

Hermione's Best Birthday Present

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Konstantin Viktorevitch Krum solemnly asked his little sister to open the door to their mother's bedroom.

"This tray is heavy, Irina. You must help. Uncle Charlie and Aunt Luna will be here for lunch. This is our time with Mum. Come on. It is her birthday, Irina. Papa would want us to do this until he gets home."

At nine and a half, he was a big boy who resembled his father greatly. His little sister Irina was a copy in miniature of their mother, right down to her unruly curls.

Hermione heard them arguing outside her door and smiled. She opened the door to stop them, but nearly cried when she saw the tray. It was fixed exactly the way Viktor had fixed it every year since they married. Now Viktor was missing, and she was worried sick about him.

"Come in, children, and thank you for my birthday breakfast. You are both so sweet to me." She had to choke back the tears that threatened to spill.

Her children carefully set the breakfast things down on the small table in front of the windows, and then Irina climbed into one of the chairs. Konstantin pulled the chair facing the window out for his mother to sit in. She kissed each of them and shared her tea and scones with them exactly as she did each birthday morning since they were old enough to understand.

Konstantin wasn't eating, though. His face showed his worry over his father's disappearance. Irina, at six, did not fully understand why her mother and her brother were unhappy. She merely chattered away about presents, and where was her papa. Konstantin jumped up and ran from the room, and reappeared carrying three wrapped packages and a brighter smile on his face.

"This one," indicating the smallest yellow one, "is from Irina. The orange one is from me. And the big one is from Papa. Mum, I am worried about him." His voice broke on the last words.

"I am, too, Kon. We will talk about it tonight after your sister is in bed. Okay?" Hermione knew she needed to talk to her son, but dreaded doing so.

Viktor had gone missing after the Aurors had raided the last Death Eater camp far up in the Carpathians. Ron and Viktor were both missing and had been for almost three weeks.

It was ironic that those two should be missing after the same raid. They had never gotten over their rivalry from all those years ago. Charlie had been on the raid along with Harry, Remus, and Tonks. Hermione dreaded what news Charlie and Luna would bring when they came over later in the day.

They were newly married, Luna's first husband having disappeared in the jungles of South America. They were quite a match, Viktor had commented. He thought the fact that Charlie had adopted Luna's children was wonderful. He had found a kindred spirit in Charlie, and they had become fast friends.

Hermione had seen that Luna wasn't nearly as ethereal as a mother as she had been as a girl. But there was something different about Luna. She was too normal now, but there were flashes of her old persona.

Hermione thought that was what Charlie had fallen in love with.

After she and Kon had cleaned up the dishes from breakfast, and Irina was playing with her dolls, Kon asked to practice his Quidditch moves using his father's old broom. Permission was granted, provided he did not fly off the property.

Hermione sat looking at the three presents still on the table. She was not going to open them until she knew what had happened to her husband and her old friend.

Owls started arriving, bringing cards and presents from her friends in England. She just put them on the table along with the others.

She picked up the briefing letter that Viktor had left behind when his group of Aurors had gone off on the raid and read it again.

'Malfoy and Umbridge are the leaders in this group. Reports say the camp has significant wards protecting it. The only way in is to fly in. The last of the Death Eaters are camped there, so no more than eight men and women. Take all precautions. We leave from Iron Gate at five tomorrow morning.' It had been signed by Remus Lupin.

Viktor had Disapparated from their house at four thirty after kissing the sleeping children and Hermione. He was the senior Bulgarian Auror on the raid, having quit playing Quidditch when Kon was born.

Viktor had specifically asked for Harry to assist on the raid. Charlie had been recruited four years ago, and Ron had transferred in from another squad to help with this raid. There were six other junior Aurors in the squad that night. Tonks was the one in charge of the six junior Aurors.

Remus had been the one who had scouted out the camp, so he had done the planning.

Hermione had packed the usual potions, ointments, and provisions he always took. He had kissed her thoroughly and whispered that they would continue trying for that next child when he got home.

That was the last she had seen of him. The Auror office, the MLE, had not given her any information about what had happened on the raid.

She was determined to get some information out of Charlie today. At twenty minutes to one she heard several Apparition noises from the yard. She ran outside and saw Charlie, Luna, Harry, and Ginny walking up the sidewalk to the house.

Kon and Irina came running to greet everyone. Hermione was afraid that this influx of her friends meant there was bad news coming. Luna and Ginny headed straight for the kitchen with a basket of things. Charlie and Harry asked if they could talk to her privately.

Oh, no, here it comes, she thought. But she realised that Harry and Charlie were smiling. What was going on? She led the way to the solarium where they could sit and enjoy the sunshine.

