

“Hermione?” The name came so soft behind her that she almost thought she had imagined it. But something about the voice tickled at her memory, felt familiar. The lilting, foreign quality that her name had on the tongue. Then the hand on her shoulder, light and warm. “I thought that was you...” She turned from the hostess, to whom she had just given her name, and looked up. He looked taller than she remembered, his face fuller, frame broader, but still lanky and the cheekbones still sharp, features with a vaguely exotic feel to them. She recognized him immediately, but it took a moment to recover enough to call his name.

“Viktor... I haven’t seen you in ages... are you with someone or would you like to join me? I’ve just put my name in for a table...”

He cast his eyes upward in thought for a moment, the soft smile turning into a thoughtful frown. “Ten years, at least. But I don’t want to intrude...”

“No one to intrude on. I’m by myself. I’d love to have you join me...”

“Your table is ready,” the hostess called out, and they followed her to a small table in the corner with only two chairs. She was inwardly rather pleased when he pulled out the chair for her, natural as breathing, before rounding the table and settling in himself. She couldn’t help staring a little when he propped his left hand under his chin. Last time she had seen him, the ring finger hadn’t been empty. Self-consciously, she rubbed her own under the table, wondering when the seemingly permanent tan line had faded. When she had finally removed it, it seemed like it would never leave.

“How long has it been? Must have been ten years. The stadium in Torquay has been shut down... must be eight years now, and the time I ran into you two there, they weren’t even speaking of shutting it down and building a new one,” he said, almost to himself, as the waitress brought them their menus.

“Ten years,” Hermione agreed. She could still remember it. There had been a blazing row when they got home, over her talking to him for so long. *Not that there wouldn’t have been a blazing row, anyway*, she thought to herself. If not over that, then something else.

“I was sorry to hear about you and Marta,” she found herself blurting out, thinking back to that day, when they had bumped into each other while leaving a match. She had been pretty, a slender little witch in light summer robes, jet black hair glossy in the Torquay sun, big dark eyes and pale white skin, petite and delicate. They had been a striking couple, but she could never quite understand if the apparent discomfort between the two of them at the time had been because of her and Ron, or because of something else. When she read that three years later, they had separated, it had seemed a bit clearer.

"I shouldn't be too sorry," he said with a soft smile. "We had no business being married to each other in the first place. No one's fault, really, unless you count it mine for not having enough sense to put a stop to it in the first place. I should have put my foot down and not just gone along with it to make everyone happy. She shouldn't have either, but then, hindsight is twenty/twenty. And it's hard to buck the expectations of two families. I guess no one gets married thinking they'll divorce. Wouldn't be much point, would there?" he asked, bending his head and studying the menu. His thick, dark hair brushed his brows. There was no rancor or bitterness in his voice, and she marveled at that.

"I guess not. No one wants to subject themselves to that, do they?" *I know I didn't. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.*

"I'm glad we divorced when we did," he said bluntly, then colored slightly. "I don't mean that the way it sounded... what I meant was, given the circumstances, it was for the best in the long run. Marta and I get along perfectly well, as long as we're not married to each other. I wanted her to be happy, and that wasn't going to happen as long as we stayed together. We couldn't agree on anything important. Except, in the end, that we didn't belong together, and we wished each other no ill will. We still keep in touch. She got remarried, oh, five years ago... they had a daughter last year. Even asked me to be the godfather. I mean, I would hate to think that the two of us being a couple of stubborn, pigheaded Bulgarians, not wanting to give it up and soldiering on when there wasn't any point, might have prevented that from coming into the world..." he said, producing a small photo from his pocket with just a hint of pride.

"She's beautiful... Marta's husband doesn't mind? The two of you still talking?" Hermione asked when she handed the picture back.

"I introduced them. I was friends with him a long time ago. Before Marta and I got married, even. I knew he would at least treat her well. He's a decent man. Funny, isn't it? Half of a failed couple put together by a matchmaker playing matchmaker for the other half? But then, I didn't pressure her to like him, either. Just an 'I thought you two might like each other, now see if I'm right' date. Got married of their own accord two years later, so I must have done something right." He smiled and took a sip of his water. The waitress came to take their orders, and after she slipped off, they resumed their conversation.

"Still, most men would be jealous," she pressed. *Horrendously, screamingly jealous.*

"He's not most men, then. We're all quite clear on who's who. He's her husband. I'm just the one she had the chance to practice on, nothing more than a family friend, now. I mean, very few people end up with the first person they

have a crush on, or the first person they kiss. No point losing sleep over where someone's been or who they've been with or who they used to be with, even if they were married," he said with a shrug. It was all she could do to keep from blurting out her wholehearted agreement. "Maybe I shouldn't say 'failed'. Implies we both didn't try hard enough. Like both of us slacked off on studying for an exam."

"Not the case?" she asked lightly, raising her eyebrows.

"I think we both tried as hard as we could. But you can't make a square peg fit in a round hole. Or make two people love one another when they don't," he added, as the waitress laid their plates before them.

"I guess not," she murmured noncommittally. "So... what have you been up to, besides still Seeking?"

"Not much. Read a bit, get away whenever I can. Bought this tiny little cottage up on the steepest mountainside I could find, and I stay there as much as I can manage. It hasn't got much in the way of back garden, but the view is pretty darned spectacular. And you can just let the mountain goats trim the grass," Viktor replied, smiling subtly.

