

“We’re going, Hermione. We’ll be back at noon. Saturday mornings in the office, you know how it is,” Ted Granger said with a shrug.

“Okay. Would you like for us to start lunch?” Hermione asked, looking up from the paper.

“I think your mum wants to stop for fish and chips on the way back. If she doesn’t, I’ll call. How’s that?” he replied.

“That’s fine. You two can do the breakfast dishes, and that would be plenty,” Helen Granger added, poking her head into the kitchen, while tucking her hair underneath a headband. “Come on, Ted, or we won’t be there before the patients. See you later, dear. Viktor,” she said, nodding at the two of them. Viktor nodded in return.

“Do they always go this early?” Viktor asked.

“Only on Saturdays. It gives people who work during the week a chance to come in for appointments without missing work, but they still get half a day off,” Hermione explained.

“Oh. I see. Can we skip the little chrome box, then, and just do the toast the simple way?” Viktor said with a small smirk, pulling his wand from his pocket. He had been a little amused to find out how attached the elder Grangers were to using the toaster, even when it wasn’t necessary. Particularly when it had been so temperamental, of late.

“I suppose. You have to understand, it bothers them because I can’t do magic outside of Hogwarts. They’ve never even really seen *me* do magic, much less anyone else. They’re more comfortable with the toaster. They’ve seen it work for more years than they’ve known about magic,” Hermione said.

“I respect that. But when the toaster only works half the time, there’s not much point, is there? And they’re not here to be upset. I’ll refrain from making toast like that when I haff to,” Viktor said, idly twirling his wand in his fingers.

“And what if one of the neighbors comes by and sees you zapping up toast?” Hermione quizzed.

“Bit of glare on the door and the windows,” Viktor said, pointing his wand at the front door, “and they wouldn’t be able to see me zapping up toast. Or doing the dishes,” he added, flicking it back over his shoulder and setting the dishes to washing themselves.

“Got an answer for everything, don’t you?” Hermione said, idly turning the page

in the paper.

“Haff to. You’ve got all the questions. Or maybe not. I’ve got one, now. Who is that peeking in the front door?” Viktor amended.

“Very funny. What? Trying to get me to look?” Hermione answered, not looking up.

“No. I’m serious. There’s an older lady trying to shield her eyes and look in,” Viktor said, turning to mutter a quick “*Finite Incantatem*” at the dishes, then slipping his wand back into his pocket and nudging Hermione’s elbow with a finger. “Look.”

“Oh!” Hermione uttered in surprise. “Oh, that’s Mrs. Avery. She lives just down the block. She used to sit with me when I was smaller. She comes over, sometimes. Remember, Muggle. She’s got no idea we’re... ah...” Hermione stammered, gesturing with her hands.

“Freaks?” Viktor supplied, raising his eyebrows.

“Stop that! She’s not like Harry’s Uncle Vernon! She’s probably just curious. She likely heard you were coming, and she hasn’t seen me since last year,” Hermione admonished lightly, scooting her chair back and going to the door to unlock it and swing it open. “Come on in, Mrs. Avery,” Hermione said, propping the door out of her way.

“Oh... hello, Hermione, dear. Ted and Helen at the office, then? I knocked, but I guess you didn’t hear. And the glare on that door is simply awful! I couldn’t see a thing. Odd, since it’s so cloudy out,” Mrs. Avery commented, squinting out at the sky and the thick clouds. “Looks as though it would rain, given half a chance.” Mrs. Avery absently ran her fingers through her curly white hair, mussing it even more than it had been. She turned her attention back to Hermione. “Well. Look at you. Back for part of the summer and looking more a lady every time I see you. What happened to the little girl I used to read Paddington Bear books to?” Mrs. Avery asked, putting her hand beneath Hermione’s chin affectionately.

“Grew up a bit, I suppose,” Hermione said with a smile. “Would you like some coffee? It’s still hot. We were just about to make some toast, too. Provided the toaster holds out,” Hermione added anxiously.

