

Hermione dug through her school trunk, vainly attempting to find her other shoe. Things had been so hectic, trying to get things together to head to Grimmauld Place for the rest of the summer. Professor Lupin was waiting downstairs for her to get ready. He had been staying here, posing as a “family friend” for the last two days, since Viktor had been called back on who knew what errand. Dumbledore didn’t want them unprotected anymore when she was home, and that meant having at least one person on the premises capable of doing magic, without worrying about the consequences. Not that she was complaining about that. Actually, her parents had become pretty fond of having Viktor around over the past few weeks.

Giving up on the shoe, she went to her bureau and gathered up more of her clothes. Shuffling through the clothes, she revealed a small bundle of parchments, tied with a white ribbon. At first, she wondered what they were doing there, but then, when she recognized the neat script on the outside, the precise, somewhat ornate writing of her name, her heart gave a little squeeze. He had strangely neat, precise, almost flowery and calligraphic writing, being used to the Cyrillic alphabet first. Her mind flew back to last summer, and she paused. Viktor’s letters. She had been putting them in the cedar bureau all last year, saving them. She had been reluctant to take them to school with her, so she had tucked them among her clothes, saving them, hoarding them, hiding them. Keeping them private like some little stash of treasure, adding to the stack as each one arrived.

They had a while yet. They weren’t supposed to leave before evening. The rest of the packing could wait a while. Instead, she sprawled on the bed, propping against the pillows. She untied the ribbon, unfolding the first neat sheet of parchment. It had arrived only a day or two after she had come home from Hogwarts, after fourth year.

Dear Hermione,

The whole trip back, I kept thinking of things I would have to write you about. I thought I would be able to fill up an entire scroll of parchment first thing, but now that I sit down and try to write, I cannot seem to remember one single thing that seemed so important to write about. I suppose I had better start by apologizing again. You were correct, I should not have spoken to Harry about the two of you. Firstly, it was none of my business at all. Second, it was not very polite. My only excuse is the fact that I felt you might not tell me the truth just out of consideration for my feelings, not because you would ever deliberately lie. I certainly would never believe that Rita Skeeter article and those awful things she implied. Unfortunately, I know how she operates. She sometimes does stories on Quidditch players as well. Not many of them are what I would call fair and balanced. She is part of the reason I do not bother believing much of what I read in the paper anymore. But, if I had wanted to know so badly, I should have

asked you, and you alone, and been content with the answer. I am sorry for any embarrassment this may have caused you or Harry. I hope you forgive my mistake.

I will probably be back home by the time you get this. We arrived back at Durmstrang fairly quickly, but the only people on campus were some of the professors and staff. Classes ended there some time ago, so all the students had already gone home. I think for most of us, it was a relief not to have to deal with all the rest of the students asking questions. I get a week or so with no practices or games to worry about. It will be nice to just go home and be with my parents for a while. I am sure they will have plenty of questions. I was there, and I still have plenty of questions. The week after, national team practices begin. It might be a good thing. Keeping busy has a way of keeping you from dwelling on things you should not dwell on too much. I have a lot of things to think about, but I would rather not take them all on at once.

If you feel like writing back at all, just tell the owl to wait. His name is Baramir, and he probably will not need much convincing after making a flight that long. There should be a pouch of owl treats attached to the right leg that you can feed him in the meantime. I never thought to ask if you had an owl of your own, but I suspect you do not, or you would have mentioned it while talking about Crookshanks. And I thought any owl you might have could be away with letters to your friends at school. Hope this finds you well. I already miss having you around to talk with. Or not talk with, as was so often the case. My mother used to tease me that when people asked at what age I began talking, she could truthfully answer, "I will let you know when he starts."

Viktor

She laughed to herself after reading the last line. She had forgotten that he poked fun at himself in that first letter. The apology had been quite sweet, and in her view, completely unnecessary. He had already apologized. And she had told him so when she wrote back. She neatly refolded the first and proceeded to the second.

Dear Hermione,

Thank you for the lovely letter you sent back so promptly. The last few days at home have been restful. Mostly getting used to being at home again and trying to convince myself that the last year really did happen and I did not dream it. Having your letter helps. If I can go pick that up and look at it and feel it and read it, it cannot all have been a dream. I am still not sure what to do with the Snitch from the Cup. I have shuffled it from drawer to drawer, box to box, into the trunk and out of the trunk. Sometimes, I wish I could just throw it away and forget about it. I could not look at it for the first week, it just made me angry and

disappointed.

Now I am over being angry and disappointed, but I am still not quite sure what to do with it. Ivanova told me I should have it put in a display box, but somehow that does not seem quite right. Seems like it would be bragging somehow. But somehow it does not seem right to hide it away either. That makes it seem like I am ashamed of how we played, and that is not true. This will probably make you laugh, but I got a letter from a (I had to look this up, hopefully I picked the correct entry) sports memorabilia dealer. At any rate, he sells things to collectors. He wrote wanting to know if I would sell it. I was tempted, but I decided I would probably regret it if I did. I tend to be like my mother when it comes to saving things.

The coach, however, did offer him the broom I rode, if he would agree to send some of the money from the sale to charity. He knows I have broken far too many brooms to get sentimental over them. So now I guess next week I will have to go through the ridiculous procedure of having someone officially verify that I really did ride that particular broom (I hope the equipment manager was paying more attention than I was, then, because I have no idea which one I was on...) and having to sign it. I always feel a bit stupid having to sign something for someone I am never going to meet. Signing something for a person who asks is strange enough. But I suppose it is for a good cause. And at least Boyar told him his other request was ridiculous. I will never understand why on earth anyone would ever be interested in buying the robes I got all bloody. Boyar swears he thought the man was going to cry when he asked where they ended up and Boyar answered "The team laundry." I guess it is true that people are willing to buy almost anything. Pity I could not sell him the black eyes and the broken nose that went with the robes. Or the Bludger that did it. If he wants that, he will have to talk to the Irish team. Someone on Ireland's team has them by now. No way he could identify the one that hit me unless the blood is still on it, though. I would hope they washed it by now.

Viktor

She had forgotten about the broom as well. She did, however, remember writing him and telling him that Ivanova's idea of a display box was probably quite sensible and a good idea. He would probably be tremendously proud of that Snitch later on. And she remembered writing back and asking him if he wished he had dreamed the past year after all.

