

Dear Hermione,

Everything is all set for your visit to take place in three weeks. Sorry to hear that Ron will be away with his family, but Harry tells me he will be coming with you. I think he will like the workouts with the Quidditch team. Bulgaria hasn't hosted the internationals for about ten years. Should be exciting. You will have a good box seat. Meet you both in London bright and early the 15th. You should love Sofia. The library is huge, and so is the museum.

Viktor

She folded up the letter and slipped it into the zippered pocket of her carry-all bag. She had read it dozens of times, wearing deep creases into the parchment. Hermione wondered if Ron was still sore at the two of them for agreeing to visit Viktor during the period when he and his family were going to be visiting Bill in Egypt and Charlie and his dragons. While Ron loved Quidditch, Hermione didn't think he had quite forgiven Viktor for being older, famous, and asking her to the Yule Ball. She could tell he had been torn when Viktor had written them and extended his invitation to both Harry and Ron, so Hermione wouldn't be alone in Bulgaria during her visit.

His owls had been somewhere between outright envy and outrage at the two of them for visiting the famous seeker without him. Stupid jealousy, really. Ron sometimes felt the same about Harry. She went and petted Crookshanks, telling him goodbye. He and Hedwig were staying here, with her parents. Later, when they moved on to the Weasleys before heading back to Hogwarts, Mr. Weasley had promised to Apparate here and pick them up. In exchange, Hermione's parents would also look after Pigwidgeon while Ron and family were gone.

Her mum and dad drove her to the Dursleys to pick up Harry. "Hermione, I'm so glad you're not going by yourself. Sure, he seemed like such a nice boy when he came here for that weekend, but I still feel better sending you to Bulgaria with someone else you already know. You are only fifteen," her mother said over the seat.

"Me too, Mum. Viktor will be practicing and playing a lot. Could get kind of lonely by myself without Harry. Wish Ron could have come too. He was all hot about me getting to see the internationals when I don't know the first thing about Quidditch, according to him."

At the Dursleys, Harry fairly flew out of the house, racing to the car. "Hey," he said, bouncing into the back seat. "You guys don't know how glad the Dursleys were to see you drive up. First of all, it meant they were getting rid of me well before I go back to Hogwarts, and cars don't arouse the suspicions of

the neighbors, those dear, respectable folk.”

“Where exactly are they?” Mr. Granger asked, peering at the still house.

“Oh, they’re afraid to come out. I can’t quite seem to convince them that you’re mug-, I mean, non-magical types.” Harry grinned at Hermione. “So, Hermione, where are we meeting Viktor?”

“He’s going to Apparate near Charing Cross Road. He’s given us an address, we’re going to meet at a shop there. Then we’ll take the portkey to Sofia.” “Ah, so he has got his license then! I wondered if the ages were the same elsewhere.”

“Yes, he Apparated here for a couple of visits, one a few weeks after school let out, a three day weekend, actually. We went to the movies and ate hamburgers and milkshakes, mostly. Oh, and he finally made a breakthrough on pronouncing my name. He kept apologizing for butchering it, but there aren’t a lot of names like mine in Bulgarian. It was kind of cute anyway. Still sounds nice and foreign when he says it, but it’s more recognizable. He makes it sound kind of exotic.”

“Not many like it in English. Ordinary Muggle stuff, that seems all exotic to him, huh?”

She looked up and sadly shook her head, “More like things he doesn’t get a chance to see in Bulgaria or at Durmstrang. Actually, his parents live, somewhere up north near the Russian border, sort of a small farm. Pretty rural, from what he said. And during the communist years, I don’t think they had a lot of contact with Muggles outside of a very small circle. I got a hint that wizards there went pretty deep underground, kind of kept to themselves. He seemed pretty curious about Muggles from other places. I think his mother works with some Muggles, though. Even Muggles in Bulgaria have a tough time getting to the English films. He knows a bit about Muggle money. The pay he’s getting for Quidditch with the Vultures, I get the feeling a lot of it goes to his parents. I gathered that maybe they’re not that well off. He said something to the effect that he was lucky he was picked to play for the World Cup and with the pro team, since it earned more than enough to pay for his tuition and books for the year. Said it saved his parents the expense. I get the feeling he’s not even at Durmstrang as much as you would think. He mentioned being tutored on the road.”

“Oh,” Harry looked embarrassed. He immediately thought of Ron, and how embarrassing Ron found it when people pointed out that the Weasleys didn’t have very deep pockets. “I didn’t realize ...”

“I wouldn’t dwell on it if I were you, he seemed a little, well, embarrassed

by it when he told me. Not nearly as defensive as Ron, but he does seem a little overprotective of his parents. They all seem a bit... proud, I guess.”

“Here you are darlings, Charing Cross, and there’s the address. Let you out here, you can wait in the cafe there until Viktor shows.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Granger.” They slammed the doors and stepped out onto the sidewalk, strolling into the cafe.

“We’re early.” Hermione observed.

The cafe was largely deserted, it being an odd time of day. Only one table was occupied, and they were quite surprised to realize who was occupying it. “Ron?” Harry asked, gaping, “What are you doing here?”

“Same as you, waiting for Viktor. Mum and Dad asked me which I would rather do. Bill had been by for an unexpected visit, stayed at the Burrow for weeks, so we got our visiting in. Charlie, he managed to get away for a few days too and come while Bill was there. I decided I would like to see the internationals, more so than the dragons, even though my poor brother’s heart was broken.” Ron put his hand over his heart in mock solemnity. “Seriously, I just wanted to go with you two. So where is ickle Vicky anyway? Can’t tear himself away from his adoring public long enough?” Hermione glared at him. Ron indicated the empty chairs. “Sit already. The milkshakes are pretty good. Muggle money does come in handy for some things.”

“Ron! Not so loud!” Hermione admonished. Soon, the three of them were sipping at chocolate milkshakes, eyeing the door.

Shortly, they saw a tall, angular shadow walk by the side window, coming from the back alley. “Is that...?” Harry asked, trailing off when Viktor Krum pushed open the cafe door and walked in. They would barely have recognized him, if they had run into him by chance. He had put on ten pounds since Hermione saw him last, which filled out his slender body slightly. He looked more... healthy, she thought, even in those few weeks since he had last been to England. His dark, hawkish features were the same, but he looked less sallow, more tanned and ruddy, as though he had been spending long hours outdoors in the sun practicing. His longer black hair was slightly tousled, pleasantly unruly, but glossy. He was garbed in a plain black tee and slouchy jeans and hiking boots. Characteristically, his hands were firmly in his pockets unless he was using them, and the incongruous duck-footed walk was still there, but he looked shockingly at home in this completely Muggle setting. Even his shoulders were more relaxed. Somehow, he seemed less weighed down. He didn’t even look grumpy, as Hermione had described him upon first seeing him.

He looked just as at home as Hermione. Harry, as usual was swallowed up in a sweatshirt that was a hand-me-down from Dudley and a good two sizes too big. Ron, not used to dressing completely like a Muggle, had actually managed a decent outfit of cargos and a buttoned shirt, but he was far too fascinated by the velcro pockets on them, electric lights, Muggle money and the milkshakes, he treated those like a newly discovered delicacy. Catching pieces of their conversation, the waiter had eyed them like they were hosting an eccentric exchange student. Funny, Harry thought, he's the only foreigner, yet he's more comfortable in this scene than Ron and me.

"So you are all here already. Good. Milkshakes?" Viktor pointed at their glasses.

"Yes. Milkshakes. Did you want one before we go? You need money for one?" she asked, reaching for her purse.

"No, no, I haff no need for one. And I haff money, just in case. Muggle, British and Bulgarian." he said, patting one jean pocket with his hand. "Vizard money on the other side. Not much time, anyway. Portkey leaves in fifteen minutes." he said, looking at his watch. They finished their milkshakes, paid (after some quick explanation to Ron about which bills were which) and gathered their things. Viktor scooped up Hermione's bag, putting it on his shoulder. "Let me get that. Help?" he offered his empty hands to the boys, but they both refused. "Ron, I am glad you vere able to come. You vill like the internationals."

Ron stuck out his lip and looked at Viktor. "Yeah, I bet I will."

"So, where is this portkey?" Hermione asked as they went out onto the sidewalk.

"This vay," Viktor replied, steering them back up the alley he entered from. They walked over three buildings, and Viktor hunted behind a recycling bin for a few minutes before coming up with an empty milk jug.

"This is it." he declared, holding it out by the handle for the others to touch. In a few moments they all felt the familiar tug behind their navels. They found themselves in an alleyway very similar to the one they had just left. "Sorry to make you carry your bags, but there is a very good restaurant in Sofia. Ve can eat there and then take the other portkey to The Pavlova."

"Pavlova?" Ron asked. They shouldered their bags and set off, the unburdened Hermione and Viktor leading Ron and Harry by a few feet.

"Home." Viktor said simply. "It used to be an inn. Ve still call it by its name. It was passed on and on, down to my mother, by her family. My father

keeps sheep on the land, my mother works in Sofia. She works with historical documents, keeping them whole, copying them..." he looked at Hermione, searching for the word.

"Ummm, an archivist?" she hazarded a guess.

"Yes! Archives! She does some translations from Russian, too."

"Your mother speaks Russian? Wow." Harry breathed.

"Not so impressive. Her grandmother was Russian, and her grandfather. My father has Russian ancestors, too. She speaks some English but not much. My father, not as much English. I spend all my summers before the Institute either helping with lambs or in the museum or library. Broom every night out in the orchard since I was seven."

"Do you speak Russian?" Hermione inquired.

"I can get by. And Russian is the semi-official language at Durmstrang. Is a beautiful language. I only wish I spoke it as well as my mother."

"Can't speak much less English than he does, can they? He doesn't speak much of anything, old silent Vik there..." Ron stage whispered to Harry from the corner of his mouth.

"You speak a second language? Or a third?" Harry muttered back, annoyed now by his friend's negative attitude. Viktor had been nice enough to invite them, after all. Ron colored and his freckles all but disappeared into his flushed face.

As they emerged from the alley and onto the sidewalks of Sofia, the three Britons paused. It was a city so bright and clean it looked fairly polished. The buildings were cool white stone or plaster work, warm red brick, bright jewel colors decorating the insides. Small crowds ambled from shop to shop. It looked almost as though it were right out of the ancient Orient. "It...it's beautiful." Hermione breathed.

"It is a pretty place." Viktor agreed. "Come on, Korina Sofia is down here. Best food in town."

They stepped into a small, dim cafe, lit with candles and lamps. A pleasantly plump woman with blonde hair strode over. She wore a flowing, silky robe, that suited her regal and commanding demeanor. "Viktor!" This was followed by a flood of excited Bulgarian. She seemed to be making a great fuss over him, so much that he shyly stared at his boots when he wasn't answering. She hustled them all into a back room, painted in a beautiful Moroccan red,

accented with gold and silver here and there, calling “Priem! Priem!”. Candles lit the room, and there was a small table set up.

“She welcomes us, you particularly as my guests,” Viktor said, as she stood beside their table and beamed at them.

“Surely that wasn’t all of it?” Ron said, “Sounds like she read you a chapter from War and Peace.” Harry kicked Ron sharply under the table.

Viktor blushed. “She asked about how Quidditch vos going. She bets on Bulgaria when I play.” Viktor lifted his shoulders in a “what are you going to do?” kind of shrug.

“Well, whoop-de...” but Harry patted his shin again before Ron could finish. Hermione glared at him across the table. Viktor looked a bit puzzled, when Ron didn’t finish, but let it pass.

“You all like roast mutton?” he asked. They all nodded in the affirmative. Viktor turned to the woman and let loose a torrent of Bulgarian, evidently ordering their entrees. He turned back to the three at the table. “Spiced cider to drink? No alcohol...” They nodded again. More Bulgarian. She bustled off, after patting Viktor on the cheek affectionately. He colored again.

They made small talk about their vacations until the woman came back with four plates. On them, a colorful wild rice, seasoned and speckled with sliced almonds, cushioning a thick, seasoned mutton stew. Alongside, roasted vegetables, hot from a grill. It smelled heavenly, and proved to be a hearty meal. Hermione noted that Viktor even had a generous second helping, though the rest of them declined the woman’s pantomimed offers of seconds. Eating like that, it was no wonder that he was starting to fill out. Previously, he had been the only adolescent boy she had ever met that wasn’t a bottomless pit when it came to food.

“Dessert?” Viktor asked after a respectful five-minute remembrance, spent staring at their empty plates. Ron had nearly scraped the design off trying to gather up all the broth. “What do you recommend?” Harry asked. Viktor cast his eyes upward, deep in thought. “Baklava.” he said, after some consideration.

Soon after, the woman bustled back and took Viktor’s order, and within minutes, they had bowls with mounded pastry, honey and walnuts, spiced with cinnamon and sugar, light as air, still steaming from the oven. On the side, fresh whipped cream. She also brought mugs of ice cold milk. By the time they finished, not one of them could eat another bite. The woman came back, pushing little takeout boxes of pastry on them “Vzimate nego!” (Take it!) , despite their polite protestations. Viktor made his in Bulgarian, but even that didn’t deter her. He quickly gave in and proffered thanks instead.

Viktor reached into his jeans pocket and produced Muggle money, to their great surprise, counting out most of what he carried into his hand. Hermione wondered if he had enough to cover four meals of that size in any currency. But why was he counting Muggle money? Mistake in picking the pocket? They all looked at one another. "We'll have to ask what we owe him when we get outside. I didn't think to ask about exchanging for Bulgarian money to help with the tab." Hermione whispered across the table.

Viktor presented the money to the woman, who began babbling back, shaking her head "no" vigorously, seeming to scold him for daring to pay with Muggle money. Surely, that was the problem. She wanted wizard money and Viktor had confused his pockets.

But Viktor insisted, "Vzimaite nego, vzimaite nego, molia. Molia!" (Take it, take it, please. Please!) capturing one of her flapping hands and placing the money in it, talking rapidly the whole while. She protested back all the more, firmly planting the full amount back in his hand, closing his fingers on it, and emphatically pushing it back to his chest.

"Ne, ne, sladko momche!" (No, no sweet boy!) She laughed and scolded him again in good natured fashion, a speech they took to mean "Your money's no good here", since she was making a big production of tearing up the bill where she had written down their orders, tossing the bits into a nearby rubbish bin.

He walked back to them, looking slightly stunned. "She says it is free, her compliments. You are my guests. We can go, she tore up the check."

"Hmph! Must be nice being famous, being in the World Cup gets you lots of freebies from your Quidditch fanciers, does it?"

"Ron!" Hermione glared at him.

Viktor looked taken aback. "Korrina Sofia... the couple who runs it, they are Muggles, last name Korrina. She used to work at the gift shop in the museum when I was small, she was friends with Mama. She even has a sister who went to Durmstrang. Madame Korrina, she is adopted. She has not seen me since I was sixteen, before I went to train with Team Bulgaria for the season... well over a year...I should have explained..." he trailed off as Ron slunk down in his seat.

"Sorry," Ron squeaked, finally. "I shouldn't have said it. You were going to pay. You tried to pay. It's not like you asked for it. You two don't ask to get fawned over everywhere you go. Between you two and Miss Brains here, it's a wonder anyone knows I exist. Heck, I used to fawn over you until I got jealous."

Ron pouted.

“I haff had vorse. Forgotten.” Viktor said simply. “Portkey is in back, just out the back door.” They walked out into the narrow alley behind the cafe. Grabbing an old tire propped by the door, they waited a few seconds before being yanked by the navel again.

They all staggered to a stop at the top of a small rise. The sun was going down opposite, casting a purplish glow on the thick clouds, and a golden backlighting to a small orchard of fruit trees and a large stone building with a slate roof. Beyond the building, opposite the orchard stood a small barn, and some wooden fence, enclosing a herd of sheep. Taking in the scene the rise overlooked, Viktor smiled softly, his eyes softened, his shoulders relaxed, his face was as unclouded as they had ever seen. The three Hogwarts students didn't know whether to gape at him or the scene below, so they settled for looking at the small farm and sneaking peeks at him out of the corners of their eyes.

Finally he broke the silence with “Pavlova. Home.” He looked round at them. “Best be getting in. They vill vonder vare ve are. It gets cool at night, and sometimes, there are volves.”

“Volves! I mean, wolves!?!” Harry exclaimed.

Viktor chuckled softly. “Yes. Ve have sheep. Volves like mutton too. Mostly they howl and make noise, maybe valk by. Unless you corner one, it is probably more afraid of you than you are of it.”

“I've heard that fairy tale before...sounds like something Hagrid would say about his skrewts...” Harry said doubtfully.

Viktor laughed out loud this time. “Not many volves hang around Ivan and Natasha. They might keep you avake, volves howling, not much else.” He pursed his lips slightly, whistled loudly, and from around the barn, two enormous and muscular gray malamutes raced toward them. They skidded to a stop in front of Viktor, wagging and panting like a couple of excited puppies.

He sat Hermione's bag on the grass and leaned over to give the dogs a ruffle on the neck and a scratch on the ears. He didn't have to lean far, since the two dogs were about waist-high when he was standing. “Ivan,” he introduced the darker, silvery dog, obviously the larger of the two. “Natasha”, he said, giving the slightly smaller female a rub on the muzzle. She was a lighter gray, white tipped hairs here and there among her fur. “Sheep dogs. They stay out vith the sheep to keep volves away.” The dogs circled the newcomers cautiously, suspiciously, letting out gruff growls as they prowled. Finally they stopped, staring at Harry with big, piercing blue eyes.



“Um, Viktor?” Harry asked, “They do know we’re friendly...?” Viktor smiled again. “Pet them. If I don’t tell them to eat you alive, no danger. They might lick you to death, otherwise.” Harry gingerly patted the two dogs, who were now crouched in front of him, motionless.

Like they were playing some bizarre version of freeze tag, the two dogs relaxed and wagged and panted as enthusiastically as they had for Viktor. They approached Hermione, who quickly ruffled their ears and was rewarded with the same enthusiasm.

Ron was more reticent, eyeing the dogs crouched before him for several moments before asking, “I won’t draw back nubs, will I?” Viktor cocked a dark eyebrow. Ron reached out for Natasha slowly, and she barked, a sharp, echoing bark that caused Ron to jump.

Viktor chuckled again. “She is impatient. She thinks you are too slow.” He ruffled the dog’s thick fur with his hands, fingers buried in it, discreetly guiding the dogs back from Ron a bit. Ron was able to pet the dogs now, their tails beating out a tattoo on Viktor’s jeans as they wagged furiously.

They gathered up their bags again and walked the last few yards to the house. The dogs never strayed far from Viktor, flanking him as though they were on short leashes. They entered a large wooden door, into a den, with a huge stone fireplace, high ceiling, and rough beams. They clustered their bags near the door, and Viktor called out in Bulgarian. From the back of the house, a woman emerged, wiping her hands on an apron. She untied it, tossed it onto a chair, walked slowly over to Viktor, reached up and placed her hands lovingly on either side of his face. Finally she ran one small white hand under the thick black bangs covering his forehead and ruffled his hair back affectionately, though she could barely reach, even on tiptoe. She murmured one word, “Sokrovishte,” then dropped her hands and inclined her head to peek around Viktor and take in the three guests standing by her door.

His mother. She had the same thick black hair, the same thick, dark lashes and brows, the same deep brown, almost inky eyes. She was petite, Viktor towered over her, and she had an angular face, much like Viktor’s, with one major exception. Her nose was very dainty, slightly upturned at the end. On her, the Slavic features were delicate and beautiful against her milky white skin. Her full flushed lips were curved up into a reserved but welcoming smile, but there was still something about her that seemed sad.

“This is my mother, Anya.” Viktor said, rather unnecessarily. “Mama, this is Ron Veasley,” Viktor seemed to make a point of introducing Ron first.

“Hello, Mrs. Krum. Thank you for having us.”

“Hello, priem, velcome,” she nearly whispered, nodding at him.

“This is Harry Potter.”

“Mrs. Krum.”

“Priem.”

“And this is Hermione Granger,” she seemed to take in Hermione a bit longer, then nodded and murmured a greeting to her as well.

“Velcome to Pavlova. Four rooms free upstairs, choose and ve prepare.” she said softly, folding her hands in front of her. “Viktor writes much about you all.”

She turned to Viktor and spoke softly in Bulgarian, indicating the three visitors. “Vould you like a bath, refreshment, anything before you go to bed?” Viktor translated.

“A bath and a bed, I think. I’m bushed.” Harry stifled a yawn. The others nodded.

“You vont to pick your rooms?” Viktor asked.

“Is there much of a difference?” Ron asked.

“Not really, they all haff small baths and are nearly the same size. Some face different directions. The beds just need sheets and the baths towels and soap.” Viktor replied.

“You pick then, Viktor, I’m sure it will be fine.” Hermione interjected.

Viktor turned back to his mother, and began reeling off room assignments in Bulgarian. She hurried off to gather the linens. Viktor made to follow, but she turned and motioned him back.

“She loves guests,” he shrugged. “She says it makes it feel like a real inn again.” As he finished, they heard the back door thunk shut, and soon Viktor’s father stood in the doorway. The resemblance to his father was also fairly apparent. He had inherited the reedy height, in fact, he was an inch taller than his father, and his father’s hair was as dark and thick as his mother’s, with a little wave. His father was a bit broader and sturdier in frame, even more heavily muscled, being more mature in body. He wore a slight frown, not the displeased and angry frown Viktor had sported most of his time at Hogwarts, but a small downturn of the mouth, as though he were studying something in his mind.

It was easy to see he had the same full mouth that Viktor generally scowled with. As he walked in, they noted his duck-footed gait. The slightly hooded, almost sleepy eyelids and hooked nose were his father's contributions as well. Hermione couldn't get over how much Viktor resembled both of his parents. Much like the Weasleys and their brood, it was hard to put your finger which parent each child resembled more.

His father's nose hadn't been on the receiving end of several bludgers though. Viktor's had been broken so many times he had nearly lost count, at least five, Hermione remembered him saying. His father shook his hand and clapped him affectionately on the shoulder, the slight frown dissolving into a quiet smile. Again the introductions all around. His father, Nikolas, didn't bother with even cursory attempts at English.

Standing behind his father, listening to the words he was about to translate for them, Viktor slowly and subtly rubbed down the bridge of his nose with his index finger and simultaneously jerked his head toward his father, a little smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, his thick left eyebrow cocked up. It was all the three could do not to burst out laughing at Viktor's reference. Nikolas welcomed them in a flood of Bulgarian and let Viktor translate. Consequently, his welcome speech was a bit longer than Mrs. Krum's. He seemed somewhat more effusive than his shy wife.

"...and if you need anything, just ask." Viktor finished up as Mrs. Krum returned downstairs. "I'll walk you up," Viktor said, leading them up the stairs. He walked down the hall and worked his way back toward the stairs, dropping off Ron, then Harry.

Hermione laid a hand on his arm. "Where's your room?" she asked.

"Down there," he inclined his head to the room at the far end of the hall, furthest from the stairs and her room.

"May I see?" He nodded. They walked down the hall and he swung open the door. She almost winced, it was so painfully bare. It looked as though he was staying at a hotel overnight, not home. A few piles of books, some neatly packed bags on the floor, not much to personalize the room.

"Not much to see. I travel so much...school, practice, games, last year Hogwarts ... When I could not just Apparate home, I did not get here much. No need to keep it too nice. I own a few books." He waved his hand at the stacks on his bedside table and a few volumes on the shelves.

"I understand. Must be hard on you. And your parents. The last couple of years, all that practicing."

“Hermione, I vos recruited into state-sponsored Quidditch my first year at Durmstrang, when Karkaroff talked to scouts he knew. I vent from Durmstrang to live and practice with the national team. I spent two weeks home that summer. They would have used me in the last World Cup the next year, but I vos not old enough to play. Just practice. I did play in pro games at fifteen, though.” It was the nearest she had heard him come to hearing him brag about his record-breaking play in the pro league. To hear him tell it now, he didn’t seem to find it much to brag about.

“Oh,” she said softly, “I didn’t realize...”

He laid his hands on her shoulders. “Hermione, Bulgaria is very different from England. Ve haff more freedom than ve used to, more vealth, but being good on a broom at Durmstrang is still a lot like being a Muggle with skill on a balance beam in Romania. A good way to avoid starving... other things... haffing to make decisions. Famous seekers don’t disappear easily.” He blushed furiously, and looked away, as though ashamed of what he had just said.

“Viktor, is there something you need to tell me?” she asked softly.

He looked back. “Just this for now. Know things haff been very different here, and at Durmstrang. Not far over those mountains is Russia. Durmstrang...” He paused and inclined his head to the window. “Communism falling vos good, but painful to live through anyway. Then the Death Eaters... You vill haff to be patient with me. I am trying to change things for better. You should go to bed, now.”

“Okay, I can take a hint.” He gave her hand a squeeze, and walked her to her door. “One last thing. Why did you invite Ron and Harry? Not that I’m not glad you did, but you weren’t particularly close and Ron...”

“Less pressure. Not as lonely for you. I am patient. With you. With Ron.” he answered curtly.

“Goodnight, Viktor.”

“Goodnight Hermione. Sweet dreams.” He shut the door to his room softly behind him.

Down the hall, Hermione crawled into bed. She replayed the conversation in her mind. Viktor’s life had been molded by the “state Quidditch machine” far more than she had known, then. Imagine being away from home that much at age twelve! Even boarding school allowed for holidays and summers home, Viktor didn’t seem to have had much time, though. She had known that Bulgaria and Russia had a great deal of economic and political upheaval the last few

years, and it seemed that even the wizard world was affected deeply.

She wondered particularly about Viktor's comment on making decisions, and disappearing. If it was as sinister as it had sounded, it worried her a great deal. She shook it off by convincing herself that she was tired and reading too much into it. Viktor had probably, like Harry, gotten used to being recognized everywhere, and needed that affirmation in some way. It was sweet that he was making an effort to pander to Ron, even if Ron was being babyish sometimes. She nestled into the down comforter and down pillows, and slept.

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## CHAPTER 2

The sunlight through the windows woke Hermione. It was still fairly early, judging from the misty sunshine coming through the last bits of dew burning off in the air. She dressed and headed downstairs. Viktor's door was standing open, and his room was obviously empty, so she went downstairs. Anya finished up her coffee, smiled, and indicated the kitchen table. "Eat now, or later with Viktor?" she asked.

"Later, I think, but thank you," Hermione said.

"Viktor, out," Anya pointed out the back door of the kitchen toward the orchard, then went back to cleaning up her breakfast dishes.

Hermione stepped out into the morning sunshine. It was pleasantly warm, and quiet, there was little noise aside from the birds singing. She could actually hear the sheep munching on the grass. She walked toward the fruit orchard, and almost giggled out loud when she saw the familiar hiking boots Viktor had worn on his forays to England splayed awkwardly in the grass, beneath a pear tree. But breaking the silence seemed almost sacrilegious, so she suppressed it.

Dressed much as he had been yesterday, in jeans and a tee, Viktor lay near the trunk, his head pillowed against Ivan, his face tilted toward Hermione. Natasha lay at his side, her muzzle resting on his thigh. His long tapered fingers rested in the grass at his left, the right hand draped across his torso. She suppressed another laugh. Nature boy, she thought.

She studied his face for a moment. Without a trace of his usual scowl, the planes of his face were far more relaxed, his mouth almost slack. He very nearly pouted in his sleep. He had high cheekbones, and thick, dark eyelashes that matched his bushy brows. His forehead was unlined between them now. His longer hair suited him, and now with the tendrils flopping across his forehead in the breeze and around the sides of his face, it made him look younger, softer somehow. Even his nose, with its hook and the battered, slightly crooked bridge, gave his face character, she decided.

For only the second time since they had met, she found it quite easy to believe his age, only eighteen, nearly nineteen. He was the grizzled veteran in competition of any kind, but he had seemed so naive when he had approached her in the library, awkward. Strange how he could have been pursued by so much opportunity to chat up those giggling schoolgirls, yet he had approached her with far more caution than he had the dragon in the first challenge of the tournament. She walked softly on the grass, noiselessly, she thought, since Viktor was obviously asleep.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when he suddenly spoke her name, without even opening his eyes. He opened one eyelid lazily, and peered up at her.

“How did you know?” she asked, hand over her heart, trying to catch her breath.

“First of all, you make noise, and it is quiet. I sleep light. Ron and Harry clomp like horses. Second, Papa is in town, and Mama never leaves the kitchen before breakfast is done. Had to be you.”

“Noisy, huh? You accusing me of being undainty?”

“Seekers use more than eyes. They use ears, too. Like scouts.” He sat up, rousing the dogs, and leaned back into the tree, ear to the trunk as though listening, “One British girl... on trail...due east.”

She laughed. “Why Mr. Krum, I do believe that was an attempt at humor. Making fun of that western film I took you to?”

“Never. Come. Sit.” He patted the grass with great solemnity, as though he were a king granting access to his throne, then propped himself against the tree.

“So, did you get out of bed early to come out here and sleep?” she asked, leaning against the trunk beside him.

“Yes,” he replied, grinning slightly.

“It’s beautiful. I’m glad you asked me. I’m glad I came,” she said, looking back at Pavlova.

“I am glad too. We can talk now, like in London. Not so much distraction.”

“Viktor... I hate to ask you this, but the curiosity is eating me up. Durmstrang... what is it really like?” He stiffened a little and she wished she had

bitten her tongue.

“Vot do you vont to know?” he asked, staring back at the house. Might as well press on now, so she asked the least offensive question on her mind.

“Is it... is it in Siberia? You talk about it being so cold, it must be even further north than here. North is Russia. Coldest place in Russia is Siberia. Pretty deserted too.”

Viktor nodded slowly. “I think it is there, or at least near there. Many of the classes are taught in Russian. Many of the instructors are Russian. A few Germans. The founder vos German. Used to be mostly Russians and Bulgarians who vent there. So many come from all over now, though, they start teaching English as part of regular classes a few years after my parents left. Not many living close, Muggle or vizard. Hard to tell. Harder than Hogvarts. Karkaroff vos even more guarded than Dumbledore about vare ve really vere. The ship is not like the Hogvarts Express, no scenery, except undervater. Ve get on at a port up north, and don’t see out for the entire trip. Hard to get your bearings.”

She could have sworn he had shuddered a bit when he mentioned Karkaroff. “Founder?” she asked.

“A vizard named Gryndel. Durmstrang. Strang und Durm. Stress and storm. He meant it to be like a harbor from those things.” Hermione could detect the slightest hint of irony in Viktor’s voice.

She let the answer sink in for a moment. “Viktor...I...I...I’ve read that Durmstrang... they... well, they don’t just teach defense against the dark arts...they actually teach dark arts...” Viktor turned to look at her, his big, almost black eyes distressed, his brows together. He nodded, slowly, one downward and upward bob of the head, then turned back to the house.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. You must think I’m awful. And nosy.” He looked at his hands, dangling between his tented knees.

He slowly shook his head in the negative. “No. Curiosity is natural. I would be asking questions if I had not been to Hogvarts. Many of the instructors, they are as kind and caring as most of your professors. Ve haff a few Snapes, as vell. To tell the truth, I do not know many people at Durmstrang well enough to pass any judgment on them. Karkaroff always had me practicing. Not much time for making friends, getting up at dawn, your whole day scheduled. Poliakoff, he is a decent enough friend, loyal, even amusing. He took it upon himself to act as a... barrier between me and... vot vos Ron calling them? My fan club?”

Hermione laughed and replied, "Well, he didn't seem to be doing such a great job last year, I didn't see him once in the library! I recall a lot of girls from three different schools who wanted to choke me. He could have taken several off your hands."

Viktor adopted a different mannerism, perkier, cheekier, which she presumed to be his take on Poliakoff. "Viktor, I am just vone man... I cannot possibly fend off three schools vorth of girls at vonce!" he said theatrically, indignation in his voice. "And Elena, she is vonting my attention! I cannot refuse Elena! Her heart vould break!"

He dropped the act and laughed. "Only thing is, the name changed and the situation changed all the time, Alexei is as fickle as some of those reporters." He adopted the strange mannerisms again, "Viktor, I vill help you fend off those vicious girls during practice. Elena vos not happy vith my birthday gift, and that Sasha, she is very nice, always eyeing you at practice. She is sad you do not notice her! If you do not vont her, I vill be glad to keep her busy for you!"

It was so comical, Hermione had to laugh. "Otherwise, though, he vos a steady sort of friend. Steadier than I deserve. Ve did not get much time to spend together, maybe because Karkaroff did not approve of him, always picking on him. Probably because Alexei vos the only vone brave or foolhardy enough to do things like put tadpoles in his drinks," Viktor chuckled as he spoke, then his face hardened. "But... knowing something about dark arts and being evil...they are two different things," he said softly.

"I'm learning that," she replied, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Silly that we act like where you come from, where you study, is important. Voldemort came from Hogwarts. So did Dumbledore. And a lot of people who fall somewhere in between on the good and evil scale. I'm sure there are plenty of good people at Durmstrang, and plenty of bad ones at Hogwarts. A certain potions professor comes to mind..." she teased, knowing Viktor was no more fond of Snape than she or Harry or Ron.

He had once told her he disliked the theatrical way Snape picked on the slightest hint of weakness from the students in his class. So much so that he retaliated when Snape ridiculed Poliakoff as a stupid boy for not knowing what snapdragons were, never having encountered the English word in a lecture before. Viktor had made Snape look twice as foolish as Poliakoff when he innocently invited Snape to give them the term in both Russian or Bulgarian, so Poliakoff could remember. She remembered thinking that Neville could use Viktor on his side in potions. Viktor didn't answer, he just kept looking back at the house in the morning quiet.

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## CHAPTER 3

Inside, Harry and Ron met up in the hall, still yawning and stretching. They headed down to the kitchen, where Anya was laying out sliced apples in a bowl, with her wand, to add to the already loaded table. They sat at the table, and she rushed to bring them glasses, indicating the milk in a pitcher on the table. "Okay?" she asked, and they nodded enthusiastically. Anya finished off the table with an open jar of honey, stepping between them to lay it on the table. She reached out and ruffled Harry and Ron's hair from their foreheads, much as she had done with Viktor, and smiled.

Feeling the scar under her fingers, she paused, turning to Harry. She propped his chin on her other hand, tilting his head back slightly, holding his hair away from his face with her right hand. She gently traced the scar with her cool finger, looking at it intently, a deep sadness creeping into her face. What might have felt like an unexpected manhandling from any other person felt like an oddly gentle, motherly caress from her. After a long moment, she smoothed his hair back down. "Sorry," she murmured, looking into his eyes, her own looking suspiciously teary. "Vork, now."

She turned toward the door, and there stood Viktor and Hermione. Viktor's face held almost the same sad expression, a short, wordless exchange seemed to take place, and they bid each other goodbye. "Sokrovishte" she said softly, patting Viktor on the shoulder, and Anya Disapparated just outside the back door. Viktor looked after her for a long moment.

"Why on ear..." Ron began, but Harry gave him a look that silenced him. Viktor glanced over at an alcove in the corner, full of family photos. He shook his head sharply, as if to clear it, and moved to sit down. He held Hermione's chair for her, then settled into his own seat.

"Pastry, pears, peaches, strawberries, clotted cream, whipped cream, apples, honey, cottage cheese, I'm not sure I could eat a tenth of this," Hermione said brightly.

"What does she keep saying to you, your mum?" Ron asked, after swallowing his mouth full of pear.

"Vot?" Viktor asked, his absolute studied concentration on the untouched apple slice in his hand broken.

"That word, sokro..sokro... whatever. What's it mean?"

"Oh, that. 'Sokrovishte' is Russian. Roughly translated, it is 'treasure', sort of like 'darling'. Her grandmother used to call her that." He finally dipped the apple slice into the honey ladled onto his plate.

“That’s nice,” Harry said earnestly, feeling a bit envious that Viktor had someone who called him her treasure. The Dursleys certainly didn’t feel that way about him.

As it was when he was with Mrs. Weasley, or even Hermione’s mother, he found himself wanting a mother like that, one who caressed your face like a lost treasure returned unexpectedly and put out feasts for you and your friends. Viktor could at least look at his mother and see several of his own features, measure his height against his father’s, trace his black hair, dark eyes, and Russian heritage on both sides. He had his mother’s eyes. His father’s mouth. That hooked nose might not be much of a prize to other people, but Harry often found himself wishing he could lament his unruly hair by simply pointing to his father and shrugging the way Viktor had written off his nose by nodding at Nikolas with an arched brow. All he had was other people’s memories, a picture in his head.

They ate mostly in silence, until Hermione turned and began examining the photos in the alcove. One was obviously Anya and Nikolas on their wedding day, the wedding party surrounding them. Anya had a demure lacy veil over her dark hair, smiling shyly at the camera, giving a little wave, Nikolas was tall and imposing in his suit, one hand on her arm, the other around her waist.

She murmured little comments about each one, picking them up and studying them in turn. Christmases, birthdays, various broomsticks and Quidditch matches. “Oh, is this you?” she asked, showing him a small silver framed photo of a toddler with dark hair, not more than a year old, intense, serious expression in place, sitting on the grass in the orchard, fingers twisting in the blades.

Viktor smiled a little. “Yes. It is me.”

She came to another photo of Anya and Nikolas, sitting in front of the fireplace, with a year-old toddler on her lap. She was jogging her knee up and down, the child studying the person taking the picture intently, solemnly. Viktor was certainly serious right from the beginning, Hermione thought and smiled to herself. He wouldn’t even crack a grin as a toddler.

As she was about to replace it, she paused. Something wasn’t right in the photo. She studied it a moment before realizing what was amiss. She glanced back over at the silver frame. The nose. The unmistakable nose passed on by Nikolas Krum was apparent in the first picture. Not nearly as prominent a feature or as obviously broken as it was now, it was definitely hooked. The child in the second picture had Anya’s nose, more upturned, a thinner bridge.

She continued to compare the two. Almost identical in every other way,

the second picture differed only in two details. The nose and the slightly longer, curlier hair. A cursory glance would have made her assume it was simply Viktor, maybe a bit older or younger than the first picture. "This one...it's not quite like the other one, could this be a cousin, maybe?" She turned back and put the picture in front of him. He closed his eyes and winced. "Viktor?"

"Not me. Violeta," he intoned sadly.

"Violeta? Who is Violeta?" Harry asked. Viktor sighed heavily, and took the photo from Hermione's hand.

"She is...vos... my sister. She vos two years younger." He studied the photo glumly, silently.

"W..was?" Harry prompted softly.

Viktor sighed again. "She vos killed. Ve had Death Eaters here as vell."

"But...but you're a pureblood. You would have never gotten into Durmstrang otherwise!" Ron said.

"Pure!" Viktor spat the word like it tasted bad. "Like that little dictator Malfoy? True, but blind luck, who your parents are, where you are born. No Durmstrang Institute, no wizarding academy, no Quidditch. I spoke almost no English then, no French now, so no Hogwarts, no Beauxbatons. Could not haff gone anyway, even if my parents had vanted to send me there. Do you think Death Eaters cared if innocents got in the vay?"

Viktor raised his brows for a moment, dropping them and resuming, a deep scowl settling on his face as he continued. "Voldemort vos strong. Many, many Death Eaters in Russia, Romania, even Bulgaria. No vone knew who to trust. My mother vos in a Muggle shop, just across the border, in Russia, with my sister. There vos...a ... a massacre. Death Eaters killed a group of Muggles, took the shop down, vith four more buildings. It vos passed off to Muggles as terrorist bomb. It fit. Russia vos beginning to crumble from the inside. Muggles had plenty to worry about. Shortages, famine, assassinations, death sqvads, terrorists. My mother lived. Violeta... " He struggled for the word, and finally, it fell flatly from his lips. "Dead."

Eventually, he looked up at Harry. "The var, it vos not just in England. Ve suffered too. Ve are still suffering. I saw her feel your scar. She is scarred too, on the inside. She vos...curious, I am sure. Ve heard of The Boy Who Lived here. Like the rest, she vonders vhy, vhy so many others died. Vhy she lived. Vhy just a few months later, you lived," Viktor's voice was matter-of-fact, no bitterness, Harry thought. "Vot's vone pureblooded three-year-old by accident against forty Muggles dead?" he finished in a disgusted tone. He laid the picture

reverently on the table, still studying it.

“Actually, it was kind of nice, your mother stroking my forehead. It just bothered me that she looked so sad. I’m sorry,” Harry said quietly, not quite sure what he was apologizing for, bringing up a painful memory, or surviving.

“Viktor, I never would have brought it up if I had known...” Hermione began, but Viktor cut her off with a wave of his hand.

He looked back up, continuing to study Harry intently. “You lost your parents. No need to be sorry. You lived. You had to votch Cedric die. You lived. How or vhy, not important. Harry, others may vont a piece of you, because you are special. Sometimes you can’t help being special, but you can help it vhen no one vill let you be vot you are. Don’t let everyone else push expectations on you. Curiosity is fine, controlling is not. Guide your own destiny, Harry,” he said with quiet conviction.

“Karkaroff nearly...” Viktor stopped abruptly and looked at Ron. “Ron...you may not think it, but you haff nothing to be jealous of. So many other people thinking you are special comes vith lots of problems. Hermione...she tells me you vere brave...sacrificing yourself in chess. Helping Harry. She and Harry think you are special. Your parents, your brothers, your sister, they do, I am sure. I vould... I vould like to consider you a friend.”

Ron nodded, his mouth open. Viktor extended a large hand across the table and they shook solemnly. Viktor turned to Hermione and said softly, “It had to come out sometime about Violeta. Might as vell be now. Do I haff to tell you how special I think you are, too?” Hermione blushed and shook her head dumbly. Viktor chuckled softly. “My parents, they talked to me this morning about you. Met you all of five minutes and they haff you pegged.”

“Pegged?” she asked.

“Know vot they said? ‘Tia e krasivo momiche, i smart’,” he laughed.

“Err, except for that bit on the end, I don’t think I caught any of that.”

“She is a beautiful girl, and smart’ in Bulgarian. No Bulgarian in those books at Hogvarts?” Hermione blushed again. “Mama caught you studying the book covers in the den while Harry and Ron just stood there yawning,” he explained.

“Bookworm!” Ron jabbed. They all laughed, and Viktor discreetly slipped the photo back onto the table in the alcove.

“Vell, I haff a whole day before practice begins. You vont to see the

grounds?" he asked the table at large. They all nodded. "Good. Lambs, hiking those hills, the orchard, I am going to put you to work." And so he did. The wandered up and down the hills around the inn most of the morning, petted lambs and generally disturbed and startled the sheep during midday, stopping to picnic in the orchard, before picking wicker baskets full of peaches and smallish red apples that were early in ripening, climbing some of the bigger trees and sitting in the forks, legs dangling.

Ivan and Natasha wagged and panted along wherever they went, never far from Viktor. Viktor pointed out the small lake, fed by a cold water spring from the higher elevations, the hills, and talked them into swimming in it by saying he had been in the water during winter holidays, even. "Good grief! Viktor, you actually swim in this lake during the winter?" Ron asked, his teeth chattering, his lips blue, shivering on the shore.

"Vinter, summer, just as cold. The water comes from the mountains, north. Melted snow."

They dashed in and out for five minutes or so at a time, with the exception of Viktor. "You sure it's actually melted?" Hermione asked, hopping up and down on the shore, rubbing her arms vigorously. "Seriously, do you ever get cold?" she asked, scrubbing the towel over her hair.

"Not often. It is a relief to not need big furred robes though," he replied, floating on his back near Harry, the only one still brave enough to be in the water. "On the bright side, no testy giant squid," Viktor pointed out.

"Or Grindylows." Harry added, his mind flashing back to the Durmstrang ship's arrival, and the moment he had recognized Viktor's profile, his thin body swathed in those bulky robes. He had thought all of Durmstrang's contingent must be as big and bulky as Crabbe and Goyle when he first spotted them with their thick furs. Turns out most of them had been nearly as slender as Viktor. Karkaroff, with his sleek furs, had been all fatherly concern, wanting him in the warmth since he had a head cold. Harry still remembered the way Karkaroff had seemingly fussed over Viktor.

"They've all surely frozen to death," Ron said.

They trudged toward the house at dusk again, tired and thoroughly worn out and pleasantly warmed by the sun. "Tomorrow, Harry, practice," Viktor murmured. Harry groaned exaggeratedly in response, too tired to form a sentence. "Ron, you too, if you vont."

"Really!?! Practice with the team? Me?"

"Sure. Hermione?"

“I’ll just watch, thanks. You know I have two left feet on a broom.”

“Nothing a little practice in the orchard would not fix,” he replied.

“Said the boy who flew around those trees as fast as he could at age seven,” she intoned. He sighed and shook his head, smiling quietly to himself.

At dinner, they talked excitedly about their day, about some of the events of the early summer, vacations with families, with occasional pauses for Viktor to narrate things in one direction or the other. Anya again ruffled everyone’s hair as she cleared things away for dessert, not lingering on Harry any longer than the rest, instead spending an extra moment gathering Hermione’s mass of hair off her neck and from the sides of her face, pulling it behind her shoulders before clearing her dishes.

This forehead stroking and hair gathering was a natural gesture of affection they often saw her lavish on Viktor when he entered a room, and they half expected her to start addressing them all as “Sokrovishte”. She doted on her guests as much as on her son. The sadness that had been there this morning was almost forgotten. Even Viktor smiled now and then during dinner. They all crawled up the stairs to baths and bed right after supper. It had been a long day.

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## CHAPTER 4

The next morning, they trooped out into the bright sunshine to portkey to the practice field. They were all wearing Quidditch practice robes with the exception of Hermione. One old holey hat later, they found themselves in front of a practice facility, surrounded on either side by mountains. “Charmed so that if anyone comes close, all they see is a box canyon,” Viktor noted. They walked inside, to find several of Viktor’s teammates milling around on the grass already.

Viktor walked to a rack and pulled out a broom, twisting the handle in his hands as though weighing the suitability of a baseball bat. He judged it fit, and tucked it under his arm. “Pick vone,” he called back to Ron and Harry, who were hanging back several feet. “Any vone you like. It is all practice eqvitment,” he added. While they timidly rummaged around in the equipment, Dimitrov, whom they recognized from the World Cup strode over to Viktor.

“Krum!” he greeted Viktor pleasantly, clapping him on the shoulder. Though Viktor was several inches taller than Dimitrov, Dimitrov was far more broad, with huge biceps and shoulders. Harry still found it hard to believe sometimes that Viktor was only eighteen, nearly nineteen, with his height and

solid frame, despite his slenderness. "I swear you've grown two inches at least! Levski and Zograf, they said you were bringing guest. I know who young lady is, but not their names." He waved his fingers at Harry and Ron questioningly.

"Dimitrov, Harry Potter, Ron Veasley. They will be flying. Harry is a seeker, too."

"Anyvare near as goot?" Dimitrov grinned widely.

Viktor's mouth curled up at the right side, slightly. "In his own way. He once caught the snitch in his mouth during a game, someone told me." Dimitrov looked down at Harry, who was fighting the urge to gulp while being studied so intensely by this famous Quidditch player. Funny, he didn't think of Viktor that way, anymore.

"You have to find out how to do that if we need to come up with new dare for you. You can play with hands behind back. And you?" Dimitrov indicated Ron.

"Who, me? Oh, I'm nobody. I mean, I don't play for a team! Just at home, with my brothers."

"Everyone start somewhere," Dimitrov answered. "Warm up. We scrimmage later," he nodded at Viktor and walked away, back to the other end of the pitch.

"Wow! Dimitrov! You think he would let me have his autograph?" Ron exclaimed.

"I'm sure he would. Ask after practice," Viktor replied.

"He's right you know," Hermione said.

"About what?"

She walked up to him, measuring herself against him, "You have grown two or three inches. At the Yule Ball, I was just two inches shy of your chin. Now I'm barely chest high on you."

Viktor studied the handle of his broom for a moment. "Sure you won't fly a little?"

"I think not. I'm pitiful on a broom. I'll just watch." Viktor drew himself up to full height, throwing his shoulders back instead of his usual slouch.

He looked even taller then, Harry thought. He remembered the night he was chosen as the fourth Triwizard Champion, he had been intimidated by how

very tall Fleur and Viktor and Cedric had seemed. Viktor had even been imposing hunched and brooding against the mantle, in front of the fire. He wondered if Viktor ever thought of Cedric Diggory.

“Ve vin first game, you haff to take a flying lesson.”

Hermione crossed her arms. “Oh, a bet huh? Oh, all right. But I warn you, trying to teach me to fly is taking your life into your own hands.”

Viktor shrugged and turned to Harry and Ron. “Ready?” he asked.

“Ummm, you go ahead, I think we’ll just watch for a few minutes,” Harry said, as evenly as he could.

“Okay.” Viktor had barely finished the word before he had swung his right leg over the broom and zoomed off, barreling upwards at a rate of speed that made Harry dizzy, just watching. His stomach fell almost as fast, just thinking of being out there with the team. As he reached the point where Ron and Harry had to squint and shield their eyes in order to see him as a speck in the distance, he turned and dived toward the ground.

“Wronski Feint...” Ron breathed. Viktor continued straight down, and Harry began to worry. He was coming in even faster than he had in the World Cup.

“Is he nuts!?!” Harry exclaimed.

“Yes, but you haff to be to be goot at Wronski Feint. He’s very goot at it,” called a voice behind them. They turned to face Zograf, Bulgaria’s keeper. Like Dimitrov, his accent was noticeably thicker than Viktor’s, as was his torso. He inclined his head toward the streak that was Viktor on his broom. “Better look. Rare treat. Not often chance to see vone this close.”

Harry began to cringe as Viktor got closer and closer to the ground. Hermione, by now standing beside him, did the same. “He’s going to crash!” Hermione squeaked. Ron just gaped. At the last possible moment, Viktor leveled off and shot by them, over the grass. He was so low that the toes of his boots audibly whipped blades of grass as he neared them, and he put down a hand, letting his fingers trail through the grass as well. When he rocketed by, the wind off of his passing sucked at their robes and pulled at their ears with a soft “whoosh”, trailing bits of grass that settled on them in the wake. He pulled up at the other end of the stadium and began circling the goal lazily.

“He is better at that than Wronski.” Zograf smirked, folding his arms across his chest proudly.



“I thought he was going to run himself into the ground!” Ron yelled excitedly.

“Made mistake vonce years ago. Never again,” Zograf said matter-of-factly. “In game. Played vith broken arm rest of match. Did not tell until after game. Still caught snitch. Third game vith Vultures.” Here Zograf visibly swelled with pride. “Just vhen I think he cannot get faster or lower, he does.” He waved his hand at Viktor, motioning him back down.

Viktor hopped off the broom a little downfield and strolled over to Zograf. Viktor introduced Ron, Harry, and Hermione again. Zograf raised his eyebrows in ill-concealed surprise upon hearing both Harry and Hermione’s names, but did not comment. “Bludgers. Twenty minutes, then scrimmage. Okay?” he said to Viktor.

“Okay. Ve vill be there., Viktor replied, looking out of the corner of his eye at Ron and Harry. “I vill be right back. Twenty minutes playing dodge vith two bludgers. Then the scrimmage. You can fill in for Volkov on first sqvad, Ron. Beater.” Viktor rummaged through the rack and came up with a beater’s club. He headed back toward the broom, still carrying it and was soon back in the air.

“Jeepers. No wonder his nose looks perpetually broken,” Ron said, as soon as he was out of earshot.

“Ron! That’s not nice!” Hermione scolded, smacking him on the shoulder with the flat of her palm.

“Ow! I meant the game of chicken with the bludgers. I mean, how crazy would you have to... oh, you know what I meant! That’s bloody dedication. Or certifiable,” Ron grumbled. Viktor was up in the air, near the goal, pummeling the bludgers as they hurtled toward him after Zograf had released them from their case. He barrel rolled, he ducked, he dodged, Harry held his breath as he watched how effortlessly Viktor evaded the bludgers, though sometimes the margin was narrow. Once the two bludgers collided just over his head and ricocheted in opposite directions.

Dimitrov walked back over to them, shading his eyes. “Ve dare him to do that after he join, start to practice with national team. Bet him he vill not. He did. He varms up always like that now.”

“Dared him? Why would you have him do something so dangerous? He was only, what, twelve, thirteen?” Hermione demanded.

Dimitrov looked a little amused. “Quidditch is dangerous. He vos kid. He vont to play vith men and vomen, he haff to prove scouts right. Afraid of bludgers alone, how can he face bludgers, beaters on other team, seekers who

might be older, bigger, try to run him into ground? How can he trust our beaters to keep him on broom? Ivanova could not be nursemaid.” He waved his hands at the brassy haired female chaser near the equipment rack and paused. “Neither could ve. Haff to make sure he is not needing nursemaid,” Dimitrov explained as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Hermione clucked her tongue, but otherwise held her silence. “Do not worry. Not so tough in scrimmage. Unless you are seeking against Viktor,” he said as he shook Harry by the shoulder and laughed uproariously. “I wouldn’t dive with him, if I vere you. He drive us all into ground at least vonce. Volkov crazy enough to try him twice. Saw double for veeks last time. He more than make up for us making him hit bludgers. Ve let him be challenge for new rookies now. Not many take it. Too scared. Especially since World Cup. Aidan Lynch still a little...” he rolled his eyes and twirled his finger near his temple as he trailed off.

“Time for scrimmage now,” Dimitrov yelled as he waved his hand at Viktor, blowing a whistle dangling around his neck. Viktor paused, hovering a moment, circled, then smacked one of the bludgers, which was rocketing toward him full steam, at Dimitrov’s midsection. He trapped it with a soft “oof” and shoved it back into the box after some struggle. He blew a second time, and Viktor repeated the act, though he had to spiral several times to avoid the bludger hitting him full in the back of the head. He finally ducked sideways, then followed through with a solid smack.

“Ve take it easy today. Game tomorrow,” Dimitrov ordered. The rest of the practice was fairly uneventful, though Harry and Ron struggled to keep up with the pace. They scrimmaged on half of the field, some of the reserves filling in the other positions, even occasionally switching off with others on the sidelines. Harry could tell that Viktor was taking it easy on him, not feinting, not cutting him off from looking for the snitch, not body checking outright, but that didn’t stop Viktor from giving him a subtle nudge with his hip and stretching out to easily reach the snitch a bare inch before Harry with his much longer arms.

The scrimmage had lasted forty minutes. As they packed up to go home, Ron babbled on and on about playing with the Bulgarian team, recounting the plays excitedly, blow by blow to Hermione, who was insisting she really had kept her eyes open for the whole thing, thank you very much. He waved the piece of paper with the team autographs under her nose and went right on recalling the practice. Harry thought the team as a whole had improved greatly since the World Cup. Ireland would find themselves in for a nasty shock if they were to meet up a second time.

While Harry stood beside him at the equipment rack, tossing equipment back into the jumble, Viktor laid a hand on his shoulder. “Good game,” he said quietly.

“Quite a compliment from someone who was in the pros by my age. You all go so fast, hit so hard. If you hadn’t gone easy on me, I would be somewhere in Russia by now because of those hip checks or lying flat on the ground. How did you ever manage?” Harry murmured back.

“Practice. And being stubborn and overgrown...” Viktor began, the barest hint of a smile tugging at his lips.

Zograf interrupted by leaning between them. “Goot!” he patted them both on their shoulders. “Viktor said you vere goot, you are. The skill is there, it just need time. Not everyone start flying crazy at seven like national treasure here!” He grasped Harry’s hand and shook it. “Honor to meet Boy Who Lived,” he said casually. He poked Viktor in the ribs with a thick finger and then jabbed it in Hermione’s direction. Thankfully, she had her back turned, still listening to Ron. “And girl vorth talking about. He never even glance at veela, this one. He never talk before about anything. Besides Quidditch. Little about Quidditch,” Zograf confided to Harry in a low voice, then walked off as Viktor ducked his head, hiding the redness in his cheeks that had nothing to do with the heat and exertion.

Viktor emitted a small derisive snort, muttering “National treasure” in a disbelieving tone under his breath. Harry almost laughed, Viktor seemed so insulted. They portkeyed back to Pavlova soon after, going for a swim and tempting frostbite in the lake before supper. Harry sat on a large, flat rock and studied Viktor as he kicked smoothly to the shallows near the opposite shore, where Hermione and Ron were splashing water at one another. Funny how someone so graceful and athletic on a broom or in the water could look so ill at ease when doing as common a thing as walking. But then, Harry had gotten rather used to Viktor’s unusual gait by now.

He supposed Viktor could never quite fit in comfortably anywhere, except on a broom, really. Skilled at a young age, record breaker by fifteen, world famous by eighteen, far younger than his teammates, always forced to prove himself to them, talented but awkward at the same time, set apart by his fame among his peers at school. Still, it was apparent that Viktor had the respect of his teammates. After watching him at practice today, Harry could see why.

He found himself sharing an odd kinship with Viktor. Viktor had many of the same problems he did, Harry thought. Not being sure when people really knew you or just thought they knew you. The feeling that people wanted something from you, and you could never be sure what. Those giggling packs of girls and Colin Creevy with his camera, not so different, really. He had even lost a family member to Death Eaters, because of Voldemort. They turned in early, so they would be well rested for the first game tomorrow. Bulgaria and Germany. Should be no contest, Harry thought. Volkov and Vulchanov could

knock bludgers at Germany all day. Viktor could outseek anyone, Harry was convinced, even with both hands tied behind his back.

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## CHAPTER 5

For the quarterfinals and semifinals, the games were a bit more informal. Dispensing with the full ceremony of national team mascots, the matches were over quicker, which was important when two or three matches had to really needed to be played in one day. Germany proved to be a cakewalk, relatively speaking. Vulchanov and Volkov repeatedly pummeled the bludgers into Germany's chasers, Daimler, Brock, and Rhein, and Ivanova was able to outmaneuver the keeper repeatedly. They were well up at 180 to 20 when Viktor caught the snitch, easily outflying the much slower German seeker, who seemed reluctant to trail Viktor too closely when he zoomed off after it.

"He has played against Viktor before," the Bulgarian Minister, who shared their viewing box, commented. He chuckled and noted, "Last time, it take them forty minutes to vake him up. He buried broom ten inches in ground."

Viktor ambled out of the locker room to join them shortly after the game, wearing a fresh set of robes. "You owe me a flying lesson," he said to Hermione.

"Fair enough. Was that game as easy as it looked?"

"An hour-long scrimmage," Viktor said, matter-of-factly. "Schuller still remembers European Cup two years ago."

Harry finally blurted out the question he had been longing to ask all day. "Viktor... why didn't your parents come today?"

Viktor waved his hand dismissively. "They hate crowds. They promised to come for the championship game, though, maybe the semifinals. I do not think this time they will have the flu like Vorld Cup. Terrible luck if they do. They get too nervous, they say," Viktor finished, pressing his lips into a thin line.

Harry let it drop. "So, what now?" Ron asked.

"The rest of the quarterfinals, one day off, practice, if all the games are done by then, semifinals, practice, finals," Viktor intoned. "Vont to stay and votch the other games?"

They all decided they did. Before settling into his seat in the box, Viktor stretched his arms over his head, then braced his hands against his hips and twisted, cracking his back, loudly. After being mauled by the enthusiastic

Bulgarian Minister offering congratulations, he first bent over, touching his knees with his nose for a moment, then he sprawled into his seat, and watched the next match begin. Throughout the game, he made little comments on plays, players, and coaches. It wasn't the excitable running commentary usually offered by Harry and Ron, but by Viktor standards, it was positively effusive. He seemed to enjoy the chance to sit back and watch someone else play.

"Viktor, do you see many games that you're not in?" He looked at her, a little surprised at the question.

"Depends. At school, many. At tournaments, you get to see games. In the professional league, not so many, until the European Cup. With the Vratsa Vultures, one season, I saw none of the games until the Cup."

"Who do you think you'll play tomorrow?"

Viktor didn't hesitate to answer, "Wales. They haff excellent chasers this year, and that new keeper, Smythe-Jones, I don't think England can handle him."

Ron gave Viktor a sour look, then sighed, "But Wales hasn't beaten England in five years! Sure, we're probably not going past the semifinals, but give us a chance! You're just afraid we'll be rooting for England if you have to play them." Viktor held his peace, almost as though Ron had said nothing, permitting himself only a sidelong glance at Ron and the barest of smiles.

"It vill be Ireland in the finals, no doubt. They are still good," Viktor murmured. Hermione and Harry exchanged looks. They both thought Viktor was trying to be conciliatory. Might as well pick the Chudley Cannons, if Aidan Lynch was still as loopy as everyone said.

After a ninety minute game, Viktor was proven right about Wales. Wales did indeed take England by surprise, laying a 350 to 40 pasting on them. As the day, and the matches wore on, Viktor's teammates filtered in and out of the box to chat, sometimes about the matches, sometimes about their families. Hermione noted that Viktor didn't volunteer much about his, but listened with interest as the others brought him up to date.

They were somewhat surprised to hear a voice behind them that bore no trace of a Bulgarian accent, during the last game of the day. They turned to look into the twinkling eyes of none other than Albus Dumbledore. "I had to come up here and say hello. A pity that England won't be competing against Bulgaria tomorrow, Mr. Krum. I daresay that would have made my rooting choices difficult, though. I do so enjoy watching you play. Considering the walloping Wales just put on England, I think I shall be very glad indeed to see Bulgaria put a proper pasting on them for us."

Viktor stood and shyly shook hands with Dumbledore. "Thank you. Professor Dumbledore, I had no idea you were coming. If you had owled, I could have gotten you a seat in this box..." He seemed almost intimidated by Dumbledore, though he stood quite a bit taller than the headmaster.

"Most generous of you, young man, but I really do enjoy watching from the stands. I've made quite a few friends down there, don't you know. You don't get all the crowd color in a box, and considering the way England just played, I could use a bit of color." He adjusted his glasses on his nose, studying them all for a brief moment before continuing. "You have plenty of expected guests to keep you busy. Severus, Minerva and Poppy will be missing me, it's our summer excursion, don't you know, so I'll be heading back now. Madame Hooch had just gone to get us some refreshments." Dumbledore paused and looked at Viktor significantly over his glasses. "I shall see you all at the beginning of the school year," he addressed the rest of the booth. He swept back out, waving to the group, Viktor still looking after him, his eyebrows drawn together, looking a little puzzled.

"Hmph. I didn't know Dumbledore was coming to the internationals either. But then, I have no idea what he does on his vacations. Of course, McGonagall is a Quidditch nut, look how she is about Gryffindor. Maybe she got to pick the place," Ron mused, as the crowd reacted to yet another goal by Transylvania. Soon after, the Transylvanian seeker caught the snitch, and the last match of the day was ended. By the time they portkeyed back to Pavlova, the moon was high and darkness covered the hills. They were glad to simply report the highlights of the day to Anya and Nikolas, then fall into their respective beds, exhausted but happy.

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## CHAPTER 6

Hermione looked at Viktor doubtfully, then around the rest of the nearly deserted practice field. He beckoned to her again, broom in his right hand, fairly vibrating as though it wanted to get off the ground worse than he did. Harry hollered, "Oh, go on Hermione! You're a witch, you should be good at something you can't learn from a book!"

"Stuff it, Harry!" she yelled back, sticking her tongue out at him. She walked over to Viktor, her arms crossed, and asked quietly, "What now?"

"First, we get you comfortable on a broom. It is like being on a bicycle, is it not?"

"It is not! My bicycle never threatened to dump me onto the ground from that high in the air!"

Viktor sighed, "I would not let that happen. Harry and Ron would not let that happen. Harry and Ron would have my hide. Besides, you are going to be on the broom with me."

"But how?" Viktor didn't answer, but swung his long right leg over the broom, which immediately began bobbing up and down lightly, supporting him with just the balls of his feet on the ground.

He grabbed the handle, and pressed down, settling into a seated position, a sort of flat-footed squat. He took his hands off and spread his arms in her direction. "Come here. Sit." She hesitated for a moment, then reluctantly swung her leg over the broom, sitting directly in front of Viktor. Since his thighs were parallel to the handle, she was really sitting in his lap more than on the broom.

"Now then, more on the broom," he said, steadying her with his hands on her hips, lifting back to straight legs, leaving her feet dangling, his completely flat on the ground. She lurched forward and grabbed for the handle, clutching it desperately. "Loosen up a little. Not so tight." He shook her gently with his big hands, and she laughed nervously, sliding her hands back toward her and taking a more relaxed grip. He took his hands off her hips, reached around her and grabbed the handle, elbows tucked in against her sides, settling his chin over her left shoulder. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," she told him. He pushed off hard, and they began to rise straight up, Ron and Harry growing very small beside the equipment racks. "I think I left my stomach back there..." she squeaked.

Viktor squeezed his elbows into her ribs a little more firmly, steadying her. They flew a couple of lazy laps around the practice field, and her heart stopped thumping so hard. Before, it had felt like something trying to claw out of her chest. "Ready to really fly?" Viktor whispered against the shell of her ear. She nodded, and he squeezed his knees against her legs, bracing her against the broom. They sped off toward the far end of the field, sucking her hair back from her face in the breeze.

When he rounded the goal, he banked and dived sharply, heading toward the pitch. It wasn't a Wronski Feint since he couldn't press close enough to the broom with her in front, but he was headed toward the ground steeply. She shrieked a little from the thrill when they leveled off near the ground, but it was obvious she was enjoying it. "Not afraid anymore?" he shouted into her ear.

"No! I'm beginning to see why you love this!" she screamed back. For the first ten minutes, he banked, he spiraled, he raced, but he was careful to keep the broom fairly upright.

"Now, how about upside down?"

“Ohhh! I don’t know...” she began, but he was already leaning, rolling to the right, then they were hanging upside down, and before she knew it, upright again. He took her through a series of banks and turns, dives and rolls, then hovered above the pitch.

“Wow...”

“Now you try.”

“What? Viktor, I can’t...”

“Can’t never did anything. Just... nudge it vare you vont it to go. Don’t think so hard. Just lead it vare you vont it to go, and it vill follow,” he urged. He took his hands off the handle, latching them together in front of her waist. She timidly leaned forward a bit, the broom moving slowly. After some minutes, she was brave enough to try a few wide turns and some shallow dives. After they landed, she thanked Viktor.

“See, no vone died... you practice, you could be a good chaser, maybe as good as Ivanova some day.” She thought his high praise was a little unwarranted, considering she had only managed to fly somewhat acceptably with his tutoring, but she appreciated it anyway.

They spent the rest of the day in Sofia, wandering the streets and shops, then visiting the museum, which Ron and Harry patiently endured for Hermione’s sake. Well, it wasn’t so bad, they allowed, but still, who wants something educational on your holiday? “You didn’t want to say goodbye to your mother first?” Hermione asked as they headed toward the door.

Viktor paused, almost as though he had been reminded of an acquaintance long forgotten and was having trouble placing a face to the name. “Of course,” he said curtly, turning on his heel and heading toward the side hall.

He led them back into a small office with a glass front, piles of papers on the small desk among the quills and parchment covered in varying colors, styles, and amounts of calligraphy. Anya’s fingers were smudged with the ink, and the original documents were covered in thick sealed Lucite, to keep them clean. He translated their polite wonderment over the museum to Anya, who looked pleased. Rather more polite wonderment from Hermione, but even Ron and Harry had enjoyed the weapons display. He relayed that they were planning to eat at Korrina Sofia again that evening, and they turned to go.

He held the door for the rest, and before he could step out, Anya spoke, reaching out, grasping his shoulder before he could go. He let the door swing shut, and stood facing her, expression completely inscrutable. She spoke for



some time, Viktor's face unchanging, but now he was staring somewhere in the vicinity of her shoes. The three Hogwarts students stood in the hall, watching Anya speak to Viktor, as though she were explaining something. He seemed to argue back half-heartedly, gesturing, then finally resting his right hand on his chest, face going sullen, then resigned. She silently handed him a small black book, which he stared at for a moment, then pocketed. Finally he stepped forward, bent low, and gave her an awkwardly stiff hug, then seemed to resume his flagging defense of his side of things.

"Poor Viktor... they're practically strangers..." Hermione said softly.

"What? What would you know about it?" Ron inquired.

"Add it up Ron! Add up how many weeks he's been home over the past six years. Maybe two weeks a summer. He's been home about two weeks in winter, every year but last year, when he was at Hogwarts. He was finally able to Apparate, but he was in one of the few places he couldn't, license or no license. Karkaroff didn't even allow them to go to Hogsmeade. He's been home maybe five or six bloody months over the last six years!"

"Shh!" Harry hissed at them, as Viktor grabbed the door again.

He was unusually quiet at the cafe, even more taciturn than usual. He mostly pushed the food around his plate, barely finishing half. Harry was more than glad to have the leftovers. Hermione finally ventured a conversation when he refused dessert, looking as surly as they had ever seen him. "Viktor..."

"They're coming to the championship game. Not the semifinal. They have to vork," he said grimly.

"But..." Hermione started, a little stunned that Viktor had volunteered any information.

"They won't take it anymore, the money. They didn't year before last, or the year before that. They've been putting it in Gringott's in my name." He fingered the pocket he had placed the book in. "Not much money at all last year anyway. I vos at Hogvarts."

"Viktor...you can't always take care of your parents..." Hermione said.

He looked at her, his scowl softening to a thoughtful frown, more like his father's neutral expression. "That's vot she said."

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## CHAPTER 7

“Ron! You can’t write Bill just asking to look at Viktor’s money! Or to ask about his parents! It’s invading his privacy!” Harry whispered urgently. But Ron went on scribbling on the parchment, the two family owls stalking around them expectantly, down from their perches in the barn, ready to be off. Baramir. Harry thought he remembered Viktor calling the big gray barn owl he had taken to Durmstrang Baramir.

“Harry, don’t you wonder why Viktor seems so concerned about the money? I mean, this is a big, nice inn. There’s some land with it. He’s an only child...” Harry widened his eyes and Ron paused, “...now... his parents both make money, why all the concern about the money? I mean, for Pete’s sake, Harry, he acts like they would starve if they didn’t take all his money.”

“Sure I wonder, Ron, but, it’s rude talk about where his money goes behind his back. If we want to know, we should just ask Viktor...”

“Yes, I think you should.” They turned to see Viktor, standing in the barn door, leaning against the frame, his arms crossed, highlighted by the sunset behind. “Votever it is you vont to know.”

Ron crumpled the parchment and stuck it into his pocket, shamefaced. “Viktor, we’re sorry, it’s just, well...” Harry trailed off.

Ron mumbled, “We just wondered why you seem so hot and bothered for your parents to take all your money. They seem to do alright...”

Viktor snorted softly, raising his eyebrow disapprovingly at some imaginary spot on the floor. “All those years ago, my mother spent eight months in hospital. She had to relearn how to valk. She did not vork for more than two years. Neither did my father. He vos busy looking after her. And me. They had to double mortgage this place, to live on, to send me to Durmstrang. A half-year late. I still haff some schooling left, exams to take. Between that and Quidditch and the Tournament last year, always playing catch up.”

Viktor sat heavily astride a hay bale, picking at the stray straws sticking out of it. “But, Viktor, it’s not your responsibility. You were only a child,” Harry said.

“It vos if ve vonted to keep it. They couldn’t get ahead on their own. Not barely even, either. So long vith so much money going out, none coming in.”

“I’m sure your parents appreciated it, but they want you to start taking care of yourself. Not them. Parents are odd that way. They either want to take care of you, or toss you out into the world and make you look after yourself. Sometimes it doesn’t make any sense which they decide to do today. Half the time, Mum does both before breakfast,” Ron piped up.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Viktor's face crumpled, a pained look settling in place of the usual impenetrable mask. In a strangled voice, he said, "But it vos my fault. If it hadn't been for me, they would not haff been there..."

Harry interjected, "Viktor... it..."

But Viktor picked up again as though he hadn't heard, "I had seen a Muggle boy vith vone at the museum, I had to haff a damned baseball cap..." Seemingly angry at himself, he was plucking frantically at the piece of straw in his hands.

Harry touched his shoulder. "Viktor, it wasn't your fault. It could have happened anyway."

Viktor looked Harry levelly in the eye. "But it did not. It happened because I vonted something from my parents. I tried not to vont anything from them after that, I avoided them and her as much as I could. Two years, hardly a vord about her between us. By then, they needed money so badly they both vorked all they could. Mama even took boarders in the inn. You don't talk much vith strangers living vith you, or vorking all the time. By the time the boarders left, I vos at Durmstrang. I did not get paid much to be a practice reserve, but it vos better than nothing. Playing paid much better, but it still takes a lot to buy a place like this twice over, books, supplies. But they do not need me now. They do not vont my help. The money was all I had to offer instead of... her." he said despondently. He grimaced at the straw in his hands.

"I think your mother and father would disagree with that. They obviously love you very much. I just think, well, they seem proud. Proud of you. And proud for themselves. Viktor, you like to do things for yourself, don't you think they do too?" Harry responded. Harry could now see why Viktor had refused the mediwizards last year at the World Cup, when he had so obviously needed medical attention. He was proud. They all were. He couldn't imagine any of them accepting help from anyone unless it was absolutely necessary.

Viktor considered this statement a moment, then nodded. "I just vish ve had not vasted so much time being...proud...strong. Ve do not know each other as vell as ve should because of it. I see that now. I used to see everything but that bloody snitch too late. I hope that changes," he said dully, standing up and walking back toward the inn, not looking back.

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## CHAPTER 8

"So that explains it. Why he's older than most of his classmates, why he still has schooling left, even though he was classified as a seventh year during

the tournament...” Hermione stared out her bedroom window, Ron and Harry sitting on the edge of her bed. “I just assumed it was all the traveling for Quidditch, all the training. He’s certainly not thick in the least. You don’t speak three languages that fluently and know two alphabets without a little something upstairs. Some of the books he read at the library were pretty advanced, too. He could do advanced transfigurations and picked the most likely curse against that dragon, he knew to go for the eyes, he certainly did better than Fleur...”

“Okay, Herm, we get it, he’s not a dunce. He had good reason to slouch around like the creeping death last year, too, beyond the giggling packs of girls and the reporters and that creep Karkaroff always breathing down his neck. And we go around the entire time we’re here poking at his wounds with a big sharp stick. We’re all horrid beasts, now aren’t we? Especially me...” Ron kicked at the floor with his toe.

“No more than the rest of us, Ron. And some of it we didn’t do deliberately. It’s not as though Hermione brought up Violeta on purpose,” Harry said.

Ron continued, “Wonder what else we can do for him while we’re here. Remind him he came second in the Triwizard Tournament? Or was it third? That Karkaroff went scurrying like some scared rabbit and just left all his students at Hogwarts to fend for themselves when he thought his old Death Eater buddies and Dark Lord were coming back? Maybe we could ask him if he’s been to any nice Junior Death Eater parties at Durmstrang? Or ask him if he wants to have a nice remembrance party for Cedric Diggory? Set his dogs on fire maybe? Smash his fingers with a sledgehammer so he can’t practice tomorrow? Shove his parents off a cliff? Drown ourselves in the lake so he can’t even go out there and enjoy it anymore?”

“Ron! Would you stop it? I don’t think he’s angry at you... he didn’t seem to be when he got back, just mad at himself...” Hermione scolded.

“I wish he were mad at me. That would make it better, if he would just try to strangle me or pound me into a pulp and get it over with. I could have quite happily gone on hating him last year, if he hadn’t turned out to be so bleedin’ decent to Harry. To you. To me even, and I wasn’t even nice to him! I think it was less complicated when I wanted to break his nose again just for being from Durmstrang and competing against Harry and daring to ask you to the Yule Ball like some sneaky spy. Why couldn’t he just act like a pompous athlete with a big ego who loves having hangers-on and getting what he wants and going to a big, bad, evil school like Durmstrang? Then I could go on thinking he’s an overgrown Bulgarian git and just think about breaking his ugly nose...” Ron said glumly.

“This is getting to be a habit,” came the voice from the hall. Viktor leaned in the open doorway, slouching, arms crossed, shoulder against the door frame,

expression neutral. “By the way, the doors do not always close. Sometimes, they swing open. The wood has shrunk over the years.” He nudged the door back further with his knee. “I should make more noise,” he added absently, grunting to himself. He stared at his knee, then let out a self-deprecating snort, “Am I to take it Ron Veasley, you don’t like my nose half as much as those silly packs of girls?” His voice was surprisingly light. It was so unexpected, the three of them looked at one another, then burst out laughing.

Ron finally caught his breath. “I have to be honest, it’s not a look most of us could pull off. I’m not sure you pull it off, but all those girls sure seem to think so. Nutty question. Why haven’t you let someone fix it? Herm here let Madame Pomfrey carve a little off her teeth you know.” Hermione shot him a glare that could have cut stone.

Viktor looked up and gave them a rueful smile, uncrossing his right arm and fingering the bridge of his nose thoughtfully, rubbing up and down its length. “The hook, I vos born vith. It came courtesy of my father. I would not haff the heart to get rid of it. I broke it the first time in practice at school, someone’s elbow. Badge of honor, then, I suppose. Second, while learning Wronski Feint at Vratsa. I vos too young to worry about vot girls might think. Running to medivizards all the time, then they would think they haff to play nursemaid to me. Third time, in Vratsa Vultures game, a bludger. By then I vonted to keep those silly girls away. Fourth time, European Cup, bludger, took me clean off the broom and knocked me all the way into the stands. I bled on our owner. Fifth time, World Cup. I vos so angry that ve couldn’t catch up, ve vere just playing for honor, the bludger could haff taken my head off, and I would not haff cared. Only reason I care now is because you saw me a bloody mess.” Harry got the feeling he wasn’t addressing the entire room at the last, just Hermione.

Viktor laid his finger alongside the bridge of his nose, still now, lightly touching the small crook in it with the tip of his finger. “I decided long ago, if I could not live vith something so...” he cleared his throat significantly, his brows arching expressively, “small... as my nose, how could I live vith the faults you cannot fix vith the vave of a vand?” he shrugged and dropped his finger, crossing his arms once more. “Anymore, I figure, broken, not broken, it vill return to its usual prominent size in a few days, no harm done. The black eyes from the World Cup, they lasted longer than the nose. Noses, they are nothing to break. Breaking other things, things you cannot see, they hurt.” He paused a moment. “Maybe I should have let them mop me up, but I vos too busy being a moody Slavic man.” His mouth curled in the slightest little smirk. “I figured if they did not call time to mop me up, I did not need it to go see the Minister box. I would just go vith my crooked, hooked, oversized, broken, bloody nose and bloody robes. If only you had let me know you vere so concerned about my nose, Ron, I would have prettied up for you...” he finished in a mock-syrupy tone, his eyes twinkling, holding back a laugh.

Ron held his ribs, gasping and wheezing, “You don’t play fair Viktor. Stop being so damned likable! Besides, moody Slavic men aren’t my thing. Now Harry, on the other hand...”

“Ron!” Harry pushed him over onto the bed, still laughing.

Viktor sobered and continued, “You could get rid of your freckles, your red hair, Harry could cover up his scar, Hermione could put potion on her hair every day... you do not, because it is not you. A nice, straight, small, pretty boy nose just would not be me either.”

Hermione looked a bit put out. “You didn’t like my hair at the Yule Ball?”

“Oh, I loved it. But I loved it every other day, too. I hardly think a little thing like hair with a will of its own would scare me off, do you?” Viktor touched the crook in his nose again as he said this. “I vos more interested in the girl that came with the hair,” he added.

“What about the teeth? Did you even notice those, or not for a month, like these two lunkheads?” she asked.

“They vere fine before. Most people grow into things like teeth. Or noses. I did not ask your teeth to the ball.”

Ron snickered, “Headstrong hair... Hermione’s got headstrong hair!”