“We, dear?” Mrs. Avery said in a confused tone, tugging at the edges of her light cardigan.

“Did my parents mention we would have a houseguest for a few weeks?” Hermione probed.

“Yes, love, they did. Friend from school, wasn’t it? Is it that girl you spend part of the summer with? Janelle Wheatson, was it?” Mrs. Avery asked, looking around the living room curiously, gawking at the opening between the living room and the kitchen, but not able to see through it from her vantage point.

“Ginny Weasley, you mean. Her brother is in my year. Ron, the one with the red hair. No, it’s not her. Actually, it’s a ‘him’, Mrs. Avery. Come on into the kitchen alcove, and I’ll introduce you,” Hermione said, leading Mrs. Avery by the hand.

“That would be nice, dear. I’ve never met any of your friends from school. It’s so far away, I don’t even get to see you very often, any more,” Mrs. Avery said. She pulled up short when they reached the kitchen. Viktor was already standing beside his chair. “I thought you said he had red hair.”

“He does. I mean, Ron Weasley does. This isn’t Ron Weasley, Mrs. Avery,” Hermione said, sounding a bit flustered.

“Well, obviously not. For a start, no red hair,” Mrs. Avery pointed out, sounding very pleased with herself.

“Right. This is Viktor Krum. He’s from Bulgaria. We’re sort of exchanging accommodations for the summer. He’s going to stay with us for a part of the summer, and then when Mum, Dad, and I take our vacations, we’re going to stay with Viktor’s parents and see the Pirin mountains. They’ll be our tour guides, so to speak. I stayed there last summer, and it was just lovely,” Hermione said with a smile.

“Then why do you need a tour guide this year?” Mrs. Avery asked earnestly.

“Pardon?” Hermione asked, obviously confused.

“Well, if you stayed in the Pirins last year, why do you need a tour guide this year?”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Avery, I meant I stayed with Viktor’s parents. Harry, Ron and myself, we all stayed with Viktor and Viktor’s parents last summer. At their home. Which is not in the Pirin mountains,” Hermione explained patiently. “Anyway, this is Mrs. Avery, Viktor.”

Viktor had just opened his mouth when Mrs. Avery said, “Hello. Nice to meet you,” a great deal more deliberately and loudly than necessary.

A quick, bemused look passed over Viktor’s face, but then he regained a neutral expression. “Nice to meet you, as well. I *do* speak English,” he said in a soft

voice.

“Oh, well, that’s wonderful. Makes things a lot easier, because I don’t know a word of anything but Latin, and that wouldn’t do us much good, unless you happened to be ancient Roman,” Mrs. Avery said, sounding relieved.

“Please, sit, Mada-... Mrs. Avery,” Viktor offered, pulling out a chair for her.

Mrs. Avery settled into the chair and tugged at her cardigan again. “Thank you, that was very gallant. You do know what that means?” Mrs. Avery asked, suddenly looking concerned.

“Yes, I do,” Viktor answered, smiling at Hermione from behind Mrs. Avery’s chair. Hermione gave a subtle shrug, as Mrs. Avery turned back to look at him.

“Oh, good. It always makes me nervous when I speak to foreigners. I’m always afraid I’ll accidentally say something that insults their grandmother,” Mrs. Avery explained.

“Well, I don’t think you have to worry about that,” Hermione soothed. “Did you want some coffee and toast? We were about to have some.”

“Well, if the two of you were going to have some, maybe I will, too, then,” Mrs. Avery replied.

Viktor and Hermione busied themselves, Hermione with the bread for the toast, Viktor with the coffee and cups. He carried the cups to the table and placed them at each seat. Hermione gave him a long look, sliding her eyes to the toaster, then back to him, and he took a stride back, as far back against the wall as he could get. Hermione loaded four slices of bread into the toaster and pushed the lever down, holding her breath. Mrs. Avery didn’t seem to notice, she was busy putting cream and sugar into her cup.

