

Hermione woke to the sunlight streaming in through the window of the Head Girl's room. She stubbornly burrowed back down into the covers and the pillow, determined to stay put. *It's Saturday. I don't have to go anywhere. I don't have class. I'm allowed to sleep in. It's not as though I have anything or anyone to get up for,* she thought to herself. Harry and Ron would likely be off scrimmaging on the Quidditch pitch all morning, war brewing or no war brewing. It still felt odd that the daily routine inside the school walls went on so much like it always had, despite what was going on out there in the rest of the world. *The rest of the world... sometimes it's like the rest of the world hardly exists. People go off to that mysterious 'rest of the world' and you hardly ever hear from them. It's like he's dropped off the face of the earth. Wherever he is definitely qualifies as the 'rest of the world'...* Viktor was Heaven only knew where... she hadn't heard from him in three weeks and more, and even then, it was little more than a hurried notice that he was still alive and didn't know when he would be back.

Hermione had drawn a few conclusions and made some wild guesses from the tiny dribbles of information she had managed to pick up here and there, but nothing really concrete. *Somewhere in Eastern Europe, almost certainly. As though that narrows it down, any,* she thought ruefully. *Doing something with the Order. Or for the Order. Or to the Order. No reason to get my hopes up about hearing from him today, either.* It wasn't as though she had any other reason to drag herself out of bed in time for the owl post, either. Like an Easter package from home. The best she could hope for was a little something from Mrs. Weasley, most likely, and that would keep. It would keep until she could be bothered to drag herself out of bed.

*A year. How can it have been over a year, already?* Sometimes, it still felt like yesterday, when she had received the notice about her parents. Sometimes, the wound was almost as raw and fresh as it had been when they had first been killed. Times like this, the day before Easter, it was feeling a bit too tender for comfort. Determined as she was not to wallow in self-pity, the prospect was tempting. *No mother, no father, no Viktor... damn it, Hermione! Stop feeling sorry for yourself! Viktor's safe, as far as you know, and Harry and Ron are still here. You're not alone. It might not be the Easter you wanted, but it's an Easter all the same. You're not alone. The same and worse has happened to a few other Hogwarts students. Harry... Susan Bones... but it's different. You had your parents most of your life...*

*But you're not alone.* You're not alone. It had been a mantra of sorts, Viktor had repeated it to her so many times in the first few weeks after. You're not alone, others have lost as much and more. You're not alone, the people at Hogwarts still love you, want to keep you safe. You're not alone, you have friends, the Order. You're not alone, because I'm still here, and I love you. *At least you're not alone, permanently. He's coming back. He promised.*

If there was anything in the world that she would trust in, it was one of Viktor's promises. Heaven knew he had kept all of them and then some, since she had lost her parents. He had been the one who had gone and identified the bodies, so she wouldn't have to, though Muggle police procedure was a complete mystery. They probably took any confusion for the language barrier. He had made most of the funeral arrangements, despite the fact that the whole thing was surely only slightly less incomprehensible to him than it was to her. Helped her sell the house and sift through the contents, room by room, box by box, crying jag by crying jag. He had propped her up, steered her through, held her hand, put her to bed, talked her into eating, dragged her out of bed, and generally made her put one foot in front of the other as needed.

Looking back now, it seemed like he had almost lived her life for her, prodded her forward into the land of the living, in those days when she was too shell shocked to do it herself. When she had been wobbling unsteadily between completely numb and being a raw, open wound. Sometimes it must have been more like dragging her kicking and screaming, rather than prodding. He had been one of the few people willing to actually let her cry. To not shush, beg and plead with her to stop. To not try to cajole her out of her grief, simply content to help her work through it, but never allowing her to stop moving forward. No rushing her out of it, but no letting her get stalled in it, either.

She had often had the rather odd thought that her parents would have approved of the two of them even more strongly if they could have seen how he had helped her handle things after their deaths. Her mother's comment, "He's definitely a good, solid young man, Hermione. I'm glad the two of you are thinking about a future together," and her father's wholehearted agreement were a bit of comfort, at least. At least they had properly met and gotten well acquainted. Had begun to feel each other out. Expressed a mutual admiration and liking for each other... before...

