

“Well, would you look at that?” Simon wondered out loud.

“I can’t look at that, because my son is hogging my Daily Prophet,” Hermione pointed out, settling in across the table in the breakfast nook with her cup of tea. “What’s so fascinating that I should take a look at it?”

The paper came down, and a scruffy redhead, with a light sprinkling of freckles across the pale skin, popped over the edge. They were clustered particularly around the bridge of the long nose, and as always, Hermione felt a slight pang of bittersweet memory when she realized how much he looked like Ron. “Guess who is going to be at the convention center at the same time you are?”

“I don’t know. Marvin the Mad Muggle,” Hermione said with a sigh. “Isn’t that the only type that would be caught dead within a mile of a professional Arithmancy conference if they didn’t have to be?”

“Mum,” Simon said in a warning tone. “Be serious. I’ll give you a hint. It’s a summit on International Wizarding Relations.”

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Hermione insisted.

“Viktor Krum,” Simon said. “He’s the delegate for Bulgaria. You and Dad used to know him, didn’t you? And Uncle Harry? You should look him up.”

“Well, of course we did. You know your history. But I haven’t seen him since... good grief... must be well over twenty years, now. His wife was expecting their first, then. He probably wouldn’t know me from Merlin by now if I did say something to him,” Hermione said dismissively.

“Well, what if I want an autograph?” Simon said with a grin. “Oh, come on, I’m only joshing. Seriously, though, you should say something to him if you see him. You’re always complaining about how you’ve lost touch with a lot of the people you used to know. Well, here’s a chance to say hello to one of them. And if you happened to get an autograph, I could take it off your hands.”

“Your father will never be gone while you walk this earth,” Hermione said pointedly. “You are every bit as infuriatingly single-minded.”

“Thank you,” Simon said tartly. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Now, I’ve got to go to work. You can have your old newspaper back. I’ll be back in the morning to see you off. Still planning on taking the new ferry, then the Floo?”

“Yes, I am. Even if it does sound nauseating. The ferry being described as the aquatic equivalent of the Knight Bus does not exactly calm my fears,” Hermione sighed, picking up the discarded Prophet. “Or my stomach.”

"Thanks for the tea. I'll be sure to come by and water the plants while you're gone," Simon said, ducking to give her a quick peck on the cheek before dashing for the door to the flat.

"You do that," Hermione murmured, studying the front page for a moment before thumbing through it, searching for the article. Sure enough, there it was. In black and white. The summit was to be held in Russia, same week and same convention center as the one she was planning to attend. Skimming through the list of delegates, she let her eyes linger on the line with his name. They hadn't spoken in ages. There had been a few scattered letters over the years after the war, usually with pictures of the children. A touchingly written sympathy card that she had received the day of the funeral. But distance and being busy with their own lives had won out, eventually. They each had their own families to see to. Children to raise. In her case, alone.

Hermione had followed his career in the papers, of course. She felt he deserved every ounce of the success he had. She had even gone along with Harry to his last game at the Bulgarian National Stadium. Hermione had been well pleased that he looked content, flanked by his wife and children at midfield after the match. He had seemed a bit quicker to smile than she remembered, but still uncomfortable with too much attention. Viktor had simply nodded his acknowledgement and walked off the pitch without so much as a backward glance, much as he had done in the first match she had watched. Less battered and certainly cleaner, but apparently no more eager to stick around for the applause. Last she had read, he had accepted a position with the Commission of Magical Games and Sports in Bulgaria. Even that must have been over a decade ago.

There had been no chance at all to speak with him, then. And if there had been, what would she have said? *What would I say now, for that matter? How have you been for the last few decades? He probably wouldn't even want to talk to me. And even if he did, the chances of me finding him in that crowd are probably around nil.* "Face it, Hermione. Don't hold your breath about getting to speak to Viktor. And what would we talk about, anyway? How many years we haven't talked to one another?" she said out loud, laying the paper aside to concentrate on her tea.

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"You be sure and promise me you'll talk to him if you see him," Simon said, giving his mother a hug, then straightening back up. He tucked his gloved hands beneath his arms in the face of the cold wind off the water.

"Why are you so hell-bent on my talking to someone you've never even met?"

Hermione asked, exasperated.

“Look, it took me, Aunt Ginny, Uncle Harry, Gran, Granddad and a partridge in a pear tree to even convince you that getting out and going to this conference would be a good thing for you. And you’re always complaining about how you hardly ever see anyone you knew from Hogwarts any more. And you kept complaining about how you wish you had tried to talk to him when you and Uncle Harry went to see his last game. So... talk to him now. Don’t go hole up in your hotel room and not say boo to anyone all week. Here’s someone you conveniently know, right there at the same hotel. Talk to him. Besides, Uncle Harry is dying to know what he’s up to,” Simon admitted. “He flipped when I told him you two would be in the same convention center.”

“Oh, I see! Harry’s putting you up to this, hmm? Well, you tell your Uncle Harry he can do his own nosing instead of sending me to do his dirty work. Does your Uncle Harry want an autograph?” Hermione said, crossing her arms.

“Not that I know of, but I still do,” Simon said with a lopsided grin.

“You’re hopeless. I’ll call when I get there,” Hermione said, turning on the dock to face the ferry.

“Travel safe, Mum. And have a good time. Try not to be all work and no play. You are capable of it, you know. And keep warm.”

“You’re starting to sound like me. Or your Gran,” Hermione observed.

“Well, she did knit you that scarf,” Simon pointed out, tugging at the end.

“I need to get on the ferry,” Hermione said, watching the boarding attendant, who was checking his watch.

“So, get on. I’ll take care of your plants.”

“That’s exactly what worries me. Ginny could-”

“... could kill your plants just as dead as I can,” Simon finished for her. “Get on the boat, Mum.”

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Hermione dropped her bag just inside the door to her hotel room, pausing to look it over. She peeled off the thick cloak and the scarf, draping them on the hook beside the door before ruffling her hair with her fingers. The first session of the conference wasn’t set to start for another thirty minutes, but she had yet to find

the rooms where the sessions would be held. Hermione ducked into the small bath, after retrieving a brush from the overnight bag, and she hurriedly ran it through her hair. She smiled at herself in the mirror a bit ruefully when her brushing resulted in her hair looking, if possible, even bushier and more untidy. At least when it had been longer, it had straightened slightly under its own weight. When she trimmed it at shoulder length, it seemed compelled to stick up, unfettered, in all directions at once.

Half-heartedly, Hermione tidied a few strands with her fingers, brushing some of them behind her ears. She took a step back and surveyed her clothing. A shade rumpled from the traveling, but they would have to do, as she didn't have time to pull anything else from the bag.

After a short internal debate, she dashed back to the door, retrieved her handbag and pulled out a little used tube of lipstick. After a rushed blotting job with a tissue, she tucked it away again. *Silly. Who do I think I'm fixing myself up for? Now I just look rumpled and painted. Simon's got me acting like I'm going to bump into him in the stairwell first thing or something. Silly boy. The chances are slim to none. This center is a few miles long at least. I could hunt for him all week and never bump into him. And why do I keep thinking about bumping into him, anyway? You would think I was fourteen again. And I haven't been fourteen in a very long time. Too long.*

"Too long. He probably wouldn't even recognize me. I doubt I would recognize him, either. Simon, your mother is about as likely to talk to Viktor Krum at this conference as Hagrid is to take up breeding fluffy bunnies. Your mother also definitely needs to get out more. She's gone to talking to herself in the mirror and addressing people who aren't there," Hermione added with a sigh. "She also needs to find the room for the first session and lose about ten or fifteen pounds," she said, bending over and rummaging through her handbag for the map of the center that she had received at check-in. After a few moments, she came up with it, studied it for a space, and then tucked it away in her pocket while she pulled out a small pad of parchment and a quill, for taking notes. She took one last rueful look at her thick-soled, scuffed, practical shoes before tugging down on the lumpy brown sweater she wore over her long, matching skirt. She wished there had been time to change, but she shrugged it off and dashed out the door instead, intent on not being late for the first session of the conference.

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Hermione stepped out of the room and flattened herself against the wall beside the door, trying to stay out of the stream of people while she tucked her pad and quill back into her bag. Already there had been so many useful things and ideas she wanted to jot down that she felt as though her head were swirling. She stood for a moment, content to watch the crowd filter by and think before making her

way back to the room. *I'll just order room service, something small. Perhaps a sandwich. No need to go out anywhere...* It only nagged at her slightly that Simon would be disappointed to hear she had been nowhere but her hotel room and the conference room on the first day.

The racket in the hall was unbelievable, and it reminded Hermione of the United Nations. Everywhere there was a veritable Babel of different languages, evidence of the wide and varied number of conferences that were scheduled in the center. Over on a bench in the middle of the hall, a couple of witch doctors wearing elaborate headgear chatted away as though they were waiting for the number five bus. Across the way, two French women who had been in the row in front of her during the session made small talk, the occasional word drifting through the thinning crowd. Almost directly across from her, in a side hall, the animated conversation of two dark headed men standing outside a door of their own drifted to her, clearer and clearer as the crowd drifted off to lunch.

Slavic, obviously, judging from the occasional word that reached her ears unimpeded by the other conversations. *Russian, maybe. Locals, probably...* Hermione thought as the conversation became more and more lively, gathering up her bag and settling it on her shoulder. She was just about to set off back to her room when two words reached her ears, crystal clear and unmistakable. Hogwarts. And Durmstrang. Hermione came up short. *I can't have heard what I just heard*, she thought. Then it came again. Hogwarts and Durmstrang.

Hermione looked off into the short hall, debating. Apparently, the two men were doing the same, with raised voices and hand gestures to match. It looked friendly enough, but there was definitely some disagreement going on. Hermione drifted over to the hallway entrance, peering down it as though she were interested in the room numbers on the sign above their heads. They paid her no mind at all, so she took the opportunity to study them. The first was of an average height, clutching a half-empty mug of coffee that looked to be in imminent danger of spilling over when he gestured at the taller man.

The second felt oddly familiar just from the little sidelong glances she had been giving him, and it only took a split second for her to recognize him when she boldly and openly looked him over. Especially when he reached up with a long index finger and absently pushed a pair of wire rimmed spectacles farther up the bridge of his prominent nose, settling them above the obvious crook there. Even with the addition of the glasses and a few years since the last time she had seen him, there was simply no mistaking that profile. Hermione crept a bit closer, making no secret of the fact that she was studying him now. He looked little different from the last time she had seen him, save the glasses. The cheekbones were still high and a bit sharp, hair still black, figure still on the thin and angular side, though a far cry from the very thin boy that had gone swimming in the lake in January at Hogwarts. No, no mistaking it. That was Viktor. "Viktor Krum," she

found herself blurting aloud, barely audible over the constant stream of patter and the sloshing of the coffee. Viktor held up a finger in her direction, without turning to look at her, acknowledging that he had heard. Obviously flustered, the other man wound up his small tirade with a derisive snort. "Hagrid's going to have to start breeding fluffy bunnies," she murmured half to herself.

The thick eyebrows lowered in a puzzled expression, as though he couldn't possibly have heard correctly, before he snapped his head around to look at her. "I beg your par... Hermione!?"

"Well, I suppose I lost a bet with Simon. I said you wouldn't know me from Merlin if we did manage to run into one another," Hermione said mildly.

"Sim... Of course. Your son. What are you doing here? I'm stuck at this thing, obviously," Viktor said, recovering himself and jerking a thumb at the placard on the easel next to the door. "Besides, I might have glasses now, but I'm hardly blind or senile, yet. I'd know you anywhere. Even with a haircut. Which looks very nice, by the way."

"I'm across the hall, there. Arithmancy conference. Cutting it was a mistake. Gave it license to stick up everywhere," Hermione lamented, running her fingers through it.

"Still haven't learned how to accept a compliment," Viktor replied with a shake of his head. "The proper response is, 'Why, yes, it *is* fabulous, isn't it? Thank you for noticing.' Or some such."

"No point in lying," Hermione protested.

"Off to another session, somewhere, or lunch?" Viktor asked.

"Oh.... lunch. I was just going back to the room to order a sandwich from room service-

"Nonsense! Let me take you to lunch, somewhere. I don't have to be back until half past one. When are you due back?" Viktor asked, pulling a small pocket watch out and peering at it.

"Same time," Hermione said. "But I can't let you-

"I can't let you go back to your room and eat a sandwich, either. Come on, you've got a lot of news to catch me up on, I'm sure," Viktor said.

"They were bringing lunch here..." the other man interjected weakly.

"You eat mine, then, Evtimov. I hardly think they'll miss me. Can't argue with their mouths full. And if I don't get out of there at least a little while, I'll strangle one or two of them," Viktor said lightly, gesturing at the open door and the group milling around inside. "I suppose we had better eat in the center, somewhere. No time to go anywhere else."

"There was a cafe between this section and the hotel, wasn't there?" Hermione suggested, pointing and edging toward the walkway between the two sections. "So, I take it from what you said that this is going about as well as these things ever go?"

"Two steps back for every three steps forward," Viktor admitted. "You get one person to agree with the first person, and by then, the first person has reversed positions, and you have to start all over again. You bicker for an hour and realize you've forgotten what you were bickering about in the first place. And maybe, just maybe, at the end of the day, you've managed to get one thing down on paper that everyone agrees on. In other words, much better than usual," he added, falling into step beside her.

Hermione laughed. "Why is it someone who doesn't care much for talking keeps having his arm twisted to negotiate with a bunch of hardheads?"

"Oh, I'm just as big a hardhead as they are. Difference is that I'm always right," Viktor said with a short laugh. "One of the benefits of being thought of as 'quiet' is the fact that, when you speak, people think it's important to listen. And if you can't get them to listen, you can't get them to agree. Having a name to throw around doesn't hurt either."

"True enough. And what might you be trying to get them to agree on?" Hermione asked as they rounded the corner, slowing to look at the names on the windows along the walkway.

"A load of dreck we should have been able to agree on thirty years ago. That would probably bore you to tears," Viktor said.

"In other words, none of my business?" Hermione replied.

"No, it's everyone's business. It's simply not that exciting. Same old ridiculous arguments. This one okay?" Viktor asked, stopping in front of a smallish restaurant that didn't look too crowded.

"Looks fine to me," Hermione agreed, stepping in when he held the door for her. Within a few moments, the waiter had settled them in at a corner table, leaving them to study their menus.



"How long has it been? Since we talked to one another face to face, I mean," Viktor elaborated, setting the menu aside.

"Don't make me feel so old by asking questions like that. It must have been over twenty-five years. You were expecting your first, whenever it was," Hermione pointed out.

"It's been a good thirty, then, if it's been a day," Viktor said, arching an eyebrow in some surprise.

"Thirty years! It can't be," Hermione protested.

"Do the math. Vladimir's twenty-nine. I'll just have the borscht and the coffee, thanks," he added to the waiter when he returned.

"I'll have the same. He can't be. There's no way," Hermione insisted.

"How old is... Simon, isn't it?" Viktor asked after a moment's thought.

"Twenty-six," Hermione admitted. "That doesn't seem possible, either. It was before Ron and I married, then... Of course, it's why you missed the wedding. What about the rest of yours?"

"Stanislav is twenty-five," Viktor said, leaning back so the waiter had room to set their orders down after fetching them from the counter. They ate in silence for a few moments before going back to chatting as they ate.

"What about the baby?" Hermione asked. "Still at home?"

"The *baby*, if you could call her that, is twenty and has a flat and a job," Viktor said with a wry smile.

"*Anna*? It seems like three weeks ago that you sent me a letter and a baby picture!" Hermione exclaimed. "Or the one where she was missing both her front teeth."

"Tell me about it. It was hard to watch her go. Before, I always had more in reserve. Made the house seem awfully empty," Viktor admitted.

"I know the feeling. You wish you had the peace and quiet, and then when you get it, it's awful," Hermione said.

"You complain about tripping over all their things on the floor, and when they leave for school, you wish you had something to trip over. Never mind when they move out for good," Viktor agreed. "So... what's Simon doing?"



"Works at the Ministry. Made Arthur extremely proud. Now he can brag there's three generations of Weasleys working there, with him and Percy," Hermione said, sipping her coffee. "It's only a little more than an entry level job, but he has a chance to move up, eventually."

"Everybody has to start somewhere," Viktor replied. "Are you still working for the Department of Mysteries, Cursebreakers Division, or will you have to kill me if you answer?"

"I'm still there. And it's not exactly exciting, either. Just theoretical research, mostly. They're footing the bill for this conference. What are your children doing?"

"Oldest one is, if you can believe it, a mediwizard. Probably thought if I didn't retire he could just make his living off of me. Works at the sister institution to St. Mungo's in Sofia. Well, that and... Here, I'll make us both feel really old," he said abruptly, fumbling in a pocket for a moment, then a small wallet, before handing over a photo.

"It's not..." Hermione said after a moment.

"It is," Viktor said with a grin.

"You're not old enough. If you were old enough, that would mean I am!" Hermione protested.

"Hate to tell you, but I am," Viktor said mildly.

"Vladimir's?" Hermione asked, running a finger over the image of the slightly solemn, dark-eyed little girl with coal black hair in the photo before handing it back.

"Evangelina. She's eight months old," Viktor said, tucking it away.

"I bet you're not proud at all," Hermione teased.

"Proud isn't the word for it. Foolish, more like," Viktor allowed.

"You still have the job with the Commission?" Hermione asked.

"For some nutty reason, they made me in charge of the place. If anything ever makes my hair gray, that will be it," Viktor said ruefully. "Or these stupid informal summits."

“Well, congratulations. On both counts. The grandbaby and the job,” Hermione said. “Or jobs. What about the other two?”

“Stan works as a wandmaker’s apprentice for Gregorovitch. Anna was crazier than the other two put together and she’s playing Quidditch. She’s a reserve Chaser for Vratsa for the time being,” Viktor said, propping his chin in his left hand.

“Not a Seeker?” Hermione said with a raised eyebrow.

“No, thank goodness. Not her style. No unfair comparisons, that way, either. I would have been rotten at being a Chaser. She’s not. Don’t you dare let it get back that I said this, but another five or six years, she could be as good as Lara was. But she’s going to need every year of it. Lara was cagey. That’s what made her so tough. You have to get a few years on you to be cagey. Anna’s a little impatient. She thinks she ought to be, now,” Viktor said.

“Lara?” Hermione prompted.

“Ivanova,” Viktor elaborated. “She’s still the meanest Chaser, man or woman, I’ve ever seen. She could burn a defender a dozen ways without even mussing her hair. She made them beat themselves.”

“Oh. I see. What about your wife? What’s she doing?” Hermione queried, the band on his left ring finger catching her eye. “She used to do some commercial art, didn’t she? And portraits?”

Viktor lowered his hand and his eyes. Fiddled momentarily with the ring, clearing his throat. Hermione had just begun considering the possibility that she had put a foot horribly wrong somehow when he looked her straight in the eye and said in a hushed voice, “Magda passed away four and half years ago.”

Hermione was horrified to hear herself floundering in much the same way she had hated so, when she had been on the receiving end, after Ron’s death eighteen years ago. “I... I didn’t know... I’m so sorry... If I had only known...”

“No need to apologize. No reason for you to know about it,” Viktor said evenly.

“It’s just... you were still wearing your wedding ring, and I saw it and-” Hermione babbled, then stopped herself. “On your left hand. Of course. I’m such an idiot. Slavic. Right hand, married, left hand-”

“Divorced or widowed,” Viktor finished weakly. “It’s okay. You of all people should know I won’t break just because you bring her up,” he said more firmly. “I don’t get much chance to talk about her, any more. You know how it is. People are

afraid to bring them up in front of you,” he said, looking at her significantly

“Speaking of which, I never thanked you properly for writing me when Ron was killed on Auror duty. I can’t tell you how many times I took it out and read it. It made a difference. Everyone else just wanted to mollycoddle me and ‘poor thing’ me,” Hermione said in a rush.

“I’m still sorry I couldn’t make the memorial service. I didn’t find out until it was too late to make arrangements, with the kids...” Viktor said softly. “Must have been tough, with Simon so young. And so sudden. At least we had some warning.”

“Viktor... I’m so sorry to hear it. How?” Hermione asked gently.

“Cancer. She avoided people in the healing profession almost as avidly as I did. By the time she admitted something was wrong and they found it, it was beyond treating, really. By Muggles or wizards. Well, they could have, but it would have just dragged things out. Even the mediwizard said so, and you know how they are, most times. Come in with a trident through your head and they’ll tell you a plaster and a potion will do it. She decided she would rather die at home on her own terms than in a bed that wasn’t hers in exchange for living another few weeks or months. So I brought her home and let her die. She was gone in twelve weeks,” Viktor said in a flat voice. “Can we stop apologizing, now? I bet we’re both sick of the ‘I’m sorrys’.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione blurted before she could stop herself.

The barest hint of a smile flitted across his face, then he sobered. “I’m not. How can I complain after getting twenty-seven years and three children with her? Tell me you would trade however long you got with Ron for anything else,” Viktor said.

“Eleven years. And no, I wouldn’t,” Hermione answered. “No one ever understands that, do they? If they haven’t been through it...”

“Then you understand why I’m not sorry. Even if I didn’t expect being nominated into this club for a good, long while yet.”

“No one ever does. You always think it can’t happen to me...” Hermione said.

“War should have taught us better,” Viktor said with a wry smile. “But we’re all a bit stupid when we’re young, aren’t we? Up to your ankles in bodies and you still think, no, they won’t get me.”

“That could apply to a lot of things,” Hermione replied. “War teaching us better.”

"Like everything we're debating at that damned summit I need to get back to," Viktor said, glancing at the clock. "I didn't even get the chance to pump you for information about everyone back in Britain. Doing anything for dinner?"

"Not a thing," Hermione admitted, rising and putting down her money.

"I was going to get it," Viktor protested, doing the same.

"It's okay, really, I've got it," Hermione said.

"Then I'll get dinner. What room are you in? I'll come pick you up at seven? That's not too early, is it?" Viktor asked.

"That would be fine. I'm supposed to get out at six. Plenty of time to change into something equally frumpy and rumpled," Hermione said, tugging at her sweater.

"It isn't frumpy. Room?" Viktor countered.

"Room four aught five."

"You're right below me, then. Room five aught five. Walk you back?" Viktor offered.

"Seems logical, since we're right across the hall from one another. Looks like I owe Simon big time, then. Here I claimed I would never run into you. And I do the first day," Hermione mused.

"You're here all week?" Viktor pressed.

"All week," Hermione admitted.

"Me, too. Well, then, that's plenty of time to find out what everyone in Britain is up to. Provided you don't get sick of me, first," Viktor said.

"I shouldn't think there's any danger of that," Hermione said. "Provided I can keep my foot out of my mouth, you mean."

"Your foot was never anywhere near your mouth. You asked an honest question. By the way, yes. Magda painted mostly and did the odd logo, poster or ad. She was never happier than when she reeked of paint, linseed oil and turpentine," Viktor said as they walked briskly back toward the convention center.

"She and Dean Thomas would have liked one another," Hermione said.

"You and Magda would have liked each another. More than you know. It's a real pity you two never really got a chance to get acquainted with one another."

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"You're late," Evtimov hissed under his breath as Viktor sat down next to him.

"Am not. You're a minute early getting started," Viktor insisted, checking his watch. "The old blunderbuss hasn't even gotten up a good head of steam, yet," he added, nodding toward the chair of the meeting, who was still shuffling an impressive stack of parchments on the table in front of him and making a few scattered comments as he had time, over the rustling.

"That 'old blunderbuss' is on the Board of Governors with you!" Evtimov said in a warning tone. "If you want him to agree to any changes at Durmstrang, you had better not let Petrovich catch you calling him that."

"I'm very well aware he's a Governor with me, thank you very much, because he's bored me within an inch of my life at a few of those meetings as well," Viktor replied. "They didn't send you with me because I'm daft, you know."

"True. Crazy, maybe. But not daft," Evtimov responded indulgently.

"Now, then, if we can all settle down after lunch," Petrovich announced in a sonorous voice, "I believe we're ready to hear some thoughts and observations on more permanent inter-Ministerial relations from Germany's esteemed delegate."

"Here go another two hours of our lives we'll never get back," Viktor muttered, rolling his eyes as the German representative stood with a thick bundle of parchment notes in hand. "You take notes this time."

"What are you going to be doing?" Evtimov asked sharply, taking up a quill.

"Staying awake and feigning interest, if possible. You would think we had never fought the damned war," Viktor complained, folding his arms. "Oh. Wait. Most of the people in here didn't. They sent other people to fight it."

"I do hope you're getting all of this out of your system, now, before you take the floor," Evtimov said.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Viktor said with a sigh. "I wouldn't even bet on my turn coming up before the week ends," he added, snapping the pocket watch shut and dropping it back into his pocket.

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Hermione dug through her bag once more, looking over the meager offerings she had packed. *So much for traveling light*, Hermione thought. “Leaves you nothing to wear, traveling light does.” She considered the blouses and skirts she had placed on the hotel bed once more, pursing her lips. “I suppose this would do, provided I get the wrinkles out, first, and the blue blouse would go-” *Why am I babbling? You would think it was the Yule Ball all over again*, Hermione scolded herself, shaking her head. *Next thing you know, I’ll be taking three hours to get ready.*

She took up the wrinkled skirt and flicked her wand at it, smoothing out the fabric. She looked over the clock on the bedside table and found she still had plenty of time to change and ready herself before Viktor was due to arrive. In fact, she found herself with a whole five minutes to spare by the time she had nervously checked her hair for the third time and slicked on a fresh coat of lipstick. “I act like I’m in for a job interview,” Hermione told her reflection. “Silly goose.”

She had just removed her cloak from the hook beside the door when there came a soft rapping. After a quick peek through the peephole, Hermione opened the door. “I hope I’m not too early,” Viktor said.

“Not at all. I’m ready,” Hermione replied.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” Viktor asked, nodding his head at her.

“Yes. Something wrong? Not fancy dress enough?” Hermione said, looking down.

“There’s nothing wrong with your outfit. I was referring to the cloak. It gets terribly cold after dark. You’re going to get chilled in that,” Viktor said, picking up an edge of the fabric draped over her arm, fingering the thickness.

“I’m afraid it’s the only one I packed. It’s the heaviest one I have, in any case,” Hermione explained.

“Here, try this instead,” Viktor offered, holding out the thick fur cloak that had been draped neatly in the crook of his arm. “If it doesn’t drag the ground, wear it. Shouldn’t. It’s supposed to be a three-quarter length.”

“But, then what would you wear? I can’t let you do that just because I didn’t come properly prepared for the weather,” Hermione protested.

“I’ve got another upstairs. Always bring a spare. That way, if you’ve been out in

the snow, you don't have to cast drying charms or put the damp one back on next time you go out. It's been known to be so cold you'll have to double up, even. I'll go fetch it. Be back in a minute," Viktor said, walking back down the corridor toward the stairwell.

"I'll remember that for next time," Hermione murmured to herself, putting her own cloak back on the hook. Awkwardly she slipped the borrowed cloak around her shoulders, fumbling with the unfamiliar clasp at the neck. A bit hesitant, she smoothed a hand over the light tan fur, rearranging it around her. Even after a bare moment, Hermione could tell it was a great deal warmer than the thick wool one she had packed.

"You do have gloves?" Viktor asked, standing in the open door once more and clasping another cloak, slightly darker, beneath his chin. "Wouldn't hurt to put them on. Even if it is only a couple of blocks. If you have no objections to going that far... I didn't even ask. That was extraordinarily rude of me," he said, tugging on his own gloves.

"No, it wasn't. I don't know where anything is around here. Besides, Simon made me promise I would at least get out of the convention center at least once on this trip. Promise kept, I suppose," Hermione demurred.

"Wouldn't want you breaking a promise," Viktor agreed. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Hermione replied, stepping out into the hall with him and closing the door to her room behind. They walked in comfortable silence down the stairs, past the front registration desk, pausing near the door to pull their hoods up close to their faces before stepping out onto the sidewalk. Hermione saw immediately why Viktor had been so insistent about the cloak. Even shrouded in the hood, the occasional invading gust of cold air nipped almost painfully at her cheeks, and her breath swirled in a dense fog that enveloped her face.

The town surrounding the convention center was large and well lit, seemingly springing up around the center like a fairy ring. At first glance, it could have been any busy Muggle town, but for some of the people you saw on the streets. Like Hogsmeade and the convention center, the place was exclusively wizard, and you were as likely to see African witch doctors and hags as someone in Muggle garb with a wand discreetly slipped into a pocket. This evening, no matter what the garb, everyone was hurrying to get inside and out of the bitter cold. "Up there," Viktor said in a moment, pointing to the next door. Hermione ducked in as quickly as possible when he held it for her. "Now, you see what we used to put up with at Durmstrang in winter?" he said, stepping in and closing the door behind them.

"No wonder the cloaks were part of the uniform," Hermione said, tipping the hood



away from her face. Her cheeks stung slightly when the warm air of the restaurant hit them, and she was certain they were red.

“Sometimes, getting older stinks,” Viktor said abruptly, tilting the hood back with one hand, removing his glasses with the other. “Anti-Fog Charm never works properly around here. Temperature difference is too big, I suppose,” he griped, holding out the misted over glasses and cleaning them with his wand. “Still, better than last year. I had a lens crack and had to fix that.”

Hermione laughed in spite of herself. “How long have you had them?”

“Two years. Tell Harry I now sympathize,” Viktor said, settling them back on. “I never could have played with the damned things. With everything else we can do, you would think we would have eliminated the need for glasses.”

“Well, a lot of Muggles *do* wear contacts,” Hermione replied.

“I have a thing about not sticking anything in my eye that doesn’t belong there,” Viktor admitted as the host returned to the front desk. “Hello, there should be a reservation, under-”

“Krum! Of course! Take your cloaks?” the host offered eagerly. Within a very short time, he had them settled at a table and Hermione finally took a good look around. The decor wasn’t quite what she had been expecting.

“An Indian restaurant?” Hermione said, puzzled.

“Don’t laugh. It’s some of the best Indian food I’ve had outside of India. Don’t even bother looking at the menu. Just tell them you want the mild curry and be done with it. Even better than the ones in Britain. Speaking of which, I believe you still owe me a rundown on part of the inhabitants. Start with Harry. Haven’t heard a thing about him in ages,” Viktor said.

“You do know that he finally got married? When he was thirty-five and Molly had just about lost all hope?” Hermione asked, pausing when the waiter returned for their orders.

“French girl, wasn’t she? Rosaline something or other? Graduated from Beauxbatons?” Viktor asked.

“Nothing wrong with your memory. Chirac. She came over to work for the Auror program, so they met at work. Their daughter Lillian is fourteen and off at Hogwarts. She’s her mother all over again. Harry doesn’t mind a bit, either,” Hermione said.

“Still an Auror? Both of them?” Viktor elaborated.

“Well, Rosaline still works for the Auror program, but in more of an administrative position, now. She didn’t really want to leave field duty, but Harry talked her into it when Lillian came along. They don’t particularly advise married couples both work in the field, any more. When they do, they refuse to put them on the same teams. Too much potential for orphans, that way. Harry still does field duty. Couldn’t talk him into leaving if you tried. Even Ron getting killed on duty didn’t scare him out of it. He’s good at it. He loves his job. Well, Ron did, too. And luckily, time has rather softened Harry being...” Hermione trailed off.

“It? The Boy Who Lived? Our only hope?” Viktor prompted, raising an eyebrow.

“Exactly. Big weight to have on your shoulders. He’s a lot more comfortable in his skin, these days,” Hermione said. “He’s ... healthier.”

“Can’t be healthy, growing up like that with those... people... then getting thrown without warning into this world where everyone knows who you are, but you don’t. Then they have the gall to dump being everyone’s savior on your shoulders, being responsible for everyone’s lives before you’re even old enough to shave. If that doesn’t mar your mental health, what would?” Viktor mused. “He’s happy, then?” Viktor added after a long pause.

“I believe he is. It took him a long time. He threw himself into his work and avoided the lot of us as much as possible for years. Molly and Arthur, bless them, didn’t understand why he couldn’t just *be* happy. But, I suppose they have no idea what it is to be really, truly alone. To have that kind of responsibility. Even seven children pale in comparison to the rest of the world. I suppose by the time Ron and I started dating, Harry was starting to heal. Really heal,” Hermione allowed, pausing while the waiter put down their plates. “I think we’re all more resilient at twenty-two.”

“Speaking of which, what changed? You and Ron, I mean. Last I talked to you before I went back to Bulgaria, there was nothing going on between the two of you. Except a friendship,” Viktor said, smiling softly.

“That’s a mystery for the ages. I don’t know. I suppose he changed. I changed. We all changed. We went out and got our own lives and took a bit of a break from one another, and it did us all good. By the time we had all finished our job training and started being around one another frequently again, it was like being reintroduced and looking at one another with fresh eyes. We were all different people. Even my friendship with Harry changed. And Ron... well, I can’t completely explain it. Things just seemed to fall into place after that, and we let it happen. Sometimes, all the stars align just right, sometimes they don’t. If anything had happened any differently, I don’t think we would have ended up

together,” Hermione said with a shrug. “We wouldn’t have been right for one another, otherwise.”

“I understand. A detail or two different, and your whole life could be different. So. Harry, married, one daughter, still an Auror. Check. You and Ron, Arithmancy and Auror, respectively. How was the wedding, since I didn’t make that, either?” Viktor asked pleasantly. “You know, my kids really mucked up what little there was of my social life. Even before they got here.”

Hermione laughed. “It was nice. Whole passel of redheads and other friends crammed into a church with far more white netting than should be legal in that small a space. I would say we kept it small, with family and close friends only, but you and I both know you can’t possibly call the Weasley clan ‘small’ with a straight face.”

“I’m terribly sorry I couldn’t make it, then. But my wife was still about to burst. I couldn’t just go off and leave her at home, two weeks overdue and miserable. And to add insult to injury, Vladimir wasn’t even born for four more days. I could have gone and been back in plenty of time. And he’s been running behind ever since. The word ‘hurry’ is just not in his vocabulary. If he had come on time, I would have been there, at least,” Viktor insisted.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t be there, too. I missed having you there. If it’s any consolation, we did drink a toast to you, Magda and the baby,” Hermione said.

“Well, we drank a toast to you, Ron and Harry four days later. Poor Magda. She pretty much took to the bed for three weeks every time. She once told me that women who are barely over five feet just weren’t designed to carry ten-pound babies,” Viktor said with a soft smile.

“Surely not. All three of them?” Hermione said.

“Just a few ounces shy, all of them. Even Anna. Magda wouldn’t even consider a girl’s name when she was expecting her. Couldn’t convince Magda that a baby that big might be a girl. All my fault, of course, just like it was my fault they all had big feet. You remember how big she was when you saw her before you and Ron married? That was nothing compared to how big she got eventually. She must have had almost four more months to go, then,” Viktor said.

“That’s hard to believe. She was so tiny, otherwise. Simon was seven and a half, and that was plenty for me,” Hermione replied. “I thought I got pretty enormous, and I was a lot bigger than Magda, and I’m not exactly tall. Even if I did just meet her the once, besides your wedding, at that match in Scotland, I remember her being fairly petite and small boned.”

“She still was, everywhere else. Barrel-shaped would not be a completely inaccurate description when she got pregnant, though. There was a lot of hauling her off of and out of the furniture. She would manage pretty well until that last month, and then she would just give it up and start lying around. Not that I blame her. I would have laid myself up for the whole nine months. What about the rest of the Weasleys?” Viktor asked.

“Well, Bill married Fleur, of course, and he still works for Gringott’s in Egypt. Charlie’s still at the dragon preserve in Romania, and he married a local girl. Percy and Penelope Clearwater married, and he still works at the Ministry. Fred and George still run the joke shop. Three kids apiece. Serves Fred right that all of his are girls. Ginny ended up with Michael Corner. Two boys. Arthur’s just about set to retire. Molly clucks and worries over the lot of them like an old mother hen with a brood of chicks, but she loves every minute of it. Anyone else you want to know about?” Hermione said, finishing the counting on her fingers.

“Longbottom. He’s at Hogwarts, isn’t he?” Viktor said after a moment’s thought.

“He took over the Herbology Professor position. He married Luna Lovegood. Frank was the most adorable little boy I’ve ever seen. Grant you, he’s twenty if he’s a day by now, and I haven’t seen him in at least five years, but I sometimes bump into Luna at Diagon Alley. She manages a shop, there,” Hermione said. She drained her glass completely. “Well, if the food is any better in India, I’m half tempted to move there.”

“Told you I was always right,” Viktor said with a chuckle. “I hate to cut this short, but I need to get some things together for tomorrow.”

“I’ll let you go if you promise to do more of the talking at lunch tomorrow,” Hermione conceded.

“If you buy,” Viktor countered.

“It’s the least I can do after you picking up dinner,” Hermione agreed. “And lending me a cloak so I don’t freeze my fool behind off.”

“No one ever understands just how cold it is here until they come. Local cloak shop does a booming business when they get some new international convention. They probably rub their hands together in glee at the weather report,” Viktor said, standing and putting the money down to cover the bill.

“Are you sure they’re not just trying to thaw their hands?” Hermione said, standing.

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"Thank you for dinner," Hermione said. "Here, I had better give you the cloak back-"

"Keep it. You might need it the rest of the week. Can't hurt to have it, anyway. And you're welcome for dinner. You made a better dinner companion than Evtimov. I'll see enough of him this week and he always wants to talk politics. It's good to catch up a bit. McGonagall keeps me up on Hogwarts a little, as she has time, but it's mostly business talk. I imagine she's busy enough being Headmistress without trying to keep me entertained or up on everything," Viktor said.

"You're sure? About the cloak?" Hermione said.

"You can give it back before we leave, if that's bothering you. Or send it back by owl post if it's still cold enough to wear it when you leave. I won't freeze. Certainly not in bed, tonight. See you tomorrow, then?" Viktor asked.

"I'll come interrupt your conversation promptly at lunchtime," Hermione agreed.

"That would be perfect. Most of my conversations so far this week haven't been so pleasant as this evening's. I would probably be eternally grateful," Viktor said.

"Well... goodnight," Hermione said awkwardly.

"Goodnight," Viktor echoed before heading back up the hall toward the staircase. Hermione shut her door when he was out of sight, and hung the borrowed cloak over her own on the hook by the door.

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Viktor hung his cloak on the hook and sat in the overstuffed chair near the bed. He reached for the stack of parchments and correspondence on the bedside table with reluctance. He quickly flipped past the notes that Evtimov had taken, on to the numerous reports the bean counters at the Ministry had insisted on compiling and forcing on him before he left. Cost analyses, time and personnel investment, projections, he skimmed them with little interest. They all struck him as vain attempts to quantify something that was impossible to quantify. The value of having something a little more permanent in place in regard to the Ministries communicating with one another. In case the unthinkable ever happened again.

"Why our memories are so short, I'll never know. What's supposedly unthinkable has already happened twice in my lifetime. If we hadn't left it to Britain alone in the first instance, who knows? Maybe it would have been just the once," Viktor

murmured, setting those parchments aside. He scanned the nearly finished letter back to the Commission, took up a quill and jotted a few additional lines about the scheduling of matches for the end of the season and a signature, sealed it and tossed it onto the bed. He would have to run that by the front desk in the morning to be posted. The unopened mail was mostly mundane and routine. Some memos from the office. A quick note, posted from Spain by Anna. She always wrote rather than calling when she knew he was away from home.

The last one in the pile, however, caught his eye. The Hogwarts seal tended to stand out. "Well, Minerva. Speak of the devil," Viktor said aloud, running a finger beneath the seal and unfolding the parchment. Usually, Minerva's letters were little more than news briefings, a bit on the school, how things were running on occasion, a bit of staffing news or inquiries about similar things at Durmstrang. Since being roped into the position on the Board of Governors there, he had been in a rather unique position to provide similar information in kind. This one seemed to fit the norm until he reached the last few lines.

Viktor closed his eyes for a moment, then reopened them. He reread the last few lines and found them unchanged. He couldn't quite decide if he had wanted them to disappear or not. Either way, they hadn't. They were still there, in Minerva McGonagall's prim, neat hand, in bold, black ink. *As the Ministries seem as slow as ever to make progress in establishing ties between countries, I am interested in reestablishing ties at the school level, through once again reviving the Triwizard Tournament. Would there be any interest in doing so at Durmstrang, and would you be willing to work toward the end of convincing your Board? If neither Beauxbatons nor Durmstrang are up to the challenges of hosting, we would certainly be willing to take over those duties once more. I think it preferable if Durmstrang plays host, however.*

The Tournament. These days, it tended to be mentioned with equal parts fear, awe and hushed reverence. Every once in a great while, someone would wonder aloud if it would ever be revived again, but no one had seriously put the idea forward. Before now. The fact that most people considered the one Viktor had taken part in the opening salvo of the second wizard war meant that it hadn't been brought up a great deal in his presence. And that had suited Viktor just fine. He had spoken about the events of the Tournament as little as possible.

After a while, the children had just stopped asking about it, curious as they were. Though, whether that was due to the vague answers he usually gave, when he gave them at all, or due to Magda finally telling them the subject was off limits, he still didn't know. He suspected the latter. Viktor had just about held his breath every August, when school letters came, dreading the possibility that the letters to the parents might announce a yearlong hosted event, or worse, ask your permission for your child to participate in a delegation to another campus.

Joining the Board had at least been a small comfort in that regard. The last three years of Anna's schooling had been free of worry about being blindsided in August by a revived Tournament. Things like that didn't just materialize without going through the Board. Otherwise, he probably would have told them to find someone else, at least until Anna had graduated. Cedric Diggory, Harry Potter, Fleur Delacour; to the children, they had just been the names of the other Champions in the Tournament when Tate had been in it, not memories. Not people. To him, Cedric Diggory was the boy who had been both kind and brave when he had no real reason to be. Eternally frozen on the border between childhood and adulthood at seventeen. Eternally frozen in memory as a limp, lifeless corpse with pale lips, lying on the grass outside a maze made of hedges.

That had been the blessing and the curse of coming back to Bulgaria after the war. You got away from it. You weren't forced to deal with it every day, but on the other hand, it was the last memory you had of so many places and people. No newer, better ones to come along and replace them. Maybe that was part of why he hadn't gone back. He had been half afraid there wouldn't be anything newer and better there to replace them with. That everyone involved was still just as broken as when he had left.

All of them had been at least a little bit broken after the war. You couldn't help but be, after that mess, witnessing so much death and cruelty. Finding out just how cruel you could be in return. Even the youngest among them had felt all used up and worn out. All of them had found their temporary outs. It seemed like all of them had wanted to curl up and fend off everyone, cut off all interaction. Perhaps it was the years of forced close quarters. Or the idea that you couldn't possibly trust anyone after witnessing all that. Or the fact that you were overloaded and overwhelmed, and people in general were just too much to handle, never mind trying to manage anything so complicated and sticky as a relationship of any sort with someone. It had been, in one sense, the generation that had avoided one another for as long as they could stand. The two oldest Weasleys had promptly escaped back to their jobs. Most of the foreigners, back into their own countries. A few to different parts of Britain, because home was no better. Harry, Ron and Hermione had thrown themselves into training for their eventual jobs. Some had disappeared into retirement. Others into reorganizing and rebuilding. One or two he could name, into the bottom of a bottle.

He had come back to Bulgaria, which was mercifully removed from most of the fighting and his job. It was easier to forget there. It was a lot easier to clear your head when you were on a broom, doing what you had always wanted to do in the first place. You could almost forget there had been a few years when flying just for the sake of flying had been a near unattainable luxury. You could throw yourself into getting your play, your team, and the league back up to the level it was before. It was welcome respite, focusing on tiny, inconsequential things like statistics, scores and techniques. Things that didn't involve life or death, contrary



to what some fans thought.

Viktor hadn't planned to stay away from her. Not for good. It had always been in the back of his mind that going back to Britain for some time would be the plan someday. Or maybe she would come there. Only, a convenient someday never quite came back around. Short visits, that had been all. First few times he had been back, they were both still feeling broken enough that they still didn't think giving a romantic relationship a try was a good idea. Always sensible and honest with one another, maybe to a fault. Each time one of them had brought up the possibility, they had each admitted to not being ready just yet. And by the last time he had visited, Magda had already come into his life. And it had been completely right, if wholly unexpected. Unexpected, unplanned, and eventually, unavoidable.

*Unavoidable, that's what this was,* Viktor thought, staring at the letter. *It was bound to happen. I had just hoped it would be outside of my lifetime. When I wouldn't have to be bothered with the details. Or the memories.* "Darn you, Minerva. Why did you have to go and bring this up now?" he said, sighing and putting the letter on top of the stack. "And why am I so certain it would be a good thing if I convinced them?" Pulling Evtimov's notes out of the pile once more, Viktor read more closely and jotted down a few notes in the margins. But the nagging question in the back of his head wouldn't quite go away. He finally decided that the bit of unpleasant past remembered still paled in comparison with the pleasant remembrances for the day. Receiving the request from Minerva wasn't a wholly pleasant experience, but bumping into Hermione again would more than make up for it by the end of the week. It could possibly even make up for the abject boredom of sitting through this conference in the first place.

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Hermione settled back against the pillow and dimmed the light. Simon had been amusingly smug about her news when she had called on the Floo, and had apparently managed not to kill any of her plants just yet. The thought had flitted through her mind that he might not be so smug if he knew just how possible it was that things could have turned out much different. Not at this conference, but after the war.

A detail or two different, and your whole life could be different, Viktor had said earlier. It certainly wasn't the first time she had considered that. In the first few years after the war, she had often wondered just how different things might have been if it hadn't been for meeting Ron and Harry on the train, or the troll in the girl's bathroom, or if any of the myriad things any of them had said had been worded just the slightest bit differently... It was impossible not to examine every single one of your actions from eleven on and wonder if a misplaced moment or a misplaced word might have been the exact thing that resulted in something

terrible years later.

After the war, as well. The ways they had all chosen to heal, the exact timing of letters and visits, decisions and accidents, all of them had played a part in where her life had ended up. Just friends, for right now, they had decided, before the war. Until things get back to normal. How incredibly naive that sounded, now. As though anything could ever get back to normal. It had been both a relief and a burden for the both of them to share that they weren't ready even when things had gotten back to relatively normal. Like most everyone else in the wake of the war, they had been more intent on picking up the pieces and putting them back together rather than seeking one another out. "I can't just yet. I wouldn't even know where to begin," he had confessed on his first trip back. Frankly, he had read her mind. She wouldn't have known where to begin either.

So, they had agreed to give themselves time. It took time. More than she ever could have imagined, for both of them to be ready. And before they had both been ready, he had made his last visit. He had explained in person. In some ways, it had been a shock, but they had parted on excellent terms. He had been almost apologetic about finding someone else in the meantime, but neither one of them had really regretted it. "We could have worked, if things had been different. They weren't. You didn't find someone else to hurt me. It just happened. You should be happy with Magda if that works. I would be happy for you if it did, because I care about you," she had told him. Hermione had even attended the wedding a couple of years later.

Not too long thereafter, she and Ron had started over, with a different sort of relationship. And it had worked. A detail or two different, and it all might have been a very different life, indeed. Attending Viktor's wedding had probably been the beginning of the end for her second-guessing every move she had made. He was obviously in love with Magda, and friendship seemed like plenty, and they were both at peace with their decisions. He was happy and her time would come sometime in the future, with someone else. At the time, she hadn't known the "someone else" would be Ron.

"A few details different, Simon, and you wouldn't be here. But, then, a few details different, and I might not be here. Or any of us. Once upon a time, your mother seriously considered being more than Viktor Krum's Yule Ball date. It might have been, but we never really tried, due to bad timing. Or perhaps it was good timing, since we seem to have found someone right, in spite of ourselves. And the important thing isn't what might have been. It's what was," Hermione said aloud. "And what is," Hermione added, rolling over and curling up on her side.

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“Have you got something treed in that watch?” Evtimov whispered.

“What are you on about?” Viktor whispered back, not bothering to look up from the page of notes he was jotting down while the Polish delegate jabbered on and on about equitable representation.

“Well, you keep taking that watch out and looking at it, at least once an hour, so I thought that maybe you had something of great interest in it,” Evtimov reasoned.

“Just wishing lunch would get here,” Viktor muttered.

“Any particular reason?” Evtimov asked, arching a dark eyebrow.

“I skipped breakfast. Took a couple of calls from work. Called home. Talked to the grandbaby. Got a late start, didn’t have time,” Viktor bit off.

“You’re cranky when your blood sugar is low,” Evtimov teased. There was no response.

“Yes, was there a question?” the Polish delegate, Czolosz inquired with the slightest hint of indignant reproach, pausing in his rambling.

Viktor looked up guiltily, like a schoolboy caught out talking during the lecture, then sat for a moment, completely silent and still. “Yes. Actually, I do have one. For all of you. If you’re all planning to complain before this thing even gets off the ground that you’re going to be underrepresented, I want population figures. From all of you. Collection dates, demographics, estimates on minimum per capita representation that you feel is equitable, the whole works. Can any of you actually show me the number of people you claim to represent? Magical folk only, of course.”

You could have heard a pin drop in the room. Czolosz blinked in a stunned fashion for what seemed a small eternity. “You want... figures?” he said, as though it were an unfamiliar, untested word.

“Yes. Numbers. I want numbers. You’ve all tossed around all kinds of numbers, but none of the ones that matter. The ones about people. The people for whom we’re supposedly hammering this agreement out. Stop talking ‘underrepresented’ if you can’t back it up. But present it after lunch, because I’m starving, and I’d wager my left arm that you haven’t got them on you, now,” Viktor shot back.

Petrovich cleared his throat loudly in the long silence that followed. “Well, yes. Excellent suggestion. Excellent. I think we’ll dismiss until the afternoon, then, unless anyone has any objection? No? We’ll step away, then.”

"You should have just apologized," Evtimov muttered through clenched teeth as the others stood and scraped chairs. "We don't have-"

"Relax, the bean counters were good for something," Viktor said, pulling out the sheet of parchment. "That's the only page of figures they gave me that I think is worth spitting over. Now, I'm going to lunch. I could eat a Hippogriff," Viktor called over his shoulder on the way to the door.

"About the figures..." Czoslosz said anxiously, loitering in the doorway.

"Call your Ministry and get them to put the numbers together. Most recent ones you have will do. I don't expect you to run out and count noses personally. It doesn't have to be right after lunch," Viktor said with a sigh.

"I thought perhaps over lunch, we could discuss-"

"If I said 'I would love to,' I would be lying. Normally, I would... but I'm meeting a friend. And the last thing I want to discuss right now is this conference and little handshake agreements on the side. Look, if you think I'm always going to side with you just because we're from Slavic backgrounds, you can forget that right now. Back it up or don't bring up the whinge. And right now, I would prefer you back it up out of this doorway. If you want my support, make your argument sensible," Viktor said mildly. "That's a reasonable enough request, isn't it?"

"I suppose," Czoslosz said, reluctantly stepping aside. Viktor worked his way across to the other bank of conference rooms, weaving through the growing crowd. Finding the door where he had dropped Hermione off the day before, he slumped against the wall near the doorframe. One of the people filtering by gave him an openly curious look, then looked guiltily at their feet as they hurried on. It was then that Viktor realized he had been glaring. He made an effort to relax his face before the other session let out. He had felt tense and cranky as a sore-tailed cat most of the morning, and the last hour and a half of ridiculous droning on an empty stomach and a poor night's sleep hadn't helped.

The door beside him opened and people began to trickle out. He reached out and latched onto her shoulder when Hermione stepped out. "How was the morning?" Hermione asked brightly.

"Long. Seriously, run, before I go back and throttle one of them with a cost analysis," Viktor said sourly.

"That good, hmm?" Hermione said, a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth.

"I threw 'get me some useful statistics' at them all in desperation. That's how

good this morning was,” Viktor replied tartly.

“Well, come on, then. Don’t want to get you arrested for a throttling,” Hermione said, cupping his elbow and steering him toward the walkway.

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“You must be awfully busy. You know, most people have *fewer* jobs when they retire,” Hermione pointed out, cutting into her chicken.

“First career wasn’t a job, according to some people. What do you mean you get paid to play? I’d love to have a job like that, where I got paid for nothing but playing. Must be nice to draw a paycheck and not have to do any *real* work,” Viktor said. “Funny, it felt pretty real when I was doing it. Besides... the Board of Governors... I got ambushed into that. I didn’t really want it. Not while Anna was still in school, certainly. Last thing I wanted to turn into was one of those parents who hold everything from wages to facilities over the heads of their child’s professors. I would have preferred to turn it down, if a few things had been different,” he explained, making a face.

“I’m sure you weren’t Durmstrang’s version of Lucius Malfoy,” Hermione said.

“Hell, no. Excused myself from every sports-related decision for three years. Didn’t buy the poor, deprived thing so much as a pair of Quidditch gloves or even suggest how often they should trim the pitch. And I made them hold the letter with her class schedule until after we had done all the salary setting for the year. I didn’t even want anybody thinking I was trying to pull strings or influence people. Or thinking she was getting preferential treatment, least of all her. Been there, done that, remember? People who favor you do you no favors,” Viktor said.

“Enjoy the Commission job?” Hermione asked.

“It has its moments. You get to see a lot of matches. And if all the teams and all the venues hate my guts equally, I know I’m doing my job properly. You would be amazed at some of the things the owners try to strong-arm you with. Give you the most ridiculous sob stories and whine like two-year-olds when they don’t get their way. I’ve even gotten an earful from my own daughter about the input I had on the rankings for the last European Cup. She thinks I shortchanged Vratsa, but if they wanted the higher seed, they should have won their last match. If that’s not equity, I don’t know what is,” Viktor said with a shake of his head.

“How on earth do you put up with that? No one ever being completely happy with the way you do things?” Hermione marveled.

“Easy. Play deaf. Selectively, of course, but play deaf. And know that if someone’s a little too happy, you might have made a mistake. Besides, I played. Complain all they like, at least they know I’ve been on the other side of it, which is more than you can say for some of the Commissioners. And you get used to it. If you’re on a team, and not playing well, your teammates and coaches aren’t happy. If you are playing well, the reserve who wants your spot isn’t happy. If you aren’t winning all the time, the fans aren’t happy. If you’re winning all the time, the opposing teams aren’t happy. Or at least, they think they aren’t. Sport. The great leveler. Makes most everyone miserable a good portion of the time, but they all keep coming back for some reason,” Viktor said with a sly smile.

“I would agree with that. Why Ron tortured himself so over the Cannons, I’ll never know. And now Simon’s doing it. So, how is it you’re keeping the Commissioner job with Anna on a team, when you didn’t like being on the Board?” Hermione asked.

“Once you get up to the pro level, Merlin himself couldn’t get you on a team if you didn’t deserve the spot. No coach or owner is going to waste money on the poorer player on the off chance it pleases the Commissioner. And when in doubt, err on the side of the team that doesn’t include your daughter. If you’re biased, you’re going to hear about it. I trust the rest of the office to keep me honest when I can’t decide. Besides, the wonderful thing about sport is that it often boils down so wonderfully to inarguable, uncontroversial numbers. It’s the only reason I’m glad of statistics. If you can wave a mathematical formula based on wins, losses, point margins and so on, it helps. And as far as venues go, I spread the wealth. The one with the cold, hard, lumpy seats gets just as many playoff matches as the best one, over the complete cycle. I’ve found they all get about the same attendance, anyway. People will forego a comfy seat for a good match. And if you put good matches in the venues long enough, eventually they can afford to replace the cold, hard, lumpy seats. It’s all very clever and sneaky and so incredibly straightforward that all the other Commissioners would probably laugh right in my face if I told them how we did things,” Viktor said conspiratorially.

“Don’t tell, but I’m trying to get them to make it about that simple for the international decisions. Although I do like the rather clever idea the Japanese Commissioner had about the winner of the World Cup hosting the next one. That could make things interesting. If he ever has the guts to float that idea, I’m throwing my weight behind it. And I had better mean that. He could do it with a straight face this year because Japan doesn’t have a prayer of winning the next one, so no one will accuse him of angling for it.”

“And you know this how?” Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Lots of boring old reasons that involve weak reserves, young rookies and veterans hanging on too long before retiring,” Viktor replied. “One of their Beaters was there before I entered the international league. That tell you

anything? And you know how the Japanese are about elders. No one has the cheek to ask him to retire. And the reserve behind him has been there just about as long. The rest of their league's Beaters still need someone to show them how to hold the club. Not a one of them over twenty-one. Chasers have a field day with all the Japanese teams. Even if they manage to hit you, it's not all that intimidating. Wears their own Chasers out, since they have to tackle like mad just to prevent you racking up two hundred points before the first jockey for the Snitch."

"That's not so young, is it? I should think compared to seventeen, it's positively ancient," Hermione said with a laugh.

"Problem is, twenty-one seems younger and younger the farther this side of it you get," Viktor said. "Never mind seventeen. Seventeen was a million years ago."

"Skip breakfast?" Hermione asked, giving his already empty plate a pointed look.

"As a matter of fact, I did. By the time you do your job back home, call your sons and your granddaughter, you don't have time for breakfast. Anna's in Spain, or I would have called her, too, but then I probably would have been late. May I just say that I sympathize with Molly and Arthur a whole lot more than I used to? Three qualifies as a brood, to me. One's enough to drive you crazy. Three, it's guaranteed," Viktor insisted.

"But it's a nice kind of crazy, isn't it?" Hermione said indulgently.

"Oh, absolutely. And the grandkids are even better. I mean, you hear all these dotty old grandparents going on and on about how wonderful it is, and you think they must be positively mad, and before you know it, you *are* one of those dotty old grandparents going on about how grand it is. Nice thing is, you can just borrow them for the fun bits and hand them back for the messy bits, and the parents can't complain when you do it. Because you've done your time. And when they get a little older, you can have all these grand conspiracies," Viktor explained.

"What do you mean by conspiracies?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"I imagine I still don't know the half of what my parents put my kids up to or did with them behind my back. I'm not sure I want to know. I think I'm better off not knowing. And I don't even want to think about what Magda's parents let the little heathens get away with. I think they lived on nothing but sugar when they were over there. And you had better believe I plan to put the lot of them to shame. See, the thing is, when you're a parent, you have to be the parent. You can't be their friend. You're not supposed to be their friend. It's not your job to be their



friend. With grandchildren, all those rules go right out the window. You can be a total reprobate because you're supposed to be. Within reason, of course," Viktor added.

"You make it sound so all out wonderful, I'm almost prompted to ask how I go about acquiring one," Hermione said with a laugh.

"Oh, that's the best part. You don't do a blessed thing. They just fall into your lap," Viktor said with a laugh. "Simon not married?"

"No. I don't think he's even considered it, yet. Not that I'm pushing. I would rather he wait than rush into something and regret it. He's dated around a bit, but no one serious," Hermione said. "What about Anna and Stan? Either of them married?"

"Stan's a little... shy about women. Hardly said boo to a girl all through school," Viktor said. "Girls usually had to ask him for dates."

"Wonder who he inherited that from?" Hermione shot back.

Viktor snorted indignantly. "Certainly not his mother. I don't know... he hasn't dated anyone in particular very much. I rather suspect he's a touch moony over this girl that works across the street, but hasn't quite gotten up the nerve to say anything to her about it just yet. He mentions her a lot. I've heard more about Mila and what she ate for lunch while sitting on the stone bench by the fountain in the square than is likely to be healthy for a person. Either he really likes her or he's seriously considering a career as a luncheon chef all of a sudden."

Hermione laughed, dabbing at her lips with her napkin. "And Anna?"

"Anna's awfully... intense. I'm not sure most men would tackle her off the field. Besides, she's only twenty. I'm sure she hasn't given it much thought. She wasn't exactly the boy crazy teenager, either. She keeps to herself a lot. Always did. On the one hand, that means she's probably not going to be overwhelmed by a number of potential suitors. On the other hand, if a woman's a shade daunting, you're not likely to approach her or stick around unless you're serious. I've only felt daunted by two women in my entire life, and both of them were downright formidable. Ended up marrying one of them," Viktor mused, finishing off his coffee.

"Really. Who was the other one?" Hermione asked curiously, putting down her own empty cup.

Viktor looked surprised for an instant, held his cup in front of him, looked her straight in the eye, then replied frankly, "Why... you." After a moment's awkward

silence he added, "We're both going to be late if we don't go in the next few minutes."

"Oh... of course... my turn to pay," Hermione said breaking the eye contact and fumbling for her purse as he finally put his cup back in the saucer.

"Dinner?" Viktor said tentatively.

"What?" Hermione said, distracted, counting out the bill and tip, laying the money in the center of the table.

"Did you want to have dinner? There's actually a Greek restaurant in the other direction. Besides, I have to make up for eating half my weight at lunch today by paying for dinner. Well, that and rambling. I think it's from being cooped up all morning and wanting to scream," Viktor said, his tone suddenly apologetic.

"It wasn't rambling. It was grand... Greek would be lovely for dinner. Just lovely. Same time as last night?" Hermione asked.

"Give or take a few minutes. I hope. Assuming I haven't created a monster by *asking* for figures," Viktor said, rising.

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"Where are you running off to like a Hippogriff with its tail on fire every time we get out of here?" Evtimov demanded when the gavel came down, ending the session for the day.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Viktor said, scooting his chair back under the table.

"Well, normally, you suffer fools a *little* more gladly than you have the last two days. Even Czolosz. You haven't suffered them at all if you can help it, especially this morning. This morning, with asking for the figures, either you made everybody in this room hate you or love you. I'm not sure which. And you looked like you would just as soon knock Czolosz down if he didn't back off at lunch. What's going on?" Evtimov asked, keeping his voice low.

"Look, work didn't stop happening back home, I still have a family that I kind of like talking to when I get the chance. And I've got to consider whether or not I'm going to bring up an issue that likely won't make me very popular with some members of the Board of Governors at the next meeting. I'm busy enough without making this thing my entire life, even just for this week. Besides, Czolosz isn't so much a fool as he is in love with figures and the sound of his own voice. And he definitely isn't the only one. And I'm meeting someone. I was lucky

enough to run into someone I haven't seen in decades, and I'm catching up on all I missed, if that's fine with you. I'd rather talk to her. She'll probably keep me from killing someone this week. Knowing you, you would encourage it," Viktor said.

Evtimov's eyebrows shot up in surprise at the word 'her', but he quickly recovered. "Her? That woman that came up to you in the hall? With the... bushy hair?"

"Don't tell me you're still so wet behind the ears that the name doesn't ring a bell at all... What the hell do they teach you whippersnappers in History of Magic these days when they cover the modern era? I know I'm older than you are, but not so old that my friends qualify as ancient history. Hermione. Hermione Weasley?" Viktor said impatiently. Evtimov shook his head helplessly. "Her name used to be Hermione Granger..."

"Oh! Granger! Of course! That's... her?" Evtimov asked, sounding vaguely disappointed.

"What were you expecting, exactly? Don't tell me you're one of those kids that thought all those names you read had to belong to people who were somehow bigger than life and intimidating? I hate to disabuse you of the notion, but we were all pretty ordinary, as people go. Dumbledore, God rest his soul, was not, in fact, seven feet tall and able to bring down buildings with a crook of his little finger. He was a rather nice, friendly looking old gentleman who came up to about the top of my forehead without his hat and he almost always looked like he was having a private joke on you or with you. Doesn't mean he wasn't intimidating or scary as hell when he needed to be, but he wasn't quite what some people make him out to be. Neville Longbottom was a slightly pudgy, somewhat forgetful, nervous teenager until he got his growth at seventeen, Ronald Weasley was about as overgrown and gangly as I was, and had ginger hair you could spot a mile off. Hermione Granger, when I first met her, had oversized front teeth, a habit of quoting books at you about every subject that could be equally endearing and annoying, a concern about house-elf welfare that was just as important to her as Voldemort. And Harry Potter was a scrawny, underfed, messy-haired runt. With glasses. Sorry we aren't what you were expecting," Viktor said with a subtle smile.

"Well... I... You weren't... certainly," Evtimov said haltingly.

"Wasn't I? What were you expecting?" Viktor asked mildly, looking amused.

"I don't know... big name... sports hero... war hero... sports hero again... all that... diplomacy... maybe less... humility. More intimidating. More arrogant. More... flash," Evtimov said after some consideration.

“Hero,” Viktor said with a derisive snort, “I wasn’t a hero. I was just some kid that really loved being on a broom and was lucky enough to be good at it and stupid enough to keep practicing it. And if not for some twinkly old man with a nose even more crooked than mine making sure I understood that heroes are made mostly by circumstance and choice is what really makes us who we are and a bushy-haired girl who treated me like nothing more than a teenaged boy when nobody else did... who knows?” Viktor shrugged in an exaggerated manner. “Sorry, I’ll try to cultivate more of an ego for you, Evtimov.”

“It’s just... I never expected you to really ask my advice on anything. I figured I would be nothing but a ‘step-and-fetch-it’...” Evtimov said.

“The Ministry hired you because you’re good at this, Evtimov, not because I need a babysitter. I can ask you things like what the real ramifications of extended diplomacy to, say, Belgium, are and get a sensible answer that even I can understand. I can go pour my own coffee. Now, can I go? I have a dinner appointment to keep so two unimpressive old folks can talk about our unimpressive lives,” Viktor said.

“Of course. Sorry to keep you,” Evtimov blurted out.

“What are you, Evtimov? Thirty-two?” Viktor asked, pausing and looking at him curiously.

“Yes, sir,” Evtimov answered.

“Wow. You really are a baby, then. I’m fifty-nine. I’m old enough to be your father. And old enough to know people are just people. Keep that in mind. Prevents you from being disappointed when they prove it by their actions,” Viktor said, reaching out and giving Evtimov’s shoulder a squeeze before turning and heading for the door. Halfway there he paused and looked over his shoulder. “And I thought I told you to stop calling me ‘sir’, I feel old enough without you doing that.”

“I’ll stop that right away, sir,” Evtimov said with a mischievous grin. Evtimov shook his head as he watched Viktor go. He certainly hadn’t been what Evtimov had expected. Not at all. When he had accepted the appointment a few years ago to be the official tagalong whenever the Ministry sent their special envoy to international events, he had done so with equal parts nervous anticipation and an overabundance of eagerness. It hadn’t helped that he had been ordered not to waste the time of a Very Important Man by spending longer than necessary getting acquainted before being sent down.

He had gone down to the Commission offices with sweaty palms, his heart

lodged firmly behind his Adam's apple and a curiously tight feeling in his chest. He had rehearsed his own introduction a couple of dozen times on the way down in the elevator, and had a hundred small panic attacks about how this man was going to react to an inconsequential eager-beaver Ministry lackey being assigned to him, with the ridiculously unwieldy title of Personal Assistant to the Special Ministerial Envoy.

By the time the elevator doors had opened the final time, Evtimov had been convinced he would be considered good for nothing but fetching coffee and running errands, like most of the other employees his age that had found themselves in similar assignments. But at least he would get to meet him. Maybe shake his hand. That was something. A step up from occasionally glimpsing him in the lobby or the hallways, certainly.

Therefore, it wasn't too surprising that Evtimov could have been toppled over with a feather when he stepped into the Commissioner's office, was greeted warmly by name without having to introduce himself, seated in the comfortably overstuffed armchair directly in front of the desk, and the Commissioner and Special Ministerial Envoy dropped what he had been doing in favor of fetching the Ministry lackey a cup of coffee. It had been just as surprising when said Very Important Man had settled back into his own chair, given Evtimov an open appraisal, smiled warmly and said, "You can close your mouth, now. There aren't any flies about."

"Sorry, sir. Absolutely, sir. Won't happen again, sir," Evtimov had stammered.

"Sir?" Viktor had said, sounding incredulous and laughing openly. "Only call me sir if you're trying to date my daughter. Or in front of my wife, if you want to feed her rather weak delusion that I'm an adult. Every once in a great while, I like to try to fool her into thinking I'm a real, live grownup with a real job and authority and everything. I don't think she's buying it for a minute, but she sometimes plays along to humor me," Viktor had said, propping his chin on his right hand, wedding band visible. "How about you just drop the 'sir' thing and try Viktor, Krum, or some combination of the two, Evtimov? Sir makes me feel faintly ridiculous, like I've garnered a knighthood or something."

