

At Hand's Reach

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Sometimes you're so close, but still missing.

Written for velvetmouse for 2009 weasley_fest. Beta: sweetflag, thank you!

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Ron Weasley must have thought she was silly. Honestly, there were only so many possible places where he could hide, and she was going to check them all and find him.

Lavender Brown resolutely flicked her long hair over her shoulder. Ron had said that he would spend his holidays with his family. Lavender had checked The Burrow first and had been stiffly informed by one of Ron's brothers, Percy, that, 'Ronald isn't home at the moment, and he, Percy, wasn't authorised to reveal his brother's current place of residence'. Lavender pulled a face at the memory of Percy's self-important expression. He was so different from her Won-Won.

Smiling wistfully, Lavender quickened the pace. She didn't know her destination, apart from 'it should be visible after a two hours' march'. So she marched obediently, thinking that this must be the last place to look for Ron. She had tried almost all possibilities: his home; Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes...the twins had been too eager to let her check if Ron hadn't hidden in the basement, grinning at her rapaciously; the excavating site near Thebes, and she wouldn't have minded spending a day or two there, had it not been for that part-Veela thing...Ron's eldest brother's wife...you never knew with those things; they could grow a beak and pair of claws in no time.

Her eyes became misty when she remembered the once-over she had received from Bill. He had swept his eyes from her feet to her head and back, clearly appreciating her outfit. Her Egypt-inspired cotton dress was very long, but conveniently had a side-split almost reaching her hip. Shifting her weight, Lavender had moved her leg to the side, causing the slit to part and reveal her tanned leg... exactly the moment his wife had appeared. She'd barely avoided being cursed by the enraged Veela. After much hissing and nosy inquiries on Fleur's part, Lavender had left.

She had to admit that there was something to the Weasleys' boys.

Checking her watch and assuring that it was two hours since she had begun her journey, Lavender stopped and, shading her eyes with her hand, looked around. Among the valleys and mountains around her, she spotted something that might be a camp, something that looked like wooden barracks.

Lavender decided to Apparate there; she wasn't used to long walks, especially not in the wild mountains of Romania, even if it was a nice, sunny day. The thought that she might run head-first into Ron made her pause and Conjure a big mirror. She straightened her clothes, washed her face free of sweat and dirt, and combed her hair. Her pink lips and curled eyelashes made her smile a contented smile. Hoping that Apparating wouldn't disrupt her appearance too much, she gripped her wand and concentrated on the camp.

Catching her breath and footing, she looked around. Definitely a camp. When she saw a man approaching, she waved her hand and ran to him, smiling friendly.

"Hi! I'm looking for Charlie Weasley."

The guy raised his brows.

"Charlie?" he asked, unsure and strangely pronouncing the name.

"Yes, Charlie. Charlie Weasley. Red-headed, freckly." Lavender moved her hand around her head in a vague gesture. "Does he work here?"

The man's eyes were as puzzled as before when he turned around and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Caaarooooo!"

The door to one of the barracks opened, and a well-built young man stepped out. They exchanged a few sentences Lavender couldn't make out. Examining him carefully, she found out that not all the Weasleys were tall, but definitely there was something in all of them. Self-consciously, she straightened her dress.

The young man finally approached with a friendly smile on his face.

"Razvan told me that you don't speak Romanian and that you're probably looking for me."

"Yes. Not quite," she amended. "I am looking for Ron." She looked up at him pleadingly. At his questioning look, she added quickly, "I'm Lavender Brown. Ron's girlfriend."

Charlie extended his hand and shook hers vigorously to cover his confusion. Ron hadn't said anything when they had met at home, barely a month ago.

"That's great. Nice to meet you. Something happened?" Charlie asked cautiously, his friendly and open face closing in sudden suspicion. He eyed Lavender's loose outfit, trying not to be too obvious.

"Yes. No." Suddenly, Lavender felt tired. "He isn't here, is he?"

"No," Charlie replied just as cautiously, affirming her suspicion.

"And you don't know where he is?" She had to ask that final question, although she wasn't sure she would believe the answer.

"Nope, I'm sorry." Charlie shook his head slowly.

Casting her eyes downwards, Lavender said more to herself than to him.

"Yeah, I thought you'd say that."

Whatever Charlie was thinking, he suddenly woke up and, clapping his hands in a very Molly Weasley-like fashion, asked with false cheerfulness.

"Maybe you'll sit for a while? I bet you've travelled a long way." He gestured towards the huts. "Be my guest."