*Before. Life is always going to be divided into before and after, from now on. Before, when I had parents. Before, when I had a home. Before, when things like Easter packages from home were no more than my due, and before the world went completely mad. And if Viktor were here, he would be kicking your sorry arse out of the bed, Hermione. And lecturing you on how ridiculous you're being, moping around. I can almost hear it, now. Mad or not, this is the world you live in, Hermione Granger. Might as well face it. Or at least get out of bed and give it a sidelong glance. Easter's not going away just because you're under the covers. You can't hide from it, no matter how badly you might want to. And the world generally looks a little bit better if you're at least vertical. Not many situations can be improved by staying horizontal all day. Getting out of bed might not fix anything, but staying in bed definitely doesn't.*

"Staying in bed definitely doesn't solve anything," Hermione said aloud, as

though trying to convince herself, throwing back the covers and swinging her legs out over the edge of the bed. She sat for a moment before pushing off from the mattress and straightening, stretching her arms over her head. She dressed and hurriedly brushed her hair. She had no more than put the brush down when the tapping on the door began.

Hermione opened the door and stared out into empty space for a second before dropping her gaze down to where the small house-elf stood, cradling a delicate wicker basket. "Please, Miss, Dobby has an Easter basket that is needing to be delivered to you," he said, looking pleased with himself and offering the basket handle to her.

"Why, thank you, Dobby. Who should I thank for it? Doesn't seem to be a tag..." Hermione said, turning it around in her hands.

"Oh, no, Miss. Dobby is not saying who it is from. Dobby has strict orders not to! The sender is wanting it to be a surprise. Miss will find out soon enough who it is from. Dumbledore himself approves, so Miss needn't worry it's anything bad," Dobby said, shaking his head so vigorously that his ears flapped in the breeze.

"Oh. Well... thank you for delivering it, Dobby," Hermione said, studying the tiny basket carefully. It held nothing but a sparse handful of straw and a perfectly smoothed wooden egg, with a scrap of parchment fixed on it. Hermione hooked her finger in the handle, removed the parchment, unfolded it and read "OPEN ME", in neat block letters. She looked down the hall to see Dobby at the head of the staircase, looking back at her, uncertain smile on his face.

"Miss is most welcome!" he called out, grinning widely, then scampered down the steps. Tucking the parchment back into the basket, she cradled the egg in her palm. A nearly invisible seam ran around the middle of it, and she found that she could part the two halves with her fingers, much like the small plastic Easter eggs she had hunted as a child. Instead of the usual jelly beans or chocolate, however, the egg held another neatly folded piece of parchment. Upon opening it, she found the same neat, nondescript letters. "AN EASTER SCAVENGER HUNT. I SUGGEST YOU REQUEST EGGS FOR BREAKFAST."

"More and more curious," Hermione muttered to herself, inspecting the basket again. Nothing to give her any clue who had sent it. Finally, with a shrug, she sat the basket on the bedside table and wandered downstairs, toward the kitchen. Though more students than usual had stayed on campus for the Easter holiday, the number was still low enough that the house-elves had reduced the hours for breakfast in the Great Hall. She had stayed in bed right through breakfast. Nothing for it but to go to the kitchen for breakfast. And she had to admit, her stomach felt a bit hollow.

The house-elves didn't mob Hermione quite the same way they did Ron and Harry, fearing she would suggest they shouldn't be happy with the status quo, but they still eagerly fulfilled her polite request for a bit of breakfast, waving away her apology for missing the serving hours in the Great Hall. On a whim, she actually did ask for a couple of soft boiled eggs and toast. Finishing up her first egg, she slid the egg cup out of the way, preparing to open the second. Doing a quick tally, she found there were actually three. One had been hiding behind the other two. "I only asked for two-" she began, but stopped short. Lifting the lid of the second egg cup, she found not a soft boiled egg, but another piece of parchment. Hermione opened the note and read "NORBERT CAME FROM ONE."

"Norbert...came from a...? I suppose it means I'm to go see Hagrid? Look around Hagrid's house?" Hermione said, thinking aloud. She laid the parchment on the table and studied the note thoughtfully, while spooning up her second egg. She latched onto the problem eagerly, for something to do, something to take her outside of herself. Once she had finished her breakfast, she tucked the parchment in a pocket and strode purposefully out of the castle, enjoying the brisk air and bright sunshine on the way to the Gamekeeper's Hut. But Hermione's mind was still intent on clicking through the clues, so far, and trying to determine who had sent the egg.

