

Detour

by Bambu

Kismet takes a hand when Hermione Granger finally travels to Australia to find her parents.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes and Disclaimer: This VK/HG one-shot is written for the delightful Drinkingcocoa as her Exchange Bingo drabble reward. The story ended up morphing into a short rather than a quick drabble, and I had to wrestle it into submission to keep it from growing even larger!

I'm most fortunate to have the sharp eyes and keen wit of TalesofSnape, Bambumom, and Lifeasanamazon (when she can carve some time out of her incredibly hectic schedule) to look over my little bits of fantasy. Thank you, ladies, for your help.

None of the source world or characters belongs to me, being the property of JKR and her assignees. I'm merely giving my brain some exercise and stretching my fingers while paying homage to her rather marvelous universe.

~o0o~

Despite careful planning, Hermione Granger's trip to Sydney did not go as expected. When Harry Potter announced his decision to accompany her, his girlfriend Ginny Weasley had thrown such a wobbly, he proposed marriage amidst the burgeoning crowd at The Three Broomsticks on a Hogsmeade weekend. The resultant good news -- *She Said 'Yes'* -- splashed across the front page of every wizarding periodical within twelve hours, including special editions. From the moment the redheaded virago landed her hero, Harry had been neck-deep in essential wedding preparations in addition to the rather rigorous Auror training he had undertaken.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry said for the fifth time when he met her outside the International Portkey Office in London's Ministry of Magic. Hermione clutched the scroll confirming her trip and acting as Portkey.

Their footsteps clicked on the highly polished floor as they made their way to the atrium.

"It's alright, Harry."

They passed the golden Fountain of Magical Brethren, ignored the handful of ministry employees who whispered to one another as Harry and she walked by, and dodged a wizard levitating a large crate of squawking fowl. A trail of glittering feathers drifted to the floor in his wake.

"Thanks for looking after Crookshanks while I'm gone."

"It's just that Ginny " Harry ran his fingers through his hair in agitation.

Hermione took pity on him, pausing in front of the magically enhanced old-fashioned Muggle telephone standing on a small pedestal at the far end of Floo Hall. "I understand. It's everything you've ever wanted," she said, tucking a strand of curly hair behind her ear. "A family of your own."

Unexpectedly, Harry pulled her to him in a tight embrace. "You're my family, too."

She set her jaw against an unexpected surge of sentiment, clinging to him for a moment. "I will never have a better brother."

"Don't forget that."

"I promise."

Again, he ran his hand through his perennially messy hair, and Hermione smiled at the habitual gesture. He might claim his hair never stayed flat, but she secretly wondered if the habit was untamable rather than his hair.

"We're just on time, Harry." Turning to the telephone, she dialed three, nine, four, eight.

He followed her inside the telephone box which had silently descended from the ceiling, and the door clicked shut just before the enchanted lift rose once again to street level.

It was a gloomy winter's day outside; fog hovered above nearby buildings expectantly, as if it were a vulture waiting the final gasping breath of its prey. The nearby Muggle pub looked shabbier than ever, and the graffiti decorating a brick wall was a decade out of date.

"I know I sound like Hagrid with a dragon egg," Harry said, "but are you going to be warm enough? It's horrid outside."

She peered through the glass and shivered delicately. "It's summer in Australia. I packed for every contingency."

Harry chuckled and pointed at her stylish handbag. "If that's anything like the original...."

"Actually, it's an improved version. Professor Flitwick was very helpful, and I've managed to compartmentalize the inner space. No more finding a baked bean tin next to my copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*."

"You always were one of the professor's favorites."

"It was something to talk about while I helped him reorganize his classroom." Hermione had wanted to retrieve her parents as soon as the danger to them had passed; however, it was December before her arrangements had been finalized. The aftermath of Voldemort's defeat, including arrests, trials, and sitting her NEWTs in October had interfered with her good intentions.

"Do you have enough...?"

"I don't want your money, Harry." When his expression turned mulish, she said, "I promise to ask if I run short."

"Hermione..."

When he crossed his arms, she exclaimed, "I will! I should be perfectly fine. I exchanged enough currency to cover my expenses for a month."

"A month! You'll miss Christmas." Then, before she could comment, he said, "If it takes longer than a month, I'm coming to help. Bugger the wedding!"

His offer warmed her heart. "I hope to be back by then."

"But you don't really know."

Her shoulders slumped. "How could I? It was safer for them if I didn't know."