And so it had happened that Evtimov had fallen into the rather curious situation of almost always addressing his superior as Viktor, less often as Krum, when they were in public at events, and having Viktor stick almost exclusively to calling him, with the utmost respect, Evtimov. Viktor had insisted that if he called Evtimov by his first name, Ilian, others might treat him with something less than the respect he deserved, baby faced as he was. Some of his fellow Ministry employees had nearly gone apoplectic the first time Evtimov had called him Viktor in the hallway. Evtimov had never quite gotten rid of the suspicion that Viktor actually enjoyed making a few people at the Ministry apoplectic. In fact, he

wouldn't entirely put it past Viktor to have insisted on the informality for just that reason.

But, then, Viktor didn't tend to stand on ceremony, much. He had made a practice of having Evtimov over to his home almost from the beginning, which was nearly unheard of for someone considered a senior Ministry official, inviting a very junior Ministry employee, and he and Magda had both welcomed Evtimov warmly. Evtimov had soon grown to consider the two of them as much friends as superior and spouse. Evtimov had worried about the older man a great deal when he had taken a leave of absence to be at home with Magda, before her death. He had been frankly and openly devastated for some time after returning. He had seemed worryingly adrift for a few months. For a good year, there had been a distinct difference in him, not nearly as quick to smile, certainly. Maybe even a touch of reluctance to go home at the end of the day when Anna was off at school once more. For the first time, Evtimov had found himself having to occasionally point out that it was well past time to be going home, and whatever was currently on the desk would keep. "Is it, Evtimov? I apologize, I hadn't noticed," Viktor had said the first time. Usually Viktor was more likely to harangue at him about leaving on time.

They had seemed, at first glance, such an oddly unmatched pair, in a way, his boss and his wife. When he stooped, she could just about kiss him without standing on her toes. She was forever going off to open venues in winter with neither mittens nor gloves, and he would always end up handing his over, the enormously oversized things flapping as she talked in what would have been a patently ridiculous fashion on any other woman. But somehow, with Magda, it was expected and right that she was always wearing Viktor's gloves.

This beautifully delicate little woman with a porcelain face who barely reached her husband's chest, who had an open manner and an easy, peeling laugh, who talked with her hands animatedly, as though she were putting every word on an invisible canvas that only she could see and this tall, often inscrutable man who could and often did shut himself off behind a completely unreadable expression and gave absolutely nothing away. And Evtimov had heard that the game face had softened considerably over the years, before he had met Viktor. Looking back at a few old posters, he was inclined to agree. But he had seen Viktor put on the absolutely formidable negotiator front enough times at these things to know it could still be pulled out of the mothballs when necessary and used to great effect. He had seen Viktor get his own way without saying a word more times than he could count. He could simply back an unprepared negotiator down with that look that conveyed he was still skeptically waiting for the punchline.

Magda had been one of those rare women who was gorgeous, knew it, and somehow managed not to come off as conceited or vain in spite of it. Perhaps because she had been charmingly lacking in pride over her appearance, content

enough in the fact that her husband considered her beautiful regardless of her appearance. Once, when Viktor had invited him home to dinner, Magda had greeted them in a pair of ragged and stained jeans that showed her knees, a long painting smock that Evtimov strongly suspected had once been Viktor's shirt when it had seen better days, her dark hair in a bedraggled ponytail. She had spent a whole ten minutes enthusiastically talking to the two of them before Viktor had wordlessly reached out with a long forefinger and scrubbed a simply enormous streak of blue paint from the bridge of her nose. Magda hadn't even paused in her talking, as though she were used to Viktor having to clean her up in that fashion.

If there had been one thing the couple had in common, besides Magda's rather surprising and unexpected enthusiasm for and knowledge of Quidditch, it had been lack of artifice. They had both been plainly and openly what they were, and faintly surprised when anyone made them out to be special. Viktor had laughed whenever Magda made reference to the number of women that would have strangled their sisters to be in her place. Magda had laughed just as incredulously when Viktor had marveled in front of her that such a beautiful woman had deigned to marry him. "Ridiculous man," she had said dismissively and fondly, pausing on her way into the kitchen long enough to plant a kiss on Viktor's temple, "no matter how smart any of you are, you never understand what drives a woman to love."

Evtimov laughed out loud now, in spite of himself, drawing a few curious looks from the rest of the delegates still loitering when he remembered what Viktor had answered. "Thank God. I think we would all be driven mad if we had half a clue, wouldn't we, Magda?" He composed himself and headed for the door, wondering if there might be just a bit of the old game face involved when Viktor mentioned these appointments with this Hermione at lunch and dinner. Evtimov found himself hoping fervently that there was. He thought it would do Viktor a world of good, even if there was no replacing Magda.

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"Is it my imagination, or is it even colder than it was last night?" Hermione said, rubbing her hands together vigorously, even though she was still wearing her gloves.

"I think it's more than your imagination. Here, hold these," Viktor said, thrusting something into her hand while struggling to pull the restaurant door together against the frigid, howling wind. "Blast it, I knew I should have just put them in my pocket," he muttered, tugging at the door with both hands and leaning back.

Hermione held up her hand and examined what he had handed over. "Oh... my... I think you... should have..." Hermione gasped between peals of laughter.



"Laugh while you've got the chance. Give it a few years, you won't be laughing so easily," Viktor grumbled good-naturedly, taking his glasses back. Each lens was frosted over with a thin shell of rapidly melting ice, and marred by a network of small, spidery cracks. Viktor let them dangle from his gloved hand for an instant, regarding them with disdain. "*Reparo*. I don't know about you, but I can't feel most of my extremities, assuming *they* haven't cracked and fallen off. I believe we now officially require booze to thaw out."

"I wouldn't complain if I had an Irish coffee. Think they serve Irish coffee in a Greek restaurant?" Hermione asked.

"I'll bribe them to go out and get the whiskey, if nothing else," Viktor said, brushing the snow from his hair and cloak.

"Where may we seat you?" the host interjected.

"Preferably near the fire and I think we'll keep the cloaks for a few minutes, thanks," Viktor said.

"Well, all our tables for two in that area are currently taken. One might open up soon or we may have had a cancellation, I'll have to check-"

"Let me put it this way. There will be something in it for you if a table for two within fifteen feet of that fireplace over there happens to become available in the next five minutes. Something bigger if it happens to be the one right smack dab on the hearth," Viktor said slowly.

"I'm sure there may have been a cancellation, I'll just run and check," the host said, darting off.

"Why do I get the feeling you've negotiated for that table before?" Hermione said, rubbing her upper arms.

"Because I have? Funny, there's always a mysterious cancellation when it's cold enough to freeze your ears off. I'm sure they'll just happen to find some whiskey right at the back of the liquor cabinet, too. Bribe and ye shall receive," Viktor mused, rubbing at his face, which was still red from the cold.

"You'll never believe it, sir-" the host began.

"There was a cancellation earlier in the evening? What a surprise," Viktor finished for him, settling his repaired spectacles back over his ears. "I'm shocked beyond belief. That never happens," he deadpanned, while Hermione covered her mouth and laughed behind her hand.

"We'll positively burn up over here," Hermione said once they had been seated, taken the special for the evening, and sent the host off to see if there just might be the makings of an Irish coffee right at the back of the liquor cabinet.

"Not if you don't get drunk enough to fall in. Take you a good ten minutes to feel your toes again. I hope you have thick socks. Wouldn't be at all gentlemanly of me to take a lady out to dinner and get her a case of frostbite," Viktor said, tucking his hands beneath his arms and huddling up.

"Two pairs and some warming charms thrown in. And I still can't feel my feet, but I think the lady's toes are safe. How on earth did you cope at Durmstrang?" Hermione said, wriggling her toes inside her boots.

"A wonderful combination of layers, youth and not knowing any better. We do allow them fires, now, you know. Nay, encourage them! Working fireplaces in every blasted room. Doesn't make it any warmer outside, but at least they can get thawed out when they come in," Viktor said, pulling his hands out from beneath his arms and tugging his gloves off. "More than paid off in that it cut way down on the number of people they see in the infirmary every year. I know cold doesn't make you sick, but it sure doesn't exactly boost your immune system to be freezing and damp all the time during winter."

"The luxury!" Hermione exclaimed, pulling her own gloves off. "I hear that isn't the only change that's been made."

"Curriculum has been reworked a shade. Faculty changes. Greater cooperation with surrounding academies. Even a few little invitational Quidditch matches, just to get them on one another's campuses a bit. Still haven't made the change I want them to. Oh, the old stalwarts justify it by crying 'tradition' these days, but it's still the same, stupid restriction. Pure-bloods only," Viktor explained, resting his hands on the table.

"Rome wasn't built in a day," Hermione said with a shrug.

"It's been a lot longer than a *day*. Muggleborn and half-blood aren't dirty words any more, but fat lot of good that does the students if they barely even meet anyone with a Muggle in their immediate family tree before getting out of school, much less share classes with one," Viktor said, sighing. "Make the school exclusive if you must, but don't base it on who your grandmother married. At least base it on something with some merit."

"Are you, or are you not the same person who got me to see that trying to go right from square one to totally free wage earners with house-elves in a fell swoop wasn't a bright idea? Baby steps, remember?" Hermione said

encouragingly, patting his hand, withdrawing it quickly so the waiter could set down their orders. "Most of them are on pension plans and get days off, by now, half are accepting some wages, and it's built in to the plan to have the majority on regular, minimum wages in another ten years. You don't change an ingrained culture overnight. At least they aren't foaming at the mouth at the very idea, right? It really is a desire to stick with tradition?"

"I think so. If they're racist, they hide it very well. No fair throwing my own advice up in my face," Viktor said with a smile.

"It was pretty good advice. Have a little patience," Hermione said.

"According to Magda, I do have a little patience. A very little. She swore I forgot that other people don't always run on my timetable," Viktor said.

"Personally accused of the exact same thing by Ron. He used to say I wasn't very patient or understanding when people didn't meet my expectations of them," Hermione replied. "And he was right. It's very frustrating when people don't see what's glaringly obvious to you, or fail to meet your standards," Hermione said, smiling weakly.

"The curse of the demanding of self," Viktor murmured.

"The what?" Hermione asked curiously.

"That's what Magda used to say. She said I was so used to demanding so much of myself that I sometimes forgot other people didn't always maintain the same standards about everything. Used to royally get my goat when I thought someone else on the team wanted to call it quits too early at practice. Or when a coach or a trainer said good enough and I didn't think it was. Thankfully, she worked a lot of that out of me. Her and the children. My goat's not so easily gotten about that, these days," Viktor said.

"Kids do tend to do that for you. It's hard to be such a perfectionist when you've got someone to take care of who is so new and unpracticed at absolutely everything. It's a good distraction. Keeps you outside of yourself, for a change," Hermione mused. "Sometimes, when you need it most."

"Agreed. Hard to be completely in the gutter even when you want to be. With children," Viktor replied.

"Simon was only eight, but I reckon he took care of me as much as I did him. After Ron died," Hermione explained.

"I doubt you needed much propping up," Viktor said. "You never did. You were

always doing most of the propping.”

Hermione shook her head ruefully. “Oh, but I had let my guard down by then. Funny, how you can lull yourself into thinking all is good and right in the world, and nothing can ever go wrong ever again, because you’ve paid your dues. When the knock came at the door, I figured it had been a slow night and he had come home early. He did, sometimes. Then I thought he had forgotten something and sent them after it. I think they were a good three quarters of the way through explaining what had happened before it ever registered that they were telling me he was dead. I couldn’t cry for a week. I told myself I was being strong and holding it together for Simon... but I just... couldn’t. If I started...” Hermione said, shaking her head again, slowly.

“You might never stop,” Viktor finished in a low voice. “I know.”

“Exactly,” Hermione said, meeting his gaze for a few moments. “You should remember quite well what I’m like when I get started crying, even over nothing. Maybe especially over nothing. Like I’m a banshee,” Hermione joked half-heartedly. “Ron hated the waterworks. Even after we married. He would head for the hills at the slightest sign of a good cry. Harry, too.”

“You did tend to get awfully moist around the edges,” Viktor said with a soft smile.

“Got everyone else awfully moist around the edges, you mean. I probably drenched you more times than you care to remember, and you never once told me to shut up and stop being such a silly girl,” Hermione said.

“I hardly think it was silly, under the circumstances. If what we all went through didn’t get you wrought up, nothing would. Better than Tonks kicking the tree. Which seems like a really great idea right up until your foot actually makes contact with the tree,” Viktor said.

“Are you positive she actually meant to kick the tree, or did she trip?” Hermione asked with a laugh.

“Considering the string of obscenities she was lobbing at said tree, I’d say it’s a pretty good bet,” Viktor replied. “I don’t think my ears have ever been quite the same since. I guess she would have kicked Charlie and me, too, for laughing at her, if the tree hadn’t gotten the better of her first.”

“Tonks is still an Auror, you know. Still every bit as clumsy,” Hermione said. “She drops by the office occasionally and lets me in on a bit of the gossip. Keeps me up on the department. They were awfully generous. They take care of their own, certainly. It’s a terrible bit of gallows humor, but the joke is that you can earn just

about as much dead as alive if you become an Auror. Pity that pension program gets such a workout, even now.”

“How many?” Viktor asked quietly.

“I can name three others that entered the force the same year Harry and Ron did,” Hermione said, picking at her plate with her fork. “That’s probably not all of them. I don’t know all the younger ones. I remember reading about one a couple of years back... around Simon’s age... but I didn’t know the family. There are more Muggleborns in that profession these days. Suppose they think it’s like playing cops and robbers, only with wands. Exciting stuff until you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time. Simon remembered him from Hogwarts,” Hermione explained. “They weren’t close, but they were acquainted.”

“I’m a little surprised Simon didn’t want to become one... what with Harry and Ron...” Viktor said, his voice tentative.

“I discouraged it. I’m a thoroughly selfish mother. I didn’t want him going into that job, neither did Molly, and frankly, I think even Harry had a hard time making it sound overly glamorous. Considering. Maybe I deprived the world of a fantastic potential Auror, but I’m relieved he didn’t seriously consider it,” Hermione admitted. “Oh, he said it a bit when he was smaller, about how he wanted to grow up and be an Auror like Dad, but I think he changed his mind soon after going off to school. Much to my relief.”

“Must not have been what his passion was, then. Because children don’t tend to discard their dreams that easily. Even to please their mothers. Or fathers. Or maybe it’s just especially stubborn ones that don’t,” Viktor allowed.

“Why do you say that?” Hermione asked.

“Primarily because we didn’t do anything to discourage Vladimir from going into healing, or Anna from going into Quidditch, but we didn’t exactly encourage it, either. In fact, I think Magda would have just as soon they had picked something else. I know I would have. I mean, it makes you wonder when your oldest makes a beeline straight for the one profession you’ve avoided as much as possible your whole career,” Viktor said, making a face.

“I’m sure he did it on purpose,” Hermione teased.

“Wandmaking is innocuous enough, I suppose. Actually, it kind of suits Stan. He got that from his mother, working on a thing with his hands, down to the last detail until he’s satisfied with it. There’s art in wandmaking. He always was a craftsman. He would spend hours blending colors to get them just right when he was filling in coloring books. But then your youngest goes and picks your career.

When they've seen it, up close, warts and all, most of their life. You find out it's not so easy, being in the stands. Especially not when it's your child out there. When you know exactly what they're putting up with, and what it's like... it's worse. Let's just say my mother and father telling me I deserved to know how they felt, some day, wasn't exactly an idle threat. You know what, though? You live. Your child comes in and gushes about how much they love it, and then you don't have the heart to tell them they're making you a nervous wreck. You just smile and nod and bite your tongue. I bet you would have, too, if Simon had decided he wanted to be an Auror," Viktor said.

"Maybe," Hermione agreed. "But, surely Vladimir becoming a Mediwizard isn't quite the same as Anna going into Quidditch, is it? I mean, I can understand you saying that about her..."

"Consider this. Your child, responsible for life and death decisions and complex treatments. The same child you had to pester weekly to stop daydreaming during Potions in third year and remind not to keep sitting on his wand. Working on real, live people with real, live problems. Tell me that wouldn't scare the bejeezus out of you. Because it doesn't matter that he's gone on to be a responsible adult who scored quite well in Potions. In your mind, he's still the nine-year-old that used the entire bottle of apple vinegar and trussed his younger brother up in enough bandages for a full mummification in response to a skinned knee, because he thought it would be, get this, fun and incredibly funny. Evidently, Magda didn't agree, because I don't remember her sounding the least bit amused when she called me up in China at three in the morning local time. She gets me up after a thirteen-hour exhibition match that didn't end until two in the morning to recruit me to give him another raking over it. She felt one was insufficient," Viktor said. "I rather suspect Stan was similarly unamused."

Hermione laughed. "Apple vinegar? The smell alone... must have been like a salad vinaigrette! Surely it wasn't *that* serious an offense, was it? For a transcontinental scolding at three in the morning?" Hermione asked, dabbing at the corner of her eye. "Surely she just forgot the time difference, didn't she?"

"That woman never forgot a time difference. She could have told you the local time in Bangkok or Bangor without blinking. She knew what time it was. Have you ever tried to console a kid that's been doused in an entire bottle of apple vinegar, wrapped up so tight he can't move and then teased about it for a half hour? Then you have to try to clean said squalling child up, doctor a knee that looks like hamburger and has been covered in vinegar, and then try to figure out how to handle the one who thinks this is all a big joke. They just don't cover that in the parenting books," Viktor paused to dab at his own eyes. "Besides, Magda was definitely not in the mood at the time. It was right in the middle of a record hot spell, it was sweltering, I was gone for five days for exhibition play and she was almost eight months gone with Anna. Magda wasn't feeling particularly

charitable toward any of us right then. Judging from the ‘why on earth do *you* males do *insane* things like this’ rant I was on the receiving end of while still in my pajamas and half-awake at best, I think a little of it might have been frustration over thinking she was about to be stuck with yet another boy. I do believe she was getting a shade impatient for a girl, for a change. Delusions of ‘girls aren’t like this’, you see. Miss Anna was not doing the rest of us any favors by constantly planting the big feet she so unfortunately inherited from me into her mother’s kidneys, and giving Magda the worst case of chronic heartburn known to woman, evidently. It was a crazy four months or so. I guess the boys were pretty needy and acting up a lot more to get some attention. New baby coming, and all.”

“You’re beginning to make me grateful I just had the one,” Hermione said, trying to catch her breath. “You think they did things like that because they were jealous?”

“Well, that, and because kids are kids and they do kid things. We once caught Stan pinching Anna to get her to cry so he could ask to rock her in the cradle to make her stop crying, because he loved her so much that he wanted to help. I mean, how can you *argue* with logic like that? We had to have a little talk about how pinching hurts, so perhaps it’s not a good idea to pinch the baby and give her the idea that she can pinch *you* when she gets a little bigger, because nobody likes being pinched. In fact, that’s why babies cry when you pinch them, and they already cry quite enough on their own,” Viktor explained. “Of course, then Anna turns out to be a hair-grabber, instead. Real hair fiend. Latched on like a crazed Jarvey every time you got within reach. You had to pry her fingers loose to put her down. I have to say the boys were awfully patient with that. In other words, they did some things because they were jealous, some because they meant well but were misguided, and some things probably just because it occurred to them to do it. Children are regular little Sir Edmund Hilarys about everything. Why did you do that? Because it was there. They were no worse and no better than any other three children in the same house. Don’t tell me Simon didn’t get some of that with all those cousins.”

“Well, sure, but it was in carefully measured small doses. And mostly at Molly’s. They weren’t all around each other constantly,” Hermione said. “Simon tended to be so glad to have someone to play with for a change, that I think they all strove to get along a little better than most. That, and Molly ruled with an iron hand when it came to the grandkids fighting. A hand of iron for her, anyway. The grandchildren all knew she was more bark than bite just like Fred and George did. They had their fair share of dustups. Simon once got a black eye over a set of Quidditch cards for which the ownership was in dispute, but I can’t say there was all that much bodily harm due to ill intent.”

Viktor waved his hand dismissively. “Oh, it doesn’t have to be from ill intent. I’ve



got you beat, there. Mine tended to hurt each other worse when there wasn't any ill intent. Maybe Vladimir went into healing because he thought he was going to have to help out with the family medical bills if they were all any nicer to each other. Anna gave Vladimir two massive shiners when he got the bright idea to show her how to use a Beater's club. He showed her, all right. Maybe a little too well. He got too close when she was practicing her swing. With everything she had in her, evidently, because my six-year-old daughter nearly broke my fifteen-year-old's nose and gave him a mild concussion. Do you know... how hard... it is... not to... not to laugh when you explain that to the mediwizard? I think I nearly bit my tongue in two," Viktor explained between fits of laughter. "And Anna wasn't helping matters, because she just kept sitting there on my lap, wailing to beat the band and saying, 'But, Tate, he told me to swing *hard*, and I did! I can't help it his face got in the way!' over and over. Stan either. He couldn't stop giggling and I couldn't look at him. I don't know whether to be peeved or grateful that Magda was out shopping with her mother that day. I suspect if the two of us had been together at the time, we wouldn't have been able to stop laughing long enough to take the boy to the mediwizard. We laughed in bed that night until we cried and our sides hurt, like a couple of complete loonies. Might not have happened if the poor boy hadn't had a nose almost as big as mine. That's not entirely my fault, though, because Magda had a 'Roman' nose, too, you know," Viktor concluded. "Hers just wasn't quite the *size* of Rome."

"And to think, I used to worry that Simon might have been healthier with some siblings. I used to worry that him being an only child and spending all that time alone with his books might be detrimental. Sounds like it saved me a lot in insurance and medical bills," Hermione said, wiping her eyes again. "Paper cuts and deciding to try out things he read in books were about the only things I had to worry about. There *was* the time we had to leave the house to air out for a week when he tried out a Potion he read in a storybook, without knowing what it was. Turned out to be do-it-yourself Dungbombs, more or less."

"Well, one thing about it. If you can survive your family, you end up a lot tougher. Sure was different for Magda and me. We were both only children. It was a circus, certainly, but it was a pretty entertaining one. I don't mean to make it sound like they were complete heathens. They surprised us a lot with how tender they could be with one another. It's gratifying to catch your eleven-year-old reading to the toddler without anyone asking him to. Or consoling his brother about a scraped elbow. Probably because we were out of vinegar and bandages, but still... They're all a lot closer than I figured they would be, given the age gap. Poor Anna, she had it worse than Ginny. And she was mad about her brothers. You would have thought Christmas had come early whenever they came home for breaks and holidays. Didn't keep her from wanting to kill them occasionally, but then, to be fair, it didn't keep Magda and me from wanting to kill them a few times," Viktor said with a shrug.

“Three is a pretty impressive brood,” Hermione murmured.

“It’s even more impressive when you know we didn’t plan to have any,” Viktor said.

“What? How do you accidentally have three children?” Hermione said with a short laugh, then she sobered when she realized he was serious.

“Oh, Magda and I talked about it. We were still undecided when we got married, so we put a moratorium on even talking about it for a while. Eventually, we weighed the pros and the cons, and we thought it over for months, about a year, actually, and we came to the conclusion that we were too busy and selfish to be good parents. We traveled too much, we were both a little too absorbed in what we did for a living, we didn’t want the responsibility, we weren’t prepared, so on and so on. So, we made the very mature, sensible decision that we shouldn’t be having any children, at least not at that stage of our lives, that was that, and if either of us changed our minds later, we could always reopen the subject. And all that debating became completely moot three months later when Magda unexpectedly turned up pregnant. Oops. We were a mix of horrified, petrified and elated, but after that first one, a couple more aren’t too scary. We went from ‘None, thanks,’ to ‘Well, one’s not so bad. Actually it’s kind of nice, and having a sibling might not be a bad idea,’ to ‘We would like to try until we get a girl, wouldn’t we?’ in less than a decade.”

“So, Vladimir was an accident, but the rest weren’t? I can understand that. We were completely paralyzed for about a week after finding out Simon was coming. And we had been planning him,” Hermione said. “Ron literally stopped talking for about three days. He just went off and had quiet little panic attacks about money, bills, feedings at three in the morning, and names.”

“I had a few panic attacks, too. I imagine every father does. It’s scary, being handed this thing that’s so completely out of your control. You just stand by and watch for nine months and feel completely helpless and useless. Then you get this tiny little creature that doesn’t come with instructions and you feel twice as helpless and useless. But Vladimir was a happy accident. Fitting. It was something of a theme with Magda and me. Happy accidents,” Viktor mused.

“How’s that?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Get me to tell you sometime about how I met Magda in the first place. Our entire relationship seemed to be based on bodily injury and accidents. Hadn’t we better be getting back? I hate to call it a night, but it’s not going to get any warmer,” Viktor said, sounding reluctant.

“Put your glasses in your pocket, this time,” Hermione reminded him with a smile.

"See, you obviously made a good Mum. Next, you'll be telling me I need a scarf when I go out, or I'll catch cold," Viktor replied.

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"Evtimov, there had better be a darned good reason you're camped out in front of my hotel room at this time of night," Viktor said in a low voice, opening the door and waving Evtimov in ahead of him.

"You're the one who stayed out until this time of night. Must have been some dinner," Evtimov griped back. "I thought you might be interested in discussing something, Viktor."

"Ilian, I'm frozen half to death, not quite drunk but I'm a little past tipsy, and I'm not really in the mood. I just want to go to bed. Can't it wait until morning? I really need to write a quick note," Viktor said, stifling a yawn with the back of his hand, pausing in taking off his winter gear.

"It was evidently a good move to ask for figures. From what I hear, it's gotten them to consider this thing more seriously. Makes it more real. There was a frenzy of owling to Ministries for reports and such after the session ended today. Some of them weren't really seeing it as a serious possibility before. So... good move," Evtimov said, hovering nearby.

"You didn't have to come back to check up on me, " Viktor said mildly. "And if it had backfired, which it very well might have, you would be up until three in the morning trying to figure out a way to fix the damage. So don't go complimenting my genius on that score."

"I wasn't," Evtimov protested defensively. "Checking up on you, I mean. I thought you would want to hear. Oh, and Czosz already figures you've got something up your sleeve about convincing Romania and Transylvania. They make their statements tomorrow. Everybody knows they're going to be the real holdouts. Isolationists. Do you?"

"The hell you weren't checking up on me. If you were any more transparent I could examine your insides, and right now I couldn't *find* my own sleeve, much less pull anything out of it, I'm so tired. But since you're here, I have a job for you. Do two things for me, Evtimov. Wait, make that three," Viktor said, holding up three fingers.

"I *wasn't*, and of course. What do you want?" Evtimov asked.

"One, write Headmistress Minerva McGonagall on my behalf and tell her the

matter is being looked into, I'll write personally when I have more time and information. She'll know what you're talking about. Second, don't let me catch you in front of my door when you could be doing something far more sensible, like sleeping, in your limited spare time at this thing. You're sweet, Evtimov, but you've already got the one child, don't try to make it two by adding me. Third, draft up a short... proposal... study... analysis, whatever you want to call it about the logistics of hosting the Triwizard Tournament at Durmstrang," Viktor said, sinking wearily into the armchair beside the bed. "History books should be of some help. Nothing too detailed, just a preliminary look."

"The... Tournament? You want a proposal on reviving the Tournament?" Evtimov asked incredulously.

"I haven't gone completely mad, Evtimov. McGonagall suggested it, I've thought it over and figure it would most likely be a good idea, since things like this are liable to take the rest of my lifetime, and I just want some more information on the possibility. Nothing's set at all, Ilian. I'm just considering how crazy I would have to be to suggest it to the Board of Governors. Or how drunk. Now, could we please both get some sleep? Or was there something else?" Viktor asked when Evtimov didn't move and looked as though he wished to say something else.

"Well, where are your glasses?" Evtimov blurted out.

"In my cloak pocket. I didn't want the blasted things freezing to my face. Now, go to bed. Shoo," Viktor said mildly, waving a hand at him. "Oh, and Ilian?" Viktor called after him when he was nearly to the door. "Yes, it was."

"Yes, what was what?" Evtimov asked, sounding thoroughly flummoxed.

"Some dinner. Now, would you please stop fretting over me like a broody Chinese Fireball, Evtimov?" Viktor said, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

"I'll try. You'll have your proposal as soon as I can get it together-"

"No rush, Evtimov. When you have time. Wait until we get back, in fact. And when you've had some sleep," Viktor added. "This won't go at the glacial speed of Ministry business, but it's not going to happen overnight, either."

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"I'm sorry, could you tell me the time?" Hermione whispered to the young woman next to her. She had searched the room in vain for a clock and she had forgotten her own watch in her sleepy haze this morning. Finally, in desperation, she

decided to throw herself on the mercy of this woman who looked like she couldn't even be as old as Simon.

"Fifteen minutes until we're due to break. Don't worry, you won't miss your husband," the woman murmured distractedly, still watching the lecturer.

"Husband?" Hermione said blankly,

"Yeah. Isn't that guy you meet every day for lunch your husband?" the younger woman asked, turning to look at Hermione.

Hermione looked at her blankly for a moment, almost nodded, rather than explain the truth. "He's... not my husband. He's... a friend," Hermione stammered, cursing the embarrassed flush that she could feel creeping up her neck and into her cheeks.

"Could have fooled me. Might make your husband jealous to see the two of you together, then. You rushed out of here yesterday like you had a hot date," the other woman joked.

"I'm widowed," Hermione blurted out without thinking, unconsciously touching the ring she still wore on a chain around her neck.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize," the woman said, looking stricken. "I was only joshing. It's just... you mentioned a son when we were talking yesterday and I assumed you were married to that man, and-"

"It's okay. You don't have to apologize. It was an honest mistake, and my husband's been gone a long while. Really," Hermione assured her, turning her attention back to her own lecture notes. She studied them closely, but didn't take in a single word more of what the lecturer was saying. She looked up only when the chairs began to scrape and protest around her in the shuffle to leave.

"Look, I really am sorry. I put my foot in my mouth clear up to my knee. Goes to show you shouldn't make assumptions. It's just that he looked familiar, somehow, and I figured the two of you must have been at the conference in Brussels last year and I had seen you two out and about together there. If it's any consolation, I thought the two of you made a really cute couple," Hermione's seatmate offered in a conciliatory tone. "That's sweet how he walks you back after lunch."

"I didn't attend last year. He's an old friend I haven't seen for years," Hermione said. She almost added *nothing more*, but then stopped herself. "We've been catching up."

"That's nice. Have a good lunch with your friend, then. See you in the afternoon sessions," the younger woman said, nodding and hurrying to the hall.

Hermione paused and looked over her scattered belongings on the table. *Why did I do that? Blush and stammer like a schoolgirl? It's not as though I haven't had to disabuse plenty of people of the notion that I had a husband waiting for me... Maybe because I didn't want to disabuse her of the notion. Maybe I wanted, just for an instant, maybe I wanted... something-*

"Something the matter?"

"Eh?" Hermione asked, starting guiltily and meeting Viktor's gaze.

"Lost something? You look like you're cataloguing the contents of the table," Viktor said, gesturing toward the quill, ink, parchment and handouts in front of her chair.

"Lost something?" Hermione echoed. "Yes. My mind. I started out this morning by forgetting my watch," she said, scrambling to gather her things and toss them into her satchel.

"You're sure it's nothing more serious? That was some heavy duty frowning you were doing at that table," Viktor said, picking up the stack of handouts and tapping the edges against the table to neaten them.

"Trying to figure out why today has mostly gone all pear shaped, I suppose," Hermione said with a heavy sigh.

"Know what will make a bad morning all better?" Viktor said, examining her over the top of his glasses.

"No. What?" Hermione asked.

"Buying me lunch," Viktor deadpanned.

"And how exactly does buying you lunch make things better?" Hermione said, smiling slightly in spite of herself.

"Two ways. One, I never said it would make things better for you, but it sure will for me. And two, by the time we get done eating it, it won't be morning any more. It will then, officially, be a pear shaped afternoon. Come on, if it doesn't look better after lunch, I'll buy you an ice cream on the way back," Viktor cajoled.

"And if it does look better?" Hermione asked.

"I'll still buy you an ice cream," Viktor replied.

"So an ice cream is supposed to cheer me up, hmm?" Hermione said skeptically. "If I didn't know better, I would swear you were trying to bribe me into a better mood."

"I think we've already established last evening that I'm not above petty bribery in negotiations. It usually costs me a lot more than an ice cream, but I don't think there are any liquor stores between here and the ice cream parlor. I'm going with the most available option. If you want liquor, you're going to have to wait until dinner, assuming you don't think dinner with me would put you in an even fouler mood," Viktor said.

"It's not really a foul mood, it's just an odd funk. Everything's been all... off, today. Especially me," Hermione admitted.

"Shall we run you back to the hotel so you can try getting up on the other side of the bed?" Viktor asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Ice cream's closer and I'm lazy. Besides, you owe me a story," Hermione said, hooking her arm through his, nudging him toward the door.

"A story?" Viktor asked.

"Yes. You promised last night, remember. One of happy accident and bodily injury. How Viktor met Magda," Hermione explained.

"Oh, that one. Over soup? There's a cafe right across from the ice cream," Viktor offered.

"Soup would be lovely. Soup it is," Hermione said as they walked toward the dining pavilion. She could feel her mood brightening considerably already.

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"Well, out with it," Hermione said, blowing on her spoonful of vegetable soup. "Let's hear this highly romantic story."

"If you're expecting something romantic, I imagine you're going to be mightily disappointed. I guess if you were being really generous, you could say I swept her off her feet right from the beginning, but that's heavy editing. I met my wife because I'm the world's biggest, most inconsiderate klutz on the ground, plain and simple," Viktor said.

"You're not," Hermione protested.



"I was that day. Or perhaps it should be because I'm such a tall bastard. She kindly pointed both of those things out at top volume while she was giving me what for," Viktor said with a chuckle.

"I'm sure I have no idea where this is going, so do share," Hermione said.

"I was... supposed to be going to a match against Iceland at the Bulgarian National Stadium, and we were required to be there an hour before the match started, or you could be fined, according to your contract. So, of course, I oversleep for about the first time ever, and I detest being late anyway, and I was damned if I was going to be late, so I Apparated up as close as I could get, then ran as hard as I could go for the stadium. If I hurried, I still had a chance to make it on time. So, I'm barreling around the stadium, heading for the back player entrance, and all of a sudden, blam. I've obviously run into something. Actually, it turned out to be someone. A someone who I have managed to knock completely off their feet and flat onto their back. I have also gifted said person with a humongous bruise right below their eye, a scraped arm, and one whale of a knot and a huge purple bruise where I have planted my bony damned knee into their thigh, as I am so helpfully told right after. Next thing I know, I'm getting called out about watching where I'm going in the loudest way possible in some of the filthiest Bulgarian you've ever heard. Would have made a locker room blush. It was the woman I ended up marrying," Viktor said.

"So... just to be clear here... Magda..." Hermione said, letting the sentence dangle.

A slow smile spread across Viktor's face and he nodded. "Was the someone I flattened. Never even saw her until she started letting me have an earful over it. So... there I am, I've just bowled over this teeny little woman, and she's cursing me like I deserve and we're starting to draw a crowd. I help her up and fall all over myself explaining and apologizing, and she will... not... shut... up. She's cataloguing her injuries out loud to anybody within a three-mile radius and calling me eighteen different kinds of fool and she will not be shushed. Then she recognized me, and that did *not* help. In fact, it just gets her started all over again, asking me who the hell I think I am and why was I late in the first place and did I think I was too good to show up for matches on time. So, in desperation, I promise to get her into the top box for the match and I promise I'll make it up to her, somehow. Of course, the top box turns out to be completely filled, so I have to talk the coach into letting her sit on the bench with him. That downgraded her to just glaring a hole through me for the duration of the match, at least."

Hermione could stifle her laughter no longer. "And this... this turned into a relationship how?"

"After the match, which was, thankfully, one, a victory, and two, kind of long, I went to see if I could get this annoying, screeching little harpy off my back about running into her. I was about as mad at her about giving me a hard time over it as I was ashamed that I had done it. I tried talking her into seeing the team mediwizard to get patched up, and she flat out refused. In fact, she looked at me like I had suggested she kiss a Basilisk. I asked her what would help make up for it, and she told me she didn't know. So, again, in total desperation, I asked if I could treat her to dinner and maybe she could think it over while we ate, assuming I didn't manage to kill her on the way to the restaurant. Well, at least she laughed. A little," Viktor said, rolling his eyes and pausing to take a drink of his tea. "While I was in the locker room, cleaning up, the coach and the reserves kept drilling me about why I had come in dragging this woman who looked like she had been through the wars, who the heck was she, how did she know so much about Quidditch, and all that. That's when I realized I didn't even have any idea what her name was. I hadn't bothered to ask."

"She didn't give you her name?" Hermione asked.

"She gave me several names, but she was using all of them to refer to me, and none of them are repeatable in polite company," Viktor said with a laugh. "Needless to say, I *was* a mite intrigued by the knowing so much about Quidditch remark, so I asked what they meant. Turns out she was critiquing every aspect of the game, in detail, and very well, I might add. She even very helpfully pointed out a minor mistake I made three quarters of the way in that the *coach* missed. Magda's father was a real Quidditch fiend, and she hung with her father like there was a Permanent Sticking Charm involved, so she picked it up from him. Anyway, armed with absolutely nothing but the knowledge that she knew Quidditch when she saw it, I went skulking back out to the bench to collect her and take her to dinner, half hoping she would have changed her mind in the meantime."

"Daddy's girl, hmm? And skulking? Skulking?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Oh, I skulked. I must have. She told me to stop doing it and to stop looking at her like I wanted to strangle her since I had already tackled her. I told her if she wanted that, she would have to stop acting like she was asking for it, because as I had already explained a hundred times, it was an accident. This tiny little thing, all of five foot nothing, about a hundred pounds soaking wet, and with an upper arm I could wrap my fingers around, managed to get up my nose in about a dozen ways in less than ten minutes. And I know what you're thinking. Easy target. But Magda went right for the jugular. I offered to let her pick the restaurant, and she immediately goes right for the most expensive, exclusive place in the entire city of Sofia. And she has the gall to tell me she's doing it. 'Korrina's. And yes, I know it costs an arm and a leg, and I know you'll have to

pull strings to get us in tonight, and I don't care. You owe me that, at least,' she says. And she insists on going as is, grass stains, bruises and all," Viktor explained.

"Then what?" Hermione pressed, listening intently.

"We went to dinner and managed not to kill one another. I got us in, after resorting to a liberal combination of bribery and tossing my name around, which I hate, in less than an hour, and we called a truce and ate together. I think she picked Korrina's just to see if I would renege, and she was a little surprised that I didn't. While we were waiting, I found out such vital information as her name and that saying she knew a lot about Quidditch was a major understatement. And she wasn't such a screeching harpy when she had cooled off a shade and talked about Quidditch. She was fair and balanced, and pretty keen in her assessments. And I held off as long as I could on playing the 'do you know who I am' card. I only did it when it looked like there was going to be a three hour wait for someone who wasn't 'somebody' and turned about forty-nine shades of red while doing it, so she cut me a break. Figured the arrogant bastard who ran her over must not be so arrogant if he couldn't even pull the 'let me give you my name anyway, just in case a table comes up' trick without looking sheepish when the host is practically angling for it, anyway. I just about died of embarrassment when he made me give him an autograph," Viktor said, shaking his head. "I think I kept praying for the floor to open up and swallow me."

"How could she think you were arrogant? If I've ever met anyone less full of themselves, I can't think who it would be," Hermione said soothingly.

"I seem to recall someone announcing very loudly in a school library that I wasn't even that good looking and those silly girls only liked me because I was famous," Viktor said, propping his chin. "Before they met me, anyway."

"You heard that?" Hermione asked guiltily, turning red.

"Sound carries in that library. And you made the mistake of saying it during a break in the giggling. Besides, you were right. It's a very silly girl that only likes you because you're famous. People make assumptions about you if they recognize your name, remember? Obviously you can't have a public job nor be a good athlete without an ego the size of Gilderoy Lockhart's. Heaven forbid you be a well-known athlete. You need to rent out a country estate for your ego to roam free. I simply hit it lucky that Magda was just as astute as you were about seeing through all that bull. I... surprised her. And not much surprised Magda. And she... surprised me," Viktor said softly, pausing for a long while. "Once she stopped grinding her teeth at me... she was... interesting and about four different kinds of confusing. She would bounce back and forth between dissecting Japan's defense and talking about current events or her family, or what was in

the newspaper and... She didn't let me get away with anything."

"Get away with anything?" Hermione echoed.

"Magda never let me get a lazy answer by her," Viktor clarified, looking distant and turning his cup between his fingers. "I couldn't just nod and smile and hope she let it go if she asked what I thought about something the Ministry was doing, or if I liked a certain museum, or what I thought of a certain team's Chasers. She would run me to the wall and pin me down about it, and demand an answer that satisfied her. Yes and no wasn't good enough. Everything had to be why and where and how, and somehow, it didn't annoy me when she asked for it. She didn't do it to be nosy, but she did it to understand you. When she asked, you could tell she really cared what the answer was. She wanted to know. She's the first person who dared ask me much about what went on in Britain. She made me explain why I loved flying. And by dessert, she was on about painting and I didn't stand a chance from there on out," Viktor said.

"Painting? What got that started?" Hermione prompted.

"Museum talk, I think. Magda asked about whether I had seen this painting at the national museum in Sofia, and before I knew it, she's talking about light and color and composition and texture... and she really comes alive. She's talking my ear off about things I don't understand, mostly, and I don't care, because she's got this look on her face... this... pure... beatific... I... I don't have the words to describe it even. It was this plain... unadulterated... *passion* for a thing, and I *understood* that. *That* I understood. Because Magda *looked*... the way I *felt* about flying. And it took my breath away," Viktor murmured, raising his eyes to meet Hermione's. "Does that sound as insane as I think it does?"

"I think you underestimate the romance of this story," Hermione replied in a low tone.

"It wasn't love at first sight. Don't think that. I didn't fall in love with her then and there. I was just... stunned. And... confused. When the meal ended, she said she would take another meal someplace a lot less fancy and a good, round debate on who had the best chance of taking the European Cup, and we would call it even. So, we did that. Only we weren't done arguing by the time the meal was over. So we had to set up another one. And another. I think it took me five meals together to realize she was that pretty. Well out of my league, certainly. A good dozen before either of us realized we were, technically, dating. Probably twenty before either of us would admit we were dating. Even to ourselves, much less each other. Dating her scared me. It felt... disloyal. I wrote you and you said you still weren't ready... and I figured it would never last. I couldn't be that lucky. To encounter two females who were willing to really get to know me and stick around in spite of it? It would never happen," Viktor said, slowly shaking his head

back and forth.

"I think you always underestimated yourself," Hermione said quietly, but with conviction.

"A woman that pretty, she could have anybody she wanted. All she would have to do is crook her finger at them, and most men would probably fall all over themselves to do whatever she asked. But I didn't. I don't know why, but I didn't. Maybe because I could never quite convince myself she would ever want me in the first place. I was probably just there until something better came along. Why on earth would she want a moody, disagreeable, cantankerous man who didn't agree with her all the time and clammed up when he didn't want to talk, traveled extensively most of the time, preferred books to people and packed enough emotional baggage to clog up the Danube? I still don't understand why she loved me. I know she did, because she said it, and Magda never said a word in her life that she didn't mean, but I still don't understand *why*. I damned near swallowed my tongue when she said she did," Viktor elaborated.

"She did because she did," Hermione said, shrugging her shoulders. "You can't explain love. If you could explain it, people would bottle it and sell it. You loved her and the timing was right. It's obvious. It was when you told me the first time. Why?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," Viktor said weakly. "I just know that after a while, I wanted it and I felt ready," He looked directly into Hermione's eyes. "And before I knew it, she was like air. Necessary. You two... were so much alike. You got that same indescribable look about books, you know."

"Did I?" Hermione asked, surprised, unable to look away.

"I still owe you an ice cream, now the story's out of the way," Viktor said, idly fiddling with his teacup once more. "Collect your bribe. You deserve it for letting me ramble."

"It's not a bribe, by the way," Hermione said, snapping out of it. "This afternoon is not going to be pear shaped. I've said it, and that's the way it's going to be."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, sister, but you're a terrible liar," Viktor said, smiling softly.

"Speaking of sleep, could we push dinner back an hour? I'd like a nap before we head out. The sleep deficit is getting to me. I realize I get out earlier than you do, anyway, but I need a little rest before dinner," Hermione admitted.

"Sure," Viktor said, looking slightly surprised. "I'll call home and check in before

we go.”

“Work? You hopeless perfectionist, you,” Hermione scolded mildly.

“Grandbaby. I’m starting to suffer withdrawal,” Viktor admitted. “I hardly ever go three days without seeing her. I keep her sometimes when they’re hard up for a sitter. I sacrifice myself,” Viktor said, laying the back of his hand to his forehead in mock fatigue.

“Mmm,” Hermione said, pursing her lips. “Why do I get the feeling that child won’t be worth two Sickles?”

“I prefer the term priceless, myself. If we’re going to get ice cream, we had better be hurrying,” Viktor said, checking his watch.

“Oh, all right. Someone would think you had to be somewhere,” Hermione said, rising and pushing her chair back under the table.

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Viktor pulled his cloak off the hook and draped it over his arm. He had just ended the last call back home, somewhat reluctantly, and checked on everyone in the process. Stan had assured him that Anna was packed and ready to come home from Spain, he had gotten the daily lunch report on Mila, Vladimir had been nearly ready to leave for a shift at the hospital and his daughter-in-law, Nikolina had been feeding Evangelina her dinner. He glanced at his watch a final time, and decided it was late enough to leave. By the time he made it downstairs, to Hermione’s door, it would be time to go.

He hesitated when he raised his hand to knock, checked the watch a final time, and then rapped softly. There was no response, no noise from inside the room. Viktor waited a short while longer, then rapped a shade louder. Still no response. He put a finger to the doorbell, and listened to the chime echoing on the other side. Finally, a frantic rustle of activity, distant, but definitely audible from inside the room. Viktor stepped back slightly when the door was flung open hurriedly from the other side. “I’m so sorry! I hope you weren’t out there long! I overslept! I forgot to set an alarm or anything!” Hermione panted breathlessly, clinging to the doorknob as though she were anchoring herself in a gale.

“It’s okay,” Viktor assured her. “I’ve only been out here a minute,” he added, struggling not to laugh when he realized she was still in a rumpled pair of pajamas, her feet bare and her hair mussed.

“I’m not even ready for dinner.” Hermione looked down at herself, suddenly feeling faintly ridiculous in her faded blue pajamas. “Obviously...” she added

lame, her cheeks flushing.

"It's fine. If you would rather rest, I understand," Viktor said.

"No, no. Come on in, at least. Don't hang about out in the hall. Come in and we'll figure out what to do about dinner. I can... I can... I could throw something on if you want to wait a few minutes..." Hermione said distractedly, running her fingers through her hair and pacing after shutting the door behind him.

"Would you prefer to just eat in? Dress code's not a problem, that way," Viktor said, the corners of his mouth twitching subtly.

"You can stop laughing at me in my pajamas. I know they're not exactly haute couture," Hermione said, planting her hands on her hips.

"I'm sorry... I was just thinking I hadn't been greeted at the door to a hotel room by a good looking woman in her nightclothes in a very long time," Viktor said, losing the battle to keep a straight face.

"You!" Hermione scolded good-naturedly, tapping him on the arm.

"I feel I've seriously overdressed for dinner, now. I hope you can forgive me my fashion blunder. My sleeping attire is unavailable at the moment, and I fear the cloak is complete overkill," Viktor said, laughing.

"I'll overlook it. Here, let me at least hang up your cloak. Well, your other cloak, that is," Hermione said, sounding slightly exasperated. "Really, I'm so sorry. I just forgot to set an alarm before lying down, and the travel-"

"No, I'm sorry. If I had known you were sleeping, I wouldn't have rung the bell. In all seriousness, I'll shove off if you want to go back to bed," Viktor offered, sobering.

"No. I'm awake and hungry, now. We might as well have dinner together. You've seen me in far worse states, I'm sure," Hermione said, looking down and tugging at her baggy pajama top. "Are you sure you don't mind eating in?"

"Prefer it, actually. I don't mind skipping the slog in the cold. We'll have them put it on my room tab. I'm up for a good lazing if you are. Anything in particular you fancy?" Viktor asked, reaching for the room service menu lying on the coffee table in the sitting room area.

"Sorry, I'm being rude. Sit down. What's on there? I haven't even looked at it since I've been here," Hermione admitted, sitting on the sofa and tucking her legs beneath her.



"Pretty standard fare, looks like," Viktor said, sitting next to her, tilting the menu toward her. "Sandwiches... pasta... soups... Ooh, steaks. Would it be really awful of me if I twisted your arm for steaks? A filet with sautéed mushrooms and onions sounds terribly appealing. I'd hate to order that and have them hold your order while they fix it, though, if you're really hungry."

"Baked potato and salad?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow. "I would wait for that. Especially if there happened to be ranch dressing on the salad and sour cream and chives on the potato."

"I imagine that could be arranged. And to drink?" Viktor prompted.

"Red wine?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"A big slab of red meat, a baked potato and red wine. At this time of night. We'll be passed out before dessert," Viktor said.

"Be worth it, wouldn't it?" Hermione said with a soft smile.

"Well, I never said it wouldn't. Just stating facts," Viktor said, patting her knee before rising. "I'll go put it in," he added, heading for the hearth. "There we are. The damage is done and should be arriving in twenty minutes or less," Viktor said, returning and putting the menu back and sitting down on the sofa once more.

"Call home?" Hermione asked, ruffling her hair absent-mindedly before propping her head against her hand and her elbow against the back of the sofa.

"Yes. Anna's back tomorrow morning, Stan was in from work and Vladimir was just leaving. All's right with the world, I suppose," Viktor murmured.

"So... how come I'm not convinced when you say that?" Hermione asked after a moment's consideration.

"Maybe all is right is a bit of an exaggeration. It could still use some improvement," Viktor said, smiling weakly. "How are things back home for you?"

"All the plants are still clinging to life against all odds, Simon's fine, Molly and Arthur say everyone else is fine, and *you're* changing the subject," Hermione said shrewdly.

"I'm trying, but you're not cooperating," Viktor replied.

"None of my business?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows in a questioning

look.

"Yes... No... I don't know... I'm thinking about something. I have to be crazy for even thinking it, but I'm thinking it. It will likely make me about as popular as the plague for even suggesting it, but I think I have to. And it's all your fault. Yours and Minerva's," Viktor said in a flat voice.

"And how exactly do we merit the blame?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"If I hadn't bumped into you this week, I might could have happily told Minerva to forget it. Find herself somebody else to champion that cause, wait another two hundred years, or whatever. But you had to go and say hello and remind me," Viktor said, plucking at the hem of his robe.

"Could I at least know what I'm getting part of the blame for?" Hermione asked.

"Reminding me how much benefit it would really be if we revived the Triwizard Tournament. Again," Viktor said, shaking his head.

"The Tournament! She's... suggested taking up the Tournament again?" Hermione said, knitting her brows together. "What have I got to do with that?"

"Well... seeing you reminded me just how much value there might be in it, much as I hate to admit it," Viktor said, looking back up at her once more. "Let's face it. If we wait for the Ministries to actually finish the job of bringing everyone closer together, we're all likely to die of old age waiting for it. Forget waiting for the Ministries to put ink to parchment and cement something formal and real and lasting. That's all well and good, but it's sort of coming at the problem backwards. It's not even really about getting the schools closer together and more familiar with one another. It's got nothing to do with the schools really. It's getting the *students* together in one place. Long enough for them to do something worthwhile," Viktor said, trailing off quietly.

"And what would that be?" Hermione prompted.

"If just one real, lasting friendship gets formed, who knows what impact that would have down the road?" Viktor said with a shrug.

"So, you're thinking it would be better to cut out the middle man, hmm?" Hermione said, pursing her lips. "Students don't have as many reservations as formal delegates. It would be nice if perhaps a future Minister of Magic had old friends tucked away in remote parts. There's always value in having friends far and wide, and all the other cliches?"

"Exactly. Wonderful thing about being young, they're likely to cut through all the

idiocy and figure out that foreigners are pretty much the same underneath the strange clothes and the funny accents without too much fuss,” Viktor said. “I’ll give Dumbledore this, he was a right sneaky old bugger that way. I suppose that was the right way to go about it. When you can’t convince the stodgy old stalwarts, go right for the young ones. They’re the ones who are going to have to fix what the stodgy old folks mucked up in the first place. I suspect he knew what he was doing, throwing all of us together for a year. If that Tournament hadn’t happened, I imagine there would have been no foreign legion whatsoever. And Heaven only knows where Durmstrang would have landed if Karkaroff hadn’t exited when he did. Though I doubt Albus planned that.”

“You didn’t have strange clothes and a funny accent,” Hermione protested, laying a hand on Viktor’s arm.

“Who was talking about me? I was talking about you,” Viktor said, looking amused. “Convince me it’s a good idea,” he added, sobering.

“I can’t make up your mind for you. I know you didn’t used to like talking about it. You still don’t want to think about it, do you?” Hermione asked softly.

“Honestly, no. Much less bring it up at a Board meeting. Saying ‘You know, I think it would be a good idea if we got together with the other academies within easy traveling distance for the occasional Quidditch game,’ is a very different prospect from suggesting we revive an event that involved fatalities the last two times it was held. I’m suggesting we involve people’s children, here, and while that’s all well and good in theory, this isn’t theory. Maybe I’ll feel differently after I actually get into the nuts and bolts of it,” Viktor said. “Know why I didn’t tell the Board to shove their invitation to join someplace the sun doesn’t shine?”

“Because it’s not polite?” Hermione asked with a suppressed laugh.

“Because I lived in an absolute horror of getting a letter about that Tournament every damned August. At least being on the Board assured me I wouldn’t be blindsided by it if it happened. Magda never did understand that. Why I wouldn’t talk about it. Or the war, much,” Viktor murmured.

“Not even with her?” Hermione asked, shaking her head.

“Not even with her,” Viktor echoed, shaking his own.

“I thought you said she pinned you to the wall until she got an answer that satisfied her,” Hermione said.

“She did. Problem is, there are some things for which there are no answers. If that isn’t one of them, I don’t know what is. Magda thought you should be able to

talk about anything. I think she figured out there just weren't any words..." Viktor explained. "Eventually."

"I take it she never saw...anything of it?" Hermione asked gently.

"She was busy being an art student in Sofia when we were busy... you know," Viktor said. "Magda never had a clue about the half of what we saw. She knew I saw a lot of things I didn't want to. Things I don't like remembering. Even now," Viktor admitted. "So, convince me this is a good idea. Convince me digging all that back up is worth it. And I'm not the only one. Plenty of people don't like thinking about it. Tell me it's worth fighting past all that determination not to remember."

"The war was worth fighting for, wasn't it?" Hermione asked, arching her eyebrows questioningly. "If it was worth it for you to overcome all that reluctance and talk most of the foreign legion into supporting Dumbledore, it's worth it to revive the Tournament. Every little bit helps. Mind you, I say this knowing full well *I'm* not going to be the one that has to bring it up. But you should. If they listen to anyone, it would be you."

"Still good at telling other people what they should do, I see," Viktor said with a rueful smile.

"You did ask for it," Hermione admonished mildly.

"I did. I was afraid you were going to oblige me, and you did. Don't hold your breath for it being held anytime soon, though. We'll have to approach it like it needs a complete overhaul. The entire concept and setup," Viktor said. "Security and safety, especially."

"I'll try to remember-" Hermione said, starting slightly when the doorbell rang.

"Steak's here, I bet. Want me to get that?" Viktor asked.

"I think you had better," Hermione said, jumping up and heading for the bedroom. "Let me get out of sight before opening it." Hermione ducked behind the door frame and listened to the distant, low sound of Viktor's voice, and the squeaky, eager replies of the house-elf.

"You can come out, now," Viktor called after a moment. "We've got a bit of a problem."

"A problem? What kind of problem?" Hermione asked.

"The leaf on the dining nook table," Viktor said, taking his hand from beneath it,

allowing it to swing back with a loud bang. "Won't stay put. Well, it will, just not where it's supposed to. Quite the opposite, actually."

"Then leave it on the coffee table and we'll eat on the sofa. I warn you, I'm much better than I used to be at telling people what to do," Hermione said, crossing her arms.

"Then I feel it only fair to warn you I'm much better than I used to be at ignoring it completely when people tell me what to do. Married a woman that was pretty good at the telling part, too," Viktor said lightly, ducking to look beneath the table and fiddle with something under the leaf.

"Ah, but you forget that the man I married often had the hardest head in the British empire," Hermione said.

"I was fortunate enough to get longer to practice, though," Viktor said, standing and raising the leaf again. This time, it stayed in place. "Spring was loose."

"I would still rather just eat on the sofa," Hermione said.

Viktor looked over his shoulder at her. "Why didn't you say so?" he asked.

"I thought I just did. Somebody was being stubborn about the table leaf," Hermione said, smiling and shaking her head.

"Not stubborn so much as too proud to let a table get the better of him," Viktor admitted, walking up to her. "Your sofa is free, Madam," he added, gesturing toward it.

"Without bribery, even," Hermione said, walking over and sinking into it, leaning over to remove the covers from the dishes on the tray.

"Did you want me to pour this or did you want to pour your own?" Viktor asked, holding up the wine bottle.

"I trust you. I'm still not quite as cautious as poor old Mad-Eye was. Still haven't started carrying my own flask everywhere I go," Hermione said, smiling as she mixed the dressing into her salad.

"Mad-Eye. I haven't thought about him in ages. Paranoid as all hell, but he had reason to be. Here," Viktor said, handing her a glass. "He taught me how to do an Anti-Disapparation Jinx. Well, that, and not to trust your own mother, even. I admit it, though, I admired him as much as I was scared to death of him. Not everyone could get about half their body replaced and just keep going. I'll be honest. That eye of his gave me the heebie-jeebies," Viktor admitted, settling

back into the sofa with his own glass and salad bowl.

“Frankly, it gave me the heebie-jeebies, too. It always made me wonder just how much he could see...” Hermione said.

“Saved our behinds more than once, though,” Viktor observed. “Lupin... Remus... where is he?”

“London, mostly. He consults with the Auror program, and fills in as a professor when he can get the work, or tutoring. It’s under control better than it was, but his health still isn’t good. And some people still don’t fancy the possibility of him... relapsing or missing a dose. Not many places would be willing to risk the uproar of taking him on full time. He looks... tired all the time. And thirty years older than he should,” Hermione added.

“He’s a good man. It’s a pity people still can’t see past his illness,” Viktor said. “But then, it’s a rare thing when an illness makes you a threat to others, like that. I can see both sides.”

“It’s not fair,” Hermione said, stabbing a forkful of lettuce a little more forcefully than was necessary.

“I never said it was. But tell the truth. Would you have been eager to send Simon off to study under a professor that could tear him limb from limb if something went wrong with his treatment? Missed dose, bad batch of Wolfsbane Potion, bad ingredients. That’s what those parents see. An unfortunate accident waiting to happen. Not the man we know. Albus took a lot of chances. Most people wouldn’t. Not everyone got the chance to get to know him the way we did,” Viktor allowed.

“I wouldn’t have,” Hermione admitted. “I’m a hypocrite.”

“Crazy old man, paranoid old coot, a werewolf, a hopeless klutz, and a bunch of ignorant youths that were too inexperienced to much more than know their arse from their elbow and a third of us needed translators. Kingsley and Hestia were about the only two of the lot who passed for normal and were somewhere in the middle between cradle and grave. How did we manage not to get clobbered, again?” Viktor mused.

“Pure, dumb luck. And stupid, optimistic idealism. We were too sure of how right we were to consider how overmatched we were. I don’t think I ever seriously considered the possibility of us not winning in the end,” Hermione said, leaning her head lightly against Viktor’s upper arm. “Did you?”

“I did once,” Viktor said, his voice hoarse. “Scared me so badly I didn’t do it

again,” he confessed, then took a swallow from the wine glass.

Hermione lifted her head. “You know, it’s a little sad that Magda never had any idea what you did in the war.”

“What? It’s a pity my wife didn’t know how many people I killed? Including the ones on our side? I killed the ones I talked into joining just as sure as I did the ones on the other side. I would just as soon she didn’t know, thanks. I spent a long time trying to forget. I didn’t exactly relish the thought of finding out how Magda would have felt about all the things I did. You had it a little easier with Ron. He was there. He saw. He knew,” Viktor said, looking her in the eye. “I did *not* have the words to tell Magda. After a while, I don’t think she wanted to know, any more. It was all dead and buried, and she learned to leave it that way.”

“I suppose I did have it easier with Ron. At least on that score. There didn’t have to be words. You’re right. I’m not sure I could explain it to anyone who wasn’t there. Did I ever properly thank you for being there?” Hermione asked, putting her empty salad bowl down and taking up her plate. “More ways than one? Even just the willingness to be cried on?”

“I think you more than paid me back,” Viktor said, swapping bowl for plate. “Magda didn’t have to do quite so much whipping me into shape thanks to my being around you.”

“You know, some people would accuse us of being awfully morbid. Talk always seems to turn to either the war or our dead spouses somehow or other. Maybe we should be worried about that,” Hermione observed.

“I’d be more worried if we never talked about them. We spent a good portion of our lives with them. Loved them. Married them. Had children with them. Mourned them. You can’t ever quite let them go. Or maybe I just can’t,” Viktor said ruefully, holding out his left hand and inspecting the wedding band there.

“You’re not the only one,” Hermione confessed after a long moment, reaching into the neck of her pajama top and pulling out the band on a chain.

“You still wear yours, too, hmm?” Viktor asked, hanging it on the tip of his index finger for a moment, then dropping it. “I only swapped hands a year ago. Couldn’t bring myself to take it off completely. A few people told me I should. Just take it off and get it over with. I couldn’t. In my heart...”

“I was still married. I know. Oddly enough, Molly is the one who suggested the compromise. I couldn’t quite bring myself to quit wearing it completely, either. I put it on a chain six years after he died. And I’ve worn it this way ever since,” Hermione said, tucking the ring back into her collar.



“At the risk of sounding nosy, there... hasn’t been anyone? Since Ron?” Viktor asked.

“No. Not exactly a huge dating pool for widows with children. No one was interested,” Hermione said.

“Now, I can’t quite buy that,” Viktor admonished. “No one?”

“Do the math. Seriously reduced population, plus most of us delayed marriage longer than average, plus eleven years of being married to someone else and one young son. It does not add up to tons of men to choose from. And you know how it is once you have children. You never just date for you any more. You’re dating with them. For them. Simon wasn’t ready for me to date for a very long time, anyway. He actually used to nag me about it by the time he got older. Still does, occasionally, but now there’s that dating pool population catch, again. There aren’t a lot of single people our age. Besides, by then, you’re old and set in your ways and not many people will have you,” Hermione said with a laugh. “Since what’s good for the goose is good for the gander, what about you?”

“Me? Haven’t even seriously considered it. In fact, Evtimov brought it up once, in the abstract, a couple of years ago, and I cried. Not surprisingly, he hasn’t brought it up, since. You see, he made the unfortunate mistake of bringing it up on Magda’s birthday. He had no idea. He meant well. I ended up having to apologize to him for falling apart on him,” Viktor explained.

“Why on earth did he bring it up in the first place?” Hermione asked, her jaw slack.

“Because we were working late, and we were the only two people there, and I guess it seemed like a good time to bring it up. Of course, I was working late because I didn’t want to go home to an empty house. But he didn’t know that. And I suspect he worries about me, for some reason. Magda and I used to have him over a lot, especially before he got married. Magda just thought he was the cutest little overly uptight thing ever when I first brought him home. She threatened to stick a paintbrush up his nose if he called her Madam Krum one more time. He doesn’t have any family around close, and he’s a good kid who didn’t have any say about getting stuck with me. Besides, he’s good at what he does, and doesn’t drive me batty doing it, so I don’t want him looking for employment elsewhere. Or maybe part of it was because he hadn’t been married long. You know how people are when they get married. They start seeing everybody else as a project if they don’t have somebody. And young people... they just don’t understand that losing someone you spent half your life with isn’t like breaking up with your girlfriend. Spending twenty-seven years with someone is incomprehensible when you’ve barely lived that long. He meant to make me

feel better, but I hadn't even considered moving my wedding ring, much less going on a date," Viktor said. "That was supposed to be over when I put this on."

"It's so hard to move the ring. Maybe it's the first step to admitting they're gone for good," Hermione said.

"Felt like burying her again. When does it stop hurting so much?" Viktor asked, his voice barely audible.

"What in particular?" Hermione countered.

"Missing them. When does it stop feeling like... Sometimes I go weeks without doing too badly, and then, something happens that I would have told her first, or something I would have asked her first, or something she would have laughed at... and then I miss her so hard I ache," Viktor explained, putting down his empty plate, then idly fingering his wine glass with his left hand.

"I wish I had a timetable. All I can tell you is, after a while, it's more fond memory and not so much ache. Still, every once in a great while, Simon does something so... so... *Ron*... that I feel like I've been punched right in the gut... but it doesn't last long," Hermione said, putting her plate down as well. On impulse, she reached out and slipped her left hand beneath his right, resting lightly on the sofa, and threaded her fingers up through his, giving his hand a soft, encouraging squeeze.

Viktor gave hers a soft squeeze in return. "I missed you. I ought to be kicked for not keeping in touch."

"We both let things drop. Life plus time plus distance tends to get in the way," Hermione said. She laughed softly, leaning her head against his arm again. "That brood of yours sounds like they kept you plenty busy. Never mind all the jobs and the personal assistant you seem to be raising in addition."

"Busy enough. And you do too much math for your own good," Viktor assented. After a long, comfortable silence he added, "Did you want dessert? There was chocolate mousse on that menu. Unless my memory fails me, you are a fiend for chocolate mousse."

"Like I said, nothing wrong with your memory," Hermione murmured. "Any way we can get it here without either of us having to move?"

"I think at least one of us has to. Do you want coffee with that? Turkish?" Viktor asked, stirring reluctantly.

"That sounds perfect. I could use it. I think the wine has me all fuzzy in the

head,” Hermione said. “Then again, maybe it should. We’ve polished off most of the bottle.”

“Be here in a couple of minutes,” Viktor said, returning from the hearth and sinking back into the sofa, parking the empty wine glass on the coffee table.

“By the time we get done with dessert, I might be glad I’m in my pajamas. That way I don’t have to worry about my waistband giving way before dinner’s over,” Hermione said.

Dessert was eaten mostly in silence. Hermione sat curled and tucked into the corner of the sofa, hands wrapped tightly around her mug of coffee, nursing the last few sips as long as possible when Viktor sat his own empty mug down abruptly and said, “I really should be going. I *would* say I should be going so you can get ready for bed, but I think you’ve got that covered, already. If I sit here much longer, I’m going to fall asleep, pajamas or no pajamas.”

“Well, thank you for dinner,” Hermione said, reaching out and patting his shoulder. “Remember to pick up one of your cloaks on the way out the door,” she added with a smile.

“Thank you for the dinner conversation,” Viktor replied.

“No problem. It’s not a very big club, so sometimes it’s hard to find another member to talk to. We have to stick together when we can,” Hermione said, shrugging.

“Lunch tomorrow?” Viktor asked.

“What else would I do? See you tomorrow at lunch. Goodnight,” Hermione said, peering up at him over the edge of her cup.

“Goodnight,” he echoed softly, collecting his cloak from the hook and stepping out into the hall, closing the door gently behind. The lights in the hall and the lamp he had left on inside his own room seemed dim and fuzzy against the darkness of the late hour. Viktor tossed his cloak across the chair, sank gratefully onto the edge of the bed and tugged his boots off, dropping them to the floor. He paused for a few moments, reviewing snippets of the evening’s conversation, removed his glasses and settled them on the bedside table, then shook his head as though clearing it. He found he didn’t feel much motivated to go through the ordeal of fumbling through the drawer for his pajamas, so he simply stripped off his trousers and short robe, dropping them next to the boots, and slid beneath the covers, drifting off only a few moments after extinguishing the light and resting his head on the pillow.