She was still coming up empty by the time she had taken a hurried survey of the grounds around Hagrid's house, and come to the decision to knock on the large door. "Hermione! Was wonderin' when yeh would get out! Got summat ter show yeh... Come on in," Hagrid said pleasantly. "Yeh remember Norbert, o' course?" he whispered conspiratorially once she had closed the door.

"Oh, absolutely. Who could forget Norbert? In fact, I was just thinking of Norbert," Hermione replied, smiling widely. *Now, there's no way Hagrid can keep a secret, so he'll be sure to spill whoever sent this, if it wasn't him,* she thought to herself.

"Really? Mind works in funny ways, don' it? I just got this in the owl post, believe it or not," Hagrid said, taking a photograph from one of the shelves.

"Hagrid? You wouldn't happen to have sent a-" Hermione began, but she stopped short when he thrust the photo into her hands. In the photo, a large Ridgeback was studying the viewer curiously, flexing its wings and lolling its tail about. Then, its gaze was distracted and it followed a small, flitting thing for a bit. It wasn't until the small, glittering object zipped up toward the camera lens, right in front of the viewer, that Hermione could identify it definitely. It was a Snitch. A practice one, if the photographer had been deliberately trying to get it into the photo, certainly, but a Snitch nonetheless. Hermione gaped open-mouthed.

"Yeh were askin'...?" Hagrid prompted, flopping into the chair across the table

from her.

“Norbert?” Hermione asked, looking up.

“O’ course! I’d know Norbert anywhere, I would. That’s him, alrigh’,” Hagrid said, nodding.

“Well, who sent it to you?” Hermione pressed.

“Don’ rightly know. No name on it. Didn’ know th’ owl, neither. Wasn’t expectin’ it. Don’ know anybody in Romania,” Hagrid said innocently.

“No members of the Order, even? Maybe on a mission there, or something?” she asked desperately.

“Nope. Can’ say. Not ‘cause I don’ want ter, mind yeh. I honestly don’ know. Thought maybe it were Charlie. He was big on Quidditch, an’ there’s a Snitch in it,” Hagrid said thoughtfully. “An’ Charlie was good with Norbert. Norbert liked him. Can’ see him sittin’ still for anyone else. Charlie would be able ter get into the preserve, if that’s where Norbert still is,” Hagrid mused. “If it were Charlie, don’ know why he wouldn’ have put his name on it, though. Maybe he sent word ter someone there ter send it.”

“Charlie. I suppose that makes sense,” Hermione said dejectedly. The Weasleys. Surely Ron had mentioned the funk she had been in, lately. Mrs. Weasley had probably organized it. She couldn’t say why the thought depressed her slightly. Maybe it was the idea of Molly Weasley taking pity on the poor, abandoned orphan. The poor, abandoned orphan who was not Harry Potter, for a change. “You didn’t send me an Easter basket by Dobby this morning, did you?”

“You didn’ seem ter much wan’ ter celebrate Easter this year. Didn’, sorry ter say,” Hagrid said quietly. “Why?”

Hermione hurriedly explained about the eggs and notes. “So, you wouldn’t happen to have anything else Norbert and egg-related, other than this picture, would you?” she asked, scanning the room.

“Not a scrap. What yeh reckon that means?” Hagrid asked, jabbing a meaty finger at the photo.

“Well, there’s a Snitch, we have a Quidditch pitch... seems logical to go look around there. You swear you don’t know who sent any of this? The eggs, notes or photo?” Hermione asked again.

“Wish I did. Like ter thank ‘em fer the photo. Know Norbert’s alrigh’,” Hagrid said

simply, and Hermione was finally convinced that he truly didn't know. She rose and put the photo back down.

"Well, I suppose if I want to get to the bottom of it, I'll have to go look. Thanks, Hagrid. Good to see Norbert's well," she added, heading toward the door.

"Have a good time. If Dumbledore okayed it, it should be alright," Hagrid called after her in a reassuring tone.

"If I don't die of curiosity first," Hermione said with a weak smile. She trudged off toward the Quidditch pitch, and she spotted Harry and Ron zipping around the pitch, tossing a Quaffle between them. She stood on the pitch a while, just watching, then sat in the lower level of the stands, glancing around. *Where would you hide a clue in here? Surely they wouldn't be so cruel as to hide it in the seats. It would take hours if I started in the wrong spot...*

"Hermione! Hey! What are you doing out here?" Harry called out from across the way. He and Ron had both landed not too far from the stands where she sat. "Something wrong?" he added, when she didn't answer right away.