Averting her eyes from the dragon keeper and trying to blink away the tears, Lavender followed him. She had been so sure Ron would be here. It was her last chance, last hope. Now it only left Ginny, and nobody knew where she was, or...something that she was trying to push away from herself...Ron hadn't told her the truth.

Frowning, she focused on Charlie's heels before her...dragon hide, not surprisingly...and her gaze travelled upwards: solid legs clad in worn out jeans. She couldn't see his buttocks, covered by an opened shirt, thrown on loosely over a T-shirt. A very Muggle outfit and very fitting for him. Robes would hide that body. For someone of his build, he moved really nimbly. Lavender smiled sadly. As if it mattered for her. He surely had someone.

They entered a dim and considerably colder barrack. Charlie motioned to one of the simple wooden chairs, standing by a similarly simple table. Lavender collapsed, grateful that her legs didn't have to support her any more. Involuntarily, she blew out a breath of relief. It was much better here than out in the sun. The sigh didn't escape Charlie's notice. His face darkened for a while, but when he looked at Lavender, there was only a warmth and genuine interest in his eyes.

"Well. It's almost dinner time. We eat here a bit earlier. Would you like to stay? I'm sure the boys would be in seventh heaven if you accept the invitation."

Lavender looked up at him to decline; she wasn't hungry, and she didn't want to sit among the strangers, pretending that she was happy. The alternative wasn't appealing, either. Going to an empty home, with her parents away, Parvati in India, and all of her Muggle friends estranged from her during her years at Hogwarts and forced secrecy.

Looking up at Ron's brother, she met his kind eyes and felt unable to refuse.

"Thank you, I'd love to."

"Good. It's settled, then."

"May I have some water, please? I haven't drunk anything since morning."

"Water? At your service." Charlie stood up briskly. "It so happens that we have the best water in the world. Some day you'll be able to tell that you've drank the water from the Dragon's Spring."

Before she could ask what the Dragon's Spring was, Charlie bustled from the hut.

Once alone, the reality crashed on her with full force. Lavender put her elbows on the table and buried her face in her hands. She couldn't afford to cry. Charlie would be back soon, and she didn't feel like explaining anything right now. A few unpleasant thoughts occurred to her, and she longed to be alone to examine them closely, yet feared doing that at the same time.

A heavy clay jar hit the table right before her, splashing cold water over her bare forearms. Jumping, as she forgot for a moment where she was, Lavender clamped her hand around her throat.

"Oh, my," she uttered, catching her breath. "That was unexpected."

"I'm sorry." Charlie's comforting hand landed on her shoulder. "I'm such a butterfingers."

"Don't worry." Shaking her head, she tried to come back to reality.

"Are you all right?" He came around her and studied her face with the same kindness and concern as before.

She was far from being okay, but nodded nonetheless. Charlie didn't seem convinced, yet he didn't say anything more on the subject, merely poured water for her and handed her a mug.

"Here. You'll feel better. Guaranteed." Winking at her, he sat across from her at the table.

Lavender took a sip, then the second and third. Either she was that parched, or the water was indeed excellent, but she did feel better. Putting the mug aside, she smiled at Charlie, who watched her attentively. Lavender felt a bit strange.

Her host spoke at last. "Maybe you'd like to lie down until dinner. The journey here is very tiring."

Lavender couldn't help it but opened her eyes widely, staring at him in silence for awhile.

"I don't think it's necessary," she said slowly, the wheels in her head turning wildly.

The awkward moment was broken when someone's very curious face poked into the hut. Despite Charlie's warning look, eyes roamed over Lavender appraisingly.

"I've heard we have a guest. Should I prepare another setting?" He grinned.

"Go, Kees. We will join you in a couple of minutes."

The man called Kees winked suggestively...*want to have some fun time, eh?*...at Charlie and shut the door.

"We have dinner in fifteen minutes. I won't accept your refusal."

Lavender stood up, distracted. "I just need a minute..."

Charlie turned to the door. "Sure. I'll leave you to..." and he stopped dead, astounded, when Lavender Conjured out of thin air an enormous mirror, mounted in an oak wood frame, sculpted in complicated floral motifs.

The girl inspected her clothes and face and took care of her long hair. One flick of her wand had it nice and combed, and another had it twirled into a bun, exposing her neck. Lavender cast one more look at her reflection, sighed resignedly, banished the mirror and turned to Charlie.

"Ready. Shall we?"

Charlie didn't move from the spot, still braced on the door handle. After a moment of confusing silence, he shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but I have to ask. How did you do it?"

It was Lavender's turn to stare.

"Did what?"

Charlie waved his hand in the air.

