?' he asked in a rush, as though he had been assessing something quite different about the man to what he hoped Charlie hadn't guessed. 'I only ask because I think you know I may need a little assistance here.' He tried to make it sound reluctant, instead of hopeful.

'I was going back today actually,' Charlie lied every bit as well as Snape, looking back to him. 'However, I now have to consider the wellbeing of an extremely rare, not to say vulnerable baby dragon.'

'And are you...?' Snape trailed off, cursing himself for not having prepared his words before he opened his mouth. 'Are you able to satisfy the particular conditions for looking after this particular baby dragon?'

Charlie let out a bray of laughter. 'Oh, Severus, if you could only see yourself. Two 'particulars' in one sentence. I would never have believed you could be so tongue tied.'

Snape flared his nostrils in anger, as much at himself as at the openly honest man opposite him. 'Are you attempting to make a fool of me, Weasley?' he hissed.

'Not at all, you're doing fine all on your own.' Weasley sat back, somehow more at ease than he had been since he had arrived, as though his relaxation and Snape's tension had been jostling with one another for supremacy. 'Are you asking me if I'm celibate, because you're not, and you think the baby dragon will know?'

'No. I am asking if you are able to justify your absence to your employers for long enough to do what requires to be done here,' Snape replied. 'For the good of the dragon, of course.' He didn't need the answer to the other question now anyway; Weasley knew his dragons, it was enough of a confirmation.

'I could,' Charlie replied, picking his words carefully. He had begun to realise something he had never known about Snape, something he suspected very few people would know, and yet he reflected, it was really quite obvious when he thought about it, and he wondered why there had not been speculation about Snape's sexuality when he had been at school, or if there had been and he just hadn't noticed. A single childless man, entrenched in the thankless task of being a schoolmaster, without even the hint of affairs with female staff members; of course he would be homosexual, either that or celibate, and had he not as near as admitted the lie of that to Charlie? Then again, he could be pining after a lost love; the Lily Evans rumour had been rife about the time when the Potters had died. But Charlie had known the truth of that; he had overheard his parents discussing the fact that it had been some kind of odd adolescent love that had just not had the chance to bloom and flower and wither of its own accord. Severus Snape was a closet homosexual; Charlie was quite pleased with the conclusion, being as it was one obstacle less in his way.

'As to the other... the condition you have been so delicately skirting, Severus,' he said, enjoying dragging the Potions Master's discomfiture out for as long as he dared. 'You suspect correctly that the Virgo would not react too kindly to a fornicator. She would know if a man had lain with a woman, Severus... it would not be wise to tempt her wrath,' he said, hardly noticing the way he had repeated his name, and the way it felt good rolling off his tongue, and the odd reaction it seemed to stimulate from Snape, something like surprise, but not quite.

He watched carefully as Snape looked away when he mentioned women, almost as though his automatic response had caught him unawares and he had been unable to stop it, as though he had only just managed to stifle the obvious next question that had sprung to his thin mirthless lips. Charlie thought he'd keep the rest of the knowledge he had to himself, for a while at any rate, just to see how things panned out. He was rather pleased that he had left Romania anyway, having hastily excused himself to the Institute Principal as needing extended leave, and reminded himself to Obliviate the fact that he had told Ron he was on holiday, from his brother's mind. Ron didn't know why he had taken the step of distancing himself from Romania and his beloved dragons; he didn't know he was running away. Anyway, noble sacrifice would be far more appealing to Snape than attempting to make virtue of necessity, and now it seemed as though he had run away from what he needed to escape, and had found a little dragon to look after anyway. Suddenly the world was full of exciting possibilities, he mused, pretending to himself that he didn't mean the thorny scowling attractive, yet undeniably ugly man opposite him, as much as the fearsome little un-hatched reptile fast asleep in her egg.

Charlie stood up; enough was enough, and he needed to think. 'I'll call back later... if I may,' he said, nodding to the cauldron. 'It might be an idea if you drew a veil of silence over this part of the corridor... just so no one wakes her.' He saw Snape's hard flat look, one that warned him that the Potions Master suspected he was making a fool of him, and cautioned himself that the hostile demeanour seemed to cover a very fragile ego. 'Suit yourself,' he said with a shrug. 'Keep it awake if you don't mind it driving you nuts. It'll probably batter off the side of the cauldron for attention.'

Severus didn't seem inclined to reply, but that was better than telling him not to come back. Charlie had already begun to regret the lie, the one he had told by omission only; it was a lie all the same, and he had a feeling Snape would think so too. He wondered how to go about un-telling it.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 5

Lucius pays his investment a visit.

Snape waited until the door clicked closed, before he let out a long shaky sigh, one that almost shocked him. He continued to stare at the space across the table where Weasley had sat, as the questions tumbled over one another, demanding attention and answers he didn't have. He started like a reluctantly awakened cat as the egg knocked on the side of the cauldron; somehow the sound made Weasley's absence more profound. He was quite sure that the egg knew Weasley had left too. It knocked again, this time more urgently, and Snape stood up and crossed the room to peer into the cauldron.

'Hush now,' he said, without noticing he didn't feel the self-consciousness he would have expected to feel at speaking to an egg, albeit alone in his own rooms. 'He may have gone, little one, but I am still here.'

He knew he wasn't mistaken; even before the egg bumped just once off the cauldron side and settled, he knew it had not only heard him, but it had understood too.

He turned his mind once more to the man who had just left, unsurprised to find that he had sat on the seat that Charlie had sat in, the one Severus never sat in, the one for the few visitors courageous enough to darken his doorstep. Had he done that deliberately? He didn't think so; he wasn't aware of the decision, it had been unconscious, subconscious. He told himself that he didn't shift his position just to see if he could feel the contours the other man's arse had left on the soft leather; best not think about the contours of Charlie Weasley's arse.

He poured a small glass of whisky, malt this time, and swirled it thoughtfully before sipping at it, letting it warm the sudden chill he felt, pretending he hadn't enjoyed the company he always saw fit to deny himself. That wasn't strictly true though, he mused in a rare moment of self-examination. It was the particular company he had enjoyed, Charlie Weasley's company. He slipped an ebony box from his pocket and slid a slim dark cigarette between his lips, lighting it from the end of his wand, and found himself looking across to the cauldron to see if the egg would knock its disapproval.

He sat for while in thought, letting the past hour or so slip through his mind, before he came to the conclusion of his failure.

Damn, he snarled to himself, he had made a mess of things. He should just have had the courage to ask Weasley if the dragon... damn, damn, if the dragon minded same sex coupling in the same way as it seemed to abhor that between men and women. Hadn't Weasley hinted as much? Hadn't he specifically said that the dragon would know if he had lain with a woman? Had he been hinting at something else? Trying to draw him out? Laughing at him?

'Well?' Ron asked enthusiastically. 'Did you belt him one?'

Charlie had taken the time to formulate his story; the question didn't catch him unawares. 'No, actually I didn't,' he said, looking to where Ron was already halfway through a superior nod of approval to Harry and Hermione, before he registered what Charlie had said. 'You'd do well to concentrate on your work, instead of trying to better your masters. Anyway, he says he doesn't pick on you.'

'You believe him?' Ron asked, clearly as confused as he was put out. 'He gave me detention for just forgetting my homework.'

'Oh, I see,' Charlie replied, as though just grasping a situation he had really grasped before he ever went to the dungeon. 'So you want me to belt Snape because you didn't bother to do the homework he set you. Is that about the size of it?'

'Bill would have belted him,' Ron retorted. 'Anyway, there's other stuff too.'

'Like what?' Charlie challenged, his temper rising at the reference to Bill, he who sat upon an unshakable pedestal, the one Charlie was supposed to look up to, along with the rest of adoring Weasley throng.

'Like lots of stuff. He's given me detention before.'

'For fun? Or maybe he likes you company?'

'For not very much,' Ron muttered. 'Anyway, what took you so long? Bill would have been in and out in two seconds flat.'

'Well, I'm not Bill,' Charlie replied, much more calmly than he would normally have done when being compared to the incomparable. 'I'm quite glad about that actually,' he said, only just admitting to himself why that was.

Ron huffed a bit, before seeming to come to reluctant terms with the fact there wasn't any blood on the dungeon walls. 'Come on then,' he said at last. 'I'm starving. Let's have lunch, and then you can watch us having Quidditch practice.'

'Not today,' Charlie replied, turning to the Hall. 'I've got work I need to do.'

'Work?' Ron asked. 'What kind of work? I thought you were on holiday?'

'It's secret actually,' Charlie replied. 'I came here to work with Severus on something.'

'What?' Ron replied in a shocked tone, although whether outraged at the prospect of work, or at the said work being with his Potions Master, Charlie wasn't quite sure.

'Mind your own business, Ron. This is secret Ministry work. I have more important things to discuss with Severus than justifying some silly grouse you have about the consequences of being too lazy to do your homework.'

'Ministry work?' Ron asked. 'Cool. Does Dad know?' he asked, his chest puffed out in a way that made Charlie despair at how easy it was to flatter a Weasley.