"What, no huge mansion in a big, gated compound with a bunch of house-elves?" she teased.

"Not my style. Why would I want to knock around by myself in a big house? What I've got is plenty, and I can get my own tea and coffee, thanks. Two tiny places with just the number of rooms I need, no more. What? Think you were going to be able to bust me for aiding and abetting the enslavement of house-elves and conspicuous consumption?" he asked, arching a prominent brow.

"Well, I *was* hoping to sell you a badge, at least. I can't believe now that I ever did that," Hermione said, shaking her head. "You remember what you wrote me about S.P.E.W? An extremely noble cause..."

"...but you might want to convince the house-elves of that, first. No good to wish them free if they don't wish it themselves. I remember. I could probably quote every letter I ever wrote to you. I agonized over them all so much, they should be imprinted in my brain forever. No easy task suddenly being asked to communicate in two foreign languages," he said with a small shake of his own head.

"Two? What do you mean?"

"English and 'female'. Twice as incomprehensible to me as regular English,"

Viktor added with a short laugh. “Anyway, I’m training my replacement. She can have the position, and I can retire in peace,” he said.

“Brezneva? I hear she’s good. Fast,” Hermione replied, nodding approvingly.

“She impresses me. She’s just twenty but she’s got twice the sense of a lot of the stringy, old players that have been around the game most of her lifetime. Or in my case, all of it. Isn’t that enough to make you feel old? She didn’t even exist the first time I was in the World Cup. She really knows how the game works, every position, every strategy. Wouldn’t surprise me to see her as a coach, someday,” Viktor pointed out.

“So, when you retire are you going to coach? I can’t believe you’re thinking of quitting at all. I figured they would have to drag you off the broom kicking and screaming...”

“Coach? And get twice the headaches that you get when you’re the Seeker? No, thanks. Maybe someday, but not right now. And I already have the lower end of the age record for the World Cup, I’d rather not capture the other end all by myself. Most geriatric. I’ll settle for the tie with Parkey that I’ve already got. I can’t see it, hanging around that much longer. I knew I was ready to go when I started thinking about not being there for the next season that a new contract would have covered, and it didn’t bother me. It always bothered me before, when I thought about the possibility of not being there. No, I’ve done my time astride a broom, at least in matches. Finishing my contract and that’s it. Retiring at forty-five. If I’m lucky, they’ll play Brezneva about half the matches next season, and I can just sit back and watch her. Then they can put me out to pasture. And in a few years, brag about how I helped train her when she was a rookie.”

Hermione gave a low whistle. “Quite the compliment, coming from you.”

“She’s no Wronski just yet, but she’s got the prime two makings of a good Seeker in large supply. Speed, and being nuts enough to hurl yourself at the ground full speed more than once, even after you’ve broken something. But like I said, it’s her understanding of the whole game that’s really impressive. She could give Ron a run for his money on spouting off statistics and trivia from every game ever played,” Viktor said, glancing back down at his plate, and he missed the expression that passed over her face. “Knows strategies and play diagrams that would make your toes curl. But that’s enough blabbering about me. What have you been up to? Still working in Muggle Relations?”

“No. I gave that up a few years ago,” she protested, surprised and yet pleased that he even remembered what her job at the Ministry had been. “They had the department up and running pretty smoothly, so I thought they could get along

without me. I moved to the Department of Records until recently. I left Muggle Relations three years ago," she added. *I left it when I left him.*

"Already bored with it and ready for another career?"

"Not bored, exactly, the time was just right to move on," she said with a shake of her head. *I couldn't stand to face his father every day. I ran.*

"Ron still an Auror?"

"Yes." *Technically, it was true.* "But he's on a leave of absence at the moment," she tacked on. *It was leave or be fired.* Why couldn't she say it? Why couldn't she force it out of her mouth? Why was she letting him think everything was just fine when it wasn't? He looked up, brows knit together, anxious expression on his face.

"Mandatory leave? Is he alright?" Normally, mandatory leave was reserved for Aurors 'traumatized' on duty. Usually mandatory leave meant you were barely fit to be out of St. Mungo's. *Rarer for Ron's problem. Must be because wizards were exposed to it less...* "I hadn't heard... Something happen to him on duty?" Viktor pressed.

It was odd, how open his face looked now, without the customary scowl. He had always seemed so closed off during that year at Hogwarts. "Off duty." She longed to tell him the rest. *I wouldn't really know if he's alright, to tell you the truth. I haven't talked to Ginny for a couple of weeks. He was, the last time I heard.*

Evidently, he sensed her reluctance. He dropped the subject and shifted tacks slightly. "What brings you to Torquay again, anyway? Holiday, same as me?"

"Actually, I live here, now. I'm between jobs. If you can call being without a prospect 'between'. I've got a cottage out on the waterfront. Just moved up here a month or so ago. Still living out of the boxes, mostly, to tell the truth, but the cottage is great," Hermione said, soft smile creeping onto her face.

"From Ottery St. Catchpole?"

"From London. This terrible little flat that wasn't big enough to whip a cat in and twice as expensive as the cottage," she told him.

"I had no idea the two of you had moved there. I guess not talking for about eight years means you miss out on a lot of news," he said with a shrug. *Not that I was getting much news that last year. Hard to carry on a conversation by yourself when the letters trickle to a stop, like a stream drying up.* He felt an odd

jolt. *I. Why does she keep saying 'I'?*

"I left him. I went to London. He's still in Ottery St. Catchpole," she said so quietly it was almost a whisper.

