



I met him at six in the entrance of the castle, just as we always did when we went out on the grounds for a walk. It had been hard to get away from Harry and Ron. Since the events of the third task of the tournament, we'd barely separated from each other. I had to say that I wanted to see Professor Flitwick and ask him for some recommendations to read during the summer and that later I wanted to have time to finish packing my things. It was enough to discourage them from following me. When Viktor saw me, he only smiled lightly, but I had noticed that his eyes lit up every time we met.

"Hermey-own-ninny." He bowed to greet me and took my hand to place a gentle kiss on it. "You honour me with your company. Shall we?" I nodded, and he took my hand in his arm, guiding me outside.

We walked toward the forest to the quiet stretch of ground a short way from the Beauxbatons horses' paddock that had become our place. We had gone there to avoid the girls that were still stalking him and the occasional Quidditch groupie that had wanted to know all about him and his experiences playing. We sat on the grass close to each other, enjoying a few moments of comfortable silence. That day the sky was a beautiful shade of blue, and the sun was still shining brightly before the sunset. It was as if the world mocked the sadness and the emptiness of the past days. The irony wasn't lost on me, and I was unable to suppress a snort.

"Vot is it, Hermey-own-ninny?"

"Nothing. It's just that I find it ironic that we're having these beautiful days during this difficult time. After all that has happened, the world seems to keep on going as if nothing is wrong. Shouldn't it be different somehow?"

He looked at me with his serious expression, as if studying me whilst he tried to find the perfect words in a foreign language to answer me. "The world must go on, Hermey-own-ninny, just as if nothing has changed because we are the ones that must change after these terrible events." He smiled at me and reached out his hand to brush away a strand of hair from my face, but when our gazes met, he knew that something other than that was bothering me. "There is something else. Vot is bothering you?"

I turned my face so that he couldn't see into my eyes. Of course there was something else, but I was meant to be strong, to always be in control, and not to show how lost I felt. I smiled slightly and suddenly found my hands quite interesting as I avoided his eyes. "There's nothing else, Viktor. I just think all this is sad; don't you agree?"

"Yes, I agree; it is sad. Death is always that way." He placed his hand under my chin to make me turn and face him. "I can see it in your eyes. You do not fool me. There is something else, Hermey-own-ninny. You are making me feel worried, and I do not like it. You know that you can tell me anything."

Viktor was someone who looked you straight in the eyes as if he was trying to figure you out. He always did that with me, just as I did with him. How can you lie to someone like him? He was right. I could tell him everything because with him I feel more like Hermione, not like the insufferable know-it-all, the bookworm, or the brightest witch of the age.

"I... I don't know what to do. I feel lost. Since the Quidditch World Cup, I realised something like this could happen, and I'm scared. I know about the danger that threatens us, but I can't fully understand it, and I don't have the answers about how to face it. I'm worried about Harry. Voldemort killed Cedric, and nothing will stop him until he kills Harry. He's like a brother to me, Viktor. You know that, and I would never forgive myself if I didn't do anything to protect him, to help him. I don't know how to do it. How do you prepare to face death and to fight evil? I don't know what to do..." My voice was faltering at that point, coming out in broken sobs whilst I let my fears and insecurities show. I had to be strong, but at times, I felt like the girl I was and on the verge of breaking down.

Viktor hugged me in an attempt to soothe me; I always tended to ramble when I was nervous or when I felt lost about something. I stopped my speech, but his embrace was my undoing, and I started crying. He tightened his arms around me whilst I cried, giving myself permission to be scared, to be weak. He looked at my face and stroked my cheek tenderly, and then, he leaned down and kissed me softly. It wasn't the first time we had kissed, and once again, I let myself become lost in the emotions he evoked in me. Every time he held me like that, I felt secure, but not that day, not when my life had been turned upside down. When I felt him deepening the kiss, I reacted and tried to drag myself from the emotions he'd triggered in me. Somehow he had managed to push me down to the ground, kissing me deeply and holding me close to him as if he were afraid to let me go. I can't deny I panicked about the way things were developing; I wasn't ready to go beyond a snog and the mild groping we'd already done.

I broke our kiss and sat up to look into his eyes, seeing that they were dark with desire and something else I couldn't place at that moment. "Viktor..."

"Shhh, it is all right. I am here with you, and you do not have to be scared anymore. I will always protect you, and I won't let anything bad happen to you. Together we will find the answers you look for. I love you, Hermey-own-ninny."