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Hermione slid beneath the covers and dimmed the light once more, considering the ceiling above her. *It's his floor*, she thought suddenly. *His room is above mine*. Then, curiously, an old saying popped into her head. One man's ceiling is another man's floor. Where had she heard that? She rummaged through her memory, and found a dim recollection of a song lurking there. *Now, why did that pop into my head? Because, you dolt, it's true. Heaven knows you should understand that. If anyone should understand what it feels like, you should. You should have said so, Hermione. You should have said*, she thought to herself, kicking herself for not having done so earlier.

*There might not be a timetable, but it always gets better. Slowly and gradually, but it gets better. You graduate through the stages of grief and mourning, just the same way you do anything else. One slow, plodding, nearly immeasurable step at a time.* You would spend ages staring longingly at the ceiling, hoping to get to a "good day", one where you didn't cry at all. Then, one day, you would get it. That old ceiling became the new floor. Suddenly, your "bad days" were the days where you cried. Then, it was on to something else. Not having your heart twist in your chest whenever anyone mentioned their name. Not telling a completely bold-faced lie when you said you were fine. Giving away the clothes in the closet, perhaps. Making it a whole week where nothing happened that made you miss them so much it hurt...

"You should have said, Hermione. You should have told him. One man's ceiling is another man's floor. And if you tough it out long enough, your old ceiling becomes your new floor. Maybe you've forgotten too much. What it was like. You could have done better than that pitiful little 'me too', Hermione," she chided herself. *Maybe you're a little too glad he understands. Nobody else did. Nobody said 'me too' when Ron died. No one could. No one else understood how raw and fresh and tender it could be, even so long after. Everyone else expected you to 'move on' and 'get over it' on their timetable, not yours. Now, someone does understand, and all I can say is that I still miss Ron, too, sometimes. Like I'm excited to finally have someone to share that with. Next time, instead of quoting equations and platitudes at him, try something more useful. Like 'I missed you, too', for a start.*

*I missed him, too. I missed Viktor.* That last thought jarred her awake slightly. It had popped into her muzzy, half-asleep brain completely unbidden, surprising her. *It's the wine*, she thought in a minor panic. *It's not the wine... you genuinely missed him... this... you... you...* Her thoughts sputtered out into a sleepy, incoherent, inarticulate jumble, and she couldn't help feeling the same frustration she did when work wasn't cooperating. When she felt an answer was right there, at the tip of her tongue or the back of her mind, tucked into a hiding place, refusing to come out completely. Like a stunning revelation had just flitted across

the edge of her vision, then danced off or dissolved away the instant she tried to fix her gaze on it and pin it down. "I ought to be kicked for not keeping in touch," Hermione said aloud, sighing. "Could we please not make that mistake again? I bet we both miss plenty of people we can't keep in touch with, even discounting the spouses," she whispered, touching the ring near her collarbone once more, tracing the patterns on the ceiling with her eyes until her eyelids became heavy and sleep crept upon her and took her.

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Viktor hooked the extra pillow with his arm and hugged it even closer around his head, trying to block out the noise that kept hacking away at the insulating, hazy cocoon of the deep sleep he was in. Finally, the insistent knocking at the door prevailed, nudging him awake. He squinted at the clock on the bedside table, and hazarded a guess that it read Not Nearly Dawn, or something equally absurd, considering the dimness of the room. He sat up a little uncertainly, trying to gauge how much of the cotton wool feeling in his head was from being woken out of a dead sleep and how much was the wine.

"There had better be a good reason!" he called over his shoulder, in the general direction of the door. It had come out gruffer and crankier than he had intended, but he found he didn't much care. It was too early to bother with being polite. At least the knocking had ceased long enough for him to fumble his dressing gown from the bedpost, get it on and walk to the door with enough alertness to avoid locating the furniture with his shins. "What!?" Viktor snapped, yanking the door open and shading his eyes with a hand in the harsh glare of the hall lights.

"I'm really sorry. I tried to get hold of you last night, but you weren't in until far too late to call in," Evtimov said, holding up his hands in a helpless gesture. "I even left a note at the front desk, but they must have missed you."

"One of the kids had better be hurt, the hotel had better be on fire, or something equally urgent," Viktor said, impatiently waving Evtimov into the room and shutting the door behind him.

"Work-related, I'm afraid," Evtimov said, shaking his head. "I thought you would want to know. Latvia, Romania, Ukraine, and Germany are all threatening to pull out. Completely," he added.

Viktor flopped into the nearest of the overstuffed chairs, pinching the bridge of his nose and closing his eyes in a pained expression. "How the hell did that happen? Viktor asked tiredly. "Unless they've added midnight sessions I'm not aware of..." he said, opening his eyes and giving Evtimov a bleary, defeated look.

"A few too many drinks at the bar last night, and a few too many tongues that got too loose after a few tempers got too free. You know how these things are. I always say they shouldn't be allowed to socialize at all. Safer. Some of them were all set to pack up and storm off last night. I got them to hold off until tonight, at least. Told them you would meet with them and smooth things over. What else could I do? Petrovitch can't control them. He wasn't even there, and it wouldn't have made any difference if he had been. He's just letting this thing run wild. They all know it. You might as well be chairing this thing... So, what do we do?" Ilian said helplessly. He was beginning to feel painfully aware of just how early it was, how dark the circles beneath Viktor's eyes were, and how tired he must be. *At least I have the good grace to be thoroughly ashamed about rousting him out this early*, Evtimov thought ruefully.

"Fix it. What else can we do?" Viktor said with a weak shrug, tightening his hands on the arms of the chair, making his knuckles seem even more prominent than usual. "Germany, Latvia, Ukraine, we have notes on all of them. Their concerns." Even though it hadn't been a question, Evtimov nodded vigorously. "Order breakfast. Coffee. Let me get a quick bath and get rid of the whiskers, at least," Viktor said, scrubbing a hand over his chin, the stubble making a rasping noise. He ran the same hand through his mussed hair, seemingly more in an effort to keep moving and awake than to neaten it.

Viktor rose and walked slowly toward the bath. "Viktor, I'm sorry. If I could have thought of anything else..." Evtimov said, shaking his head as he trailed off.

"It was a good reason," Viktor said with a dispirited shrug, pausing. "I'm sure all they want is someone to listen to them complain, a bit of ego stroking, and a little concession. Even if the concession doesn't mean anything in the long run. We'll feed them on the Ministry Sickle tonight and make them feel like they've been heard. We'll figure out something to offer them that they were going to get anyway and make it seem like we're being generous. By the way, please excuse the mess. I wasn't expecting company this early," Viktor added absently, continuing into the bath and closing the door behind.

Evtimov nearly laughed aloud. The room was about as neat and almost militarily organized as any he had ever seen, save a small pile of clothing beside the rumpled bed and the equally rumpled occupant. Given a few minutes and enough strong coffee, the latter would probably be remedied. Even if it was mostly caffeine-fueled, the usual "fix it, even if it doesn't want fixing" attitude would be a welcome replacement for the rarely glimpsed look of defeat. Evtimov couldn't help but think that he would just about give his own right arm to know exactly where Viktor had been last night that no one at the front desk had spotted him going in or out. But he was far too intelligent to ask this morning. Neither before nor after the coffee.



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Evtimov doodled in the margins of his notes, trying to look busy while the Romanian delegate, Madam Vanescu, an older woman with iron gray hair and a spine to match droned on and on about giving up sovereignty and independence. Mostly the same useless complaining he had heard the night before in the hotel bar. Hot air at best and paranoid, nationalistic blather at worst. Viktor had placated her somewhat, at least, by agreeing to let her have his spot on the floor today instead of the last day spot she had originally drawn. It hadn't been much of a concession, really, if she had known the whole truth. Viktor had frankly admitted he was still mostly at a loss for what to say in addition to the scant prepared remarks he had put together before coming to the conference. And Evtimov doubted he could have even read those with much enthusiasm, given the draining early morning session they had put in.

Evtimov gave up on the notes and took a guarded, sidelong glance at Viktor, instead. The interest he displayed was feigned, but fairly convincing, at least until the eyelids closed just an instant too long and his chin dropped slightly. Ilian discreetly nudged Viktor's elbow, which was resting on the table, near Evtimov's parchment. Viktor raised his head and returned the sidelong glance for a few moments, then shifted and resituated in his chair, taking the opportunity to fish his watch out to check the time. When he had finished, he removed his glasses and set them on the table in front of him. It was almost like putting out the white flag. Ilian had already checked the time a few minutes prior and found the answer to be slightly depressing. Nearly an hour until the scheduled lunch break, and this yammering about all of Madam Vanescu's reservations about the pitfalls of pledging assistance on paper to one another wasn't getting any more interesting.

By the time the gavel came down to call an end to the morning session, Evtimov had doodled an impressive vine-like border around the entire outside of his parchment, and Viktor had graduated through cracking every single one of his knuckles, drumming his fingers on the table, and polishing the pesky, invisible smudge from one lens of his glasses with the hem of his robe. "I don't guess I need to ask if you still want to put it off until tonight, not lunch?" Evtimov whispered.

"Not lunch. It isn't enough time and I haven't the energy," Viktor said heavily. "Set it up with them, would you? I don't care where. Here would be fine. Somewhere. We have the budget for it, you can pick as well as I can. Are they bringing their minders as well?" he asked lightly, settling his glasses back on and raising one eyebrow above the frames.

"I think I'm the only minder on the list. They don't even like that you're bringing me," Evtimov admitted.



"Tough. You have to keep my foot away from my mouth," Viktor said with a weak, lopsided smile. "And possibly keep me from passing out in my entree. Tell me I didn't snore, at least," he added with a soft chuckle, the first real sign of an improving humor that he had shown all morning.

"No more than I did, and I don't think I did," Evtimov replied briskly. "You sure you don't want to pick the spot, Viktor?"

Viktor shook his head. "Ilian, you can pick a restaurant. Wherever you can get a table for six. Seven," he corrected himself after a moment, glancing over Evtimov's shoulder, toward the door.

"Sev... seven," Evtimov said, scribbling it down, trying not to sound too surprised.

"Maybe. I don't know. Maybe seven," Viktor said uncertainly, rising. "Is that all you need before I go?"

Evtimov debated a moment before replying. Maybe it was the sleep deprivation, but he was feeling a bit reckless. "Tell Mrs. Weasley... that I, for one, would enjoy seeing her at dinner," Evtimov said evenly, looking up at Viktor. "Provided we don't bore her to death." Not surprisingly, Viktor didn't display any obvious reaction. Evtimov hadn't really expected him to, no matter how tired he might still be.

"I think she's resistant to fatal bores. Get her to tell you about Professor Binns, sometime. She endured seven years of him, and even managed to take notes," Viktor said, walking toward the door.

"Enjoy your lunch," Evtimov tossed over his shoulder, adding cheekily, "Don't pass out in it."

"I'll try to avoid that particular embarrassment, Ilian. And Ilian?" Viktor called back, the footsteps pausing.

"Yes?" Evtimov replied, shuffling the last of his notes into his bag and looking up.

"You could relay that sentiment to Mrs. Weasley yourself, since she's right out there in the hallway," Viktor said, the slightest twitch pulling at one corner of his mouth and nodding his head toward the doorway. Sure enough, she was standing outside, leaning against the wall, peering in through the sea of people rushing out the door.

"I'll let you do it. We haven't been properly introduced," Evtimov said, suppressing a laugh.

"Remind me to take care of that this evening, then," Viktor shot back, turning on his heel and walking out into the hall. Evtimov watched the two of them greet one another and head off together. He would just about wager that the question of where Viktor had been last night had been answered to his satisfaction.

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"I hesitate to ask, because I like you," Viktor said, flopping down unceremoniously onto one of the empty benches near the food court, in front of the fountain, "but since we only have the one more day here, I hate not to. What are you doing tonight, for dinner?"

"I hadn't really thought about it. I assumed we... Why?" Hermione asked suspiciously, sliding onto the bench as well, setting down her takeaway bag. For some reason she couldn't quite fathom, Viktor had suggested walking all the way down to the far end of the food court and visiting the small, unassuming hamburger stand tucked in the corner.

"If you're up for a near-fatal boring meeting, I have to babysit four other delegates this evening. To keep them from throwing tantrums and taking all their toys and heading home. Or rather, Evtimov already did that, now I have to keep them interested and convince them there's something in it for them. There's a free and probably rather nice meal in it for you, but I wouldn't expect the most scintillating dinner conversation," Viktor admitted, setting down the two glass bottles of lemonade and opening them with his wand.

"What, exactly, are they supposed to be interested in?" Hermione asked, taking the one he held out to her.

"Trying to get all of the..." Viktor trailed off and narrowed his eyes, thinking for a long moment, "Durmstrang... area countries to sign an accord that lays the groundwork for a larger accord that would eventually lead to... well... The wizard equivalent of the United Nations, I suppose you could call it. Or that's the quickest, easiest way I can think of to describe it. I'm sure there are reams of explanations tucked away in the Ministries, but that's what it amounts to. Be years before the gavel comes down on the first meeting, at best, but, if we're lucky..."

"I think I should find that fascinating! So... this would be a temporary or a smaller organization, a bit like NATO or the UAE," Hermione said excitedly. "Or the Allied Powers! And I just realized half of what I'm babbling about probably makes no sense, does it?" she added, sagging slightly.

"Allies did. Same time period as Grindelwald. NATO. North Atlantic Treaty

Organization, right? You'll have to tell me what the UAE is, though," Viktor replied, peering at her over his raised bottle.

"United Arab Emirates. It's sort of a loose political collaboration, too... Not quite the same thing but... no matter. You would probably be the only one in the room who knows what any of them are. Including the UN. Most wizards aren't much interested in Muggle politics or history," Hermione admitted.

"Maybe they should be. Keep us from making some of the same mistakes. Bunch of infants. I think they ought to be spanked and sent back to their Ministries to stand in the corner for having an idiotic argument in a *bar*, but I imagine that would put a kink in signing anything if four of the countries go missing," Viktor complained loudly, opening his own bag.

"Shh, aren't you afraid one of them might be within earshot?" Hermione said with a grin, checking over her shoulder guiltily.

"No," Viktor said bluntly. "I'm probably going to have to say it to their faces tonight, albeit more nicely. And none of them would be caught dead down here, eating one of these," he explained, pulling out the hamburger he had ordered. "Not and miss a chance to show off to all the other delegates about how big their Ministry expense accounts are. You still haven't answered."

"Hmm?" Hermione said distractedly, fishing out her own burger. "Oh! Dinner. Sure. Why not?" She added, unwrapping it carefully and taking a bite. "Just curious. Why a burger?" she asked after she had swallowed.

"Because," Viktor said, pausing to take a drink, "it will probably be all fancy stuff tonight, and I'm kind of tired of fancy. And I'm pathetic. I actually like the things," he added with a smile.

"Well, I actually like them, too, but it's not the first thing I would have guessed you wanting for lunch," Hermione said.

"Drawback of traveling so much. Introduces you to all this 'foreign' cuisine you really shouldn't be eating, either. And a great many things I am never touching again with a ten meter pole," Viktor added with a laugh.

"Things you had to swallow anyway because of other envoys?" Hermione pressed.

"Some. Is there a polite way to tell the Japanese commissioner you generally consider raw fish bait for catching dinner, not dinner in itself? But mostly because of Magda. She had this thing about trying new food. And she couldn't just leave well enough alone and try it herself. Oh, no, everybody *else* had to try it, too. I

have the only kids alive who ate things like crepes suzette and broiled trout when they were three. Grant you, I found out I liked a few things I never would have tried otherwise, but still. I never would have tried squid if Magda hadn't practically forced me to at wandpoint," Viktor said with a shake of his head.

"You like squid?" Hermione asked curiously.

"It's wonderful if you enjoy chewing on rubber bands. Similar taste and consistency. No, I detest it, but I wouldn't know that for sure if Magda hadn't made me try it the once. Before, I just didn't eat it on general principle of it looking like that. It used to appall her that sometimes, we would be within walking distance of these great local restaurants, and I would be absolutely dying for a common burger, instead. I was worse than the kids. So, sometimes we ate the burger and sometimes, I tried squid or something else equally disgusting-sounding. You know, haggis actually isn't too terrible if you can forget what it is? And I had to give up turning down fried chicken livers after we ended up in an American diner in the south that didn't serve anything but. Never eat any. They're delicious," Viktor explained.

"Then, why the warning to stay off?" Hermione said with a laugh.

"They've got to be absolutely awful for you. You can practically hear your arteries slamming shut if they're done properly. There are copious amounts of gravy involved, too. Usually near a mound of mashed potatoes that are drowning in butter and approaching the size of your head. And cornbread. That sounded positively dreadful until I tried it. Trust me. Stay well clear of anything served in a restaurant where the waitress calls everyone honey. You'll just end up wanting more, and I hardly ever get back there, these days. Not that it would do me much good, with the Ministry being in New York. I think you need to make it south of the Ohio River for proper fried everything on one plate. Trust me, don't ever try them. You'll be happier in the long run."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," Hermione said. "What is it with you men and not wanting to try anything new, anyway?"

"What is it with you women and not wanting to leave well enough alone?" Viktor teased back.

"Ron was exactly the same way. He would have eaten the same five things for dinner every night in a week and not blink. You would think I had asked him to leap off the roof of a Quidditch stadium when I made something different or we went to a new restaurant. Anyone would think you avoided trying new things because you were afraid of not liking something," Hermione mused.

"Well, I'm not that way any more, obviously. Eat far more than is really good for

me, to tell the truth. I think we're more afraid of finding out we *like* something new. Men are creatures of habit. New is scary. Means you might have to change... or risk something... Or worse," Viktor replied, studying her intently.

"Worse?" Hermione prompted.

"Admit it," Viktor elaborated. "Probably nothing a man hates worse than admitting he might need a change," he said, ducking back to the rest of his burger. They ate in silence for a few minutes.

"What should I wear?" Hermione ventured, folding up her empty hamburger wrapper and dropping it back into her bag.

"Hmm?" Viktor said, doing the same with his wrapper and nursing his lemonade bottle instead.

"To dinner. What should I wear? Need it be fancy?" Hermione asked.

"Considering the week so far, I think I would have to recommend the pajamas for comfortable napping. I'm sure anything you wear would be fine. You always look quite a bit more than presentable. Even when you don't spend three hours getting ready. In fact, I don't think I've seen anyone look so fetching in pajamas," Viktor said, a slow smile spreading across his face.

Hermione sighed. "I think I'll skip the pajamas and dress up. Wouldn't want anyone feeling they hadn't gotten their expense account's worth because my wardrobe was not up to snuff for the restaurant. Now, are you ready to start back?" Hermione asked, looking over her shoulder toward the other end of the convention center, where the meeting rooms were located, then gathering up their discarded bags and tossing them into the rubbish bin.

"Define ready," Viktor said, rising reluctantly. "Do I recognize the time and acknowledge that if we don't want to be late, we had better go? Yes. Do I want to go back? I'd sooner have an Erumpent trample me at the moment," he added with a deep sigh.

"I'll definitely walk next to the wall, then. Just in case," Hermione said, laughing and hooking her arm through his. "Duty calls," she added, giving his arm a tug.

"Duty stinks," Viktor said earnestly, and with such conviction that Hermione couldn't help but laugh again.

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Hermione considered herself in the mirror for what had to be the tenth time,

debating whether the wrap should go with her or stay in the room. She had just decided it should stay, that the inner and outer robes were plenty in the way of layering, when the doorbell rang. Hermione glanced at her watch and noted it was a few minutes earlier than she was expected to be ready. She hadn't even decided what to attempt to do with her hair. She laid the folded wrap on the sofa as she passed to answer the door. "Madam, I am having a note for you," the house elf at the door squeaked out enthusiastically, waving a slip of parchment at her.

"Thank you," Hermione said, fumbling for a pocket. It took a moment to realize that she was without pockets in these robes. "Sorry, just a moment and I'll get your tip-"

"No! No tip, Madam! Glad to be of service!" the house-elf protested, waving his hands and hurrying off down the hall. Hermione shook her head and thought to herself, *At least they don't scream bloody murder when you offer them a tip these days. Most of them.*

Hermione unfolded the slip of parchment and read *Running slightly behind. Work call. Evtimov is supposed to be entertaining the charges downstairs. Shouldn't be more than five minutes late picking you up. Apologies, Viktor.* Hermione refolded the note and put it on top of the discarded wrap. On the bright side, it gave her five more minutes to let her hair worry at her, she supposed. Or to reconsider wearing that wrap...

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Viktor hurried down the stairs, reluctantly, nevertheless. He was equal parts annoyed and grateful that he had a valid excuse for not already being downstairs, but was just as annoyed about being late, which always bothered him. He hated tardiness. In himself and others. Especially in himself. It went against his grain, excuse or no excuse. Something minor nagged at him, niggling and distant in the back of his brain, something forgotten. He had just pulled up short in front of Hermione's door, and given it a hasty couple of raps with his knuckles when it occurred to him that his face felt unaccustomedly naked. *Of course... glasses...* Viktor thought, frantically patting at his pockets, praying he had stuck them somewhere on his person while taking the call, rather than having to go all the way back upstairs for them. He finally located them in, of all places, his trouser pocket. "Blasted... *things!*" he spat, fishing them out.

"No fair being in a foul mood before we even get down there," Hermione said from the open door.

Viktor slipped them on hastily. "I'm sorry, I thought I had forgotten my..."

"You were saying?" Hermione prompted after a moment, leaning against the door frame.

"Mind, apparently," Viktor said with a shrug. "You look incredible. You didn't pack that."

Hermione shook her head. "I did some shopping downstairs. So sue me. Come on in. I need to solicit your opinion on something. As is," she asked, walking into the room a short way and holding out her arms, then indicating the long, flowing inner robe with a silver bodice and black skirt, paired with an outer robe of silver, "or with the wrap?" She hastily flipped the black velvet wrap from the sofa onto her shoulders. "Or maybe without the outer robe and just the wrap?" she added, hastily slipping out of the outer robe and shrugging the wrap up onto her shoulders once more.

"I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree. I have no fashion sense whatsoever," Viktor protested.

"You have eyes and an opinion, don't you?" Hermione countered. "So, which looks best? Come on, I've gone round and round with myself over this."

"That looks... really beautiful. Just like that," Viktor said, evening up one side of the wrap by pulling it farther up her left shoulder. "It all does... but... that."

"Hair look fine? I thought it at least made a change from sticking out in all directions," Hermione said, pointing to the silver comb holding her hair back in a fairly neat French twist. Already a single tendril had partially escaped and hung below the comb. She didn't really pause for an answer, grabbing up a small silver handbag, popping it open and dropping her wand into it. The much larger looking wand disappeared quite easily into the charmed interior.

"It looks great. You... look great," Viktor insisted. "You make me feel a little shabby by comparison," he added, adjusting the sash on the forest green, tunic-like short robe he was wearing.

"Nonsense. You look very sharp. And I bet you didn't have to go down to the shops to find something decent to wear, either. Suppose I had better hope none of the people we're having dinner with went into the same shop," Hermione said ruefully, picking a bit of lint off the wrap.

"I freely admit Magda used to dress me, and Anna largely took over. And I doubt any of them have had time to go shopping. Too busy trying to find something to nitpick about this whole arrangement," Viktor said, shaking his head. "You didn't have to dress up for them, you know."



"Who said I was dressing up for them? I'm dressing up for me. Now, are we going downstairs, or are we just going to stay up here and talk fashion all night?" Hermione asked.

"Don't tempt me," Viktor cautioned, offering his arm.

"Prefer fashion to politics?" Hermione asked in surprise, tucking her own arm into the crook of his.

"Safer subject. Besides, I think it's more the choice of company. I think I could talk about anything with you and enjoy it. Them, they could suck the fun out of anything," Viktor said sourly.

"Don't tempt me to back out," Hermione said, opening the door.

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Evtimov surreptitiously checked the clock on the far wall again. He had made the proper excuses, used all the proper platitudes, and ordered all the proper cocktails, and everyone seemed to be occupied pleasantly enough, but he still couldn't help dying a small death every time the minute hand advanced a tick. Twelve minutes past and counting, not that he was counting. Much. "I am sure he will be here soon," Madam Vanescu said, studying Ilian down the bridge of her sharp nose as though he were a rather interesting curiosity. It sounded like a cross between an inquiry and a demand, coming from her, rather than an observation.

"I'm certain the rest of you understand that duties back home didn't simply disappear because he's away," Evtimov said firmly, sounding a great deal more confident than he felt. He could personally wring the neck of that blasted idiot contractor for botching the installation of the new rings at three of the stadiums so badly that half the pitch surfaces were now in need of replacing, leaving them scrambling for an alternate venue for half the matches this next week, but he made sure none of that filtered into his expression. He kept it carefully neutral. If there was one thing he had learned in this job, it was that an unreadable expression was invaluable. Evtimov focused his gaze on the door, sipping at his wine casually, hoping he didn't look nearly as desperate as he felt.

The minute hand crept forward another notch just as the Latvian delegate, Ruskin, cleared his throat impatiently. "Must be some call," he muttered in his oddly impeccable English, twirling the skewered olive perched in his martini.

Evtimov took a look around the table, at all the gray heads, and resisted the urge to tartly remind them that not every delegate had the luxury of being retired from everything else, save full time complaint. Truth be told, he suspected the lot of

them rather resented the fact that Viktor had earned such clout before earning a single gray hair. These four at the table had all elbowed and fought their way into their positions at their respective Ministries through politics. He was certain none of them had been begged to take the position. No, they had all coveted the spot and worked for it. "I'm sure he'll be down as soon as possible," Evtimov said again, not rising to the bait, taking a miniscule sip from his own glass. The other glasses were getting worryingly empty. He hated to think how foul the moods would get if he had to, Heaven forbid, order a second round of drinks for everyone before Viktor even made it downstairs.

He let his eyes wander to the door once more, and spotted the familiar, lanky figure and the woman with him, who was getting to be more familiar, of late. Instead of betraying himself further, Evtimov hid his widening smile in his drink and tried to compose himself once more, hoping the wave of relief hadn't been obvious. Viktor raised his hand to Ilian, Ilian acknowledged the gesture, then Viktor and Hermione headed to the bar, to pick up drinks as well. It almost didn't register when the Ukrainian delegate, Kasparov, wondered aloud, "Who on earth is he with? What does he think this is, a dinner date?"

"No idea. Haven't seen him much more than talk with a woman since his wife died," the German, Klaus Kroner said bluntly, twisting in his seat and gawking, open-mouthed. "Hardly seems the type to show up at a business dinner with a... Pretty enough," he added. He looked Hermione up and down appraisingly. "Lovely, but hardly the sort of companion to bring to this. This isn't a cocktail party," he said sternly, blowing indignantly at the thick mustache that unfortunately made him look even more walrus-like than he would have otherwise.

"I'll remind you to-" Evtimov began, but Madam Vanescu interrupted, rapping her fist on the table.

She spoke in staccato fashion, like a professor naming off a list of pranks to a particularly naughty schoolboy. "I'll not have this made light of! This is not some social event! It's not the sort of thing to be bringing your female companionship to! We're going to be discussing far more important things than the weather and sport! It would be one thing if it were his wife, that might pass, but when it's-

Now Evtimov took his chance to interrupt. "Madam! May I remind you all to mind your manners? Before you go leaping to all sorts of conclusions about appropriateness, may I remind you that Viktor carved out time from his own *personal* schedule to accommodate you all for this dinner? In his *personal time* for the four of you to speak to him, openly, outside the conference? When he didn't have to? This is *his* time, and you were all told you were free to bring along whomever you like as well. You chose not to. You have no *right* to get bent out of shape simply because he chose to bring along a dinner companion. And before

you go complaining further, do any of you even *know* who that *is*?" he asked sharply.

"No," Ruskin said, narrowing his eyes. "why should I know anything about Viktor Krum's choice of dinner companions?"

"Because! There's probably only one other person alive in the world who *isn't* a Ministerial envoy that is *more* appropriate to sit in on this conversation! And I doubt Harry Potter would be all that interested in dining with any of you," Evtimov snapped back. "*That*," Ilian hissed in a low voice, "is Hermione Granger Weasley." The four sets of eyes on him widened in surprise, then silently moved back to the couple waiting at the bar.

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"We seem to be attracting some attention. And it doesn't look happy. Are you sure we shouldn't have gone straight to the table?" Hermione asked anxiously, gazing over her shoulder once more, toward the table.

"They have drinks, so we should have drinks. They can see we're here. Besides, here's where all the men in the place are supposed to envy me because I'm with an attractive lady," Viktor replied, leaning against the counter without even looking at the dinner table.

"Whose hair is already escaping," Hermione said, reaching back to tuck the rogue strand back into the twist. "And I doubt I attract the sort of envy Magda did. Besides, it looks more like the lot of them are staring daggers at me."

"And it gives Evtimov long enough to convince them it's acceptable that I brought you. I imagine old Vanescu is having a good old self-righteous rant, and Ruskin and Kasparov are trying to decide whether to throw in with her and be royally offended. Kroner, he's probably too busy admiring the way you look in that outfit to be offended much. There's a good reason he's had four wives. He appreciates the female form a little too avidly. I'll warn you. I hear he pinches. Punch him right in the nose if he does. Or lower. They'll get over it by the time we get to the table," Viktor said with a rueful, halfhearted smile, not even bothering to glance at the table.

Hermione took another long look at the table. "That assessment looks to be uncomfortably accurate. Which scares me, since you aren't even looking at the table. You've been at this too long. If you had told me it would offend them, I wouldn't have come," Hermione said firmly.

"And I would have spent the whole evening contemplating doing myself in with the butter knife. There's good reason I didn't tell you. I knew you wouldn't come if

I told you. Those four find offense in everything. We're talking about people who protested my being an envoy to the first summit I attended just because I was supposedly 'far too young' and cried foul one time when Magda attended a lunch with me. And that's all it was. A lunch. No business talk, just lunch. Just because none of them had anyone that actually *wanted* to eat lunch with them. If it weren't you, it would be my choice of boots. Or something else," Viktor said, catching the attention of the busy bartender. "Really, you look beautiful. I'm sure they're staring mostly because they can't figure out who I'm with. They're just being nosy and veiling it as concern about... whatever. They're wondering what to feed the gossip mill. They haven't seen me with anyone female for a long time, remember?" Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but before she could, Viktor asked, "What did you want to drink?"

"I hadn't really thought..." she stammered uncertainly, while the bartender waited. "What are you having?"

"I'll take a tomato juice with lemon. With a celery stalk and some salt. And take your time putting it together," Viktor told the bartender. "And whatever she wants."

"I'll take the same," Hermione told the bartender. "You sneaky little devil. You're going to go over there with what looks like a Bloody Mary..."

"They all had the option of staying stone cold sober, too. Evtimov didn't shove the alcohol into their hands. I'm sure he just offered. I like being guaranteed I can drink the lot under the table and not have to worry about how fuzzy my head is. See? I *have* been at this too long," Viktor said, sliding one of the glasses toward her and paying the bartender. "Thank you."

"I see why you like bringing Evtimov to these things. Easier to run the scam with two of you in on it," Hermione said, lifting her glass and raising an eyebrow at him.

"Absolutely. Now, shh, don't tell on me. If they find out, I'm ruined. We should probably go sit. Looks like Evtimov has them properly hushed up. I could introduce you," Viktor said, taking his glass and cupping her elbow with the other hand. "So you know who to avoid."

"Of course. Now that you've made it impossible for me to run off, screaming into the night. You're sneaky," Hermione scolded. "Very sneaky."

"No, I'm not. I'm just pretty good at making sure the other people do most of the work necessary to beat themselves for me. And bluffing. Works in Wronski Feints *and* politics, fortunately. Now, are you going to go grace that table with your presence, or are you going to keep Evtimov waiting to be introduced and

me eyeing the butter knife?” Viktor asked, nodding his head toward the table where their dinner companions waited, trying not to be too obvious in their curious inspections.

Hermione couldn't help but be reminded of the Yule Ball, when her own classmates had stared and hardly recognized her. That had been both gratifying and horrifying. On the one hand, it had been nice to hear all the whispers about the 'very pretty girl with Viktor Krum', but on the other hand, it had been just a bit disheartening to realize no one had ever thought to say such a thing until she had put in hours on her appearance. When she had complained about the three hours spent getting ready, once, Viktor had cocked a bushy eyebrow and made the rather cryptic comment that obviously, no one around Hogwarts had ever paid much attention to anything. It had taken her quite some time to work out what he had meant. That if it took three hours of getting ready to convince them she was pretty, none of them were looking very hard. “Well, I can't very well be responsible for your demise by butter knife, now, can I?” Hermione replied, allowing him to put his hand on her back and steer her gently forward.

“I hope you all pardon the delay, but I'm sure Evtimov took good care of you. I owe you all an apology, and Evtimov, I owe you an introduction,” Viktor said when they reached the table, amidst a shuffle of chairs as the men rose. “Ilian Evtimov, this is Hermione Weasley.”

Hermione took the chance to look him over frankly. He couldn't be a great deal older than Simon. In fact, he barely looked as old as Simon. He looked soft and almost certainly had to be older than he looked, to be in his position. The thick, dark brown hair was impeccably kempt, and when he smiled at her, the deep dimple in his cheek made him look, if possible, even younger. She practically had the mad impulse to ask him what year he was in. “An honor and a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Weasley,” he said earnestly, with almost as much enthusiasm as he had shown in gesturing with his coffee cup, the first time she had spotted him. “I've heard so much about you.”

“Please, Hermione. Mrs. Weasley still seems like it belongs to my mother-in-law. And I imagine most of what you've heard was in history class, if I were to guess,” Hermione replied, shaking his hand.

“I've also had the unique privilege of hearing a few personal anecdotes, as well,” Evtimov demurred, exchanging a quick glance with Viktor.

“Nothing too embarrassing, I hope,” Hermione replied, smiling back.

“All flattering, I assure you,” Ilian insisted. Viktor made the rest of the introductions and held one of the empty chairs for her. Hermione sank into it gratefully, her knees feeling a bit too much like they were about to go clacking

against each other any second. She said a silent word of thanks that the chair in question was planted between Evtimov and Viktor. After the pleasant formality of ordering dinner, following a seemingly endless recital of specials, they sat in silence for a short space.

“Well?” Viktor said deliberately, raising an eyebrow. Hermione had to duck into her glass to keep from laughing out loud. For a split second, he had looked for all the world like a father that had been called in on a mission to find out which child had started the argument that had gotten out of hand, and more importantly, to put a stop to it. Hermione supposed he had done just that, more than once, with his three. “I did this so you four could bend my ear. So someone start bending it,” he added impatiently. When no one spoke up right away, he took a slow sip from his own glass, then muttered, “Fine. I see I needn’t have bothered,” in a disgusted tone.

“It’s just that... the four of us are not convinced that all these agreements are necessary. It’s a big sacrifice, asking all of our countries to put up so much, when there’s no real proof that there’s any gain from it,” Kasparov began uncertainly.

“And what, precisely, is such a big sacrifice? All that’s asked of the member nations is a bit of time investment, perhaps some money, a new Ministerial position, possibly, and a bit of a formal commitment should any crisis of an international nature come along. If you’re really hard pressed to come up with all of those three things, I think you could manage with no more than your Minister devoting a few hours a month to reviewing the proposals and attending a few meetings. I hardly think we’re asking too much. We’re certainly not asking that you all sacrifice your firstborn, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Viktor replied. “And the benefit... do we really have to lay that out?”

Kasparov snorted derisively. “And I suppose you think our Ministers have so much free time that they have no trouble finding a *few* hours to devote to that?”

“I doubt any of them are sitting about, twiddling their thumbs for want of anything to do, but I *was* under the impression that you do pay them to do more than decorate their offices. I don’t see any of them crying ‘too busy’ when there’s a good match in country. Or out of country, for that matter. I’ve yet to be turned down when I offered tickets,” Viktor said in an offhand manner, turning his attention back to his glass. “If your Ministers can forfeit six hours out of their busy schedules to sit in the top box for a match of no particular consequence whenever I happen to have some tickets, they can squeeze a few extra hours out for reviewing some paperwork and a little extra travel.”

“It’s hardly the same,” Madam Vanescu drawled out in her nasal, dreary voice.

“If nothing else, they could kill two birds with one stone and review the paperwork



during lulls in the matches,” Hermione interjected. The barest twitch of a smile flitted over Evtimov’s face before he could straighten it back out and hide behind his glass.

“There you go. Seems reasonable enough to me,” Viktor said with a shrug, putting his glass down. “Okay, let’s say for the sake of argument, your Ministers are all terribly, terribly busy and can’t *possibly* carve another instant out of their schedules to do a speck more work. And you can’t afford to create another Ministry position. I’ll see what I can do about matching you all up with a neighboring nation. Maybe seeing if the position could be shared between two represented countries, if you’re interested. That way, neither country would bear the entire cost, yet both countries would get the benefits of representation and membership. But you have to commit to the organization in the first place. I can’t go in and try to make this fly with the other Ministries if you won’t sign and complain that you *would* if someone would do part of the work for you. Some of the more populous countries would probably be open to doing a bit of job sharing, if you’re willing to give up a monopoly on the representative’s time. Anything wrong with that idea?”

“Would we get equal time with the representative? Equal weight to any other member nation?” Madam Vanescu asked shrewdly, giving Viktor a pointed look.

“One nation, one vote. Assuming it’s a voting issue. But the representative casts the vote. Otherwise, I’ll see what I can do. No promises. Considering the organization is just now getting off the ground, I expect it can be arranged rather easily with one of the nations that are more eager to participate. Not everyone is hellbent on making this process as difficult as possible,” Viktor shot back, lowering his eyebrows and glaring right back. Hermione had the fleeting thought that Madam Vanescu probably only rarely got as good as she gave in the intimidation department. Madam Vanescu soon broke eye contact and went back to inspecting her ice cubes.

“And if the partner nation and our nation don’t agree on a key issue of great importance?” Kroner interrupted sharply.

“Up to the discretion of the representative as to who they want to side with. You get what you pay for. If you’re too damned cheap to pay for a whole representative, don’t bother expecting him or her to represent you wholeheartedly,” Viktor replied. “As I said, you already have the option of having a representative devoted solely to your population. Your Minister. You can’t have your cake and eat it, too. I’d love to see you try to argue the point, though,” he added, casting a sidelong glance at Hermione before the waiter began setting down plates.

“I’m sure several of the delegates would be interested in possible representation



deals,” Evtimov said over the clatter. “I can give you a list of at least six names that would probably be open to doing just that,” he added to Viktor. “Two or three more that would likely consider it.”

“It works in the Muggle world, after all. There are plenty of smaller nations that cooperate when it comes to things like this,” Hermione insisted. She tried not to notice the way Madam Vanescu pursed her mouth even more tightly at the word ‘Muggle’.

This time, the corner of Viktor’s mouth twitched slightly. “And I’m sure the lot of you don’t want to get shown up by how easily and smoothly the Muggles are able to set up and run something like this,” he said, giving Hermione another long look before turning his attention to unfolding his napkin. “And several decades before us, too, I might add.”

Ruskin took a rather vicious hack at his chicken with his knife. “I doubt we can be compared to such helpless-”

“I think you had best watch where that sentence is going,” Hermione bit off, slightly appalled somewhere in the back of her mind at her own boldness. “Some of us at this table are Muggleborn.”

“And the Muggles have us beat by miles on some things. Like international cooperation in times of crisis,” Viktor added.

Ruskin smiled coldly, without it reaching his eyes. “Of course. I do apologize. I still doubt any situation with *them* could be compared to *us*, however.”

“I don’t see why not. A despot is a despot, regardless of whether he or she can wield a wand or not. I agree we have a slightly different situation, what with the additional need to keep from trumpeting the fact that we even exist, if we can help it, but our situations aren’t so different, deep down. What we need is the same. Some sort of international coalition that can be called on when necessary. If we’re all so worried about keeping our heads down that we keep them buried in the sand, we’re worse than useless to one another. If we let things fester until we have another Voldemort on our hands, I think even your most oblivious Muggle might notice there’s something going on. It’s a shade hard to ignore a war going on in the magical world,” Viktor shot back. Though the name didn’t foster the extreme reaction it had in her youth, Hermione couldn’t help but notice the definite effect it had on them all.

“Is that your complete argument? The possibility of another Dark Lord of that caliber?” Kroner asked. “Scare tactics?”

“Grindelwald... Voldemort... the names might change, but the situation doesn’t. A

wizard or witch gone bad is everyone's problem. Ignore it at your own peril. Last time proved that well enough," Viktor replied.

"There's no evidence that this would have done any good against him," Kroner pointed out.

"Wouldn't it? If any of us had bothered sticking our necks out the first time, maybe he wouldn't have had so many loyal followers still out, about and well connected. Maybe there wouldn't have been so many Lucius Malfoys tucked away in all corners of the world, sitting on all that intelligence and influence, just waiting for Voldemort to show up again. And all those resources. If some of us had even done any dedicated policing in our own backyards, maybe we could have prevented-" Viktor paused momentarily when Evtimov let out a thunderous cough. "Maybe we could have prevented the network of Death Eaters being quite so stable when he returned. And I include *my* backyard in that statement," Viktor added in a softer tone. "We all let it fester. Britain, too. No one wanted to get their hands dirty or ruffle any feathers."

"Convince me," Kroner said in a deathly quiet voice. "Convince me I get *anything* out of this." Hermione had to marvel at how Viktor and Ilian patiently explained over the course of dinner what had probably been covered ad nauseum already in the sessions, all week. It took the better part of an hour to include what Hermione supposed were just the highlights. She listened with keen interest, but by the time her plate was empty, she decided the butter knife would indeed look fairly tempting by the time one had spent a week going over this same argument with a room full of these types. At least it was slightly encouraging that Madam Vanescu, Kasparov, and Ruskin had all softened their expressions considerably, and looked more agreeable. The fact that they were each on their second drink might be a bigger contributing factor, Hermione allowed, but at least they weren't looking quite so formidable as they had at the top of the dinner hour. Kroner tented his fingers momentarily, then spoke. "Not convinced," he said, a smug smile crawling across his face.

"Then you're a fool," Viktor said bluntly. This time, Evtimov's near strangulation on his drink wasn't faked in the least. Hermione felt her own jaw slacken. Even Madam Vanescu and Kasparov looked shocked. Kroner's face hardened, if possible, even more, and Ruskin seemed in a big rush to fill the cavernous silence first. He floundered for a second before trying to sound conciliatory.

"It's just... you're being so hasty about all of this. We need time to examine all the angles. You can't just expect us to sign up for this without adequate evidence to decide it's necessary," Ruskin said finally. He sounded practically meek compared with his prior blustering. Hermione thought he looked awfully deflated, given the pompous, superior attitude he had taken earlier.

"If you haven't seen enough evidence, it's your own fault. You're not looking very closely. How much does it take, Ruskin? Do the heavenly host have to come down and sing about the necessity of this organization in three part harmony? If so, I'll see what I can arrange," Viktor said tartly.

"You... you obviously... think it's self-evident. We mightn't," Madam Vanescu added in a flat voice. She, too, seemed to have lost her nerve in the face of a real confrontation.

"Isn't it? Exactly how many times does the magical world have to be pushed to the brink of destruction before it becomes self-evident!? How many *bodies*? Do we count the Muggles? Or do they not *count* for anything? Plenty of dead wizards and witches! I could name a lot of them! Do you prefer I go alphabetically or by age!? I'm sure if I skip one, Hermione could fill in the blanks!" Viktor said through clenched teeth. By now, all the other delegates aside from Kroner were finding the tabletop immensely interesting.

"That won't ever happen again! It's all alarmist claptrap! You think you can *scare* us into signing!" Kroner spat back.

"That's the most incredibly ridiculous thing I've ever heard! Won't happen again?! When it's already happened *twice* in *my* lifetime! You *are* a fool!" Hermione felt as much as saw six pairs of eyes slowly fall on her. Her better judgment shouted at her to shut up and leave well enough alone, but the damage had already been done, she supposed, and the words tumbled out in a rush. "Not *one* of you was anywhere near any of the fighting, I bet! You didn't send your sons or daughters, you considered the Muggles that died faceless strangers, and the wizards and witches little better!" Hermione could hear herself getting more shrill and hysterical sounding as she went on. "None of you want to think about it happening again, but it could! It will! Especially if you turn a blind eye to one another! If you don't cooperate. You can stick your fingers in your ears if you like, but it doesn't prevent it from happening. The more you deny the possibility, the more likely it is to happen. It's the perfect environment for them, the lot of you dicker over what's meaningless in the long run, like who gets what tiny advantage! And with you or without you, others will sign. Most people will see reason, before it happens in their back garden," Hermione finished, swallowing hard. "Everyone else will. You'll be a laughing stock if you refuse to sign."

The other occupants of the table seemed frozen in place for a few long moments. Then Kroner gaped, flummoxed and at a loss for words for an instant. "Surely you can't agree with *that*!" he demanded, reddening and pointing indignantly at Hermione.

Viktor paused, took a slow sip from his glass, then cleared his throat. "I have to disagree on a couple of points, I admit. For a start, that's *not* the most ridiculous

thing I ever heard, and I'm not quite so optimistic, but then, I've been to more of these things than Hermione has," he said, sounding like he was commenting on something inconsequential, like the weather. "Is that your argument in all its glory? It's too much cost, too much bother, and I'm trying to scare you with bogeymen? This is what the four of you dragged me down to hear? This is what got the four of you into an argument over whether to leave? You're worse than I thought."

"It's the ridiculous, cockeyed idealism of naive *youth*. Everyone agrees to help everyone else, we all hold hands and sing, and nothing awful ever happens again. Especially not big, bad wars. Heaven forbid anyone ever be involved in a war again. Someone might scrape a *knee*," Kroner said, with particular emphasis and distaste on the word 'youth', then a drop into a nasty, mocking singsong rhythm. The rest of the delegates at least had the good grace to look ashamed. Hermione stared at Kroner, her own mouth slack, waiting for someone to break the lingering silence. She let her eyes slide over to Evtimov, and found him sitting, stunned, an expression on his face remarkably similar to her own. "It's a weak country that has to depend on everyone else, and Germany is not weak!" Kroner thundered, slapping a hand down on the table, rattling the plates and glasses. Hermione jumped in spite of herself, then braced for the inevitable outburst from Viktor.

Only, it never came. Instead, he did the last thing she would have expected. He laughed. Quiet, soft, mirthless, but unmistakably laughter. "*Youth*. That's a good one. What makes you such an expert on everything, Kroner? Age? Because I don't remember seeing you risking your life anywhere. I didn't so much as see you risking your teatime. *Youth*. I haven't been young *or* a cockeyed optimist since I was nineteen. That's the first time I had to kill someone," Viktor said softly, swallowing hard. Even Kroner blanched. Hermione dropped her gaze to her lap. She knew what was coming. "By then, they had started pulling Muggles and innocent bystanders into it. Killing them just to keep us guessing, using them as human shields... you name it. Azkaban was abandoned, at best the Ministry was just going to summarily execute them anyway, maybe torture them a bit to see what they could get out of them... but that was usually too much trouble. Easier to have us do it in the field. They not only gave us their blessing, they encouraged it. Kept them from getting any dirt under their nails. They got all squeamish about cleaning up their own mess. Couldn't keep them at the Ministry. What if the rest of them decided the ones in custody were worth rescuing and all the Aurors were out in the field? Can't risk the all-important senior Ministry employees, now can we? Heaven forbid the Head Bean Counter or the Almighty Figurehead sprain an elbow in a Death Eater raid. They as good as said they would be right back on the streets if they were a 'name' and we took them alive and turned them in to the authorities. Hell, they were. We stood by and watched Federov kill six people before we could take him alive and he practically beat us back home after we handed him over. And killed more. One of

those people was all of *eight years old*. In *Hogsmeade*. Wizards, Kroner. I left him in the dirt with his ribcage turned into dust. Along with what was left of my cockeyed optimism. I was *nineteen*." Viktor tapped his index finger on the table at the last word, so softly it was barely audible. Somehow it seemed louder than Kroner's table-rattling slap earlier.

Hermione felt a phantom pain shoot through her side. The memory of Dolohov and that whispered spell in the Department of Mysteries, the crunching and grinding of bone, her ribs shattering, it always brought the ghost of that pain back for a split second. "We killed. We all did. Eventually. We had to. It became kill or be killed. No one should have to make that decision," Hermione said, tucking her fingers beneath her arm, giving her side a surreptitious rub. "We weren't even twenty, and we were making life and death decisions," she said, more firmly. "Cooperation isn't weakness. Cooperation is strength. Knowledge is strength. Compassion... understanding is strength. United... we can't be defeated. Separate and suspicious of one another, we almost certainly will be. Where were you when we were out there? In your office? "

Viktor leaned out across the table slightly, and his voice dropped even more. He spoke through clenched teeth. "I recruited people to help, that were killed before they were nineteen or twenty. I killed people that were standing between us and getting out of a bad situation because we didn't have time to talk it over. I killed people that had wands pointed at people who couldn't defend themselves. I sometimes killed people I knew. I killed Fortenbrau. I went to school with him. I ate meals with him. I played Quidditch against him. I sat in classes with him. I sat at the same *desk* with him. And I snuffed him out when he almost took Lupin by surprise. Charlie Weasley and I killed one that begged us to, because he knew if we left him there alive, his fellows or his Lord would do a lot worse to him than we could ever dream up for letting us get past him. Maybe it was a mercy on him, the two of us simultaneously putting the Constrictor Curse on him and squeezing all the breath out of his lungs so he would die faster. But I still wonder how much smothering *hurts*. How long does it really take to go completely unconscious? I know what a fractured skull sounds like, too. If not wanting my children and my grandchildren to know what that's like makes me a cockeyed optimist, then I guess I am. I'm not an *idiot*, Kroner. I know this isn't a panacea or a cure all. It doesn't keep us all safe in our beds at night just to put our names on a piece of paper. It's not some magical ward that keeps it all from happening. What it is... is a deterrent. A weapon, come to it. It should make them think twice about taking us all on again. Because it's harder to divide and conquer. Because there's *some* cooperation. And if, Heaven forbid, it should happen again, and let's be honest, it probably *will*, preferably hundreds and hundreds of years from now, long after we're all dead and gone, it will *not* be up to the educational heads, a group of children and a bunch of unwelcome Ministry *misfits* to head up the *entire* war effort!"

"You've said it yourself. Nothing can absolutely prevent it," Kroner said flatly.

"It sure as hell won't if we don't do it. It's not a magic ward against everything. But it's *something*," Viktor insisted. "It's the only thing we can *do*. Or do you prefer huddling under your desk and hoping it doesn't happen on our watch?"

"Our *watch*. You're only fifty-nine. Do you think the world's been handed over to your generation just yet?" Kroner said mockingly.

Viktor cocked an eyebrow and sighed heavily. "No fool like an old fool, Kroner. But you *will* sign," Viktor said with conviction.

"I'll leave," Kroner threatened, narrowing his eyes.

"Then *leave*. All four of you leave if you want. Go have your minders pack your bags and stomp out in a huff, like toddlers that don't get your way. But I'll talk if you do. I'll talk to the press. I bet they would be *very* interested in your pathetic reasoning for walking away from the only line of defense we've got without even staying for the entire conference or bothering to vote. And my story will feature a lot of very overblown egos and shortsighted and selfish power brokering, and not a speck of flattery. I'll make Cornelius Fudge look like Albus Dumbledore compared to the lot of you. It will be ugly. Exceedingly ugly. And the press *loves* ugly. It would work, too, because I've got two things the rest of you don't. One, I can still snap my fingers and get the press at my door whenever I want, eager to listen. It's the beauty of not preening for them and talking to them every time you see them, like you lot. They're really eager to listen to you when you *do* say something. Better yet, they think you actually have something of import to say. Second, unlike the rest of you, I don't have *any* desire to be Minister of *anything*, one day. I don't give a damn if none of you can stand the sight of me by the time we leave here and Oblansk chucks me out of office when I get back home, as long as that agreement gets a fair hearing and an honest vote. I'm not participating in the popularity contest," Viktor snapped.

"You *wouldn't*," Kroner challenged.

"Try. Me. Try me, you pompous bastard. I'll do it in all your papers. I'll talk to the damned student newspapers, if that's what it takes. I'll fuck you over in the press so that your own mother wouldn't vote for you if you were running for Best Dressed Wizard of the Year! You won't be allowed to so much as sharpen pencils in the Ministry any more by the time I'm through," Viktor replied.

"I'm not going to sit here and take this," Kroner hissed, jumping up from his seat and heading for the door.

"I'll see you in the session tomorrow!" Viktor yelled after him.



There was an uncomfortable pause, and some shifting in chairs before Madam Vanescu murmured, "Yes. Until the session tomorrow," and rose, hurrying for the door. The other two delegates mumbled their goodbyes and scurried close behind her.

Hermione watched them go, staring after them for a long while until the muffled curse caught her attention. "Damn." Evtimov tipped his glass up and drained the dregs, swallowing. "Damn," he repeated in the same tone. "You just threatened to *fuck* over the German delegate's political aspirations," he added in awed fashion, slack-jawed and somewhat horrified. Hermione had a vague suspicion he might be about to suffer a meltdown of Percy Weasley proportions after that display.

"I know," Viktor said, removing his glasses and unceremoniously plunking them down before shoving his empty plate aside, planting his elbows on the table and burying his face in his hands. "Kick me now."

"It's all my fault. I started it," Hermione stammered, putting a hand on Viktor's shoulder. "Honestly, it's all my fault, me and my big mouth and my righteous indignation. I never should have said what I said. I never should have let what he was saying get to me. I should obviously never be a diplomat. It was none of my business in the first place. I can't apologize enough-" she added to Evtimov, shaking her head helplessly.

"Apologize? That was the most brilliant thing I've ever seen. You two got all four of them back on their heels," Evtimov interrupted. "Completely."

"I just broke up a conference decades in the making. Ah, Merlin's beard. Why didn't you kick me and shut me the hell up, Ilian?" Viktor moaned, voice muffled behind his hands. "I took a bad situation and actually made it worse."

"For starters, my leg isn't that long... Besides... broke up... no! No! Don't you see? It's the only thing you could have done!" Evtimov said excitedly, rushing around to the chair on the other side of Viktor. "You can't have made things worse. Worst thing that could happen is they all walk without attending the last day. They were going to do that anyway. Didn't you hear what the three of them said? They're all *coming* tomorrow! And Kroner, he'll have to. He's too worried you'll ruin his political career not to come," Ilian insisted. "He wouldn't dare not come."

"I hope you're right," Viktor said, raising his head. "Otherwise, I have to ruin him. And pompous ass though he may be, I don't want to. He does a fair enough job of it on his own."



"He won't *dare* see if you're bluffing," Ilian argued.

"Because...?" Viktor countered.

"I *know* you, and I wouldn't," Evtimov said earnestly. Viktor smiled weakly at that.

"You could have kicked Hermione. She would have passed it on," Viktor said.  
"And added a bit on for good measure, I imagine."

"I'm not about to kick either one of you," Evtimov said, shaking his head, the former, customarily purposeful expression returning. "This doesn't mean we're out of the woods, of course. You still have to present tomorrow. And they all need to vote... preferably our way... a majority, at least, on the first pass... I need to go call home first, but I assume we'll be putting in a late night? Your quarters?"

"Afraid to stick around for dessert?" Viktor asked.

"Don't want any. Haven't called home all day," Evtimov said, shaking his head once more.

"Go on, then. Hurry. Before the baby goes to bed. Come up after you get finished. No rush," Viktor said.

"I'll see you later, then. Mrs. Wea- Hermione," Evtimov corrected himself, "*truly* a pleasure and an honor. And to think, I once thought he was exaggerating. I would hate to be on the opposite side of an argument. I'll sign for the bill on the way out." He riffled his fingers through his hair, mussing it slightly, before heading for the door.

"Did you want dessert? I'm still debating whether I should stop at the foot currently in my mouth," Viktor said wryly. "I ought to be tasting my own knee."

"I'd settle for some coffee. Elsewhere. I want to talk to you," Hermione said bluntly. "In private, preferably."

"Am I in trouble for that 'exaggerating' remark? Because if so, Ilian is fired," Viktor countered.

"It's naught to do with Ilian... have you noticed we're being stared at by most of the restaurant?" Hermione asked uncomfortably, looking around.

"I hadn't noticed. But I imagine it might have something to do with my cursing very loudly and naught to do with you. This time," he added.

"Well, let's see if we can both manage to walk out of here, go get some coffee,

and take it back to your quarters without causing an international incident,” Hermione said, rising and rearranging her wrap.

“Fair enough,” Viktor said, sighing heavily and rising as well. “Why does it always worry me when you say ‘I want to talk to you’?”

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“My room,” Viktor said, pinning the door back with an arm. “And your coffee,” he added, handing over one of the paper cups they had stopped for on the way back to the hotel side of the center. The layout was similar to her own, but one thing surprised her so that she commented on it without thinking.

“It’s smaller than mine,” Hermione blurted out, blushing slightly when she realized she had said it aloud.

“You sound surprised. Not everyone tries to see how far the expense account stretches. And it’s not like I was planning on holding any wild parties. Have a seat,” he offered, indicating one of the overstuffed armchairs near the small coffee table. “The neighbors are very quiet. There’s a linen closet where the rest of the suite would be. Towels and sheets don’t make much noise. Now... what is it?”

They both settled into a chair, facing one another. “It’s just that... I’ve figured you out,” Hermione said quietly.

“I shouldn’t be too proud about it. It’s not as though I’m that complicated. What have you figured out?” Viktor replied.

“Exactly *what* you never told Magda,” Hermione pointed out.

Viktor shrugged and took a sip of coffee. “I never told Magda plenty of things. The children never even got that much. It’s not as though they’re daft, they can put two and two together and come up with four, I’m sure, but-”

“Some things are conspicuous by their very absence. I *know* the litany, Viktor. We’ve *all* got one. You skipped a name. A situation. I bet you told Magda at least as much as or more than what came up at dinner. But you skipped one. I’m curious. Why?” Hermione paused for a space, but there was no answer. “It certainly can’t have been because of who he was. Why, then? I don’t think it was because it involved me. She knew, didn’t she?” Hermione prompted.

“About us? Of course she did. Everything. That’s not something I would or could have kept from her. Didn’t want to, for that matter. She knew we... might have been together longer under different circumstances. That was never an issue. In

fact, she suggested inviting you to the wedding,” Viktor said, shaking his head and averting his eyes. “No. That’s not it.”

“Then... why? Why no mention of Draco Malfoy? Certainly can’t be because it was less justified than the others. If anything, maybe it was more justified. He wasn’t the first, he wasn’t the last, he wasn’t even the youngest one we- ”

“I prefer not to think about it too much. You could drive yourself mad, analyzing these things. Thinking about what you did. Questioning every move,” Viktor said, putting his hand on the chair arm and squeezing it so tight that his knuckles blanched.

“If you hadn’t, I would be dead,” Hermione countered. “Or worse. Like the Longbottoms. He was going to torture me until I died or went mad, whichever came first.”

“I didn’t say I regretted doing it, exactly... I don’t like... the how,” Viktor replied, his voice barely above a whisper. He put his cup down on the table, and Hermione couldn’t help but notice that his hand trembled slightly.

“I used the Avada Kedavra on Dolohov. Simon doesn’t know, either. He doesn’t know his mother once used the worst Unforgivable on another human being, even if that person almost killed his mother twice and prevented him coming into the world in the first place. Just about all of us did, one time or another. Not all of our feelings were noble ones. We were human, too. If you had incapacitated him, turned him over, they would have just let him right back out in less than an hour, because he was a Malfoy. Lucius probably would have taken him into hiding, he would have been where no one could reach him, and that would be that. And what good would that have done anyone?” Hermione asked, putting her cup down as well, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees.

“Dumbledore still thought he could change. Maybe he could have, if we had kept him there at the school longer. I guess we’ll never know now, will we?” Viktor asked, clearing his throat.

“He was going with his little gang to the front gate to let the Death Eaters in and take off some of the wards. So they could come in and kill all of us they could get to. First years and up, no mercy. I think he had *made* his choice. It was them or us,” Hermione insisted.

“And the line between them and us got a lot more faint after that night. At least in my mind. Before that, I could always tell myself that I wasn’t *like* them. That I wasn’t capable of killing someone else... with my hate. The others... hate didn’t even come into it. It was survival, or protecting someone else, even a small mercy now and then. Malfoy... I *hated* him to death. I didn’t even think of

anything else. No other options. I just *hated* him so much in that instant... and I killed him with it. Took away his choice. Enjoyed it for a split second. Felt like he deserved it for what he was doing, standing over you, making you scream, *laughing* about it. I took one look at his smug little face and declared myself judge, jury and executioner. And when he hit the floor, the last lie I could tell myself was gone. That I wasn't *quite* like *them*. That there was something that set our side apart. That I was incapable of hating that much. But we were just alike in the end, weren't we?" Viktor said, his voice hoarse. "We're all capable of that kind of hate. That kind of cruelty. We all thought we were on the right side, that we were *right*. That what we believed was worth fighting for, at any price. Only thing we disagreed on was the principle we were fighting for. I never talked much about the war with the children, because I never wanted them to think there was something noble, admirable or worth celebrating about man's inhumanity to man. We weren't heroes. We just wanted to live. And now, I don't want anyone else to have to find that out about themselves."

"So you never told Magda you used it? Never owned up to it with anyone else?" Hermione asked.

Viktor shook his head again. "For the same reason *you* don't tell *Simon*. She might not have understood. And I couldn't bear thinking about how differently she might look at me, if she knew and didn't understand. I don't think I was capable of explaining it to her. There are no words. We were there. She wasn't. And I was tired of having to explain myself. Even to me. I spent a lot of time questioning. Everything. Took a lot of years to finish putting myself back together. *That* she understood. Vladimir, Stanislav and Anna... well... let's just say that when I leave this earth, I would prefer that the things they remember about what I did with my hands don't include using them to kill people, with or without a wand. I would rather they recall something more mundane, like making pancakes on Saturdays or combing their hair or steadying them on a broom. I don't want them to think that I'm *proud* of what I did in the slightest, because I'm not. We did what we had to do, not because we were *great*, but because we wanted to survive." Viktor leaned forward, mirroring her posture, reaching out and taking one of her hands in his. "I think for me... having someone that wasn't there... not talking about it if I didn't want to... being away from Britain... going back into Quidditch... that worked. That worked for me, putting myself back together. If you overanalyze things, sometimes they fall apart. Maybe, in the beginning, I was afraid that if Magda overanalyzed me, she wouldn't love me any more. Before we married, I told her everything I could about you, me, the war... I think I was testing. To see if it was real. And after we married, I had no desire to revisit that. She didn't like subjecting me to it, either. By the time I could have, there was no need to. She's the one who finally told the kids to back off, to stop asking about it. Issued a fiat."

Hermione smiled weakly, giving his hand a soft squeeze. "The inevitable 'did you

kill anyone in the war' question, hmmm? Because that would be so *spectacular*, if they actually *knew* someone who had *killed* someone. Simon used to pump Harry for Auror stories the same way."

He returned the awkward smile. "When Stan asked for about the umpteenth time, I actually yelled at him. Screamed, more like. He couldn't have been more than *nine*. He was just so *excited* about the possibility that I had... The idea that my child was standing there, positively *beaming* over the morbid idea of some of the things I had done, it just went all over me and I lost it. I think I was channeling Molly," he added with a soft chuckle. "He legged it whenever I raised my voice even slightly for about a month," Viktor added, sobering.

"I think Simon wished I had been channeling Molly. He got a long lecture on the nature of war and the absolute sanctity of life that avoided the question completely. He probably would have preferred the yelling," Hermione admitted, laughing softly. "Children don't think about the fact that they were real people, too. The people that got killed. It's like a bedtime story, to them... Boys, particularly. Besides, Simon thought it far more distracting that I knew you and Oliver Wood in school. Tomorrow... are you going to be able to fix the damage I did?"

"Damage *you* did? I used the word 'fuck' in conjunction with a political threat. I think I win the prize for the evening. Why Evtimov didn't go apoplectic or drop dead from shock, I'll never know. He usually goes to nudging me madly under the table if I so much as let a 'damn' slip by in the presence of a lady or get within a mile of saying anything risky. He damned near took my leg off once at Oblansk's house for almost letting it slip to the Canadian Minister that I positively detest oysters. Turns out it was what he had ordered up for the menu that evening when they asked him what he wanted. I mostly shuffled mine around my plate, ate twice as much dessert and international relations emerged unscathed. I have no idea what I'm going to say, tomorrow. Ilan will have some ideas, I'm sure. He's never let me down, yet. If he says we haven't set international cooperation back a hundred years, I'll believe him. Can I count on lunch tomorrow to keep me from pasting them all?" Viktor asked, giving her hand a playful squeeze before letting go.

"Lunch, but not dinner. I leave on the ferry late tomorrow afternoon. Which brings me to the question about what I do with your cloak. Would you like for me to bring it to you at lunch, tomorrow?" Hermione asked.

"Wear it home," Viktor protested, shaking his head. "It's supposed to be windy, tomorrow. Look... I'm still going to owe you a dinner. The new ferry stops on the other side of the Black Sea, too, you know. The house is not that hard to find. I can give you directions from the dock. And you're always guaranteed a table. The chef's not that fantastic, but he can manage a fairly decent dinner. I'll let you

know how the last day of the conference *really* went. Maybe you can make it some Friday evening, if you leave from work?"

"Maybe... in a couple of weeks. I'll need some time to get caught up at work. If you don't mind my keeping the cloak that long?" Hermione replied.

"Not as cold back home, right now. I think I could manage with one until then. Don't make me wait so long to talk to you again," Viktor warned.

"I'll definitely make it before another thirty years. The ferry wasn't so bad. A little unsettling at first, but not nearly as bad as I was expecting. Maybe they'll even introduce frequent floater tick-" Hermione began, but she was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Ilian, I'm sure," Viktor said, apologetic, rising reluctantly.

"I'll just take my coffee to go, then," Hermione said, scooping up her cup and rising as well. "Don't both of you wear yourselves out, now, staying up until all hours, working at this," Hermione warned Ilian on her way out. She couldn't help but secretly relish the fleeting look of surprise on his face when Viktor had opened the door.

"No, madam," Ilian replied briskly, "he needs to be awake enough to give the speech, tomorrow. Assuming we come up with something to talk about."

"Well, I won't keep you from it, then. Goodnight, Ilian, Viktor," Hermione said, nodding to each in turn.

"Would you not like an escort back to your room?" Evtimov offered, looking concerned.

"Not necessary. I think I can find my way downstairs," Hermione said, declining. "Thank you for offering, though. I think I'll fall into bed first thing after I've finished this coffee," she added, heading off down the hall.

Viktor closed the door to his room after she had entered the stairwell. He cocked his head and started speaking on his way back to the armchair. "Earlier... when you said I hadn't made things worse, was that true, or did you just say that to prevent me committing suicide with my salad fork?"

"At least it gets a full vote, now," Ilian said grimly. "That's better than where we stood last night."

"And please tell me you have some brilliant idea as to what I should talk about tomorrow?" Viktor said, sinking back into the chair.

"I don't know how brilliant it is, but I think you should talk about what you did tonight. Minus the profanity, of course," Evtimov said with a grin, flopping into the opposite chair. "I think one good anecdote from someone who was there, really *there*, is worth a million political discussions. I've had a look around that room. I think you're the only one attending who stepped outside an office for the duration of the war. Forget all the metrics and statistics, all the jockeying and the politics. Talk about *why* this is so important. All the statistics in the world are meaningless if one dark wizard or witch is all it takes to upset things because we're all busy dickering over things like how much running this costs."

"Say that again..." Viktor ordered, perking up and leaning forward with interest.

"What? All the statistics in the world are meaningless if one person is all it takes to upset things?" Ilian asked, looking confused.

"Perfect. That's what we talk about. And when I say 'we', I *mean we*. The power of one versus many. The really important numbers. Keep a parchment and quill handy. We're going to talk this out and take notes. No need to script out every word. I never stick to the script, anyway," Viktor admitted.

"There's *been* a script? News to me," Ilian countered, getting up to fetch the parchment.