Viktor put his fork down. "I'm so sorry," he said sincerely, looking her in the eye. He waited, expectant, silent. Most people shrieked like they were in pain and demanded to know why. Why? You two belonged together, everyone said so. Why? You were the perfect couple. Why? You two are all that's left. Why?

And for the first time with anyone but Ginny, she found herself wanting to tell the reason why. To even admit it happened in the first place. "Three years ago. The divorce was finalized six months ago."

"You have my utmost sympathy, then. I know it doesn't mean much right now, but it gets better. Funny, people always think that by the time you divorce, you hate each other so much you're ready to be rid of them, but... It doesn't work that way, does it? Divorce hurts. Even when you know it's the right thing," he said, reaching across the table and laying a hand over hers.

"Don't you want to know why?" she asked, taking a perverse sort of pleasure in being the one to ask first for once. "Aren't you going to ask what happened to 'the perfect couple'?"

"Only if you want to tell me. Otherwise, it's none of my business. If you want to pick over old wounds and compare scars, I can do that. Or I can let it alone."

"Sorry. It's just that everyone asks. Demands to know, really."

"I know. They do even if they know you fought like cats and dogs. They do even if they saw it coming a mile off. And it gets damned annoying. Marta swore she was going to get us signs. Hers would read 'Because money and fame aren't everything'. Mine was going to read 'None of your fucking business'. She always was more polite, bless her," he said blithely, a self-effacing smile creeping across his face.

Hermione laughed in spite of herself. "If you don't mind hearing me moan about my problems, come back to the cottage with me. I've got an entire chocolate cheesecake, there, that is simply calling my name every time I pass it on the counter," she asked on impulse. "And coffee."

"Turkish?" he asked, with a soft smile, raising one eyebrow.

"So strong you can stand the spoon up in it. Come on. We can walk from here." Ron always fussed when she drank that coffee. Always Turkish. And she

couldn't deny that the reasons she drank it extended beyond the taste. He *had* introduced her to it, after all. Maybe it *was* a way of hanging on, even with some small part of her.

"On one condition. You let me get the check."

"Always the gentleman."

"Not always. For instance, I just swore in front of a lady," he teased.

"The lady at the other table is out of earshot," she fired back.

He paid, and they walked in silence most of the way to the cottage she was renting, commenting only on the weather. "Come on in, I'll start the coffee," Hermione said, turning on the light, "and make yourself at home on the sofa." By the time she came back to settle on the cushion beside him, the rich scent of the coffee was wafting through the house as it brewed. She breathed deep, then began, abrupt, overeager. "He drinks." She rubbed her hands nervously on her knees.

"Sorry to hear that," Viktor said plainly.

"That's not the sole reason, of course, but it contributed," she said uncertainly.

"Fatal flaw?" Viktor prompted.

Hermione cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, the thing that drives the final nail in the coffin," he responded. When she stayed silent too long he prodded, "Want me to go first? Had more practice, more time to think about it." She nodded shyly. "Marta and I were introduced to one another fourteen years ago. Everyone was still recovering from the war. She was pretty, smart, funny... She was great, we had a good time together, everyone expected us to get married, so we did, eventually. Only problem is, we both knew it wasn't a good idea, even then. I had one fatal flaw. I wasn't Antonin Drogolov. She was engaged to him. He died in the war, she still missed him, was still in love with him, wasn't really ready to move on. And she had one, too. She wasn't you. See, we made the mistake of thinking that the two of us being beneficial to one another was good enough. Not a bad thing, really, the two of us happening. We both needed somebody, someone to help us heal. Someone to mourn with. To move on. We just shouldn't have pushed it to marrying. Should have shook hands and moved on separately. You can make a marriage work with two people, but not two and the ghosts of two more. She was constantly wondering what it would have been like if Antonin had survived, I was constantly wondering what it would have been like if the two of us..." he

trailed off, leaving the sentence hanging in the air between them.

“But how can it have been a good thing, then?”

“We both at least got willing to take the chance, again. The chance that you always take when you fall in love with anyone. The chance that your heart gets broken. Or at least bruised. We got just enough of a hint of what you risk it for to make us want to again. Some parts were good, even at the end,” he said, picking at a loose thread on his robe. “The talks we had, sometimes. She could always make me laugh even when things were pretty bad. And the one place we were always good together was in bed. Funny, but we always got along there, even when we didn’t anywhere else. Common goal, I guess. To feel good together for a little while, if only to forget how miserable things were everywhere else.”

“Sounds like a case of hindsight being perfect.”

“Not really. We both freely admitted at the beginning, our hearts were really elsewhere. I guess we both thought if we wanted it badly enough, it would happen. We would... really be in love after a while. Not that I didn’t love her, on some level, don’t still love her, but... she wasn’t the person I was *in love* with. And she wasn’t in love with me. I think we loved the idea of getting married and loving one another,” Viktor explained. “Thank goodness we didn’t have any children together, compound one mistake with another. It was gut wrenching enough with just the two of us involved. I can’t imagine involving children,” he said, shaking his head. “You two never...?”