“So, you two met at Hermione’s school, did you? I would have guessed you old enough for university by now. You don’t have to stand all the way back there. Don’t be shy, come on back to the table,” Mrs. Avery insisted, tugging at the sleeve of Viktor’s shirt. Viktor took a cautious half step back toward the table, and Hermione jumped as the toast popped up. Luckily without incident. Hermione quickly put the slices on plates and loaded the toaster with two more slices, popping the lever back into place. “Wouldn’t you like to sit back down?” Mrs. Avery pressed, and Viktor shook his head slowly.

“I’m fine,” he protested. “I was just... going... to get... the preserves,” he said, gesturing at the refrigerator. Hermione began to edge in the opposite direction, further away from both appliances as he edged cautiously toward the

refrigerator. Hermione was just about to breathe an inward sigh of relief that they weren't close enough to one another and the toaster to cause it to rebel, when the two final slices of toast rocketed out of the appliance, a good two feet above it. She grabbed them up off the counter when they landed, and dropped them on a plate, looking at Viktor, who had frozen with his hand on the refrigerator door. They both slowly turned to look at Mrs. Avery.

"I think the springs in that thing might be a bit tight, dear," Mrs. Avery remarked. "Now, then, you two sit, and we'll talk. You met at school?"

"Yes, Mrs. Avery. We met last year," Hermione said, sitting and relaxing. Viktor sank into the chair next to her a bit limply, looking as relieved as she felt that her former babysitter hadn't thought the toaster's behavior too strange.

"Why did you end up at her boarding school?" Mrs. Avery asked Viktor.

"I was there for... an academic competition," Viktor answered.

"Oh, I thought you meant he went there for the year," Mrs. Avery said to Hermione.

"Well, actually, he did," Hermione explained.

"A yearlong academic competition? What kind of academic competition lasts a whole year?" Mrs. Avery countered.

"It... it's something of an academic tournament. Several events, spread out through the year," Viktor said carefully.

"I see. So you were an exchange student, then?" Mrs. Avery said.

Viktor looked at Hermione helplessly. "Err, sort of. Only no one from my school was exchanged with his school. They... ah... they, the other schools, that is, sent a group of students to study with us for a year, and one was chosen to compete and represent each school. Viktor represented his," Hermione interjected.

"Well, you must test like our Hermione, then. You must have scored very high on exams to represent your whole school. Is that how they picked all of you? Who scored the highest?" Mrs. Avery asked curiously.

"More... more of an impartial judge who picked the representatives," Viktor explained. "Who knows what the reasoning was. It's not like we could ask," he added, ducking into his coffee cup.

"How many schools competed, dear? That must have been exciting for you,

Hermione, all those foreigners on campus. She always was interested in just about everywhere when she was little,” Mrs. Avery said conspiratorially.

“There were only two other schools, and Viktor was really the only one I got to talk to, much. A Russian boarding school and a French one. Each school sent twelve. There aren’t a lot of schools like mine, and it’s a rather old tournament. Very... traditional,” Hermione said.

“How’s the competition run? What do you do in it?” Mrs. Avery asked, nibbling at the corner of her freshly buttered toast.

“There are these... exercises, sort of. Practical application of what you learn in school. And a panel of judges score you on how you tackle the problem,” Viktor responded, going back to his cup.

“Oh, so it’s all in how you slay the dragon,” Mrs. Avery said offhandedly. Viktor’s eyebrows shot up in surprise and he coughed.

“It’s an inside joke from a book Mrs. Avery used to read to me, the Hobbit, I’ll explain it later,” Hermione blurted out hurriedly, patting him on the shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It just went down the wrong way,” Viktor protested in a strangled voice.

“So, did the two of you have classes together?” Mrs. Avery asked, seemingly oblivious to anything out of the ordinary.

“Oh, no. Viktor was a seventh year. He didn’t have any classes with me,” Hermione answered.

“Then, where did the two of you meet?” Mrs. Avery pressed.

“School library,” Viktor wheezed, then cleared his throat again. “I asked her to a dance they held over Yule.”