'Actually, nobody knows,' he replied, making a fist below his youngest brother's chin. 'And it had better stay that way.'

'Cool,' Ron repeated a bit less surely. 'Poor you though, stuck working with that greasy old bat.'

Charlie watched Ron turn away to follow Harry and Hermione into the Hall, the other two having lost interest quite quickly when realising that Dumbledore wasn't about to announce Snape's death over the lunch tables. It had gone quite well, he mused; now all he had to do, apart from thinking up something to ensure Snape wasn't arrested for owning an illegal dragon's egg, something he seemed not to have considered, was worm himself a little more under Snape's admirable defences, just to see what was actually lurking there. But for now he had something a bit more pressing to attend to, something he suspected wouldn't take too long, something thoughts of the sullen sulky Potions Master had brought to a head again. The boys' toilets on the ground floor should be empty now that almost everyone was in for lunch; he'd just drop in there for hors d'oeuvre. He wondered if Severus was feeling the same way; the thought did nothing to dampen his ardour.

Severus slid to his knees as the last imaginary echoes of Charlie Weasley's name bounced off the uncaring tiles, and his angry seed washed down the drain hole of the shower. He let the hot spray dance on his back, as his heart returned to a more measured pace and his breathing began to still. At last he dragged himself to his feet, clutching beyond the steamy haze for the towel he had hung slightly further away from where he encountered it... just above a pair of highly polished boots that didn't belong to him.

'What on earth were you doing on the floor, Severus?' Lucius asked, his silver-blond eyebrow all but disappearing into his ridiculous hair. 'Did you fall?'

Severus snatched the towel and wrapped it quickly around his waist. 'What do you want, Lucius?' he snapped. 'How did you get in here anyway?'

'The door was open,' Malfoy replied. 'A touch careless on your part, Severus,' he said reproachfully, nodding towards the bedroom, and thence to the study, where Severus sincerely hoped he hadn't woken the egg. 'What on earth were you thinking about? Anyone could have come in and stolen my dragon.'

Snape resisted the almost overwhelming desire to tell Lucius that he had been thinking of shagging Charlie Weasley into next week, just for the look he would be rewarded with, just in case... he pushed the thought away, as his nether regions shocked him by reminding him that, whilst he might have given them temporary respite, they weren't going to be satisfied for long, not without the real thing.

'What do you want, Lucius?' Snape repeated, pushing past him, and roughly drying his black hair into a submission of damp, already tangled ropes with another towel he grabbed from the rail.

'I came to find out how our experiment is progressing,' Lucius replied. 'Where is the dragon anyway?'

'My experiment is underway,' Severus replied.

'And the dragon?'

'It's in its ruddy egg, Lucius,' Severus snarled. 'Even you would have noticed a fire-breathing reptile hiding behind my desk.'

'And the milk?' Lucius enquired delicately.

'In the ruddy egg too, one would suppose,' Snape replied, throwing the door of his study open onto the draughty corridor. 'Now, go away, or you'll upset the balance of what I'm doing here.'

Malfoy drew himself up to his impressive height and flared his nostrils. 'You were sleeping on the floor of your shower, Severus, with your door open to all callers,' he said. 'Now let me see what I have paid so dearly for.'

The egg took that moment to knock loudly on the side of the cauldron, and Severus fancied it was angry at having been disturbed. 'Now look what you've done,' he snapped. 'You've woken it up.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Malfoy replied, peering somewhat cautiously into the cauldron, and drawing back quickly when the egg surfaced and flipped over, before diving to the depths of the cauldron and knocking on the side nearest Snape.

'Hush, little one,' Snape said soothingly, praying to Merlin that he wasn't about to make a greater fool of himself than he already felt. 'I am here; I shan't let him disturb you.' He felt enormously gratified when the egg gave a couple of soft, almost timid little knocks.

Lucius peered into the cauldron suspiciously, and the egg surfaced so quickly that it splashed boiling seawater down the front of his leather doublet, as he staggered back in fright. 'I'll just let you get on with it then, shall I?' he asked, backing towards the door with his wand drawn.

'Are you frightened of an egg, Lucius?'

'I shall wait outside the Hall for you, Severus,' Malfoy said in way of reply. 'Hurry up and get dressed or we shall miss lunch altogether.'

Charlie looked across to the high table again, just to see if Severus had perhaps sneaked in on all fours and he'd missed him, but the two seats between Minerva and Dumbledore were empty.

'Who's missing from the high table?' he asked Ron.

'Um, just the bat,' Ron remarked through a bread roll he was attempting to chew into submission with a few spoonfuls of soup.

'There are two seats empty.'

'Malfoy's probably here,' Harry remarked sourly. 'He always sits next to Snape.'

'Come here often, does he?' Charlie asked.

'More often than the Ministry,' Ron replied, swallowing the mess in his mouth. 'So Dad says.'

'He's a governor, Ron,' Hermione remarked. 'And stop speaking with your mouth full.'

'Well, people should stop asking me questions when my mouth's full.'

'Yup, there they are, the gruesome twosome,' Harry said, nodding to where Lucius Malfoy and Snape strode across the Hall, a startling counterpoint to one another.

Charlie watched Snape scan the Gryffindor table, catch his eye for a moment and look away. He felt a knot of something icy lying on his chest, as he watched Malfoy sit and then look up at Severus, something to do with the fact that Snape's hair looked damp, and Malfoy looked smug enough to drink his own bathwater. He came to the uncomfortable conclusion that the two men were more than just good friends. He stood up and left the Hall, ignoring Ron's enquiry, and not even noticing the frown Severus sent to his retreating back; he was too disappointed, and couldn't think why that was, after all, he had only been in Severus Snape's presence for little more than an hour since he had left school. It was a pity about the dragon though.

Severus made his way back along the dungeon corridor. Lucius had left for the Ministry, seeming disinclined to meet with his reptilian investment again. He closed the door quietly, but not quietly enough; the egg knocked against the side of the cauldron.

'Go back to sleep, little one,' he said quietly, and sat down at his desk, wondering why Weasley had left the Hall so abruptly. He tried to push it out of his mind; he had more important things to do with a weekend than wonder why a man he had only just met was having such an alarming mental, not to mention physical effect on him.

The egg knocked again. 'Go back to sleep,' he repeated, searching for the tone that had seemed to soothe it before. But the egg wasn't to be soothed. He even tried knocking gently on the side of the cauldron with his stirring stick, to see if he could quiet it that way, but apart from knocking back at the same spot, the egg seemed not too interested in pleasing him. It began the patience testing irregular knocking it had been doing before Weasley had arrived on the scene, and by the time a frustrating hour had passed, Severus was disgusted with the romantic idea that he had ever been able to commune with it at all. It had just been tired and had gone to sleep of its own accord, and now it had had a nice nap it had decided to go back to driving him insane instead. Damn it, he would never get anything done if it didn't ruddy well shut up, and if his calculations were correct, it would be another ruddy week at least before the damn thing hatched. And then it went quiet again, almost as though it had gone into a sulk, and Severus lifted his book, refusing to cross the room to look at it.

He had just got himself settled, just run his current fantasy through his mind again, when someone knocked his door; at least this time he recognised it wasn't the ruddy egg. The egg woke up, of course, and even before Snape pushed his mind out to identify his visitor, the egg had recognised the dragon-keeper and was rattling the side of cauldron. For some odd reason he didn't care to identify, that almost made Severus smile.

'Come in, Weasley,' he called, without bothering to stand. 'The wards are down.'

He watched Charlie close the door, and even before he turned, Snape knew something had changed him back into the hostile brother of Ron Weasley who had called earlier in the day. That shocked him, that it had only been that very morning.

'I just called in to let you know that I'm going back to Romania after all,' Weasley said, and the egg splashed water out of the cauldron, causing the ring of fire to hiss in what sounded like anger.

'But... what about the dragon?' Snape asked, finding himself on his feet. Weasley was already heading back to the door; he hadn't even acknowledged the egg. 'Damn it, Weasley, you can't leave me in the lurch.'

'In the lurch?' Charlie replied over his shoulder, seeming reluctant to meet Snape's eyes. 'You were doing fine until a few hours ago; I'm sure you and Lucius will manage very well.'

'Lucius?' Snape asked, as Charlie put his hand on the door handle. 'What are you talking about, Weasley?'

'Lucius... Lucius Malfoy. The man who gave you the dragon egg in the first place.' Charlie turned at last to look at Snape; there was something challenging in his glare. 'Expensive gift, Snape.'

'I wouldn't let Lucius Malfoy anywhere near the egg,' Snape retorted, and the egg obligingly knocked its agreement on the cauldron. 'Anyway, it doesn't like him.'

'How do you know?' Charlie challenged again. 'I thought you said you wouldn't let him near it.'

'He tried to look in the cauldron, and it spat boiling seawater at him actually,' Snape replied, not bothering to hide his satisfaction, not now that he had begun to understand some of Weasley's apparent hostility. 'I didn't bother to mention to him that it was salt water. It should dry to a nice white ring on his black leather. I confess I'm rather hoping the rest of the Ministry thinks he dropped his lunch down himself before he notices.'