A clock inside the telephone box chimed the hour, and Hermione jumped. "I have to go." She hugged him quickly, offering a brave little smile. Then bracing herself for the inclement weather, she opened the door and stepped onto the filthy pavement. Harry's 'Good luck' was cut off as the door snapped shut and the telephone box descended back into the Ministry. Silently. As if it had never been there at all.

Hermione wrapped her arms around her waist, hugging close what little warmth she still retained. Her fingers reflexively tightened around the Portkey, and in the next moment it activated. The unwelcome but familiar sensation of being hooked from behind the navel spun her away from the drab little street in central London.

The journey was long enough for her to regret the decision about wearing a cloak, and the landing was rough. Hermione staggered, then regaining her footing as she glanced around at her destination.

It wasn't Sydney.

She stood in an open-air, paved stone courtyard with a narrow egress blocked by a wizard dressed in heavy winter clothes. His expression was as grim as the cloudy sky overhead.

Memories of being hunted, captured and tortured crowded Hermione's brain, and wartime conditioning controlled her reflexes; between one adrenaline-fueled heartbeat and the next her wand was in her hand and a hex forming on her tongue.

In the split second between thought and action, a body landed on her, knocking her to the ground. Hermione's head struck the stone floor and she struggled to free herself; the spell on the tip of her tongue aborted.

"*Po dyavolite!*" the man who had knocked her down exclaimed angrily.

Inexplicably, she recognized his voice. "Viktor?"

The body on top of her froze.

The man who levered himself onto his elbows in an awkward parody of intimacy was indeed Viktor Krum. The instant he recognized her, his angry scowl transformed into a winsome smile, parenthesized by a neatly trimmed goatee. Gently, he brushed her wild hair out of her face and said softly, "Her-my-own-knee! It is vunderful to see you."

He scrambled to his feet and offered his hand.

Hermione allowed him to help her rise, but then her paranoia reasserted itself. She took a step back, ostensibly to straighten her clothing, but cautiously choosing a defensive position between him and the growing cluster of people clogging the doorway. "It's been a long time," she said.

"Since Fleur's wedding." Viktor eyed her attire critically. "Did no vun tell you about Varna? You vill freeze."

"There appears to have been a mistake," Hermione explained, quickly looking about for her crumpled Portkey. "At least I hope that's all it is."

Viktor's brow furrowed and his attention sharpened. "Vat do you mean a mistake?"

"Ah!" she exclaimed and flicked her wrist, summoning the inactive Portkey from where it had been crushed beneath her. "I was supposed to land in Sydney." She held out the parchment. "Australia."

Viktor's lips thinned as he scanned the information on the discharged Portkey. "I will fix this for you. Vun moment." For the first time, he looked at the bystanders. "Atanas," he called.

The grim-faced man Hermione had initially noticed pressed through those standing in his path to meet Viktor half-way. They engaged in a rapid-fire discussion she didn't understand.

At that point, another man, one with thinning hair, stepped forward. He gave Hermione a speculative look before pulling his wand from his robes.

Hermione's heart slammed in her chest, and she tightened her grip on her wand. Even six months post-war, Aurors were still arresting Death Eaters and their accomplices who had escaped the final confrontation at Hogwarts. Voldemort had kept no register, no scrolls of enrollment with names neatly alphabetized or color-coded for ease of reference.

Had she been sent to Bulgaria by design? Should she attempt to escape? Could she reach Paris? Romania was closer. Maybe she could find Charlie Weasley.

While her thoughts whirled in a rapid, narrowing spiral, the man with thinning hair cast a diagnostic spell on her Portkey. As he turned toward Viktor, the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic emblem embroidered on the left breast of his robes became visible.

Hermione took a deep, uneven breath to still her pounding heart.

Shortly thereafter, Viktor nodded his head at the official and said the only distinguishable word Hermione had heard. "*Razbiram*."

Atanas, too, nodded at Viktor before turning on his booted heel to accompany the putative ministry official through the doorway. As if it were a sign, the rest of the crowd dispersed, although several bystanders glanced back over their shoulders before they left.

Viktor returned to Hermione, his expression pensive when he looked at her closely. "Vat is wrong? Are you all right?"

"It's nothing." She attempted a smile, but it didn't come off. Excess adrenaline still coursed through her, and she tucked a wild curl behind her ear.

His eyes narrowed as he watched her hand shake. "Her-my-own-knee?"