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"Cross your fingers, Ilian," Viktor muttered under his breath as he stood. A dour looking Kroner over in the far corner determinedly refused to join in the usual polite applause, but Ilian noted he hadn't used the morning's open floor time before the presentation to lodge any complaints, either. They had spent a remarkably short time preparing the sketchy notes on the piece of parchment Viktor laid on the podium. It had been startlingly eye-opening, hearing some of the things Viktor referenced about the war, even in sketchy detail. Evtimov couldn't help but feel that there were only two possible receptions this thing could get. Either it would fall flat on its face or blow all the other dry, numbers-laden approaches out of the water. How the likely holdouts voted in the initial polling pass would tell the tale. *If* they voted.

"You have the floor," Petrovich said, nodding and settling into his own seat. There was some coughing and shuffling about while Viktor took a long moment to adjust the glasses that didn't really need adjusting and straighten a sash that didn't really need straightening. Ilian tapped his own stack of parchments against the tabletop, even though the edges were already neat. It was all part of waiting until the right moment. Viktor took a deep breath through his nostrils, then picked up the parchment, walked out from behind the podium, stopped directly in front



of one of the delegates.

“Four hundred and fifty-three,” he read out in a clear voice, indicating the table in front of the rather surprised looking delegate with his fingertips, peering through the lenses and consulting the list as though he were taking attendance on the first day of class. Ilian rose and walked to the spot, hanging the corresponding parchment off the front edge of the table, the number easily visible, written in thick, black strokes. Viktor crossed the floor and stopped in front of another. “Two hundred and sixty,” he called out in the same fashion, and Ilian dutifully followed, hanging the appropriate placard in front of that table with a quick Sticking Charm. “Six hundred and forty-nine,” he read at another nearby table, and soon the number on the parchment was hung there, too. On and on it went, a meandering trip from table to table, reading out a number at each one, the parchment attached right behind, the obvious confusion and discomfort rising with each figure and placard. Some of the numbers were smaller, but the most of them were heartbreakingly large, once you knew what they were, Ilian thought. The Russian delegate’s number absolutely dwarfed all the others, unsurprisingly.

When Ilian’s hands were empty, he spoke up. “That’s all the numbers I have,” he explained, showing his palms.

Viktor took a quick scan of the room. “Anyone not have a number? Anyone missed?” The delegates and their assistants shifted and exchanged uncomfortable glances with one another, but no one volunteered. Viktor walked slowly back to the podium, the black leather soles of his boots making a soft scuffing noise on the floor. It seemed to be the only noise in the room. Ilian took his former seat again. “If anyone is actually interested and doesn’t want to do the math, Evtimov has the total of those numbers. But since several of you don’t seem all that interested in the sum total, just your own numbers, I’ll skip that, for right now. The numbers you have in front of you should interest you, because they’re official death tolls for each of your countries.”

“Death tolls... for what?” the Slovenian delegate blurted out, obviously still thoroughly puzzled.

“For *Britain’s* little problem. There’s not a country in this room that didn’t lose people. Even if they didn’t formally send them. These are the numbers of mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, mentors and promising young people lost. On both sides. To something that wasn’t *our* problem. And this is just... one... war,” Viktor emphasized, holding up a single finger. “You see, all it really takes is just *one* sufficiently motivated wizard or witch gone bad, to become *everyone’s* problem. In an ideal world, we would all live in a nice little isolated bubble, and one country’s problem wouldn’t affect us all. But this isn’t a perfect world. One country’s problem is everyone’s problem. And burying our heads, wishing it would go away, doesn’t work,” Viktor said, pausing to put both

the parchment and his spectacles down on the podium. "We tried that already. It failed spectacularly."

Viktor stepped away from the podium again, stood in front of it, closer to the first bank of tables. "I'm fifty-nine. I'm sure there are delegates in this room who think I'm insufferably young and I don't have the foggiest idea what I'm talking about when it comes to politics. I disagree with everything but the politics part, but there have already been two wars in my lifetime. *Two*. These are figures from just *one*. There's still plenty of time for another one or two sometime before I die, and *that's* if we pace ourselves. And I don't want to think about how I'm going to explain to my grandchild why we didn't do anything when we could. Why we didn't talk to one another. Build up an alliance. When we had the chance."

"I didn't know the faces that go with every single one of those numbers," Viktor continued after a brief pause, "but I knew enough of them. I bet I know at least one story for every single one of those placards. A lot of them were very promising young people. Some of them weren't even out of school. Some were good and decent. Some could have stood some improving." Viktor's voice dropped even more, barely above a whisper. "Some could have changed. If they had lived. The casualties weren't just Cedric Diggory, Sirius Black, Albus Dumbledore.... British names. Your numbers have names. They have faces. They have stories. They have families. I carry them around in my memory. They're carried in a lot of memories. I remember a round-faced German boy with a lisp and white blond hair who had this nasty habit of misplacing his wand behind his ear. There wasn't enough left of Reichert to bury. I remember an old Russian Auror who came out of retirement to help get some of these young people ready. As though you could ever be ready for that. Dementor's kiss for Popov. Killed shortly thereafter. Merciful, I suppose. If you're still in doubt, talk to me and find out which faces I remember from your country. Argue me it's worth it to let it happen again."

Viktor returned to the podium and collected his glasses, before heading into what Evtimov knew was the final portion. "We've spent an entire week, talking about numbers. Representation, membership, staffing, and costs. But no one's really talked about the cost of not doing it. Now we have. You see the cost. It's posted in front of you. As far as monetary cost goes, don't try giving me the pathetic argument that it costs too much to do it," Viktor warned, scanning the room. "It costs too much not to. I guarantee, if I were to walk into your Ministry and talk to my counterpart, proposing something frivolous like a new national stadium site or a hosting opportunity for a tournament, I wouldn't be turned away anywhere for want of a Sickle. You would *find* the money somewhere. Don't try to tell me you wouldn't. So, if you vote against this on principle of monetary cost, be prepared to explain to the next few generations why you think Quidditch is more important than their lives. How many times have we had to approach a second Ministry for something like that, Evtimov?" Viktor asked, holding out a hand in Ilian's

direction.

“Not once. Tournaments, building projects, joint ventures, travel costs... not one event postponed, moved, reworked, or cancelled for want of funding from another Ministry. In all the years you’ve held the job,” Ilian replied. “There’s always a budget for Quidditch. Somehow.”

“Not once. Interesting. They *always* manage to find the money for something like that,” Viktor observed. “Find the money for something important, now. And do us all a favor. If you can’t truly justify voting no, abstain on the initial polls. If you’re still honestly undecided, come speak to me. I’ll do my best to convince you this is a good idea. I think it is. And if it takes holding this conference over an extra day or two, and speaking to all of you, one on one, I’ll *do* it. I’ve *seen* war. There’s nothing strong, glorious, noble, or natural about it. It’s full of death and suffering and cruelty, and there *are* no winners, only survivors. Such a *waste*. Maybe I’m being a mite selfish, but I don’t want it to happen again. Not if there’s the slightest chance that I have to see something like that again. Or worse, that my children or grandchildren do. I can’t make up your minds for you, no matter how badly I might want to. All I can do... is remind you how much *one* mistake can cost. Or rather *how many*. We have a chance, here, now, to help prevent it. To counteract the effects if it does happen. Tell me that’s not important. Tell me those numbers in front of you aren’t important. I’ve made my point, so I’m turning the floor back over.” Viktor said, heading for his seat once more.

Petrovich rose and took the podium again. “I think we can take our baseline vote, and then break for lunch, if no one has anything to add during this open floor time?” There was no response. “Ballots are in front of you, on the table, and must be signed with your name and personal seal to be considered valid. Drop them in the ballot box on your way out,” Petrovich added hastily, scurrying back to his seat.

“Well?” Viktor whispered. Ilian openly scouted the room, watching with interest as some of the delegates scratched quills noisily on parchment.

“I think the ones who were leaning toward yes will definitely vote yes. The rest will abstain, to see how many yes votes there are. Kroner... maybe two or three others... will vote no just to spite us. Don’t ask me for numbers. I have no idea. I think it was well received by most,” Evtimov muttered back.

“Here’s where I wish Legilimency wouldn’t be completely unethical,” Viktor groused, scribbling his own name on the ballot, then sealing it. “Should we stick around until the room empties?”

“I say we leave while we can. Go eat lunch, Enjoy yourself. It’s likely going to be a long afternoon. Maybe an evening, too. I bet half a dozen take you up on the

offer to talk to them. Let them think we don't worry about what any of them vote," Evtimov added, grabbing up his remaining papers. "I'm going back to the room for a nap. I want that far worse than food."

"Leave it is, then," Viktor agreed, standing and leading the way to the door, without pausing to look at any of the rest of the delegates. He barely slowed to drop the ballot in the box, and Evtimov hurried after him. He was little surprised that Hermione was already stationed in the larger hallway outside the conference room.

"I understand you leave this afternoon. In case I don't see you after the lunch hour, safe and pleasant journey home," Ilian said with a pleasant nod in her direction. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go collapse into bed."

"Nice to have met you, Ilian, and thank you," Hermione replied. "Don't you need a nap?" she asked, turning to Viktor once Ilian was out of earshot.

"Desperately. But I'll be damned if I give in to it now. I think these things require a certain minimum level of sleep deprivation and grouchiness, don't they?" Viktor replied.

"Speaking of these things, how's it going?" Hermione asked, peeking curiously around the door jamb.

"Won't really know until after lunch. First polling pass right now," Viktor said with a shrug.

"What's with the numbers?" Hermione prodded, her gaze falling on one of the pieces of parchment.

"Come to lunch, and I'll explain it," Viktor said wearily, grabbing her hand and giving it a soft tug.

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"I'm beginning to think the two of you could put your heads together and find a way to convince an Inuit to buy an electric icebox," Hermione said, putting her sandwich back down on the plate.

"Don't sound so impressed until we know if anyone bought it," Viktor said, stirring his bowl of stew in a half-hearted manner. "I wish I were half as persuasive as you think I am. If I were, maybe this conference wouldn't have gotten so out of hand in the first place."

"Can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs," Hermione said

encouragingly.

“What do you do when you’ve tipped the entire basket? Evtimov’s probably right. This first vote will be pretty meaningless. The ones who are undecided will abstain, and the hardcore holdouts will vote no, and we see who among the ‘yes’ votes can help convince the undecided. Then we set to it and take as many polls as necessary until everyone either gives up and votes no or we get the minimum number of members,” Viktor said with a shrug. “I just hope that whatever happens, it happens before tomorrow. I’d like to get home tomorrow.”

“Homesick?” Hermione asked in surprise.

“Peoplesick. And sick of the people here, Evtimov and present company excluded. Home should still be there whenever I get back,” Viktor said.

“I think it’s good you finally talked about it a little. With someone, at least. Of course, I guess in this case, it’s the pot calling the kettle black, isn’t it?” Hermione admitted.

“I think we earned our right to emotional unhealthiness, thank you. So, how are the plants?” Viktor asked in a falsely bright tone.

“Oh, the plants! We fall back on plant talk when a conversation gets too risky. The plants and the son watering them were fine enough when I called this morning,” Hermione said with a soft smile, shaking her head.

“Tell me what you want to order up for dinner. When you come to the house,” Viktor prompted, cocking his head. “Food’s a safe subject, isn’t it?”

“I still like moussaka and Shopska salad. I’m not picky. Obviously,” Hermione said ruefully.

“Stop that. Or haven’t you finally learned to stop being harder on yourself than everyone else is?” Viktor scolded.

“Now you’re talking about *my* kettle. I’m not nearly so insecure as I used to be... I’m whittling away an insecurity or so every decade. I’m not nearly so keen on proving myself to everyone else as I used to be,” Hermione allowed. “Being admired and telling everyone else they have to live their lives according to my rules doesn’t hold nearly the amount of attraction it did back when I was in school. I’ve finally learned it’s too tiring to boss the entire world.”

“You had nothing to prove. Besides, the rest of the world usually beats you up plenty. No need to do it yourself. And I bet you weren’t half as bad as you made yourself out to be,” Viktor insisted.

Hermione shook her head again. "I was *worse*. I thought I had everything to prove. Thank your lucky stars you didn't meet me before you did. I probably would have informed you on the proper technique in riding a broom."

"And quoted a dozen books on the matter. Ruthless little thing, weren't you? Thank goodness you mellowed," Viktor said with a soft chuckle.

"Grew up, you mean. A little, anyway. I still occasionally want to boss people I don't agree with. Like Kroner, last night," Hermione said, averting her eyes.

"You wouldn't be human if you didn't. Let's be honest. Deep down, we all think everyone else could benefit from our advice. That they all need to be told what to do," Viktor replied. "I would gladly let you come in and boss the rest of them if I thought it would do any good."

"Some people finally get good enough sense to keep their mouths shut, though," Hermione pointed out.

"Name one," Viktor shot back.

"Okay, learn to be bossy less frequently, then," Hermione said.

"Name one," Viktor repeated. "Molly ever do that?"

"Well..." Hermione began uncertainly.

"Her audience just got bigger," Viktor argued. "More people to boss does not equal bossing less. It's just spread thinner. That's why people should have more than one child. So you don't overboss the one."

"Fine, maybe I haven't grown up as much as I think I have, then," Hermione said, shrugging. "Hopefully, my advice has gotten a little better and more well rounded, at least. And I hope my delivery is less annoying."

"More 'After being through that' and less 'This book says'?" Viktor prompted, raising his eyebrows.

"Considerably more," Hermione replied firmly.

"Good. Be a real shame to waste all that valuable experience that you've been through," Viktor responded. "Now, before I have to go back and try to boss a bunch of ornery delegates into what I think they should do, have a safe trip back home. I hope all your plants are still living. Would it be okay if I gave you a call after a week or so and we set up a time for dinner? That should give you enough

time to get caught up, shouldn't it?"

"That would be extremely welcome," Hermione assented. "Now, I have a ferry to catch, and you have a group of ornery delegates to get back to. I suppose we had better pay and go. Come on, I'll walk you back to the conference room. Then I have to go check out."

"And I'll owe you a dinner," Viktor reminded her, pushing aside his empty bowl and tossing down his napkin. "You collect or I'll be forced to boss you about it."

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Hermione put her bag down just inside the door. She would unpack later. She carried her handbag in and placed it on the dining table. The late afternoon sun shone on the slightly yellow vine in the kitchen window. "Overwatering them is just as bad as failing to water them, Simon," she said, shaking her head and lifting one of the slightly limp tendrils with her fingers.

"I thought he did pretty well, considering his marks in Herbology," Ginny said, trailing in from outside. "You know that was never his strong suit."

"Thank you for coming to meet me at the dock. Even though it was wholly unnecessary," Hermione pointed out.

"Oh, come on, I just wanted an excuse to take off work early and buy some takeaway," Ginny said, setting the containers down on the table. "So... conference. Boring as all hell?"

"Bits of it. There was this fascinating session about new algorithms for cutting research time-" Hermione began.

"Stop! You lost me at algorithms and I'll never make it back aboard the train," Ginny said, shrugging her cloak off. "That's new. You must have done some shopping," she added, fingering the thick fur of the one Hermione had been wearing.

"I did some shopping, but that's not part of it. That's borrowed," Hermione said, searching in the cabinet for the tea kettle.

"Borrowed? Who would you have borrowed a cloak that heavy... Oh. Old friend?" Ginny asked curiously. "Simon mentioned that you ran into Viktor. Still have a lot in common?"

"Simon did, did he? Might know. In common? I suppose so. Actually, we've added something, unfortunately. He's a widower, now," Hermione said softly,



determinedly keeping her attention on filling the kettle.

“A widower? When did that happen? And how did it come up?” Ginny asked, looking horrified and pausing in setting out the plates.

“Going on five years ago. And when I put my foot in it nearly first thing and asked about Magda,” Hermione added gloomily, setting out the cups. “And I floundered like everybody used to do with me. Which I hated. I wanted to curl up and disappear. Cancer. She died of cancer. He seems to have taken it awfully hard. But how else can you *take* losing your spouse?”

“That’s awful,” Ginny said sympathetically. “I hope the two of you talked about something other than that.”

“We did. I know it sounds morbid, but it felt good to talk about Ron and Magda... with someone who has been there. I’m not knocking the rest of you, but... Well, anyway... it’s not the only thing we talked about. By the time we caught each other up on our families, and talked a little about old times, and a bit of current events, there was more than enough to fill up a few lunches and dinners,” Hermione said, not noticing Ginny’s brows raising in surprise. “There’s one thing I’m a little glad I don’t have in common with him just yet. He has a grandbaby. Beautiful little girl. Can you imagine?”

“A *few* lunches and dinners?” Ginny asked in an even voice.

“Well, our schedules coincided. And we were right there together. It was something to look forward to,” Hermione demurred. “We swapped off paying. He still owes me a dinner, so I’m going to collect when I return his cloak.”

“Still enjoy one another’s company, then?” Ginny asked, openly studying Hermione.

“I... find I missed him. I enjoyed talking to him. I’m disappointed we lost touch,” Hermione replied, avoiding Ginny’s gaze.

“Enjoyed as a friend, or...?” Ginny let the sentence dangle.

“Of course as a *friend*. What else? We haven’t even laid eyes on one another in decades,” Hermione answered a little too forcefully. “Water’s hot,” she added, jumping up from her seat when the kettle set to whistling. Ginny couldn’t help but notice that Hermione’s cheeks were suspiciously pink.

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Evtimov stared at the piece of parchment again, blinking hard. It was as though

he were worried that the signatures would disappear any second. He ran a fingertip over the seal, then counted the number of signatures again. One more than they had needed for formation. And it had only taken until early evening, and minimal arm twisting for the undecided voters. Some of the crankier holdouts who had voted no would likely see the light, come slinking back in the coming weeks and add their names to the original. When the large snowflakes started falling again, he hastily and clumsily rolled the copy awkwardly with his gloved hands and tucked it into the satchel at his feet once more, away from the damp and the sharp wind off the water, whipping and gusting over the open ferry deck. It was really too cold to be sitting out here, but they had been so cooped up the entire week, the open seats had seemed welcoming, even if the morning was a bit gray and the damp bone chilling.

Occasionally, one of the crew or another one of the passengers huddled up inside would peer out at them curiously, then shake their heads as though the two men sitting on the deck in the cold must be amusingly and pitifully mad, no matter how thick their cloaks were and how warm their gloves might be. Most of the passengers were hunched over coffee, soup, or something else steaming inside, or covered up head and ears in their beds, if they were on one of the longer legs of the trip. The two of them were on for an hour, at most, and a short space in the open air seemed a nice reward after days spent inside that stale, warm meeting room.

“I still can’t believe it was so easy. Well, not *easy* easy, but I figured we were in for most of the night, arguing with some of them. I can’t be-” Ilian stopped abruptly, ducking his head slightly and taking a peek under the edge of Viktor’s hood to confirm his sudden suspicion. Head nodded, jaw slack. Ilian leaned forward a bit more, and then he was certain. Viktor had nodded and fallen asleep not fifteen minutes after leaving the dock in Russia. Ilian crossed his arms and ducked his own head, letting his hood fall forward over his face to fend off the wind. Heaven knew they could both use some quiet for a change. Evtimov let his gaze wander over the horizon and the seemingly endless stretch of water drifting by, and let his mind go pleasantly empty and still for the first time in at least a week.

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When the dock came into sight in the distance, Ilian reluctantly stirred, half drowsing himself, and nudged Viktor’s shoulder. “Looks to me like that would be uncomfortable,” he prodded.

“I’ve slept in worse spots,” Viktor muttered, shifting in his seat. “You learn to take it where you can get it. Keep at this long enough, I bet I can learn to sleep with my eyes open.”

"Maybe you can pick that up when this group attempts to join up with the rest," Evtimov observed. "Minister Oblansk will probably send you. Before if not during."

"Tell me Oblansk doesn't hate me badly enough to send me to talk to them, too. What did I ever do to him?" Viktor said lightly, hooking the strap of his bag with the toe of his boot and dragging it from beneath his seat.

"You know he will. Or make you go with him," Ilian insisted, snatching up the strap of his own bag and then crossing his arms against the cold.

"He'll ask nicely. So nicely that I can't possibly say no," Viktor argued, peering out from beneath his hood as he leaned over to grab the bag. "Unfortunately. Sometimes I wish he would rudely order me somewhere, just so I could say no for a change. Unfortunately we work for a terminally nice man. If he weren't, I could tell him where to get off."

"You say the oddest things, sometimes," Ilian replied, shaking his head and smiling.

"Lack of sleep," Viktor murmured distractedly, looking toward the dock, scanning the group gathered there. Most of them were passengers waiting to board. But a few of them, at least, would be here to meet someone disembarking. It certainly didn't take a Legilimens to guess who he was likely looking for. At this time of morning, Anna would almost certainly be at the practice facility, and Stan at work. But Vladimir didn't go in to work until a later shift, most of the time, and today would be Nikolina's day off from the bookshop. Not that he didn't understand completely. He was anxious to get home to his own wife, Aleksandra, and eager to see little Danail. A week of nothing but rushed Floo calls, usually well after Danail's bedtime or before he was up, that wasn't nearly as satisfying as actually being there to put the boy down for the night. "There," Viktor said, obviously having picked them out, before turning to his bag on his lap, checking that all the compartments were closed.

Ilian squinted and stared in that general direction, where Viktor had been looking. After a long, hard look, he was able to pick out the familiar figures as well, in the distance. Ilian gave Viktor a sidelong glance, marveling. The older man might be in need of his glasses when reading, sometimes, but when it came to spotting things far away, he still had the eyes of a Seeker. "Going to visit?" Ilian asked.

"An hour or two," Viktor assented. "Maybe see Anna this afternoon. Stan."

"Admit it. You just want to see Evangelina," Evtimov teased.

"Damned straight," Viktor said forcefully. By now, they were nearing the dock,

slowing so they could put in beside it. "Go home and enjoy the rest of the weekend. If I catch you working on anything, I'm thrashing you."

"Well, I wouldn't want that! I'll try to restrain myself," Evtimov said blandly. Within a few minutes, they were settled in at the dock and heading down the ramp, the first two passengers off. "Hello, pardon me if I hurry off inside the station and head home. It's been a long week," Ilian said to the couple standing there, slightly apart from the group waiting to get onto the ferry. "Besides, *somebody* ordered me home." The man holding the squirming bundle covered with a thick blanket loosely against his shoulder bore a striking resemblance to his father, with the same tall, lanky build and similar facial features. Anyone who had known Magda would easily recognize that he had her smile, though. Vladimir didn't have quite the air of seriousness or the formidable exterior most people attributed to Viktor. The easy smile probably accounted for it.

"Evtimov," Vladimir said, offering his free hand. "If what I've read in the papers is half true, you earned it," he said, smiling broadly.

"Not so bad. I'm off," Evtimov said, resituating his bag on his shoulder.

"Since when did you read papers in the first place?" Viktor said, dropping his bag on the dock without ceremony, then taking Evangelina. A piercing squeal emanated from the blanket and a plump hand immediately seized on his glasses. "Enjoy the rest of the weekend! No work! Hear me?" he called after Evtimov. Evtimov waved his acknowledgment at the door to the station.

"Hard to miss headlines that big. And why do I get the feeling that's still not the half of it?" Vladimir asked. "Did it really go that easy? Did you threaten them all with a Beater's club?"

"Because when is what's in the papers ever the half of it? Here," he scolded gently, taking his glasses back and tucking them in his cloak pocket. He gave the little girl a quick peck on the cheek. "She's freezing. What were you thinking standing out here with her?" Viktor asked lightly.

"We've been out here all of two minutes. And you would have complained if we didn't. You didn't answer the question," Vladimir said indulgently, crossing his arms.

"Don't make me start lying straight off the ferry. And you're right. If you hadn't brought her, I could have asked what you were thinking, not bringing her when I haven't seen her for a week," Viktor admitted, tucking a stray tendril of Evangelina's hair behind her ear.

"What do you say we get in out of the cold and you come eat lunch with us?"

Nikolina offered. "Lamb stew. I'm freezing," she commented, hunching up against the wind, her cheeks pink.

"You made it?" Viktor asked. When she nodded, he added earnestly, "You're the best daughter-in-law I have."

"I'm also the *only* one you have," she replied with a wide smile.

"Doesn't make you any less special. Especially if you made lamb stew," Viktor insisted.

"Go on," Vladimir said, bending down. "I've got your bag, Tate. Get inside. Before the *baby* freezes."

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"So," Vladimir said, handing over one of the cups of coffee in his hands, then settling himself into the sofa, "how was it, really? I doubt the 'spirited debate amidst a marvelous air of cooperation' articles were very accurate. Complete and utter bull, more like."

"Please," Viktor said, taking a quick drink before setting the mug on the table next to his armchair, well out of reach of the baby on his lap. "I just got back. Don't make me relive it just yet."

"That good, hmm?" Vladimir asked, looking amused.

"An absolute horror. I'll leave it to your imagination. It can't be any worse than the reality. We're lucky four of them didn't walk out completely. They wanted to," Viktor admitted. "There was some 'spirited debate' over that."

"Ah. So there *were* threats," Vladimir said with a laugh. "What did you do? You and Evtimov take two apiece and sit on them?"

"Liberally applied. I blustered for all I was worth," Viktor said, resituating one of the small stuffed animals piled in the chair with them back within the baby's reach. The majority of them made some sort of noise when squeezed, moos, oinks, squawks or non-descript squeaks. As far as Evangelina was concerned, the noisier they were, the better.

Vladimir smiled wryly. "That's why they pay you the big money, isn't it? Not a single bright spot all week?"

"Hah! Enough of them signed, didn't they? That's bright enough for me." Viktor hesitated a long moment. "And I did run into someone I hadn't seen since before

you were born. Having someone else to have lunch with, away from the delegates probably prevented at least one killing. Ilian's fine, it's just that you can hardly get him off the subject of work when we're at these things."

"Really? Who?" Vladimir asked curiously.

"Hermione... Weasley. She caught me up on everyone in Britain. Most of them, anyway. She was there for another conference," Viktor explained, leaning over to take another drink from his mug.

"Owl! Could you get that? It's pecking the glass nearly out of the window and I've got my hands full in here!" Nikolina called from the other room.

"That's nice," Vladimir said distractedly. "Oh! Before I forget, Stan and Anna said they would come by after three," he added as he put his mug down and jogged toward the kitchen.

"Awfully busy around here, isn't it?" Viktor murmured in Evangelina's ear. "And noisy," he added over the racket of pots, pans, pecking and a protesting window frame from the next room. Evangelina squeezed the small, brown cow in her hand and held it out to him as it gave a loud, bleating and rather tuneless moo, giggling. "You're not helping," he pointed out, taking the cow and kissing the top of the girl's small, dark head.

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Viktor stepped through the front door of the house, and wearily dropped his bag right beside it. It was amazing how the almost completely sedentary business of sitting in a conference room for a week could make you more bone tired than playing a tournament used to. Viktor stood a moment and surveyed the room. Not a thing out of place except for the stack of papers that Stan had likely brought by and placed on the coffee table, and in contrast to everywhere he had been for the last few days, including Vladimir's, the house was still and perfectly silent. The heavy cloak found its spot on one of the hooks near the front door. It was barely one, so he had some time to put things away before Stan and Anna came by, or to look at a few of the papers, but he found he didn't much care to. The bag could sit beside the door just as well for the moment. The papers could stay where they were.

Frankly, the bedroom seemed too far away, even though it was just down the hall. Too far to carry the bag and too far to carry himself. Even for a lie down. Instead, he sank gratefully onto the sofa, leaning back into it, closing his eyes for an instant and listening, for the first time in what seemed like ages, to nothing. No ferry paddle, no voices, no debates, no convention center bustle, no noise. For a while, at least, it would be welcome. Before it became a little odd and out

of place again, the absolute quiet of no one else in the house.

Viktor hadn't been in that sort of prolonged quiet since before he and Magda had married. Not until after she had died. There had been the quiet little rented flat, barely big enough to house even his admittedly meager possessions and himself, when he had first come back to Bulgaria. When he had wanted the quiet and the isolation, and anything beyond the barest polite interaction with others had felt like an intrusion or like having your nerves scraped raw. That was when hiding out in the quiet had been so appealing. Now, after years of the house being filled with Magda's voice, and her music on the wireless while she painted, and then the children and their racket, the quiet seemed a bit too big for the rooms, sometimes.

Viktor opened his eyes and let his gaze drift over the cluster of family photos over the fireplace. The wedding portrait. Three baby pictures of stocking capped, mottled newborns that would have been impossible to tell apart, if it weren't for the different receiving blankets and the nearly imperceptible differences only an overly proud parent could pick out. Older baby and childhood pictures where it was shockingly easy to recognize which adults they were going to turn into were mixed in. The photo taken of them all at his last match, where Anna was already several inches taller than Magda, and slightly self-conscious about it. The towering wall above the mantle itself had been reserved for paintings instead of photographs.

Magda had done portraits of them all, whenever the mood took her, enough to scatter liberally throughout the house. All of them were simple, no more mobile than wizard photographs, really. She had shunned doing the more elaborate portraits that took on names and lives of their own long after their original subjects were dead. Magda had turned down a healthy commission on doing portraits of the Board at Durmstrang when one of the members had offered. She had always regarded the portraits of former headmasters and headmistresses so popular at wizard schools to be the height of hubris. "It's as though they think we can't possibly manage decently once they're completely gone. Or as though they can't stand being dead. It's so unnatural, this little parody of you still being here, living on after you're gone. It's morbid," she had protested when Viktor had asked why.

Magda had picked out certain family portraits for the spot of honor in here, using some reasoning of her own that she had never quite been able to adequately explain to any of them, save maybe Stan. They had all come to accept that portraits simply either merited the space above the living room mantle or they didn't, and Magda was the sole judge of their worthiness, and that was that. They certainly hadn't been picked for their formality. A selection or a veto was never reversed, and even after she had passed away, Viktor hadn't dared swap them around or move them out of their present arrangement. The same portraits she



had done of each of the children at seventeen still hung in exactly the same position as they had before.

The first one had been Vladimir at seventeen, black hair messy and in need of a trim, blowing in the breeze, long limbs seemingly draped in all directions while he sat on the wooden swing in the back garden on a summer afternoon, cheeks just short of being sunburned, laughing. His shirt and trousers were rumpled, sleeves pushed up haphazardly, feet bare, one trailing in the grass. Magda had been so pleased with the way it had turned out that it had gone above the fireplace almost the instant it had finished drying. Normally, paintings sat in her studio for weeks or months on end before they even made it into a frame, much less onto a wall. "That was quick. You've already decided to put that one up there?"

"There will be one of each of them. At seventeen," she had said, stretching onto her toes and poking at the corner of the frame with her wand in an effort to get it to hang evenly.

"Why seventeen?" Viktor had asked curiously, reaching over her to square up the frame.

"It's such a good age. You are who you are, but not quite what you're going to be. You're so full of promise and potential. Adult, but not. You're a walking choice at seventeen. A whole lifetime of it. Besides, it makes for nice symmetry. This turned out perfectly," Magda had said, paint streaked hands on her hips, matter of fact. Only she could have said it that way and not sounded conceited or prideful. It was merely stating fact when she said it.

"It is... perfectly *him*," Viktor had agreed. And it was. There was no way he could explain it, either, except to say that there wasn't another pose or expression or setting that could have more perfectly embodied their oldest. Stan's had been completely different, but just as perfect in its own way.

Stan's portrait showed him perpetually curled up in the window seat, trouser legs and sleeves rolled up and feet bare, his legs crossed, arm draped across a sketchpad that covered most of his lap, fingers smudged with charcoal and black ink. Magda had even insisted on faithfully recreating the smudgy streak on his right cheekbone, the one that Stan had initially complained made him look like a street urchin straight out of something Dickens had written. The expression on his face was pure Magda, the same features, the exact same look she got when she worked over a sketchbook or in front of a canvas. If Vladimir had been a fair physical imitation of his father, then Stan was every bit as faithful a reproduction of Magda. The softer eyes, the softer jaw line, features not so razor sharp, lips set in the exact same line as Magda's when he concentrated. Even his hands were hers, only bigger, long fingers with squared off tips, not so rawboned as Viktor's, fingertips always a touch stained with whatever he had been working on,

as though art and craft could literally work its way beneath the skin. Even now he almost always had wood stain or paint worked into the ridges. He painted now and again, as a hobby.

Anna's had been the exception born of necessity. It had become clear shortly after Anna had turned sixteen that there would be no portrait at seventeen. At least not by Magda. Even if he hadn't wanted to admit it, Magda had accepted it. "I'm doing the portrait of Anna. For over the fireplace." She had announced it one evening when he had asked her what she was working on. She had already begun making the concession of sitting in a chair in front of the easel. Before it was finished, she would have it on a sketching easel that rested on her lap, so she could paint in bed and put the finishing touches on it.

"You can't yet... she's not seventeen..." Viktor had argued. As though cancer and dying paid any attention to petty things like birthdays or traditions.

"Nonsense. If I don't do it now, it won't get done," she had said, like they were discussing something inconsequential, like tidying up before going on a trip. "Besides, she's grown. If she gets any taller, she'll be as tall as you and Vladimir. She just about is now. She's there. She won't change much between now and seventeen. And I've got the perfect pose," Magda had added, cocking her head at the canvas, taking a moment to consider it, find what she had done to her satisfaction, then set off again with the brush. It had been the first time of many to come when he had wanted to yell at her for being so damned complacent about dying. For just accepting it and planning around it, bowing to it.

He had come over and sat on the chair next to her, moving the extra palette she used for mixing out of the way, first. "Don't... Wait... until later... please..." It had come out like pleading. It was either say that or what had been tumbling around in his head, *Don't you fucking give up on me! You're not allowed to just get told you're dying and take it without a fight or without even being upset or angry or sorry for leaving us. You're not allowed to just calmly accept that you're dying. You can't.*

"I can't," she said distractedly, reaching over and brushing his hair back behind his ear, and for an instant, he thought she had been agreeing with his thoughts, until he remembered he hadn't said it out loud. "Or there won't be one," she added, and he had finally looked at the canvas. Anna sprawled on her stomach in the grass in the back garden, in a familiar faded sundress that she had nearly worn out, skin tan, long legs bent, bare feet that she usually thought were far too big stuck up and waving in midair over her crossed ankles. Her ponytail was messy, her face ringed with escaping tendrils of coal black hair, damp and curling a little in the humidity.. She was propped on her elbows, stained, greasy rag in hand, polishing the already gleaming black handle of a broom lying in the grass in front of her, mostly limbs and sharp angles. "She's nothing if not her

father's daughter. More ways than one."

*True. And she had probably cursed every inch of that height, the size of her feet and her hands and her nose and the fact that all the Durmstrang professors could pick her out as being Viktor Krum's daughter within two seconds of her arrival more times than one. Towering over the older boys on the Quidditch team was bad enough when you were one of them. Towering over most of them when you were barely thirteen and a girl to boot couldn't be easy. And maybe she had resented the expectations that came with it, being her father's daughter, Viktor had thought.*

"I think it's just perfect, don't you?" He had nodded mutely in reply, afraid to trust his voice. "I got paint on you," she pointed out. He had used that as an excuse to leave. To go down the hall to the bedroom and cry. He hadn't allowed himself the luxury of doing that again until after. The portrait was finished and up over the fireplace two weeks before she died. Magda hadn't touched anything to paper or canvas after that. Sleep had become a more welcome refuge than art, by then. She slept more than she was awake, exhausted and weak.

All the photos after that had gone elsewhere. The ones of them all at Vladimir and Nikolina's wedding, Evangelina's baby pictures, all those had gone on the coffee tables and on the shelves, instead. He had been content to leave the mantle and the wall above it exactly how she had arranged it. People who had never been in the house before would usually end up standing before it, gawping and grasping for adjectives sometime before they left. That was proof enough to him that it should be left alone. Viktor let his eyes trail over her signature now, the same on all of these portraits. The same as it had been on every poster and commission she had ever done, hasty and bold and black, added almost as an unnecessary afterthought, especially on the ones of the children. Those portraits hadn't really needed her stamp on them. Her stamp was evident enough on the subjects themselves.

Viktor slipped his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose. His eyes felt heavy again and he was on the verge of headache, head swimming from days of sleep deprivation finally catching up to him. Politeness be hanged. He couldn't stay awake another two hours, waiting. Whichever one of them let themselves in first could wake him. He tossed his spectacles down on the coffee table, swung his legs up onto the sofa, propped his boot heels against the far end and draped his forearm over his eyes.

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Stan hesitated in the doorway, wondering whether he should even attempt to be quiet. It would probably be useless. If he sat, the squeaking of the armchair would probably wake him. If he left, the closing of the door would probably wake

him. And if he went into the kitchen, his boot soles hitting the stone floor would be almost sure to wake him up. But he hadn't the heart to do it on purpose, anyway. He eased the door shut behind him, muffling the click of the latch with a hand. It still sounded almost like a gunshot in the quiet. No movement from the sofa. Stan slipped into the nearest armchair, easing himself down as quietly as possible. The chair emitted only the tiniest squeak. Viktor slept on, so Stan decided he would sit at least until Anna showed, or until Viktor woke on his own, whichever came first.

Stan wasn't much surprised to see the stack of newspapers he had brought by undisturbed. He hadn't really expected Tate to read them, even if he hadn't been tired when he got home. He had hardly ever done more than scan the paper, and rarely did he read any articles that included his name, even when he was playing. In fact, if anything, he had avoided them that much harder when the stories involved him. It was Mama who had been the one to carefully fold up papers and file them away in a small box in the closet, with labeled tabs between.

Within a few minutes, Stan heard the back door handle rattling, and footsteps in the back entry. Viktor stirred slightly and mumbled, "Is it three already?"

"Closer to a quarter past," Stan admitted.

Viktor sat up slowly, rubbing at his eyes. "Thank you for coming by and checking on things while I was gone."

"What was there to do? I brought in the paper and occasionally treated the owl," Stan said with a shrug.

Anna finally emerged from the kitchen, carrying a glass of water. She leaned over the back of the sofa and wrapped her free arm around Viktor, tucking her cheek in next to his. "So, stranger, how was practice? You've obviously just come from there. First stop was for a drink, you're damp, and you smell like an equipment locker," Viktor said, reaching up to pat her hand.

"I took a shower. That's why I'm damp," Anna said, slightly defensive, coming around the sofa, folding her long frame in next to Viktor. She was only a spare couple of inches shy of being exactly the same height as Viktor and Vladimir. Though Stan was quite tall enough by most people's standards, he and Magda had been able to joke about being pines among redwoods.

Viktor picked up her hand and sniffed it. "And polished your broom after, from the smell of it," he said with a smile.

"And oiled the pads," she said, swapping the glass and waving her other hand in

his face. "Practice was fair enough. Drills, drills and more drills. Like usual. And I found out I might get into the next match," she added casually, taking a sip of water.

"How did that happen?" Viktor asked. "I figured the lineup would stay the same the rest of the season. Someone moving or traded?"

"Injured," Anna answered with a shrug. "Iva was too busy flirting instead of paying attention to the scrimmage, and she took a Bludger to the head. Obviously her head isn't nearly as hard as yours," Anna pointed out, squeezing Viktor's shoulder. "The mediwizard suggested she sit out at least one match. If she does, I'm first on the list to replace her."

"That's good news. Well, not for Iva. Unless that Bludger had some help..." Stan teased.

"None but Iva not getting her head out of its way because she was too busy making cow eyes at Kiril, thank you. Clocked her right in the back of the head. You would think she had been killed, the way she carried on," Anna said tartly. Stan and Vladimir's teasing hardly ever got much of a rise out of her. That had certainly come in handy once she had begun attending school, at least.

"I wouldn't talk. I'm not the only one in this room with a hard head," Viktor said. "Call if you get the nod. And tell Iva where she went wrong was by not taking it in the face."

"It's a weekday away match. Wednesday," Anna said, draining her glass. "And Iva wouldn't want to mess up her pretty little button of a nose, either."

"I could leave a little early for that. I've earned that much. Good work," Viktor said softly, brushing her loose hair back behind her shoulder before resting his arm along the back of the sofa, behind her head.

"I haven't gotten in, yet. They just said it's possible, that's all," Anna demurred. "You making me learn all those drills must have paid off. Nadejda has been with the team longer."

*Anyone else would have come in here practically doing cartwheels over a maybe like that, but not Anna,* Stan thought. *Too much like Tate.* What Anna and Tate had said just about passed for excited gushing between the two of them. "Have a little more faith than that, Anna. They'll put you in and you can intimidate the other team right off their brooms. Just give them that glare you used to give Vlad and me when we didn't act to suit you," Stan said. "Come to think of it, you still do that. They might forfeit. Seriously, that's fantastic news, Anna. You should be excited."

"Coaches generally don't let things like that slip unless it's pretty certain. They'll sit Iva if they told you that," Viktor insisted.

"I'll believe it when I see my name on the official starting roster," Anna said with the barest of smiles. "Coaches can always change their minds. Besides, you'll see it when they file the rosters."

"Maybe I'd rather hear it from you. Besides, since when do I bother reviewing rosters?" Viktor said.

"Evtimov will tell you, then," Anna said, leaning her head into his shoulder.

"Not if I threaten him. Call me, anyway," Viktor prodded.

"Come on, Anna. Can't you even be a little excited?" Stan chided. "I'll see if I can't get off a bit early. Should be able to. Not much call for new wands this time of year, and we're well ahead of the production schedule. I could go in an hour early a couple of days to make it up. I'll try not to embarrass you by cheering so loud it shakes the foundations of the stadium."

"It's not certain I'll even get off the bench," Anna said, smiling wanly and shaking her head almost imperceptibly.

"Killjoy. Well, I'm going to come and cheer for you, anyway," Stan said, standing up. He stooped to give Anna a kiss on the cheek. "It would be boring not to root for you, *momiche*. I need to go home and start dinner."

"But, I was-" Viktor began.

"Tate, don't say you were going to make dinner," Stan said in a warning tone. "Get some sleep instead. I bet you didn't get more than five hours a night all week. If that. I'll bring you something back, if you want."

"No..." Viktor replied, shaking his head. "I'll just sleep."

"Then I'll just go. Are you sure you don't want something? The cafe has these very nice looking salads with chicken. I haven't tried one, but-" Stan offered.

"That won't be necessary. Really. If I get hungry, I'm sure I can dig up something," Viktor insisted.

"Okay, I offered. Bye, Tate," Stan said, squeezing Viktor's shoulder before heading out the door.

Viktor raised a thick eyebrow and looked at Anna for a moment. "Make note. Mila likes salad with chicken," he commented, one corner of his mouth curling up slightly.

"I wish he would just get it over and introduce himself. Sounds like he's stalking her, watching her eat lunch every day and not saying anything. I would find that creepy. Like Iva going all moony and stupid over Kiril every time he's around," Anna said in a disgusted tone.

"Men are brittle little things. You're asking an awful lot, for a man to just up and introduce himself to a girl he likes. Or worse, tell her he likes her. We're positively destroyed if we admit it and she doesn't receive it very well. Besides, he gets that from me," Viktor admitted.

"You didn't stalk Mama. You ran her over," Anna pointed out.

"But I did that once. Watched this girl I liked for what seemed like forever, until I got up the courage to actually go talk to her. In the school library. It's a wonder I didn't fail at everything that year. I didn't make a very good first impression with her, either, even if I didn't cause her bodily injury right off the bat. Or maybe that should be second impression. Either way, she was rather peeved with me before I ever talked to her," Viktor said. "As for Iva, I suppose women are entitled to make complete fools of themselves, too."

"Well, she's going to be a completely dead fool if she doesn't stop doing things like that at practice, never mind during matches," Anna replied. "She's lucky she didn't get whiplash or break her neck." Anna hesitated for a long while, picking at the hem of her robe. "Iva's not cut out for this, is she?"

"You want my honest opinion?" Viktor probed.

"What else?" Anna said firmly, looking him in the eye.

"She should be a practice reserve. The rest of her career. She doesn't have the... ah... spirit for it. She always plays slightly out of the match, and like she's afraid of being hurt. And if there's one thing that's guaranteed to get you hurt, it's being afraid of being hurt and trying to avoid it. She plays cautious, and you just can't do that. Iva's a good, solid player when she forgets to be scared. But that's not good enough. I imagine they were trying to find a way to get her out of the lineup before this. But you knew that already. You shouldn't feel guilty about taking her spot," Viktor soothed. "It would have been Nadejda if it hadn't been you. And while we're being honest, let's keep in mind that you play a hell of a lot smarter than Nadejda and Iva put together, and you could knock either of them into next week. And I'm not just saying that. I ran into Lara a couple of months ago, and she was highly impressed. You didn't tell me she watched a practice."



"She was only there for half of it. She didn't see how many mistakes I made. You still think she's the best player you've ever seen, don't you?" Anna asked curiously.

"In that position, hands down. There's a reason the entire national stadium gave her a fifteen minute standing ovation when she retired six years ago. She played intelligently. And she was tough. You can't be a great Chaser without both of those things. She could still give you a darned fine run for your money. Trust me. The older you get, the more important the smart part becomes. You can only be young and reckless and throw your body around like it's nothing for so long. Lynch found that out. A little late, but he found that out. Get smart earlier," Viktor advised. "Or you end up stuck with all these creaky, achy reminders of why you should have."

"I still can't help but feel a little guilty," Anna admitted. "She'll be angry at me over it, the silly thing. Like I wanted to see her get replaced before the end of the season."

"You'll get over it. Iva will, too. The coaches may take some heat for it, but only until people see you play. You knew this would happen, someday. That things would change. Didn't you?" Viktor said, cupping his hand against the back of her head, smoothing her hair.

"I hate change. It always hurts," Anna said earnestly, her dark eyes flicking over the mantle, then back down.

"Sometimes, change is good. It's not good to be stagnant. You keep making the same mistakes over and over, you never grow, and you get boring. Save that for when you're ancient and already know it all. Like me," Viktor added.

Anna smiled in spite of herself. "Tate, you most certainly don't know it all. And you're not boring. And you are not ancient."

"Some days I feel it," Viktor said. "Especially when I look at you and wonder when my baby went and grew up on me."

Anna sobered. "I wish Mama could be there."

"I wish she could, too, *pilentse*. I do, too," Viktor said, cupping her shoulder and pulling her close enough that he could tuck his chin against the top of her head. "She would be *so* proud of you. Even if she would lose her head and be worried sick and tell you silly things, like not to get hurt. By the way, don't get yourself hurt, hmm?"

Anna chuckled softly. "Tate. I'm not going to get hurt in a match. You just said..."

"I meant with Iva. Or anybody else with a stupid opinion that they insist on giving you," Viktor explained.

"Never bothered me before," Anna said.

"Then don't let it bother you now. You earned the spot. Never let anyone convince you any differently," Viktor said.

"I won't," Anna insisted. "I won't."

"No, you won't. Hardhead," Viktor said affectionately.

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"Mum? Hellooo... Earth to Mum... anyone home?" Simon said in a singsong voice, waving his palm in front of Hermione's distant eyes.

"Hmm? What? Sorry... I was miles away..." Hermione admitted sheepishly, putting down her teacup.

"Obviously. I *said* how is your first week back at work?" Simon said, looking amused. "You've just got one more day to survive."

"Oh. Fair enough. It's hard to get back to the old routine. It takes two days to catch up for every day you're gone," Hermione said distractedly, looking off toward the living room again.

"You... ah... expecting someone on the Floo or something?" Simon asked, following her gaze.

"Yes... no... not really. Not tonight. Tomorrow, maybe. I'm just tired. I still haven't recovered from last week," Hermione blurted out, rubbing at her eyes. Simon couldn't help but scan the kitchen and the back entry. No sign of a cloak that didn't belong. He was half afraid she had already ducked out of the invitation by sending it back with an owl.

"Mmm. Aunt Gin told me all about last week. Sorry to hear about his wife. That's rough. But I suppose I'm preaching to the choir," Simon said, probing.

"I imagine so. Losing your spouse to an illness can't be any easier than losing them all at once. Maybe it's worse," Hermione said, running a finger around the rim of her cup. "And since when does your Aunt Ginny tell you all about *my* week?"

"Since you barely said two words about it. So... are you going?" Simon asked hopefully.

"If he calls and asks. Not that it's any of your business. And I'm *not* going to go eat dinner at the man's house and harass him for an autograph," Hermione warned sternly.

"I don't want you to. I was only teasing. Besides, I still have the one Dad got, anyway, remember? I think you should. Go. Have a good time," Simon said.

"Thank you for giving me permission to have a good time," Hermione said tartly. "Honestly. Have the lot of you called a conference, headed by your Aunt Ginny, over whether or not I should go on a dinner date?"

"No. I just think it would be nice if you went and had a da... dinner date once in a while. And actually enjoyed yourself at it. Instead of spending the whole evening mentally listing the reasons why they aren't Dad," Simon explained. "I mean, I wonder sometimes if you kept an open mind."

"Trust me. The couple or three men who asked me to dinner had far bigger problems than not being your father. Not being your father was the least of their worries. And I hate to tell you, even if that hadn't been so, it's not as though any of them pursued me ardently. One of them was too busy being in love with himself to even notice me not having a good time. He made Gilderoy Lockhart look like Mother Theresa," Hermione said with a brief laugh. "He ended up with that singer, whatever her name was, Miss One Hit Wonder... before they divorced, anyway. I think they lasted all of a year."

"And how many of them turned tail just because you had a son?" Simon pressed. "Come on. I know about the mediwizard. Trent, or whatever his name was. You two didn't even make it out the front door once he found out. Spotted the toys and he was off."

"He was a shallow little bugger, too. And the third one and I just didn't hit it off in any case, son or no son. I hardly think three men is a scientific sampling. Besides, even if ninety-nine out of a hundred took off because I had a son, we came as a package. No negotiation. If they weren't willing to accept a little thing like having a son, they weren't going to be too charitable about any of my real flaws, either. And having you was definitely not a flaw," Hermione said firmly. "Any flaws you still have in your thirties aren't likely to get wiped out that easily. Simon, you needn't worry about me. Things always work out. However they're supposed to. I shudder to think about ending up with any of those three for more than a bad first date. You didn't want me keeping a mind so open that my brain fell out, did you? Because that's what would have had to happen for me to go on

date two with any of those three. And the suitor line rather ended there.”

“No. Just... have a good time. It’s just... sometimes you overanalyze things. Get them down and examine them to death. Feelings... sometimes they don’t stand up to logic,” Simon said.

Hermione reached out and cupped his sharp chin in her hand briefly. “You sound like your father. Or more likely, your Aunt Ginny, because Ron would have just told me I was thinking things to death. Why are you so concerned about a dinner I haven’t even been formally invited to, yet?”

“I don’t know. I guess... I just... Seems like there’s more to this than simply bumping into an old friend. I mean... didn’t you... the two of you...?” Simon floundered and trailed off.

“That’s not any of your business, either. You’re every bit as dearly inept at asking personal questions you have no right to ask as your father was. What I did in my youth is my business. Besides. We’re talking about someone I haven’t seen in decades, who went off and had a separate life in another country all that time. You and Ginny seem to be forgetting that the two of us haven’t lived the past thirty years sealed in little boxes and tucked up on the shelf. He’s gone through a marriage and having three children and raising them, and a couple of careers. Or three. We might have changed a shade, you know. There’s no guarantee he’s interested in anything but talking. And there’s no guarantee that either of us want to go mixing up our lives like a tossed salad to accommodate one another. That would be an awfully big change, even if everything aligned. We’ve both got baggage, you know. Simon, it’s just not simple. This isn’t a fairytale. And it’s all rather premature, given that we’ve barely got a handful of lunches behind us and a bit of catching up,” Hermione protested.

“Still... just try to have a good time, Mum. And if he doesn’t leap at the chance to accommodate you, he’s taken a few too many Bludgers to the head,” Simon insisted, rising, then ducking to kiss her on the cheek. “I need to go. I’ve got to go in early tomorrow.”

Hermione twisted in her chair and spoke when he reached the door. “Simon... he’s still getting over putting his wife in the ground. Do you think that’s like breaking up with your girlfriend? You don’t shrug it off in a week. I know, remember?”

Simon paused in pulling his cloak on. “I know. But somebody used to tell me that change was good for you. I thought that was you. Right, I’ll stop nosing in your business. You’re right. It’s none of mine. And you’re old enough to make your own decisions. You give me that respect, I’ll do the same for you. It’s certainly not like you’re some doddering old dear that needs her son-”

"I kissed him before your father," Hermione blurted out.

"What?" Simon asked.

"I kissed him first. Viktor. He was my first real kiss. He was a good kisser. Not that your father wasn't... it was just different. They were very different," Hermione summed up. "They always were."

"Oh. I didn't know that. The... kiss... not the different part. I think I knew that already." Simon paused a long while as though digesting it. "Well... g'night, Mum," he added, waving.

"Goodnight!" she called after him. After a few moments, well after the back door had shut, she added, "Nosy, well meaning son of mine," with a soft laugh.

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Evtimov hovered expectantly for a while in silence. Finally he flicked his wrist slightly, rustling the bundle of parchments in his hand quietly. "I know you're there, Evtimov. You're allowed to sit, you know," Viktor said without looking up from his desk. Ilian sank into the chair and waited for him to finish. "Or was there some other reason you've decided to take up residence there like a human hat rack?"

"I have the rosters. If you want to look at them," Ilian said noncommittally.

Viktor looked him straight in the eye, then pulled his glasses off. "Do I want to look at them?"

"I don't know. Do you?" Ilian said evenly. "I was threatened within an inch of my life if I spilled it. You can look at them or not. No skin off my nose."

"She didn't call. But with her, that doesn't mean much. Do I want to look?" Viktor repeated.

"Or she could have called when you were in a meeting. I don't know. I haven't so much as looked myself. I don't even know if you really want her to be on there or not! Sounds like you don't, either. I have them in my hand. If you want to look at them, there they are. If not, tell me, so I can get on with processing, filing and distributing them," Ilian said in an exasperated tone, tossing them down on the desktop. Viktor drummed his fingers lightly, considering the stack. Then he snatched them up, slipped his glasses back on and flipped through the pages, pausing near the back.

He looked so thoroughly disheartened for an instant that it took a bit longer than normal for Ilian to process it when Viktor said, "Officially, Iva's on the disabled list, Anna's on the match roster."

"Then why do you look like someone just kicked your kneecap?" Ilian prodded. "I should think you would be happy. Your daughter just got put on a roster a year before you guessed."

"Because... you know this is going to start something. With Iva, anyway, if not more. Anna was worried that Iva was going to be angry. She will be. Iva's a player with mediocre skills and a diva disposition. She *will* complain. Loudly. And Anna won't be able to win a war of words, no matter what she says. Not that she would say anything in the first place. The only thing she can do is keep her mouth shut, go out there and play. As if there weren't enough pressure, already," Viktor said with a heavy sigh.

"You knew that would happen. Regardless of when she got put on. Talk. By idiots who don't know any better. Anna, too," Ilian pointed out. "You said you were going to stand back and let her fight her own battles. Like always."

"I might let her fight her own battles, but it doesn't mean I enjoy standing back and watching it happen. I never did. Not when she was home, not in school, not now," Viktor noted, sitting back and crossing his arms.

"She survived it in school just fine, didn't she? And two older brothers at home, to boot. They all turned out just fine. Besides, she's too much like you. She wouldn't let them have the satisfaction of getting to her, would she? If they do, she can just beat them down, right?" Ilian asked with a sly smile.

"I hardly think the combined power of the press and a mouthy player with an axe to grind is equivalent to some snotty boy who couldn't stand being beaten by a girl calling her Sasquatch in her seventh year. And I don't think single-handedly beating up the entire press is a viable option. I doubt they would cry uncle as fast as Gustav Ziegenthaler did, no matter how good she is at getting you down and prying your wrist up behind your head. But you're right. She'll have to learn to deal with it. And I will, too," Viktor admitted. He pursed his mouth and thought a moment. "Did you keep that last hour open on Wednesday?"

"Clean as a whistle. Leave early," Ilian encouraged. "Go to your daughter's first professional match."

"Thank you for that wholehearted endorsement of my playing hooky," Viktor said with a faint smile. "Go home after you get the rosters done. It's practically the weekend."

"You won't play hooky. You'll come in two hours early the next day, and you know it. You needn't, but you will," Evtimov said, taking back the stack and neatening the edges against the desk.

"No, I won't. Half an hour," Viktor protested.

"You would break out in a rash," Ilian replied.

"Maybe an hour. But not two," Viktor insisted.

"I'll believe it when I see it. Any weekend plans besides stewing over what might happen to Anna?" Ilian asked, raising his eyebrows.

"That's plenty right there. Finish recovering. Make a call or two. Sit in my house and not move. Revise that. Lie in my bed and not move. Revel in not having to go anywhere. Until late afternoon, anyway," Viktor said, fidgeting with the quill.

"Still have to go to the Varna match?" Ilian said, making a sympathetic face.

"That fool won't be satisfied that he doesn't need money to repair the stadium foundation until I go look at it in person. That foundation is solid as a rock. Hell, the foundation *is* a rock. But if it finally shuts him up, I'll go. Should be a decent match. Or I can work on learning to sleep with my eyes open," Viktor said with a shrug. "Maybe Vlad will let me borrow some company. Conversation ought to be about Evangelina's speed. Or maybe he'll want to go. Stan, maybe, too. This is his off-week and he hasn't been to a match with me for a while."

"I'm sorry I asked," Ilian observed, grinning.

"Sorry. I shouldn't be bellyaching about seeing matches for free. That's the dream part of the dream job. It's the talking to the people that inevitably buttonhole me at the matches that I hate. Sometimes it makes me wish I had showed good sense and stayed retired. Or gone back into something sensible. Like broom design. Announcing. Coaching. Something where I would have a valid excuse for occasionally wanting to bang my head against a stadium wall," Viktor added.

"Something where *you* get to bellyache at the Commissioner instead of having to listen to it?" Ilian pointed out.

"That would be perfect! Could you arrange that?" Viktor asked, one corner of his mouth curling up slightly.

"Sorry. The Commissioner's booked right up. Couldn't possibly squeeze you in for months. Seriously, do you want me there Saturday?" Ilian offered.



"No... enjoy your weekend. There's no need for you to listen to it, too. I'll bellyache at you about it Monday," Viktor said glumly, propping his chin in his hand. "While I'm thinking of it, no late appointments next Friday if you can help it. If that changes, I'll let you know. Now file those things and go home. I'll be right behind you."

"I'll make note. By the way, I've almost finished that study. About the Tournament," Ilian elaborated. "Take a while to compile it into a report you can actually read."

"Hit me with it whenever you finish. No rush."

"I'll just file these, and we'll lock up, then," Ilian said, rapping the stack against the desk and hopping up.

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Viktor glanced up at the clock over the mantle, then checked it against his watch again. He did the math in his head. Two hours. Britain would be two hours behind. It was still a bit early to risk calling. Assuming Ministry office hours still ran the same as they had when he had been a frequent visitor there, she probably wouldn't be home, yet. And he didn't want to disturb her at work, either. He would wait another hour, at least. Hopefully that would be late enough that she would have been home for more than a few minutes, but not late enough to interrupt her dinner. "You're overanalyzing this. It's just a Floo call," he chided himself, sitting down on the sofa, stretching his legs out. Viktor took a sip of coffee from the mug in his hand then considered the newspaper.

He weighed the decision about reading it for an instant. The rosters hadn't been released until well after press time. The coach wasn't one to gab with reporters, and he certainly didn't confirm or deny rumors. He wouldn't have let slip about the roster to the paper ahead of time. Maybe not even to Iva, if he knew what was good for him. Iva wouldn't have reason to complain and reporters wouldn't have a reason to ask until it had been made official. It would likely land her in the doghouse with the coach if she did make a fuss, but Iva didn't strike him as the most levelheaded player, either. Still, it was probably safe enough to read. Maybe he would call after he finished.

Viktor made fairly quick work of the paper. There just wasn't much of interest in it. There simply wasn't much in the way of news that didn't make the conversational rounds at the Ministry. And the rest, he wasn't very interested in, anyway. He could still do without reading about who said what to whom at a charity event, or which outfits people wore, or who ended up in the corner with someone else. He checked the clock again. "Near enough," he said out loud,

draining what was left in the mug and refolding the paper.

He stood and stretched, then walked over to the hearth. Viktor hated making these long distance calls. The connections were almost always horrible, when they weren't downright impossible, and you had to have someone at the Floo hub patch you in to the other hub. It usually took a good ten minutes to connect, if you were lucky. Of course, five years ago, it would have been completely impossible to make such a call at all, even on a rotten connection. There were some who swore that you would be able to travel long distance, even transcontinental distances, by Floo in another decade, but given the state of the connections for talking, Viktor doubted anyone who valued having their body in one piece and all their limbs attached would be fool enough to try it before another twenty. He could nearly kick himself for not saying he would just write, instead. He grabbed a handful of Floo powder, ducked carefully under the edge of the stone fireplace, tossed it in and stated clearly "Central Floo Hub, Sofia."

Hermione cast another anxious glance into the living room. She could have sworn she had heard something. But for the third time, she had been wrong. "Stop haunting the living room," she told herself firmly, turning on her heel and heading back toward the kitchen. "It's not going to make him call any faster. Fix your dinner and stop stalking the fireplace." She felt as though her ears were straining for the slightest sound the whole time she was gathering up the ingredients for her salad. Still, she nearly dropped the tomato on the floor when a woman's voice rang out "Hermione Weasley! Central Floo Hub, London, calling!"

"Coming! Just a minute!" Hermione shouted, hurriedly scotching the tomato against the other vegetables on the counter, wiping her hands on her apron and trotting into the living room.

"Ah! There you are! Now, hang on a minute, I've just got to get the ruddy thing patched in to the Hub in Sofia. It's a right pain in the neck. We've lost the connection three times, already," the dark-haired woman huffed. "Why people insist on these newfangled-y things like transoceanic Floo calls that don't work half the time, I'll never know. What's wrong with a nice letter and hiring an albatross? Or a pelican, if you've got a package? Even a nice penguin works if you're writing someone in Antarctica and it's waterproofed..." she muttered, her head disappearing from the flames. Hermione caught a great deal of mumbling and debating, all well muffled, on the other end of the call.

After a few moments of chatter fading in and out, she caught a distinctly male voice. Heavily accented. "Dobar vejjer... Hermione Veasley?" Her name hadn't been too badly slaughtered. Not quite like it would have been a few decades ago. She wracked her memory. *Dobar... dobar... dobar den was good day... vejjer... vejjer was evening...*

“Dobar vejjer! Da!” she said loudly, falling back on what little Bulgarian she remembered. “Err... iz zdrava... no... iz zdravai? Hello?” No answer. “Kazum se Hermione Weasley. Hello? This is Hermione...” Just as she was about to give up hope of getting an answer, a sandy head popped up in the flames. Spewing a rather lengthy bit of Bulgarian that she understood nothing of, save Viktor’s name. “Oh dear. Now what?” She shrugged helplessly. The head disappeared again, and after a moment, it was replaced by a familiar face. The voice was a shade muffled and distant, but Hermione could at least hear and understand.

“Let’s just make it quick and simple, before the connection drops. Next Friday?” Viktor asked.

“I think that would be fine. Time?” Hermione said without thinking.

“Pick one. Your time,” Viktor said quickly.

“Oh! Er... I could probably be there around six, my time,” Hermione stammered. “At the dock. How will I...?”

“I’ll *write* with the directions,” Viktor said, the connection fading slightly.

“Fantastic. Hire a penguin,” Hermione said.

“Hire a... What!?” Viktor said, obviously puzzled.

“I’ll explain it later. I’ll say goodbye before we get cut off,” Hermione said.

“See you next week,” Viktor said.

“See you next week,” Hermione echoed. She stood staring at the fireplace for a few seconds after his head disappeared. She shook her own, then wandered back to the kitchen, muttering, “Talk about anticlimactic. First truly long distance Floo call, and it lasted all of ten seconds. That’s what you were waiting for like some anxious little schoolgirl?”

Viktor raised up carefully, promptly banging the back of his head on the edge of the fireplace anyway. “Damn it,” he muttered, rubbing at the back of his head with his hand, “they never make these things tall enough.” Enough fireplaces had left him with a ringing or throbbing head over the years to know. “And what did she mean, *penguin*? Had to be the connection...”

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“You’re going to wear the hinges right off that thing,” Ilian said, shaking his head and pulling the door closed behind him. “Do you really think we would let you

miss it?" he added as Viktor guiltily snapped his watch shut and hastily dropped it back into his pocket.

"I wasn't... I... Oh, forget it. If she's a tenth as nervous as I am, they'll have to carry her into the stadium, anyway," Viktor muttered, sounding slightly disgusted with himself. "I notice you shut the door. That can't be good. How ugly is it? Iva. In the papers," Viktor elaborated.

"Never could fool you when I had bad news. Worse than it needed to be. Not as bad as it could have been," Ilian said, shrugging.

"That could mean anything, Evtimov," Viktor said, leveling a look at him, slightly skeptical. "In fact, I think it means nothing at all."

"Exactly. Why do you think I always say it that way?" Ilian replied. He heaved a deep sigh. "I imagine you had better have your best 'no comment' face on when you go. A few fluff articles on possible favoritism by people who have never once been in danger of getting a splinter in their bum, much less catching a Bludger."

"They're always the ones that know the most about the game," Viktor said, the tiniest hint of a smile tugging at one corner of his mouth before he continued. "And Iva?"

"Centerpiece of most of the fluff articles. Tale of woe and her obviously superior talent being passed over in favor of the daughter of a legend. For a name. Poor little darling, jettisoned without cause. And similar rot. That agent of hers has figured out they've got nothing to lose. If she doesn't complain, they relegate her to practice status. Permanently. Maybe even cut her loose at the end of the season if they get a promising new prospect. If she whines, she gets some attention and sympathy. Maybe even a 'shut up' concession offer from the team. Coach won't willingly budge on the rosters if he likes the way Anna plays, but the owners might not like getting dragged along for the ride. You'll get asked about it. Anna, too. Sorry," Evtimov said. "She got pretty nasty in one of them. Personal," he added, swallowing hard. He hated to be the one to break the news, but he would hate it even worse if Viktor got jumped on the subject out of the blue.

"I imagine she's used to having me thrown in her face. It ought to be getting old by now," Viktor said dryly. "You would think people could find a new line."

"They have. Or Iva has. She made out like part of the reason was... that Anna... got the sympathy nod," Ilian said quietly. "Because of Magda."

"Throwing her dead mother in her face... That *is* a new low," Viktor said, leaning back and crossing his arms. He sat for an instant, not moving. "Thank you, Ilian. Now, at least my 'no comment' face won't look too surprised," he murmured,

biting his lip. "Quick question, Ilian. Father or Commissioner?"

"Beg pardon?" Evtimov asked, looking confused.

"Which do I go as? Father or Commissioner?" Viktor prompted.

"Maybe it's just me, but I think you would have a better time if you left the job totally at the office. Just this once, at least," Ilian answered. He opened his mouth to continue, but was interrupted by a frantic knock on the door. The door flew open and the gray-haired receptionist stuck her head in.

"Sorry to interrupt, but if we're going, we need to leave, soon," she said while pulling on her cloak.

"We? You're all going?" Viktor asked, looking stunned as the rest of the office dashed for their cloaks and capped off bottles of ink on desks.

"Absolutely! If you think we're missing our girl's first match, you've got another think coming!" the receptionist insisted.

"You people are totally ruining any appearance of impartiality on the part of this department. I love that. Let's go," he told Ilian, smiling.

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"I know why you're here. You know how this whole conversation is going to go, and that I'm not going to say anything worth printing, so why bother asking?" Viktor said with a sigh, tossing his cloak over the back of his seat in the top box. "I don't care how long I've known you, Federov. The answer's the same. No, I don't care to comment. On anything," Viktor said, not unkindly.

"It's my job," Federov said with a shrug, equally easygoing. "I'm just doing my job like you are. So, how's the conversation going to go? Humor me."