'Come here often, does he?' Charlie repeated the question he had asked Ron, appearing to be trying to find a way to back down a little, but still get what information needed.

'Altogether too often. However,' Severus said, 'he seemed reluctant to linger once the dragon let her feelings be known.'

'So...' Charlie began, and then hesitated, and then appeared to feel that discretion was not perhaps the better part of valour after all. 'So, you're not having an affair with Lucius Malfoy?'

'Lucius Malfoy is the last man on earth I would have an affair with,' Snape replied testily, in an attempt to hide his confusion, and yet make it clear that, whilst he perhaps did not consider Lucius Malfoy to be a worthy suitor, that didn't rule out any other men, or man in particular.

'That's all right then,' Charlie grunted. 'I wouldn't care to fall over the fat tart every time I came to see the dragon.'

'Stop loitering at the door, Weasley,' Snape replied. 'You'll upset the egg. It's been very trying this afternoon.' And just to prove him wrong, the egg bumped once off the side of the cauldron, and fell silent.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 5

Things move one step forward, and three steps back.

Charlie laid Snape's notes down. He couldn't fault them, or his reasoning behind his assumptions. Snape appeared to know that whilst a dragon could never suckle her young of course, she used her milk to break down any poisons in the creatures that she slew for them, tearing them to easily digestible shreds with her talons and mighty beak in the case of sea dragons, and teeth in the case of land dragons, and mixing the shreds with her milk. He had made full use of that knowledge in theorising that the milk could be crucial to him. He hadn't failed to concede just how dangerous dragons were though, even to experienced dragon-keepers, and just how daunting a task it would be to embark upon the rearing of one, and the collecting of that milk, particularly from something as chaste as a Virgo.

As Charlie already knew, Snape had recognised that the Virgo didn't seem to view coupling between men and women as acceptable, and that her violent hostility towards married keepers was the stuff of legends, as though they dallied in abhorrences akin to bestiality, and that she would not see fit to sacrifice her own purity to ones so soiled. Indeed for many centuries eunuchs and sworn virgins had been the only wizards or witches permitted to handle the Virgos. What Snape wouldn't know was that more recently, as recently as a hundred years before, the Institute had found it increasingly difficult to recruit wizards of the standard they required, who were keen to lose their balls on the off chance that they might graduate to handling Virgos, and it had been about then that it was discovered that the Virgos had no hostility to men who lay with men, aside from their natural aggression, or women who lay with women for that matter. It was all conjecture of course, the sum total of experiences gleaned over the Institute of Dragon Research's thousand year history, the Institute secrets that were never published.

Charlie didn't know why the Virgo seemed to accept male and female dragons as being different halves of one species, but failed to do the same with witches and wizards, but he was fairly content that it was so, narrowing the research field the way it did. He grinned to himself in satisfaction as he laid the notes aside, pushing away the bitter memories of how his own research had been stolen from him, before he had the spurt of confidence to break away, and how that had stifled his lust for truly making a name for himself. Charlie had always known he could do it; he had just been too young, too trusting, and had fallen foul of what he saw as his own inadequacies. Perhaps if he had been more like Bill... he shoved it away, he'd broken free, or hoped he had, and he was content that Snape's theory for using dragon milk as the base for his antivenin was sound. It wasn't so much that Severus had covered the angles and understood the Virgo the way he did that charmed Charlie most though; it was the fact that he had theorised for both treating dragons and wizards, and that he was intending to return the dragons some kind of quid for their pro quo.

He was also quite sure that Snape would be perfectly aware of the one gaping hole in his research programme. 'This could take years, Severus.'

Snape nodded.

'And if Lucius Malfoy carries the strain in his system, he would be dead before you ever got your research complete, let alone tested.' He nodded to the cauldron, to where he was sure the baby dragon inside the egg was listening carefully. 'She's not even hatched yet. She won't produce milk... not until she's ready to make her own first egg.'

'Not necessarily years,' Snape murmured. 'I'm sure you are every bit as aware as I am that a mother dragon deposits milk into her shell before the egg is laid, so that the baby can put out any fires it lights by mistake.'

'Not enough though,' Charlie replied. 'There wouldn't be enough to make a sufficient batch of any antivenin to dose anything as... as large as Lucius Malfoy for any length of time.'

'Enough to begin to make test batches though,' Snape reasoned.

'To test on whom?' Charlie asked. 'I'm sure I'm not about to ask Lucius if we can use him as a guinea pig.'

'You are going to arrange to test it on an infected dragon, Weasley,' Snape replied, and Charlie could see that he wasn't finished.

'And?' he invited, returning the black-eyed man's stare, one he noticed had become remarkably less hostile.

'And you are going to then see if you can obtain some dragon milk for me.'

'From a Virgo, of course?' Charlie replied.

'Of course. We can easily argue that it has to be Virgo milk to allow our antivenin to be universal, a sovereign specific if you like.'

'And not just convenient for Lucius Malfoy?' Charlie asked, but he had liked the way Snape had used the word "we".

'My reasoning is sound, Lucius Malfoy notwithstanding. Unless of course you want to spin a yarn,' Snape replied. 'Although I'm not sure I would want to lie to a dragon.' And the egg knocked on the side of the cauldron in agreement.

'Well. We'll just have to make sure that she doesn't light any fires,' Charlie said, nodding to where the egg gave a somewhat mischievous little knock.

'As good a reason as any for keeping Lucius away from her.'

'How are we going to do all this without someone finding out, Severus?' Charlie asked, swept along with the idea of being part of Snape's research.

'Lucius would like everything kept secret,' Snape admitted. 'However, if that is not possible, which I fully intend to be the case, disinclined as I am to work for ten years for nothing but a pat on the back if Lucius Malfoy remembers, I rather intended to leave that up to him.'

'Hmmm, he's got a track record where dragons are concerned,' Charlie countered. 'Remember, he was the one instrumental in getting Hagrid's dragon confiscated.'

'He also has a remarkable ability for wriggling out of tight spots, when his own interests are concerned,' Snape replied, feeling more relaxed than he had done for... he couldn't quite recall how long. 'By the way, Hagrid's dragon... how did he settle?'

'She settled very well, once she got over her indignation at being mistaken for a boy and being called Norbert,' Charlie replied, watching the way Snape had spread his hands in invitation for his reply, the way the long tapered, work-scarred fingers seemed every bit as eloquent as the man who owned them. He dragged his gaze from them, back to Snape, before he wondered what they would feel like. 'Stupid name for a girl, even a girl dragon.'

'It was a stupid name for a boy too,' Snape replied, wondering why he was so enjoying talking about anything as inane as Hagrid's choice of names.

Charlie smiled, but he still felt uneasy. The Ministry was notoriously prickly on the point of rare magical creatures without licences; added to the fact that the Virgo was also an extremely dangerous dragon, and had quite clearly been illegally obtained, he felt Snape was expecting Lucius Malfoy to jump in, where Charlie thought he was more likely to distance himself. 'How do we keep her safe, Severus?' he asked, claiming joint surrogate parenthood for himself. 'If the Ministry march in here and confiscate her, she'd never survive.'

'Do not concern yourself with that, Weasley. If the need arises, let Lucius explain things to the Ministry. After all, it's his dragon.'

Both men sprang to their feet, as the egg broke the surface of the seawater, and flipped over with a splash, and began knocking loudly on the side of the cauldron in indignation.

'Hush now, little one,' Snape said softly, not even noticing that once again he felt no self-consciousness at speaking to a cauldron of boiling seawater, and pretending not to notice that Weasley was watching him across its rim. 'We are only seeking a way to keep you safe.'

'Go back to sleep,' Charlie said, stroking the cauldron side, as Severus watched the large but slim weather-beaten hands caress the hot metal, in a way he wanted them to caress him.

And the egg bumped once off Snape's side, and once off Charlie's, in what sounded to Snape suspiciously like encouragement.

'You're very good with her,' Charlie said, and Severus knew he didn't imagine the way Weasley had leant slightly over the cauldron towards him, or the way the little dragon seemed to crouch inside her egg with bated breath for what might happen next, and he suspected with a wry inward smile of resignation that she would become very demanding if they allowed her to be.

He drew his gaze away from where Weasley's sea green eyes had widened, unwilling to commit himself, unsure. 'That is as may be, Weasley,' he said. 'It was you she missed when you left though.'

Charlie smiled. 'After an hour?' he said. 'I think you flatter me, Severus.' His tone was still soft, almost as though he were addressing the dragon egg, or some other object of his desire.

'I think she sensed your expertise,' Snape replied, content now not to break the mood any further, confident to let it sweep them where it would. 'Perhaps your chastity?' He noticed Weasley's mouth was slightly open, just a little, like a cautious invitation.

'About that chastity, Severus,' Charlie breathed, and the egg gave a hopeful little knock, and someone else gave a louder, altogether more demanding knock, and Weasley drew back, and Severus pushed down the scald of disappointment, and the egg splashed boiling seawater down the sides of the cauldron to hiss angrily at the interruption.