“Oh, shut up, Ron!” Hermione walloped him with a pillow. “Sorry, “ she said to Viktor, patting the pillow gently, Ron’s muffled laughter still filtering through it.

“Ve haff more if you vont to hit him again,” Viktor grinned outright.

“I might take you up on that. So what was it then? I mean, I realize I’m not all that pretty, not like Lavender or Padma or Parvati. Or Fleur. I mean, I’m not that hideous, but you seem to be the first one who bothered to spot that I was a real live girl, not just a last resort fallback plan for a date when no other vaguely female creature will go with you.” She shot a look at the pillow. Viktor came and sat on the side of the bed and cocked his head at her.

“No. Not like them. Maybe that is vot I liked about you. They think they are pretty. They vont everyone else to think they are pretty, they think they get vot they vont because they are pretty. Like veela. You do not bother to think if you are pretty or not. You vere just... you. I think it vos mostly because you ignored me. Yes, you ignored me very vell. And you did not giggle vonce.”

She tilted her own head and asked, “What’s that got to do with anything?”

He spread his hands. "Simple. You vere a very pretty girl behind that book, and unless I vos very much mistaken, I thought, not so bad on the inside. My father always told me a girl vith her nose in a book she does not haff to read could not be half bad. Hogvarts reading list could not be that long. Instinct. If I talked to you and you liked me, it vos not for Quidditch. Not because I vos famous. You vere the first to spot that I vos a real live boy. If you did not like me, I vos stuck vith a giggler," he replied, making a face as though a giggler were a fate worse than death.

"Thank you, Viktor. So, are you going to finish up your schooling at Durmstrang, exams? And what are they going to do with Karkaroff gone?" The question had slipped out of her mouth before she could think.

He looked at the floor for a moment. "I haff not decided. I haff some...options. Choices to make. If Karkaroff is still gone, they vill haff a new headmaster, I am sure. No idea who it vill be. I haff been talking to someone, about how I can, vell...vork.. something out...maybe..." he responded haltingly.

"I'm getting the feeling it's none of our business," she said.

Viktor grinned and continued, "More like just not vorked out. I do not vont to say before it is certain. I vill just say, you may see me again sooner than you think. Much sooner." He playfully shoved Ron back over, having seen him just struggle up from the bed, pillow still half over his face.

"Ow. That was NOT likable, Vicky!" Ron shrieked hysterically, still out of breath.

"Ve should go eat, Ronnie. Practice again tomorrow, if you vont. Maybe you can break my nose. But be prepared, Ivanova vould scratch your eyes out if you do anything to hurt our chances against Wales. She almost killed the first player who clobbered me and got away vith it in the European Cup, and ve von that. And Vulchanov and Volkov, they haff got big clubs! Play 'kill the seeker' at your own risk. You mess up my nose the girls vill not like me any more."

Viktor snatched the pillow off of Ron, plopping it back on the bed. Harry thought to himself that it was the first time he had seen Viktor be anything approaching playful. And one of the rare times he had seen him so pleased. No, wait, hopeful. That was it. If Harry wasn't very much mistaken that had been the unfamiliar look in his eyes. Hopeful.

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## CHAPTER 9

The practice was fairly uneventful, Viktor caught the snitch three times in

an hour and half, Harry once, though he suspected that Viktor might have played blind a bit on that one. He couldn't believe that had been a real coughing fit Viktor had suffered when the snitch started whirring around Harry's ear, it went on one cough too long. Viktor had probably heard the thing before he did. And given half a chance, Viktor could have caught up and body checked him into next week long before he caught the snitch. All the Bulgarian players slapped him on the back and congratulated him for beating Viktor to the snitch, and Harry could have sworn Viktor and Ivanova shared a wink over his head. "Thanks for the break, Viktor," Harry whispered beside the equipment rack.

"Vot break?" Viktor asked innocently.

"What break, indeed. You probably heard that thing a mile off. I wish Slytherin would take a cue from you, though, Malfoy wouldn't do that for a million knuts, let someone beat him in front of others."

"Slytherin!" Viktor spat. "That little brat Malfoy, he is all talk. He does nothing but hide behind his father's name and money, and those goons. For such a small boy, he sure does look down his nose at a lot of people. A lot of others in that house are the same. I do not care for his head of house either."

"You and me both. Snape feels the same way about me. All of Gryffindor, really. Malfoy isn't too fond of me either, come to it."

"I am glad ve stayed on the ship, even if it vos musty. I am not sure I could haff taken some of those people in Slytherin all evening too. Or even just Malfoy. I think I vould have preferred sleeping on my broom, or vith the giant squid," Viktor finished, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

"Ole Malfoy snuggle up to you a lot while you were there?" Ron asked. "I'm sure Draco the amazing bouncing ferret was real proud they had a world famous seeker at their table every meal."

Viktor nodded, a bitter edge to his voice now, "He vos...a pain. That big lecture about vhy I should not have asked Hermione to the Yule Ball. All that ridiculous talk about 'mudbloods' and how I could trace my bloodline back over a thousand years. He thought I did not know. She told me in the library. I told him I did not care if her parents vere drunken Cornish pixies and offered to rearrange his face if he ever called her that again. The offer still stands. He vos vorse than Karkaroff and his 'the honor of the school is at stake, you are my champion' speeches. Karkaroff acted like vinning that tournament vos a matter of life or death..."

Cringing as he realized what he had just said, Viktor paused, then turned to Harry. "Sorry. I did not mean it that vay..."



Harry blinked, "I know. It's okay. It's not so bad now when I think back on it. Sometimes, I even think it was just a bad dream, and I'll wake up from it. Cedric didn't deserve...to die."

Viktor clucked his tongue, "I know vot you mean. I liked Diggory. He vos always polite to me. Always. Even though I vos from Durmstrang...vith Karkaroff." Harry caught the oddly precise echo of Viktor's words when they had parted at Hogwarts. "I am still not sure vot ... really... vent on. It vos so... confused..." Viktor scowled and knit his brows together. I suppose he does think of Cedric Diggory, and that memory brings up more ghosts of the Viktor of last fall, Harry thought.

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## CHAPTER 10

"Wales has got no chance, have they?" Ron elbowed Harry.

Harry turned to him and answered, "If you think they do, I wouldn't bother telling Viktor. Unless you want him giving you the nose job or rearranging your face. I swear, I think he's literally snorting steam today. What was it Smythe-Jones supposedly said about him, anyway?"

Hermione cleared her throat, "And I quote, boys, from the Daily Prophet, 'Stupid Slav'. And that's the nicest thing he said. The rest of the Welsh team, they weren't too complimentary either. Not even written by Rita Skeeter, and there's more mud in there than in a bog. You think Viktor's mad, you should see the rest of the team. They might not nursemaid him, but I'd sooner insult a Hungarian Horntail and her brood than let them hear you say a nasty word about Viktor. I don't think he was exaggerating when he said Ivanova would take your eyes out. The rest of the team must have been eating iron filings and gunpowder since the World Cup. They could eat most teams alive, now. On or off the Quidditch field."

Hermione folded the paper, laid it in her lap and sighed. "I gather there was some verbal exchange between coaches about the fact that he attended Durmstrang, as well. The coach ran into the Welsh team yesterday at the practice field after we left, and I suspect they weren't exchanging muffin recipes." She pursed her lips and went on, "Viktor...they...well, they insinuate in the interview that he was involved in... Cedric's death. They don't come right out and say it, but they imply it."

Harry sniffed, "I guess they all went to completely upright and respectable Hogwarts, where everyone's good and kind and they never try to kill you like some people we know, huh?" The sarcasm fairly dripped from Harry's voice as he spoke, "Probably said it because they think he hangs out with dangerous and wacko characters, namely me, after all those Rita Skeeter articles last year."

“I do believe Viktor could have bitten a spiked nail in two when he read it. Harry told me your mum thinks he’s a sweet boy, Hermione, but I wouldn’t want him mad at me. He grows twelve inches up and twice as broad when he gets angry. Right up there with Hagrid in the towering-over-you-impressively-and-menacingly department. If they were trying to get inside his head, I think they went about it all wrong. I don’t think I would want to be Cornelius Cymry today,” Ron said, nodding at the Welsh seeker.

The match, somewhat to be expected, began rough and tumble, mostly rough. Vulchanov and Volkov pounded the bludgers mercilessly at the Welsh chasers, driven by the desire for payback on Viktor’s behalf. The Welsh, of course, reciprocated, fouls abounded, and penalty shots counted for more than half the score by the ninety minute mark, with a score of 360 to 250, in favor of Bulgaria.

Smythe-Jones committed a particularly vicious foul on Viktor, deliberately clipping him as he and Cymry jockeyed for position near the goal. It was only by his fingertips that Viktor managed to keep his grip on his broom and stop himself flipping off. The referee would have stopped play, but he waved him off, reluctant to stop for as small a thing as a miniscule scrape on his cheek.

“Ninety minutes straight,” Ron commented, adjusting his omnioculars.

“One hour forty, actually,” Hermione replied, glancing at the time on the scoreboard.

“Nope, ninety minutes. That’s how long Viktor’s had that scowl on his face. Before that it was a deep frown with a side of surliness. Oh, wait, he just changed to looking absolutely murderous, but then I would too if Cymry kept clobbering me and the ref didn’t call it at all,” Ron shot back.

Harry looked downfield, where Cymry and Viktor were parrying astride their broomsticks, and he caught the glint of gold as it whizzed between Viktor and Cymry’s heads. Viktor stalled and whirled to the outside, getting the drop on the snitch a second before Cymry. Cymry streaked after Viktor, just inches behind. They raced low, nearly dragging the ground, around the inner perimeter of the stadium, boots hitting the grass occasionally. Cymry actually dragged his foot for a moment, before regaining control. The snitch rose a few feet, still roughly following the inner perimeter.

“Ohhh, traffic!” Ron shouted, as Viktor and Cymry weaved through their respective teammates, as Bulgaria worked downfield. Ivanova tossed the quaffle through the goal, adding to Bulgaria’s lead, and the crowd roared.

As Viktor rounded the corner of the stadium, Harry noticed a startled look

pass across his face, he hesitated a moment before scissoring his outstretched fingers around the tiny wing sticking out from the snitch. "Look! He's..."

"Look out!" Ron interrupted Harry. Harry zoomed back out, and saw what Ron was referring to. Viktor's fingers had no more than touched the snitch than Cymry made his own desperate grab. For Viktor's robe.

Viktor was shooting along at such a high rate of speed when the tug came, the broom bucked and he flipped, literally head over heels, unable to hang on tightly enough with one hand. The crowd groaned in dismay over the blatant attack on their seeker. Or maybe it was more accurate to say Viktor went heels over head.

Viktor tucked in a little as he went flying and made a complete 360, landing arms and chest first in the deep sand beneath the Bulgarian goal, plowing through the pit, cutting a wake through the grains, which sprayed all around him like water. He propped up when he came to a stop at the edge of the pitch, a hill of sand pushed before him, eyes screwed up tight, sand coating his face and hair.

He gave his head a shake, sand flying from his dark hair, then brushed his face with his left hand. Turning over gingerly with his right hand still down, buried up to his wrist, he sprawled, long legs bent, feet buried into the soft sand. He glared at Cymry, who was now off his broom and standing at the far edge of the pit, as though he would like to barbecue him in oil given half a chance. Then he held out his right hand in a cascade of sand, where the snitch was still caught by one wing, fluttering weakly between his index and middle finger. He had left behind a trench fourteen inches deep. "Not a smart move to hack Viktor off," Ron noted.

Hermione took a look through her pair of glasses, "Actually, I think the rest of the Bulgarian team is giving Cymry a look that makes Viktor's expression look positively sweet and charitable by comparison."

Harry scanned the gathering, "Volkov looks like he's swearing a blue streak in Bulgarian. I think if I were Wales, I would watch what I say from now on," Harry said dryly. Viktor stalked off the field, deliberately banging his shoulder into Cymry's on the way to the sideline, shooting him one last withering look over his shoulder. Cymry just stood there, looking absolutely sick and green.

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## CHAPTER 11

"You sure you're okay?" Hermione asked for the sixth time. All she had gotten out of him the first five times was an unconvincing "Fine."

“Except for the never ending grit in my teeth, I am fine. The medivizards said so,” Viktor replied impatiently, grinding his teeth with a look of distaste.

Hermione gasped in mock horror, “Viktor Krum actually consulting a medical professional! Did something vital fall off after you left the field?” Viktor laughed in spite of himself. “And the moody Slavic man even laughs! Are you sure you didn’t hurt your head?”

“I am not so moody when we win. Besides, the rest of the team threatened to kill me themselves if I did not let them look at me.”

Ron poked Viktor in the shoulder, “France! Imagine that! You’re going to be playing France, not Ireland. Ole Aidan must still be a bit scrambled, he wasn’t in the game. Team Bulgaria gonna come tuck you in tonight, make sure you get a good night’s sleep, Viktor?”

“Do not give them any ideas!” Viktor snapped back irritably. He hadn’t particularly liked his teammates ganging up on him and insisting he let the medical team take a look at him. The last thing they wanted was for him to discover an injury in the final.

“I wouldn’t mind having Ivanova tuck me in though,” Ron went on dreamily. Hermione rolled her eyes, but Viktor gave Ron a look that would have withered all of Professor Sprout’s greenhouses. “Uh oh, that’s the ‘positively murderous’ look. Duly noted. No more wiseacre comments about your teammates. Protective of each other, aren’t you?”

Viktor softened as he answered, “Yes. They’re all you’ve got when you travel, particularly if you are not old enough for Apparating, the floo network is spotty, and cultivating contacts everywhere you might play to turn every spare bit of rubbish into portkeys is impractical. Ivanova is pretty enough. But she is bossy. Very. Bossy. She could tuck you in permanently. And she is at least ten years older than I am.” He said the last as though that settled things, turned more contemplative, and shook a lingering bit of sand out of a fold in his robe.

“Viktor?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Why did you hesitate just before you grabbed the snitch?”

Viktor stopped walking. He turned on his heel and looked at Harry. “I thought I saw someone I recognized. In the stands. But it could not have been. Not there. Just my eyes playing tricks,” Viktor said thoughtfully. Harry doubted very much that Viktor’s eyes ever played tricks on him, but he bit his tongue.

“Early game tomorrow. I need some rest,” Viktor said wearily, as they trudged toward the inn. Already a pale moon was showing in the early evening sky.

“Party tomorrow if ve vin,” Viktor called back idly. “Pack your dress robes.” He chuckled, low and barely audible. “And your hair potion.” Ron opened his mouth to say something, but Viktor cut him off with a dry, “And your freckle remover. Ivanova doesn’t like freckle faces. She likes dark, moody Slavic men. At least, her husband is vone.” Harry and Hermione snickered, hands over their mouths.

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## CHAPTER 12

By the time Harry and Ron and Hermione staggered downstairs, squinting in the early morning light, Viktor was dressed and standing at the kitchen table. He turned as they walked in, but didn’t look up, still busy with his morning preparations. Hermione stopped short and stared. Viktor was already wearing most of his new national team dress uniform, which had changed a bit since the World Cup, rather than his usual robes or the Muggle clothing he sometimes wore. She looked over the black dragon hide boots that reminded her of riding boots, with their smooth, rounded toes and mostly flat soles with short blocky heels. The highly polished boots hugged his shins up to just below his knees, covering the bottom of the black dragon hide pants.

On top, he wore a loosely laced, draping white shirt, neatly tucked in to the pants. On his chair sat a small equipment bag containing the rest of his gear. His glossy black hair lay thick on his forehead, and he absently stuck out his bottom lip and blew it away from his eyes as he finished zipping the bag. For possibly the first time, she found herself struck by how completely handsome he looked in his uniform. No wonder some of those girls swooned at the sight of him.

They sat and ate, but Viktor mostly pushed the food around his plate, rearranging it in neat little piles all around the edges. As they tried to gather everyone at the back door to set out, Hermione nudged him and whispered, “You look nice. Weren’t you hungry though?” Viktor simply shook his head. “Nervous?” He paused a moment, then shrugged and nodded subtly. “This can’t be as many people as the World Cup.”

Viktor looked at her for a long moment before saying, “But different from World Cup. Different audience.” Hermione thought a second, and remembered Viktor mentioning that his parents had been home ill with flu during his biggest game.

“Oh! Of course, your parents, they weren’t at the World Cup!”

Viktor studied her silently for another space. "Them too," he finally added. The whole conversation was masked by the sounds of Ron and Harry racing around the house trying to make sure they had onmioculars and spending money, clomping up and down the stairs, and Anya and Nikolas exchanging notes in quick, loud bursts of Bulgarian as they scattered through the house, attending to last minute details.

Hermione realized with a start that Viktor had taken no one but his teammates to the World Cup. No family in the stands, presumably no one he had then considered his friends. Karkaroff, maybe, she didn't even know if Poliakoff had been there, the Bulgarian minister, definitely, and several thousand strangers in scarlet cheering him on. Truth be told, a lot of the Irish fans had been cheering him on, since he was the most exciting player in the game for either side. That's what he had taken to the World Cup, the adulation of a group of strangers. Attention he didn't necessarily want. That and six teammates.

Not that he didn't obviously enjoy his teammates for the most part, but he still was the outsider in that group. The tall one. The thin one. The seeker. The kid. The one they had made prove himself by doing something as mad as playing chicken with a couple of bludgers while doing his own beating at his first practice. The young one. The most famous one. The one with so many female fans swooning over him. Hermione reasoned that the cause of Viktor's nervousness was the fact that he was finally playing in a huge game in front of people who mattered to him. Else, why be nervous? She found herself oddly flattered by his nerves.

By the time they rounded everyone and everything up and arrived at the Quidditch pitch, there was about an hour until the match was set to begin. The Bulgarian Minister was already seated in the booth where Viktor had arranged for them to sit, along with the French Minister. After a short greeting and some polite conversation, Viktor turned his attention to unloading some of the things in his bag.

He doled out onmioculars to his parents, then rummaged to the bottom, laying a few things out to get to some small earplugs at the bottom of the bag. He gave two each to Harry and Ron.

"Wonder why Dumbledore didn't come up and say hello yesterday. What are these for?" Ron asked, studying them.

"For the veela. Veela are like sirens. If you can't hear their song, you will not do anything silly like try to jump out of the box." Harry blushed when he remembered how he had been so hypnotized by the veela at the World Cup that he and Ron had tried to do that very thing.

“So we’re just supposed to sit here with our ears plugged all match? We’ll never know what’s going on!” Ron complained.

“No.” Viktor produced his wand from a pouch on the equipment bag. “*Silencio veela!*” he intoned over Ron’s pair. “Now. You can hear everything else but the veela song.”

Something occurred to Harry. “Viktor? How do you play, I mean, can’t you hear the veela? And why just give them to us?” Viktor pursed his lips, considering his answer.

“Females are immune. So are most men who haff ... found contentment vith someone already,” he explained carefully.

“So that’s why Dad wasn’t about to take a leap out of the stands at the World Cup! That would make Mum happy, I suppose...” Ron mused.

“But, Viktor, that doesn’t cover... everyone on the team, does it?”

Viktor considered a moment. “No. I haff not played vith ear plugs... ever. Veelas...they don’t vork on those who look for more...do not find... that ... that sort of girl attractive...” It was obvious that Viktor was struggling to explain.

Hermione interjected, “You mean, all flash and no substance?”

Viktor puzzled a moment over her statement. “Vot?”

“You know, beauty that’s only skin deep.”

“Exactly! Vhen you know vhat they are like on the inside, the outside does not look so attractive. Pretty package, usually a nasty surprise inside. Some veela, like some people, are qvite nice, but...” he trailed off and Harry picked up the sentence.

“...most are ugly, shrieking, fireball-throwing, beaky-nosed bird-women on the inside when they get angry?”

Viktor nodded in reply, and said, “Not many men who are near angry veela more than vonce or twice have a problem turning them down after that. And most show their true colors easily. Still, to be safe.” He prepared Harry’s pair, gathered his Quidditch robe off the chair, grabbed his equipment bag and left the booth for the locker room.

They trolled the railing for a few minutes, just crowd watching and adjusting their onmioculars. Harry was watching a wizard complete a truly thunderous looking sneeze for the third time when he felt a soft hand on his

shoulder. He turned to find Anya behind him, holding out a black pair of Quidditch gloves. Viktor had left them on the chair. "Take to him?" she asked.

"Sure. We'll all go," Harry replied.

Hermione hesitated before asking, "Would they let me in?"

"Awww, Hermione, if they're not all in their underpants..." Harry elbowed Ron sharply. "Hermione, surely they have someplace private to change if they have to strip down. Ivanova goes to the same locker room." The trio headed toward the locker room, and they bumped into Ivanova, in full Quidditch gear, just outside.

"Ahh, Viktor's friends! He is in there. Cannot find...oh, you haff them! Go in, go in!" She nudged them a little toward the door. They entered to find Viktor sitting on a bench, knee protectors in place over the boots, stripping off the white shirt, his Quidditch robe lying beside him. Even through the fabric he was pulling over his head, they could hear him muttering in what sounded like muffled but extremely irritated Bulgarian.

"Viktor, we brought your gloves," Harry called out. Viktor nearly ran over to Harry, grabbing the gloves and letting loose a heavy sigh of relief.

"I could not think vere I could haff put them!" He made a disgusted noise, something like a snort. "Scatterbrained. I did not pack my extra pair. Thought I would have to summon some." He smiled weakly at them, indicating the wand in his hand, then started as he noticed the time. He darted back to the bench and grabbed his Quidditch robe, quickly pulling it over his head, a mumbled "Sorry" filtering out through the material as he dressed. "I haff to finish dressing. Must varm up, and the announcer vill be out there soon, so you had best get back to the box." He tucked his wand back into the equipment bag pocket.

Lacing the gloves on and adjusting the golden tasseled belt of his robe, Viktor tossed his equipment bag into his locker. Harry stared at the much fancier robe, embroidered with gold thread, cut shorter than most robes and showing the boots and pants to great effect and allowing for easier movement at the same time. "Wow!" Harry breathed, "Those are some fantastic uniforms. Gryffindor colors, on top, even. Could you let us know the name of your tailor?" They made Viktor look somehow taller and more imposing than ever, even his eyes flashed darker and his hair seemed blacker against the bright scarlet.

Viktor smiled more confidently now, tying his thick, dark hair back into a short ponytail with a black leather tie. "I vill make sure he outfits the whole team."

"I'll hold you to that. I have witnesses."



“Mum would want to give him a haircut, like Bill,” Ron whispered to Harry.

“Go on, now. Shoo!” Viktor flapped his hands at them.

Hermione hung back, whispering, “Nervous now?” after Harry and Ron stepped through the door.

“Think ve vill vin?” he asked her in return.

“No. I know it.”

“Then I am not nervous.” He squeezed her hand, and she could feel the large, smooth calluses just below his fingers from where he gripped his broom, the rest of his hand surprisingly warm and soft. Then he held the door for her, sweeping out behind her to join his teammates, who were milling around outside. For once, he stood tall, shoulders back, his chin not buried in the neck of his robes as though he wished to crawl inside them. He busied his hands with picking a broom out of the rack, giving a little wave to the three Hogwarts students as they rounded the corner on the way back to the booth.

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## CHAPTER 13

Settling back into the booth, it was only a short time until the referee strode out onto the field behind the announcer. A full three-quarters of the stadium was outfitted in bright Bulgarian scarlet. The white and royal blue colors of the French team were overwhelmed in the stands. The usual mascot festivities took place, the veela dancing, the hippogriffs of France parading and swooping.

It all went by in a blur until the introductions. France was introduced first. “Alouette! Madeleine!” , six streaks of blue in all, then finally, Viktor’s counterpart, the French seeker, Jean-Paul De La Croix. De La Croix was a regular on the Quafflepunchers, as were most of his teammates. He was of a much slighter build than Viktor, not nearly as tall and muscular, but he streaked in impressively on his broom. Then the Bulgarian team, nearly drowned out by the crowd’s thunderous cheering. “Ivanova! Dimitrov! Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov!” The six players hovered near midfield, as the announcer paused dramatically. “Aaaaand... Krum!”

If the cheering had been thunderous before, it now threatened to shake the stadium apart. The crowd still remembered his heroic effort to get the snitch despite a broken and bloody nose last year. Viktor streaked into the stadium, his uniform a blur of black and scarlet and gold. He halted just short of his

teammates, they conferred for a moment, and then scattered to their respective posts. As in the World Cup, the referee was Hassan Mostafa. Harry wondered if this time, he had any veela-proof earplugs. And a fire-proof broomtail.

Mostafa mounted his broom, sweeping his bright green robes aside. He kicked open the crate and the four balls shot upward, a last glint of light catching the snitch as Harry gazed through his onmioculars, and then it was gone. The whistle sounded and the pace was so fast that the announcer often had no time to complete a player's name as he called the play. "Aloue..., Lev..., Ivanova, Levski, Madeleine blocks!" Play went on, fast and frantic up and down the field. Soon Harry's nose ached from pressing the onmioculars against his glasses, and his hands grew weak from clutching them. Viktor and Jean-Paul were dueling near the Bulgarian goal, jockeying for position, for some window to locate the snitch. They split only for a moment when a bludger smacked by Vulchanov at De La Croix whistled between them.

Viktor obviously had the advantage when it came to muscle and speed, fending De La Croix off, always edging ahead slightly, impeding him so that he finally, in frustration, committed a foul, blatantly elbowing Viktor hard in the face. "Wonder if ninety percent of his injuries are his nose..." Ron mused. On the penalty shot, Ivanova scored, putting Bulgaria ahead 70 to 60.

Thirty minutes into the match, play was still as wild as at the beginning. "What's he doing?" Ron asked.

"Where?" Hermione looked about wildly.

"Up there...no wait, down there..." Ron followed Viktor's rapid plummet.

"Feint?" Harry ventured, and was about to add more, when he removed the onmioculars and realized what had Ron so confused. Viktor was diving right down toward the spot where the chasers and beaters were converging on the quaffle from all directions.

"Surely it's not a feint...that's suicide!" Ron yelled. All ten of the French and Bulgarian chasers, beaters, and seekers were headed right toward midfield, quaffle flying furiously between them, bludgers whirling from club to club.

"De La Croix knows Viktor's a feint waiting to happen, but he couldn't take the chance that Viktor is just feinting, he might have seen it!" Hermione clutched the rail, her knuckles turning white. De La Croix raced after Viktor, pulling nearly even when the entire group of players reached midfield. Viktor wrapped himself flat as possible onto his broom, pulling in his elbows and knees, weaving through a narrow opening between Vulchanov and Volkov. His boots nearly brushed their noses, and even they looked surprised to see Viktor cut it so thin.

De La Croix clipped Fontainebleu, his own teammate, nearly taking him off the broom, and wobbled unsteadily after Viktor. They continued to hurtle down through layers of Quidditch players, Viktor pulling up and skimming over the surface of the field at the last possible moment. De La Croix crashed, though not a spectacular crash, skidding off of his broom, bouncing across the pitch on his backside.

“Gets them every time!” Ron cheered. Play was stopped, until De La Croix waved off the mediwizards, and climbed gingerly back onto his broom. Viktor, hovering near the French goal, used the opportunity to seek solo. When play resumed, De La Croix stayed a bit further away, following more warily. France managed two more goals, fueled by anger and embarrassment. “Look! I think De La Croix spotted it!” Ron pointed to the French seeker.

Viktor appeared to hear the snitch before he saw it, and Harry caught it zooming past his shoulder, and toward the other side of the field. De La Croix had a bit of a head start on him, but he leaned forward, and began to close the distance, soon pulling even.

They began a brutal series of hip checks and bumping while striving for position. Harry winced as he thought about how Viktor could have slammed into him that way during practice. It made his hip sore just to think of it, crashing into Viktor’s solid wall of muscle. The snitch led them on a complete loop of the field, circling and heading directly toward the box where they sat.

Harry looked over at Anya and Nikolas. They were both leaning against one another, nervously clutching hands, onmioculars now forgotten in their laps. They both wore clouded, anxious expressions.

“Incoming!” Ron said, the snitch continuing on its course toward the box. As the two headed after the snitch, which now kept leading them higher and higher, Viktor began to stretch, only one hand on the broom, even bracing his feet across the top, straining upward and pushing up over the broom so he could get a greater reach. From the precarious perch, he began to crowd De La Croix over, outreaching him by a hand length. He was going to..

“Bludger!” Hermione shrieked, pointing at the dark blur headed toward Viktor and De La Croix. Viktor, locked against De La Croix and intent on the snitch, had no time to react as the bludger smashed into his broomstick just below his waist, splintering it beneath him, knocking him into De La Croix first, then plummeting him down, tumbling in the air. The snitch was lost, and the entire stadium gasped as Viktor hurtled toward the pitch, De La Croix ricocheting sideways, but still on his broom.

“Ivanova!” Harry pointed, just finishing the name when Viktor latched on to the back of Ivanova’s passing broom. The broom bucked wildly, and Viktor

twisted beneath, holding on with one hand when one of them slipped free of the handle. Ivanova began circling near the Bulgarian end of the field, trying to give Viktor a hand up, but with Viktor behind her, Ivanova could not reach his free hand. Even with perfect leverage, her slight frame had no hope of hauling the much larger Viktor up onto the broom without some help.

She started to spiral downward, obviously trying to land safely with Viktor beneath, but Viktor's grip was slipping. As they passed parallel to and level with the front of the box, Viktor dropped from the broom, kicking wildly. The entire stadium gasped again, a moment of silence, and then a roar of approval. "Viktor!" Hermione yelled. "What are they cheering? Why are they bloody cheering! That is the Bulgarians cheering, isn't it?"

"Yeah, where is he?" Harry answered. Anya and Nikolas looked sick, frozen with their hands clamped over their mouths.

Ron leaned over the rail and screamed back, "There he is!" The seven occupants of the booth rushed forward and leaned over.

There, below and between the boxes, Viktor dangled from a stadium railing used to hang banners, hauling himself upward with his hands. They could see him muttering, a familiar scowl on his face. He was probably cursing a blue streak in Bulgarian now, Hermione thought, looking at his mouth working as he muttered to himself. Anya finally let out her breath and laid a hand over her heart.

He managed to plant his feet, bracing the soles of his boots against the wall of the stadium, and dared to lean out, waving his arm, trying to catch Volkov's attention. As Volkov turned, though, a bludger drew near, and he gave his full attention to beating it away from his face, like some overgrown bee. Ivanova was trying frantically to attract Mostafa's attention, but he was busier eyeing the shrieking veela on the sidelines warily.

"No one can see him out on that end of the field! The banner's got him blocked off! Oh, come on, ref, time out!" Ron hollered. Viktor's feet slipped, and he spoke again, fumbling at his robe pockets with first one, then the other hand. The occupants of the booth imagined they could make out *Accio broom*, interspersed with what sounded like some very rude Bulgarian indeed.

From near the benches, an unmanned broom shot toward the railing, though it was wobbling and meandering a bit, not sticking to a straight path. "He must have gotten to his wand... oh, thank goodness!" Hermione exclaimed. Viktor clamped onto the broom zooming by with both hands, twisting beneath for a moment before narrowing his eyes in concentration and chinning up against the broom handle.

He first managed to lay across the speeding broom on his stomach, legs dangling off one side, head off the other, wobbling unsteadily. As he made to climb up the rest of the way, Ivanova screamed, "Viktor, duck!" Viktor folded limply over the broom just in time, nearly overbalancing and heading over the handle head first, the bludger grazing his hair.

Viktor pushed up and swung his right leg over the handle, laying low, urging the broom after De La Croix, who had by now, relocated the snitch. Viktor soon drew even and nudged De La Croix, forcing him aside with his greater weight. They both shot straight up, following the snitch, and the crowd could only tell that their hands tangled, and the flash of gold disappeared among their fingers. Even with onmioculars, it was impossible to tell which team had just won.

"Who got it?" Ron squealed. Judging from the absolute quiet, no one else in the stadium knew, besides the two seekers. Both Viktor and De La Croix banked and flew toward Mostafa, who was hovering near the ground, surrounded by Bulgarian players who were berating him for not stopping play earlier, so Viktor could be gotten down from the railing and supplied with a new broom. The veela looked as though they would like to give him a piece of their minds as well.

De La Croix dismounted, and stood before Mostafa. A second later, Viktor glided in, dismounting the broom before it came to a complete stop. With long strides, he marched over to Mostafa. "I still don't know!" Harry replied, "Maybe neither. Maybe they're all so peeved they just came in to complain."

De La Croix had a blank look, neither happy nor sad, fists clenched. Viktor paused before Mostafa, breathing deeply, nostrils dilating, scowling heavily, chin tilted up proudly, defiantly, fists clenched at his side. He stood there for a long moment, glaring at Mostafa with such force that the referee took a hesitant step back. Then Viktor lifted his right fist, parted his fingers, and showed the tiny golden snitch, trapped against his palm.

The entire stadium exploded in a cacophony, the veela struck up a song and began to dance in joy. Viktor simply stood there, stock still, as his teammates dismounted and ran up to pound him on the back. This went on for several minutes, until he lowered his hand, and a slight smile crept across his face. So slight that only those who knew him best would have dared to term it a smile. He turned and strode toward the locker room, full of purpose, snitch still in hand, as though the stadium was cheering for someone else entirely.

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## CHAPTER 14

Hauling the cup into the box, the officials gathered for the presentation to

the winners. The Bulgarian Minister was hopping around excitedly, rubbing the cross French Minister completely the wrong way. As the Bulgarian team filed in, Viktor last, he made eye contact with Hermione and mouthed, "One minute", before slipping past his teammates and giving his somewhat startled mother a squeeze that was neither awkward nor stiff.

Then there was a proud handshake and shoulder squeeze between himself and his father. Hermione could tell they were both surprised yet gratified that Viktor had bothered to come to them first. As he snuck back to the end of the line, he reached out to grasp Hermione's hand, which was resting on the back of her chair, folding the snitch into her fingers and curling them shut as he shot her a quick wink. She could have poked Ron with a fork when he leaned and whispered, "Why are you sniveling like that? They won already!"

"Oh, Ron! Honestly! You think I'm bawling over a stupid Quidditch game?" Ron almost told her that the internationals were certainly not a stupid Quidditch game, but he thought better of it. She pocketed the snitch, still warm from his hands.

By the time the presentation was over, they had very nearly clapped their hands clean off their wrists. Viktor finally broke away from his teammates and back to the trio, after bidding his parents goodbye. They were headed back to Pavlova. "Party," he said simply, a subtle curve to his lips that they had come to recognize as a smile. "As soon as the crowd leaves, the pitch is ours. Ve vill go put these in my locker," he added, taking the onmioculars from Hermione and steering her toward the door with a hand on the arm. With Harry, Ron, and the rest of the team close behind, they made their way to the locker room. Viktor stowed the pairs of onmioculars into the large pocket, then stripped off his gloves and knee protectors, preparing to stuff them in the equipment bag. He paused with the gloves in hand, frowning down into the side pocket for a long moment. He pursed his lips as though in deep thought, clucked his tongue, and shook his head as though clearing it.

"Viktor? Something wrong?" Hermione asked. He shook his head slowly, pressing his lips together in a thin line. Tucking the gloves into the bag, pulling his wand from it and zipping it up, he tossed the entire thing back into the locker.

"Let's go," he said with some enthusiasm, swiftly tucking his wand into his right robe pocket. Odd, Hermione thought, she would have sworn he had looked both puzzled and disturbed when staring into that pocket. Must have been taking inventory again and thought he misplaced something else, she supposed.

Viktor led them to a back door in the locker room. "You two can change in here, Hermione, you can use the back room."

"What about you?" she asked.

“Me? I am not changing. Even Ivanova goes to these things in her uniform. It is the beauty of a dress uniform, you do not fall in the sand pit or take a bludger in the face, you do not have to change for the Ministry officials,” Viktor shrugged.

“Actually, I’m kind of glad you’re not changing. Frankly, you look pretty incredible in that uniform,” she confided in a low voice. Viktor flushed, but regained his composure quickly.

“If you look half as beautiful as you did at the Yule Ball in this dress, I will need to take along a very large stick,” he warned, pointing toward an equipment rack.

“You do realize all the girls at Hogwarts are going to want to boil me in oil after hearing about this, don’t you? Bad enough when I ‘stole’ you in the library last year!”

“Let them stew over it. Go on and change. I for vone am starving.” He lightly steered her through the door by the shoulder.

Viktor milled around the locker room, while the boys changed, looking at the closed door from time to time. Hermione stepped out shortly, her hair pulled up into a ponytail, cascading down, a simple sleeveless robe, in hunter green draped over her. Viktor let out a low, appreciative whistle, offering his arm to escort her out. “Am I to take it you approve even without the hair potion?” she asked.

“Absolutely. They should have the tent up by now.”

“Tent?” Harry asked.

“They set up a tent, there’s food, and there should be music and dancing, too. We answer a few questions from reporters, then spend the rest of the night avoiding them and eating. Not so hard, because they are usually eating too.” He opened the door and they stepped out onto the pitch, which had changed greatly since they had entered the locker room. Indeed, there was a behemoth of a white tent set up near one end of the pitch, with multiple buffet tables and what looked to be fairy lights strung up around the sides. On closer inspection, they proved to be great clumps of fireflies. There also seemed to be landscaping around the tent. “Is a bit more formal, like most of the dances at Durmstrang. No Weird Sisters, I am thinking,” Viktor commented.

“So what do we dance to?” Ron asked.

Viktor’s mouth curled slightly, “Oh, something more along the line of a

valtz.”

“Waltzing!?! Good grief, I can’t waltz for beans!” Ron hissed loudly.

“Is simple. My mother taught me. Even my father knows how, and he claims to be the most socially graceless wizard Durmstrang ever produced. It is the one social grace she could make sure I had. She could not teach me to like batting eyelashes and small talk,” Viktor tossed back over his shoulder at Ron.

“Like you needed anything else to make the girls swoon!” came an incredulous voice thick with a Russian accent behind them. “They never would have gotten the girls pried off of you if you had talked to them too, Viktor! They were always three deep even though you hiss and spit at them like some sore-tailed Chinese Fireball!”

Viktor cocked his head without even turning around and began in an exasperated, reproving voice, “Alexei... you would never have gotten a date, either.”

Alexei Poliakov jogged up abreast of them, and he and Viktor shook hands. “Why did you not owl me you were coming?” Viktor asked.

“Father came with the Russian Ministry, he had extra seats. It was very last minute. And I could not deny my lovely Katrina here the chance to meet my friend from school, now could I?” he asked with a wink, as Katrina, a very pretty and dainty blonde glided up beside him. “She is ready for her sixth year at Durmstrang, but she has never gotten chance to meet you in person,” Alexei finished, presenting the two to one another with a sweeping arm.

“Oh, you were wonderful, so brave, so strong, so fast! My best friend Liesl was absolutely heartbroken when she heard you would be going to nasty old Hogwarts for most of the year last year. She wishes you practice all the time. She was planning on asking you to one of the balls. She already had a dress picked out to match your eyes if she could get at you for the Midwinter Ball or the Spring Ball. Will we have the pleasure of your presence this year, shall I get in line now?” she fluttered her eyes prettily, laying a delicate hand possessively on Viktor’s forearm, just above the wrist.

Hermione thought she might gag, and as she watched Viktor’s impassive face, she presumed he felt just about as enthusiastic about this full frontal female assault. He allowed himself a subtle eye roll in Alexei’s direction, grasped Katrina’s hand, and held it rather formally, balanced on his fingertips, as though he were greeting royalty. He touched as little as possible of it, treating it rather like a dead fish.

“Charmed, Katrina,” he said, with a slight nod and curt bow toward her.



Hermione nearly laughed out loud when she noticed the bow allowed him to make an exasperated face at the ground without offending Katrina. "I cannot say at this moment where I will be by the time two of those balls roll around. I would hope to say, no matter how many it disappoints," here he gave a pointed look to Alexei again, "I would already have a full dance card for the opening ball." He released Katrina's hand and reached for Hermione's, threading his large fingers loosely between hers. "May I present Miss Hermione Granger?" he asked warmly. Katrina's face fell into a petulant pout as she recognized the name, and Hermione noted the stilted pronunciation he had used with Katrina, "Her-my-oh-knee", emphasizing the last two syllables which were so difficult to the native speaker of a Slavic language.

"She was an admirable partner at the Yule Ball at nasty old Hogwarts, and I would hope she would consider coming to Durmstrang for the opening ball. And this is Mr. Ronald Weasley, and Mr. Harry Potter, also attendees of nasty old Hogwarts, where I had a lovely time, thank you for inquiring. I hope they would let me extend the same hospitality to them at Durmstrang, and I am sure Mr. Weasley or Mr. Potter would be happy to dance with you at the opening ball," Viktor said airily, the sarcasm barely detectable to the casual observer. Katrina probably didn't realize the full import of the insult she had just received, but she realized she had been rebuffed as a potential date.

She lifted her chin proudly at Alexei as she said, "Too bad. I must go powder my nose, Alexei, I will catch up in the tent." She turned on her heel and flounced prettily toward the stadium door.

She had barely gotten out of earshot when Viktor dissolved into raucous laughter, deep and hearty, propping himself up against Alexei's shoulder with his free hand, while Alexei snickered as well. Finally, Viktor had to wipe the tears from the corner of his eyes and pant for breath. "Well I see you have not improved your chatting skills, Viktor, so the girls at Durmstrang will be after you just as hot and heavy while you are there. You get any nastier to them, you will have to check the cupboards, sweep under your bed before you go to sleep at night and beat them off with a stick just to get to breakfast! Would you do without me to protect you?" Alexei tapped Hermione on the arm in a friendly manner, "Would you do to him? I have not been able to make him laugh like that in two years, at least!"

"And I see your taste in women has not improved, either, Alexei," Viktor scolded, looking at the door where Katrina had disappeared.

"Bah! She is nothing more than a pretty girl to take to game. Is your advantage of knowing you, I can always get a date. Just have to promise they meet you and they are all atwitter," Alexei grinned back mischievously. "Then you promptly dash their girlish hopes and stomp on their hearts with your brooding and I find out if they might like me to comfort them instead. Although, usually

you do not mention other girl. Or any hint you will valtz with someone else.” Alexei eyed Hermione, appraising her.

“Alexei, I think you would do better to find a girl who likes you for you, not your friend,” Viktor replied.

“Not yet. Someday. Not so smart as you, yet. I will keep pretty Miss Granger company while you get the reporters out of your hair, no? And I promise to behave. Viktor would snap me like a twig if I step out of line with you,” he wagged his eyebrows at Hermione. Viktor had mocked him perfectly, she thought.

Viktor let go a great sigh. “She will snap you like a twig, you mean. Overly sweet and bubbly, but harmless, I assure you,” he jabbed a finger at Alexei. “Might as well get it over,” he started trudging toward the tent, his fingers still curled between Hermione’s.

Inside the tent, it looked like a very formal reception, and Hermione found herself glad that she had picked something to wear that rivaled her Yule Ball gown. The strains of a string quartet wafted over the groups of people clustered inside, sipping what looked to be cider, looking very elegant and tall and proper. Viktor was seized by his teammates the instant he stepped inside. “Come, come, team picture, reporters, then you can eat all the chocolate covered strawberries you can hold and valtz all you like and Alexei can pick up the rest of the admiring crumbs from your table,” Ivanova declared, practically hauling him off by the wrist as he looked back at Hermione with a very funny, wide-eyed ‘help me’ sort of look. She laughed in spite of herself at his obvious distress.

Harry let out a low whistle, “Wow, this looks like something straight out of the old aristocracy.”

“Might as well say it is,” Alexei murmured, “Durmstrang is just full of old European bloodlines and old European money. People who summer in Paris and winter in Rome and own artvork and patronize the arts. Some of them patronize each other, too, more ways than one. Most of them end up in these ministry jobs, diplomats, that sort of thing. Maybe that why I like Viktor so much, he thinks it is just as silly as I do, caring who your great-great-grandmother married and how skilled she was at the tango and bothering to talk about it at parties.”

“Of course, Viktor does not have to worry, the girls like him regardless of who his great-great-grandmama marry way back when, big, strapping, high earning, handsome sports star that he is. I told him being so shy and naive and snarling and bashing his nose would not work. Girls just like that more.” Alexei adopted a mincing posture and a prissy voice, not far from Katrina’s tone earlier. “So sweet and shy, the quiet type, so dark and brooding, bet I can draw him out! I

hear he haff Romany blood, that is probably vhy he is so mysterious. Oh, he must be so brave to take a bludger right in the face and still catch the snitch! His face vould be too perfect with a straight nose, that crook, it's cute, it gives him character!" He dropped his flailing wrist and paused a moment before continuing, "You must have good effect on him. He looks much better now." Alexei seemed to have tacked the last statement on somewhat abruptly while studying Viktor across the tent.

"Better?" Hermione asked.

"Better. Healthier. Most of last year, he look ill to me, sallow, even thinner than usual, and that is saying a lot vith Viktor. I always say Viktor vos the biggest skinny boy I know. Solid as a brick, but nearly concave in places. Sometimes I vonder how he keep his trousers up. But he is vasting away most of last two years, he hardly eat anything at school. Sick. He even get a head cold vhen ve leave for Tournament last year. He never get sick before. I began to really vorry about him. Probably Karkaroff's breath or looking at those teeth up close every time ve eat, I tell him. Maybe it vos the idea of being chased by girls from three schools at the Trivizard Tournament. I think he vork too hard, vorry too much about his parents, missing exams last year, vot he going to do this year about Durmstrang, being away from Vratsa, Karkaroff always on his back, that tournament, being ill, that head cold he haff vhen ve get to England, always the vorrier. Then Diggory..." Alexei shook his head slowly.

"Nobody does guilt like Viktor Krum, even vhen is not his fault. I thought he vould curl up and die over it vhen they told him vot happened in the maze until Dumbledore told him it vos not his fault, defended him. Beats himself up over lost games bad enough, Diggory, I think, a hundred times vorse. Anyone who know Viktor at all know he vould sooner cut his arm off than hurt anyone, unless in defense of someone, and there all those idiots vere, claiming he had done it on his own! Poke fun at his nose, his Quidditch, that odd valk of his all you like, never a grunt from him. Look cross eyed at one of his teammates, insult his mother, pick on someone who is defenseless, he vill probably send you home breathing through your ears!"

"Very protective, Viktor. He vonce put school bully three years older and a foot taller in rubbish bin for making vone of the first year students cry in his fourth year. He nearly pinned back that Malfoy boy's ears last year vhen he say something nasty. Luckily, most of the people at Durmstrang vere too afraid his bite vos like his bark to try him too much. Rest afraid of it might get back to Karkaroff. Part of vot makes Viktor such a good player, he finds and exploits veakness. Turns it against his opponent. He dislikes showoffs. Bullies. He can usually hurt them more than they could imagine, if they blink in a standoff. Viktor is intimidating enough, everyone blink sooner or later."

Alexei barely paused for breath before starting up again, "Vorry! Hah!

He spend a lot of nights on that Firebolt at midnight, over that lake of yours, me hanging over the rail of the Durmstrang ship making sure he did not kill himself by running into tree in dark while doing Campos Spiral or falling in and drowning while upside down. I thought he would be worse after Karkaroff left us there alone, but I think he was relieved. At least after Dumbledore made that farewell speech and did not tar and feather us all for daring to haff him as a headmaster. Viktor was our bloody captain on that ship anyway, not Karkaroff. Too much responsible, Viktor, even when he need not be. Every loss his fault. Never any blame on the rest of the team. He need to rebel, I tell him, spend some of his own money, haff some fun. Little did I suspect he would blow Karkaroff's temper so well, though. I thought I was only vone with that kind of talent," Alexei's dimples reappeared.

"What are you talking about?" Hermione demanded.

"Why, you," Alexei said simply, a little surprised. "Taking you to ball. He wont to send Viktor with Elena, who come with us. I think Karkaroff bring her just for that reason. He think Viktor and Elena make a good couple, both tall, her with her milky white skin and pretty pink lips and dark hair and eyes, like Viktor's. Most of the boys in Durmstrang dream about Elena at night. I would not be surprised if Karkaroff dreamed about her at night. Viktor would not hear of it, say he haff own date, refused to tell anyone who. I guessed, because I see him going to library every day on your schedule, not his own like at Durmstrang. He always read late at night at Durmstrang. Madame Durshenkova take a liking to him, even leave library open later at night, give him a key sometimes, so he could study."

"I was not only vone who guess, since somebody tell Karkaroff the day of the ball. I cannot imagine who, probably someone jealous of Viktor, for being chosen champion. I guess it was you he asked, but even then he would not even shake his head yes or no when I ask. Still, someone else must guess too, since Karkaroff tried to convince him otherwise for hours before he leave. I think Karkaroff would have beaten anyone else who had pulled that. Refusing to tell, then planning on showing up with girl from rival school, best friend of one of your competitors, that was enough." Alexei inclined his head toward Harry as he spoke, then turned back to Hermione. "When he found out you were ah, ah, ah...." She could see the expression on his face change as he realized he had taken a turn down the wrong conversational path.

While Alexei backpedaled, Hermione coolly crossed her arms, "Mudblood? Muggle-born? Not a European aristocrat?" she asked, her eyebrows arching, heat rising in her face.

"Yes. When he found that out, I think his head was about to explode, he would have killed anyone else, but he knows better with Viktor. Viktor gets something in his head, no shifting it. Stubborn is not the word for it. Could haff

broken both his legs, arms, all his fingers, he still would have gone with you if he had to crawl there. Karkaroff knew that, why waste his energy?” Hermione felt herself shiver at the nonchalant way Alexei indicated that Karkaroff would have resorted to violence if it had done any good. “Only person I have seen more stubborn than Karkaroff. Viktor inherited that trait from Papa Nikolas along with the nose, to hear some of the longtime professors tell it. Viktor was Karkaroff’s best and worst student for same reason, stubborn work ethic. Dogged when he wanted to, Karkaroff wanted, ornery and immovable when he did not. In early years, that was just for Viktor to be a great seeker, they could agree on that. I always get feeling there was battle of the wills between them. Do not worry. Not all purebloods are such ... how you English say it? Gits... like Karkaroff. Last few years, especially, more contact with outsiders. I hear rumors the ‘pureblood’ requirement will probably be dropped by the new headmaster. Some of the old stalwarts will probably flap a bit, but it will pass.”

“Yes, Viktor would move heaven and earth if he cares for you. I should know. He was more than willing to growl at Malfoy and threaten those two great lumps that follow him around when he says something nasty about you. I do not think... Crabbe and Goyle, was it? I do not think those two were used to being stood up to, they looked scared out of their wits, if they had any. I have seen it before, with his parents, with me. Karkaroff was Dark Arts teacher when we first met him. Viktor told him off pretty smart when he picked on me in class. Before that, I wonder if he speaks at all. Viktor could get away with it, everybody loves a winner, especially Karkaroff. Viktor was already a winner. Practicing with Vratsa by then. Viktor probably would have done it anyway, get away with it or not. Maybe Karkaroff just jealous of Viktor’s affections, that why he not so thrilled about you and me. Viktor protect me from Karkaroff, I protect him from mobs of girls. I think I get better deal,” Alexei said thoughtfully, watching Viktor hold what seemed like an uncomfortable conversation with a reporter across the room at the far end of the tent.

“So, you probably know Viktor the best of anyone at Durmstrang, hmm?” Hermione said politely. She was beginning to see a possible reason why Viktor wasn’t used to talking much. You couldn’t get a word in edgewise around Alexei. She wasn’t sure if being adopted as a friend by Alexei was a blessing or a curse, if you like peace and quiet at all.

Alexei snorted incredulously, rather like Viktor often did. “Know Viktor? I do not think anyone really knows Viktor there. I have more dirt on him than most, I know his mama was hurt badly years ago, how or why, he still has not told me. He does not want reporters hounding his parents, making his mama and papa relive whatever it was. Rita Skeeter would have field day. I know he sends some money home because of it, so that probably why he is not big spender and show off, why he works so hard. I know he would rather giggly girls leave him alone, and he was not overly fond of Karkaroff and a few other teachers, but I still do not know the truth behind that, either. Most students would have eaten

Karkaroff's favoritism up, not risked it by balking when it did not suit and taking up with us 'undesirables'. I spent a nice week with him at his home once, I had nodding acquaintance with his parents from school events and some Quidditch matches they attend. But close friends? More of a mutual protection society."

"I suspect he has said more of substance to you in the time you have known him than he ever has to me in six years. Even his letters are closed off and distant sometimes. I think that why he does not get rid of me earlier, run me off like he does everyone else. I do not ask questions, just take him as he is and do not push him for more. I guess I should feel honored he share that much with me. More than he share with anyone else there. He could function just fine without me. He does not miss me much when I go off with girls. It is just quieter for him. I used to even be able to make him laugh occasionally, back before that last push for the World Cup. Back before... whatever it was happen to him. Back before Karkaroff took over completely, I suppose."

Katrina came back, and Hermione could both see and feel her eyes traveling up and down the length of her dress, the cascade of bushy, curly hair gathered in a ponytail, disapprovingly. Katrina was probably looking daggers at her, Hermione thought, but the thought was interrupted by Viktor's return. "Valtz?" he asked with a smile and bow, putting his hand out.

"I'm afraid I'm in the same boat with Ron, I can't waltz for beans, either, Viktor. Hopping around at a school dance to the Weird Sisters was one thing. Swaying a little while revolving to the slow songs, that isn't waltzing."

"Me, three," Harry added meekly.

"Outside! All three of you!" Viktor ordered with mock sternness, as though he couldn't believe they didn't know how to do as simple a thing as waltz.

"I can waltz perfectly, Viktor. I would like to dance," Katrina piped up.

"So can Alexei. He is a wonderful dancer, or so he keeps telling me. You two can dance while we are outside," he responded innocently, still steering Hermione toward the tent flap. Katrina followed them with her eyes, glaring at Hermione in particular when Viktor didn't pay "the lovely Katrina" any mind.

Just outside the opening of the tent, he beckoned to Ron and Harry to watch, took up Hermione's right hand, held it aloft, captured her left hand, planted it on his right shoulder, then tucked his big right hand into the small of her back, his long tapered fingers lightly braced against her. She could feel the heat of his skin through her thin gown, and was shocked to realize that his hand covered so much of the expanse of her back. He lifted his chin wordlessly and began to waltz in the space before her with small steps as she stood still. "Now, you do the same, only mirror things. Back, two, three, up, two, three. I have the

hard job, leading, all you have to do is let me lead,” he said as she stiffly followed. For a bit, the steps were halting, but then, she found herself melting into the flow of the dance, and no longer counting in her head.

“Good, good, now closer, you cannot waltz a mile away,” he said as he stepped up, so close that his legs were nestled in the folds of her robes, her nose was close to his chest, and she could smell him. Like at the Yule Ball. She recognized the pleasant, clean, sharp, and slightly spicy smell that somehow reminded her of sandalwood and winter and wood fires with cedar chips. It was crisp somehow, like mountain air.

“But I’ll probably step on your foot. You should know I’m not the best dancer. Too klutzy,” she protested.

“You’re fine. It’s easier not to step on anything when you are closer. And if you step on my foot, that is my fault for not leading,” he said, starting her off again. It was easier with him standing closer. She could feel his muscles tense before he stepped, tell where he was going, where he was preparing to steer her, much easier than before. Combined with the cues he was giving her with his hands, a slight tilt of his fingers this way or that, she found it easy to follow along. He paused and paired her off with Harry, then Ron, critiquing them gently, and they soon had a basic grasp on how to waltz.

Going back in, Viktor turned to Ron and Harry, “I made Ivanova promise to give you each at least one dance. She is a good instructor, if you mind your manners.” Viktor led Hermione around the perimeter of the wooden dance floor, over to the lone ancient wizard “conducting” the unmanned string quartet and the woodwinds with his wand. “Emperor Waltz, Strauss, please,” Viktor requested, standing beside him, addressing his shoulder. Hermione noted that he had, with some effort, pronounced “waltz” with only a faint trace of his soft Bulgarian accent on the second word.

Without looking around the old man said, “Sonny, that’s nearly a ten minute piece, if everyone else here doesn’t want to waltz for nine minutes plus, it’s going to get me some angry looks.”

Viktor grinned back at Hermione, and as the current piece came to an end, the old man turned to Viktor. “Oh! Mr. Krum! I had no idea...of course I’ll play what you want...”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” Viktor smiled back, cupping a large handful of coins from his pocket and placing them in the conductor’s hands. The wizened old man looked at the coins, then pocketed them.

“Thank you. The money wasn’t necessary, Mr. Krum, request anything you want all night. Emperor Waltz fourteen times in a row if you like,” he said

grandly.

“Just the vonce for now,” Viktor replied graciously. “And thank you.” He cupped Hermione’s elbow and led her back off the dais. “Now I haff ten minutes to think vot else ve can dance to. I am still not used to being able to do that.”

“Do what exactly?”

“Ask for things and just...get them, haffing the money to make things happen when fame vill not do it. Not that I did not haff money before, I bought nice enough things before, but now... My parents stashed away enough for me to buy a house,” he said, an edge of wonder in his voice. He sounded a bit disturbed by the thought.

Behind them, the low, slow strains of the Emperor Waltz started up, and by the time they had assumed their positions at the edge of the dance floor that had been conjured up earlier and covered the entire inside of the tent, it had started in earnest, he pulled her toward him and they had spun into the crowd that was beginning to form before she could really worry about which foot to begin with. Nine minutes plus, as the conductor had put it, never flew by so fast. It was a lively song for the most part, with slow, easy interludes that allowed them to slow and catch their breath, then whirl off madly again when it picked up. She felt almost stately, courtly, she thought, and she occasionally caught glimpses of Alexei and Katrina, Ron and Ivanova, Harry and a girl who looked a year or two younger, with black hair. “Ministry official’s daughter,” Viktor explained when Hermione asked who she was.

“Vone more?” he inquired, when the music came to a stop. She nodded breathlessly. He sprinted back up the dais, which wasn’t far, and she heard him request with precise pronunciation, “Tchaikovsky, Nutcracker Suite, Waltz of the Flowers.”

As he took up her hand again, Hermione looked at him curiously, “First of all, where’s that accent of yours going? Second, how do you know so much Muggle classical music?”

“Practice, practice, practice. Some sounds are so... foreign, it takes practice to get your mouth used to them. Actually hearing lots of people who vere raised speaking English for a few months helped. Second, who said they vere all Muggles? You think Beethoven vos not a little magic?” he teased. “My mother loves music. She used to play classical all the time on the vireless. She heard it first at the museum. My father, he is very, very keen on Tchaikovsky. He took me to see Nutcracker ballet in St. Petersburg every year I can remember before I vent to Durmstrang, Russian National Ballet Company,” he explained. “Most years since, too.”



She was concentrating so hard on the rare unguarded smile lighting up his face that she nearly forgot she was dancing. Suddenly it seemed effortless. Though they weren't attempting quite the spectacular dance floor theatrics that Alexei and Katrina were getting up to, they were doing a fair job at being regal. Well, Viktor was doing a great job at being regal, almost military in his bearing and that uniform, she was just along for the ride, inelegant bushy hair, sweaty palms and all. She wondered how his hand could be so warm and dry cupped around her fingers, his thumb occasionally stroking the back of her hand lightly. She noted that Ron and Harry had switched partners for this dance. "Hey, look, I'm waltzing!" Ron called as he and the Ministry official's daughter twirled by.

"Viktor!" Ron's dance partner called over his shoulder.

"Hello, Charlotte!" he called back. Outside of Ivanova, his mother, and herself, it was the first female he had ever seen Viktor greet somewhat cheerily.

"Ivanova isn't a bad instructor!" Ron called again before the flow of the floor took them further apart.

On and on it went, Viktor requesting between each song, some she didn't recognize by title, like "Il Gardinello, Flute Concerto, Vivaldi", and "Waltz from The Serenade For Strings, Tchaikovsky", but she recognized them once they began. Some of his choices were unexpected, like "Arabian Dance, Grieg, Peer Gynt Suite", but the heavy drums and brass that the conductor conjured proved particularly good for the new steps he put her through. After the "Minute Waltz", she pleaded exhaustion and hunger, so he asked her what she would like to hear while they ate. She blurted the first thing she could think of, "Rhapsody in Blue", Viktor looked at her a bit oddly. "George Gershwin, errr, modern Muggle jazz, I suppose. Piano."

Viktor buttonholed the conductor and explained the request, and soon there was a phantom piano, pounding away at the pile driver chords of Gershwin. "I like it," Viktor said after a few lines.

"You should hear John Coltrane, or Jelly Roll Morton," she responded.

They loaded their plates with things from the buffet, and Viktor fetched some cider for them both. As he sat the glasses down, a high pitched childish voice came from somewhere directly behind him. "Viktor! Viktor! Mama and Papa say I can come over for a few minutes! Then I haff to go back vith Papa vhen you get tired of me!" Viktor laughed, turned and bent, addressing someone apparently around the height of his knees,

"Ahhh, now you know I could never get tired of you. Come meet somevone." Viktor turned back to Hermione, and a small pair of dark eyes nearly hidden under some equally dark hair appeared, peeking around Viktor's

leg shyly. Viktor put his hand on the mass of dark hair and gently nudged a little boy of about four or five from behind him.

The little boy continued to cling to Viktor's left leg, right arm firmly wrapped around his knee, clutching a fold of Viktor's pants tightly in his fingers, the other pudgy thumb in his mouth as he solemnly studied Hermione. "This is Hermione, Petyr. This is Petyr. Mama and Papa are Ivanova and her husband, Anton Gregoryev. Can you say 'Hermione'?" Hermione noticed the stilted, careful pronunciation Viktor had used again when prompting, and smiled encouragingly at Petyr.

"Herrrrmmm-own-ninny," he mumbled around his thumb, and Hermione couldn't help laughing out loud as he butchered her name in much the same way Viktor once had.

Petyr started at the sound, then shyly buried his face against Viktor's leg again, looking as though he wanted to cry.

Viktor laughed, "Don't worry Petyr, I had the same problem vonce. Alexei tells me girls have such difficult names just to make boys feel like fools when they get them wrong. Girls with hard to pronounce names are always pretty. Or maybe being so pretty makes their names hard to pronounce. And I was not even dealing with a thumb in my mouth when I did it. You already speak English better than I did when I was twice your age," he cajoled, deftly prying Petyr off his leg and swinging him up into his arms.

"Really?" Petyr asked after a bit, wide eyes daring to peek up from Viktor's neck, where he had tucked his small head.

"Absolutely, I barely knew any. Ten words, maybe. I started too late, Petyr. Mama was smart to make you learn young. Come on now, quit hiding your face, you are too hard to talk to if you keep ducking your head into my neck. And those eyelashes of yours tickle," Viktor sat in his chair and rearranged Petyr on his lap.

Petyr studied Viktor long and hard, "Your English is different," he said accusingly.

"Yes, it is. I am trying to get my 'w' not to be so lazy, when I remember. After conquering Hermione's name, I think I can do anything," Viktor grinned.

"Your Russian is still better," Petyr declared.

Viktor laughed again, "Yes, I suppose it is, sladko momche, I suppose it is, although I do not know how you could tell, since you know all of fifteen words of Russian,"

But Petyr interrupted to protest “Sixteen! I learned a new vone!”

Viktor raised his eyebrows and continued, “Good! But I haff been speaking Russian since I was smaller than you. I got Russian lullabies, nursery rhymes, and fairy tales.” Petyr looked Viktor slowly up and down, as though he doubted Viktor had ever been so small as to need lullabies, but he held his peace and slid his dark eyes back to Hermione, studying her warily.

“Who is she?” he demanded finally, jerking the thumb in his mouth at Hermione.

“Miss Hermione Granger. I met her last year at Hogwarts, you remember me talking about going there for the Triwizard Tournament? She was nice enough to come visit me with her friends and be my waltz partner,” Viktor explained patiently. “And it is not polite to ask about someone like they are not at the table,” he corrected gently, “You can talk to Hermione too. She does not bite.” Petyr looked doubtful, eyeing Hermione with about as much distrust as Hermione would have shown for one of Hagrid’s skrewts, but considered this for a moment,

“Like Mama and Papa always waltz together? Does that mean she is going to be at every dance?” Whew, in his own way, Petyr was a tougher interviewer than Rita Skeeter, Hermione thought.

As Viktor stammered for an answer, she reached out and patted Petyr’s hand. “Not exactly. But maybe someday, we will always waltz together like your mama and papa,” she whispered. Viktor smiled at the top of Petyr’s dark head resting against his chest, but didn’t look up.

Once more the sharp little voice piped up, “Are you the girl he talked about all summer?” Viktor looked up at Hermione and nodded.

“Yes, I guess I am, then,” Hermione told him.

“The vone he go to see in Linden even though he haff practice?” She hadn’t known he had to skip practice to come.

“Yes, Viktor came to see me in London,” she replied. “Viktor vos right. You haff pretty hair, and he said you like books,” Petyr said approvingly, like some pint sized matchmaker summing up her worthiness for his client. “Mama tell Papa you vere good for him, maybe he not be so sad anymore. But Viktor is never sad around me, I tell her,” he finished, nodding emphatically, as though the very notion of Viktor ever being sad was ridiculous.

Hermione smiled. “I don’t think anyone could be too sad around you,

Petyr. Little pitchers have big ears,” she said, pointing at Petyr and laughing.

Viktor sighed and shook Petyr playfully, “And your mama haff a big mouth, you tell her for me. If she spent as much energy on improving her shot as she did on trying to fix my love life, ve would haff won the World Cup easily.”

“Broken before? Your love life?” Hermione asked lightly, wondering just how many waltz partners Viktor might have had before her.

“More like non-existent,” Viktor replied, pursing his lips. “How many times have I waltzed with a girl at these things, Petyr?”

“Never! He always sit vith me, unless Papa get tired and Mama make him dance vith her instead of Papa. Vonce vith Charlotte, vhen she cry because no boy her age vill dance vith her. She never haff trouble finding partners now.” Petyr had leaned out and studied Viktor’s face at the mention of the World Cup. He finally planted a small finger lightly on the bridge of Viktor’s nose. “Does it still hurt?” he asked.

Viktor laughed softly, “No, no, noses mend. It quit hurting a long time ago, when those fantastic black eyes went away. I think you would be better off asking if it is still crooked, or big, or hooked.”

“Is it?” Petyr asked innocently.

Viktor laughed again. “Still all three, I am afraid. Still big, crooked, and hooked. Promise me you will not let your nose get that way, Petyr.”

Petyr touched his own nose and promised in all seriousness, “I von’t.”

Viktor glanced across the tent, then leaned over Petyr, “I think your Papa wants you back. I see him waving.”

Viktor pointed to a large, dark man, of whom Petyr seemed to be a miniaturized version, waving at their table. Viktor stood, gave Petyr a squeeze and a pat on the back, then stood him on the floor. “Walk you back?” Viktor asked.

“No, I can go by myself. Can I hug Hermowninny ‘bye?”

“You vill...will haff to ask her,” Viktor grinned. Hermione knelt and gave Petyr a hug, and he gave her a squeeze around the neck accompanied by a charming little peck on the cheek, then toddled off with a wave. “He vill be worse than Alexei someday,” Viktor mused, shaking his head. “Mischief and women both.”

“What makes you say that?” she asked, as she turned back to the table.

“Five minutes, and he has already kissed my date, right in front of me, when I haff not. And if I am not mistaken, he had at least one frog in his pocket, which I would not be surprised to see turn up in the punch bowl, if Anton turns his back,” Viktor replied with mock irritation and a shake of his head.

They had barely touched their chairs when Dimitrov came over and draped his hand on Viktor’s shoulder. “Just thought you would vont to know... that awful Skeeter voman vos trying to get in to see you. Ve try explaining that this is a private reception, you vere busy, but she does not take hints. So Vulchanov and Volkov, they offered to store their clubs in a very interesting place if she did not leave. Ve knew you did not vont to have her disturb your friends,” he said, raising his eyebrows at Hermione, then flicking his dark eyes across the room to where Ron and Harry were admiring Zograf’s broom.

“Thank you,” Viktor breathed, visibly relaxing, “I do not know vhy she bothers coming, she writes vot she vonts anyway.”

“Well, you can eat your strawberries in peace now,” Dimitrov commented. “I vos beginning to think you had given up eating altogether last year, Viktor, even those chocolate covered strawberries of yours. When he first joined the Vratsa team as a practice reserve, ve could bribe him to do almost anything with those things, he loved them so. He ate so much anyway that ve figured the owner vos paying him more in food than in his pay envelope. Ve used to vonder if he had a hollow leg. No vonder he shot up so tall. If he outgrows his Papa much more, all the other seekers vill quit until he retires. Good to see him with a full plate again, though. Enjoy the rest of the reception,” he added, nodding at both of them, patting Viktor on the back, and taking his leave as Viktor flushed slightly from the compliment and stared at his plate.

“Was something really wrong last year, Viktor? Poliakoff just made the remark, well, among lots and lots of remarks that he made, that you didn’t eat much last year, that you actually lost weight...” Hermione began, concern in her voice.

“It vos nothing. I just...vos not very hungry last year for some reason and I vos ill twice, vonce vith terrible flu, I spent veeks in bed,” he protested weakly, as though even he didn’t believe what he was saying, not looking at her. She let it drop, seeing that she wasn’t going to get much else out of him on the subject of how his eating habits had differed over the last couple of years. They ate mostly in silence for a few minutes, Viktor making comments on some of the guests, pointing out some of the more important attendees, who occasionally drifted over to congratulate him. Then Poliakoff and Katrina joined them, and talk became unnecessary as Alexei chattered on at all three of them indiscriminately. Katrina grabbed the chair closest to Viktor, and was still glaring at Hermione at every

opportunity.

“You haff a very interesting hairstyle. You haff such... curly hair, how do you ever manage? I just could not wrestle my hair into a ponytail if I had such bushy hair without bottles of hair potion. You did not bother with hair potion I see, did you?” Katrina asked sweetly, the smirk on her face and mockery in her voice apparent as she tossed her smooth shimmering curtain of blond hair fetchingly around her bare shoulders.

She had managed to work this comment into a small pause in Alexei’s raucous stories about his summer, some of which Viktor was familiar with and laughed at before Alexei had even begun to wind up, others he hadn’t had time to work into his letters. “Oh, I manage just fine. I’ve had special martial arts training and I lift weights,” Hermione snapped back a little irritably, tired of Katrina’s catty comments and scrutiny.

Viktor hid his grin from Katrina behind his napkin for a moment before composing his face again and lowering it. “All those weights you lift must be why you have such big... muscles,” Katrina said, dismissing Hermione with a toss of her head, then leaning back toward Viktor.

“I like it,” he reached out and twirled a spiral of hair around the length of his index finger, examining it before gently smoothing it back into the massive fall of hair and combing through it lightly with his fingertips, trailing them down Hermione’s back an inch or two below her ponytail. Then he brushed one of the short, stray ringlets back from her temple.

“I find her hair every bit as fascinating as the freckles on her nose and the fact that she already knew there was a Bulgarian Khan with my name in the 800s,” he said firmly, as though he weren’t about to brook any argument to the contrary. Hermione felt the heat rise in her face. She hadn’t realized that Viktor had even spotted the tiny freckles on her nose. Or that he had taken note of any of the historical facts interspersed throughout her nervous babbling in the library the first few times they had talked. At least they all hadn’t been from *Hogwarts: A History*, or about Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, she thought to herself. She still blushed when she thought of how she had excitedly informed him that huge fur robes were part of the official uniform at Durmstrang, when his was draped across the back of his library chair. She had wanted to crawl under the table the moment it left her mouth.

Katrina, not to be outdone, giggled and batted her eyes seductively at Viktor, wiggling her shoulders. Knowing Viktor as she did, Hermione knew that Katrina had just done exactly the wrong thing. Strike one, she was playing up her girlishness, not being herself. “That is fascinating. Why, you must be related to royalty.” Empty flattery, strike two. Even if Viktor were current crown prince, he wouldn’t see that as anything he earned on his own merit. He had once

written in one of his letters to her that he would rather be earnestly complimented for digging a good ditch than for his bloodline, which he had nothing to do with.

“Maybe, maybe not. Records do not go back that far. And I fail to see how it would benefit me if I were or why I should be proud of it,” Viktor said blandly. She gets any closer, she’ll have to crawl off her chair and sit on his lap, Hermione thought, raising her cider glass to her lips to hide her displeasure.

“Personally, I find it fascinating she did not bother to fix herself up so much for the reception like the other girls. I wish I could be brave enough to go out without fixing my hair or makeup to perfection,” Katrina purred, angling for some praise for her perfect outfit and expertly fixed face. Strike three, she thought, insulting his chosen date.

Viktor stiffened in his seat, suddenly wide eyed, his brows arched in surprise, “Why? Is the real you so hideous as all that?” he asked, absolutely serious, all innocence and no hint of guile. He reminded Hermione of Petyr earlier.

As Katrina sputtered, Hermione had to blot some of the cider she had nearly spewed across the table from her lips and cover her laughter with a polite cough. “Would you like to step out and get some air? It is getting very hot in here,” Viktor asked Hermione as she finished wiping her mouth with her napkin. He had made it fairly clear that the “you” in his sentence included no one at the table but Hermione.

“Yes, there is a lot of hot air building up in this tent. I wouldn’t mind going outside,” she said as she took Viktor’s proffered left hand.

“I have to be talking to a friend of Father’s anyway, like I promised,” Alexei grinned. “I will be seeing you at Durmstrang at the beginning of the year, at least. We will have plenty of time to talk then. Uninterrupted,” he slid his eyes over toward Katrina, smirking, amusement plain in his face.

“Katrina, you simply must bring your pretty self with me to meet Father’s friend. He has just gotten back from Abu Dhabi, he has a son about to start Durmstrang, and I promised Father I would answer some questions about the school. Then I will probably be going. Goodbye, Viktor,” Alexei said warmly, as they shook hands and parted. It seemed even Alexei wasn’t too fond of his date this evening. And his date was becoming less and less enamored of Viktor as he continued to combat her charms. Katrina muttered under her breath as they turned and walked toward the tent flap, away from Katrina and Alexei.

“What did she say?” Hermione asked, once they stepped outside and put a few feet between them and the tent. She noticed that there was quite elaborate landscaping around the tent, huge bushes and hedges, flowers

growing wild on them, honeysuckle, she thought from the scent.

“Oh, she called me a very rude name in Russian. I cannot imagine what would possess her to do such a thing. It is not very becoming,” Viktor enunciated carefully, then chuckled under his breath.

“You sure she wasn’t talking about me?” Hermione asked.

“No. It was definitely a very male thing to be called, though I will not repeat it in present company,” he said as he laughed harder.

“You’re getting good at that,” Hermione said as she laughed with him.

“Which? Running girls off in a huff or pronouncing things properly?”

“Both, actually.”

“I haff been lazy with my mouth until now. I never had a reason to vont to be very good at English. There vere... were only journalists to talk to in English before. Not being so good at it was a good way to get them to leave me alone. Let the coach talk for me. I was always good at running individual girls off in a huff. It is the packs that are hard to get rid of. Just like volves...wolves,” he corrected himself carefully.

“Nonsense. I couldn’t get Russian or Bulgarian down as well as you have English down in that short a while. You do quite well, considering English is a terrible language to learn. I don’t think you’re lazy about anything you set your mind to, Viktor.”

He stood quiet for a moment beside her, his profile backlit by the moonlight. She scanned her eyes over the shadow of his distinctive features. “Did you really mean what you said, about the ball? Or was that just something you said to get up Katrina’s nose?” Hermione asked after studying him.

“Oh. I meant it. That was not the way I planned to ask you. If you would like to come. The three of you. I am sure I could arrange it. The ball is always on a Saturday, so you would not haff to miss classes. Portkey in close to the grounds, portkey back, it would be quite easy to arrange. Durmstrang has some nice guest rooms,” he replied, weighing the words gingerly in his mouth, continuing to look across the pitch toward the team bleachers.

“I can’t speak for Harry and Ron, but I would love to come.” He turned toward her and stepped close, as he had when they danced. He gathered up her hands in his, gently cupping them and running his thumbs over the backs of her hands, holding them near his chest. She could see his face more clearly now, as he caught more of the light filtered through the tent sides and that from



the lanterns stationed at intervals around the tent. He studied her intently with his dark eyes, then leaned down slightly, toward her upturned face. She panicked, oh, oh, oh, he's going to kiss me and I have no idea what to do or whether to close my eyes or how to react or even what the protocol is, and where do the noses go and what do I do, what do I do, what do I do?

"May I?" he asked quietly. She willed herself to nod, to move, to do anything affirmative. She supposed she must have finally nodded, because he moved in slightly closer. He was a bare inch from her when he suddenly jerked back up as though he had been burned. She was confused. What could she have done already to make that look of absolute rage pass over his face, when he hadn't even touched her?

"Come out! I know you're in there, and if you do not come out this instant, so help me, I will hex every one of those bushes on fire and burn you out!" he growled, drawing his wand from his pocket.

There was a loud rustle in the bush a few feet from them, and a figure crawled out from between the vines. Hermione recognized her when she stood up and brushed herself off. "Rita Skeeter!" Hermione gasped.

"Now, now, young lovers, don't pay me any mind...." Viktor closed the gap between them in two long, brisk strides, Hermione had to lift her skirt and sprint to keep at his side. He was actually baring his teeth, more menacing than he had been even in the game with Wales.

The lower his voice dropped, the more force there seemed to be behind it, the more anger, and it dropped by the syllable. "You...get...out....now...or you will be lucky if I just let Vulchanov and Volkov make good on their offer earlier! After last year you are lucky I did not hunt you down in the first place and take you apart with my bare hands! I should haff, all that rubbish you printed!"

"Now, Viktor, darling, you're a public figure and the public has a right to know who you're..." He interrupted her defense by getting, if possible, even closer, towering over her. His knuckles were completely white, he was gripping his wand so tightly.

"You haff no right to intrude on my life! No one has any right to know anything I do not want to tell them! You haff a choice. Leave now, say nothing, print nothing, or Hermione and I will turn you in for being unregistered. If I feel generous. If I do not feel generous, I will make you spit up slugs for the next week, set your hair on fire, let my teammates at you near the equipment rack, and complain so loudly to the international commission and your publisher that you will not be able to set foot or beetle veng near an event of any kind in the wizard world for the rest of your life, and still turn you in! For a start before I hire the lawyer! Right now I am not feeling generous!"

“Lister, sugar, you can’t do half what you just said, you two are still students...” she began confidently studying her long, manicured nails.

“You forget something. I am of age. I have been eighteen for nearly a year. I am not at school. Tonight I am not an enrolled student anywere. I can use my wand here. Any place. And right now I would take great joy in doing any vone of those things to you. Would probably make me more popular. Fame cuts both vays, you mudslingers forget. Vont to grab the blade and find out?” He poked the end of his wand at her face.

“Okay, okay. So I’ll go. And I won’t print that you very nearly kissed Miss Granger there or asked her to a ball at Durmstrang. You don’t seem to be in the mood for an interview tonight.”

Viktor literally snarled at her, but his voice was better modulated. “If your publisher ever vonts to have me speak to any of his reporters, he had better not send you within six miles of anything I am involved in. Just to make sure... *Obliviate!* No interviews tonight. Haff a nice evening, Miss Skeeter, do not let the door hit you on your way out.”

Rita got a pleasant, slightly blank look on her face, thanked Viktor, and walked toward the stadium exit. “Think she’ll stick to it?” Hermione asked as soon as she shut the door.

“She vill haff to. She vill not remember it, even you being here. Or her being here. I made sure of it. As far as she knows in the morning, she took a nap and overslept, never making it here,” Viktor replied, slipping his wand back into his pocket.