Hermione shook her head vigorously. “No. I thought about it. Wanted to. We even tried for a few months before I realized it would just make things worse. Involving a baby wasn’t going to fix things, it would just make things worse, pile one more problem on top of the rest. I guess... I never really stopped thinking, wondering about what would have happened if I had made the other decision, either. And he knew that. He resented it. I think I knew it was a mistake, even then. But everyone... everyone expected it. Wanted it. Demanded it. I suppose we got along best when Harry was still alive. He was... a buffer. A common interest. He mediated. When he died, I guess the two of us made the mistake of believing what people told us. That we were all that was left, that we belonged together. We owed it to ourselves, our families, the magical community to marry one another. And I suspect we both had ulterior motives. To have the one person who reminded us most of Harry with us. To have a little piece of him with us. To hang on to him. And I regretted it from the day we married. Soon as I saw you sitting there in the church. I wish you had said something. Stopped me.”

“What was I supposed to do, Hermione? You had to make a decision. I had to

go back to Bulgaria and Russia for a few months for the Order. When I came back, you were engaged. To someone else. You were a grown woman. What was I supposed to do? Come and lecture you on why I thought I was the better choice? It was your choice to make. I couldn't make it for you. If I had tried to, you would have hated me and we would have lost touch long before we did. What was left? Breaking up your wedding?" he asked softly, no hint of anger in his voice.

"Sometimes I wish you had."

"All I could do was congratulate the two of you and forget it. Or try to. Hermione, I think I made it pretty clear how I felt, didn't I? I mean, did I make you doubt how much I loved you?" he asked, reaching up and brushing a tendril of her hair back.

"You made it clear. It was just... everyone expected me to marry Ron. And I loved him. I didn't realize until it was too late, though, that just loving someone isn't enough when you have nothing much in common. Or when all you had in common is buried in Godric's Hollow. I admit it. I caved. I caved to the pressure. I did what was expected of me. I wanted to please everyone. And eventually, I hated him. I felt like he was part of it. He made me, just like the rest did. I hated him because he wasn't what I wanted. He wasn't you. At first, it was the little things. Arguing all the time. Him being jealous. He was jealous of you. Even back at Hogwarts. He even yelled about it when I drank Turkish style coffee, said I'd rather be with you than him, that I was throwing it in his face. And I couldn't really deny it. Speaking of coffee, I need to go get that," she murmured, attending to the coffee and the dessert for a few minutes. She set the filled cups and slices of cheesecake on the coffee table in front of the sofa, then settled back down onto her cushion.

She breathed deep and began again. "When I talked about getting money together to buy a house, it was always 'Well, if you had married him, that wouldn't be a problem now, would it?' When I complained about being smothered in all that mess of Weasleys every waking moment and wanting some time to ourselves, it was 'Well, I suppose you should have married an only child, then. Why didn't you?' When I said I wanted to wait to have children, it was 'Well, maybe you should have married someone who likes career girls.' Every chance, he threw you in my face. He screamed when we exchanged letters, even though I let him read them, let him see there was nothing improper. Eventually, it got to be such a hassle, I let them drop. I stopped. We had a blazing row the time we bumped into you and Marta, as well. He accused me of coming on to you, right in front of him and your wife. Turns out my big sin that time was touching your arm for all of two seconds. He was suspicious as hell. Thought I was seeing you, even when you picked up and moved back to Bulgaria. Even after you married Marta. We could never agree on anything.

And after a while, fighting got to be old. Everything was a battle. And fighting wasn't nearly as much fun as it used to be back in school. Then... then he started drinking..." she trailed off for long moments.

He shifted a little, turning to face her more fully. "Early on?"

"Couple of years in. First, it was once every couple of weeks, stumbling in from some bender somewhere, all hours of the night. He blamed himself for Harry, see. Thought he should have been able to save him. Then it got worse and worse. More and more drinking. More and more arguments, when we were talking at all. I cleaned him up, kept him presentable as much as possible, and we lied and said everything was fine. I slapped this big fake smile on, and everyone bought it. I'm not saying it was any more his fault than it was mine. But the Firewhiskey didn't make things any easier. I finally saw that he wasn't going to do anything about it with me there. Maybe he would with me gone. He's moved in with Ginny now. A few weeks back they told him to take a leave of absence from work and get himself together or get fired, he could take his pick. I finally decided that whatever he did, I needed to get out. I couldn't stand sitting around watching him destroy himself piece by piece. And I couldn't make him stop. And even if he could be fixed good as new tomorrow, too many hurt feelings to go back now."

"It's not your fault. You didn't put the bottle in his hand. You can't take it out, either," Viktor said, propping an elbow up on the back of the sofa, supporting his cheek with his hand.

"I didn't help keep it out of his hand," she said, sipping at her coffee and taking a bite of cheesecake.

"Grown man, Hermione."

"I'm partly responsible."

"You are not responsible for the whole world," he protested, picking up his own cup of coffee.

"Surely I was at least a little responsible for the person I married?"

"You were supposed to be his partner, not raise him. I'm sure there's more than enough blame to go around on everything else. But he chose to drink. He owns that decision. Burn all your bridges? Still talk to any of his family?"

"Still talk to Ginny occasionally. I think some of them kind of blame me. Think I'm a traitor for not sticking around. I couldn't stand the accusing looks, the questions. Molly, of course, would like my head on a pike for daring to call her

baby boy a drunk. But I imagine she's singing a different tune, now that Ginny's spent a few months cleaning up his sick, dragging him to bed or covering him up on the floor when he can't make it to bed, and arguing with him when he gets nasty," Hermione said, "unless Ginny's covering for him the way I did."