I froze in that moment. He had told me before about his feelings for me, saying he had never felt like that before, but it was the first time he'd said openly that he loved me. I knew in that moment what that emotion in his eyes was, and I felt overwhelmed. I had feelings for him as well, but they were not as strong as his. He was a dear friend, and the attraction was undeniable. However, I wasn't in love with him.

"Viktor, don't..."

"Why not? You know me. You know I am not a person that does things, how do you say? Things by halves, I think. You can think we are young, but in my heart, I know you love me, and I love you. Can you feel the same, Hermey-own-ninny?"

"I'm just fifteen. How can I know?" That weak explanation was all that came to my dizzied mind at that moment. I was young, I was uncertain of the future, and he was asking something of me that I couldn't give him, something I wasn't sure I had.

"You are not supposed to know, just to feel. Vot do you feel? Please be honest, as I have always been honest with you. I want you to do the same for me." He was quite serious with a wary look in his eyes; it was as if he feared what I was about to confess.

I sighed and looked down...not daring to face him. "I love you, but I'm not in love with you. And now I don't know if I will have the chance of being so. How can you fall in love when you're so young and already afraid of dying?" I knew that I was breaking his heart, but I had no other choice. I had to be honest with him then, just as we have always been with each other.

"I am trying to understand you and to accept what you are telling me, but it is hard. I confess I have plans for the future, so you must know my intentions. I want to be with you as long as it is possible. You are everything I ever wanted, and I want us to be together. If after knowing each other longer, and you fall in love with me, I want to make a family with you. I am willing to wait until you are ready to try, to love... But for now, I want you to be happy more than anything in my life, and if I have to let you go so you can do what you must do, I will do it."

"Viktor, I'm sorry. I..."

"Don't say a word. You have a long way before you, and you have to live what the fate has prepared for you. Follow your path, and become who you are meant to be. Someday you will find someone who can love you, and when that time comes, I will fight to be that man." He released her from his embrace and retreated from her slightly. "We have to go now. Dinner will be ready soon. We do not want to be late to the last dinner at Hogwarts."

He stood and held out his hand to take mine and help me stand. He took my hand and guided me to the castle in silence, only the eventual hoot of an owl breaking the quiet of day turning into night. The sky was darkening, and there was neither the moon nor stars to light the velvet black. The night had listened to me and had decided to join in the pain of loss and unfulfilled love.

When we reached the entrance of the castle, he stopped and turned to face me, smiling gently. There was no one there, so he hugged me strongly, as if it would be the last time; he was trembling, and I knew his heart was indeed breaking. He took a deep breath and whispered into my ear, "Goodbye, my love. Know that I will always love you and that I will wait until you are ready." He kissed me lightly on the lips before bowing and leaving me to enter alone, as I always did to avoid questions.

That was what happened the night we called it a day. The next day, he only wished me luck and promised to always remain near. I didn't see him during the next few years, but he kept his promise and remained close to me with his letters. I still keep the memories of the way he kissed me and of his declaration of love before going on his way. I didn't have the heart to tell him I wasn't planning to allow myself to love him when we were about to face such difficult times. I knew I couldn't bear the pain of

losing him if I did, and I wasn't selfish enough to make him endure the pain if I died. We didn't talk about our feelings in our letters, but I knew he was biding his time. Besides, there was no point in bringing the subject again. After all, there wasn't a thing we had left unsaid the night we called it a day...

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**Lorraine's Notes:** I owe Viktor a happy ending, and this time he'll have it. In my mind, Hermione is the passion, the energy, the freedom in this pairing whilst Viktor is the peace, the calm, the commitment. Together they complement each other and share important features like intelligence, courage, loyalty, trust and love. I know they're both too young for making promises of undying love, but Viktor is sure about his feelings, and he's not a quitter. Hermione still has to live her faux pas... sorry, her 'romance' with Ron before growing up and being ready. If they are meant to be, they'll find the way.

Many thanks for lovely Southern Witch, who beta read this story. Also, thanks go to CocoaChristy for giving it a read through!

**Southern's Notes:** Viktor is doing a good thing by giving her time. I like that about his character and feel a bit sorry for him, but I do understand Hermione's point.

**Christy's Notes:** Hermione is definitely lucky to have someone to care enough about her to wait until she is ready....