“Being with a wizard allowed to do off campus magic has its advantages. What I don’t understand is, how did you know she was there?”

Viktor started, then blinked at her a couple of times. “I ... don’t know. I just... knew. I guess I felt like we were being watched, maybe I heard something in the bushes. Rita Skeeter being what she is, I just figured it was her. I cannot believe she had the gall to do that after you found her out. After you wrote me about her. Dimitrov warned me...earlier...” he trailed off.

“No matter,” she said, laying a hand on his arm. “Let’s walk a little. I think we both need to clear our heads and work off some steam. I think my face is on fire.”

They joined hands and strolled briskly up the pitch, toward the far end, in silence. They stood in the moonlight under the goal, near the sand pit, each just basking in the other’s company for several minutes. Far behind, people began to

stream out of the tent, gathering in little clumps and looking at the sky. Figures were also dragging large tubular objects on carts around the tent. "What's going on?" Hermione asked, tapping Viktor and pointing back down the pitch.

"Oh, the best part of the evening. They always do fireworks to music, a big finale for the evening. I cheated. I asked the conductor earlier what they would be doing. Tchaikovsky. 1812 Overture. Oddly appropriate, as it involves the French. And it explains the cannons," he smiled and dropped his head.

The first thin, silvery fireworks began to explode over the tent as the overture struck up in earnest, building to a crescendo that would soon bring in the cannons. "Beautiful," Hermione breathed. Beside her Viktor's profile tilted up at the stars, the fireworks. "My permission still stands, you know, and unless someone is buried in that sand pit breathing through a straw, we're alone," she ventured hopefully. He turned to her again, leaning in cautiously, even more hesitantly than before.

An inch from her face, he slowly tilted his face to his right, then gently pressed his warm, dry lips softly against hers. All she could feel for that moment was his lips on hers. His eyes closed, dark lashes fanning out over his tanned skin, and she watched through half closed lids as he pulled back a bit, parting their mouths, but still so close she could feel the warmth radiating from his skin. She couldn't believe how soft his mouth was, how pliable his lips were when just a few minutes ago he had seemed so hard, solid, immovable. He neared again, kissing her once more, soft and slow, deeper, but still a model of decorum. This time she closed her eyes and noticed the odd, new, but not unpleasant sensation of his nose brushing against the side of hers lightly, the tip pressing warm against her cheek.

There was the slight tickle of the tip of his nose as he shifted his mouth over to the corner of her own, trailing over her face, planting a kiss there, off center. She heard the sharp, deep inhale of his breath through his nose, as though he were preparing to dive underwater for a long time, was dimly aware of bright red and blue fireworks were exploding over them, the cannons firing, trumpets blaring, kettle drums pounding. He pulled back and straightened a little, cupping her face lightly in his hands. He dropped a chaste kiss onto her forehead, among the escaping tendrils of hair. He trailed the fingers of his right hand back, combing them into her ponytail.

His eyes nearly closed, lips parted slightly, fingertips still entwined in her hair, he sighed and breathed a single word in an awed tone under his breath, so softly she was almost convinced she had imagined it at first. "Sokrovishte."

Her heart squeezed in her chest when she realized what he had said. Sokrovishte. Treasure. She searched his face for a second, then found herself answering without really willing it, in like manner, "I love you too, Viktor." And it

felt perfectly right in her mouth.

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## CHAPTER 15

“Errrm, Harry, if that isn’t them, I’m badly fooled. And unless we want Hermione to never speak to us again, I suggest we turn around and hotfoot it back toward the tent,” Ron whispered.

“Why? Where?” Harry asked, squinting off into the dark three quarters of the way up the pitch, but still trying to catch the fireworks overhead.

“There, under the goal. He’s kissing her, you great git, and I don’t hear her screaming bloody murder or telling him off or explaining the entire history of kissing to him, so I suspect she might want to be alone with him. Let’s go Harry,” Ron grabbed Harry’s elbow and tugged.

“I guess they’ll come get us when they’re ready to go,” Harry said lamely.

“Yes, I suppose they will, once they stop mooning over one another and snogging. Poor things had to go stand in the sand pit to get a moment’s peace, so I guess they deserve it. Come on,” Ron said.

“Ron? I thought, well, last year, I thought maybe you... liked Hermione. The same way Viktor does,” Harry whispered.

“Maybe I did. A little. Or maybe I was just jealous that she found someone else famous to be with. Harry, you get a lot of attention. It’s hard to compete with The Boy Who Lived. Hermione, though, she always treated us pretty much the same once she got to know us. When she showed up on Viktor’s arm at the Yule Ball, all I could think was, ‘Great. Now she’s off with an international Quidditch star who probably makes more money in a month than my entire family does in a year. She’ll never pay any attention to me again. She’ll forget I exist, and Harry will probably move on to bigger and better any day now.’ and things like that. She was as ordinary as I was, even if she was smart, but once you have her assuming the title of Viktor Krum’s Girlfriend, she became a local celebrity. And you were busy with the tournament. I was lonely. And jealous.”

Ron paused, several feet from the tent and the crowds milling about. “I suppose I’ve always take Hermione for granted. She was always the mousy brown thing with big teeth who was a little too bossy, slept in the girl’s dorm, and knew all the things you find in books that came in handy in a pinch but are really annoying the rest of the time when someone’s spouting them at you. Then Viktor comes in from Durmstrang with his packs of girls already mooning over him and his dodgy English, and he goes and figures out she’s an interesting human being and not a bad looking one at that, before either of us really work it

out. I guess I wanted Viktor to be a big jerk so I could hate him for something instead of admiring him for giving Hermione her due before we did, but it turns out he's decent. More than decent. If you had asked me last year, I would have told you there wasn't a man alive who really deserved Hermione Granger, any more than there's a woman alive who deserves Harry Potter, because you're my friends and nothing is good enough for you. Maybe there still isn't a man alive that really deserves her, but Viktor Krum has to come the closest. And if you can't tell she's falling completely in love with him on this trip, you're blinder than I am. You think she would let anyone else kiss her? Like that? Let anyone else teach her to waltz? Let anyone else wrestle her hogtied onto a broom? She won't even ride with you, Harry. Viktor actually got her to steer!"

Ron leaned in closer. "Harry, I used to think I had lots to be jealous of, between you and Viktor. You know though, Viktor's right, what he said the other day. I shouldn't envy you. Viktor's had it harder than I have, even without the packs of overachieving older brothers. It's all been on just him. I can't imagine handing over your paycheck at age twelve for fear your parents are going to get tossed out of their home. We were always poor Harry, but we managed not to worry about eviction. Fred and George exploding the house, maybe, but not eviction. Months of your mother in the hospital. Knowing there should be someone else in your family who isn't there anymore, and not talking about it with anyone. You know what that's like, Harry. Reporters like Rita Skeeter always in your hair. Always being the oddball somehow in every group. People hating you, blaming you, just because of where you go to school. That's no more fair than when they blamed you just because you're a parselmouth."

"You know, Hermione pointed out something in one of her letters during the summer. It should have made me ashamed then, but I don't think it did until after Viktor told us all that about his sister and his mother in the barn. At the tournament, you got to rescue me, someone you had known for years. You always said I was your first real friend, we live in the same dorm, beds next to each other, classes together. Fleur was supposed to rescue her sister, and that seems to be the only person she cares about, aside from Fleur. Cedric got to rescue Cho, and grant you, they had only been dating a short while, but they had known each other the entire time they went to Hogwarts. They lived close and had a lot of the same classes and were friendly long before that, according to most of the people in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Some of the people in those towers claim Cedric always liked Cho. Viktor got Hermione."

"So? I don't see how that's different from Cedric and Cho..." Harry began, but Ron interrupted him.

"Yes you do, Harry. He had only just met her. He was only with her in dribs and drabs when they were alone in the library, and that couldn't have been often, all those girls giggling after him all the time. Nobody from Hogwarts ever saw them together enough to make them suspicious, or it would have been all

over school, now wouldn't it? The person who allows he knew him best from Durmstrang, Poliakoff, he was there already. His parents could have been brought to Hogwarts just as easily as Gabrielle was brought. One of his teammates, even. But Hermione is the one they picked for Viktor. You think they just drew lots? Happened to pick us? Merlin's beard, Harry, he was in love with her even then, or he wouldn't have missed her that much. And I should have figured that out from the second task, that he wasn't just after her to find out about you, when he was so concerned about her afterwards. When he offered to let her come visit. Do you think Viktor's so much as bothered to say 'boo' to another girl?"

Ron looked back at the goal, where two figures were starting to move back down the pitch. "Do you think he trusted anyone at Durmstrang with what happened to his sister? Poliakoff thought not. He didn't seem to know Viktor had ever had a sister. He shared it with us, Harry. He was not only willing to let Hermione see him in his natural habitat, he was willing for us to come too. He never would have done that if he had been trying to take advantage of her. He's been nothing but patient with all of us. Even me, when I was the jerk. Who knew he even had a sense of humor? Hermione, I guess, because she actually gave him a chance to prove who he was, all those letters and those two visits. You even gave him a chance before I did, and for all you knew, he was trying to kill you."

"And Viktor's been chipping away at that smart, capable, sensible girl facade of Hermione's so well because he recognizes it. It's the same thing he did by being 'moody Slavic boy' to keep everyone that wasn't willing to take him the way he was at bay. It's what he did to fend Karkaroff, reporters, and those girls off. You notice he didn't treat fans who just wanted his autograph the same way he did those girls who mooned over him? He actually looked decently pleased when I asked. I've figured that out, Harry. He doesn't mind that, because that's admiration of his skill, something he's earned. Fair enough, everyone knows he's good. He doesn't eat it up, but he doesn't shrink into his robes when it happens, either."

"But when a girl starts liking you before she's even met you just because your face is on the cover of a Quidditch magazine, does she really like you, or just what she thinks is you? Karkaroff could care less what other skills or interests Viktor had. Same with reporters. He wasn't a person or a player, he was THE YOUNGEST SEEKER EVER, a headline, Harry. Color for a story. That's why Rita Skeeter was so eager to use him as a counterpoint to you Harry. See, everyone else thinks they're a one-note song. Viktor's just a great seeker, Hermione's a bookworm, nothing else. We even fell into that trap, Harry. Viktor bothered to see if there was anything else to her. Hermione returned the favor. That's what he really wanted. He accepted the package deal, you and me for a chance to get to know Hermione better. You telling me a guy who is that ... great... at eighteen, nineteen, doesn't deserve her?"

Ron talked faster as the gap narrowed, “He hasn’t made one shifty move. In one way, I still wish he had. Then we could go on being our comfortable little threesome and not have to worry about letting anyone else in, anything changing. You and I could roam around, and always be assured Hermione was back there in the corner by herself, waiting for us to come back, if she wasn’t in the thick of it with us. She would always be there for me when you’re off saving the world or getting the snitch or being made over. But he’s not like that. I wouldn’t be surprised if he asked permission to kiss her. In fact, I would be shocked if he didn’t. It’s like he crawled out of a royal court from four hundred years ago. He’s been protective of us all. You know Volkov and Vulchanov didn’t run Rita Skeeter away just for our benefit on their own, they did it because he asked them ahead of time. I heard them say Viktor asked them to if she showed up and started trying to get near us.”

“He’s freaking Prince Charming. Captain Nice. Lord Manners. At this point, I would damn near date him. Have mercy, Harry, he deserves Hermione. Mum was having kittens over Hermione visiting a boy a little more than three years older, until she found out we would both be going with her. I still don’t think she’s too wild about it. Keeps owling me to find out if he’s trying to sneak off with Hermione, asking if he’s behaving himself like a gentleman. I don’t believe she quite believed me when I said he put Hermione’s room as far away from his room as possible, with us between. She thinks he’s some rich international playboy living in a mansion with a harem and on the make or something. But if Mum knew the half of this, she would be ready to perform the wedding ceremony tomorrow.”

As the couple reentered the pool of light from the tent, Harry saw that it was definitely Viktor and Hermione, fingers twined together as they walked. They were both wearing nearly identical soft smiles, and neither one of them spoke for some time as they stood before Harry and Ron. “Ready to portkey back, then?” Harry finally ventured.

“Oh, we are not portkeying tonight. Carriage. Rather like Beauxbatons carriages,” Viktor said.

“Carriages? You mean with the flying horses?” Ron asked.

“I did not know when the reception would finish. Hard to arrange for a portkey. And we can sleep in the carriage...” Viktor stifled a yawn politely with the back of his hand.

“Viktor, um, your accent seems to be cutting in and out...” Harry began.

“I am working on it. I figure I have three people worth talking to in English now, I should bother to pronounce things properly... easier for me to work on that

than for you to learn Russian or Bulgarian. It is hard to remember, though,” Viktor replied. They gathered their things from Viktor’s locker and walked out of the stadium.

There, a short wizard in semi-formal robes met them, holding a carriage door open. “Mr. Krum,” he greeted, then began to speak in Bulgarian as the three climbed in and arranged themselves inside. Viktor replied, answering with short phrases.

“What was that all about?” Hermione asked once he settled in beside her, eyelids already drooping.

“Where to go, how fast, did we want to see something in particular... I told him home, I do not care, beds at home, and wake us up when he gets there, not before, unless the carriage is on fire. I think I could sleep for a week suddenly,” Viktor tilted his head back against the seat as he spoke, his sharp chin pointing at the ceiling.

The other three dropped off shortly after they left the ground, but Harry remained wide awake, looking out at the moonlit mountains, the crisp stars in the sky, the wisps of cloud. He snuck a few sidelong glances at Viktor and Hermione, just to make sure they were asleep, then studied them frankly. Ron was right, he supposed. Looking at the two of them now, Hermione’s bushy head tucked against Viktor’s shoulder, his arm around her shoulders and his dark head resting against hers, his cheek next to the crown of her head, there never seemed a more natural couple.

Our trio’s become an occasional quartet, he thought to himself. And he found it wasn’t an entirely unpleasant thought. He liked Viktor, after all. And life would be a lot more pleasant now that Ron had decided he liked Viktor too. And the thought of Viktor and Hermione. Hermione seemed to be the last one to admit to the other members of the trio just how much she liked Viktor, Harry smiled to himself. If you didn’t count private kissing that we stumbled on. Like Hermione, he marveled at how much younger Viktor looked when he was asleep. It was the first time Harry had seen his face completely relaxed and unguarded. The thought was interrupted by a soft bump as they sat down.

Viktor barely managed to stay awake long enough to tip and thank the driver, gather his bag and drag into the house. He even speculated on sleeping in the orchard rather than negotiating the stairs. “You can’t. Ivan and Natasha aren’t available as pillows. They’re with the sheep,” Hermione teased.

“I think I could use a tree root,” Viktor replied. They would all sleep late in the morning, they allowed. The clock was on Much Too Late To Be Up, and it had been for hours. It was nearly on A Bit Too Early To Rise.

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## CHAPTER 16

The three of them came out late in the morning, nearly noon, really, standing with bleary eyes and messy hair and dressing gowns in the hall. Viktor's door was still firmly closed. "Wouldn't be surprised if he locked the door and put a trunk in front of it," Ron observed.

"Well, he did do everything we did yesterday, plus play in a match. No wonder he was tired last night. Wish I could have stayed awake for the carriage, but all that dancing wore me out," Hermione said, stretching.

"That was nice," Harry pointed out, "I was the only one who managed to stay awake all the way home."

"So," Hermione said casually, "would you two like to go to the opening ball at Durmstrang? Viktor said the invitation stands, and he could arrange it if we want to go."

"Durmstrang? I don't know, Mum would probably have a fit, but maybe if Viktor were to ask her, or better yet, ask Dad first, he would probably let me go," Ron speculated.

"I'm sure I could go," Harry said. "Are you sure you would want us to?" he asked.

"Sure. I'll be nearly sixteen, but I still bet Mum and Dad would be a lot more likely to say yes if you two go along. Besides, you two have to dance with the lovely Katrina! And the more the merrier I always..." Hermione replied, but was interrupted by the rattling of a doorknob.

Viktor's door swung open and he stood there, in long shorts and bare feet, hair a bit wild, eyes half open, light black circles under his eyes. He sighed, rubbed a hand down his face, then muttered, "Votever you decide, I would be glad to talk to whomever you vont me to, in votever order, but quit haffing a conference outside my door." He ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair, smoothing it slightly. "Confer at breakfast. Or lunch, or votever meal ve manage to stumble downstairs for. I am going to go get dressed, then dunk my head in the sink and hope I do not drown..." he finished thickly, pushing the door together quietly.

Hermione laughed and put a hand over her mouth, "I forgot. He told me he sleeps lightly. The other day I woke him up just by walking across the grass when he was asleep in the orchard, and I thought I was being quiet. I'm used to you two sleeping like the dead. We must have sounded like a bunch of hens to him."

They all broke up when a muffled but still forceful and somewhat indignant “Yes!” came through Viktor’s door.

Shortly afterwards they managed to dress and struggle downstairs for a meal. “You’re going to pass out in your plate, Viktor, sorry we woke you,” Hermione jostled his elbow, which was resting on the table.

He removed his curled fingers from over his mouth, continuing to prop his chin. “It is okay. If you had not, I would be slouching around much too late tonight, grumpy as ever. Besides, I vos haffing a very nice dream, and maybe I would not remember it at all if you had not been talking so loud.”

He gave a wan smile in the direction of his plate, repositioned his hand under his chin, and poked a bite of pancake. Hermione thought he looked too pale and haggard to be up, but he had protested that he shouldn’t sleep any later when she asked if he wanted to go back to bed before they came downstairs. This despite the fact that he had initially answered her query in Bulgarian, without noticing. “Okay, so, you told me ‘ne’ means ‘no’, but you’ll have to work out the rest of your answer for me in a language I actually understand,” she had said. They all opted for breakfast fare when Nikolas had petitioned Anya and Anya had given them the choice. Viktor was so exhausted, he was even chewing with his chin propped.

“I can see why your dad voted with us on the second breakfast, Viktor. These pancakes are incredible,” Ron said.

“What were you dreaming?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, nothing much. Some remembered bits and pieces from last night, I guess. Music, dancing, fireworks. The mountains. I remember seeing some of the buildings in Sofia. Some of the mountains around Durmstrang. And a meadow, a lake, some flowers. Nothing fancy, not much vent on. Just... images, mostly, places I haff been.”

Harry laughed and said, “Doesn’t sound too exciting to me, Viktor. Not after the last few days you’ve had.” Viktor finally took his chin off the heel of his hand and took a drink of milk before answering.

“I did not say it vos exciting. Nor particularly nice. But it is the first real dream I remember haffing in years that vos not a nightmare,” Viktor blurted out, swallowing hard and examining his plate, looking as though he wished he could have those last words back. They all got the feeling he would never have said it if he hadn’t been tired, so they didn’t push further. They all knew by now Viktor couldn’t be pressed. Viktor did things on his own timetable. They learned that faster than Karkaroff.

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## CHAPTER 17

They spent a fairly lazy afternoon, finally managing to go swimming in the lake for a couple of hours. Floating really, as none of them had much energy. Tomorrow was their last full day here at Pavlova. Viktor had agreed to escort them all on the morning after that to the Burrow for their usual stay with the Weasleys once their visit to Bulgaria had ended. This year it had grown from the usual week to ten days. Now that he had gotten awake, Viktor found he didn't want to go to sleep, despite the lateness of the hour and everyone else being in bed, so he reclined here in the dark den on the sofa, tucked in and propping his chin on the back, in front of the large window, looking at the moonlight spilling over everything outside.

He didn't hear his father walk in. His father's voice always had a theatrical, booming quality, even when he spoke softly. It commanded attention without having to demand it. "Viktor," came the deep, gravelly whispered Bulgarian behind him, "scoot over. Let your old papa sit on the sofa with you for a minute." The request reminded him of the nights when his papa had come in to his bedroom at a similar hour, only to find him sitting up in bed silently, his eyes just as wide open as they were now. Mostly when his mama had been gone and he couldn't sleep.

Those nights Nikolas had perched on the edge of his bed and cradled him and reeled off as many Russian songs and poems and fairy tales as he could muster until Viktor had been so worn out he couldn't possibly stay awake, no matter how desperately he had tried. They each didn't look into the other's eyes. He had read somewhere that eyes were the windows to the soul. That must explain it. Some windows open on places you don't want to revisit. Sometimes he could still hear Papa's voice telling the Russian version of Cinderella in which she wore the more plausible fur slippers to the ball when he was halfway between waking and sleep. In his memory, it always layered over the beating of his papa's heart, throbbing in his chest beneath Viktor's ear.

In those first few weeks, he had stayed awake mostly because he was afraid that come morning, his father would have to tell him he didn't have a mama anymore either. If he didn't sleep, maybe he wouldn't dream about Papa saying Violeta was gone again. He wouldn't keep picturing that single image he had burned into his mind of piles of rubble and the people lying there, dirty and bloody with blank, staring eyes, like rag dolls and bits of rubbish, stray limbs poking out here and there at odd and unnatural angles, before Papa had picked him up and buried his face into his hard shoulder, the weightless sensation of being carried back across the street toward the cafe where they had been waiting, Papa's big hand on his head, smoothing his hair over and over. It was there every time he closed his eyes and let his guard down. It crept in while he

slept and couldn't defend himself.

He wouldn't hear the yelling and the running and the wailing of the sirens blending in with the wailing of the people who were still standing and weren't stunned into an eerie silence. He wouldn't wake up in the halls of the hospital, with those sterile white lights hurting his eyes, to his father's crying both from the grief and the relief. From finally finding Violeta's name and Mama's name on different lists. He grew to hate sleeping and waking up equally, for a while.

It became a habit, fighting sleep, because you couldn't defend yourself when asleep. Then Mama came home and he had tried to stay awake in case she needed anything, in case she screamed and cried when the same image came for her and she had to touch the both of them to convince herself that they weren't gone too. She hadn't been able to make it up the stairs yet, so he would have to go to her. He couldn't bear to think of her enduring it one more second than was necessary, so he listened. He was ready.

On the nights it was quiet he sometimes stayed awake just for the comfort of hearing two voices downstairs late at night, arguing over which Tchaikovsky album to listen to, whether to play Beethoven or Handel, when he crept out onto the landing and strained to hear with his feet splayed on the top step where they couldn't be seen from the den, bony and usually scabbed knees together, running his fingers over the thick calluses already worn into his hands from the handle of his broom. They sat above the soft palm of his hand, nestled into the area beneath the base of his fingers, at odds with the surrounding skin. He worked at making other parts of himself just as hard, as numb, as unfeeling. The scabs always changed, different trunks he climbed, different branches he clipped when he was going too fast on his broom, intent on the practice snitch he had insisted on buying with his birthday money. But those same calluses had been part of him almost as long as he could remember. They never changed.

In some ways it had been a relief to go to Durmstrang. No one there knew or cared how many nights he sat up in bed, reading by the light of his wand behind the thick drapes rather than let himself drop off. How many nights he woke up in a cold sweat and a tangle of bedclothes, noiseless except for his heart pounding in his ears and quickened breathing. No one came and checked, anymore, not even Poliakoff, who had always slept like the dead, the sleep of someone with a clear conscience and no troubles. So he didn't worry anyone.

He had happened to draw the bed next to Alexei, when he still slept in the communal dorm. Alexei often slept in the bed next to him with his drapes open, charmingly unashamed of his unkempt little burrow in the blankets, the crumbs he got in his sheets when he snuck food from the kitchen into his room, his wildly mussed hair, his slack mouth, the ridiculously thick flannel pyjamas he wore in the cold, even his occasional snoring. Alexei obviously enjoyed sleeping. Dreaming.

Viktor sometimes hunched in bed, sitting, knees bent, slender arms wrapped around his shins, brooding and angular like a hawk on a wire, a hawk on the hunt. Instead of sleeping himself, he watched Alexei at it, his face unlined and untroubled in sleep, and he envied him. It made him hungry for that kind of peace. He was starved for it. It might have been what made him tolerate Alexei's full attention later. He had hoped some of it would rub off on him by accident. How could anyone so noisy and raucous during the day be so still and languid by night?

And then the referral by Karkaroff to Vratsa's scouts had meant he could help at home, rather than just being a burden, another expense they could ill afford. They could afford to let the boarders go and not replace them as long as he sent the money home. Papa and Mama would never entertained the thought of it if they had any other way. There hadn't been one. By this time, they had no savings left, only debts. Boarders were hard to come by these days. Papa refused to take up his old job, he couldn't leave her, the inn, even if it did mean bankruptcy. Losing it. He would stay while he could. When Viktor worked, Papa and Mama didn't have to feel compelled to drag themselves upstairs in the middle of the night and the wee hours of the morning to see if he was still up. They could concentrate on just putting themselves back together for a change. Only the two of them at ease with one another, like it was when they were in the den and thought he was sleeping.

But it had meant making sure no one found out, too. Even then, the reporters had been hungry for a story, and they smelled one on him. He wanted to make sure his parents didn't become that story, that the most they would get out of him was his youth and his skill, a few records broken, otherwise a mystery. That Violeta didn't become that story. They had all buried her too deep to have her ripped up by quills and paraded under their noses again. Even Alexei had only gotten a tiny inkling of what had happened to them. Foolish weakness to have told him that much, but what else could he do? At least he couldn't be tempted to talk too much and let the whole story slip. Nor would Alexei.

His competitors, older and younger, had been hungry for a weakness they could exploit, and that would have been it. So he buried it and tamped it down with his foot, and didn't dare blink when challenged even when it meant broken broomsticks and arms and noses and bruises and his own blood everywhere. He soon learned to admire brooms as tools, not the pseudo pets some of the other players seemed to regard their brooms. He broke too many to become fond of them. Brooms could be replaced and body parts healed. Even hearts, when you quit picking at the wounds. And he tried not to get close enough to anyone that he was tempted to talk too much. To let it slip. To give anyone the ammunition that might catch Papa and Mama in the crossfire.

Problem was Alexei didn't take the hint, he wasn't offended easily, nor

was he fended off easily once Viktor had stepped between him and Karkaroff that first time in class. Alexei latched on and would not be shaken off. So Viktor had accepted him as the closest thing to a friend he had. He had little more than tolerated him at first, but apparently he hadn't been too bad at it. Alexei was still there. At least Alexei didn't pry when he sensed Viktor wanted to stop talking, he just did the talking instead.

Alexei did respect boundaries, and Viktor had so many then. An amusing companion at least. A very odd couple indeed, to everyone else, dark and silent Viktor with his spiky exterior and inscrutable expression, bubbling Alexei with his never still mouth, his pranks, his assault on life to suck it completely dry. Everyone half expected Viktor to murder Alexei over breakfast for talking too much one morning, but instead, the chatter was soothing. It kept him from having to think too much. All the others got the full brunt of his glaring, because they were only interested in bloodlines or money, or jealous of Viktor's having made primary seeker on the house team in his first year.

Or worse, interested because they had already gotten wind of those reporters and Karkaroff saying Viktor Krum was going to be a name better remembered than Josef Wronski in a few years. Interested because they thought he would be famous. Then later, interested because he was already famous. Coaches chose him because he would break all the records, because he was skilled, because he was young, pliable, but stubborn enough to coach himself when they couldn't.

He would nearly kill himself trying to master the Wronski Feint, get it an inch lower, a second faster, then get back up and try it again when others would refuse. He was willing to lift weights that made even the first team beaters cringe. Anything for an advantage. All the small advantages added up. No weakness left to exploit. No chance for an opponent to get an advantage. Stubbornness and fierceness and a touch of desperation made him a great player. His youth made him a little more marketable. Vratsa was always willing to give a new player a chance. It all added up.

A few months into the first year, Karkaroff had begun to set him apart, favor him, setting him at odds with the other students though he held Karkaroff at arm's length even more furiously than he had everyone else. It had been a feeling, and not a good one, either, that made him do it. Karkaroff had no idea of the situation at home. Or what had caused it. Or why most of Viktor's answers consisted solely of silent glares or grunts or snorts, or at best, single words, short phrases. He didn't intend to let Karkaroff know any more than what was necessary. It made him cringe to think of that man really knowing anything about him. About Mama and Papa. About Violeta.

It had been a relief, in some ways, not having to talk with anyone. Letting Alexei do all the social interaction, letting Alexei build a fortress of sound around

him and make him forget himself and laugh when Alexei did things that seemed completely mad, like loading a teacher's desk with hundreds of stunned frogs that got pretty lively just in time for the lecture and the professor's customary retrieval of his reading glasses from the drawer. They had found frogs in their beds even weeks later. And Alexei actually seemed to like him regardless of how much he growled or complained or scowled or brooded. Alexei didn't know what was good for him, sometimes. The way he always ran after all the wrong girls among those who followed Viktor around proved that.

He had even begun sleeping eventually, worn out from Vratsa practices, the games with real professionals, the never ending interviews and English lessons and tutoring on the road and house games and hiding behind books in the library at midnight and Karkaroff's regime demanding you be up at dawn or even before when he was at school. He pushed himself until he couldn't go anymore and then he was insulated from the rest of the student body in his private quarters. Professional games and practices had meant arriving back at odd hours, so it was supposedly in deference to the other students, rather than to Viktor. Stubborn work ethic, Alexei had called it. In truth, he was just afraid to lose the chance to help keep Pavlova. Afraid to stop doing the one thing that he truly enjoyed and completely controlled lest he curl up and die from lack of freedom. Lack of joy. Books were wonderful, but they were still on the librarian's schedule, at her whim. The schedule of the professors. Quidditch was on his schedule. The schedule meant he didn't get home often, but at least it meant he still had a home to go to. It meant they didn't lose the one place that still held her memory so perfectly. He slept so heavily for a while from the absolute exhaustion he didn't remember dreams, good or bad. Exhaustion was good, he pursued it. It gave him the closest thing he could find to Alexei's peaceful sleep.

It wasn't a totally joyous existence, but it was much better than bearable even at its worst, those years. For some stretches he was even something approaching happy. Then that awful nagging feeling at the back of his mind began two years ago. After Karkaroff became headmaster. The rumors about the mark on his arm. The words "Death Eater" whispered in the halls and dorms, then finally spoken aloud. The talk about Lord Voldemort gaining power, his return, his continuing pursuit of The Boy Who Lived. The polarization of the faculty. The students. Factions forming, the distrust forming like mist on the lake.

The voice when he least expected it. A whisper at first, like a gnat in his ear, faint but annoying. Bearable. He had suspected it was Karkaroff even then. He could hear the warning note in his simpering fawning over Viktor while he played the tyrant with everyone else. It made him shiver when the coldest drafts in the castle couldn't. The nightmares began anew, then they brought endless new variations, the only dreams he had. He returned to being a light sleeper. He woke at nothing, no matter how bone tired he was. He woke sometimes to the voice, real or imagined.

Louder and more insistent in the months leading up to the World Cup. Familiar, but not absolutely recognizable. He couldn't prove it was Karkaroff, even to himself. Combatable, though. Karkaroff had miscalculated just how stubborn Viktor's work ethic really was. Viktor and Alexei had decided to give themselves the Defense Against Dark Arts education that Karkaroff had neglected, poring over books in the library for things that interested them. Not only could he execute a competent Imperius, he could resist one too, thanks to his clandestine practice sessions with Alexei. Even one as persistent as his headmaster's.

It took nearly everything in him, to keep it at bay, pushed it into the same compartment he kept everything else trapped in, but it happened at the expense of his sleep and his appetite. He made excuses about stress and nerves and practice, and he watched himself get thinner and more sallow by the day, and he didn't much care anymore, as long as it didn't interfere with the one real joy he had left, being in a Quidditch game, pay or no pay. It was easier to block out when he was on his broom. He could have blocked out anything there.

Luckily everyone had put his even greater moodiness down to adolescence, fatigue, his sallow skin to the rigors they were all going through for the competition, the increasing thinness to his general lack of appetite and the growth spurt that added a couple of inches to his height. He had barely been able to force himself to swallow the birthday cake they had provided for his birthday the week before the final game. It had seemed sickly sweet and cloying. They had chalked that up to his getting overheated during the practice.

Lucky his parents had been ill and hadn't made the World Cup. Mama would have had a fit. Ordered him into bed. Papa would have asked him what was wrong. And he didn't have an answer. Wouldn't have made a difference if he could have fingered Karkaroff then. What would they do? Get him away from Karkaroff? Impossible. Wherever he went, the administration would have wanted to send him to the Triwizard Tournament. He was too big a trophy to keep locked up, especially after the Cup. To Hogwarts. And that meant Karkaroff would be there too, no matter which school delegation Viktor was part of.

He had gotten ill with the flu nearly as soon as it started to get cold in Durmstrang, late September. His defenses were stretched to the limit, and something snapped. He couldn't eat most meals for a week, and when he did it often came back up soon after. Even Alexei broke his usual rules, had dared to question him about it, pointing out that he knew Viktor was sick. There wasn't much Viktor could do, but try to fend off his concern, write it off as a virus, being overtired. Alexei wasn't fooled, but what could he do about it? He could hardly sit with Viktor like a child.



When Alexei had discovered him face down on the cold stone hall floor in the middle of the night, his forehead on fire with fever, covered in sweat yet shivering in the cold night air, bare except for the shorts he usually slept in, with no recollection of how he had gotten there, Alexei had been so alarmed that he had physically hauled him down the hall and the winding staircase to the infirmary and onto a cot. Next he had gone to rouse the school nurse by pounding on her door and shouting. That brought most of the professors running, and one of them had fetched Karkaroff.

His condition had scared them all so badly, they hadn't even bothered to ask Alexei why he was in the hall fully clothed and wearing his cloak in the middle of the night when he was most certainly not delirious. Challenged, Alexei might have protested that Elena had made him lightheaded enough on their moonlit walk around the grounds. Alexei's longwinded lecture had been the first comprehensible thing he heard in the infirmary. Everything else was roaring and static and distortion. He could barely make out Alexei's blurry form sitting on the cot next to his in the lamplight, but the voice grounded him. He wasn't floating away as badly with Alexei's voice to hold him there, Alexei's yelling. It made his teeth rattle, his ears throb, but he welcomed it.

"I had to hold you under the arms and drag you down the central staircase. You cursed and growled at me like a mad dog when I tried to get out my wand to get you downstairs. I probably scraped half the skin off your ankles and feet, and you fought me like a wounded bear most of the way down the steps. Viktor, damn it all, you are a lot bigger and stronger than I am, even if you are wasting away and won't admit it! You wiry little bas-..., you scared the hell out of me! You couldn't tell me who you were or who I was or where you were. I don't think you even realized you were out of bed, the way you answered me. If you can call mostly moaning and mumbling incoherently an answer."

He could tell Alexei was worried because he was now cursing loudly and indiscriminately in front of the professors, not censoring himself once he got wound up. He muttered a string of profanity that would have made a sailor blush before starting in again. "Here I am thinking you're near dead, and you still practically knock me down the stairs when you get it into your head you don't want to go to the infirmary. Anyone would think you had a bad experience with a mediwitch, the way you avoid them. I never should have mentioned the word 'infirmary' even if I thought you were unconscious."

Alexei's anger was sharp, sharp as his voice. Viktor welcomed it the way he would have welcomed his mother brushing his sodden hair off his forehead right then. He couldn't seem to raise his hand to do it himself just now. It was real concern, the way Alexei kept repeating his name, more real than the shadowy figures on the other side of the room. "I should have just yanked you down here before you knew what had happened. That's what I get for talking to you, Viktor. No one should ever argue with you, Viktor, even when you're at

death's door. They should simply bash you in the head with a whacking great mallet and slap you on a cart and hope they get you where they're going with you while they have the chance, before you wake up and dismantle them with your teeth. It's the only way to win an argument with Viktor Krum. I feel sorry for the professors who had your papa, if he really was anything like you, Viktor."

He had cursed at the adults so vehemently when they asked him to leave that they relented and let him stay there on the cot next to Viktor's. Normally, Karkaroff would have slapped Alexei for a start for daring to practice such language, then dragged him off to the dungeon for further punishment, but he had bigger things on his mind at the moment. The rest of the professors milling around seemed to be similarly worried over him. So worried that Alexei's mouth didn't raise much concern. Viktor had clung to Alexei's anger, it meant Alexei cared whether he lived or died. Good job, that, since Viktor didn't much care at the moment. Alexei didn't get angry at anything he didn't really care for. It was why Alexei didn't often get angry. Not much mattered to him enough to get angry over. And Viktor found he couldn't work up any anger of his own at the moment, and that had always been his one reliable emotion. Alexei's would have to do.

But Alexei didn't know that it hadn't been the bit about "Taking you to the infirmary" out of Alexei's intended soothing stream of patter when he had lifted him from the floor that had made him fight. It had been "Then I'll fetch the nurse and Karkaroff". Something about the name had made him panic, resort to fight or flight. It gave him the same feeling he got when the nurse had sponged him down with ice water to help bring his fever down. He could hear the blocks of ice thumping against the tub she carried, and idly wondered where the kettle drum could be. She told him when she roused him enough to give him a mouthful of ice chips that he had vomited blood earlier.

He didn't remember it, but he thought they were new sheets he was on. Wait, it was a different cot, a different piece of ceiling he was staring at. He was where Alexei had been a few moments...hours maybe...ago. He didn't remember being moved. She pronounced it the worst case of flu she had ever seen and hoped it didn't get around the rest of the school. Curiously, no one else ever got it. "Fight, dammit! Fight whatever the hell's going on in your head, Viktor! Is it him? Igor? Karkaroff?" Alexei had hissed in his ear when she went to fetch more blankets and convey her diagnosis to the huddle.

"Not sure, I don't know who, make it go away if it's him, I can't keep this up," he had found himself mumbling, pleading, seemingly very far away. He realized he was clutching Alexei's wrist desperately, as though he were drowning. Perhaps he was. His head buzzed and roared, but at least the voice wasn't there. He wasn't coherent enough to listen for clues in it if it had been.

He made it through the night, a confusing swirl of people across the room

conferring among themselves and setting up shifts to help check on him, booming ice tubs, cold sponges and cold spoons full of ice in his mouth, his tongue thick and sore, his forehead on fire, sweating so much that he could feel the droplets running along his temples and into his sopping hair every few seconds, dripping and splashing onto the pillow like scalding teardrops, then freezing and shivering when they pulled the blankets off of him, that weightless floating away, then feeling as though his limbs were weighed down with lead, trapped against the bed. Once, a feeling of being turned inside out, weakness, draining the consciousness and the strength from him.

A pale, wan Alexei told him the next morning that they had managed to get a dose of potion poured down him with an eyedropper, only to have him bring it up again a lot faster. "And after I had to help pin you down to keep you from flailing all over the bed. The second you managed to keep down. You were comatose the rest of the night. I don't think you had enough energy left to vomit. You do realize your hip bones are sticking up a good inch and a half past your stomach? You look like you've weathered a famine," Alexei had said bluntly, slightly indignant. Viktor had kicked the covers down in his sleep, and managed to raise his head enough to see that his shorts did gap slightly over his concave stomach, not touching anything but his bony hips. He hadn't been that thin yesterday, had he? He needed to start eating.

He spent a good portion of the next two weeks in bed, both in the infirmary and in his room. Alexei came and kept him company, but he didn't push for any more answers. He now knew Karkaroff was the perceived enemy, but he had no idea the full extent of it. Nor where Viktor suspected it was going. If all he had heard was true, Karkaroff had been a Death Eater. A Russian Death Eater. Maybe one of the ones who had taken five buildings, including one Muggle shop containing Violeta and Mama, from ordinary structures to smoldering death traps and kindling. It made his blood boil and his stomach turn to think it might be true. Karkaroff had turned in his fellow Death Eaters, rather than face Azkaban. He wouldn't even manfully face a deserved punishment, the coward. If Voldemort came back, Karkaroff would need something else to save his hide. A bargaining chip. A trophy. Who had always been his trophy?

He maintained an uneasy distance between himself and Karkaroff for the next few weeks until they left for the tournament. He had promptly gotten a head cold two days before they left. On the ship Karkaroff always made himself scarce, for fear he would have to lift a finger. He still had the cold when they had reached Hogwarts. If it was anything like the flu he had earlier, he would be dead before the tournament started anyway, champion or no champion, he thought, no matter how much Alexei urged and yelled at him.

As the tournament rolled along, though, his cold went away in the warmer climate, the voice was quieted to a soft buzz in the back of his head, annoying but not a great pain. Karkaroff had other things to worry about. His old friends,

according to Alexei. Leave it to him to work every source of information he could find. One of them was supposedly here at Hogwarts. So, even Hogwarts had one. Every wizarding school has a Death Eater in its closet, he thought to himself. I wonder who it is at Beauxbatons? Maybe it's the whole lot.

Then he had gotten a different sort of lifeline to replace Quidditch. In the library. He had seen her late one evening, when the packs of girls had thinned and he could finally concentrate on his book. Only he couldn't concentrate. He studied the bushy head, sticking out between and above the book cover and wondered why it seemed so familiar. She couldn't be waiting him out for an autograph, they were never so patient. It wasn't as though there were anyone watching. There was no one else here, she could have tap danced on his table and no one would have been the wiser. Even the librarian was off in the stacks. Besides, the girl was ignoring him to beat the band. She never looked up from the page. He had lain awake that night after he went back to the ship, trying to place her. She couldn't possibly be one of those roving packs of wolves that Alexei sometimes took off his hands. He never remembered any of them. She was wearing Hogwarts robes. Gryffindor robes. And he couldn't shake the feeling that he knew her from somewhere else.

It was driving him mad. So he had gone back to the library on the same schedule. And she had been there again. Tsking loudly and giving him a rather harsh glare over the top of his book after he came in and paused near the circulation desk. He had almost slunk back out under that withering look, until he realized it was directed mostly at the four girls behind him, who were conferring behind their notebooks about whether to sit or browse the stacks to get close to him. She sighed audibly and went back to her book. He had made a beeline for his usual table, then, backed up against the most densely packed stacks, not too far from her. He put her between him and the girls, and he made sure that he didn't look too inviting to those girls by shooting them the nastiest glare he could muster. They were now shamelessly pointing at him and making those horrid giggling noises behind notebooks as they whispered. He wondered why no one ever joined her. Seeker or no seeker, surely he wasn't the only one who wasn't blind? But what made him so sure? Didn't matter. His instinct was screaming at him, and even when he didn't understand it, he always followed his instinct. It never really steered him wrong. Surely girls and snitches couldn't be that different to instinct. Surely it wasn't completely wrong about her. Sometimes, you just knew. Papa said it had been that way with Mama.

He felt a little stupid for nearly running away when she had given him that look. Papa couldn't make him feel that foolish and small under his piercing gaze, even if he deserved it. He had stared down beaters four times her size, twice his, taken bludgers in the face, how could a pair of eyes over a book do that to him? It hadn't been until he had endured two more days of watching her and racking his brain that he had put it together. He had read little, studied less, between puzzling over the girl hidden behind those tomes and under that mass

of hair and the English words he was unfamiliar with. But he had learned much, watching her. She loved to read. He could tell by the ever-changing covers she hid behind. She wasn't only reading things she had to, she was reading because she wanted to. And she didn't care that he was there, watching her, sitting near her. That was new. She didn't rise to the bait of "Viktor Krum, Famous Quidditch Player". Thank goodness.

Malfoy helpfully supplied her last name, as well as that of the two boys she was usually with, Potter, Weasley, and Granger, while making one of his stupendously clumsy digs for attention. Of course, he could already identify Potter. It was hard to miss him when Karkaroff had pulled up behind him at the door to the Great Hall the first night, looking as though he couldn't quite believe his eyes. The night Alexei had clumsily dumped his plate down his front while clowning for Elena.

He spotted the scar after Harry paused to let their group through, and despite some initial surprise on his own part, he placed it quickly. Everyone knew the story behind that scar. Some of the others gaped and pointed, poking one another. Viktor refrained. He knew how it felt to be treated like an exhibit at the zoo. Viktor calculated roughly in his slightly fuzzy head, yes, Harry Potter would be about fourteen. And he would be here at Hogwarts, wouldn't he? Had it been that long? It couldn't be, could it? Yes, it was. She would be fifteen now, if she were alive. His train of thought was interrupted by Karkaroff's hasty exit. He had barely glanced at Harry and the two with him, intent on chiding himself for having to do the math in his head. He shouldn't have to, even if he was tired and did have a head cold. Her age should just come to him.

He couldn't very well ask Malfoy the rest of her name without arousing suspicion. Just as well. Later, he found he couldn't pronounce it properly anyway. He couldn't wrap his tongue around the collection of foreign syllables that felt so strange in his mouth, though it always sounded perfect when he sampled it in his head. It had taken weeks of practice at home, without pressure, to force it out of his mouth closer to the way it sounded in his mind. Something approaching the way she had pronounced it for him at the ball. Even then, it came off his tongue with a gently rolling "r", subtly softened vowels, different emphasis, his Bulgarian accent changing the name's shape slightly, but still leaving it recognizable. It still came out that way, but she had seemed pleased enough with his improved, if still foreign, pronunciation.

"There's Potty Potter, Weasley the Weasel, and their little tagalong Granger. Poor as church mice and twice as tatty, every single one of them. Simply appalling what they'll let into Hogwarts. Nothing like Durmstrang with their pureblood requirement, I'm sure. My parents almost sent me there to keep me away from the riffraff, but they didn't want to send me so far away from home," he had supplied, angling for affirmation. Or possibly wailing and lamentation from the Durmstrang contingent that they had been cheated out of

the pleasure of his presence at their school. He had gotten Alexei asking him to pass the bread and Viktor's blank stare and raised eyebrow. Malfoy hadn't known what to make of that. Alexei had recognized it as a sign of Viktor's deep disapproval. No one else would have. Right now, Viktor could strangle Karkaroff for ordering them to sit with Slytherin. Apparently he knew their head of house.

Then, suddenly it had clicked. Of course. He had seen all three of them together before, somewhere other than Hogwarts, but where? She was getting up from the table, probably to go to the library, so he excused himself, flung his cloak around his shoulders, even though he could have easily stood it here in short sleeves, and headed for the library. He did it to avoid looking more out of place than he already did. As he walked in, it dawned on him. The World Cup. She had been in the box. At the presentation. Along with Potter and Weasley and the Minister. His hand flew to the bridge of his nose and the now familiar crook there. He had been a real mess, nose smashed, his face all bloody, his robes dripping with it, two blooming black eyes, he remembered. Anton told him later that Petyr had cried for him, he had looked so awful. At the time, he hadn't cared about his injuries. All that mattered was that he had done his job. Why did he care now?

He was still standing there like a simpleton, finger on his nose when he realized she was watching him. He scratched an imaginary itch, then steeled himself and walked up to her, forcing his face to relax. He was going to ask her if it killed him. And knowing Karkaroff, it just might. "...box...Minister...Cup" he muttered, almost under his breath. Oh, brilliant opening, Viktor, he had chided himself, when he realized he had said it out loud. Loud enough that she had heard. She probably does think I am a simpleton, now.

"Pardon?" she had said, tilting her book out farther from her.

"Vere you in the box with your Minister of Magic at the World Cup? Top box?" he asked, his voice more forceful, but still library-whisper soft this time. Damn his accent. Why didn't he practice his English more? No one worth talking to in English before, you fool.

"Yes... I ...I was there with some friends... Harry and Ron actually..."

"I thought so...may I sit?" He indicated the chair next to her. He had picked it specifically so he could put his back to the girls peeking through the gaps in the books. She nodded wordlessly, so he hung his cloak on an empty chair and sat, his hands resting on the table. He forced himself to smile at her while he tried to think how to begin. She studied him so intensely, it felt as though she could see straight through him. It was at once a comfort and disturbing. There were some things he didn't want anyone to see.

He suddenly broke off and stared at the table for a moment as though

gathering his courage. He hoped she couldn't see that he blushed. Seemingly to fill the silence, which loomed interminable and deafening, Hermione had asked, "Do you like Hogwarts?" He looked up, a little surprised that it hadn't been a question about Quidditch.

He considered a moment. "I like the library," he whispered almost conspiratorially. "I like to come here to read. Not so many people vich are vonting me to sign things. The books are nice too. Not so many books at Durmstrang, I am thinking. They can't giggle too loud." Now his mouth was running away with him. He was jumping from thought to thought. Inherited that from Papa too, he thought, suddenly feeling self conscious about his nose. Drawing too much attention to those girls. Stop jerking your thumb over you shoulder at them like you're hitchhiking, Viktor. Might as well get to the point.

He leaned in closer, looking straight into her eyes again. They were a sort of cinnamon color. She didn't blink. "You read. Lots. I never come here ven you are not here." Did he just inadvertently insult her by calling her a bookworm or make it sound like he was following her? No matter, it was out of his mouth now. "I... I come here to vatch you ignore me, too." He actually laughed a little at this, where did that come from? When was the last time he had laughed? And she did too. He couldn't believe he had just said that, so he went back to inspecting his own hands. Nothing for it but the truth, now.

"Ignoring you?" she asked.

"Yes. Those other girls..." here he inclined his head toward the four whispering, giggling Ravenclaw girls by the stacks across the room, "they are always vanting me to sign things. Or they just stare and point and laff. I haff had enough. Silly. How do you say it? Imm.. imm... not grownup..." he floundered and looked at her a little helplessly. Why did he choose a word he had never used out loud before, only seen in books? Wonderful, I should confine myself to writing everything on parchment and just flinging notes at her from my usual table from now on.

"Immature." she interjected.

He nodded, his lips pressed together. "You vould never giggle and point at me. Too busy vith your books. Vould..." here he returned to staring at his own fingers, picking at a nonexistent hangnail, embarrassed and shy again. He pressed the calluses in his hands against the table, just to have a new sensation to focus on.

"Vould you like to go to the Yule Ball?" Was he asking her to go with him or just making conversation? He suddenly realized his awkward diction made it hard to tell the difference. Awful language, sometimes, English. So many shades of meaning in a single word. A single phrase. "Vith me?" he added,

tilting his head up, casting a slightly sidelong glance that still allowed him to keep tabs on his fingers, now nervously drumming against the table. He willed them to be still, but they didn't obey.

She just sat there, staring back for what seemed an eternity. Slowly, his usual scowl crept onto his face. "Someone else has asked you...of course, you are probably going with...your friend..." he said dejectedly.

"Yes! I ... I mean, no! I mean, no one else has asked...and...I... I would like to go to the Yule Ball with you..." He brightened considerably. Again he leaned in close, his face only a couple of inches from hers.

"I will be honored." He nodded slightly. "I must go. Flying practice is early today." He gathered his things and walked off with a little wave, the girls behind the shelves giving Hermione stares filled with daggers, even though they couldn't possibly have heard him. But he had talked to her. Of his own volition. Reason enough to envy. He fought the urge to run out of the building and wondered why he trembled. Then he realized why in the cool evening air. He detected an outsider. Like him. Her books were every bit as much a shield as his were. As his scowl and slouch was. And unless he was very much mistaken, there was more to her than the books.

She was pretty, but then, so were all those other girls. But she had spark they didn't have. He couldn't imagine the rest of those girls huffing at him for disturbing their reading. Or asking him about anything other than Quidditch. She had promise. She might actually let him be himself. If only he could figure out how hard to push. He knew better than most, you push too hard, you get the door slammed in your face. Maybe for good. He had slammed it just that way a few times. Hangers-on don't take "no" for an answer, but a slammed door speaks louder than words. He had mastered slamming the door with nothing more than his face. His expression.

Their ensuing conversations encouraged him more. He confessed that he had been watching her, trying to get his courage up. He had surreptitiously asked the librarian for her first name one day, when she left before he did. She avoided Quidditch talk for the most part, unless he brought it up, and she asked him about the books he read, she told him about the ones she read, she didn't fuss over him. If anything, she treated him as appallingly ordinary. It was a breath of fresh air. But then she would. Look who she was friends with. Harry Potter. The one name that every wizard knew.

He also got a glimpse of how much she might like him back on the night her mouth ran away with her. First, she spilled the beans about being a "mudblood". She didn't want to get him in trouble, she had said, she knew Durmstrang had a pureblood requirement. Certain people didn't think she was fit to mix with purebloods. His eyebrows had shot up in surprise and her face had



fallen. He had rushed to assure her that it didn't matter, he was just surprised that such a capable witch hadn't encountered magic until she attended Hogwarts. He had heard by now that she always got top marks. Malfoy seemed particularly bitter about that, he seemed to mention it every fourth meal. Karkaroff would care about her parents, but by the time he found out, if he found out, it would be too late.

Then she had started spewing facts. Nervously. When she had noted that there was a Bulgarian Khan named Krum in the 800s, he had been impressed. He barely knew that, and he might even be a distant relation. She didn't turn it into some "you might be royalty" flattery. It was just an interesting fact about where he was from, his name. She didn't ask if he could trace back that far. When she had gone on and on about the other schools and her reading up on the both of them, she had thrown in the tidbit about bulky fur cloaks being part of the official uniform at Durmstrang, and he had to stifle a laugh. Her eyes had slid to his own heavy cloak, on the empty seat beside him, and she had blushed. "But of course, you knew that," she had added lamely, shrugging it off.

"I knew. I am always being yelled at for not wearing mine enough," he had replied, and covered her hand on the table with his own, reassuring her. She wasn't the first girl to put her foot in her mouth around him. But she sure was more charming than average when doing it.

Karkaroff had been furious, of course. He still didn't know who had ratted him out, just that it hadn't been Alexei. Alexei knew about keeping confidences, even when Viktor hadn't actually confided anything. Probably one of the boys who had gotten chummy with the occupants of Slytherin had heard Malfoy run her down, seen Viktor going to the library more than once, and put two and two together. Some of them were pretty eager to see Karkaroff's golden boy taken down a peg. Karkaroff had called him into his quarters the day of the ball and ranted and raved and shouted, practically foaming at the mouth, getting in Viktor's face with his yellowed teeth and spouting off about the honor of the school and the integrity of Viktor's bloodline and other nonsense in his clipped and perfectly scholarly Russian. Anyone walking by the ship would have heard a well modulated torrent of abuse in a language they didn't understand.

Clever of him not to use English. Never to use Viktor's name in his tirade. No one here would have a reason to know Russian. Not even Dumbledore knew Russian, it seemed. Anyone close enough to hear would have no idea Karkaroff was ripping his prize pupil to pieces. When he had finally summed up after forty-five minutes of calling Viktor an ungrateful embarrassment as many ways as possible with "And after I've treated you like my own son! Well?! What do you have to say for yourself?!?"

Viktor had coolly replied in equally deft Russian, "It's only a ball.

However, if we do decide to water down my bloodline, I'll be sure to ask if we can name our first son after you." Karkaroff had actually raised his hand to Viktor at that, then thought better of it. Karkaroff hated that he could never get a rise out of Viktor, unnerve him the way he did everyone else. Hitting him would just be asking for trouble.

On his worst day, if Viktor was conscious, he could easily thrash his headmaster. If he ever defended himself physically, Karkaroff was in trouble. Even this much thinner, Viktor was still well muscled and strong. Wiry. Tough. Quick. Besides, Karkaroff knew from experience that beating him didn't work. He had tried it once during third year when Alexei had stolen his grade book and hidden it under Viktor's bed. Karkaroff knew it was Alexei, everyone knew it was Alexei, but the evidence had been hidden under his bed. Karkaroff gave him the chance to point the finger, to escape punishment. He probably saw it as a welcome chance to drive a wedge between his golden child and that appalling, disgusting boy. Viktor refused.

Even with Karkaroff standing over him, shouting "*Flagellare!*" for the twentieth time, the invisible whip cutting into his raw and bloody back, Viktor had refused to admit it was Alexei that had stolen it, even though Alexei had urged him to tell when the summons to Karkaroff's office came from downstairs. "Viktor, I tried confessing to him, he would not have it, you have to tell him! Give him what he wants! He wants you to rat me out, turn me in for it! He is going to call you to the dungeons if you do not!" Alexei had argued even when he knew there was no hope of getting Viktor to yield, after his face had gone stony. Impassive. Committed.

Everyone knew what happened when you got the call to the dungeons. No one could hear you down there, no matter how loudly you screamed. Everyone knew. But Karkaroff had given up on ever being able to beat anything out of Viktor after that. Viktor didn't even whimper. He already knew body parts healed, physical pain was temporary, the nurse had to see to you afterwards, and you recovered. There weren't even scars. And now, he was too valuable to beat. Karkaroff couldn't risk any other coercion. He needed Viktor for the tournament. And Viktor knew it was all hot air, this speech. He had gone with Hermione. Karkaroff had looked as jealous and suspicious as a spurned lover, but he didn't push the issue any more. Viktor was almost positive that Karkaroff had given up on owning him after that. But he had been wrong.

Then there was the shame of the third task. The voice was suddenly back, stronger than ever, the words crystal clear, and he found himself concentrating more on that than the instructions he was being given. He fought the urge to put his hands over his ears, to look around and see where Karkaroff was, where that chant of *join me Viktor, join me Viktor, don't be a fool, you can buy my way back in, back into their good graces, your present fame is nothing compared to what he could give you, you never want to be attacked like you*

*were the other night, do you?, he can protect you, you could give Mad-Eye Moody a run for his money with your skill, I need you, I made you, you would be nothing without me, I treated you like my own son, give in to it, join me* was coming from. It beat a tattoo behind his eyes, and he felt almost as though he had the flu again.

It had to be him. It was unmistakably his voice now. He forced himself not to look at his parents. They had already asked him what was wrong beforehand. They wouldn't accept the excuse of nerves again. They hadn't really the first time. If he looked at them, he would break, snap like a dry twig. He held himself back from shrieking at Karkaroff to stop, from hurling himself at Dumbledore and begging him to make it stop. Hermione talked about him like he was a man to be trusted. He seemed trustworthy... but Viktor had nothing else to go on. For all he knew, Dumbledore was the Death Eater colleague Alexei had heard about. Now he fought the urge to go look at his arm, to demand that everyone roll up their sleeves. He had heard there was a mark on the arm. That it burned black sometimes.

He had already been stupid enough to turn his back on Crouch in the woods, even though he was obviously mad. He kicked himself for it. So stupid to try to see where Potter was going. But all he could think about was how useless he would feel if Hermione's friend didn't make it back to the castle in one piece while he stood there with someone so completely out of their mind as to hold conversations with trees. Grant you, at the moment, he didn't feel much more sane. Then inside the maze, he tried to push Karkaroff back into the compartment, block him out. He had been so intent on doing so, that he didn't even notice the other voice at first.

He paused. He had to be losing his mind. It was another. Quiet at first, under the current of Karkaroff's constant whining patter, then roaring up over it, drowning Karkaroff into the background. It wasn't words. It was rage. It was madness. It was a horrible screeching shriek, a rumbling. He had never heard it before. It scraped through his thoughts, careening around inside his skull like nails on a chalkboard, and he realized he couldn't hold against it all. Not at once. This all at once was too much. He was too weak. Before the second wave overwhelmed him completely, he stuffed Karkaroff into the box once again. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction, even if it meant giving in to the second. He had probably helped kill Violeta. He went under like being pulled into a riptide, a powerful undertow. He was utterly drowned in the madness, and he knew no more.

Alexei had been the first one to explain it to him. True, he had heard others say, "Diggory's dead!" in wails and whispers but somehow it didn't make sense until Alexei said it. He couldn't be. He was just ahead of me in the maze. I heard him walking. Talking. To Potter, maybe. Maybe casting a charm of some kind. I couldn't make out the words, but it was Diggory's voice. But how

did I end up out here? Then the whispers, the stares, his own name mentioned. He had sought out his parents and told them to get out. To get outside the protective perimeter and Apparate home. Something about the look on his face must have told him parents not to argue. They had squeezed his bony shoulder and left immediately. With them gone, he had crumpled, empty, his head completely empty for what seemed like the first time in ages. He didn't have anything left. Nothing to fight with, nothing to fight against, except the guilt.

Unlike Fleur, Diggory had been decent to him. Polite. Pleasant. Admiring of his talent on a broom without fawning. Without empty flattery. Even with that great pillock of a headmaster associated with him, the Dark Arts background, they had treated Viktor as a worthy competitor. He and Potter, that is. Now they were telling him Diggory was dead, and he had used one of the unforgivable curses on him. Which one? Cruciatius, Dumbledore said, but later he added that Viktor was under the Imperius curse.

The moment Dumbledore said "Cruciatius", that's when he knew he wasn't responsible, stark raving mad or not. If he had been insane enough to want to cheat like that, Karkaroff had taught him a stable of curses that made the Cruciatius Curse seem like a tickle with a feather. Curses that didn't get you put in Azkaban. Curses that left no marks, no trace. Ones that didn't bring Ministry officials running. Sometimes, they left behind nothing recognizable at all, done properly. Call Karkaroff what you will, but he was nothing if not a thorough teacher. Didn't matter that he hadn't willed Cedric's suffering, though. It was still his wand in his hand that did it. He should have been strong enough to fight it off. Reason enough to be ashamed.

All these feelings and memories whirled through his mind in a matter of a moment, but Papa clearing his throat brought him back to the present. Viktor swung his legs down off the sofa and turned from the window, putting his bare feet on the cool stone floor. As he sat, Nikolas scolded, "Your mama would tell you that running around the house at night with no shirt or shoes is a sure way to get yourself sick. Of course, you would tell your mama that you were hot, even if it were dead of winter. We couldn't even keep you in a winter cloak outside. You would hang it on a tree in the orchard and go on your way with your sleeves rolled up. Still, you never got sick, I told her. Mama used to claim you were part polar bear." Nikolas paused, then sighed heavily. "Can't you sleep?" Nikolas asked, still staring off into the mostly dark room.

Viktor studied his father's profile, so similar to his own, for a space in the half light, the planes of his face thrown into a sharp relief of light and shadows. "No, but not for the reasons you think," Viktor replied. He turned his face to the dark room as well. They had conducted some of their best conversations in the dark, no eye contact, nothing but their voices connecting. It was less threatening somehow to converse with a pair of arms, a touch, a voice, a pair of dark eyes could be too intimidating, too much of a challenge. You might see something

there that made you hesitate. It seemed both of them were reluctant to change a proven formula.

“You eat now?” Nikolas countered.

“You’ve seen,” Viktor said.

“You have filled out a lot. Reasons?” Nikolas asked.

Back to that. Papa had always bounced from subject to subject and back with no transition, at the speed of his thoughts, generally with an economy of words. Anyone on the other end of the conversation had better be prepared to do some mental gymnastics and tallying to follow a conversation with Nikolas Krum. Mama called it his verbal shorthand. “I slept too late. I needed some quiet to think. Now was as good a time as any. I’ve made some decisions.”

“Decisions?” Nikolas’s voice was curious.

“For one thing, I decided I owe Alexei a very long explanation. Seven years worth of explanations. For my behavior. What I should have trusted him with a long time ago.”

“Good. You need to tell someone without being cornered into it, Viktor. Even your mama and I have. Alexei won’t tell anyone you don’t want him to. I know it’s not easy, but you did it with the three upstairs, and you haven’t known them seven years. Alexei can’t be any harder. Next decision?” Nikolas sounded pleased.

“You sure you and Mama won’t take the money? I don’t need it. If I fulfill my contract this year, I get a bonus in addition to the salary. That would be plenty for me to put to use after school. More than enough. You know I don’t need fancy things.”

“It’s not a matter of you needing it. You earned it. It’s your money. You’ve gone above and beyond what you needed to. It’s only a homestead in the end, Viktor, no matter how desperately we wanted to keep it. We could have lost it and still had everything that was truly important if you were okay and Mama and I had each other. Nothing could take our memories of her. But don’t think your mama and I don’t appreciate what you did. What you sacrificed. We won’t be rolling in money for some time, but we are comfortable enough. Most of the debts are gone, thanks to you. The rest, we can manage eventually. We decided to put the money away for you, and as a fallback, just in case. But we didn’t need it, Viktor. Put it with the rest of the money you have put away. We’ll let you know if we need you to part with any of it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Boy...” Nikolas warned him with mock sternness, “Mama already fought this battle. Viktor, your mama and I bred that stubbornness into you, you get a double dose. But we’ve had a lot more practice at it. Don’t think you can outlast us. Take your own money. And enjoy it for once,” he finished gently. “Actually, I shouldn’t call you ‘boy’. You’ve been a man for a long time. Too long. Too soon,” he said, an edge of melancholy to his voice.

“There’s a lot of that going around, these days. Too much. Upstairs, for instance. All three of them. Him, particularly.” He jerked his chin at the staircase. He caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his eye, his father’s sharp chin raising as he followed the banister with his eyes to the top, then his nodded agreement, a quick bob of the head.

“True. You recognize it in him. More decisions?”

“Yes. I’m tying up the loose ends at Durmstrang, then leaving. Three weeks there, at most.”

“For which alternative?”

“I’m accepting the offer. Best of all possible worlds under the circumstances. Being able to Apparate has its advantages.”

“It will be hard work.”

“I’m not afraid of hard work. And I just can’t stay at Durmstrang. Too indecisive. Not now. Not when I have the alternative. Choices. Not even with Karkaroff gone. I explained this to you and Mama. The reasons. What happened last year.”

“I never said you were afraid of hard work. Quite the contrary, you seem too fond of it. And I understand why you are reluctant to finish your schooling at Durmstrang, even disregarding the other considerations. It isn’t the same place where Mama and I went to school. Have you discussed it with anyone else?”

“Not yet. I want to make sure the details are all worked out first. I’ve learned never to count chickens before they hatch, you only end up disappointed. Usually with a handful of crushed eggshells. I believe it will be well received, though, if things work out. He seemed eager for me to accept. I think she would like it, as well.”

“You’ve made your feelings clear?”

“Yes. I believe I have.”

“Is that a decision too?”

“Yes. I decided it was worth it. I have patience and time. I have nothing but time. For once, that’s all I have to give that is really wanted. It’s all I have that is of any worth in the first place. Time. The thing in which all men are equally rich, but few spend wisely. I think this is worth spending on.”

“Ah, so you’ve discovered the secret then? Look for the one who doesn’t want your gifts, but the gift of you?”

“The secret was easy. I’ve seen that with you and Mama every day of my life. Finding someone who also knew it, that was the tough part.”

“Wise creatures. We can learn a lot from them. Like how to spend your time.”

“Especially the ones who read?”

“Especially the ones who read. And listen to Tchaikovsky. That all of your decisions?”

“You might add a George Gershwin to your list. I’m going to laugh more, and I’m soon going to bed. My eyes are heavy suddenly. There, that’s enough decisions for one night.”

“Deciding is hard work. It could be relief, though. You think Ivan and Natasha would like to go with you?”

“I’m not sure it would be allowed. It’s a bit fuzzy yet as to where I would be living. Baramir is on the approved list. Besides, don’t you need them here?”

“Mikhail has a new batch of older pups, just about the right age. I was thinking of getting a couple of them, starting their training. They would soon catch on. He owes me a favor, so he offered them to me. I know you love those dogs. And they pine over you when you go. If it’s possible...”

“I’ll take them. If it’s possible. More details, Papa.”

“You’re good at details. You know when to attend to them and when to ignore them.”

“Ignore them?”

“Minute details that aren’t important. Ones that go away or aren’t important in the first place, particularly. Like being too young. You ignore it long enough, you aren’t too young anymore. Two more days, you’ll be nineteen.”

You're making your mama and I feel old. In two days, it's your birthday."

"So it is. I hadn't really thought about it. And you two... feeling old? That will be the day. Why do I get the feeling I'll be creeping around like an old man years before you start?"

"Just because sheep aren't nearly as prone to injure you as opposed to Quidditch players and bludgers. I have never had a sheep knock me off a broom into the stands."

"Probably. Goodnight Papa."

"Goodnight Viktor. Sleep pleasantly."

It was a phrase that carried a lot more than the usual meaning, passing between the two of them. "I think I will." Viktor padded across the floor and up the steps silently, to his room, to bed. And he was surprised when he found himself looking forward to it.

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## CHAPTER 18

"Oh come on, Viktor. Mum will be insulted if you don't at least stay for dinner. She found out in my last letter it was your birthday tomorrow, she nearly sent me a howler for not telling her sooner. She always does a cake for Harry's birthday, too. Owls it to him," Ron bobbed as he treaded in the water, addressing the rock where Viktor was perched.

"I do not want to be a burden..." Viktor began uncertainly. They all got the feeling he wasn't used to having a big deal made of his birthday. He seemed uncomfortable with the idea.

"Burden! Mum will personally rip my head off if I can't get you to stay. We had given her more warning she probably would have asked your size so she could knit you a loud jumper with a big 'V' on it. Mum has this thing about birthdays, you see. She must like them. She had enough kids to ensure she celebrates them pretty much year round."

"I do not want to put your head in jeopardy, so alright. I will stay if she asks. I don't haff to be back early. I don't haff to be back at Vratsa for a team meeting until three days from now, in fact. I haff an appointment the day before, though," Viktor warned.

"She might let you go, if you make it real clear up front that you need to. Mum likes guests too. She's liable to implore you to sleep on the sofa, though. We run kind of short on beds this time of year," Ron teased.



“I imagine you do. How many are there again?” Viktor asked.

“Bill and Charlie are away from home now. Bill works for Gringott’s in Egypt, Charlie works with dragons. You might have seen them both at Hogwarts last year. Well, Charlie certainly. He helped wrangle the dragons. Bill came with my Mum and Dad when the families... Percy, he’s still at home until he finds another place to live that meets his high standards. I’m guessing he’ll leave in time for his retirement. Fred and George, they’re the twins, me, and then Ginny,” Ron counted on his fingers. “Seven of us.”

“Seven. And all of you with red hair, right?” Viktor folded his arms on his knees.

“Absolutely. The Weasley red hair. Known and loved far and wide. Didn’t Malfoy fill you in on our red hair and vacant stare? How the Weasleys always have more children than they can afford?” Ron asked.

Viktor smiled. “It must be nice. Having so many people around when you are small. I had to make my own fun. Nobody at home. And I will trade you the Krum nose for the Weasley red hair. Actually, I kind of like it, and you do not, so... I think I will keep it. I could not pull off red hair.”

“Fred and George certainly made sure it was never dull, but I don’t know about fun. It’s okay, I guess, if you’re one of the first ones in line. Pain in the neck, though, coming after the rest of them. The Weasley legacy precedes me. Percy was enough perfection for the lot of us.”

“You’ll make your own way. Think of poor Ginny. Everyone ahead of her and no one ahead of her,” Viktor countered.

“What do you mean by that?” Ron cocked his head.

“Six brothers ahead of her, that she has to follow, that everyone will identify her with. But not one sister,” Viktor replied.

“I think what Viktor’s trying to say is that you might be trailing a long line of Weasleys, but Ginny has to trail all of you. And top that off with the fact that you boys have each other, and she doesn’t have a sister. No one who has walked exactly the same path. She’s alone in the mob of you Weasley boys,” Hermione interjected, climbing onto the rock with Viktor and toweling her hair. “You don’t have it so bad, Ron.”

“Exactly. You can be alone even in a crowd,” Viktor added. “You call your home The Burrow?”

“Bit of a joke, really. Rabbits live in burrows. Nine of us. Couldn’t find a family more like rabbits than us. You never did tell us why the inn is called The Pavlova,” Ron considered.

“Years ago, my mother’s... let’s see, it would be her great-great-great...great-grandfather, left St. Petersburg, left his home, made his way south, and came to Prishta, that’s the wizard village that’s nearby. He was quite educated, fairly well off, his papa had been a court scholar for the Tsar once. But I think he was bored. He wanted to see the world. He worked along the way, it must have taken him months to get here. The first day in the village, he spotted this young woman in front of one of the shops.” He resituated himself on the rock, getting more comfortable.

“His name was Yuri Gregorin. He asked around and found out the woman he had seen was named Anastasia. No one knew her last name, they said, she was some Romany witch that had come in with her family and ended up staying behind. She kept a room over one of the shops, a bookshop.”

Hermione interrupted him, “Romany? Isn’t that another word for...”

“Gypsy. Yes. There used to be a lot of witches and wizards among the Romany. They found that moving constantly was almost as good for being undetected by Muggles as settling in wizard villages and avoiding them. A lot of the Romany ones broke off and settled down, though, because the Romany started getting a bad reputation. There were a few thieves among them. So most of them got called thieves. Unfortunately, a lot of the old Romany curses and charms and herbs have been forgotten because of that. No one to pass them on, anymore. Not for years. Some of the Muggle-born Romany still know a lot of the herbal potions, some of the minor curses and charms. They haff better skill at it than the true Muggles. A few of them can even use the curses effectively. There used to be a lot of minor seers among them. But once the stronger ones broke off, they started having a lot of squibs. Even the most magical among them now are fairly weak. They are a separate world, these days, none of them carry wands, as far as I know. Romany were always interested in magic you could do without wands.”

“Yuri found work outside the village, on a farm. He left at dawn, and he did not get back until late. He kept the accounts for them, and he took the job because it paid well. Anyway, he eventually introduced himself to Stasi, found out she worked in the bookshop, and generally started spending too much of his time and too much of his money there, when he was not working, just to be near her. She was smart, capable, loving, beautiful, he thought. He wanted to be with her forever. After several months, he asked her to marry him. She told him she would, if he could give her what she wanted most. He couldn’t think what it could be.”

Viktor counted on his fingers as he continued, "One day he would come in with his money pouch, and tell her he could give her what she wanted, he could provide for her, he had a good job. She just shook her head. What she wanted could not be bought with the money in that bag. The next day, he would come in with his tools and pledge to build her a house, put a roof over her head. Same answer. Day after day, week after week, for months, he would have a meal with her and try to guess what it is she wanted. Flowers, fruit, candy, houses, land, money, he conjured pictures of children, a family, he even brought in a gazing crystal, to symbolize a future. All the same result. No, these were grand things, and she did want them, but it wasn't what she wanted him to provide most of all. 'You hold my heart, what else could you possibly want?' he asked her. 'Your heart is necessary, of course, but what I want is the secret to you keeping mine,' she told him. He offered her books, he offered to buy the shop for her, she loved books. She allowed she did, but that wasn't it, either."

"Finally, she offered to help him guess. 'If you can answer this riddle, you will know what I truly want. No man can buy it. No man can earn more of it. Its value cannot be fixed, even the largest amounts of it can be wasted and worthless, the smallest amounts precious beyond measure. Every man is equally rich in it, and spends it at the same rate, but some spend it more wisely than others. They trade it for treasures that cannot be bought.' He racked his brain for weeks. I did too. Mama told me the story and then refused to finish it until I had guessed."

Ron furrowed his brow and mumbled, "Every man is equally rich in it. Well, we know it's not money. No man can buy it or earn it, that also leaves out money. Spending, that sound like money too, but it can't be money. Viktor, you're not going to leave us hanging for weeks are you?"

"No, I promise to tell you if you give up," Viktor smiled at Hermione, who was whispering it to herself. Harry repeated the riddle over and over as well.

"Love maybe?" Harry guessed.

"No. The problem with that answer is that love can be earned. It should be earned. Anyone who thinks you cannot earn love has never taken up with an animal or a child. And love is never wasted or worthless. It always has worth to the one who gives it, even when the one receiving it does not value it. No, that was my first guess," Viktor grinned.

"Viktor, just how much time did you spend trying to figure this out?" Harry asked finally.

"Two weeks. She allowed me one guess a day, just like Yuri. When I figured it out, it seemed so simple I nearly kicked myself," Viktor replied.

“Time! That’s it, it’s time! You can’t buy time, or earn it. You can waste a whole day, or spend a precious few seconds, depending on what you’re doing!” Ron shouted suddenly.

“Exactly! He finally guessed it one day. ‘Time. I thought about the riddle itself, and it is time. But I do not understand,” he told her. ‘That is the answer. No man can get more time, by buying or working for it. Time can be wasted at something that will not matter in a year, like earning an extra sickle, or it can be spent on a precious moment with someone that will live in your memory and keep you warm in your old age. Ask a drowning man how important a second is. Ask a lonely man how worthless an idle hour is. We all have only the present, we are guaranteed nothing else but that we spend our time at the same rate, both the pauper and the king. You can spend it keeping accounts because it pays well, or you can spend it keeping me because you love me. A fine house and land and money and children do me no good if you are not there to enjoy them with me,’ she told him. He quit his job, had this inn built, purchased the land. They married and ran the inn together. Three children. They both lived to be quite old. When they died, they passed the inn on. It has always been in Mama’s family. Mama got it when her grandfather passed it on. Just before she and Papa married,” Viktor finished.

Ron pursed his lips. “That’s a wonderful story, Viktor, but it still doesn’t explain the inn name, does it?”

“You guessed the riddle, you mean to tell me you cannot guess where the name came from?” Viktor raised his eyebrows. “It was the one piece of information I left out.”

“Her name,” Hermione ventured. “You never told us her last name. You just called her Anastasia. If you can trace things back that far with records, you must know her last name,” she turned her face to him.

“Anastasia Pavlova. He named it after her. He thought she deserved to keep her name alive in more than a book of records. Stasi, he called her. He recorded that story in a journal he kept. Mama still has it here somewhere, she copied it and preserved the original. Her parents had lived on the steppes, joined up with a Romany band that moved through when they had a drought, she liked Bulgaria and stayed behind when they went back. That journal taught me the grand total two words in ancient Romany that I know. *Guerda Engelikos.*”

“What’s it mean?” Harry asked.

“Harry, I haff not a clue. All I know is Yuri wrote down that Stasi said it each night when she put the children to bed. When he and she went to bed. He said it was a Romany charm. Nothing on what it was supposed to do. He said it was ancient, powerful and important, but he did not say how. He said they

taught the children to never forget it, to call on it in their worst times of trouble. Said it kept the evil eye away, whatever that means. Maybe the information on it was in another journal that did not survive. Pity no one remembers back that far. A lot of the Romany language, the magic, was lost a long time ago. Like the Celts, “ Viktor sighed.

“You two spend entirely too much time reading, I think,” Ron mused.

“It is my past. Part of how I got here. If Yuri had not found Stasi, I would not be here. And I had a very demanding History of Magic professor at Durmstrang who was very keen on talking about lost magic. Every fifth lecture seemed to be about some tribe or nationality that lost all its wizards somehow. I think she tried to make the point about not marrying anything other than purebloods with it. She was decidedly against marriage to anyone with a Muggle in their family tree. Watered down the bloodlines, she thought. I guess she would rather the Druids had kept intermarrying until they were so inbred and added they could not count the pillars at Stonehenge, much less design it,” Viktor rolled his eyes.

“Your family seems pretty open minded and liberal, what’s kept Muggles out of your family tree?” Harry asked, sprawling on the grass next to Ron to sun himself dry.

“I do not know that there are not any Muggles there. There may be, back before anyone can trace. Luck. Circumstance. Durmstrang was founded three hundred years before Hogwarts. A lot of opportunity to meet a potential mate there. They would certainly be another pureblood wizard, since that was a requirement. You would have to go out of your way in years past to even meet a Muggle or a Muggle-born.”

“Tradition too. Wizards tend to set up communities here, in Russia, most of the places Durmstrang receives students from. Maybe having a Romany ancestor helped. Romany people were persecuted, hated, even among some of their fellow wizards for some time. Even the non-magical ones were slaughtered. As little as fifty years ago. I suspect Stasi might have warned her children and grandchildren against making similar quick judgments. Papa’s family, several of them worked in Muggle Affairs, once the Ministry felt the need to establish such a department. Like your papa, I think, they took a liking to Muggles. Papa’s uncle worked with them. He said he came away from his job with a greater understanding of them,” Viktor traced a pattern with his finger around Hermione’s hand.

“How did Anya end up working with them?” Hermione captured his finger, ducked her head beneath his and looked up at him.