"Er " Her eyes darted around the courtyard, lingering on the empty doorway before returning to Viktor's lean figure standing before her. "I know it's been a long time, and I please forgive me, but well, there have been incidents."

"Vat do you mean?" When he extended his hand she didn't take it, and his expression morphed into something between hurt and confusion. "Her-my-own-knee, vat is wrong?"

"Will you answer a question, Viktor?"

"Of course."

"Where were we when you asked me to go to the Yule Ball?"

Viktor had always been more intelligent than others recognized, and although his eyes narrowed, he didn't hesitate before answering. "Not in the library, as so many haff said. I vas taking you back to your common room and the stairs moved. Ve vere stuck for long time. I vas nervous. If you said no, then I did not know vat to say."

"I didn't say no."

This time, she didn't back away when he stepped close. "Vill you tell me vat is wrong now?" he asked. "You vill tell me about the incidents?"

Her eyes remained on the open doorway. "Can we talk about it later?"

Viktor turned his head, his expression thoughtful. "*Da*," he said. "Later."

She changed the subject; rather, she returned to the original subject. "What did they say about the Portkey?"

"There vill be an inquiry."

"I checked the scroll when it was handed to me."

"Yes. The vords say Sydney, but the charm vas to bring you to Varna. They believe it vas error." His lips quirked in amusement. "Atanas vas most displeased. My arrival vas to be the only one for ten minutes. He did not like that it vas so ... er ... bumpy."

"I wasn't terribly happy about your arrival either, although it is nice to see you again." Absently, Hermione rubbed her elbow, bruised when she had fallen to the floor. "Can they send me on to Sydney now? Or back home?"

"First, they must speak with their counterparts in London and Sydney. There is much coordination between Portkey offices. To avoid overlaps like ours."

"All right," she said. As inconvenient as the situation was, the precaution was understandable. Sometimes, a mistake was just a mistake.

"They say tomorrow you may return."

"Tomorrow!" Dismayed, Hermione wrapped her arms around her waist. Night had begun to fall; it would be completely dark within the hour, and the temperature in the courtyard was dropping. "I don't... what am I going to do? I don't know where to stay. I've never been here before."

"I will help," Viktor said simply.

Looking up into his lean, serious face, Hermione remembered how close they had become in such a short few months during the Triwizard Tournament. Close enough that she had been the thing he would miss most. Close enough that she would trust him now, despite the things Ron and Harry had said about Viktor's behavior at Bill's wedding. "I'd appreciate that," she said.

Viktor gestured for Hermione to precede him into the building, and he followed, his hand resting on the small of her back, just as he had done when they had been at Hogwarts. Such old-fashioned courtesy. This time, Hermione's smile made it to her lips.

The corridors in the Bulgarian Ministry for Magic were wider than those in London, and it seemed everyone they passed recognized Viktor. Beloved national figure, she reminded herself, just like Harry. Viktor nodded to those he recognized, and ignored the fawning attention of the rest. Hermione didn't notice that a fair number of glances were sent her way as well.

By the time they reached the Ministry's domed entrance, she was shivering. They might be indoors, but she was dressed for a much warmer climate. Viktor noticed, and without fanfare, he swirled the cape from his own shoulders to wrap around hers.

"What about you?" she asked, eyeing his dark green jumper. "I have a coat in my bag if you can direct me to a ladies'."

"Vill not be necessary. Ve vill travel by Floo."

"All right." She sighed happily; his cloak was very warm. "Where are we going? I have Muggle money, so a hotel... Or, I could..."

"Vill not need money," he interrupted. "Ve are going to my home."

"Viktor, you don't have to..."

"I vant to, *mila*." He smiled at her. "I asked you to visit long time before, and now you are here."

"Ago. It's 'a long time ago'." An instant flush stained her cheeks. "I'm sorry!"

Viktor's abrupt laugh startled her; his eyes were shining. "Now I *know* you are Her-my-own-knee. I did not doubt, but now know."

She was sure the tips of her ears were as red as beetroot. "It's a terrible habit, and rude of me."

"Not to worry." His amused expression faded. "I did not understand before. Your need to know I am me." He looked beyond her, at the small clumps of ministry employees, some openly staring and gossiping. "As agreed, ve vill speak of this later. In privacy at my home."

"I'm still welcome?"

"You haff always been welcome."

Hermione touched the sleeve of his jumper. "Thank you. It would be... wonderful."