"If I just waded through two dozen reporters and said no comment to whatever they asked, what do you think? You ask if I've seen the articles. I say no, personally, I don't read them. Didn't when I played, don't now. You summarize and ask me to comment. I decline. Like always. I don't know why you think I've changed. Talking to the press about player politics is a new trick, and I am a decidedly old dog. Get used to it," Viktor said, leaning against the back of the chair. "And by the way, I'm not *doing* a job. I'm just a father here to watch my daughter play in her first professional match. That's all. No more, no less. I wish you lot would get that through your thick skulls."

"I wish that were true. The part about *just* being a father. Now, what you just

said, *that* I could print. Minus the ‘thick skulls’ comment, of course. Look, I’m sorry, I know this can’t be easy,” Federov murmured. “Reading those things.”

“You’re still assuming I read the blasted papers. If I did, I would have gone mad long ago. Off the record, Iva and her complaint will only be a story until you and your little friends down there find something else to talk about. Next week it might be ‘Iva who?’ again. Federov, I don’t have anything to say to you, either. No matter what I say, it won’t be the right thing. You know that. Not to mention, saying *anything* will get me in the doghouse with Anna, and that’s not a pleasant place to be. Therefore, I stubbornly stick to my usual ‘no comment’,” Viktor replied, returning a similar shrug.

“Fair enough. I’ll beat it down to the sidelines, then. My editor can’t say I didn’t try,” Federov called over his shoulder.

“Thank you for not trying *too* hard,” Viktor shot back, rounding his seat and flopping into it.

“Why do you two *do* that?” Evtimov asked. “I’ve never understood the point of that little dance.”

“He did me the courtesy of actually displaying some integrity back when I played, so I do him the courtesy of occasionally talking to him. And this way he doesn’t have to lie to his editor. Believe it or not, there are a few honest reporters. And Federov’s one of the few I’ve met. He knows no means no, and that the press does not own your soul just because you have a public job,” Viktor explained. “He gets to print one fairly meaningless remark that no one else got, it makes his editor happy and I get to leave with my vow of silence intact. More or less.”

Stan, in the seat beside him, resituated Evangelina in his lap. “The nerve of that... that...” Stan floundered, seemingly searching for a word that adequately described Iva, but he was cut off by Evangelina squeezing her battered cow, which let out a strangled moo.

“From the toys of babes,” Ilian observed, looking amused.

“I think you had best leave that sentence unfinished. Even if it’s so,” Viktor pointed out quietly. “Especially if you were about to describe Iva.”

“What’s Anna supposed to do when someone says something like that, in the papers?” Stan asked.

“If she’s smart, keep her mouth shut and prove them wrong on the pitch,” Viktor replied. “And if you two are smart, you’ll keep your mouths shut, too.”

“Easier said than done,” Vlad muttered darkly.

“Why would that make things any worse?” Stan said.

“For a start, your sister would probably hex you a dozen ways from Sunday for trying to stand up for her when she didn’t ask for it. Second, it’s not going to make the articles go away. Anything you say only stokes the fire. Leave it alone long enough without any fuel, and it will die, eventually,” Viktor explained. “Just sit here, and watch the match. And that goes for me, too.”

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“Say something. I know you’re dying to,” Stan insisted.

“They’re not going to win. Tie. It’s going to be a tie,” Viktor said, pulling the blanket further up, covering the small, dark head sleeping against his chest.

“Why do you say that?” Stan asked. “They still have time to make a hundred and sixty-”

“But they won’t. They’re tired. Look at them. They’re not going to score any more. And the Seeker is practically falling off his broom. It’s cold, it’s dark, the opposing Seeker will catch it. It will end in a tie,” Viktor explained. “First game with this lineup. No shame in a tie.”

“How long do you give it?” Vladimir asked, pulling out his watch and squinting at it in the dim light.

“Five minutes at the most. The Keepers are all over everything. No one is going to score,” Viktor said. Within three minutes, he had been proven right. After a quick dash for the Snitch, the Varna Seeker had it.

“How do you do that?” Vlad asked, closing his watch and tucking it back in his pocket so he could applaud.

“You devote a few decades of your life to doing something, you start to notice little things like a Seeker not keeping form because he’s about to fall asleep. Are you all interested in a little celebratory dinner? Evtimov? What about the rest of you?” Viktor asked, surveying the front row. Most of the office murmured polite declinations, noting the late hour.

“I appreciate the offer, Viktor, but I think I had better get home. Or mine will be passed out just like that, too,” Ilian said, nodding his head at the limp body of Evangelina. “If I go now, I can probably get at least one story in before tucking him into bed.”



"Some other time, then. Goodnight. Vladimir, come here and fetch your daughter, I'm going to go fetch mine. She'll probably be out of the shower by the time I get down there," Viktor said, handing the baby over. "You three hash out where we're going to eat while I'm gone. Keep them in line, Nikolina."

It took a few minutes to make his way through the crowd, out of the box, and past a couple more very persistent reporters, down to the locker room. "I'm not used to the Commissioner coming down to visit the locker room after a regular season tied match," a familiar voice called out.

"Radomir," Viktor said, nodding at his old coach, "for your information, the Commissioner didn't come down here. I did. I'm off the clock."

"You never get off the clock with that job. You can be extremely proud," Radomir said, shaking Viktor's hand. "She played a hell of a match on short notice. Sorry about the fuss," he added under his breath.

"Knew to expect it," Viktor replied. "Maybe not quite so vicious..."

"Expect more. I'll be in next week to file papers to fine Iva. She didn't show tonight with no warning. Team rules. Be present, even if not slated to play, unless there is a medical reason. I didn't put up with that diva nonsense when you were here, I sure as hell am not going to start, now," Radomir said gruffly.

"Wouldn't ask you to. Make sure all the paperwork is airtight, though. I don't want her coming back on me saying I could have opted not to fine her," Viktor warned.

"It will be. Kiril! Is Anna out of the showers?" Radomir called when the door to the room with the lockers and equipment swung open and Kiril walked out, hair damp.

"Sure. Anna! Commissioner's here!" Kiril shouted back through the swinging door.

"Impossible. The Commissioner doesn't come trooping down to the locker room after every match," Anna groused, stepping out with her equipment bag on her arm.

"Try your *father*, instead. He does. Especially after his daughter's first match," Viktor replied.

"Which was a *tie*," Anna said, crossing her arms and scowling fiercely in a way that seemed a little too familiar.

"Be glad. My first professional match was an eighty point arse-kicking. Sofia handed us our heads on platters. And it was only that close because I lucked out and got to the Snitch first. Opposing Seeker was probably too distracted watching his team score every two or three minutes. Now, come on, your brothers are waiting to go eat and you're probably starving," Viktor cajoled.

"Why do you think that?" Anna asked.

"Because I never ate before matches, either," Viktor said.

"You should be proud. Fine first match. Not many mistakes. No practice tomorrow. Be ready for a tough one the day after. Keep that up, your name earns a permanent spot on the roster," Radomir said. "Under the circumstances, you kept your head in the game admirably. Don't let them get to you," he added quietly, touching Anna's arm. "You earned that spot. You earned a right to keep it. Ride out the rest of the trial period like this, it's yours, free and clear."

Anna nodded. "Let's go, Tate."

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"I can't believe no one else wanted dessert," Viktor said, walking into the kitchen and rummaging through the icebox.

"No one else could hold their eyes open," Anna said, settling into one of the kitchen chairs.

"Here," Viktor said. He put two pints of ice cream on the table, then fetched two spoons. "You eat out of that container, I'll eat out of this one, and we won't tell anyone," he said, sitting next to her, giving her one of the spoons and nudging the container of plain chocolate toward her.

"I'd rather have the chocolate and cherry," Anna said, smiling faintly.

"Fair enough. I won't arm wrestle you over it," Viktor said, swapping them. They pried the lids loose and ate a few spoonfuls in silence. "Want to talk about it?" Viktor asked casually, not looking up from the container.

"Not particularly," Anna said. A long pause followed. "I could strangle Iva," she said fiercely, jabbing her spoon into the container.

"I could, too, but I think we would definitely be the number one suspects if she turned up dead. They'll get tired of listening to her whine in a day or two," Viktor advised. "Keep playing like you did in that match today and they'll have something else to talk about."

"I made mistakes," Anna complained. "Too many."

"Everybody does. So, you'll make fewer next time," Viktor said.

"But if I hadn't missed that one open pass, we might have scored another goal and-

"And you might not have. And if you hadn't made every one of those six goals you *did* make, your team would have lost. No one player wins it or loses it. You can do everything right and still lose the match," Viktor said, reaching up and absently skimming a finger over the crook in the bridge of his nose. "Just concentrate on playing the best you can in the moment and forget about the last match and the match after. Nothing you can do about those. Play the match you're in and everything else falls into place. Even things like Iva. You have nothing to be ashamed of." Viktor said, pushing her hair back from her face. "Look, baby, there are going to be a *lot* of Ivas. Let the coach and me worry about Iva, take care of the part of her behavior we actually have some control over, strictly by the book, and you just worry about playing."

"She could have left Mama out of it," Anna spat. "Dragging you into it was bad enough. Tired line. You only got it because he's your father."

Viktor sighed. "She could have. But she wouldn't have gotten as many headlines. Let Iva dig her own hole. Your silence just hands her a bigger shovel. Play her a little deeper, too, while you're at it. Today was a good start. Varna's no pushover, and you lot held them goalless. And scored fifteen goals on them. That's not shabby. Especially under the circumstances. I'm proud of you. For all of it. Your Mama would be, too."

"It felt good," Anna confessed. "Playing that well, I mean. It felt good, doing that in a real match."

"You looked good. You played smart. And tough. I bet that one was surprised that elbow didn't have any effect."

"All those butt-kickings the rest of you put on me when I was little. Even Mama didn't have any mercy," Anna said with a laugh, putting the last spoonful of ice cream in her mouth. "And *you*. You were the worst. Worse than Vlad and Stan put together, with the not letting up."

"Because I knew I had better enjoy it while I could. You weren't going to be easy to beat for long. Go home and get some rest, you'll be sorer than you think, tomorrow," Viktor insisted.

"Yes, sir. Goodnight, Tate," Anna said, wrapping her arms around Viktor's neck, kissing his cheek. He patted her between the shoulders briefly and returned the kiss. "I had better go," Anna said, jumping up and grabbing her cloak. "Thank you for the ice cream," she tossed over her shoulder as she stood at the back door.

"You're welcome. It's here any time you want some," Viktor called after her. Once the door had swung shut, he added under his breath, "And the advice, too. For what it's worth."

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"Mrs. Weeeeeasley! Hermione Weasley!"

"Hmm? Sorry, what?" Hermione said, looking up and blinking owlishly. She had been engrossed in an equation, staring at it and puzzling over it. In fact, she had the nagging suspicion that for all her staring at it, not one bit of it had sunk in or made any sense.

"For about the fifth time, now, Arthur's called up here and wants to know if you're free for lunch. I've been standing here in this doorway, talking to you for the last three minutes, for all the good it's done," the receptionist said, looking slightly peeved.

"Oh. Of course. Tell him to come up when he's ready," Hermione said distractedly.

"He's already in the lobby, waiting. I told him you would be out when I could pry you away from those parchments."

"Is it lunchtime already? I'm so sorry. I hope I haven't kept him waiting long," Hermione fretted, standing and grabbing her cloak, throwing it on as she hurried along. "I'm sorry, Arthur, I was... well, I was doing absolutely no good, is what I was doing," she admitted.

"Only been here a tick. Come have a bite with me, and it will all look rosier after," Arthur said with a smile. The red hair had long since completely silvered, of course, the corners of the eyes crinkled a bit more, and the face was a shade fuller, but the eldest Weasley still looked remarkably like he had when she had first met him. Equally cheerful and optimistic, despite everything. "How about a sandwich in the Leaky Cauldron?"

"I could do with a sandwich," Hermione allowed. The two of them made their way there and placed their orders mostly in comfortable, familiar silence. It was only after they had taken their seats and started in on their lunches that she suspected there was more to this lunch than usual.

"Anything exciting planned for the weekend?" Arthur asked, trying to feign indifference and failing at it miserably.

"And why would you be asking that?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Just wondered if you had anything interesting planned, is all," Arthur insisted.

"Arthur," Hermione warned. "Did Simon put you up to asking that?"

"No! No, Simon didn't..." Arthur replied, shaking his head.

"Molly, then," Hermione said, putting her sandwich down and crossing her arms, suddenly certain.

"Now why would you think that?" Arthur stammered.

"Because in nearly thirty years as your daughter-in-law, you have never *once* asked me what I was doing this weekend?" Hermione pressed.

"Well, Molly was just a bit curious-" Arthur admitted, blushing.

"For Merlin's sake, does everyone in the Weasley family know? What did Ginny and Simon do, send out a newsletter?" Hermione interrupted.

"There, there, dear, it's naught to be getting all wrought up over. We would just all like to see you happy," Arthur soothed, patting her hand.

"Is there some... *myth* brewing among you that I'm living under a rock all by myself and I'm terribly unhappy and lonely?" Hermione said indignantly. "I don't need the lot of you *pushing* me at just anybody that happens to pass for reasonably eligible, like I have some sort of expiration date! If it weren't for Molly, I never would have gone on those other dreadful dates," she spat. "I'm going to have to tell Viktor it's not just *young* people that see you as some kind of project!"

"No! And this isn't just anybody. Is it?" Arthur asked gently. "You seriously considered... marrying... or is that a myth, too? And you're *never* lonely?"

"That was a long time ago. A lot's happened. And you be just as lonely with the wrong person as you can be by yourself," Hermione said. "That's why no second dates with those others."

"So... maybe a lot had to happen for the time to be right," Arthur said earnestly. "Not everyone is so lucky as me and Molly girl. Where it's so sure. Right from the

beginning. Sometimes, a lot has to happen,” Arthur repeated.

Hermione sighed and smiled weakly. “It may ease Molly’s mind to know I’m going to dinner tomorrow evening, then. We’ll see,” Hermione allowed. “You lot seem ready to marry us off if we have more than two meals together!” she scolded.

“Good. Enjoy yourself,” Arthur said cheerfully, going back to his sandwich.

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“Make it quick, Ilian, I have to go to the grocery,” Viktor said, pausing momentarily in pulling his cloak on.

“The grocery? On a Thursday evening?” Evtimov said thickly.

“People *do* eat on Thursdays,” Viktor said. “What is it?”

“I thought you should know. Paperwork came in to fine Iva,” Ilian said, holding up a sheaf of parchments.

“I know. Radomir warned me. As long as it’s airtight, I don’t care. Fine her,” Viktor said.

“I haven’t reviewed it yet, but I think so. But Iva wants an appointment tomorrow,” Ilian replied.

“What for? She knew she was going to get fined! If she didn’t, she’s thicker than I thought. Radomir doesn’t take that from his players. You follow team rules, or you get fined. It’s in your damned contract!” Viktor snapped.

“Well, don’t yell at me about it. I think she wants to talk to you about dipping into her pension fund while she’s on the disabled list,” Ilian explained.

“Oh. So that’s her game. She wants to apply and have me deny it. So she can say I’m persecuting her. I’ll show her. As long as it’s filled out correctly, I’ll approve it. Bet Iva doesn’t see that coming,” Viktor said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you. Squeeze her in. Half an hour. No more.”

“That wasn’t even a good snap. It’ll have to be toward the end of the day. I know you wanted to keep that clear. I can still keep that last hour clear,” Ilian offered.

“Do it,” Viktor said.

“Done. Now, go buy your groceries,” Evtimov said, waving Viktor toward the door. “I’m right behind you. Want me to strangle Iva? I’m half tempted to do it for

you.”

“No. She’s not worth strangling. Or that’s what I keep telling myself,” Viktor said, turning the lights out behind them.

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Evtimov stuck his head inside the office. “She’s here. Send her in?”

“Got the papers?” Viktor asked, looking up from his desk.

“Here,” Ilian said, holding them out. Viktor stood and met him at the door, taking them. He riffled through them quickly.

“Well... come in if you’re coming in,” Viktor called, looking into the outer office, seeing Iva standing at the other end of the room. Some of the looks she got from the staff as she walked to the door were less than friendly. “Close the door behind you if you want this to be private,” he added when she stepped in.

“Should it be?” Iva asked pointedly.

“Up to you. Bring a marching band, for all I care. Have a seat,” Viktor offered, rounding his desk and indicating the chair opposite. “Unless you want to be contrary about that, too.” he added as she pushed the door shut.

“About my fine-”

“I’m not repealing it. It’s cut and dried, the paperwork and the rules are airtight, it was filed properly before the deadline, I’ve signed it. No negotiation,” Viktor said, sliding the sheet in question across the desk.

“It’s not fair-” Iva began, but Viktor cut her off again.

“It’s the team rules. They’re there in black and white, and it’s in your contract, it’s on file here at the commission. No notification of your absence, you get fined. If you don’t like the team rules, take it up with the coach and owners. I have no power over their rules. I just enforce them and levy the penalty,” Viktor said, holding his hands up in a helpless gesture.

“He only did it because it was me!” Iva pouted, crossing her arms.

“Here’s where I’m going to point out that argument is a load of fertilizer. This same man fined me at least a dozen times in my career. Certainly made sure I got my behind to practice on time. And it didn’t matter if I was a minute late because my watch was slow, ten minutes late because I overslept or thirty



minutes late because I had a sick baby and a sick wife and couldn't find a sitter, he still fined me. Radomir doesn't cut people slack because of who they are. Nor does he persecute them. Find a new tune," Viktor said flatly.

"Oh, and I suppose the fine would have gone through if it had been *Anna*," Iva taunted.

"I don't imagine Radomir would hesitate, and if it got filed properly, I would sign it. She needs fining if she breaks a team rule. That's what fines are for. First time she's late, see if he doesn't fine her," Viktor said evenly. "Now, was there anything else?"

Iva narrowed her eyes and thrust out two folded sheets of parchment. "I want to receive my union benefits while I'm on the disabled list. And I don't want any unnecessary delaying or—"

"That your medical statement?" Viktor asked, unfolding one of them. "Signed?" he asked when she bobbed her head. "Is that your application form? Signed and filled out?" He studied them for a brief space, then smoothed one of them out, grabbing a quill and writing across the bottom.

"What are you doing?" Iva demanded, leaning forward, straining to see.

Viktor paused and peered at her over the top of his glasses. "Signing it and dating it," he explained patiently, in a tone very close to the one he had used when the children were being particularly persistent and exasperating, if not quite in need of reprimanding. "That's what I have to do when I approve payments from the player's union." He went back to signing his name.

"Just like that?" Iva asked, narrowing her eyes. "You needn't think that's going to buy my silence."

"I expect your pension will pay your rent and buy your groceries, or whatever you want to spend it on. Your mouth doesn't enter into it. You pay into the fund in case you need it. You applied for it properly, I approved it. That's the way it works for everyone," Viktor said, sliding the parchments back across the desk. "Just like the fines. I've been accused of a lot of things since I took this job. Being a skinflint, wasting too much money, not understanding scheduling, scheduling in lesser venues, not being politically minded... but there's one thing I have never seriously been accused of. And that's not being fair. In fact, if anything, they get angry at me because I'm too fair. I don't cut anyone a special deal. I treated you like I would any other player."

"Oh, I see. You think if you do this, I quit talking to the press about Anna," Iva scoffed. "It's not going to shut me up about the truth, just because you give me

what I deserve anyway. She got the spot because of who she is.”

“If by ‘who she is’ you mean what kind of player she is, you’ve finally hit on the truth. While we’re on the subject of the *truth*, let me give you a little friendly advice,” Viktor said, taking his glasses off and setting them down. “Completely off the record and totally outside of my role as Commissioner,” he elaborated, resting his palms on the desk and leaning forward, lowering his voice. “If you think she got the spot over you because she’s *mine*, you’re deluding yourself. I’ve seen it before. A player who doesn’t want to admit that they don’t have what it takes, looking for someone to blame other than themselves. It’s the crowd’s fault, the equipment’s fault, the venue’s fault, the owner’s fault, the coach’s fault, a teammate’s fault, everyone’s fault but their own. I hate to tell you this, but I’ve been seeing players get nasty since before you were born. The bigger the excuse, the nastier they get. Congratulations. You have the dubious distinction of sinking the lowest of anybody I’ve ever come across.”

“You just don’t like me saying it’s because she’s got your last name. Heaven forbid anyone point out that everybody *knows* she’s your daughter,” Iva replied.

“No, I don’t mind *that*. That’s open season. In fact, it’s old hat. All of my children have heard that line of nonsense about how everything was easier for them because they were mine, probably since they were toddlers, and they all know it’s bull. Anna, especially, I imagine. If anything, they had it harder. I sure didn’t cut them any slack or do them any favors, and I made sure their professors and coaches didn’t show them any favoritism, either. I asked them to be harder on them. I knew they were going to need it. They’ve always had to work harder to prove they have nothing to prove. Hell, I *expect* to be thrown in their faces when someone’s looking for an excuse. It ought to be a tired old line to Anna, by now. But you have a lot of damned gall, coming in here and making demands and threats after throwing my dead wife in my face. You’ve got a lot of *fucking nerve*, implying Anna losing her mother had a *thing* to do with her replacing your sorry behind on the roster,” Viktor hissed.

“So maybe I’ll talk about her a little more,” Iva shot back.

“I wouldn’t if I were you. Because I am only so patient. You can talk about me *all* you want. Hell, talk about *Anna* all you want. Call me sixteen different kinds of fool, say I’ve spoiled all my children rotten and bought them their careers with my name, and say I’m the worst Commissioner in the history of the office as much as you like. Until the press gets tired of hearing it and won’t give you any more column space. I don’t care. It wouldn’t be the first time. Say Anna is the worst player you’ve ever seen, she only got the spot because her last name’s Krum, and she couldn’t outplay you if her life depended on it. Be my guest. It would only serve to show how ignorant you are of what it takes to make a real player. Anna can take it. She’s heard meaningless trash talk before. You aren’t the first load of

hot air she's encountered. You're just background noise and extra motivation, you and your favoritism charges. But if you mention *Magda* as a reason one more time, I will go toe to toe with you in the press and I will... *eat... you... alive*," Viktor said, leaning in closer and biting off each word.

"You *never* talk to the press," Iva replied, but she leaned back slightly.

"Exactly," Viktor said, sitting upright once more. "But for this, I'm willing to make an exception. I only speak to the press when whatever I say is important. Therefore, they think *anything* I say is important. I can snap my fingers and get about fourteen papers in here, eager to copy down whatever I want to give them. If you think you scare me, threatening to haul Magda into it, you're badly mistaken. I can destroy you in about three sentences. Two, maybe, if I'm feeling particularly pithy. And best of all, I can do it without defending myself or Anna, and still make you look about that big," Viktor pointed out, holding his thumb and forefinger a small distance apart.

"Fine, then. Let's hear it," Iva said, looking smug. "Let's hear what the press would eat up."

"I think it a real shame that Iva finds it necessary to resort to disrespecting the memory of the dead by dragging my wife's name into a debate that can and should be settled on the playing field. She's behaving like an average player with a diva's ego that just can't quite accept responsibility for the quality of her own playing and improving upon it. I'm sure she doesn't mean to come off as a difficult, spoiled player more interested in her own agenda than that of the team, but it certainly does sound that way, since she thinks my being widowed is more important to a veteran coach's decision than her own talent," Viktor recited, raising an eyebrow. "I could possibly edit it down if I gave it some thought."

"You wouldn't..." Iva said.

"I don't even have to insult you directly, and *no* team on *any* continent will *ever* touch you, even as a practice reserve. No coach would have you. Not because I'm the Commissioner, either. Because they'll know I'm right. I never resorted to name calling when I played. If I said it, it wasn't just talk. They won't want some whiny little reserve that thinks she's the best thing to happen to Quidditch since the invention of the Quaffle. Who doesn't know when it's in her own best interest to back off and let her playing do the talking. It's your call. Let it blow over as a momentary lapse in judgment that Anna and I were big enough to ignore, or drag it out unnecessarily and hex the rest of your career." Viktor offered. When she didn't respond, he added, "I've been around player politics since before you were born. Just because I didn't play that aspect of the game back when I played Quidditch doesn't mean I wasn't paying attention to the rules. I was on the receiving end of plenty of it. You *knew* Anna would keep her mouth shut, and

that she wouldn't let me step into it if I *wanted* to, which I don't. She doesn't need it. You banked on the two of us keeping quiet and giving you enough rope to hang yourself. You crossed the line, though. You just *had* to have that extra big headline by saying something new. Well, I can say something new, too. And the best part is, I don't even have to resort to lying or pulling something completely irrelevant in, like you did. Did you really expect me to rise to that pathetic bait? I do my job, no strings attached. My personal feelings don't enter into it."

"What do I have to do?" Iva asked in a small voice, looking sour.

"Leave my wife out of it. That's all I ask. Leaving my daughter out of it, too, would only be good common sense, but that's up to you," Viktor allowed. "You don't have to worry that I'm going to pull out the stops if you're silly enough to keep saying she shouldn't have gotten your spot. Critique her form, her play, her decisions, hell, the way she maintains her equipment and wears her uniform. Anything that actually has to do with her being on the field. But her mother is off limits."

"Fine," Iva muttered. "How long does the pension go?"

"Until Vratsa releases you from contract or removes you from the disabled list. At that point, if you don't get picked up, you go onto the former player's pension scale and you have to reapply when you wish to start drawing. You draw more the longer you play and the longer you wait, obviously, since it's a sliding scale. It's all in the league handbook," Viktor answered evenly. "Any more questions?"

"No," Iva said, pouting.

"Good. I think it's about time you left. Forgive me if I don't show you to the door. I might be a little too tempted to hurl you out it. Hand the paperwork in to the nice young man who showed you in. Ask him for a copy of the league handbook if you've misplaced yours. And if I were *you*, I wouldn't make any appointments for a while. With me *or* the press. I suggest you practice your 'No comment,' and leave it at that," Viktor said, lowering his eyebrows and glaring at her. "But if you're lacking rope and are still determined to hang yourself, I can provide just enough."

"I wouldn't expect me not to talk about whether or not she deserves the spot, though," Iva sniped, getting up and stalking toward the door.

"I wouldn't expect them to stay interested long. Especially when you're proven wrong," Viktor said dryly. Iva stepped out and closed the door behind her harder than necessary. Within a couple of minutes, the door swung open again and Ilian stepped inside.

"I take it that went well?" Evtimov asked, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

"About as well as it could. Shut the door," Viktor said with a heavy sigh. "At least I think I managed to get the main point across without saying what I was really thinking," he added once Ilian had complied.

"Which was?" Ilian prompted, settling into the chair.

"Shut up and leave my little girl alone or I'll gut you, you stupid, vicious wench," Viktor said, in a tone so light that Evtimov couldn't help but guffaw.

"I hope you phrased it better," Evtimov said, regaining control.

"Oh, I gave her open season on the two of us," Viktor said, waving his hand dismissively. "Carte blanche to run the two of us down as long as anyone will listen for anything from our choice of shoes to our career skills. Just no mentioning Magda. I had to tread very carefully around anything that sounded like I was warning her off of me or Anna. Especially Anna. Come on, Evtimov. You know that's the only reason it bothered Anna in the slightest. Because Iva brought Magda into it. Otherwise, it wouldn't even have registered. Iva could have suggested putting the two of us on pikes in the town square, and Anna wouldn't have cared. I wouldn't have either. Much. I admit it. Sometimes I wish she weren't so insistent on standing up for herself. Every once in a while, I wish she would let me do it," Viktor complained. "Against my better judgment, occasionally I'm seized by the overwhelming urge to be protective. And she won't let me."

"It's your own damned fault for raising them all to stand on their own two feet," Evtimov pointed out.

"I know. I should have gone for more whiny and dependent," Viktor said, shrugging. "Just as well. I would be accused of impropriety up and down the board. That's the problem with this job. Figuring out where it ends. Most people seem to think it doesn't. So I have to bite my tongue and let all the players take their lumps. Anna included. Builds character. Or so I keep trying to convince myself."

"Taking your lumps or biting your tongue?" Evtimov asked pointedly.

The corners of Viktor's mouth turned up subtly. "Both. Anything else character-building that I need to do before I leave?"

"I think you're free and clear. And well deserved it is. For not saying that to Iva, if nothing else. I don't think I could bite my tongue if it were Danail," Evtimov admitted.

"Danail is still getting the hang of talking, much less speaking up for himself. Enjoy it while you don't have to ask for permission. That comes all too soon," Viktor said, standing and stretching. "If that's all the torture you have for me this afternoon, I'm leaving, then. Have a good weekend, Ilian."

"You, too," Ilian replied.

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Viktor looked up at the clock when the pecking came at the back door. It was too early to be Hermione. The ferry couldn't even have docked, yet. There was no way it could be her this early. He wiped his hands on the dishtowel and went to the back door. He was a bit surprised when it turned out to be Vladimir, with a fussing and exceedingly cranky looking Evangelina perched on his hip. "Oh, good, you're here," Vladimir said, sounding relieved. "I thought maybe you were working late and I would have to try to catch you at the office. Or run Anna down."

"Why didn't you just let yourself in?" Viktor asked, sounding puzzled.

"Can't come in. Don't have time. Look, I hate to do this, but could you keep her? I know this is last minute, but Nikolina's doing inventory at work, and I was supposed to be off tonight, but they called me in. They're swamped. I can't find another sitter. We can't pick her up until late, eleven, maybe, but-"

"Leave her all night. Come get her in the morning," Viktor said, taking her.

"You're sure? All night? It won't be keeping you from doing anything? You don't have anywhere you need to be? And she's pretty fussy right now. Teething. She's liable to keep you up half-"

"Nothing more important than this. Leave her," Viktor said. "I'm just fixing dinner. I don't have anywhere to go. And I've had some experience with teething, remember? She'll be fine."

"I didn't bring things for overnight. Gah! I forgot the gum ointment. You can run over to the house and-"

"She's got clothes and food, her own bed here, and toys in the bag. Some people wish they had it so good. And the three of you survived without gum ointment. You managed by gnawing on frozen waffles and such. I had a hand in raising you three without killing you or scarring you beyond repair. She'll be fine. Go on," Viktor said impatiently.

"You're positive? I mean, she won't be interrupting something or driving you mad while you're trying to do something and you're just not saying? And I'm serious about her being up and down a lot. If she's too much trouble-

"She won't bother a thing," Viktor fibbed. "I rather like being with her, remember? We'll be okay. Hand over the baby's bag and go on. You're going to be late for shift change. You and Nikolina sleep in tomorrow. I don't have to be anywhere tomorrow." When Vladimir didn't answer for a beat, Viktor added, "Goodnight, Tate. You can say it or she can say it, but one of you say it," Viktor prompted.

"Thank you, you don't know how big a help this is, taking her, last minute. Goodnight, baby," Vladimir said, kissing Evangelina's cheek. "Behave, now."

"Oh, Mama and I had to throw ourselves on the mercy of Baba and Diado last minute a few times, too. Any time," Viktor demurred.

"Goodnight, Tate. Call if you want us to come early-

"Get out, don't show up before noon or I won't let you in," Viktor scolded good-naturedly. "Goodnight," he added, pushing the door together. He stood for a moment, looking at the door, blinking. "You know," Viktor mused, hefting the squirming little girl higher on his own hip, "I was planning on having dinner with a younger woman this evening, but you weren't exactly what I had in mind. Come on, then, pilentse, let's see if we can't finish dinner. And get you in a better mood," he added, chucking her under the chin. Evangelina rubbed at her mouth with her knuckles and looked that much more disagreeable.

Viktor picked up the bag and took it into the living room, dropping it on the sofa. Then he went and pulled the old high chair from the corner of the kitchen where it now sat. It had been dragged down from the attic a few months back, having earned a long sabbatical there after surviving three childhoods. Viktor settled her in and fastened the tray on. Being confined instead of being carried didn't set well with the occupant of the high chair.

"Now, look, I need both hands free, at least for a few minutes," Viktor cajoled over the pleading whimpering. "Just hang on a little while. I swear it's not for the whole evening. Five or ten minutes," he said, turning his back on her and going about the business of finishing dinner. Evangelina made no secret of the fact that the last place she wanted to be stuck at the moment was in the high chair. Viktor resolutely ignored her for a few minutes, rummaging through the drawers, cabinets, vegetable bin and ice box for things he needed. It was safe enough to Accio the things from the bin and the ice box, but some of the drawers and cabinets were so tightly packed that it was less trouble and racket to look for things yourself, without a wand.



“Grand. I’ve lost my mind,” Viktor muttered, holding the large, wooden salad bowl he had just finished pulling out of the cabinet, looking at the empty bit of counter where he was sure he had put down the spoon for stirring the moussaka just a short while before. He only had to puzzle over it for a few moments before the mystery was solved, as the solid banging of wood against wood joined the generally unhappy cacophony behind him. “Oh, very cute,” he said, setting the bowl down and turning around. Sure enough, Evangelina was pounding away at the wooden tray of the chair with the spoon he had left on the counter. “Well, I suppose I don’t have to worry about you being a Squib, then, do I?” he admitted, walking over and unlatching the tray. He hefted her out and settled her back on his hip, which seemed to improve her mood by leaps and bounds. “I know, your gums hurt,” Viktor soothed. “Here, trade you a Popsicle for the spoon,” he offered, summoning one out of the icebox. Evangelina warily accepted the trade. “That will make your mouth feel a little better, at least. And try not to have three quarters of it on Diado by the time you finish, hmm?” Viktor said absently, dropping the spoon into the pot and setting it to stirring.

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When the next, firmer knock came at the door, Viktor was dead certain it was Hermione after checking the clock. Allowing for the ferry being reasonably late, disembarking, Flooing from the station to the nearby inn, and walking the remaining short distance, there had been plenty of time. He had offered Flooing directly from the station to the house, but he had known she would likely opt for coming to the door instead. Even years ago, she had stubbornly held onto the Muggle custom of not dropping directly into someone’s house, even when invited, but knocking instead. He suspected half of it was due to her not really liking travel by Floo, either. He wouldn’t put it past her to have walked all the way from the station, instead, if she could get directions.

“I’m fifteen minutes away from being finished,” Viktor grouched, putting Evangelina back in the high chair, “I still haven’t changed, and I’m covered in slobber and popsicle drippings.” He pointed his wand at the biggest sticky red patch near his shoulder and muttered the charm. It lightened only slightly, still stubborn. Thankfully, Evangelina was distracted enough by the remains of the popsicle that she didn’t protest being left in the high chair again. “This is not how I pictured this going,” Viktor complained, grabbing the dish towel and slinging it over his shoulder on the way to the back door.

“Hello,” Hermione said, the instant he pulled the door open. She was standing there, a shopping bag in her hand, her own cloak pulled up close around her. “Sorry, am I early?” she asked, the smile on her face faltering slightly when she noticed the towel. “I didn’t misunderstand the time difference, did I?”

“No... no, I’m late,” Viktor admitted ruefully. “Come on in,” he added, stepping

back and holding the door.

“How can you be late to dinner in your own house?” Hermione asked, smile returning, as she stepped in.

“I’ve managed. Slight change of plans. Unexpected company. Dinner for two is going to be dinner for three, instead. I wouldn’t worry she’s going to monopolize the conversation, though,” Viktor said with a weak laugh. “Throw things during dinner, maybe, but not butt into the conversation, much.”

“Oh... oh, Evangelina?” Hermione asked, catching on. “Emergency babysitting?”

“Poor little urchin just got dumped on my doorstep. Vlad got called in last minute and Nikolina’s doing inventory,” Viktor explained, bobbing his head. “I would steer clear if you don’t want to get sticky,” Viktor advised, brushing at the damp patch on his robe with the dish towel. “Popsicle,” he elaborated.

“A bit of stickiness never hurt anyone,” Hermione protested, moving on into the kitchen. “I’ve been sticky before and survived. Hello, sweetie,” Hermione said to the little girl, who surveyed her curiously in return with wide, dark eyes. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Keep this one occupied for fifteen minutes,” Viktor said, taking away the sticky popsicle stick and cleaning the sugary fingers and face. “Sorry, I’m slower working one-handed and hauling her around.”

“Nonsense. I’m not even used to eating all that early. Here, pumpkin, I don’t mind hauling you around at all,” Hermione offered, holding out her hands. Evangelina still eyed her warily, uncertain.

“I would also be careful if you have anything removable on your person that is within easy reach,” Viktor warned. “She’s in that stage where she’ll take anything that’s not nailed down. Glasses, especially. And she’s a load.”

“Well, I haven’t any glasses, and anything else she’s welcome to,” Hermione said, putting down the bag, shedding her cloak, then unfastening the tray and picking up Evangelina. Evangelina looked her over intently for a bit, then shyly plucked at the top button on Hermione’s robe. “You’re sure there’s nothing I can lend a hand with?”

“No. Mostly it’s just waiting for the bread and moussaka, and finishing up the salad. And making the coffee, assuming you want some. There’s some wine... if you want it. I don’t think I will, now, with her staying... Don’t let that stop you, though,” Viktor insisted, shutting the oven door again. “Sorry, I should have set the table ages ago.”

"I don't need wine. Coffee's fine," Hermione protested, watching the table settings drift by. "I take it I shouldn't have held you to the literal when you said 'the chef'?"

"What? Oh! No, sorry, I'm afraid I'm the chef. Magda used to laugh at people who inquired about 'the chef'. She would tell them we had taken on two, full time, and trained three assistants. We got enough of eating other people's cooking when we were on the road and had to eat out. There's something to be said for eating your own cooking, imperfect though it may be. We had plenty of time to swap off when we were at home. Although I do admit to occasionally having to eat around a bit of sandwich because there was paint on the crust. But I didn't mention that any more than she mentioned it when I would burn something around the edges on the stove because I was too busy listening to a match on the wireless. Grant you, she did that occasionally, too," Viktor said. "The kids would come up with the most incredibly outlandish combinations for meals, sometimes. Stan went through this stage where every dish he picked would have Feta in it. And Vlad used to make this truly horrendous sounding omelet sort of thing with shredded chicken and cheese and peppers. We were ashamed to admit to anyone that we actually ate it. It's really quite good if you can get to it before it gets cold and soggy. To me, things like that were a lot more fun than having a real chef on hand. I think a professional would have been boring. I can manage feeding myself. To cook for one person who isn't even here a lot of the time? No point. "

"I suppose not," Hermione demurred. "With Simon it was eating peanut butter all the time. He lived on peanut butter his entire tenth year. You would have thought Hogwarts was going to completely deprive him of peanut butter the instant he stepped onto the grounds. I read you must have had quite the week."

"Beg pardon?" Viktor asked, looking back over his shoulder.

"Anna. I read she was in a match. Or wasn't the Prophet right about that? The Prophet had a little blurb on it Thursday," Hermione said. Getting a mite bolder, Evangelina riffled her fingers through Hermione's hair. "Was a tie, wasn't it?"

"That's it? Just a blurb about her being in the match? Then you don't know the half of the week I've had," Viktor said with a derisive snort.

"Sorry? I feel I'm missing something vital," Hermione said.

"Player politics," Viktor spat, closing the samovar with much more force than was necessary. "Let's leave it at saying the girl Anna replaced wasn't so charitable about it, and the more I think on it, the angrier I get about it. And she had the gall to come in for an appointment today. Do you know how frustrating it is to know

you can't say much of anything about it when somebody just starts... making things up because they don't have a real case?"

"Because you're the Commissioner," Hermione said.

"Because Anna would wring my neck," Viktor corrected. "Don't you *dare* stick up for me, Tate, I'll do it myself, became her favorite phrase somewhere around age seven."

"Oh. Well, that's not what I expected. I wouldn't have expected something like that to upset you much. I would have figured you had heard it all before," Hermione said, catching the little fingers that were prodding at her chin.

"Oh, I've been called any number of things that aren't repeatable. This one came up with a new line. Blamed it on Magda. The other bits about me... nothing she hasn't heard a hundred other times. But that... that bothered her," Viktor said more softly.

"Bothered her or bothered you?" Hermione probed.

"Both," Viktor admitted. "She mentioned it. She hasn't so much as mentioned anything like that for years, no matter how hard I try to pry it out of her. Anna's used to people making snap judgments. One way or the other. She's heard 'your famous father' as a reason for everything from grades to team spots her whole life. 'Your dead mother' is a new one to us both." Viktor smiled faintly. "If I stood up for her directly, though, Anna would never let me hear the end of it. Commissioner or no Commissioner. Just as well. She had better learn to stand up for herself. On the pitch. And I had better be getting used to that, too."

Hermione gaped for a moment. "You're... kidding... She said it was because... Magda's..." she stammered. "I'm definitely seeing the downside of your daughter's choice of career. My sympathies. Still, I bet you're proud," Hermione said.

"Of course," Viktor replied, his expression easing. "But I think I'm going to die a thousand deaths by the end of her first full season. I admit it. There's still this stubborn little corner of me that wants to go and be a father when I read things like that. So I try not to read things like that if I can help it. Thankfully, I got into the habit of ignoring things like that a long time ago. Healthier for me and Anna. And whoever is saying it," Viktor said with a laugh. "I've had better weeks. Professionally, at least. I can't complain about the personal. It was a good match and she played well. I can't ask for much more than that. How was going back to work for you?"

"Jarring. And maddening. It took about a week to even begin to catch up with all

the notes on my desk, and I feel like I've stared at a million parchments and drawn a complete blank all this week. Of course, it didn't help that it took most of that first week just to get my mind back in the same time zone as my body," Hermione said ruefully.

"Time zones, nothing. Travel just plain takes it out of you. The strain of not being able to completely relax while you're somewhere strange and always worrying about making the next leg of the trip or the next meeting," Viktor mused. "And then there's the worrying about what's going on back home that's going to be waiting for you when you get back. Did you want a bowl or a plate? For the salad?"

"A bowl, I think," Hermione answered, watching the intense concentration on Evangelina's face as she went back to plucking at Hermione's button.

"Sorry, I'm being a terrible host. Did you want anything while we're waiting? And sit, you don't have to haul her all over the kitchen," Viktor scolded mildly.

"I'm fine, really. It's actually a nice change after being cooped up on the ferry. And in the office all week. Unless you count a nag session with Arthur over lunch," Hermione said.

"Arthur? Nag? I can't imagine what he would nag about," Viktor replied.

"He took me out for a sandwich, but he had ulterior motives. I think it was a case of Molly nagging by proxy, if you want the truth," Hermione said, shaking her head. "Let's just leave it at that. That bread smells incredible."

"Needs to cool a bit before it can be cut. Supposedly, you can do it with a Cooling Charm, but I always overdo it and end up with cold bread. I would rather exercise two minutes of patience. Besides, the coffee needs at least that long," Viktor said, glancing back at the samovar on the counter.

"What are you going to feed the little one? She can't survive on popsicle alone, can she?" Hermione asked, ducking her head to peer into Evangelina's face. The baby had slyly shifted from plucking at the button to poking at the ends of Hermione's hair to watch it bounce.

"Oh, she'll eat a bit from the table. Some bread and some soup. And I threw a potato in to bake. She'll eat most of that. What she doesn't attempt to launch across the table. Sometimes she's really bad about throwing things if she's not particularly hungry. Look, I'm going to go change. I doubt I'll be much cleaner by the end of dinner, but at least I won't be quite so sticky, maybe. Make yourself at home. Be back in a minute," Viktor said, pulling at his robe.

Hermione stood for a moment, looking around the kitchen. Curiosity got the best of her after a second, though, and she boosted the baby up higher and wandered to the doorway, to peer through into what appeared to be the living room. Not surprisingly, it was a fairly large room. The house had looked fairly large all over, as well, two stories, at least. It was certainly on a sprawling piece of property, since the only other houses visible once she had reached the gate had been far distant, barely winking lights in the clear night. The long walk up the slight rise to the house had made her glad she had chosen sensible shoes. She could, of course, have taken up the offer to Floo directly, but it hadn't felt quite right, doing so. It would have felt too much like intruding.

She took a small step through the doorway, letting her eyes trail over the furniture and the end tables, the photographs sitting here and there in frames. A couple of the baby, obviously, and if she wasn't mistaken, the group photo on one of the tables contained several former players. It looked as though it had been taken at a dinner party or gathering of some sort. Zograf, she was quite sure of, and, if she weren't seeing things, the woman next to him was definitely Lara Ivanova...

"Here, stop that!" Viktor snapped, and Hermione jumped guiltily. "Don't let her pull your hair," he added, gently disentangling the little fist from the back of Hermione's hair.

"I didn't even notice," Hermione protested.

"You wouldn't be saying that if she gave it a good hard yank. Trust me, she's stouter than she looks. Ready to eat?" Viktor asked.

"Sure. Smells like the coffee is ready, too," Hermione observed, wandering back into the kitchen.

"Here. You can put her down before your arms give way," Viktor offered, nudging the high chair closer to the edge of the table. "And if you don't mind, could you look in the side pocket of her bag and see if there's any baby food in there?" he asked, ladling a little bit of moussaka into a wide bowl, then preparing a small slice of bread and the small potato on an equally petite plate. Hermione made sure the tray was fastened on firmly before going to check the bag.

"Two jars," she said, holding up one in each hand. "But surely she's not going to eat all that? I mean, it's been a while since I fed an eight-month-old on a regular basis but-"

"Nope," Viktor said, taking the jars from her and nudging open one of the upper cabinets. Without really looking, he shoved them in among a host of other miniature jars of pureed vegetables and fruits. Hermione gaped.

"What was that?" she asked, jerking her head toward the now closed cabinet door.

"My way of avoiding an argument. And technically, she's a nine-month-old by now," Viktor said, handing over the ladle. "Help yourself. Look, you know how kids think they know everything? For some reason, my eldest has it in his head that his medical textbooks, written mostly by people who have never so much as been spit up on once in their life, know more about when a baby is ready to eat from the table than I do, despite the fact that I managed to help raise three real, live babies who all ate anything and everything from the table well before the textbooks recommend. So he insists on sending that stuff over here and I pretend I actually feed it to her. I mean," Viktor said, pulling out one of the jars, "honestly, would you actually *eat* stewed prunes? They look disgusting. And strained peas? What's *in* mushy peas that needs to be strained? Given the choice, what would you eat? She usually eats like a yeoman when she's over here because she actually likes what I feed her. She spits half of this out and Vlad wonders why. I tried this argument once and lost. I figured it wasn't worth fighting over. I'll just do it behind their backs. What's the point of having teeth if all they ever feed you is mush?"

"So, you just shove it in the cabinet and feed her whatever you're eating?" Hermione asked, serving herself.

"Guilty as charged. It's a way of winning the battle without having to fight the battle. I'll... donate it, or something, some day," Viktor said with a shrug, tearing the bread into miniscule bites. "You know how it is. First baby, you realize they don't come with instructions, so you look for some. With us, it was throwing ourselves on the mercy of our parents. With them, it's medical texts."

"And what are you going to do if he ever opens up that cabinet?" Hermione asked, filling her salad bowl.

"Tell him I just stocked up. He doesn't have to know I'm stocking up from the baby's bag. Remember what I said about grandparents. We get to do these things," Viktor said, packing the things he had prepared over to the table. "Did you want milk and sugar?"

"Please," Hermione said, taking the full coffee cup from him, once he had poured it.

"Sugar's in the bowl on the table, and you can leave the milk there, too," Viktor said, handing over the bottle. "It's sheep's milk. I hope that's okay."

"It's fine," Hermione said, taking it to the table. She fiddled with her coffee while



Viktor finished preparing his own bowls and plate. "So... what else are you doing behind their backs?" she asked as he settled his own things in and fed Evangelina a bit of bread.

"Oh, all kinds of reckless things. Not only do I feed her real food, I sometimes take her outside without wrapping her up so much that she's sweaty by the time you get out the door. I mean, there has to be a decent middle ground between letting her freeze and wrapping her up in fifteen layers. Although, truth be told, Vlad and I are probably pretty close together on that one. If anything, Vlad kind of errs on the side of keeping her too cool rather than too hot. It's Nikolina who thinks the child's been used to tropical weather in some prior life. And if you let this get out, I will deny it to my dying breath, but I've had her on the broom with me a bit, and there's a toy one up in the attic for the not so distant future," Viktor admitted.

"Why, you completely wicked influence, you," Hermione said with a smile.

"On the flying, I think Vlad just follows the don't ask, don't tell policy. He doesn't ask, and even if he did, I wouldn't tell," Viktor pointed out. "Anna does the same thing," he added, after giving the baby a spoonful of potato.

"Doesn't ask?" Hermione supplied.

"Doesn't tell. I'm afraid to ask her. I imagine she goes a lot faster than I do. And Stan, a lot of his don't tell involves paint, I think. I've found a suspicious amount of green or purple behind her ears once or twice after she gets back from there. And funny, Stan always seems to give her a bath before she returns home," Viktor said, looking amused.

"That sounds more risky for the adult involved. Or like it entails more cleanup, at least," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"Eating a few crayons and tasting a little finger paint never killed any child. If it had, none of my three would still be breathing," Viktor said with a shrug.

"But none of them took to art but Stan?" Hermione asked.

"All three of them could run rings around me. Not that it's saying much. I can't draw a straight line with a ruler. We didn't push any of it. If they enjoyed doing it, they did. If they didn't, we didn't force the issue. They can actually tell you what makes a good painting. I could tell you one if I saw one. Just," Viktor explained. "Magda never quite gave me up for totally hopeless on that score. Do you still haunt museums?"

"Every chance I get," Hermione replied. "Occasionally, Simon even comes along.

He doesn't protest too much as long as I'm not asking him to miss a good match."

"Is he as crazy about it as Harry and Ron used to be? Or for that matter, Charlie?" Viktor asked.

"Worse, if that's even possible. Charlie and Harry are terrible enablers. Encouraged him to build up this collection of player autographs that I couldn't even begin to shake a wand at. Yours is one of them. He's probably had that one the longest," Hermione said.

"Why on earth would he want to keep that old thing?" Viktor said.

"It's the one Ron got. At Hogwarts," Hermione explained. "Simon started adding to Ron's old collection when he was about twelve."

"Ah. Want to hand me a crowbar so I can get my foot out of my mouth?" Viktor said lightly.

"Well, it's not as though I expect you to remember every autograph you ever handed out," Hermione soothed.

"But, that one I ought to. It's not as though I handed out a ton. Besides, he didn't giggle or ask for it in lipstick," Viktor pointed out. "It was a nice change."

"I wouldn't have put it past him. He was shameless about getting autographs," Hermione murmured, draining her cup. "Almost as shameless as Simon is. I swear, I think he would break line in front of a four-year-old if he thought he had to. Is there more coffee?" The two of them had finished, and even Evangelina was nearly through.

"Plenty. There's dessert, in fact. Baked apples, assuming I get them in to warm sometime this evening," Viktor said, blotting a little broth from Evangelina's chin.

"Stay put, I'll get it. I'll get the dessert, too, if you'll just tell me where it is," Hermione said, jumping up.

"In the icebox. You should see it when you open the door. Just set the dish in the oven," Viktor instructed. "It's hot."

"I don't know what your grandfather was talking about. Your table manners are impeccable," Hermione said, brushing a wisp of dark hair back from the baby's forehead as she returned to the table.

"Says the woman who hasn't ever let her guard down for a minute and gotten a

lap full of potato,” Viktor said. “Must be hungry. When she’s bored with it, more of it ends up in various spots in the kitchen. Sorry, I should have thought of the dessert before now.”

“I’m in no hurry. Last ferry leaves at midnight. I have nowhere to be tomorrow,” Hermione protested, propping her chin against her hand.

“I’m sure there are more exciting things you could be doing,” Viktor said, spooning up the last bit of broth from the bowl and tipping it into the little girl’s mouth.

“Exciting is overrated. Besides, how often do I get a meal that I didn’t have to cook that doesn’t come as part and parcel with a whole mess of Weasleys? Not that that is an entirely bad thing, but Molly just doesn’t do small dinners,” Hermione said. “Sometimes it would be nice to have a meal that doesn’t involve at least a dozen people and two rooms.”

“I apologize in advance. This is probably the most annoying toy ever created,” Viktor said, getting up and scrounging through the baby’s bag again, coming out with the obviously much-loved stuffed cow, “but you have to act like it’s the most amazing thing you’ve ever seen, or she practically takes it as a personal affront.” He handed it over and wandered back to the stove.

“What’s it do that’s so annoy-” Hermione started to ask, but she was cut off by the bleating moo. “Oh! That!” she said with an exaggerated expression of surprise, laughing. “Oh, that’s nothing! Simon had this whizzy top that sounded exactly like a dying Jabberknoll. A sick, dying Jabberknoll. With indigestion.”

“That’s just as annoying when you’ve heard it a few thousand times. In one night,” Viktor argued, shaking his head and smiling indulgently. “Trust me. I know. Although it’s an improvement over the sheep.”

“There are more of these, somewhere, I take it?” Hermione asked.

“A whole barnyard’s worth. The noisier they are, the better she likes them. It’s quite the racket when she gets them all going at once. Dessert’s warm. Did you want some ice cream with it?” Viktor offered.

“I’ll skip the ice cream, I think. Smells marvelous just as it is,” Hermione insisted. They ate dessert mostly in comfortable silence, punctuated occasionally by Evangelina’s babbling and playing. “Don’t forget to hang your cloak back up,” Hermione reminded him, while they gathered up the dishes and set them to washing. “I probably should have reminded you when I brought it in.”

“Actually... do you want one of those cloaks?” Viktor asked.

"One like it? Is the shop nearby, then?" Hermione said.

"No. Came from Russia, best I remember. I... thought I had already gotten rid of everything, but the other day when I went to put the bag up in the attic, I found Magda's. She hadn't had it all that long. It's still good as new. It might as well be put to some use, if you want it. Since it's a cloak, it should fit. The measurements don't have to be exact. In fact, I think they only make three standard sizes and just measure the length for the hem," Viktor explained.

Hermione hesitated a long while. "Anna wouldn't rather have it? I mean, I think she would appreciate her mother's cloak more than..."

A smile flitted over Viktor's face and Hermione was surprised when he folded his arms and actually chuckled out loud. "Sorry... I forgot. You haven't really seen Anna, have you? Not even a recent picture?"

"Well, no..." Hermione said uncertainly, clearly puzzled. She couldn't think why that should matter.

"It's just... well, Anna comes up to about *here* on me," Viktor said, making a gesture much like a salute across his forehead. "She stopped borrowing her mother's clothes well before she went off to school, because there was no hope of them being long enough. Anna has all of Magda's things she wanted. It was just sitting in the attic, going to waste. Nikolina has a couple, or I would give it to her. If you don't want it, it's just going to get donated."

"If you're sure," Hermione cautioned.

"I'm sure. Come on, I'll show you some of the house while we're at it," Viktor said. "Come on, sugar, no leaving you in a fully stocked kitchen by yourself. Too many little temptations and things that will break," he added, lifting Evangelina from the high chair. "I laid it out on the bed so I wouldn't forget. You've seen the back entrance, and the kitchen. And the living room," Viktor said, pausing just a short while in that room before heading on down the hall.

But Hermione didn't follow. Instead, she stopped completely, frozen in her tracks. The cursory glance toward the half of the room she hadn't gotten to in her initial sweep of the room had revealed the fireplace. Or more importantly, the group of paintings over the fireplace. She stood and looked at the grouping, speechless for several moments. "Viktor," she said, not able to take her eyes off of the paintings.

Viktor stepped back out from the bedroom door. "Sorry, did I lose you at the turn?" he asked, coming back out and standing beside her. He followed her gaze

up over the fireplace.

“They’re a wonder,” Hermione said, finding her voice again. “Anna, obviously,” she said, pointing to the teenaged girl in the grass. “Stan?” she asked after another pause, studying the portrait of the boy in the window seat. Viktor simply nodded. “And Vladimir, right?” Viktor nodded again. “Wedding portrait? Magda did that as well?” Hermione queried, catching the signature in the corner. She kept studying the softly lit portrait of the two of them, fitted so naturally together, smiles subtle and unforced, in the wedding regalia she remembered so well even now, complete down to the tiny wreath of woven greenery and small white blooms, stark against Magda’s glossy black hair. While it was the most posed of any of the portraits, it still lacked the air of a formally posed portrait. It was more a perfectly captured random moment beneath a heavy bower of flowers.

“From a photograph someone took. We had a formal one done by another artist at the time, but I always liked hers better,” Viktor said. “The other one got relegated to the bedroom. I never could talk her into doing a painting with just her in it,” he added, sounding regretful. “She said she thought it looked pretty conceited to do a painting of no one but yourself. Begged her to for years. Then, I never had much luck talking her into *anything*. She had her notions and she stuck to them.”

Hermione scanned rapidly over the rest of the portraits. “But isn’t *that* Magda?” Hermione asked, pointing to one of the smaller canvases, featuring a female figure in dark blue robes, seated on what looked to be the same swing Vladimir occupied in the larger portrait.

“Yes, but she’s not exactly *alone* in the painting, either,” Viktor said with a laugh. Hermione stepped forward and peered at it more closely. Magda displayed the same wide, easy smile, as well as the same choice of seating. Her hair was shorter than in the wedding portrait, loose around her shoulders, and her face fuller, cheeks flushed. Hermione let her gaze trail downward. Sure enough, Magda’s right hand rested on a large and, once one looked closely enough, obviously very pregnant belly jutting forward beneath the robes. “It was when she was pregnant with Vlad. She gave it to me for my birthday that year and said I had better enjoy it, because that was the closest I was ever going to get to catching her doing a true self-portrait. Magda was always big on symmetry,” he added, glancing over at the painting of Vlad. “Sometimes, I swear she *knew* somehow he was going to spend half of every spring, summer and fall out there in that same swing.”

“When is that one from?” Hermione asked, gesturing to another one of the smaller portraits. If she wasn’t very much mistaken, it was set in the Bulgarian National Stadium. The almost ominously dark mountains looming in the background and the light fog swirling around the face of the rocks towering

above the seating was certainly one of the more distinctive features of the facility. In it, Viktor stood on the pitch in full uniform, looking off somewhere into the distance, hair fluttering slightly in the wind, the sunset filtering through the fog and the rings in the background. Like the others, this one wasn't deliberately posed, his stance was loose and casual, and he wasn't even facing the viewer. Instead, it was mostly a rendering of his very distinctive profile.

"The first year we won the World Cup. I tried to talk her out of putting it up there. At least my track record on talking Magda into or out of things is perfect. I lost them all," Viktor said dismissively. "She had this whole system about what went up there and where. Damned if I know what it was."

"Well, they're all... absolutely exquisite," Hermione said earnestly, stepping away.

"Some of the subjects could have stood some improvement," Viktor said bluntly, pushing his spectacles further up the bridge of his nose before heading for the hall again. "Well... nothing too exciting back here. Studio up here at the far end," he said, leading her to the far end of the hall, then pushing the door open. "I keep meaning to ask Stan if he wants some of this. Might keep a little of it. She might take to painting," he added, hefting the baby up further into the crook of his arm. There was a jumble of easels and palettes, tubes of paint and brushes, cups full of pencils and charcoal sticks scattered here and there on work tables throughout the room. Some rough pencil sketches and charcoal drawings were draped over tables or tacked to the otherwise bare walls. "Guest room, guest room, bath," he said, counting off the doors. "Well, that guest room used to be the nursery an eon ago. Ou... master bedroom," he corrected himself.

"It's lovely," Hermione said, looking around at the furnishings. Neatly folded on the deep green comforter was the cloak. What really caught her attention, though, were the photos and paintings scattered around the room. "I'm not being horrendously nosy if I browse the photos, am I?" she asked.

"No. Feel free," Viktor offered, sinking down onto the edge of the bed facing the door and settling the baby on his lap, back to her. One shelf was fairly overflowing with pictures of the children and Magda, some separate, some group shots. A few featured Magda proudly displaying either a swollen belly or an infant cradled in her arms, some with a sibling or two posing alongside. A few were similar shots, featuring Viktor with the children instead. In some of the photos, the two of them looked incredibly young, still easily mistaken for teenagers or new graduates. She could barely remember him looking that young when he truly was in school. The strain of the war had made them all look, and certainly feel, older. The only real clues that they were older than that were the little ones cradled on laps, being swung around, or tumbling or running about, in and out of the frames. One seemed to be a fairly recent picture of Magda in the studio, hair in a haphazard bundle at the nape of her neck, a pencil jabbed through it, paint

smearred liberally on her cheeks, hands and smock as she studied a canvas.

As the infants in the photos progressed from babies and wide eyed toddlers to children on the verge of adolescence to lanky teenagers, the adults looked more mature, as well. Hermione's eyes fell on a cluster of photos with just Viktor and Magda. The small wedding snapshot that had certainly been the model for the painting over the fireplace. Several taken in various stadiums. Cup finals, probably. A few that were plainly in the midst of victory celebrations. A handful from the backyard or living room, where they were smiling broadly, or in some cases, falling about laughing, holding and clinging to one another as though they needed the propping up. Those fascinated her, because she could never remember Viktor smiling or laughing quite that freely or easily. But one in particular stood out.

In it, the two of them appeared to be outside, the light soft behind them, a few people milling about with glasses in their hands, as though at a party. Judging from their appearances, it was a fairly recent photo. Magda seemed to be seated on Viktor's lap, and his arms were wrapped tightly around her, his chin tucked in over her shoulder. Their eyes were closed, or mostly closed, and just the barest hints of smiles played over their lips. The tip of his nose just barely nuzzled against her cheekbone, and one of her small hands held onto his wrist. The other rested on his cheek. Magda seemed to sink back into him with the same sort of ease and trust that she had seen in other longstanding couples, the type that could disappear into their own world, even in a crowd. She had long admired Molly and Arthur's ability to be alone together, regardless of how many were in the house with them at the time. She was just about to ask when it was taken when she noticed the printed napkin on the table beside them. She could make out the word "twenty-fifth", at least, rusty though she was. She was quite positive from the few trappings she could see on the table that it had been taken at their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

Hermione couldn't help but feel a real pang of envy. A milestone that big had been a still far distant thing, when Ron had been killed. Celebrating even ten years seemed rather paltry by comparison. For another thing, Hermione envied Magda her looks. In every picture, even the ones where she had definitely taken no pains with her appearance, she was unquestionably striking. Hermione had always thought herself not particularly photogenic. She cringed at some of the candid shots from the family photo album. She had felt frumpy and fat in most of the pictures Ron had coaxed her to take in late pregnancy. She had bluntly stated that the glow of pregnancy was definitely a myth in her case. Even in the photos where Magda sported an enormous belly, swollen fingers and full face, she was still undeniably beautiful.

If Magda's hair was a mess, it didn't seem to matter. It was still shiny and black, stark against her light complexion, echoed in the dark lines of her eyebrows,



sooty lashes and nearly black eyes. Pregnant middle nearly straining at the empire waist of a maternity top? Nothing compared to the radiant glow she seemed to project. Figure swallowed up by a too large painting smock? It only drew attention to how petite she was. Cheeks smeared with paint? It only served to draw attention to her fine bone structure. Prominent Roman nose that would have seemed overpowering and overlarge on anyone else? Somehow, it worked in conjunction with the high, strong cheekbones, the strong jaw and chin. It was a face that could have just as easily belonged to an exotic empress. The camera obviously loved her. And Hermione admitted silently, just as enviable, or perhaps more so, someone *else* obviously loved her. "She's so gorgeous. In all of these," Hermione breathed without thinking. "Magda was a really beautiful woman. I think I had forgotten just how striking she was."

"Being beautiful cannot make one loved, but being loved can certainly make one beautiful," Viktor murmured without turning around.

"Where's that from?" Hermione asked curiously.

"I'm not sure it comes from anywhere. It's just what I remember Magda saying the first time I made a big deal over how pretty she was," Viktor said, shrugging his shoulders. "She always said it was like congratulating someone on being tall, anyway. What are they supposed to say? Thank you? Like they had something to do with it?" He laughed and the baby giggled and squealed in response. "She accepted compliments on her looks about as poorly as you always did."

"Beg pardon?" Hermione asked, rounding the bed and sinking onto it beside him. Evangelina proudly waved her toy at Hermione. "What are you on about? It's not like I got a ton of compliments on my looks."

"You got plenty from me, and I'm sure Ron. And you took to them every bit as poorly as Magda ever did. Most girls would not start explaining in gory detail how they spent three hours getting ready or admit to the use of hair potion at the mere mention of how nice they look. For future reference, in case Ron didn't teach you any better, the proper response to 'you look absolutely lovely' is just 'thank you', not a blow by blow account of how you wrestled your hair into submission," Viktor said with a grin. "Don't get me wrong, it was a nice change from those girls that claimed they were natural beauties while wearing four inches of makeup, but most girls would just accept the compliment and move on. You're supposed to act like you roll out of bed looking that way. Or so I hear. Or if you're Magda or Anna, most likely you did roll out of bed looking that way. Neither one of them took pains very often. Anna still doesn't."

"You men never appreciate what we go through," Hermione protested.

"Wrong. We do. It's just there's not that much we can do to gild the lily in our own

cases, so to speak. Can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Besides, you didn't have to go to any trouble to be pretty for me. I thought you were, anyway," Viktor replied. "I much preferred the hair not being wrestled into submission. It was more like the rest of you that way," Viktor said quietly. Hermione had the rather mad thought that if they leaned just a tiny bit closer they would quite nearly be kissing. She frantically tried to think of something to say, anything, but her mind seemed to have locked up just as firmly as her muscles. She had just nearly made up her mind to lean forward slightly, to see what would happen, when Evangelina made a grab, then squealed loudly. Hermione looked at her, and the baby proudly held out her trophy. "Oh, thank you so much. I had gotten so tired of leaving my glasses on my face, like you're supposed to. *Give me those,*" Viktor scolded mildly, taking them back before lifting her up and giving her a playful shake.

"I'll keep that in mind if I ever get complimented, again," Hermione said. "A simple thank you and no mention of all the travails I went through in getting ready."

"This might sound odd..." Viktor said, pausing a long while, not taking his eyes off of the baby standing in his lap, "but, do you feel like you're forgetting, sometimes? I mean... I never really thought of it from that side, before. I used to feel sorry for Harry, not ever knowing James and Lily. I never thought about what Remus, Sirius, Albus and Hagrid went through. You never realize what a big charge it is, being the keeper of someone's memory. I keep worrying about what little things I'm going to forget by the time she's big enough to hear it." He turned and looked at Hermione once more. "I know Simon *knew* Ron, but..." The baby, bored with being in one spot for so long, leaned over and held her arms out to Hermione.

Hermione gathered her up under the arms and shifted Evangelina to her own lap. "I had this massive panic attack, once. A few months after he died. I had gone back to work, and for some reason, I got to thinking about what Ron's voice sounded like. And I couldn't for the life of me remember. I couldn't make myself hear it in my head. And the more I tried, the worse off I got, until I couldn't even picture his face when I closed my eyes. And I thought 'What kind of person can't remember the person she was married to for more than ten years?', until I got myself so torn up, I had to go home early and dig up this Howler Ron had sent to Simon when he was on a training trip, for not taking out the rubbish bin when he was supposed to. Took me a good two hours to find it, and then I had to just lie on the bed and cling to it and cry for a while. I spent days after that just staring at pictures, trying to burn his face, the shape of his hands, the way his hair fell, everything, into my memory, how many freckles there were on the bridge of his nose, like there was going to be a pop quiz." Evangelina bobbed forward and flung her arms around Hermione's neck. Hermione patted the soft, plump shoulder, then buried her face in the hollow between the baby's shoulder and

neck, breathing deep, the light scent of baby powder filling her nostrils. "But you never really forget. You think you will. You worry you will. But you don't. They won't let you. It all came back, when I didn't force it. When I just let myself remember, or let Simon remind me."

"That makes me feel better," Viktor said simply. "You'll take the cloak, then?"

"I'd love to. It's beautiful. I really appreciate the offer," Hermione replied.

"Care to see the rest of the house, or is the python cutting off all your air?" Viktor asked, one corner of his mouth curling up.

"I'd love to see the rest of the house. And I haven't had a good baby hug in a long while. She can python me any time she wants," Hermione insisted, patting the baby's back and rocking back and forth.

"I warn you, she's due to get cranky pretty soon. She fusses something fierce when she gets sleepy. Doesn't want to give it up for fear of missing something. Though she might be extra wound up, since she has someone different to show off in front of. Sometimes you can't get her down before eleven," Viktor cautioned.