"Hair? It's easy. I can't demonstrate on you..." Lavender looked at his cropped head. "But basically it's..."

"No, no, I don't mean hair." Charlie laughed out. "The mirror. I mean, the *whole* mirror!"

"It's very useful; I can see all of myself, then." Lavender's voice went on a defensive note, and she started to speak quickly. "On a train, or some such, it's impossible of course, and I have to conjure a hand mirror, but here..."

"Hey, hey! It's all right. It's amazing. I don't know a lot of people who could Conjure an object that big and complicated. And believe me, in the dragon camp, you can find people with the strongest magic possible."

Lavender calmed down, but was still frowning. "Ron said that I spend my time and energy on useless things."

"Let's forget Ron for a while, all right?"

The girl looked as if she wasn't sure if she could do it.

"Well, back to the mirror," she said hesitatingly. "I don't think it's a matter of strength. It's mostly..." She paused. "...mostly a matter of concentration, knowing what you want and what for."

"Yes, purpose; I think it explains a lot." Charlie smiled and opened the door. Gesturing for her to walk out, he made an apologetic face. "And look, I kept you here with my idle curiosity and you're probably starving."

Lavender walked out onto the bright sunlight that somehow didn't brighten up her mood.

"Ah, no, not really. I think I've lost my appetite." She suddenly regretted accepting the invitation. Her mind was somewhere else again. She looked miserable, and Charlie felt the urge to comfort her somehow. Through lack of a better idea, he started to comment on the nearby buildings.

"This blockhouse in the middle contains the kitchen and our common-cum-dining room. There, on the left, you can see a hospital...for us mostly, but sometimes we use it for baby dragons, before they are big enough to incinerate it with one deep breath..."

Lavender turned to him sharply, clapped her hands and cried excitedly, "Baby dragons?" There was no worry in her face, and Charlie hated to disappoint her.

"There are no little dragons at the moment. Zelda's egg hatched two years ago, and while Zeron isn't adult, he isn't what you could call 'small'."

"What a pity! I'd like to see a little dragon soooo much!" Lavender folded her hands, as if in prayer, as if Charlie could, somehow, come up with a dragon on a whim.

Charlie laughed and tucked a stray strand of her hair behind her ear. "Come on. Dinner's getting cold. The boys will think that I'm trying to keep you for myself."

Linking arms with her, Charlie led her to the barrack in the centre of the camp. Ushering her inside, he shouted, "Gentlemen, the greatest sorceress, Lavender Brown, graces us with her presence!"

The roar of different shouts greeted them.

"Eh, did she already enchant you?"

"She certainly enchanted me!"

"Oi, there's a lady in this crowd!"

After the last remark, Charlie turned to Lavender and said loudly.

"This is Carmen, the only lady in residence." He smiled and bowed slightly, and Carmen seemed placated. It took a significant effort on Lavender's part to not gawk at the newly introduced woman. Broad shoulders and muscular arms surpassed even Charlie's, and there was nothing delicate about her: from her appearance to her voice, to her movements. Everything about Carmen was angular and rough.

The dragon keepers shifted on the bench, making space for Lavender. After more pushing and prodding, they made enough space for Charlie to sit next to her.

The meal was a raucous affair. Everyone wanted to share their news: be it from the reserve itself, which was located among the highest part of the mountains, or from the many facilities in the camp. They shouted one over another, not really caring if anyone listened.

Lavender took it as a chance to mope some more. She played idly with her food, pushing it around the plate, rarely raising the fork to her mouth, and chewing with an utter lack of appetite. In her misery, she did not notice that her neighbour, despite taking part in the discussion, was stealing surreptitious glances at her now and then.

The party wolfed down their helpings, and in no time, the dinner was over. They all spilled outside, taking clay mugs of what they called 'bragă', the mere smell of which made Lavender nauseous. She shook her head violently several times when the hospitable residents offered her some in various languages.

Charlie didn't take his eyes from her, noticing every disgusted scrunch of her nose and her hand hovering protectively over her belly. Suddenly, he asked his colleagues to let her rest a little and then show her around the camp. They were all too eager, drowning out Lavender's questions about where Charlie was going and her protests not to leave her with folks she couldn't understand.

Charlie strode purposefully to the hut that served as a kind of an office for the camp and threw a handful of Floo powder into the grate. After several mid-stops, he finally fell out from the Burrow fireplace, covered in soot, dishevelled and visibly agitated.

Upon hearing the sound of a Floo arrival, Mrs Weasley ran into the kitchen.

"Charlie! What a surprise! Did you forget anything? Are you staying for the night?"