Despite the occasional titter from an onlooker, they crossed to the fireplaces lining the far wall. Hermione inhaled the complex scent clinging to Viktor's heavy cloak, recognizing his aftershave: woody with a distinctive masculine undertone. It was the same as when he had escorted her to the Yule Ball during her fourth year at school. It seemed a lifetime since then, and yet, it had only been four years. She remembered dancing with him at Bill and Fleur's wedding, but Viktor had been so angry about Xenophilius Lovegood's Deathly Hallows symbol he had been very poor company.

As if that memory had triggered his own reminiscence, Viktor's cheeks flushed. They had reached the fireplace farthest from the Information and Welcome desk, and he said quietly, "The last time ve met, I vas a boor, Her-my-own-knee. After ve escaped I looked for you, and regretted my "

A witch suddenly jostled him from behind, as if crowding in line, but there was no one else nearby. Her face was lit by the fervor of an avid fan. Viktor stiffened, glaring at the woman, until she backed off. Quickly, before she overcame her momentary shyness, he reached for a handful of Floo Powder, and flung it into the fire. Then, pulling his wand from a hidden sheath in his sleeve, Viktor cast a non-verbal spell before he enunciated their destination. He grabbed Hermione's hand, tugging her into the blazing green fire.

The last thing she saw before being sucked through the Floo network was the zealous fan flinging herself against the magical shield Viktor had erected. Sparks blossomed beneath the witch's fingers as she burned herself in repeated attempts to follow her idol. Hermione shuddered and tightened her grip on Viktor's hand.

Traveling past a variety of fireplaces, a rapid kaleidoscope of images from homely to luxurious, they were conveyed through the magical network. After several minutes, the Floo spat them out into a large kitchen, both rustic in architectural style and modern in appliance. The walls were made of stucco, rough-hewn stone and brick in warm earth tones, and the air was redolent of spices and a home-cooked meal.

A woman's voice was heard from another room, "Viktor?"

"*Da! Ella tyk, mila*," Viktor replied, his voice loud enough to carry.

Hermione smothered her surprise, and schooled her expression to one of welcome before a young woman, no more than a year older than Hermione, with dark curly hair and beautiful eyes hurried into the kitchen. She faltered when she saw Hermione.

Viktor's smile was natural. "Anna," he said in English, enunciating carefully, "I haff brought my friend home. This is Her-my-own-knee Granger. She vas stranded for the night in Varna."

"Hello," Hermione said. "I'm very sorry to intrude like this. There seems to have been a malfunction with my Portkey, and they apparently can't send me on to Australia until tomorrow. Viktor was kind enough to offer me somewhere to stay, but perhaps a hotel..."

"No," Viktor said. "Ve are honored to haff you as our guest. Are ve not, Anna?"

"*Da ... er ... yes, you are most welcome*," Anna said hesitantly, the unfamiliar English stilted and heavily accented. "Viktor has spoken of you much."

"*Blagodaria*," Hermione replied. The Bulgarian word for thanks was one of the few she remembered. Anna smiled, and Viktor grinned as if he'd won a spot on Bulgaria's International Quidditch. "*Priatno mi beshe*."

Anna's smile brightened her expression and a quick spate of Bulgarian followed.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, "I don't speak very much Bulgarian."

Anna's cheeks flushed bright red. "Excuse please. It is very good to meet you as vell."

"Not at all," Hermione replied. "Thank you for letting me stay in your home."

Viktor draped an arm around Anna and hugged her briefly to his side. "*Mysesstra* and I speak English every day, Her-my-own-knee. Is for practice. She is student. A serious student like another young voman I know." Hermione smiled back at him; Viktor had always complimented her intellectual curiosity. "Anna's an excellent Healer," he said, turning to look at the dark-haired woman at his side. "Next year she goes to St. Mungo's for advanced training."

This time, Anna's blush was from praise.

Hermione glanced at the other witch with more interest. "I'm told it's a very competitive course."

"She vill be best healer," Viktor said proudly.

"My *brat* is kind."

"Oh," Hermione said, and then she remembered the kinship meaning of *brat*. "Oh! Viktor's your brother."

"Vat did you think?" Viktor asked, his brow furrowing, and then his expression changed and color highlighted his ruddy cheeks. "Anna's not ... No!"

Anna giggled. "Not his wife or lover. I am his little *sestra*."

"Sister," Hermione supplied helpfully, and then she blushed. "I beg your pardon."