Dear Hermione,

The last year, do I wish I had dreamed it? Not really. Parts of it, I do, of course, but for the most part, there is nothing I would or could change. I do not regret playing in the Cup. Of course I wish we had won, but you know going in

that one team has to lose. I am sure you are right, later on I will be quite proud to put that Snitch out somewhere that I can see it. Right now, I think I will leave the display box in the trunk, though. Give myself some time before I go putting it on the mantle. Do I wish I had turned the opportunity down? No. I do not think I could have and lived with myself, even if I had known we were going to lose. Or my parents, for that matter. They would have been convinced I had lost my mind completely if I had turned that down! Maybe I will be fortunate enough to do it again, someday.

Hogwarts. At the very least, I got my curiosity satisfied. I know what it looks like now. What the people are like there. What the classes are like. Reading about it in the History of Magical Education pales in comparison. Meeting Dumbledore was interesting, to say the least. Meeting Harry was an unexpected pleasure. Not that Harry was unexpectedly nice, just that I had not realized before recognizing him that the Boy Who Lived would be old enough to be at Hogwarts by now. I never bothered to sit down and do the math before. It surprised me a little, realizing he was that old already. And of course there was the Yule Ball. That was quite a bit different from the dances they usually have at Durmstrang. Those tend to be a lot more formal. It was nice for a change to go to a dance where you can hear something different in the way of music. I doubt we will ever have anything like the Weird Sisters at a Durmstrang ball.

That is the first dance I ever decided to find a partner for. Well, I had to have a partner, of course, because I was a champion. It made me nervous when they said we had to pick a partner. I could have just let Karkaroff pick someone who came with us, though. She would have been a fine dance partner, but I am glad I finally got up the courage to ask you. I only wish I had been able to pronounce your name properly when I asked. Or after, for that matter. I know I am still butchering it, but the last two syllables, the way they are pronounced, it is a rare to non-existent sound in Bulgarian. I suppose I can put that on my list of summer projects now, finally getting your name right. I knew sooner or later Coach Boyar would end up being right and I would regret not practicing English more. But talking to reporters is not a good enough reason, in my book. After Rita Skeeter, I am finding it a good excuse not to practice English. Why bother learning to properly pronounce a whole other language only to be misquoted and downright lied about in it?

Of course, the ending of the Tournament, I think we would all wish we had dreamed that. I am certain the Diggorys do. I regret that. You read about the history of the Tournament, you know it is dangerous, you know they discontinued it because of the death toll, but it just does not seem possible that anyone could really get hurt in one of the tasks until it happens. Then it is too late. I liked Diggory, though I did not get much of a chance to get to know him. He was always polite to me and treated me well, even though I was from Durmstrang and so many other people were suspicious just because of that. And he seemed

a good sport. Not many people know how to compete well. Knowing how to lose is just as important as knowing how to win. He always seemed just as happy to be in the Tournament when he was behind as he was when he was in the lead. Given the judges though, I guess we should throw out all the scoring anyway. Dumbledore was probably the only one even approaching being fair and unbiased. Cedric and Harry made it to the middle of the maze first, and they were good enough competitors to agree to a tie, so they certainly deserved the win. At least, that is what I understand happened. If I understand anything that happened.

I leave next week for Sofia, the capital. Actually, no I do not. I cannot get used to the fact that I can Apparate back at the end of the day if I want. I guess I do leave, but I can come back home in between. Makes for less luggage. Last year, I had trained, Apparating, I mean, but did not have a license yet. I did not have time to go for the test before training for Quidditch began. A lot of the team stay there with their families anyway, since it is easier to them than jumping back and forth between home and training. Or as Zograf keeps reminding me, "I was living at training facilities when you were still flying around in your backyard on a toy broom." I think at this point he would feel quite odd going "home" somewhere else. I do, and I have not been at it nearly as long as he has. Some of them have wives and husbands, one has a son already, and they do not want to be away from them any more than they have to, so they just bring them along.

At this point, I am running out of scroll, and I think it would be too cruel to ask Baramir to carry two together this soon, so I will just wrap up by saying that there is certainly one thing that I am glad I did not dream. The girl in the library who kept giving me the evil eye every time that other girl with the Bulgarian scarf around her waist and her friends giggled at me.

Viktor

She certainly remembered that one. And the way it had made her heart pound when she read the last sentences. She remembered pulling it out, over and over. Reading it a dozen times before she finally got the courage to write back. She had half expected Baramir to go off before she was ready, but he stayed perched in the tree outside her bedroom window, patiently waiting, only disappearing for short periods in the evening to return with a mouse, still waiting. He had waited two whole days and a bit more, while she drafted her reply. She had to draft the letter several times, until she was happy with the way it sounded. It had been in that letter that she had told him her parents were considering letting her go to Bulgaria, if the circumstances were right and they could meet him first. His reply had been somewhat surprising. She had forgotten that she had denied giving him any evil looks in the library, though, until she read the first line of the next letter.

Dear Hermione,

You did too glare at me. You gave me some stern looks that put my parents to shame, and that is saying something. Once, I nearly ran back out of the library until I figured out you were looking at the girl behind me. I only figured out you did not hate me for some mysterious reason when I happened to be in there by myself that one evening and you were not looking at me as though you wanted to strangle me. I finally understood that it was the girls you were glaring at, not so much me. When I was in there by myself, you never even looked at me until I had nearly stared a hole in the cover of the book you were reading.

Your parents are willing to let you visit? I hardly dare believe that. Not that I do not still want you to visit, quite the opposite, but I think it was too forward of me to ask when I could visit you much more easily. In fact, I can hardly believe I was so simple as to ask that way in the first place. I should have offered to come meet you in London if you wanted and nothing else. I mean, my parents do not have to worry about sending someone underage off somewhere strange. If I had to, I could do magic somewhere other than school. I made it look as though I believed your parents would have no problem letting you go off to an unfamiliar country with someone they have never met. Perhaps if they are willing, I could host you and them, or would they be willing to let you come accompanied by Harry and Ron? I remember you saying you visit with Harry at Ron's home in the summer, maybe your parents would be satisfied with their company? Or for that matter, all of you could come, if it means you can visit. But I suppose it makes no difference until I meet them. They might take one look at me and decide that no number of chaperones is enough.

You never said if you and your parents were planning on taking a holiday of some sort elsewhere with you. Maybe I could come visit you in London sometime soon, if you like and will not be somewhere else? I have never been to London. I have been to England, but I hardly think the Quidditch stadium counts as much of a sightseeing tour. The last time I was there, I took home a fat lip, courtesy of one of my own Vratsa teammates running into me during the match. I am still not sure if it was his elbow or the club, and Vulchanov is not telling. He swears making me angry makes me fly faster anyway. I need to try to get that notion out of his head or he will be smacking me on purpose instead of by accident every opportunity from now on. I would not put it past him to start smacking the Bludgers at me instead of away from me during games if he really starts believing it.