“Mama met Madame Korrina’s sister on the ship to Durmstrang. They

became close friends, they ended up in the same house. They spent holidays at one another's homes. When Mama graduated, Madame Korrina had a job in the museum, in the gift shop, while she went to university in Sofia, and she passed on that there was an opening there. They needed someone who could speak Russian, do translations, preservations. Mama loved reading old books. History. It was her dream job to get paid for it."

"But you said Madame Korrina was a Muggle, how did she end up in a pureblood wizard family?" Hermione tilted her head and pursed her lips.

"There used to be a Muggle village and a wizard village fairly close to one another, up in the mountains, a few days east. Giants. They wiped out most of the Muggle inhabitants. Worse in the wizard village. The Ministry sent wizards to clean up the mess, to relocate the inhabitants, put memory charms on the Muggles that survived. One of them was the man who was to become Madame Korrina's adoptive grandfather. They found her wandering around the village, by herself, about two years old. They could not find a family that claimed her, so they assumed all her relatives had been killed. Of course, they assumed that her relatives had been wizards. She must have wandered in from the Muggle village, though. It was already two days after the attack. She must have walked most of those two days. Braydon Korrina took her home with him. His son and the son's wife had no children then, so they agreed to raise her. They did not find out she was a Muggle until they had already fallen in love with her. So they moved to Sofia and blended in among the Muggles there. When Madame Korrina was eight, they had another daughter."

"No one complained? Gave them a hard time?" Harry asked.

"No. Braydon was a pretty powerful man. Very important. I think most people were afraid to say anything bad about his son raising a Muggle. Besides, how can you fault a man for having pity on a child? As long as she married a Muggle and went to school with Muggles, I do not think it bothered anyone."

"And just how can they be sure she was a Muggle!? How can they be so sure she wasn't born a... a squib! She could be as much a pureblood as her sister!" Hermione snapped indignantly.

Viktor raised an eyebrow. "She is not a squib. For a start, purebloods supposedly do not breed squibs. A squib is supposed to be a throwback to a Muggle ancestor. I do not know if that is true, but there are enough other reasons to believe she is a Muggle. She never got a Durmstrang letter. Or a Hogwarts letter. Or a Beauxbatons letter. It is assumed that even if no one knew her birth name, the owl would still find her. Even squibs get invitations to school. Most convincing, though, she is aging like a Muggle," Viktor spoke gently, as though breaking a disappointment to a child.

“What do you mean, aging like one?” Harry wrinkled his nose.

“Aging like one. Even squibs do not age that way. Harry, you do not mean to tell me you do not know?” Viktor’s mouth was slightly open. He looked stunned.

“Harry, wizards live longer. It’s nearly unheard of for a wizard to die at anything less than a hundred and fifty if they die of natural causes. Nicholas Flamel, he was five hundred, but that was unnatural,” Hermione informed him.

“A hundred and eighty is not out of the question. Madame Korrina, she is aging much faster than a witch would...” Viktor added.

Harry sat up, dumbfounded. “You mean...we...the lot of us...are probably going to live over a hundred years... more?”

“It’s one of the reasons wizards and Muggles don’t mix a lot, Harry. It’s hard to explain to Muggles why you’re still around after so long,” Ron pointed out.

“Why doesn’t anyone ever tell me these things?” Harry marveled.

“Because we assume you know. Or maybe that you’ve cracked a book,” Hermione sniffed. “But then, wizards just seem to take it for granted. I don’t remember reading much about it. Just a tidbit here and there,” she finished.

“Getting cloudy. We had better go in. It looks like it is going to storm,” Viktor squinted and surveyed the thick purplish clouds backing up over the mountains.

“Looks like regular old clouds to me. Same ones that have been there all week,” Ron said.

“They are thick around the mountain. Low. Purple underneath, gray on the top. If it does not storm tonight, I will eat my wand. Besides, Ivan and Natasha want in. They haff been whining and haunting the door all day. They sense it coming. For such big strapping dogs, they do not like lightning very much. The sheep will be okay. Papa will probably put them in the barn.”

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## CHAPTER 19

“Oh, get down already you silly dog! Anyone would think you had never seen a storm before!” Viktor pushed Natasha’s muzzle gently away from his chest. She had been practically in his lap before the clap of thunder finished. She whimpered and lay down next to Ivan on the hearth, and Viktor picked up the book he had been reading that Natasha had knocked out of his hands.

Ron moved the curtain back from the large window facing the mountains. "I've never seen one like it. I mean, the lightning's almost blue and it's sizzling around here like... like..."

"Like lightning?" Harry supplied.

"That is what happens in mountains full of lakes," Viktor murmured, shaking out the pages and smoothing them where they had bent against the floor. "Things back up and build up and scrape against one another. Then when the cooler air finally nudges things loose, this is what you get. You think this is bad, you should see some of the ones at Durmstrang. We get lightning sometimes during blizzards, even."

"How cold is it there, really?" Harry asked. He had gotten so used to Viktor in short sleeves, it was hard to picture him in those huge robes again.

"Depends. Some years, it gets cold starting in September. By mid-October, it's always cloaks outside when the sun is not out, sometimes inside by then. Last year we had an early blizzard. Freakish. A couple of weeks into September, just after the opening ball. The snow piled up to my waist. Usually it does not snow until December. It usually comes off by April though. May and June are always warm."

"You play Quidditch in cloaks?" Harry wondered.

"When it is cold enough. A couple of matches a year."

"The ship. What's that like?" Ron put the curtain back down.

Viktor looked over the cover of his book, silent for a moment. His eyes flicked to the window and another flash of lightning. "A little musty. It takes four people to make a crew. So we took shifts, usually fifth years and up. Karkaroff took a few of us on some trips during the year where we crewed for practice. When you leave for Durmstrang, you get on at a port up north, a small shipping town in Russia. There are small quarters on board, you have an assigned berth, we get on, sail out past a cliff, into a cove there, and a whirlpool opens up. From there, it is underwater until you get to the lake in front of the castle. Then you come up like we did at Hogwarts. Kind of leaky when you are not careful about making sure things are sealed. Last year, we flooded the bottom berths with four inches of water because some idiot did not check the cargo hold like he was supposed to. But I suppose I should thank that idiot, because it helped me solve my egg."

"You mean the one with the clue about the second task?" Harry remembered sitting in the bath with his shrieking egg, wondering how he was going to get any sense out of it.



“The ship listed a little during the day when we were gone, and the cargo hold door was loose. Water ran in, and when I got back from Snape’s class, I had water in my room. I spent the whole night before looking through things from the library, trying to figure out what noise it was making and the thing made my head hurt when I tried to listen to it. Let us just say I was not haffing one of my more easygoing days already and coming in to wet ankles did not improve my mood,” Viktor said, his mouth set.

Ron laughed, “You threw it, didn’t you?”

Viktor ducked his head behind the book, but not before they saw him smile. “With pleasure. And great force. Alexei tells me I knocked a picture off his adjoining wall. Luckily it came open and fell in the water. It was almost worth the two hours we spent casting drying charms.”

“Bit damp in here isn’t it?” Hermione rubbed her shoulders and arms.

“Bit damp out there, Hermione,” Ron countered.

“*Incendio!*” Viktor said, not looking up from his book, wand in his hand. The fireplace was so large that they actually felt a blast of hot air as the flames shot up. “She is cold,” he explained when Anya looked up from her own book in surprise. “We hardly ever light that except in winter,” Viktor explained again. Ivan and Natasha looked rather indignant and stalked away from the hearth to flank Viktor’s chair, looking at Viktor as though reprimanding him for daring to light a fire behind them. “You need not look at me like that. You wanted in,” he told them, shutting his book.

“What are you going to do when you get these two together with Crookshanks?” Ron got down off his chair and gave Natasha a scratch behind the ears.

“Oh, they like cats,” Viktor said lightly.

“Really? They like cats?” Ron had to share his attentions with Ivan now, as he shoved his shaggy head under Ron’s arm.

“To eat mostly,” Viktor added darkly. Hermione nearly spilled her cup of milk.

“What!?” Hermione wheezed.

“Teasing,” Viktor raised his hands, palms outward in a protestation of his innocence. “Unless Crookshanks suddenly turns man eating cat and takes a dislike to me, I think he is safe.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him...” Ron laughed as Natasha suddenly decided to lick enthusiastically behind his ear, nearly bowling him over.

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## CHAPTER 20

The rain went on through the evening, but the lightning stopped by twilight. Harry and Ron spent the most of it playing exploding snap. “Hah! Those went everywhere... Harry?”

“What do you think they’re talking about? And what do you suppose they got him for his birthday? I couldn’t stand to wait if they had already put it in my hand, could you?” Harry peered out the window to the porch, where they could see Viktor’s dark head inclining toward Hermione’s. There seemed to be a deep, serious conversation going on. All they could see of her above the window was her easily recognizable hair sticking up above the folds of one of Viktor’s light cloaks. It was cool when the rain fell outside.

“Who knows? They’ve been at it a while. Maybe they’re just saying goodbye,” Ron said. They didn’t come in until the sun had gone down completely and the only light was the moon. The four of them went to bed soon after.

Harry woke up and blinked out his window. The rain and the clouds had cleared, instead the bright moonlight flooded into his room. He must have fallen asleep with his mouth open, he thought, as he tested the confines of his mouth with his dry tongue. What he wouldn’t give for a glass of milk. Well, why not? He got out of bed and sneaked downstairs as quietly as possible, feeling his way across to the kitchen. He checked the small icebox in the corner of the kitchen and found the milk, and tried three cupboards before finding a mug. Sometimes he missed having an electric refrigerator. Could use a light in there, he thought, poking about with your wand was awkward. He wandered around the kitchen and eventually to the back door, opening it and stepping out onto the porch, into the noise of dripping leaves in the orchard and frogs and crickets chirping.

The weathered and silvery boards were smooth and warm under his bare feet, the air warmer but fresh and clean and earthy, with just a hint of green grass, as though everything outside had been scrubbed. He would have shrieked if he hadn’t had a mouthful of milk when Viktor’s barely audible voice interrupted his survey of the night and the nighttime chorus in the yard, “Harry?” Viktor put a steadying hand on his shoulder when he jumped. “Sorry,” Viktor said softly, “What are you doing up?”

“I could ask you the same thing. I just wanted some milk. You’re out to drown me in it. It’s a wonder I didn’t inhale the mug. How did you know I was out here anyway?” Harry asked peevishly.

Viktor sat heavily in the same chair he had occupied earlier in the evening, next to Hermione. He was in his apparently customary sleeping attire, baggy shorts, and Harry idly wondered if Viktor ever got truly cold. "I sleep light, remember? I wondered where you were going at this hour, like you had an appointment," Viktor replied, sounding a little exasperated. He ran his fingers through his dark hair. "Harry, we need to talk, anyway."

"For the last time, Viktor, there's nothing between me and Hermione," Harry teased. Viktor acted as though he hadn't heard, clearing his throat.

"I owe you an explanation."

"I don't like the sound of this."

"Too bad. You need to know. As much of it as I know, what little that is. I think you need to know. Keeping secrets has caused enough damage all around, I think. Hermione agreed. In theory, anyway, since she does not know exactly what I am going to tell you. She seems to think that had you been told a few things in years past, you could have been saved a lot of trouble. Since it concerns you the most, I think you deserve to hear it first," Viktor continued in a slightly hoarse voice. He sounded like he could use a mug of milk.

"Okay. Midnight confessions. Round one. What is it you have to tell me?" Harry settled into the chair next to him. He noticed Viktor's hands tightening on the arms of his own chair, as though he were steeling himself for a blow.

"The maze. What happened there. What Karkaroff did for the two years before, or what I think he did. Why I think he did it. Why I could not keep Crouch at bay when he did the Imperius Curse when I should have been able," Viktor spoke without looking at Harry. When he did turn to look Harry in the eye, Harry almost wished he hadn't. Viktor could be intimidating in the best of circumstances. With his dark, piercing eyes catching the moonlight, Harry felt skewered on his gaze. And there was something else. Viktor looked haunted, oddly out of character. It gave him the same creeping feeling he had when Albus Dumbledore was not his usual twinkling self. When Dumbledore showed rage or that glimmer of triumph. Or that look of defeat.

Viktor swallowed hard. He took a deep breath and began. "I always had this... feeling... about Karkaroff. That something just was not right. I had no real reason to distrust him, except for the way he treated Alexei and anyone else he took a dislike to, like your Snape, until a little over two years ago. That is when the rumors started. Talk of dark marks. Death Eaters. Some of the students pulling away into groups. Ministry...demonstrations. I think Karkaroff suspected even then...that I had a talent for certain... areas. I think he was starting to feel

us out, sift through us. See which of us demonstrated skill at certain things. Which ones it would be worthwhile to pursue.“ He told Harry everything he could stand to reveal without going into unnecessary detail. The voice. The illnesses. The maze. How demonstrating skill at certain things in Durmstrang was a double-edged sword as long as Karkaroff was there.

“You were playing half-crippled, then, if you were constantly doing two things at once, trying to fight Karkaroff. That explains why you fell behind. Otherwise, you should have been able to thoroughly whip at least me and Fleur. You whipped Fleur anyway. Cedric might have given you a run for your money, but you could have pulled well away if it hadn’t been for that. That, and the fact that the Triwizard Tournament is about as random a cheatfest as I’ve ever seen. Crouch feeding me hints, it’s the only way I managed to stay with competitors who were three years older. So, you think Karkaroff wanted to buy his way back in?” Harry asked when Viktor finally paused.

“I think so. It makes sense. He turned them in. He would do anything to save his own skin. Getting back into their good graces, it is the only way he will survive. Crouch hated him. Would haff killed him given a chance, I think. I do not imagine that the rest of the Death Eaters would welcome him with open arms. I think delivering something of value, that is the only way he can do it,” Viktor commented.

“And you would be something of value. You’re good at something they want?”

“I am good at things I wish I did not know about. I would probably be better off. Some of the others, too. At Hogwarts, maybe they would be encouraged to be Aurors, mediwizards, potion masters. You would be something of value, too. Karkaroff may have tried it, if Crouch had not beaten him to it. If he had not been so afraid of what he thought was Moody. He may still. He is desperate. I should haff trusted Hermione’s judgment better. She trusted Dumbledore, I should haff too,” Viktor’s shoulders fell.

“No. Viktor, you were right. You didn’t know who you could trust at Hogwarts, based on what you knew. There is an ex-Death Eater on campus. Snape. You never know who to trust at Hogwarts, either. And I owe you an explanation. Hermione, Ron and I are the only ones at Hogwarts who know about this, outside of Dumbledore. Let me tell you about my godfather, and what happened on the other end of the portkey in the maze...” Harry began, feeling the need to reciprocate. He knew how hard it must have been for someone as private as Viktor to share what Karkaroff had done to him. What he was doing to Durmstrang.

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## CHAPTER 21

“So, Pettigrew, he was really responsible? He is still alive? And Voldemort has a body...” Viktor’s voice had resumed its usual strength.

“Yes...Viktor, you said his name! Dumbledore is just about the only other person I’ve heard use his name out loud... Everyone else calls him You-Know-Who.”

“Voldemort? If you’re afraid to give a thing a name, how on earth are you ever supposed to be brave enough to fight it? If you’re afraid to speak something out loud because you think that makes it real, you are fooling yourself. Pettigrew. An animagus. A traitor. A rat. How appropriate.” Viktor bit his lower lip gently with his teeth.

“Yes. He was hiding with Ron’s family the whole time. That fool Fudge wouldn’t know a blatant truth if it danced on his head and sang the national anthem. Wouldn’t take the word of a bunch of kids. Sirius is still in hiding. All we get are letters to each other. Actually, I was a little surprised when he wrote me back and told me to go on this trip and have a good time. He was a lot suspicious of you last year. Rode me for going off into the woods with you alone,” Harry summed up.

“There you go, then. See what secrets do? It is mutual. I would not have trusted Sirius Black. Wanted murderer, dangerous criminal. Half the wizard world would probably kill him on sight, call the authorities second. I would not trust me either, if I were you. You were a fool to go into the woods with me, I was a fool for watching where you were going instead of watching my back. Couple of fools, and we paid for it, did we not? Well, that casts a new light on things. Definitely. Much better not to be fed fairy tales,” Viktor was rubbing his chin as he spoke.

“If it makes any difference, I trusted you before that. You were alright. Now, I trust you as much as anyone I trust at Hogwarts. It took a lot of courage for you to tell us about your sister. It took a lot of courage for you to tell me what you just did. Dumbledore would have let me fumble around in the dark for months and made me figure it out on my own, most likely. Sometimes I feel like he’s playing charades with me, and not giving any hints until I’ve already guessed the answer. Learning experience, and all that. Still, I trust you as much as Dumbledore,” Harry said tentatively.

“Why, since that is not the half of what I should probably tell you?” Viktor asked.

“Because, it’s obvious you love Hermione. Really love her. Hagrid once said that real dark wizards didn’t care for anyone but themselves, no love for anyone else. You couldn’t be too dark if you spotted the good in a girl that even

her two best friends had missed. And you're... honorable. Hermione's no fool. She would be careful who she gives her heart to. And I don't know if you've noticed, but I believe she's handed it over."

Viktor snorted softly, a noise that seemed to say he couldn't believe his luck. "I will do my best to merit it, then. I had a feeling about her, too."

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## Chapter 22

"So what did you get?" Ron asked as he finished his muffin and stuffed a stray sock into his bag.

"Get?" Viktor looked puzzled.

"For your birthday! Sheesh! You really aren't any good at this wild eyed birthday greed, are you? You mean to tell me you still haven't opened it?" Ron rumped his own hair in his frustration.

"Yesterday was not my birthday. If it will make you happy, I will open it when we get there," Viktor grumbled as he trudged back up the steps to fetch the small package his mother had handed him the previous rainy evening at dinner. Harry was sure he and Ron were much more curious about what might be inside it than Viktor. He seemed rather indifferent.

"Come on, then. Stoatshead portkey will not wait all day and The Burrow is not getting to be a shorter walk," Viktor lectured. After much making over from Anya and Nikolas and many goodbyes, they bundled themselves out to the hill overlooking The Pavlova. They reused the knobby old tire they had traveled with from Sofia on that first day. Coming to an unsteady stop, they collected themselves at the top of Stoatshead Hill.

"C'mon! Open it already!" Ron shook Viktor's elbow.

"I'm getting curious too, Viktor," Hermione added.

He took the small box from his robe pocket and untied the ribbon almost reverently. This he folded and tucked back into the pocket. He peeled the paper open at the end flap, and slid the wrapping paper off in a neat packet, which he flattened and returned to the same pocket. A hinged box lay in his palm, and he considered it a moment before prying the top open.

In the box was a small locket on a chain. He removed it and balanced it on his fingers for a second, studying the back. "*Guerda Engelikos*," Viktor read the cyrillic script aloud, then rested it in his palm, gold chain spilling over his cupped fingers. After a bit, he tapped the small locket lightly with his wand. It

opened to reveal four tiny portraits, one on the inside lid, one each side of the middle hinged leaf, and one on the inside back. Nicholas, Anya, Viktor and Violeta as a girl of about two.

He prodded it gently with the tip of the wand again, and the corners of his mouth turned up subtly when the strains of an orchestra came out of nowhere. Not nowhere exactly, but from the locket. "Isn't that...?" Hermione began.

"Nutcracker Suite, Waltz of the Flowers. Tchaikovsky," Viktor finished for her.

"I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation, but I couldn't guess," Ron said.

"I had no idea they even really remembered telling me the story in the first place, it has been years," Viktor said quietly, flipping the locket back over to run a finger over the inscription. "The music, there are two perfectly logical explanations. Papa listens to a lot of Tchaikovsky. Nearly every Christmas holiday, we would go to St. Petersburg and see the Nutcracker Suite. And they danced to it, late at night when I was supposed to be in bed. I used to lie at the top of the stairs and watch them through the banister sometimes. I fell asleep once with my head on the second step. I wonder if they ever knew about that. Oh, they danced to other things, but it was almost always that one, sooner or later." He pressed the small locket closed lightly between two fingers, then put it around his neck and tucked it into the neck of his robe.

"Curiosity satisfied?" Viktor asked as he raised his eyebrows at Ron.

"For now," Ron replied. "Okay, Burrow's that way. All downhill from here." They set off down the hill toward the burrow, soon reaching the door and hearing the usual bustle of various Weasleys inside.

"I still wish you would let me give it a trim, dear. I don't know why Gringott's lets you go to work with that earring, and your hair all silly," Mrs. Weasley was scolding.

"Hey, Bill's here, then." Ron tossed his bag down by the door, and he, Harry and Hermione walked into the Burrow and the kitchen, where Bill was sitting at the table with a cup of tea, completely ignoring his mother's critique of his dressing style while perusing the Daily Prophet. Viktor hung back near the entrance to the kitchen. Ginny was busy putting dishes on the counter, readying to set the table, and Mrs. Weasley was banging away in several pots and pans.

Bill glanced up from his tea. "Oi, Harry, Ron, Hermione! How was your summer then? Come here, tell us all about it and save me from Mum's attempts to remake my image, already. She'll have me in one of those three piece

Muggle suits by the time I get out of the kitchen if I'm not careful. Oh, and hullo there! Viktor Krum! Mum didn't tell me you were escorting these three home," Bill added, noticing Viktor for the first time.

"Now, Bill! I did too! And who did you think the birthday cake was for?" Mrs. Weasley interjected.

"Oh, one of my many siblings, probably. I thought maybe I had forgotten one, Mum. It's too hard to keep track. And how was I to be expected to know it was Viktor's birthday?" Bill said cheekily.

"Bill! I distinctly told you! Honestly, you would think you don't hear a word I say. Don't mind him, dear," Mrs. Weasley smiled at Viktor.

"Must have been in the middle of all that haircut, earring, and clothes talk. I listened to the games on the wireless. Sounded like they were real crackers. As good as the World Cup. You were incredible in all of them," Bill said, shaking Viktor's hand.

"Thank you," Viktor replied. Just then Fred and George came running through the kitchen.

"Mum, we're just off to the shed... oh, hullo, you lot... George here thinks he may have the solution to our Exploding Quills going off prematurely!" Fred yelled as they tramped through.

"You boys be back here in time for lunch! And you could at least..." Mrs. Weasley shrieked after them.

"...properly greet our guests, we know. Viktor, you were fab in the games, don't say a word about them until we get back and can listen to the blow by blow. You won us a fair bit in that Wales game when we took a flutter ... oops!" Realizing his error in mentioning betting, George managed to streak out the back door before his mother started her tirade.

"Gambling! Those boys are going to be the death of me yet, and we're not going to have two planks of the garden shed standing if they don't stop cooking up their jokes out there!" She sat the pan she was stirring on the counter a little harder than necessary.

"I don't suppose I would be wrong in guessing that it's our twins that are going to be the death of you, and not any of the rest of them, Molly?" Mr. Weasley walked in from the back garden. "Oh, hello there, Viktor, it's nice to finally meet you in person! I really enjoyed watching you in last year's World Cup. Arthur Weasley." Arthur offered his hand.



“Nice to meet you,” Viktor replied.

“Mum, Viktor’s got longish hair, you won’t be harassing him for a trim the entire time he’s here, will you?” Bill piped up, pointing a finger in an exaggerated accusation at the back of Viktor’s head.

“Bill! Will you let that drop! Course not dear, Viktor’s is nowhere near as long as yours. Viktor, don’t you mind the lot of them, I don’t know why I bother. Why don’t you and Hermione go out in the garden and arrange the tables? Hermione knows where they are, and I thought we would eat out today, since it’s so nice,” Mrs. Weasley said. Viktor looked the tiniest bit relieved at the prospect of getting out of the noisy kitchen. He wasn’t particularly fond of crowds, Hermione knew, and the Weasleys were definitely a noisy crowd.

“Funny, I tried asking her to let it drop several times, and it didn’t work. Maybe I didn’t hold my tongue just right,” Bill laughed. Viktor returned a slight smile, then followed Hermione out the door.

Mrs. Weasley clucked her tongue and looked after them. “Dreadfully shy thing, isn’t he? Barely said two words the entire time he was in here. But then the rest of you didn’t exactly give him a chance to get a word in edgewise.”

“More like quiet, Mum. He just doesn’t say anything unless he has good reason to. I imagine he’s not used to the kitchen being busier than the train station and twice as noisy. His family isn’t a constant three ring circus like our crew. Nikolas was probably the most talkative of the lot, and he didn’t exactly talk our ears off. Could be because of all the translating back and forth, but he was still friendly enough,” Ron said.

“Did you say Nikolas? Nikolas Krum?” Bill interrupted.

“Well, it’s his dad, so yeah, I suppose he would be Nikolas Krum, Bill. Fathers do often share a last name with their son,” Ron shot back.

“Mind your cheek, Ron. Hmmm, well I suppose that probably *would* be him, then,” Bill said to himself, rubbing his chin.

“Him who?” Ron wrinkled his forehead in confusion.

“Fella I work with, Lestrev, he’s got a picture of his first crew that he showed to me. Viktor look quite a lot like his dad?”

“Sure. Dark hair, black, dark eyes, he got the nose from him, tall and built rather like him, too. Surely you saw them at Hogwarts last year?” Ron responded.

“Not really. And I wasn’t working with Lestrev then. I suppose it’s Viktor’s dad, then, in the picture. Lestrev isn’t a big one for Quidditch, doesn’t really follow sport, but he saw Viktor’s picture on a Quidditch magazine I was reading and asked if he might be any relation to Nikolas Krum, maybe his son. Told him I had no idea what Viktor’s dad’s name might be. Lestrev seemed to think it a little unlikely that Nikolas would have a son in such a ... a public job. But with that longer hair and the way he’s filled out a bit since last year, he looks remarkably like his dad in that picture. Suppose he would be about the same age by now, too.”

“Why so unlikely, dear?” Mrs. Weasley asked, putting the potato salad in a bowl.

“Now, Mum, if I tell this, you have to promise not to shriek ‘poor baby’ and go running out there in the garden and tackling him while you squall,” Bill warned. He took a deep breath. “I don’t suppose I should really tell this, but... Nikolas had to deal with a family tragedy several years ago. Quit his job and never came back.”

“Viktor’s mum getting hurt in a Death Eater attack. His sister dying in the same attack. In Russia. He’s told us. His dad quit his job to stay home with his mum,” Ron said.

“What about him?”

“Viktor’s dad?”

“No. Viktor.”

“What about him?”

“Lestrev seemed to think Nikolas quit as much to be with his son as he did to be with his wife. Considering the circumstances, if Lestrev heard right, I suppose it would be. I mean, I can’t imagine. Nikolas rather dropped out of sight after that. They lost touch really. By the time it happened, they were on different crews, but they were still friendly, saw each other occasionally before that.”

“Huh? What are you getting at, Bill?”

“It’s got to be hard to see something like that happen, much less to someone you know. You see...”

“I was there. I saw,” Viktor supplied from the doorway. “What is it with you Weasleys? Every time I leave a room and come back, I seem to walk in on a conversation about me,” Viktor said, not unkindly.

“I’m sorry. It really was none of our business, but I work with a former colleague of your dad’s. Lestrev. He seems to think pretty highly of your father. Says Nikolas Krum is a bit of a living legend around Gringott’s. For being the only coworker that crusty old Lestrev ever got on with completely, if for nothing else.”

“Enormous blonde man with a perhaps overbearing fondness for black pudding, mulled wine... and a limp... and a walrus mustache?” Viktor asked in a lighter tone.

“That’s the one. I can’t imagine two people of that description ever working at Gringott’s,” Bill nodded.

“Papa has some pictures of him and I think I met him once or twice at Gringott’s. He has not gotten anything else chewed on by a dragon?”

“Miraculously, no. But not for his lack of trying. You would think a man three toes down would learn his lesson and be more careful about where he camps. But no, he’s still as oblivious to signs of dragons as a garden gnome with his head in a bucket. He was lucky it was only a young one that got at him the first time, not the mother. Nobody on his team with a lick of sense lets him set up camp anymore. Lestrev hasn’t exactly followed Quidditch much, but he saw your picture on my Quidditch mag and asked me if you might be the son of Nikolas Krum. He told me what happened when he was telling me about your dad.”

“Why didn’t you say you were there, Viktor?” Ron asked.

“I did not think it that important. My sister. My mother, they were important,” Viktor said softly as he slid into a chair at the table and spread his hands, rubbing his palms over the wood. How could I? What good would it do? How exactly do you tell someone that you’ve seen what Hell must look like, stood ankle deep in it, waded through it, still see it? It was why he didn’t press Harry for many details about what happened at the end of the maze. Death did not improve in the retelling, in the reviewing. Some things defy your ability to describe them. And what point is there to sharing what you can’t describe? Turning it into useless noise?

“Has she recovered? Lestrev said the last he heard, she was still in for a long road and Nikolas had given notice at Gringott’s that he wouldn’t be coming back. After that, Lestrev got reassigned to Egypt...” Bill asked the question gently.

“She was very lucky,” Viktor mouthed carefully, considering his hands. “It crushed her pelvis and her legs, but she relearned how to walk after she healed.

To look at her now, you would never know.” Not entirely true. He could just about convince himself of that, if he forgot the way she still winced when she stood too long, or walked up stairs. He and Papa were probably the only ones who noticed. She hid it well. The weakness in her legs. She had never picked him up again. He had grown so much that she couldn’t lift him by the time she recovered enough to try it. She still didn’t know that he had heard her crying about it that night.

“Lestrev said they got transported to a Muggle hospital first... that your sister might have...” Bill began, but Viktor stopped him with the slow shake of his head.

“No. He does not think that anymore. It would not have mattered. Muggle or wizard. No one can bring back the dead,” Viktor was barely audible, but his voice betrayed a quiet strength. His voice commanded attention without demanding it, much like his father’s. It had taken Papa a while to shake that one last ‘If only...’ No one can bring back the dead. No one can bring back the dead, he had finally told Viktor. For once, the collective Weasleys inhabiting the kitchen were completely silent.

“Where... where were you? When it happened?” Hermione asked, standing behind Viktor’s chair, gripping the back.

“Across the street. We went to a cafe to wait for them. Luck. Circumstance. Three buildings up, five down. We were in one of the three. They were in one of the five. Not so much as a scratch,” he said, holding out his arms and turning them over, as though looking for a sign of injury even now. Not a scratch. On the outside, at least, he added in his head. The inside was another story entirely.

“I’m sorry Viktor. Lestrev will be glad to hear that your parents are doing well, though, if I can pass that on?” Bill inquired.

“Yes. You can pass that on. They are well. Tell him, believe it or not, Papa keeps sheep now, as more than a pastime. And Mama went back to her job at the museum. And tell him their son might graduate before he is twenty, if he can get through the rest of his studies without an excuse to avoid his exit exams, but he is still not interested in working with Lestrev. I value my toes too much,” Viktor finished with a sly smile.

Bill laughed and the tension was broken. Ginny had been on the verge of tears, and Hermione thought she would also become a sobbing mess in short order as well if Ginny so much as sniffled. Mrs. Weasley was determinedly dabbing at her eyes with the corners of her apron. Hermione marveled that Mrs. Weasley had been able to restrain herself from falling on Viktor’s neck and sobbing, much less that she was now on her way to dry eyes.

“Now if we don’t get out there and start eating soon, we’ll still be at it at midnight. Ginny, set the tables, Bill you fetch the salads, everyone carry something and that should take care of it in one go,” Mrs. Weasley directed, regaining control of herself. They shifted and grabbed bowls and platters, filing into the back garden and sitting down. Thinking back to last year, Harry recognized the two tables they were using. Bill and Charlie had levitated them with their wands and had a duel with them. He doubted Hermione and Viktor had done anything half as silly when they had set the tables out in the garden.

They passed a pleasant lunch, and Mrs. Weasley actually managed to coax a few sentences out of Viktor. Hermione could tell, though, that Mrs. Weasley was duly impressed with his direct, simple answers, and his respectful attitude. Her own parents had been quite taken with him for the same reason. Arthur, of course, was more interesting in talking Quidditch, as were the rest of the Weasley men. Viktor carefully avoided talking about himself too much, often steering the conversation back to a particular team as a whole, or praising another player’s abilities.

“Harry here is quite the seeker, himself, considering he never played the game before Hogwarts,” Mr. Weasley said.

“I know. I heard plenty of stories. And I saw him fly once. It is not every seeker that can win a game by catching the snitch in his mouth,” Viktor replied.

“That was an accident,” Harry piped up, blushing.

“Accident or no, you still had to really be flying. I do not recall catching anything in my mouth during a game except a bug or an elbow,” Viktor protested with a smile.

Harry laughed. I wish I had told him the rest of it, that Sirius is an animagus, too, Harry found himself thinking. It would be kind of nice for someone other than the three of us to know that as well. Maybe it will be kind of nice to go to the opening ball and see what Durmstrang looks like, too. Meet some other students there.

Viktor had to protest for all that he was worth to resist Mrs. Weasley’s invitations to stay. “I really haff to go. I haff to be at an appointment tomorrow, a team meeting soon after, and then school. We start a week earlier than Hogwarts this year. By the way, I found out the opening ball will be the first Saturday in the Hogwarts year. Dumbledore already gave his permission. I will take care of the rest. Besides, I promised Mama I would be back. I suspect I might be hauled off to St. Petersburg tonight for a concert,” he said with a little smile.

“Well, you’re more than welcome to come visit any time you like. And if Dumbledore doesn’t have a problem with the three of them going, I don’t suppose I can find one either. Bye bye, dear,” Mrs. Weasley told him.

Ron, Harry and Hermione walked him out the front door and onto the lawn, silent for a moment. “Thanks for the invite, Viktor, I had a really great time,” Ron finally volunteered.

“Yeah. The games, they were fabulous. After an entire summer away, I was beginning to miss it. The Dursleys don’t exactly let me follow the sport,” Harry added.

“C’mon Harry, let’s go see what Fred and George are up to,” Ron said, jerking his head toward the Burrow.

“Oh. Yeah. Fred and George. Right. Well, goodbye, then, Viktor,” Harry called.

“Goodbye. You are welcome. And thank you, I enjoyed having the company,” Viktor replied. I enjoyed having the company. That was a foreign phrase in more ways than one, Viktor thought to himself.

“Well, then...” Hermione began, and trailed off.

“Well, then. I would like to kiss you goodbye, but I think we haff far worse to worry about than Rita Skeeter, this time,” Viktor said quietly, as he inclined his head subtly toward the house. Hermione looked quickly over her shoulder and saw Fred and George gawping out one window, Harry and Ron trying to drag them away. In another, Mrs. Weasley was peering out from between the curtains with what just might be Ginny’s head below hers. “I think Mrs. Weasley would be less charitable if I kissed you the way I wish to, I think she would haff my head,” he added, as she turned back and suppressed a laugh.

“Oh, surely not. Although, she did think I was a scarlet woman, last year until Harry told her differently,” Hermione murmured.

“Nothing wrong with scarlet. Bulgarian team colors. Durmstrang robes. Maybe I like that color,” he said with a grin, remembering what Hermione had told him about her experiences after the Rita Skeeter articles. “Would you settle for a remarkably restrained kiss on the cheek?” he asked softly.

“I would. But only as downpayment until I see you again. At the ball. I think my parents will say yes, since Harry and Ron will go.”

He nodded silently, then placed a curled finger beneath her chin. He tilted it upward slightly, then bent and placed a quick kiss on her left cheek. “Until

then, Sokrovishte,” he whispered near her ear before straightening.

“Until then, Viktor,” she whispered back. He took a couple of steps back, pulled out his wand, and disappeared with a small pop. She found herself missing him already.

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## CHAPTER 23

“This one?” Hermione asked, holding up a light silver cloak.

“That one. That one’s beautiful. And it goes with the dress robes. And your barrette,” Ginny said after some consideration.

“This one,” Hermione said, handing the cloak to the witch behind the counter. “And the cat-shaped clasp,” she added, handing them over as well. The cat stretched and purred quietly as the witch rang up her purchases.

“You’ll look great. I wish I could go. It all sounds so nice. It’s not fair that Ron gets to do everything,” Ginny pouted.

“Oh, Ginny, I wish you could too, but there will be plenty of balls. And Viktor would have had quite a job getting one more head in. He had a hard enough time convincing them about Ron, if it makes you feel any better. Harry he managed to slip in on the grounds that he was a fellow Triwizard Tournament champion. He got them to let me come based on my being his Yule Ball partner. They were a little confused as to why he wanted Ron there. I think they had a hard time believing he just wanted to invite a friend. From what he wrote, he had to throw a bit of an ‘after all I’ve done for this school the least you can do is let me have three guests before I leave’ fit before the board of governors would give in on all three of us. They’re very secretive at Durmstrang.”

“Are you sure it’s safe? I mean, they learn the Dark Arts there...” Ginny began uncertainly.

“Viktor promised that we would be safe. He doesn’t seem the type to promise that sort of thing without being sure. And Professor Dumbledore gave his permission. He wouldn’t have done that if there were any undue danger.” She had been greatly surprised when Sirius had also given his blessing to not only the trip to Bulgaria, but the trip to Durmstrang. Maybe he had deferred to Professor Dumbledore’s judgment. Who knew what he based his permission on? “It’s not as though Hogwarts has exactly been safe these last few years, either,” she added.

“True. So... are you going to waltz again?” Ginny asked.

Hermione colored slightly. "I suppose we will. We had better get back down the street and get the rest of our school things," she said curtly.

The rest of the stay with the Weasleys and the trip on the Hogwarts Express was unremarkable. Quiet even. Until the door opened and Malfoy poked his blonde head inside, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. "So... I hear Weasel here actually got to sit in a box at a Quidditch match again. I wonder which of your siblings you had to sell to afford a ticket there?" he sniffed.

"For your information, I was a guest of someone," Ron replied airily.

"And who on earth would have taken pity on you and invited you to the box? Don't tell me the Minister of Magic is taking on more charity cases?" Malfoy drawled.

"No. Viktor Krum invited us," Ron said.

Malfoy's already pale face paled even more. He stammered for a moment, then asked, "And why would he have invited you three?"

"Because. He likes us. Unlike some other people, he has taste," Harry interjected.

Malfoy was so stunned, he left with a halfhearted, "I can't say I care for his taste in guests," thrown over his shoulder.

Hermione finally allowed herself to laugh when Malfoy was out of earshot, and Ron and Harry stared at her, puzzled. "I'm sorry. It's just... well, Viktor wrote earlier in the summer and said that Malfoy was still trying to cozy up to him, as Ron puts it. Malfoy's father tried most of the summer to get them seats in the box we were in. Angled with the Bulgarian Minister, and with Viktor. Lucius Malfoy apparently tried writing to Viktor and using the 'I knew your headmaster very well' ploy, thinking Viktor would do him the favor. Viktor told them he already had the seats in his box filled, and he contacted the Bulgarian Minister and asked him for his own favor. Namely, keeping the Malfoys out of his box."

"Really? Wow, no wonder ole Malfoy is green then. But according to Poliakoff, Viktor already told Draco off once," Ron replied.

"True. But Malfoy just can't believe that his wealth and power and his family name wouldn't open more doors than our friendship. See, he thinks Viktor's like him. In it only for what he can get. Probably thinks Viktor would have come to his senses over the summer and tossed the mudblood and her friends," Hermione said softly. "Can't wait to see how he reacts when he find out we're going to the opening ball at Durmstrang as Viktor's guests. I was half



tempted to tell him, if I weren't afraid his head would explode," she added. She looked out the window and recalled Viktor's last letter. The letter in which he had told her what he had shared with Harry on the porch that night. No wonder he wanted away from Durmstrang. He still hadn't told her exactly what his plans were, though.

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CHAPTER 24 (submitted)

"Hagrid, are you sure this is far enough outside for the portkey to work?" Harry called.

"Fer sure. Now you three be careful... no tellin' what some o' them students at Durmstrang might be up ter...I don't hold wi' some o' them foreigners..."

"We will, Hagrid. We will," Harry assured him. It was nearly evening already, on Friday, and the three of them were eager to take the portkey to the as yet undisclosed location near Durmstrang's grounds. Each one of them had a small pack that would serve as a sort of overnight bag, their dress robes and cloaks carefully stored inside with some other clothes. Mrs. Weasley had even insisted that Ron take the new dress robes he had worn to the Quidditch reception, though Harry couldn't imagine how the Weasleys had managed to find the money for such a thing. Of course, Ron had managed to outgrow the hideous dress robes he had worn to last year's Yule Ball, maybe it was out of necessity.

"Well, here then," Hagrid said, handing Harry an old tin can that had once held soup. "Couple o' minutes, and this thing leaves. I'll meet yeh back here this time Sunday," he added.

Soon they felt the familiar jerk behind their navels, and they staggered to a stop in a dark, damp spot. "Where are we exactly?" Ron wondered aloud, gathering himself from the ground again. "It's dark as a cave..."

"It is a cave. I am sorry it had to be here, but it could not be in the open. If I did it anywhere else, they promised to revoke the invitation," came a familiar voice from a few feet away. "*Lumos.*" As the wand burst into a beam of light, they could finally make out Viktor's form against a gray shelf of rock.

"The board of governors?" Hermione asked, readjusting her pack.

"The board of governors. You would think I had offered to host a rabid goblin convention, not invited three people," Viktor complained. "Around this bend, there is the entrance. Then a quick walk to the grounds. I would have preferred the edge of the forest, myself." They followed Viktor's lead and stepped out into the bright sunshine. They found themselves a little surprised at

how green and lush everything was. Hermione had half expected frost and nothing but brown, but there was thick green grass, several varieties of wildflowers, a rich and varied stand of trees, there was the sound of what could be a brook or river somewhere in the distance, and the land rolled pleasantly in every direction. The sun was shining and a warm breeze lifted their hair.

As they walked, the sounds of running water could be heard more clearly. After a few minutes, they rounded a low hill, and were confronted with a small pool and a cascade of water pouring from a sizable waterfall, some twenty feet. Viktor walked up to the edge of the pool, placed his hands together, fanned his fingers and plunged them into the side of the curtain of water. He spoke a word, then abruptly parted his hands. To their surprise, the curtain of water parted as well, into two thin layers, as though bent by his hands. It continued to run into the pool as though its flow had never been interrupted.

He then stepped out onto the wet rock beneath the flow of the waterfall, the twin falls of water passing over him, touched only by a slight mist. He walked out to the middle of the falls, then turned back toward the wall of rock and repeated the procedure, also parting the back curtain of water. He then murmured what they presumed to be the password while rapping on the rock three times. A grating noise told them that rock was scraping against rock. He beckoned to them since he would be unheard over the roar of the water. Behind the open rock, a rushing column of water roared by, foaming and swirling. "We have to step into it! Do you want to go one at a time? Once you arrive, you just swim to the surface and wait!" Viktor yelled into Hermione's ear. She shook her head, so he grasped her hand and pulled her aside. "Harry, Ron? Step in or take a hand! I haff to go last either way, the gate closes once the person who opened it goes through!"

Ron and Harry clamped on to the chain, Harry at the head. "Just step forward into it!" Viktor instructed.

Harry took a deep breath and stepped forward, into the rushing column of water. To his great surprise, he remained completely dry, but was sucked upwards, against the current, instead of down. Behind him, he could feel Ron's hand, and he presumed that Hermione and Viktor trailed behind them. There was not nearly as much whirling as was involved when traveling by Floo Powder, in fact, it was rather pleasant, except for the roar and the breakneck speed at which they were hurtling along. After a few minutes, they began to slow considerably, and the roar dulled. They were nudged gently into a clear, still pool of water, apparently very deep. Harry found he could still breathe as easily as before.

"Now, hurry, you haff to get to the surface pretty quickly. Straight up," Viktor said, pointing with his free hand and kicking toward the surface, where the sunlight was filtering through, interrupted by only one large shadow. They all

broke through in a few moments, and Harry realized that the shadow he had seen was the Durmstrang ship tied to the dock. Sitting in the sunshine, it didn't look nearly as ghostly as it had when Viktor and the rest had arrived at Hogwarts aboard the great hulk. But it still looked as though it could not possibly be seaworthy, by rights it should be sitting at the bottom, with its leaky looking hull and spiny, skeletal masts.

Viktor let go of Hermione's hand to pull himself up onto the dock. Viktor stepped out of the lake bone dry, but the rest felt a sudden rush of cool water soaking their robes the instant he left the lake. He offered a hand to each in turn and pulled them up as well. "Well, that was interesting," Ron breathed after setting foot on the deck, dripping everywhere. "What happens if the wrong person gets in there?"

Viktor stuck a hand back into the lake and brought it up dripping. "They drown if they do not get out in time. Once you get in, you must know where you are going, you have to know about Durmstrang to get there. Have some concept of it in your mind. Else it just shuttles you along forever and never lets you out anywhere. If by some miracle the wrong person managed to open that door, make it through the portal and get into the lake, they would probably still drown. It is a long way down. If not, they would be lunch," Viktor said, shaking the droplets off his hand.

"Lunch?" Ron asked as Viktor fished out his wand and cast drying charms at the three of them, leaving them as dry as himself.

"Lunch," Viktor replied simply. He turned to the other side of the dock, cupped his hands around his mouth, and whistled sharply. For a few moments, nothing happened, then the water around the dock directly in front of Viktor's feet began to bubble and churn. A great scaly head, dragonlike in appearance broke through the water, snorting steamy mist. The creature had large webbed front claws that paddled lazily below the surface as it treaded water, and its large flexible lips peeled back from a mouth full of sharp and uneven teeth that could easily have crushed a full grown man. The head alone rather dwarfed Viktor, big as he was. Right in the middle of the thing's forehead, resided an unblinking third eye, golden where the others were green. Viktor crossed his arms and stood as though waiting to be addressed. Ron, Harry and Hermione scrambled backwards and nearly stepped back off the dock, they were so startled.

The creature snorted loudly, the hot breath from its nostrils blasting Viktor's loose robe straight back, rippling the folds in his pants, as though in a stiff wind. It regarded them all for a moment in silence, and the three half expected to be eaten in turn. "English please," Viktor piped up into the silence. Hope he doesn't mean 'Try the English cuisine first, please' Harry thought to himself.

“English, eh? One of my newer tongues. You belong here on these grounds, though you will be nothing more than a visitor soon, that much is certain. These three, I smell the foreignness on them, they do not belong here at Durmstrang. If you had not called soon I would have come to investigate, perhaps even on land though I rarely venture there any more, for they smell particularly tasty... friend or foe... am I to welcome and protect them, or am I to crunch their bones?” came a deep, snarling voice from the creature, his lips curling back from the teeth again in a grimace. His head bobbed and dipped again to within a couple of inches of Viktor’s face on his long flexible neck, and he regarded them all with his eyes narrowed to shrewd green slits.

Viktor bowed his head subtly, a gesture of respect, then raised it and spoke, “These three are here at my invitation. No harm is to come to them. In fact, I would ask a favor.”

“Favor? Ahhhh, very well, Viktor. I suspect I know what it will be. You have not asked one of me in all the time you have been here. Not like some of those sniveling idiots who come rushing at every problem, waking me from my rest when they hear I might grant favors. I half expect some of them to ask me to do their schoolwork for them! They do not realize that favors must be earned. You were one who solved your own problems, asked no favors. Your father was the same. As was your mother. They did not come to ask a favor until their graduation. That I promise to look after any children they might send here, if I were still Guardian. Rather useless favor, it turns out, as you seem to have looked after yourself, and the other never set foot on these grounds. More is the pity. The world would have been better off with another child of Nikolas and Anya in it.” The great head wagged back and forth, tongue clucking sadly for a moment.

The Guardian tossed his head slightly, and continued, “You have lived up to your name, first, middle, and last, in many ways. Viktor. Often the victor, even when his companions are not victorious. Nikolas. You carry many of the same merits and faults passed on by the man who gave you that name and helped bring you into this world. Krum. The Bulgarian Khan. Those who think you might carry his blood in your veins are wise, for it is so, you carry his legacy.”

“Krum nearly conquered the Byzantines, would have, had his time not been cut short. He had the skull of Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros made into a drinking vessel after massacring his army. Silver plated. The Khan drank from the skull of his enemy, civilizing agent though he was. First true governor of his country, you govern yourself now with the same iron hand. I was lucky enough to meet the Khan who bore your name when he visited Gryndel. Krum the Great. Krum the Terrible. Krum the Law-Giver. You have the same set to your chin, and you fairly reek of the same qualities I found in him. Not a common scent on the grounds these days. Or ever, for that matter.” The Guardian’s head shot forward and nudged Viktor solidly in the shoulder, almost conspiratorially.

He neither moved nor commented, and the Guardian cocked a scaly brow approvingly and took a long sniff up Viktor's chest, nearly brushing his chin with the great scaly nostrils. The Guardian's breath ruffled his hair before the creature backed off.

"Worthy companions, I hope, if you find them worthy of your protection. You will continue to live up to all of your names, if I see into you clearly. But I would expect no less of the son of Nikolas Krum and Anya Milyaskova," the Guardian added with a great sigh. "I would have granted you many favors if you had but asked, as I would have gladly granted your parents many favors. Your parents were part of a mostly peaceful time here at Durmstrang. The one who rises anew was just a rumble in the distance. Pity you could not have been a part of that untroubled time," the Guardian said almost kindly.

"I told them I would be threatening to eat their great-grandchildren when they were out past curfew. I will probably be threatening to eat yours, if they are sent here. Very well, Viktor Nikolas Krum, ask your favor, and I will grant it," the Guardian said in a surprisingly gentle tone, nudging his great scaly nose, if possible, even closer to Viktor's face and peering into his eyes with a curious and questioning gaze.

"I ask that while these three are on the grounds, under your domain, you guarantee their safety. Everywhere. Anywhere. From everything," Viktor requested.

"You mean protect them on the entire grounds from any danger, not just guarantee that I or my children do not make them into a meal? Do you know what you ask?" the Guardian probed, narrowing his eyes even further.

"I do. I want you to protect them by any means necessary. From anything. From anyone. From everyone. If that means you have to tear me limb from limb to prevent me from deliberately bruising one of them, whether under my own control or not, so be it," Viktor said softly but firmly, in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Kill then? Kill anyone who threatens them? Anything?" the Guardian asked lightly, sliding a rasping pale tongue across his teeth in a thoughtful gesture.

"Kill if necessary. I do not want one hair on their heads touched while they are here. I promised their safety. To them. To others. I mean to guarantee it, even if it means death. Do you understand?" he replied.

"I understand. I understand that you are truly your father's son. He was loyal as well, and honorable," the Guardian said, widening his eyes and continuing to stare into Viktor's eyes intently. "You have a lot of Anya Milyaskova

flowing through your veins as well, I made no mistake by putting you in Gryndel's house same as your parents. You would have done the founder proud," he added, continuing to survey Viktor's face for a moment before pulling back.

"You flatter me," Viktor replied, again giving the deferential bow of his head.

"Sadly I do not. I scarcely do you justice. Very well, Viktor. You have your favor, and I cannot say you have not earned it. That you will not earn it soon enough," the Guardian narrowed his eyes and took them in, then turned to look toward the mountain. "Earth, air, fire, water. Two escape during the old order, defeat him in the new. Purebloods, halfblood, mudblood, too. Two escape from death, now death pursue. The risen cannot last, not when the past is present, and the present past," the Guardian said slowly, then turned back to Viktor. "I will let my children know they are not to be touched, even if that means snapping Headmaster Potenko's head off to keep him from pinching them," the Guardian said. "Oh, and Viktor... this is very important for some reason. Look to your heart. You will know when it is time to put this to use," he added almost as an afterthought. He gave his own respectful nod, then sank slowly below the surface, almost regal in his bearing.

"Wh...wh...what on earth was that?" Harry forced out finally.

"The Guardian. He belonged, if such a thing can be said to actually belong to anyone, to Gryndel, the founder. Bound to him really, more accurately. Gryndel saved his life and gave him a place to live. He was left with the task of guarding the grounds, and sorting us when Gryndel died and could no longer do so. He is ancient beyond measure, he sees things, some past, some present, some future. Sometimes he speaks in riddles, and it is useless to ask him to clarify. I think perhaps even he does not know what his riddles mean at times."

Viktor looked at the water, and spoke again, "He was probably ancient beyond measure by the time he came here. Heaven only knows what he really is, I do not think he would have granted Newt Seemander an interview for Fantastic Beasts, and strictly speaking, he is not a beast, since he obviously can carry on a conversation. He will sometimes grant favors, if you earn them and can get up the courage to ask. He has the right to eat you if you ask a favor you are unworthy of, but I do not think he has actually exercised it since Gryndel's day. A certain matter of a dishonest professor accepting payments from parents for grades and asking for a means of escape when Gryndel discovered it," Viktor replied, turning to face them again.

Viktor continued, "He is rather an effective deterrent to students wandering the grounds when they should not, as well. The last thing you want is for the Guardian or one of his children to come on you while they are hunting. When they are hungry, they are not nearly as reasonable as he was just now.

They did apologize for eating the horses that time, but then, the last groundskeeper should not have left them in the field. Little good it does for anyone to shut the door and apologize when the horse is already out of the barn and eaten. They do not hunt often, only once every few months and they warn the faculty so they can keep an extra eye out, but they do not bother telling the first year students that," he grinned. "Alexei and I were one of the few who bothered to read up much on the history of our school, so we soon worked out when it was safe by watching how many faculty were listed for grounds patrol," he added with a wink to Hermione.

"You don't seem the type to be out wandering around when you shouldn't be," Hermione said.

"You don't either but you seem to be in the thick of a lot of things. Have you not heard that it is always the quiet ones?" Viktor laughed. "Alexei and I used to sneak out to the lake at least once a week after hours after we figured it out, down to the paddocks to give the horses carrots and apples, we broke into the library just to prove we could, flew on the Quidditch pitch in the dark... once we went into the woods when we had no business being there and almost got ourselves eaten by a Romanian Longhorn. What it was doing this far north, I have no idea, but we nearly stepped on its tail, and if it had not been for the trees being so thick and the moon being behind a cloud, I think it would have found us in two seconds and no one would have known what happened to us. We ran back so hard we very nearly ran headlong into the moat, and then into Madame Durshenkova on patrol in the hall. I'm surprised she could not track us by the pounding of our hearts and our panting anyway. For a librarian, she is a bit deaf. It scared us so badly, we did not sneak out again for a month. We contented ourselves with raiding the kitchen every night. We did not get to do it much once I started being off campus so much and Alexei started taking tamer company of the female sort on his nighttime walks. It is a wonder we survived a year, we were so foolhardy," Viktor added, sobering a little.

"So where is the castle?" Ron asked.

"You're looking at it," Viktor replied.

"What? No I'm not. There's nothing there. There's the lake, there's the dock, there is the mountain range, there are the woods, but I sure don't see a castle," Ron said, waving his hands about the grounds. He stared off at the base of the mountain, where a light mist swirled in the sunshine.

"Yes you are. The Guardian heard us coming, he concealed the castle. Look," Viktor spread his palm in front of his lips, pursed them, and blew a short blast of air in the direction of the mist. It scattered as though pushed out on a hurricane. A short stroll from the edge of the lake, there stood a deep, wide moat, and situated behind it, butted up against the foot of the mountain, stood a

tall, imposing castle, thinner and taller than Hogwarts, a deeper shade of gray that would blend in quite well with the mountains, especially when the sun was not as bright as it was currently. It looked more welcoming than any of them could have imagined, from Viktor's descriptions of it.

"So how do we get across the moat? I don't see a drawbridge or anything like that," Hermione asked.

Viktor walked up to a great stone pillar on the shore, to the left of its mate. He pressed a sequence of stones, and the water began to churn. "Not another of your friends?" Harry asked.

"No. The bridge," Viktor replied, as large blocks of stone began to rise in sequence out of the water, constructing a curving walkway across the moat, evidently unsupported by anything other than thin air. "Come on then," he said, walking toward the edge.

"Is that thing going to hold?" Hermione asked.

"I haff used it for years," he replied, stepping backwards onto the bridge, jumping up and down on it, the stone not budging under his feet. They walked across and into the castle, greeted inside the foyer by a man not nearly as tall as Viktor, but certainly many times as broad. He rather reminded Hermione of a polar bear, with his sleek white hair, his full face, ruddy round cheeks, and his portly frame. He barely reached Viktor's chin, he had large black eyes, that twinkled rather like another headmaster's, and his robes were trimmed in a shaggy white fur, which furthered the resemblance to a big white bear.

"Headmaster Potenko," Viktor called to him, bowing slightly before covering the rest of the distance between them.

"Mr. Krum. I trust all your guests have arrived safely and find themselves welcome? I must apologize for not meeting you at the bridge, you arrived earlier than I expected," Potenko said in a thick Russian accent, heavily rolling his 'r' sounds. "I must also apologize for the state of the castle. We are still in the first stages of making it...a bit more comfortable, but I hope the guest rooms will be satisfactory. You may find our house elves more evident than usual. Do not hesitate to ask for anything you may need from them. Albus Dumbledore helped me to expand the staff over the summer. I still have a terrible time convincing them that they can call me a dotty old fool if they like, but they have made progress. Is Dumbledore well? Any news from Hogwarts?" The words tumbled from his mouth rapidly, and the three were a bit taken aback that he had mentioned Dumbledore in such an obviously affectionate manner. His voice boomed almost as though it were shouting from a barrel, which seemed appropriate, given his barrel shaped frame.



“He’s fine, I suppose. We have our usual one and done Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Fleur Delacour from the Triwizard Tournament is taking the job for a year, so I suppose he will be looking for another soon enough. He did say to send greetings and congratulations on starting your first year as headmaster. Did you say he helped you get more house elves?” Hermione said after a pause. Dumbledore must have really been scraping bottom, she thought to herself. Fleur hadn’t even managed to avoid the Grindylows in the second task, what could she know about defense against dark arts? It might be Lockhart all over again.

“He did. I sent some of them to Hogwarts to train with a, err, Dobby, I think it was. Mr. Krum, I think I can work out which one is Miss Granger, but the other two, I may need a bit of help,” Potenko waved a meaty hand in their direction.

“I apologize. I am being lax with introductions. This is Miss Hermione Granger. She is entering her fifth year at Hogwarts, and she was an admirable partner at the Yule Ball last year,” Viktor lifted Hermione’s right hand and placed it lightly in the headmaster’s broad, spread hand. He lifted it and planted a speedy formal kiss on the back of it, then folded the other large hand over it.

“Pleased to meet you Miss Granger. Welcome to Durmstrang. May you find your two days here pleasant,” he added with an even more formal bow.

“This is Mr. Ronald Weasley, also entering fifth year. I believe you met his father once at a conference. Mr. Arthur Weasley, he works with the Ministry,” Viktor steered Ron by the shoulder, maneuvering him so Potenko could shake his hand, sandwiching Ron’s hand much as he had Hermione’s.

“Ah, yes, Arthur Weasley. He gave a fascinating presentation on Muggle Artifacts. Years ago. He could not have been much older than yourself, but I cannot forget that shocking red hair. You will find we do not see many redheads at Durmstrang,” Potenko seemed to barely suppress a laugh.

“And this is, of course, Mr. Harry Potter. Fifth year, fellow competitor and champion in the Triwizard Tournament,” Viktor added in a soft voice.

“Mr. Potter. You have my admiration for your worthy performance. Particularly in the face of such a large disadvantage. Viktor tells me you demonstrated some remarkable flying skills, so it is a pity you will not be staying long enough to get a great deal of flying in, or even a team scrimmage.” Potenko spoke gently, then smiled. “I do not know what we will do for entertainment when Viktor is not on a house team any more. Take field trips to Vratsa, I suppose. I fear any replacement Professor Pushkin finds for Gryndel House will be a bit of a letdown in most people’s eyes,” he continued, turning his smile on Viktor. Unlike Karkaroff’s flattery, they all got the feeling this was genuine praise.

“You haff not seen Brecht fly yet this year, then? She has been training over the summer, gotten very fast. I would not be surprised if she bumps Masha out of the starting position easily. Her style would be different of course, but a little variety never hurt anyone. That would be five good years counting this one from a first class seeker for Pushkin. There was Quidditch before I played, there will be Quidditch long after I am gone,” Viktor shrugged.

“But I do believe it will be a long time before we see someone else here with your kind of skill at such a young age. I feel privileged to have seen you play so many games well before everyone talked about you in the World Cup. But enough Quidditch talk. I am sure your guests want to get to their rooms. I put them near your quarters, the ones nearest the guest baths,” Potenko motioned toward the central staircase and Hermione found herself shiver a little when the image of Poliakoff trying to wrestle a delirious Viktor down them flashed through her mind.

“All you haff to do is notify me, and there will be tickets for you, whenever and wherever you want them. How can I not offer them after that high praise?” Viktor smiled back.

“I will be seeing all of you at the Opening Ball, if not before,” Potenko added bowing formally once more, before turning militarily on his heel and striding off down the hall, where Hermione figured Karkaroff’s quarters had once been, where the infirmary was. Where Viktor allowed in his letter he had almost died. And somewhere at the head of the stairs was the stone floor where he would have died had Alexei not found him in time. She stared up at the staircase for a long while, until her thoughts were interrupted by Viktor’s voice.

“I hope you do not think he was presumptuous? Kissing your hand? It is just that it is customary when there is a formal introduction...” Viktor began anxiously.

“No, no, it was fine. I feel like I’m in a fairy tale or something, all this formal bowing and kissing of hands. So if we had been formally introduced, you would have kissed my hand?” Hermione asked as she shouldered her small pack again before Viktor could scoop it up and they set off up the stairs.

“I suppose I would have. Problem is, there was no one to introduce us, Miss Granger. And I wish you would let me take that,” he added in a light voice.

“I’ll hit you with this pack if you offer again. It’s only a few changes of clothing. I had to hang onto it for all I was worth the entire walk. Don’t think I didn’t see you eyeing it. I’m perfectly capable of carrying it myself,” she grouched.

“That is not the point. You are a guest. I haff had it drilled into me from

birth to carry a lady's luggage when she is a guest," Viktor argued back.

"Well, Hermione's no lady, so you haven't broken any rules," Ron laughed.

"It's a bit close to the truth, Viktor. Tell you what, I'll settle for the formal introduction later in lieu of you carrying my luggage," she laughed.

"Viktor! You back already!" a familiar voice exclaimed from the upper railing. Alexei's dimpled face shone over the banister near the top of the stairs. He ran down a few stairs to meet them, then whirled and accompanied them to the top, almost jogging to keep up with Viktor's long stride. "You might want to have your stick ready. I do not think girls believe me anymore when I tell them you have a date already. Too many years using that excuse. No surprise when they do not believe you. Liesl, she is telling everyone she is going with you and all the girls who believe her hate her for no reason and Katrina is telling everyone she is full of ..."

"Alexei! I am not interested in catfights," Viktor grumbled.

"Too bad, there have been some good ones, more vicious than ever. I have not even decided where to begin picking over the leftovers," Alexei said mischievously. Viktor just rolled his eyes in reply. "I think they got wind you might be leaving before the next ball. Katrina has a big mouth," he added over his shoulder.

"I do not think it was Katrina's big *mouth* that made you ask her to the finals," Viktor replied with an arched eyebrow.

"Fair enough. She has other charms. Madame. Masters Weasley and Potter," he bowed low repeatedly and backed away. "I will see you at dinner in a little while?" Alexei inquired.

"If you behave yourself. Heaven only knows how I stand the embarrassment of being seen with you," Viktor snorted.

"Same way you take all the attention. Grudgingly. I will save a table space for six. Maybe I will have my date by then. Back to my own little room," he called, waggling his eyebrows and walking across the landing to the upperclass dorms.

"Your bath here, your bedroom here. You two choose between these two rooms, our shared bath is right there. That one up there at the far end is where I ...sleep," Hermione noticed he hesitated a moment before saying the last word, as though actually sleeping in that room was a new concept, something he had never really tried before. "Potenko let me keep it for the time being," he added. She glanced at the patch of stone beneath his boots, wondering where exactly

he had sprawled on that night.

Hermione opened the solid oak door to her room and nearly dropped her pack. The room was large, with a heavy oak dresser and bureau, as well as a bedside table. The broad window looked out onto the mountains behind the castle, and the king size canopy bed was draped with opulent curtains, in a deep purple color. "Helps keep out the cold in the winter. I doubt you will need them while you are here," Viktor murmured, flipping the curtain at the head of the bed back with a finger. "And there is a fireplace. Light it if you get cold," he added, pointing at the small hearth on the other side of the bed." He paused and looked around. "It did not used to look like this," he said wonderingly. "Dinner is in an hour," he said, collecting himself. He stepped over to her and picked up her hand, "Why Miss Granger, I am most pleased to meet you. Viktor Krum at your service," he said solemnly, lifting her hand and bending low to place his lips on the back. "I would be most greatly pleased if you allow me to escort you to dinner this evening," he intoned, every bit as formal as Potenko earlier.

"What's the proper response?" Hermione stage whispered.

"If you want to stay in my good graces, 'I would be delighted' works," he whispered back in the same fashion, not changing his expression and barely moving his lips.

"I would be delighted, Mr. Krum," she replied aloud, with a small nod of her own head.

"Until then," he said, taking a large step backwards toward the door, bowing, then swinging on his booted heel as Potenko had done earlier, closing the door behind him. She smiled to herself and shook her head. She should thank Alexei, annoying chatterbox though he was at times, for saving her from losing Viktor before she ever got the chance to meet him. It hurt to picture him on that floor with nothing left in him to fight Karkaroff. She much preferred him now, not so thin and pale and yellow as he was last year. He could still stand a bit more weight on his slender frame, but somehow, he seemed much younger than he had the previous year, awake or asleep, she realized suddenly. Must be because he doesn't scowl so much, anymore, she told herself as she hung her cloak up to shake the wrinkles out of the silvery fabric. Maybe he unpacked a bit of his own baggage over the past few months. He didn't seem so weighted down.

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## CHAPTER 25

A light rap on the door told her that her hour was up. "Coming," she called, and swung the heavy door back. Viktor stood there with Ron and Harry.

“Come on then. We are waiting on you,” Viktor said.

“You made them wait on me, more likely,” Hermione replied.

“I won’t deny it’s true, will you Harry?” Ron looked at Harry.

“True enough. I mean, I’m pretty hungry myself,” Harry answered.

“Alexei cannot hold the chairs forever. Well, he could, but I give him five minutes before he forgets all about the chairs and goes wandering off after some girl,” Viktor added.

Hermione stepped out into the hallway and realized there was a steady stream of students of all years milling around in the passages downstairs, and many in the upper years streaming down the staircase in small groups, talking in a cacophony of foreign languages. Wonder if Hogwarts sounded like this to him? she thought to herself. Probably not. He at least knew some English. Her Bulgarian was poor to non-existent, though Viktor had taught her a handful of words, her Russian worse. She recognized the German, but could pick out little that had any meaning. There were other languages, as well, she figured. Surely most of the Slavs went here? She saw what Potenko meant about redheads being thin on the ground at Durmstrang. The school seemed to be a study in extremes. Most of the students had dark, dusky, even swarthy skin like Potenko’s, and hair and eyes that ranged from the completely jet black to the dark, dark brown, more like Viktor’s coloring. It was rare to spot anyone with just plain brown hair. The rest seemed to be like Malfoy, fair and pale and Nordic looking, with whitish blond hair and milky skin. Occasionally, she spotted someone more like Anya, with milky skin and dark features, but they were rare. Seeing her scrutiny of the rest, Viktor nudged her lightly with an elbow. “We used to joke that it was the Cossacks and the Valkyries,” he whispered.

They waited for the staircase to mostly clear before starting down. They were halfway down when a musical, lilting voice with a German accent rang out behind them, loudly enough to echo on the stone walls. “Viktor!” It was backed up by a chorus of giggles. Viktor paused and his shoulders twitched up toward his ears, as though someone had just unexpectedly dumped ice water on his neck.

He mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like, “Head Valkyrie,” before forcing himself out of his cringe and slowing his descent of the stairs. A flurry of light footsteps overtook them and four girls, all of the Valkyrie variety huddled around in front of Viktor. He bore nearly the same expression he had on his face (or was it lack of expression?) for the conversation with the Guardian earlier. Well, maybe not, he didn’t look nearly as pleased. “Liesl,” he forced out politely through his teeth. He could hardly have looked less thrilled.

“The ball is tomorrow night and you have been avoiding me, naughty b..” she began in a teasing voice.

“Spoken for,” he interrupted.

As they all stood there, various packs of girls trailed by, whispering and giggling and pointing and tossing their hair in Viktor’s direction. Viktor gave some of them pointed looks, as though he were willing them to the bottom of the stairs. Most of them slowed considerably when they noticed Viktor on the stairs, and one even squealed “He looked at me!” excitedly once she and her group reached the bottom of the staircase.

“You didn’t even let me finish. Okay, so you have a date for the ball, very well, then. We hear this every year from Alexei, ‘Oh, I think he has a date already,’ and then she never seems to show and you hide in the corner away from everyone or talk to your teammates about Quidditch all night and won’t even give a girl a dance. I suspect you danced with Brecht that time two years ago because she was a silly little first year on your Quidditch squad and so awed by you she couldn’t talk so you didn’t have to carry on a conversation. Last year, she dared to speak to you. She may even have gotten an entire sentence out if you gave her the whole night. At least now she manages to stutter a whole word at you occasionally during practice, I notice, V-v-v-v-v-v-viktor K-k-k-k-k-k-k-krum,” Liesl mocked cruelly, dropping into a high pitched and babyishly sweet voice on his name.

“You just danced with her so none of the rest of us could get at you. Poor thing probably still talks about it, even if she did turn a hundred shades of red the entire time she danced with you. If she has any friends with hours to spare. Or maybe she couldn’t tell it was you through those thick glasses of hers, the little four-eyes. But maybe it wasn’t just pity, maybe you think you have to dance with Brecht. Maybe Alexei never passes on all these invitations you have been getting all these years from such pretty girls,” she pouted prettily. “Perhaps if I speak to you directly instead of going through Alexei you will promise a girl at least a single dance, just in case your date does not show, hmm?” she added, fluttering her eyelashes and reaching to stroke a palm up his chest. Hermione was reminded of the predatory way the Guardian had thrust his nose into Viktor’s chest and sniffed, only this time, Viktor stepped back at the touch.

“Spoken for,” he said again, more firmly, and opened his mouth to add more, but she interrupted him this time.

“Now, you haven’t taken to doing your own lying, have you? Normally you get Alexei to do it for you, you’re so pitifully bad at it. You may be shy, but you are an honest and honorable man, Viktor,” she scolded, stepping forward again. Viktor actually stepped back hard into the broad railing, which barely reached his waist, and flattened his palms against the top. If she hadn’t known

better, Hermione would have thought he was contemplating bailing over it, and she felt the sudden urge to step between them and shield him. She realized it was rather absurd to think about her protecting Viktor from this little slip of a girl who didn't even reach his chin, but Viktor looked more wary of her than he would have if she had been something set to devour him alive.

"Actually, he's promised to dance with me already," she found herself saying.

Liesl turned a cold glance on Hermione with her icy blue eyes. "Has he really? And who might you be? I don't remember seeing you before," Liesl tilted her nose upward, in a manner that reminded Hermione unpleasantly of Fleur in her haughtier moments.

"Hermione Granger. I'm a guest, I don't attend Durmstrang. I'm his date for the ball," she replied in an even voice. She felt like punching this ice goddess in the nose. She must have been hanging around Ron far too long, for she would soon be throwing the words 'Eat slugs!' at her if she wasn't careful.

"Viktor? Is this true?" she demanded, folding her arms. From the way she narrowed her eyes, then cocked her blonde eyebrows in surprise, Hermione could tell she recognized the name. There were enough articles about me last year, she thought to herself.

"It is," he answered, "I plan on dancing with someone I do not scrimmage with this year. And even as a supposedly silly first year, Brecht had ten times the sense you have now. If you mock her in front of me again, so help me..." Viktor's eyes narrowed and seemed to darken, his voice began low and dropped lower, a warning note in it, as there had been when he confronted Rita Skeeter, then trailed off as his dark eyes darted to the head of the stairs.

"V-v-v-viktor... a m-m-moment please," came a quiet female voice from the top of the staircase. Hermione turned to see a small blonde girl with large wire rimmed glasses, thin and much shorter than herself, trailing down the other banister, then crossing to their side. She barely cleared Viktor's waist when she stood on the same step. Liesl and her gang tossed their hair and glided off down the stairs, haughty as ever. "P-p-p-p-p-p-pushkin w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-wants m-m-m-e t-to t-t-t-t-t-t-try o-o-out f-f-f-for f-f-f-f-f-f-first t-t-team n-n-n-n-n-n-now! Th-th-thank y-y-y-y-you," she pushed the words out of her mouth, struggling with her speech under Viktor's gaze, then she shyly stared at the toes of his boots and flushed, her face going very pink. This must be Brecht. Liesl's impression of her had been all too painfully accurate.

Viktor grasped her upper arm and shook her gently to get her to look up at him. His hand was so large compared to her thin arm that he could easily have wrapped his long fingers back and touched his palm with her arm settled in his

hand. He made her look like a tiny, delicate doll in comparison. He had to lean over to address her easily. "I did not talk him into anything you did not deserve. I saw you on the practice field last week. You are much faster than you were last year. Pushkin only thinks he wants a bigger seeker. I got him too used to my being able to block. It is just because I put a beater off his broom once when I had to, now he thinks every seeker has to be able to do that. He will see. You will not need to block with the kind of speed you have. If you learn to feint, I would hate to play against you. Masha is too slow, and does not even want the position. Pushkin barely kept Masha on the team last year while I was gone. Masha is more interested in Care of Magical Creatures and says so. Masha will be warden somewhere, not a Quidditch player. You could be a professional some day," Viktor said softly and the small girl's pink face went even redder. She suddenly found his boots intensely interesting again.

"Y-y-y-y-y-your tr-tr-tr-tr-tr-tr-training. W-w-w-w-wa-wa-wa-watching y-y-y-y-you," she responded finally.

"Your practice, you mean. Eat with us, if Alexei has not lost our seats or given them away. This is Ron, Harry and Hermione," he said, presenting her to them. "This is Marianne Brecht. She was second team seeker for Gryndel house in her first year. We do two tiers of teams, even have inter-tier matches, and second team players usually move up the ranks in later years, pretty rare for a first year to be on either one," Viktor explained.

"You three go ahead, Viktor and I will catch up in a minute," Hermione told Marianne, Ron, and Harry.

"Good enough. I'm starving. Dining hall that way, then? Follow the crowd?" Ron asked Marianne, who just nodded and turned a new shade of pink. A few more latecomers were filing around them on the stairs, and before Hermione could speak, one of them stopped on the same step. To her surprise, Hermione recognized her. It was Elena, taller and more elegant looking than she had been even the year before at Hogwarts. She was nearly as tall as Viktor, the top of her head coming just about even with his nose, her hair and eyes just as dark and piercing, but she had light, creamy skin like Anya's. Karkaroff had been right about one thing. They would make a striking couple, for she could easily picture them as royalty. If jaws had dropped when she and Viktor entered the Great Hall for the Yule Ball, they would have come unhinged if he had come in with Elena on his arm. They both had the upright stature, the height, the lifted chin, the firm set to their mouths, the overall bearing, without the haughtiness or vanity of someone like Draco Malfoy, or Liesl. Maybe there was something to this pureblood business, after all, she found herself thinking. She thought back to the Guardian's words. Krum. The Bulgarian Khan. He looked so angry right then, she could just about picture him turning Liesl's skull into a drinking cup like his namesake.



“How is my favorite fellow countryman?” Elena asked lightly, in a husky voice, her Bulgarian accent bleeding through. Hermione had assumed she was Russian, until she heard her speak.

“Tell me who he is, and I will go ask him,” Viktor replied acidly.

“Temper, temper. No need to take it out on me. Liesl getting up that considerable nose of yours about Poppet’s stutter?” she said in a concerned voice, looking after the tiny blonde head now disappearing around the corner. “Not much else makes you that angry, and the smoke is coming out your ears now. I saw Liesl trying to eat you up earlier, big boy. And in front of your date, too. I bet she felt a fool. Teach her to brag about her date when her supposed date is not knowing,” Elena said with an arch of her thin, dark, perfectly shaped eyebrow, then looked around at Viktor’s guest. “Go eat your dinner and enjoy your company, Viktor. Poppet has to learn to stick up for herself. You will not be here forever. Alexei and I will be gone soon enough, too. No dancing with her this year. You added at least six, maybe seven inches since two years ago, she hasn’t grown one, it would look ridiculous, and anyway, your dance card is all filled up with Herrr-, Herrrr-, Miss Granger, I von’t massacre it, he will be ready to thrash me, next,” she said with a cordial nod of her head to Hermione.

“If no one else will, I will dance at least one with her. No one else would these last two years, I had to do something, I could not just let her sit there,” he pleaded, his hands spread.

“You just sat there,” Elena countered.

“That was by choice, it is different. I do not believe I cried, either,” Viktor argued.

“She has to find her own partner soon enough, Viktor, you danced with her when no one else would, you trained her when Pushkin did not really want her on second team because she was so small, you showed her how to get faster, you persuaded him to let her try out tomorrow. You cannot keep this up. Poppet can hold her own in a fair fight,” Elena said bluntly, crossing her arms.

“No one who fights with her fights fair,” Viktor nearly whispered.

“Then she has to learn to fight dirty. Now get yourselves downstairs and eat before the house elves close the kitchen. I will try to let it be known in the girl’s dorm that Alexei did not dream up Viktor’s date this year, maybe you can get some peace tomorrow. His equally famous Yule Ball date is here. And tell Alexei I think about it if he behaves himself,” she added as she trotted down the rest of the stairs.

“Next time I send out press releases! Viktor Krum has real live date!

Alexei Poliakoff tells truth!" Viktor growled after her.

"No goot! No one ever believe Alexei Poliakoff telling the truth! No next time here and those madwomen do not listen, Viktor. Rita Skeeter just haff you married with ten kids, alone and pining over lost love, or in schoolvide orgy depending on day of veek with press release! Besides, that Hogvarts girl stuck vith you unless she tosses you off cliff, no matter vhat Rita Skeeter say. You are no Alexei," she called back.

"Elena and Brecht only two sensible girls in Durmstrang. But she cannot say your name yet, either. Now what were you going to say?" Viktor asked Hermione.

"I was just going to ask... no, it's silly," she replied.

"Nothing you ask could ever be silly," he countered.

"I just wanted to know if you wanted me to bother with the hair potion?"

"I prefer you did not. I like it just fine without you slicking it down. Like you care for hair any more than I do. You did not notice I cut mine," he pouted playfully.

"I did too! I just didn't mention it. You only trimmed it. Only difference is you don't have enough in back for that little ponytail now, you didn't touch the front or the sides," she ribbed back.

"I mean, I am sooo concerned with how I look and you do not even mention my drastic haircut..." he said in an exaggerated voice, as they continued down the stairs.

"Oh, good grief, two inches gone and I'm supposed to make over you. Vanity, thy name is Viktor. Oh, alright, I'll go with my hair all bushy and kinky already and have all these sleek and shiny Valkyries and Cossacks staring at me."

"Not all the Cossacks are so sleek," he replied, tossing his slightly wavy hair away from his eyes. "Stare all they like, they still do not get a dance with you, I'm going to keep you plenty busy."

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## CHAPTER 26

"Viktor!" Alexei shouted and waved, indicating two empty chairs by his side as soon as Viktor stuck his head around the door. Viktor waded through the

crowded room, clearing a path and leading Hermione by the hand. Hermione noticed that people respectfully shuffled out of the way when they saw who it was, he rarely had to excuse himself to get through. When he did have to speak, and people turned at his soft voice, usually nose to chest, looked up and saw Viktor, they moved even quicker. He stepped aside and let her go first, trailing behind once they reached a totally clear path.