Anna's giggle turned into a laugh, and Viktor coughed. He stepped next to Hermione and removed his cloak from her shoulders, quickly speaking to Anna in their native language.

"May I offer you some tea or coffee, Herm-o-ninny?" Anna asked.

Reminded of how Viktor originally struggled with her name, Hermione kindly did not correct Anna's pronunciation. Instead, she said, "Tea would be lovely. Thank you."

Viktor waved his wand and levitated the cloak toward an open door; Hermione surmised it was being hung on a coat rack somewhere. "Please," he said, gesturing to a table and chairs of sanded wood in an alcove in the large kitchen.

As she made her way to the table, Hermione said, "Thank you again for your help, Viktor."

Viktor held her chair, and grinned. "I am happy to haff knocked you down."

Anna levitated a silver tray holding an ornate tea set to the table, followed by several plates containing cheese and other delectable appetizers. She gave her brother a chastising frown, but filled a small plate for Hermione, another for Viktor, and then one for herself before.

"You're much heavier than you look," Hermione eyed him appraisingly. Then she smiled. "Honestly, but for you I might've been stranded at your Ministry." She nodded as Anna filled her cup and added a splash of milk. "And it has been a long time since we've seen each other."

"I did not knock you down last time, but..."

"There were Death Eaters," Hermione said, and was a little surprised when Anna gasped. Apparently Viktor hadn't revealed details.

"Vhen the Ministry fell," he said. "Before. I vas angry before. There vas that man first."

"Xenophilius Lovegood, I know. Harry told me some of what you said. Ron made sure it wasn't flattering."

"Flattering?" Anna asked. "Vat is flat-er-ing?"

"It means complimentary," Hermione explained, "but in this case, Ron wanted me to think the worst of Viktor."

Anna frowned. "Vat do you mean the vorst of my *brat*?"

"Ron was envious so he repeated some things Viktor said in a way that wasn't very nice."

Viktor slathered butter across a piece of pogacha, the butter melting into the hot bread. "I vas disappointed Her-my-own-knee vas taken. That is vat Ron Veasley and his cousin said."

"Taken?" Hermione asked. "I wasn't taken. I escaped with Harry and Ron. Wait, when was this? What do you mean 'taken'? How oh, those prats! I can't believe they warned you off."

"It is over now, and you are here." Then, as if Viktor realized what that meant, he said again in a happier tone, "You are here."

Hermione smiled at him. "Yes. I am."

Anna appeared unwilling to let the slur on her brother rest. "Vat did they say to you, Her-my-knee?"

Hermione sipped the excellent tea and considered whether to answer, and if so, how much to say. In the end, she was as honest as she had always been with Viktor. "They said Viktor was drunk and chatting up most of the unattached women. They said he was angry that being a 'famous Quidditch player' was no use if all the 'cute ones were taken'."

"Viktor!" Anna was shocked.

Hermione hid a smile at his expression. He looked endearingly like a small boy caught flying a broomstick in the house. "I vas very unhappy," he said as if that explained it, as perhaps it did.

Unexpectedly, there was a tapping at the window over the sink, and Anna rose to let the owl in. She accepted the letter and offered the owl a treat. A very becoming flush stained her cheek. "Vill you pardon me?"

Without waiting for an answer she hurried from the room, her letter held as if it were something precious. Viktor's expression was indulgent, and when he returned his attention to his unexpected guest, he offered to refill her tea.

"Thanks," Hermione said. She added several squares of a white cheese and some olives to her plate. The salty black olives were a savory accompaniment to the tea.

After he refilled their cups, Viktor settled back in his chair, and they lapsed into a comfortable silence.

After a time, Viktor asked, "Tell me, Her-my-knee, vy are you going to Australia? And vy are you traveling alone?"

Hermione carefully placed her cup on its saucer and gathered her thoughts. Very few people knew about her parents.

At one time Viktor had known her very well, and so he said softly, "You do not haff to tell."

She looked at him then; at the man who had been her friend, her first kiss, and if the Triwizard Tournament had not ended in death and Voldemort's resurrection, the man who might have held her heart in his calloused, competent hands.

"It's not that," she said. Suddenly her eyes were swimming in tears. She had cried at all the funerals: Fred's, Remus and Tonks', and she had even cried for Snape. Through it all, the fear for her parents had been held at bay until Viktor's comment turned the lock, the sluice of repressed fears and worries flooding her.

He shifted, sliding closer, and took her hand in his. His dark eyes were filled with emotion. "Vat is it, Her-my-knee?"