I think Zograf and his wife Tatiana went on holiday in London year before last and Apparated. I guess they would be able to tell me where it would be safe to Apparate. Somewhere near one of the museums, I think, or maybe it was one of the train stations. I can ask, if you want me to come and will be there for the

visit, that is.

Viktor

That had been when she had written back and invited him, first chance he got, as many days as he wanted to come. Her parents were willing to let him stay with them, even. She had stared at her letter back so long that Baramir had hooted rather impatiently at her, wanting her to tie it on so he could be off. Not surprisingly, Viktor had fended off the offer of staying with them in favor of a hotel. She had already assumed he wouldn't want to impose too much, but she offered anyway.

Dear Hermione,

Friday is the earliest I can make it. Tell your parents that I thank them for the offer to stay with you, but I think it would be better if I stay at a hotel. I do not wish to impose too much. Zograf and his wife were able to recommend one quite close to your home, and I believe I can manage the Underground. It cannot be too much more confusing than the trains in Sofia, at least according to Alexei Poliakoff. He was part of the Durmstrang group, the Russian boy who usually sat next to me at meals. You probably remember him. He tends to make an impression, because he never stops talking or sits still. He swears that Sofia has the most confusing mass transit system in the world. I took him on it once when he visited. I told him it was just because he is horrible at reading Bulgarian, speaks it only a little better, and could not read the schedules. I say Sofia has nothing on St. Petersburg for getting you lost.

This is probably going to sound silly, but what do you usually do during your summer holidays at home? Surely you do not spend the entire time hiding in the library, do you? At least tell me you go outside to read during the summer. Nothing better than putting yourself under a tree to read. Unless it is reading in a (tell me if this is the correct English word) hammock. One of those woven things that you generally tie to two trees and lie in. We had one last year, fixed in the orchard, and I spent nearly the whole time I was home in it. I threatened to spend the night in it at least once. If it had not rained that night, I would have. I think Mama took it over once I was gone again. Papa wrote me and told me he was going to have to give in and move all the furniture out there or put one more up beside it if she spent much more time in it. It wore out just at the end of fall and I have not had a chance to replace it. I will have to keep an eye open for one the next time I have to travel with the team. I forget where I ran across the last one. I guess that will be a while, since Bulgaria is hosting the Internationals this year. Would you and Harry and Ron be at all interested in watching them? I get far more tickets to them than I will ever use. I usually end up trading them off to other players with big extended families or friends coming to visit that do not have enough tickets for them.

You will probably not believe this but Malfoy's father wrote me. Seems he wants to be in a box for the Internationals, and thinks that because he "knew my headmaster quite well" that I will be willing to invite him. If he only knew how little pull that held with me. Of course, he was not so coarse as to come right out and say it, but he did hint. Oh, and he hinted that he would be writing the Bulgarian Minister of Magic, whom he met at the Cup, and seeing what his plans were for Internationals. Hint. Hint. So I wrote the Minister and asked for a favor of my own. That on no account was he to invite anyone with the last name Malfoy into any box I was going to be in. Or near. Awful of me, but I also wrote back and told him that all my tickets were already spoken for. I thought it was more polite than telling him I would rather let a Hungarian Horntail in the box than invite him and his pasty, annoying, conceited twit of a son. Strictly speaking, it is not a lie, since some of the other players have already asked for them if I cannot use them. So they are spoken for. I just do not know who will be using them yet.

But I suppose we can talk about all of that on Friday. Just send me a note letting me know if Friday is okay. I would have to leave by late Sunday afternoon. I need to go to a team meeting that evening. Or Vulchanov will not be the only one wanting to give me a fat lip. Team meetings. No one likes them, everyone hates them, yet no one suggests we just stop having them. Well, actually, we all did once, but Coach Boyar spent all of the next team meeting explaining why team meetings were important, and then called another team meeting to cover what we were supposed to be meeting about in the first place, so we gave up after that. We resign ourselves to getting through them as quickly as possible, trying not to fall asleep, and making sure all the other players have to suffer through them just like you do. Miss one at your own risk, and that goes more for your teammates than the coach. Strange, Coach Boyar is otherwise quite a likeable and reasonable man. I suppose everyone has their flaws. Insistence upon boring team meetings where we accomplish nothing seems to be his. See you Friday, I hope.

Viktor

And he had come. Apparated right into the train station, behind the bank of call-boxes, followed her written directions on the Underground, and arrived promptly at fifteen after ten on Friday. She almost hadn't recognized him when she opened the door. It was hard to tell what had thrown her most. The fact that it was the first time she had seen him in anything other than robes, or the way he looked. He had looked so much... healthier. Not so sallow and extraordinarily skinny as he had when they had parted. He had looked painfully thin in his swim trunks all those months ago. He couldn't have put on more than five or six pounds in the time they had been apart, but he had definitely been outside practicing or reading, or something that had given him a slight tan. There was

even a little color in his cheeks.

Strangely, she thought he looked taller, but she finally convinced herself that it was more the fact that he was not slouching nearly as much, as though some great weight had been lifted off his shoulders as much as any growing he might have done since she had measured herself against him at the ball. Ridiculous to think he might have shot up that much taller in just the short time they had been apart. She was a bit relieved to note that he still walked the same, toes turned out slightly, a shade awkward compared to his flying, almost as though he was still new to walking on legs that long, not quite sure how to work them properly, still testing them. And his hands still tended to stray to his pockets when they were not in use, and he was still shyly and quietly respectful, nearly bashful, when introduced to her parents. She had been surprised to note that he seemed to have only minimal trouble understanding British Muggle money, once she was able to explain the parallels to Bulgarian money. She had looked it up in a travel book at the library for the visit, but had expected him to have only a passing familiarity with Muggle money of any kind. He had turned out to be adept at converting the currency, doing quick estimates and rapid calculations on his fingers as fast as she could work them in her head.

He had actually seemed very comfortable in the hiking boots, blue jeans and T-shirts he wore. If she had passed him on the street, she probably would have pegged him as a student about to go off to university in the fall, or perhaps just home for the summer after first year. Any of the awkwardness or uncertainty he occasionally displayed in public, if anyone noticed, just marked him as a regular old tourist. He could easily have passed for a Muggle foreign student there on summer holiday. If he did not speak, it took an intensely close look at his face to mark him as a possible foreigner, to spot the difference in the slightly exotic, sharp and angular features.