Charlie didn't respond to any of her questions, merely pecking her on the cheek.

"Hi, Mum. I'll explain everything later. Or maybe someone else will explain." His voice took on, uncharacteristically for him, a menacing note. He Apparated upstairs, only to reappear downstairs in a matter of seconds. "Where's Ron?"

"Charlie! Has anything happened?" Molly trotted after her second son, who was stomping angrily towards the back garden. Finding it empty, he turned around abruptly almost crashing into the small, plump woman behind him. He grabbed her shoulders gently and asked once more imploringly.

"Where's Ron, Mum? It's important."

"I don't know where he is. He only said he'd be back tomorrow morning. Nobody's telling me anything, nowadays." Molly suddenly retreated into a tearful mood, and her lower lip wobbled.

"It's because you want to know everything, Mum." Charlie kissed her on the forehead and moved to stand beside the fireplace. "I'll be back tomorrow. Tell Ron that I have something to talk about with him." A sudden thought struck him. "And if he gets that brilliant idea to try and avoid me, tell him he will regret it. I mean it." Charlie raised his finger to accentuate his words. After a moment of silence, where Molly stared at him wide-eyed, he grabbed a handful of powder and was gone with a swish.

"But what has he done?" Molly cried out into the subsiding green flames.

~*~

A little shaken after the long journey across the whole continent and back, Charlie searched the camp, looking for his unexpected guest. Spotting the dainty figure with long hair billowing in the wind, he stopped for a moment, trying to sort out his feelings. He couldn't figure out which one got him so worked up. Surely, it was a matter of family honour. No Weasley man would leave a girl in a situation like this, but Lavender Brown wasn't the first or the last girl who...

His youngest brother was in a deep shit, even if he didn't know it yet.

Charlie walked over to the girl surrounded by a few of his pals trying to explain to her the dangers of raising young dragons. It seemed that every attempt at proving this to her landed on barren ground, as she exclaimed her 'awwws' at their descriptions of burns and wounds that little, sweet creatures could cause. Charlie smiled and lightly put an arm around Lavender.

"Hi. Did those good-for-nothings show you our camp?"

She looked up at him, brushing her hair off her face. Her eyes sobered a little; the laughter and tenderness that had been there was replaced with a sense of reality. Charlie hated this. He refrained from an encouraging hug and decided not to say anything about his escapade until he had contacted Ron.

"We have a big bonfire tonight. I bet you're dying to know the customs of the dragon keepers."

The others made a racket, one over the other trying to persuade Lavender to stay.

She threw up her hands and, covering her ears, shouted, "All right, all right!" which earned her much cheering among the crowd.

"Wise girl. You might want to rest a bit."

With a little push at the small of her back, Charlie guided her towards his hut, ignoring his companions' remarks. A few steps short of it, Charlie stopped abruptly and turned to her.

"You don't have to stay, if you don't want to. I'm sorry it all came out as if we were forcing you or something. There's a fireplace in the office, and in fifteen minutes you could be home. If you prefer," he added, hoping that it didn't sound too confusing or, Merlin forbid, contradicting his previous invitation.

She looked at him again with that adult, sombre look in her eyes that made Charlie want to hold her tight. Smiling sadly, only with her lips, she said quietly, "No, I really want to. I don't want to go back just yet."

The wind was getting stronger, and Lavender's dress flapped against Charlie's legs. She hugged herself. "Is it always this cold here? It's depressing."

"No, that wind is a good sign, in fact. It brings fair weather: calm and bright. In a few hours the wind will subside, and you'll see. It also causes bouts of depression to those who are not accustomed to it. Besides, the altitude and micro-climate... You have to acclimatise. Sleep for a few hours, and everything will be better then. You'll see."

"I hope so," Lavender whispered more to herself than to Charlie.

Not knowing what to say to make her feel better, Charlie put his hand between her shoulder blades, trying to convey the courage with that simple gesture as best as he could, and resumed his walk.

Inside, he quickly prepared his bunk bed for her, splaying extra blankets.

"Try to sleep. I'll be in the hospital, brewing, if you need anything. I'll wake you up for the fire."

Lavender nodded, and Charlie left.

He wandered aimlessly around the camp. A few thoughts were nagging against his consciousness, and he couldn't quite put them to rest. Finally, he went to the hospital; he hadn't found any fitting solutions to his dilemmas and brewing couldn't wait any longer. With the speed that Razvan used the stocks of ointments, they would run of them in a few days.