'Ron said I might find you here,' he who had to be adored said, taking Snape's seat, whom he had barged past with little more than an unfriendly nod. Bill drew a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one, before even as much as glancing back at Severus, as though to let him know he didn't intend to ask for permission that one such as he should not be required to seek. Charlie took a moment to enjoy the murderous look Snape shot him back from where he still stood at the door like an unwanted visitor in his own home.

'What are you doing here?' Charlie asked as unenthusiastically as he felt.

'That's not very gracious,' the God of the Weasley clan remarked. 'I had a few days off, and went to see you in Romania, but you'd bugged off again.'

Charlie didn't like this, but he took another quick look at where Snape had turned away to the cauldron, and Charlie could see he was only feigning disinterest, before his attention was unpleasantly diverted by the disaster that seemed to be looming.

'Zachary's furious with you this time, Charlie,' Bill went on, and Charlie wondered how to shut him up, short of laying him out cold, which was beginning to seem like a reasonable option. 'You'll be lucky if he takes you back this time.'

'I'm not going back,' Charlie said flatly, avoiding the way Severus looked up sharply, in a way he knew Snape would have hated him to notice, and trying to cut Bill off in a damage limitation exercise he thought might just be too late.

'Of course you are,' Bill replied easily, blowing a couple of smoke rings that just managed not to be heart shaped. 'You always do. I took the liberty of reminding Zachary you always storm off in a sulk, have a fling with some other poor unsuspecting sod, and crawl back.' He gave Snape a cursory look, as though dismissing him out of hand as a possible candidate.

'Why don't you just fuck off back to Egypt, and mind your own business?' Charlie snarled. He still didn't know how to stop this.

'Oh behave, Charlie. You're not about to sweep six years of unbridled passion under the carpet, and you know it.' Bill let out a laugh at his own brilliant assessment.

'I said, I'm not going back,' Charlie snapped, at last looking again to where Snape seemed to have drawn close to the cauldron, as though for protection, but he had an uneasy feeling he sought it for himself as much as the egg.

'That'll be Fleur,' Bill said brightly, getting to his feet at the sound of a more timid knock, failing to notice the devastation he had wreaked in a few short moments. He flung the door open to be met by Fleur adoring him in her cloyingly ridiculous accented English. 'Come on, Charlie, let's go. Mum and Dad are upstairs,' he said, just to be proved wrong for once, as Molly's voice hooted down the corridor, bouncing in echoes off the dungeon walls.

'Weasley,' Snape hissed to Charlie, from where he stood at the cauldron Bill hadn't even noticed. 'The noise... if you would be so kind.'

There was no point; Charlie could see that. He could see Severus refused to recognise the appeal in his eyes; he would read it as he saw fit, as another lie.

Severus stood for a few long moments with his hand on the closed door, thanking Merlin, or whoever wasn't listening anyway, that he hadn't succumbed to the almost overpowering urge he had had to take Charlie Weasley; his mouth, his body, and whatever went with them. At last he swallowed the bitter aftertaste of one defeat too many, and crossed to where the egg was knocking somewhat disconsolately at the bottom of the cauldron.

'Don't worry, little one, I shall care for you,' he said, and the egg knocked back.

A Weasley indeed, Severus snarled to himself, trying to square his shoulders from the slump they seemed to have adopted of their own accord, telling himself he had had a lucky escape. It would be a long time before he would be so foolish as to drop his defences again, the way he very nearly had. Love in haste, and repent at leisure, his romantic history to date. It had been the dragon of course, or that was the way he explained it to himself.

He lifted the notebook, the one Weasley had been studying earlier. And he had been studying, that had been something Snape had appreciated; he hadn't just flicked through the notes with the arrogant confidence of one who knew it all anyway. He laid the notes down in irritation, pushing Weasley from his mind. What had been thinking of, anyway? The man was a good fifteen years younger than he was.

'So?' the egg remarked dryly. 'Were you thinking of starting a family? Anyway, I'm only little, and you're both supposed to look after me.'

Severus had staggered to his feet, wondering for a moment if he were either drunk or dreaming, and the egg knocked the side of the cauldron, in something he didn't even want to consider sounded as though it were telling him to pull himself together and give it another go. He peered into the cauldron, but the egg had either fallen asleep, or was pretending to.

He didn't notice when he finished the last of the malt and started a new bottle, nor when his reflective yet maudlin mood slipped into drunken self-pity, as he relived his few spectacular romantic failures. He was incapable of affection, of casual friendship, the twin passions of love and hate knowing no moderation in him. Sometimes he thought he was naught but the fallout of the shit in his life, with nothing but the debris of humiliation scattered around him; and sometimes he looked closer, if he had a bottle to prop him up, and he knew he was the sum total of his own inadequacies. And the drunker he became, the more self-loathing he became too, the more defeatist, the more pathetic, until he quite forgot where love ended and hate began, because he didn't know there was anything in between.

'I see the bat hasn't come for dinner,' Ron remarked through a mess of potatoes and chicken.

'I meant to ask,' Bill said across the table to Charlie. 'What were you doing in Snape's lair?'

'Why?' Charlie snapped. He had managed so far not to include himself in the noisy family conversation; he doubted anyone had noticed.

'Charlie,' Molly scolded, then grinned her sugary grin down the House table from where the Weasley clan had perched themselves at the very end, almost outnumbering the rest of the Gryffindors. 'Bill was just asking a nice question.'

'You answer him then,' Charlie replied sourly, and stood up.

'Charlie Weasley,' Molly hissed, 'come right back here and answer your brother.' She gave another grin, this time to where Fleur had herself draped across Bill, in a way that made her look as though she had no bones in her body, as though she were an article of his clothing. 'Oh, whatever must you think of him, Fleur? Such a sourpuss he is.'

'That's enough, Molly, all of you,' Arthur broke in, in a voice that made Charlie turn round from where he had begun to walk away. But Arthur had already stood, and was walking towards him, cocking his head to the door of the Hall, as the rest of Weasleys stopped eating and talking at one another to watch.

'In here,' Arthur said, nodding to the Library.

Arthur listened, saying very little as Charlie told him as many of his problems as he was able to. At length he sat back. 'I never liked him, son,' he admitted. 'I never said as much to you, but I was never comfortable with him, and I sometimes got the uneasy feeling that that was because I didn't think you were either.'

'It wasn't like that. I just had to get away, and start fresh on my own,' Charlie replied, the lie rolling easily off his tongue.

'He manipulated you, Charlie,' Arthur said. 'If you had been younger, not a grown man, I would have stepped in; maybe I should have.' He shrugged. 'You were never the same once you got together with him. I'm glad you're back.'

They were quiet for a while, each man lost in his thoughts, but neither uncomfortable with the silence.

'And now?' Arthur ventured. 'Are you going to stay here and work with Snape?'

'I'd like to,' Charlie replied. 'It's what I want to do. It's an opportunity I never expected.'

'And you and Severus?'

'I've only been here for a day,' Charlie objected, where he knew he should have issued a denial.

'Perhaps,' Arthur said, nodding the way Dumbledore nodded, so that Charlie found himself wondering if it were a generational thing, and one day he would find himself nodding in the same way. 'An honourable man though, a difficult man, but honourable.' Arthur gave his son a long look. 'Not one who would exploit you.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Charlie said hotly, searching for something to throw his father off a path he didn't want to walk down, couldn't walk down. 'You know Severus is...?' He trailed off, unsure of how frank he wanted to be.

'That he's homosexual?' Arthur asked. 'Of course. That was why he split up with Lily Evans. Acrimonious it was too. Severus adored her, but for him it was only a profound platonic friendship, and Lily, unsurprisingly, wanted more. He was very bitter about it, which is a bit unreasonable, and he resented James deeply.'

'I didn't know that,' Charlie replied. 'Not that bit.'

'No reason why you should. It wasn't anyone's business but Lily and Snape's. I just happened to be around at the time, doing work with James's father at the Ministry. Anyway,' Arthur went on, 'he lived with another man for a while, after he left school, but that ended badly too.'

'Who?' Charlie asked, doubting his father would tell him. 'A Death Eater?'

'It turned out that he wasn't, although a lot of people thought he was... some still do,' Arthur replied. 'It was Sirius Black. I'm not sure I would let Snape know that you know that though.'

'Shit,' Charlie muttered; that slipped a lot of missing jigsaw pieces into place.

'Oh, they had already split before the Potters died, but Snape was bitter about that too. Black wasn't a very nice person, and he was less than discreet about things that were none of anyone's business. And yet, I always got the feeling that Snape wasn't a naturally bitter man; I think he was the victim of circumstances... many of which he brought on himself.'

Charlie watched his father nod again. He knew most people regarded him as the kindly fool he was, but he was a wise kindly fool, was Arthur.

'Anyway, I'd better get back before someone actually notices I'm not there.' Arthur began to haul himself to his feet. 'Let me put my thinking cap on about the dragon, son. I think you're right, I think Severus is relying too much on Lucius bailing him out of trouble, if there's any with the Ministry.'