“Elena says she think about it if you behave, whatever that means,” Viktor told Alexei as he caught up and pulled Hermione’s chair out.

“I ask her to be my partner at ball,” Alexei responded.

“I take back my statement about her being one of the two sane females in this school then,” Viktor said as he dropped into his seat.

“Because she has the good sense to consider an invitation from the most handsome gentleman in Durmstrang?” Alexei pouted.

“Who else asked her then?” Viktor jabbed back. Alexei put a hand over his heart in mock suffering and rolled his eyes.

“A-a-a-a-and w-w-w-w-who i-i-is th-th-th-th-the o-o-o-o-other s-s-s-s-s...” Marianne began, turning another shade altogether. It was obvious that she admired Viktor as a seeker, and Hermione suspected, had a raging crush on him. Hermione had heard her voice when she had been speaking to Ron with little evidence of her stutter as they had approached the table. When she spoke to Viktor, it multiplied horribly. She felt a stab of sympathy for the tiny girl.

“...sane female?” Viktor supplied when she paused for breath, to Marianne’s timid nod. “You, of course. Unless we count Hermione, and she is only visiting. Elena at least had some sense before she started dating Alexei. You better not get near him and for heaven’s sake, do not date him, Marianne! I swear Alexei eats brains. He turns the girls who have some sanity into simpletons somehow then leaves them littered over the grounds for the rest of us to trip over. I would hate to have to go hitting Alexei in defense of your honor because he is such an idiot and has the attention span of a stunned mountain troll! It would not be a fair fight, anyway.” Hermione got the distinct feeling that Viktor had threatened a lot of people on Marianne’s behalf. She didn’t seem to have many friends her own age, yet the other students obviously treated her well, at least when Viktor was around. He seemed to look after her like a younger sister.

“Not fair, Viktor, you could snap me like a twig. You could snap Potenko like a twig, and that is saying something. Besides, you know I would never hurt Poppet here. She is probably your replacement on the team unless Pushkin has some other trick up his sleeve. Masha gave notice, if Pushkin gets another

seeker, he is quitting. She will be like a little dragonfly, darting all over the pitch! Big change for those beaters who always try to bash you in the nose and get away with fouling you because you are a big boy and can take it, they will not be able to catch Poppet! Her nose is not such a formidable and tempting target, either,” he teased, reaching out to pinch her nose playfully. “And I did not hear you threatening to pummel me when Elena and I had that trouble before,” Alexei said, waving his fork at Viktor.

“Elena can take care of herself. Any Bulgarian woman worth her salt could skin you alive with her teeth without blinking, Alexei. You Russian boys are soft, big marshmallows,” Viktor replied, winking conspiratorially at Marianne.

“True. We Russians are poets and lovers and musicians, not fighters, Viktor. Not like you Bulgarians, always wearing your army boots and I bet your big sabers rattle when you get into bed. But I have to admit, the idea of scrapping with Elena is not unpleasant, she could wrestle me anytime,” Alexei rhapsodized, wide grin on his face.

“You see? You see, Poppet? This is the kind of rascal you girls have to put up with while waiting for a real man,” Viktor said, rolling his eyes. He turned to Hermione and covered her hand on the table with his own large one, “If I ever start to sound like that, feel free to smack me solidly in the head with the business end of a Firebolt.” Hermione laughed at that, but she felt a little twinge when she noticed Marianne looking longingly at Viktor’s hand over Hermione’s. Oh no, she definitely did have a crush, then.

Hermione tried to draw Marianne into the conversation where possible, but it hurt to watch her long, drawn out words get more and more difficult for her to form. She noticed that Viktor and Alexei both often finished sentences for her without betraying any impatience when they could divine what she meant to say. “I will come to tryouts tomorrow, Poppet. I want to see Pushkin’s jaw drop,” he told her when she excused herself from the table to head back to her common room for a potions study group.

“W-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-would y-y-y-y-y-y-y-you? I-i-i-i-it w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-will b-b-b-b-b-b-b-be s-s-s-s-so d-d-d-d-dif-dif-different th-th-th-th-thi-this y-y-y-y-ye-year. Y-y-y-y-you a-a-always h-h-h-had y-y-y-your sp-sp-sp-spot guaranteed. W-w-w-w-w-w-w-we all c-c-c-c-competed f-f-f-f-for th-th-th-the r-r-r-r-r-right t-t-t-to f-f-f-fill i-i-in w-w-w-w-w-when y-y-y-you w-w-w-w-w-were b-b-b-b-bu-busy w-w-w-w-w-with o-o-other th-th-th-things,” she finished finally, looking as though she had been granted a great treasure.

“You promise to practice your feint? I do not want to see the cup go back to Schylar’s house for a long time. And as for Konrad, I want Pushkin writing me that you gave him a nice juicy mouthful of mud the next time you play Bronsky’s house team,” Viktor smiled at her. She just bobbed her head enthusiastically

and ran for the door, changing to yet another shade of crimson.

“I hope you do not mind going to the Gryndel house tryouts? Harry and Ron may wish to watch the whole thing, but I haff to go at least for Poppet’s tryout. I promised her I would even last year. It was the only way I could get her to ask Pushkin to try out for first team. He will not usually let anyone below fourth year even try out for first teams,” Viktor told Hermione.

“So how did you get on?” she asked.

“He was, shall we say, overruled?” Viktor answered, carefully avoiding the name of the person who had overruled Pushkin. Karkaroff, she suspected.

“He did not need much convincing once Pushkin saw you fly. You almost did not need the broom,” Alexei commented.

“I don’t mind. I can’t imagine anyone so tiny as Marianne playing Quidditch. Won’t it be rough on her, being so small?” Hermione asked Viktor.

“She makes up a lot for the size difference in speed and skill, and she is tougher than she looks. She broke an arm last year, when Konrad clobbered her, the big brute. He is almost my size,” Viktor added, finishing off his pumpkin juice.

“And why do you call her Poppet?” Hermione asked.

“Poppet. Old English. Means ‘doll’. We found it in an old History of Magic text in the library, in a passage about Salem. It seemed to fit. It was a lot nicer than what most people called her. Excuse me, I need to go find out when Pushkin is scheduling the seeker tryout, at the beginning or the end of Gryndel’s slot. He will not tell anyone who is trying out what order he is going to do the positions in. He likes to surprise them. I will be right back,” Viktor blotted his lips with a napkin, tossed it onto the table, then made his way toward the faculty table.

Alexei leaned across the empty seat between he and Hermione once Viktor was well out of earshot. “Sore spot with Viktor. He cannot stand to see anyone picked on. Little thing that she is, bookish, those glasses, that stutter, wanting to be a seeker and getting sorted into the same house with the vone school seeker with a guaranteed spot, she is a, how you say it? Prime target? Some of them are vicious. Girls especially, because, aside from Elena and Poppet, and now you, he does not give girls the time of day. Usually he bites their heads off or backs away from them like they breathe fire and spit acid. He only treats Elena nicely because she never go after him, she was nice to Poppet, she dated me, and they can reel off that Bulgarian together. Bulgarian is still my veak language. Viktor’s much better at Russian than I am at Bulgarian,” Alexei

said as he shook his head and watched Viktor speak to a large man at the end of the table that Hermione took to be Professor Pushkin. "Does not help that everyone but Viktor knows Poppet is sweet on him ever since he danced with her that first time. Forgive me for saying this, no reflection on you, but Viktor is clueless when it come to females even if he is wise about them. Knows what to look for in a woman, and yes, by that, I mean you, but mystified as to why girls act like that around him. He has no idea Poppet likes him that way," Alexei told Hermione.

"How could he not? I mean, the stutter alone..." Hermione began.

But Alexei interrupted, "He never hear her stutter less. He thinks she is that bad always. Elena and I, the rest of the school, they have heard her stutter just a tiny bit when Viktor is not around, seen that she does not blush a hundred colors when he is not there. They see her stare at him when he is not looking, watch herself in his boots when she talks to him. He thinks Poppet is always that shy and awkward. Poppet talks like that all the time around him, you see? Once she started talking to him at all. I do not think they said a word to one another in the first six months they knew each other except 'Would you like a dance?' at her first opening ball. Viktor could not take her crying by herself in a corner when a pack of girls teased her. When a big old sixth year who is already being mentioned in every Quidditch story as a probable World Cup player dances with you, it shuts a lot of mouths. Even then she did not anything like reach his chest, and he has grown at least half a foot since then. He gave her a dance or pulled her into the Quidditch talk at the rest of the balls he attended, too, before the teasing could start."

Alexei twisted in his seat and went on, "Maybe that why Viktor sit with her at practice when neither was flying. He felt sorry for her and she never talked much. She was no work when he did not even feel like talking about Quidditch. He coached her, because they scrimmage together sometimes and Masha did not want to practice extra. Masha did not want the job in the first place. He used to put her on the best broom he had while he rode the oldest thing the school owned, just to even things up. Viktor probably would have coached her just so he could have a better scrimmage partner, even if no one else wanted his position. Competitive. Both of them. Poppet wants it. Problem is, she wants Viktor too. I hear tell she cried when she heard about you last year. Of course, she was not only one. A third of the school cried. Elena knows she cried when she found out you were coming here. Elena keeps trying to hint, get him to step back and make her fend for herself so she gets some practice before Viktor leaves for good, but Viktor has no clue. He is soft hearted. Sometimes he cannot see beyond that nose of his, he does not see reason with Poppet. I just wanted you to know he is not being deliberately cruel to Poppet, he just does not know. He would not be cruel that way, he does care for her, but as a friend, a mentor," Alexei summed up.

“Clueless about girls, huh? That mean he’s clueless about me?”  
Hermione asked.

“Heavens no. He loves you madly, I think, a blind man could see that. He contends you are no ordinary girl. I am inclined to agree. No ordinary girl could catch Viktor Krum’s eye. It is the ordinary ones that confuse and appall him. I would still like to know what you did in that library to get to him. Normally, he would rather shove a red hot poker in his eye than approach a girl for a drink of water in the desert. You he asked to a ball. Two balls now. I still cannot get the reason out of him,” Alexei mused, watching Viktor return to their table.

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## CHAPTER 27

Hermione couldn’t sleep. It may have been the bright moonlight spilling in through the sheer drapes, the strange room, the absolute quiet, the anticipation she felt about the next day, or all of these, but she felt as though her eyes were propped with toothpicks. Maybe Viktor was still up. Maybe they could talk. Take a walk, even. Sneak down to the kitchen. Sit together. Hang upside down from the banister by their heels like vampire bats. Anything would be better than lying here staring at the canopy, beautiful as it was. She scooted out of bed and pulled her dressing gown over her pyjamas. She crept to the heavy door and opened it. She would light her wand when she got past Harry and Ron’s doors, to avoid waking them. Nothing short of a search light would wake them when you wanted to rouse them, but knowing her luck, better not to risk it. The torches in high holders along the wall would cast enough light to get to Viktor’s door. He slept so lightly, she could wake him without disturbing the rest.

She was rather startled when her foot and knee bumped into something quite solid in the dark, in her doorway, where there should be nothing solid. She half swallowed a short, strangled scream, not getting much volume. She was just about to catch her breath and really shriek when she felt a hand curl on her calf, but then Viktor’s voice came sharp but soft in the darkness, “Hermione!” It seemed to be coming from roughly in front of her, and below her. Just about where she had nudged her foot into whatever that was in the dark.

“*Lumos!*” she whispered, lighting her wand. Viktor sat at her feet, twisted around to look up at her, hand steadied against her leg. “What are you doing there?” she hissed at him.

“What are you doing out of bed?” he asked her anxiously.

“I couldn’t sleep. I wanted to come get you. I thought we could talk or something. Now answer me, what are you doing there?” she asked a little more kindly.

“Nothing is wrong? You are not hurt? Sick? Scared?” he insisted.

“Scared? Not before I bumped you. That took ten years off my life. I’m fine. I just couldn’t sleep. Nerves about tomorrow night, I think. And it’s a lot quieter in there than in the dorms. The silence is deafening. Now what are you doing there?” she asked a third time, then answered her own question. “You were sleeping there, guarding the door, weren’t you?” she said as it dawned on her. He had seemed so intent on her safety and well-being just now. He couldn’t be surprised that she had yelped when she bumped into an unexpected body in the hall, could he? Of course. He had been guarding her door.

“No.”

“Okay, so you were sitting there. Wide awake, then, guarding the door,” she replied, catching the minor loophole in her question. Liesl had been right about one thing. He was a pitifully bad liar. He might as well wave a sign. His answer had been utterly unconvincing, even if he was technically telling the truth.

“Yes.”

She sighed and sat down next to him, hip to hip, leaning into the crook of his arm when he resituated himself with his back against the door frame. Her head fell against his shoulder, and she realized with a start that he was still wearing his clothes from earlier in the evening, boots and all. His wand was in his hand. She peered up at him questioningly. “I promised,” he said simply.

“It didn’t mean you had to do this. Sit on a stone floor all night. You set protection charms when I came in to go to bed,” she scolded. “I can hear, Viktor, and I do a fair bit of reading. I recognized the words and your voice. You asked the favor. I don’t know what the Guardian’s children look like, but I suspect that big shaggy thing with wings patrolling outside my window earlier wasn’t an owl. It was nearly the size of a...a... a... St. Bernard,” she said softly.

“I promised,” he said again in that same stubborn tone, and tightened his arm around her. She knew it was no use arguing, so she just settled into the position more comfortably, breathed in the scent of him, listened to his heart beat under her repositioned ear, and felt the even rise and fall of his chest. She knew he wouldn’t sleep at all tonight. He had a promise to keep. And Viktor Krum, she had learned, was nothing if not an honorable man. After her scare, she felt all wrung out. She didn’t have the energy to protest much.

It didn’t take long for her breathing to fall into rhythm with his own, for all her muscles to go slack and drift off into sleep with the rest of her as she relaxed into him. He was still quite wide eyed, having prepared for tonight by sleeping late that morning, resting up as much as possible. Not that he couldn’t have



done it without preparation, since he had gotten by on far less sleep than this each night for years. For what seemed like forever. But he might as well come out of it as rested as possible. It was to his advantage to be alert in case something should happen. It just had to be until the dawn started coming, then he could rest safely. Evil men love the darkness.... where had he read that? And something about night or the dark hiding the wickedness that men do as well, and possibly 'be ye therefore children of the light'...? It must have been Paul ... must it not? It sounded like him.

Just until dawn. Then he could put her back into her bed and lie in his own for a few hours. The Guardian had obviously passed the word on already, judging from Hermione's comment earlier, and all the various Sentinels, the Guardian's children, would be keeping watch outside. According to Alexei this night watch of the passageway was unnecessary if the favor was granted, but past experience nagged Viktor otherwise. Never turn your back. The greatest dangers were often what was inside already, even the things or people you welcomed in with open arms, not something you had to keep out. That applied in all things. Besides, he had a promise to keep. He had committed, he had to see it through. Leaving it solely in other hands was out of the question. Do nothing halfheartedly. If you're going to drown, do not try it in shallow water. An old Bulgarian proverb Papa loved quoting.

Sitting here now, feeling her warm head on his chest, her soft body curled into his side, he was glad he hadn't let Alexei talk him out of it. It had been quiet and still, no sign of trouble, but he would not have rested in his own bed. It was worth a few hours sitting on the floor concealed in the dark just below the light line of the torches in exchange for the peace of mind. He didn't completely trust all the protection charms and security spells he could put on their rooms. Not when he could walk a few feet from his door and put himself, his eye and ears and wand, right there in addition to all those things. At this moment, a few hours on the floor seemed a small price to pay for the present company, unconscious and unresponsive though it might be. He wound a tendril of her hair loosely around a finger and examined it in the torchlight, picking up the highlights, feeling its softness. He caught the occasional scent of her shampoo, something light and sharp, something with a hint of citrus.

Craning his neck around the door frame, keeping his body as still as possible to avoid waking her, he took a look outside. The changing illumination behind the clouds out her window told him the dawn would be breaking soon, the moon was still just visible over the top of the rocks. A great hulking birdlike shape sat in a niche across the way, on the side of the mountain. Right where one of the Sentinels should be. Good. Its eyes, their eyes, alone would be quite good enough come dawn, and he could rest. He was sure there were others he couldn't see right now, in various spots on the grounds. As the first thin rays of light began to poke through the clouds nearly an hour later, he scooped her up as gently as possible, sliding his right arm slowly beneath her already tented

knees, placed her back in the bed and closed her door. She never stirred. He took mental inventory and found he was only a little stiff, and tired, which was to be expected. In his room, he paused only to strip and drop his clothes and boots onto the floor with yesterday's clothes, tug on a pair of shorts. Normally he would have picked up after himself, but he had been quite busy with preparations these last two days. He would let the house elves do it this once, whenever they got to it. Crawling onto the bed without even pulling down the sheets, it seemed he could still feel her hair brushing his collarbone, the warmth of her cheek and her breath on his chest. He sprawled onto the pillow with a small smile playing on his lips and slept.

Hermione slept nearly an hour in her bed, then woke to the thin, misty gray light of early morning. It was past dawn, but still early, she figured, from the ethereal quality of the light, and the fog that hung heavy around the peaks and hadn't even started to burn off in the sun. She closed her eyes again, preparing to go back to sleep, but she started awake as she realized she was wearing her robe. Viktor. It hadn't been a dream. He had put her back, obviously. She slipped off the bed and went to her door. No Viktor. She glanced down the hall to his door, the passageway dim, still and undisturbed in the quiet, while everyone slept. She felt her way along the wall, her eyes slowly adjusting to the guttering torch light, and put a hand on the pewter door handle. She held her breath and turned, prayed it was unlocked, willed her heart to be quiet. If he was sleeping, she didn't want to wake him.

It took a few seconds for her eyes to readjust to the dawn light streaming in through the opening between his drapes and pick out his form on top of the bedcovers. The trail of his clothes spread out over a small patch of floor. His long limbs spread languidly over the bed, his bare skin ranged from tan to peach in the half light, the muscles well defined. She picked out his usual shorts riding low, a prominent hipbone jutting above the waistband, his slender frame, not so painfully skinny now, but still willowy, his face turned to the side and nearly buried into the pillow. His hair fell over his forehead, across the pillow in thick waves, brushed his lashes here, skimmed his cheekbone there. She fought the urge to brush it from his face. She could hear his breathing, deep and slow and untroubled. He had the barest trace of dark stubble along his jaw. She tried to stifle the cough that scratched at her throat, but it escaped, harsh against the stone walls and the cool air and the morning silence.

She held her breath once more, and waited for him to wake. Instead, he barely stirred, only burrowing more deeply into the pillow, then stilled. He was dead to the world at the moment. She felt a twinge of guilt. He was that exhausted because of her. Because of them. She crept back to the door, and shut it as gently as possible, then slipped back into her room and her bed.

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## CHAPTER 28

He awoke to Alexei's voice at the door, "Viktor! Are you in there?" and the bright light of full morning. He was half tempted to pull the pillow over his ears and ignore it, to try to go back to sleep, but it might be important. Besides, any more sleep would probably be too much, and leave him more tired in the end. Anything that got Alexei up before noon on a Saturday had to be important, he thought as he smiled to himself and headed for the door. He didn't bother with his robe. Alexei wouldn't holler like that in front of anyone. He pulled the door open and caught Alexei in mid-rap, about to strike the door. He looked slightly taken aback.

"What?"

"Still... asleep?" Alexei asked, sounding surprised. He ducked his head to the side and surveyed the room behind Viktor curiously, as though looking for something.

"I was."

"I'll come in then. Cannot haff you out in the hall like that, there vill be a riot. If you do not haff company, that is. Vhat haff you been up to?" he asked, scrutinizing Viktor.

"Company?"

"She is not still here?"

"What?"

"Vell, you come to the door dressed, or should I say, undressed like that, hours past your usual rising time, vith bed head and a grin on your face like Wronski himself just complimented you on your feint, and a big pile of robes strewn all over the floor. Now, either you got up to some gymnastics last night that tired you out or you vere having something besides vhat they are serving downstairs for breakfast?" he asked with raised eyebrows.

"Do you ever get your mind out of the gutter? Does it keep a summer home there or haff you moved it there permanently?" Viktor sighed and crossed his arms, exasperated. "I did nothing of the sort. Nothing like what you are implying. Want to check under my bed?"

"If you say so, Viktor. Nothing? I admire your restraint. You must be superhuman. The girl you talked about all this time is just down the hall and you did not even steal a kiss?"

“I prefer not to be a thief.”

“Gah! Viktor, if you were as self-righteous as you are virtuous, I would get sick from standing next to you, much less listening to you. The purity fairly radiates off of you. I do not understand you. All those girls chase you all these years, and you do not so much as look their way. Beautiful girls. Willing girls. You go off half a world away and pine after some girl with her nose always in a book, who does not know Wronski from a drunken leprechaun, pretty enough, I grant you, but nothing spectacular. This girl, who is three years younger, naive, probably, whose name you can barely say. You get her here, three doors down, private room, you know you can get away with anything, and you do not even attempt to -”

Viktor held up a silencing hand and broke in, “Do not say it. Do not dare imply that I would take advantage of someone. You would not understand if I explained it. Not yet. You will someday. When you wise up about Elena, figure out why the two of you keep getting back together, when you stop being such a fool about girls.”

“Viktor Krum take advantage? Heavens, no. He will not even accept what is offered. I love girls. All kinds of girls, what can I say?” Alexei said with an exaggerated shrug.

“No. You love a girl. You like the idea of Alexei Poliakov being a ladies man, chasing lots of girls. There is a difference. If you could get that ridiculous playboy fantasy out of your head, you would be much better off. Would you just admit you love Elena? No one here is trying to separate you two anymore. Igor’s gone. Potenko would be thrilled if during his term as headmaster, he does not have to catch you in a closet with a different girl every week.”

“Viktor, you bloody mind reader. Is it that obvious?”

“How obvious is it with me, Alexei?”

“Oh, so I might as well be wearing a sign?”

“Blinking lights and ten foot letters. I have seen billboards that are more subtle.”

“You guarded her door, that is why you sleep so late, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“You know that was not necessary.”

“But I did it anyway.”

“Viktor,” Alexei sighed, shaking his head, “I came in here to get you for breakfast, but I suppose ve haff missed that now. All this talk. How about ve take the girls on a picnic instead? Harry and Ron too. None of us haff eaten. I haff not seen her. The boys just got up. They vere tired from the trip, I guess. I suppose you vill insist on chaperones anyway, being the decent and upstanding young man you are. I could trust my sister vith you.”

“If you had one.”

“If I had one. Come on, ve vill hit the kitchen like old times, go out to the garden,” Alexei enthused.

“May I dress first or is that not on your schedule?” Viktor asked dryly.

“Might make for a more interesting picnic if you go that way. I vonder if Miss Granger is as trustworthy as you or as predatory as you seem to think I am? She vould haff to fight off a dozen other girls, but I bet she could take them. She might jump your bones over the orange juice if you go in your sleeping costume. Or out of it... Viktor, you need not glare at me like that. Okay. It was out of line. I apologize. I vas only joking. Viktor? I vill be in the hall... I vill knock on her door, come out vhen you finish dressing... Touchy about your lady, are you not? Loff does that to a man...”

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## Chapter 29

By the time he managed to get into some clean clothes he had to stop and pick up the pile on the floor. He found he couldn't stand to leave them there. It couldn't make him any later for breakfast. They were going to have to scrounge their own from the kitchen in any case. Elena, Alexei, Ron, Harry, and Hermione were all waiting on the landing outside his door already, Alexei with an outrageously oversized picnic basket on his arm. “The house elves might haff gone a bit overboard,” Alexei said in a deadpan, “I told them there vere only six of us, but they packed enough for six regiments. I should not haff mentioned the vord ‘guests’.”

“So I see,” Viktor replied. Hermione stepped away from the group and stood at his side. He noticed she looked nearly as pale as his face had been when he had washed it in the basin. Why was it that lack of sleep washed you out, drained your color? Alexei, evidently was making the same comparison, his eyes shifting back and forth between the two of them, but luckily, this time, he kept whatever he was thinking to himself. “East gardens?” Viktor asked him.

“East gardens. Big hedges this year,” Alexei replied, nodding. He whirled and headed down the stairs. Outside the castle, they broke right and rounded the moat and the east tower. Hermione gasped as they came upon what must

be the East Gardens. Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, rows and rows of thick, towering hedges in various neat formations, crawling with blooms of every color, size, shape and description. “The circle?” Viktor suggested when they all paused. It was the least mazelike formation, nice and open, plenty of room to spread out. Maze. He kicked himself mentally. Why hadn’t he thought about this?

The whole garden looked like a big maze, though it really was impossible to get lost inside it. Each graveled path always led out, if you stayed on it. None of the formations connected to one another, there was no dead end and your choice of path between the hedges only changed what scenery you got, which smells, which blooms, which vines, but it was a convincing enough illusion from the perimeter that many of the older students would tease new first years about dropping them off in the maze and letting them find their way out. They were the same type of hedges the Hogwarts gamekeeper, Hagrid, had used for the maze. It was what had prompted him to make the connection, to grunt, “Maze,” when Bagman had expected them to guess what the third task was going to be.

Harry eyed the entrance a bit uncertainly, and Viktor felt a stab of guilt. Now who was poking at old wounds with a big sharp stick? “I know what it looks like, but it is really just a garden. No way to get lost. Gravel paths lead directly out, there are no dead ends. The circle is straight ahead, in the center,” he said softly. They spread out along the wide path between the hedges and walked toward the towering circle in the center.

As they drew nearer, Hermione was able to work out what the monstrous yellow, red, orange and white blooms, some bigger than her head, were. “Lilies... those are the biggest lilies I’ve ever seen...”

“Lilies. Tig...” Viktor began.

“Ouch! That thing just stuck me!” Ron yelled, yanking his hand back from the wildly rustling foliage and sucking a finger. He had been trying to pluck one.

“Tiger Lilies,” Viktor repeated, sighing. “You do not want a hug from one. Their thorns are as enormous as their blooms. They retract when they do not need them, like cat claws. There is a trick to getting one. Alexei here pestered the gardener until he would show him how. I’ll show you when you get the picnic basket unpacked.”

“So that is how you got vone without them eating you alive?” Elena asked Alexei.

“Nevermind I nearly took my hand off on those thorns anyway.” Alexei muttered.

“You are too impatient. If you did not rush, you would have gotten away unmarked,” Viktor told him.

“True. But Elena was not going to wait all day,” Alexei replied, plopping the picnic basket on the perfectly manicured grass in the middle of the circle of hedges and Tiger Lilies.

Viktor rustled around in the basket for a moment before coming up with a sharp paring knife. “You do not need all day,” he mused, balancing the handle in his fingers, weighing it in his right hand, then dropping it down against his leg, loosely gripping it. He walked up to one of the hedges, and stood in front of one of the flaming orange blooms, nearly as broad as his hand. He stuck a long finger into the foliage, a few inches below the bloom, and stroked up the thick stem, trailing it up and out of the thick leaves, to the swelling just below the blossom. There he brought up his middle finger, and pinched the stem lightly between the two fingers. Then he stood and waited.

For a long minute, nothing happened. Then, the lily began to rustle, to almost slither out of the hedge. Hermione never knew that a flower could be menacing, but it reminded her too much of a snake, and the thorns were raising like hackles all along the stem, some well over an inch long. Viktor stepped back several times, but never took his eyes off of the flower. He left little slack in the curling stem and before long, he was standing a good three feet from the wall of flowers. Suddenly, the stem tensed, coiled slightly, and the bloom shot closer to Viktor’s face. At the same time, he brought the paring knife up from beside his thigh and slashed it across in front of him, severing the stem cleanly. The stump of it hit the ground, then was gathered slowly back into the hedge like a fishing line reeled in. The thorns on the portion of stem he held promptly rained to the ground and withered. He handed it to Hermione without a word, then sat on the blanket next to her.

“Vot? No lily for me?” Elena asked lightly.

“You are more than welcome to get your own,” Viktor laughed, laying the knife on top of the basket and she laughed too.

“He told me the same thing about peeling my caterpillars in Potions third year, gah, I hated that job,” she told Hermione. “First words I hear out of him in two months of being my partner. Just nods or grunts or shakes his head for two months, then the only thing he says to me all class is ‘You are more than welcome to get your own’,” she mocked Viktor’s gruff voice.

“I cannot believe I was ever so rude. I will make it up to you. What color? Size?”

“Why the dance? Why can’t you just slice it off at the hedge?” Hermione

asked, breathing in the sweet scent of the bloom.

“The rest of them reach out and grab you if you are too close. See, the one you are holding, it tries to scare you off by moving, it only springs as a last resort when it realizes it has come out too far and the rest cannot help. If you slice it off at the hedge, the rest will cut you to ribbons before you can get out. Good thing they do not have teeth! The mediwitch has put a lot of disinfectant on people who think they can get a Tiger Lily that way. They get it all right, but they also get enough scratches to make them think twice about getting a bouquet,” Viktor grinned, popping one of the frosted grapes off the bunch into his mouth then opening one of the bottles of milk.

Elena stopped considering her choices for her flower and finally answered, “White, I think, a smaller one, for my hair tonight,” she nodded to herself approvingly and held her fingers a short space apart. Viktor stood up and wandered around the inner perimeter of the circle, crunching on an apple and taking the occasional swig of milk, the knife handle tucked between his fingers, next to the neck of the milk bottle.

“Third year potions. The year of the completely random partner that you were stuck with all year. Remember that ridiculously complicated lottery system the professor came up with? She could have just drawn names, not assigned us all double-blind numbers and all that nonsense! Took her longer to set up the rules than it did to let us draw! My goodness, I had Estefania Bogolova as my partner. I know you were not fond of her, Elena, but she was gorgeous if somewhat flighty. It is a wonder I passed that class, staring at her all afternoon,” Alexei said, “Luck of the draw, indeed.”

At the mention of the name, Viktor did a fair impersonation of Poppet’s chameleon routine, turning multiple shades of pink and red in a short space. “They are all too big in here, I will check around the outside hedges, they are smaller,” he said a little too loudly and a little too fast. He strode off like someone who realized he had forgotten an urgent appointment but just might make it if he hurried.

Elena shot Alexei a dirty look when his footsteps faded beyond the hedges. “Alexei! Surely you know better than to bring her up!” she hissed in a reproving whisper.

“What?” Alexei asked, genuinely puzzled. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Can you really be so clueless?” she whispered back, then slid her dark eyes to Hermione, who was looking at them both as though they had grown extra heads. “He has not mentioned her to you?” she asked Hermione. Hermione numbly shook her head no. What could be so awful about a girl that the mere



mention of her name sent him blushing and running? “No, of course not. He would not be so crass. It is not as though he would see it as something to brag about, like most boys. Estefania... she... she throw herself at him,” Elena whispered.

“So? Half of the school does. Has for years,” Alexei said matter-of-factly.

“No. She... she ... get herself expelled for it,” Elena said.

“She transfer. To Beauxbatons,” Alexei insisted.

“You really do not know? Vone night, when Viktor come back up rear staircase in early, early morning after travelling with Vratsa during his sixth year, she wait for him. Tell him she need to be with him. Offer herself to him,” Elena gestured with her hands helplessly, as though trying to pull the words she was so reluctant to say out of someone else’s mouth.

“You mean want to, errrr, sleep with him? Not all that new. Girl proposition him over breakfast right in front of me vonce in fifth year. He did not even get her name, just blushed at his eggs, then snarled at her and scared her off,” Alexei complained as though he just couldn’t understand what would have possessed Viktor to do such a thing.

“Vorse. I do not mean she just tell him she want to go to bed with him. She *offer* herself... right there ... on the landing! I mean she hike her robes, bend over the banister!” Elena’s voice was urgent and low, which emphasized its huskiness.

Even Alexei’s eyes went wide and his jaw went slack at that. “I did not know! How do you know? What did he do?” Alexei tugged at the sleeve of her robe.

Elena waved him off impatiently. “I thought he would have told you. Maybe he too embarrassed to even tell you, Alexei. He told her no, yanked her off the banister, pulled her underthings back up and her robes back down, and was going to run like scared rabbit, but the Potions Mistress already caught them both while she is coming back from kitchen. She had seen Viktor coming up the hall and wanted to make sure he made it to his room okay. Lucky she heard and saw whole thing, because Estefania tried to say Viktor was going to force himself on her when she get caught.”

A grimace passed over her face and she gritted her teeth. “Stupid, rotten girl. I never hear of a victim doing all the talking, then undressing herself for her attacker. Or a man *dressing* a girl he is about to attack. Viktor was completely in the clear, just standing there with his equipment bag, going back to his room, minding his own business. He had permission to be in the hall. She did not.

There was an impartial female witness. I roomed with her in same quad, remember? She cried for a day that they were tearing her away from the loof of her life by expelling her, the idiotic little trollop. Viktor went back to Vratsa for a sudden two day *practice* until she left. They called it transfer. Karkaroff did not want to embarrass Viktor any more than he was already. You know Viktor would have died. Bad enough, if everyone had found out the truth. Worse, what if they all think Karkaroff really did cover up for him, that he was trying to..." she trailed off as she stopped and listened. Distant footsteps were coming toward them.

"Ron, close your mouth. Harry, you too. I hear him coming back," Hermione said hoarsely. Hermione, close your own mouth, she scolded herself silently.

"You too Alexei," Elena added, elbowing him. "Thank you, Viktor, this will look loffy in my hair," she added brightly in a few moments, when Viktor reappeared in the gap between the hedges, holding a small, perfectly formed white Tiger Lily just the right size for tucking over her ear. He seemed to have gotten over being so shaken earlier. He put his empty milk bottle back in the basket and picked out another handful of grapes and ate them in silence.

"They usually have informal Quidditch scrimmages Saturdays. Not really team scrimmages, anyone can play if you show up, on a team or not, no coaches. If you want to go get into a game, you can. Goot way to burn time until lunch, tryouts right after," Alexei told Harry and Ron.

"Excellent idea. Harry and Ron can go play Quidditch, you boys can go pick up your dress robes at the tailor shop in the village, I know that is where they still are, both of you, do not lie, it will only take you twenty minutes to fly there and back and make a stop besides. Hermione and I can wait here like a couple of queens for you two to bring us back some chocolates," Elena cut in, reaching out to either side of her and patting Viktor and Alexei playfully on the cheek.

"Does not want much, does she?" Viktor flashed a halfhearted smile at Alexei. He still seemed vaguely embarrassed, as though he had done something supremely stupid in front of them that he would just as soon forget.

"Madame commands, I dash. If you two really want to play Quidditch, we can show you to the pitches, introduce you, as we go to the broomshed. Very informal. No set teams, they just scramble and have fun...whoever shows..." Alexei addressed Ron and Harry.

"I haven't had a good Quidditch match against someone new in ages. I'm up for it. Ron?" Harry turned to his friend.

"Sure. I could use with a game. See you later, Hermione. Elena." Ron shuffled off with the rest of the guys, leaving her there with Elena.

“Males. Forget their own heads if they were not sewn on,” Elena said ruefully, shaking her head and chewing another grape. “They would have waited until thirty minutes before the ball, then gone rushing around like chickens with heads off.”

But Hermione couldn't quite get her mind to shift gears. Not until she had some answers. “A girl really did that to him? Just...” Hermione began.

“Stripped herself and nearly jumped him on the staircase? By her own admission. I heard it from her lips when she blubbered about being caught. Hard to miss her catervauling at three in the morning, after she got back from Karkaroff's office. Four beds in each quad, close quarters,” Elena answered nonchalantly.

“No wonder he backed up so fast when Liesl touched him,” Hermione mused, helping herself to another grape as well.

“Real piece of work, Liesl. Her and Katrina fall out over whether or not Liesl could get a date with him. Bah, horrid girls,” Elena said, screwing up her mouth in distaste.

Another thought occurred to Hermione. Did Elena...? “Elena... do you...did you ever...like... Viktor?” she asked, somewhat fearful of the answer.

Elena gave a throaty, rich laugh. “You mean the ‘hike my robes and bend over the banister’ kind of liking for Viktor? No. I like him, but not that way. But I can see why so many girls do like him that way, though. Does not hurt that he makes a lot of money and is famous, but that is not all of it. He is quite handsome. Even with that nose of his. Maybe because of it. Keeps his face from being so perfect, makes it more interesting. And he is a bit self-conscious of it, among other things, so he does not get too full of himself for his looks. Big, strong, athletic, proud looking when he is not slouching around with his chin in his robes and his shoulders drooping like he was most of last few years. He has very nice features, eyes, mouth, chin, wonderful hair. I hear his papa had a fair number of girls chasing him when he was here, and he certainly was not famous, unless it was for being so bullheaded,” Elena squinted and considered a moment before continuing.

“He knows how to treat a girl, his refusal to peel my caterpillars excepted. Maybe I should have cried. He has a soft heart, he is kind, honorable, gallant. He would never take advantage. I could do much worse than Viktor. But we have only been friends. I got the feeling I just was not what he wanted a long time ago. I still feel sometimes I barely know him. Only person I ever see him open up to is you, and to a lesser degree, Alexei. Karkaroff did not get the hint. He figured since we look like a nice couple, we would be. Both Bulgarian. I was one of the few

females he even tolerated, so Karkaroff tried to push us together. Viktor very nicely declined without hurting my feelings. Karkaroff called us out last year to dance first at the Opening Ball, and Viktor actually muttered at him, 'Ve are still just friends,' before ve started. Karkaroff vas all about looks. Viktor, he is too quiet. I prefer prattling chatterboxes, like me," she smirked a little at that last.

She twirled the flower in her fingers and continued, "Viktor would vant to strangle me if he knew I had just talked about him to you like that. I can hear him now. 'Elena, Hermione can make up her own mind! I do not need you acting like a publicist! She vill think I put you up to it!' But he did make me practice your name. That vorried him endlessly, that he could not get your name off his tongue the right way last year. He knew how it vas supposed to sound, but could not do it. Tortured himself over it. That is when I knew," Elena confided.

"Knew what?" Hermione asked.

"That he loved you, of course. I caught him practicing your name vone evening. Viktor never practices anything unless he finds it vorth his vwhile. His coaches and me, ve haff been nagging him for years to practice his English, he never vorry about more than getting by vhen necessary before. He has been practicing more than your name, now. I bet he lived behind a dictionary for a few veeks after he left Hogvarts, so he could write to you. Obviously, he has practiced his speaking. Hermione, do not take this the wrong vay, but I hope you are as trustvorthy and honorable vith another person's heart as Viktor is," Elena put a hand on Hermione's arm. "He has been through a lot. I get the feeling I do not know the tenth of it. I doubt I know as much as Alexei, all told. I think he wrote to you, told you. He came back to Durmstrang fifteen pounds heavier but a hundred pounds lighter, you see? Each letter he sent, even these last two veeks, he got a little lighter, like he was unloading a rucksack he has been carrying the entire time I know him. I know I probably sound like an overprotective mother hen, but Viktor does not give his heart lightly. Do not break it," Elena said gently, an edge of pleading to her voice.

"He told me some of it. Harry too, what concerned him. I don't think he has told me all of it, either. I don't know if he can. Put it in words, I mean. I don't intend to hurt Viktor. I don't intend to," Hermione said firmly.

"Then you are miles ahead of those other girls. None of them care vhat they do to him, just that they vin. He is just a piece of meat to them, a trophy," Elena spat. "Like he vas to Igor. Like ve all vere to Igor."

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## Chapter 30

"Viktor? I vant to apologize," Alexei whispered in the aisle of the confectionery.

“Alexei Poliakov? Apologize? Whatever for?” Viktor said lightly, putting yet another box back on the shelf and picking up another to consider. Alexei knew it was forced.

“What I said in the hedges this morning. I had no idea. Elena told me. I never would have mentioned her name...” Alexei trailed off as the corners of Viktor’s mouth pulled down and he looked somewhat ill.

“She knows?”

“She roomed with her, that year, remember? In the same quad. That is how she found out. You know Elena. I am sure she threatened to skin the other girls in there with her if they told another soul. I imagine that is as far as it went.”

“Hermione knows?” Viktor turned, if possible, an even whiter shade of pale.

“She does now.” Viktor put the box back on the shelf harder than necessary, snatching up the next wordlessly. “She does not think less of you. If anything, it should make her respect you more.”

Viktor scowled and ground his teeth together so hard that Alexei could hear them scraping. He barely moved his lips when he spoke. “That is not the point! Would you want Elena to know if some ... some... girl ... treated you like... like... you were some... horse put out to stud! Like you are looking for some kind of brood mare!” he sputtered with poorly suppressed anger.

“Viktor...”

Viktor slammed yet another box back on the shelf, so hard that the shelf vibrated and the wizard at the register leaned out to give them a curious look. “I have no idea what she likes. The subject of chocolate never came up,” he complained, frustrated. From half naked girls leaning over banisters to chocolate and back. Nikolas Krum’s hopscotch conversational style would never be dead as long as Viktor lived, Alexei thought to himself.

“Viktor, pick one.”

“What do I do wrong, Alexei? Tell me. I would like to know. What the hell do I do that gives them the wrong idea? I attract all the wrong ones like...”

“Wrong. You attracted one right one. That is all you are entitled to in a lifetime. Some people do not even get that. And I do not think she cares what you bring back. You cannot go fix getting famous. You did everything right. Those wrong girls, that is what they want, your name. She wants you. Just you.”

You trust Granger. Forget about the rest of them. You haff nothing to be ashamed of. More than I can say. More than they can say,” Alexei spoke softly and put his hand on Viktor’s shoulder.

Viktor turned and looked down at him. “She could haff gotten me expelled. If Professor Malatova had been one minute later coming by, maybe she would haff believed her. I wondered what I did wrong, maybe I encouraged her...”

Alexei grabbed his other shoulder and gave him a little shake. “Viktor. Stop beating yourself up. You are not responsible for everyone else. You are about as encouraging to a girl as a mad hippogriff with a backache and a bad attitude. Estefania vas a total fruitloop,” he said with such sincerity and seriousness that Viktor laughed. “Now! Buy your girlfriend some chocolate, already!” he ordered sternly.

Viktor went and interrupted the middle aged witch with dark hair stocking the glass display with various truffles and chocolate covered fruits. “Look, I give up. I never bought much chocolate. What do I get for a girl?” he asked in Russian.

“One of those Opening Ball dates, hmm? How about a truffle assortment? Guaranteed she will like at least one of them, if she likes chocolate at all. Want me to put one together? One of each kind?” she asked, waving a hand at the rows in the display case.

“Go ahead. I suppose she can take the rest home.”

“I vill haff the same,” Alexei added.

“This is more money than I haff seen you spend in one day ever. In a month, even,” Alexei ribbed in English, nudging Viktor’s elbow.

“Say, aren’t you Viktor Krum? My wife works at the tailor shop, said she fitted you for your robes. And fifteen girls saying they were going to the Opening Ball as your date,” the wizard said as he rang up their purchases.

Viktor nodded to the first query, then waited for him to finish. “No, just one date for me. The one I am taking, she has not been in. She got her robes elsewhere. Could not make it here,” Viktor replied simply.

“Too bad. The wife would have given her a deal if the two of you had come in together. She always said you were a nice young man when you came in for your school robes, real polite. If she did that for all of the girls that claimed to date you every ball, though, she would have to redo her price list and be done,” the old wizard handed Viktor his wrapped parcel.

“Your wife always does a marvelous job. She even manages to make me look decent. She will not have to worry about those girls much longer,” Viktor told him with a smile. He jerked his head at Alexei, and they walked out the door.

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## CHAPTER 31

“Really? You like arithmancy? That was always my poor subject. Viktor said you were good at everything but Divination,” Elena laughed again, her beautiful, rich laugh. Hermione enjoyed listening to her laugh. She was nowhere near as cold and aloof as Hermione might have imagined her.

“Divination! Creative writing, you mean. At least the way Trelawney teaches it. She’s nothing more than an old fraud. Maybe it would have been a decent class if someone else had taught it,” Hermione said as she finished packing the things back into the picnic basket.

“Maybe Potions teachers are required to be sour. Professor Malatova is not exactly sweet on any of her students. I think it is required. You need someone to punish, to do those disgusting things like harvesting frog guts and dragonweed and gnat’s blood,” Elena laughed. “Viktor got stuck doing the last one. He sat there for nearly the whole hour, looking at a book, and she was furious. Ready to give him a week of detentions, she was. With ten minutes to go, he pulled out his wand and did an extraction charm on them, the whole lot at once, he was done. Turns out he spent the hour looking it up, how to do it without having to do it himself the hard way. Madame Malatova could not figure out whether to brag on him for being so clever or thrash him for being cheeky. She settled for not inventing any more reasons to give him detention. Supposedly he did not volunteer himself enough, the first time she gave it to him. Viktor never volunteered himself in class.” Elena’s laugh tumbled out of her mouth again.

“What tales are you telling on me?” Viktor’s voice called from outside the hedge.

“Oh, all of them. Next, the one about you and Alexei nearly getting yourselves eaten by a dragon,” she said airily.

“Too late. I told that one. Hermione, I have about forty different varieties of truffle here. If you tell me you hate truffles, I am tempted to toss myself into that hedge,” Viktor offered her one of the parcels in his hand.

“No, I love truffles. Any kind of chocolate, really,” Hermione responded, untying the string around the brown paper.

“Same for Madame Elena. I know you love truffles,” Alexei grinned.

“Come with me to the castle. I want your opinion on which jewelry I should wear,” Elena tugged at Alexei’s hand and gave him a pointed look, raising her eyebrow, then casting her gaze back at Viktor and Hermione. “We will leave the basket here. You might want some milk to go with those truffles,” she called back, pulling Alexei after her.

“See you tonight,” Alexei called as he left the circle of hedges. Viktor ran his fingers back through his hair, then scratched the back of his neck and stood there awkwardly, as though not quite sure what to do.

“Sit on the blanket with me. I have to eat at least one of these. You really shouldn’t have. A chocolate bar would have been enough,” she said as she lifted the top off the box. To her surprise, the truffles were huge, easily the length of her middle finger.

“Never argue with the saleswoman after you ask for advice,” he replied. “She said truffles, I bought truffles. I have not bought chocolate in years,” he added.

“Really? Why not?” she asked, biting into one of the darker chocolate shells.

“Saved money. Made my coaches happier, too. Did not get to the village that often anyway. Not that I did not...or do not make up for it by eating everything else I can get my hands on, so maybe just to save money, then,” he said, running a finger over a smudge of cocoa on the inside of the box lid.

“This one’s incredible. Dark chocolate on the outside, and semisweet on the inside. Here, you eat the other half, I’m going to try at least one more,” she insisted, holding it up to his lips without thinking. He looked a little surprised, but took it between his even white teeth. “Any recommendations?” she asked after a moment, twirling her finger randomly over the box of chocolates. He reached out and stilled her finger, then placed his own on a piece dusted with powdered sugar.

“Those. I remember those, I think. Milk chocolate on the outside, caramel fluff in the center.” He removed the piece in question and carefully divided it with his fingers. He offered half to her in the same fashion, and she could smell the caramel. He ate the other half only after she nodded her head approvingly while chewing. Viktor dug two bottles of milk out of the basket, opened them both and handed her one.

“Couple more?” she asked. He nodded. She picked up one that had been iced with tiny blue stripes. “Do I smell orange on that one?” She snapped it open. While it looked like a regular truffle, she could definitely smell orange.



She tested it in her mouth. The chocolate had just the smallest hint of orange essence hidden in it.

After he had swallowed his half, he studied the box and laid a fingertip on one with small white icing x markings on the top. "Those are the lemon ones I think. Like the last. Or maybe it is lime. I think they had all three." He divided this piece as well, and smelled his half. "Lemon, so I was right the first time," he told her, offering the other piece to her between his thumb and forefinger. They finished their milk in silence, and he gathered up the empty bottles and placed them back in the basket. She carefully put the lid back on the box and set them aside, putting the Tiger Lily blossom on top. He reclined back on his elbows, closed his eyes, tilted his head back, chin in the air, and let the breeze push his hair back from his forehead.

"Tired?" she asked finally.

"A little," he conceded. "You?"

"A little," she echoed. She lay down flat on the blanket and watched the thick clouds roll by for a moment. Then she gave in to impulse and tapped his elbow lightly. He opened his eyes and noticed her new position, so he reclined fully as well, the top of his dark head nestled in the mass of her hair, so close that they could have touched temples by turning their heads an inch. A loose tendril of his hair, caught by the wind, occasionally brushed against her face, and she studied his profile out of the corner of her eye. They both tracked the clouds for a bit, squinting against the sun, but soon, he dropped his lids a bit too long and his eyes stayed closed, so Hermione turned her head and tucked her chin against his shoulder, her nose just brushing his cheek, his hair tickling her face when the air lifted it. Before long, she dozed too, there in the warm sunshine and the breeze. They both went in and out several times before rousing themselves for the walk back to the castle and lunch.

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## Chapter 32

After lunch they walked back toward the Quidditch pitch for tryouts. "Seekers first, this time, so you do not have to stay any longer, if you do not want to. I thought maybe we would go to the library..."

"Viktor Krum? Did you just ask me on a date to a library?" Hermione teased.

"I thought you could sit at a table and I could go find myself a pack of stupid boys and we could hide in the stacks and giggle at you, just to see what it feels like, for a change. I thought you would want to see it. You cannot tell me you are this close to a library you have not been in and you are not dying to get in there. You had to take a turn through the one in Sofia, even though you do not

read a speck of Bulgarian,” Viktor teased.

“True. I would like to see it. I just didn’t want to sound like a complete wet blanket by showing up for a ball and being all eager beaver about the library, of all things,” she confessed.

“You love books. It is nothing to be ashamed of. Remember, I might not be here if several years ago some woman had not liked books so much that she moved in over a bookshop. Maybe someday we will be telling people that books are to blame for the two of us haffing to waltz together at all those formal receptions,” he laughed. They slid into a seat a couple of benches up from the front bleachers, next to Harry and Ron, who were already sitting there with Elena and Alexei.

“Well, Poppet’s got her full rooting section,” Ron told them when they sat down. “Now she just has to deliver. By the way, the scrimmages were great! Loads of fun, I’d like some of the Durmstrang lot on my team anyday,” Ron enthused. Pushkin’s seeker tryouts proved to be a lot like the Madame Hooch method. Poppet had the top time in the single trials, catching the snitch in forty seconds, and she held her own quite well in the free-for-alls, managing to come up with the snitch first three of the five times. She was by far the fastest in the time trials. By the time Pushkin blew his whistle and dismissed them, she was beaming.

“V-v-v-v-viktor, d-d-d-d-d-d-d-d-do y-y-y-y-y-y-y-y-you th-th-th-th-th-think l-l-l-l g-g-g-g-g-g-g-got i-i-i-it?” she shyly addressed his kneecaps rather than his face.

“I would be very hard pressed to pick anyone but you. Pushkin is no fool. I saw him fiddling with his mustache when you were flying, that is his tell, he probably cannot wait to put your name at the top of the list,” Viktor responded.

“B-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-bet h-h-h-h-h-h-he n-n-n-n-ne-near-near-nearly tw-t-t-t-tw-tw-twirled i-i-i-i-i-it off d-d-d-d-d-dur-during y-y-y-y-y-y-your tr-tr-tr-tr-tryout!” she grinned.

“Oh, I do not know about that. Hermione, are you ready to go?” Viktor turned to her expectantly.

Hermione wrestled with her answer for a moment. Poor Marianne’s smile had vanished at Viktor’s words, but Viktor was looking at her expectantly, ready to go. There was no way she could pretend that she would just love to sit here for the next hour watching beaters and keepers and chasers try out rather than go to the library. Viktor knew that she wasn’t nearly as interested in that sort of thing as Harry and Ron. “Sure,” she said finally. “I’ll see the rest of you tonight if I don’t see you before,” she addressed those sitting on the bench as Viktor took

her hand and led her back out of the bleachers.

“Poppet, you let me know where Pushkin puts you tomorrow,” Viktor called back when he had nearly rounded the end of the stands. She nodded back numbly.

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## Chapter 33

“How much time do you want to get ready?” Viktor asked, looking at the clock over the circulation desk and Madame Durshenkova, a tall, thin witch with a bun and slightly graying black hair. She reminded Hermione rather a lot of Professor McGonagall.

“Oh, we could waste another half hour at least. You know I’m not high maintenance,” she murmured, flipping through the book in her hand. “So is that what Durmstrang looked like when it was built?” she asked, jabbing a finger at a woodcut illustration.

“According to the caption. See there, those are the numbers? Remember, cyrillic reads differently. Was not much to see then, was it? They added the other buildings on the grounds something like a hundred years later, best I remember. Come here, I will show you my favorite shelf,” he took the book from her and put it back in its proper place.

He led her by the hand back a few stacks, to a deserted corner. The shelves were sparsely populated by some older, slightly frayed books with worn bindings. She was somewhat surprised to see that the subject card on the shelf read “Muggle Writings”. It looked oddly out of place, a scruffy little corner in the small, but nicely kept building and shelves. “This is your favorite shelf?”

“Guess why.”

She studied the titles intently, passing her finger over the collected works of Shakespeare, a compilation of quotes, the poems of Shelley, even a King James Bible that looked as though it had been there since the time of King James himself. Buying time to think, she studied the nook, a dim corner with an aging wooden bench covered in pillows that were a bit threadbare at the seams. How on earth could this be his favorite shelf, she wondered to herself, it looked like the most neglected portion of the otherwise quite well-appointed library. She was just about to say so, when it dawned on her. “Because it’s deserted,” she whispered with a smile.

He reached up and pulled a thick book with what looked to be Russian (she could never be sure, but Viktor had said most of the books in the library were in Russian with only a few in English, German, and Bulgarian) writing on the cover off the shelf and turned it over in his hands. “Dostoevsky. Crime and

Punishment. I had to haff something to read while I hid out back here. I got tired of packing things back here, so I started reading what was already here,” he replaced the volume while he spoke. “War and Peace,” he said, pulling out another thick volume, sitting on the bench and setting the book on his knees, flipping the pages. He soon shut the cover and slid it carefully back onto the shelf. She sat on the bench next to him and leaned into his side, much as she had on the floor the previous night.

He dipped his head and buried his cheek in her hair, arm draped across her shoulders, his chin against her temple. She reached up and put her hand on his other cheek, cupping his face, twisting to put her other hand on the opposite side, turning him toward her, then examining him. “May I?” she asked him, grinning. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he leaned over slightly. She gave him a soft kiss on the mouth, then pulled away, hands still on his face. “We should go get ready,” she added under her breath.

“Yes. We should. But I think I could spend the evening on this bench,” he replied in an undertone as the librarian appeared at the end of the shelf.

“But you cannot. Go get yourselves ready so I can close the library,” she said with an indulgent smile. “Viktor, you haff a funny idea of what to do with a date before a ball. Most girls like somevhere other than the library,” she smirked at him.

He blushed slightly and got up, grabbing Hermione’s hand and trailing her along behind him. “She is not most girls,” he told Madame Durshenkova as he passed, and tossed her a small smile. She chuckled under her breath and shook her head as she watched them go.

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## Chapter 34

“I bet Viktor isn’t doing this,” she said to herself. For what seemed like the hundredth time, Hermione twisted her hair up into a bulky French twist and put the silver clasp in firmly. *That’s got most of it, at least*, she thought, looking into the mirror and tucking a few stray tendrils back into and under the twist with bobby pins. It was a losing battle to get all of her hair tucked in without at least a gallon of hair potion, because curls wanted to spray from the twist in every direction, so she simply fluffed the longer curls, ignored the smaller, loose ones brushing the nape of her neck, and hoped she looked stylishly mussed, rather than just messy. She surveyed herself in the mirror and nervously smoothed the skirt of her dress robe again, though there wasn’t a crease or wrinkle in sight.

She had chosen a sleek, satin robe in silver with a matching pair of sensible but dressy platform sandals and a light cloak. She fastened the clasp onto the cloak at her throat, and took one last look. Madame Malkin had assured her that the silver looked fantastic on her. The slit over her left leg

made it easy to wear, to dance in, the shoes were perfect with it. It was a bit more than she was used to spending, but they had seem worth it. *Used to spending. Who am I kidding? Like I bought tons of dress robes in years past.* The Yule Ball robe was the first time she had so much as considered the existence of dress robes, much less shopped for them. *I don't know why I'm so nervous,* she thought to herself. *He asked me here. He wants me here. He's already seen me dance, so I can't possibly embarrass myself any more than I already have by being a klutz on the dance floor. He has the hard job. He has to lead. He leads well. He made me look more than decent at it. I didn't kill anyone with my waltzing. Or even my flying. He liked me with my big teeth and bushy hair, just as much as he liked me with dress robes and my hair all slicked down. Surely he'll meet me halfway and like me in a dress robe and my hair up, if not tamed.*

She mentally shook herself and began a stern lecture in her head. *Hermione Granger, he doesn't care if your hair is perfect or if you have on the most expensive robe in the room. Get a grip on yourself. Stop obsessing.* She stayed her hand from reaching up to a stray curl at her temple. *Leave it. If he's so bothered by your escaping hair, he can fix it,* she thought to herself with a touch of hysteria. *I like it. Isn't that what he said? He wouldn't have said that, if he didn't mean it. Not even to take the mickey out of Katrina.* On impulse, she smoothed a little lipstick onto her mouth. *There. That's it. I'm done. No more fussing. I've already wasted thirty minutes on my hair alone.* Unbidden, her hands smoothed over the folds of her robe again. *I've gone completely obsessive compulsive,* she laughed to herself. *Is this what being in love is like? You develop a rousing case of mental illness? Freak out over every detail? Go completely barmy, spare in the head? I bet Viktor isn't doing this.*

*I bet Hermione is not doing this,* Viktor thought to himself as he opened up the cupboard for the third time, intending to fetch the same pair of boots he had already come after twice already. *How do you manage to forget something twice when you only have to travel a few feet across the room? First, boots... oh, no wait, I need the sash. What was I going after in the first place? Oh, yes, boots. But I would need the clothes first. Boots last. Great, and I still forgot the stupid boots. Is this what happens to you when you fall in love? Your mind goes on permanent vacation and you lose the ability to do something so basic as dress yourself? Fantastic. As though I did not have enough trouble out of that task in the first place. Never gave much thought before to what I looked like, anyway. School robes have their advantages. No thinking about what to wear. Today, the scarlet I think. Or maybe scarlet. No, I will be really adventurous and wear the scarlet instead. Same as yesterday. Same as tomorrow. Boots. Boots. Boots? Oh, look, a right and a left, and both from the same pair as well! I have managed to count up to two, hurray for me! Most intelligence I have shown in the last half hour. It is a wonder I did not drown in the bath!*

*Good grief, I am going to look a right idiot in these things. Why on earth*

*do I ever let Alexei talk me into anything? To shut him up, probably. Me and my big mouth. Telling him she liked the new Quidditch uniforms. What was I thinking? Then you should get something dressier made the same way, indeed. Pants and short robe. Everyone else is going to be wearing long robes, and there I am going to be in these things. Katrina or whatever her name was had one thing straight. I am royalty alright. A royal twit. Well, they have to be better than what I am wearing now, right? I could just show up in this towel, and while I am at it, with my hair dripping wet, that would make for a pretty short date. Then Rita Skeeter can print 'Viktor Krum struck dead by Durmstrang Opening Ball date for daring to show up in a towel' tomorrow. I will just go to her door and suggest we stay in, forget the ball. He snickered as the completely absurd picture crept into his mind. Sure, Viktor, do that in the towel and put your foot in your mouth again. Have not done that enough this weekend.*

*He considered the pile of clothes nestled in the unwrapped parcel from the tailor shop and tried to talk himself into putting them on. Viktor, you bought them, you are stuck with them, you cannot get something different in the next twenty minutes, and you have outgrown everything else in your closet that would be half decent to wear to this thing. Put them on already. She liked the Quidditch uniform. She said so. Hermione does not engage in petty flattery. If she had hated it, she would have said so. Well, maybe not, but she would not have told you that you looked nice in it if she had not meant it. It is not like you have a choice at this point. Put the things on, do something, just stop standing here like a big lump!*

*The pants first. And the bloody boots I have had such a time getting all of ten feet with. Heaven help me, I have huge feet. Three sizes bigger than Papa's, and he is not exactly what I would call dainty. But then, they go with the nose and the outsized hands, do they not? At least you stand up straight occasionally, now, instead of ducking your ears into your shoulders all the time. Now the robe, then the sash. This is a first. Standing in front of a mirror before I leave for a Durmstrang ball. For anywhere, for that matter. Do I look like something of a prat? No. I probably look like a complete prat. White pants. Oh, that is asking for it. I give myself ten minutes before I get something on them. Maybe I should not have gotten my hair cut. Maybe I should have cut all of it, not just the back, since it is nearly in my eyes. Maybe I should just get out from in front of this mirror and walk down the hall already. I will turn into another Alexei at this rate, always fussing over himself and preening.*

*The nose is not going to get any better in the next ten minutes, either, no matter how much you stare at it. Get over yourself. You had the same damn nose last year at the Yule Ball. It was every bit as big and hooked and crooked then. It is not like De La Croix's bony elbow did any more damage to it. She seems fine with it. Teach you to stop catching bludgers with your face. Now get you and your nose and your big feet and hands down the hall, or you're going to be late, and that's not being very gentlemanly. Alexei and Elena were going to*

*take Harry and Ron down, they're probably already gone, all you have to do is walk a few feet down the hall, knock on one door, walk one girl down the stairs and manage not to make a complete fool of yourself before you get down there. Or after. But it is not just a girl. It is her. It is Hermione.* He squeezed his eyes shut tight, so tight he saw stars behind his eyelids. "I bet Hermione is not doing this", he scolded himself.

He forced himself out his own door and into the hall, staring at her door. *You would think doing things like being in the World Cup would make you immune to the jitters.* But somehow being with this one person all night was a thousand times more intimidating than being in front of those crowds. *That was just a stupid Quidditch match. I did that a hundred times before. Did the words 'stupid Quidditch match' actually go through my head? Where did that come from? Knock, you fool. You cannot just stand out here all night, staring at the door like a starving stray crup, willing her to come out.* He raised his hand and rapped lightly with his knuckles. *That was a weak, weak knock, Viktor. Miracle if she heard that.* He gathered his courage, raised his hand to rap again, harder.

Hermione leapt up from her perch on the bed at the first rap, grabbed the doorknob and twisted, pulling it open to catch Viktor there, with his hand raised, a look of mild surprise on his face. "Oh. Sorry. I thought maybe you hadn't heard, I did not knock very hard," he said.

"I thought it was about time, I was listening for you! Let me get my cloak, just in case, and I'll be ready to go! Oh, and I forgot to give this back to you in Bulgaria. It's the snitch you handed me," she said, pulling the golden ball from her bag. *Gah! Quit being so eager beaver, Hermione! You nearly ran him over getting the door open! Oh my. Oh...oh...my. Shut your mouth Hermione, you're gawking. But I can't help it.* She ran her gaze from the bottom of his boots to his face. It was something like his dress uniform, but even more formal, somehow. Softer and less structured at the same time. It was the first time she had seen him in a robe of any color other than red. Blood red Durmstrang robes. Bulgarian scarlet for the Quidditch uniforms. Now...this.

*This is different.* She still would have called the boots "riding boots", since they were smooth, round toed, and had a low, blocky heel, but these were so smooth and highly polished she was sure she could have seen herself in them. They gleamed, and they were so black, they looked like polished onyx, hugging his calf to just below the knee. Close-fitting white pants, wool from the look of them. A soft cream color, really, not white. Not harsh white, but subtle and warm. On top, a black satin robe with long sleeves, tied with a matching sash of the same fabric and color, softly draped over him, the neck laced loosely with silvery gray laces and mostly open, his collarbones and the chain of the locket he had been given peeking out over the neckline, the bottom hem striking his leg midway down the thigh. His hair fell in thick dark waves over his forehead, brushing his brows. Even his eyes looked almost black in the dimmer light.

Black, black, black, from head to toe, broken only by the tan of his skin, the silver of the laces, and the light pants. A heavy school cloak was folded neatly and hung over one arm. Once again, she was struck by the change in his physical appearance over the last few months. Weeks, really. Alexei was right. He looked so much healthier and approachable. Not all bones and angles and hunched shoulders and invisible walls. *Sleek. Shiny. Even his hair shines. And I bet he did not spend the entire hour tormenting himself about getting ready, either.*

*Oh my word...she looks even better than at the Yule Ball and the reception, and I did not think that was possible.* Her arms were bare, the robes sleeveless. Held on her shoulders by simple spaghetti straps, they cascaded over her in silver, satiny falls and her left calf just peeked through the demure slit that started about level with her knee. The hem fell just above her ankle, and his eye was drawn down to the platforms sandals, with their silver flowers and leaves worked in metal. He looked back to her face. That smile. *It might be nice if you answered her, instead of just gawking at her like a simpleton.* "You keep it. I wanted you to haff it," he said.

"Are you sure?" she said, giving him another shy smile. He nodded. She turned and dropped it back into her bag.

"You..." they both began at the same time, verbally stepping on one another. "You first," she insisted.

*What was I going to say? What do I want to say?* He reached his right hand up halfway to his face, abruptly dropped it, then quickly braced it on his hip, bending his knee and shifting his weight. *Get your hand away from your hair. Put it down. On your hip. How do you forget how to operate an arm? Off my damn hip. Stop slouching! This is not hanging out at Quidditch practice! Stand up straight and spit it out!* "You ... absolutely incredible...it... does not...do it justice by a long shot." *Grrrr! What the blue blazes was that? Is that the best you could come up with? Maybe I should take a page from Petyr's book and just say 'You haff pretty hair', although I suspect that works better when you are his age...*

She smiled shyly at his boots, blushing from the compliment. *Stop staring at his boots! You'll be stuttering next, like Marianne, and you do not have the next hour to stammer at him about how wonderful that outfit looks on him. Those Hogwarts girls would really want to rip me to pieces if they could see him now. See me now. With him looking at me like I'm some sort of dream girl. Standing ten inches away from him...staring at his feet like a big idiot! Like some sort of fascinated magpie...ooooooh....shiny! Look at the shiny boots! Say something!* "Thank you. I was just about to say the same thing. You look fantastic. First time I've seen you in anything but a red robe," she murmured. *Brilliant. Absolutely bloody brilliant. Oh, well spotted, Hermione. It's not red. Duh. I bet*



*he noticed. He knows his colors. He's not three!*

"You look lovely. I could go on and on, but it would just be useless noise. We should head on down now. If we wait much longer, Alexei will be back up here with a posse," he told her, offering his arm. *Oh glory be, I managed a few sentences. All by myself. I think they might have even had a subject and a verb in the proper order. Now carry her cloak, already.* She laid her hand on his forearm, and he offered the other, with his cloak draped across it. "Your cloak? You might need it later, after dark," he told her. She draped her cloak across his, and they walked to the head of the stairs. *Just make it down the stairs. Stairs now. Panic later.*

*Don't trip going down the stairs. I would absolutely die if I go tumbling down the central staircase in front of all those people milling around down there. Who am I kidding? In front of him. Stairs now. Panic later.*

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## Chapter 35

"I vas beginning to vonder..." Alexei said as Hermione and Viktor approached. "Now, did I know vhat I vas talking about or not?" he asked Elena.

Elena gave a low whistle. "I haff to admit...much as I hate to... you vere right. Viktor... that is some outfit. You might be the only man alive who can get away vith formal dress that looks suspiciously like a Quidditch uniform."

"Uniform! That reminds me... Viktor, thank you. The tailor made an entire set of robes for the team, and they look great," Harry said, readjusting his glasses on his nose. Viktor smiled, but stayed silent.

Elena continued, "Good thing you do haff a date. You vill start a new trend. And Hermione... see, I haff done my homework, unlike Alexei... you vill be Miss Granger or Madame for the next six months for him... your robe is fabulous. You look vonderful," Elena said, playing with a fold of Hermione's skirt. "And the both of you need to stop imitating Poppet every time anyone pays you a compliment tonight. You vill be getting them a lot. You are acting more bashful than Anton and Ivanova's little boy, Viktor."

"Homework? Elena, you at least haff spoken some English your whole life. Some of us vere not so lucky, Viktor and I, ve got our first real English lessons here," Alexei said.

Elena shrugged and smoothed Hermione's skirt back down, then her own. "Liesl and Katrina haff both collared a date, so I do not think you vill suffer too much wrath. Heaven help the poor boys, but at least you do not haff to vorry about either of them blaming you for them being dateless. Oh, and you know that little boy, oh, what was his name? Third year, heart shaped face, and the tiny cowlick he can never get to lie down? Bronsky's House? Hans

Hauptmann?”

“The vone who came first in the seeker time trials among the second team tryouts?” Viktor asked.

“Yes, that vone. You would associate him with something Quidditch would you? I think he is interested in Poppet. There has been a lot of staring going on, even out here in the foyer. Maybe you ought to haff a talk vith him,” Elena said with a soft smile.

Viktor looked over the crowd and across the large foyer just outside the hall, to a large crowd of third year girls and boys, separated by a few feet. Marianne was with the girls, and sure enough, there was a slender boy with a heart shaped face and rather sharp chin, and a small cowlick that waved above his head like a flag looking at her longingly from among the pack of boys.

“Why? He looks harmless enough, or haff you heard something I haff not?” Viktor asked her after studying them both.

Elena sighed heavily and rolled her eyes. “Not that kind of talk. He is harmless. He likes her, you big dolt. You just might haff to nudge him toward her, he might take all night to ask her to dance otherwise. Or vorse, not do it. Give him some advice. Or do you vant Poppet to stand there all night vwhile her friends dance? Or shall ve just draft Ron and Harry rather than letting them talk Quidditch vith that group over in the corner or dance vith someone else or eat, vwhatever they vant? Look, you go plant the idea in his head vwhile I take her to the powder room and put a little makeup on her. Not that she needs it, but I need some excuse. You do not mind if I borrow him a moment before we go in?” she asked Hermione, who shook her head.

Elena glided across the corridor, looking as regal and elegant as ever in her light rose robes, and collected Marianne. “Be back in a minute,” Viktor told Hermione after they had disappeared around the corner. He strode over to Hans Hauptmann, whose wide eyes got even wider when Viktor spoke to him, pulled him aside and steered him around the opposite corner.

“Quite the matchmakers around here,” Ron observed.

“Not normally,” Alexei said. “Not Elena, anyvay. Nor Viktor. Do not vorry. Your bachelorhood is safe. She vill not be trying to get you married at this dance.”

“Hey, Harry, you think that lot we scrimmaged with will be able to continue that debate on strength versus finesse, or do you reckon most of them will be dancing?” Ron asked, tapping him on the shoulder.

“Don’t know. I only heard one or two of them say they had dates they had to get ready for. We’ll see,” Harry said.

“You would think you two would get tired of Quidditch all the time. Honestly,” Hermione said.

“You would think you would get tired of books all the time, but you don’t, now do you?” Ron countered.

“Books are good for you,” Hermione said.

“So is Quidditch. Viktor likes both, so it must be possible for them to peacefully coexist in the same brain, now mustn’t it?” Ron said sweetly. “Really, you would think Harry and I never cracked a book.”

“We almost don’t,” Harry whispered and made a face. Hermione laughed in spite of herself.

Viktor came back around the corner and deposited a dazed looking Hans back in his group of friends. “Well?” Hermione questioned him.

“Well what?”

“Well... what did he say?” she pressed.

“Nothing. Just gawked at me with his mouth hanging open. It could mean, ‘Yes, I’ll ask her to dance’ or ‘I do not speak English’ or ‘I haff lockjaw’ for all I know. I assumed it meant the first. I think there might haff been a nod, but I would not bet on it. It might haff been wishful thinking on my part,” Viktor shrugged.

“What did you say to him?” Hermione asked.

“I told him he had better dance with her and behave himself or I would boil him in oil,” he said flatly.

“Viktor! You didn’t!” Hermione scolded, hoping he was joking.

“Of course I did not! I just told him it would be nice to ask Marianne to dance, if he wanted. I told him I was sure she would be happy to dance with him since neither of them seem to haff a date. Just a suggestion, no more no less. No mention of boiling him in oil. But if he does pull something...”

“You will keep your big nose out of it,” Elena finished for him, having come up behind them, circling back from the powder room. “Time to let go and see if she can valk on her own Viktor. If she falls, she gets back up. Stop being so

overprotective. And here I thought I was a terrible old mother hen.”

“But...”

“But nothing. Attend to your own date. Vone is enough to keep you busy. You and Hermione keep each other busy, Alexei and I will keep each other busy, Ron and Harry keep themselves busy however they wish, and Hans and Marianne keep one another busy if they wish to, agreed? If anyone deserves boiling for something they do to Poppet, let her do her own,” Elena ordered with a raised eyebrow. Hermione was beginning to see that Viktor wasn’t the only one who could be pretty stubborn. This was the nearest she had ever heard anyone come to bossing Viktor.

Viktor mirrored her expression for a moment. “Big talk from a lady who just made me go over there and wrestle a third year I haff never so much as said ‘good morning’ to around the corner to strongly suggest that he pick Marianne as his dancing partner. The least you could do is haff the good grace to be ashamed of yourself for meddling then grouching at me for the same thing. Very subtle Elena. Why did we not just smack him with a club and drag him over there by the hair? Or her,” he said.

“Matchmaking is not always meddling, Viktor. I am just hurrying things along. I am sure he would haff gotten up the courage eventually,” she countered, but she looked somewhat embarrassed.

“Sure. He looked every bit as eager as a rabbit about to hop into a lion’s den, and I probably scared him out of it if he had any inclination,” Viktor chuckled, offering Hermione his arm again. The doors had opened and couples and groups were starting to stream into the hall. When they came through the doors, Hermione gasped. She would have hardly recognized it as the same room where they had eaten the night before. The ceiling and walls had been decorated with a deep, shiny blue fabric, and white ribbons and bows dotted it like stars in a midnight sky. The hall was dotted with great stands of flowers she recognized from the garden, including some Tiger Lilies of various colors, mercifully absent their thorns. Elena was sporting her white lily over her right ear, tucked into her neatly pulled back hair. It gathered into a neat bun at the nape of her neck, and once again Hermione was aware of the many little strands brushing the back of her own neck.

“Oi, Harry, there they are. You want to go over and talk to them?” Ron pointed to a clump of boys and girls across the room. All of them looked to be fourth years or older.

“Sure. See you later, Hermione, Viktor, Elena, Alexei,” Harry said, ambling after Ron with his hands in his pockets. He wasn’t really in the mood to cramp the two couples anyway. Maybe later he would dance with one of the girls

from the scrimmage earlier who didn't have a date. Some of them had offered to take a turn. Not the same as dancing with Cho, but they had seemed nice enough, and they weren't all twittery and prissy like some of the girls at Hogwarts. They had seemed content to talk Quidditch and maybe give him and Ron a dance or two. It would be good practice if Hogwarts ever had another ball.

The two couples were just settling into their chairs when a loud voice rang out, "Meet with your approval, ladies?" Potenko had come over from the faculty tables.

"It's beautiful," Hermione said.

"I can never remember the hall looking this wonderful," Elena added.

"I really came over here as much to ask the four of you a favor. To start off the ball," Potenko said, beaming as though he were offering them the chance of a lifetime.

"Of course we all will!" Alexei said with gusto, then an odd expression passed over his face and he jumped in his seat. Hermione got the distinct impression that he had just been kicked solidly under the table by Viktor.

Too bad, I would have liked to kick him myself, she thought. Waltzing at the reception was one thing, here was another story. There... no one had really cared that she and Viktor were together. They were all adults with families of their own, not schoolchildren with nothing better to do than gossip about who was with who. Sure, they had been mildly curious about the girl Viktor had talked about, but no one was likely to be telling Viktor who he should be with, or worse, wanting him themselves, at the reception. The reporters had even been respectful. Probably a requirement to get in, to not act like Rita Skeeter. Here...how many people would want a look at her? The entire room. She had already noticed plenty of open staring her way. At the Yule Ball, she had the advantage of surprise, no one expected Hermione Granger to be Viktor's partner. Half the school had to look three times to recognize her. Here...her reputation preceded her. What was it Elena had called her? His equally famous Yule Ball partner? Her stomach felt as though it had dropped right out of the bottom of her chair.

Viktor bit his lower lip, trying to think of a polite way to refuse. It was a simple enough request. No undue burden. Potenko had not ordered them to open the ball, he had asked politely. He thought he was doing them a great honor. And he was. He does not realize I would rather not, he is not a cruel man. And Alexei had just volunteered them. Nothing came to mind that did not offend. Hermione suddenly looked almost as pale and sick as he felt thinking about the four of them being out there in front of the entire school. Best he could do is put a few more people on the floor with them and delay the inevitable a few

minutes. "On one condition. Give us a few minutes to pick some music," he said finally, surrendering to the idea. It is not as though I was going to sit at this table all night, right? I will simply dance a little earlier than I planned. "And that you let me go fetch one more couple," he added, "Third years. Actually, if you could round up at least one couple from each year, maybe that would be better," Viktor said in a rush.

Potenko looked a bit surprised at the request, but he seemed pleased by the idea. "That would be a new tradition. Usually it is only sixth or seventh year couples that get picked. I will recruit a few of the faculty and see who else we can come up with," he said with a large smile, whirling off in his formal robes.

"Alexei!" Elena hissed at him, "You and your big mouth! You could haff let them answer for themselves!"

"Sorry," Alexei shrugged. "Viktor could haff not tried to break my shin vith those big boots of his, too," he muttered. "Vhat other couple?" he asked, looking up from under the table, where he was no doubt massaging his leg.

"I just thought of a way to ensure Marianne gets her dance," Viktor said, sliding his chair back. "Congratulations, Hans Hauptmann, you haff been chosen to help open the Opening Ball for the third years, grab a partner," he said under his breath, dropping his gaze across the room to where the elfin boy stood shyly taking in the hall with his friends, and then setting off across the room like a man on a mission. Elena suppressed a laugh.

"Well, I suppose something good has come of it, then," Hermione said, shaking her head.

Elena turned in her seat and watched Viktor and Hans. "You would think Viktor vas going to eat him alive the way Hans looks! Poor boy, probably thinks he has looked at Poppet crooked and Viktor is going to get him for it! If his eyes get any bigger, they vill roll across the floor," she said, laughing. Viktor had finished talking to Hans and gave him a little push between the shoulder blades toward the three girls in the corner. Toward Marianne.

"Vhat did you tell him this time?" Elena asked as Viktor rounded the table.

"That he does not haff all night, get a move on! Worse than me," Viktor said, shaking his head and pulling the chair back in. "He might get it out by the time we get called out, the timid little mouse! Now, one problem solved, one to go! What do we dance to?" he asked Hermione.

"I think Elena and I should get some choice..." Alexei began, but Viktor interrupted him.

“Oh no you do not! You had no business volunteering me. You forfeit any input. Elena can vote, but you can guess who I am going to side with when it comes down to it, Alexei,” Viktor said.

“Oh, I do not care. Pick whatever you want,” Elena said idly, propping her chin on her fist.

“Something faster?” Hermione ventured. The last thing she wanted was to be standing still for very long. With all those people staring at them.