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It was already dark when Lavender woke up. Charlie withdrew his hand from her shoulder when he saw her eyes flutter open. The candle on the table bathed the small cabin in a warm light. The wind must have died down as Charlie had said, because Lavender couldn't hear its sad howling.

"Time to get ready. I prepared a sweater for you. It's not very cold outside, but when sitting still around the camp-fire, your back might get cold."

Drowsily, Lavender got out from under the blankets. Upon noticing her incredibly creased dress, she groaned exasperatedly and tried to smooth it away. "I can't go like this. Look at me!"

Charlie did. She had that petulant look of a child woken up too early and not liking it and very set on making everyone know this. She was right; her dress didn't look presentable, her hair was tussled crazily around her sleepy face and there was a pillow crease pressed on her cheek. That sight irrepressibly brought to Charlie's mind very un-brotherly thoughts.

"You look lovely," he blurted out before he thought and then didn't want to take it back: Ron or not. Trying to rein his mind back into protective mode, he presented the sweater to her. "This is for you."

Lavender, puzzled by his previous unexpected comment, looked at the garment he held in the outstretched hand and found her voice. "I am not wearing this!"

Charlie sighed inwardly. The girls couldn't see the practical side of things. "I know it's a bit of an unusual colour, but..."

"This colour, as you called it, although I've never seen one like this, is unacceptable..."

"Okay, I know it's ugly, but the dragons don't mind..." he tried to reason, but Lavender had none of it.

"Do I remind you of a dragon?" Charlie bit his tongue, and Lavender continued. "As I said, it's unacceptable, not only because it's ugly and clashes horribly with my dress, but it also is in conflict with my inner aesthetic being." She said the last few words in a tone as if it ended the discussion.

For Charlie, it opened another one; he just wasn't sure he wanted to. He didn't know whether those 'inner aesthetic beings' were dangerous and if it was serious if you went against them. So he tried from another angle.

"And my inner mother hen tells me it's too cold to sit in Carpathians at night in summer dress only."

This reminded Lavender of the state of the said dress, and she answered distractedly, "It's summer. I'll be all right," while returning to her futile task of smoothing it out.

"It's high mountains, first and foremost." Charlie took a deep breath to explain the connection of altitude and temperature, and how it changed once the sun vanished behind the horizon, but Lavender's next question cut off this train of thought.

"Why did you say I looked lovely?" She carefully avoided his eyes.

Charlie didn't think it would be prudent to disclose his reasons, so he shrugged. "You know, your hair..."

Lavender gasped, forgetting all about dresses and sweaters. "My hair!" In one leap, she got to the table where she had put her wand and hastily Conjured the mirror.

Even seeing it for the second time, Charlie couldn't hide his awe. He walked to the mirror and traced his fingers along the many carvings adorning the frame. "One day, my lady, you'll have to show me how it's done."

"All right." Not quite listening to him, Lavender let her hair down and smoothed it.

Inadvertently, Charlie's attention shifted from the worn-out oak to the silky strands of dark blond hair spilling over Lavender's hands as she tried out different hairstyles. It shone in the candle light and seemed much darker and heavier, for some reason, than in the sunlight.

"Like this, or like this?" Lavender shook him out of his thoughts, letting her hair splay over her shoulders first and then lifting it up, revealing the lovely line of her neck. Her dress shifted upwards in the process, and Charlie found himself once again checking out her midsection.

"Both look great on you," he answered in his best friendly tone, trying to remember what was best for a girl in these circumstances.

"Like this, I think." Lavender put her hair up, and her eyes swept over her reflection. Noticing her dress, she groaned aloud. "Oh, Merlin! I'm not going anywhere," she said, exasperated, and sat on the bed, folding her arms over her chest.

"Now, let me do some magic. All right?"

The girl looked at him curiously, but didn't respond.

Charlie didn't give up. "Do you trust me?"

Lavender shrugged. "I suppose so."

"I'll ignore your obvious lack of enthusiasm...so unbecoming in someone so young...and worse, your lack of trust, because that would hurt me personally. My intentions are as pure as the Carpathian snows."

Lavender squirmed a little, pressing her lips together to suppress the smile.

"All right. I trust you."

Charlie walked over to her with a very official 'May I?' demeanour and took the pleat of her dress, extending it to the side. To the thus prepared surface, he touched his wand and said, "*Derugae*."

The fabric became smooth in an instant, and Lavender gasped.

"That's just...You know, I could kill for a spell like that! Would you teach me, please?" Her agitation over something so simple as a household spell amused him greatly.

"Well, it seems that I finally have some means of trade. Sweater?" He extended his hand with the damned sweater.