"Too many hurt feeling to go back, hmm?" he asked, studying her.

"Too late."

"Define 'too late'."

"Too late to salvage any of it. We tore it all to bits and burned it. Then buried the ashes. Don't get me wrong. I still care about him. I want him to get sober and be happy. He just can't do it with me. Our relationship started dying before we even got married."

"Join the club."

"And what club would that be?"

"The 'I wish I knew then what I know now' club."

"But enough moaning about myself. And Ron. How long are you here?"

"I don't have to go back for two weeks, at least. I just got here today. I hadn't even gone to the hotel yet," he added as he picked up the saucer and fork.

"I've kept you from making early check-in time, then. Torquay goes to bed early. Half the hoteliers won't even let you in after nine. Barely will if you're a registered guest already," she said with a smile.

"So I'll sleep on the beach, if nothing else," Viktor replied, giving a dismissive shrug.

"Could sleep here," she offered, in a soft voice.

"This place doesn't look big enough to have two bedrooms."

"It doesn't."

"I don't do sofas," he replied, a subtle curl to the right side of his mouth.

"I wasn't thinking of putting you on the sofa. Small bedroom, big bed," Hermione said, her voice catching in her throat.

"I'm admittedly pretty rusty on how all this male-female interaction works, but if I didn't know better, I would swear that was an invitation to stay the night..." he trailed off, looking her in the eye.

She studied him in return. The thick, dark hair falling over his forehead, skimming the dark brows, eyes so dark that in the dim light, the pupils were almost indistinguishable. Same full mouth, albeit with a softer, more neutral expression now than in the early years she had known him, but the exact same prominent cheekbones, the exotic tilt to the corners of his eyes. The frame heavier, more mature and solid than it had been when she had first seen him at the World Cup, but still slender and lithe. "And if it was...?" She let the question hang between them.

"I'd have to ask a few questions, first."

"Like?"

"Like, do you think it's too late for this?"

"I hope not."

"And second, is this just an invitation to stay the night, or something else?"

"Something else?"

"Just want to make sure the bridge is still there before I set foot on it. Is this just 'stay the night' or is there the possibility of anything else? Like any tomorrows?" he asked plainly, raising his brows in a questioning look.

"If you want."

"This isn't about what I want. The question is what you want."

"I want anything and everything you're willing to give," she answered without hesitation.

"And what are you willing to give?"

"If tonight's all I get you for, that's better than nothing. But... everything. I wish I had offered a long time ago. I didn't figure you would still be interested by now. To be frank, I didn't think you would accept the invitation to come here. Why do you ask?"

"Because. If all I wanted was a tumble in bed, I could find that somewhere else. With a lot less baggage involved. And I'm not talking about where I pack my

clothes.” The corners of his mouth pulled down in a slight frown.

“Those girls with the Bulgarian scarves never quite go away, hmm?” she asked lightly.

To her surprise, he burst out laughing. “No. They just get old enough to rent flats to invite you back to. Or hotel rooms.”

“Seen the insides of lots of flats and hotel rooms, have you?”

“Not a damned one. Nobody else’s hotel room, anyway. I haven’t slept with anyone since Marta.”

“I find that a little hard to believe.”

“Believe it. I didn’t say that I hadn’t had any invitations, just that I hadn’t taken anyone up on one.”

“Why not?”

“Wasn’t interested in what they had to offer.”

“Which was?”

“One night. And not much else to get you through the days to come. Can I be so nosy as to ask how long it’s been for you?”

“Roughly, four years. Maybe longer, if you only count anything pleasurable. Our sex life may have been the first thing to go completely south.”

“Pity,” Viktor said offhandedly, putting his empty cup down.

“Pity it was the first thing to go?”

“Pity no one’s made love to you properly for so long.”

“Think you can do it properly?” she challenged, sly smile curling her lips.

“Given half a chance, maybe. I warned you, I’m rusty. I’m still fairly confident that I’m better than nothing, though,” he said, soft smile spreading across his face.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. There was a time or two when I was married that I would have preferred nothing,” she said, shaking her head ruefully.

“Well, how about we both knock a little of the rust off and see if we still remember how any of the mechanics work, at least?” he asked, gathering her hair and putting it behind her shoulder, then planting a soft kiss along her jawline, near her ear. He trailed a finger along the side of her neck, then nuzzled against her throat, lips warm and gentle on her skin. She sighed and raised a hand to the back of his neck, twining her fingers in his thick hair, pulling him closer.

His hands slid around her waist, warm and strong against her back, right palm massaging between her shoulder blades, fingers working and kneading lightly. Viktor trailed his mouth back to her chin, kissing her there, then covered her mouth with his.

Hermione concentrated on the feel of his lips against hers, gave herself over. When her lips parted, he nipped at her lower lip with his teeth, then sucked gently at the bow of the upper for a moment. When he smothered her mouth again, the tip of his tongue flicked against her mouth, tasting, testing, slipping briefly inside. She began to reach for him with her free hand, but he captured her wrist lightly between his finger and thumb, halting her. “Not here... wait until we’re in bed... Bedroom?” he said into the shell of her ear, voice low and husky.

“End of the hall,” she said, and he slipped a forearm beneath her knees, scooping her up off the sofa, situating her in his lap for a brief space of time, nibbling gently at her earlobe before lifting her again and standing. He carried her to the end of the hall, through the open door of the bedroom, and sat her on the edge of the bed, where she slipped her feet out of her shoes, letting them fall to the floor.