"I can stand a little fussing. Lead on. And remind me to take the cloak when I leave," Hermione said, standing up with the baby still clinging to her.

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"You can either Floo direct to the station, or I will be putting on my cloak and walking you back, hauling a sleepy baby. I'm not having you traipsing off all by yourself down to the dock when it's pitch black out," Viktor said stubbornly.

"Fine. I'll Floo, then, if you insist," Hermione said, flustered, gathering up the shopping bag she had carried in. Only now it contained the other cloak.

"I *do* insist. No point being crazy just because you can. Take the Floo, And take care," he added, ducking to give her a slightly awkward embrace with one arm. Hermione caught the vaguely familiar scent of him, as their cheeks brushed.

"I will. You, too. I'll see you in a couple of weeks, then? If nothing comes up?" Hermione queried.

"If nothing comes up," Viktor echoed. "It shouldn't. But, then, I thought I wasn't doing anything tonight, either," he said, going back to swaying a bit with the baby slumped against his shoulder, her thumb socked firmly in her mouth.

“Well, if something does come up, don’t worry about it. Goodnight,” she said, taking up a handful of powder from the bowl next to the fireplace.

“Goodnight,” Viktor said. He stood watching the fireplace for a few moments after she had disappeared. “I think it’s well past time for you to say goodnight, too,” he murmured, kissing the top of Evangelina’s head. She squirmed and snuffled against his shoulder, already half asleep, her eyelids heavy. “Shh, pilentse. Come on, let me set up your bed, hmmm?” he said, resting his cheek against her hair and carrying her down the dim hall.

End of Part 1

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“I’ve read it through once. The expanded report. Give me the big picture, Ilian,” Viktor said, flipping through the stack of parchments he had just skimmed, then setting them down on the desk.

“Could you be more specific?” Ilian prompted.

“If you were forced to give me your personal conclusions about the Tournament in a couple of minutes or less, what would you say?” Viktor elaborated, removing his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“I believe it would have an enormous beneficial effect on school relations and, by extension, international relations, especially a few decades down the road. Easily budgeted for, and well worth the time and trouble it would take to host the thing and organize it. But it needs a major reworking in structure, security, scoring and rules. How all the Tournaments didn’t end up in either a bloodbath or a riot, I’ll never figure,” Evtimov said carefully. “The scoring and rules are a joke. If I were you, I would have most of my ideas about how the thing could be improved upon well rehearsed before even suggesting it to the board.”

“Any ideas on that point? Fixing it, I mean,” Viktor said. “I’m open to suggestions.”

“Not a clue. It would be like telling the league they have to play on bicycles, instead, wouldn’t it?” Evtimov said with a helpless shrug. “Was the cheating *really* that bad?”

“Rampant. Encouraged, even, from what I understand. Not that some of the cheaters *needed* any encouragement,” Viktor said, pursing his mouth. “That has to go.”

“I might start with what needs to stay,” Evtimov suggested tentatively. “It’s a shorter list, I suspect.”

“That one’s obvious. No changing the participating schools, or the method of choosing the participants. That’s the only thing that’s even remotely fair,” Viktor said heavily. “And without that basic structure, it’s not the same tournament. Besides, it’s hard enough coordinating three schools.”

“Scoring?” Evtimov inquired, raising an eyebrow.

“That... needs to be rebuilt from the ground up. For a start, there need to be more judges than just the heads of the schools. Trustworthy and impartial though they may be,” Viktor said, rolling his eyes. “Some way of mitigating the favoritism factor. Problem is, this one can’t be solved with neat little inarguable statistics like Quidditch seeds, where you can say numbers don’t lie. Scoring of the completion of a task is almost always completely subjective. That’s half the bloody point of the structure of the tournament. It’s mostly in how you tackle the problem, not how you solve it. Or even *if* you solve it. Problem is, students sometimes take what you think is a perfectly clear cut problem and interpret it in a whole new way you never figured on. We need to allow for that.”

“Encourage it, even?” Evtimov said.

“Heaven help, yes. The little buggers need to be as creative as possible, or they’ll all get identical scores. Maybe I can think on it during all the ferry rides,” Viktor said wearily. “Or at the inn. I won’t be doing anything else.”

“Going somewhere?” Ilian blurted out.

“Anna has that rescheduled match in Spain,” Viktor said noncommittally. “And I have some other business to see to afterward.”

“Not having dinner with Anna?” Ilian asked innocently.

“I imagine she gets enough of eating with me when she’s home. The last thing she probably wants is me poking into the locker room after every other game like I’m checking up on her. Besides, prior commitment,” Viktor said. “Match should be over by then.”

“You said ‘the inn’. I take it you’re not coming straight home,” Evtimov said. The maddeningly vague answers had made him a little bolder than he might be, otherwise. The repeated request to keep a Friday afternoon as free of appointments as possible had raised Ilian’s suspicions.

“Setting me a new curfew, Evtimov?” Viktor said in a mildly reproving voice, arching an eyebrow. It was a rarely seen and oh so subtle reminder that he was treading a little too close to overstepping a minor personal boundary. The times

when Viktor would go fiercely private with Ilian were few and far between these days, but when he did, Ilian knew not to press any further.

“No. None of my business, of course. I just wondered. That’s all,” Ilian said. “Rosters will all be filed in plenty of time, all the paperwork’s done, there’s no one camped out to see you. Go home early, have lunch, and go to the match. And enjoy your other plans, too,” Ilian offered.

“Thank you. At least I don’t have to worry about blasted reporters at this one,” Viktor said, smiling slightly.

“Nice to see Iva finally got a clue about keeping her mouth shut. And Anna playing matches like those last three don’t hurt in the giving them something else to talk about department,” Ilian added.

“More likely it was Iva’s agent that got the clue. And they would gladly turn like a pack of wild dogs if Anna has an off match. Don’t count the press her friend just yet. We should know better,” Viktor said ruefully. “And I have to start thinking about who goes on the selection committee for the national squad. That might be another kettle of newts I’m opening up there, assuming I go with my usual anchor. But I wouldn’t trust anyone else to chair it. They wouldn’t pick a squad in a month of Sundays if she didn’t crack the whip at them.”

“Lara? Why would anyone protest you putting Ivanova on the committee? It’s not like she hasn’t been on it and been chair the entire last *decade*,” Evtimov said. “And more.”

“Look at it from their point of view. You’re obviously putting Lara on the committee because the two of you played together... you’re friends from way back...”

“You’re appointing her so she’ll pick your daughter,” Evtimov supplied. “I see the problem. But I still don’t think anyone would protest too much. Lara wouldn’t give her the spot if she didn’t deserve it any more than *you* would. Anna wouldn’t accept it, either. You’re *all* that stubborn. And there are going to be far more committee members on tap that you didn’t play with *or* against. I don’t think anyone could legitimately argue she doesn’t deserve the spot if she gets chosen.”

“You would be surprised *what* the press can argue,” Viktor protested. “But, I’ve taken heat before for my choices. Why should this be any different? I’ll burn that bridge after I’ve crossed it if I have to. No point stewing over it just yet. They certainly can’t argue that there’s anyone more qualified to do the picking. I’m taking you up on the ‘go home early’ offer.”

"You ignored my 'don't come in early' offer," Evtimov pointed out. "I could have done most of the budget review."

"And you would have had to stay late to do it. You had enough to do. Go home at a decent hour," Viktor ordered, standing. "If you need me, it can wait until Monday. I'm not *that* important."

"Safe trip," Evtimov said, following Viktor to the door.

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"I owe you a bottle of wine, then," the Spanish Commissioner conceded, sounding disappointed. The match had stayed close until the ending catch. "Care to collect during dinner?"

"Some other time. Anna's going to go celebrate with her teammates, and I need to be elsewhere, shortly," Viktor said, checking his watch. "I appreciate the offer, though," he added hastily.

"Another time, then," Garcia said.

"Let me know next time you're in for a match. We'll have dinner," Viktor offered. "And you can pay up. Unless you want to go double or nothing on the next match?"

The Spanish Commissioner perked up considerably. "I'll take you up on that."

"Sorry to rush off, but by the time I say something to Anna..." Viktor said with a helpless shrug.

"Go on," Garcia insisted. "I'll let you know when I plan to be in Bulgaria. And I might as well get the second bottle ready while I'm at it."

"I don't know about that," Viktor called over his shoulder. He waded through the crowd of people as quickly as possible, slipping through to the less crowded sideline opposite the locker rooms, eventually. Luckily, the security had all been there long enough to recognize him and let him by without so much as asking what his business was and hardly a second glance. Soon enough, Anna spotted him and meandered across the pitch to the low barrier there.

"Where are you all going to celebrate?" Viktor asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know? If I tell you, you'll just worry. Garner another bottle of wine? How many does that make?" Anna said with a grin, leaning over and propping her elbows against the railing.



"If he doesn't stop trying to come out ahead, I'm going to have to start my own private label and open a vintner's shop," Viktor said with a sigh. "I've lost count. Don't let him know that."

"I'll try to avoid bringing it up. I think the chances are very slim I'll spill that you quit counting somewhere around ten bottles, though," Anna replied. "Especially as I don't think I'll be around him this evening."

"I need to go. Ferry leaves soon enough. You played a good match," Viktor murmured. That had been something of a running joke between the two of them ever since a rather sleepy Anna had offered the same assessment following one of the hardest fought and longest European Cup finals in history. The unusually close, smothering, muggy weather and the frequent, pelting rain had been as much to blame as a tenacious French team that simply refused to go away. It had seemed a marvelously absurd thing to have her announce to him in her high pitched and still babyish voice, out of the blue, when Magda had finally made it down to the locker room with the children, quite a while after the match had ended. By then, it had been more the wee hours of the morning, rather than the night. It had seemed equal bits highest possible praise and ridiculous understatement given the fact that he was still sitting in the middle of the locker room floor, legs feeling like rubber and lead, soaked through with stale sweat and rain, literally too worn out to make it any further, like most of the rest of the team. His legs had been cramping something fierce, the muscles knotted and seizing up.

Anna had promptly flopped into his lap, anyway, and snuggled up to him right after Magda had put her down, uncaring that he was about as appealing as a wet dog in desperate need of a bath. She had popped her head up off his chest just long enough to pronounce her judgment, then, without much further ado, fallen into that comatose, floppy-limbed, ragdoll sleep that only those under the age of seven or so can manage at the drop of a hat. They had ultimately had to reschedule the cup presentation for two days after, due to none of them being in any sort of state to make it to the Top Box and it being too dark for anyone to see the presentation in the first place. It had likely been the only trophy presentation at which there were more fans present than there had been at the match in question. The crowd, like the team, would have been too tired to enjoy it, anyway.

"Good? I'm practically faint from the praise," Anna teased, straightening and giving him a quick hug across the railing.

"I don't want to give you a swelled head," Viktor said.

"No danger," Anna said. "Not with you. Now, shoo, go on. You'll miss the ferry to

wherever it is you're rushing off to," Anna scolded, not letting go.

"I will if you let go," Viktor replied, tugging lightly at her arms, giving her a quick peck on the cheek.

"Where are you going, anyway?" Anna said as he hurried back toward the exit.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he called back without looking.

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Viktor scribbled down a quick note in the margin. *Different judging panels, each task, throw out high and low, averages. Prevent weighting or favoritism? Less biased? Any hope of getting as many as ten per without slanting judging? Unaffiliated with any of the schools? Affiliated with more than one school each, at least.. Suggested names...* The train of thought slipped away slightly as Viktor felt the lurching little bump that signaled the ferry was at the dock. He hurriedly tucked quill and parchment back into his bag, hoisting it up onto his shoulder and making his way out onto the deck and down the gangplank before most of the passengers had even finished gathering their things.

He could Floo from here to near enough Ottery St. Catchpole. Apparating most of that last distance would be no trouble at all, even if it had been a very long time indeed since the last time the Lovegood house or The Burrow had been his intended destination. Hermione had assured him he would still easily recognize the old part, the part favored by those who would prefer to keep certain things away from curious Muggle eyes, even with all the new houses that had been added in the last few decades. Almost all directions were still given with either the Burrow, the ridge, or the hill nearby as the main point of reference.

Sure enough, though he could pick out several houses that had sprung up like mushrooms among and within sight of the older ones, most of the area looked comfortably familiar. He was able to spot the ridge above The Burrow and head fairly confidently in what must be the direction of the house that had just been built when Hermione and Ron had moved into it. He could still remember how she had described it in the letter that had come a few months later, once they had finally stopped moving the furniture every weekend, in an effort to find out where it was supposed to fit. "Smallish, but ours, and paid for to boot, thanks to a bit of help from Arthur and Molly." The oft-moved furniture hadn't been paid up for a few more months, yet.

He rounded the bend not far past the old Lovegood house, and spotted it. Like most of the houses in the area, it seemed to have grown out of the landscape overnight like some monstrously fast growing melon, more than been built on it, as it was nestled back into a hollow at the bottom of a hill. It was a cheerful and

rather unassuming robin's egg blue, with black shutters and a white picket fence around a middle sized front garden, trimmed short and hemmed in rock-rimmed flower beds, projecting a strong sense of neatness and order. Anywhere besides Ottery St. Catchpole, it might have seemed hopelessly twee, but here, it was simply open, cozy and welcoming, as tidy and humble houses were supposed to be. Houses in Ottery St. Catchpole had the curious habit of getting away with being every bit as folksy, eccentric and homey as the inhabitants.

Just to be sure, he double checked the house number, which was painted, every bit as neatly, in white on a slate tile, next to the door. It also helpfully bore the name "Weasley" directly below it, in script embellished with curlicues. Viktor stopped outside the gate and gave it another look. Somehow, the house managed to look exactly the sort of house one would picture Hermione living in. It was definitely a far cry from the ramshackle air The Burrow presented. That house had always looked held together by magic and a prayer, even on its good days. It hadn't kept all of them from having fondest memories of the place and the people in it, in any case.

Viktor reached over the gate and unlatched it, swinging it in and stepping through. The hinges gave a protesting squawk when he pushed it back together. He walked up the narrow footpath and knocked lightly on the door. "You did make it," Hermione said, swinging the door open. "Come on in," she offered, holding the door and stepping out of the way. "Let me take your things. Have a seat on the sofa. Didn't you wear a cloak?"

"I... thank you," he amended, after she had taken the bag. "It's still too hot with one when you're out walking. It's in the bag."

"You didn't have any trouble finding the house?" Hermione asked, putting the bag on the rack near the front door.

"It was just about where I expected it to be," Viktor said, sinking onto the sofa a bit uncertainly. "Can I help with anything?" he asked when she bustled back toward what he presumed, from the quick glimpse he had gotten, was the kitchen.

"No. The tuna steaks are just about ready, and everything else is done. Did you want a glass of wine? I've got some chilled. No unattended moppets are likely to get dropped on my doorstep unexpectedly. They all find their way to The Burrow, instead," Hermione said, pausing in the doorway. "Molly exerts some sort of magnetic force on every moppet in need of babysitting within a dozen miles."

"Sure. I'll take one," Viktor said. Hermione disappeared around the door jamb completely, and he could hear the clink of glasses and various other rustlings.

“Did you want something to nibble on with it? I’ve got some cheese and crackers. You must be starving. It’s later back home,” Hermione said. “You’re probably used to eating before now.”

“It’s not so far off my usual dinnertime,” Viktor protested, checking the clock. “Am I not allowed in the kitchen? I feel a bit daft, shouting back and forth from in here.”

“If you don’t mind the mess and the crowding,” Hermione called back. “I’m afraid the kitchen isn’t exactly roomy. You didn’t answer,” she added, holding out the full glass to him as he entered and pouring another.

“Is there such a thing as a kitchen big enough? Oh... cheese and crackers... Only if you have it ready. Otherwise, don’t bother. I’ll drink slowly. Or were you counting on getting me drinking on an empty stomach and taking advantage of me?” Viktor teased. The kitchen was not exactly roomy, but managed to look more efficient than cramped.

“They’re on that platter on the table. And on getting you drunk, that’s a laugh. Anyone who could put away half a bottle of vodka and a whole one of that Bulgarian white lightning in a single sitting and not even wobble when he walks...” Hermione said, shaking her head.

“It’s rakia, and I can’t drink like that any more. I’m out of practice. Besides, I’ve had enough of you Weasleys getting me drunk and taking advantage of me to last a lifetime. Only Bill, Charlie, Fred and George used to do it under the guise of ‘teaching me to play poker’. Funny, I would swear the rules changed radically every time we played. Why do you think I switched to betting them on things like who could drink who under the table? Back then, I knew I had that one in the bag, because they were a bunch of lightweights. You could probably have gotten Fred and George drunk on three bottles of Butterbeer,” Viktor said, taking a bite of cheese.

“You got here a bit earlier than I expected, really,” Hermione said, leaning over to check the oven.

“Match ended fairly early and I was able to grab an earlier ferry. I just told Anna goodbye and left,” Viktor admitted. “She was going out with the team.”

“Where?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Well, she said ‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’, so I’m sure that means they’re going to El Pobrecito,” Viktor said.

“El Pobrecito?” Hermione echoed, raising a questioning eyebrow.

"Think The Hog's Head, with slightly cleaner glassware, fantastic tapas that are the only reason anyone without a death wish would chance going there, and one big, cranky bartender built like a bull. We have a tacit agreement. She pretends she's not going somewhere that I would worry about, and I pretend I don't really know teams still go to El Pobrecito to celebrate," Viktor explained.

"Odd sort of agreement," Hermione observed.

"Oh... I suppose it's safe enough if you go with a group, but I wouldn't walk in there by myself for a bet. You're liable to get mugged. However, I try to bite my tongue whenever I feel dangerously close to saying 'Don't go there, you're liable to get mugged' to her. I'm guessing you could do worse than going with a couple of burly men who wield clubs for a living. Even a pretty shady character has to be desperate or pretty damned drunk to chance running afoul of a couple of professional Beaters. Back in my day, we always went still wearing our uniforms, just in case some of the locals didn't follow the sports pages," Viktor pointed out.

"What good would having a couple of Beaters along do if they didn't have their clubs?" Hermione asked.

"Who said they left the clubs behind?" Viktor said with a shrug. "You take them with you and put them on the table in plain view, if you're smart. I know this all sounds horrible, but Anna's capable of taking care of herself. Besides, they're going to let something happen to her on their watch and chance the Commissioner deciding he wants their testicles strung up because they just stood by and let someone accost his only daughter? Hardly likely."

"That's an awful lot of faith you're putting in her teammates," Hermione said, taking a sip from her own glass.

"Safe as trusting her being out with her brothers. I imagine there's about the same level of willingness to pound anyone who looks at her cross-eyed. If you're lucky, teammates are about as close to family as you can get. It's something of a matter of honor that if anyone picks a fight with one of you, they've picked a fight with all of you, even if none of you get along in the slightest. Vulchanov and Volkov threatened to knock out their fair share of teeth on Lara's behalf when someone got a smart mouth. Not that she ever really needed it. Still, tough to turn down a primer on manners from someone who has a bicep the size of your thigh," Viktor said lightly. "Lara got some very squeaky apologies."

"I see. Are you going to have to rush off to make the last ferry home? Don't let me get started nattering on and on and make you miss it because you're busy listening to me and not paying attention to the time," Hermione said, using her wand to remove the hot pan from the oven.

"I just need to make it to The Leaky Cauldron, actually. I'm staying there tonight," Viktor said.

"You can Floo, then. Why the Leaky Cauldron?" Hermione asked, pausing in removing the dishes from the cabinet.

"For starters, they've got nice rooms. So I can go from there to Hogsmeade, then on to Hogwarts. Minerva and I are going to have a little get-together. I'm hoping she's got some brilliant ideas up her sleeve on how to help me sell the idea of this revamped Tournament to... anyone in their right mind," Viktor admitted. "Only fair. It was her suggestion in the first place."

"If you're so unsure about it, why get on board with it? Tell her to get Fleur or Harry to promote the idea if she's so keen," Hermione said dismissively. "Excuse me. I need to get past," she added, pointing to the other side of the kitchen. Viktor stepped aside, hugging the edge of the table. Hermione still had to brush slightly to make it by.

"Do you really think Minerva could be accused of being any less cagey than Albus was? She's just like him. Never did so much as pick what she was having for breakfast without checking which way the wind was blowing first and considering the effect it would have. Minerva picked me on purpose. And not all because of being on the Board, either. People are still afraid to so much as mention it in front of me. What's it say if I suddenly come along suggesting we should revive it? If Durmstrang is the one that offers to host? Trust me, Minerva looked at all the angles, first. She knew I couldn't refuse. Not in good conscience, at least," Viktor said. "Any more than I could say no when Albus called me up there for that little chat in his office before we left Hogwarts. How on earth could I say no to the first adult outside of my parents and a coach who took a genuine interest in where my life was going and how it was going to fit into the fabric of everything else?"

"So, Minerva's just as scheming, hmm?" Hermione asked, slipping by again.

"Positively devious," Viktor affirmed. "Those students don't stand a chance."

"Then, between the two of you, you ought to be able to come up with something workable. I get the feeling you've gotten just about as devious in your job," Hermione said lightly.

"I wish I had. Make things a lot easier," Viktor murmured. He took another sip of wine and considered the room again. "The house is nice. What I've seen of it."

"I'll give you the Sickle tour after dinner. Well, maybe more like the half-Sickle

tour. It's not big enough for much of a tour," Hermione said, no trace of regret in her voice.

"Size isn't everything. The size isn't what makes it home," Viktor said.

"But sometimes everyone having a bit of space can help keep you from rubbing each other the wrong way. Dinner's ready," Hermione announced.

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"That's a really good picture of the two of you," Viktor said, putting his coffee cup on the table in front of the sofa and picking up the frame. They had just finished the after dinner tour of the house and settled in the living room with their coffee.

"Our anniversary. Tenth. I'm sure we didn't have quite the photographer... that *was* at your twenty-fifth anniversary? That picture of you and Magda? The party?" Hermione asked, clasping her cup tighter.

"Photographer? Pfft," Viktor scoffed, putting the picture back down. "Lara took that. She gave it to me... after." He didn't specify, but his tone indicated he wasn't simply talking about after the party. Hermione decided not to press further. "She and Magda were close."

"Ginny took that. She's sort of the family Colin Creevey. I wouldn't be surprised if she has more pictures of all our children than we do. Lara and Magda were really close, hmm?" Hermione prompted.

"You tend to get close in the trenches. Especially when Magda traveled with me a lot. They were a lot alike. You have to have someone you don't live with to commiserate with when those lunatics that call themselves fans do something completely bonkers. Someone who can offer you a bit of perspective and remind you it's not just you," Viktor said with a fleeting smile.

"Such as?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well," Viktor began, shifting on the sofa to face her a little more, propping his elbow across the back, "Magda got some not so nice mail when we got married."

"I can relate to that. There wasn't Bubotuber Pus in any of them, was there?" Hermione said.

"Not that I know of. A few not too happy Howlers from silly little teenage girls, mostly. Lara got some not so nice mail when she got married, too. Loonies who think they should be in charge of or part of your social life aren't confined to the female gender. After Lara's experience, I gladly let people screen my fan mail. I



didn't need people I've never met crying about how I should have married them, instead. Or how I ruined their lives by not making a point spread," Viktor said. "Not that getting married completely cuts off that nonsense. Gets more insane, maybe."

"Really? Surely it doesn't get worse?" Hermione said.

"It used to be vaguely funny when people got so wrapped up in a stupid game that losing prompted them to send hate mail. Not so funny when you have a family. And you have to be careful about... people who show up at your hotel room," Viktor said carefully.

"I suspect you don't mean for a chat," Hermione replied.

"Lara had to toss out a few overly hopeful bellhops over the years. For that matter, her husband, Dragomir, had to toss a few out. And he had a few... propositions from groupies," Viktor explained.

"So you were only half kidding about not being met at the door by a woman in her nightclothes for a while?" Hermione asked, chin dropping.

"Happened a few times. I found yelling 'no thank you' and slamming the door pretty effective. Not necessarily in that order. Magda kind of found it amusing after a while. Especially when she was with me. I had this one really persistent girl in... France, I think it was, who didn't take the hint and kept ringing the bell. Magda had just gotten out of the shower and marched to the door, in nothing but a towel, and told her 'I got here first. He's already booked for the night,' and slammed the door. Sure beat the hell out of my solution. I was going to call the manager," Viktor said with a laugh. "From then on, if I got a persistent one, I just threatened to call my wife. Told them if the idea of confronting my wife didn't put the fear of God into them, nothing would. Argue with her, you would most likely end up *seeing* God."

"Certainly took a lot of self-confidence to do that," Hermione said, returning the smile and taking another swallow of her coffee.

"Don't tell me you wouldn't have done the same. Besides, I reckon she looked better in that towel than most of them looked in the dress robes and the tarty up lingerie. One or two, she suggested they go down the hall and find Volkov's room. He never did marry. He could have all the groupies he wanted," Viktor pointed out.

"I suppose when things like that happen, about the only thing you can do is fight back or laugh. Or both. Lucky you, having Magda around to defend you from those vicious, scary women missing half their kit," Hermione said, trying to hide

her amusement and failing miserably.

Viktor laughed heartily. "Listen here, you, there were quite a few times I was glad to have her defending me. And not just from half-dressed women, either. She might have looked all dainty and sweet, but you messed with anyone she cared about, she would tear your throat out. You remember that crazy, scary look Molly used to get when someone threatened one of hers? Magda had her beat. She left more than one smart aleck reporter checking to see if his head was still on once she got through with him."

"I don't know about that. I think Molly might be the scariest she-bear I've ever seen when you cross her. But, then, what mother isn't? Especially when it comes to your children," Hermione said. "And let's be honest. Husbands are almost as defenseless, poor little dears."

"Probably worse. I think my favorite had to be what she did to this photographer, though. Anna was barely a few weeks old, and this guy was bound and determined to get a photo of her, despite the fact that Magda had already told him no. So she snapped the lens off his camera, popped open the back, pulled the film out, dropped the whole works, and cast Incendio on it. All without even taking Anna out of the carrier she was wearing. When he finally got his power of speech back, he said 'That camera cost me eighty-five Sickles!' So she picked up her handbag, counted out the money, slapped it into his hand and said, 'Then the satisfaction was had at a bargain price,' and walked off. Photographers gave us a wide berth for a while," Viktor said, laughing again.

"Where was she when Rita Skeeter was around?" Hermione asked.

"I seem to recall you didn't take any guff from the press in that instance, either. I don't know if Magda would have poked holes in the jar, though," Viktor said with a sly smile. "She might have just popped the top on and watched her expire."

"Don't think I wasn't tempted," Hermione said ruefully, finishing her coffee. "More coffee? Heat up your cup, at least?" she offered.

"Sure. I hate to leave good company, but I should probably go when I finish that," Viktor said, handing over his cup.

"Going home tomorrow from Hogwarts? Or staying longer?" Hermione called back from the kitchen.

"I think I'll be going home sometime this weekend. I'm not sure. Depends on how things go with Minerva. I need to be back at least by late Monday. Dinner meeting with Oblansk. Why?" he asked as she handed him the refilled cup.

"No reason. Curious," Hermione said, sinking into the sofa and carefully inspecting her own cup. Her voice sounded false and strained even to her own ears.

"I don't know. We'll see," Viktor said softly. "Doing anything Monday for lunch?"

"Not that I know of," Hermione replied, not taking her eyes off the swirling clouds of milk in her coffee.

"Maybe I can make it back by and we can have lunch. Monday," he repeated.

"We'll see," Hermione echoed.

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Viktor walked across the Great Lawn, paying no attention to the occasional curious look he got from the few students who were out this early on a Saturday, lured out of bed and the castle by the bright sunshine and the unseasonably warm weather. The most of them were wearing only light cloaks. He had forsaken his own completely not long after leaving The Leaky Cauldron. It had felt too hot and oppressive. He paused halfway across and looked over the lake. He had taken the opposite view from a porthole in his quarters on the ship. The place had changed very little in the years since he had slept next to that dock. The trees might be a bit larger, the branches a bit different, some of the flowerbeds had likely changed borders, the faces of the children on the lawn had changed, even if he would wager quite a few of the names hadn't, but for the most part, he could have just as well been seventeen again. He glanced briefly down toward the Gamekeeper's Hut, then turned his attention back to the slip of paper in his hand. She had only sent it in case of her already being in the Office of the Headmistress when he arrived for some reason or other, with perhaps no one around to announce his arrival, it being the weekend, but it irked him that he couldn't figure it out.

Unlike Albus, Minerva seemed to favor the most obscure of office passwords, scholarly writers and such, rather than sweet names that any one of the children would be familiar with. He wasn't sure he could even hazard a guess at how to pronounce the collection of syllables on the piece of parchment she had mailed him. He had the vague recollection of having read it as a name in a textbook somewhere, but the pronunciation eluded him. Dutch, perhaps? Swedish, maybe? Some language with an incredible fondness for vowels. He had just about made up his mind to take the chance on going on in and finding her well before their scheduled meeting rather than trusting to the password when someone called his name. Or boomed it out, rather. "Viktor!" rang out across the expanse of the Great Lawn so loudly that a group of birds in the trees at the edge of the forest took flight, rustling leaves as they went, for a second, it looked

as though a couple of the apparent first years were going to do the same, and Viktor started in spite of himself, even as he recognized the voice, nearly tossing the slip of paper to the wind. "I though tha' was yeh, lad!"

By the time he had collected himself enough to turn around and say, "I think 'lad' might be straining credibility a tad, these days," Hagrid was within a stride of him and ready to engulf his hand in a shake that threatened to rattle his teeth. One of the few changes since his last arrival here were the deeper crinkles around the edges of the half-giant's eyes, and the even more generous sprinklings of silver in his wiry, black beard and unruly hair, particularly around the temples. Otherwise, he was as ruddy and hale looking as ever. Moreso, even, than when he had first left for home for good, perhaps.

"Yeh haven' changed much! Not much!" Hagrid said, finally dropping the hand.

"Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you. Not that I care to remember, but I've got some *children* you could call that without laughing too hard," Viktor pointed out, resettling his glasses back up in their proper position.

"Those are new, 'course. Any o' the young ones outta school?" Hagrid asked.

"Any!? Try *all*. Got a mediwizard, an apprentice wandmaker, and a Quidditch Chaser. I'm already starting to get little people coming along all over again. I've got a grandbaby!" Viktor pointed out.

"Can' be! I'll be... I'm sorry... I mean, I heard about yer wife. McGonagall an' Olympe both, o' course. Hear about ev'rythin' with other schools an' all. Olympe told me ter give yeh her sympathies," Hagrid said awkwardly.

"Thank you," Viktor said, equally awkward for a second. "Speaking of which, I figured you would be off visiting Olympe, it being the weekend and all. Minerva led me to believe the place would be darned near deserted."

"She's here. Yeh need ter come down an' visit, if yeh have time. Show pictures roun' an' all. That littlest one o' yers was still little more'n a babe in arms last time yeh were here fer testifyin' at tha' education summit," Hagrid said hopefully.

"If I had known they were going to stick their fingers in their ears and pretty much ignore our recommendations, maybe I wouldn't have bothered. You know, I'm not *officially* due until three. By the way, the toddler I was hauling around on my hip all that weekend now comes up to here," Viktor said, holding his palm parallel to the ground.

"Really? Hard ter imagine. She was a real Daddy's girl, tha's fer sure. Didn' wan' yeh outta her sight fer a minute. Cute little nipper. Come on down an' catch us

up, me an' Olympe. Got biscuits an' tea. Olympe made 'em," Hagrid offered.

"Great," Viktor answered, relieved. "By the way, don't have any new... pets... do you?"

"Jus' the hound. Brutus," Hagrid said, sounding slightly disappointed about the fact.

"I see. Sure, I'll come down. Now, if that's okay," Viktor said. He figured the worst he had to fear was being slobbered on a bit by Fang's heir.

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Viktor stepped into the Headmistress Office. It was still recognizable as the former Headmaster's Office, but it did have just a slightly more feminine feel than it had when Albus had occupied it. The flowery china set and the dainty sugar bowl on the desk being the most obvious additions. The sugar bowl was a contrasting and rather jarring Scottish plaid. The confusing and mysterious bric-a-brac from Dumbledore's term still hummed along just as it had when he had first stepped into the room, only in slightly different positions. Back then, he had still been nervously bracing for the expected tongue lashing from the old man, rather than the gentle, probing request for support it had turned out to be. Instead of feeling cornered while pinned on that gaze, he had found himself leaning forward, trying to suss out what, exactly, was going on behind that contradictory exterior. Being drawn into that soft, almost grandfatherly demeanor that could be so deceiving.

Well aware that heads of schools the world over tended to be a mite too fond of dramatic entrances, Viktor dropped his bag loudly beside the empty chair in the deserted office and waited an instant. "You're right on time. Not that I expected any different, unless Hagrid and Olympe were wont to keep you the rest of the day," a familiar voice said, coming up behind him, though there was no obvious way for a person to enter behind. But Viktor hadn't bothered looking for a cat anywhere in the room, and nervous students were even less likely to, so it tended to be very effective.

"Honestly, Minerva. The author of a book about the *philosophy* of Transfiguration? The Transfiguration Professor had to let me in, and she had to have three gos at his name at that. His name sounded like a drunken Scandinavian's wet sneeze. What's *wrong* with a simple password like Chocolate Frogs?" Viktor scolded good-naturedly.

"I'll pick my passwords any way I please, thank you," Minerva said primly, holding her arms out for a quick embrace. Except for the fact that the new streaks of silver were overtaking her dark hair, she, too, looked almost exactly as she had

when he had been taking notes on her lectures in the classes with the seventh year Slytherins. "Have a biscuit?" she offered, pointing to a tin on her desk.

"I'm all full up on biscuits. And tea. And sympathy. But you go ahead," Viktor said, declining.

"Speaking of sympathy, I can tender mine in person, finally. I know I wrote as soon as I heard-"

"And it was much appreciated. Thank you for taking the time to do that," Viktor said, settling into the chair uncomfortably. *You would think I would finally know what to say. Something that doesn't feel false and all wrong.*

Minerva pressed her lips together in a thin line for an instant and seemed to be fishing about for something else to say. "I'm glad I got to meet her when the two of you were here, last. And when I was there to speak with the Durmstrang Board. She was a joy to talk to. Doesn't seem possible it could be eighteen years since you were here. I had to write another sympathy letter far too soon later *that* year, as well."

Viktor nodded. "Ron. I've kicked myself a few times since then. We were right *here* that summer. We could have gone and visited... before... But it didn't seem like a good time, what with traveling with the fussy toddler and the other two driving their grandparents mad back home and needing to get back for work... And you always think you've got plenty of time. You think you have all the time in the world to do it later," he said softly.

"If it makes you feel any better, I've kicked myself a few times for not having seen him for several years before that, too. Hazard of dedicating yourself to teaching. Far too many of your former students out there for comfort. And they all start unexpectedly sending their children in, soon as you've just about gotten comfortable with the fact that they're old enough to graduate. Speaking of which, I hear tell you've got some room to brag in that regard. Or I read, rather. Wee one's gone and followed in your footsteps, somewhat," Minerva said, smiling.

"She's not so wee, anymore. But since we're on the subject of wee ones, I haven't quite worn out the pictures of my granddaughter, so if you'd like to see them, you can. Before we get down to this business of figuring out how we sell this idea to anyone. And how we make it actually *work* this time," Viktor amended.

"I've taken the liberty of asking them to prepare quarters for you for the night. I doubt this is going to be a single afternoon job," Minerva said. "Besides, Hagrid and some of the rest of the staff, myself included, would be a little disappointed if you get away without a bit more socializing, first."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," Viktor replied, shaking his head. "About the job, not the socializing. Now, I've already got a few ideas about how to weight the judging of each individual task..."

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Simon walked briskly down the hall and made for the old sofa in the lobby. Its slightly squashy springs had seen better days, but it was still where he usually settled when waiting to see if Mum was coming out for lunch. He didn't generally bother the receptionist. He was there well ahead of the time she usually popped her head out for some air, so he flopped onto the sofa and thumbed through the book he had brought along, ducking over it and skimming the page. He pretty well ignored the nervous looking young man with a roll of parchment in his hand, reciting something over and over to himself in the chair over in the corner, in his own anxious little world. Job candidate, most likely. It took a good few minutes for the other figure in the room, standing next to the wide window to even register in his peripheral vision.

Simon glanced up and looked him over. He was tall and lanky and dark-haired. There wasn't much else to be noticed, considering he had his back to Simon, busy looking out the window. Occasionally he would turn his head slightly, idly follow something across his field of vision, some of the traffic, most likely, then go back to looking straight ahead. For a bit, only a vague nagging feeling pricked at Simon's brain. The nudging of something very nearly familiar. *Probably just wondering why he's at the window instead of sitting, if he's waiting for some...* Then the jolt of recognition. *No way.* Simon turned his head and openly stared. Not that it did much good. All he could see at the moment was the man's back and the back of his head.

*Can't be! I'm imagining it. No way. No bloody way. Wouldn't be him. For a start, no Cup rings. But... if you had more than one... how would you choose which one to wear? Would you wear any of them? Did he ever wear any of them? How would you know? Think! Posters... did he ever wear any of them in the posters? No. No Cup rings in any of the posters. And if you didn't even wear them for posters, why would you bother wearing them the rest of the time? Probably shut up in little boxes somewhere. So... no help there. He's the right height. Tall. About a ruddy foot or more too tall for a proper Seeker. Or so popular wisdom would have you believe. Or it used to, anyway. He kind of rewrote the book on what makes a proper Seeker. Or... I think he's about the right height... black hair... toes are a little turned out... I could do this all blinking afternoon! Turn your head! Just look to the side! I should recognize your profile... seen it in enough posters and newspaper pictures and old photos... Uncle Harry's showed me a boatload of photos from back then... Oh, hang it all!*



Simon put his hand to his mouth and coughed. It sounded ridiculously forced, even to him. The interview candidate stopped mumbling to himself and goggled at him. *Already halfway made a fool of myself. Might as well complete the job.* He let loose another torrent of barking, not taking his eyes off the figure at the window. The man took a quick glance over his shoulder, then turned his attention back to the world outside the window. *Ruddy hell*, Simon thought, freezing for an instant, then quickly staring back down at the book. *It's him. I'll eat this book if it isn't. Viktor bloody Krum is standing in front of the window, not twenty feet away from me. What the hell do I say? Hi, you don't know me, but you knew my Dad and Mum? My Uncle Harry? Fought a bit of a war and went to school with them, I think. You took my Mum to a dance, once? Harry and Dad used to go on and on about the way you played and Harry took me to your last match? Hi, you've never met me, but I've got your autograph? He'll think I'm bonkers! Just tromping up and saying hey, there, I'm Simon! Simon who? Who the hell is Simon-*

"Weasley? Simon Weasley?" The voice was low, soft, and had a distinctly foreign quality to it, despite the excellent diction. Much like Aunt Fleur's voice, the vowels and the cadence held on to something distinctly "other". He'd heard it in plenty of post-match interviews on the wireless when he was a child. Always concise, clipped answers, generally consisting of either monosyllabic words or gentle attempts to deflect the praise back to the team at large. Simon looked out beyond the edge of the book, still firmly keeping his head down. *Damn. He really is talking to me*, Simon thought, studying the black boots the owner of the voice was wearing. The toes were pointed right at him. "You *are* Simon?" Simon forced his gaze up into a face he knew very well, despite never having seen it in person. Unlike the posters and most of the old photos, however, there was a slight, uncertain smile. The images he had seen had always tended toward the grim or solemn. And the wire frame glasses certainly hadn't been in any of them.

"Err... yeah. How did you know?" Simon blurted out. He immediately wished he could have it back and a few moments in private to kick himself for ever having said it. *Brilliant. Shall I make an even bigger fool of myself?*

"Well," Viktor said, crossing his arms and tilting his head, "first, I spent a considerable amount of time around a considerable number of Weasleys when I was roughly your age. The hair color tends toward the rare and it's hard to forget. And as far as I know, none of the younger Weasleys, besides you, work here. Second, I've seen your picture. And third, even if I hadn't, I *still* think I would recognize you. You look a great deal like your father. And you apparently read like your mother. Like the book's going to get away if you don't keep a close eye on it. And a firm grip," he added, gesturing at Simon's white knuckles. Simon could feel himself flushing when just the faintest hint of amusement tugged at the corner of Viktor's mouth.

"I... err... ah, it's a..." Simon slapped the book together and jumped up, nervously

wiping his palm against his robes. "It's a pleasure. I mean... An honor! An honor and a pleasure, really..." he amended, thrusting his hand out for a shake, "... just ... I've heard so much about... you know, from Uncle Harry and all. And I used to listen... every match I could... when you played. Gosh. I mean, Dad and Uncle Harry were *still* talking about that first World Cup when I was a kid. Harry still says it's the best match he's *ever* seen. And that you were the most natural flier that's ever been on a broom. Dad, too. Said that." Simon willed himself to stop babbling, but the words seemed to be coming from somewhere else, almost. He was finally stunned into silence by the wholly unexpected realization that he was very nearly as tall as the man with whom he was shaking hands.

"That's... quite the compliment, then. Because Harry wasn't exactly a slouch on a broom," Viktor said solemnly. "And your father, from what I hear, was a pretty decent Keeper in school, himself. And both of them could talk the game. You never played?"

Simon shrugged. "For a little while, anyway. A year. More the enthusiast. I announced matches. Play by play and all. I played Keeper, like Dad, but more because they couldn't find anyone else over first year ready to fill the spot than anything... Everyone above first year always wants to be Beater or Chaser or Seeker, you see. All the glamour positions. Keeper's a bit of a thankless job, isn't it? Your daughter's playing now, isn't she? I heard the Aussie match the other week. Sounded like a real corker. The passing and the tackling was so fast that the announcer could barely keep up without his tongue dragging!"

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Hermione looked up at the clock and dropped her quill. She was already five minutes late. She scrambled for her handbag and dashed for the door, heading out into the hall. But the scene in the lobby brought her up short. Viktor was there waiting for her, sure enough, just as he had said. Hermione had certainly not expected to come out and see him having a rather animated conversation with, of all people, her son. She froze for an instant, watching the two of them, thrown back into memories of similar conversations she had seen between Ron and Viktor.

For Ron, the truce had been a little uneasy at first, but calm and steady had won the day in the end. More importantly, it had earned Ron's trust. The nasty flare of jealousy and envy had slowly turned into a sort of grudging appreciation and admiration, and finally, a warm enough friendship. It had always been on its easiest footing when they were talking Quidditch, of course, but then, it had been the same with Harry. And Charlie, for that matter. Give them someone else to help break down a team's preferred defense or a broom model's pros and cons, and they could go at it half the night. Perhaps other subjects were just too weighty and depressing. Quidditch was possibly the only safe subject where the

lot of them could find common ground.

It certainly hadn't hurt that Viktor had been just as willing to get his hands dirty and get into the trenches as anyone. Ron had once confessed that he had expected someone spoiled, pampered and largely useless. Someone more like Lockhart. It also hadn't hurt that Viktor was given to being blissfully unfazed by Ron's poorly veiled hostility, used to ignoring far worse done on the pitch as "just part of the game", to be shrugged off and forgotten once the final whistle blew. Managing to get on rather well with all of Ron's older brothers had tipped the scales as well. Even Percy and Molly couldn't find a great deal to pick at and complain about. Viktor had cared every bit as much as any of them about the outcome of the fight for the cause, and the safety of those who fought for it. And it was readily apparent that he had given up as much, and quite possibly, more, to make the same stand the rest of them had.

Soon enough, all of them, Viktor, Harry, even Ron, had occupied the same compartment of her life comfortably enough, and she no longer had to keep them completely separate, though she preferred to, just a bit. To keep back a little something for herself, private and just for her. She had even been the slightest bit selfish with Viktor, eager to keep some small taste of what she had felt when they had been writing to one another, one on one and no one else between or beside, no third or fourth. Harry and Ron always felt as though they came together, back then, her two best friends. No considering one without the other, no secrets, no sharing with one without sharing with the other. With Viktor, there had always been a tiny corner of their relationship reserved just for the two of them. Them alone. Carved out parchment by parchment, exchange by exchange, in the simultaneous shyness and boldness that letters afforded. The very cowardice of not having to speak face to face tended to make you brave about revealing yourself. Far braver and more reckless than you could ever be in person.

But this... Hermione wasn't quite sure if she was ready for this. She walked toward the two of them slowly, half wishing she could blink and make it go away. Prior to today, her life had still been fairly neatly divided into Before and After compartments, Simon firmly positioned in the After, Viktor just as firmly anchored in the Before. Or was it the Just For Me? Now those two sections had collided off her watch, without her permission, and she wasn't quite sure how to feel about it. *It looks congenial enough. Simon was encouraging about this. But that was the abstract. This is the real. Ron had a bit of trouble telling the two apart... but he was fourteen at the time. Fourteen and a ball of hormones and total thickness about girls and people in general, all rolled into one. He didn't even know what he thought or wanted. But then, I'm one to talk, aren't I? I don't know what I want, either, and I'm a grown woman. So why do I feel like I'm bringing a date home to meet the parents? Like the two of them have to get each other's approval for me to have them both in my life? Because one of them is my son,*

*and there's no such thing as having a life without him, any more.*

"Mum, look who I bumped into while I was waiting to see if you wanted to go to lunch," Simon said, grinning at her.

"So I see. I suppose it would be rather useless for me to do introductions, then," Hermione said, smiling wanly. "Actually, I was already planning on going to lunch," she added, taking a small step closer to Viktor and subtly inclining her head, hoping Simon would catch the hint.

"Oh! Oh, errr... I'll catch Grandad, then. Wait, no I won't, he and Uncle Perce are at that off site meeting..." Simon stammered. Obviously the penny had dropped. Hermione winced inwardly. It was as uncomfortable watching her son do it as it was when she did it, floundering around for what to say, an elegant way to extract yourself from the corner you had just inelegantly painted yourself into. "I'll go-"

"You could just come with us. I don't mind. Really," Viktor offered.

"Really? I couldn't. You're sure... I mean, if neither of you mind..." Simon amended. He was smiling so broadly that Hermione just didn't have the heart to tell him that she did.

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"I just couldn't do it. I couldn't stand there, and say, 'Yes, I mind, very much, thank you,' not when he was standing there with that same beatific grin that Ron used to get in those situations," Hermione complained.

"So, our Simon just invited himself along on your date, hmmm?" Ginny asked, joining Hermione at the kitchen table with her own cup of tea.

"Calling it a date might be overly generous. It's not like we got much talking in," Hermione added, taking a sip from her cup. "And Viktor offered. Simon tried to extract himself. Halfheartedly, anyway. He didn't exactly decline very hard."

"Why, Hermione Jane Weasley, I do believe you're jealous," Ginny said, after a moment's consideration.

"Jealous!? What did you put in that tea?" Hermione said indignantly.

"You're either jealous about your son being more wrapped up in meeting Viktor than he is being with his mum, or you're jealous Viktor spent a big chunk of the time he was supposed to be spending with you talking to Simon. One or the other. Or maybe both," Ginny pointed out.

"That is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard," Hermione said, finishing her tea. "If he had wanted to spend the time with me alone, he never would have invited Simon along. Maybe he didn't even consider it a date. And suggesting I'm jealous when my grown son wants to talk to someone else, that's mad."

"Is it? What was Viktor supposed to do? Tell him to 'get lost, kid' right in front of you? He *did* stay longer than he planned and go out of his way coming back just to eat lunch with you. Doesn't that say something?" Ginny asked. When there was no answer, Ginny added, "You always did want to keep Viktor to yourself. Didn't much more than admit you were writing to him, much less anything about what the two of you wrote in those novelettes. Or talked about when you were huddled up together on porches or couches or up trees in the back garden all the time."

"That may be," Hermione allowed, standing up, "but I was a teenager, then. Why would you want to accuse me of acting like a teenager now? I need to go, if I'm going to get a few things at the shops. Thanks for the tea and the sympathy, but you can just put your wild theories to rest."

"Well, see you later, then," Ginny said placidly.

"See you later," Hermione echoed, heading out the door. Ginny leaned back and watched her walk out of the back garden through the window.

"I'm accusing you of acting like a teenager because you are. Admit it or not, you're in love like one," Ginny murmured to herself. "Bet Simon will agree."

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"I hear you and Viktor got on like a house on fire," Ginny prodded, sitting back down at the kitchen table after checking on dinner in the oven.

"He was great to talk to. And not just about Quidditch, either. He had some stories on everyone. Dad, Mum, you, the lot of you. How come you never told me about the time Uncle Fred locked you out of the house wearing nothing but a towel and you got him back by smacking him in the head with Viktor's broom when he finally let you back in?" Simon asked, laughing. "How did you swing and hold the towel at the same time?"

"I'm sure that would have made a lovely bedtime story for your impressionable young self. I hope hearing that story was worth intruding on your mum's date," Ginny said with a laugh.

"I didn't mean to. I mean... what was I supposed to do? Big thickie that I am, it

didn't even dawn on me that he was there waiting for *her* until she said, and by then I had already said what I was doing there," Simon said, reddening. "And he invited me."

"Remember an urgent appointment. Made your Mum a mite jealous, I think, but she won't admit it," Ginny said.

"I thought the days of bugging up Mum's dates just because I exist were long past. I mean, it's not like anyone has to take on raising me or worrying about me being underfoot all the time, any more," Simon said ruefully.

"One, *that* guy was an idiot of the first order. Two, I don't think you had a thing to do with all the other ones being jerks, either. Just call ahead next time. So... is he still that good looking?" Ginny asked curiously.

"What? Is who what? Good looking?" Simon asked, mouth agape.

"Viktor. Is he still as good looking as he used to be? Oh, I suppose he wasn't exactly everyone's cup of tea. After all, he wasn't exactly a *pretty* boy, what with that nose of his and the way he used to slouch around like he would just as soon disappear when he was younger, but there was always something about him. Maybe part of it was just the foreign and mysterious air, and the ultra-formality, but at least half the girls at Hogwarts just about melted into a puddle if he so much as looked at them cross-eyed. The other half were busy swooning over pretty Cedric Diggory. Once he stopped trying to hide in plain sight and scowling at everything that moved the nose just gave him some character and made his face interesting. He was an awfully handsome man by the time he grew into his height and himself. Not that he ever *noticed*. Why do you think he has those massive posters sales figures?" Ginny said.

"Because he was a *great* player?" Simon answered, looking at her with a questioning expression.

"Oh, Simon. Not everyone buys Quidditch posters for the Quidditch. Some of them get sold because the man or woman in the uniform is easy on the eyes," Ginny said dismissively.

"I don't know..." Simon said uncertainly. "He looks exactly like he did when he retired, if you ask me. Except for the glasses. And not as... formidable, maybe. I mean, he seems... less serious than I expected."

"Well, he's still damned good looking, then. I don't blame your mum for being peeved. And he was always something of a closet softie. I ask you. Unbiased opinion, is he sweet on your mother? She seems to be having a hard time swallowing the idea that he might be. Or she's scared to admit it," Ginny added.



"Not so sure my opinion is unbiased. He sure did smile at her a lot. If that means anything. Always watched her while she talked and things. Held the door and pulled out the chair and whatnot. If that's being sweet on her, yeah, I guess he is," Simon said with a shrug. "Look, if they were so fantastic together, what stopped them from getting married back then? Not that I'm complaining. I wouldn't be here if they had... But, she's never said."

"Two terminal cases of levelheadedness and the good sense to know they weren't ready. I guess if the war hadn't happened, maybe they would have. But lucky for you, and your Dad, circumstances were what they were and Viktor and Hermione didn't push it. They loved each other too much to be together when neither of them were ready to give it everything they had. And then Viktor met Magda and... they parted on good terms. I don't think either of them would change a thing. Love and circumstance are a funny thing. I once called your Uncle Michael a dunderheaded fool. And meant it. Funnily enough, he went and grew up and I did, too, and it got to be the right time. All things in due time. Even love. Maybe both of them just need to get to grips with being ready for it again. A few nudges in that direction couldn't hurt," Ginny said, smiling.

"I told her to go have dinner at his house that first time," Simon said defensively.

"Good for you. Now don't invite yourself to any more of their dates," Ginny added, getting up to check on the roast again.

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Viktor considered the cup of coffee he had just poured, trying to figure out what to have with it. It was barely dawn outside, the light still had a gray quality to it, as though it weren't quite awake, either, and the fog was still lifting off the ground, especially thick back toward the lake, a good way from the house. He hadn't even bothered to do the dishes from their dinner the night before, yet. The two table settings were still sitting in the sink. The kitchen still smelled faintly of lamb and mint. Though it was Saturday, he had been restless, unable to sleep past his usual rising time, so he had decided he might as well get up and have breakfast. He had just about decided that he would need the cup of coffee before he would be capable of deciding what to have with it when a light pecking came at the back door.

"Hey... you headed home from your shift?" Viktor said, swinging the door completely open when he saw that it was Vladimir.

"I saw the light on. I figured you were up. Got another cup of that?" Vladimir said, huddling up inside his cloak in the damp, inclining his head toward the cup in Viktor's hand.



"Sure. Come on in," Viktor offered.

"Aren't you freezing, door open and nothing but your pajama bottoms and a dressing gown?" Vladimir said.

"Not really. Besides, what am I supposed to do? Answer the door in my cloak? Got time for pancakes?" Viktor asked.

"If you're offering to make them," Vladimir answered, shucking off his cloak.

"Get your own coffee, then," Viktor said, starting to gather up the necessary equipment. They both stayed silent until the first batch was in the pan and Viktor had settled into the kitchen chair next to Vladimir. "Well?" Viktor said, raising an eyebrow questioningly and taking a sip of coffee.

"Well what?" Vladimir replied.

"Well, are you going to tell me what's eating you?" Viktor asked.

"Who said anything was eating me, Tate?" Vladimir snapped, lowering his eyebrows, hunching his shoulders and frowning at the coffee cup.

"You did. Or are you going to try to tell me you just *happened* to be passing through at this time of day on the off chance I might be up, and this slim possibility somehow won out over going straight home to a warm bed with your wife in it? I don't buy it," Viktor said, shaking his head. "My pancakes are pretty good, but they're not *that* good. And if your lip gets any lower, you're going to trip on it. Or that cup's going to burst into flames, the way you're staring at it." When Vladimir still didn't answer, Viktor prompted, "Work?"

"Had to deliver some bad news," Vladimir said finally, his face relaxing slightly.

"So, now you're going to make yourself miserable over it for weeks, too? And take all the rest of us with you?" Viktor asked. "You worry me when you do that."

"What?" Vladimir asked, looking up.

"Take things to heart so hard when you can't help it. What was it?" Viktor said.

Vladimir ducked his head again, fiddling with the cup for a moment before answering. "Had a kid come in who got up in the middle of the night and got into the potion ingredients. Mixed a few of the wrong things together while playing and the cauldron exploded. Boom, no more right hand," Vladimir said with a heavy sigh. "Not enough there to even attempt to regrow it. Prosthetic is the best

we can do. Even that's not going to be easy. What's left has to come off, first."

"Otherwise, he or she is presumably okay? Or going to be okay? Happy and healthy and all that?" Viktor asked, voice even.

"She. A few minor chemical burns. Temporary ear ringing and hearing loss. Scared the hell out of her, so she's like a cat clinging to the curtains, but I guess if you consider going through life a hand down 'okay', she is," Vladimir said gloomily.

"I once knew a man who didn't have half his original parts. You name it, he probably had it replaced. He got on fine. Taught me a lot. Prosthetics are a lot more advanced these days. She'll probably never miss it much if she's young," Viktor soothed. "She'll adapt."

"Try telling her that right now. Or her parents," Vladimir replied.

"That's your job. And I don't envy you the job in the slightest," Viktor said, patting his shoulder and walking back to the stove. "You know why I wasn't crazy about you wanting to do this?" he blurted out suddenly.

"No. Why?" Vladimir asked, turning around in his seat to watch.

Viktor kept his attention on the stove. "I saw enough of that. In the war. To know it's not easy. Dying... and losing... things. Death and suffering... it's easy to start feeling responsible for it when you see it all the time. You almost feel like you control it somehow. And it's easy to take those things hard. You take things hard. I knew you would. You always did. When you lost your first patient, you moped around here for a month, at least. I couldn't do it. Not... day in and day out. I wouldn't be able to. All that death and misery."

Vladimir blinked in surprise. Though he had never asked, he had suspected something a lot more mundane behind the well camouflaged but not-quite-thrilled reaction he had gotten when he had announced the decision. The long hours, the long schooling, the responsibilities, the being on call almost constantly... Not this. And he couldn't remember a time when Tate had willingly brought up the war of his own accord. "But it's all worth it when you can help. When you can do some good. Make it better. Get rid of some of that suffering... It's not *all* death and suffering and misery. It's *life*, too. Mostly life, really," he found himself protesting. "And hope. I just hate it that we couldn't fix her hand. Okay, I hate it that *I* couldn't fix her hand. I hate saying 'I can't' to a patient. Especially parents."

"You said a prosthetic was the best you could do for her. Did you really mean it?" Viktor asked, not turning around, using his wand to set the table.

"Of course I did," Vladimir replied.

"Then you gave her your best, just like every other patient that comes through the door and you've got no reason to bash yourself. Or pout. So quit it. Does her and you no good. Here," Viktor said, putting down the platter of pancakes. "I'm fairly sure pancakes have no medicinal value, but they're good for the soul. And have a side of absolute lack of sympathy on my part. Stop kicking yourself about things you have no control over. You knew that was going to be part and parcel of the job," Viktor scolded lightly, ruffling Vladimir's hair and resting his hand on top of his head for a second before heading back to the stove. "Kicking yourself is not your job. Plenty of other people willing to do it."

Vladimir smiled in spite of himself, feeling the tension drain. "No sympathy, eh, Tate? So why did I come here?"

"Besides the pancakes? So I could kick your arse for you, I imagine. Try me again in a couple of hours. I'll try to work some up. You want sympathy, try your wife," Viktor said, starting another batch of pancakes, then leaning idly against the counter.

"If you think I would chance rousting her out this early to feel sorry for me, you're mad. Dawn's too early to hope for sympathy from her, either. Safer to come here. She wouldn't even offer the pancakes," Vladimir said, putting a couple on his plate. "Can I at least do the dishes or something? I noticed you've got a few piled up."

"No, I'll get them later," Viktor protested, watching as the pan flipped the pancakes. "Eat, go home and go to bed. Don't make yourself any harder to live with. Nikolina and Evangelina don't deserve that."

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"If you're going to be grouchy, you can just keep walking," Stan said, only glancing up from the varnish he was mixing.

"Grouchy? What are you on about?" Vladimir asked, leaning against the end of the workbench in the back of the wand shop.

"I heard about the emergency pancake intervention and the reason behind it. I'm sorry, but if you're intent on spreading the misery, keep moving. I'm working," Stan insisted. "Speaking of which, shouldn't you be? I thought Wednesday was your early shift."

"Not for another half hour. I don't go until two. I'm better. Really." When Stan

gave him a skeptical look, he added, "I'm not... *happy* about it, but she's doing okay. As okay as she can be. We fit her for it tomorrow."

"You're not brooding on it? You're fine," Stan said, giving him a look.

"No, I'm not. I went home that morning and scoured the house for anything that might explode and got up four times an hour to check on the baby and thanked the powers that be a dozen times that it wasn't my daughter in the same situation and hoped it never would be. But I'm not exactly wallowing in it, either," Vladimir said, shrugging. "Besides, I hardly think a serial stalker is in any position to be lecturing me on my mental and emotional health," he added, following Stan back to the front of the shop.

"Don't you start that, again. I am not stalking her," Stan said, not rising to the bait. He adjusted the slender piece of wood in the vise before opening a drawer to rifle through the brushes.

"Have you ever talked to her?" Vlad said, crossing his arms. "Anything besides minimal polite interaction, I mean. Something more scintillating than asking her where they keep the art supplies over there."

"No."

"Then you're stalking her. Anna agrees with me. Damn it, go up to her and say something. 'Hi, you don't know me, but I've been watching you eat your lunch out here for a year' might be a good start. If she doesn't hex you for being a creep, it's a good sign," Vladimir replied.

"That would be rich," Stan said, shaking his head.

"Pack a sandwich for lunch tomorrow, go out there, sit on the bench and say hello. *Talk* to her instead of just mooning at her from a safe distance. What's she supposed to do? Read your mind and come in here and throw herself at you?" Vladimir asked.

"It's not that easy! Not everyone's like you and Mama. Not everyone can just waltz up to people and strike up a conversation and always know what to say. Some of us didn't get our levels in Socializing and have girls lined up for every dance," Stan protested, sounding flustered. "Mama could have gotten away with asking Merlin what kind of undershorts he wore and sounded just charming doing it. And you're just like her."

"And you're just like Tate. Wouldn't say ten words a week if you could figure out how to avoid it. You could have had girls lined up, too, if you had shown any of them the slightest bit of encouragement. Do you think those girls that asked you

out did it for their health? No, they got tired of waiting for you to do it. Look, if you don't promise me you're at least going to go out there and try to talk to her, I'm going to come here tomorrow with a sandwich of my own, and *I'll* talk to her, with you or without you," Vladimir threatened.

"You wouldn't," Stan said.

"Try me. Maybe I'll bring Anna. She can... well, she won't say 'boo' to anyone, either, if she can help it, but I might get her to put in a good word or two," Vlad insisted.

"Soon. Maybe-"

"You've been saying 'soon' every time I ask for three months. *Tomorrow*. Even if it's nothing but 'Hello, nice weather we're having, isn't it?' you talk to her. She's not some untouchable exhibit behind museum glass. She's a flesh and blood person, just like you, and if she thinks she's too good to talk to you while eating her lunch, better you find that out now and tell her where she can stick it. Worst that can happen is that it turns out one of you doesn't like the other. If she snubs you, tell me and I'll go stick her lunch up her nose," Vladimir said.

"Okay, okay. I'll do it," Stan conceded, dipping the brush in his hand into the varnish and carefully cleaning it off against the edge of the jar. "To shut you up, if nothing else, you maniac. What was *in* those pancakes?"

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Viktor fiddled with a quill as he read through the update from the opening of the summit for the Western European nations. A few of the Eastern European attendees couldn't seem to decide which side of the divide they fell on, since some of the same countries had sent delegates to both meetings, albeit different delegates. It seemed to be fairly encouraging, but Oppenheimer had always struck him as just a shade overly optimistic about nearly everything, so perhaps it should be taken with a grain of salt. The African nations and the Southern Hemisphere were still dragging their heels on setting up firm dates for their summits. He was still scanning the final list of registered representatives when a low, throaty voice rang out from the doorway. "Listen, I don't care what the Commissioner is doing or that I don't have an appointment! I demand to speak to him right now! I'm going to really give him a piece of my mind!"

The voice was so distinctive and familiar that Viktor didn't even bother looking up before remarking placidly, "The lady had better check and see if she's got a piece to spare first." He slid the sheet of parchment aside and faced her. "Lara, you nut. Not that I'm anything less than thrilled, but what are you doing here?"

“What? Isn’t that how everyone comes in here? I need to talk to you,” Ivanova said, grinning. “Some business, some pleasure. Have a few minutes?” she asked, stepping inside the doorway and running her fingers through her brassy hair as she brushed it back. She had taken to wearing it loose after retiring, and she still seemed to be impatient with it coming anywhere near her face, as though it were going to interfere with something. Her face was as exotic and lovely as ever, with fine bone structure, high cheekbones, strong chin, full mouth. Combined with that slightly smoky bedroom voice and tawny, hooded eyes, it was little wonder that Lara had always had a fair number of male fans who couldn’t tell you the first thing about Quidditch. Wireless interviewers and photographers had just eaten her up at every opportunity.

“Is this a closed door issue?” Viktor asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Part of it, yes. Then I’ve got something that’s going to take more than a few minutes. Let’s take care of the quick question first,” Lara said, pushing the door closed and settling in the chair on the other side of the desk. “First of all, how are you?”

Viktor studied her an instant before answering. It hadn’t been asked in the usual breezy fashion one would ask that question in. It had all the hallmarks of a loaded question. “Fair enough. Busy. The kids are all fine, though. The baby’s walking, believe it or not, and I still haven’t been driven completely bonkers by them or the job, just slightly mad, so I can’t complain,” he said.

“That’s not what I asked. I asked how *you* were,” Lara insisted, looking at him intently.

Viktor sucked in a deep breath. “It gets easier. It never quite gets easy, though.”

“Maybe it will, someday. By the way, nice job on shutting Iva up, whatever you did. Tell you what. You can fill me in on all the details about the kids during lunch. We’ll go someplace nice, talk pension committee business for ten minutes and make the Ministry pay for it,” Lara said, scrunching her nose up in an impish manner.

“You’re completely wicked. That’s probably why I always liked you. I can probably find it. In the entertainment budget. If they refuse to approve it, I’ll pay for it out of my pocket. I hesitate to ask... does what you want to talk about before lunch have anything to do with anyone who shares my last name? Tell me it’s not about the selection committee,” Viktor pleaded.

“It’s about the selection committee. We’re deadlocked,” Lara said evenly.

“You know you can’t talk to me about too much. Confidentiality... conflict of

interest... ethical violations, we never would get shed of the committees and journalists wanting to investigate,” Viktor said, obviously flustered.

“I signed the exact same confidentiality agreement you did, and I *did* read it. I know what the consequences are. They wouldn’t need a committee to figure out we broke it. You’re allowed to break deadlocks. We have a deadlock. And I’m not going to name names. You have nothing but a hypothetical situation to consider and give me an answer for. We won’t be violating anything,” she said confidently.

“Okay. Give it to me,” Viktor said, sounding reluctant.

“We have two Chasers that were unanimous choices. No disagreement whatsoever. Both of whom are probably what you would call long, real bangers, hardnosed. Our remaining two final candidates are totally different from one another. We want to complement the two we already have on the team, and we’re not sure how to do it properly. We can either select a third with a similar build and style of play, or one who is much smaller, compact and more maneuverable. Both are excellent players, solid passers, good tacklers. I don’t think we could go far wrong picking either, but we want to do the best for the team overall. The one who doesn’t get chosen still gets to be an alternate. If you were coaching, what would you want at your disposal?” Lara asked.

“Large quantities of alcohol,” Viktor shot back.

“That goes without saying. What would you like to be able to put on the field?” Lara pressed.

Viktor thought for a few moments, drumming his fingers on the desk. “I always was a big fan of diversity. If you already have two Chasers who can get in there and wrestle the ball away from someone bigger, take a stray elbow or knee or, Heaven forbid, a Bludger, and not pay much mind, make the third someone who can get out ahead faster than they can and squeeze into tighter spots.”

“Is that your official recommendation?” Lara asked, eyebrows raised.

“It is,” Viktor assented. Lara pulled a sheet of parchment from her inside pocket and jotted a name at the bottom, using the quill from Viktor’s desk. “It’s okay... she’ll be thrilled with just being picked as an alternate,” he added, more to himself than to her.

Lara looked up questioningly. “Who will? It was between Federov and Gorsky... You mean Anna!? She was a unanimous pick. You mean to tell me you thought you were voting against her just now? And you were worried about being accused of being unethical...” She shook her head and signed the list.



“What? She’s only twenty-”

“So? You were only seventeen at that Cup. We all agreed. She’s a solid player, and if we’re smart, we put her on the national team right now and get her some experience with players of that caliber. In a few seasons, they’ll be anchoring teams around her the way we used to anchor them around you,” Lara said, putting the quill back and handing the list across. “The other Chasers have a few years on her. They’ll be able to show her a thing or two. But I’ve seen her in enough matches to convince me she’s a good gamble.”

“You didn’t browbeat her through?” Viktor asked, taking the parchment and looking at it rather disbelievingly.

“Browbeat? I didn’t even nominate her for discussion. Didn’t have to. Plovdiv’s coach did. He rather grudgingly admits she pretty much made mincemeat of the Chasers he put on her at their last match. Don’t get me wrong, she’s still a little raw, plenty to learn about how to be smarter rather than tougher, but that comes with some time. And we all know that flies by. You can tell who taught her to handle a broom, though,” Lara replied. “I’m sorry, but the pension committee talk isn’t going to be that easy to solve. I’ll give you the privilege of taking me out to lunch for that one. Come on, we can assault each other with grandchildren’s photos and come back to work late.”