“Faster...Vivaldi maybe... ‘Concerto for Two Trumpets’...or how about ‘The Spring’ from ‘The Four Seasons’? It is long, but not bad to dance to. Or ‘The Autumn’. No, too long. They are both ten minutes. That one from ‘Swan Lake’ maybe. Three minutes or so. Something of the Swans, I cannot remember the name... ‘Scene of the Swans’, I think. ‘Capriccio Italian’, Tchaikovsky, but that is worse than ever. Fifteen minutes if it is one. We would drop. No, I haff it. ‘Puss-In-Boots’ from ‘Sleeping Beauty’. Tchaikovsky. Only a few minutes. Even a first year could dance to it. Perfect,” he said, smiling.

“I don’t know that one,” Hermione said softly.

“Oh, sure you do,” Elena said dismissively, then began to hum a tune. Hermione was surprised to find that it was indeed familiar, and from a source she would not have expected. It was from the Disney version of Sleeping Beauty she had seen as a child. Of course, they had taken Tchaikovsky’s music from the ballet suite. In the movie, Aurora had sung the words ‘I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream...’ to the same music. To her imagined prince. Then with her real prince as they danced in the woods. She almost blurted this information out, but then realized that no one at the table, least of all Viktor, would know what she was talking about, so she kept it to herself. He would only know about its ballet origins.

“Oh, I do know that one after all,” she said simply.

Viktor leapt up and made his way over to the conductor, renewing acquaintance with him and passing on their selection for the first dance. Potenko was coming toward their table with a pack of couples, and Hermione felt her heart leap. That looked like at least one couple to represent each year. “Come on, then, the lot of you. Soon as Viktor comes back to collect his partner, we will begin,” Potenko said with an even larger smile than usual. “Rest of you out on the floor,” he directed cheerfully.

“Relax. Enjoy it,” Elena whispered, giving Hermione’s hand a reassuring squeeze as she and Alexei joined the group and Potenko began stationing them at various spots around the floor, leaving a space for Viktor and Hermione. He strode back from the conductor’s corner looking far more confident than she felt,

stopped in front of her, and offered his right hand wordlessly. She took it and stood, positive her legs would fold when she rose. But they held, and they stood motionless for a moment, looking at one another. He put his left hand on her upper back and guided her gently toward the spot set aside for them. Once there, he stood on the outer rim of the circle, as all the other boys had, they took their positions, and he pulled her close, giving her a light, bracing squeeze toward him and a slight smile. Suddenly having everyone watching didn't seem so bad. Let them watch.

As the horns and violins began to play, they started off, and all her worries about tripping or making a fool of herself or anyone watching, everyone watching, were gone. She found herself smiling broadly, and all the curious onlookers were just part of the scenery. Unbidden, the vague memories she had of the animated scene from the movie she had last seen as much as a decade ago ran through her mind. Ridiculous, really, how familiar this felt, how right, how comfortable. You can't dance for beans, Hermione... now look at you. She could do it, as long as his fingers stayed against her back, as long as he held her hand, as long as he kept looking at her like that. Then the music stopped and they all applauded. "Now, we are off the hook, is that the right phrase? You do not have to dance the rest of the night if you do not want to..." Viktor said, grinning.

"Oh no, I'm just getting started. I'm going to dance you under the table by the end of the night!" she teased, and she surprised herself by really meaning it.

"I would like to see you try," he said, throwing his chin up and crossing his arms.

"Watch me! Besides, what do I have to worry about? You have to lead! Looks like Hans and Poppet might be hanging around for a few more, too," she added, pointing at the two small blonde heads that lingered on the dance floor not too far from them.

"Good. I might not have to boil him in oil after all," Viktor murmured. Several more couples streamed onto the floor after the applause died down, and though a few of them stared at her as they passed, Hermione found she didn't mind so much. Even the slightly hostile appraisals from some of the girls. One dark haired girl fixed Hermione with such a glower that Viktor scowled right back at her, so fiercely that she quickly wiped the nasty look off of her face and scurried after her partner so fast that Hermione couldn't help laughing. After that, she paid more attention to the dancing than she did the other dancers. The first few songs took in several composers, most of whom she could identify easily, such as Borodin, Debussy, Mozart, Respighi, and of course, Strauss. They danced to everything that the orchestra played. She even dragged Viktor across the room to request the Emperor Waltz, and they danced to it, slow and stately for when the music was, then whirling off madly when the horns came in



and the tempo picked up.

“Chopin. Waltz in D... is it flat or sharp or major or minor?” she observed when the tinkling piano and the speedy runs began sounding.

“I cannot remember. What does it matter? Neither one of us are going to be playing it, are we?” he asked.

“But I might want to request it next time,” she said without thinking. I’m assuming there’s going to be a next time, she realized with a jolt.

Viktor caught it as well. Next time. She said next time. So maybe I have not handled things so badly after all. Next time. Those are the best sounding two words I have heard in a long time. He felt his smile creep a bit wider.

He taught her a reel, and they used a box step on some of the songs, but by far, her favorites were the waltzes. Nothing else made her feel as much like the heroine of a fairy tale or a romantic movie. She almost chided herself for being so stupid and ridiculously giddy over it. It just wasn’t sensible to be so full of yourself, to keep hearing this voice in the back of your head saying ‘I feel like the queen’, but she couldn’t help it. Why do I feel like the only person in the room, the only person in the world, when he looks at me like that? How can such a small smile make me feel like I’m about to explode and fly in a million different directions at once? They danced to so many songs that Hermione soon lost count, but many of the other couples had already filtered onto and off of the floor around them multiple times when Headmaster Potenko and Madame Durshenkova waltzed up to them, literally, and the headmaster politely asked if he could cut in on the next dance. “May I cut in? If it is not too big an imposition? I would like to have one dance with the first female guest we have had here in many years. And one of the privileges of being headmaster is that I can be a big oaf and ask for other people’s partners and no one thinks less of me. I am sure Madame Durshenkova would be glad to keep Viktor occupied while we take in one dance?” he said to Hermione.

“Certainly,” she replied, and they switched partners as the current song ended, the men bowing to their new partners before starting the next dance. Dancing with Potenko wasn’t quite as easy as it was with Viktor, but he was nonetheless an able dancer. She just didn’t seem to fit into his hands and his arms quite so naturally as she did with Viktor.

“Miss Granger, I thank you for the dance and return you to your rightful partner,” he said, bowing low after the music ended and offering her hand back to Viktor. “You have wonderful taste in partners, Mr. Krum. May you two enjoy many, many more dances together,” he added warmly, giving her a small wink and giving his short, trimmed beard a tug. She felt a rush of warmth and affection for the brawny headmaster with the twinkle in his eye, so reminiscent of

Dumbledore's, as he collected Madame Durshenkova and headed back to the faculty table. He was so different from the sleek, cold, fake exterior that Karkaroff had presented.

"Hot in here, isn't it?" Hermione said airily, "I sure could go for some fresh air... truce on dancing one another under the table for now?" Two hours of dancing had left the both of them hot and ready for a break.

"Truce. I will go get our cloaks," Viktor said and soon returned with his over his arm, holding hers until she could get the clasp fastened. He flung his around his shoulders and they headed for the door to the outside. It was chilly, the air crisp and the stars stark and clear against the black sky, the harvest moon large and with a hint of orange. Hermione was surprised to see her own breath as a foggy mist after the warmth of the day and she shivered a little as the bracing air hit the perspiration that had formed on her forehead and upper lip. They walked the path through the low bushes until they were several yards from the outside entrance to the hall, seeing a few other couples strolling in the moonlight, sitting on the stone benches that dotted the grounds, each in their own world. Indicating a low stone bench out in the open, Viktor asked, "Is this alright?" She nodded her approval.

"Wait a minute," he said, sitting on the bench and fanning out his cloak on the right side, spreading it over the seat and holding it open. "Now, sit. That light cloak of yours is probably not going to be enough once you cool off," he said as she sat next to him. The bench just held the two of them comfortably, and she once more tucked in beside him, their thighs touching, his right arm draped over her shoulder. He flipped the cloak down over her and back toward him, covering her. Once again, she was shocked at the warmth she could feel radiating from him. No wonder he never gets cold, she thought to herself. He's a human furnace. He must burn off everything he eats. How on earth he put the new fifteen pounds on, I'll never know. He must have eaten like Ron does during the first part of the summer.

"What is so funny?" he asked, breaking into her train of thought.

"Oh, nothing. Everything. I was just thinking it's no wonder you never get cold. You're twice as hot as I am," she said, smiling.

"The big cloak helps. I should haff warned you it would be pretty cold out here at night," he said with some regret.

"No. No, this is better, I think. No fun being out here in my own cloak. More fun being in here with you," she mused, laying her head against his shoulder and reaching up her hand to take the one he had draped over her shoulder.

“Hermione... you scarlet woman you... you didn't really want to get air,” he chided.

“Absolutely. I just suggested air so I could get you alone and take advantage of you... I just wanted to get into your cloak like all the other girls. Then your local Snape can come along and blast us out of the bushes,” she said and laughed along with him.

They sat for a few minutes in a silence broken only by their breathing and the occasional strains of music when others opened the doors to enter or exit the hall. When the cold air began to sting her cheeks, Hermione finally raised her head and asked, “Go back in? Let me put you under the table for good? There's what, a good two and a half hours left? This thing goes until one. I'm game if you are.”

He ducked his head so that his face was right in front of hers and he could look her in the eye. “I need to tell you something first. I need to tell you several things, but most of them can wait a bit. I should haff said it earlier,” he told her in a low voice. “If there is one thing I learned early, it is this. Always say it while you haff the chance, there might not be another,” he said, drawing a deep breath, “I love you.”

“You already told me that, you wrote it. You even said it out loud,” she said, smiling up at him.

“No, I did not. I wrote it, but I did not say it. And I haff kicked myself several times for missing a good chance. Several good chances.”

“You called me ‘Sokrovishte’.”

“Ah. But I thought you would not consider that the same as saying those three words out loud.”

“No, it wasn't the same as saying ‘I love you’. It meant more. It was better. I would call you that if I could make it sound half as wonderful as it sounds when it comes out of your mouth. I can't do it justice.”

He covered her mouth with his and kissed her softly, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze and murmuring “Then I must remember to call you Sokrovishte more often,” as he pulled back. She was half tempted to suggest they stay where they were, but the hall was looking very inviting. She didn't want him to think that she really was like some of those other girls. And she was ready to dance some more, to wring every moment and every song and every dance she could out of this night.

“There they are. Told you they would be back,” Elena said, gesturing

toward the door with her glass of punch. "I think they are trying to kill the rest of us. I do not think they sat down vonce until about twenty minutes ago when they vent out," she told Alexei, draining her glass. "And stop the presses. He looks happy. Really and truly happy. Has to be a first at vone of these things."

"Hell must be freezing over as ve speak," Alexei said, nudging her elbow playfully with his own.

"I cannot believe it. They are headed back to the floor. Ve vill haff to hire a lift to get them both out of bed tomorrow morning. Or afternoon," she whispered.

"You are assuming they are going to sleep tonight. Looking at the two of them, I doubt it. They vill not sleep for months. Too high. They vill not vish to. They vould levitate above the bed, in any case," he replied in a low voice.

"I hate to admit it, but you vere right. I do not know exactly vhat she did to him, but vwhatever it vas, I am glad she did it. She is goot for him. I do not vorry so much, now."

"Now I know Hell is freezing over as ve speak," Alexei muttered.

"Vhy?"

"You just admitted I vas right about something. Two times in one night."

"Three somethings. You are dating me, no?"

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## Chapter 36

"Pachelbel? Johann Pachelbel? The one-hit wonder of the classical world? Canon in D. I've heard it at every wedding I have ever been to," Hermione laughed as she recognized the song that had just begun.

"Muggle weddings, are they much different in Britain? I've never even been to one here, just read about them," Viktor asked on a whim.

"Than wizard weddings? I don't know. I've never been to a wizard wedding either. They vary anyway. Some people have big formal weddings in cathedrals with lots of attendants and sit down dinner receptions, other people elope, go off with no planning and get married at the courthouse by a justice of the peace. Some people go in between, say, a wedding in the backyard, cookies and punch. What are Bulgarian weddings like? Either kind."

"Sounds a lot the same. They vary. My mother and father got married at Pavlova, but they had lots of people there. A lot of classmates. And what is a

'one hit wonder'?"

"It's sort of a joke name for singers or bands who have only one popular song in their entire career. Name one more song by Johann Pachelbel that you can hum," she challenged.

"You haff a point. Cannot think of a single one," he chuckled. "Look, do you want to go get a drink? I see Elena and Alexei are holding down the table for us, now."

"I admit, I could use a drink. And another rest. But not a long one. We still have two hours until they make us go," she warned.

"Agreed. What would you like?"

"Punch I think. No butterbeer. I'm quite warm enough, thank you," she said, wiping her moist forehead with the back of her hand.

As they reached the table, Viktor pulled out her chair. "So, punch for you. Elena, Alexei, do you two want anything?"

"I vill take some punch. That vill just about make up for you not peeling my caterpillars," Elena teased.

"Never going to let me live it down, are you?" he asked.

"No. Someone has to keep you humble."

"Nothing for me, Viktor," Alexei waved him off, so Viktor set out and soon returned with three glasses of punch.

"Well spotted, by the way," Viktor confided over his cup to Elena, propping his elbows on the table.

"Thank you. Now what are you talking about?" she said after taking a long drink from her own cup.

"Haff you talked to Poppet all night?" he asked her in return.

"No."

"Exactly."

"Oh. That. And now I retire from my career as matchmaker with a perfect record," she said, offering her cup in a mock toast.

“Amen to that,” Viktor replied, mirroring the gesture.

“No more matchmaking for you two then?” Hermione asked.

“Mama always said the surest way to cause misery is by trying to make other people happy. If matchmaking is not a fine example of that, I do not know what is. What is that saying about the road to Hell and good intentions?” Viktor said, ducking back into his cup with a subtle smile and a raised eyebrow.

“What’s wrong with trying to make people happy?” Hermione countered.

“Nothing. Trying to make people happy, there is nothing wrong with it. Trying to *make* people happy, that never works,” Viktor replied, placing heavy emphasis on the word ‘make’ the second time through. “Pushing two people at each other is like juggling lit fireworks and dynamite. You never know if you are going to get a nice display or blow up the shed,” he laughed.

“Like the idea of the two of us together,” Elena snorted. “Ve would kill vone another in a veek if ve ever dated, leave a trail of destruction a mile vide,” she said with a smile.

“I would hate to see the aftermath,” Viktor agreed. “Nothing but smoking ruins. Not a stone left on top of another.”

“Why are the two of you so sure about that? You seem to get along fine. I’ve never heard a cross word between you,” Hermione said.

“Too much alike,” they said in perfect unison, and Hermione and Alexei burst out laughing.

“Ve make fine friends. Anything more, no. Couple of stubborn, pigheaded, fiery Bulgarians who vill not back down from each other, not a good combination. Not us. Vorks vith both our parents, but not us, eh, Viktor? Difference is they all wanted to be together so they vere villing to not do battle over every little thing they differed on. Spark between us, yes. But of the dynamite variety, to steal Viktor’s phrase, if ve had to court. Sharp of us to figure that out before ve listen to those people who think ve should be together, or the castle might not still be standing. It would never vork. Ve would butt heads all the time. I’m strongvilled, he was already old and firmly set in his vays at fifteen. No offense,” Elena said, grinning.

“None taken. But ‘fiery Bulgarian’ was redundant. We argue and peck at one another like an old married couple anyway. Now, are you the pigheaded one and I am the stubborn one, or the other way around?” Viktor teased.

“As you like,” she responded, “Alexei, are you ready to go back or are you

too tenderfooted?”

“Ah, yes, my lady, nothing makes me want to dance more than hearing my two dearest friends talk about how romantically incompatible they are. Funny, I do not think Viktor and I could successfully court one another, either. Wonderful how these things work out, is it not, Miss Granger? That leaves you two free to wear the rest of us out just watching you two dance,” Alexei said.

“Is that really true? If I didn’t know better, I would think the two of you would make a good couple,” Hermione found herself asking.

“Elena and I would *not* get on as a couple. For one thing, she and Alexei have been together, on and off, most of the time they have been here. I just referee the shouting matches and the pouting sessions and tell them what idiots they are for not admitting what they really want instead of doing this dancing around one another all these years. Do not misunderstand me. Elena is a formidable woman, more ways than one, and sometimes I think Alexei does not know he has a tiger by the tail. Intelligent, stubborn, proud, sure of herself, absolutely beautiful. And she does nothing for me. I do nothing for her,” Viktor shrugged.

He finished his punch and set the cup on the table, rotating it between his fingertips as he spoke. “We figured out a long time ago that we worked best as friends. I did not want her, she did not want me, only other people thought we belonged together. Other people who did not know us very well and played deaf when we tried to tell them so. So I referee and yell at Alexei for being a dog when she gets tired of doing it, and in turn she plays mother hen when it suits her and gives me a good, swift kick when I really need it and I do the same. She is about the only one that was ever willing to do either one, but we really would kill one another if we could not get away from each other when we need to. Generally right after one of us gets a well deserved swift kick in the rear from the other. It would be the immovable object and the irresistible force. Alexei knows when to bend with her. I would just butt back until we both snap, and she would do the same,” he laughed.

“What do you mean by ‘a good, swift kick’?” she asked.

“Last year for instance. ‘Viktor, whoever the hell it is, just ask her to the ball. The worst she can do is say the word no.’, and ‘Elena, just stand up for yourself for once. Put your damn foot down. This nonsense with the other girls. Alexei does not understand hints. Tell him you want to be with him’ Thankfully, Elena does not need a kick that often. If she were less sensible, like Alexei, my leg would get tired, being around the both of them,” he sighed. “Your leg ever get tired being around those two?” he asked, nodding across the room to where Ron and Harry were dancing with a couple of the girls from the Quidditch scrimmage earlier.

“Sometimes. They fight over the most ridiculous things. Like last year, when Ron was dead sure Harry had put his own name in for the Triwizard Tournament and hadn’t shared with him how he managed to get over the age line. Didn’t talk to one another for weeks, then they act like nothing’s happened when Ron manages to see reason, and here I am worrying myself over it all that time,” Hermione complained. “How did Elena know? About you wanting to ask some girl? Namely me?”

“She did not know it was you, but she knew it was someone. Beats me. Sometimes she just knows things. That mysterious woman’s intuition, I suspect. Or maybe I am more transparent than I think and Alexei is simply much less observant than she is. Are you ready to go back out there?”

“Ready for the rest of the ball. I won’t sit again for the rest of the night. Collapse in a heap in the floor maybe, but not sit,” she said. They stayed on the floor long after Alexei and Elena had returned to the table. Soon some of the younger couples had left the ball entirely, gone back to their dorms and their beds. Most of the couples had retreated to their tables and only a hearty few were still dancing.

“So, are you ever going to tell me what you’re going to do with yourself? Everyone keeps implying you’re leaving sooner than Alexei and Elena, but I don’t even know when they’re leaving. Do I even get a hint?” Hermione asked him when they reached an otherwise empty patch of dance floor.

“Alexei and Elena are doing half-years. They were on track to be Triwizard candidates even last year, so they took more classes than usual to keep from falling an entire year behind while gone. They are doing double sessions on their remaining classes until they get caught up and can take exit exams. After Christmas, they leave. I still haff not gotten everything worked out, but I think I will see you again in three more weeks,” he confided. “I haff most of the classes in or haff taken the tutoring, all but two, I just haff not been tested yet,” he added.

“We take our O.W.Ls this year. Ever so important to do well, I do hope I get all I can, because they can impact your career and then you have to choose the N.E.W.T.s that you want to do, and I’m babbling now, aren’t I?” she said, seeing the bemused smile twitch at the corners of his mouth.

“One test at a time. You do not haff to live your whole life in one breath, you know, and you haff nothing to prove,” he said with a nod of his head. Not long after, Ron and Harry came by to bid them goodnight, followed closely by Elena and Alexei. “May I do something I haff been dying to do all night?” he asked a few minutes after Elena and Alexei had gone.



“I guess so,” she replied, puzzled. Without breaking step, he took his hand off the small of her back, reached up behind her and unclipped her hair, slipped the clasp into his pocket, then tousled her hair lightly with his fingers, so it fell down her back. “Didn’t like it?” she asked.

“Loved it. But I missed it, too,” he said bluntly.

“It was starting to come down anyway,” she said, wrapping her arm tighter around him, hugging herself to his shoulder. There couldn’t be more than two or three dances left now. Even the diehards at the tables in dark corners and those couples out on the benches were starting to call it quits.

“If you haff any requests, you had better be getting them in,” Viktor said in her ear.

“What’s left? I mean, we’ve done everything but the tango...I just said the wrong thing, didn’t I?” Hermione said when Viktor began to pull her by the hand toward the conductor. “Oh, tell me you don’t know how to tango...” she pleaded.

“Piece of cake. Besides, what are you afraid of? There are what, twenty people left? Most are faculty, and the vast majority of them, you will never see again,” Viktor argued. “It is no harder than the waltz, certainly.” He passed on their request, and she learned the tango. Learned might be overstating the case, she thought. More like I watched him do the tango and followed along. When the last song ended, they milled around the room, having a word with some of the faculty, the conductor, and lingered near the table where their cloaks hung on the chairs. They both seemed reluctant to leave, even though the ball was well and truly over.

He walked her up the stairs, and to her door. “Viktor, I can’t thank you enough for asking me. I had a wonderful time,” she said, feeling as though she was going a bit pink.

“Me too,” he replied quietly. He leaned over and brought his face closer to hers, and he was a bit surprised when she raised onto her toes, tilted her own face up to initiate a quick kiss on the lips. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” she echoed, and closed her door. She was so exhausted she didn’t even bother asking if he was going to be in the hall the rest of the night. No use arguing in any case, if he was planning on staying out there. She barely had the energy to pull off her robe, hang it up neatly, drape her cloak over the chair and crawl into her pyjamas before falling asleep.

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## Chapter 37

“You can come out now, you little spy,” Viktor whispered out in the hall. “Poliakoff,” he added in an exasperated tone.

“Just making sure you got back alright. I bet they had to throw you out,” Alexei whispered back, walking out of the shadows at the corner of the wall. “I take it Granger had a good time?” he asked as he ambled over, his pyjamas wrinkled underneath his open dressing gown and his hair wild. “She certainly seemed keen enough on kissing you, no need to steal anything,” Alexei teased.

“Make yourself useful. Stand here for a few minutes. I am going outside for some air,” Viktor said.

“Oh. Air. What we haff inside the castle not goot enough?” Alexei asked with a raised eyebrow. “Oh, alright. Go on. Go do whatever it is,” he said, fingering his wand, which he had pulled from his pocket. “I will just tell whoever catches me standing outside Granger’s room in my sleeping costume that I was sleepwalking,” he added, shaking his head.

“I will vouch for you,” Viktor replied, also shaking his head, and he turned and went back down the stairs, out the front door. He stood for a moment on the short staircase, toes hanging over the drop off to the moat, before seeing the dark shape coming in from the lake to light on the railing. The Sentinel folded in its shaggy wings, shuffled on the railing for a moment, and fixed Viktor with a piercing gaze. It resembled nothing so much as a furry, large eagle, with a hooked beak and sharp, powerful talons. The “bird” was a sooty, smudged gray from head to toe, except for the beady yellow eyes.

“Nothing,” it whispered in a breathy voice that sounded neither male nor female. “Safe. For now. Not like last year,” it added with a shake of its head, as though it were trying to clear cobwebs, or shuddering in the cold. “Bad feelings. Dark. Cold. So cold. Sooo coold,” the thing drawled, putting its beak right in Viktor’s face. These things exhibited the same disconcerting habits the Guardian displayed, invading your space, giving you that predatory look. You had to stand your ground, not back down. “But you knew that. See him before you leave for good. Important.”

Suddenly it broke eye contact and clicked its beak, ruffled a wing, and turned, preparing to fly off. Viktor followed it with his eyes, up and over the first tower, heading toward the back of the castle. He stood for a long minute, studying his boots and the stone step. Best go relieve Alexei. Only a few more hours until dawn, anyway. He will be leaning against the wall, sleeping, Viktor told himself, so he turned and went back into the castle.

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## Chapter 38

It took him a few moments upon waking to remember where he was. Durmstrang. The ball was last night. No, it had to be a dream. Nothing that perfect had ever happened to him at Durmstrang before. But then his eyes fell

on the boots sitting next to the chair, and the clothes he had draped over the back only a few hours before. He ruffled his hair and wondered what had woken him. He sat up and listened. Quiet. Too quiet, if it had not been for everyone sleeping even later because of the late night last night. Must have been the sun. Or the twinge in that shoulder. As he stretched, his tight shoulder gave an uncomfortable pop, then eased. Should have leaned the other one against the door frame last night. Two nights in a row must have been too much.

He was sitting there debating whether to roll over with his back to the window and try to get more comfortable, or abandon the bed altogether when a timid pecking sounded at the door. Not Alexei. He did nothing that quietly. "One moment," he called, swinging his legs out of bed and grabbing the dressing gown off the bedpost. Probably Hermione. Or Harry or Ron. Instead, it was the last person he would have expected. "Poppet, something wrong?" Probably here to give me what for about that Hans Hauptmann business, he thought blearily. To his great surprise, she wordlessly threw her arms around his waist.

"P-pushkin p-picked m-me," she said with wonder in her voice, once she had let go. "I-I m-made f-first t-team!" she beamed, then her smile faded. "Oh, V-v-viktor, I w-woke y-y-you..."

"It is okay. I need to get up or I will... he has posted the list already?"

"It is n-nearly e-e-eleven," she said bluntly.

"Oh. No one up yet?" he asked, leaning out to look down the silent hall.

She shook her head and replied, "N-not m-many. Th-th-thank y-y-you V-v-viktor. L-l-last n-night t-t-too."

"Oh, I was forced to," he said without thinking, then catching himself and thinking how that sounded, added, "I did not want it just to be the four of us. Out there. First. Unfair how they used to pick only students in the upper years." I left my head in bed, he scolded himself. Ah, a door jamb. Bang head here, you idiot. I was forced to. What were you thinking? You were not, obviously.

"Still i-it w-was s-sw-sweet," she said, "I w-will l-let y-y-you r-rest." The broad smile was back. He closed his door after he had seen that she made it to the head of the stairs and started down. Poppet. On first team. That would show all the ones who had teased her about being too tiny. Too timid. Thick-tongued. Pushkin always was fairly reasonable. And like any good coach, he just wanted the best overall player, if it be a tall, dark, gangly boy or a petite, fair wisp of a girl. He paused halfway between the door and the bed and brought his brows together. Either it was his imagination, or Poppet's stutter had vastly improved overnight. But he was too tired to think about it much. He returned his dressing gown to the bedpost and crawled back into bed. Consequences be

hanged, he had to sleep a little longer. Everyone else was.

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## Chapter 39

“Honestly, why didn’t you two pack as you went along? It’s not as though you were carrying a full set of luggage anyway. I finished packing in two minutes this afternoon,” Hermione scolded. Harry had just come running into Ron’s room with his haphazardly packed bag and hopped up and perched himself on the edge of Ron’s high bed with Viktor and Hermione. Viktor was the only one who could put his feet flat on the floor from there. Ron was still opening dresser drawers and discovering things he didn’t remember bringing in the first place.

“Oh, do be quiet Hermione! Not all of us can be as perfect as you... why on earth do I have four pairs of socks in here? Why did I think I needed that many socks?”

“Probably because you never unpacked your bag from your last trip,” Hermione countered.

“If we find anything else you forgot, I will haff it sent,” Viktor said in a soothing voice. “By the way, I think you forgot this,” he said in an even tone of voice, reaching into his pocket and drawing out a small knitted hat, which he offered to Hermione. Harry thought it looked suspiciously as though it were a house elf sort of size.

“Well, but I...I... it’s not...” Hermione stammered, going a bit pink.

“Still working with spew, then, Hermione?” Ron said, dissolving into a fit of laughter. “Knitting for freedom?”

Viktor cast him a sidelong glance, then spoke softly to Hermione. “First of all, it would not count. The clothes haff to be given to them by their master, and since Potenko is headmaster, they would haff to come from him. Guests and students do not count. They would not even wear it. They would think it a mark of disgrace, it does not look like something they foraged for. Besides...they would scream something awful about it if it did set them free. I heard Potenko is haffing a hard enough time getting them each to take a day off a month. They are trying to talk him down to a half day if he insists. They think... Dobby...was that his name?” he continued at the silent nod from Harry, “They think Dobby is a regular scandal, getting wages. It is going to take time for them to get used to it, Hermione. They may never want it. Remember what I said about *making* people happy being a dangerous business? I think that applies to house elves too. Remember, Dobby wanted to be free. Little wonder, if Malfoy takes after his father at all.”

Harry piped up, "You remember how miserable Winky was, don't you Hermione? Crying like that all the time."

"Who is Winky?" Viktor asked. It was obvious that Hermione had failed to tell Viktor about the house elf at Hogwarts that wailed over the fact that she was free.

"I'll tell you sometime in a letter, here in these next few weeks. Too complicated to tell you all of it right now. She's at Hogwarts too," Harry replied.

"They can't help it they're brainwashed to think they have to work all the time," Hermione said stubbornly, her eyes tearing up and her lip quivering. Harry knew that was the last stage she went through before progressing to great whooping sobs.

"Brainwashed or not, if they do not want it, you cannot force it on them. Forcing freedom they do not want on them would be no better than forcing servitude on them," Viktor said, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Dumbledore and Potenko, they are trying to change things, slowly, but they are trying to change. Slow is probably the only way it is going to work. Setting them free willy nilly just because you want them to be free, that would be chaos."

"Hogwarts and Durmstrang weren't built in a day, huh?" Harry joked.

"Actually, it was. The castle, anyway," Viktor replied, looking a bit puzzled.

"And so was Hogwarts," Hermione said hotly, drying her eyes. "If you two would ever read..."

"We know! We know! *Hogwarts, A History!* You've told us a blue million times! We don't need to read it, what with you spouting it at us like that all the time!" Ron complained.

"But anyway, the point is... buildings are not so complicated as living beings. They haff these funny things called 'minds of their own' and 'feelings' and they do not always react the way you think they should," Viktor interjected, in a conciliatory tone.

Alexei's grinning face popped in around the doorframe. "Elena is downstairs. She wants the two of you to come downstairs, Ron, Harry, so she can tell you goodbye and so she can take you to the kitchen and get you some snacks for later. Hermione vill not haff any room in her pack, what with all that chocolate." The boys gathered up their haphazardly packed bags and walked toward the door.

“See you downstairs, Hermione,” Harry called back over his shoulder. He dearly wished Hermione wouldn’t turn into a sobbing mess every time she got upset. At least Viktor didn’t seem to get all worked up over it, he just calmed her down. He and Ron never quite knew how to handle her when she got that way.

“See you downstairs, Viktor,” Alexei called back in a singsong voice, following after them. Viktor stood up from the edge of the bed and took Hermione’s hands, to steady her when she slipped from her perch, since she was farther away from the wooden stepstool that butted against the bed.

“You forgot something else, you know,” he said softly.

“What?”

“This,” he said, producing her hair clip from the other pocket.

“Oh. I forgot to give you this, too,” she said, reaching into her pack, placing the clip inside and fetching out a slender volume, entitled *Russian Composers*. “I realized I didn’t get you a thing for your birthday, and I picked this up when I bought my schoolbooks. It reminded me of you. I thought you would like it.”

“Thank you,” he said, accepting it and looking thoroughly pleased. “We should go soon if we are going to make the portkey back,” he said, with regret in his voice. “I will miss you Sokrovishte, but remember, three weeks is not that long.” They embraced and kissed, then stood for a moment in silence, considering one another. Suddenly Viktor reached over and scooped up her pack off the bed. “And I am carrying this back,” he said with a small grin.

“Go ahead then. I give up,” she teased, reluctantly stepping back from in between his arms. They walked to the entryway, where Elena, Alexei, and even Potenko were waiting. Potenko seemed to be bidding Ron and Harry a hearty goodbye. Elena ran over and fell on Hermione, giving her a warm hug, then letting her go to hold her at arm’s length and study her.

“Take care, Hermione. It vas good to haff you,” she said.

“Gave her someone new to fuss over,” Alexei added, grinning wide.

“Oh, you,” Elena scolded.

“Miss Granger, thank you once more for the dance, and thank you for your visit,” Potenko added, bowing low once more. Then he grasped her hand and said, “Do tell Dumbledore I said hello. Now, I must go, and you must too, if you are to make it back without undue hurry.”

“Thank you,” she told him. “I enjoyed it so much.”

“Where’s this portkey back, then?” Ron asked.

“Through there. Other edge of the forest. There’s a trail through there. A good little walk. We will stop to rest and eat before we get there,” Viktor told him, pointing out the open front door.

Elena and Alexei stood in the door and waved to them after they had cleared the moat and crossed the lawn, before they went into the trees. “So, Madame Elena, what is your final verdict?” Alexei asked, looking at her expectantly and slipping an arm around her waist.

“Mark my vords. Ve vill be going to their vedding some day. Miss Granger vill be qvite easily Viktor’s equal vith a bit of aging.”

“She must be qvite the young voman, then, if she merits the approval of the two toughest judges of character I have ever known,” he replied, nodding.

“Who?”

“Viktor Krum and Elena Keznova.”

“She might even be good enough for him,” Elena teased.

“Oh, you. Old mother hen.”

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## Chapter 40

“Ewww. What is that?” Ron asked, unwrapping a pale hunk of cheese.

“Ron, honestly, how rude! You would think you never ate anything new! Would you say ‘Ewww! Bouillabaisse!’ in front of Professor Delacour?” Hermione said, wrinkling her nose and Ron flushed.

“Sheep’s milk cheese. White cheese in Bulgaria. You call it something different, but I cannot remember what it is,” Viktor said, unperturbed. “Something short.”

Harry timidly broke off and tried a piece of the crumbly cheese. “Feta. It’s feta.”

“That is it.” Viktor shifted a little, then leaned back against the tree trunk again. He cast his eyes up through the canopy of leaves over his head, and noticed the familiar shadow passing over. He didn’t remark on it, instead, he

turned his attention back to the apple in his hand. By the time they had finished eating, there was little sunlight filtering through the leaves. "Portkey should be leaving soon. Of course, I haff to find it first," he said, getting up from the ground and wandering through the tree line, poking into the grass. "This must be it," he said, pointing to a mangled looking shoe nestled in the gnarled roots of a tree.

"It's been fun," Ron said, when Viktor shook his hand.

"Glad you came," Viktor replied.

"Thank you Viktor, I had a great time," Harry said, and extended his right hand. Viktor clasped it and put his other hand on Harry's shoulder. "Take care, Harry. Be careful," he admonished.

"I will."

"Hermione, your pack," Viktor said, handing her the bag from the ground.

"Three weeks," she said.

"Three weeks," he echoed. "You haff to go now."

They gathered around the shoe, and everyone laid a finger on it. Soon, they felt the telltale jerk behind the navel, and they were standing on the outskirts of the Hogwarts grounds, where Hagrid and Fang were waiting for them. "Good ter see yeh!" he boomed at them.

Viktor stood alone for a second, listening to nothing but the wind in the leaves and the birds. He turned on his heel to set out back to the castle, he would have to hurry to make it most of the way back before dark, but was brought up short by a pair of eyes on level with his and a blast of hot breath. They belonged to another of the Sentinels, this one resembling a large unicorn, but solid, deepest black, with red eyes. He hadn't heard it come up behind, and he started. "Your guests are gone?" it asked in a deep voice.

"Gone," Viktor replied a little breathlessly, collecting himself somewhat.

"Then our charge is over?"

"Over. Unless they ever happen to set foot on these grounds again, for whatever reason."

"Walking back in the dark?"

"What choice do I haff?"



“The choice of my company. Or a ride.” Viktor considered a moment, then forced himself to nod. This Sentinel might make his heart pound and unease him by sneaking up on him, but there were far worse things out here at night. He would never make it all the way back before night fell completely. He didn’t relish the thought of even ten minutes in the thick trees in full dark. Heaven only knew what might be out here that he and Alexei hadn’t stumbled on in their nighttime forays. What they had found was bad enough.

“I accept. The ride.”

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## Chapter 41

“Elena, you haff to stop that. If you start, then I will, and we do not want that. You act like I am going to my certain death...” Viktor chided.

“You might very well be. You know it is worse there. You know it will start in earnest there,” Elena replied, wiping at the tears on her cheeks with the backs of her hands.

“I haff to leave sometime. This is not going to be gone by the time you two leave, either. And I could trip on the stairs here and break my neck. You know there are no guarantees. There are no sidelines to stand on. No neutral ground. I cannot fool myself with that line anymore. I know too much for certain now.”

“You know, I am really crying for completely selfish reasons. I vill miss you. No more complaining about you not peeling my caterpillars, no vone to help me yell at Alexei,” she smiled weakly, then dissolved into fresh tears.

“Yes you will. You just haff to do it in letters or with your head in the fireplace, for a while. It is not as though you will never see me again. We are allowed to visit. By all rights, we should haff had to say goodbye last year. Would haff, if not for the tournament. And Alexei does not need yelling at so much anymore. One person might be able to handle it, and if anyone can keep him in line single handed, it is you. If he does not behave, let me know and I will send him a howler. Now pull yourself together, or someone is going to haff to make me stop crying before I can go,” he said, putting his arms around her and pulling her close, patting her between the shoulder blades.

“Promise me you vill take care of yourself,” she said, pulling away and grabbing his shoulders.

“Of course.”

“And Hermione.”

“Done.”

“Better be,” she scolded, then hugged him around the neck fiercely and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Viktor, tell your Mama and Papa hello for me,” Alexei said, abandoning all pretense of shaking hands and settling for throwing his arms around Viktor in an embrace, thumping him on the back. “And for heaven’s sake, be careful.” He pulled away and added, “No being a fool about Hermione the way I was about Elena.”

“Take care of her properly now. Or there will be two extremely angry Bulgarians ready to skin you alive, and I do not mean Elena’s parents. And I do not want to have to do that. Elena will not leave enough for me to skin, anyway, if you cross her just right. And warn me when you start planning the wedding.”

“Have to. You will be the best man, of course. More ways than one. Need help with your trunk?”

“I shrunk it down and it is in my pocket already, Alexei. All packed. I sent Baramir home last night. Now I need to go home. I might not see Mama and Papa again for some time. I need to see someone else before I go.” He let them think it was Potenko or Poppet, but he had already said his goodbyes to each of them, as well as some of his favorite teachers. He had one last appointment to keep here at Durmstrang, out by the lake. The dusk was already falling when he reached the dock, sat on the edge, laid his broom beside him, and whistled sharply.

“English again? Oh, please say yes,” came the Guardian’s voice.

“Good enough.”

“Ready to go?”

“Yes and no. Ready to start something new, but reluctant to leave certain people. Eager to leave some old things, eager to see some people again, not so eager to see some others.”

“Eager to see the mudblood with the earthen colored hair again? She is a grounding influence on you. Terrible puns in English, are they not?” the Guardian chuckled, no hint of distaste in his voice.

Viktor smiled. “Yes, Hermione Granger. I am eager to see her again. I take it you approve, despite the use of a less than complimentary term?”

“Nothing uncomplimentary. Nothing wrong with being of the earth.”

Nothing wrong with being a mudblood. Just means she sprang from non-magical roots, mysterious as a plant that grows through solid rock. It is only the ignorant and narrow minded that put malice behind that word. And I approve. She has fine qualities," the Guardian replied softly.

"She does not take too kindly to being called that. One of the ignorant and narrow minded makes a habit of putting malice behind it and tossing it at her at every opportunity," Viktor said, pursing his lips.

"Then I apologize. And what about the boy with the messy hair and the sea green eyes?"

"Harry Potter. I will not mind seeing him again, more regularly. I suppose we haff something in common and I even enjoy his company, if you can believe that. More than a handful of people that I like spending time with and am not related to! Imagine that."

"Something in common?" the Guardian queried with a raised brow.

"I suppose so. We both enjoy flying. He is skilled, especially for someone so young, with so few years at it. He is a seeker, as well. And he lost someone, too. His parents."

"Ah, but is he so much the creature of the air that you are? Flies like the wind?"

"I would not want to play against him in a few years, I think. Given some age and experience, and a few years to grow, he would be fairly formidable. If there is such a thing as organized games and sport and diversions by the time he gets much older. It would be a pity, if there is not. I would like to play against him while I still haff a chance to beat him," Viktor laughed.

"And the boy with the fiery red hair?"

"Ron Weasley. A good boy. A bit like Alexei, I am afraid, but not so bad. I will haff more help keeping him in line, unlike Alexei."

"Heaven forbid, another Alexei Poliakoff!" the Guardian said in mock horror.

"I take it back then. Maybe I should elaborate. He is a bit thick about how others feel, a little slow to catch on about how his actions and words affect others. But he is reliable enough for his friends in a crisis, I am told. Fiercely loyal when it comes to it. And I haff to say, Alexei was the same. I could always depend on him when I had to. Now, what was so important that you needed to see me before I leave?"

“Everything. Nothing. Your suspicions about last year. True. Your fears about the future. Warranted. The storm will break and you will be in the eye. Answer a riddle for the answer to a riddle. What weapon will work.”

“That is no help whatsoever. You haff me going in circles.”

“I am allowed to give you no more. I can tell you no more than I know. I can tell you this. Give yourself time, learn to control what you can, and be patient. You are going toward help, in that regard, every bit as much as you are headed toward danger. The rising did not happen overnight, neither will the fall. You are already familiar with the elements of the solution to our problem. They just need to be put together properly.”

“The war is coming. Will I live through it?” Viktor asked.

“You know I cannot tell you that,” the Guardian said gently.

“Will she live through it, then? Harry? Ron? Elena? Alexei?” Viktor cast a glance back over his shoulder at the towers against the mountains.

“Just as forbidden a topic. What would you do if you knew? If I told you any one of them wouldn’t make it, what good would it do aside from making you sick over it? Besides, no future is written in stone. You know as well as I, the choices we make largely shape what we become, what our future becomes, whether we have a future. I could predict your life down to your death in your sleep at a hundred and fifty, if I could make the visions come on command, and you could thwart that by throwing yourself in here to drown or turning your wand on yourself. Even prophecy is malleable. I see what I see. You see what you see. Use your head. And I remind you to look to your heart. You will know what that means when the time comes. And then more will become clear.”

“So, if I figure it out, it will at least become a little clearer how to fight. What to fight with?”

“Surely. I wish you luck.”

“I thank you. For watching out for them. For watching out for me.”

“You did not require much watching after.”

“All the same. You did it when I needed it. Like that evening in the woods. Even if the Sentinel nearly gave me a heart attack before offering me a ride.”

“Take care, Viktor Nikolas Krum.”

“I will.” And at that he rose from the dock, picked up his broom, got on, and started for the edge of the grounds, the waterfall where he had brought Harry, Ron and Hermione into Durmstrang. He would be able to Apparate home from there. Finish preparing for the rest of the journey.

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## Chapter 42

“Less than a week now. Four days. I do wonder why he hasn’t written though. I hope something hasn’t come up,” Hermione said.

“He’ll write yeh when he writes yeh,” Hagrid said sagely. Harry noticed that Hagrid had developed a much more charitable attitude toward Viktor since the Triwizard Tournament. He had once warned Harry strenuously to stay away from him. But then, Hagrid had just been rebuffed by Madame Maxime for calling her a half-giant (though it was true) and was having a bit of a general uncharitable feeling about foreigners. And there was that little problem of someone trying to kill Harry at the time, as well. But his reconciliation with Madame Maxime, combined with their glowing descriptions of their trip to Durmstrang and most of the people they had gotten to know there had apparently changed his attitude somewhat.

“Can we go to the barn with you to feed the hippogriffs?” Ron asked, finishing his bun. Rather a brave thing to do, as Hagrid had owned up to baking them himself, and Hagrid’s cooking sometimes left something to be desired.

“No, no. I already took care of ‘em. And it’s gettin’ late and cold. Get yerselves up to the castle already, or yeh’ll be outta bounds before yeh get there,” he said. Can’t have ye gettin’ into the barn just yet. Not fer a few more days anyway. Spoil the surprise yeh got comin’, he added silently, to himself.

“We really should go. I still have to finish my Potions essay,” Harry said.

“Oh, Harry, honestly. I was done yesterday,” Hermione scolded.

“I only have the last paragraph to put on. I’m nearly done,” Harry said defensively.

They put on their cloaks and bid Hagrid goodnight, and began the walk back up to the castle, wandering along the tree line of the Forbidden Forest, ambling slow in the moonlight. “So, what you reckon Hagrid’s hiding in the barn?” Ron asked. “Mad dragon? Manticore? Breeding more skrewts? Fire breathing crups? Ogre with a toothache? Lethifolds on leashes, I bet.”

“He did seem pretty reluctant to let us in there. Which is odd. Normally he’s all for us going to the barn with him. I shudder to think what he might have tucked away in there for our next lesson. He is terrible at keeping secrets, isn’t he?” Harry replied.

“Stop. Stop!” Hermione hissed, her voice low. “Do you hear something?” she whispered. They all listened for a bit, but Harry and Ron could discern nothing but the wind.

“Hermione you’re hearing...” Ron began, but she grabbed his and Harry’s sleeve and pulled them into the shadows of the trees.

“Put out your wands!” she ordered. And they did, standing there with the moonlight only, hidden in the dark tree line. Suddenly, Harry could hear it too. The occasional rhythmic thud, the rustle in the trees. It was impossible to tell where it was coming from, just that it was getting closer. Then it seemed to be across the grounds, in the trees, circling back toward Hagrid’s cabin. Harry, Ron and Hermione stepped out a bit, cocking their heads in that direction. Then a gust of wind came, and the sound was drowned in its howl. For several seconds, the sound was gone.

“Well, whatever it was, it’s gone n...” Harry began in a whisper, but was cut off in midword when he was knocked sideways and launched off his feet and realized that Hermione was tumbling down the incline with him, as well as a dark shape, which he came to recognize as a tall man in a thick, heavy cloak before his glasses were knocked off of his face. It had to be a man, it was too tall for a woman, too solid to be a dementor, and he had seemed just as surprised to bowl them over as they had been to be bowled over, judging from the sharp intake of breath when they had collided. They came to rest at the bottom of the small hollow, sprawled in a heap among the grass and the twigs and the dead leaves. Harry wheezed for breath. The man’s knee had caught him in the gut halfway down the hill, knocking all the breath out of him. Ron half-ran, half-surfed down the steep hill after them, with his wand raised. “Don’t move! Or I’ll... I’ll...”

At the same time, Hermione raised up from the ground, propping on her elbows. The figure in the cloak was pushing up from the ground as well. There’s something familiar about those big hands on the ground, the only feature she could see as yet in the moonlight, she thought, and as he turned to look at her, to her great surprise, she recognized the dark eyes underneath the hood that looked so startled. Then distressed.

“Viktor...” she breathed. “What are you...”

“Shh! No time for that,” he gasped, sounding out of breath, struggling to his feet and pulling the hood back. “Ron, for heaven’s sake, put that down! Go

hide! Or double back to the castle!” he hissed, bending over to scramble back up the steep hill. Harry and Hermione struggled to their own feet and began crawling up after him. A puzzled looking Ron followed.

“But what’s going...” Hermione began, as she crested the rise and could stand upright again.

Viktor grabbed her shoulders and shook her, “No time! Either you stay in the trees and head back up to the castle or I shove you back down this hill and you stay there!” he breathed, then froze for a moment, listening.

“My wand...” she squeaked in a thin voice, looking frantically on the ground around her. He looked over her shoulder at the large hollowed out tree at the edge of the forest. A narrow crack ran up the front of the trunk, just big enough to turn sideways and wriggle through, but the inside was easily five feet across and largely empty. Two or three people could fit, though it was a tight squeeze.

“Okay, no time for running now. You hide. You do not come out, no matter what happens. No noise,” he insisted, pushing her inside the narrow opening in the trunk. “You too, Harry,” he said, nudging him inside as well. As Harry could not see very well with his bent glasses clutched in his hands and still had to concentrate rather a lot on his breathing, he didn’t protest much.

“Now look here, what is going on?” Ron said hotly. “You come in here and start shoving us into trees and don’t stop to explain what you’re running from or why you just tackled us or even what you’re doing here ...” Ron was working his way back toward the edge of the hollow, further away from the tree.

“You want an explanation?” Viktor said incredulously. “You’ll get it in a minute. I apologize in advance. This is for your own good,” he said through gritted teeth. He gave a fearful glance back over his shoulder, opposite where Hagrid’s cabin was. Ron followed his gaze and it had just registered that the stars were starting to go dark in that corner of the woods, and the darkness was spreading in their direction, before Viktor planted his hands on Ron’s chest and shoved him hard back down the incline. Off balance against Viktor’s greater weight, Ron could not remain standing. He slid down the hill on his backside, and he saw Viktor leave the top of the rise and head back toward the tree. Then he heard a voice, farther off. It was neither Hermione, Ron, nor Viktor. He lay still in the pile of leaves at the bottom and listened.

Viktor positioned himself in front of the slit in the tree, spreading his cloak out behind him, hoping the darkness was enough to conceal anything that might not be hidden behind him. Anything that might give away the fact that there were more people out here than one. It would be soon enough, judging from the dark that was coming this way. He drew his wand back out of his cloak. “I see you.

No use running any more,” came the fruity, unctuous voice once more, clearer now that it was closer. Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm inside the tree.

“Karkaroff!” she whispered urgently. Harry put on his glasses, though the frames were wildly bent and cocked oddly over his ear and nose. Viktor took a large step forward, and Harry could just make out the figure of Karkaroff in the moonlight beyond the edge of the woods. “Do you have your wand?” Hermione asked. With a sinking feeling, Harry realized he had lost it on the incline when they had gone tumbling. When Viktor had plowed into them at full speed in the dark. It was probably buried with a hundred twigs in a pile of leaves somewhere out there. He shook his head numbly. “I lost mine too,” she said, clutching his forearm painfully.

“Why do you always run from what is good for you, Viktor?” Karkaroff asked.

Viktor gave a completely mirthless laugh. “Like you?” he asked in a quiet voice.

“Come back with me. You have no choice anyway. There’s nothing for you here,” came Karkaroff’s purring voice. Suddenly they both seemed quite loud, even though they were speaking in a fairly normal tone. Harry had expected whispering. Then it occurred to him. There was no one up to hear them. Curfew had passed. They weren’t supposed to be out here, in or out of a hollow tree. No one else was on the grounds. No one would miss them until morning. Hagrid was in bed. They were too far from the castle or the gamekeeper’s hut for a conversation to wake anyone. Neither of them cared about disturbing anyone or drawing attention. Viktor would have probably welcomed someone coming. A properly armed someone who knew what they were doing, Harry thought ruefully.

“That is where you are wrong. Wrong. Like you were about so many things,” Viktor said evenly.

“Wrong? The only thing I was wrong about was not exerting more influence over you earlier. Miscalculating and overcompensating later. Come with me. Come to him. He is willing to forgive. To offer blessing. To welcome you with open arms into the fold, offer you the eternal life he has ...”

Viktor snorted derisively. “What? Forgive like you do? Offer to share the same way you do? What kind of a fool do you think I am? I know you did not exactly spend a lot of time around us for fear of having to really interact with one of us or do some real work, but surely you noticed I was not a complete simpleton in class? Do you really think I believe he would forgive you for turning in your fellow followers without a repayment? A bribe? A...gift? Several gifts. Mine. Next you will be painting me a picture of him sitting in the middle of you



Death Eaters saying 'Suffer the little children to come to me', Igor. The Dark Lord share? Voldemort, share? How generous has he been in the past? You must all be mad." Viktor's tone was cold and mocking, and it made Harry shiver. He noticed that Hermione trembled as well.

"Do not say his name!" Karkaroff said, with some of the same nervous fear and the edge of hysteria in his voice that they had all grown used to at the mention of that name. Harry noticed a tall, dark cloaked figure drawing up behind Karkaroff, and the swallowing of light behind it, the cold blast of air that pushed in front of it, the billowing seemingly empty robes clued him in as to its identity, as well as the respectful distance it kept between itself and Karkaroff as it milled around restlessly. Hungrily. Prowling.

"Harry, it's a dementor!" Hermione whispered in his ear, and he nodded. He had never felt so helpless. Here he was, trapped inside a hollowed out tree, of all things, with Hermione, the two of them wandless, Ron at the bottom of the hill out of sight, maybe without his wand by now, and they were just having to stand here, well hunch here, really, while Viktor stood out there with his former Death Eater ex-headmaster and a dementor ten feet away.

"Why not? Afraid of his name, too? Why is everyone so afraid of a word? Words hold power, but what is so special about his name? Everyone else rejects it because it reminds them, makes them afraid. Speak of the Devil, he is sure to appear. You all act like it is blasphemy. It is his bloody name! It is his name! And I refuse to respect it! It doesn't deserve respect! Voldemort! Voldemort! Voldemort!" Viktor spat the words at him fiercely, and he jumped at each recitation of the name.

"Harry! He can't do a corporeal patronus yet! Only the mist!" Hermione pleaded in his ear, her lips nearly touching it.

He jerked her closer and whispered back, "Right now, I think that's the least of his worries! Shut up, we'll only make things worse if Karkaroff or that dementor figures out we're back here!" I don't know how it could get worse, but I'm afraid to find out. I wonder where Ron is by now, he thought to himself. Viktor took another large step out toward Karkaroff, and Harry found it hard to decide who was looking more menacing. He could only imagine the look on Viktor's face.

"Viktor, you don't understand! You would if you came with me..." Karkaroff said a little nervously.

"What? Understand what? That you are all a bunch of cowards, so afraid of death you are willing to do anything for a scrap of a promise, afraid of each other, willing to turn each other in to avoid a punishment you deserve? Igor, I know all about your Death Eater days. And more importantly, after. Knowing

someone who works for a ministry and finally being of age is handy. At least the Lestranges took what was coming to them. There is some honor in that, at least, I suppose. Hollow, but if you're going to sell your soul to the Devil, at least give him his money's worth. You did not even do that. You spouted names at them in the hope that they would let you go. Did half of them even join? Or did you just manufacture the list?" Viktor asked.

"Damn it, you have gifts! Gifts that could be put to use. You would be honored. You would be one of his greatest treasures."

Viktor seemed to shudder violently at that last word. Treasure. Sokrovishte. What a mockery of what his mother calls him, Harry thought to himself. "Gifts," Viktor said sadly. "Gifts I neither wanted nor can control as of yet. You know I cannot control them. What use would I be? Other than a way to get your foot in the door? You ought to wish me on the competition, Igor, since you trained me. You ought to know the answer is no. It will always be no. Ne. Nyet. No. There, Bulgarian, Russian and English. Surely one of them will get through your thick skull."

"Viktor...you noble fool. It's going to get you killed. Why here? Because of them, isn't it? There's where I made my mistake. I realized you were as stubborn as your father. If not more so. I didn't take into account that you were as sentimental and soft hearted as your mother. I left you too much freedom at first."

"Freedom? That is a laugh."

"I let you have a joy. Flying. But the temptation to get you famous, it was too great. I knew the first time I saw you fly, you would be famous. You far exceeded my expectations. I also made the mistake of not cutting you off from that disgusting Poliakoff. He was a bad influence on you. And he made you laugh occasionally. More joy. He was disrespectful and a rotten..."

"Do not run down Alexei Poliakoff," Viktor said in a low, dangerous tone. "He is a true friend, even if I did not know how to accept his friendship properly."

"And I let you read."

"Books. Escape when you cannot escape. Would you haff even cut me off from the library, Igor? Not much of an education." There was a false lightness in Viktor's tone now.

"If I had it to do over. And Elena. I had high hopes for you two. And you two defied me."

"We tried telling you. We were not meant for one another. If you had

opened up your damn ears you could haff saved yourself a lot of trouble.”

“So you kept saying. Stubborn. Willful. The two of you. I should have chained the two of you together if nothing else. If I couldn’t make the two of you accept one another on my terms, I should have cut you off from her. And that Brecht the last two years. Mollycoddling her and training her. You and your compassion.” Karkaroff said the last word with great distaste.

“Compassion is not a weakness. It is a strength. If it weren’t for at least a little compassion on someone’s part, you would still be rotting in Azkaban. I should think you would be grateful for a little compassion.”

“Sentimental fool. I never should have brought you here for the tournament. That finished you off, didn’t it? Finished ruining you. Tell me Viktor, what was it? What was it that made you pick that filthy, disgusting little mudblood? It’s not as though you didn’t have plenty of others to choose from. Durmstrang was full of the lovely and the willing. Purebloods your age piled ten deep. They were drooling after you all over campus. Here, three schools full of girls and you zero in on that one. And she wasn’t even particularly pretty. If you were going to pick a watered down bloodline at least pick the half veela, something with a bit of magic on both sides. Not that abomination, not that mudblood!” Karkaroff snarled.

“Never, ever call her that again!” It was an order that didn’t leave room for argument.

“What was it? I can’t figure out what she offered you, other than a chance to defy me. And you were never rebellious, even when I could sense you hated me with every fiber of your being. You never went out of your way to find ways to defy me. You took it when it came along, but you never went looking for it. It can’t have been that. Like I said, she wasn’t particularly beautiful. You had plenty else to choose from. Begging you to take them. I’ve run through all the typical enticements. She can’t have offered you money. You make enough as is. For a schoolboy, you were fabulously wealthy already. You don’t seem to particularly care for it in the first place. It can’t be that she offered herself to you. You never availed yourself of that at Durmstrang, even though I would have turned a blind eye if you had decided to form a harem. And there were plenty of willing girls. You didn’t even give in when one of them hiked her robes and bent over for you. I would have smoothed that over with the Potions Mistress. Put a nice little memory charm on her. No, Granger can’t have offered her body. Unless you found out that there was something she was willing to do that you particularly liked? If you had only let me know about your tastes...”

“Stop it! You know better. You know it wasn’t that. She offered me herself, alright, but not the way you mean it. I could never explain it so you would understand.”

“Alright then. My other mistake was letting you win that argument. I should have beaten you, tournament be damned. You didn’t care enough about winning anyway. But little good that would have done, eh? I could have beaten you half to death, and you have enough of Nikolas in you that you would have gone anyway just to spite me, wouldn’t you? I hear you even made friends with Potter by the time I left. Exchange seeker tips, do you?”

“Something like that.”

“And my worst mistake. I started trying to get inside your head too early, too subtly. You fought me off.”

“You gave me two years warning to practice. What did you expect? Alexei was good enough for that. He helped me practice. Told me what we might be missing in our Dark Arts classes since you took them over. Remember, his father is in the Ministry. He remembers the good old days, before you started leaving things off the curriculum. Then when you started using these things...” Viktor jabbed his wand at the dementor, which was ranging farther and farther away, but always coming back to the area behind Karkaroff, “...you nearly killed me. You had them on campus, did you not? At Durmstrang?”

“Regrettable, I admit. I was getting desperate. I was hearing rumors that great things were being planned. That the Dark Lord was plotting his greatest triumph over that little brat! Coming back bigger and better and more powerful than ever! And if that were to happen, I needed you. Then my mark started coming back and you had learned how to fight off an Imperius somewhere, even though I didn’t teach you. I needed you to conform, to break, so I thought I would let them soften you up a bit. You didn’t eat. You didn’t sleep. They nearly broke you, but you finally fought back so hard, I thought you were going to kill yourself trying to throw them off.”

“Nearly did,” Viktor answered matter-of-factly.

“I thought you were going to die in the infirmary that night.”

“I did too. Sometimes I wished I had. That rotten Alexei might be the only reason I am still alive.”

“Put the wand down, Viktor. I treated you like a son. No one here can show you that kind of love.”

“Love! If that was love, I would not want to see your definition of hate! You manipulate all of us, sift through us for the ones you think you can use to your advantage, groom us how you like, and toss away the chaff to the fire. Igor Karkaroff, you can waste your breath all you like. We haff a standoff. You lose

either way. You leave me here, you do not get your ticket in. Voldemort and his Death Eaters kill you on sight as a traitor. You try to kill me and make a mistake, I am fully justified in killing you. You try to kill me and succeed, you still do not get your free pass.”

“What if I leave you and promise to kill someone else? You won’t kill me without provocation, immediate danger. You have principles. Anything less would be murder. I can leave here and promise to kill someone you love. I don’t have a hope of killing your Mama and Papa by myself, you and they have well seen to that. I won’t be able to break into Hogwarts at will and kill Potter for fun. Killing Potter would be signing my death warrant for sure. The Dark Lord wants to do the honors himself. But I can promise you this. If you don’t go, I will hunt down that girl and torture her. I’ll make her wish she was dead for days. Weeks. I’ll make it so bloody and violent that there won’t be a scrap of flesh big enough to bury. She’s a mudblood. She’ll have to leave the magical world sooner or later. Maybe for a parent’s funeral, if necessary. I could arrange that. I hear those Muggles are foolish enough to list their names and location in big books to make them easy to find. I bet there cannot be that many Grangers in London. I have to get the right one sooner or later. You can’t protect her all the time, Viktor.”

“Then I might make an exception in my principles. It would be worth the term in Azkaban if they convict me. Besides, we both know it is only a matter of time before the dementors abandon it. Kiss or no kiss, I wouldn’t be there long. And don’t fool yourself. I would be your worst nightmare as an executioner. You know I have a particular talent for all those petty tortures. Talk about bloody scraps, it would finally be a pleasure to know those curses. And you know all about how good I am at the not so petty ones. I could give you back your memories. A hundred times bigger and better and more vibrant and more clear than they were when they happened. I would make you live with yourself, Igor. What you have done. I could make you relive it over and over and over. I know what that is like, unpleasant memories that just will not go away. That particular talent comes out fairly well when I lose control. It has been a long time since I lost control of myself completely, hasn’t it? I bet I would not even have to try now. It would just happen while I got rid of you. All your Death Eater days right there in your head. Make you feel like a big man to hear defenseless little children you have killed scream? Guess we can find out.”

Hermione and Harry clutched one another harder inside the tree. He had that same helpless feeling of something being fundamentally wrong with the world he had when he had seen Dumbledore standing over the imposter Moody’s body on the floor last year, looking enraged. Something was desperately out of kilter. Viktor shouldn’t sound like that. Viktor’s voice was cold. There was something in it that he and Hermione had never heard before. The anger was not new, but something else was. Hate. Pure, unadulterated hate. He advanced another step on Karkaroff, who was beginning to look as

afraid as he had been surprised at Viktor's words. Then Karkaroff's expression changed, smug and oily as ever. "Well, well, what have we here?" he said in his usual unctuous tone. Then the dementor came back into sight, clutching a petrified Ron. It had sniffed him out at the bottom of the hollow. "Go with me or he dies, the dementor is hungry," Karkaroff said carelessly.

"What makes you think I care?" Viktor said. For the first time, Hermione found herself wishing that Viktor was a better liar.

"Don't lie. You don't do it very well. I know you made friends with him too. He sat in your box at internationals. I saw him."

"So it was you!"

"Ah, so you saw me then! Well, I must be more discreet next time I go spying. Besides, even if you disliked him, you wouldn't want him to die needlessly. Without purpose. You might as well tell me where the other two are. He wouldn't be out here without Potter and Granger, now would he? No indeed, he wouldn't. Might be afraid in the dark," Karkaroff said, with a high pitched hysterical giggle. "Bad things in the dark." Viktor seemed to be weighing his options. The hostage changed things. Now it might as well be three against one. "Fair enough, Viktor. I'll get him to rat on his own friends. A couple of drops of veritaserum on the tongue, he'll soon tell me if he's alone," Karkaroff said, producing a bottle from his pocket. He administered the potion and asked Ron, "So, boy, where are your friends?"

They could tell Ron was struggling to stay silent. He bit his tongue, he stammered, but finally, it tumbled from his lips, "In the hollow tree! Behind him!"

"Useless now, you can have him. Bon appetit," Karkaroff said dismissively, and the dementor started pulling back its hood and leaned toward Ron.

"*Expecto Patronum! Wingardium Leviosa!*" came Viktor's voice, and a silvery fog surrounded the dementor, stunning it, then Ron went hurtling by them, into the thick trees. He would be concealed by the forest.

Then Karkaroff's voice rang out, "*Expelliarmus!* Fool. Delaying the inevitable. I'll give you a choice. Move aside, let me at Potter, and I will let the two of you go. Even Weasley, if I feel charitable."

Viktor stepped back in front of the opening to the tree. Harry and Hermione had to crouch to peek out around the bottom of his cloak, between his feet. "No you will not. What would prevent you from killing them anyway? Your word? I know what that is worth. Nothing. Less than nothing."

"Move aside Viktor, and I won't kill you."

“The only reason you would spare me is if you think I am valuable, and we haff already established that I am not going willingly. Unwilling, I would be worse than useless. I would be dead weight. He would be your ticket in. I would be the sideshow. If you want at him, you haff to kill me. I can finally see you in all your Death Eater glory, Igor. Killing the unarmed.”

“What have you got to lose Viktor? Move aside. Even if I am as untrustworthy as you say I am, you lose nothing. You might even die first and not have to watch me torture her. If I tell the truth, you and she can leave. She only loses one of her friends. Not both of them, and you, if she cares for you at all, and her life. You can’t make that decision for her, can you?”

“If I move aside, I lose everything. I would rather lose my life than render it completely meaningless. I would be no better than you if I stand aside. I would be worse. I would haff judged the word of a man I know is a terrible liar, a murderer, a Death Eater, a coward, and a traitor over the life of someone who showed me kindness when they did not haff to. Someone who showed me love.” Viktor sounded as calm as if he were discussing a grocery list.

“Oh, so you’re a noble fool? Look to your heart, Viktor. Look to your heart and ask yourself if it is worth it. If they are worth it. If she is worth it. Is she?”

Before Harry could grab her, Hermione had wriggled out of the tree and run around to the side of it. “Stop it! Stop it!” she screamed, sounding hysterical. Harry wriggled out after her and stood beside her, and Ron joined them, creeping out from the shadows. Viktor stepped between them and Karkaroff once more, shoulder pointed at each of them, staring Karkaroff down. Harry noticed Viktor had reached up and was clutching something at his neck with his left hand.

“Stand aside. Don’t be stubborn.” Karkaroff insisted.

“Too late. Haff been stubborn all my life. Got a double dose. My mother is not as completely soft as you think she is. And as to your question, I haff asked myself that. A hundred times. Forty of them in that library over there before I forced myself to talk to her. When I throttled myself over learning her name. When I stood you down over the Yule Ball. When I cornered Harry about her. When I wrote and hoped and waited and sucked up the courage to ask her somewhere again. And I always get the same answer back. Yes.”

“Then I hope she appreciates it. *Crucio!*” Viktor stood for a moment, then crumpled onto his hands and knees, still clutching whatever it was with his hand.

“Is that the best you can do?” Viktor said through clenched teeth. He

scouted around to face Karkaroff more fully, never taking his left hand away from his neck to steady himself. Harry sucked in his breath. He knew what that felt like. It felt like every fiber of your being was electric, the bones crushing, the life being pressed out of you. Red hot searing pain in every cell. How could he move at all?

“*Flagellare!*” Karkaroff shouted, and a crack sounded through the air. When Viktor looked back up, he had a fresh cut across his cheek, oozing blood.

“Pitiful. Unoriginal. Whipping has been done to death,” Viktor mocked. Harry looked around. Hermione and Ron were frozen with identical, wide-eyed looks of horror on their faces. His own mouth was hanging open. I wonder if I look so fish eyed, he wondered, then scolded himself for wondering such an absurd thing at the moment.

“*Fractura,*” Karkaroff said idly, strolling closer and pointing his wand at Viktor’s hand. A muffled pop sounded, and this time, Harry noticed that Viktor’s little finger was turned in at an odd angle all of a sudden.

“Broken bones? Please. I thought you were a Death Eater, not an amateur,” Viktor said in a bitter voice. Why was he deliberately goading Karkaroff?

“Very well then,” Karkaroff huffed, indignant, pointing the tip of his wand at Viktor, no more than a foot away now. “*Avada Kedavra!*” As the words left his mouth, Viktor shouted something back.

It took a moment for the words to register. Then another moment to realize why they were familiar. “*Guerda Engelikos!*” echoed off the trees in the dark, and Harry’s legs buckled, the strength drained out of them, as though he had been hit with a jelly legs curse. He saw the green flash leave Karkaroff’s wand, and the blast of white light that emanated from Viktor. There was a blast of heat, a rush of hot air, almost like a bomb exploding, and the bodies went flying. Karkaroff and the dementor pushed farther out into the open, Viktor picked up off the ground and hurtled backwards into the trees. While still blinded by the light, Harry heard a loud crack and a sickening, solid thud behind him.

Harry struggled up onto his wobbly legs and readjusted his mangled glasses. Out several yards in front of him, lay the smoking, mangled, lumpy heap that had once been the dementor. The foul smell of sulfur seemed to be wafting from it in the yellow smoke pouring off its robes and the pile of thick, dark goo around them. Was it dead? Could you kill a dementor? Karkaroff’s body was a few feet away, unmoving. Surely he was dead? He would be on them if he weren’t. Beside him, Hermione was trying to make her way toward the trees. “Viktor...” she said in a strangled voice.



Harry pounced on her, grabbed her around the waist. “No, no Hermione. Don’t look. I looked with Cedric. I wish I hadn’t. You’ll wish you hadn’t... it’s terrible...” he knew he was babbling, but he couldn’t help it. She quit struggling, turned and he hugged her while she sobbed. It was oddly quiet crying for Hermione. He could barely hear her.

“I’ll go,” Ron said grimly, walking over and picking up his wand from where he had been standing with the dementor and lighting it. Harry buried his face in her hair. He didn’t want to look. Anywhere. Not at the horrible smoldering heap that might be a dementor body, not at Karkaroff, not at Viktor. Not at Ron’s expression when he had seen death. Not at Hermione’s face. He would just stay here until someone came and got him, pried them apart. “Harry! Harry! He’s alive!” came Ron’s voice at his side, and he shook him by the shoulder.

“Karkaroff? Alive? But...”

“No! Viktor! He’s moving! He’s hurt, but he’s moving! Come on!”

Ron led them back through the trees about five feet, where Viktor lay crumpled on top of a freshly broken branch in front of a solid oak. He had obviously taken the branch with him from another tree, it was not an oak. Then bounced off the trunk. His face was turned into the pile of leaves on the forest floor, but he flexed a finger or two on his left hand, then gave a wet, shuddering cough. Harry felt petrified. He should do something but he couldn’t move.

“Run, get Hagrid! He can get him up to the castle!” Hermione shouted, and edge of desperation in her voice. Without a word, Ron handed Harry his wand, then sprinted back to the tree line. They could hear him running full tilt once he cleared the trees. Viktor gave another weak cough and choked. Hermione put a hand behind his head and lifted it slightly out of the soft ground and detritus of several autumns beneath the tree. A mouthful of blood ran out, but there followed a wheezing breath. It seemed forever until they heard Hagrid’s voice call to them.

“Harry? Hermione? What on earth is goin’ on? Ron came thumpin’ on the door babbling something about Viktor...” he hesitated when he brought up the lantern and saw the full scene at last, “...Krum...” He knelt beside them and brushed a bloody strand of hair from Viktor’s forehead. “Oh lad,” he said sadly, then shook his shaggy head. “Ron, you get up to the castle, get Madame Pomfrey, take Fang wi’ ye. Hermione, hold the lantern. Harry, you help me get ‘im up.” Harry nodded numbly. Hermione scrambled out of the way, and Hagrid tried to gather Viktor up as gently as possible, but he seemed to jerk or whimper at every touch. When he lifted his torso from the ground, bracing him around the shoulder, Viktor’s right arm swung back at an unnatural angle, bent midway between shoulder and elbow, and he let out a pained, strangled cry. “Wrap his

cloak around the arm, Harry. Gather it up an' tuck it in against his body. It's broken," he said softly. When Hagrid stood, with Viktor's head resting against his shoulder, his left leg also looked oddly twisted, the foot pointing out too far and more blood streamed from the corner of his mouth when he coughed again. Harry finally registered that Hagrid had on neither coat nor cloak, he had come straight from bed. Viktor's dark hair was soaking blood into Hagrid's dressing gown and pyjamas, and Harry could finally see the jagged cut hidden up near his hairline when his head lolled back slightly. There didn't seem to be a spot on him that wasn't wet and red by now, and he looked strangely dwarfed and delicate in Hagrid's arms.

Hagrid started for the castle with him and Hermione ran along beside, muttering something under her breath, and Harry finally distinguished it as the constant repetition of "Viktor, please don't die, please don't die," by the time they made it to the front entrance. What she said, he thought numbly, not quite willing yet to think 'Viktor' and 'die' in the same sentence. He's not dead, Harry. He focused on the rattling breaths he could hear from Hagrid's arms, and clung to that sound.

Inside Madame Pomfrey met them at the door to the hospital wing and went to work on him almost before Hagrid had time to lay him on the bed. She jerked the curtains around them and they could hear her murmured exclamations every few seconds. Hermione sat down weakly two beds away and sobbed, while Ron and Harry stood silently by, their knees so shaky they almost knocked together. After a couple of minutes, Hagrid came over and told Ron, "Go get Dumbledore. He'll be needin' ter know. Go on boy! He needs ter know what's goin' on!"

Hermione took her face out of her hands and looked up at Hagrid. "Please. Please let me over there," she whispered, though she looked like the last thing she wanted to do was move from her seat.

"Let Madame Pomfrey work. Then we'll see what Dumbledore says, eh?" he said gently. "Harry, lad, ye gonna be alright?" Harry nodded his head.

Dumbledore swept in wearing his dressing gown and walked over to the drawn curtain. "Poppy, may I pull the curtain?" he asked in a calm voice.

"He's a mess, but I suppose you can. Those lot have already seen it," she called. "They shouldn't be in here in the first place, but I'm too busy to throw them out."

He reached up a long arm and pulled the curtain back. He considered the resident of the blood soaked bed for a long moment, then said, "Well. I must say, I didn't expect Viktor for another four days. And I expected him to arrive in rather fewer pieces when he did arrive. I gather you three were with him when

this happened? Perhaps you can shed a little light on it?" Dumbledore said, suddenly looking haggard in the dim lights.

Harry found himself blurting out the events of the night in a rush, while Hermione continued to sob and wail progressively louder, and Ron tried to comfort her. He didn't realize until he said, "If he hadn't done it, we'd all be dead. And he did it without a wand. I don't know how he did it without a wand," that his cheeks were wet and he was crying as well.

"Igor, eh? Well, that explains why he arrived early," Dumbledore said, considering Harry for a space.

"And if you three hadn't been blundering around the grounds at night in the dark, maybe he would have made it to the castle without having to stand against Igor and a dementor, if that fantastic story is true," came a familiar oily voice from the doorway. There stood Snape, in his dressing gown as well. "I was doing patrol and I could not help but notice Granger's caterwauling and Weasley's pounding up and down the stairs, so I came to see what was wrong," Snape said nastily. But even Snape looked a bit paler when he stepped inside and took a closer look at the bed.

Madame Pomfrey continued to fuss and work over Viktor, and they sat there for what seemed hours, waiting for her to pass verdict. Finally she stopped and walked over to Dumbledore. "He really should be in hospital, but he shouldn't be moved either. I think it would be best for him to stay here for the time being, if we can keep a close watch on him. Heaven knows what else he may have wrong with him that I haven't found yet."

"How bad?" Dumbledore asked.

"He might as well have hit a tree full speed on a Firebolt. Better, maybe, he might have slowed down first. He's done a fair job of bashing his head, cuts and bruises all over him. Broken right arm completely in two that's going to be a right bummer to heal, take days, maybe, before he can use it, and his left knee was wrenched right apart, probably take a week or more before he'll be able to bend. Two before he can stand on it, if he's lucky. He's cracked some ribs, and at least one of them broke and punctured a lung. Another minute or so in that position with his head off to the side and he would have drowned in his own blood. The pinky snapped cleanly, the cleanest break I've ever seen, that should be easy to take care of, but that's the least of his worries. The funny thing is, he has what looks like a burn. In the palm of his left hand and on his fingers. Blistered him. Looks like he tried to grab a hot coal and squeeze it, but it's perfectly round. And I don't know when he'll wake up. I wouldn't bet on anytime soon. I think there's more than the knock on the head to it. There's something else going on."

“Burn?” Dumbledore walked around the bed, and gently turned over Viktor’s left hand, tracing a finger over the palm and adjusting his spectacles on his crooked nose. Then he reached the same finger up to something lying at the hollow of Viktor’s throat. He picked up a small metal disc on a chain, which Harry recognized as the locket Viktor had been given for his birthday. There was a red burn under it as well. “Guerda Engelikos, I presume,” Dumbledore mused as he flipped it over and saw the Cyrillic script on the back. Harry nodded when Dumbledore regarded him over his glasses.

Dumbledore readjusted his glasses and began giving orders. “Poppy, let these three stay here, if they like. They won’t sleep anyway. Let her pull the curtain and finish cleaning him up, then you can sit at his bedside, Hermione, as long as you promise to stay out of the way. Hagrid, Severus, I think we had better go out and see if we can locate Igor and what’s left of that dementor, as well as Harry and Hermione’s wands. Viktor’s too. Hornbeam and dragon heartstring by Gregorovitch, if I remember from the weighing of the wands. It should have survived. Hagrid, I suppose you will be taking care of Ivan and Natasha a bit longer than planned. Until Viktor can do it himself. You can let them out of the barn now, I think. No one but these three would recognize them, and I think the surprise has already been sprung on them. They might want to keep you and Fang company. Baramir is in the with the other owls already. He arrived with a letter for me two days ago. I don’t know where his things are. You might go through his cloak when you get it off of him Poppy. His quarters are almost ready, but he won’t be needing them just yet in any case. Do you need any help getting him into something more suitable for the hospital ward?”

“No. No. You go ahead. Your job will come later, when we try to figure out or treat what else is wrong. You and Snape. Part of this may be beyond my ken. I’ve never treated anyone who’s managed to melt down a dementor before. I didn’t know you could do such a thing and I don’t know what he might have done to himself in the process. I’ll be talking to someone at St. Mungo’s first opportunity.”

Dumbledore and Snape returned some minutes later, fully dressed now, and in their cloaks. Dumbledore handed a wand each to Harry and Hermione, then laid a third on the bedside table when Madame Pomfrey opened the curtain again shortly after they had returned. An unearthly yelping and wailing and howling sounded outside the infirmary window, and soon afterward Hagrid came in, now dressed as well, with his usual hairy overcoat. “Might’ve been a mistake lettin’ those dogs out. They’re makin’ a terrible ruckus. They know he’s in here, pinin’ over him somethin’ terrible. They’re just gonna keep doin’ that until we let ‘em in,” Hagrid said, looking expectantly at Madame Pomfrey. As if backing him up, Ivan and Natasha howled that much more vigorously, and at least one of them began hurling themselves against the window.

“Oh, very well then. I can’t take that racket, he’ll never get any rest nor

will anyone else within a country mile with that going on. Turn my hospital ward into a kennel. Now, are any of you three hurt, or just dirty?" Madame Pomfrey muttered.

"Dirty..." Hermione mumbled, and got up. She was dry eyed now, and she walked over to the bed and sank into the chair next to it. She traced the blistered burn in his palm much as Dumbledore had done, then threaded her fingertips loosely between his. Ivan and Natasha came padding in from the hall, in front of Hagrid, whimpering and yelping, and they both sniffed and licked at his other hand before sitting at attention at the side of the bed. Harry and Ron walked over, each absently scratching a shaggy head between the ears. Harry's curiosity had overcome his horror and he had to see now.