Sitting on the edge of the high bed, she was level with his chest. Hermione unlaced the neck of his short robe, revealing his collarbones, and she paused to trace her fingers over the ridge of them. When she pulled her hands back, he crossed his arms, grabbed the lower edge of the material and pulled it over his head, discarding it on the floor.

She ran her hands over the smooth, firm curve of his shoulders while he traced his own finger over the hollow of her throat, then followed it with his mouth, lips brushing feather light over her skin. Hermione sucked in her breath when he kissed along her collarbones, then stroked a hand around the opening of her blouse. She embraced him, then trailed her hands up and down his back, pulling him toward her, her breathing quickening. When he pulled away she reached for the buttons of her blouse, but he whispered, “Let me,” and gently folded her hands away, slowly unbuttoning and peeling the fabric back from her skin, revealing her shoulders, then her bra, finally undraping her and sliding it off of her arms, dropping it onto the floor with his own robe.

He caressed the upper curves of her breasts with his fingers, then trailed them

down, and she could feel her nipples tense and harden beneath the satiny fabric of the cups, beneath his touch. Viktor cupped her, circling his thumbs lightly, and she gasped softly. His hands glided back around her torso, and he unhooked her bra, sliding the straps down over her shoulders and off her arms. He touched her again, without the fabric between, kneading her full breasts lightly, then fondling and teasing over her skin, her nipples hardening even more.

Hermione reached for the waistband of his trousers, but again, he fended her off, capturing her hand and giving it a heartening squeeze. He shook his head when she gave him a questioning look. "Be patient. We've got all night. More than that, if you want it. Two whole weeks, I'm not going anywhere. I want to touch you all over, first... really make love to you..." Viktor brought her hand to his mouth, kissed the back of it lightly, then turned it, kissing the palm and each fingertip in turn. He felt her pulse flutter under his lips when he kissed her wrist, then worked his way to the soft, inner fold of her elbow, the warm, firm curve of her upper arm, her shoulder, kissing and stroking each in turn.

He ducked his head to her breast, mouth finding her nipple, licking and suckling as he teased the other with the ball of his thumb. She closed her eyes, threw her chin toward the ceiling and reveled in the attention. After several minutes, she heard him whisper, "Lie back... enjoy it..." in her ear, and his hands were on her shoulders, guiding her back onto the mattress. She lay there, eyes closed, light glowing bright and tinged with red on the other side of her closed lids, hearing the solid thump of his boots hitting the floor as he discarded them, then the soft protest of the springs and the slight shift when he joined her on the bed. When she opened her eyes, he was sitting beside her, over her. Viktor stroked a hand lightly down her side, tucking his fingers into the waistband of her skirt, rubbing a thumb thoughtfully over the button there.

"The light..." Hermione gasped, same old ridiculous panic and self-consciousness settling in, even as she chided herself for it. It hadn't always been like that. Not in the beginning.

"What about it?" he asked idly, flicking his thumb against his finger, rubbing the button back through the slot, leaving only the raised zipper between them.

"It's... still on..." she pointed out lamely, feeling her cheeks flush.

"So it is. And is that a problem?" he said lightly, wiggling the fingers in her waistband. When she broke off her gaze, he said, "I want to see you." No answer, only the furious blushing, and silently cursing her own shame.

"I... I've put on some weight," she squeaked, choking on the words, ashamed she had said it.

“What? Since I first met you? I certainly hope so. What? A pound?” Viktor said with a low, throaty laugh. “So have I.”

“But... you’ve put it on in all the right spots,” she said, biting her lip.

“Self-conscious? You? I can’t believe that...” His dark eyes came into the field of her vision once more, as he leaned on one elbow, looked her in the eye. “About what?”

“My belly,” she replied softly. “It sticks out.”

He raised back up, but soon she felt his fingers curl lightly under her chin, bring her face back to him. “You know... most men find a little bit of a tummy sexy. And trust me, you can’t have more than a little bit of one,” he said, looking slightly amused, but then the look dissolved into one of concern. “What did he say to you?” Viktor paused a moment, looking at her intently. Hermione had the fleeting thought that she had never felt more naked. “Hermione?”

“He never would have said it if he hadn’t been drunk... half the time when we did... it was just him rolling over on me, smelling of booze, in the middle of the night, with no warning. After a while I got tired of it, of it being nothing more than a ten minute rut. When he could manage it at all. Which got to be less and less the more he drank. One night, I made the mistake of making fun. He could be nasty when he was drunk. Not physically, but sometimes he... said things. Of course, I started it by being nasty in the first place. He told me that it was no wonder he couldn’t get it up for me... fat and ugly as I was...” she trailed off, trying to force herself to study his chin rather than look into his eyes.

Viktor tilted her chin up again. “You’ve got to know that was the drink talking. You know Ron would never have said that...”

“I know. But it doesn’t make the little voice at the back of my head go away, either,” she replied, shaking her head.

