

Beginnings

by LaiksMarei

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: This story is quasi-DH compliant. It was written for the Live Journal sexy_brilliance exchange; the recipient was lorraineblue. Essentially, I ignored the parts of the novel that I did not like or felt were unnecessary to the facilitation of this fic.

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A gaggle of Weasleys had surrounded Hermione for what seemed like an endless amount of time since her arrival at the Burrow for the Delacour/Weasley nuptials. While normally she would have welcomed the warmth, comfort and familial feeling they exuded with open arms, Hermione found it positively stifling at this particular juncture in her life. Succinctly, times were darker since the death of Hogwarts' most beloved Headmaster, and the horizon only looked more hopeless and grim with each passing moment. Watching those who had become her surrogate family for the last six years interact with one another with ease — given the current atmosphere — only served to increase the deepening chasm in her heart at the effective loss of her own parents.

Excusing herself from the kitchen, begging off the temptation of Mrs. Weasley's strawberry clotted cream with a claim of needing some fresh air, Hermione escaped to the solitude of a tiny niche she had discovered behind Mr. Weasley's workshop the previous day. After making herself as comfortable as possible in her newfound hidey-hole, she expelled a resounding breath and allowed the smile that had not reached her eyes for quite some time to fall away from the corners of her mouth. Slowly surrendering to the brittle despair that lay within her soul like a tiger in wait, Hermione allowed the torrent of silent tears to break free from their confines. Time stood still while she wept for the memory of Mad-Eye Moody and Hedwig, the letting go of her parents to their new life free of magic and their daughter, the perilous journey that lay before her and her friends, and finally, she wept for allowing her carefully-constructed emotional facade to fracture.

As the last of the hushed sobs wracked her body, Hermione failed to notice the grating of earth under approaching footsteps or the shadow that fell across her person. "A bit overwhelming, innit?" a gruff yet muted voice questioned. The words drifted to her on the breeze, and for a moment, she thought she had imagined it. Pulled from her lamentation, Hermione abruptly looked up to discover the crystal blue eyes of Charlie Weasley looking down at her, soft and full of concern.

Embarrassed to be caught in such a vulnerable state, Hermione immediately glanced away, dragging her palms over her face and eyes before raking them through her untamed hair, semi-effectively smoothing some of its bushiness. Certain her voice would be wrought with emotion, she cleared her throat before turning back to speak to the dragon tamer. "Pardon?"

Charlie leaned against his father's workshop, blocking the already diminishing light from the setting sun. His roguishly handsome face broke out into a sympathetic smile as he allowed Hermione to compose herself. "Right. I saw you slip away from everyone after refusing Mum's best pudding. Figured I'd better make sure you hadn't gone

completely barking," he finished with a coquettish wink.

Hermione closed her eyes as a shaky laugh left her. "I just needed ... you know ... needed a moment to catch my breath."

"Don't we all these days. Mum is determined to drive us all 'round the bend, me especially, I think."

Hermione giggled in earnest, grateful for the distraction. "You wouldn't be referring to a certain haircutting incident now, would you?"

Charlie looked at her crossly as his hand instinctively reached for the fringe that was now brutally short. "I'm not sure which is worse — ruddy mums and their proper-young-man standards, or cheeky, know-it-all witches," he said a bit sourly.

Hermione did her best to appear contrite, perfecting the illusion with solemn eyes and lowered head.

Charlie simply chuckled before playfully nudging her with his foot, insisting she "budge over" so he too could stow away.

Scooting over as much as possible to accommodate him, Hermione took a moment to study him, reflecting on the man that was Charlie Weasley. He was shorter than his brothers were. His build was stocky and muscular, no doubt from the countless hours he spent reining in dragons and past days of Snitch chasing. His skin was blanketed by an endless sea of freckles and burns that often entwined; his hands bore calluses and grass stains. From the few times they had conversed with one another, he had appeared knowledgeable but somewhat shy initially. After he became comfortable with her, self-assurance would bolster the closet exhibitionist and flirt within him. These were just some of the many things Hermione found pleasing about the second-eldest Weasley sibling.

Having settled in beside her, Charlie once again interrupted her thoughts. "Had your fill yet?" he queried in a teasing tone.

Hermione fought desperately to suppress the heat of mortification from rising in her cheeks at having been caught staring at the dragon master. "I haven't the slightest idea as to what you are referring," she said primly, trying to concentrate on his face.

"Uhm-hmm," he added, clucking his tongue. Too soon, his striking features took on a more somber air. "Want to talk about it?"

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. Could Charlie want her to share her darkness and distress with him? Could he want to sympathize with her, feel for her? Did he really want to understand? Was it too much to hope Charlie had not come to her out of some obligation, as Ron and Harry had done so many times previous, but with a genuine intent to commiserate and comfort?

"How could you know?" she asked as she turned away. Her voice hinted of bitterness and sadness, though there was no trace of venom in her tone.

Charlie's Seeker reflexes took hold as his hand shot forward to firmly grasp her chin, forcing her to face him.

Hermione sensed the troubling shadows play across her face. Her eyes made no attempt to mask her pain, nor did she try again to look away.

"You might be surprised at just how much I notice," he whispered, a lone, scraggy finger stroking her jaw line.

Hermione nodded in acceptance and acknowledgment of Charlie's declaration. Hesitantly, she reached to cover Charlie's hand with her own. She smiled at him then, guarded but genuine. In that moment, she realized this was an honest beginning for the two of them, not an afterthought. A moment filled with an infinite amount of promise, greeted by an azure sky.