"No way!" Lavender rushed to the door as if she were afraid the garment might sprout tentacles and grab her from a distance.

Charlie laughed and opened the door for her.

"Well, it's time, anyway. Ladies first." He bowed slightly, letting her out.

The fire site was visible from a distance, a beacon in the complete darkness.

It wasn't as cold as Lavender had feared, but all the same, the breeze woke up goosebumps on her bare shoulders. She hoped she would get a spot close to the fire and quickened the pace.

"In a hurry?" Charlie couldn't resist a gleeful remark.

"Me? No." Lavender didn't slow down.

Soon, they heard the inviting voices, urging them on, asking what took them so long and in general being completely intrusive. Charlie decided. Once they approached, the place for Lavender was found instantaneously, while Charlie had to fight for his next to her. Sitting on a naked log, Lavender leaned forward into the heat radiating from the roaring fire.

The flames lit the faces of the people sitting in the circle. They gave them a feverish, red tinge while the rest of their bodies were drowned in the dark. Long sticks were dug into the ground with their other ends leaning toward the fire, weighted down by chunks of meat skewered on them. The drops of fat were falling into the fire with a loud sizzling, audible over the roaring flames. The delicious smell was wafting around, but Lavender only scrunched up her nose. Charlie sighed inwardly. His suspicions were being confirmed. Poor girl, and poor Ron...should he make the wrong choice! Charlie clamped the sweater tightly in his hand for a second, before putting it away on the log, between the girl and himself.

Lavender's only reaction was to push it surreptitiously so that it dropped to the ground.

A small smile played on Charlie's lips. For a while, he pretended not to notice and then picked the offensive garment up, shook it out and put on the other side. He was sure the little stubborn witch would change her mind later in the night.

All the men around the fire felt a perceptible animation with Lavender's arrival. Kees, the cook, who was supervising the preparation of the meats, fended the others from the sticks and made a show of choosing the best morsels for their guest. Finally, the plate landed in front of Lavender. She looked up, surprised, at Kees, who beamed at her, very proud of himself.

"You should try this. The best marinade in the world. Don't take my word for it, try it!"

The girl smiled politely at him, but shook her head and leaned away from the plate.

"Thank you very much, but I'm not hungry. Your dinner was delicious, and I really ate more than I should have."

The compliment didn't have the desired effect.

"Ah, you barely nibbled at it. I saw you." Kees wagged a finger in her face. "Now, if you don't want to break my heart, you have to eat this." And he extended his hand, holding the plate even closer. Lavender looked as if she was ready to break his heart without a second thought. Charlie decided it was time to chime in.

"Give it here, Kees." At Lavender's questioning look, he added, "I'll help you with it."

Reluctantly, the cook let go of the plate, unhappy that it didn't go straight into girl's hands.

Someone else spoke from Lavender's right in a questioning tone of voice, but she didn't understand a single word. He held out a kind of a clay jar, clearly offering it to her.

Charlie answered him in what was probably a refusal. Her curiosity piqued.

She nudged Charlie lightly and asked in a whisper, "What did he say?"

Charlie turned to her.

"He wanted to treat you with horseradish, but I said that we don't kill our guests."

"Horseradish?"

"Yeah, I know..."

But he didn't. With his brows raised, he watched Lavender snatch the plate from his hands and smile charmingly at the boy.

"Yes, please." A considerable heap of white stuff appeared beside the meats, and Lavender sighed contentedly. "Thank you." Then she began to tuck in, as if she hadn't protested just a moment ago.

Charlie had never considered himself an expert on women's behaviour, but this surprised even him.

"Lavender, be careful. It's really strong; don't eat too much if you don't want to breathe fire."

"Of course, it's strong. Why would anyone want to eat horseradish that isn't strong?"

She had a point, but in present circumstances it was void. Charlie just hoped that her body would know better.

"All right. Just not too much."

"All right, Mum."

Questioning voices rose over the tumult of the discussion, and Charlie again spoke something that might have been a refusal. Lavender let it pass, too busy with wolfing down the treat she had been offered.

The cups made of bark started to circle among the dragon keepers; strangely, none of it made it to the two of them. Finally, Lavender took notice.

"What's this?" She pointed with her chin to one of them.

"Tuica." Charlie reached out and wiped the grease from her chin.

"Oh." She blushed. "Thank you."

"Don't worry. Look at them. They wouldn't mind your manners."

Lavender looked around. Most faces were red, and not only from the fire. They were shouting one over the other, taking big bites, smearing the grease all over themselves and taking big sips from their cups.

"What's this 'tuica'?"

"An alcohol made from plums."