"No, nothing wrong. I think," Hermione protested.

"Then, why so... What are you looking for? We're the only two here," Ron added, when she kept scanning the pitch.

Hermione explained once again, about the small basket Dobby had delivered, the eggs, and the photo of Norbert. "I'll have to thank Mrs. Weasley for organizing this. Sweet of her to think of me this way," she summed up tactfully.

"Er... Hermione? Mum's got you an Easter basket. I've seen it. It's a big one, with a ton of homemade biscuits in it, and Chocolate Frogs. She never said a word about a scavenger hunt," Ron protested. "And I haven't said anything to Mum about Easter, particularly."

"Harry? Do you know anything about it?" Hermione asked.

"No. I've got you a chocolate bunny upstairs, if you showed any signs of wanting it. Scavenger hunt's a bit too clever for me, don't you think?" Harry said.

"Then... where should I look? So far, everything's been egg-related, and I can't for the life of me figure out what could be egg-related about a Quidditch pitch," Hermione said, looking around again.

"Beats me. Let us put our gear up and we'll help you look," Ron said.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” Hermione said.

“We were just messing about, anyway. Come on to the equipment shed,” Harry invited. The three of them got up and walked to the equipment shed, and Harry opened the door, pausing and cocking his head. “Hermione, I think I just found your egg,” he said with a laugh.

“In the equipment shed?” she asked, stepping in after him. There, in the middle of the shed, sat a bushy green eggplant in a large clay planter. “Aubergines...an eggplant?” Hermione said incredulously. She circled it, studying the small, purple, vaguely egg-shaped vegetables dangling among the green, and soon spotted the note tucked in among the leaves. “Not every egg comes from a bird, some come from the ground,” she read aloud. “The greenhouse?” she ventured.

“Looks like. That wasn’t in here when we got our brooms this morning,” Ron said, nudging the container with a toe.

“You’re sure?” Hermione said.

“I think I’d notice a bloody big eggplant, don’t you?” Ron shot back. “How did it get in here?”

“I have a suspicion. The house-elves, or at least Dobby, seems in on it. He seems to know who did all this. Him, and Dumbledore. Dobby implied that Dumbledore had okayed the whole thing,” Hermione said, putting her hands on her hips. “Nothing for it but to go to the greenhouse, I suppose. You two don’t have to come.”

“You’re sure?” Harry said.

“Positive. Go back to your messing about. I’ll be fine. I admit, I’m dying to find out who’s doing this. Must have taken a while to work all this out. Someone has far too much time on their hands,” Hermione said, ducking back out of the shed.

As she walked out of earshot, Harry turned to Ron and said, “You’re sure your mum didn’t?”

“Pretty positive. Not really Mum’s style. I thought maybe you had. You didn’t, then?” Ron asked.

“Nope. Wish I had thought of it. Bloody clever. You reckon Dumbledore’s behind it?” Harry countered.

“Bit busy to be organizing scavenger hunts for individual students, isn’t he? What with the Order and all? Wish Hagrid had known for sure that Charlie sent that

picture of Norbert. I could tell Mum someone had heard from him. She's about to have kittens about not hearing from him for three weeks. Not that I would put it past Dumbledore to arrange it, but it seems a bit odd right now. Sure, if there were nothing else going on..." Ron trailed off.

"Well, Hermione will figure it out soon enough. And tell us," Harry said with a shrug.

Hermione rounded the greenhouse, looking at the various flowerbeds that Professor Sprout tended every year. She still stood there, at a loss for where to begin, when the Herbology professor herself called out, "Pleasant good morning, Miss Granger!"

"Professor," Hermione greeted, nodding back. "Doing some gardening?" Hermione queried, looking at the thick gloves the professor wore.

"Just going to do some weeding. If only all my plants were as hearty as the weeds. Could I do something for you?" the plump professor asked, smiling.

"I know this is going to sound completely mad, but there... wouldn't happen to be anything sort of egg-related... having to do with eggs, around here, would there?" Hermione asked.

"Egg-related? What on earth do you mean, dear?" Professor Sprout said, genuinely puzzled. Again, Hermione recapped the clues she had so far. "Egg-related... well, I suppose... but that's a bit of a stretch..." the Professor said to herself.