"Sorry." She bit her lip.

"Not to vorry. You do not haff to say."

"No. It's all right." She swallowed hard. "It's my parents. I sent them to Australia before last summer."

"After Fleur's wedding?"

"Before. I knew Harry's plans, and Mum and Dad wouldn't be safe."

"It was good of them to go. I would not have left my child."

She saw him through a film of suppressed tears. "They didn't want to leave. I made them." Viktor raised an eyebrow. Hermione moved her fingers as if to free him of the obligation of touching her; the memory of Ron's reaction to what she had done strong in her mind and churning in her stomach. "I had help," she said. Viktor merely tightened his grip, rubbing his thumb soothingly over the back of her hand. "Nymphadora Tonks."

"She was an Auror, I believe."

Hermione nodded in response, and added, "Tonks married Remus Lupin before Bill and Fleur's wedding."

Viktor's eyes widened, and to his eternal credit, he didn't sneer. "The werewolf?"

"Yes. He was an excellent teacher, and a close friend of Harry's parents." She shook her head. "But that's not the point. Sorry. This isn't easy to tell."

"Have you spoken of it before? To anyone?"

"Just Harry and...and Ron."

"They did not agree with your decision?" he asked, astutely.

"Harry understood." She stared at Viktor's hand, the one holding hers. "He wanted to come with me today, but he has the wedding to plan and Auror training."

Suddenly, Viktor released her hand and straightened in his chair. His expression became the mask he wore when he played Quidditch. It was ruthless and predatory, and his accent was thicker when he spoke. "They told me you were with Veasley. At that wedding."

"No," she replied, shaking her head, and looking directly into his dark, hooded eyes. "Ron and I weren't... *aren't* together. I don't know why they said that."

He inclined his head, his expression still measuring. "I understand Potter's reasons, but Veasley.... If he is your friend, why is he not with you? Does he have Auror training, too?"

"I don't really know. I didn't ask him. He disapproved of what I did with my parents." She gave a bitter little laugh. "That's an understatement. Ron didn't mince words when he told me what he thought of my choice of me."

"Tch! You were protecting your parents."

"Ron didn't see it that way. He thought..."

"That is not how a friend acts." Viktor's tone was harsh with condemnation.

"Ron's" Hermione began to protest, but it was a broken refrain. After a moment, she said, "I'm not sure what Ron is any more."

After his initial, genuine grief at Fred's death, Ron had rallied when *Witch Weekly* requested a private interview with him. Alone. Unaccompanied by either the Boy Who Lived Twice or the Loyal Muggle-born Friend. His family was so mired in their loss they never noticed how eagerly he embraced his fame. On the other hand, Hermione and Harry had watched Ron luxuriate in the public spotlight, embellishing his tales of heroism and deprivation. His behavior had curdled whatever hopes Hermione might have once cherished for a future with him.

Rearranging the olives on her plate gave her a moment to regain her composure before she spoke. "Not to make excuses, but Ron's always felt overshadowed by his brothers, and then there was Harry."

"I have seen the papers. I have read his stories."

"He was jealous."

"I remember he made you cry," Viktor said as if it were a crime.

She protested. "That was a long time ago."

"Not so long for me to forget," Viktor's frown furrowed his brow. "If you had gone to ball with Veasley, I would have been jealous. But I would never make you cry."

"I never thought you would." Hermione had forgotten how protective Viktor could be. Something in her expression must have reflected her affection for him, because his frown faded and his posture relaxed. She said, "I'm done with crying over the callous things Ron Weasley says to me or about me, and that's why he isn't here."

"I am sorry you have lost your friend."

Thoughtfully, she said, "I suspect he never really was *my* friend, and he was only ever interested in me when someone else..." She broke off, and stared at Viktor. "You. It was always you." She laughed then.

Viktor frowned. "*Mila*? Would you care to explain?"

"I think ... Oh, Viktor, please don't be upset, but I wonder if ... if the reason Ron was jealous wasn't about me at all."

Viktor's lips pinched to a thin line and he glowered at her. "You laughed."

"Not at you! Never at you." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Ron's a huge Quidditch fan," she explained, "and you're his favorite player."

When he blushed, Viktor looked anywhere but at her directly. "Is not amusing."

"No, it isn't. Really. And if Ron is ... well, it doesn't matter. I hope he'll be happy either way."