He seemed softer and younger somehow, less hard and less reluctant to smile. Unable to think of much else to do, she had taken him on a short walking tour through part of the city, then they had eaten at a diner, hamburgers and milkshakes. Part of her had been hungry to do something so pedestrian, so Muggle, so... normal... with someone. She had done most of the talking, of course, but he had talked a bit once they were secluded over in the corner away from everyone else. About how lucky he was to have been chosen for the Cup and pro teams. He hinted without coming right out and saying it that the money had been extremely welcome, if not needed desperately. He talked about it paying for his books and supplies and tuition. A little about how he had traveled so much, he had needed a tutor to even hope to keep up with his classes. It had taken a second to register, when he had said, "And next, Hermione?" in response to her suggestion that they leave the diner and move on to something else.

“My name...” she had said, openmouthed, finally catching on that he had pronounced it differently from when he had said goodbye at Hogwarts. It still had a foreign quality to it, softer, rounder vowels, a slight rolling in the ‘r’, a slightly different cadence, but it was her name. It sounded vaguely exotic and more carefully formed in his mouth, but it was undeniably the correct pronunciation of her name.

To her horror, he had colored slightly and looked stricken before asking “Still not right?”

“No! No! It’s... perfect. You make it sound better than I do, actually,” she had assured him. “I thought we might go to the art museum. Tomorrow, how about you come over for a late breakfast and we go to the movies all day. It’s been an age since I did that.” All she had gotten in response was an uncertain smile and a spare nod, but she wouldn’t have taken gold in exchange right at that moment.

He had patiently accompanied her through the art museum, listened to her babble about this painting and that, and nearly shocked her into silence when he volunteered that one of the artists also had a painting hanging in the museum in Sofia, then proceeded to describe it so well, blocking it out in the air with his hands, that she could almost swear she saw it. He seemed to have a more than passing familiarity with it. Seeing her scrutiny, he had explained that his mother worked there, and he had spent a lot of time there when small. He volunteered nothing more.

Dinner with her parents had surely been uncomfortable for him, subjected to the questions from her parents, their quizzes about where he was from and what he did and what his parents did, but he had let it show very little. There she found out that he lived nearer the Russian border than any other, that his father kept sheep and they lived in what was once an inn called Pavlova. His answers were short and direct, usually ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and little elaboration until it was asked for, except for the puzzlingly awkward “I am the only child my parents haff,” he offered in response to the question of whether or not he had siblings. In Bulgaria, she later found out why he had deliberately chosen to answer the question that way. It made her cringe when he had returned the following Christmas only to have her parents ask that he refresh their memory about his having brothers or sisters. He had given the exact same answer a second time. Truthful, but not exactly the entire truth.

That first visit, it had just seemed a charmingly unusual and wholly expected answer. Having seen him at a distance with his parents at the third task and no other children with them, she had known he was an only child long ago. She had only been able to tell then that both his parents had the same black hair, and that his father was tall, his mother was not. She had sensed

those only child qualities that she knew so well from her own personality long before the third task, though. The occasional answer of the 'Yes madam' or 'No sir' variety slipped into his conversation, and it was apparent that it was completely natural and unforced. Sincere. Helen and Ted Granger obviously liked him. They had decided that night to let her go, properly chaperoned, of course. She had been slightly surprised that they would consider her properly chaperoned if at least Harry or Ron went as well. They trusted her judgment, they said. They trusted her assessment of his character as much as they did her own. They trusted him.

Breakfast next morning had been eggs and toast and bacon, and some sticky buns. Funny how she could still remember it, when she could barely remember what she had for breakfast last week. It had embarrassed her when she realized he had been up for hours by the time her definition of "late breakfast" rolled around, a bit after nine. She had done the math in her head, when he told her how far he had ridden the Underground, the number of blocks he had wandered through, just killing time and looking around before coming over. At bare minimum, he must have gotten up by five thirty. He must be used to getting up at the crack of dawn. He would be. She chided herself for not thinking of it earlier.

She had laughed when he mentioned walking the block near the English Ministry of Magic, and how it was so easy to weed out the Muggles from the wizards and witches. "The Muggles never gave me a second look. The others tended to ... gawk, like maybe they knew me. I look different in Muggle clothes," he had allowed. She had laughed until she hiccupped when he had mentioned the one in hip waders and bathrobe, packing his wand in plain view. "The Muggles were all busy gawking at him," Viktor had said, as they rode the train in an otherwise deserted car to the station nearest the movie theater.

She kept sneaking sidelong glances at him during the movie. Movies, she corrected herself. The first one was a western, and they had taken a break after that and gone across the street to eat, coming back for the short film festival that would take up most of the afternoon. She had to keep convincing herself that he was there in the seat beside her, she frankly studied him, more than the films themselves, she admitted to herself now. The flicker of the lights on the screen over his face, the sharp black planes his hawkish features formed when they were completely in shadow.

Midway through, their arms had collided on the shared armrest and it seemed for a moment that they both quit breathing, and neither one of them dared shift one way or the other. They didn't dare press any closer, and each one refused to pull away, for fear of offending. She was certain now, that was what happened. They had been afraid to go ahead and clasp hands, and they had been afraid to move away, so they had frozen there, uncertain of what else

to do. The warmth of his arm faded from her skin as her arm went numb, propped in that position so long. His left arm seemed just as dead and without circulation as hers was when they left the theater. He kept surreptitiously flexing his long fingers, squeezing them into a fist, then slowly unfurling them like an opening flower, as though willing the feeling back into them as they walked. Pins and needles prickled at her right hand until their food arrived at the Chinese restaurant they picked for dinner. She was rather ridiculously proud of being able to use her chopsticks, rather than the fork, and a bit surprised to find that he was fairly proficient with them as well.

“Won’t you come in for a minute?” she had found herself asking on the porch that evening.

“I had better go. I haff kept you out late enough. See you tomorrow?”

“Sure. We can go see if we can find you a hammock in the shops and have lunch before you go. Goodnight,” she said, nearly having to force the last word out. And then it came, that look. The same look he had given her when he had said goodbye in the entryway after the Yule Ball. The very air changed. She thought he was going to kiss her, but she had tossed a nervous look over her shoulder at the front door, and the moment was gone. She found that she had mixed feelings. She was as angry at herself for ruining it as she was relieved that he had let it drop a second time without comment, that he had not forced the issue, instead giving her hand the same soft parting squeeze he had the night of the ball. He didn’t even give her the light kiss on the back of the hand that he had that night. But it would have been absurd to kiss her hand on the front porch of her home, in the middle of Muggle London with the both of them in jeans, T-shirts, sneakers, hiking boots and not a hint of the formality that there had been at the ball, wouldn’t it? She felt a smidgen foolish when she thought about it for wishing he had anyway.