"What? Anything. I mean, the last clue was one of your eggplants," Hermione pressed.

"Explains where that went, at least. There are some bird nests... in the hedges around the greenhouse. They build there every year. Sometimes, they're nearly a menace. For a few years running, you remember, they were so thick you almost couldn't walk around the greenhouse without bumping into a bird. There are always old nests tucked in there," Professor Sprout said, pointing to the hedges at the front, near the door. "Help you look, dear?"

"I would appreciate it," Hermione said. They spent a good twenty minutes parting the tiny branches and dodging some angry, twittering birds before Professor Sprout called Hermione's name.

"Dear, I think this might be for you," she said, holding the branches aside to reveal an obviously abandoned nest, in shabby disarray, holding a folded parchment with her name on it. "Happy hunting. I really do need to get some



weeding done before lunch,” she said apologetically.

“Thank you!” Hermione told the professor, before latching onto the scrap and reading it eagerly. This note was much longer and more cryptic than the rest. “AN EGG FROM AN EGG IS STILL AN EGG. AN EGG PLUS AN EGG IS STILL AN EGG. ANY PRODUCT OF EGGS STILL AN EGG, AND AN EGG WILL GO INTO AN EGG AS MANY TIMES AS YOU LIKE, BUT ALWAYS REMAIN AN EGG.”

Hermione sat beneath one of the trees on the lawn and puzzled over the words on the scrap of parchment, reading it to herself over and over. Finally, she gave up on unraveling the clue and wandered in for lunch, just making the end of the serving period. After eating, she stared at the parchment again, sharing the words with Ron and Harry. “I think I’ll go pay another visit to Dobby,” she said finally, picking up the parchment and hurrying to the kitchen.

“Oh, no, Miss, Dobby is not allowed to help! Besides, poor Dobby doesn’t know the answer. The sender said Miss would be able to find all the solutions on her own, certainly,” Dobby said apologetically, handing the parchment back. “The sender gives them to Dobby in envelopes, with where they should be hid and in what order, but Dobby doesn’t remember which order they went in. Besides, Dobby promised he would not help Miss find the solution, no matter what. Miss wouldn’t like to ruin the sender’s nice surprise, would she?”

Hermione felt vaguely ashamed of herself. “No. No, Miss wouldn’t,” she sighed. “I’ll just have to find the solution my- Wait! Solution! That’s it! It’s all math!” she said excitedly. “An egg from an egg is an egg, plus an egg... adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing... it’s a zero! A zero is always a zero, no matter which of those things you do! An egg looks like a zero! Math! Arithmetic. The Arithmancy classroom... oh, Dobby, thank you!” she gushed, giving the house-elf an affectionate squeeze so fierce that he let out a surprised squeak. Hermione hurried off toward the classrooms, striding through the halls more confidently now that she had unraveled the cryptic clue.

The door to the classroom was closed, the interior dark. “Now, every clue has been entrusted to someone. They’ve all been with someone, really. Even if the person didn’t know who sent it, or that it was there, even... wonder where Professor Vector might be... Maybe I should have gone to her office, not the classroom,” Hermione said to herself, turning around to face the opposite wall. The portrait across from the door had caught her eye, particularly the jeweled Faberge style egg on the witch’s necklace. Hermione walked closer, studying it, until a voice pulled her out of her reverie.

“Going to stare at me all day?” the witch in the portrait snapped irritably.

“Sorry... I... I was just admiring your pendant. I never noticed it before... how it’s shaped like an egg,” Hermione said apologetically.

“It *is* an egg. Genuine Faberge,” the witch sniffed. “Something else you wanted?”

“Er... there wouldn’t happen to be a note left around here, lately, would there?” Hermione asked.

“If you’re referring to that piece of rubbish that the grotty little house-elf insisted on shoving behind my frame, I would be most grateful if you would remove it. It’s most uncomfortably lumpy on my delicate self,” the witch in the portrait complained, wriggling her shoulders, but leaving her hands folded primly. Hermione carefully tipped the frame out from the wall, and a note fell from behind the portrait. “Oh! That’s so much better! You have no idea! The torture!”

“Thank you, very much,” Hermione said, hurrying off, unfolding the parchment along the way. She paused on the staircase to read, “A tisket, a tasket, a golden egg not in a basket. A bauble full of babble, but a hint of a task it held. A task... golden egg... babble, the merpeople singing, the second task from the Triwizard Tournament? The lake, next?”