“How *is* Hristina?” Viktor asked, standing.

“Growing like a weed. She’s already eight. Baby’s walking, huh? Who put her up to that?” Lara asked mischievously.

“Me, mostly. Talking next. So I can send her home and they can tell her to sit down *and* shut up.”

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“So,” Lara said, propping her chin after putting down her coffee cup, “anything else of interest to share?” Again, it didn’t have the air of an innocent question. Lara hardly ever asked questions she didn’t already know the answer to.

“No. Why? What have you heard?” Viktor said, half wishing he hadn’t added that last.

“Funny you should mention that. Plenty. Seriously. You have no other news? And don’t try to hide from me. I’ve seen you in nothing but a towel and known you since Comets *weren’t* classic models,” Lara said with mock sternness.

"I've got no idea what you're on about," Viktor said. "Honestly."

"So you're *not* seeing someone?" Lara asked directly.

"See... wha? N... what made you ask that?" Viktor stammered, coloring. "I'm not... ready for anything like that..."

"I guess it was someone *else* Klaus Kroner saw at that restaurant a couple of weeks ago, then? Maybe he should get his eyes checked. Funny, he never forgets a woman's... well, let's be honest, he never looks at their faces much, does he?" Lara said, gesturing around her own torso. "And he never bothers with their names, either. But he never forgets a woman. He said it was the same one you were with in Russia. A lot. He obviously hates your guts ever since that summit, by the way. He almost shattered his teeth he was gritting them so hard when he said your name."

"Never was very fond of me. I didn't improve his opinion there. And why were you talking to that pompous windbag in the first place?" Viktor asked, recovering slightly.

"*He* talked to *me*. It's not like I could avoid it. Cocktail party. Dragomir's business friends, mostly. I'm sure Kroner's lady of the week was the one who got invited. You're trying to change the subject," Lara said, pinning him under a direct gaze that didn't allow for changing the subject any more. "You're not seeing anyone? Were you having dinner with a woman or not? It's *not* an accusation, Viktor."

"Not really. I mean, I was having dinner with someone, but... Dating? Not... exactly. A few lunches out, and... dinners at each other's houses... and a couple of dinners out... I mean, we've never called it..." Viktor trailed off and stared at the tabletop.

"A *few*? Sounds like you're seeing someone whether you admit it or not," Lara said gently. "I seem to recall you definitely 'not dating' someone else and you ended up spending twenty-seven years with her. Look," Lara said, putting her hand out and laying it over his on the table, "Magda wouldn't have wanted you to curl up and pretend you're dead or don't need anyone any more and cut yourself off because she's gone. You know that, don't you? She would royally kick your behind for it, in fact. I know you still miss her. I do, too. I won't pretend to know what it's like, but I do know letting yourself love someone else wouldn't be an insult to her memory. Not at all. Magda would want that for you if she couldn't be here. I do, too. I worry about you, sometimes. I would like to see you have that again," she added, giving his hand a squeeze.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to risk that again. Yet," Viktor said in a voice barely over a hoarse whisper. He turned his hand over and squeezed Lara's fingers, cradling

her hand on top of his, studying that instead.

“Love?” Lara prompted.

“Losing someone you love,” Viktor answered, swallowing hard.

“It’s the price you pay. We all risk it. Any time we love. If you had known,” Lara said, “when you got married, about Magda getting ovarian cancer, would you have called it off?”

“Not for the world,” Viktor said, raising his gaze to hers.

“Then, if you’re lucky, you’ll decide this woman is worth the same risk. If she is, she should understand. It doesn’t have to be all at once. It can be a little at a time.” Lara gave his hand a final squeeze, then withdrew hers. “Do you mind if I ask who this unfortunate woman is? If it’s none of my business, tell me.”

“Unfortunate?” Viktor asked.

“Well, she’s got a tough act to follow and she’s stuck with you, that’s two marks against. Three, if you count the misfortune that she’s actually met Kroner,” Lara said lightly.

“She didn’t always follow,” Viktor said, picking at the edge of his napkin. “Hermione happened to be at a conference when I was at the summit. We ran into... well, she spotted me. We had lunch while she was there. Kept me from strangling Kroner.”

“It’s not like you’re easily missed,” Lara said, covering her surprise. “It’s been a long time since you saw her.”

“A lifetime, more like. Several lifetimes. None of our children were alive the last time we saw each other. Well, here, anyway,” Viktor said. “The children were still pretty small the last time we wrote, even.”

“Older, but not wiser? She didn’t have the good sense to keep away from you, hmm?” Lara teased.

“I suppose not.”

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“I’ve got some good news,” Stan said tentatively, jogging his knee up and down with Evangelina astride his thigh.

"If it's about Mila, I already heard," Viktor said, not looking up from his book.

"Vlad has a big mouth. And that's not what I was talking about," Stan replied.

"What is it, then?" Viktor asked, closing the book and putting it down on the coffee table.

"Did he have to tell you about that?" Stan said peevishly.

"Yes, or he would have exploded. You know how he is. Shouldn't have told him first if you didn't want him beating you to it. News?" Viktor prompted again.

"I got promoted. Well, will be. Journeyman level. He's going to let me do a bit of design along with the usual production. As soon as we get some idea what the demand will be for fall, I'll know exactly how much I can do on my own," Stan said.

"From start to finish?" Viktor asked.

"From start to finish. Picking the cores and the wood and everything," Stan explained. "Not just deciding what they look like and crafting them to his specifications."

"That's... absolutely marvelous. Congratulations. I'll have to promptly brag on that come Friday morning," Viktor said.

"You won't," Stan protested, blushing and ducking his head. "You don't brag. About anything."

"I do about you three. I'm only half responsible, so I'm allowed. And that one," Viktor added, gesturing to the baby. "Speaking of that one, you care to keep her until sometime tomorrow evening? She's supposed to be staying overnight. I can probably be by to get her before her bedtime. Or you can just bring her over here to begin with if you prefer."

"Sure. Why?" Stan asked, looking up in surprise.

"Doing something else after work. Won't be able to go straight to pick her up," Viktor said vaguely, picking the book back up from the coffee table.

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"So, did you stop by for any other reason than to keep me from working?" Stan asked patiently, rubbing a little more varnish onto the piece of wood secured in the vise in front of him.

"Isn't that reason enough? I've got a few minutes to kill before my shift starts. I might as well kill it talking to you," Vlad said, straddling one of the workbenches and sitting down. "Seriously, I've got something to ask you."

"What?" Stan prompted, not looking up from his work.

"Is it my imagination, or is there something up with Tate?" Vladimir said finally.

"Define 'something up'..." Stan said, putting down the cloth.

"Well... is he... acting funny... to you?" Vlad asked. "Not... funny... but... unusual. Different."

"Noooo... what makes you ask that?" Stan asked, swiping a stray tendril of hair off his cheek and leaving behind a wide chestnut streak.

"Well, it's all going to sound silly. Until you start thinking about it all together. He's been awfully... quiet... lately," Vlad explained.

"As opposed to his usually gabby self?" Stan said in a disbelieving voice, looking skeptical.

"I mean about where he's going or what he's doing. Not all cloak and dagger or anything, but more than usual. Okay, look, it's nothing by itself, but add it up. You remember a few weeks ago, when Nikolina had to do inventory at the shop and I got called in? I've thought about it. Tate was trying to get rid of me," Vladimir pointed out.

"I would, too. You hover too much. All up in everyone's face like none of us know how to handle a baby. All up in the air over whether the baby gnawed a crayon or chewed on some parchment or got a speck of paint on her or whatever. Even Tate. And considering he managed not to kill you, even if you deserved it, once or twice, that's a shade insulting. He probably wanted you to shove off so he could do what he pleased without you breathing down his neck and fluttering about what kind of socks he's going to put on Evangelina," Stan said

"That's just it. Normally, he doesn't pay much attention. Just tells me to come in and tunes it out. He never shoos me off. He shooed me off," Vlad said indignantly. "And I'm better lately."

"I beg to differ, Mister 'Oh my heavens, you didn't let her swallow paint, did you?'," Stan shot back. "I'd shoo you, too, if I thought it would do any good. But obviously, it doesn't. Shoo. See?"

“Okay, fine. First baby. I worry. So sue me. I still say, it’s like he had another pressing appointment and wanted me gone. And that’s not all. You remember that morning I stopped by? I realized later, he had dishes in the sink,” Vlad pointed out.

“Well, alert the media. Tate didn’t do the dishes. So what?” Stan said dismissively, picking up a bit of sandpaper and going to work on another piece of wood, smoothing it.

“They were the nice set of dishes,” Vladimir elaborated.

“Gasp. Whatever’s next? Sitting at the kitchen table? In the chairs? He grabs whatever’s closer, I imagine,” Stan replied. “It’s not even like Mama saved them for anything special.”

“Two place settings,” Vlad said.

“So he didn’t do the dishes for more than a day. It’s not like he has anything else to-”

“I think there was lipstick on one of the coffee cups,” Vladimir blurted out.

“What? You think...” Stan said, looking up finally.

“I think. I can’t swear to it. I mean, I was pretty upset, bleary and tired, and I didn’t think much about it at the time, but... I don’t think anything on the plate was that color. It looked more like... lipstick. It was just around the rim. In one spot,” Vlad said, illustrating with his hands.

“That’s a pretty big leap...” Stan said skeptically.

“Not when you consider it with everything else. And how he reacted when I told him about you and Mila! He got the oddest look when I said, ‘Oh, I’m so excited about the family dating news,’ or whatever I said. Like he had been caught out at something for an instant. That got me to thinking,” Vladimir said. “Do you think he might be... seeing someone?”

“It’s always dangerous when you start *thinking*. But now you mention it... he *has* been going back and forth a lot. Could it all be for Hogwarts and McGonagall and trying to hammer out that Tournament? How many times can you talk about it? I mean, I know he’s working on it, he said... And what about the other week? When he wanted me to keep Evangelina for him for a little while? Said he had something else to do after work. Never said what it was...” Stan said, trailing off. “Maybe he’s not even taking the ferry because of Britain. I mean, I just assumed...”

"Tate's got a girlfriend," Vlad said bluntly.

"You really think?" Stan asked. "Who would it be? And where?"

"I think so. I have no idea. I doubt it would be anyone we know. I can't think of anyone about his age. He's not the type to go in for some little chippie half his age like... what's his name... Kroner. And I can't think of anyone his age that we know that is single or that he would be caught dead with. Certainly not that awful Madam Putin. He would have hives if he had been spending more than ten minutes with her," Vlad snickered. "Whoever invented the word 'harridan' must have known her personally."

"Don't even joke about that, she's horrid," Stan protested. "He would probably sooner cut his own arm off. I can't think of anyone, either. But... good for him if he does," he added after a moment's consideration.

"You would be happy about that?" Vlad asked, sobering.

"Well... sure. Wouldn't you? I mean, I worry about him. No reason he should be alone the rest of his life. Mama's been gone almost five years, we've all moved out, I think he's lonely, sometimes. I don't like the thought of him being lonely. Not when he doesn't have to be," Stan said after some thought.

"I would be happy for him, too. You know who wouldn't be too thrilled, though," Vlad said with a quick bob of his head.

"Madame Putin?" Stan replied with a grin.

"Anna," Vladimir said, all seriousness.

"Anna? Why wouldn't *Anna* be happy about it?" Stan asked.

"Because that was her mother and that's her father and she's his daughter," Vlad said matter-of-factly, as though that explained it.

"And? We're his sons. She was our mother, too. Same situation," Stan argued.

"Oh, no, it's not. Believe me. Not the same situation at *all*. Not by a long shot. We used to think it was downright funny when some woman was flirting with him. Well, Mama did, too, but that's neither here nor there. Remember how *angry* it used to make Anna? Even when she was small? Or for that matter, when she got older?" Vladimir explained. "Tate isn't just protective of her. She's probably *worse* about him."



"I wouldn't talk overprotective. I seem to recall someone *making* me go scare the hell out of some poor little second year that took Anna to a dance. Poor child wouldn't have known what 'behaving improperly' was, much less dared do it in the first place. Anna could have hexed him silly, anyway. She didn't need us stepping in. And thanks to you, I'm the one that got my ear chewed about it after, when she found out," Stan said. "And I still don't see how it's different. She's the baby, but that's got nothing to do with it. Tate sure didn't take it any easier on her than he did on us. He didn't coddle her any more, either."

"Do you remember what Tate said, after Evangelina was born? Congratulations, you have my sympathies, and good luck, because you're going to need it. And to think, I laughed. He warned me, and I didn't listen. He was right. You'll see, daughters are just *different*, he said. Fathers and daughters just *are*. I shouldn't have laughed. Trust me, I'm seeing it already," Vlad insisted.

"Now I think about it, I suppose you're right. She wouldn't be very happy about it, would she? You think she suspects anything?" Stan asked.

"Well, we're just speculating, really. But I doubt she would. She and Tate both travel so much, I doubt she would keep track like we do. We're the ones that see them both off and meet them when they come back. Tate knows where Anna is all the time because of the job. Anna's got no real reason to keep up with where Tate is absolutely all of the time. And I don't know about you, but *I'm* not about to be the one to tell her what we think," Vlad said.

"I'm not about to, either. If it's something he wants told, he'll tell it sooner or later. Until then, it's none of our business in the first place," Stan said. "Any of us."

"True. Doesn't mean it's not fun to speculate about, though. I had better get going, or I'm going to be late. We'll talk later," Vlad said, heading for the door.

"You mean you'll come harass me while I'm trying to work, later," Stan called after him.

"Same thing," Vlad tossed over his shoulder.

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Anna went to the icebox and picked out a few cubes of ice, dropping them into the small towel she carried. She limped to the sofa in the living room, sat down, swung her long legs up onto the cushions and gingerly put the towel to the hard, black bruise on her thigh. As expected, the cold stung her bare skin and the bruise throbbed when the muscle clenched. The scrimmage at practice had been a hard one, and one of the new practice reserves hadn't held back from going after the ball at all. Getting rammed by the broom handle had been almost

expected.

She could have had the mediwizards look at it, but Anna welcomed a few bruises and aches to take home with her. It reminded her the new season was about to start. She liked starting over with a clean slate, a whole new season of possibility stretching out in front of you, bigger and better than the last if you were willing to sweat and work for it. The quite respectable third place finish in the standings, just forty points out of first, with the National Team had only served to whet her appetite for the next season. It gave her something else to think about besides autumn and how much she hated it. How much it depressed her.

She had always hated autumn for some reason or other. When she was small, because it meant Vlad and, later, Stan would be heading back to school for what seemed to her eons at a time, though in retrospect she realized they made frequent visits back home, rarely away for more than a month without at least one weekend or a holiday break home. Most other students didn't come home nearly as often. Autumn had been the annual loss of her brothers, their chatter and teasing and fussing and coddling and even spoiling. She never truly appreciated their willingness to include her until they were both gone and there was nothing to be included in. No one to savor delicious little childish plots and plans that adults never understand.

The house had always seemed dreaded quiet in the first couple of weeks after getting back from the dock and seeing the two of them off in the ship. Though Mama and Tate had been just as willing to drop what they were doing in order to read her a story or play at something or walk to the lake for an afternoon, just for her alone, it simply wasn't the same. Not the same as when all three of them could gang up against mock protests of being too busy doing something very important and pretend to wear them down. Not nearly as wondrous and forbidden as all five of you playing hooky on a summer day from nothing much at all at the same time. It hadn't mattered that there wasn't any school to worry about, or that Mama could paint or draw just as well after your bedtime as before, or that when Tate was home instead of at practice or away at a match, there really wasn't much else to demand his attention besides Mama.

Fall had always meant everyone going in different directions. School started, and the boys headed back to school. Then Tate had preseason practices again, and matches, and she and Mama didn't always go along. When she had gotten old enough to look after herself well enough within the fairly friendly confines of the stadium, she had at least gotten to go to some of the practices when Mama couldn't or wouldn't.

That, at least, had been good for some grand little conspiracies of sorts between her and Tate. Secrets that took a bit of the sting out of autumn. Like not mentioning just how close to her head a rogue Bludger had come before one of

the Beaters had gotten to it. It had seemed more funny than scary after Tate had stopped squeezing her so hard that her ribcage hurt and she couldn't get her breath, and laughed a bit instead. And there were a few chances to handle a broom model well beyond her capabilities, without much intervention on Tate's part, save sitting behind her and nudging an elbow or giving a succinct bit of corrective advice now and again. But mostly, he silently trusted her not to run them into something, steer wrong or go too fast. And occasionally, when she begged just right and practice hadn't gone too long, a chance to sit in front and hang on for dear life while he did a Wronski Feint that put her close enough to the ground to smell the grass before they pulled up.

It was a ride that never failed to be equal parts dizzying, terrifying, and exhilarating, taking her breath completely. The arms braced tightly around her waist and the way he leaned over her and forced her down low over the broom handle meant she never budged. Anna couldn't have fallen off, even if she hadn't been holding on, but it always gave her white knuckles, nonetheless, going that fast and seeing the ground rushing up at her, the wind and the speed threatening to push her backwards and clear off the back of the broom if Tate weren't behind her, the blur of green, and then seats, boxes and banners, then sky, sun and clouds after pulling up, an instant after your heart stopped. He had finally taught her how to do it. She couldn't go nearly as fast or as low, but she had eventually been able to do a fair enough one. Not nearly convincing enough to plough a half decent opponent in his ranks, of course, but good enough to give her that same wild, barely controlled feeling that made your heart pound after it sunk in that it hadn't stopped for good.

He had done the same for Vladimir and Stan, too, when they had been at home. But neither of them had begged for more the same way she had. Neither of them had hounded him into showing them how. When she had gotten old enough to get on the ship, it had mostly put an end to going along to the practices, too. Autumn had claimed something else from her. Autumn had meant getting on the ship, without Vlad even her first year, with him nine years older, already out of Durmstrang and in the Mediwizard training program, dragging in at all hours with black circles under his eyes and reading over enormous medical texts when he wasn't sleeping after a long shift at the hospital shadowing someone else. She and Stan had only gotten in two years together before he was out, and in the same arts academy Mama had attended instead, and she was getting on alone every fall.

Anna had refused to admit how lonely and scared she had been, getting on the ship the first year, even with Stan unashamed to sit with her most of the trip and encouraging about what it was like. Tate hadn't talked much about it, except to reassure her that she would be fine, that the professors and classes wouldn't be anything she couldn't and wouldn't handle, and that Stan would be there to help take care of her. It had still pulled at her, the way Mama and Tate had held onto

her just a little bit longer than necessary before letting go, and how Mama had just about successfully hidden the fact that her eyes were tearing up a little, and not from the wind. Anna had overheard part of the rather depressed sounding conversation the two of them had held at the kitchen table about sending the baby off to school at last, when they had thought she was still outside.

Autumn always seemed to bring that same heavy, oppressive feeling of finality with it. No more baby at home all the time. No more spur of the minute mid-week trips to matches that Mama pulled off with nothing more than a duffle bag and no plans whatsoever on what to do when the match was over until the last possible second. Trips worked out around school took planning. No more staying up late in her pajamas, listening to the wireless and trying to figure out what the pairings were going to be come time for the National Team to play, or better yet, at the beginning of a Cup run. No more following every single match to guess who might end up playing against Tate. School demanded consistent bedtimes. No more feigning sleep by the time the announcers had signed off in order to get carried to bed. No more being woken up at odd hours of the night or near-dawn when Tate came back home from the occasional match where Mama and Anna hadn't gone along. He had always come in and sat on the edge of her bed, no matter what the hour was, tucked any wayward limbs back in, smoothed her hair back and kissed her temple, just as he once had for Stanislav and Vladimir, until they had declared themselves too old for kissing. Tate had still checked on them both for a good while after that, in any case. Apparently they weren't too old for getting their hair ruffled and a squeeze on the shoulder. Anna usually drifted back off to the comforting low drone of Mama and Tate's voices before they shut the door to their bedroom.

And fall wasn't even content to stop at taking that. Worse than the years where she had gotten on the ship was the year she hadn't gotten on the ship with the others. The year the season of death hadn't stopped at taking everything green outside. The autumn when not just the flowers and the trees had faded, withered and died, but Mama had, too. Anna had felt just as helpless in the path of Mama's illness as she was in the face of the advancing seasons.

Everyone else had been so maddeningly calm. The three of them had been called together into the living room, Mama had laid the situation out almost as though she were recounting what they were having for dinner, and no one had said a word. Not even Vlad, who always had something to say. Later, she realized that they were all three thinking they couldn't have really heard what they had just heard. Anna had waited for Tate to say something, something to fix it, or at least make it better, only he never did. He just sat there, in resigned, stoic silence. Nothing else could have driven home the fact that there *was* nothing that could fix it or make it better any more clearly.

In her head, she had wanted to kick, scream, rage against it, how unfair it was,

that it couldn't be true. Not Mama. Not the most alive person she knew. But her body hadn't responded. She had sat there, just like the rest of them, taking it in without moving for a while. Finally, Vlad had ventured to ask, "So... they think it's too far advanced... spread," his voice had cracked on the word, "too much for a course of treatment to be effective?" It had been a question, but not really. Anna could tell from the way he asked it. He already knew the answer.

"It's a matter of quality versus quantity. It wouldn't buy much time, anyway," Mama had said simply. "A mediwizard and a mediwitch said as much." The mediwizard would surely be the one they all knew. Vlad had asked who the mediwitch was, and Anna held her breath. But he had nodded grimly at the name, making no comment. Anna's heart sank. She had been hoping for an accusation of incompetence, at the very least, maybe a demand that she get another opinion from someone who wasn't a quack. Nothing of the kind. Obviously Vlad knew and respected the opinion and skill of whomever had pronounced the death sentence.

And that was that. It was the last time fighting it had been brought up and discussed. No matter how many times Anna had wanted desperately to ask why she wouldn't at least try, she had always bitten her tongue. Instead, talk had turned to "managing" things. Always the passive act of managing them. Managing the symptoms and the effects. Managing the discomfort. Eventually, managing the pain. The same mediwizard they had all gone to for childhood immunizations and repairs had come over a few weeks after and shown Vladimir how to brew up a simply awful looking potion with a cloying, sickly sweet smell, to numb the pain, how to adjust the potency and figure the proper dosage. Vladimir had come over from his flat and spent hours hovering over the necessarily small batches, with the same attention he had given to those enormous medical books, until the smell of it seemed constantly embedded in his hair and robes. After a few days, the smell of it had made Anna sick to her stomach. Vladimir had been able to retreat into being a mediwizard, into putting those skills to use. Into *doing* something. At least he could offer her a bit of relief.

Stan, not surprisingly, had retreated into art. He had already been working on his final portfolio for school in any case. He would come over from the nearby dormitory frequently, and Mama advised him on what to include, what to change, and why. They had spent hours, whole afternoons, sometimes, prattling on about concepts like angles and composition and lighting, things that seemed so foreign and garbled to Anna when she tried to wrap her head around them. More than once she had fought the urge to interrupt and ask them why it mattered. What did a bunch of pictures matter under the circumstances? Why would it matter if a line here were a bit thicker, or the shading a bit darker, or the texture a bit different? How could Stan even *think* about a thing like school and a possible internship when Mama was dying? But in her more charitable moments, Anna saw that it was a welcome respite for Mama to go off into that isolated world that

only artists knew, that only Stan completely understood. She had obviously enjoyed watching him sketch even after she had stopped completely, seeing the hands so like her own coax images out of nothing but parchment and smudges of charcoal. At least he could offer her a bit of distraction, make her feel involved and useful.

Tate had retreated into everything and nothing, all at the same time. By the time the illness showed on her face, he had requested and been granted an open ended leave of absence, length undetermined. He had gone and talked to the school, made arrangements for Anna to stay at home when the ship left, to do any necessary assignments on her own. She would return... after. Not surprisingly, the concession was granted rather quickly, thanks to who was asking and why. A tutor would come if necessary, they offered, but it never was. Sometimes she had to ask Mama or Tate for a nudge in the right direction, but she had always been able to keep up with or ahead of her schoolwork. It had been repeated over and over that schoolwork came first and sticking to a disciplined schedule was imperative. And for her own part, she knew it left more time for flying and such if she got homework out of the way. At home, at school, it made little difference. The assignments were worked on promptly and completed and returned in the same manner. Always. The reading and assignments arrived by owl, every day or two, in neat little bundles compiled by one of the professors, and Anna sent back the ones she had completed by the same bird, a never ending cycle almost as regular and nauseating as the batches of potion. She did them, but what did assignments matter?

Tate had said very little, as always, but it wasn't the sort of comfortable silence it used to be. There was a nervous and anxious, heavy air about him instead, so much so that Anna avoided asking any more than she had to, for fear of provoking something. As the weeks wore on, he always seemed to be just a wrong question or statement away from either raising his voice and snapping at you irritably or crying, and Anna couldn't have said which would have horrified her more if she had been the cause of it. It never happened, but it made Anna think twice about the way she had always shamelessly made demands on his time before. Before long, he was just as tired looking as Mama had been, dark circles under his eyes from the worry and catering to her at all hours, staying up with her when the ache was too bad to sleep, then getting up early, letting Vladimir know the next batch needed to be stronger. Every once in a while, he would simply walk out the back door without a word, and stand in the back garden, not moving, as though he needed to get away. But he never went too far, never out of earshot. The weaker Mama had gotten, the more she had latched onto him, clung to him. Literally and figuratively.

Though any one of them could have done a perfectly good *Mobilicorpus* to get her to either the bath or the kitchen table for meals, or indeed, even carried her, she was so light and petite, Mama had always insisted on Tate. She claimed



being moved by the spell was far more uncomfortable, and seemed to have drawn the line firmly at her children having to move her. The single time that Vladimir had tried to insist on doing it himself rather than going to fetch Tate just to pick her up and carry her to the kitchen for breakfast, Mama had snapped at him so viciously for it that he hadn't done it again. She had meekly apologized a few minutes later, of course, and Tate had murmured a quiet "That had nothing to do with you," and squeezed Vladimir's shoulder when he told the two of them to come eat some breakfast, but the sicker she got, the more Mama seemed to steadfastly refuse assistance of any kind from anyone but Tate. The company of her children she welcomed, even pleaded for, but she hated their help. It was a fearsome thing to so much as offer her a glass of water she hadn't requested first by the time she was taking her meals in bed as well. Nothing could provoke Mama's anger quite like insulting her pride. Anna supposed that having spent their entire lives protecting and providing for them, it made Mama ashamed to suddenly ask them to do the same for her.

Tate had been able to baby her like none of the rest of them could, without provoking as much protest or nastiness, aside from the occasional slightly sharp complaint when the potion was doing little more than taking the edge off the pain and she had to be moved right then. If Vladimir had become more a mediwizard, and Stanislav more an artist, Tate had become more of a father, steering sometimes directionless, hapless children toward where they could do the most good, smoothing over the rough spots between them and taking care of one increasingly petulant and needy patient that made almost as many demands as any infant.

If the rest of them had become more themselves, Anna had felt, if anything, she was becoming less and less herself. She had felt more purposeless and useless the longer it had gone on, no particular role to fulfill but occasional companion, cook and fetcher. In the beginning, Anna had at least been able to keep Mama a bit of company while she listened to matches on the wireless, to talk a bit about which teams were better than last season and which were likely going far in the standings. But it was nothing Tate didn't already do, and it wasn't the same as it had been when the three of them had sprawled around the living room listening to a match, commenting and arguing good-naturedly with the commentators and each other about calls and players. It just wasn't the same when she had to sit anxiously on the overstuffed chair beside the bed, or on the king-sized bed that was easily big enough for all three of them, and with Mama and Tate both so worn down that it wasn't unusual for one or both of them to doze off well before the match was over. More than once Anna had turned off the wireless before it ended, put out the light and slunk out, pulling the door closed behind her.

More and more, she felt like an intruder in the bedroom. It seemed reserved for Mama and Tate and that mysterious give and take, whatever it was that allowed Mama to let her guard down and accept help. It took more of Anna's willpower all



the time to make herself walk into the room, to face down exactly how sick Mama was, and how little she could do about it. Anna was ashamed of herself for being so horrified and pitiful, so sorry for herself. Anna had only cried the once during those weeks, and it had made her even more ashamed that Mama had been the one to see and comfort her. Anna had been getting increasingly unfocused, and the schoolwork had gotten harder and harder to do without practical lessons in the classroom. While she once wouldn't have hesitated to ask any of the rest for help with it, now, she was unsure where to go. The frustration of being unable to solve something so simple as a homework problem had been magnified beyond all proportion, wearing on her already frazzled nerves.

It had happened when she had fretted for hours over a particular potion she was required to work out the recipe for and then brew, started it, refigured it, and thrown it away three times when it had gone glaringly wrong, and had just about resolved to leave it until she could capture on Vladimir and beg his help. Even in her frustration, though, she realized it was unfair to ask Vladimir what she was doing wrong. By the time he came in from night shift, he was every bit as exhausted as Mama and Tate, and he had his own brewing to do for Mama. He was having to change it every few days by then, and it sometimes took him a couple of tries to get it right as well. She had finally resolved to swallow her pride and ask Mama or Tate when she was having a good moment. That was where Vladimir had gotten his knack for Potions in the first place, after all. From Mama.

Anna had pecked timidly on the bedroom door, afraid to wake either of them if they were asleep. But Mama had been awake and called her in. Tate had been sleeping instead, in his clothes and on top of the covers, snoring softly, barely louder than Mama's by now slightly raspy breathing. Mama must have had a particularly bad night the night before. Tate only slept that heavily when he was exhausted. Anna had crept around to Mama's side of the bed with her book, trying to ignore how ashen and pinched Mama's face looked, how bruised looking the smudges beneath her eyes were, how bony and wasted her wrists and arms seemed. Most of all, she tried to ignore how swollen her abdomen was beneath the covers as she sat propped against the pillows. She had overheard Vlad telling Stan that was a bad sign, the worse it got. "I need help with this," Anna had said pitifully, holding out the book.

"Of course, pilentse, sit up here," Mama had said, scooting over and patting the bed. Anna had shamelessly crawled in like a child, tucking herself as much as possible into Mama's side, her head against Mama's shoulder and arm, but mindful not to jostle the mattress much. Sometimes even the smallest things could make Mama wince. She was sure it looked absurd, with the way she towered over and dwarfed Mama, but she didn't care. She felt like the little child she had been addressed as. She had studied Tate, too, worried that she was going to wake him. "Is the snoring distracting? Taken care of," Mama had teased, reaching over and tickling a fingertip lightly across his cheek. He turned

his head in that direction without waking, and the snoring stopped completely. It was the sort of thing that had made her laugh when she was smaller and invited in on a morning after a late match, when Tate was sleeping in. The badly broken nose he had earned at seventeen meant he almost always snored slightly when flat on his back. Not that it bothered Mama. Mama would complain it was far too quiet without a bit of snoring every once in a while. "What is it, baby?" she had asked, cupping Anna's face with that same hand. Her hand had felt oddly clammy. One of the side effects of the potion, especially at higher potency, was sweating. Her skin was almost always damp, now.

"They want me to figure out the recipe to brew this. And I can work out all the ingredients, but not the right proportions. It's not right. I've started it three times and tossed it... it's all wrong... I can't do it... it's all wrong. It's just all wrong... I can't... can't-" To her horror, she heard her own breath unexpectedly hitch, and turn into a hiccupping sob, and fat, scalding hot tears were pooling in her eyes and flooding down her cheeks when she blinked. She would have bolted from the room if it hadn't been for Mama's arm around her shoulders and the hand on her cheek.

"It's okay, baby, let it out," Mama had said, pulling her in tighter and resting her chin atop Anna's head. Permission granted, Anna had buried her face in Mama's shoulder, clutching at the covers and Mama both, her whole body shuddering as though it were trying to wring her inside out, her crying almost completely silent. It was as though she had bottled it up for so long, she couldn't even sob or wail, just gasp for breath. It had seemed to go on for ages, until her face was a hot, wet mess, her nose and eyes burning, swollen and dry, no more tears left, her throat constricted and aching, and her body felt limp and rubbery. "Better?" Mama had asked simply when Anna dared show her face again. Anna had nodded mutely, even though it wasn't, really. "You'll figure it out without me, I'm sure. You'll see. You all will," Mama had said, brushing the sodden hair away from Anna's forehead and cheeks. Anna had stayed there in a heap, clinging miserably to Mama's waist, tasting salt whenever she licked her raw lips, for a long while. Until Mama had patted her cheek and said, "Go wash your face, it will make you feel better. And give that another try. I bet you can figure it out on your own. I need to get up."

Anna had complied, slipping off the bed and hurrying down the hall to the other bathroom, before Mama even woke Tate. She would have been even more ashamed to have him see she had been crying. The damp patch of her tears wouldn't even show since Mama's pajamas had already been soaked all over. Besides, she couldn't bear to watch it any more, to see Tate have to work out how to pick Mama up without making her moan.

By the time Anna had been asked to stay with Baba and Diado instead, it had almost been a welcome relief. The last couple of weeks Mama had been alive

had been reserved mostly for Tate, and Vlad poked his head in daily, but not really to visit. Anna had said her goodbyes and I love yous before leaving the house, the words catching in her throat. Stan hadn't gone back to the house after that day, either. Mama simply wasn't up to company any more, even her children. From what Vlad passed along, it sounded like the only person she even tolerated was Tate. Instead, the two of them got daily updates from Vlad, carefully filtered words chosen from words that had already been carefully filtered by Tate in the first place. No matter how clinical they were, they all amounted to the same thing, anyway. Mama's dying. The words had pounded in her head relentlessly, a tattoo that beat behind her eyes and wouldn't leave her be. She had jumped at every knock on the door and Floo call, sure it was Vlad coming with the news that she was finally dead. Anna didn't know whether to hope against it or hope for it. Both seemed equally cruel.

When he finally had come in one morning with Stan to deliver the news, Anna had cried again, great whooping sobs, unable to hold back when Vlad and Stan's faces had both crumpled. They had all three sat on the sofa and she had shamelessly let them take turns cradling her head against their solid shoulders, and cry with her. She had gone home late that same evening, after Tate had finished making arrangements for the funeral, already cried out. The funeral and the days home afterward had all passed in a dreary, lifeless blur, with a gaping hole where Mama should be. Tate hadn't even mentioned her going back to school until early December, and even then he had suggested going back after Yule, seemingly reluctant to even bring it up. He had gone back to work at about the same time. Reluctantly, but he had gone back in December, back to a routine of sorts.

The two of them had fallen into a comfortable enough pattern after a bit, Anna doing schoolwork while he was at the office, Stan and Vlad in and out throughout the day as their schedules allowed, Tate home promptly when the day was over, for dinner and quiet evenings. After a while they even listened to a match sometimes, without talking much. It was as much a worry as a relief that Tate never cried in front of her. On the one hand, she dreaded the possibility. On the other, it nagged at her. Why didn't he cry, not once, not even at the funeral? Weren't they allowed to cry? Didn't he miss her? Or was he so relieved it was over he didn't even want to cry? Was he maybe even glad to be rid of her, her constant demands and neediness?

Maybe Tate had kept his crying private, she reasoned. She certainly had, after that. Yule had been a subdued affair, spent together eating and talking, not much in the way of presents or celebrating between the four of them. None of them had the heart for it. Tate had put her back on the ship in January, after a hug that reminded her a little too much of the first time she had gotten on. Anna had thrown herself into her schoolwork, into prepping for final exams, into flying, into her spot in Quidditch, into everything fiercely, as though she could get some

control back by tackling every project, wrestling it into submission and ripping its throat out. She had stayed on until the next holiday break, no weekends home, trying to catch up in one on one sessions with the professors. But outside of that, everyone gave her a wide berth, even the professors, uncertain what to say but a wholly inadequate “I’m sorry”. She had always kept somewhat to herself anyway. Most of the personal attention she had gotten from anyone other than her teammates had always tended to be the negative kind. People whispering about who she was, that she got special treatment. Even a few of the professors, she knew they had said that, before they taught her. A few of them had been completely surprised to have her prove them glaringly wrong, or to have Tate come in and talk to them and demand not that they go easier on her, but that they go that much harder. And if the scars on her heart hadn’t quite healed by the time spring had fully come and she had gone home for a week’s holiday around Easter, they had at least scabbed over.

Spring proper had been a little better, giving her exams and the distraction of scouts coming to matches to watch her play, congratulating her on her skill, slipping her their cards, jotting schedules on the back for tryouts. Tate eventually sat down with her one weekend to weed out a handful of them with terse commentary like, “Bad news, that one,” and “I wouldn’t consider that squad unless you have to,” after glancing at the names on them. She hadn’t dared to say it out loud, but she was really seriously considering only the one. Vratsa. His finger had lingered on that card for an instant longer, the all too familiar names on it, and then left it. She thought Tate knew, or at least suspected that she had her heart set on it, anyway. He hadn’t discouraged her from it, but he hadn’t exactly encouraged it, either, maybe hedging his bets against her being disappointed. He had kept himself at a slight arm’s length during these things, because of how it would have looked, otherwise.

He had cautioned her over and over about the sort of opposition she should expect, at any of the tryouts, but it was nothing new. It had always been that way. Just a little extra hurdle, a little extra challenge, a little extra fire to make her want to prove herself. Every cheeky reporter or photographer, every snide comment, every smart remark, every derisive, muttered taunt of “Daddy’s girl,” from the other players at the tryouts made her that much more determined that if she was going to go out for a squad, it was damned well going to be the one that was the best squad in the league eighty percent of the time. If she put on a uniform, it was going to be the same one Tate had worn, or none at all. She simply refused to let herself merit anything less. Not that she hadn’t been realistic. Far from it. If she got onto Vratsa’s roster, it would be as a practice reserve, not an active squad member right away. Unlike some of the others trying out, she wasn’t too proud to accept a place on a squad that didn’t put her straight into matches the next season. Some of the others would have been disdainful of such an attitude. But she knew Tate was right. If she was going to be her best, she needed a challenge, and time to develop, not pampering and preening as a token name on

a subpar squad. Chasers just didn't come in at seventeen or eighteen and take over a team. If Vratsa's coaches knew anything, it was how to develop a player, not a prima donna. A lot of the others would have thought her insane for sifting through four eventual offers early that summer, discarding all the ones that offered her first string, and immediately accepting a second string appointment with Vratsa. She had signed it and owed it back, afraid to tell Tate until she had gotten the final contract back, lest it evaporate unexpectedly. Somehow it had made her prouder to hear him tell her she had made the right decision than it had to have gotten the offer in the first place.

For her first season, she had lived at home, Tate had sat in on a lot of the scrimmage sessions, and they had both traveled a great deal. As their schedules diverged further all the time, it seemed more practical for her to get a small flat of her own instead of barging in and out at home. Anna stopped feeling like she needed to keep an eye on him. Slowly, very slowly, Tate had started mentioning Mama again in casual conversation, and Anna had, too. The scabs slowly scarred over, healed, but not ever the same again. Holidays were still a little bittersweet, birthdays and would-be anniversaries were a shade somber sometimes, but life went on, and there were things to celebrate again. Stan graduating into the exclusive internship at the wandmaker's shop, Vladimir getting his certification, Vladimir and Nikolina getting married, the birth of a plump, dark-haired, snuffling little whelp they all doted on, with the ridiculously oversized name of Evangelina Magda Krum.

Those things seemed to dull the throbbing of the scars. They only got truly raw and red when it was autumn, and everything started dying again. Then she sometimes got maudlin for no particular reason that she could put her finger on, more frequently as the days shortened and the sun hid away earlier and earlier in the evening. That was when she would usually wander over to Tate's, no matter what the hour, without an excuse of any kind. She thought he understood without her having to come up with one. She didn't need an excuse with Tate. Anna had even woken him up a few times, obviously, unaccountably desperate for some company, but far from being annoyed, he had seemed pleased. She couldn't count the times they had eaten a spur of the moment breakfast at midnight, just indulged the baby if she happened to be with one or the other of them, or walked to the lake for a swim that would have had anyone else complaining about possible frostbite.

Anna lifted the towel from her thigh. The skin was an angry red, the blood beneath the skin a nasty mixture of purple and downright black. The skin was hard and rigid, and the throb was spreading. She cursed herself for not having the mediwizards look at it. No matter. It was as good an excuse as any, not that she needed one. Anna was sure Tate kept some ointment for bruises, and she needed him. Needed him to help keep the weepy feeling at bay before it threatened to turn into full-fledged weeping. She hated feeling sorry for herself

when there was no excuse. But Tate always made her feel like she didn't need an excuse. She got up and limped off in search of her sandals. She could Apparate to the bottom of the hill and slog up it well enough, without freezing before she got there. It wasn't that cold out yet.

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"I really should do something about that coffee table," Viktor said, nudging the leg of the table with the toe of his boot.

"Like what?" Hermione asked, leaning back and resting her head against his arm.

"I don't know. Padding Charm, on the corners, maybe," Viktor replied.

"What's next? Padding the entire world?" Hermione said.

"If only. I do feel a little bad about it. My granddaughter seems to have inherited my unfortunate tendency to cushion all serious blows with the face. She had quite the shiner. I almost sent her home with a piece of steak for it. She ran straight into that corner, there, full tilt. I suppose it hurt me worse than it did her. And Vlad. She only sniffled around for about thirty seconds," Viktor admitted. "Looks worse than it is, really. Little rat ordered me to put her back down not long after. She's getting pretty good at that bossing. I knew there was a downside to her learning to talk. Not that she had any trouble being the boss when all she could do was point and grunt. She's got several very willing minions."

"You're not in trouble, are you?" Hermione asked with a laugh.

"No. I think Vladimir's gotten his head wrapped around the fact that toddlers... well, *toddle* into things, by now. And that you can't altogether prevent it. You could pad the entire house, and a child will find the one corner you missed and promptly run smack into it. Twice, probably. And almost certainly with her face. Next, we'll see if we can't get across that kids occasionally eat things that aren't exactly food items and still come out none the worse for the wear," Viktor said with a chuckle.

"Toddler school of hard knocks, hmm?"

"Have to eat so much dirt before you die," Viktor said. "Or that's what my Baba used to say." He absently reached up and twined his fingers in her hair, then slipped them under, skimmed them against the bare nape of her neck. Hermione closed her eyes for a few moments, tipping her chin forward so he could brush her hairline. Viktor's fingers trailed around beneath her earlobe, then drifted down the side of her neck, onto the hollow of her shoulder. Without thinking, Hermione tilted her head away again, letting his fingertips slide up and down



over her warm pulse, which seemed to have picked up, down into the dip next to her collarbone. They stilled after a bit, resting lightly on her shoulder, hesitant, uncertain.

"I would rather you didn't do that," Hermione blurted.

"Touch? Sorry... I-" Viktor stammered.

"Stop. I would rather you didn't stop," Hermione amended. The fingers came back to rest on her shoulder again, perched there like a bird about to start. After a few moments, they trailed down her arm and back up. Hermione put her left hand on his thigh, stroking, kneading the muscle. Her eyes were still closed and her head tilted forward when she felt his mouth against her jaw and neck, warm against the thin skin. It made her suck in her breath, it was such a leap from the chaste kisses on the cheek that they had finally gotten up the courage to exchange upon parting. Hermione had kissed other men after Ron, of course. Some of the not so successful dates had insisted on going through all the motions, but none of them had been half so good as even the early, shy, delicate brushes of her cheek that she had gotten from the two of them. And they certainly couldn't hold a candle to the kisses either Ron or Viktor had given her when the shyness and hesitation had fallen away.

It might seem absurd to some that they had started again at the ground floor, shy and uncertain, when they had once been anything but reserved with one another, had known each other, technically, longer than any of their children, even, but somehow, it seemed right to act like naive teenagers again. The first time, they had been completely inexperienced, feeling their way along together. Now, they had led whole other lives apart, and were just taking their hearts out of the boxes again. But the kiss currently tickling at the lower hollow of her neck felt anything but naive. Hermione could feel her cheeks flushing. Another kiss like that, and her cheeks wouldn't be the only thing flushing. "Kiss me," Viktor whispered in her ear, then nuzzled against her cheek. There was an edge of pleading and need to it.

If Hermione had been thinking straight, she might have hesitated, wondering *how, where, should she?* But only two men had ever been able to rattle her out of her usual pattern of thinking things to death, and one of them had been gone a decade and more. The other had just asked her to kiss him. Before she knew it, she had turned into him, put her hands on either side of his face, and pressed her mouth into his. They fumbled for a moment, a shade rough and clumsy for an instant, then found just the right balance and angle, the only noise their breathing, sucked in sharp through their noses, his breath warm on her cheek. Viktor's large hands snaked around her waist and hips, around behind, cradling her back and then rubbing up and down, up between her shoulders, his palms hot through the material on her skin. Hermione ran her fingers back, twined them



in his hair, clutched at it almost desperately, making a quiet near whimpering sound in the back of her throat.

Viktor pulled back for a split second, then kissed her again, mouth wandering away from her lips, nose pressed against her cheek, trailing over it, wandering over even her jaw and chin as she slipped her arm under his, around his waist, pulling him closer, pulling herself closer. He kissed the very corner of her mouth, just barely skimming her lips, and a noise registered. A quiet, almost indistinguishable gasp. A noise that Hermione was certain neither she nor Viktor had made. Hermione pulled away and looked over his shoulder, toward the kitchen doorway, the direction where the noise had seemed to originate. There, looking so much like the lanky sixteen-year-old in the portrait above the mantle, and even more like her father in person, was surely Anna. Her hair was pulled back in a similarly haphazard ponytail, slender legs and arms long and mostly bare beneath a pair of gray shorts and a worn, gray shirt. With the wide, dark eyes and the frankly shocked expression, she reminded Hermione of nothing so much as a startled deer, too surprised to move, but every instinct screaming at her to run. A massive bruise blemished most of one thigh.

“Viktor...” Anna was obviously caught with her guard down, now, and Hermione’s first thought was to wonder if she was usually as good as Viktor had been about keeping her face neutral. Hermione had only seen the nearly unreadable expression slip a very few times during the war. When it had, it had been startlingly easy to read his face. Just as easy as it was to tell when Anna’s shocked expression dissolved into one of recognition, then, unexpectedly, she looked as though she had been completely and utterly gutted. Hermione’s heart lurched in her chest just to see it. “Anna’s-” Hermione was cut off by Anna’s muttered words. Her Bulgarian was rusty enough, but it was clearly recognizable as a guttural obscenity, just from the tone, if nothing else.

“Anna...” Viktor said, turning to face her. He, too, seemed taken aback by the expression on Anna’s face. He stood up and walked toward her, pausing uncertainly when she stepped back and bumped her hip into the doorframe. Viktor started speaking in Bulgarian, and walked toward Anna again, the words so rapid that Hermione couldn’t hope to keep up, only catching a syllable or a word here and there, especially when Anna started talking, too, a confusing crash of foreign sounds overlapping and colliding. Viktor looked as though he were having a hard time deciding whether to be hurt or angry after a few sentences.

Hermione could barely understand a word of what Anna was saying, but the tone wrenched at her again. It sounded like a cornered, wounded animal given voice, pure anguish with a rising tide of fury behind it, equal parts of each coming through when she broke into nearly the same impeccable but still heavily accented English Viktor had employed by his late twenties, pointing an accusing

finger back at the couch and asking, "How *could* you?" Anna's voice trembled, whether from anger or from being on the verge of tears, Hermione couldn't tell.

"How could I what? Want to *be* with someone?" Viktor asked incredulously. Though he had said Anna was nearly his height, Hermione was still stunned by the way Anna could look him directly in the eye, with the same determined set to her jaw, the same stubborn tilt to her chin.

Anna looked Hermione over, obviously struggling with what to say. Hermione couldn't shake the feeling that Anna wouldn't have been nearly as thrown if she hadn't recognized the woman whom she had caught her father kissing. Or if it had been anyone but her. Anna turned back to face Viktor, crossed her arms, and forced the words out through clenched teeth. "In *this* house... in front of... with *that*...with *her*..." Finally, a coherent sentence. "What about Mama? What about her?"

Viktor's mouth worked soundlessly for an instant. Quietly, almost so quiet that Hermione couldn't make out the words, he answered flatly, "Mama's dead. I'm not." Hermione would have thought she had imagined Anna slapping him completely, had it not been for the sound of it and the way Anna looked totally horrified with herself, ashamed, the instant she had done it, dropping her chin and looking away. Viktor reached out and forced her chin back up, made her look him in the eye once more. He looked positively wounded, and his voice was firm but breaking. "Don't you *ever* do that again. I think we need to have a talk. Long overdue. *Now*."

"I think I had better go," Hermione announced to no one in particular, getting up and moving closer to the door.

"I think that would probably be best," Viktor said without even looking her way. "We'll talk later."

"I... of course..." Hermione floundered for something to say, and came up wholly and completely dry. In the end, she decided there was no way to extract herself elegantly, so she settled for grabbing her cloak and hurrying out the door, tears blurring her vision by the time she was at the bottom of the hill. It was hard to say what hurt worse. The way Anna had looked at her, or that it was made glaringly plain that at least one of his children had absolutely no idea that she and Viktor had been seeing one another. Or indeed, that he had been seeing anyone at all.

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After the door had slammed shut, Anna's legs finally seemed to respond to the *get out* command her mind had telegraphed earlier. She turned and would have run for the back door, if Tate hadn't grabbed her arm. "Here, now! You don't get

to come in here, yelling at me like a banshee and expect to just run off when you're finished. Sit!" He steered her over to one of the kitchen chairs and gently pushed her down onto it. She could barely see it for the tears fogging up her eyes "We're going to talk, you and me. Let me get you something for that awful looking leg, first," he added. It made Anna's throat constrict even more to hear his voice crack like that, strained and broken over the words. She could dimly hear him rummaging through the cabinet over the sink. "Put your leg up here," he ordered, flopping into the neighboring chair and pulling it closer to her, where she could easily drape her leg over his.

He jerked his glasses off and set them on the table hastily, soaking the cloth in his hand with the liquid from the familiar vial. Anna kept her head down, watched him brace her leg with one hand, swabbing the cloth gently over the massive bruise with the other. "Tate..." she said miserably.

"Why didn't you let them look at this? It's settled, even," he added, swabbing the underside of her leg, clear down behind the knee, where the blood had seeped and settled beneath her skin. "You're going to be sore for a week. That's what team mediwizards are *paid* for, you know. To fix you up when you need it. Stop being so *stubborn* and *pigheaded* and admit you need a little taking care of once in a while!" he scolded sharply.

Anna made a noise halfway between a sob and a laugh. "You sounded like Mama getting after *you* just now," Anna squeaked out.

"Well, maybe Mama knew what the hell she was talking about!" he snapped angrily. "Maybe if she had taken her own damned advice-" Anna felt something warm and wet drop onto her leg. It certainly wasn't the potion. That felt cold. Anna looked up in surprise. She realized now why he had removed the glasses. She hadn't noticed until just now that he was weeping. Maybe he hadn't been until just now. He bit down on his lower lip hard and made a half strangled sound in the back of his throat. "*Why* would you *think* I didn't love your mother? How on earth could you even *ask* that?"

"I didn't... I..." Anna wanted to reach out and touch him, but she was half afraid he would crumble, somehow. Part of her would give anything now to be able to take the words back. But the last of the hurt and spite welling up in her chest needed out. "It's just... why *her*? Why *that* woman? You were with her, *before* Mama. I know her. Mama showed me the pictures. You might have married her, she said. *Would* have if it hadn't been for... *whatever*... Were you just waiting around to go back to her? What *was* Mama? The consolation prize? You didn't even *cry* when she *died*," Anna wailed, dissolving into tears, burying her face in her hands.

"Like *hell* I didn't!" he said, setting her leg off of his before snatching her wrists

away from her face.

"But you *didn't*... at the *funeral*... We cried. You didn't!" Anna accused.

"Because I was afraid if I got started, I wouldn't be able to stop! I didn't have anything left, anyway! You can only cry so much," he added softly. "I was trying not to fall completely apart in front of all of you," he said, cupping her cheek with one hand. "In front of you. It just about killed me, losing Magda... Sometimes the only thing that kept me going was the thought that you still needed me. That somebody still needed me to keep it together. Otherwise... You can't honestly believe I didn't love your mother... can you?"

Anna shook her head slowly and swallowed hard. "But you were with her first. Loved her. Mama said-

"I *married* your mother."

"But *why*? If you loved *her* first-

"She has a *name*. Hermione. It's not that simple, baby. Loving someone isn't the be all and end all. And you *do* understand you're not restricted to loving just one person your entire life, don't you? You can love two people equally and differently and separately-" He stopped abruptly and sucked in his breath. "Who do I love more? Who do *you* love more, Vlad or Stan?"

"Neither. That's different," Anna said without hesitation.

"No, it's not. They're two different people, and we love them for themselves. Not better, not worse, just different. Yes, baby, I guess if things had been different, maybe I *would* have married Hermione instead, and I suppose we would have been happy enough, and I never would have even *met* your mother... But they weren't. And I have never for one second regretted that they weren't. Not then. Not now. Yes, I loved Hermione. Cared about what happened to her even after I met Magda. Still did even after we married and lost touch. But Magda's the one I loved when the time was right, when I was ready for it. She knew that. She's the one that suggested we invite Hermione to the wedding. That's what she showed you, isn't it? The wedding pictures?"

"And some from... before. When you were... over there..." Anna said vaguely. By the time she had gotten big enough to wonder, it had been made abundantly clear that you didn't bring up the war directly around Tate.

"You know your mother. She never would have stood being second best to anyone. Do you really think she would have kept those if she felt like I just picked her because she was there and would rather have been with someone else? For

your information, Hermione was still single when I married your mother. If I had really been pining away for someone else, instead, I still had the choice at the time. But there was only one choice. Hell, falling in love with your mother was the *last* thing I wanted to do at the time. Believe me. I was a mess. I didn't deserve her. Not that I really deserved either of them, but I suppose that's what makes it love in the first place. The fact that you don't really deserve it. Can't deserve it. I still don't know why Magda bothered. She could have had anybody she wanted. A lot better than me. Magda didn't have to pick me, either. I know this might shock you, but we both had lives before we had you. Before we met each other, even. She dated other people, too. Look, baby," he said, putting his hands on either side of her face, "I married your mother with the full intention of spending every day of the rest of my life with her. I should have died first," he said bluntly. Anna felt slightly taken aback. "I was a man, I was a little bit older, I had a dangerous job where you have a really good chance of getting your head bashed in... I should have died first. I was *supposed* to die first." His lip trembled slightly, the tears flowed again, wet lashes looking even darker.

"Tate..." Anna breathed.

"Damn it, I buried enough people before I was even twenty. I shouldn't have had to bury her, too. And you know what makes me so *angry* about it? I have replayed that year before she died over and over again in my head, a thousand times, and I don't see that first thing we could have or should have done differently. No big red flags, no warnings, no *nothing*. I wish there had been. I would give *anything* if there had been. I would have traded places with her in a heartbeat if I could have. You needed her," he said, smoothing her hair back. "*I* needed her. It broke my heart, losing her. There were days I wouldn't even have bothered getting out of bed if it hadn't been for you being here. Days I could have just curled up and died, it hurt so bad. There's not a day that goes by that I don't still miss her. That doesn't mean life stops, or that I'm not human. I'm *lonely* sometimes, baby. You've all got lives of your own, now. I do, too. Maybe, if I'm lucky, I get two chances with someone I don't deserve. If I haven't screwed it up beyond all repair."

Anna pitched herself forward, half throwing herself, half collapsing into him, her arms clasped desperately around his ribs, the way she had done when she was small and had to stretch much too far to get her arms up around his neck without a boost. "Don't say that, Tate, please, it wouldn't have been any better, losing you... I'm sorry... it just surprised me... I missed her *hard* today... and I needed you... and seeing it made me think... Fucking dead leaves," she swore softly into his collarbone, weeping.

One hand came up behind her head, cradling it, the other massaged between her shoulders, the same way it had countless times when some childhood hurt had driven her to seek this same sort of solace. "I know, Anna. I know, baby," he

whispered. He kissed the top of her head and they just cried together for a while. When she stopped, Anna stayed as she was, reluctant to pull away, to give up this safe place. Being held. Protected. "Anna... I made a mistake. I see that, now. I thought keeping it hidden was being strong for you. I should have shown you it was okay. It's okay to miss her. It's okay to mourn. Your mother tried telling me that keeping things in wasn't a good idea. I should have told you. I should have told all three of you about the war, too. I just wasn't ready for you to know that much about me, when you were growing up. I guess I was afraid of disappointing you. Exposing you to ... *that*. And I certainly shouldn't have kept the three of you in the dark this long about running back into Hermione. Seeing her. That wasn't fair to the three of you, and it certainly wasn't fair to her. And I need to talk to Stan and Vlad, too. I think you need to understand some things. About the war. About me. About your mama."

"Like what?" Anna asked, sniffing and sitting upright again.

He took a deep breath. "Best to begin at the beginning, I suppose. When I was seventeen, I went to Hogwarts, for the revival of the Triwizard Tournament. First time I ever set foot on the grounds. You've been there, too. You were just too young to remember. McGonagall still remembers you. And Hagrid *still* talks about what a 'cute little shaver' you were," he said, smiling faintly. "He kept saying you were such a pretty little mite, and you would just stare a hole through him like you didn't know what to think unless he let you pull his beard and pretended it hurt to make you laugh. Grant you, I did the same thing. Not the beard, stared, I mean. It was pretty hard not to. I took you and Mama with me when I went there for a meeting. I wanted her to see it... Anyway... seventeen... I should have known from the instant I got off the ship that life was never going to be the same after that. Never as simple and straightforward. Not that that was entirely a *bad* thing..."

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Viktor padded into the kitchen and put on a dim light. He couldn't sleep in any case, so he might as well make some coffee. It was near enough morning that he thought a couple hours of sleep would likely make him feel worse rather than better. Anna was currently sleeping down the hall, in his bed, worn out by the time they had finished. Or truth be told, after *he* had finished. Strangely, he felt more unburdened than he would have expected. Normally, even thinking about what those last few months had been like made him feel like a twenty pound weight had been lodged in his chest. But he had always gone over it by himself. Maybe he had needed someone else to confirm that there really *hadn't* been anything they could have done differently. All the symptoms had seemed so benign, even in retrospect.

What was odd about putting on a few pounds? She had always tended a little



more toward the curvy side after the children. What would have been an extra five pounds on anyone else actually looked good on her. Why would a little thing like a few aches in her legs and back be strange? He had always told her hunching over her work and sometimes perching on rickety stools couldn't be good for that. She had shrugged it off as nothing more than standing, sitting or bending too long, more intent on her work than her posture. Her monthly cycles had never been something you could set your watch by. When they got more erratic and sparse, it was nothing more than starting to go through the change a little earlier than expected. And everyone got heartburn or indigestion every once in a while, didn't they? Even the mild nausea and fatigue hadn't raised any alarm. At first. Surely just a bug, she had protested. Magda had even joked that the last bug of that sort had turned out to be over ten pounds and was currently costing them a small fortune in medical training tuition.

For a couple of days, there was a little bit of nervousness that it might be so. It certainly wasn't unheard of at their age, even among Muggles. It wouldn't even have been as big a surprise as finding out about Vladimir's pending arrival had been, really. Harder to explain and adapt to, perhaps, but certainly no bigger a surprise. They seriously discussed the possibility briefly the night before the bleeding had started. They had been, frankly, a little relieved, then. Only... it hadn't stopped completely. And she outright yelped when he had given her a squeeze around the waist one night in bed. That had been when he had insisted she was going to the mediwizard tomorrow even if he had to drag her and sit in the waiting room all day. Viktor realized just how bad she must feel when she not only failed to protest, but agreed right off.

The same silver-haired mediwizard that had diagnosed all three pending births, monitored their progress as they had grown, then come to the house at all hours to pull them into the world, yowling, and tended to a host of the usual childhood ailments and injuries in the years that followed, had gladly made a place in his schedule. Viktor knew it was bad the instant the man looked rattled. Viktor had never seen him look shaken like that, not even when Vlad had managed to split his head wide open on the banister, or when Stan had taken a worryingly long time to breathe and cry properly, or when Anna had been down with pneumonia and a fever so bad that he had insisted on a night in the hospital. He apologized profusely for the uncomfortable examination, part of which had literally brought tears to Magda's eyes, and stepped out for several minutes. Viktor dreaded him coming back.

When he had come back and opened his mouth, it was even worse than Viktor could have imagined. "Viktor... Magda... I'm sorry... I wish I could tell you something different, but I did the tests three times..."

Magda had taken it better than he had. "We're getting a second opinion. Somewhere else," Viktor had said. He couldn't accept it. Refused to accept it



without protest.

“Viktor...” Magda had said in a warning tone. She couldn’t have given him a dirtier look if he had literally spit in the mediwizard’s face.

“No, I would encourage that, actually. I’m far from an expert in these things. I rarely see it... I can recommend someone. At the hospital. She deals with this sort of case more than I do. She’s considered top of her field. I’m sure I can call in a favor, get her to see you in the next day or two...”

They had gone off the next day, clutching a slip of parchment with a name on it, searching out the office and spending most of the day there. They hadn’t worried much about the possibility of running into Vladimir on his swing shift. He was still training exclusively on the other wing, wrapped up in the alternating assignments to the maternity ward and the emergency ward. They still broke in new trainees by subjecting them to life’s bookends on crazy, demanding, ever shifting schedules. One assignment where you mostly ushered patients into life, and another where you sometimes ushered them out, or snatched them back from the edge.

The appointment meant hours of prodding and scans, tests and questions. The mediwitch had obviously earned her reputation. She was nothing if not thorough and knowledgeable, even gentle. Didn’t matter. It was the same diagnosis. Same prognosis. They could treat it, but there wasn’t much point, unless you were a glutton for punishment. It was cancer, it was aggressive, and it had spread. Treating it would maybe delay the inevitable, but not by much. The best she could offer was the advice to make Magda as comfortable as possible while she was waiting to die.

Magda’s joke about being pregnant had been an apt irony, it turned out. Viktor had the thought more than once that the whole thing played out like some sort of gruesome parody of Vladimir’s birth, starting with many of the same vague, non-specific symptoms, ending with a swollen belly, pain, sweat, and tears, only this time, all for nothing. Both times there had been the startling revelation that something had long since taken root and been growing in secret, inside her body. Magda had already been creeping up on eight weeks of pregnancy before she had really suspected. Before they had found out there was life growing inside her. This time, it was death growing inside her, instead.

They kept it between the two of them for two long weeks. Magda was adamant about making all the discreet arrangements they could before telling the children. She briefly considered, then firmly and completely rejected the idea of treating it, despite the few, half-hearted attempts he had made to convince her it might be worth a try. Viktor suspected she had “considered” it simply to humor him. They had purchased a joint cemetery plot and headstone, and both of them updated

their wills. And they simply nodded and made polite noises when they were complimented on their 'rare foresight' during these transactions. It all seemed to have a queer air of unreality to it, this business of being heartily congratulated on not putting these things off like most people did, when the thing he wanted most desperately was to be able to put these things off another hundred years, at least.

He had felt incredibly numb and resigned by the time they told the children. Magda started being more open about the concessions she was making, and Viktor started ticking them off in his head. Three nights in a week where she had to take something to settle her stomach. That was one more than the week before. Sitting instead of standing in front of the easel in the studio, because of the twinges in her legs and back. She hadn't done that at all the week before. Changing into something looser, because of the pain and the swelling. Gritting her teeth and curling up on her side in bed, some nights. Not refusing when he offered to rub the small of her back, to help ease it down. Admitting she needed the dose to be stronger next time, when he suggested it. Allowing it was too painful and tiring to walk any more than she had to, and that the fatigue and shortness of breath crept up on her even when she just walked from the bedroom to the kitchen.

Then there were concessions on top of the concessions. Magda's decline had been shockingly rapid once she had conceded the big things. Not just accepting offers of help, not just admitting her body was shutting down bit by bit, but actually *asking* for help. Asking to stay in bed for meals, if it wasn't too much trouble. Asking for help to get from there to the bath. Asking for something more to take the edge off the pain. When she had *stopped* asking for them to fetch pads, pencils, brushes and other paraphernalia from the studio down the hall. Once she had hung up the finished portrait of Anna and laid her art down for good. It might as well have been hoisting the white flag and surrendering to it, when Magda stopped creating things. He hadn't realized until then that so much of her day to day chatter had been about what she was making all the time, ideas for this job for a client, trying a slightly different technique on the next painting, little progress reports here and there. Half the time, it made very little sense to him on the whole, and he made no secret of it, but that never deterred Magda. He didn't realize how much he would miss it until it was gone completely. It was replaced, instead, by pitiable requests and demands. Pleas, even. It had hurt almost as much as watching the life and the fight go out of her, seeing her become more and more dependent on them all, knowing how much pride she took in being self-reliant. Even as sick as she was, she tried to hide just how bad things were from the children, at least.

He had nearly stopped sleeping, too, by the time Vlad started adjusting the doses every day or two. Magda would get a few hours of peace at the most, before she woke from the pain, or restlessness, or sheer boredom, even, of

spending so much time in bed. Who knew just being tired could be so tiring? Slowly she ate less, spoke less, slept more, at least in fits and starts. He slept lightly most of the time, until he became so exhausted he just couldn't stay awake any more, on edge, always listening in case she needed something. They finally discussed it and decided Anna should really stay elsewhere for the duration. Magda hadn't wanted Anna's last memories of her to be like that. Viktor hadn't either. She said her final goodbyes to the children well before she died. Vlad had only stuck his head in to deliver more potion, and to deliver reports back to Anna and Stan, after that.

By then, her breathing had been raspy and heavy, as though she were perpetually winded. The sheets were almost always soaked in sweat, her skin was clammy with it, and the slightly stale smell of it clung to her damp hair. The last few days had reminded him so forcefully of when Vladimir had been born. The swollen belly, the sweat, the days of mounting pain and panting for breath. Her first labor had been slow to start and had moved at an uncomfortably leisurely pace, beginning with barely there contractions that weren't quite labor, that had finally built over a long while to a sharp peak. He had spent a great deal of it lying on the bed with her, spooned behind her, massaging her sore, cramping back, or just rubbing her pregnant belly, feeling her body working to get their child out into the world, and the wriggling and nudging from within. He had felt rather useless and helpless while at it, not able to do much about it but hold her hand and try not to let on that he was just as nervous and scared about the entire thing as she was. That, he would have given anything to speed up. This, the selfish side of him, at least, he wanted to slow down. Or better yet, halt in its tracks. Part of him wished she could just die and get it over with. So she wouldn't have to hurt any more.

That last night had been hard. Magda had almost begged for something more for the pain early in the evening. He had begged her to eat something, even if it were just a piece of toast. She hadn't eaten much else for days, no appetite for it at all, even when she did eat. "I don't want it," she said, clamping her lips together in a thin line and shaking her head.

"Please. Just a bite or two-"

"I don't want it," she insisted, turning even whiter, beads of sweat dotting her forehead and upper lip again, even though he had just wiped her face with a damp cloth not a minute before.

"But you haven't eaten anything at all to-"

"It will just make me sick, and I don't want it in the first place. Don't make one of the last things I did on this earth having an argument with you about a piece of toast, of all things," Magda had warned. "Just hold me. Please. Just do that."

He had crawled onto the other side of the bed, then, propping himself over her as gingerly as possible, one hand tucked beneath her back, the other stroking her damp face. There wasn't any real pain right then, the potion doing its job better than usual at a higher than recommended dose and on an empty stomach. "Magda... I..." He choked on the words, his throat constricting when he looked into her eyes. They were remarkably clear and lucid, given the effect of the potion. And unafraid. That was what stunned him throughout the entire ordeal. Sad, hurt, frustrated, angry even, she had been all of those. But she never seemed afraid. Her attitude hadn't quite been on a par with Dumbledore's 'death is just the next great adventure' philosophy, but she had certainly been unafraid of it. Viktor had been plenty afraid for the both of them, he supposed.

"Shoush," she murmured, falling back on the familiar term of endearment, "I have to say this." Magda pulled his head down to rest on her chest, twining her fingers in his hair. Her breath rattled by his ear, just the other side of her breastbone. "I've had a marvelous life. With you. And the children. Thank you. I love you."