Charlie smiled, then felt a lump swell in his throat as Arthur pulled his shoulders to him, and kissed the top of his head, as though he were a small boy with a skinned knee.

'And you've got a man to see about a dragon,' he said, winking at Charlie.

'I don't think I'm brave enough tonight,' Charlie replied ruefully.

'Don't wait too long, son.'

Charlie watched him go, thinking about his family, and whilst he might not have been Molly's blue-eyed boy, Charlie knew he was Arthur's. That warmed him, as did the knowledge that he loved his brother Bill as much as he loved his other brothers and sister, and that Molly would drain her veins for any one of her children, even if it would always be handy if Bill were first in the queue.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 5

Bill recognises something he should have seen before.

He'd lost a day, an entire day, and he only knew that because he also knew he couldn't possibly have drunk more than two bottles of whisky in one night, not and still be alive to tell the tale... to himself, he thought sourly. He shaved the two days' growth without really looking at himself, wondering what depths of self-pity he had stooped to, or why he'd let himself get so low.

It had been a good half hour since he'd swallowed the hangover cure, but he knew it wasn't enough, and he rummaged about in his cupboards for something to dull what felt like a monumental headache about to ambush him if he turned too quickly, one he doubted he had the courage to endure. It was a mercy at least that term ended in a week, and as his only classes on Monday mornings were with seventh years, and the exams were over, he was virtually free until after lunch. It was just as well, the way he felt.

He peered into the cauldron, just to check the egg hadn't hatched, and the dragon hadn't flown off of her own accord whilst he had been lying on the floor dead drunk, but it was still there, either asleep or sulking. He tapped the side of the cauldron, but apart from bumping off the side just once, the egg was resolutely silent, and he had a notion that she was voicing her disapproval. That was fine with Snape; he wasn't too impressed with himself either.

He tidied up the mess with a couple of quick spells, and made his way to the Hall, and took his usual seat between Dumbledore and Minerva. He raised the teacup, sipped at the dark bitter brew and laid the cup back on the saucer, all without noticing, all before glancing at the end of the Gryffindor table where Charlie Weasley wasn't sitting. Charlie Weasley hadn't come to breakfast, which probably meant he had left Hogwarts after all.

Couldn't even entice him with a dragon, Severus snorted in self-derision. Anyway, what was he thinking of? A damn Weasley indeed, he must be getting desperate in his old age, the ripe old age of thirty-odd, if his memory served him rightly. The inanities trailed off as he watched the flurry of activity at the door to the Hall, and he found himself almost straining to see who was behind Potter and his cronies, who the boys were talking and laughing over their shoulders to, and the disappointment welled up in Snape's stomach as he recognised Remus Lupin. He'd just lifted the teacup again, in some sort of self-mocking toast, when he heard it clatter back onto the saucer as the dragon-keeper walked into the Hall, stopping to give him a tight smile before heading to the Gryffindor table.

'Severus? Severus, are you in?' Minerva asked, poking an elbow she seemed to keep sharpened especially for digging him in the ribs when she felt it was appropriate.

'Yes, of course, sorry... what did you say, Minerva?'

'Just that Albus, and indeed I, were a little put out that you didn't see fit to share your exciting research with us,' she said archly, letting her eyes slip to where Snape's were already glued to the back of Charlie Weasley's head.

'Pardon?' he managed, quite unsure of what mad indiscretions Weasley had spilled, and what the even madder consequences were likely to be, the owning of an unlicensed dragon not being the least, the fact that it wasn't quite hatched notwithstanding.

'Mr Weasley informed Albus and me that you and he have acquired something rather exciting, and that he has come all the way from Romania to assist you in your research,' she replied. 'It would be quite a feather in Hogwarts's cap if you were to succeed.'

'Pardon?' Snape repeated, quiet bereft of a more sensible response.

'Oh, don't worry,' she assured him, patting his hand confidentially. 'We are quite aware of the level of secrecy to be maintained. Nobody but Albus and I know.'

'Quite,' Snape replied, keeping to the safety of one word answers, until he had the leisure to strangle more appropriate responses from Weasley.

'Is there room in your own quarters, Severus?' she asked. 'Or would you like Albus to arrange somewhere larger?'

This time he didn't miss the suggestive undertone, and he turned to give her the benefit of his iciest stare. 'Let me assure you, Minerva, and our esteemed headmaster too...' he said, turning to where Dumbledore had pretended to have fallen asleep, a trick he used quite often when he felt the occasion merited. 'Let me assure you both that I am perfectly able to defend myself at close quarters from not only Mr Weasley, but any dragon we may conjure up in the future... should the need arise.' He lifted his teacup again to signify that the conversation was over.

'Have it your own way,' Minerva persisted, dipping into her green velvets, and wafting an almost overpowering cloud of lavender in Snape's direction, one that did little to stifle the nausea that had begun to replace his headache. 'Arthur Weasley left this for you.'

Snape looked the Ministry scroll, trying to decide if it were disaster, or salvation from the problem he had steadfastly pretended to himself that Lucius would deal with. He unrolled it, taking the time to read the heading, as though to steel himself for the body of the document.

Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, in conjunction with the Department of International Magical Co-operation, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Snape wasn't keen about the Law Enforcement part, but he read on.

It has hereby been decreed, after consultation with the Institute of Dragon Research in Romania, that the egg of a Draco Virgo Intacta, in the current possession of Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and Charles Weasley, dragon-keeper of the Institute of Dragon Research in Romania, who are deemed to have rescued the said egg from the black market, has to remain under their supervision for the purposes of research.

Severus stopped reading for a moment, and let his eyes flit quickly to where Weasley was watching him back. At least one of them had made use of Sunday; Snape just regretted it hadn't been him.

The purpose of Professor Snape and Mr Weasley's research has been decreed to be secret, and thus it is also decreed that none other than Professor Snape, Mr Weasley, or any they see fit to enlist in the future, in the furtherance of their research, will be permitted access to the dragon. The Ministry extends its offer of assistance to Professor Snape and Mr Weasley in the finding of secure accommodation for the Draco Virgo Intacta, in a way that befits her, should that become necessary, and also extends its grateful thanks to the Institute of Dragon Research in releasing Mr Weasley from his duties in Romania to continue his research with Professor Snape for an indefinite period.

The foregoing decrees now form a binding Magical Contract between the parties aforementioned, namely Professor Snape and Mr Weasley, the Ministry of Magic, the Institute of Dragon Research, and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Ratified by the following officers:

Amelia Bones

Bartemius Crouch

Arthur Weasley

Lucius Malfoy

Snape rolled the scroll up, quite unsure if the bubbling feeling in the pit of his stomach were ominous or euphoric, and decided on a combination of the two. He wondered if Weasley had reached out just for the dragon, but that didn't really make sense; he had left dragons by the score in Romania. He cautioned himself to take things very slowly, instead of making the mistakes he had littered his life with: Lily Evans, Sirius Black, Voldemort, to name but a few. He sipped again at the tea, and laid it back down; it was cold anyway. Once he had warned himself again to tread carefully and slowly, until he knew Weasley's mind, and his own, he stood and crossed to the Gryffindor table.

'I hope you don't think you're going to be sitting all morning over breakfast, Weasley,' he snapped. 'We have work to do.' He turned away, and stalked out of the Hall, his back ramrod straight, and his hair and robes dancing in his slipstream.

Charlie hesitated at the door, rehearsing the lines he had been rehearsing for over a day. It had been a huge relief to him that Snape had kept to his rooms all day on Sunday, although he didn't know why, and just supposed he was either busy with his research, or final school work for the end of term. It had let Charlie try to take stock of where he was in life; it wasn't a very good place, and he didn't think he had the courage to continue what he had begun.

He was just about to knock when he noticed the door was slightly ajar; that made him think of trust, and how his own had been so badly abused.

Snape was sitting at his desk in his customary seat; he was wearing his academic robes, instead of the plain faded black he had worn at the weekend. 'Do you care to explain this, Weasley?' he asked, looking down at the Ministry scroll.

He had to do it now, right now; Charlie knew that. 'I'll come to back to that, Severus,' he said, remaining standing. 'Before I do, I... I need to set you straight on some things... for the avoidance of misunderstanding.'

'Let me assure you, Weasley,' Snape replied, and Charlie fancied something like disappointment crossed the harsh features, 'your past or current romantic associations are of no...'

'...Let me speak, Snape,' Charlie interrupted him; he wouldn't hide, not the way he thought Snape was hiding. 'I just want you to know that... whatever I've led you to assume about me... and I know I mislead you, but I... I'm just not ready for... I'm just not ready... not coming off one terrible mistake.' He knew he didn't imagine Snape seemed almost to relax, as though he had been thrown some sort of lifeline, some sort of way of avoiding what Charlie thought he had needed to say himself, but could never have done. 'I also want you to know, just in case it matters, that that might not always be the case... but I'm just not ready.'