“Goodnight, Hermione,” he had said with a ghost of a smile, and she had heard the soft pop in the dark after she had shut the door, his Disapparating back to the hotel. Searching for the hammock had proved to be fruitless, there didn’t seem to be one in the whole of London, at least in the shops she was familiar with, so they spent the rest of the morning at the bookshop. She found herself strangely touched by how he handled books. It was something she hadn’t noticed in the library. Always the same routine, a long index finger trailing along the spine or the front cover, along the title, then tilting it out and away from the shelf by the top, hefting it once or twice in the right hand almost as though testing the weight of it, left hand smoothing over the back cover, then the front cover, sampling a few of the pages with the book tented open, spine couched in his right palm, covers supported by his spread fingertips. The left fingers usually played around the page edges while he browsed. Then it was either placed back almost reverentially, or carried over to the ever-growing piles they were each

accumulating on the counter, always without comment. She realized she had never seen him selecting books from the shelves in the library, just taking piles of them to the front counter for Madam Pince.

He was more decisive in his choices than she was, so he was ready to pay long before she was ready. She caught him doing a quick calculation, counting off sums. Thumb against fingers, tallying and converting, lips moving slightly as he shuffled through his pile and checked the total before taking the pile to the register. One of the books went back to the shelf, precisely where he had picked it up, and she had never been sure if it had been a last minute decision caused by the book itself, or as a result of the calculations. He had paid and settled in one of the squashy armchairs along the wall, resting one ankle on the opposite thigh and propping one of his purchases against his calf, large bag on the floor next to his foot. She felt compelled to keep returning to the end of the shelves, to lean out and reassure herself that he really was sitting there, in a London bookshop, hair falling forward, one stray tendril occasionally catching in his lashes when he blinked, studying the page, patiently waiting for her to finish debating the relative merits of this book and that with herself.

She had finally trailed up to the counter with two more books, and was puzzled to find her pile missing. "Young man already paid for them," the clerk had replied when she asked about them. "He's waiting for you," the older gentleman had added, studying her over his glasses and nodding his head in the direction of the armchair. Somehow, the phrase struck her as strangely apt. He's waiting for you. Her mind had flashed back to the porch the previous night.

"Ready to go?" she had asked softly, touching his arm lightly. He had started a little, engrossed in the page in front of him. He looked up and seemed to study her for a long moment before replying.

"Not really. But I haff to go," he said in a low voice, sliding his dark eyes over to the clock on the wall. She hadn't realized it was so late.

"You'll have to rush something awful. I'm sorry, I take so long to choose..."

"No. I am packed already. Just the books extra, Apparate to the hotel, Apparate home," he had replied, slipping some of the books out of the bag at his feet and into hers without comment.

"Thank you," she had said, not sure what else to say.

"No, thank you. Thank you for letting me come. Haff you given any thought to..." he had trailed off uncertainly.

“They gave permission. We just have to see if Ron and Harry would come. Harry... sad to say the Dursleys would probably be glad to see him go. Ron...we’ll see, I guess. My parents would probably come if they can’t. I want to come.” The trip back to the house was completely silent, but it was comfortable silence. Her parents were good enough to allow them a private goodbye in the living room after they had said their own. “Write when you get back,” she had found herself pleading.

“About the meeting? Haff trouble sleeping?” he had asked, one corner of his mouth curling up ever so slightly.

“I miss it, on the days I don’t get letters.”

“I haff to go.”

“Goodbye, Viktor.”

“Hermione.” Something in her chest lurched and twisted almost painfully, there was that look again, but he broke off to stare at the toes of his hiking boots for a moment, then reached out hesitantly and haltingly brushed a stray piece of hair off of her forehead instead. That soft pop after he had given her hand that last, gentle squeeze had been the loneliest, saddest sound she had heard all summer. She could close her eyes now and see every moment of it. Every second of the time they had spent together, each awkward pause, the missed opportunities, the ones they had each passed up. The feel of the calluses in his hand, at odds with the rest of his soft, warm palm. Looking back on it now, she decided that the bookshop clerk had inadvertently summed it up best. He’s waiting for you.

It had only been a few days later that she had gotten what was written on the next piece of parchment, but Baramir might well have lost a leg if he hadn’t submitted willingly to the scissors she had snatched off her desk when he landed on the windowsill and the stubborn knot would not yield to the picking of her nails. She had cursed herself for keeping them short for the first time.

Dear Hermione,

I just wasted an entire afternoon of my life that I can never get back listening to a group of usually reasonable people go on and on about boots, of all things. Apparently, if we do not decide immediately between short boots and tall boots, or choose the wrong ones, the entire earth will go spinning off its axis and crash into the sun, or something equally horrible. At least I think that is what it amounted to. I was busy counting the ceiling tiles after fifteen minutes. Problem is, it is a small room, so you have to keep starting over. By the time they got started debating whether to stick with dragon hide or not, I was reduced

to counting the number of times they said the word 'boots' and trying desperately not to fall asleep and fall out of the chair. They had to ask me twice to get my opinion, because by then I was done listening. My entire contribution to the discussion was to stick my foot up on Volkov's chair and say, "As long as they will fit on that, I do not care what they look like." Ivanova always tells Volkov that he is more concerned with his appearance than she is about hers. He probably is. He was the only one actually worried about what they look like. Boots. We just wasted two hours on boots. By the time we got out, most of us had thought of several things we could do with our boots, including some rather creative places to put them. Places attached to those people who think we need to have team meetings about such exciting topics as boots.

I wrote to Ron and Harry, inviting them to come for the Internationals. I do not expect a reply for a while, but I will let you know. If neither one of them can come, do you think your parents would still be willing to make the trip? I will just keep aside that many tickets anyway. Enough for my parents and yours, Ron, Harry and yourself. Anything I have left over can go to Levski. He is always begging for tickets. He invites more people than he can scrounge tickets for, most of the time. He might be the only player in the league that actually buys them on a regular basis. He usually ends up with mine. We begin training tomorrow. Thank goodness. It means we cannot have a meeting.

Viktor

She had been slightly surprised that he had taken the initiative to invite Ron and Harry. She had thought at the time that he would prefer her parents accompany her. Or at least that she be the one to extend the invitation to Ron and Harry. She had written back, filling him in on her news, asking about how often his parents came to games, how much she was looking forward to seeing him play again, bringing up how brave she had thought he was at the final. How impressed she had been, even though she was terribly ignorant about Quidditch and flying, that he had gone on after the Snitch and managed to catch it despite the Bludger. The answer had been an almost painful shock.