“How about I take a look and give you my honest, unvarnished opinion, then?” he asked gently, and she nodded her consent, tilting her pelvis as he drew the zipper down, then shucked the waistband of her skirt low on her hips. She obligingly tilted her pelvis back up so he could draw the skirt down her body and free. He peeled the waist of her knickers low on her hips as well, then ran a hand over the ripe, full curve of her belly, the round and soft peak between her hipbones. Viktor caressed the hollow of her navel with his index finger, circled around it, then down to the line where her panties barely covered her now, then along the ridge of her hipbones. “You have such a beautiful body... absolutely nothing to be self-conscious about,” he said earnestly. “Best I remember, women aren’t supposed to be built like boys of thirteen. They’re supposed to be

softer. Rounder. Curvier. Unless you want to be built like a board, I don't see anything wrong. You have a wonderful figure. Ripe," he murmured, planting a soft kiss just below her navel.

"You're not just saying..." Hermione prodded as he raised up again, propping over her once more, face to face.

"Does that feel like I'm having a problem?" he asked bluntly, pressing himself firmly against her thigh. Hard. Rigid.

"No... no, it doesn't..." she replied, gasping when his hand slipped between them and stroked her where the thin scrap of material still covered her, the heat of his hand, his skin, almost shocking, even after all his touching and caressing.

"I want you naked. Then I'm going to ravish every inch of you. Every part of you. If I haven't kissed, tasted or touched it by the time you get my trousers off, you had better direct me to it, because you're not getting my trousers off until I've done everything I can think of. Got that?" he asked lightly, a slight, bemused smile gracing his face.

"But I want to pay you back..."

"Stop right there. Hermione, just let someone do something for you for once. No keeping tabs, no feeling obligated, no paybacks, no keeping a responsible little tally and making sure everything comes out even... just let me make you feel good," he pleaded, hand tucking further between her thighs. "No keeping a ledger in bed. Promise?"

Hermione searched his face for a minute. "Alright," she breathed.

"Good, then," he said, moving his hand beneath her, sliding it beneath the waistband of her knickers, kneading the curve of her bottom while bending his head to her breast. He raised himself again, and slowly slid the last piece of clothing down her thighs, removing and discarding them.

He knelt and massaged her lower legs with his hands, pressing his fingers firmly against the muscle, and she could feel herself relaxing under his touch. Viktor slowly worked his way up her legs, finally pressing against her inner thighs with his thumbs. When his lips followed and touched her there as well, she shuddered. He prodded her to part her legs further, pressing his palms to her legs. He kissed the insides of her thighs more fervently, and she felt his hair brush against her occasionally, skimming her skin or tickling past the curls between her legs.

Then he was touching her there, teasing at her with a single fingertip, parting her

gently, stroking and dipping lightly inside. Shallow at first, but gradually deeper, curling and nestling within, a second finger joining the first as he watched her expression. Several minutes of insistent little thrusts, relentless and rhythmic, thumb pressing against her clitoris, caused her to writhe in response, breathe heavier. The first gliding sensations gave way to a stronger one, the feel of her muscles clutching fitfully around his fingers tucked inside her, a flood of warmth and wet.

“Now?” she whispered when he withdrew, but he held up a single finger in a gesture that said, ‘Wait’ and put his mouth to her, lips first, then tongue, working at the same places his fingers had just been. When she felt her muscles spasm again, she pleaded, “Please, I want you inside...”

“Whatever you want,” he said with a raised eyebrow, and his hands went to the drawstring of his trousers.

“Wait... let me...” Hermione said, and he dropped his hands to his sides, kneeling there, between her splayed knees. She rose to her own knees before him and loosed the laces, peeling them down his narrow hips, then his boxers, touching him lightly before drawing her hand back. He sat and pulled both the trousers and the boxers the rest of the way off in one smooth motion. She began to lay back, arranging herself on the mattress, and opening her arms to him.

He lowered himself over her, tracing a forefinger along her lips, kissing her tenderly on the mouth, then nudging at her, positioning himself. She lifted her hips from the mattress slightly to meet him. A soft, experimental nudge. Slipping just inside. A harder push, slight resistance, a slow advance until he was completely inside of her. A pause there as he planted a kiss on her mouth, then a slow rhythm, in and out, filling and emptying, his chest brushing and pressing against her breasts, all silent except for their breathing.

There was a steady, relentless building, and he stilled occasionally to simply lie on top of her, inside her, nuzzling at her throat, or stroking her, running a hand over her body, over the full curves of her figure. She clamped her lips together and let out a muffled “Mmmph”.

“It’s okay to make noise, you know. Talk to me. Tell me what you want. What you like,” he murmured into her ear, moving against her.

“This. More. Deeper,” she said, putting her hands on his shoulder blades, then sliding them down his back, feeling the muscles tense and release, tense and release, tense and release. She uttered a small cry when he lifted further off of her with his arms and arched his back, thrusting into her more deeply. In turn, she arched her hips to meet his long, slow strokes, setting up a languid rhythm, lift, push, fullness, ebb and drop, begin again, tide rushing in, tide flowing out.

“Please... don’t stop... “ she gasped when he stilled and lowered himself to nibble at her shoulder.

“If I don’t, I’m not going to last much longer...”

“I don’t care. Finish it. Faster. I can’t bear you stopping right now,” she pleaded, squirming a little beneath him. He tucked his forearms beneath her arms and behind her shoulders, propping on his elbows, and obliged her request, thrusting hard and fast. In a few minutes he tensed, teeth clenched, and she felt him quiver, then a fresh flood, and her own muscles quivering and clutching around him as he remained nestled inside her. Viktor kissed Hermione again, his mouth covering hers, teasing at it.