Snape nodded, and Charlie knew he saw relief. 'No, Weasley,' he replied, 'but then, neither am I.' He'd stood up, and Charlie didn't remember when he'd done that, but the next thing he knew, Severus's long fingers stroked his cheek, the beautifully expressive, work-scarred fingers he had longed for. 'But alas,' Snape murmured, 'unlike you, I doubt I ever shall be again.' He looked down for just a moment, and then across to his desk, and seemed to remember the scroll, lying there like a prompt from an awkward moment he had probably struggled to handle. 'Now, perhaps you would care to enlighten me,' he said, nodding to the scroll, his eyebrow rising as though to show he was back in control, on familiar territory; he had crossed the hostile terrain and reached the other side, unscathed.

Charlie let himself relax as much as he dared. 'I think... well, I know it was Dad.'

Snape almost smiled. 'Much as it may surprise you to know this, but that does not surprise me,' he said. 'What did the old rogue do? Con Lucius?'

'Yeah,' Charlie replied, grinning as he sat opposite Snape, without feeling any awkwardness. 'You were right about Lucius though. Dad let himself be caught making an attempt at forging a licence for the Virgo; he said he had to wait for ages for Lucius to get back from lunch to catch him though. He said Lucius played a blinder after that. He dazzled the Ministry into thinking that the Romanian Institute had tipped him off about the illegal egg being sold, and told the Institute the same story in reverse. By the time he'd finished, no one actually knew who had claimed what.'

'Yes, Lucius is very good at that,' Snape said, looking to where the egg seemed to be applauding against the cauldron. 'Well done though. I confess it has been a grave concern.' He fingered the scroll. 'And you, Weasley, have you closed the doors that you need to close? Caged your own dragons?'

'Yes,' Charlie lied, feeling a prickle of sweat roll down his back.

'Very well, let us get to work then.' Severus stood, and was about to cross to the cauldron when someone knocked on the door. He frowned for a moment. 'Your brother Bill again,' he said.

Bill Weasley pushed past him, took one long searching look at his brother, almost as though he'd never seen him before, and furiously pointed at where Charlie had moved to the cauldron. 'Why didn't you tell me?' he bellowed like an injured bull.

'What?' Charlie replied.

'Get moving,' Bill said in way of reply. 'You've got something to do in Romania, and you're going to do it right now.'

Severus reacted at last. 'I don't think Charlie wants to go back to Romania,' he said, moving between the brothers, not even noticing he had used Charlie's given name for the first time.

'Well, he's going to,' Bill snarled back, and Snape noticed that the hostility didn't seem to be directed at either himself or Charlie.

'I'm not going back. I can't,' Charlie replied, and Severus didn't care for the undertone of something like fear.

'Yes, you can, and we're going right now.'

'We?' Charlie asked.

'Why didn't you tell me?' Bill repeated.

Snape thought there was something broken in his voice. 'Sit down, Weasley,' he said, deciding to intervene. 'Why didn't Charlie tell you what? What has happened?' He sat down himself, and Bill sat in the seat opposite him as Charlie looked away.

'He hasn't told you, has he?' Bill asked. 'He hasn't told you that the fuckhead he lived with has been stealing all his research, and publishing it under his own name.'

When Charlie didn't reply, Bill went on. 'Dad just told me, when I asked him what was wrong with Charlie, why he'd left everything I thought he loved. He told me that the Principal wrote to him a couple of years ago to tell him that he thought there was something wrong, that a previously ungifted bully boy suddenly became a brilliant theorist, and a previously gifted man just as suddenly became withdrawn, and didn't live up to the expectations they had had of him.'

Charlie had denied nothing, admitted nothing, and Severus had an uneasy feeling that he knew why that was, knew what Bill had recognised.

'Do I understand where you are leading, Weasley?' he asked, slipping his ebony cigarette case from his pocket, and offering one to Bill.

'I think you do. Dad thought he was just besotted enough by that fuckhead to throw away his work, but I... fuck,' he snarled, turning again to Charlie. 'How do you think I feel about this? About not noticing sooner that the bastard had you under an Imperius Curse for six fucking years?'

Charlie hissed as though he had been scalded, his face twisted in agony at the mention of the Curse.

Snape spun to Bill. 'Can you break it, Weasley?' he asked.

'Yeah, I can break it, Snape... right after we go to Romania and I break his fucking neck.'

'I can't face him,' Charlie replied at last. 'Do you have any idea of how hard it is to break away?' He was sweating, trembling in the agony of even talking about what held him.

Bill stood up and grabbed Charlie's two arms. 'Of course I do... I'm a fucking curse-breaker.'

'Could this wait until the end of term... it's only next week?' Snape asked. 'I think I should perhaps go with you.'

'You can't leave the egg,' Charlie said in something like desperation, and the egg knocked on the cauldron in what might or might not have been agreement.

Bill frowned across at the cauldron. 'Is that thing talking to you?' he asked.

'Let us just say that she seems able to voice approval or disapproval,' Snape replied, failing to mention that the egg had actually spoken to him, although he had really discounted that now as a figment of his imagination, or pretended to.

'I can't do it,' Charlie repeated.

'You must, Charlie. I'll be with you, every second, I swear it. You're my brother, damnit,' Bill said. 'Tell him, Severus; tell him he's got to close this door before he can open another.'

'He's right, Charlie,' Snape said, nodding slowly, refusing to look away until Charlie caught his eye.

'But... what if the egg hatches?' Charlie asked, his arguments weakening.

'I'll stick it back together again,' Snape replied, letting his lip twist at the corner, just a bit, just to let him know that he was there for him too, and not just Bill. 'How long will you be away?' he asked Bill.

'I've got an open International Apparition License for Gringotts; it allows a passenger,' Bill replied. 'A day at the most, less, we're not going to be socialising.'

'I've got my own license,' Charlie muttered, looking away again.

Snape turned to where Charlie was stroking the side of the cauldron, as though trying to glean some comfort from his agony of indecision. 'Charlie,' he said, waiting until Weasley looked at him, 'you must go. And you must Side-Along with Bill; you're not arriving there on your own, even for a moment. Bill will look after you, but you must go now.' When Charlie looked away he went on. 'You must go now, for her sake,' he said, nodding to the cauldron, to where the egg's knocking sounded almost like a song.

'And if I forget to come back?' Charlie asked, the panic rising in his voice.

Snape crossed the room, to where Bill stood with his head lowered, and he knew how he felt, knew as well as Bill did that Charlie could never have told anyone what held him, not until it was broken, and that he, as a curse-breaker of all things, should have noticed long before. He took two vials from his drawer of vials, where had intended only to take one, and dipped a small ladle into the cauldron, muttering a charm he knew neither of the others could hear or understand, as the egg seemed almost to mutter back, so soft and continuous was her tapping. He filled each vial with a little of the seawater and sealed them, handing one to each man.

'Now you have to come back,' he said, raising his eyebrow at Bill's startled look that he had so easily accepted the vial without asking the consequences of doing so. 'Oh, don't worry, Weasley, I give you my solemn oath that I shall release you once you bring your brother back.'

Every time he felt the panic rise in his chest, Charlie touched the vial. He wished Bill would just get on with it. He'd been trying to convince Arthur that he couldn't go with them for a quarter of an hour, and it seemed to Charlie like he had been pacing outside the front gates waiting for Bill for days. He wondered how he had managed to keep the panic he was feeling at bay for so long, and why it had only manifested itself when Bill had arrived in Snape's rooms. Of course, he knew that talking about it hadn't helped, and he also knew that Zachary had not searched for him, probably content that Bill would send him back, just as he knew the sense of security he had felt at Hogwarts, with Snape in particular, would never have lasted, not once Zachary knew he wasn't going back of his own accord.

'Come on,' Bill said, coming to the gates at last. 'Quick, before Dad starts on me again.'

'What d'you mean?'

'I mean, between ranting about you, and giving me all sorts of grief about not noticing that his immortal beloved Charlie was in trouble, I don't know how he managed to breathe too,' Bill replied over his shoulder.

'What d'you mean?' Charlie repeated, lengthening his stride to keep up.

'I mean he never stops going on about Charlie this, and Charlie that, and now I've let his precious Charlie down, I'll never hear the end of it,' Bill said sourly. 'You'd have thought it was my fault. Just as well Mum came along, or he'd still be going on.'

Charlie was going to ask him what he meant again, but Bill seemed to be content to keep going anyway. 'Merlin,' he went on, shaking his head as they reached the Apparition point outside the main gate, the one that could only be used with permission from Dumbledore. 'If you knew how I used to envy you. Just as well Mum knew I was alive, or I think he would have forgotten to send me to Hogwarts.'

Charlie found himself smiling.

'What are you grinning at,' Bill snapped. 'It wasn't funny. I had quite a complex.'

'So did I,' Charlie replied, and laughed out loud.

'It'll be all right, Charlie,' Bill said, suddenly serious. 'We'll be back before you know it. Back with your little dragon... and Severus?' he said. 'Are you and he...?'

'No.' Charlie shook his head.

'Not for long I suspect.' Bill gave him a knowing look. 'You seem to have crept under his admirable defences. He seemed quite concerned for your welfare.'