Dear Hermione,

How often do my parents come to games? I cannot remember the last one they came to. It must have been the last time Vratsa was in the European Cup, so that would have been two years ago. They came for one of the quarterfinal games, I think. I forget who we played, even. Really, I never pressed them much to come. Bad enough trying to play when some of the other members of the team are nearly old enough to be your parents. Actually playing with your parents there when you are still in school, well, you can imagine what that would be like. It makes Mama nervous, watching matches with me in them. She could never even stand to watch me fly in the orchard at home for very long,

much less sit still for a match. It worries her. It is strange when you consider that she was on a house team as a Chaser when she was in school. But I think things that did not seem so dangerous when you were doing them somehow multiply to be a hundred times worse when your children do them. She played Chaser, but I still know she broke her arm at least once. And she and Papa never liked crowds. Papa finds it difficult to get away for matches. Unfortunately, neither sheep nor Quidditch follow nice, neat timetables or stick to predictable schedules.

They planned to come to the Cup, but they both caught the flu a few days before, and I made them stay home. They slept through most of the match on the wireless, though I suppose that is just as well. Better Mama hear what happened with Aidan Lynch after the fact. Well after the fact. I wish she had missed that Bludger business as well. Not that I could have kept it from her, I had to go home with those black eyes and she is more than a little observant. I am positive she could not have missed noticing it for two solid weeks. But the longer you can keep her from finding out about an injury, the better. Mothers are never fond of any enterprise that ends with someone bleeding or something broken. Or anything that shows any promise of ending up that way. Ten times as bad if something ends up bleeding and broken. Mothers are not great fans of Quidditch. Even if they used to play it. Maybe especially if they used to play it.

And what do you mean you never cared for flying enough to learn to do it properly? I thought everyone dreamed of flying. I bet if you really tried it, you would want to do it. Not necessarily in a game or anything like it, but just for you. Who knows if you like Quidditch or flying if you never really tried it? You might find you like it. Maybe not the bit where you head toward the ground as hard and fast as you can go, but the rest of it. And I do not think it particularly brave to keep going after the Snitch when you have been smacked in the face. It only makes good sense. If you quit just because you are bleeding, you are surely not going to catch it. You might as well end up with something to show for it if you take a Bludger in the face. Besides the broken nose. And maybe I can come next week or the beginning of the week after that. I will have to see. With my luck, they will call another team meeting to discuss socks or something equally important. I wonder what they would do if we just all refuse to show up? Probably call a team meeting about it. Harry is definitely planning to come, Ron will probably be traveling with his family. But I am sure they already wrote you and told you so.

Viktor

She had written back, confirming that they had indeed already informed them of their replies, and asking if he had enough tickets and could accommodate the two of them. In return, she had gotten a hurriedly scribbled note, not really a letter. She had folded and unfolded it, and eventually, carried

it with her on the trip.

Dear Hermione,

Everything is all set for your visit to take place in three weeks. Sorry to hear that Ron will be away with his family, but Harry tells me he will be coming with you. I think he will like the workouts with the Quidditch team. Bulgaria hasn't hosted the Internationals for about ten years. Should be exciting. You will have a good box seat. Meet you both in London bright and early the 15th. You should love Sofia. The library is huge, and so is the museum.

Viktor

After that letter, she had at least gotten more bold about asking things. She was particularly curious about Durmstrang. He had revealed very little in the way of details about the school. She couldn't help being curious. And she had asked if he could visit again, if even only for part of a day. She and her parents would be gone on a holiday to the beach for a few days, and somehow, she found herself fairly desperate to see him before she left the house. It was as though she were worried that Baramir wouldn't be able to find her for the few days she would be away. And she couldn't bear missing a letter.

Dear Hermione,

What is it like going to a school full of purebloods? Not far off from going to school with a school full of people who are not purebloods, I think. I did not see a great deal of difference in being at Hogwarts, in one sense. People are people. Not every pureblood is another Malfoy. But I suspect you knew that. Ron is one, is he not? I keep forgetting, because I started playing deaf after about the third meal with Malfoy. I got tired of being told how much better it would be if Hogwarts had the same requirements and got rid of the "Muggle-lovers like Weasley". Strange, I did not hear any of the students from Durmstrang complain about being at Hogwarts. As though Malfoy knew anything but what other people told him about Durmstrang in the first place. Ridiculous how he kept going on and on about how proud I should be of my bloodline. Frankly, I would rather be earnestly complimented on digging a good ditch than on my bloodline. At least I had something to do with the quality of the ditch. I did not do anything to earn my parents, nor did I get to pick them. I can make it this Saturday, part of the day. After that it will probably be quite impossible to get away before your visit. Movies or the museum, you decide. I am sure whichever you pick will be fine.

Viktor

She had opted for the movies again. They didn't really have time for the museum, as it turned out. She had shuffled her arm on the seat between them through most of the film, had maybe even been a bit rude about invading his space, hoping for a bit of contact. She could have sworn that he very nearly grasped her hand once, but stopped himself and draped his own hand next to her arm instead. She contented herself with resting her hand on his forearm for a few minutes. She thought he had shifted his arm toward her a bit, but she could have imagined it. He hadn't even had the time to come back home with her. They had shared an awkward goodbye at the train station instead, the crowd rushing past them on all sides.

Once again, she has sensed the undercurrent when he studied her face, but she had let it be drowned out by her own embarrassment at the thought of being kissed in front of all these people. She had willed herself to relax under his gaze, to look welcoming, to forget about all those other sets of eyes, but her muscles had rebelled, stubbornly holding her rigid and tense. She had been stupidly relieved once again when he had moved his eyes off of her and onto the open doors of her train and the crackle in the air between them was drowned out by the swish of the train doors and the voices of those getting on and off. It hadn't been right. It hadn't been right, and he had sensed it. He's waiting for you, she had reminded herself.

She debated over the next few days whether or not to bring it up. Did you mean to kiss me in the train station? How about on the porch? Did you want to kiss me? Or did I imagine it? She grilled herself. Why couldn't I just let him do it? Because it wasn't right. Because I wasn't ready. Yet. He knew she wasn't ready, and he respected it. But how long could he be that patient? She had decided not to bring it up by the time Baramir had returned, but he brought it up first.