"May I taste it?"

"It's not a liqueur, Lavender. It's more like vodka." It came out harsher than he had intended, and Lavender immediately picked at it.

"I see," she said slowly. "May I taste it?" she repeated stubbornly.

"I don't think you should." He looked her straight in the eye. Some things were out of discussion.

"And why ever not, Charles?" She mimicked his way of speech from earlier. Charlie didn't like the fact that she pretended to not know why and stupidly stuck to her whim.

"You know why."

Lavender held his gaze for a long moment, then looked away and smiled friendly to a guy holding a bottle. Gesturing to him, she asked, "May I?"

He poured her a heartfelt amount and, sloshing the alcohol a little over the brim, offered it to her. Before Lavender managed to grab it, however, Charlie intercepted the cup with a sure hand and quite solemn expression.

"May we talk for a moment, please?"

Lavender looked at him hard through narrowed eyes.

"I don't know. It's you who knows a lot of things about what I may and should do."

Charlie's feature softened. He didn't want to anger her nor antagonise.

"Please." This time it sounded like a request, and Lavender reluctantly acquiesced. Charlie put the cup aside.

Winding an arm delicately around her, he guided her from the merry circle around the fire. They turned the corner of the nearby barrack that blocked the sight and sound of the camp fire.

Lavender weaved out from his loose embrace and hugged her bare arms.

"So. I'm of age. Care to explain why you didn't let me drink?"

"Pregnant women shouldn't drink."

"Ah, don't let them, then."

She was making it harder.

"The fact that Ron behaved like a prick..."

"And what has he to do with this?" she asked in a raised voice.

"Look, I know it's hard for you. You haven't even told him yet?"

"Tell whom what?" she asked angrily, although she began to have an idea.

"Tell Ron that you're pregnant."

"That's enough!" Fury struck her after hearing it said aloud. She pressed her lips together in an effort to stop more angry words. After a while of breathing hard through her nose, she spoke again in a strained voice. "You know what all the Weasleys have in common?"

Charlie thought that their conversation was getting off the subject, but asked nevertheless.

"What?"

"You all seem to think that I'm stupid!"

"Oh, for Merlin's..." Charlie threw up his arms exasperated. He tried to take Lavender's hand in both of his, but she squirmed away. "Nobody thinks you're stupid. But what you're trying to do now wouldn't be so smart. You're going to hurt not only yourself, but also..."

"I am not pregnant," Lavender said loudly and clearly, stressing the 'not'.

"But also—" Charlie repeated distractedly. "You're what?"

"You heard me."

Charlie stared at her for a long time, trying to collect his thoughts. It had made perfect sense.

"But you threw yourself on the horseradish."

"Kees did, too. Is he pregnant?"

"And you didn't want to eat a regular meal. And your dress."

"What about my dress?"

Charlie gestured around himself. "It's very loose."

"It's a summer dress. They are supposed to be loose."

Charlie fell silent and then muttered to himself. "Good that I didn't catch Ron."

Lavender bristled again and put her fists on her hips.

"So you knew all along where he was!"

Shaking his head, Charlie spoke. "I didn't. After dinner, I went home to ask for him. They wouldn't hide him from me," he said with a crooked smile. "He wasn't in. He's going to be back tomorrow morning. He didn't tell Mum where he was going. I thought it would be wise to talk to him before bringing him here to talk with you."

Lavender crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm not speaking with him."

"Well, the situation is a bit different now, but I still think you should talk. If Ron wanted to end the relationship, he should have said so."

"It doesn't matter now. I don't want to see him."

Her face betrayed hurt, and Charlie decided not to push any further.

"Why don't we go back to the fire? I might even let you drink tuica. But only a little!" Charlie pleaded with his eyes for her to cheer up and not take his words too seriously.

"Yeah, it would be best. And I will drink as much as I want."

"We'll see, we'll see."

It felt safe to put an arm around Lavender's shoulders, steering her back to the crowd of, by now, half-drunk people. Her skin was cold, and he brushed his thumb over the goosebumps. Their return was noticed by a few and commented on. In reply, Charlie good-naturedly made a rude hand gesture.

Instead of sitting on the log, he plonked on the grass, propping his back against the wood. He patted the ground next to him, invitingly.

"Better to have something to support you if you want to drink."

Lavender looked scandalised. "I'm not going to drink that much!"

"Ah, you're saying it now. Wait till you have the taste of it. I will have to carry you to your bed."

"You wish," she blurted out without thinking.

He waggled his eyebrows at her meaningfully. "I'm not denying." When Lavender hesitated, not knowing what to make of it, he winked at her and mouthed, "Come on."