“What on earth are you babbling to yourself about, Granger?” Professor Snape’s familiar voice cut through her thoughts from a few stairs below her.

“Nothing important, Professor. Someone’s just done something rather nice for me, is all. Left me an all day brainteaser to work on,” she said, holding up the parchment. “Excuse me, I have to get to the bottom of this. I’ll see you in class,” she added, excusing herself politely.

“Deserve one another, they do. One as annoyingly self-righteous and barmy as the other. Eggs,” Snape muttered under his breath, looking after her, then giving a derisive snort. He continued up the staircase, heading for Professor Vector’s office.

Outside, Hermione slowly circled the lake as the afternoon shadows got longer and longer. She carefully and methodically tramped through the tall grass at the edge of the water, looking in all the hollows in the green, for some hint, some clue. Finally, as she was about to give up, a flash of gold caught her eye, nestled among the tall reeds near the dock. She picked it up and eyed it curiously, finally prying open the egg, pulling out the scrap of parchment, tucking the empty egg beneath her arm. If she didn’t know better, she would have sworn that it was actually one of the eggs that the Triwizard Champions had been charged with fetching from the dragon nests in the first task.

“One last bit of research. Ask Madam Pince to see a detailed reference on caring

for Basilisk eggs,” Hermione read aloud. “Basilisk eggs? But that would be in the Restricted Section...” Nonetheless, Hermione set off for the library, hurrying so that she was actually a bit sweaty and out of breath when she arrived.

“Yes, Miss Granger?” Madam Pince asked, looking up from her book and over her glasses.

“Madam Pince... I need to find a reference book on caring for Basilisk eggs. I know that sounds completely ridiculous, but...” Hermione began. Madam Pince waved her hand impatiently, interrupting her.

“There’s only one book in the library that’s very detailed about that. Are you aware that *Putting Parseltongue To Use* is in the Restricted Section, Miss Granger?” Madam Pince said, a note of disapproval in her voice.

“Well, since it involves Basilisks, I rather thought it might be... but you see, I got this-”

Madam Pince interrupted again. “Then you’ll be able to find it on your own. You know your way around the Restricted Section well enough. Professor Dumbledore left a note of permission allowing you access to the Restricted Section today, so that won’t be a problem,” she said, returning to her own book with a slightly bored air.

Hermione opened her mouth to question the librarian further, but thought better of it and clamped her lips together. She whirled on a heel, passing a few students sitting at the tables, working on essays. She didn’t see Madam Pince put her book back down and hurry off into the rear of the library as soon as she was out of sight.

Hermione wandered the stacks, coming up to the proper section, running her fingers along the spines, reading the titles, some of them rather ominous sounding, looking for the book in question. When her eyes fell on the well worn, thick leather cover, she hesitated for a moment, then reached out and pulled the book from the shelf. Without preamble, she turned it up and carefully riffled the pages, waiting for the scrap of parchment to fall out. After a couple of passes, nothing turned up. Determined, she propped it across an arm and flipped the pages, paying little heed to the words or illustrations on the pages. Still nothing. Frustrated, she shoved the book back into its slot, deciding to search the shelves around it. The rather curious obstruction she felt when she pushed the book caught her attention, though.

She pushed on the spine again, and found the book refused to go flush with the others around it, though it seemed not to be as deep as those surrounding it. Hermione tugged it back off the shelving, then lowered her eye to the slot.

Nestled in the space behind the book, she could see something. She reached in and pulled out a small, wrapped box, with beautiful silver paper, and a large periwinkle blue bow. She replaced the book and turned the small package over in her hand, looking for a name. It bore only her own, an artful rendering in calligraphy.

She sat in the aisle, crossing her legs, untying the bow and unwrapping the gift, almost hesitant to remove the lovely trappings of the present. She carefully folded the intact paper and ribbon, laying them on the library floor beside her leg. Inside the smooth, glossy white cardboard box, nestled within a small silk pillow that matched the bow, lay an egg.

It was lavishly painted, bright red enamel trim, delicate gold threads trailing along the smooth surface, small crystals set in patterns by a jeweler, the traditional Russian firebird motif. She looked at it only fleetingly, searching the box for some sign of another clue. A note. A name. Anything. Beneath the pillow, the box was empty.