Dear Hermione,

This may be the wrong thing to do, but I feel I have to tell you something. Several things, really, but one, at least, that cannot wait until your visit. I suspect you already know it, but I feel I should make it clear, just in case. I desperately wanted to kiss you goodbye in the train station. I have never wanted to kiss another girl at all, much less wanted to do anything as mad as kiss one in the middle of a train station. Most of the time, I am certain I did the right thing by passing up the opportunity, because I think you were not ready, and things like that should not be rushed or forced. But sometimes I want to kick myself for not doing it anyway. Because I wonder if I will ever get another chance. I need to tell you this now, because I have learned it is never a good idea to put off telling someone how you feel about them. I would never want to rush you into anything you are not ready for, or push you to feel something you do not, but I need to tell

you how I feel. I am certain of that now.

I will try to be patient. Tell me if I am not being patient enough. If I do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable or rushed or pressured, do not hesitate to let me know. I can wait while you decide how you feel, however long it takes. And if it turns out that you want nothing more than friendship, then I can be content with that. Well, maybe not content, exactly, but I would hate to lose you just because you do not feel the same way about me that I do about you. I would prefer having you in my life as just a friend, rather than insisting on all or nothing and ending up with nothing. Besides, I care for you enough that I want you to be as happy as possible. That might mean you decide you want to be nothing more than friends. Do not go counting my feelings more important than yours or not being honest with me for fear of hurting my feelings.

There are so many other things I should tell you, about my past, about my family and Durmstrang and Karkaroff and the Tournament, but I think those would be best told face to face. And really, I should tell Harry some of this first, since it concerns him so closely. Not that I would not find it easier to write them, since parchment and quill are a lot less intimidating, but I would rather look you in the eye and say them out loud, no matter how hard that might be. I think I would be better able to look myself in the eye after that. All I ask is that you be patient with me about it. About what I tell and when I tell it. So many of these things, I have carried around for years and did not dare tell anyone, even my parents, or Alexei and Elena. I am not sure I know how to tell these things properly. But I know I can trust you with these things. I can trust you not to judge me too harshly for keeping them to myself for so long. I only hope that my other friends are half so understanding. I only hope Alexei and Elena can forgive me for not trusting them with it sooner. Provided I ever get up the courage to share it with them. I think I will have to, eventually. No, soon. Soon enough the three of us will probably be headed in different directions entirely.

I fear I may have left it too late with the two of them already. Maybe I have left it too late with you as well and I should have said something earlier. So many opportunities when I could have said so, and I did not. And I cannot figure out whether to regret passing up the opportunities or regret writing this, or whether I have done the right thing at all any step of the way. I kept thinking about this Bulgarian proverb that Papa quotes all the time. If you are going to drown, do not try it in shallow water. So I suppose I had better pick the deepest bit. I learned early, always say it while you have the chance, there might not be another. I suppose that lesson will make more sense someday, if you allow me to explain. I suppose if it is foolish to say this, I will at least have been a complete fool and drowned myself thoroughly. I suppose I cannot put off telling you any longer. I love you.

Viktor

She had spent the next hour just reading and rereading it. All the way through, now just the last paragraph, now just the last line. Over and over. She had studied every line, every mark on the parchment, every stroke of the quill, an almost forensic appraisal, as though the whole thing were a murder mystery puzzle. The quality of this letter had been different. This one seemed more tightly structured, more refined, more constrained and boxed in on the page. It took nearly every speck of available space, as though it had been drafted and redrafted, every stroke of the quill accounted for and allotted space on the scroll. It did not have the freewheeling conversational tone, the ease of the others. The other letters must have streamed from the quill. This one had been coaxed out patiently. He had obviously put thought and effort into each and every word. And the last three, even now, a year later, they made her heart swell almost painfully in her chest, as though it were about to burst. She couldn't imagine the courage it had taken to put those words down. Any of them. All of them. Those three. She had thanked him for his patience, asked for a little more, offered her own. For a change, she was waiting for him. Waiting for him to be ready. Waiting for him to talk. But the important thing was, he was still waiting for her. And she assured him he had done the right thing. She couldn't quite bring herself to put those same three words down. She couldn't quite force herself across that invisible border, from which there was no turning back. There would be no recanting, when she said it. She wasn't about to offer it lightly. He hadn't. She could still remember last year's agonizing over her reply, reading his letter now.

Then the visit. Violeta. Anya. Karkaroff. Durmstrang. It had come out in dribs and drabs, by accident and intent, in long narratives and short bursts and hints and scenes. Mostly in the early mornings, out in the orchard, before Harry and Ron were up out of bed and down the stairs for breakfast. That final morning, barely dawn yet, he had finished up by telling her about the third task. All along the way, there was that perfect, gentlemanly decorum. No pushing, no shoving, no forcing, no pressure. It had just... happened. Unfolded like a rare flower, one petal at a time, so slowly that you could not see it happening, but could measure the difference hour by hour against the last.

That night on the pitch after the final, she had granted permission. He had asked, but really, he had known already what the answer would be. They both had, even though she had to prod herself to finally nod, to move. Being interrupted had only served to make it that much sweeter. At the other end of the pitch, under the stars and the music and the fireworks, she found she no longer needed to be waited for. On the contrary, she was impatient for it, hoping for it, needing it. And it had been more perfect than any of the other opportunities could ever have been. Because she wasn't waiting for him, he wasn't waiting for her. They had simply opened the door and taken the steps together. It had just been one more set of coordinated steps, like the waltzes

they had done earlier in the evening.

He had offered her something better than those three words that night. He had offered a sigh and a single word, soft and awed, foreign and familiar, all at the same time, so quiet she nearly missed it. Sokrovishte. Treasure. It was “I love you,” but better. “I love you too, Viktor,” she had replied, and the words had seemed right in the air between them and felt right in her mouth. Any reservations she had left had melted away in the perfection of that moment. That kiss. The fireworks and Tchaikovsky and the cannons had seemed pale and thin and flat like cardboard cutouts in comparison. It was that contact of their mouths, their skin, their breath that had been brilliant and vibrant and loud. Everything else was just background to the kiss.

She had only gotten one more letter from him that summer. Between the visit and the Opening Ball at Durmstrang.

Dear Hermione,

The ball is arranged, Dumbledore has the details. I cannot believe I am actually looking forward to a Durmstrang Ball. Used to be they were the bane of my existence. Balls are just a good excuse for people to completely lose their minds. You have the boys doing ridiculous things to impress the girls, so they can in turn impress the other boys with what girl they were able to get as a partner, and the girls twittering on about what they are going to wear for weeks, as though any of it will matter a week later. Elena threatens that she is going to start wearing a sign that says “It is only a ball” every time one rolls around. One of the few sane females in the entire place, Elena is. She is not one of those girls who tries to be as girlish and giggly and flashy as possible at the cost of everything else. Like common sense and a brain in her head.