Gad, he looks horrible, Harry thought to himself as he winced. His hair had been brushed back and the jagged gash on his forehead was pasted together with some thick, greasy orange salve, as was the clean slice across his cheek. He had two spectacular black eyes that put his World Cup bruises to shame. His lower lip was split and swollen, and where the locket fell at the hollow of his throat when he laid flat, there was a perfectly round, red burn mark. A few smaller bruises and scratches covered the rest of his face, arms and hands. Madame Pomfrey had bandaged up the broken pinky and the broken arm. His left knee had a thick splint propping it up, running down to and braced under the arch of his bare foot with bandages. Madame Pomfrey had put him in shorts so she could get at the knee, and several large bruises that looked suspiciously like branch marks spotted the bare right leg, and the open neck of his shirt just showed the top of the mass of bandages and bruises that was his chest. Ivan stood and stuck his muzzle into the side of Viktor's face, licking at his ear and whimpering. Viktor's head rolled to the other side, but he did not stir. "It's okay now. He'll be alright," Harry said, grabbing Ivan's collar and pulling him back. He wasn't exactly sure who he was trying to convince.

He laid a hand on Viktor's bare knee and found him disconcertingly cold and clammy. Madame Pomfrey echoed "He'll be alright," when she brought the two of them chairs, as well, then added, "It will just take time. He's young. You bounce a bit easier when you're young," as she left them to take her call from St. Mungo's.

They spent a mostly sleepless night, all but Viktor, and come morning, Dumbledore made Harry and Ron go to class. "Hermione can afford to miss class a bit easier, don't you agree? I'll let them know that they are to let you sleep if you absolutely can't hold your eyes open. Hermione, I'll let your teachers know to send your homework to you here, if you wish," and Hermione had nodded at this, not taking her eyes from Viktor's face, "but you two had better go. Professor Snape has agreed to let the two of you finish your essays during class, if you don't have them done."

In the late afternoon, after a quick nap and a look in on Crookshanks, Harry and Ron found that Hermione had not even left the infirmary for meals, and Madame Pomfrey had served her there. She left her books and lessons untouched, and she looked pale and drawn when they dropped back in for the second time. "I don't know what is worse," Hermione fretted, "when he was completely unresponsive and didn't twitch or dream or move in his sleep at all, or now," she added.

Ron looked at the bed, where Viktor was currently as unresponsive and unmoving as the night before, and asked, "What do you mean by 'now'? Seems the same," he said bluntly, yawning and stretching.

Hermione looked at Ron dolefully. "He has spells where he talks in his sleep, like he's having a nightmare. He tosses and mumbles things. Mostly in what sounds like Bulgarian, although some of it could be Russian. If only I had a dictionary..." Ron had shuffled off to the library afterward and asked a very surprised Madame Pince for a Bulgarian-English dictionary, which she had finally dug up from the depths of the back room, to join the Russian-English dictionary he had finally located on the shelves. He knew Hermione always felt better forearmed with a book.

Next morning Ron and Harry stopped by again before going to breakfast and class, to find her already up. Viktor was mumbling, "Ne poveche. Stiga smyrtta," over and over under his breath and he moved restlessly. Hermione showed Harry a piece of parchment filled with her scribbling, various spellings and misspellings of the words he was saying.

"Problem is, it's Cyrillic. No standard Latin spelling. I think that's it though. 'No more. No more death.' Bulgarian and Russian sound so alike, but the Russian doesn't really make sense, unless he's having a completely ridiculous nightmare about laundry or something, and surely he wouldn't be dreaming about something that silly. Dumbledore has been in and out all night and Madame Pomfrey has had her consultation. I think Dumbledore was even surprised that you could kill a dementor. Karkaroff, he's dead too. They found his body. Just like he'd been hit by the Avada Kedavra directly. You do understand what this means, Harry?"

"No! I don't understand what any of it means!" Harry snapped at her irritably, then immediately regretted it.

"It means you're not the only one to have survived a direct hit from the Avada Kedavra, to turn it back on someone. We all saw it," she said softly.

"I'm just tired, that's all," he said by way of apology. By late that afternoon, Viktor sometimes opened his eyes for a short space, but they were oddly blank and flat and dull and lifeless, and there was no sign that he really

saw anything in the room. While Hermione and Ron slept, Harry watched him lie there, staring unseeing at a point out past Harry's shoulder, and Harry scratched Natasha's ears while Ivan curled at his feet. Unbidden, the memory of Dumbledore telling him about Neville's parents, still in a ward at St. Mungo's, not even able to recognize Neville, came to mind. There were worse things than dying. Viktor still spoke only when his eyes were closed, and Harry wondered what he was seeing, what scenes were playing on the inside of his eyelids while he slept. I understand what this means, he thought to himself. Another boy... no, a man, he corrected himself, put himself in front of a death curse for me. And he might be worse off for it in the end than Cedric, even if he did survive.

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## Chapter 43

It always began the same way. In the cafe. There was always the same group there, the same group that had been there over and over, countless times, the young man with the tired, gray face standing out particularly, because he had been facing him the entire time he sat at the table. He could have described him to perfection at the drop of a hat, every line of his face, he had seen him so many times. So many years. Over in the corner, the dark haired woman with the two children, one a toddler she had perched on the edge of the table and crooned to while the little boy next to her ate. Otherwise deserted and quiet except for the older woman with her gray hair pulled back in a bun, wiping the counter. It was too early for the lunch crowd yet.

And every time, Papa would get up and walk to the counter, lean against it, make small talk with the woman behind the counter, and after a minute, the washed out man would join them too and begin talking. He could never make out what they said. He was bored, so he slid off the seat and walked away from them to the door, leaning his forehead against the cool glass and looking back down the street. Then up. Nothing but shoppers with their bags and parcels, walking up and down the sidewalks and a few on the benches next to the fountain. Then he caught the dust, from the corner of his eye, before the sound really registered, back down the street, the rumbling, then the smoke mixed with it, and he pushed the door open.

Somehow he had gotten down the street. Though he didn't remember walking it, he must have. At first his eye had picked out only piles of rubble and he had wondered where the building had gone. Buildings. Then things too big to be rubble, covered in stony gray dust and streaked with red and black. Blank, staring eyes. And he couldn't stop himself from walking farther, toward where the building they had come from should be, but wasn't anymore. He dimly registered the heat, the rawness of his throat, the dust and smoke making his eyes water, the burnt, oily taste in his mouth, the smell, singed hair and skin, the far off sirens and the voices. Some were shouted names, others wordless wailing and keening that sounded like the sirens. He studied a man who stood there while he walked by, silent and still, holding his shopping bag as though he

couldn't decide which shop to enter next. He wasn't watching where he was going, and his foot wobbled when he stepped on something rubbery on the sidewalk, almost turning his ankle. He had looked in spite of himself, he told himself not to look, then and now, but he always did. It was a hand and arm. Not attached to anything. Severed at the elbow. Lying there with nothing else of the body it had once belonged to, in front of the toe of his sneaker.

Then Papa's voice screaming his name, grabbing him by the collar and yanking him backwards, so hard that he left his feet before Papa even put an arm beneath his armpits, seeing the hooded, masked figure across the square before Papa finished gathering him up and pressed his face into his solid shoulder. There was nothing but Papa's hard shoulder beneath his face and his big hand cupped on the back of his head, smoothing his hair down and carrying him back toward the cafe. Papa's arm squeezed his ribs so hard he could barely breathe, but he didn't care. It meant he was safe. He didn't have to think or look anymore. "Ne poveche. Stiga smyrta," Papa said to someone after he had stopped. He must have fallen asleep then, the last time sleep would be a complete refuge from that scene.

The next thing he always remembered was darkness and being shaken, and how at first he thought that he had just had a nightmare or overslept. Then he opened his eyes and the bright lights made his eyes ache. He ducked his head back toward Papa's chest, away from the lights, and realized that it was shaking. He leaned his head back, and saw that Papa was crying. That part always shook him worse now than what he had seen in the square. Because it was the first time he had seen an adult cry. Because he knew now what came next. "Viktor, Mama's hurt. It will be a while before she comes home with us. Violeta... she's not coming home," he said in a strangled voice. He touched Papa's cheek and it came away wet.

His hand was wet. He parted his eyelids and the bright light made his eyes ache for an instant, but he squeezed them shut, then reopened them, and they adjusted. Everything felt vaguely unused and neglected, as though he had slept far too long. Then he remembered where he must be. Hogwarts. He felt a raspy tongue drag across his right palm and heard a plaintive whimper. The dogs. One of them, anyway. The other one wouldn't be far. He twisted his head to the left instead and saw the back of a dark, bushy head resting on the bed level with his hip. This side of it, a piece of parchment and a quill. He reached out across them and touched her hair with his fingertips, just to convince himself it was really there, he wasn't seeing things. "Sokrovishte." She stirred and turned her face toward him, looking at him impassively, picked up the quill and waited, with it paused over the parchment. He waited a moment for her to say something, and when she didn't, he tapped her nose lightly with his index finger. "Waiting for me to dictate a letter?" he asked thickly. Now why would he have a fat lip? he thought, testing the split with the tip of his tongue.



She couldn't have been more surprised if he had gotten out of bed and done a cartwheel. "Viktor...oh... Viktor..." she started crying and fell fiercely on his neck.

"Ow! Wait, wait, wait, stop that for a minute, get up! Where are Harry and Ron?" Not in any of the other beds, apparently, they were all empty. The only other alternatives were very, very good or very, very bad.

"In class," she wailed, not moving.

"Wait. You did say in class, did you? No offense, but you are going to have to loosen your grip a little, I cannot breathe with you doing that. My chest hurts. Let me up first. And to think I once called Elena a python, you put her to shame!" He gingerly propped up on his left elbow when she let go. "Another pillow?" he asked.

"You're okay?"

He looked down at the other arm, which ached dully, and the heavy splint on the left leg. Most of the bruises had faded to a nasty green or yellow or brown, some of the worst ones had settled into a deep purple. His chest felt like a mountain troll had mistaken it for a kettle drum. Even his cheekbones throbbed. "Okay might be overstating the case. But considering I should be dead, I am rather better than should be expected. Just throw it back there," he said when she grabbed the pillow from the next bed. He pushed up with his left hand and slid back, propped against the headboard with the pillow between. Ow, ow, ow. I wonder if I could hold my breath for the next week? "In class? They're okay. You're okay?"

"Okay might be overstating the case," she laughed, wiping her cheeks. Ivan and Natasha were shoving their heads up over the edge of the bed, jousting jealously for position, tongues lolling and tails wagging.

"Stupid dogs," he said affectionately, giving them each a quick scratch under the chin with his right hand. The twinge that ran up his arm almost made him regret it.

"Viktor!" Harry yelled from the doorway and ran in, grabbing him.

"Not that I do not appreciate it, but ow already! Off my ribs! Next person that hugs me gets the dogs set on them!" Harry thought he had never been so happy to have someone be irritable with him, and he pulled away with a mumbled apology. Viktor regarded him for a moment. "Last time I saw you, your glasses were in sorrier shape. When was the last time I saw you, anyway?"

"This is the third day," Harry said.

“Three days. No wonder I feel stale then. Sorry I shoved you down the hill,” he said to Ron.

“Didn’t apologize to those two, and they went down a lot harder than I did,” Ron grinned.

“But I did not see them at all until we were halfway down the hill in the dark. I pushed you on purpose.”

“Had to, didn’t you? I was busy being a stubborn, pigheaded idiot and you didn’t have time to argue.”

“Join the club. Where’s Dumbledore? I need to talk to him. And you three.”

“If Mr. Weasley will go get him, and you’ll sit still for five minutes and let me examine you, I just might let you have a powwow,” Madame Pomfrey scolded. “I wondered when you were going to rejoin the land of the living.”

“You still look horrible,” Harry said.

“Gee, thanks,” Viktor said sourly. “On the bright side, I do not think my nose is broken. Has to be a first. It feels like the only thing that is not broken.” He shook his head as though clearing it.

“Just about. You’ve got one of each limb still in the right number of pieces and one or two of your ribs might be intact. Now would you stop wriggling around so I can have a look at that cut on your forehead?” Madame Pomfrey complained. “That should be nearly healed. I’ll be mending your bones for days yet.”

Ron and Professor Dumbledore came in and Dumbledore walked to the side of the bed, greeting the dogs with a friendly pat, then turning to the resident of the bed. “Ah, Viktor, welcome back. More ways than one,” he said with a wry little smile.

“By the way, the answer is yes,” Viktor said.

“Yes?” Dumbledore asked with raised brows.

“Yes, part of it figured out now. Unfortunately, until three nights ago, the answer was no. Wish it had not taken quite that long,” Viktor said, fingering the locket at his chest.

“And what the blue blazes are you two talking about? Why doesn’t

anyone ever explain anything to us!?!” Harry shouted.

“If you would stop shouting and making my ears ring, I would be glad to explain, I think,” Viktor told him, while he rubbed his temple.

“Maybe it would be best to start from the beginning. Or near enough the beginning that these three will understand what we’re talking about,” Dumbledore said as he settled into one of the chairs by the bed.

Viktor took a deep breath and began, “This is what I was trying to work out. Well, not this exactly,” he added, looking around at the bed, “but coming here. I only have to work in two more exams, and that is it. I will have graduated. Vratsa was willing to let me train on my own as long as I could still go to Hogsmeade and Apparate back for games. Then I was going to fill in the rest of the time by being a sort of teacher’s assistant. I did not want to finish at Durmstrang. Dumbledore tells me a few of the teachers are going to be a bit, er, extra busy for a while,” he said, cocking a brow at Harry. “Extra assignments, so to speak.”

Viktor shifted to get more comfortable. “You remember what I told you on the porch that night? About what happened in the maze? I wrote to Dumbledore after that. We think now there might be more to it than Crouch as Moody getting into my head.”

“But why?” Harry asked, puzzled.

“Because it was not a voice. If it were just Crouch as Moody, doing the Imperius, and he outdid Karkaroff, it should have been Moody’s voice, same as you heard when he did the Imperius on you. No reason why it should not have been. When Karkaroff really pushed, I heard his voice. Plain as if he were talking to me. When he did not push, I got whispers, but it was still a voice. Even when he had the dementors working on me as well, I still heard his voice. When someone does the Imperius, you should hear their voice,” Viktor explained.

“So?” Ron said.

“So... I did not hear a voice. I heard... screeching. Wailing. No words, no voice, nothing distinguishable. It did not even sound like a person. Then I remember nothing. I should be able to remember. We think it might be someone or something that is still here. It may not have been just Moody... I mean, Crouch. He may have had help. Here. There might be a way to find out, but we will go into that later. Much later,” Viktor looked at Dumbledore for a moment, then spoke again. “When I wrote you last, I had already left Durmstrang and I still did not know what all that business I wrote you about meant. Went home for a few days. Sent the dogs on ahead, so Hagrid could

take care of them if I got delayed. Left there and went to Hogsmeade. Actually got there early. Igor was there. I found out he was staying at the Hog's Head after he almost turned a corner on the street and bumped into me, literally. He was coming down the street and I... I just knew he was there. I ducked into a shop and he went by. I asked around until I found out where he was staying. The same night, I left Hogsmeade. Maybe he did some asking around of his own, because by the time I got near the grounds, I knew he was following."

"How did you know that, Viktor?" Hermione asked.

"I...just did. Same way I knew there was something wrong about him from the moment I met him. Same way I knew you were alright when I saw you in the library, before I met you. Same way I knew Rita Skeeter was in the bushes that night. Same way I knew Igor was in the same town before I saw him. In other words, I haff no idea. It has been happening more lately. Knowing things for certain that I have no way of knowing. I am no seer, but I get these... feelings about people sometimes. So strong that I would bet on them. Do bet on them. Just one of the things I haff no explanation for. Like that broom at internationals," Viktor said, looking at his hands in his lap.

"Oh, when you fell off? What do you mean 'no explanation'? Can't have been easy to summon it with your wand in your pocket while you're practically dangling by your pinkies, and it wasn't pretty, but it got there, didn't it?" Ron prodded impatiently.

"Oh, it was in my pocket, alright. The pocket of my equipment bag, in my locker," Viktor replied, looking up at Ron.

"But that... oh... that would explain why you had such an odd expression when you picked it back up and put it in your robe pocket before we left..." Hermione mused out loud.

"At first, I thought I must haff been shuffling things around, stuck it back in the bag with my other equipment, and just did not remember. I was pretty scatterbrained that day. But the more I thought about it, the more certain I was that I could not remember getting it out in the first place after doing the earplugs. Then I thought maybe one of the others did it. Saw me and sent the broom out. I asked. I do not think they did it. I cannot haff summoned a broom without a wand, now could I?" Viktor said, shrugging his shoulders.

He continued, "But there is no other explanation. Ivanova was the only other person on the field who even knew I was dangling, and she was too busy getting after Mostafa to stop play to do it. None of the coaches are allowed to haff wands on the field, and in professional competitions there is a charm on the field that prevents people in the stands from using their wands on anyone or anything on the field. They let players carry wands if they wish for emergencies,

and emergencies only, but I saw none of them with their wand out. I usually do not carry mine anyway, was not allowed when I was underage, got used to not being able to carry it. The others were too busy playing. That leaves Ivanova and me, and Ivanova even says she did not do it. That leaves me. And if my wand was in my pocket, I never felt it. Even if it is an impossible explanation, it is the only one left. That I managed to do it without a wand.”

“What are you talking about, Viktor? What’s it mean?” Harry asked.

“I am not sure. You remember that before you got your wand, sometimes things would happen without explanation, especially when you were afraid, or angry, or in danger? Uncontrolled, wandless magic. Usually happens when your powers are just starting to manifest themselves in earnest, but before you have been matched with a wand and trained. Most people raised in wizarding families come to expect it when you are about eleven. Goes along with growing up, those power surges. Maybe it was because I was in danger of dying. Maybe that is why the summoning worked without a wand. Maybe that is why the charm worked the other night. We were all going to die if it had not worked. That is how it usually works when you are younger. You get scared out of your wits or so angry you cannot see straight, and something happens that you cannot control. Extreme fear, anger, maybe it is necessary for it to work. At any rate, I knew he was following, and I tried to get to the castle before he got here. I ran into these two in the dark, literally, and I am sure they told you the rest of it, right?” Viktor asked Dumbledore.

“But how did you know what to do? Fear and anger might explain the ability to do magic without a wand, but how did you know what charm to use?” Dumbledore queried, examining Viktor over his glasses.

“The Guardian. He told me. Twice. Once when I took these three in, once before I left. He kept telling me to look to my heart. That I would know what it meant when the time came, it was very important advice. At first, I thought he meant the decision about coming here. But then Igor used those exact same words with me. Look to my heart. Ask myself if it was worth it. He said it twice. The Guardian said it twice. I looked down, and there it was. The answer. I have been wearing this locket next to my heart since the day I got it. There is a charm written on it. I researched it in Durmstrang’s library, what little there is on the charm. That is part of why I went back, at least for a few weeks. To get things in order. To find out more about those words. Telling these three about Guerda Engelikos made me curious about it again. A charm against the evil eye. Romany words. Romany were very big on wandless magic once. The evil eye is supposed to be a death curse. It all fit. Too well,” Viktor replied. He was looking paler and weaker now, after sitting up for a while.

“Well, then. I will have to do some research of my own. We’ll talk more later. In the meantime, get some rest. You three try not to overstay your

welcome, or Madame Pomfrey will be tossing you out on your ears,” Dumbledore admonished. “Viktor, you can fill me in on any more pertinent details you think of later. For now, I’ll leave you to bed,” he added. “You three, all three of you, I think you had best be back in class tomorrow. Even you, Hermione.”

“Yes sir,” she replied softly.

When he had gone, Viktor picked up Hermione’s hand from the edge of the bed, studied it and ran a thumb over the back of it. “By the way, what did he have to say for himself?”

“Say for himself?” Hermione echoed.

“Igor. What excuse did he give? Who did he blame everything on? Or did he just offer to name names again in exchange for leniency?” Suddenly Viktor looked particularly weary. The trio looked at one another, silent, none of them willing to answer. “Well?” Viktor asked, looking up into her face.

Hermione went paler as well. “Viktor...Karkaroff...he’s not saying anything... he’s dead,” she whispered.

Viktor knitted his brows together and a look of distress passed over his face. “Dead? But... I... oh... I...” he stammered, then dropped his gaze to his knees, silent for a long moment. “I did it, did I?” he finally asked in a soft voice.

“Not exactly,” Hermione replied. She struggled for further words.

“I am no better than he was, then,” Viktor whispered.

“Why’s that?” Hermione asked.

“I killed someone. I hated him. I threatened him. I wished him dead. I pictured him dead. I wanted to make it as painful and as awful as possible, too. I am a murderer, no better than Kark...”

“Now listen here!” Hermione said sternly, putting her hands on his face and turning it toward her, “You listen to me! You stop blaming yourself! Karkaroff was threatening your life, our lives. And you stood him down. You kept putting yourself between him and us. You didn’t attack him unprovoked, you didn’t even point your wand at him and say the words. You defended yourself, defended us. Nothing more, nothing less. You didn’t even strike him back. You didn’t say the words.”

“I wanted to,” Viktor said weakly.

“But you didn’t. I don’t know that I would have been that charitable in your

position,” Hermione said angrily.

“I wanted to use every horrible thing I know how to do on him,” he argued in a low voice.

“But in the end, you didn’t. Doesn’t matter why. Even if you had, no one would blame you. What matters is, in the end, you’re no more guilty of murder than Harry was when he was a baby. Karkaroff might as well have turned his wand on himself. He cursed you, used Avada Kedavra, and it came back to bite him. Just like Harry and Voldemort. Viktor, I don’t think it counts for nothing that you never did the easy thing and gave in, instead of doing what was right. You could have stayed at Durmstrang... safer there right now, isn’t it? Instead, you stood with us. For us, really, when we couldn’t stand for ourselves. It’s a protection charm, isn’t it? Not a curse. Not a curse. You didn’t use one curse. Now does that sound like a murderer to you? And do you know that you did something even Dumbledore didn’t know was possible? You killed a dementor,” Hermione said gently.

Viktor pursed his lips soundlessly, then finally formed the word. “What?”

“The dementor. With Karkaroff. It’s nothing more than a squidgy pile of goo by now, if it’s stopped smoking,” Ron piped up.

“I am not sure I want to figure the rest out, then,” Viktor said glumly.

“Figure the rest of what out?” Harry asked.

“All the rest of what the Guardian said. I am not sure I want to find out about anything else I might be capable of doing. Although, maybe finding out slightly more than right about the time it becomes a matter of life or death would be handy. On the other hand, we could not have ended up more dead if I was wrong, now could we?” Viktor asked.

“No. Dead’s dead. Anything the Guardian told you that we haven’t heard?” Harry asked, sitting on the neighboring cot.

Viktor flexed his left hand and examined it. “You mind if we leave that until tomorrow?”

“We had better go anyway. Madame Pomfrey keeps looking us over, and if we have to go to class, I’ve got some work to do. Get some rest,” Hermione said, tapping his arm and getting up from her seat.

“Yes ma’am,” Viktor laughed softly under his breath. As he watched them go, he thought to himself, more will become clear after, eh? That part was a blatant lie. I’m more confused than ever, now. I need to start fresh and reread

the whole thing again. Maybe I am missing something obvious.

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## Chapter 44

“Jumping beans,” Ron said to the Fat Lady, and Harry and Ron stepped through the portrait hole into the common room. Hermione was waiting for them, back from arithmancy already.

“Ready to go down and see Viktor?” she asked them.

“Hermione Granger putting anything before homework? Call Rita Skeeter!” Ron said in mock horror, clutching his chest.

“Oh, stuff it Ron. Besides, I’m done with everything but arithmancy, anyway.”

“Just divination for us. We’ll have to make up some new disaster to befall us in the next week or so when we get back,” Harry told her.

They trailed back out of the portrait hole and down to the infirmary. Viktor was sitting up, looking at a small leather volume, and Ivan and Natasha had made themselves at home in the little bit of unused space on his cot. “What are you reading?” Hermione asked as she settled into one of the chairs next to the bed.

“These same notes I haff been staring at all afternoon, and they still do not make sense. He turned the book around and held the pages open. There, in neat handwriting were the words

earth  
air            -Greeks, 4 elements?  
fire  
water

Two escape, old order, defeat, new

Pureblood, halfblood, mudblood.

death pursue.

risen cannot last, past is present, present past

heart

“Mean anything to the rest of you?” he asked.



“Errr, which bit? I understand ‘Greeks’. I quite like their gyros,” Ron replied.

“Makes as much sense as anything else I haff come up with. Perhaps I should just write in ‘sandwiches’ and be done with it. New secret weapon in the war against Voldemort, Greek food,” Viktor said, shrugging.

“Okay, now I admit I’m lost,” Hermione said.

Viktor shut the journal and looked up at her. “Remember the Guardian going through this when we went to Durmstrang? Before I left, he told me something along the lines of ‘figure out the puzzle, it will tell you what to fight with’, and if that is not the puzzle he was talking about, I do not know what is. Only thing I can come up with is that the first four things he named, the ancient Greeks called them the four elements. They thought the entire world was made up of these four things. Other than that, I am dry on ideas. Spoiled rotten dog,” he said absently as Natasha rooted her muzzle into his hand angling for a pat.

“Tell you anything else?” Hermione asked, resettling in her chair.

“A whole lot of nothing. Nothing useful, anyway. He told me that my suspicions about last year were right. When you started talking about the dementors being at Hogwarts year before last, it made me think they might have been welcome at Durmstrang, too. I guess that was what he was referring to. That my fears about what was coming were warranted. Pretty obvious once Karkaroff showed up, if I did not get the hint after talking to Harry about last year. A lot about how he could not tell me more, how prophecy can be thwarted by what we choose to do, nothing very specific,” Viktor replied, laying the journal on the bedside table.

“What you said about the dementors, the other night, about them leaving Azkaban, what did you mean?” Harry asked.

Viktor looked Harry in the eye. “They are not going to stay at Azkaban. You know that deep down, do you, Harry? Common sense, if nothing else. Nothing that terrible and powerful is going to be happy being a Ministry lapdog any longer than they haff to. Fudge is a fool to think the Ministry is in control of the dementors. I am surprised they are still there now. Ever heard the phrase ‘Do not meddle in the affairs of dragons’? You do not make deals with them, make them your jailers, either. Just biding their time until it is convenient or until their hand is forced. When they leave Azkaban, that is when it really begins. The lines will be drawn and even Fudge will haff to admit that Voldemort is back. No one wants to admit it yet, but Fudge is being thicker about it than most. He will not even entertain the possibility seriously. Why should they leave as long as the Ministry is blind enough to start threatening anyone who dares say

Voldemort is back with Azkaban? Fudge does the dirty work, Voldemort's enemies get locked up, and the dementors get a well-stocked private larder. So many deals with the Devil, and they are going to come due, soon. Fudge is going to regret not listening to Dumbledore."

"Other ministries... are they... do they... do they believe it?" Hermione asked carefully.

"More likely to than Fudge. The Russian Ministry, I think they are undecided but leaning. All it would take is a scrap of hard proof, maybe even just some hard convincing of the right people, and I think they would be willing to believe. The Bulgarian Minister, he always seemed a sensible and practical sort, and I believe Potenko has his ear. Potenko is certainly convinced of it after speaking to Dumbledore. Any others, I haff no idea," Viktor answered.

"How would you know for sure?" Ron queried.

"Alexei's father works for the Russian Ministry. The Bulgarian Minister, he buried enough Aurors in his time. Colleagues. Friends. Family even," Viktor said, plucking at the edge of the blanket. "No one wants to see that kind of horror again. Even wants to admit it might come again. But only a complete fool can stand there and say that dragons do not exist when there is one burning down your house in front of you. Surely Fudge is not a complete fool? He will haff to admit it when confronted with enough evidence?" Viktor said, looking up at Harry. Harry realized it was a direct question.

"I... I don't know. Fudge is not exactly as fond of me as he once was. Seems to think I'm a complete nutter, now. I get the distinct feeling he thought I was full of it when I told him what had happened, who killed Cedric," Harry stammered.

"Potenko seems to think that Fudge has this idea that Dumbledore wants his position. Politics. Politics will get us all killed if Fudge leaves it too long before he comes to his senses. No matter how many other ministries believe it, Fudge needs to. It will begin here. Not in Russia, not in Bulgaria, but here. This is where it starts," Viktor said with conviction.

"Again, how can you be so sure?" Ron asked, but Harry and Hermione could tell it was halfhearted.

"The storm will break and you will be in the eye of it. That's what the Guardian told me before I left. But it did not matter. I already knew. All those years at Durmstrang, and I suppose I may haff seen more true dark arts performed here at Hogwarts last year than I ever did there. How one could do what the Crouches did... I do not know. Your own son. Your own father. Hogwarts and Durmstrang, they haff some housecleaning to do. Both of them

haff those opposed and loyal to Voldemort inside their halls. It was always so. It will always be until there is a complete victory for one side or the other,” Viktor said plainly.

“You mean when Voldemort is defeated.” Ron said emphatically.

Viktor’s voice came back, a little flat, “Or wins. This is not a fairy tale, Ron. In real life, sometimes the dragon does win. I think it largely depends on how well we choose. Being ‘good’ does not predestine you to win. Sometimes being lucky is more important. This whole thing may come down to a lucky guess, a blind choice, a single remembered kindness or a remembered cruelty from years ago.” Harry nodded mutely. He was thinking of all the happy and unhappy accidents that had saved him over the years, when facing Voldemort. At the word ‘kindness’, the face of Wormtail flashed in Harry’s mind. Dumbledore had warned him that Peter Pettigrew’s life debt might very well pay off some day for Harry. Maybe mercy was a strength just like compassion. For the first time since Dumbledore’s speech, Harry felt that maybe, just maybe, letting Wormtail live had not been such a bad choice after all.

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## Chapter 45

“I don’t care what time it is, I need to talk to him,” Snape muttered in a low voice.

“The boy needs his rest. Between Dumbledore coming in and questioning him, and those other three coming in every spare moment, he hardly gets any time alone these last few days. What he does get alone, he spends sitting up reading or fooling with those dogs or getting up when I’m not looking or some other nonsense he has no business doing. Found him halfway down the corridor yesterday, on one leg, leaning against the wall with his one good arm. Just wanted to try it and see how far he could get, he said. You would think he’s expecting to have to make a quick exit any minute,” Madame Pomfrey fussed back.

“First of all, Poppy, he is hardly a boy. He’s nineteen. He’s been of age for two years now. While I know it’s hard to believe, he isn’t exactly one of the students. Not now. Mollycoddle him all you like, but he’s not a child. He’s a grown man, and he’s allowed to be just as stubborn and headstrong and idiotic about getting up out of bed as he likes and can get away with. You want to keep him in bed, sit on him, strap him in, whatever you like. It’s none of my concern. Second, considering where he’s been and who he’s been with the last few years, I would hardly be surprised that he isn’t exactly comfortable being cooped up someplace he’s not familiar with and can’t get out of easily at the moment. I doubt Igor’s behavior exactly encouraged him in sleeping soundly and taking it on faith that a bed, any bed, is a safe place to be. Besides, the last few years

should have convinced you that Hogwarts is not exactly a safe haven, either. We spent all last year reassuring the champions with the fact that our Defense Against Dark Arts teacher was one of the most respected Aurors in history, and look what happened there! Durmstrang might be a better hideout right now. In fact, if he had good sense, that is probably where he would still be. Dumbledore at least trusts Potenko. Now, are you going to let me talk to him, or are you going to make me go wake the headmaster?" Snape hissed.

"It's two in the morning," Madame Pomfrey grumbled.

"I am well aware of the time. I do have a clock and I am capable of reading it. Now let me in," he replied acidly.

"Oh, very well, then, but you wrap this up quickly, whatever it is," she said, then stepped out of the doorway. "He's somewhere amongst that pile of dogs," she said rather sarcastically, waving her hand at the lone occupied bed. Ivan draped across the pillow, head away from the door, and Viktor's head rested against him, rather than the pillow. Natasha curled at the foot of the bed, in the space next to his legs. As Snape approached the bed, she promptly began to growl, low and menacing. Viktor did not appear to stir. As Snape grew nearer, Natasha stood.

"You can stop growling at him, Natasha. Harmless enough, I think," Viktor mumbled quietly, opening his eyes. Instead Natasha growled that much harder, snarling and crouching. "She must seriously dislike you," Viktor said lightly, propping up on his left elbow, sitting, then grabbing Natasha's collar. She reluctantly sat and licked her muzzle, still eyeing Snape as he sat in a chair. Ivan roused when Viktor did and leapt off the bed when Viktor ordered him down.

"The feeling might be mutual. Thinks I'm a threat, does she?" Snape asked with an arched brow.

"No. Just warning you to mind your manners. If she thought you were a threat, she would not haff growled first. I would be prying both of them off your throat, instead. And I move a touch slower, right now and could only handle one at a time if they were not in a listening mood. Pity Durmstrang did not allow dogs. I could haff slept a lot easier," Viktor said, easing back against the headboard. The trappings had come off the right arm today, but it was still a little tender and sore and he had to drag the heavy apparatus on his knee along when he wanted to move his leg. The ribs were still agony when they protested, but at least all the bruises on the arms and legs had mostly faded, and all that remained of the black eyes were a couple of dark smudges along his cheekbones.

"You look considerably better than when I saw you last. But then, that's not such a feat. You looked mostly dead when they brought you in," Snape

offered.

“That just might be the nicest thing I haff ever heard you say. Grant you, you did not actually say you were not disappointed I did not end up dead. Now, are we going to make small talk all night, or did you come here for a reason other than to wake me up and tell me I looked rotten when Hagrid hauled what was left of me in?” Viktor asked rather irritably.

“You know what I need to do,” Snape said, fingering his wand, which he had just drawn from his robe pocket.

“Check me for the mark, I suspect. See if I haff one like yours. I would be old enough, would I not? No getting off with just the temporary membership badge,” Viktor said lightly.

“Most people would be insulted by the very implication,” Snape said with some surprise.

“I am not. I would think you a great deal less intelligent if you did not want to check. I take it Dumbledore does not concur with your suspicions, since he has not so much as asked me to roll up my sleeve?” Viktor asked.

“Doesn’t want me to check at all. Dumbledore is a great deal more trusting. Wants to take you at nothing more than your unforced word,” Snape replied with just a hint of distaste.

“I wish I could be that trusting. I suppose you wanted nothing less than a heavy dose of veritaserum and a good look at my arm?” Viktor said.

“Very perceptive. I’ll settle for the look at the arm. Maybe I had you all wrong then. Potter, Weasley, and Granger would have just gone on a fifteen minute rant on the injustice of it all and how I was a horrible, suspicious, bitter git with greasy hair who asks the innocent to prove themselves and lets the guilty go free. Granger would probably start up another organization for the protection of your welfare against big villains like me and start selling badges. Their naiveté is shocking sometimes. Instead, you go and roll up your sleeve. When you slid in that jab about my Russian during potions last year in defense of your friend, I had you pegged as just another self-righteous, crusading Gryffindor, if you had gone here. Although, I must say, I admired your subtlety. Granger would have waved her hand and quoted me the handbook,” Snape said in a wondering voice.

“She will get over that soon enough. Perhaps if you bothered to treat all your students with respect instead of abusing, harassing, and belittling them, you would get some respect back, but that is neither here nor there. You judge the three of them too harshly. Remember, I haff seen a lot more than they haff.

Even Harry, in some ways. I haff been around a little longer, at least. As far as Hermione knew until a few years ago, this world did not even exist, there was no possibility of a Voldemort. Ron was protected in the Burrow and his biggest worry was living up to his brothers. They may still have that notion that everything is black and white. There is good and evil and nothing in between. You and I both know there are a hundred petty evils that have nothing to do with Volemort and a million shades of gray. One of the worst shades of gray is indifference and there is plenty of that right now. They certainly are not children anymore, but it will take a little more experience to completely disabuse them of the idea that the good always triumphs. We get that idea fed to us for so long when we are children, it is hard to shake. Usually," Viktor said softly.

"You think what they know now isn't enough? They would have to be idiots not to recognize what the stakes are after all they've been taught, all they've seen..." Snape began.

"Not the same thing. Read all the books about Aurors who died in the first war that you like, it is still just words on a page to them. Memories from someone else. Someone else buried their friends, their brothers, their sisters, their children. Might as well be a million years ago to them. Harry was just a baby when his parents died. He lost a potential future, not a remembered present. No hope of him actually remembering them on his own. Last year he had to drag Cedric's dead body back with him, but it was a schoolmate, not someone he was close to for years. Not someone he considered a close friend or a relative. Nothing quite compares to putting someone you truly loved for a long time in a hole in the ground for good, now does it? Harry will get it soon enough. It will sink in that he is not immortal, and neither are those around him. Maybe he already does, and is just not willing to admit it out loud. So will Ron. I am afraid Hermione already does," Viktor said with a little regret.

"What makes you say that, aside from your obvious affection for her? Granger is smart enough when it comes to the academic, but unless you can look it up in a book somewhere, I doubt she has come to the realization that this isn't going to be won on the merits of character and hard work, necessarily. Because we think we're right," Snape sneered back.

"The questions she asks. Ron, and to a lesser extent, maybe Harry, seem to take it on faith that Voldemort will be defeated. No question. He lost before, he will again. Sure, loads of people we are all too young to know died before, but that never happens to the people I love. To me. And we will all live happily ever after. Hermione might be the only one who really understood what Pomfrey told Dumbledore about how close I came to being dead a few nights ago. What I said about it being a lucky, correct guess. If I had been wrong, we would all be dead. Harry and Ron, I do not think they haff given it much serious consideration. I scared them, but not the way I scared her, exactly. To them, it was no more than my due to live, I earned it because I was brave. She knows

just how lucky I was. She gave some serious thought to how close it was, what would have happened if I had died. She has gone so far as to imagine it. They have not. Instead of expecting the fairy tale ending, she is asking how many ministries will be on board, how many already believe it. Last year, Harry was a great wizard and a good soul and there was nothing he could not do. This year, she worries about him more. She has considered the fact that there might be a tombstone with his name on it, and she did not reject it out of hand. She asked me what happens if Harry dies before Voldemort,” Viktor said plainly.

“And your answer?”

“That I do not know, and I hope we do not have to find out. You and I both know there is something about Harry that is going to prove important. Even if you do not care for him that much,” Viktor added.

“Potter’s been breaking rules and overstepping boundaries ever since he got here,” Snape spat.

“Better be happy Dumbledore breaks some of the rules, too, or you would still be rotting in Azkaban,” Viktor retorted. “Surely rule breaking cannot be the sole reason you dislike him so. But I do not want to chat with you about your pettiness. Do you want my arm or not?” Viktor asked, offering his bare forearm.

“Clean,” Snape muttered, shoving his wrist back at him when he was through.

“You sound almost disappointed.”

“You go rushing in many more times like you did with Igor and that dementor before and you and Potter both will get yourselves killed. Brave I admit, but foolhardy. Senseless bravery is not always noble, sometimes it is just senseless. This is not a Quidditch match.”

“I know that. Oh, how I know that. If someone were to explain to him the full story, I am sure Harry would be a lot less reckless. Seems like being reckless is the only way he can find out about his own past if you ask me. Stop treating him like a child on the one hand and expecting him to act like an adult on the other. And Snape?”

“What?”

“Thank you. I did not know you cared. Your concern might be touching if you learned how to express it better.”

“Quit giving Pomfrey a hard time by hopping down the hall. Like being able to hop out of here on one leg would ever be a life saver. It’s not as though

you would be much help in your present condition were something to happen. Stop being a damn hero,” Snape said derisively.

“It might be. If I had to, I would. I do not intend to let any of them get buried if I can help it. You?”

“I don’t need the sorting hat. Gryffindor,” Snape muttered on his way out the door.

“I am sure Harry would be surprised to know you care at all,” Viktor murmured to himself after the door had shut. “Funny way of showing it, though, the lot of you. Keeping him in the dark then wondering why he goes steaming in blind and flapping your hands over it afterwards. Voldemort is not going to haff mercy on him because he is still a child. He did not before. You should not either.”

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## Chapter 46

“Quidditch practice get rained out?” Viktor asked when he saw it was Harry in the door.

“Yeah. Ron is finishing up his homework. Silencing charms. Kept making his chicken squawk that much louder all through class, so McGonagall gave him some practice. Hermione is up there trying to get him straightened out on how to do it. They’ll be down in twenty minutes. How are you?” he asked awkwardly.

“Depends. How awful do I look these days?”

“Considerably less awful than a week ago,” Harry grinned.

“I will take it, but you still cannot hug me. Come for a walk with me,” Viktor said abruptly.

“Walk?” Harry asked, puzzled, his eye falling on the bulky splint still on Viktor’s left knee.

“More of a hop in my case, but come on. Just down the hall. I am tired of these four walls. Pomfrey is in the greenhouse.” Viktor slid out of bed and coasted from bed to bed, supporting himself and keeping his left leg up off the floor, then braced against the wall instead, and made his way to the door. He had obviously done it before, the movements were well practiced. “I need to talk to you.”

“How come I never like it when you say that?” Harry replied uneasily.



“Because I never say anything pleasant after that. I promise one of these days I will catch you off guard and tell you something completely, unarguably happy after saying ‘I need to talk to you’. Maybe this is, a little. Harry, you know how you told me that no one will tell you anything until they haff to?” Viktor asked, concentrating on his slow progress down the hall and the floor below.

“Yeah, what about it?”

“I promise I will, if I find anything out. I do not think it is fair. You had to find out what little you know about your parents far too late. Voldemort too. I do not think it is right to blindfold you and expect you to be happy about it. Seems like everyone else here knows more about you than you do. Dumbledore wants me to help him figure something out first, then we really get down to business. Maybe I can find out something too. Harry, I ... I can ... maybe someday I can help you remember. This is my limit, turn around,” Viktor added absently, crossing the hall and starting back in the opposite direction.

“Help me remember? What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Later. Not now. Do not get your hopes up that I can do it right now, I haff to learn how to control it. But let me just say this. The body remembers what the mind does not, sometimes. You had a whole year with them, Harry, a year you cannot remember. It is always there, what the body remembers. And it can be brought back. Harry, remember what I told you I was good at?” Viktor never looked up from the floor. He was going considerably slower by this time.

“Memory...” Harry whispered. “What you said that night on the porch, and that night with Karkaroff, about forcing him to relive ...”

“Supposedly, it can be controlled. I can pick and choose if I haff some idea what I am looking for. No one ever bothered to teach me, though. Hermione says she has read about it. No big surprise there. Turns out it is a late emerging talent. When you lose control of it, it usually goes for the one that is most deeply buried. People only bury their nightmares that deep, Harry. Real or imagined. Nothing more terrifying than what comes from your own mind,” Viktor muttered. It was obvious he was getting tired. “Right now, I am a real horror show, Harry,” he said bleakly.

“Horror show?” Harry said.

“Know how I found out I could do it? I got angry at my charms teacher when I was fifteen. He was a regular Snape, only worse. He was an equal opportunity hater. I think he hated me a little extra because Karkaroff treated me differently. Determined to teach me I was nothing special I guess. A real winner. Called Alexei, Elena and I out for cheating on an exam when we did not. We broke our backs studying for that test, and he was convinced we cheated. Was

determined to make us take it again and give us half marks at best. We even offered to take veritaserum. Called Elena a liar and a slacker. Next thing I know, he is on the floor, screaming. Turns out he had once been attacked by a lethifold. Nearly died. And he remembered it. I made him remember it. Over and over. That feeling of nearly suffocating. The dark. Only a thousand times worse. Alexei went and got the nearest adult. Unfortunately that was Karkaroff. And he figured out it was me doing it. Elena was already out in the hall, sobbing, Alexei had run to get someone, I was still standing there with my mouth hanging open. Karkaroff shoved me off into the hall, it stopped, and the professor promptly resigned that afternoon. Karkaroff had me looked at. I can do it on command, but it is spotty. And generally ugly. Really ugly, Harry. I do not want to try it with you and end up giving you that night, only worse,” Viktor said, shaking his head. They had made it back to the cot and he sat on the edge. He didn't specify what night, but Harry knew what he was talking about. The night he had gotten that scar.

“Can you do the pleasant ones, then?” Harry asked in a shaky voice.

“Managed it twice. With Alexei. But I drug up some bad ones too, while trying it. Luckily Alexei is not the type to haff too many bad things buried. He has pleasant dreams, does not haff too many horrors in his past. Like I said, Harry. Maybe someday. Maybe Dumbledore will know someone who can help. If that talent can be shaped better than Karkaroff would haff done. Harry, I know it is not much, but it is all I haff to offer right now. At least I haff not let it get away from me in the last couple of years.”

“If you can't control it, exactly, why was Karkaroff after you so hot and heavy, then, if you don't mind my asking?” Harry asked, sitting on the edge of the cot next to Viktor.

“It is rare. Rare is valuable. I bet he knew I could be trained. And what difference would it make, if all he wanted it for was to intimidate people? Threaten most people with their own worst memories, they tend to fold. Nothing worse than your own mind, Harry. Very useful for interrogation and intimidation. Show them a slice of what they wish to forget and promise to show them more. And it is not the only thing I can do. There are other things. Things I will not go into now. Hermione knows,” Viktor said, as though that was all that really mattered.

“Letters?” Harry asked, curious how much more Hermione might know than he did.

“Mostly. The great thing about letters is, you can be braver. Easier to talk to a sheet of parchment than a face. And she has been more patient than I had a right to expect, waiting for me to tell her everything I needed to. Speaking of letters, would you take this to Baramir?” He handed Harry a sealed piece of

parchment, with 'Nikolas and Anya Krum' written on the outside in Viktor's neat script. "Not much I could tell them, but at least they know I am in one piece when I write," Viktor said.

"It's more of a case of you not concentrating, Ron," came Hermione's voice from the hall.

"I tell you, I got a defective chicken," Ron said defensively. "Oy, Harry," Ron poked his head around the door jamb, "rain's let up. We're having a shortened practice. Coming?"

"Yeah, let me run by and send an owl first, and I'll be right there," Harry said, getting up and making way for Hermione to take his seat. "Bye, Viktor. Thanks," he added.

"Bye, Viktor!" Ron called, already out in the hall.

"So. How did it go?" Hermione asked, putting her hands on her knees.

"He knows nearly all you know by now. All that really matters to him, I guess. I did not tell him about the demonstration. I am hoping that one stays between you and me."

"You didn't have to tell me that. I admire the fact that you did. Told him all you had to tell me, did you?" Hermione asked, looking up at him.

"No," Viktor said plainly.

"What do you mean, no?" she asked in an exasperated voice. "Wasn't that the entire point of my trying to get him down here by himself for once? So you could talk to him?"

"I do not recall telling him I loved him. I am fond enough of him, but I do not think I am going to be calling him Sokrovishte any time soon," Viktor said with a grin.

"You! When does that brace come off?" Hermione said, pointing to the bulky wrapping around his knee.

"Maybe middle of next week. Sooner than expected. Not soon enough," Viktor sighed.

"So you won't be dancing for a while. Still sore? Too sore to be hugged, for example?" Hermione asked mischievously.

"I might bear up under your attentions if you take it easy," he laughed

softly under his breath. She gave him a quick hug around the neck and a peck on the lips. "Any luck in the library?"

"No more than you've had in the infirmary. I can't find a thing that seems to fit what you and I remember the Guardian saying. I give up," she said, frustrated, and leaned her head into his shoulder.

"Do not do that. Then I will," he said draping an arm around her shoulders, as Madame Pomfrey came bustling back in from the greenhouse, her wicker basket full of herbs.

"You haven't been up have you?" she called as she walked by.

"Up? And leave this fascinating room? I might miss something!" Viktor answered.

"Don't come crying to me then, when you end up hurting your knee worse, hopping around like that," Madame Pomfrey scolded, shaking her head. "Still, you are a lot tougher than I gave you credit for. Fooled me with that arm. Those ribs ought to be letting up soon as well. We might get you out of here in three weeks time, total, if you would behave yourself."

"Oh, you know you will miss me. And the dogs. The dogs especially," Viktor added.

"Speaking of which, where are they?" Hermione asked. She hadn't noticed that Ivan and Natasha were not in the room.

"Hagrid did me the favor of taking them out with him and Fang. They get restless too. No one offers to take me for a walk, though," Viktor smiled.

"I would, but I don't think I could carry you. Fairly sure your feet would drag. Take a rain check?" Hermione said.

"Take a what?"

"Rain check. Sort of a voucher, so you can pick up something you already paid for later. Means 'would you agree to do it later?', in this case, when you are able," Hermione explained.

"I most certainly would. I still owe you something for your birthday, you know," he said softly.

"I'll take a nice lunch by ourselves next Hogsmeade weekend. You should be able to limp around by then," she said brightly.

“Done. That mean you do not want the present I brought too?” he laughed. She only smiled and blushed in reply.

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## Chapter 47

“There’s the prefects baths. If you promise not to drown yourself while trying to swim laps or at least let someone check on you... I suppose you could go up to one of them,” Madame Pomfrey said, thumping a pillow on one of the unoccupied cots back into a satisfactory shape.

“Well, I am not taking you with me,” Viktor said stubbornly. But the prospect of getting out of this room, even for an hour, was so tempting, he might have agreed to a marching band going along if he were in a more accommodating mood. All he wanted was a bath. She acted like it was swimming the English Channel.

“I’ll go, Madame Pomfrey. That is, if Viktor doesn’t mind me being the one to go along...” Harry began uncertainly. Viktor seized on the offer before he could finish the sentence. There was a fifteen minute delay while Madame Pomfrey rounded up the ward’s ancient wheelchair and lectured on the importance of not overdoing, which Harry let go in one ear and out the other. Viktor didn’t seem to be even allowing it in the first ear. They had no more than reached the edge of the steps when Viktor asked him to stop.

“What? Forget something?” Harry asked.

“No. I am getting out of this thing,” Viktor said, hauling himself up by the banister.

“But Madame Pomfrey...”

“Has not thought too much about how I was going to get up the steps. Unless you want to go back and sit through another lecture on how to properly get me up and down the steps without jostling anything vital that might kill me on the spot, I suggest you park that wheelchair over in the corner and let me get up them the best I can on my own. You could be listening to the Cannons game with Ron, or in the library with Hermione, but no, you went and volunteered to accompany the cripple upstairs and make sure I do not forget how not to drown in a bath. Now seriously, what is the matter with you?” Viktor asked with just a hint of irritation in his voice. He had made it to the first landing, but turned and sat on it.

“Knew I would be grateful for the same if it were me. Going stir crazy?” Harry asked, sitting next to him.

“If you mean, am I ready to climb the walls in there, yes. I know she

means well, but she is driving me batty. I half wish there would be a big epidemic so she would have someone else to fuss over and get off my back. My mother would not even be this bad. Next landing,” Viktor said, pulling himself back up and taking the stairs on one leg again.

In several stop and go spurts, they finally reached the statue of Boris the Bewildered, a befuddled looking wizard with his gloves on the wrong hands, and Harry gave the password, “pine fresh”. Viktor raised an eyebrow at him and a smile curled one corner of his mouth. “What?” Harry asked.

“And just how do you know the password to the prefect bath? I do not remember you being made prefect. Oh, wait, you are in cahoots with two of them,” Viktor laughed.

“Actually, Ron and Hermione didn’t tell me, I found it out last year. Cedric. The egg,” he reminded Viktor timidly, as Viktor tested out a few of the taps.

“Oh. I am sorry, I forgot...” Water, multicolored steam, and thick white foam were gushing into the bath by now.

“Never mind. Now what? Am I going to have to man the lifeboats or something?” Harry teased.

“I think it would be fine if you just keep me company. Preferably out of the tub,” Viktor said, gingerly pulling his shirt over his head. Harry winced when he saw the purple-black bruising that had settled into the small of Viktor’s back and halfway up his ribcage. Viktor sat on the edge of the bath and dangled his feet into the water. “Now come on. I cannot believe that you volunteered for this just because of the thrilling prospect of hanging out with me while I take a bath. Out with it.”

“Okay. Promise you won’t laugh?” Harry said nervously.

“I just had to agree to let you accompany me before I could take a bath. Like I am in a position to laugh at you...”

“How did you know Hermione liked you?” Harry asked in a rush.

“You are assuming I did.”

“Didn’t you?”

“Well, she agreed to go to the ball with me. That was encouraging.”

“But how did you know she would say yes?”

“I did not. I took a chance and asked. Elena told me the worst thing she could do was say ‘no’. Harry, if you are looking for some fantastic insight into female behavior, what is the saying? You are barking up the wrong tree?” Viktor said with some surprise. He cut off the taps and sat back down on the rim of the bath. “Is there... some girl...?”

“Cho Chang. Ravenclaw. She’s the seeker on their team. Oh, sorry, I’ll turn around. Let me know when you’re in... Anyway, I asked her to the ball last year, but she was already going with Cedric. I think she likes me well enough, but after last year...” Harry trailed off.

“You can turn around. Well, that does complicate things,” Viktor said, his voice neutral.

“And she’s a year older.”

“Oh my word. She would practically be robbing the cradle, I mean a whole year, someone would probably call the authorities to report a kidnapping...” Viktor began in an exaggerated tone, putting his hands on his cheeks in mock horror.

“I get it, I get it. But it’s different, you being older than Hermione. You’re a guy,” Harry said bluntly.

“Oh, brilliant observation. And that is relevant because...?” Viktor asked.

“No one thinks twice about a girl being younger than her date. And you and Hermione both act about forty anyway. Last year... last year Fleur called me a ‘little boy’ when I came back into the study after my name was drawn. You probably thought I was a little twerp too,” Harry said bleakly.

Viktor ducked under the water and pushed his wet hair back out of his face before answering. “Fleur probably called you something a lot nastier out of earshot. Considering she came dead last, are you going to let her opinion of you before the tournament bother you? And she was seventeen. According to you, that is practically ancient, apparently. And I haff no idea what a ‘twerp’ is, so I doubt I had you labeled as one,” Viktor finished.

“Pipsqueak. Runt. Brat. Little kid.”

“I never thought I would be so grateful for something as simple as a bath. You were kind of short, but you were just fourteen, and you got picked, same as we did. Always respect the competition,” Viktor said sagely, propping his arms on the side of the bath, resting his chin on a forearm, regarding Harry. “First rule. Always respect the competition. They usually deserve being there just as much as you do, and maybe more. If it is either of those, you had better be

prepared. If not, then you find yourself pleasantly over-prepared. Besides, what does it matter what anyone thinks, other than Cho? And the only way you are going to find out is to ask her. Or at least talk to her. Talk to her sometime. Maybe in Hogsmeade.”

“But she’s always with a pack of girls. How on earth are you ever supposed to get her alone to talk to her?” Harry asked glumly.

“Grant you, I did not have to worry about that with Hermione,” Viktor conceded.

“No. You were the one surrounded by a pack of girls ...” Harry began.

“I never had to worry about that either,” came a plaintive voice from the other side of the bath. A decidedly female voice. “No one ever wanted to be my friend,” it wailed, and Harry looked up into the thick spectacles of Moaning Myrtle, perched on the taps.

“Myrtle! You can’t just go around spying on guys in the bath!” Harry spluttered.

“And this is...?” Viktor queried a little uneasily. He hadn’t been so startled that he nearly drowned himself trying to stay modest the way Harry had the previous year when Myrtle had revealed herself, Harry noted. But then, let’s be honest, Harry thought to himself, Viktor isn’t exactly the scrawny plucked chicken of a boy that I am, what’s he care if she sees his chest?

“Moaning Myrtle. Usually haunts the girls’ toilet, but apparently she likes spying on people in the bath too. She spied on me last year.” Harry muttered to Viktor.

“I told you I shut my eyes when you got in. Your friend too. You *could* not talk about me as though I’m not here,” she sobbed accusingly. Then suddenly she brightened, and fluttered her eyelashes, “And you *could* introduce me to your friend, but no one ever thinks of poor Myrtle, all alone in the plumbing, not a friend to talk to,” she pouted. “You promised last year that you were going to come visit me, and you haven’t been down once.” Sudden tears filled her eyes and she rummaged for her handkerchief.

“Myrtle, Viktor Krum. Viktor Krum, Myrtle. I’m sure Hermione told you all about her, right?” Harry said sarcastically. Dear heaven, let him say he’s heard of her, or she’ll wail for an hour, he thought to himself sourly.

“The broken stall, right?” Viktor asked tentatively. Myrtle brightened once more and floated around to his side of the tub.



“You’re that foreign boy all the girls talked about last year, then! ‘Oh, Viktor has just the dreamiest eyes, doesn’t he?’ and ‘Do you think he would give me an autograph?’ and ‘Did you see him in the World Cup? He was so brave, wasn’t he?’. Never a thought for poor Myrtle, I can’t watch Quidditch any more,” she said, her lip trembling. Harry could see that Viktor was blushing furiously now. “I heard more about you than I did about him,” she jerked her head at Harry. “I saw you when you were in the lake, but part of the time it was with the shark head, and part of the time, you were a lot skinnier. Skinny boy in his swim trunks. I see you’re not so skinny now,” she said with more glee than Harry had seen from her since she had called him thick for not being able to figure out the egg straightaway.

“I guess not,” Viktor replied blandly.

“Still with Hermione then? All the girls hated her, you know, when they found out you asked her. And some of them hate her still. I hear them, talking nasty about her in there, about how she got to visit,” Myrtle said, obviously pleased with herself. “I could tell you some of the things they say, who says them,” she chirped.

“Glad to hear that,” Viktor said in a not very convincing tone. “Now could you kindly go away so I could get out?”

“No! I’m staying right here! You can’t make me go! I’ll watch what I like! If you’re going to keep accusing me of spying, I might as well do it!” Myrtle said, crossing her arms defiantly. Harry felt his jaw drop in surprise. Myrtle?

“Fine then,” Viktor shrugged, “I’ll get out anyway,” he said casually, walking closer to the edge.

“You wouldn’t!” Myrtle squealed.

“Try me,” Viktor said flatly, raising an eyebrow.

“You wouldn’t. I’m staying here,” she said, far less convincing now. Wordlessly, Viktor planted his hands on the edge of the bath and started to push up slowly. Harry couldn’t move. What the hell was *wrong* with the two of them? Had they both lost their minds completely? When Viktor had almost straightened his arms, his waist was just below the rim of the tub. Suddenly, Myrtle let out a shriek and bolted for one of the taps opposite, at top speed, and Harry could hear her squeals traveling downward inside the pipes. He presumed she was headed back to her usual toilet. He gaped at the wall until another noise caught his attention. He looked back to the bath. Viktor was propped up on his folded elbows at the edge of the bath, his forehead resting on the floor, his shoulders shaking. The foam still came up past his waist, even this far out of the bath.

“Viktor? Are you alright?” Harry asked tentatively. “Viktor?” Then he realized what the noise was. Viktor was snickering under his breath. Then it turned into full blown laughing.

“Not ... not really,” Viktor finally lifted up his head and wheezed in between gales of laughter. “That was murder on my ribs, but...but...it was worth...it was worth... the look...on her... face! You ... you...you should haff *seen* it Harry! Although... I...I... think you ... you looked almost as shocked!” Viktor slipped back off into the bath and leaned his back against the wall of it, laughing still.

Harry finally began to laugh and lose his breath as well. “You called her bluff! Oh... that was priceless! I’ll have to visit her now! Even... even the dead ones have the hots for you, Viktor!” Harry dissolved into fresh peals of laughter.

“Oh, shut up! Now turn around so I can really get out. I am glad this thing has steps... my ribs are killing me now. Make yourself useful and toss a towel and those clean clothes over here, laughing boy!”

“Think we should tell Ron about Myrtle? I mean, he takes baths in here,” Harry said, starting to regain control of himself.

“Let him do his own bluffing!” Viktor said.

“If Myrtle ever comes back. You might have permanently scared her off of spying...” Harry fought not to lose control again. Viktor hopped by him, hair still damp, dressed now. He paused in the doorway.

“We can only hope,” he muttered. “Maybe I should haff invited Madame Pomfrey along. Maybe I could haff bluffed her out too. Come on, down the stairs is going to be a lot trickier than up. I am going to need a banister and a shoulder. Last thing I want is to fall down the stairs and prove Madame Pomfrey right.”

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## Chapter 48

“Last day before you’re a free man. Got any plans once you get out of the infirmary?” Harry asked.

“Start studying. N.E.W.T.s,” Viktor replied after a little thought.

“Oh no, now we’ve got two of ‘em, Harry,” Ron said.

“I think I will just skip the tutoring in History of Magic. I should be able to do that without help. I haff an old research paper that should suffice for the N.E.W.T. on that one. That leaves one to really study for,” Viktor continued, ignoring Ron’s pained expression.

“Which one?” Hermione asked.

“You will laugh,” Viktor said quietly.

“Never,” Hermione replied.

“Dark Arts. Defense Against, I mean,” Viktor tacked on hastily.

Ron’s mouth went slack. “You have to study for that?” he asked.

“What could you possibly not know? I mean, anything you think you would have trouble with? We could practice. A corporeal patronus isn’t necessary, most people never learn them, but it would be impressive, and you can talk about defensive charms in your sleep and they would never hit you with those awful skrewts again on the practical exam, because Hagrid’s just invented them last year. They just do basic dueling technique and throw a few simple things in like boggarts and grindylows and maybe a manticore, usually theory about werewolves, rarely do you see dementors or lethifolds or anything really horrendously dangerous on the practical exam...” Hermione began.

“You will laugh,” Viktor said again, flatly.

“Will not,” Hermione said stubbornly.

“Boggarts.”

There was a long, stunned silence before Hermione could force out, “Boggarts? You’ll have trouble with ... boggarts?” Harry could tell she was straining not to sound too surprised.

Viktor raised an eyebrow. “Let us just say I would tend to clear the examiners off if they choose to put me in the same room with a boggart. They would not stick around to score me,” he said. It seemed to be a forced attempt at humor, but even Viktor didn’t smile.

“Boggarts,” Hermione repeated hollowly. “Well, you’ll just have to practice them then.”

“You make that sound like it is easy,” Viktor said uneasily.

“It’s the only way you’ll get better at them. What...what do they turn into, for you?” Hermione asked uneasily.

“Not usually the same thing twice. That seems to be part of the problem, I freeze,” Viktor shrugged. “You mind working with me on a corporeal patronus,

Harry?"

Harry blushed at the unexpected compliment, although he suspected Viktor had asked the question as much to change the subject as to get an answer. "Sure. Lupin taught me. Pity you couldn't have been here when Lupin was teaching. Best DADA teacher we've ever had. Fleur, well, she's better than I would have expected, given how pitiful she was in the tournament against Grindylows, but I admit, she's a lot easier on the eyes than Mad-Eye Moody, or, um, Crouch as Moody was," Harry laughed.

"Not a big accomplishment. Even Snape fills that description," Viktor said with a weak smile.

"It's late, lady and gentlemen. He gets out tomorrow. He can ruin his health on his own time, then. Now get yourselves up to Gryffindor tower," Madame Pomfrey called across the room.

"What you reckon?" Ron asked in a low voice, after they had started up the staircase to the tower.

"What?" Harry asked.

"What you reckon he sees that is so awful it clears rooms? Hermione?" Ron looked over the top of Harry's head, to Hermione on his opposite side.

"First I've heard him mention boggarts. Mind you, he said Karkaroff was pretty heavy on the Dark Arts, light on the defense, but boggarts? I guess we'll find out, though," Hermione mused.

"We? What do you mean we?" Ron asked.

"Not going to let him practice by himself, are you? Harry's helping, isn't he?" Hermione asked.

"No. No. I suppose not," Ron replied glumly.

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## Chapter 49

"Remember what you said about limping around in Hogsmeade?" Viktor asked.

"Yes, why?" Hermione said.

"That just about covers it," Viktor said flatly.

"Well, I don't know what you expect, I mean, you just got that brace off

and Madame Pomfrey said..." Hermione began.

"...that I should be more patient and give myself time to heal and blah, blah, blah. I haff heard it already. Repeatedly. Does not mean I am happy about the fact that walking two streets is probably just about going to do me in," Viktor grumbled.

"You're lucky you're still here to limp at all," Hermione replied quietly.

Viktor sighed and said, "You are right. I should be more grateful."

"Heard anything else that might be... useful?" she asked.

"Not really. I haff been doing most of the talking. Be a while yet, I think. Dumbledore's researching something. Ready to go?" Viktor queried.

"Go? We've got twenty minutes before the carriages leave."

"You obviously haff seriously overestimated how fast I can limp, then," Viktor said, rising off the chair in his new quarters. Dumbledore had arranged for one of the unused rooms in Gryffindor tower and Viktor had moved into it just after Madame Pomfrey had allowed him out of the infirmary.

"I'll go grab Harry and Ron, then, and I'll meet you back on the landing, alright?" Hermione said, grabbing her cloak off the other chair.

Ivan and Natasha got up and hovered hopefully around the door. "No. Not now. Later, maybe, for now, you stay," Viktor told them. They whined a bit, but soon went back to their spots in front of the fireplace.

"So he's got the brace off then, has he? How's he walking?" Harry asked as they walked back to meet Viktor.

"Don't know. Haven't seen him yet. Walking. Every time I've been by, he seems to avoid getting up. From what he said, though, it must be pretty rough going. He says it's still sore," Hermione replied.

"I think so," Ron whispered as he pointed. Viktor was coming to meet them on the landing, but now the familiar gait was much slower and had a hitch in it, a pronounced limp.

"I am beginning to really hate stairs," Viktor said by way of greeting. "Stairs all over this castle, and one you haff to hop over every time, and the lot of them keep moving just when you think you haff the hang of them," he sighed.

"You sure twenty minutes head start is enough?" Ron asked, and

Hermione glared at him.

“If I just go ahead and fall down the stairs, plenty,” Viktor replied. “Not the prettiest way to get down, but I think I will go with second fastest,” he said, planting a hand on each banister and swinging down while keeping off the leg as much as possible. As they reached the carriages, a few of the professors and several students were milling around. Hagrid was among them, and he came over.

“Gonna be takin’ Ivan and Natasha again tonight, am I?” Hagrid asked Viktor.

“If it is all the same, I’ll go too. I need to get out as well,” Viktor said, looking over the carriages. Harry’s eyes slid to them too. And the black figures pulling them. The figures he had not known were there until his return to school. Bony black horses with empty black coats clinging to their bones and big bat wings. He had seen them for the first time after getting off the train. No one else had seemed to be able to see them.

“Fine. Fine. Good ter see yeh walkin’ abou’ an’ all. Need ter go talk ter Dumbledore fore we go,” Hagrid said, giving them all a wave. Harry stared at the animals again, squeezed his eyes shut, then reopened them. Still there. And in broad daylight this time, too. They looked almost as sinister as they had in the approaching dark when they had arrived for the term.

“Might as well go claim ourselves a carriage,” Ron said brightly.

“Go on then,” Harry said absently.

“You two coming then?” Hermione waved her hand at Viktor and Harry.

“Go on. I will be there in a minute. Or ten,” Viktor replied, folding his arms across his chest.

“You two are in a funny mood,” Hermione complained, but she and Ron went to find an empty carriage.

“Thestrals. A whole herd. Impressive. Wonder what else Hagrid has hidden around here?” Viktor said in a quiet voice.

“Pardon? What did you say?” Harry squeaked out.

“Thestrals. I bet you can see them now... can you?”

“You can see them? Those bony things?” Harry asked.

“You can see only see thestrals when you haff seen death. Cedric. Last year,” Viktor murmured.

“You saw... you saw them last year, too, then, didn't you?” Harry said.

“Yes. Kind of spoils the magic a little, does it not? More fun thinking the carriages go by themselves. That's what I used to think. Come on, Harry. Get in the carriage. Remember, they were always there, even when you could not see them,” Viktor said, unfolding an arm and nudging Harry's elbow. “Trust Hagrid?”

“Of course,” Harry stammered.

“Well, I am sure he trained them, or they would not be here. Get in,” Viktor added in an encouraging voice. Harry gulped and walked toward the carriage Ron and Hermione had chosen, Viktor limping behind. He tried to ignore the glowing white eyes that sometimes turned to follow him.

“Maybe I shouldn't have talked you into this,” Hermione said uncertainly, after Viktor had gotten in and propped his left ankle across the aisle, on the corner of the opposite seat.

“The knee is not going to be any better at Hogwarts. And I could do with seeing someplace else. I haff been in there for almost a month,” Viktor responded, jerking his chin toward the castle. “If you remember, I never made it to Hogsmeade last year, and frankly, this year's visit left something to be desired,” Viktor replied, looking out the window. “I am rather tired of sitting upstairs either grading papers or writing my own. By the way,” he said, looking at Ron, “I think you meant to write that gillyweed is Mediterranean, not Middle Eastern, but aside from that, your Herbology essay was quite good. You should put that much effort into your Potions essays,” he said with a subtle smile.

“What was wrong with my Potions essay?” Ron asked.

“Besides being six inches too short and giving the wrong phase of the moon for picking milkweed? You want to pick that in the dark of the moon. Otherwise it is worthless for potions,” Viktor replied.

“You're worse than Snape,” Ron accused.

“No I am not. For one thing, I do not automatically deduct ten points for seeing the name 'Potter' or 'Weasley' at the top. You want better grades from him, maybe you should put your name at the end. He spends twice as long on yours, trying to find something wrong, and he never can, and that makes him twice as angry when he goes on to grade the next one,” Viktor told Hermione. “Feel sorry for whoever follows you. Harry's was fine. A little short, but fine. I

took the liberty of getting McGonagall to back me up on my grading before I ever showed them to Snape. Insurance,” he added blithely.

“How were the rest of them?” Hermione queried.

“They varied. I might not want to let some of them near a cauldron I was in the same building with if they mix like they write. Maybe Snape has a reason to be edgy,” Viktor laughed.

“Well, he causes part of it,” Hermione said indignantly. “Poor Neville, I mean, he could do alright in Potions if Snape would stop scaring him witless at every opportunity and calling him worthless.”

“I did not say I agreed with his teaching methods. Longbottom? Round faced? Bit nervous?” Viktor asked.

“That’s him,” Hermione responded.

“Oh, he came by to pick his up earlier. Stammered something awful. His essay actually was not bad. But if he is that nervous in Potions, I could see a few cauldrons becoming casualties. I guess he was anxious to get it from me rather than Snape, but it does not matter. He will not be in class Monday,” Viktor said.

“Do we dare hope we get out of it then?” Ron asked, brightening.

“No. Afraid you are stuck with me. Wants us to do a restorative potion. Should be easy enough, even for Longbottom,” Viktor said quietly.

“Without Snape glaring at him all period, he should be able to do it, with a bit of help,” Hermione said.

“No. No help,” Viktor said.

“No help? But...” Hermione began.

“No help. Do not put me in that position. It is going to be bad enough already. If I have to shift points in any direction, I am going to be grouchy like you would not believe,” he told her.

“What on earth do you mean by that?” Hermione asked.

“I mean, I am going to be sitting in a room, leading a class full of people I know. Some of them are mostly names from your letters, others are people I am riding in a carriage with right now, some I ate with most of last year, and at least one Slytherin I did not particularly care for and told him so to his face. Now,



three of these people in Gryffindor, I am quite close to. Some of the Slytherins were not so bad either, and while I would not exactly call them friends, I haff nothing against them. Some of the Slytherins I could happily see repeating a year, and I suspect if Snape were not head of their house, they would be. Or at least in the negative as far as points are concerned. I haff the same problem Hagrid does when he teaches your Care of Magical Creatures class with the Slytherins, only worse, because of you. How to be fair. He cares about you three more than the average student, but does he let you slack off in class? I do not haff to grade the potion, but I haff to watch you make it. If I let you help Neville, it is no better than if I let Malfoy do it for Crabbe and Goyle. The last thing I want to do it haff to take points from either Gryffindor or Slytherin and haff it get back to Snape. I will never hear the end of it. Or award them. Same thing,” Viktor said. Harry realized it might have been the longest speech he had ever heard from Viktor.

“No partners, then?” Hermione asked hopefully.

“No partners. Not even random. Let me worry about Longbottom, you worry about not taking the bottom out of your cauldron,” Viktor said.

Harry swallowed hard. “Can it take the bottoms out of cauldrons then?”

“If you put something in too early, yes. So just follow the directions, and you will be fine. Easy, I swear,” Viktor said, turning back to the window. “We could get out now, you know,” he added casually, “Or would you like to sit in here and discuss potions the rest of the day?”

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## Chapter 50

“How’s this going to work? You doing Potions, I mean,” Hermione asked as they settled at their table in the cafe, Viktor propping his foot on one of the empty chairs.

“Same way it always works. You are Miss Granger, and you do not get caught helping Longbottom for fear of losing points, and we will all try to make sure the Potions classroom does not get blown sky high. Madame Pomfrey might like to keep busy, but let’s not bring her an entire class at once. I just haff to figure out how to be Mr. Krum for a period without treading on too many toes. Just treat Mr. Krum like you would Professor Snape,” he added, picking up the menu.

“I don’t think I could work up that much animosity toward you,” she said sourly, doing the same.

“Not me. Mr. Krum, evil Potions Master substitute, remember?”

“Are you implying Mr. Krum’s evil or you’re just substituting for the evil Snape? Never mind. I don’t want to know. How’s the essay coming?”

“Finished revising the research for History of Magic. Added a bit, threw in some of the things we talked about. It could probably do with another set of eyes looking at it, if you haff trouble sleeping some night. Not the most exciting thing in the world, talking about groups that sometimes do not even exist any more. A little sad, really, when you think about all that could haff been passed down that was not.”

“What was Harry looking all goggle-eyed at before we got into the carriages?” Hermione asked.

“Ever think about what makes the carriages go?” Viktor said without looking up.

“Magic, obviously, I mean, they’re not being pulled by anything,” Hermione responded, running a finger down the menu.

“Stop looking at the price column, just get what you want. This is supposed to be for your birthday. You always trust your eyes?” Viktor asked.

“When it comes to the prices?” Hermione asked, puzzled.

“When it comes to explaining things. Like how carriages go,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Well... there’s nothing there... is there? I mean, you don’t see anything...” she began uncertainly.

“Some of us do. Harry does now. Hagrid must see them, or he could not take care of them.”

“What could some people see and others... oh... thestrals? You mean, thestrals pull the carriages?”

Viktor nodded, then went back to studying his menu.

“Are you going to tell him why you can see them?”

“The pork chops sound good,” he mused.

“And what is Dumbledore researching so long? Hermione added.

“What are you thinking of getting?”

“Trying to change the subject?”

“Trying, but you are not cooperating,” he said, pursing his lips.

“Point taken. I’ll keep my nose over here for the rest of the day. You and that knee going to be ready to play by the time Vratsa is?”

“If I get off my backside and get out as much as possible, probably. If it makes you feel any better, I am not completely sure what he is trying to find out, myself. I could guess, but it would be that, a guess. Knowing Dumbledore, he wants to be sure of what he is doing before he tries something with me. Can we leave it at that?” Viktor looked over the top of the menu at her.

“That’s more than I knew a few minutes ago, so I guess so. He’s no more talkative with you than he is with us, then, I guess. You know, I’ve been thinking...” Hermione began, but they were interrupted by the waitress, coming to take their orders.

“You were saying?” Viktor asked, after she had taken their menus and gone.

“I was going to say, I know the perfect place to practice. Boggarts anyway. The Shrieking Shack. No one goes there still. No one would pay any attention if we went there to practice. We could even go late this afternoon. Sneak in the door. Hardly anyone walks by.”

“You sure you want to know?” Viktor asked gently. “It is not going to be a professor telling me I did not pass... Wait a minute, where did you get a boggart, anyway?”

“McGonagall. She thinks I’m practicing for my O.W.L.s,” Hermione responded, patting her bag on the other empty chair.

“Time turners, boggarts, what else would she get for you?” Viktor asked in a wondering voice.

“I’m afraid to ask. So... did you have anything planned for this afternoon, or ...” Hermione trailed off, playing with her napkin.

“Nothing specific. Nice birthday, huh? Lunch, about a month late, and later, homework. In an abandoned, supposedly haunted shack,” Viktor chuckled low, shaking his head. Soon their food arrived, and they ate in a comfortable silence for a while. Then the conversation came back in trickles, about Hogwarts, some of the other students, home, family, the upcoming Halloween feast.

“I owe you a present,” Viktor said finally, as they finished up dessert. “I hope... you do not think it is presumptuous...or pushy of me. It is just a small promise, but maybe someday in the not too distant future, you will let me give you one with a bigger promise attached,” he said, setting a small wrapped box in the middle of the table. Wordlessly she picked it up and unwrapped it. Within the velvet box inside, lay a simple pearl ring, set in a slender gold band.

“Viktor...it...it’s beautiful...but you sh...”

“If you tell me I should not have bought and given you something I want you to have, I will scream,” he muttered.

“Alright then. It’s beautiful. Thank you. I’ll leave it at that. Thank you,” she added, a little breathless. “I love it.”

“You love it?” he asked with a raised brow. He seemed a tad relieved.

“I do. I would have loved it if it had been out of a bubble gum machine. Because I love the person who gave it to me,” she said in a low voice, leaning across the table.

“Love it enough to let me put it on you?” he asked in the same tone, also leaning across the table.

“Sure,” she said, offering him the box. He picked the ring out and slid it over the ring finger of her offered left hand.

“I just have one question,” Viktor said, still cradling her fingers in his own right hand. “What is a bubble gum machine and why would there be a ring in it?”

“Is it the English or the Muggleness of it all that’s confusing?” Hermione laughed.

“Both, I think. Explain it to me while we try to find Harry and Ron, then,” Viktor replied, swinging his leg off the chair and standing.

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## Chapter 51

“Ewww. If anything, the Shrieking Shack has gone downhill the last two years,” Ron said distastefully, looking at the thick layers of dust coating the floors and the smashed furniture.

“It wasn’t exactly a palace the last time we were in here,” Harry replied.

Viktor perched on the edge of the bed where Ron had been when he had

broken his leg, after Sirius as Padfoot had pulled him into the Whomping Willow entrance. "Get it over with," he said, sounding a touch weary. "You do not have to stay if you do not want to," he added quietly, to no one in particular.

"Nonsense. It can't be all that bad," Hermione said, trying to sound more confident of that than she felt.

She removed a small chest from her bag and set it on the floor. It gave the occasional thump or rattle, proof of the boggart within. "Last chance," Viktor said, leaning over and putting a finger on the latch, then turning his head to look at them expectantly. Harry, Ron and Hermione all stood there, saying nothing.

"Wait! I'll get it," Hermione said finally, walking over, scooting the case several feet away from the bed, then opening the latch, flinging the lid open, and jumping back. For several seconds, nothing happened. Nothing came out of the box, there was no noise, there was no movement.

"Hermione, you sure you had a boggart in there?" Ron asked.

"I'm sure of it. It was in there before. McGonagall told me it was, you saw it rattling..." she fussed as she walked over to the case that contained the boggart. She snatched it up and peered inside, gave a piercing shriek and tossed the case up into the air, leaping back. The case hit the ground and out bounced an arm. Bloody, severed at the elbow, twisted, and dusty. A woman's arm. Oddly, Harry noticed that there was what appeared to be the pattern of a small sneaker tread on the forearm. The fingers flexed weakly for a moment, and then, with a loud crack, it was replaced with a body, tucked beneath a pile of rubble, eyes staring and blank, accompanied by an unearthly, keening wail that seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once, then *crack!*, a hooded, cloaked figure which peeled up the sleeve of its robe, displaying a Dark Mark proudly, like a badge of honor.