Charlie started off, "Hermione, we wanted to tell you about the raid. We got all the Death Eaters finally. Viktor had us go in Disillusioned on brooms. He had a strategy to take them out from the air before we landed. We hit the camp with multiple stunning spells, which got everyone except Malfoy. He came running out of his tent firing spells wildly into the air.

"He hit Ron's broom and Ron fell. Viktor swooped down to catch Ron before he hit the ground, and Malfoy sent another spell. Harry and I hit him with everything we had. He went down like a rock, but Viktor and Ron had fallen on the other side of the mountain we were on.

"We sent the youngsters back with the prisoners and searched for hours, but could not find them. Harry and I reported back to the MLE, but came back to search again the next day. We found Ron's broom, broken, at the top of a mountain. There was a waterfall near the bottom of the mountain and a deep, very swift river running through the gorge below. We looked for days, Hermione.

"Then, four days ago, Luna asked me a question: if dragons remembered people by sight or smell. That was when I got the idea to take the Chinese Fireball from the Tournament, and get her to see if she could find Viktor. I still had one of his shirts from the day he was teaching Kon and Lorcan the basic Quidditch moves. I gave it to the dragon, and she hissed and stomped around a bit. Then I put a saddle on her.

"I knew she wouldn't go permanently away from the preserve because she has eggs again, but she seemed to want to fly, so I took her out. She made straight for the Iron Gate gorge and then headed northeast for the mountains. She swooped down to the edge of the river and landed on a huge rock close to the waterfall.

"I called out for them and heard an answering shout. It was coming from a hidden ledge at the far side of the waterfall. They were both there. Ron had been hurt badly, broken leg and broken shoulder. Viktor had refused to leave him there. He could not have gone anywhere anyway. Viktor's broom was broken, too. They stayed there for just over two weeks while Viktor healed Ron, and they talked. Boy, did they talk. Viktor tried to send a Patronus, but something about the gorge blocked all magic. I took the dragon back up to the top and sent for Harry.

"They were brought out that day and have been at St. Mungo's. We held off telling you because Viktor said something we could all relate to: that the best birthday present anyone could give you was for your husband and your friend Ron to make peace between them. Hey, I think that is them now!" Charlie grinned and suddenly looked very like Ron.

The sound of several people Apparating in echoed through the yard. The children's yells of 'Papa' sent Hermione running out the door. She yelled his name and flung herself into his arms. He swung her up and kissed her hungrily. Ron stood next to him grinning like mad. She hugged Ron when Viktor put her down. The children were all over Viktor, so Ron walked with Hermione to the bench under the oak tree on the side of the house.

"I feel like an idiot, Hermione. He saved my life, and I have hated him for years. At least, I used to hate him. Can't really hate a bloke who saved your life, can you? Anyway, when I woke up on that ledge and saw who was mending my leg and my shoulder, I cringed. I really did not want to talk to him.

"I just wanted to feel that he had stolen my girl all those years ago and be a sulky immature prat. He didn't act like there was any animosity between us at all. He kept up a running commentary the whole time he set my leg and my shoulder. He told me how you always pack potions and supplies for him. Those supplies kept us alive, and the potions healed my injuries really fast. We had nothing to do except talk. I learned he wasn't such a bad guy after all.

"And he loves you a lot. He loved you all the way from the Tournament. I hadn't realised that. He apologised to me for coming between us. That was when I saw that he hadn't done that at all. There never really was an us, was there? That was just my fantasy.

"What I am trying to tell you, is that sometime around the second week we started talking, about you, your kids, his decision to quit Quidditch, the fact that you cut yourself off from my family because I was such an idiot, and what got me finally was when he said you missed me, that you missed my friendship. I'm sorry, Hermione. I was a jerk. I figured out by the end of our sixth year that we weren't going to be together, and instead of accepting that and going on, I acted like a spoiled brat.

"I pushed away one of my best friends and alienated my sister and her boyfriend. I screwed up. Viktor is really a great guy. He took care of me the whole time and didn't get mad at me when I yelled at him and whinged and sulked. He told me funny stories and jokes and Quidditch stories for about three days until I yelled at him to shut up.

"Then he just said that he understood why I was unhappy, that if he had lost you to me he would feel the same way. I just gaped at him. He said you always talked about

what you wanted for your birthday...for the two of us to be friends. This year, you get that present. He and I made peace, finally. I had no choice. He would have talked me to death if I hadn't." Ron grinned again and looked past her to where Viktor stood, just watching. Ron got up and walked over to Viktor and shook his hand, then walked away to the front of the house.

She got up and went into Viktor's arms. He drew her to him and kissed her forehead.

"We have made peace, Doushenka. Was this not a good birthday present?"

"Yes, love, the one I have wanted for too many years. And I already know what I am giving you for your next birthday." She snuggled closer to him and smiled.

"What is that, my love?" he asked.

"Another baby."