'You're looking for something that's not there, Bill,' Charlie replied. 'Anyway, I'm nowhere near ready to let my own defences down again... I... I think I've had enough of that,' he said.

'Take your time with him, Charlie, with yourself too,' Bill cautioned. 'He's been stung badly a couple times that I know of.'

'Sirius Black?' Charlie asked.

'Yeah.'

'What happened?'

But Bill just shook his head. 'Ask Snape that one, Charlie... or perhaps not. I don't know it all,' he said. 'I only know he lived with Severus for about eighteen months. When Black left he let Severus know, via the rest of the wizarding world, that he had been spying on his suspect loyalties, and that going against his own sexuality had been a small price to pay. He spewed out a lot of other stuff too, personal things about Snape that may or may not have been true, but at the time were easy to believe about a sullen ugly boy.'

'Black wasn't homosexual?' Charlie rubbed his hand over his chin. 'No wonder Severus hated him.'

'I think the problem was that he didn't hate him. Times were bad remember, and it was good for people to have someone to focus their hate and mistrust on, someone who didn't seem inclined to strike back; Snape was a perfect candidate. I only know he emerged a more bitter wounded man from that little mess than Lily Potter could ever have dreamed of making him. Sirius Black was a horrible person,' Bill went on. 'As to why he loathed Snape to the degree he did, well, he was a bully who began picking on a weaker kid at school, and probably just found out he liked it so much, he just kept going. And as to why Snape never fought back, not really at any rate... and he certainly became powerful enough to so, much more powerful than Black... but I think he was besotted by Sirius... the bad boy syndrome.' Bill turned to Charlie again. 'But you're not like Black... or Lily, and he's not like Zachary.' He smiled tightly, and laid his hand on Charlie's arm. 'Ready to face it now?' he asked.

Charlie nodded; he was ready to go now, because he was ready to come back too.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 5

A trip to Romania.

Severus was torn between staring at the closed door, and staring at the cauldron, where the egg had begun to knock an unremittingly anxious staccato beat.

He moved to his desk, Summoning a book on the Imperius Curse from the back of his bookcase; it was handwritten in a spidery sepia script, and bound in black eel skin, an expensive gift from Lucius. He flicked through the stiff parchment pages until he came to the part he needed, the part that concerned him more than Bill's skill as a curse-breaker. He stood from his desk, a turmoil of indecision, and crossed to where the egg's urgent tapping had hardly relented.

'Will you consent to someone coming here to watch over you until I return, little one?' he asked, waiting until the egg tapped back just once from where she had fallen silent at the sound of his voice, before throwing a handful of Floo powder into his fireplace.

As he turned to leave the room, he found a vial of seawater in his hand, and he looked across to the cauldron to where he somehow knew the egg was pretending to be asleep. He left his wards down, and walked quickly along the echoing dungeon corridor, passing Dumbledore on the way; the old wizard just nodded once. Snape took the dungeon steps three at a time, wondering what insanity had possessed him to allow them to go off on their own. The only truly decent person who had crossed his path, and stopped to take the time to begin to know him; to look again; to touch something below the shroud of hostility with which he cloaked himself so effortlessly that he had forgotten what it felt like to shed it; and he had let him go off on his own, to Merlin alone knew what danger, with only one other man to protect him. Charlie Weasley would not even be able to warn Bill of danger, not once he came face to face with the man who held him under his Curse.

Severus raced across the entrance hall, his sense of urgency heightening as he scanned it quickly for any sign that Charlie and Bill had lingered, but the only person he saw was Arthur, shambling back in the main door with his shoulders slumped.

'Arthur,' he called, hardly breaking his stride. 'Have they gone?'

Weasley nodded, his face pale and tense.

'When, man?' Snape demanded. 'Can I catch them?'

Arthur shook his head. 'You'll never catch them, Severus,' he said. 'They've got a head start, and even you can't Apparate from here to catch them before they reach the main gates... so, unless you can fly...' he said wryly, trailing off to shake his head again, with the air of a man who knew he should have gone too.

Severus took a long look at him. 'Come on,' he said. 'And hang on tight when I say so, Arthur, unless you can fly too,' he added over his shoulder, as he strode out the main door, and anyone looking from the windows would have been forgiven for thinking that the enormous black bird that flew across the lawns towards the main gate, was Severus Snape, with Arthur Weasley clinging to his shoulders, like a man being saved from drowning in mid-air.

He landed beside the two Weasley brothers, just as Bill had slipped his arm around Charlie's waist, and Charlie had put his hand on Bill's shoulder, to be met by the business end the elder Weasley brother's wand, as he reacted admirably quickly to whatever had dropped from the sky.

'Fuck sake,' Bill gasped. 'I could have cursed you into next week. Can you fly?' he asked, narrowing his eyes, without looking to see if Severus had a broom he clearly knew he didn't have.

Snape raised his eyebrow, to signify that the first remark was unworthy of comment, and the question of flight was rhetorical. 'Can we get a move on, Weasley?' he said instead.

It was almost dark when they landed within a few moments of each another, outside the gates of the Institute of Dragon Research, Bill and Charlie having touched down just before Severus and Arthur.

The Institute's home was a schloss, some eighty miles from the city of Sighisoara in Transylvania, and Severus knew that the current Principal claimed that Arven DeLengho, the chief dragon-keeper to the legendary Vlad Dracula, was one of his ancestors. Had it not been for the urgency of their mission, he would have liked to have spent some time there, perhaps unravelling the legends from the core of truth he suspected lay behind them.

The schloss looked romantically gothic in the fast falling dusk, with candlelight twinkling in a hundred mullioned windows. It reminded Severus somewhat of a small version of Hogwarts, the way the mountainous land seemed to loom over it in immovable protection, and the way Apparition was forbidden inside the grounds for all but emergency use in the dealing with dragons. He wondered where the dragons were actually kept, until a tell-tale slight reddening of the deep dusky sky, perhaps a mile away above the dense forest, gave them away. He supposed some charm kept the trees around from being razed to the ground.

Snape suspected the formation they took as they passed through the main gates was conscious. He and Bill were on the outside, wands drawn inside their cloaks, even though there would be no reason for anyone to suspect their intentions were hostile, and Charlie and Arthur were between them, both men nervous, Charlie much more so than his father.

'He will probably feel that Charlie has arrived,' Bill warned across the other two men.

Snape nodded. 'I think it would be wise for me and Arthur to Disillusion ourselves,' he said. 'Just in case the element of surprise is required.'

Bill nodded back, as Snape and Arthur both charmed themselves to invisibility, and Charlie turned to where he knew Severus stood. 'Don't go far,' he said, and Severus could feel the desperation he tried to hide.

'We're right here, son,' Arthur replied. 'We didn't come here to desert you ... either you or Bill. This is family,' he said firmly, and Snape felt something warm explode inside him, as though Arthur had deliberately included him.

The nearer they got to his quarters, the more nervous Charlie became. He could feel Zachary now, feel his power, feel himself wondering what he was doing, what had possessed him to think that he could wish him harm. He looked at the man at his side, almost thinking of his brother as a hostile stranger, one to endanger what he felt sworn to serve.

'I don't think I want you here. Go home now, all of you, I don't want you here,' he said, the words falling off his tongue in a cold torrent.

He could feel someone behind him, someone trying to access his mind, tugging at him, trying to instill a sense of security that he couldn't even begin to understand. 'Stop that,' he hissed, spinning away from Bill, but there was no one behind him, no one he could see.

'Well, well,' Zachary said in his heavily accented English, as he flung the door open on the rooms he shared with Charlie. 'The prodigal returns. Hello, Bill,' he added, nodding to where the elder Weasley brother stood with his wand pointed below his cloak.

'Watch out, Zachary,' Charlie hissed, trying to call the words back before he betrayed Bill, his confusion of his allegiance to his brother, and the power the other man held over him climaxing into panicked bewilderment.

Charlie's warning came too late though; Bill had used the element of surprise, and shoved Zachary back into the room, and Charlie was at a loss as to which side to take, the one he wanted, or the one he had to.

'Your wand, fuckhead,' Bill demanded, as Zachary looked up at him, his eyes blazing with the hate of belated understanding.

'Take your brother's wand, Charlie, and give it to me,' Zachary said calmly, with the confidence of one who knows he cannot be denied, but he was too late again. Charlie had slumped to the ground, Stunned by his invisible father's silent spell.

'I said, your wand, fuckhead,' Bill repeated, pointing his own wand, as Snape watched the other man's confusion at what had felled Charlie.

'I don't think so,' another voice said from behind Snape, similarly accented to Zachary's, but not quite the same. It seemed that Charlie Weasley wasn't the only one who had brought his brother.

Snape spun, still invisible, and found the other man had stripped Arthur's charm, and had his own wand pointed at the older wizard's chest. Severus cast his mind quickly about the apartment, satisfying himself that apart from the identified players, they were alone. 'Expelliarmus,' he murmured, watching the man's wand fly up in the air, only to clatter uselessly on the floor below the window. 'Stupefy!' he snapped, unconcerned now that his own charms dropped. Zachary's odds had shortened dramatically with his brother disarmed and disabled, and he knew it.