“Leave it to our Hermione to meet someone in the library. So... you must be eighteen or nineteen?” Mrs. Avery prodded.

“Almost twenty, actually,” Viktor allowed.

“Twenty! Well, you are old enough for university, then. Are you going to university? What are you studying?” Mrs. Avery queried.

“Not at the moment,” Viktor said.

“You mean you’re on break, or just not going? That would be a shame, a young man bright enough to represent his entire school in an academic competition not going to university,” Mrs. Avery said earnestly, leaning across the table to pat Viktor’s hand.

“It’s... it’s not so common for people like me to go to university. Err... it... usually it’s more like job training, really, not so much university study,” Viktor explained. “I can always go back later. Right now, I have a job. I... play a sport. Professionally,” he added hastily.

“Don’t sell yourself short like that! Really? A professional athlete? Well, that’s exciting. What do you play?” Mrs. Avery asked.

“Football!” Hermione interjected a little more forcefully than necessary. “He plays football,” she added more softly when Viktor looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

“Local league? What position do you play?” Mrs. Avery prompted.

“Wo... Winger,” Viktor amended, dragging up the only position, besides goalie, that he could remember from some of the conversations between Muggle-born students he had overheard the past year. “A bit of national league, some international,” Viktor said noncommittally.

“World Cup level? I’ve always thought that would be terribly exciting,” Mrs. Avery countered.

“Noo... nooo. Maybe someday, though,” Viktor said, taking a bite of toast. The corners of his mouth twitched as he chewed and studied his plate.

“Mr. Avery and I were never big sports fans, but we do watch a bit of the World Cup when it’s on the telly. Seems like an awfully rough game. Is that how you broke your nose? It *was* broken, sometime, wasn’t it? Mr. Avery did his once on the door jamb, so that’s the only reason I could tell,” Mrs. Avery whispered conspiratorially.

Viktor nodded. “I took a ball in the face. It was going very fast, and so was I,” he said simply. “*Somebody* told me I looked a terrible mess.” Now, Hermione had to duck into her cup to keep from laughing.

“If you ever make it to the World Cup, why, you would just be absolutely famous. Everyone would know who you are. Well, except for Americans, maybe. I hear they prefer their own version of football, a lot rougher,” Mrs. Avery enthused.

“They seem to haff their own version of everything, a lot rougher,” Viktor said.

“As for being famous, well, being famous isn’t all it’s made out to be. I hear,” he amended. “Too many expectations from too many people. Not many people willing to let you be yourself. I could live with not being famous.”

Mrs. Avery nodded her agreement. “Well, I suppose that’s true. What would you do, though, if the sporting job doesn’t work out?”

“Could always go back to education,” Viktor answered.

“Well, that would be nice. You really should consider university, sometime, even if it’s not right now. Our Hermione here always did love books. I expect her professors at that school count themselves lucky to have her,” Mrs. Avery said emphatically.

“I’m positive they do. I could name one in particular who counts himself very lucky, indeed. To haff her,” Viktor said with a soft smile. Hermione’s cheeks flushed a darker shade of pink.

“So, what are you planning to do over the summer? Besides play tour guide for Ted, Helen, and Hermione?”

“Work on improving my English. Get more familiar with London. Later this summer, I’m attending a wedding in Russia. Enjoy a break from work,” Viktor enumerated, stacking his empty cup on the empty plate.

“That sounds lovely. Wedding in Russia? Relative?” Mrs. Avery pressed.

“Two schoolmates. They were in the group that came to Hermione’s school, as well,” Viktor explained.

“What’s the name of your school, dear? Maybe I’ve heard of it.” Mrs. Avery said.

“Oh, you would never haff heard of it. It’s way off in Russia, and it had a German founder. Not really plotted on anyone’s map around here,” Viktor said with a shrug.

“Oh! Look at the time! Mr. Avery will be thinking I’ve fallen into a manhole, by now! Thank you for the coffee and the toast, and the lovely conversation. It was wonderful to finally meet one of Hermione’s friends from school,” Mrs. Avery said, shuffling her empty dishes industriously.