“You’re so beautiful,” he breathed, kissing her forehead. Under the circumstances, from anyone else, it would have seemed ridiculously chaste. Instead, it seemed merely tender. They remained twined together in a tangle of limbs for a few minutes, exchanging kisses and contented sighs. “Turn over. I’ve just seen the one side,” he said with a small smirk, lifting off of her, withdrawing.

“And what are you going to do once you’ve seen the other side?” she teased as she turned over.

“Give you a backrub, for a start.”

“I won’t argue, then,” she said as he kneaded her shoulders and ran his thumbs along the back of her neck. She shivered a little when he kissed his way down her spine, rubbing his hands down her back as he worked his way down, massaging her lower back for a while, then kneading her bottom. “Suddenly I think I realize why all those society matrons are so fanatical about going to those posh spas and getting rubdowns. That feels simply incredible...”

“Big hands should be good for something,” Viktor said with a laugh, slipping his fingers between her legs, drawing a light circle on each of her thighs, sliding a long finger, then a second, inside her once more, working between her folds. She tensed as he stroked her gently, right hand drawing light patterns along her lower back at the same time. She lay there, limp, letting him touch her until she reached orgasm again, crying out softly into the pillow. “As you can see,” he said, lowering himself over her once more, “I don’t see anything wrong with this side, either.” He tucked his chin over her shoulder, resting lightly on top of her.

“You mean ‘as you can feel’, don’t you?” she asked, pushing her hips back against him. “I can feel that you don’t waste any time getting ready for round two, do you?”

“Like this? Or some other position?” he asked, threading a forearm beneath her torso and giving her a squeeze to him.

“Let me up on my hands and knees,” she answered, and she raised herself, opening herself to him. There was no holding back this time, no patience, no drawing it out and making it last, just need. Need to please themselves and each other, need to touch, to feel one another, his hands bracing firm on her hips when they weren’t roaming her body. They were both damp and panting when they collapsed back onto the mattress, Viktor resting his cheek between her heaving shoulder blades for a few minutes, reaching out and threading the fingers of his left hand through hers, stroking her hair with the other until they regained their breath. They lay together, drowsing, eyelids heavy for some time before he rolled to his back beside her, resting his head next to hers, so close she could smell him, the barest hint of soap and shampoo mingled in with clean sweat and the slightly musky, almost sharp, scent of his skin.

Hermione picked herself up and draped herself across his chest instead, pillowing her head against him, where she could hear his heartbeat beneath her ear. Viktor’s hand went up to idly twine in her hair, winding tendrils around his finger, then smoothing them back in, finally stilling and cupping warm and gentle against the back of her head, holding her to him as they drifted off to sleep.

She almost didn’t dare to open her eyes in the morning, afraid it might have been a dream, but as she lay there, the sunlight glowing behind her lids, the soft tattoo beating beneath her ear, the warmth radiating from him, and the hand cupping her shoulder told her it was no dream. Hermione felt deliciously naked, lying there, without the sheet pulled shyly up under her chin. Cocooning. Hiding. That’s what she had done toward the end. Lights off, sheet up, fumble in the dark, like she had something to be ashamed of. And he had, too. Maybe she had, then.

She raised her head and appraised him frankly. Dark hair charmingly mussed, draping over his forehead and the pillowcase, equally dark eyelashes brushing his cheeks, slight pout in his sleep, like a little boy. Torso and arms, not what you could really call broad, but solid and muscular. He was certainly a far cry from the very skinny boy he had been at eighteen. One big hand casually draped across his flat stomach, legs sprawled, at complete ease in his sleep, naked, unabashed, unashamed. She almost hated to wake him. Almost.

She trailed a hand lightly down his chest, over his own, down below his waist, stroking him. He didn’t stir at first, and she jumped in surprise when he murmured, “Lord, what a wake-up call... Please tell me you don’t have to be anywhere today,” before opening his eyes.

“I have a pressing appointment right about now. I’m supposed to be on top of

you,” she responded, kissing his lips.

“See, now, I knew that the shy and bashful thing from last night just wasn’t you. Come here. Don’t want to be late for your appointment,” he teased as she straddled his hips, easing herself into position while he planted his hands on her hips and guided her down. “That’s the woman I remember. The one who wouldn’t be afraid to grab a man in a dead sleep first thing in the morning without worrying about how her hair looks.” Hermione settled into a gentle, rocking rhythm as he trailed his fingers slowly over her front, over and around her nipples when she leaned forward, down and around the soft flesh of her belly, along her sides, following the ridges of her hipbones. When he tensed and spilled inside her, she lay back down on top of him, tucking her head beneath his chin. “Good morning to you, too.”

“Two weeks,” she said, rubbing her hand over his collarbone and breathing in the scent of him. His hand worked in her hair once more.

“Two weeks. All yours. And if you want to come back with me, I have a tiny little cottage up in the mountains with not a house-elf to be seen and a back garden the size of a postage stamp. Tiny little bedroom, giant king-size bed. And the view is incredible. Also all yours, if you want.”

“I think I’ll take you up on that. I always wondered what a mountain goat looked like up close.”

“No responsibilities to hold you here? Maybe I was wrong, then. Maybe you have changed a little. For the better. I half expected you to reel off a dozen reasons why you couldn’t possibly, Hermione.”

“Freedom is one of the wonders of being unemployed. Besides, I’ve got a responsibility to myself. To see about doing what I want for a change.”

“And what would that be?”

“Being with you. Just being with you.”