"I love you, too." His voice hadn't been much stronger than hers. His throat seemed to be threatening to close up completely, though his eyes were dry.

"Good. Now... just be here. That's all I want. Just be here until it's over," she had said, so much an echo of that earlier time, when he couldn't help or do it for her or take the pain away. He had shamelessly tucked himself around her, his head resting against and in the hollow of her shoulder, occasionally kissing her or stroking her hair. He left his right hand resting near the bottom of her ribcage. All the better to monitor the rise and fall of her chest, the passage of another breath, in and out. The rise and fall of his hand slowly became less and less, her breathing becoming more shallow, more labored, the breaths coming farther and farther apart as she drifted off, her eyes closed. It might have been minutes or hours, he didn't know. All he knew was waiting for the next breath, the next movement of his hand. Finally, the pause between breaths went on a beat too long.

"Magda?" There was no answer. He raised up and checked on her. No breath, no pulse. "Magda." His voice sounded like it was broken and ground down to dust, just like the rest of him. He kissed her slightly slack mouth, brushed the sodden tendrils of hair away from her forehead. He noticed his fingers were trembling. Then, suddenly, the rest of him trembled, as well. Now that it had sunk in, that he was alone, the dam shifted and broke. Tears mixed with the sweat on her skin. He clung to her and rested his head against her chest once more. "You don't have to hurt any more, baby. Now I do." He hadn't any idea how many hours he had been there, sobbing, until there was just nothing left and it was nearly dawn. He had managed to clean up in time for Vladimir to come by after his shift, pass along the news, and make the arrangements. He hadn't cried

again for a few days. There just hadn't been anything to cry with. He had kept most of his mourning to himself, as much as he could. Hadn't even considered it needed to be anything other than completely private. At least until last night, with Anna.

Viktor drained the cup of coffee and looked out the kitchen window. There was a little light peeking out from behind the clouds, thin, dawn light. The loud rap on the back door was wholly expected after the message he had left with the receptionist at the hospital. "Don't go giving me a lecture on my door answering attire. I'm not in the mood," Viktor said wearily, swinging the door open enough to let Vladimir in.

"Is something wrong? The receptionist just said-"

"Hush. Quiet down. Anna's asleep down the hall. Nothing's wrong," Viktor said, walking back to the kitchen. "Exactly."

"So... why are you calling and asking me to stop by before I go home, and already through half a pot of coffee, looking like you haven't slept. And why's Anna down the hall?" Vladimir asked, looking doubtful.

"Long story. Are you doing anything tonight? I need to talk to you and Stan," Viktor asked, sinking back into the chair.

"I'm free. I'm not Stan's social director, but I think he and Mila were going somewhere this afternoon. Should be back early enough. Why?" Vladimir asked.

"Because I want the two of you to come by. I need to talk to you. Should have a long time ago. It's going to take a while. Bring dinner. Go pick something up and I'll pay for it. I'm not about to commit to *making* it. And do you have any Wakefulness Potion?" Viktor said.

"A little. Not much. Probably not enough for a good dose. Look, whatever it is, it's not worth it. Cancel it and get some sleep, instead," Vladimir insisted.

"I wish I could. But if I do, I'm going to have a very irate and insulted Italian on my back, and Evtimov, to boot. I've already put off this meeting with the Italian Commissioner a half dozen times, and I committed to Ilian and I going to a pre-season match so we can have it. It will be bloody boring, and short, but I committed. Ilian rearranged family plans to go. I can't ask him to do it again. And he has to go. The Commissioner doesn't speak a word of English, and he's the only one who understands Italian. I sure as hell don't. I don't think knowing a grand total of three Italian dishes is going to make for a productive meeting. If the dose is big enough to keep me from passing out two thirds of the way through the match, that's fine. Bring it over. And while I'm at it, Sunday

afternoon... get Anna to keep the baby," Viktor added. "It's only a couple of hours. I'm sure she can do it."

"Why? Where are you going to be?" Vladimir asked in surprise.

"With any luck, making an acceptable grovel of an apology. Or maybe I can even do that today if the match is short enough. I'll explain everything later. In the meantime, bring the potion back, get you and Stan over here sometime this evening, bring dinner if you want it, and find yourself another babysitter for Sunday afternoon. And leave your sister be. She had a hard night. Let her sleep as long as she wants. And don't worry. It's nothing bad," Viktor insisted. "It's just something I put off saying for too long."

"If you say so..." Vladimir said uncertainly. "I'm glad Evtimov's going, then. I wouldn't trust you to get to Italy and back in one piece in the state you're in right now. Liable to end up in Afghanistan if you haven't slept."

"He's never misplaced me, yet. Now, shoo. Go on. I have to leave, soon. I'll see you tonight, I'm sure."

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"Okay, I'll bite. What's eating at you? Other than the fact that you probably feel like death warmed over because you haven't slept and the fact that this is the most boring match in history and we have to act like we're enjoying it?" Evtimov said quietly in Bulgarian.

"The fact that I really should be somewhere else, and that I'm an idiot. Or maybe rather that I should be somewhere else *because* I'm an idiot. What else is new?" Viktor said ruefully, with a short laugh. "And I don't imagine all the coffee I've had is helping. I think I'm vibrating."

"I'll concede you the coffee part, but I reserve the right to fight you on the idiot portion. What are you talking about?" Ilian prodded, giving the Italian Commissioner a sidelong glance. He seemed more engrossed in the match, such as it was, at the moment.

"Okay, then. Not an idiot. A coward," Viktor said with conviction.

"I very seriously doubt that," Evtimov argued, looking surprised.

"No. I won't let you win on that one. I have been. I was afraid to say a lot of things I should have said a long time ago, about why things turned out the way they did, and I didn't tell the children I was seeing someone, and it blew up in my face when my 'before' and 'after' unexpectedly collided. Now, if I'm lucky, maybe



I can apologize enough to Hermione to make up for it. Took a hell of a lot of apologizing and explaining to make things up with Anna. I haven't even begun to make it up with Stan and Vlad. All because I was too afraid to show them how much I really missed Magda when she died. And to admit maybe I love someone else and might be willing to risk that all over again. Not even to myself. Now I've paid for it. Maybe she's not willing to risk it, now. I should be over there right now, apologizing for carrying on like I was ashamed for anyone else to know what I thought of her. No, I think I have that argument won, Ilian," Viktor said, not taking his eyes off the field.

"Err... I won't pretend I caught the half of that. Maybe we can cover it again, sometime. Well, you've certainly put a lot of thought into your argument, but I still disagree. I think it's normal enough. I... can't begin to imagine what that would be like. Losing her. I know it hurt. I miss her, and I only knew her a few years. I think she would be happy for you," Evtimov said carefully. "So... what now?"

"Stop lecturing me. I already got that from Lara. I suppose I finish getting things squared away with my children, tonight. Take a trip tomorrow and see if I can still do a fair enough grovel and hope she's in a forgiving mood. I was hoping this sorry excuse for a match would be over in time so that I could do it today. No such luck," Viktor said, shaking his head and looking over at the Italian Commissioner, who was, by now, giving them both openly curious looks. "You're sure he doesn't speak any Bulgarian, right?" He gave the Commissioner a friendly nod, that was returned, if with a slightly confused look.

"Positive. He barely speaks passable Italian," Ilian blurted out without thinking. Within a few moments, the two of them had graduated from sniggering under their breath to full blown, near hysterical laughter.

"Great," Viktor said, wiping at the corner of his eye, "now he thinks we're both loony, to boot."

"Well, he thinks we're enjoying this stinker of a match, and he would have to think we're loony to think that, wouldn't he? So what difference does it make?" Ilian choked out between wheezes. "We'll come up with an excuse that doesn't offend him."

"I plead temporary insanity because of the sleep deprivation. What's your excuse?"

"Tremendously funny Bulgarian joke that just doesn't translate. Or that I can't translate. My Italian suddenly got really rusty," Ilian said, struggling to regain his composure. "That does it. I'm seeing you home when this is over. I say we rent a carriage so you can sleep on the way. I don't think I even trust you to work a Floo connection right now."



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Hermione hacked at the green peppers on the cutting board viciously. She had spent the last few hours wavering between being weepy and then being horrendously angry at herself for being weepy in the first place, to being angry at *him*. Then being angry at herself for being angry at him. By now she was just angry for the sake of being angry, her ill mood seeping into everything. “Um... Mum? Why are you doing that by hand?” Simon asked tentatively. He could tell she was in a mood and a half as soon as he had set foot inside. He was still afraid to ask why.

“Because I feel like it!” Hermione snapped. The doorbell chimed and the cheerful noise irritated her even further. “Make yourself useful and go answer the front door.”

‘Yes, madam,” Simon said, almost eager to get out of the kitchen. He pulled the front door open, and found himself looking almost directly into a pair of slightly hooded eyes so dark they were almost black. Simon gaped at the visitor for a moment, not sure what to say. It certainly hadn’t been anyone he would have expected. He was rescued when they said something, instead.

“Is Hermione here?”

“You might not want to see her, but yeah, she is. Hang on a minute, I’ll get her,” Simon said, recovering.

“Thank you.”

“You might want to save that thank you or take it back. Mood she’s in, you might not be too thankful when I do send her out here,” Simon murmured. He made his way back to the kitchen. “Er, Mum... there’s someone at the door.”

“Thank you, Simon, I hadn’t figured that out from the *doorbell* ringing,” Hermione said tartly. “Would you mind telling me who it is and what they want?”

“Look, I think you had better just go to the door. And stop taking your *mood* out on me and those poor, defenseless peppers. Somebody seems to have come a very long way just to talk to you, so I imagine it’s important,” Simon lectured. “If you want to be rude and leave them standing out front, fine and dandy. But don’t go taking *my* head off about it.”

“Oh, good grief. I’m sorry. I’ll go to the door,” Hermione said in a slightly kinder tone. Simon noticed she stomped off with the knife still clutched in her hand.

"What?" Hermione said sharply, swinging the door open. The first thing she noticed was a large, booted foot not so discreetly slipping into the doorway, inserting itself between the door and the frame, so she couldn't slam the door completely. The second thing she noticed was that, big as it was, the boot obviously didn't belong to the person whom she was really expecting to be at the door. Hermione let her gaze trail up the long, denim-clad leg, the white peasant top, up into a rather surprised face.

"I think," Anna said uncertainly, "that will not be necessary. Unless you are more upset than I realize. Please, I want to talk to you. Don't close the door." She looked softer and younger, now, with her dark hair spilling loose around her shoulders, her eyes pleading, without the anger in her voice. But still uncannily like her father. "You do not have to ask me in, but please, don't close the door." Hermione guiltily dropped both hands, the one holding the knife and the one clutching the doorknob. "I would have been here earlier this morning, but I had to go all the way to London and ask someone at the Ministry how to even find the house."

"Don't be ridiculous. Come in," Hermione said, stepping out of the way. "I couldn't let you come all that way and not even let you in."

"That's what I said, but it didn't seem to be too popular a sentiment when I said it," Simon pointed out. "You're Anna, aren't you?" he asked, curiosity gnawing at him. *What the hell is going on? Why is Mum in such a mood, and why the hell is Viktor's daughter going all the way to London just to get directions to the front door?*

"Yes. You're Simon, aren't you?" she echoed. Simon nodded. "I am sorry, but... could we speak... alone?" Anna looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Sure. I was just about to leave, anyway. I'll... err, take that," Simon said, taking the knife handle. "I'll leave it at the scene of the pepper massacre. Nice to have met you. I... I've heard a lot about you. And... read. Err...I'll just pop out the back door." The two women watched him go, and heard the back door close.

Anna squeezed her own arms, almost as though she were hugging herself, and shyly studied her own feet for a moment. "I should say I am sorry. I... There is no excuse for the way I acted. It was rude and-

"Perfectly understandable, given that your father apparently didn't tell you," Hermione said ruefully.

Anna raised her eyes, peering at Hermione. "It *was* a shock, but-

"But nothing. Your father didn't think I was important enough to warn you about,

so, of course it was a shock. End of story. I don't blame you for being upset," Hermione bit off.

Anna drew in a deep breath, dropped her arms to her sides and straightened slightly. "I still should not have reacted that away. Please," Anna said, unconsciously working her fingers into fists, then relaxing them, exactly the same way Hermione knew Viktor used to when he had a bad case of nerves, "accept my apology." *She probably doesn't even realize she does it. Viktor never did. Anna is obviously as uncomfortable under close scrutiny as Viktor ever was. Odd, given that she must have grown up seeing so many people watching her father like that.*

"Fine. Apology accepted," Hermione said a little more gently. That she was still angry was abundantly plain, however.

"You're angry at him," Anna said. It was more marveling statement than a question. "Please, forgive him, too," Anna added. "He's sorry." Hermione looked her over more closely, made more bold by the bad temper. Anna wasn't exactly the sort that qualified as daintily or gracefully pretty, but there was a definite, quietly dignified sense of beauty about her. She had certainly inherited Magda's ability to carry off strong features well, and to command attention when she wasn't trying to disappear. She might even have a bit of Magda's jaw line and chin. Everything else about her, though, from the long fingers to the lanky limbs, from the stance to the facial expressions and most of her mannerisms, *that was* purely Viktor.

"If he's so sorry, why isn't he doing his own apologizing?" Hermione asked, crossing her own arms defensively. She was caught halfway between feeling sorry for this seemingly ill at ease girl who had swallowed her pride and let her guard down, and being angry at her for reminding her so forcefully of Viktor. Irrational, she knew, but feelings aren't always rational.

"Because he had to go to Italy today. After spending most of the night talking to me," Anna said, looking guilty. "We had a lot of things to talk about. He thought it was important to talk to Vlad and Stan, too. They're coming tonight to talk. He's going to come here tomorrow. I wanted to apologize, first."

"What? He didn't want to spring it on them the same way?" Hermione shot back. "That worked so well. I'm glad to see I finally rank somewhere on the list of things worth mentioning, right after work and the weather and whatever else comes down the pike! Must have been a slow news day."

Unexpectedly, Anna drew herself up ramrod straight, scowling, dark eyes narrowed. "I understand you are upset. But you must understand, too. How *hard* it was for him to admit it. He is used to keeping things to himself."

"I can't believe it was that hard to admit he was even seeing me," Hermione replied.

Anna lowered her eyebrows and scowled that much harder. "Not that. That he loves you. The last person he felt that way about died. If you don't know how much that hurt him, or how scared he is that might happen again, you don't know him as well as you think you do. And if you would rather be angry and bitter over him not telling us until now, or not being perfect, fine! Maybe you don't deserve him if you feel that way! Mama loved him just fine the way he is. And you can be angry at us all you like, but that doesn't change the fact that he loves you!" Anna swallowed hard. "Tate doesn't go around giving his heart to just anybody. He doesn't love lightly. But he loves you," Anna whispered.

"And how do you know that?" Hermione asked.

"Because he said so. Last night," Anna said quietly, her face relaxing slightly, fingers working again.

"And what difference would it make to you, either way? Why would you care how he feels about me?" Hermione said mulishly. "Why would he ask you to do this?"

"He did *not* ask me! He asked me to do nothing. He does his own talking. He does not even know I am here." Anna considered her boots again for a moment, then raised her head. "And I *care* because he's my *tate*, and I *love* him, and I want him to be *happy*. And I think... you would make him happy. If I didn't think that, I would not *be* here. Because... if you hurt him, you have not *seen* angry." Anna thrust her chin out defiantly, then planted her hands on her hips.

Hermione sighed. "You *are* your father's daughter, that's for sure," she said, shaking her head. "You're both like a couple of blinkered Erumpents when you set your minds to something."

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Viktor knocked on the door a little louder. The air was a bit cool this early, but he had left his cloak behind. He was just about to give it up and come back in an hour when he saw the doorknob turn. "Look, I know you're probably angry at me, and you have every right to be, but I've come a damned long way just to say this in person, so, you might as well let me in. Or I'll say it from out here. Very loudly. Where all the neighbors can hear," Viktor insisted.

"Fine. Suit yourself," Hermione said, shrugging and stepping out of the way. "But it's not necessary. You don't-"

Viktor walked past her, already talking before she had gotten the door shut. "Yes, it is. It's necessary. Just... be quiet and let me say this. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was such a big ninny and a coward. If I could go back and fix it, I would, but I can't. The best I can do is say I'm sorry and explain why. Look-"

"*Really*. You don't-" Hermione started to protest.

"No, let me finish. When Magda died, I didn't think I was ever going to feel that way about anybody ever again. Because it hurts too much to lose someone you feel that way about. So... when I started to feel that way about you, again, it scared me. I wasn't sure I was ready for something like that all over again, and I didn't know if my children were ready for me to start feeling that way about someone, and I didn't know if you might feel the same way, so it was easier to just keep my mouth shut about it. And then, the longer you go, the easier it is to keep it to yourself. I should have known it was a bad idea, but I kept it to myself, anyway. I made a mistake, okay? A very big mistake. But it wasn't because I was ashamed of you, or the way I felt about you. I love you. If anything, it was because I liked keeping you to myself. It felt nice, having some part of my life that had nothing to do with the kids, something separate that wasn't really any of their business. Something they weren't in the middle of. Again. I used to have that with Magda. Funny, considering they were *ours*, but some little piece of our marriage was just for *us*. Nobody else got into that space between us, not even the children. I *liked* having you all to myself. It felt a little decadent and-"

"Indulgent," Hermione supplied. "Selfish. I know. And you can stop apologizing. Not that it wasn't nice to hear, but Anna already apologized enough for the two of you. I imagine you've heard this a million times, but that girl is *so* much like you. She's every bit as stubborn as you ever were. She had the nerve to put her foot in my door, and to lecture me in my own house." Hermione sank onto the sofa.

"Anna? She was *here*? When?"

"Yesterday. And she gave me a right going over for even thinking of doing anything that might hurt you. She's got the she-bear impression down pretty well, too," Hermione said placidly. "I think she got a double dose of that."

"I'm sorry about that, I-" Viktor stammered.

"No need to apologize. I needed it. She was right. I wasn't very understanding. And she made me admit... I would have done the same thing if I could have gotten away with it. Kept it completely to myself, if I could have. I just didn't have a chance. But you don't have the entire extended Weasley clan nosing into everything. Why is it so ruddy embarrassing to catch yourself acting like a teenager when you're in your fifties? Or have someone else do it?" Hermione said morosely.

"Sixties, now, in my case. Few weeks ago, remember? And I think it's because you think by this point, you ought to know better, but you don't. So," Viktor said, seating himself beside her, "what do we do, now? Start over?"

"Not quite over. Let's just back it up a little and resolve to take it a little slower and easier. It's not like we have to be in a big hurry to get married and start a family, or anything. And to be a little more up front about things. I love you, too, you know. Even if you *are* maddening, every once in a while," Hermione said softly.

Viktor laughed quietly and put his mouth close to her ear. "I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you're no bed of roses all the time, yourself. You can be inflexible. Judgmental. Demanding," he said in a low voice, pausing when she cracked a smile.

"You can be headstrong. Stubborn. Too wrapped up in your job, Or should I say *jobs*?" Hermione replied, turning to face him.

"Coldly rational."

"Overextended."

"Too worried about what everyone else thinks about you, not enough about what you think," Viktor said.

"Too private. Repressed, even."

"And yet, I still love you, anyway. Still love me?" Viktor asked.

"Only if you finish that kiss we were in the middle of when we were interrupted. I don't think I have any relatives hidden in the house that are going to pop up unexpectedly," Hermione said.

"I don't know... Do you want to completely discuss the repercussions of that action, first? I mean-"

"Oh, shut up," Hermione reproved gently. She reached up and removed his glasses, putting them on the nearby table.

"What was that for?" Viktor asked.

"I shouldn't like to see them get damaged. They seem to take enough abuse without me joining in," Hermione explained.

“What are you planning to *do*, exactly?” Viktor said.

“I’m going to skip the getting you drunk part and go straight to the taking advantage of you part,” Hermione replied, smiling.

“I like the way you think,” Viktor said, lowering his mouth to hers. “By the way,” he said, pulling back momentarily, “in the spirit of all this new openness and whatnot, I have to attend this likely to be boring public reception next week, and I could use some company. And Stan’s birthday is in about five weeks. We’ll probably have dinner or something...”

“I’ll think about it. Right now, no thinking...” Hermione insisted, putting her hands on either side of his face and kissing him. “Thinking just seems to get us into trouble.”

“No danger, if you keep that up...”

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“Hey. We’re coming in. Moppet here wants to show you how she looks before she has her photo taken by herself,” Anna said, leading Evangelina into the master bedroom by the hand.

“Well, don’t you look nice? Getting your photo taken, hmm?” Viktor said, hefting the little girl up.

“In my dress robes and with the flower basket,” Evangelina said. “Mama got a petticoat for me, see?” She pulled up the skirt of her robe to show the ruffled petticoat underneath.

“So I see. Might want to keep that out of sight during the photo, though. What have you got in the basket?” Viktor prompted.

“Daisies and roses, Diado,” the little girl answered. “This one won’t be as good as the last one.”

“Why not?” Viktor asked.

“Because it’s just me. Anna already took one with me. That one’s better because it’s got two of us,” Evangelina explained solemnly in her high voice.

“No argument from me, there. I still want one of both. Hadn’t you better be getting back to the living room and taking it, though? Mama have your flower basket?” Viktor said.



“Mama’s got it,” Evangelina said, nodding.

“Good enough, then. Give me a kiss. See you in a little bit,” he added, pursing his mouth as she complied, then setting her back down.

“Go straight back to Mama,” Anna said, holding the door for her. Anna grinned at Viktor after shutting the door, shaking her head.

“The collective wisdom of the three-year-old,” he said with a laugh. Viktor then gave a low whistle.

“What?” Anna asked.

“You just look really beautiful. Heels and everything. What brought that on?” Viktor asked, cocking his head at her.

“Vlad seemed to think that a wedding called for heels, and I got tired of arguing,” Anna said wearily.

“You don’t have to wear them if you don’t want. It’s in the back garden, for Merlin’s sake. Tell Vlad if he really wants heels, he can wear them,” Viktor said dismissively.

“Don’t tempt me,” Anna said, shaking her head. “And it took too long to find these. I’m going to wear them if they kill me. And as long as they don’t actually make me taller than you,” she added, measuring herself against him. “I don’t want to go down the aisle taller than you.”

“What difference would it make? Besides, I think you’re safe. Those are what? A half-inch, maybe? Thick soles,” Viktor pointed out, holding out one dress boot-clad foot. “When did I become your personal acceptable upper limit of tallness anyway?”

“Since always. I really would hate to walk down the aisle and be taller than you. This is going to be one crazy wedding,” Anna observed.

“Why shouldn’t it match the participants? If Simon walks Hermione down the aisle, I figure it’s just as fitting you walk me down it, seeing as there’s no other way to get to where we have the altar standing. Think of it as practice for me getting to return the favor someday. Speaking of which, have you mentioned to Filip or whatever his name is that your Tate knows a lot of people who either made or currently make their livings wielding clubs?” Viktor asked, one corner of his mouth curling up slightly.

“Tate,” Anna warned, “I hardly think that’s necessary. He hasn’t been living under

a rock his entire life, he's not brain damaged, and it's been all of three dates. Besides, he knows perfectly well I know several people who currently make their livings wielding clubs. And that, worse comes to worse, I could probably take his head off. He caught the bit about the two older brothers, as well. And the fact that I plastered one of them with a Beater's club, once. And that was by accident. Imagine if I were trying."

"Just so he's had fair warning," Viktor replied.

"Tate, you're not allowed to go scaring him," Anna said. "Behave yourself."

"I thought it was my duty to scare him."

"No. You didn't act like that about Mila. Or Nikolina. Fix your sash," Anna said, stepping up to him, tugging at it and straightening it.

"Might have if I thought it would do any good. Might have saved me plenty on weddings. Nice change of subject, by the way," Viktor said, looking amused.

"Maybe I shouldn't have gone to Ottery St. Catchpole that time. Might have saved you the cost of one wedding right there. Should have asked for the repeat customer discount. And I still say, *behave*. Be nice," Anna warned, shaking a finger at him.

"On one condition," Viktor replied. "You have to promise me you'll dance with me at least once."

"I'm awful at it," Anna protested.

"You wouldn't be if you would stop worrying about what you look like and whether or not you were about to step on anything and just dance. Nonetheless, I want one dance with my daughter at my wedding. It's not like that's an opportunity most men get. Do it for me," Viktor cajoled, resting his hands on her shoulders.

"If you promise to behave. And if Hermione doesn't mind. And if no one watches," Anna muttered.

"Most of them will be dead drunk by then, anyway. It's not like anyone will notice your dancing," Viktor argued, shaking her slightly.

"Oh, I'll do it," Anna agreed reluctantly.

Vladimir came through the door and shut it behind. "All the photos before are done, I think... woo..." he trailed off momentarily, "you look positively girly.

Almost.”

“Oh, stuff it,” Anna said good-naturedly.

“I’m teasing. You look... well, let’s just say I’ll keep something handy to beat them off with. Stan hasn’t been in?” Vladimir asked.

“Not since this morning. Why? Have you misplaced him or something?” Viktor said.

“Oh. He said he was going to come talk to you. That’s all. He said not to go far,” Vladimir said. “I need to go fetch some people... By the way, we’re not doing that silly superstition about not seeing the bride are we?” he added, pausing at the door.

“Considering I talked to her face to face an hour ago, I think we can safely assume the answer is no. Why? What are you two up to?” Viktor asked, suspicious.

“Up to? Nothing. I’m just following orders. I was told if we had a few minutes to spare after the pictures and before the ceremony, to pin you down, fetch a specified group of people, and come back here. I gather Stan’s got something to show us. No good asking what. I don’t know, either,” Vladimir admitted. “Do you have the time to spare or not?”

“Plenty, I think,” Viktor said, taking his watch out of his pocket and checking it.

“Good, then. I’ll see if I can get back here with my whole list,” Vladimir said, stepping out.

“Don’t look at me like that. I don’t have a clue, either,” Anna insisted.

After a few minutes, the door opened again. Vladimir, Nikolina, Evangelina, Simon and Mila all shuffled in. A moment later, Stan stuck his head in the doorway. “Everyone in? Good. I will be right back,” he promised, ducking back out. After another short pause, Hermione walked through the open door, looking puzzled and stopping.

“Has there been some sort of emergency meeting called? Did the wedding cake explode or something?” she asked, scanning their faces.

“Explode? The wedding cake? Why would you ask that, Mum?” Simon asked, chuckling.

“Well... your Uncle Fred and your Uncle George *are* here. You just never know

with them... nothing *has* exploded, has it?" Hermione said a little more anxiously.

"Not that I'm aware, Mum. By the way, you look really nice," Simon said, gesturing at the silky dark blue robes, draping softly around her, caught up with a white sash in the middle.

"Oh. My hair's *still* not cooperating. I can't get the bloody flowers pinned in it. They keep falling out," Hermione said, flustered, worrying at the hair around her shoulders.

"Language... What she really meant was 'Thank you. Of *course* I look beautiful on my wedding day.', " Viktor said. "Even if you forget the flowers."

"I will take care of that, later," Nikolina said dismissively. "Vare vos he going? Stan?" she asked in her thickly accented English.

"I wish I knew," Viktor said with a shrug. "But from what I gather, it's not crisis-related, so relax already," he added, putting his hand on Hermione's shoulder.

Viktor had barely finished the sentence when they heard footsteps. Shortly, Stan stepped in, carrying a large, flat square object wrapped in brown paper and twine, which he leaned against the wall. "Okay. So... I wanted everyone here to see this, the whole family. Mila and I had no idea what to get the two of you. Not as though the two of you need more housewares. You *have* two houses full. It is not much, probably not up to Mama's standards... but for what it is worth... this is your wedding gift from the two of us," Stan said, untying the twine and peeling back the paper. He stepped away and it became clear that the paper had concealed a large canvas, a painting.

The main part of the canvas was taken up with a scene set in the back garden, a little alcove of trees not too far from the lake behind the house. Fanned out across the scene in a loose grouping, all the occupants of the room stood, smiling, Simon on the right side, Hermione, with Viktor standing slightly behind, Vladimir with Evangelina in the crook of his arm and Nikolina, Stan and Mila, and Anna. Hermione recognized it almost immediately as an adaptation of one of the photos that had been taken at Stan and Mila's wedding just a few months prior. But her eyes were drawn down to the bottom corners of the painting. In smaller insets, there were two other paintings that made her suck in her breath and put her hand over her mouth. The rest of them murmured appreciatively.

In the right lower corner, there was a recreation of the very familiar photo of herself and Ron at their tenth anniversary. In the opposite corner, the equally familiar photo of Magda and Viktor at their twenty-fifth. "So *that's* what you wanted the photo for!" Simon exclaimed. "I wondered why you asked me for a copy of it."

"Actually, you *gave* me the idea for this. When you said we did not have any photos of the entire family except at the wedding... It occurred to me that we could not *really* have a photo of the *entire* family any more... but we could have a painting. I thought... maybe we could put it on the fireplace wall. It is about time those things got rearranged again, don't you think?" he asked tentatively.

"It's beautiful," Hermione said, finding her voice again. "Absolutely... I don't know what to say." Her voice was slightly strangled, and she blinked hard, her eyes misting up. "It's... oh! It's so sweet!" she said, rising to her toes to kiss Stan's cheek.

"Here, Mum, don't go getting all soggy. There aren't enough hankies in the country if you and Gran both get all weepy. And you know Gran's going to get weepy," Simon cautioned, handing over his handkerchief.

"I think it would fit right in up there. That would do your Mama proud," Viktor said. "It's perfect. You can put it up there on one condition."

"What?" Stan asked.

"You have to figure out where it goes and how to rearrange all the rest of it. I have no idea where any of it should go," Viktor said. "Your mother had that system..."

"Come on. Ve fix your hair," Nikolina told Hermione, in a take charge manner. "Anna, come on. Help. You too, baby. Come help Nan." Evangelina followed them out.

"Anna, you come back soon as you're done. I need you to do something for me," Viktor called after them.

"I.. it's... Wow. Just... wow. That's incredible. I mean, I knew you painted, but not like that," Simon marveled. "It was nice of you to make sure Dad was included... Er... I should probably get on outside. See that we're about ready before I come back and collect Mum."

"I will give your photo back after the wedding. Remind me," Stan warned.

"I had better, too. You did good, little brother. It's wonderful," Vladimir said, pausing on his way to the door.

"I think we had better go, too, Stan," Mila said, following.

"Go on. He'll be there in a minute. I want to talk to him, first," Viktor said. When

they had gone and closed the door, he stepped closer to the canvas and studied it for a long while.

“You really want it over the fireplace? It doesn’t have to go up-”

“It’s going up there, and that’s final. Thank you,” Viktor said simply, squeezing Stan’s shoulder. “I can’t think of a better gift. Only thing is, I hope you understand your mother’s system for what went over that fireplace and where better than I do. Which, if you understand it at all, that’s more than I do.”

“She explained it all to me once. Actually, how she figured out *what* went up there is pretty simple. She told me, ‘That’s where I hang the pictures of the people I love the most, and usually the ones that remind me most of the reasons *why* I love them.’. The way she arranged them is a touch more complicated. That’s where the composition and complementary colors and sizes and things come in,” Stan explained. “I figured Hermione and Simon are as much family as anyone by now. Mama never put herself up there much, but I felt like she should be. And Ron deserved a place up there, too. He is Simon’s father... Now, if you don’t want it up there, you *would* say-”

“I want it up there. That’s every bit as beautiful as anything your mother ever painted. You do her proud. She would want it up there. You do me proud. Stop being so modest. Thank you,” Viktor said, embracing him. “It couldn’t be more perfect, you hear me?”

“I owed you, Tate. Both of you. Well, all three of you, really. For everything. Mila got it framed, by the way. Picked it out and all,” Stan said, hugging back. “We love you. You and Mama and Hermione. And Simon, too, for that matter. I’m glad for the two of you.”

“You should probably get going. We don’t have a whole lot longer, before we make it official,” Viktor said, releasing him. “I have one more thing I need to do before I go out. Or one more thing I want Anna to do.”

“Okay, Tate. I’ll be outside with Oblansk,” Stan called over his shoulder. He nearly collided with the door when Anna threw it open. “Hello. You’re wanted inside.”

“We got the flowers in. Well, several times. We finally succeeded in getting Evangelina to leave them in. She kept wanting to pull them loose. That was her idea of helping. What’s this thing you want me to do?” Anna asked.

“Hold out your hand,” Viktor ordered. He grasped the wedding band still on his left finger and, with some difficulty, removed it and placed it in Anna’s palm. Then he reached into his pocket and drew out a sturdy gold chain, threading the

end through the ring. "Would you put it on me? Please." He held up the ends of the chain, letting the ring dangle on it over her hand.

Anna stared at it mutely for a moment, then took the ends. "You're going to keep wearing it?"

"I figured if Hermione could keep up with one for that long, surely I can, too. This doesn't change the fact that I was married to her and that's my wedding ring, and I want to keep it close. This doesn't change a lot of things. We're still going to keep their pictures out, and we're going to be buried with them, and-"

"Don't say that. That's a long way off," Anna said. "A long, *long* way."

"Exactly. You couldn't get rid of me if you tried. It's all laid out in boring old wills, anyway. Should make for simply fascinating reading when we finally croak. Now fasten it for me, so I don't have to fiddle with those tiny catches." Viktor said, turning his back to her.

"There, all done," Anna said. "Now," she said, hooking his arm, "let's go. I looked down the hall, and Simon and Hermione are all ready to go."

"Yes, boss. Let's go."

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"I'm going to explode," Simon moaned, leaning back in the chair. "It was all fantastic, but I'm going to explode. You would think I would have learned after the last time. I couldn't eat for a whole day after the last wedding."

"Nonsense. Dance it off. Half the reason you have dancing. So you can go back and eat more," Vladimir said dismissively.

"I couldn't wiggle for a bet, much less dance," Simon protested.

"Then drink a while and you will forget you are too full," Vladimir replied, taking a drink of his own rakia.

"Oh no! I am not drinking more than a shot of that stuff this time. It put me under the table last time. I had half a bottle down me before you two bothered to mention it was moonshine. I'll stick to this teensy little glass of ouzo, I think. I'd like to not wake up dead tomorrow," Simon insisted.

"I see Tate finally collected on Anna. She's not half bad if you get her just the slightest bit tipsy first so she's not so self conscious," Stan observed.



"You're welcome," Vlad said. "Twisted her arm early and often." He took another drink and watched the people dancing for a few moments. "Remind me again. How many cousins did you say you had?"

"Too bloody many to count," Simon said, "that's how many. By now, you just number Weasleys and their kin in the rough dozens. Mum and me were kind of odd birds, being only children and all. I guess, technically, they're sort of yours, too, now. What was it like, growing up with no cousins? I can't imagine that... Or having brothers or sisters, either."

"Pretty much the same as having a gaggle of cousins, I imagine. Except, everyone who you were crazy about and everyone who drove you mad lived in the same house, instead. And you can't even pretend to disown them. Not that you want to. Much," Vladimir said.

"Speak for yourself," Stan said placidly. Mila walked through the crowd and approached the three of them.

"Dance with me," she pleaded.

"I have only sat out two of the last dozen. My feet are killing me. Get Simon to dance with you," Stan replied.

"I couldn't... really..." Simon protested weakly. But soon Mila had him hauled up out of his chair and was dragging him toward the rest of the dancers.

"Nonsense! You're family, now. I trust you," Stan called after them, laughing.

"That was either all a fiendishly clever ruse to get out of dancing with your wife, or a fiendishly clever ruse to get him over there so Mila could introduce him to her penfriend. Either way, bravo. Let me guess. Her penfriend got the appointment in Scotland?" Vladimir asked.

"Da. Got it in one," Stan admitted. They sat in silence for a few minutes, just watching. "So, do you have the foggiest idea what half their names are?"

"The mob of redheaded ones? I *might* be able to hazard a fair guess on twenty of them and get fifteen. I think if you stick with 'Weasley', you're almost sure to be at least half right, aren't you? I suggest nametags if we ever have a family reunion. A lot of nametags. Get Molly to give you the rundown. She can reel off all their names, relations and birthdates in order without skipping a beat. All... however many dozen of them there must be," Vladimir said, gesturing with his glass in the general direction of the biggest cluster of redheaded Weasleys. "I haven't bothered to count. I suspect by the time you get them counted, there are more of them than you started out with. Kind of makes the lot of us look paltry."

"Incredible," Stan commented, as though to himself.

"That she can do all their birthdays and names? Not so incredible, I reckon. She's their mother. And grandmother. And... well, you get the idea."

"Not that. I was thinking she must have to knit Christmas jumpers all year. I can't believe she did us one, too, this past year. She's a cottage industry all by herself," Stan insisted. "This is going to be one odd extended family. How are you ever going to explain all this to Evangelina? I'm grown and I can barely keep all of it straight."

"Oh, that's the beauty part. Evangelina won't *need* it explained. As far as children are concerned, families don't really need explaining. They just *are*, like grass and trees and the sky. I'm sure she'll ask one day, because she's curious about Mama, or why some of us have different last names. But she won't really need it explained. Families happen in the oddest ways and in the oddest places. Why should ours be any exception?" Vladimir said, shrugging.

"Either that was really poetic, or I'm really drunk," Stan replied.

"Why can't it be both? They certainly didn't water it down," Vlad said, contemplating the glass. "Finish this, I'll be ready to dance again."

"Your feet won't hurt?" Stan asked.

"I won't be able to feel them. Evening, Madam Putin," Vladimir said, looking over Stan's shoulder.

"I'm not fa- Evening!" Stan corrected himself, turning to look.

"Eeeevening. Lovely affair, if somewhat more informal than I expected," Madam Putin sniffed, adjusting the rather long fox stole around her neck, then the miniscule, shivering dog in the crook of her arm that had the unfortunate appearance of being a malnourished and mangy rat with an oversized head. "I mean, that's all well and good when it's two young people, just starting out, you understand. But one expects a certain formality..." she trailed off, waving her hand around in the air.

"Oh, absolutely. I can't imagine what they were thinking, not renting out Westminster Abbey or The Hermitage. But I think they were already booked. Both times," Vlad said mischievously. "So we have to settle for the back garden for Stan's and theirs. Just like we had to with mine. I expect Anna, poor thing, will have to do the same. Can't be playing favorites."

"I suppose that new wife of his doesn't care. I hear she didn't exactly come from *money*," Madame Putin said conspiratorially.

"Now-," Stan began, but Vladimir stood and stretched.

"I don't have the foggiest idea. She seemed nice enough, so we didn't bother opening her handbag and counting what she had in there, did we, Stan? It's not like we charge admission," Vladimir said. "Besides, I think people of real quality... it has more to do with their personality and their character than their bank account. Or that's what I was always taught."

Stan stood as well. "Absolutely. And they don't come any finer quality in the character department. Not by a long shot. You can dress up trash in fancy furs and fine robes, but it doesn't make much of a difference. You can't disguise real quality, though. Don't you agree?"

"Of course," Madam Putin agreed, looking uncomfortable. "One can't disguise one's breeding, though."

"Oh, breeding hasn't got a thing to do with whether a person is a purebred or a mongrel. That only works with dogs," Anna said, stepping around Madam Putin and slipping in between Stan and Vlad. "And even then, a purebred can still be turned into a cur," she added, putting out a hand toward the dog, which barked sharply and snapped at her. "Or a mongrel can be a real hero. Whatever got us started on the subject of breeding, boys? Madam Putin starting another kennel?"

"Muffin must be getting overtired," Madam Putin crooned. "I wanted to wish your father well. And extend my sympathies again. Your mother was a fine woman."

"She was. So is Hermione. I'm afraid he probably won't be free for some time. He's promised to dance with Lara, and by then, they just might be ready to call it a night and go on honeymoon. I doubt you'll catch either of them unless you wait a long while," Anna said.

"And we wouldn't want Muffin getting more overtired, now would we?" Vladimir said, putting his hand out and provoking the same reaction Anna had. "Poor lamb could get all distraught and bite someone, and that could be nasty. We'll be sure to pass your sentiments on, though."

"Of course. I must get Muffin home," Madam Putin allowed, adjusting her elaborate stole again and sweeping off. "Good evening."

"Did she lose the lawsuit about Muffin biting whoever that was?" Stan muttered.

"Don't think it's gone to trial yet," Vladimir said.

"Good riddance to her and Muffin both," Anna said.

"I'll drink to that," Vladimir said, taking another swig.

"You would drink to anything right now. You're soused already," Anna scolded.

"I'll drink to that," Vlad repeated.

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"So... where are you going on your honeymoon, then?" Lara asked, nudging Viktor's elbow. The crowd had already dwindled slightly in the early evening.

"Inside," Viktor said blandly. "We're going in, locking the door, going to bed and ignoring you people."

"You're not going anywhere? Not much of a honeymoon..." Lara replied. "Going to bed..."

"That's what you think," Viktor said, resituating Danail on his leg. "Depends on what you mean by 'going to bed', doesn't it?"

"What prompted the decision not to travel?" Evtimov asked curiously.

"Do you really have to ask that? Let's see, two jobs at one Ministry, Hermione heading up that joint research project for the next few months at two Ministries, four children spread out between two entirely different countries, two houses, and two extended sets of relatives in two countries, that's plenty of potential travel right there. It will be a treat to stay home for a whole week. And that's to say nothing of the fact that right after the joint research project ends, we're going to be stuck going back and forth to Durmstrang on and off throughout the next year," Viktor added in a low voice.

"For the...? I assume that's not exactly supposed to be common knowledge just yet?" Evtimov said, mouth agape.

"Passed the Board six days ago. A whole Board session before I would have ever dared hope. Thanks rather a lot to Minerva and Olympe being so willing to try it again and lead a delegation, despite being involved in the last one. Laying it on thick about expecting Durmstrang to really host it right didn't hurt, either. And a bit of convincing from a rather nice planning and impact report that someone put together. With that schedule and proposal you laid out, they thought a year and then some was plenty of time to plan the entire thing and get ready for hosting it," Viktor said, prompting Evtimov to blush. "Speaking of which, I would

like for you to consider being on the judging panel for one task, Lara."

"Gladly. Assuming it doesn't violate any ethical agreements," Lara said.

"But... but... What about the office? I mean... you'll be gone maybe a couple of weeks at a time, at least four times... and that's in addition to everything else," Evtimov protested. "And that will probably be some of our busiest times of the year. We barely get everything done sometimes as it is. What if I can't get hold of you? And something needs signing?"

"Actually, Oblansk and I had a little talk about just that. We think we have a solution. Some of the same authority will be granted to a second position. We're going to hire someone for a full-fledged Assistant Commissioner position. That should allow for some of the decisions being made and a few things getting done on those rare occasions when I'm not necessarily right there, breathing in everyone's ear," Viktor explained. "Besides, the Floos do work. And owls still manage to find the place. I'm a little more expendable than you seem to think."

"Oh. Well, I hope they're easy to work with. I would hate to think they didn't agree with all the things we-"

"I imagine they'll be supremely easy to work with, Ilian. Unless you're in the habit of disagreeing with yourself," Viktor said.

"M-myself?" Evtimov stammered.

"We agreed that you deserve a promotion. There's not a bad pay bump involved, either. And let's be honest, you've been the Assistant Commissioner in everything but title, anyway, the last few years. The hours and the work you put in, you deserve to be listed as something more than my personal assistant. Don't think that means you've lost *that* job, though. You still have to mind my business for me," Viktor replied. "Or I'm sure to say something that gets us all into trouble. I might let it slip to the wrong person that I detest oysters and muck up the years-long process this United Nations thing is probably going to be. By the way, Africa's finally got a date for their vote on the initial proposal. Ten months from now."

"So, maybe before Danail gets out of school, they could *actually* have a full meeting... Wow. And as for the promotion... I don't know what to say-"

"Thank you would be fine. You earned it. Oblansk and I figure that whenever I finally get fed up with it and quit, you would be a pretty strong candidate for our first Commissioner who doesn't happen to be an ex-player. We're trying to get that first foot in the door. That might not be an entirely bad thing, having a Commissioner who can't be accused of having any lingering loyalties. And who

actually has good sense,” Viktor said.

“Well, we’ve searched the entire buffet table, and come back with a few bits of chocolate and dessert, mostly,” Hermione said, showing the small saucer in her hand, guiding Evangelina with the other.

The little girl pulled away and stopped in front of Viktor. “I want to sit with Diado,” she insisted stubbornly, giving Danail a long, hard look.

“Okay, come on, I’ve got two legs,” Viktor offered, helping her climb up. “By the way, jealousy does *not* become you.”

“Here, I think there’s quite enough of that for them to share,” Hermione said, handing over the saucer to Viktor once Evangelina was settled.

“I’ve just been hearing about the honeymoon trip. Exciting,” Lara teased.

“Going nowhere sounded thoroughly inviting to me. Years of trekking back and forth every other week just to see each other was plenty of travel for me. I think we could both pilot the ferry, by now. And in a pinch, Apparate most of it. And it’s not as though that’s going to ease up just because we’ve married,” Hermione admitted. “If anything, it’s sure to get worse.”

“As long as it suits you,” Lara said. “However are you talking part of your company out of not staying overnight?” she added, tipping her chin at Evangelina.

“She’s going home with Anna to stay overnight,” Viktor answered.

“That’s what you think,” Lara said, laughing.

“No. She’s *going* home with *Anna*. There was bribery involved, even,” Viktor said in a low voice.

“For Anna or by Anna?” Lara asked.

“By Anna. I think there were promises of pancake making in the morning. Or whenever they manage to crawl out of bed. And cookie baking. And other things that probably aren’t going to be mentioned to Mama and Tate,” Viktor admitted.

“What aren’t we mentioning to Mama and Tate?” Vladimir said, coming up behind. “By the way, Tate, you owe us. Big time.”

“We’re not mentioning what Evangelina and I are doing on our girl time together, that’s what,” Anna said, picking her up. “We may stay in our pajamas all day.”

"And what do I supposedly owe you for?" Viktor asked.

"Madam Putin wanted to come over and talk to you, and we talked her out of it. Put it on our tab," Vlad said.

"How about we consider it a small repayment for me feeding, clothing, and housing you, and paying for your educations, instead?" Viktor replied.

"That works, too," Vlad admitted.

"Speaking of pajamas, I think we had better be getting home and getting someone into his, before he starts being cranky," Ilian said, gathering up Danail. "I would say safe journey, but I think the walk from here to the house is probably not all that treacherous. So, I'll stick with congratulations," he said, extending a hand to Viktor, then Hermione.

"Depends on how much you've had to drink. I think we can still make it to the house, though," Viktor said.

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"Wait," Viktor said, laying his hand over hers on the doorknob. "Are we going to just walk in?"

"What? Or make complete idiots of ourselves by having you carry me?" Hermione asked.

"Nobody is watching. And if they are, so what?" Viktor offered. "They're practically miles away."

"I feel ridiculous," Hermione said. Nonetheless, she shoved the door open and threw her arm around Viktor's neck when he stooped.

"I think that's the point, isn't it? To get being foolish together over with first thing?" he asked, stepping in. "It's the great leveler. Close the door. Then lock the blooming thing."

"Done. And done. So, now what? Collapse here or collapse into bed?" Hermione asked.

"Put a light on, and let's see if we can't make it at least as far as the bedroom," Viktor said. Hermione held up her wand to light the way. "There. That wasn't so bad, was it?"



"I'll survive the embarrassment, I suppose," Hermione said, letting him set her on her feet. "I would say I'm going to freshen up, but I think cleaning up is the best I can manage," she added, heading for the bath.

"I wouldn't say that," Viktor called after her, sinking onto the edge of the bed before taking off his glasses and setting them on the bedside table. He pulled off his boots and socks as well, then lay back on the bed. After a moment's consideration, he removed his trousers and robes. "Do you like a particular side of the bed?"

"Both sides and in the middle, actually," Hermione answered, coming back in, wearing a silky gown. "Didn't I mention I'm a bed hog?" she said, crawling in on the opposite side and kneeling behind him, draping her arms over his bare shoulders.

"You're small, I bet I can take you," he replied, taking up her hand and kissing it. Viktor turned and leaned over her as she lay back on the bed, kissing her mouth, hand skimming over her waist and the curve of her hip. "By the way, before we do this, did I mention there's good news and bad news?"

"Don't tell me. You're a bed hog, too?" Hermione asked with a laugh.

"No. The good news is I was with one woman for twenty-seven years," Viktor said solemnly.

"And what's the bad news?" Hermione prompted.

"I was with one woman for twenty-seven years."

"How's that both?" Hermione asked.

"One woman can teach you a lot in twenty-seven years. But the problem is, you pretty much only know what that one woman likes," Viktor explained.

"I suppose we've got more than the one night to figure it out," Hermione said with a shrug. They kissed again, and his fingers roamed over the swell of her breast, the nipple hardening under his touch, peaking under the thin fabric. "Um... You know... I don't exactly look like I did when I was eighteen. I mean, I've had a child-

"So? I don't look like I did when I was eighteen, either. I don't recall ever getting a real good look at you back then, anyway. I got a pretty good feel every once in a while. Even if I had, the memory's starting to go-

"That's enough out of you," Hermione warned. "I'm serious."

"I am, too. What? You think Magda looked just like she did when we got married after three children? She gained weight and got stretch marks just like every other woman alive. Believe it or not, I loved her just as much when her stomach stuck out as when it didn't. Maybe more. You appreciate a woman more when she's had to haul your ungrateful spawn around for the better part of a year and has the scars to prove it. What are you worried over? One or two stretch marks? Five pounds?" Viktor asked, shifting down and resting his cheek against her stomach.

"Something like that. You make it sound like I ought to be showing them off or something," Hermione said, burying her fingers in his hair.

"Maybe you ought to. You produced one fine kid, didn't you? I didn't have a thing to do with him and I'm fairly proud of him, anyway. He rather makes me wish I did."

"I had a lot of help in that department. A lot," Hermione admitted.

"Didn't get any help carrying him, though. So stop worrying if your arse is any more well padded than it was so long ago that we ought not even remember. That's the nice thing about getting older. Take your glasses off, you don't see a lot of flaws," Viktor observed. "The world looks a lot nicer."

"You can see perfectly bloody well without those glasses unless it's positively miniscule print, and you know it," Hermione scolded. "Not that you would need them to see that my arse, among other things, is bigger than it used to be."

"So... are we just going to talk about it, or am I actually allowed to take a look at you?" Viktor mused, trailing a finger along her hipbone. "Or are we just going to grope through our clothes for old time's sake?"

"I'm waiting for you," Hermione replied. After a short hesitation, he propped himself over her again, then shucked the gown up her hips, bunching it around her waist, hooking her knickers and pulling them low, below the soft curve of her belly, kissing her there. Her hips were a bit wider, her waistline and the curve of her stomach perhaps a bit softer than they had been, a few fine, barely visible white lines between her hipbones. Her breasts were certainly fuller than they had been at eighteen, and when he pulled the gown over her head, the light from the lamp revealed a few small marks there that matched the faint ones on her belly. Viktor kissed her mouth again, felt her nipples brush against his chest, her hands on his shoulders and neck, her fingers in his hair. He pressed against her, and he felt himself stir and harden.

They kissed in silence for a long while, the only noise their breath, lips against

skin, and shifting against fabric and the mattress. Hermione slipped a hand between them, stroked him through his boxers, then pushed them lower on his hips. "Wait..." he cautioned, pulling back, kneeling long enough to remove them, then pulling hers out of the way. He tucked his fingers between her legs, rubbing and fondling, kissing her neck and jaw at the same time.

When he finally entered her, their coupling was unhurried, almost languid, tempered more by patience than need. He propped over her and they looked one another in the eye, her hands roaming over his shoulders and chest, his hand occasionally brushing her hair or cheek, or sliding across her breast. They kissed each other, soft and slow, moving together until he spilled inside her. They lay in silence for some time, intertwined, his chin tucked in next to her shoulder. "I love you," she whispered.

"Obicham te. Better be improving your Bulgarian. By the way, since you let me in on the fact that you're a bed hog, I feel it only fair to warn you. I've been known to snore," Viktor said in her ear.

"I hate to tell you, but you were known to snore when I first met you," Hermione said. "Of course, I was a bed hog back then, too."

"But I've got you pinned, and I'm not moving," Viktor murmured.

"Fair enough. But I reserve the right to resort to any means necessary if you start snoring."

"Fair enough."

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"Come on, love. We had better hurry if we're going to get there in plenty of time to meet the ship," Hermione said, beckoning to Evangelina across the massive entrance of the Durmstrang castle. Already, she showed evidence of having the long limbed, lanky frame that Viktor and Vladimir had passed on. She was tall for her age, seemingly all arms and legs until she looked at you with those enormous, nearly black eyes. "You want to see it come in, don't you?"

"Take our hat, Nana?" the little girl asked, pulling the knobbly knitted hat from her robe pocket.

"If you're going to show it, you had better. And you had better take your cloak, too. Here," she offered, holding it out and helping her into it.

"Ship's coming, right, Nana?" Evangelina piped up.

“Right, the ship *is* coming, isn’t it, Nana?” a familiar voice rang out behind her.

“Harry! You did make it for the feast!” Hermione said, hugging him.

“Couldn’t miss *this*, could I? This can’t be Evangelina! I saw her only a few months ago... You’ve grown a foot at least,” Harry teased.

“Look, I see Mama and Tate out there next to the lake, or there’s Anna and Stan and Mila. Go straight out there to one or the other and I’ll be there in a minute,” Hermione told the fidgeting girl.

“Okay, Nana,” Evangelina said, running out the door. Hermione kept an eye on her until she was satisfied she had joined Vladimir and Nikolina.

“If I didn’t know better, I would swear she had been speaking nothing but English all her life,” Harry said.

“Well, they’ve all pretty well spoken English to her in addition to the Bulgarian since she was big enough to sit up. Besides, *my* grandchildren are the smartest in the world, right? Isn’t that the way it’s supposed to go?” Hermione replied.

“I reckon. Nana? Is that what you’ve settled on and decided you’re going to be called? Should I inform Simon, or does he already know?” Harry asked.

“He already knows. She decided for me, truth be told. When Viktor and I first got married, she couldn’t say ‘Hermione’. The closest she could get was ‘Nan’. After a while, she just started calling me ‘Nana’ and it stuck. Of course, I suspect it might have something to do with the fact that they read her Peter Pan about that time, and she found out ‘Nana’ was what some people call their grandmothers. Please, no jokes about her naming me after the dog,” Hermione warned.

“Speaking of which, I’ll have you know she informed me it was ridiculous they were making such a big deal out of a boy who could fly in it. Certainly sheds a new light on how we approached fairy tales when we were growing up, doesn’t it? Funny how kids like her see flying as no big deal. After all, it’s something her grandfather and aunt considered a part of their living.”

“So, are you two going to make it back to Britain before grandchild number two makes an appearance?” Harry asked. “Simon’s getting a bit nervous, I think.”

“Well, if Caroline doesn’t go exceedingly early, we should make it in plenty of time. With just enough time to recover after that and make it back to Bulgaria in plenty of time for grandchild number three,” Hermione said with a sigh.

“No rest for the wicked. Or the parents of the fertile. How’s Evangelina taking to the idea of a sibling?” Harry said.

“Just fine in the abstract. I’m sure it might be a different story when the baby gets here, but right now, she’s fine with it. She’s not as jealous of everyone as she used to be. I guess she’s got enough adoring public to go around, between the lot of us,” Hermione said. “And she’s gotten a bit of practice when Danail comes over to play. They get along pretty well.”

“Hadn’t we better get out to the lake? Ship’s due any minute,” Harry observed. They wandered out across the lawn toward the dock. “So, he’s been gone for over a week, fetching the Hogwarts contingent. Miss him? I don’t think you two have been apart that long since you got hitched, have you?”

“If it hadn’t been for Evangelina, it would have been awfully quiet these last few days. We’ve knitted to keep ourselves busy. It was a bit lonely before they got here,” Hermione admitted. “I was knocking around in those simply enormous guest quarters without him. It was awfully hard telling him goodbye, knowing he would be gone at least ten days. I might have gone if it weren’t for the already tight quarters they had. They had to swap out crews to accommodate all the students as it is.” The two of them joined the shuffling crowd near the dock, waiting for the ship to come in, next to the rest of the Krums. The Beauxbatons group had come in their customary style earlier in the afternoon, and were already settled inside the castle. The students now stood in orderly groups, waiting to greet the Hogwarts students who had been selected, their headmistress, and the classmates who had been crewing the ship when it left the first time. The crowd was even bigger than the group that had gathered for the foreign student arrivals when Hogwarts had hosted.

Before long, the half-familiar low rumble sounded, followed by the noise that still reminded Hermione of nothing more than a huge, sucking sink drain. The battered, ghostly looking hulk rose from the middle of the lake, great cascades of water running off the mast and decks, over the hull. Before they had set off, she had gotten the chance to see the inside. The cozy quarters inside had been far more luxurious than she would have imagined, given the ramshackle looking exterior, if a bit compact. Like most of the things connected with the campus, the ship quarters had been renovated and improved a great deal. The Durmstrang ship looked impressive, even intimidating, silhouetted against the early evening sky. Evangelina stared at it, wide-eyed, shrinking back against her mother. Nikolina leaned over and whispered, “It’s just Diado and the students.”

The ship glided up to the dock, noiseless except for the drips, and after a while, the gangplank dropped, and a few uncertain looking students poked their heads out on deck, followed by the familiar, erect figure of Minerva McGonagall. The older Durmstrang boys that had comprised the skeleton crew on the trip to Hogwarts scrambled out and secured the ship to the dock before waving the Hogwarts students down. Viktor followed the rest out, and after all the students

had disembarked, he assisted Minerva off the ship. By the time he stood on the deck and had pushed the hood of his cloak back, Evangelina had dashed toward him, hurling herself into his arms, crying out "Diado!" A few of the bystanders laughed, and Nikolina looked as though she would just as soon disappear.

"I knew we should have brought a leash," Vladimir muttered.

"Oh, she's not hurting anything," Hermione protested.

Hermione could make out Viktor whispering, "Shh... Give me two minutes," in Evangelina's ear before he reintroduced Minerva and the Headmaster of Durmstrang, and made a few welcoming remarks. "Well, Minerva, I never thought I would be saying this, but welcome to Durmstrang. I hope you and the students have a pleasant stay for the Tournament, and if you need anything, just ask," Viktor concluded.

"Thank you. For right now, I'll be grateful enough for a bit of floor that doesn't move under my feet and a hot dinner," Minerva replied. "Come along, now. Inside. We mustn't hold up dinner for the rest any more than necessary," she added to the students. The crowd slowly followed after, breaking up, but Hermione and the rest hung back.

"I'll let you all be. I'll see you later. I could eat the table legs, myself," Harry said, nudging her elbow. Hermione huddled up inside her cloak and walked closer to the deck, where she caught snatches of Evangelina's voice between gusts of wind.

"... knitted... and Nana ... and I helped!" she said proudly, waving the small knitted cap.

"Wow, that Nana's pretty handy. That's awfully small, though. Is there a house-elf somewhere still in need of liberating?" Viktor asked, sticking his fist inside the cap.

"Ne! For Simon's baby!" Evangelina said in a reproving voice.

"Oh! Well, that explains it, then. That green will look good if it happens to have red hair. We'll have to remember to take it with us when we go. Look," he said, kissing her cheek, "why don't you go in with Stan and Mila and find us a table?"

"Come on, pilentse," Stan said, taking her and putting her on his hip.

"She helped knit, hmm? And you still finished?" Viktor said, kissing Hermione.

"She held the yarn and picked the colors. And knitted part of it with the simpler

stitches, even. She's not bad at all. She's got a good eye for colors. Besides, teaching her to knit kept my mind off of knocking about in that huge suite all by myself," Hermione admitted.

"I told you they were huge. I've seen three-bedroom flats that were smaller. They did those things up right when they expanded," Viktor said.

"I am *so* sorry. She just go away from me..." Nikolina said wearily.

"Oh, don't worry about it. The one you married once announced he was thirsty to everyone in the room right in the middle of a speech by the Minister," Viktor said with a grin.

"Never going to let me live that down, are you? I was *three*," Vladimir protested.

"No. It still tickles Oblansk every time he thinks about it. He says it's the best heckling he ever got. Look, since we have an extra bedroom, how about she stays with us tonight? We'll take the one off your hands. Nothing we can do about the second one, yet," Viktor offered, gesturing to Nikolina's growing middle.

"Would you? You wouldn't mind?" Nikolina replied.

"I'm sure she'll ask, anyway. I mean, Nana's been letting her play with sharp, pointy things, for goodness sake. No way she's going to pass up further possible forbidden delights that might come with staying overnight... And speaking of sharp, pointy things, just how sharp was that elbow?" Viktor asked Anna.

"It was a knee, thank you," Anna said, running her fingers over the yellowed bruise above her eyebrow. "And it was well worth it. We won. It's not like we could lose our first game in defense of our European Cup, now, is it?"

"I've already given her the 'What are you trying to do, get yourself killed?' speech, so save your breath," Hermione pointed out.

"It was just an exhibition game," Viktor said.

"You should know full well, there is no such thing as *just* an exhibition game," Anna argued.

"Of course. I should know better," Viktor admitted. "Whatever was I thinking? Can we go in and eat before we're all frozen solid?"

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“Diado!” Evangelina’s keen voice rang out from the other bedroom.

“What?” Viktor called back from the bed, not moving the forearm draped over his eyes.

“You haven’t tucked me in!” she answered in Bulgarian.

“Oh! I’ll be there in a minute!” he said, not moving.

“You’re taking cold, aren’t you?” Hermione asked.

“No.”

“Liar. You sound like you’re breathing through a straw right now,” Hermione replied.

“I’m not *taking* cold. I’ve already *got* it. Never fails. I spend more than three days straight on that ship, I get a head cold. Even if it’s not damp,” he complained, sitting up reluctantly, sniffing.

“Well, either quit bellyaching about it or suck it up and go down to the hospital wing, then,” Hermione ordered, putting away more of their unpacked things into the wardrobe, the last stragglers.

“I am not getting the mediwitch to open up the hospital wing just for a cold. I’ll be right back,” Viktor said, getting his dressing gown on.

“No, you won’t. You’ll be lucky to get out of her little clutches in an hour or less,” Hermione said pleasantly.

“Fine. I’ll be back when I’m back, then,” he said, heading for the other room.  
“Okay, what do you want me to read?”

“I want to look at these,” Evangelina said, holding up a photo album.

“Where did you get those?” Viktor asked, sitting on the edge of her bed.

“Mama made it. She said I could put photos of the new babies in it, later, and it would have everybody in it,” Evangelina said. The photos were in no particular order or arrangement, and they spent some time flipping through them, Evangelina sitting in his lap and asking questions about when and where they were taken, and who some of the people in them were. Nikolina had even mixed in some of Anna, Stan, Vlad and Simon as children. “She’s pretty,” Evangelina said, pointing to a picture of Magda at her easel. “Who is she?”

“She sure is. That’s your Baba,” Viktor said, smoothing Evangelina’s hair. “She looks a lot different in that picture than she does in most of the paintings. She liked to get good and dirty when she painted, too.”

“How come Danail doesn’t have a Nana, and I’ve got a Nana?” Evangelina asked.

“Well... a long time before you were born, Nana and I weren’t married to each other. We both married other people. You know these rings we always wear on chains around our necks? Those are our wedding rings, from the first time. And we loved them, very much. That’s why we keep wearing our rings, and keep their photos out, and paintings.” He idly fiddled with the chain around his neck for a moment, holding the ring out where Evangelina could see. “Your Nana was married to a man named Ron Weasley. And they lived together, and they had Simon together. And I married your Baba. Her name was Magda. And she gave me your Tate, and Stan, and Anna,” Viktor explained.

“What happened to them?” Evangelina asked curiously.

“Ron... he was an Auror. You remember we talked about what they do? Catch bad people? And how dangerous that is? Some bad people hurt him while he was doing his job. Badly enough that he died. And after that, Nana had to take care of Simon by herself. And your Baba... she got really sick. Sick with something really bad, that not a lot of people get. She got sick enough that she died, too, and I was by myself. And we were both awfully lonely by ourselves. We had these big gaps where these people we loved used to be. So, we’re really lucky we found each other,” Viktor said carefully.

“Lucky?” Evangelina repeated.

“I’m sure, if we could have fixed it, Nana never would have wanted Ron to get hurt, and for Simon to lose his Tate. And I never wanted your Baba to get sick, either. And I’m sure Ron never would have wanted to leave Nana or Simon. And I know your Baba never would have left us, if she had been given the choice. But there are some things you can’t change, and that’s one of them. Getting sick with something like that, or what bad people do, sometimes. Your Baba would have been just crazy about you. I’m sorry you never got to meet her. But you never completely lose someone you love. They’re still in your heart and your memories. They leave little pieces of themselves behind. You’re a lot like her, you know. You and your Tate smile and talk like her. And Stan draws and paints like her. You know all those paintings over the fireplace? She did most of those. I think you’re going to be good at that, too. And Anna does the exact same thing with her mouth, when she’s thinking, that your Baba used to do. Just like that,” Viktor said, running a fingertip over the photo. “Baba would have loved taking care of you. I bet she would have taught you how to paint and draw, and all kinds of

things. But, since we can't change that, we sure are lucky to have Nana to help take care of us all, instead. Aren't we?" he prompted. Evangelina nodded. "And maybe we can help take care of Nana and Simon a little, too. And Caroline and their baby. Help fill in the gap a little. Do some of the things Ron would have. Just like Nana does some of the things Baba would have done if she were still here."

"Like knitting caps?"

"Like knitting caps."

"You still love Baba?" Evangelina asked.

"I loved her with all my heart. Still do. But I love your Nana, too. Just as much. Look, it's like Mama and Tate and the new baby coming. Mama and Tate love you more than anything in the entire world. And they'll love the new baby just as much. But they'll still love you just as much, too. And Nana and I won't love you any less, either. We could never forget you, because we love you. It's the same with Ron and your Baba. We'll never forget them, because we loved them. Any of us. You understand?" Viktor asked.

"I think so."

"It's getting late. Why don't we put this up, and finish looking at it tomorrow? And you can get Nana to tell you some more about Ron, and I'll tell you more about Baba," Viktor said, putting the photo album back on the bedside table. Then he tucked Evangelina under the covers.

"What was Baba like?" she asked, her eyelids heavy.

"She was something else. Nana had some big shoes to fill. Luckily, Nana's something else, too. Now go to sleep. Time enough for that tomorrow," he scolded gently, kissing her forehead. The little girl was drowsing by the time he pulled the door together.

"See? I told you," Hermione said as he climbed back into bed.

"It got complicated," Viktor said, flopping back against the pillow. "It wasn't just 'read me a story'."

"So I heard. Every word, in fact."

"And?"

"And it was very sweet. All of it."

“And I meant every word of it. Except I’m not sure Magda ever would have taken up knitting. She never was much on knitting. A couple of pairs of booties were about her limit when she was expecting Vlad,” Viktor said. “She bought baby afghans.”

“That’s okay. I doubt Ron would have knitted, either,” Hermione said with a laugh. “Pregnant or no.”

“You know what I meant,” Viktor said tiredly, smile twitching at the corner of his mouth for an instant before disappearing, not opening his eyes. He sniffled again.

“I know what you meant. Even if my Bulgarian still leaves something to be desired. It was still very sweet. What you said. Obicham te. Leka nosht,” Hermione said, kissing his lips, then resting her head on his shoulder. He tucked his arm behind and around her.

“Obicham te. Better back off. You’ll be having my cold,” Viktor warned.

“I’m sleeping with you. I think ending up with your cold from kissing you is the least of my worries,” Hermione allowed. “I know you’re worn out, but are you even going to be able to sleep with your head like...” She trailed off when he began snoring. “I guess the answer is yes,” she whispered. Hermione reached up with a tentative finger and lightly ran the tip of it over his cheek. He turned his head toward her and rested his cheek against her forehead, and the snoring ceased. “Thank you, Anna. And Magda. That’s quite the handy trick,” Hermione said, smiling to herself, settling in and drifting off to sleep.