She was so intent, she didn't even notice the shadow falling over her from behind. Until the person spoke. "You're rusty. I was beginning to think you were never going to figure out the Arithmancy clue." The voice was hoarse, a bit thin and strained, almost like a distant echo. She might not even have recognized it, except for the inflection. The foreign and almost musical lilt to the softly rounded vowels. The subtle rolling that a Slavic speaker would give to the letter r. It had softened greatly, no longer the thick accent it had once been, but exotic and unusual, still. Hermione almost didn't dare to turn around, for fear that it wasn't true. She had hoped and imagined she had heard that voice so many times over the last few weeks. She couldn't turn around. He might not really be there... "Like it?"

She stood and turned, nodded mutely. To put it politely, he looked a right mess, little better than he had the first time she had seen him up close. A half healed purple bruise, nearly the size of her own palm, rimmed with a sickly greenish brown border, surrounded a ragged scrape along his left cheekbone. It had obviously been days since his last shave, since coarse, scratchy looking dark stubble was visible. He was in need of a haircut, as well. His black hair was curling up haphazardly at the collar, there were dark circles from lack of rest under his eyes, and his boots were covered with a thick layer of dirt, not a bit of shine to them. If anything, his usually sharp cheekbones and chin looked even more angular. And he was quite possibly the most welcome sight she could ever remember seeing.

Finally convinced that he really was standing in the aisle of the library, Hermione rushed at him, grabbing him around the waist and burying her cheek into his chest so forcefully that she actually staggered him slightly and he reached out to

steady himself against the shelf. "I promised," Viktor said simply, putting one big hand between her shoulder blades, the other twining in her hair, cupping her head, cradling her to him. They stood there in silence for a while, no noise but her soft, hiccuping sobs and sniffing as she struggled to regain control of herself. "Here, now, I'm getting all wet, and I've had quite enough of that these last few weeks," he chided gently when she quieted.

"You're hurt," she said finally, daring to reach up and touch a fingertip to the bruise.

"Branches hurt just as much as Bludgers," Viktor said ruefully, touching it himself. "I really should learn to keep my face out of things when I'm on a broom, especially when I'm going fast. Looks worse than it feels. You like the egg?"

Hermione lifted the palm where she still cradled the egg. "It's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. Thank you. I loved the firebird. Clever of you to set this whole thing up. I never once really suspected... that is, I never dared to suspect it was you. Dobby was so vague and mysterious, and Hagrid didn't know..."

"Hagrid can't keep a secret. Had a lot of help. Some of it unwitting. Dobby was in on who was behind it, kept me posted, and Madam Pince let me hide out in back. Dumbledore had to approve it, of course. Did you take a good look at the scene on it? There's more than a firebird," Viktor said, stepping up behind her, wrapping his arms around her, leaning down and resting his chin on her shoulder. His cheek brushed hers lightly and she found that the stubble was indeed scratchy, but she hardly minded.

Hermione flipped the egg over, studied the scene on the other side for a moment. "It's a house." The pleasant little cottage had a thatched roof, and smoke coming from the chimney.

"Not *just* a house. Not if you look at what's *really* in that egg. If you accept it, it's not just a house," he said, reaching up and cupping his hands around her own, guiding them along the egg until her fingertips were on either side of a previously unnoticed seam. He helped her pull the two halves apart, then slid his fingers back around her wrists, his thumbs rubbing over her pulse. She pulled the egg the rest of the way open, gasping when she saw the contents. "See, if you put that on, I'm not giving you a house. I'm giving you a home, someday, when you're ready, which is an altogether different prospect," he murmured in her ear. "Will you marry me?"

"I'm not putting that on," she said firmly.

"Why not?"

“I want you to put it on,” she insisted, holding up one half of the egg.

“Is that a yes?” Viktor asked, plucking the ring out of the hollow enamel shell.

“Yes,” Hermione answered, extending her hand and fingers. He steadied it with his own and slipped the ring snugly onto her left ring finger. Then he tilted his face to hers, she turned and kissed him, reaching her newly bedecked hand up over her shoulder, burying her fingers in his hair. She found she hardly paid any attention to the stubble. When they parted, he embraced her tighter for a moment, then loosened his grip to allow her to turn and face him. “That might be the most beautiful word in the English language,” she said, putting her head against his chest again.

“Home?” he said quietly.

“Home,” she echoed, holding on tighter. “Home.”