I think the two of you would get along well, you and Elena. She is not afraid to be a regular person, either, instead of some big, ridiculous act. She usually ends up dragging me out of the corner for at least one dance every ball. One year she swore she was going to bring a pitchfork, if that is what it took, and she would not hesitate to use it in front of everyone. I would not want to try her. I would not put it past her, either, if she could get hold of the pitchfork. She can be a bit bossy, sometimes, when she gets it in her head that it is for your own good, but I have to forgive her for that, or it would cut my social circle just about in half. When she gives me a good nudge, more often than not, it is well deserved and even needed. Takes the two of us to gang up on Alexei. One to give him the lecture, one to hold the hand over his mouth. Not that he listens much. She will not have to worry about getting me out of the corner this time. I intend to keep you very, very busy dancing, if you will let me.

I am glad I finally talked to you. Really talked. I told Harry about the third

task, what I told you that last morning. I hope he at least feels he knows a bit more than before, if not everything. I feel about a hundred times lighter, having gotten all that off my chest with you. Now I just need to finish doing the same thing with Alexei and Elena. You would think that someone who kept you from dying would be easy to talk to about anything. If it were not for Alexei, I suppose I would have died in the hall. I almost died in the infirmary anyway. Alexei does not do it very often, but he can administer a good swift kick with the best of them (even Elena) when necessary. But it is not easy, even when I keep reminding myself of that.

You know, my parents really liked you. They keep writing me and hounding me about whether or not you are coming to the ball. I wrote them back and told them they were not being subtle at all, to stop being so persistent. Unfortunately, I get being stubborn from both of them, in fairly equal measure. Everyone seems to think Papa is the really stubborn one, but Papa has nothing on Mama when it comes to being hardheaded. I get the feeling I am not going to be able to fend them off much longer. I will just have to give in and promise to write them the instant you get here. I do not know which of the three of us is the worst about worrying that you might not make it for some reason.

Now, to answer your question, before I go using up all the parchment or forget. Az vi obicham in Bulgarian. Ia tebia liubliu in Russian.

Love,
Viktor

“I love you“, in both languages. It had been impulse, asking how you said it. Or maybe it had been an excuse to see it in his writing. Or maybe she was just starving for that phrase from him, in any language. Now she retied the bundle, and slipped the letters into her trunk. It was the last and the first. The last he had written. The first he had signed that way. There had been no more letters that summer. He had not written before showing up at Hogwarts, in the middle of the night. Then there had been no need for letters. They had been together. She had saved his thesis, of course, in her school trunk, along with the note he had written, telling her it was done. The note with the address of the cafe where they had met before going on the trip to Bulgaria, it was still tucked in the side pocket of her carry-all bag, but there had been no more real letters. It was absurdly funny, now that she looked back on it, that he had asked her, “Waiting for me to dictate a letter?“ after waking up in the infirmary. She considered the bundle for a moment, nestled among the folds of her clothes. She made a final decision. She would take them with her. She would have to finish packing now, or they would never be able to leave for Grimmauld Place. In another hour, she had rounded up the rest of her things, including the rogue shoe that had been hiding under the edge of her bed.

Hermione was almost sure she was imagining it, at first. All those memories, those letters, they must be making her hallucinate. The ghost of postal owls past, she thought to herself. But she blinked her eyes, and he was still there, in the window. Baramir. "Might as well put him in a cage and take him back with us, save him the flight," came Lupin's voice from the open doorway. "That is Viktor's owl, isn't it?"

"I don't have a cage," Hermione said, holding the unread scrap of parchment to her chest.

"Well, I can conjure one, I suppose. Hope you're packed. We leave in a few minutes. I'll take your trunk down," Remus said, bringing his wand up and floating her trunk through the doorway. That just left her with Crookshanks to bring down, and Baramir on the sill.

Dear Hermione,

Gone after him, his month is up. Will likely be waiting for you by the time you get there. Assuming our "constant vigilance" does not take us too far out of the way.

Love,
Viktor

She refolded it carefully and slipped it into her pocket, promising herself that she would add it to the bundle later. Someday she would have to get all those letters and do something with them. Something more permanent than tying them in a beribboned bundle and putting them in the trunk. Sometimes she felt Anya's archiving ways had rubbed off twice as strong on Viktor, and that she had picked it up from him in the time they spent together. She wanted to preserve every drop of ink, every crease in the parchment where they had each handled it. He still kept that Snitch and its display case in the trunk, though not hidden in the bottom, at the farthest corner, anymore. She felt certain that when he made it back to more permanent surroundings at Hogwarts, this year, it would make it to the mantle, where it could be seen. Maybe not right away, but eventually. She had the one from the night of the kiss. The final. It was tucked away in her trunk. She had a different reason to take it out and look at it occasionally. A different reason to be proud. He had put it in her hand, curled her fingers around it. He had trusted her with it.

She hated traveling by Floo. It was dizzying and disorienting. The fireplace in the living room, where she said goodbye to her parents, it would be disconnected from the network as soon as they had made it to Grimmauld Place. She wouldn't be seeing her parents again until Christmas holiday, probably, and that would only be if Viktor was able to accompany her on the trip. But she

would be seeing him. He might even already be there. Ron, sitting at the kitchen table when they popped out of the fireplace, gave her a quick hug. "Are they here yet?" she asked him anxiously.

"They're back, Harry and Viktor. Got in about an hour ago. The rest are still out, on patrol, I think. Harry is already in bed. He said he would see you in the morning. Didn't even want to eat. Mum tried to get him to let her fix him something, but I think he was too knackered to be hungry," Ron explained. "Actually, I'm kind of knackered myself. We'll talk tomorrow, then?"

"Sure," she replied, "Goodnight. So Harry and Viktor made it back alright?" She directed the question at Mrs. Weasley, who had passed Ron in the kitchen doorway, on her way back from Harry's room.

"Yes, I tried to get Harry to eat something, he looks a bit peaky. All that flying in the cold, damp air I bet. Would you like me to fix you something dear? Hungry?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"I am a little hungry. But I don't want to put you out. A sandwich or something would be fine," Hermione protested.

"I've got chicken. Just as easy to fix for two as it is for one," Mrs. Weasley said.

"You've not eaten?"

"Oh, I've eaten dear," Mrs. Weasley said, rattling skillets and pans on the stove.

"Then who else hasn't?" Hermione said.

"Viktor," Mrs. Weasley replied.

"Why not? They got in an hour ago, Ron said," Hermione said, but somehow, she already knew the answer, before Mrs. Weasley had even opened her mouth to reply.

"He's waiting, dear. He's waiting for you."