Still glowering, Viktor pulled his wand and summoned a beautifully cut decanter from one of the kitchen counters. He caught it deftly and removed the stopper, adding a dollop of the dark amber spirit to his tea. He glared at his drink. "I would rather not speculate."

"Me either." Hermione was privately amused by Viktor's need to fortify himself, but quickly sobered when thinking of the topic at hand. "In any case, I need to find my parents."

"I do not understand. I thought you were merely bringing them back. Why do you have to find them?"

"I'm not sure where they are. When I cast the Memory Charm..." Viktor sucked in a sharp breath, his eyes flicking to her. Hermione rushed on. "I thought you understood that's what I meant."

Putting the teacup down, he leaned toward her and recaptured her hand. "I do understand. It's ... vell..." he glanced toward the hallway before looking back at Hermione, "...to keep my *sestra* safe, I would do as much. Please go on."

"Tonks helped me arrange new identities for my parents. She fixed their bank accounts so they had access to their funds in both their alternate and real names. So they're Wendell and Monica Wilkins, but they're also Margaret and William Granger. We knew they accessed their funds when they arrived in Sydney, but after that..."

"You do not know if they are alive?"

Hermione flinched.

Outside the cozy house, clouds churned in a turbulent storm, and thunder crashed in an odd counterpoint to the conversation.

Hermione didn't answer Viktor immediately; he was a Seeker and she knew he had a great deal of patience. It took her several minutes before she was able to speak past the fear she could not ... would not articulate. "When we were in the forest all those months, I had no way to find out. It wasn't safe. And after the war-- Tonks didn't make it."

Viktor hadn't released her hand, and Hermione found herself tightening her grip, his calloused fingers a reassuring connection to reality.

"This happened after the wedding?" he asked quietly. "The forest and camping."

"A few weeks later. We had somewhere safe for awhile, but after we infiltrated the Ministry..."

"That was true?" His eyes widened in surprise. "I thought it was more lies."

"That one was true. We were almost caught." She shuddered at the memory. "I don't know why I'm telling you this."

He squeezed her hand gently. "I would like to think we are friends. Yes?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes."

"It is what friends do," Viktor said simply.

"Some friends," she replied. "Good friends." Then she squeezed his hand in return. She took a deep breath. "After our escape.... It was then we were living rough."

"Just you and Harry and Ron?"

Something in his tone distracted her, and she looked at him closely before replying. "Yes. There was no safe way to contact Tonks, or anyone else. And then when Ron left..."

Viktor's straightened abruptly, his grip tightening. "Veasely left? He left you and Potter? Alone?"

"Er ... it was complicated. He did return. After a few weeks."

"But he left you his closest friend and the woman he ... tcha!" He sneered; the expression even more disdainful bracketed by the defining line of his goatee.

"There were extenuating circumstances."

"He put you in more danger!" Viktor exclaimed. "You and Potter. *Mila*, he is not worthy of your friendship. He never was."

Hermione blinked rapidly. She really hadn't expected their reunion to be so revealing or emotional. "He did save Harry's life."

Viktor's eyes narrowed. "Was Veasley the only one suffering these ex-ten-you-ate-ing circumstances?"

"Well, no..."

"Then he is weak." Their eyes met for a long moment, and his tone was gentler when he asked, "It was hard, those months?"

Saying 'yes' would be too easy an answer, and yet it was the truth. Those months they had spent on the run, hunting for Horcruxes with minimal information, cut off from any viable assistance had been terrifying and frustrating. In hindsight, Hermione would have done things very differently, and had he lived, she would have made her opinion known to Albus Dumbledore, the puppet master extraordinaire. Without conscious volition, her hand pulled from Viktor's and rose to her neck, to the permanent reminder of Bellatrix Lestrange's interrogation the previous Spring.

Hermione was so lost in thought she didn't notice the way his eyes followed her fingers as they traced the scar on her throat, or his speculative expression. However, he spoke softly once more. "You do not have to say, Her-my-knee."

"I *hate* camping!" The statement burst forth as vehemently as a victim throwing off an Imperius curse. When Viktor flinched, Hermione apologized. "Sorry. It's Viktor, you're the first person I've talked to ... beyond my testimony before the Wizengamot."

"As I said before, I have read the papers."

"Very little of what was printed is accurate. The reality was both easier and worse. I really don't discuss particulars." She shuddered. "Living them was more than enough."

"I understand. I remember the tournament."