Lavender tried to carry on with her sulking, but the spot near the stocky, solid-looking man seemed far more pleasing than the idea of perching on that log, with cold wind licking at her back. She didn't comment when Charlie spread the damned sweater where her back would meet the log. And she also pretended not to notice that Charlie pulled her to his side when helping her sit down. His thigh pressed to hers was hot, even through his jeans. She could lean against his side, but she didn't, suddenly afraid of over-interpreting his intentions.

Instead, she fussed about her dress. "It'll get dirty, and it's quite new..."

"I thought it's a summer dress. What can you do in it if not sit on the ground?"

Lavender grunted reservedly and then spoke. "And where is this tuica you promised, hm? Do all the Weasleys make empty promises?"

"Ouch, that hurt." Charlie pressed his hand to his heart, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "Oi, Razvan, pass the bottle, won't you," he shouted. "You've had enough, anyway."

Two cups appeared at Charlie's feet, and he filled them with a translucent, slightly pearlescent liquid.

Having handed her one, he raised his.

"Cheers!"

Lavender knocked her cup against his.

"Cheers!"

They both felt that there was something to celebrate tonight.

The drink tasted vaguely of smoky plums, but it was definitively a spirit, as Charlie had said. It burned her throat and warmed her stomach. Suddenly, Lavender was glad she had eaten all that meat. The next few sips brought her into a very nice state of a hazy contentment. The problems seemed distant, and her senses were able to register only one thing: the warmth of the body she was snugly pressed to. She must have slumped against Charlie, not noticing when she had. It was nice and comfortable, and she decided not to move from here.

"So, what are your plans for the holidays?"

Lavender probed her memory, but came up with nothing. Parvati travelled with her parents, and her non-magical friends had drifted away during her years at Hogwarts.

"Now, as of today, officially none." She downed another gulp of tuica to wash out the bitter taste of that sentence.

Charlie toyed with his cup, staring at the flames. "Why don't you stay here for a while? We have a barrack for the guests; it's empty for the better part of the year." The fingers of his right hand started to drum some nervous rhythm on his thigh.

Lavender looked at him and felt the urge to find some excuse. "I don't have my clothes... nothing with me."

"You could always drop by home and pick up a thing or two, to stay for as long as you like."

She had to think about it.

In her short moment of lucidity, Lavender patted her shoulders to check why the skin there has been itching for some time now. Her fingers came across the wool of Charlie's sweater. It must have crept over her when she hadn't been looking, or maybe Charlie had taken advantage of her drunkenness, adorning her, without any warning, in a purely Weasley fashion, with that king of all the ugly things.

Surreptitiously, Lavender checked if in the firelight the colour didn't look so hideous.

It did.

Taking it off meant a lot of moving, and she didn't feel up to it, especially when it meant losing her place at Charlie's side. So she did the next reasonable thing anyone would do. She checked who was looking.

She shouldn't have worried. Everyone was very busy with drinking and some barbarian game that included a lot of rapid knife movements around fingers splayed on the ground.

Lavender squinted. The knife looked very sharp and was quite big. The movements were so fast, and getting faster still. It was only a matter of time when the first finger would be cut off.

"He will hurt himself."

"Happens. Nothing we cannot cure here."

Lavender opened her mouth to respond, but in that moment, a shrill whistle pierced the air. The ringing in her ears was deafening.

Wide-eyed, she turned to Charlie.

"What. Was. That?"

This was answered without Charlie's help.

A voice boomed, "Kasper! Vince! You have the first shift tomorrow morning. Beds! Now!"

Lavender managed to pinpoint the source of the voice: the bulky woman she had seen in the canteen. Even if the outlines were a little blurry, there was no mistaking her for anyone else.

The whole company sobered a little. Charlie stretched his legs towards the dying fire, almost burying the heels of his dragon hide boots in the embers. Lavender felt his forehead leaning against her temple and heard him whispering in a sing-song voice, "It's our sweet Carmen!"

Carmen was surely sweet enough to make the two men give up their game, extricate themselves from the crowd, and obediently, even if a little unsteadily, march towards the barracks.

"Wow!"

"Exactly."

Going past Lavender and Charlie, one of the early risers stopped and, fascinated, stared at the girl in a drunken stupor. He moved his lips for a few times before uttering, "Nice sweater, missy," then saluted her and marched off after his companion.

Lavender sobered immediately, tore the thrice blasted item off her shoulders, and threw it on the ground.

The valley echoed with Charlie's laughter.

2009, March June