Snape covered Bill as he dropped and disarmed the big Hungarian wizard, and snapped Zachary's wand in front of his disbelieving eyes.

'I should kick fuck out of you,' Bill said calmly. 'But I have my brother's sensibilities to consider... more than you ever did.'

He raised his wand and pointed it to where Zachary's wand lay on the ground, as Snape bound Zachary in unbreakable cords, and then bound his brother. Charlie was barely conscious, and Arthur was on the ground at his side, holding him, as the dragon-keeper trembled in some unimaginable agony.

Severus watched the cords in the curse-breaker's neck stand out in effort as he performed his incantations, the sweat rolling down his face, as the curse began to seep from the two broken ends of the wand, to coalesce in an orange ball. The ball burst open, and something almost unseen, but not quite, forced itself back into both Zachary's mouth and his brother's. 'OIREPMI', Imperio backwards, until they both slumped, eyes rolling back into their heads, so that Severus wondered if they were dead.

Severus looked on in a grudging mixture of envy and admiration, as Bill grasped the remaining aura of the curse in his hand, from where it floated in the air in front of him, sizzling like a malignant orange comet, and plunged it into the cracked stone floor at his feet, and sealed it closed again. At last he dropped his wand to his side.

'Done?' Severus asked.

'Done,' the curse-breaker replied, his voice low from strain and exhaustion. 'That was a bitch of curse,' he said. 'It was the two of them.'

'I couldn't tell you,' Charlie said tiredly, rousing himself to some sort of guilty explanation of a crime not committed.

'He knows that, Charlie,' Severus replied, wishing he could shove Arthur away, and drop to Charlie's side in his place. 'We all know.'

'What about them?' Arthur asked, nodding to the two prone wizards, and Severus admired how well the older man had stood up.

'Perhaps we should leave the Institute to tidy up?' Severus suggested. He thought Bill looked almost as exhausted as Charlie, and he wanted to be away from Romania; that aside, he wasn't sure the egg wouldn't be playing Dumbledore up, or worse still, having a conversation with him, he had forgotten to tell it to be discreet.

'You get Charlie back, Severus,' Bill replied, nodding to where his brother had seemed to have become even more aware of his surroundings, trembling slightly still, but from fatigue now, instead of fear. Snape didn't fail to notice that Bill had used his given name again, and suspected that it had been used more by Weasleys in the last three days than it had ever been used by anyone before. 'I'll go to the Principal with Dad and explain things,' Bill went on, 'and we'll meet you back at Hogwarts. Your rooms?' he asked.

Charlie was asleep; he had neither commented nor objected when Severus had helped him undress to his underwear, and helped him into his own bed, and by the time Snape got back into the room with a Dreamless Sleep Potion, he was sleeping anyway.

Dumbledore didn't tarry. He had taken a long look at Charlie, the searching look no one had given him until the last day, and seemed to satisfy himself that whatever had needed to be done, had been done; then he sat at the fire, waiting for Snape to come back into the room.

'No trouble?' he asked, as he heaved himself to his feet in a puff of dusty robes.

'No. Arthur and Bill are speaking to the Principal though. Just to tidy up,' Severus replied. 'The Institute is under his sole jurisdiction.'

Dumbledore nodded, and Snape suspected he was trying to hide his surprise, and perhaps envy, that Arthur had gone along for the ride. The old man cocked his head to the bedroom. 'Look after him, Severus,' he said, without the absurdly annoying twinkle he let pass over his eyes, when he thought he was being mischievous, but was really only irritating. 'He will be feeling... slightly bereft, for want of a better word. Something has been ripped away from him too, remember; something bad, but even that leaves an odd void.'

Severus nodded his understanding. 'Did the egg behave?' he asked.

'Behave?' Dumbledore asked, as though it were not the place of eggs to behave or misbehave.

Severus decided not to reply.

'Fuck,' Bill gasped, looking at the cigarette he'd just lit, 'what are these? That's not what you gave me last time.'

'Contraband, I suspect,' Snape replied lazily. 'Lucius brings them.'

'I don't think he's supposed to confiscate them for his personal use,' Bill replied, taking a much longer drag, and letting the smoke trail thinly from his lips.

'Why don't you tell him that? I'm sure I do not intend to explain it to him.'

Charlie was still asleep, and Arthur had gone to relate the night's events to Molly; Snape suspected that thought was more daunting to him than what he had so far gone through. Severus and Bill sat at Snape's table, and he found he was re-evaluating Bill Weasley the same way he had re-evaluated both Arthur and Charlie. Severus could see he was tired though, and he knew the tremendous power he had expended. He also knew Bill wanted to go and get some rest, and was unsure of just how to leave Charlie alone asleep in Snape's bed, or even if he should do so.

'I'm not about to force my attentions on a virtually unconscious man, Weasley,' he said. 'You may seek your own bed.'

'I thought you'd never get around to it,' Bill replied, dragging himself to his feet. 'Me going to my bed, I mean.'

'Of course,' Snape replied dryly. 'You may leave the cigarettes,' he said, nodding to where Bill had not quite inadvertently slipped the ebony box into his pocket. 'The box at least, if you don't mind.'

Bill grinned, emptying the box before laying it on Snape's desk, and slipping the cigarettes carefully into the breast pocket of the soft black shirt he wore. 'You're a surprise, Severus Snape,' he said, giving him a long knowing look. 'Then again, maybe you're not.'

It was well into the middle of the night, perhaps almost dawn, when Severus felt a hand on his shoulder, and started awake to find himself slumped uncomfortably at his table, with his head on his arms.

'You should come to bed, Severus,' Charlie murmured. 'You can't sleep there.'

'You need to rest,' Snape replied, pushing down the flood of trepidation, wondering whether Charlie were issuing an invitation, or if he were just on the point of leaving. He decided not to turn round until knew.

'I won't take advantage of you, I promise,' Charlie said, his hand squeezing lightly.

'Nor shall I,' Severus replied, turning at last. 'But I think you know that.'

Charlie nodded. 'We never did finish that conversation properly... or honestly,' he said. 'There's something you need to know, Severus.'

But Snape had already guessed, already guessed that the first fleeting notion he had had of Charlie Weasley had been the correct one. 'Not Zachary?' he asked, just to let Weasley know that he knew.

Charlie shook his head. 'He sought only to fool the dragons,' he said, 'and when he realised he couldn't...' He trailed off, and Snape found he could relate only too easily to what he was trying to say, given his own bitter experiences with Sirius Black.

'And the succession of men you dallied with, on the occasions you broke away?' he asked, content now that the question was safe, and that the answer would be truthful denial. 'The ones your brother mentioned?'

'It's easy to let people believe what they assume,' Charlie replied, moving closer. He raised his hand to Snape's pale hollow cheek, the way Severus had touched his. 'That said,' he breathed, 'my ultimate chastity aside, I have found to my pleasure that there are many ways of skinning a cat, so to speak.'

'Chastity,' Snape repeated, the word sounding like the ultimate triumph of good over evil in the cesspool of life. 'Undefined?'

'Yes, but...' Charlie moved even closer, until his body was touching Snape's.

'And so you shall remain,' Severus breathed, 'in all the ways that matter to you.' He pulled the dragon-keeper to him, and held him like the precious rare gift he was, and knew he didn't imagine that Charlie slumped in some kind of relief that he understood, and that he would remain inviolate, inviolable.

And the baby dragon peeped over the top of her shell, just to check that things were moving along in an appropriate manner, before she crouched back down into her bath of mother's milk, and mended the cracked shell above her, and went back to sleep for a day or two.

Epilogue

'This is a proud day indeed for Hogwarts, and for our friends in the Institute of Dragon Research,' Dumbledore said, addressing the crowd of dignitaries and academics and selected pupils in the Great Hall. 'If you would?' he invited, nodding to where a tall wizard of proud bearing had stood from the front row.

His face was heavily scarred, and his left eyelid drooped slightly, but he made no attempt to disguise his disfigurement, wearing it with arrogant self-esteem. Lucius Malfoy, the only man ever to have survived dragon-pox, strode to the podium. He smiled his superior smile in turn to the two men who flanked Dumbledore, one on either side: a tall redheaded man with an open smile, and a black-haired man with harsh features that cast unkind shadows on his face. Lucius pinned the Orders of Merlin to Severus Snape and Charlie Weasley. He stepped back, as though to admire his handiwork at the gleaming orders, his pale grey eyes flashing unspoken, unspeakable thanks.

Deep in a charmed seaside cavern in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, a young Draco Virgo Intacta looked up from admiring her first egg. She paused for a moment, then dropped her scaly green head to knock her beak against the cauldron of boiling seawater that held her issue, and the egg knocked back.

Footnote: This was a short fic for Pittwitsch's 'Seven Deadly Sins' challenge (thanks so much, Pitt, for the irresistible gauntlet you threw my way). Having taken them to Romania though, I am very tempted to take Severus and Charlie back there one day, perhaps to unravel the mysteries of Vlad Dracula.