Hermione nodded. Before the Horcrux Hunt, she and Viktor had been regular if not frequent pen-pals. At one point, he had written about his remorse at being used by Barty Crouch Junior, how unclean he had felt after casting the Cruciatius Curse, and how unnerving it had been to be helpless against Crouch's Imperius.

"I remember it too," she said. Once again, they lapsed into a shared silence. It was during this silence Anna returned to the kitchen. She took a look at her brother's and their guests' sober expressions, and asked, "Should I leave you alone?"

"No, please!" Hermione exclaimed. "I'm sorry. I was just explaining the reasons I'm traveling to Australia."

"Is not for good reason?" Anna asked.

"It is, but it's also complicated."

Viktor sat up in his chair. "Will you permit?" he asked Hermione.

She controlled her reaction, but Viktor saw it, and said, "There is nothing for which to be shamed, Her-my-knee. She will not condemn you, but if you do not wish for me to..."

Before she could change her mind, Hermione said, "All right."

Viktor met her eyes, and Hermione knew her trust was not misplaced. She nodded, and then he rose from his chair, stepping toward his sister. Hermione understood perhaps a dozen words, her name being one, nonetheless, she could tell the progress of the story from Anna's reactions: concern to shock, comprehension to affection.

Hermione reached for the crystal decanter and added a splash of brandy to the rest of her tea. She rather thought she had earned a bolster to her spirits. After several long moments, and two or three questions on Anna's part, Viktor switched back to English. The Krum siblings turned toward Hermione. "It's settled," he announced while Anna smiled at Hermione.

"It is?" Hermione asked.

"*Da*," Viktor said. "Tomorrow, ve make arrangements for you to go to Sydney."

"Yes." Hermione knew there was something else. "And?"

"Ve also make arrangements for us..." he gestured between himself and his sister, "...to go with you."

"Viktor!" Hermione exclaimed while Anna clapped her hands in delight. Then Anna said, "I am a Healer. If there is need, I can help with your parents."

Hermione thought she was turning into a bit of a leaky tap as her eyes welled up with tears again. "Thank you for the offer. I- I can't..."

"But you do us a favor, Her-my-knee." Viktor said, stepping next to the table, gazing into her upturned face.

"I do?"

"Yes. I haff need of vacation. It is summer in Australia. Ve vill find your family and then ve vill celebrate Christmas together."

Anna was practically dancing around the kitchen, but she came to a halt when she caught sight of Hermione. "Do you not vant us to come with you?"

"That's not... I didn't expect..."

Anna's expression was knowing. "*Razbiram*," she said.

Hermione flushed, slightly uncomfortable with this almost stranger knowing so much about her life when she, in turn, knew so little about Anna's.

"You vere kind to my *brat* ven he vas in England. You are his friend. That is important to me," Anna said earnestly. "If you permit, I would be honored to help you."

"I don't know how long it will take," Hermione tried to explain.

"It takes as long as it takes," Anna said simply. "Now, I vill go see vat I need for prepare. Excuse me, please." She touched Viktor's arm and angled her head in a silent message, and then she slipped down the hallway, leaving Hermione and Viktor alone once again.

"My apologies, Her-my-knee." Viktor cleared his throat. "I overstep."

"It's not that," she began, but he interrupted her.

"I know you." He smiled, eliciting a corresponding smile from her. There were things that didn't change about one's personality. "You haff plan. Most likely it is very good plan."

"It's workable," she said.

"It is probably more than vorkable." He chuckled, but his expression sobered. "I could not help you during the var, but you are my ... friend. I would like to help you now."

Since she was eleven, Hermione had been an integral part of a triumvirate. And it seemed that once again, she was destined to be part of a triad. If she were being honest with herself, it would be a relief to share some of the anxiety of her trip, especially if things didn't go well.

Any remaining resistance Hermione might have had crumbled when Viktor extended his hand toward her and said, "Please."

She rose to her feet, reaching for his hand. He folded her against his chest, tucking her head beneath his chin. Her reply was muffled against his chest. "All right. I would like that. Very much."

Viktor tightened his hold, and suddenly Hermione's quest didn't seem as futile as it had only that morning.

~o0o~

Fin

Translations: Bulgarian - English

Da - Yes

Ne - No

Dobre - Good (multi-purpose)

Blagodaria - Thank you

Mila - Dear

Razbiram - Understand

Kretin - Cretin

Po dyavolite - Damn it

Priatno mi beshe - Pleased to meet you

Brat - Brother

Sestra - Sister