“Leave it, I’ll get it,” Viktor said gently.

“Let me walk you to the door, Mrs. Avery,” Hermione said, standing and walking through the living room to the front door. At the front door, Mrs. Avery beckoned

her out onto the front porch. "What is it?" Hermione asked, leaning out, but still staying inside the door.

"He's just wonderful. You know, love, I think he's quite sweet on you. I can tell just from the way he looks at you. He really should go to university, though. Pity to waste the ability. Have a good time with him this summer, but not *too* good a time, if you know what I mean. And your parents really should have that toaster looked at," Mrs. Avery warned. "I mean, if the two of you are nervous to even go near it."

"I'll tell them that, Mrs. Avery. Thanks for stopping by. And for still looking out for me," Hermione said with a smile.

"Bye, love. See you later, maybe. I'll get this old lady out of your hair so you can talk to your gentleman friend," Mrs. Avery said conspiratorially, giving her a quick hug. "Wouldn't want him to get away."

"Bye, Mrs. Avery," Hermione said, hugging her back.

"Safe to put the dishes back to work?" Viktor asked.

"Safe enough. She's gone."

"Is she the equivalent of an examiner for the Wizengamot?" Viktor asked lightly.

"That would be a 'lawyer'. No. She just likes asking a lot of questions. She's always been curious. Maybe being around her so much when I was small is why I like to find out things, too. She doesn't mean anything by it. She's wordy, but harmless," Hermione protested.

"Oh, she seemed nice enough, but she asks a *lot* of questions. And we haff *got* to stay away from that toaster. It only goes mad when both of us are near it at the same time. I think you're on to something, there. It's something about the magic," Viktor said, shaking his head as he put the preserves back into the refrigerator.

"She asks a lot of questions, but she sees a lot, too," Hermione said, walking up behind him and slipping her arms around his waist. She leaned her cheek against his back for a moment.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, giving one of her hands a squeeze.

She pulled away and stepped back. "I'll explain it later, when I tell you about The Hobbit. Then, maybe this evening we can go to the library and see if we can figure out enough of the rules of football to be half convincing," Hermione said

ruefully. "I'm sorry. It was the only thing I could think of."

"It's alright. If I were going to pick a sport that I know very little about to fictionally play, football would be right up there. I know they haff the equivalent of a Keeper and you kick the ball. No flying. Not a clue past that. And I've heard a bit about Westham United, or is it West Ham United? I can never tell what they're saying for sure when they talk about English football teams," Viktor said, turning around. "The teams all seem to haff such odd names."

"How do you know all that?"

"Sometimes, it pays to listen to what people talk about in the corridors and before class starts. Rarely, but sometimes. Most of the time, though, I just ignore what they say. Or I never would haff asked you to the Yule Ball," Viktor said.

"Well, good thing you rarely listen. Or would that be listen rarely?" Hermione countered.

"You're the one who is supposed to be improving *my* English, not the other way around," Viktor said, ducking his head to plant a quick kiss on her forehead. On the counter the toaster jumped and rattled, then spewed a weak spark and a puff of acrid smoke. "Unplug that mad piece of machinery, please," Viktor murmured.

"Might as well just send this one to Mr. Weasley, so he can have the plug," Hermione said, yanking the plug from the wall. "Seems to be all it's good for. More an eclectic appliance at the moment, than an electric one. I'll explain that one, later, too. I'm afraid it's a terrible pun. Let me go upstairs and see if I can locate my copy of *The Hobbit* while you supervise the dishes."

"Done. Or they probably will be, before you get back," Viktor agreed. Hermione headed for the stairs to her room, and the well stocked bookshelf. She ran her fingers along the spines, and quickly located the book she had come to fetch. She had her fingers on the doorknob before she paused, turned back, and skimmed her fingers along the shelf once more. On impulse, she grabbed the other, thinner volume, tucking *The Hobbit* on top of *Paddington Bear*, then flipped the light switch, pulled the door shut, and headed back to the kitchen.