*Crack!*, Anya, thin and pale and haggard, in a hospital bed, face buried in her hands, crying, Nikolas sobbing on the edge of the same bed, head resting on his folded arms - *crack!*, a billowing green smoke, forming the Dark Mark, the images whirled by, lingering just a moment before- *crack!*, another corpse buried in the rubble - *crack!*, another, *crack!*, another, *crack!*, another, each one in worse shape than the last, bloody, charred, crushed, nearly unrecognizable as what had once been a person. By now Hermione had both of her hands pressed flat over her mouth, as though suppressing another shriek. Harry thought he might be sick. *Crack!* - Karkaroff, raging away in what sounded like Russian, *crack! crack! crack!* Elena, Alexei, Poppet, only each one of them had the pale, waxy complexion that each of the corpses had. *Crack!* - a dementor, the gray, fleshless hand reaching out from beneath the robes, reaching up to pull back the hood, *crack! crack! crack!* Hermione, Ron, Harry, with the same pale, dead, glassy eyed looks, obviously dead, *crack! crack!* Dumbledore, Hagrid. *Crack!*

now a young, brown haired man with messy, matted hair and stubble lying on a cot, wrenching, convulsing, crying out, Russian, Bulgarian, it didn't matter, it made them all cover their ears until he quieted, panting and sweating on the cot. Then he turned to face Viktor. "You let go," he said in a low, accusing voice, and with a *crack!* the cot was replaced with a fabric covered dais, on top a sizable, rectangular wooden box, painted white.

The silence was deafening after the previous ranting. Harry could hear his heart pounding, the blood rushing through his ears. He waited, waited for a noise of some kind. The boggart had not changed that fast from form to form when Lupin had set a whole DADA class against it. Now Viktor stood in front of the dais, silent. Harry wondered what could possibly be so frightening about a big white box... but then it dawned on him. It wasn't a box. It was a casket. A child's casket. Hermione dropped her hands from her mouth at last and slid up beside him. "Viktor?" she asked uncertainly, slipping an arm around his waist.

"You do not want to see ..." he began, putting a hand on her shoulder, before he was interrupted by the lid flying open. Hermione gasped and buried her face against Viktor. He swallowed hard, squeezed his eyes shut, reached up with his left hand and slammed the lid closed. "*Riddikulus!*" he said in a hoarse voice, then again, stronger, "*Riddikulus!*" and the white casket shrank to a small square box, which popped open to reveal a jack in the box. "*Riddikulus!*" he said more firmly, and the boggart disappeared in a puff of smoke. Harry was suddenly very glad that he and Ron could not see into the casket from across the room. Viktor was completely devoid of any color, as pale as Harry had ever seen him in the infirmary, maybe more so. Hermione was making great whooping sobs, slightly muffled now against Viktor's chest, and Viktor was rubbing her shoulder absently, still looking at the spot where the dais had been.

"Bloody ... bloody hell!" Ron finally breathed. Harry turned to look at him, and realized he was pale as well, the freckles standing out starker than ever on his face. "I... I... I just see spiders," he stammered at Viktor.

"Wish I had a phobia," Viktor replied in a hollow voice, limping toward the entrance to the Shrieking Shack, arm still around Hermione, who was, by now, noisier than ever. Harry and Ron looked at one another for a few moments, then followed. By then, Viktor and Hermione were sitting on the small rise near the shack, and she had begun to quiet a bit, mostly sniffing.

"Violeta," Harry said flatly. It was as more a statement than a question. He felt sure he knew who Viktor had seen in that small coffin.

"We could not haff the casket open. She was completely crushed. I remember sitting there, staring at that damn box the entire funeral, thinking they must be mad if they thought I would believe that she was in there without looking. I looked when they were out in the hall. Before they carted her off. I

wish I had not. That is one of the few times my imagination was not worse than the reality," Viktor said softly. "Better start back if we want to make it before the carriages leave."

Hermione raised her head, "Oh... Viktor...I'm so sorry... I never should have...If I had known..."

"Shh. Stop it. Usually I just stand there like a simpleton and watch it until someone else does something about it. I managed to get rid of it myself this time. That is something. Now get up and do not worry about it. Come on. The cripple needs a headstart," Viktor said, pushing up and standing in front of Hermione, offering a hand. Harry noticed the new ring on her finger when she reached up to take it. Best to ask about that later, he thought to himself, and they started back silently. By the time they returned to the carriages, Hermione was dry eyed, if a little red around the eyes and nose. There was little talk inside the carriage on the way back, and outside the carriages, Viktor excused himself to go see Hagrid, about getting the dogs and walking the grounds. Hermione murmured something about charms homework, and gave him a quick peck on the cheek before they parted.

"Was it really that awful?" Ron finally asked curiously, as they reached the portrait hole. "Bloody, gory?"

"Oh Ron! You great insensitive wart!" Hermione slapped his shoulder, then pounded her way up the stairs to the girls dorm.

"Well, I only asked..." Ron gawped after her, shrugged, then stomped up the stairs to the boys dorm.

Harry waited in the common room until it was quite deserted, and was nearly drowsing in front of the fire when Hermione came back downstairs and curled up in one of the chairs nearby, Crookshanks purring on her lap. "You okay?" he ventured.

"I came down here to get away from that question upstairs," she said quietly. "Everybody up there seems to think Viktor broke up with me or something. Well, I suppose it is 'or something'. I found out how he remembers seeing his sister last," she added.

"Viktor give you that ring? It's beautiful. Looks nice on your finger," Harry asked as casually as possible.

"Birthday present. A bit late, but nice all the same. He was a bit tied up during my birthday. And after. What with nearly being killed on our behalf and all," she said bitterly.

“Hermione, I’m sorry. Look, you know Ron didn’t mean anything by it, he’s just never seen a dead... he didn’t think...”

“That’s his problem. He never thinks. My God, Harry, it was horrible. He had told me they had a closed casket, but he didn’t say he looked,” she said, her voice softening.

“I’m sorry. Tell me when I can stop apologizing okay?” he asked, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

“Oh, Harry, I’m sorry too. I’m taking it out on you and I’ve no reason to. Let me start over. Yes, I’m fine, except for being a bit upset and slightly miffed that Ron has the emotional range of a teaspoon, and apparently no sympathy for anyone at all. Viktor and I had a very nice lunch, and he gave me a lovely present, a promise ring, which I have right here on my finger, and I repay him by making him sit in a filthy shack while a boggart drags up every horrible thing he’s ever thought of, real or imagined, mostly real, and tops it off by showing him his sister’s crushed body inside her casket,” she whispered.

Harry thought for a moment. “They might do boggarts. Better than having him fail the exam because of a boggart. Besides, you heard him. He wasn’t mad, he wasn’t upset with you, he actually seemed pleased that he managed to get rid of it in the end. Reckon it’s worse for him because he has no specific worst fear?” Harry asked as he got up and walked to the window.

“I don’t know. I suppose it might be. He would never know what to expect, would he? Dementors are awful, but at least you always get dementors. Well, I’m going back up to bed. Maybe they’re all asleep by now and Lavender will quit hounding me about Viktor,” she said abruptly, lifting Crookshanks off her lap.

“Ivan and Natasha met Crookshanks yet?” Harry asked.

“No. Might have to do that soon. What made you think of that?” Hermione asked, stretching and yawning.

“Viktor’s coming back from Hagrid’s. Unless you know another tall, dark guy with a limp and two dogs that live in Gryffindor tower who would be out there cold as it is with no cloak?”

“Tall, yes. The other things, no. Tell Ron I’m sorry I yelled at him and hit him. And that he is still an insensitive prat,” Hermione called over her shoulder.

“Done,” Harry said, and watched Viktor limp across the lawn in the moonlight, slowing more the more distance he covered. Ivan and Natasha stuck close as always, as though on invisible leashes. So, Viktor could see the



thestrals too. At least he wasn't crazy on that count. He did find himself wondering about one thing though. Who was the man on the cot? He had recognized the other figures, had names that went with them, or knew they were victims in the square in Russia. Who was the young man who had screamed at them all, and what was it he had said in English? You let go. What did that mean? No need puzzling over it tonight, he thought with a yawn, and climbed the stairs to the dorm.

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## Chapter 52

Harry had wondered how long it would take for one of the Slytherins to inquire after Snape. Malfoy had his hand up immediately when class began. "Where is Professor Snape?" he asked in his drawling voice, when Viktor acknowledged him.

"Not here, obviously," Viktor answered shortly.

"But where is he?" Malfoy insisted.

"As I do not know I cannot answer that. I can only tell you where he is not, which is 'here'. I could give you several vague answers, such as 'somewhere else', 'not within a mile radius' and 'away', which are all accurate, but not much help. You can ask him when he gets back in time for the next class, and he can answer you or not, as he sees fit. Anything else?" he asked lightly. Malfoy looked as perturbed as he dared, but offered nothing further, folding his arms. Harry was secretly pleased to see that Malfoy was obviously still very wary of Viktor after their run-in last year. He wondered if Hermione knew about Viktor's offer to rearrange Draco's face on her behalf.

Viktor went through a quick lecture on restorative potions and some of the ingredients, pausing now and again to answer questions or go back over points that someone had missed. Viktor stressed that not following the directions meant losing your cauldron without naming names, as Snape would have done. It was refreshing to have a Potions class that lasted more than fifteen minutes without an insult lobbed at one of the students, Harry thought to himself. "Well, that about wraps the lecture up. All that is left is for you to make a Pepper-up Potion. Leave them in a vial on the front desk and Professor Snape will grade them. Oh, and he does not want you to partner up this time," Viktor added when a few of the students made to gather their things and head toward their usual partner. Snape often partnered them off when they were making dangerous potions. He hoped they would keep a check on one another when he could not. Neville, who was sitting next to Dean Thomas, went very pale at the announcement. He put a timid hand up in the air.

"Yes, Longbottom?" Viktor said.

“N-No partners?” Neville squeaked. He seemed almost as intimidated by Viktor as he was of Snape.

“No partners. You are on your own,” Viktor replied.

“Well Longbottom can kiss his cauldron goodbye right now, then,” Malfoy muttered loudly, raising a smug laugh from both Crabbe and Goyle, and a gale of giggles from Pansy Parkinson.

“And Malfoy can sit in his for the rest of class if he continues insulting his classmates. Or wear it on his head if he prefers. I think you will find there is nothing wrong with my hearing, and I hate dealing with points,” Viktor said, not turning to look behind him at Malfoy. “Now, what else, Longbottom?” Viktor added when Neville’s hand went up halfheartedly again.

“Please, sir...I’ll never be able to do it without help...” Neville began.

“And why not?”

“I... I’m horrible at potions. I always melt my cauldron or blow it up or...”

“Okay, that is enough. Well, think about it. Why are you so terrible at potions? You should be able to do it if you can read and follow simple directions, can you do those things?” Viktor asked, not unkindly.

“Why? I just am... I’m always forgetting what I did or didn’t do or leaving out something or putting it in twice...” Neville seemed almost frantic now, but Viktor stopped him midstream with a raised hand.

“So, what can you do about it?”

“Do?” Neville asked, puzzled.

“Do. I had a friend at Durmstrang that was terrible at potions too. Nearly failed first year. He did the exact same thing. Went through six cauldrons. Only thing is, he was always forgetting because he was always staring at the girls in class. You are not staring at the girls in class, are you?”

Laughter filtered through the room, and even Neville laughed nervously and his face turned a bright pink. “No,” he said at last.

“Well good for you, then. That will get you slapped as well as cost you your cauldron, at least if you ogle one with a good arm and a bad temper. At any rate, just do the same thing he did. Get out two pieces of parchment and a quill. Label one of them ‘ingredients’ and the other one ‘steps’. Look at what’s on the board. Take each ingredient in turn, measure it, then copy it down. Do that with

each one. Read it off the board, measure it, then write it down. Line them up in the order they go in. If, at the end, your list or your line does not match what is on the board, you know you skipped something. When you are done, all your ingredients are ready to go, and you do not have to worry about measuring wrong because you are hurrying to get to the next step. Then copy down your steps. Check each one against the board before you do it. When you do it, check it off. Have another piece of parchment handy for other notes. For instance, if you have to time a potion, write down the time you start it. Double check your glass against the clock. Do that, I bet your cauldron is still in one piece at the end of class," Viktor said with a barely there smile, then his attention was drawn to some muffled laughter in the back. "And Finnigan, thrilled though I am at Fred and George Weasley being successful businessmen, if I see another wand turn into a haddock, or any other thing that is not a wand, I will be forced to bludgeon you repeatedly over the head with it. So if you have another, better hope it is a rubber chicken," he said with a raised eyebrow. "Better get to work," he added, waving his wand at the board, the instructions for the potion appearing.

They spent the rest of the period working on their portions, Viktor circulating among the class, and Harry noted he took care not to hover over Neville to the point of making him nervous. Viktor's limp was less severe now, barely noticeable, in fact, when he didn't have to walk long distances. He took frequent breaks from the walking to lean against the wall, weight off his left leg. Neville was diligently checking his sheets of parchment, and at the end of class, Harry was pleased to see that Neville's potion was the same shade as everyone else's, and his cauldron bottom was still on. "Now that was not so bad, was it?" Viktor asked Neville as he stoppered his potion vial. Only a few people were still cleaning up their workstations, Harry, Ron and Hermione among them.

"No, it wasn't!" Neville beamed, running up front to put his with the others that were finished.

"You just forgot one thing," Viktor called after him.

"What? I wrote everything down, I did, I know I did," Neville wailed.

"Your book. You left it on the table. Your potion was perfect," Viktor held up Neville's book in his hand and wagged it.

"Thank you," Neville said breathlessly, collecting his book and heading out of the room.

"That was pretty amazing," Hermione mused, watching Neville walk through the door. "One of the best Potions classes ever."

"Thank you, Miss Granger," Viktor deadpanned.

“Class is over,” Hermione laughed.

“Not until we get out of this room. Race you to the door once I get these vials in that cabinet,” Viktor responded.

“Me mam will flip out when she hears you taught class!” Seamus Finnigan grinned as he gathered his books and walked over to them.

“And is that good or bad?” Viktor asked.

“Good I reckon. We saw you in the World Cup. She thought you were the best thing about going, even though we were rooting for Ireland, of course. She couldn’t believe Lynch fell for it. Twice. And the Internationals were great too.”

“Thank you. Well, she ought to love me then. I let Ireland win the Cup. How would she feel about me threatening to hit you on the head with a rubber haddock, then?” Viktor grinned.

“Probably tell me I deserved it. Viktor... I mean, Mr. Krum?”

“You can call me the first three feet from here, on the other side of that door.”

“Would you sign something for me to send her? I got one for me last year, would you do another for her?” Seamus asked hopefully.

“As long as you do not want me to sign the haddock,” Viktor sighed.

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## Chapter 53

“Just a moment,” Viktor called, then muttered, “You could get off my feet,” at Ivan, curled under the desk, nudging him gently with a toe. Ivan just yawned and stretched in response. “Hermione, get in here,” he said, when he got the door open. He gave the ginger cat that trailed in behind her a quick scratch on the ears.

“Brought Crookshanks. Thought maybe it was time they got acquainted,” she said, bending to pat Natasha, who had bounded over from in front of the fire. Natasha and Crookshanks regarded one another warily, and Natasha gave the cat a curious sniff, then trotted off nonchalantly, back to the drowsing Ivan. Crookshanks went over and gave Ivan a similarly curious sniff, and he barely twitched in response, rousing a little, then dropping back down, muzzle on paws. Crookshanks curled in the corner nearby, settling in for his own nap.

“See? Thoroughly unimpressed, the lot of them,” Viktor observed.

“Well, I’m impressed. Neville and Malfoy. And even Seamus Finnigan. The lot of them all in one class period,” she said, settling into one of the armchairs in front of the hearth.

“Longbottom was easy. He is fine as long as no one tries to scare him witless, literally. Finnigan too, if he is not busy playing with one of the Weasley Wizard Wheezes line during class. Fred and George still testing their...whatever they were that makes you sick?” Viktor said, taking the other chair.

“Yes. Skiving snackboxes. But only on themselves now. I threatened to write Mrs. Weasley,” Hermione said smugly.

“My word, you do play dirty then,” Viktor laughed.

“Malfoy... I wish I had a picture of his face when you threatened to put him in a cauldron. He’s used to being king of the Potions class. Do you really not know where Snape is?” Hermione asked, though she already knew it had been no lie when Viktor had replied to Malfoy earlier.

“Ask me no questions, I tell you no lies. Away on an important mission. That is all I know. Here’s the book back. Nothing in there either, and I do not know about you, but I am getting sick of reading about the Greeks. I know more about them than I ever wanted to. I swear we haff to be missing something,” Viktor said, rubbing a hand over his forehead.

“This is worse than first year, when Harry and Ron and I couldn’t figure out where we had heard the name ‘Nicholas Flamel’ and we practically lived in the library trying to find out who he was. Maybe I can get permission to go to the restricted section again,” Hermione griped, taking the book. “Got your essay done?” she asked, looking at the long parchment on the desk.

“Done. Again. I think,” Viktor replied, nodding. “Two scrolls, even. Another for references. Tons of things I memorized so I can back it up. If you look at it and deem it okay, I will probably just go ahead and tell them to get it over with. Test me, and then that leaves just one.”

“Trust me to take it and read it and not lose it?” Hermione said.

“You can haff a copy,” he said, walking over to the table, laying out the scrolls beside two blank ones, then waving his wand and reciting “*Replicatum!*” He rolled up the newly created extra copies and handed them to her.

“Well, that’s handy. I need to learn how to do that,” Hermione said, turning them over in her hand. “Halloween tomorrow night,” she said idly.

“Halloween. It has been a year. Seems like forever and yesterday, both at the same time,” Viktor said, settling back into the chair.

“Ever regret it?” she asked, not looking up.

“Regret what? Coming? Being picked? Asking you? Not getting my nose fixed? Be more specific, please,” Viktor asked with a small smile.

“Any of it. Coming. Being picked. Asking me. Coming back. Being here now. Leave your nose out of it. You know what I mean by that,” Hermione said venturing an upward glance.

“Not if it was the only way I could end up with you. And seeing as this is the only reality we haff, I guess it is. So... no,” he said in a soft voice.

“You sound so sure. How can you be so sure?”

“If I am not made for you then why does my heart tell me that I am?”

“Well, I can’t argue with logic like that, now can I? You could have stayed at Durmstrang, graduated, gone and had a nice, relatively safe Quidditch career, written me...” she said, trailing off.

“Yes. I could haff. But I made this choice. Felt right. Still feels right. Besides, what good would regret do me?” Viktor asked, leaning forward in his chair.

“Good point. Still...”

“Good and bad aplenty over the last year. Mostly good for me, if you must know, in my opinion. Because of you. I haff had worse years,” he said, shrugging.

“I nearly got you killed,” she whispered.

“Did not. I nearly got myself killed. Or how about we place the blame squarely where it belongs and just say that Karkaroff nearly killed me?”

“I’m still responsible for the boggart...in the shack.”

“I could haff refused. Avoided it altogether. And then, probably, they would haff a boggart for sure and I would fail. Ironic, but not too laughable from my point of view. It is not so bad. First time I managed to do anything other than just stand there. I just wish you had not seen... her,” Viktor said, running a finger over the chair arm.

“Why didn’t you tell me you looked? I would never have...”

“And how do you work that into a conversation exactly? ‘Lovely weather today. Did I mention I was a stupid kid and lifted the coffin lid before we buried my baby sister? Might not want to put a boggart near me, if you haff one lying around, it usually ends up turning into her. Eventually. Wonder what is on the menu for dinner?’ I never even told my parents. They still do not know I did it,” he answered in a low voice.

“Still, I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“Sorry.”

“Are you still apologizing, or are you apologizing for apologizing? Either way, stop it. I cannot keep up.”

“Sor... okay, I mean.”

“Game in about a week,” Viktor said, leaning back in his seat.

“Knee ready?” Hermione asked.

“Need to fly some to find out. Making a deal with Harry. Wronski Feint for a corporeal Patronus. Even trade.”

“He’ll be a terror if he learns it. He’ll try to faceplant Malfoy first game,” Hermione laughed.

“I will do it even if he does not help me practice then. I will even throw in a sloth grip roll.”

She pointed at him in mock accusation. “Mr. Krum, I do believe your prejudice is showing. You do realize that sloth whatever might as well be Bulgarian?”

“We haff got to get you a copy of Quidditch Through The Ages,” Viktor said with a subtle smile.

“No, you can teach me. I’m finding it’s sometimes more fun not to learn things out of books. Busy tomorrow night?”

“Only the Halloween Feast and then walking with the dogs.”

“How about I go along?” she asked casually.

“That would make for a more interesting walk. You are going to be out of bounds if you do not go. Soon.” He stood again.

“Do I get a kiss goodnight first?” she asked, rising as well. His only answer was to slide his arms around her waist, pull her close and press his lips over hers for a long moment. “Goodnight,” she murmured, picking up the scrolls and the book and walking toward the door. She opened it and stood in the doorway, reluctant to leave.

“Forgetting something?” he called when she had reached the door. She turned to see him smiling, suppressing a laugh.

“I’ve got both of them. I’ll check your reference scroll later. And the book,” she said, waving them in the air with a questioning look. He stood there, arms folded, same bemused expression on his face.

“Something furrier. Not that I do not like him, but I haff enough fur in here already.”

“Oh! Come on, Crookshanks. Crookshanks! Sorry,” she added sheepishly, as Crookshanks woke and stalked over to her. Viktor followed and put a hand on the doorknob.

“Stop apologizing! Goodnight. I will get the door, go on, you haff your hands full,” he chided.

“Do I ever,” she laughed to herself as she walked down the hall, hearing the door click softly behind her.

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## Chapter 54

“Lupin said you had to think the happiest thought you can possibly think of. Concentrate on it. That’s the trick,” Harry said.

“Well that explains it then,” Viktor said flatly.

“Explains what?” Harry asked.

“Why I could never do it before. Can you imagine Karkaroff twittering around like a hopped-up fairy on Fizzing Whizbees, telling you to think happy thoughts?” Harry was so tickled by the thought of Karkaroff flitting and mincing about, chirping about happy thoughts that he laughed out loud.

“Okay, I can’t imagine Lupin doing that either, but you at least get the mist, and it’s all kind of staying together now, so it can’t be too much harder to get the real full blown thing. Come on, this can’t be too much different than



practicing with Alexei, can it?" Harry asked.

"Yes it is. You haff not already suggested we pack it in and go do something else. He would haff thirty minutes ago. Five minutes in," Viktor pointed out.

"Come on, try it again. But first, close your eyes and concentrate on something happy. Then we can go to the Quidditch pitch, already." He paused for several seconds while Viktor closed his eyes. "Got something?" Viktor nodded silently. "Going to do it sometime today?"

Viktor smiled and opened one eye. "Let me finish it up first. Give me a minute's peace. Okay. *Expecto Patronum!*" This time, a ghostlike and wispy silver hawk shot out of the end of the wand. "Well. That was not what I was expecting..." Viktor said.

"What did you expect?" Harry asked.

"I do not know. Dogs, I guess. Been around sheep too long, I suppose," Viktor replied, shrugging.

"What does it matter if it worked?" Harry asked. "And are you ready to go to the pitch?"

"Guess I am. Grab your broom. I owe you," Viktor said, rising and walking to the cupboard in his quarters.

"What did you think about?" Harry asked as Viktor reached in and set his Firebolt out.

"None of your business," Viktor said lightly.

"She never takes that ring off, you know. And she's not exactly big on jewelry, usually," Harry said slyly. Viktor only smiled in reply and whistled for the dogs. "Not gonna say a word are you?" Harry ribbed on the way down the steps.

"No. I do not hear you saying anything about whether or not you talked to Cho, either," he retorted.

Harry flushed, but did not reply. "Okay then. What's the secret to a really good Wronski Feint?" Harry asked, standing in the middle of the pitch.

"I take that as a 'no' on talking to Cho. Wronski Feint. Be fool enough to hurtle yourself toward the pitch as fast as you can go without killing yourself. And you are every bit as foolish about this as I am, so I think you haff it made. Just get on for right now. Let me shake a little of the dust off first, then we talk,"

Viktor laughed and took off. After some minutes of cruising around the pitch, Viktor skimmed the grass, then landed and waved Harry down beside him. Even after a few weeks off of a broom, he made it look so effortless that the broom was almost unnecessary. "Okay, now we get down to teaching you for a change. Get back on your broom, point yourself at that goalpost and work on getting as close to it as you can and going as fast as you can. First thing you need to work on is judging distance at a high rate of speed. Want me to show you first?" Harry nodded. Viktor streaked toward the goalpost, whipping around it so close that his cloak wrapped around it briefly as he circled it and banked to return. "You start an arm's length away. When you get good at that, halve it. Halve it again. Then try it pointed at the ground, but easy at first."

An hour later, they walked off the field, dogs in tow. "You can laugh, you know," Harry muttered.

"It is not funny," Viktor replied, pulling out his wand and murmuring "*Oculo Reparo*," and handing Harry his glasses back. "Not bad, you only came off completely five times."

"It was six," Harry said through clenched teeth.

"Count yourself lucky either way. You do not know how many times I came off," Viktor said in a conciliatory tone.

"I only tried it seven times going at the ground! And you were what, eleven?"

"I flew a long time before that. You are pushing yourself too hard. Give yourself time to get lower and faster. Do one at a time, even then. The ground does not give much when you hit it. Harry, you have to learn something."

"What's that?"

"Most of the time you came off because you could not decide whether to commit or not. If you are going to crash, you are not going to make it better by trying to decide when to pull out that close to the ground. You need to decide that before you dive. I am coming up out of this a foot off, or at the very last second, you tell yourself that before you start. If you do it properly, you are not going to crash. Either way, no point in doing it halfheartedly. If you are going to drown, do not try it in shallow water."

"Huh?" Harry replied.

"Old Bulgarian saying. Just more proof that I am an old Bulgarian, I guess. Means 'do nothing halfheartedly', even if it kills you. In this case, very applicable, because if you keep changing your mind, you are going to get

yourself killed while you try to work out where to pull out. Work on it sometime when I am not around. Easier to commit when you know no one is going to see you made a fool of if you crash. Harry?”

“What, Viktor?”

“Not as bleedin’ easy as it looks, is it?” he asked softly, trying not to laugh.

“Good grief, no. You make it look so effortless. Did you ever walk straight when you were learning this? Everything’s sore. Even my eyelashes hurt,” Harry said, running his fingers through his hair.

“Did not walk straight before, according to some people. Okay, I admit it was pretty funny when you got it right then almost clocked yourself on the goalpost that time. You should watch where you are going after you pull up instead of celebrating,” Viktor advised.

“Oh, shut up. And don’t tell Ron,” Harry said good naturedly.

“My lips are sealed. At least I did not make you take on a couple of bludgers by yourself. Or grease your broomstick. Or glue you to it. Or hex your gloves. Or...”

“You know far, far too many hazing rituals for my taste. What hasn’t the Bulgarian national team done to rookies?”

“Oh they did not do all that. They usually just dare you to do something you would usually consider crazy and see if you will do it. If you do it, you are usually crazy enough to play Quidditch with them. No, the English team does all that. The Welsh did it to Cymry. I think they even stunned him once and buried him in the sand pit overnight. Forgive me if I do not feel too sympathetic toward him after our last meeting,” Viktor laughed.

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## Chapter 55

“I believe someone owes me a walk,” Viktor whispered in Hermione’s ear when the Halloween feast was drawing to a close.

“Where are Ivan and Natasha?” she asked, gathering her cloak.

“Out already. I set them outside before I came down. Come on, we will go find them,” he whispered again.

“Going for a walk. See you back in the common room later,” Hermione called to Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, Fred and George. Or anyone else within earshot, she thought to herself happily. The whole Great Hall could hear, for all she cared. At least her roommates had stopped asking if Viktor had broken up

with her after that first Hogsmeade weekend.

“Had ole Silent Vik for Potions the other day. He wasn’t half bad. Loads better than the Greasy Git, not nearly so much glaring and sourpuss behavior, even if he did charm our names onto our foreheads,” George said cheerfully.

“Well, it was all your fault. He did warn you to stop answering for me and for us to stop switching seats. And I rather like that he made me wear my cauldron on my head rather than bawling me out for not paying attention. Snapey-kins would have taken fifty points from Gryffindor for catching me chucking that toad spleen at Peterson and given a ten minute speech besides. Too bad Viktor spots flying toad spleens the same way he spots the snitch,” Fred observed.

“And he inquired about what happened to our lovely beards from last year. He’s no laugh riot, but he sure is a lot more entertaining than points and detentions and essays,” George added. “What about you, Gin? How did you like Mr. Krum in Potions?”

“He was okay. He still kind of intimidates me. He’s so serious and...tall. We probably didn’t learn much. Most of the boys goggled at him and asked him about Quidditch every three minutes, and most of the girls were busy preening and primping in their mirrors and giggling. He had to stop one of the girls from dropping her whole vial of bubotuber pus into her cauldron and eating the bottom out. A lot of them hung around for autographs afterwards,” Ginny said, picking at the remains of dinner on her plate.

“Must be nice to have to beat the birds off with a stick. Or in his case, a broom,” Fred grinned, wagging his eyebrows.

“Maybe less pleasant than you think. Besides, he’s only got eyes for one. Hermione,” Ron interjected.

“What, he’s not the enemy anymore, little brother?” George teased.

“Oh, stuff it, George,” Ron grumbled.

“She spends a lot of time with him. Did he get her that ring?” Ginny asked.

“Ring? Oooh, call Rita Skeeter! We got ourselves an engagement!” Fred snickered.

“Promise ring,” Harry said wearily. “Just a promise ring.”

“Well, it’s very pretty. I’m going upstairs now,” Ginny said, rising and

setting out across the Great Hall.

“Uh oh. Methinks I see some hints of the green-eyed monster in yet another fourth year Weasley,” George laughed.

“What on earth are you on about, George?” Ron asked.

“Ginny’s jealous. Just as jealous as you were last year,” George replied.

“You don’t mean you think she’s got a crush on Viktor?” Ron gasped.

“Not really. I dunno. Maybe she does. Sort of. Wouldn’t be the only one. Some of the girls in our class were all moony over him. But you know, Hermione used to spend most of her time away from you two with Ginny. Now she spends it with Mr. International Quidditch star,” Fred pointed out. “Bet she’s gone upstairs to pout or sulk or watch out the window,” he added.

“Viktor seems nice enough, if a little broody-like. You think Hermione would get us tickets when they get married?” George remarked, shoveling another forkful of dessert in.

“George!” Ron scolded.

“Alright. Alright. If they get married then. Man’s already gotten her a ring. Least he could do is get her favorite set of twins some decent tickets. We’re practically family,” Fred grinned.

“To quote Hermione, ‘Fred, you insensitive wart’.” Ron said.

“What? I wish them every happiness. Hope they’re so happy they don’t mind getting us into a few Quidditch matches every once in a while is all. They can have a whole mess of bookwormy kids who are hell on broomsticks and send them to Hogwarts. Just make sure they get put in Gryffindor,” Fred protested. “And maybe Hermione having a boyfriend will make her less of a prefect. Get her off our backs. We could engineer that.”

“No hope of that,” Ron lamented. “Still into rules. Hate to tell you, but Viktor is too.”

“Darn! No catching them out after curfew and blackmailing her, then?” George wailed.

“Nope. The man made you wear a cauldron on your head. He’s creative with his punishments, not completely insane. He isn’t going to get tossed off campus for stepping out of line. His ring’s still here,” Ron snickered.

“Ron, you insensitive wart,” Harry laughed.

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## Chapter 56

“So, how did Harry do at learning the Wronski Feint?” Hermione asked, breaking the relative silence. The only noises were their feet in the grass and the dogs trotting back and forth.

“I do not believe I am at liberty to say... no, wait, he only told me not to tell Ron,” Viktor responded.

“That bad, huh?”

“He did better than I did the first time I really tried it at Durmstrang. I broke my arm that first day. And I was a big enough idiot to keep trying it. Although, an inch to the left and he would haff split his head like a melon, once.”

“To the left?” she asked, puzzled.

“Well, he managed a pretty good feint about a foot off the ground and celebrated without looking where he was going, which was right toward the goalpost. Just missed it. I think he is finding out it is not as easy as it looks.”

“Dare I ask if you’ve had any luck?”

“Not a speck. Maybe we are looking at this all wrong. Maybe Greeks haff nothing to do with it. Maybe we are focusing too much on that. Any more ideas?”

“Not a one. My parents wrote back.”

“What did they say?”

“Well, needless to say, they’re a bit confused. I mean, I think maybe they expected to have me to write and invite you by over the holidays, or even for me to invite all three of you. They just weren’t expecting that. Me telling them I couldn’t come by myself at all, and then, only for a day...”

“Are they at least considering it?”

“Yes, they would be fine with you coming, but they don’t understand. They don’t understand this world. Your parents...”

“Are not any happier about it than yours are, really. I am sorry I cannot spare more than the one day. One day in London, one day in Bulgaria, that is all I can manage. Do you want to go on Christmas Eve or Christmas day? I will talk

to Dumbledore about Ron and Harry going to the matches and Pavlova too. They seem to forget that Quidditch players like holidays too. Boxing Day matches are great if you do not have to play in them. If you are a player, it is another story," Viktor said.

"Christmas Eve would probably be easier. They'll leave for skiing holiday the next afternoon. Mrs. Weasley..."

"She understands that the three of you will want to be together. And we can go to the Burrow before the day is over. I promised her we would if she let Ron come. Then back to Hogwarts, or maybe we can just go straight to the match."

"It's not fair to Nikolas and Anya. You could have two days with them, maybe more if the matches are short."

"Lots of things are not fair. Besides, I can go see them when I am out by myself for games anyway between now and then. No worse staying out a little extra and Apparating there before I come back to Hogsmeade. It is not as though I am going to be away from them as long as you are from your parents. Maybe we can go back by on the way back to Hogwarts."

"That's a change, me being away more than you. Although, I'm not far behind you for time spent away from home. These last couple of years, especially. Summers seem so short, and then I go to the Burrow, and lately, I don't even make it home for Christmas much, if at all. Last year, I didn't make it home over the holidays at all. Yule Ball. But you knew that," she told him.

"I might remember something about that, yes. Kind of a pity there will not be one this year. I found I kind of like dances with the right person."

"We'll just have to find some other excuse to dance, then," Hermione said, pausing and looking up at him.

"Who needs an excuse? Right here, right now. Just make sure we do not fall in the lake. We do not want to peeve the squid. Or trip over Myrtle."

"Myrtle?"

"Long story."

"Besides, you lead, that's your job, keeping us out of the lake. And what, precisely, are we supposed to dance to?"

"See, I just happen to carry this locket that just happens to play the Nutcracker Suite. And I hear from reliable sources that is a rather nice song to

dance to. No requests, unfortunately, but it might serve the purpose.”

“No tango. I still stink at that one.”

“No tango. Agreed. I am sure the Russian Ballet would be relieved. Tchaikovsky too.”

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## Chapter 57

For Harry, the first three weeks of November passed in a whirl of homework and practice sessions of all kinds, the Quidditch practices with the Gryffindor team and lessons with Viktor when he was not away at his own matches or practices, as well as the occasional DADA session with him. He often fell into bed so exhausted that he did not dream. When he did dream, he rarely remembered what they were about, just a vague feeling of unease about them, and his prickling scar was easier to ignore the longer it persisted. It faded to a merely annoying constant tattoo in the background. Professor Snape continued his sporadic absences, and Harry wondered what he could possibly be up to that would take him away from campus so often, usually once a week.

“Don’t question our good fortune, mate,” Ron said when Harry remarked on it. “Anything that gets Snape out of class can’t be all bad,” he observed, when he and Harry returned from Quidditch practice. Since Ron had become the new Gryffindor keeper at tryouts, they were spending hours on the field, trying to please Angelina Johnson, who was turning out to be just as demanding as Oliver Wood, if not more so. “I’m just about all in, Harry, I’m going to bed. Viktor didn’t say that Snape would be back for sure tomorrow, did he?” Ron asked.

“Didn’t say he wouldn’t be either. Can’t say that I’ve missed him. Bet Neville would say the same. He’s not nearly fainted during potions for weeks, even with Snape there. Snape is probably grinding his teeth over the fact that he can’t bluff him off of using those lists. G’night Ron,” Harry said, yawning and stretching.

“G’night, Harry,” Ron called back, and they settled into bed. Harry soon found himself walking in the Forbidden Forest, the swirling fog creeping around his ankles, the soft wind on his face in the twilight. He could hear singing, and it seemed the most beautiful song he had ever heard, though he couldn’t distinguish the words. He had to find that song, that voice, high and clear. He stepped through the trees, picking his way around the gnarled roots, trying to find the source of that sound, he had to get to it...”Harry! Harry!” came Ron’s voice from behind him, and Harry felt a jolt of disappointment and anger at Ron for interrupting. His shoulders were being shaken, though no one was in the woods with him...”Harry! You’re sleepwalking!” Ron hissed.



And then, Harry woke, standing in the middle of the common room, Ron grasping his shoulder. "Ron?" Harry said in a dazed manner.

"Harry, you must have been having a dream. You got up and wandered off. Lucky I was still awake with this headache, or I might have slept through it and you would have been in Hogsmeade by morning. You okay?" Ron peered at him more closely.

"Sure...sure. Just tired from today, I guess. Let's go back up to bed," Harry mumbled. He couldn't help but be disappointed at losing his dream. He couldn't remember the words, or the tune, but the quality of it, the beauty of it, he remembered that clearly. He had wanted to find the source of that song. Harry settled back into bed and drew the curtains, staring into the dark. He had never been sleepwalking before, what had made him start now? That voice, he thought, that voice could lead me anywhere, as he curled back up under the sheets and blankets, lay his head on the pillow and slept again.

In the girl's dorm, Hermione punched her pillow and rolled over again in an attempt to get comfortable. It was no use. The dull ache in her head made sleep impossible, and before, when she had dozed, her dreams had been restless. Might as well read a bit, she figured, grabbing the book on her bedside table and whispering "*Lumos*," lighting her wand to read. After a few pages, her eyelids grew heavy again, and she whispered, "*Nox*", lay her wand and book back on the table, and closed her eyes. Maybe a good night's sleep would get rid of the throbbing in her head. It seemed to have faded a bit.

Viktor stood and looked out his window, over the quiet grounds. Nothing stirring but a few owls on the hunt, going back and forth from the Owlery. His eyes fell on the journal page again, the new page of notes he had rewritten after scribbling so many false leads on the first.

earth, air, fire, water

Two escape in the old order, defeat him in new

Pureblood, halfblood, mudblood

escape from death, now death pursue.

The risen (Voldemort? Someone else? Something else?) cannot last when the past is present and the present past. (Time? Time turners? Something old?)

It still didn't make sense. No matter how many times he read through it. He sighed and shut the journal, laying it back on the table. He closed his eyes and rubbed a fingertip over his forehead, as though testing for the pain there that had gotten him out of bed in the first place. Funny, he couldn't even remember

the last headache he had suffered where he couldn't readily identify the cause. Usually it takes getting pounded by a bludger, or a rotten head cold, or meeting a tree trunk up close and personal, he thought to himself. It was still there, but more subtle now, almost gone. Staring at that page is not going to do a thing for this headache but make it worse, some sleep would be better, he thought to himself, walking toward the bed and crawling back in.

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## Chapter 58

"Who the heck is that?" Ron asked, reaching for the toast and jerking his head toward the staff table.

"Haven't a clue. Maybe a new substitute, but it looks like everyone else is there. Suppose Viktor can tell us, if he eats with us this morning," Hermione replied. Harry took a long look at the new resident of the staff table, a short woman with large, bulging eyes and a horribly fluffy pink cardigan. It put Harry in mind of Hagrid's hairy overcoat. She had the look of a toad, just waiting for a fly to venture too close. In a few minutes, Viktor got up from the staff table and slipped into a chair at Gryffindor's table.

"I take back what I said about Fudge not being a complete fool. Meddler," Viktor muttered.

"Who's that woman?" Ron asked.

"Dolores Umbridge," Viktor replied shortly, looking as though he had just tasted something disgusting.

"Well, what's she doing here?" Hermione asked.

"Here to interfere, if you ask me. Supposedly, she is here to make sure the school is up to standards. Review us all, evaluate Dumbledore, she's going to be sitting in on classes. You three missed Dumbledore's announcement, you were late this morning. You all look like you slept about as well as I did. That woman is going to be trouble, mark my words," Viktor added, throwing a look over his shoulder back at the staff table.

"Greasy Git here today? He's been here two solid weeks and more," Ron said, sounding a little disappointed.

"Professor Snape is not here today, and please stop calling him that. A little respect please, even if you do not like him. Umbridge is going to be in Potions this afternoon, she will come back sometime to see Snape teach it. Fudge is going hunting for people loyal to Dumbledore. Umbridge is just the first dog on the trail. I have to go. I need to see Professor Sprout before this afternoon, and she is booked solid in the greenhouse," Viktor said, getting up.

“Not going to eat anything?” Hermione asked.

“Ate a little before you three got here. Umbridge sort of stole my appetite even though I haff known she was coming for a week. Look, watch what you say around here, around her particularly. I get the feeling she is not going to stop looking at the end of the staff table,” Viktor said, leaning over to give Hermione’s hand a squeeze, then walking out of the Great Hall.

“Oooh, immediate dislike. From Viktor. That’s not good. And what’s with him getting after me for calling Snape by his pet name? He doesn’t particularly like Snape either, does he? He hardly ever calls him Professor Snape,” Ron said.

“No, but Professor Snape is still a teacher, and we’re still his students, and he deserves his title. Wonder what Umbridge said or did that set him off?” Hermione mused, then gave a little yawn, gathering her books.

The day seemed too long for Harry, he was tired. He had never quite gotten back to sleep after his midnight stroll down to the common room, though he had tried to drift back off to that same place, that same voice in his dream. By the time Potions came around, he had nearly forgotten about Dolores Umbridge, until he walked into the dungeon classroom and was confronted with her sitting in Snape’s chair at his desk. Viktor stood in front of it, perched on the edge, waiting for the bell. He seemed to be determinedly ignoring Umbridge, and in fact, he stood precisely in front of her, saving most of the class from having to look at her. Usually he walked the room when he spoke.

“Last class, Professor Snape tells me he finished lecturing about pain soothing potions but he just wanted me to add a bit about willow bark, that he did not haff time for. Willow bark, of course, was even used in Muggle medicine. Willow bark tea was used for headaches and pain relief. The same thing that makes willow bark tea work is used in a common medicine that I bet just about every Muggle house has in a cabinet somewhere. Anyone know?” A few scattered hands shot up, Hermione’s first, of course, but Viktor gave her a subtle shake of his head and a quick flick of the eyes toward the figure behind him. “Mr. Thomas?”

“Aspirin,” Dean Thomas beamed.

“And what about the stomach soothing draughts? There is an ingredient in them that is in most spice cabinets, and in a drink that a lot of Muggles recommend for an upset stomach.” This time, only Hermione’s hand went up. Viktor waited a long moment before nodding at her and saying, “Miss Granger?”

“Ginger. Ginger ale. I got that all the time when I was sick.”

“Hem, hem,” came a small clearing of the throat behind Viktor. He ignored it and went on.

“While it is not exactly a potion, ginger ale is a good example of...”

“Hem, hem,” louder this time.

“...what a lot of Muggles call home remedies, or sometimes even...”

“Hem, hem!” the cough was forceful, and even more forced this time. Viktor still plunged on as though he hadn’t heard.

“...herbal medicine. There are several good examples in your...”

“Pardon?” came a falsely sweet voice. For a moment, Harry had trouble placing it, as it didn’t sound familiar, but he soon traced it to the toadish face that was now peeking around Viktor. She was also tapping at his arm with hand full of flashy rings.

Viktor stood and turned. “Yes?”

“I was wondering if I could ask a few questions?” she asked, smiling as though she had found that juicy fly.

“Since I am in the middle of teaching a class, I think it would be better to save them, unless they are about ingredients for home remedies,” Viktor said softly but firmly, then turned to the class again. “There are several good examples in your book in chapter...”

“They’re only tiny little questions,” she said in her dripping sweet voice.

“Will my answers be tiny as well?” he asked without turning.

“Oh, I should think so,” she said, clutching her ever present clipboard to her chest and bustling around the desk. It took Harry a moment to discern that she had stood up at all. She was so short, it didn’t make much difference. In fact, she didn’t seem to come up much past Viktor’s waist. She was probably shorter than Poppet had been.

“Chapter 11. Examples. Read,” Viktor said in staccato fashion to the class, and though books opened immediately, few eyes were actually moving over the page. The entire class snuck surreptitious glances toward the front at Viktor and Umbridge facing off.

“Now, I understand you haven’t graduated as of yet?” she asked loudly,

quill poised over her horribly pink parchment, which matched her cardigan.

“Yes and no,” Viktor answered blithely.

“Well, it has to be one or the other. Could you explain?”

“Technically, yes. I have enough credits that I could claim to be a graduate if I wished. If I had attended Hogwarts, I would be. I decided late last year that I would like to have N.E.W.T.s in two more subjects, so I am getting them here. Independent study and a bit of tutoring. I did not declare intent to graduate last year, though I could have. You have to declare before you are granted graduate status where I last attended school,” Viktor explained carefully.

“But you’re nineteen,” she said. Harry could sense that there was a hint of accusation in the statement. “You’ve not graduated at nineteen?”

“I turned nineteen this summer. Several things combined explain why I have not yet graduated at that age. For one thing, I started out behind, a half year late,” Viktor said.

Umbridge pounced on the admission with great relish. “Owing to?”

“Family circumstances beyond my control,” Viktor answered in a guarded fashion, a tone that suggested the subject was closed to further discussion. Thankfully, Umbridge picked up on it.

“So Dumbledore hired someone who hasn’t graduated to be a substitute?” The was a touch of incredulity in Umbridge’s voice now, as though she were discussing the hiring of a troll for a babysitting position.

“Seeing as the only subjects I lack N.E.W.T.s in at this point are History of Magic and Defense Against the Dark Arts, and those are two classes I never substitute for, I do not think it is an issue. The headmaster did not seem to think so either. If you check my marks in the subjects I teach, I am sure you will find them more than satisfactory. Professor Dumbledore found them more than adequate,” Viktor said.

“Even a half year behind, you should have been able to catch up, shouldn’t you? I mean, you seem like an intelligent enough young man...” Umbridge began, looking up at him. Something in her tone suggested she doubted her own words.

“Compounded circumstances. Most of the time I was attending Durmstrang, I had a job as well. It took me away from campus a great deal,” Viktor replied, crossing his arms once more.

“A job? That would be most unusual wouldn’t it? A young teenager holding down a job?”

Viktor blushed subtly. “Twelve actually. I was twelve when I became a practice reserve,” Viktor said softly.

“Practice reserve, dear?” Umbridge asked as though testing out a foreign phrase she had never heard before on her tongue.

“I became a practice reserve for the Vratsa Vultures Quidditch team when I was twelve,” Viktor explained patiently.

“Ah, yes, playing Quidditch,” Umbridge said in the tone of someone who is reassuring a small child that they are being a help. “Did that take you away from campus a great deal? Playing Quidditch?”

“They typically do not bring the practices or the matches to you. You have to go to the stadium. I started playing in matches at fifteen. Some of them tend to take place out of the country. Since I was not allowed to Apparate then, travel took a while.” Harry knew Viktor wasn’t particularly comfortable reeling off his list of accomplishments. He looked as though he would rather be doing anything than speaking to Umbridge in front of the class. Harry could hardly blame him, modesty or no modesty.

“Playing a sport, though, is that really a full time job? I mean, plenty of students here are on their house teams and they don’t fall behind to the point that they don’t graduate by at least eighteen,” Umbridge said in a condescending manner.

“If you ask Vratsa’s owners and Coach Boyar, I assure you they would call it a job, since they had to pay me to get me to show up. My contract looked the same as everyone else’s except for the fact that it required my parents to sign as well. I enjoyed it, but I could already play for free on my own house team, and in fact, I did. I hardly think a school Quidditch team, which does not travel, does not rely on a professional coach to set a practice schedule, and plays only a small portion of the number of matches that a professional team plays compares as far as taking your time goes. Then add on my play with the Bulgarian national team, and the time that took. And last year, I participated in two other things that interrupted my studies somewhat. I went to the World Cup with Bulgaria, so that eliminated any tutoring time I might have had otherwise during the summer, and I participated in the Triwizard Tournament here. While Hogwarts has some wonderful professors, it was a bit hard to follow, since I did not speak English quite as well then. And not all of the courses transferred. Some of the other students in that Durmstrang tournament contingent are still finishing up their educations as well. Just not here,” Viktor said, narrowing his eyes.

“Well, if you want to call playing a silly old game a job, I suppose so,” Umbridge said dismissively. Several of the students were looking positively scandalized at that remark. Calling Quidditch a ‘silly old game’ was not the way to win over most of the students. “Nineteen is awfully young to be leading a class, isn’t it? You’re hardly older than some of the students,” she pressed.

“That woman...” Hermione muttered under her breath. Harry could see that her face was reddening.

“What?” Harry whispered.

“She’s going to make him out to be too old on the one hand, too young on the other,” Hermione whispered back.

“I am a good sight older than the first years, not so much older than the seventh years. Math being what it is, I assume that is true for all the teachers,” Viktor replied blandly.

Finding no answer for that remark, Umbridge continued. “Well, back to your English then. You speak English as a second language, hmm?” She was back to addressing Viktor as though he might have trouble understanding the language, or as though he was hard of hearing.

“No,” Viktor said plainly.

“No? Well, then where did you get that accent?” Umbridge asked, somewhat surprised.

“I speak English as a third language. Bulgarian is my first, I consider Russian my second language.”

“Fluent in English?” Umbridge queried slowly, as though addressing a child again.

“As though she hasn’t stood there, listening to him and talking to him!” Hermione said through clenched teeth.

“I admit I am considerably more fluent in Bulgarian and Russian than I am in English, but I would be willing to bet my command of English is at least as proficient as some of its native speakers. I spoke Bulgarian and Russian as a small child. I did not learn English in earnest until I went to school. My parents spoke little English,” Viktor replied, raising an eyebrow, as though daring her to remark on that. Umbridge obviously got the message.

“And you went to Durmstrang? Where Karkaroff was headmaster?”

“You know I did. You haff a copy of my credentials. Durmstrang, where Potenko is now headmaster. I got shed of Karkaroff some time back,” Viktor answered.

“Teach the Dark Arts there, don’t they?” she asked sweetly.

“Used to. I hear they are slowly shifting to a more defense-based curriculum. Not that they ever officially advocated students employ the Dark Arts in anything other than an academic fashion or in a respectable career path. Quite a few Aurors got their start in those classes. Bit hard to decide if you want to be an Auror without knowing something about what you will be facing. I believe that is the philosophy behind Defense Against the Dark Arts classes here,” Viktor replied.

“Awfully dangerous, teaching students about the Dark Arts, isn’t it?” Umbridge questioned in a low tone, acting almost conspiratorial.

“Oddly enough, I do not recall anyone ever being killed at an event our school hosted while I was there,” Viktor replied tartly.

“Tragedy, that Diggory boy dying in that tournament mishap,” Umbridge said, sadly shaking her head so that her jowls wobbled and clucking her tongue.

“Tournament mishap. Right,” Viktor’s voice left no doubt that he was having none of that explanation.

“Pity you’re not a native English speaker,” she said mostly to herself, scribbling on her parchment.

“Excuse my lack of judgment and foresight for not getting myself born in England. Then I could haff learned English as my native language and attended Hogwarts and we would not be haffing this discussion,” Viktor said acidly.

“You’re a member of Gryffindor?” she asked, ignoring the glare Viktor leveled at her.

“No.” Viktor’s voice was dropping lower and lower. Hermione, Harry and Ron knew that generally, the more angry Viktor got, the quieter he got. Harry shifted in his seat, trying to listen so hard it felt as though his ears were stretching.

“But your quarters are there!” Umbridge said loudly, making Harry jump guiltily. Hermione elbowed him subtly.

“I live in quarters in Gryffindor tower. I am not a member of the house, since I am not a fulltime student. The last school house I was part of was



Gryndel's house at Durmstrang. The Sorting Hat has never been on my head, therefore I haff not been sorted into a new house. No point really. In a few days, I will haff one N.E.W.T. left to prepare for. I do not attend class with any of the other students. Might as well sort Mrs. Norris." There was some muffled laughter from the front of the room at that remark.

Umbridge seemed not to hear. "Wouldn't that make you a bit partial to Gryffindor?"

"No more partial than Professor Snape is to Slytherin, since he is their head of house. Will you be asking him where his loyalties lie in this class?" Viktor asked lightly.

"I understand your Yule Ball date from last year is a member of Gryffindor," Umbridge asked, and for once, Viktor looked mildly surprised at the question.

"I fail to see how that relates to anything," he said noncommittally.

"Are you not still seeing her? Seems a bit dodgy to me, putting an adult teacher in the same tower with a student he is seeing," Umbridge said, clucking to herself again.

Viktor sighed deeply, then answered. "I am subject to the same rules as the students, in that regard. Students and teachers are both allowed to haff private lives. Students at this school who are seeing one another are often separated by far less space. They may even share common rooms, and haff neighboring dorms. I am not in a student dorm. If I wanted into the Gryffindor common room, I would haff to give the password and enter past the Fat Lady, and even then, I could not get into the dorm. The founders felt that letting males enter the female dorms was in bad form, so they haff made sure it cannot happen. The steps are taken care of. And I cannot Apparate up there, since no one can Apparate or Disapparate on the grounds of Hogwarts. But I am sure you haff read *Hogwarts, A History*," Viktor added with a sharp downturn of the corners of his mouth. It was the closest Harry had seen him come to outright scowling in weeks.

This answer seemed to please her more than if he had said he slept in the bed next to Hermione, Harry thought to himself. "So your quarters are more isolated then? Secluded? Private? Away from everyone else?"

"On another hall. Which is patrolled regularly, just like all the others. The caretaker, Mr. Filch takes a fairly frequent stroll down my hallway, just as he does every other hallway in the tower. I stopped to chat with him the other night. Teachers patrol," Viktor explained again.

“You patrol the hall sometimes?” Umbridge asked, putting her quill to the corner of her mouth.

Viktor dropped his arms back to his sides and flexed his fingers as though he were itching to get them around Umbridge’s nearly non-existent neck. “As a teacher, yes. It is part of my duties.”

“I hear you invited her to visit, that you’ve given her a ring.” At these words, the entire class turned to look at Hermione. She shot them such a look that most of them ducked back to their textbooks.

Harry could see that Hermione’s cheeks were burning bright red, and she muttered again under her breath, “The nerve...the absolute nerve!” Viktor had flushed as well, and Harry could tell he was struggling not to let it show too badly.

“We visited one another’s homes over the summer, before Dumbledore and I ironed out the details of this proposal, yes. And she’s given me a book that sits on my bookshelf. Birthday gifts that were exchanged before I started substituting. Since I have no more bearing on this young woman’s final grade than I do on any other student in this class, which is none at all, I resent anything you might be implying. Professor Snape still determines grades at his own discretion. Otherwise I would excuse myself from ever teaching her class. And if you think my personal behavior is in question, you can talk to the headmaster about it instead of hinting at things. I am also fairly well acquainted with several members of Slytherin, since I ate all my meals at the same table while I was here last year. I do not hear you questioning how fairly I grade them when I recommend marks to Professor Snape or when I supervise them,” Viktor said evenly.

“And you think you can be impartial?” Umbridge asked incredulously.

“As impartial as any other teacher. I guarantee you every teacher has greater than average affection for some students, and petty grudges against others.” The small frown had become an outright scowl now.

“Impartial even with a girl you love?” Umbridge trilled.

Viktor folded his arms across his chest once more and reared back on his heels a bit, glowering at her. “Well, if I really loved her and wanted to be partial, I would be harder on her than anyone else. I would make her work twice as hard as everyone else for the same grade. Luckily, she does that on her own, so I do not have to. I mean, I would hardly wish to date and possibly marry an uneducated twit eventually, now would I? My little Quidditch hobby might fall through or she might want a career of her own, and I would want her to be able to get whatever job she liked. Worse yet, they might decide professional Quidditch is not a real job one of these days and stop paying for it and she might

need the work lest we starve. I might not manage to graduate before then, either. But I suppose I could always get a job with the Ministry,” Viktor said, his voice dropping lower on each word. Before Umbridge could respond, the bell rang. “Class dismissed. Please do read those examples, since I doubt any of you did it in class,” Viktor called, not taking his eyes off of Umbridge’s face. Harry, Ron and Hermione dawdled, taking longer than necessary to gather their books. Harry noticed that by now, even Hermione’s ears were a bright red.

“You’ll be hearing from my evaluations soon enough,” Umbridge twittered happily, then strolled out of the classroom. Hermione stalked to the front of the classroom after everyone else had gone.

“That...that woman! The nerve of her! Implying those things, and in front of the class, too! I mean...honestly! As though you don’t speak better English than the most of us do! As if she couldn’t hear...for herself...” Hermione spluttered.

“Stop it,” Viktor said with a sigh. The scowl didn’t budge.

“Why? She acts like having a full time job shouldn’t interfere with your studies, and those little hints about Durmstrang! And what she said about us! She just as good as said we were...sneaking...” she began.

“Stop it or I will go after her and choke her with that awful pink cardigan. I am angry enough as it is, without you reminding me. And setting her off any more is going to be like poking a hippogriff with a sharp stick. It is going to get worse. I get the feeling she is not too fond of those of us with less than impeccable bloodlines,” Viktor muttered through a clenched jaw, shooting a glare at the empty doorway.

“You mean that’s why she brought it up? She found out you’re seeing a mudblood?” Hermione spat.

“Oh, that she is just interested in because she can make it sound like Dumbledore is practically letting us live together in her report. It will sound nice and scandalous. She would not care if you were a certified pureblood. You are a female, and that is enough. Not that kind of bloodlines exactly. Well, I do not think so, anyway. She has a small mind, but not quite small enough to hate you for being Muggle-born. But she definitely does not seem fond of half-humans. Kept clucking her tongue over Dumbledore hiring Lupin, when he was a werewolf, and you should have seen her jump when she heard the rumor that there was a half-giant and a half-veela on staff. Delacour has one thing going for her at least,” Viktor added.

“What’s that?” Hermione asked.

“She is going along with the Ministry line on changing the DADA class. Expect it to be all theory soon. Delacour seemed all for it, oddly enough. Funny, you would expect her to be angry when someone is telling her how to do her job. I do not recall Umbridge pointing out her accent. They seemed awfully friendly at that staff meeting we had. Maybe they get along well. Both kind of short on substance. I need to go. I promised I would be at team practice this week. Cannot let my hobby slide,” Viktor gave a small rueful smile at last. “See you later,” he told them all, and walked out the door.

“How’s he doing all that traveling? And how does he manage never to be gone when Snape is?” Ron asked, scratching his head, ruffling his hair.

“Gets on the Firebolt, goes to Hogsmeade, Apparates from there. And he’s missed some practices in order to sub for Snape. Luckily, no games missed yet. He’s got his exam for History of Magic scheduled this weekend. More Umbridge. Ugh,” Hermione said under her breath, and the three of them started walking back to Gryffindor tower.

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## CHAPTER 59

The last days of November and the first weeks of December were no better. Umbridge sat in on class after class. Though Harry rather enjoyed seeing Professor McGonagall give Umbridge what for during her observation of Transfiguration, for she had been far less polite and respectful than Viktor had been, it made his heart fall to see her ever present fluffy pink cardigan, pink parchment, and clipboard each time. Hagrid had taken them into a clearing in the Forbidden Forest, and shown them (the ones who could see them, at least) the thestrals during his observed class. Umbridge had treated Hagrid as though he were something of a simpleton as well, engaging in exaggerated pantomime as though English was not even Hagrid’s third language. And Harry had almost felt sorry for Trelawney, when Umbridge had tried to bully her into predicting anything at all of substance during Divination. Even worse, she deemed Snape one of the best teachers at Hogwarts, much to Harry’s chagrin.

“Didn’t seem to have a problem with Fleur,” Hermione muttered under her breath as they left Defense Against the Dark Arts. “No ‘Is English your second language, dear?’ with her,” she added.

“What’s Umbridge got to complain about? All she ever does is have us read the book. I don’t remember the last time we actually performed a charm in there. Viktor was right though. Umbridge acted like Fleur had the cooties when she confirmed she was part veela,” Harry said in a soothing tone.

“Sure, but she didn’t insult her about it out loud. Or ask her where she slept in front of the class or about how close it is to Roger Davies,” Hermione complained. “Did you write home about Yule, Ron?”

“Sure, Mum’s alright with it. Bit disappointed, but alright. How come nobody but Viktor gets to go with you to your house, though?” Ron asked.

“Dumbledore thought one underage student and a couple of Muggles loose in Muggle London was plenty for him to keep up with at once, I think. He wouldn’t let me go home at all unless I agreed to let Viktor come with me. I don’t think he could spare us each a bodyguard. And you have to admit, Viktor stands out a bit less in London than, say, Hagrid. Or a gaggle of students accompanied by a gaggle of wizards. Put him in jeans and sneakers and a sweatshirt, he looks like a college student home for break. I got the feeling Dumbledore didn’t want us to stand out too much, just get in, visit and get out. He managed just fine there when he visited this summer. London’s not so different from Sofia. It’s only a day. I get to spend Christmas with you two. Pavlova and the Burrow all in one day,” Hermione said.

“Still not fair. Harry and I can take care of ourselves,” Ron grumbled.

“Lots of things are not fair,” Hermione replied lightly. “And when you get off these grounds, you’re just as good as a Muggle, at least in London, unless you want us all getting tried for underage, unsupervised magic. Have no trouble tracing it down to my house, now would they? If they’re all like Umbridge, the Ministry would probably prosecute us all for lighting our wands to keep from falling down the stairs in the dark,” she added.

“Are your parents any happier about it? You only getting one day home?” Harry asked.

“I guess so. They’re resigned to it, I think, now that Dumbledore wrote them explaining that he only wants to make sure I’m safe while I’m away from school. Uncertain times and all that. And they like Viktor well enough. They trust him. They let me go to his house, didn’t they?” she pointed out.

Again that night, Harry drifted off to sleep, and soon found himself wandering the Forbidden Forest, called by that voice, that song. It was beautiful. And it seemed to be coming from the lake. He worked his way along the paths, out of the forest. Across the lawn, just across the lawn, that was the only thing separating him from...

“Harry?” Viktor’s voice came out of the darkness. “Harry.” Harry woke with a start, to find his bare feet on the stone floor of the castle, in the corridor outside the common room. “What are you doing out here?”

“I...I was dreaming... I must have gone sleepwalking,” Harry answered. Again, he added silently to himself. He had had this same dream, so many times now, and always it slipped away, or when it was clear, either Ron woke

him because he was mumbling in his sleep, or caught him in the common room or on his way to the stairs, and now Viktor had headed him off in the corridor. It was almost disappointing. That dream was a lot nicer than the flashes he got of Voldemort and Wormtail plotting, and the odd flashes of emotion he got that were oddly out of sync with his own even when he was awake.

“Well, get back inside, to bed,” Viktor said, studying him with his brows together.

“What are you doing out here either?” Harry asked, noticing that Viktor was in his dressing gown, carrying his wand.

“Making sure you do not fall down the steps and crack your head open in your sleep. Now, do I have to take you back in myself, or can you make it?” Viktor said, stepping closer. He was out of the light now, and the shadows made his expression impossible to see.

“Fairy lights,” Harry mumbled to the equally sleepy Fat Lady, and stepped back through the portrait hole.

“Has he done this before? Gone wandering in his sleep?” Viktor asked quietly.

“Not that I know of. But then, some decent people are asleep at this time of night,” the Fat Lady yawned.

“I thought you were supposed to keep tabs on them,” Viktor said in a low voice.

“I do the best I can. But even I can miss things when I’m asleep, dear,” she replied rather indignantly, and set back to snoring vigorously. Viktor waved his wand and whispered the words to reset the alarm at the door. If Harry or anyone else came in or out of that portrait hole the rest of tonight, it would wake him again. He slipped off back toward his quarters. Filch would probably be along soon and he didn’t fancy a late night chat with him about how he should be allowed to whip the students or to toss Peeves or the latest indignity foisted on Mrs. Norris by pranksters. It made his head ache worse to think about it.

He rolled his shoulders back. Probably just lack of sleep and stress, worrying about when he was going to hear back from the examiners and trying to get ready for the holiday break. I’m catching it from Hermione, he thought to himself, smiling, this worrying over how I did when I know I did fine. Or maybe it was all that tooth grinding Umbridge inspires. He still had a stack of Arithmancy papers to grade for Vector sometime tomorrow. He hadn’t been sleeping well. And he had just had one of the oddest dreams. Not a nightmare exactly, just the opposite, best he could remember. Not much seemed to happen at all. One

thing bothered him about it. Of all the places on campus to dream of, why the Forbidden Forest? At least he thought it had to be the forest. He had only been in there once. Then that awful screeching had woken him up. At first he thought one of the students must have trodden on their owl. Maybe it was one from the Owlery outside his window. It had seemed so close. Must have been close to wake him up like that. Then the alarm on the portrait hole. He dearly hoped Harry stayed in bed the rest of the night. He could do with the sleep.

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## Chapter 60

“How are the two of you going?” Harry asked, looking at the fire in the common room. It was deserted, save for a couple of second years playing exploding snap in the corner. Hermione and Viktor were leaving the next morning for Christmas Eve in London.

“Flooding from Hogsmeade to Diagon Alley, then from there, we take the underground and meet my parents at the station,” Hermione answered. “Suppose we’ll do the same in reverse to get back, then Floo to the Burrow from Hogsmeade.”

“Forget that. More importantly, what did you get him?” Ron asked.

“Nothing,” Hermione said flatly.

“What? What kind of a present is that?” Ron asked, scandalized.

“A safe one, considering Umbridge is still digging around here. We discussed it a while back, and we thought it just wasn’t sensible to exchange gifts, given the circumstances. We would let our visits home with each other suffice, and call it a Christmas. Viktor thought we shouldn’t give her anything more to pick at. As it is, he can claim he’s just accompanying me to London to make sure I arrive safely, as a favor to the headmaster, since I’m not supposed to do magic off campus yet and my parents are Muggles. Umbridge thinks Muggles are pretty helpless little things, even in the Muggle world, so it seems plausible. If gifts are involved, I’m sure Umbridge will turn them into more than they really are,” Hermione sighed.

“How can she make Christmas gifts evil, for Pete’s sake?” Ron persisted.

“Oh, I’m sure the ring alone will somehow become an engagement ring or the book a bribe for grading leniency as it is. Heaven forbid we exchange Christmas gifts too. If I get him a present and he gets me one, it will be Dumbledore letting me sleep in Viktor’s quarters every night and me surely pregnant with his baby by the time she gets through twisting it. Rita Skeeter has

nothing on her for imagination gone wild,” Hermione muttered darkly.

Harry felt himself blushing at Hermione’s blunt language, and he noticed Ron turning red as well. “Well, I suppose Viktor’s glad he’s got one N.E.W.T. down, then?” Harry asked loudly, to cover his embarrassment.

“Oh, sure. I knew he wouldn’t have any trouble with it. He passed with flying colors, in any case. The other one really shouldn’t be any trouble either, thanks to you, Harry. He’s just got the writing to do now. Viktor says those practice sessions really helped,” Hermione offered.

“Only fair. He’s got me fainting pretty well now, even though I can’t get up the kind of speed he can and scrape grass up off the pitch at the same time. Although, he did point out that hitting the ground at three quarters of the top speed of a Firebolt is just about as painful as hitting the ground full tilt on a Firebolt. And besides, it’s not like anyone else on any of the teams has a Firebolt anyway. They wouldn’t be able to keep up with me fainting at full speed on Cleansweeps,” Harry replied.

“And we wouldn’t want Malfoy...I mean, other seekers... not keeping up so they can kiss the turf, now can we?” Ron said gleefully.

“Honestly, Ron,” Hermione scolded halfheartedly. “Well, I better get to bed. Viktor wants to leave early tomorrow. You two have a good Christmas Eve tomorrow, if I don’t see you before I leave. Going to the Burrow will be nice. Ginny already leave on the Hogwarts Express? Just the three of us going with Viktor, right?” Hermione said, stretching.

“Yep. You know she did. Fred and George, too. She would have said goodbye, but you were off somewhere,” Ron said.

“Probably the library. Viktor and I were tossing around ideas for what he could do for the paper. I’ll see her at the Burrow, then. Goodnight,” Hermione called as she walked up the stairs.

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## Chapter 61

Christmas Eve morning broke foggy and snowy and a little gray. Feathery flakes were floating here and there, and the snow was well up to Hermione’s knees already. Hermione was glad for her long overcoat and the cloak that covered it when the wind howled across the lawn. Their breath condensed in great clouds when the wind was still. “So, anything else you would like to take?” Viktor asked, handing her the small overnight bag from the ground.

“No, I think this is plenty. My presents are in here, and a change of clothes each and I think that will do unless we get stranded somewhere. Unlikely if my parents drive us back to Diagon Alley. Or we can ride the underground on



Christmas morning, if we stay overnight, but they do a limited schedule, and only in the morning. We wait too late, we'll never get a train. We were going to spend the night, weren't we?" Hermione asked.

"Planning on it. Unless something changes," he replied, pulling on a pair of gloves. He too was bundled up against the cold, with hiking boots, heavy jeans, a sweater, long overcoat and his cloak on top. It would be windy on the broom, and walking Diagon Alley would be cold as well. "Ready then?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. Wished Hagrid a Happy Christmas yesterday, just in case I didn't see him before we leave again tomorrow. Am I to be in front or in back?" Hermione asked as he got on the broom.

"In front I think. It will be easier," he said, parting his cloak and tossing it back over his shoulders. "Now you on," Viktor said, pushing the broom closer to the ground. She straddled the broom and settled in, her small pack over her shoulders and between them, gripping the handle with her gloved hands. "Now then, pin this in front, and maybe we both will avoid freezing to death on the way to Hogsmeade. I think Hogwarts is trying to compete with Durmstrang this year. Elena wrote me that they were almost up to their eyeballs there last week," he added, flipping his cloak around both of them. Soon enough they had made it to the Three Broomsticks, and they hurried inside to get out of the wind. "Well, the Firebolt might as well go into the pack now. *Reducio*. Do I get the honor of carrying it or are you going to smack me with it if I try to pick it up?" Viktor said with a quiet smile. His cheeks were very red from being in the frigid wind, and Hermione felt sure hers were just as flushed.

"In the spirit of Christmas, you can carry it. Got the Floo powder?" she asked, rubbing her arms and huddling near the fire. He nodded and pulled one glove off with his teeth, reaching into the pocket of his coat and pulling out a small bag of powder.

"You haff done this before, right?" he asked, offering her some.

"Sure. With the Weasleys. Throw first, state your destination clearly, step in," she recited. "Me first or you first?"

"I had better go first. See you in a minute. Diagon Alley!" Hermione waited a moment, then followed, stating the same destination. For several moments, she felt as though she were whirling around and around, fireplace after fireplace, until she came to a stop in the one located in the shop at Diagon Alley.

"Don't think I'll ever get used to that..." Hermione said, steadying herself against the side of the fireplace.

“Oh, you do after you do it several hundred times,” Viktor said. “It does not get more pleasant, but you get used to it. We will walk to the entrance and cut through to the Leaky Cauldron. Then we had better put the cloaks in the pack as well.” They walked up the cobbled street and entered the Leaky Cauldron, the rather shabby looking pub that concealed the magical door between Diagon Alley and Muggle London. “You want anything before we leave?”

“I wouldn’t say no to a butterbeer. I could do with some warming up,” Hermione replied, rubbing her hands together. The pub was largely deserted, except for a couple of old wizards at the bar deep in discussion with one another, and Tom, the innkeeper.

“Two butterbeers, please,” Viktor said, leaning over the counter.

“There you go. And where might you two be headed in that mess out there? Or are you going out into that mess?” Tom asked as he set the bottles on the counter.

“She’s going home to see her parents. I’m just along for the ride,” Viktor replied quietly. As they were finishing their drinks, one of the wizards at the bar, now deep into an animated argument, slid off his barstool and came over to their table.

“Ere now, Barn an’ me are ’avin’ a bit of a wager. Are ye or are ye not Viktor Krum?” he asked, narrowing his already beady eyes under enormous bushy white eyebrows.

“I still was the last time I checked, so whoever thinks I am wins,” Viktor called loudly across the room, then finished off his butterbeer.

The wizard standing next to the table laughed gleefully and the one still at the bar mumbled “Oh, nuts,” into his flagon.

“Tol’ ye so, now ye can get my tab!” the winner of the bet gloated to his companion.

“Come on, let’s go before they get started betting on statistics,” Viktor whispered across the table.

“Don’t like talking about your statistics?” she asked.

“Do not know them in the first place. You would be surprised how many people can quote me how many games I haff been in with which teams, when I haff no idea. And they all hang out in places like this, making bets,” he whispered back. “I haff not been on the underground since I was here in the

summer, about how long will we be on it?"

"Oh, twenty minutes at most, I would think. We'll still get there pretty early," Hermione answered. Viktor gathered up their cloaks and put them into the pack, then slung it over his shoulder. They walked out the front door into a light snow and a London street full of shops decorated with fairy lights and tinsel.

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## Chapter 62

Hermione pressed her gloved finger into the doorbell and hopped up and down, her breath clouding around her face. "Hurry up, Mum, Dad, we'll freeze out here. The two blocks from the station are the longest two I've ever walked!" Both of them were so cold by now, their teeth chattered.

"Honey! Come on in, you'll catch your death of cold out there! You too, Viktor!" Mrs. Granger propped the door to let them in. "Let me go get you two some towels and hot chocolate or something to warm you up while you get rid of your coats, you're soaked to the skins!" she called, walking out of the small mudroom toward the living room and kitchen.

"Explain to me again why Muggles abandoned nice big hooded cloaks in favor of coats," Viktor muttered, shaking a great flurry of snowflakes out of his dark hair onto the floor. Tiny ice crystals still clung here and there, even in his eyelashes.

"Haven't a clue. Fashion, I suppose. Come on in, we'll get dried out by the fireplace," Hermione said, hanging up her coat.

"I could ..." Viktor began drawing his wand from a pocket, but Hermione shook her head.

"No magic unless you have to. It might sound funny, but it kind of makes Mum and Dad happy to do things the hard way. The Muggle way. It might get us pneumonia, but let them take care of us when they can. She already knows we're soaked to the skin. It would disappoint her to go get towels and hot chocolate and find out we don't need them. Silly I know..." Hermione said in a low voice.

"I understand. Parents," Viktor whispered, putting his wand back.

"Exactly. Parents. Oddest creatures on the planet. Humor 'em," she smiled. "Come on into the living room. I don't know about you, but I can't feel anything in most of my limbs," Hermione said, flapping her arms around her again.

"My legs are numb," Viktor replied, nodding.

“Must be record cold, then, if you admit you’re cold,” Hermione laughed.

“Ted! Hermione and Viktor are here! Here you go, towels so you can get dried off and there’s hot tea and hot chocolate in the kitchen, or there’s coffee being brewed, if you prefer it. I wish you had called so we could have come and picked you up,” Mrs. Granger said, giving Hermione a quick squeeze.

“It was only two blocks. Would have taken us longer to wait in line and get to a pay phone than to walk considering how crowded the station was, Mum. Might not have been a working pay phone in the entire station anyway. You know they stay broken more than they work,” Hermione responded. She and Viktor were vigorously toweling their hair to get the icy water out.

“So, what will you take to drink. Viktor?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“Whatever she wants. I do not care, I think, as long as it is not frozen. Thank you for offering,” Viktor answered from beneath his towel.

“Hot chocolate, Mum. That would be fine, thanks,” Hermione said, brushing her damp hair back from her face.

“Hermione! Come here, glad you finally made it!” Mr. Granger said, grabbing her in a bear hug. “Viktor, welcome back,” he said offering a handshake.

“Thank you for allowing me back,” Viktor said quietly. Hermione was struck anew by how tall Viktor was. He was well over a head taller than her father.

“Nonsense, glad you could make it. You two get by the fire and get warmed up. The both of you are probably frozen solid. Either of you care for a breakfast? I think your mother’s got eggs enough for an omelet in there. I could make one of my famous ham omelets. Of course, they’re not famous anywhere outside of this room, but famous all the same. Or did you eat before you left and can’t possibly hold it?” Mr. Granger asked, smiling.

“We didn’t get to eat before we left, Dad. An omelet sounds pretty good. Make it two, and you have a deal,” Hermione said.

“Helen! You do have eggs don’t you? Be awful if I’ve just offered you something I don’t have,” Mr. Granger confided.

“Of course I do. And ham. Here’s your hot chocolate,” Mrs. Granger said, handing them each a steaming mug. “You two sit tight and thaw out. Your dad will do the omelets and I need to work on the turkey.” They sat in the chairs on either side of the fireplace, steam rising from their mugs and off of their wet

shoes.

Finally Hermione broke the silence. "I had the most awful time trying to explain to them what you do... how well known you are. I finally gave up when I tried the Michael Jordan analogy and that fell flat. They're even less into sports than I am, if you can believe it."

"Not known at all out here. Not that that is a bad thing. Did I tell you about the summer? The block near the Ministry building?" Viktor asked.

"About how easy it was to tell which ones were the wizards because they were the ones doing double takes? You told me you spotted ten. No fair counting the one in the hip waders and bathrobe, though," she laughed.

"To be fair, I haff seen Muggles in worse getups. Especially on the underground," he teased back.

"But not packing wands, I hope. So much for discretion," Hermione mused, taking another sip from her mug.

"Speaking of discretion, do they know about that? Did you tell them or am I going to get an inquisition to rival one of Umbridge's?" Viktor inclined his head at her hand.

"Sure. Mum thought it was a sweet birthday gift. Expect plenty of questions, but not about this," Hermione said, wagging her finger.

"One question."

"Shoot."

"Michael Jordan?"

"Basketball player. Muggle sport. The one and only professional basketball player even I can name. If he walked down the street in most of the Muggle world, he would get about the same reaction you get in most of the wizard world. He might even be asked to sign rubber haddocks, for all I know," she explained.

"Omelets up! Come on in here and get them while they're hot!" Mr. Granger called from the kitchen. As they ate, Mr. and Mrs. Granger made small talk with them. Mostly it was questions for Hermione about school, Harry, Ron, or Ginny. And they asked Viktor about himself. The only uncomfortable moment was when Mrs. Granger asked, "Remind me again, any brothers or sisters back in Bulgaria?"

Hermione cringed inwardly, and Viktor paused for a long moment before answering, "I am the only child my parents have," without looking up from his plate. The Grangers didn't seem to notice how awkward the answer was, how it had avoided the expected, simple 'yes' or 'no'. Probably take it for poor English, Hermione thought to herself. Her parents were fascinated to discover that English was, in fact, his third language, not just his second. Unlike Umbridge, they were impressed that he was fluent in Russian as well.

The day seemed to rush by. She and her parents exchanged gifts around lunchtime, and she fended off their queries as to why she hadn't brought something for Viktor as well by saying, "We're exchanging gifts later," while leaving out the detail of how much later it would probably be. Like next Christmas, when Umbridge is gone, Hermione thought to herself, packing away the sensible new pair of winter shoes, the book and the jeans and sweater her parents had given her.

After dinner, she went to the guest room and knocked lightly. He wasn't anywhere downstairs. All the other doors were open and the rooms empty. If he wasn't in here, he wasn't in the house. He had slipped off right after they had finished clearing the table. "Viktor? May I come in?" He opened the door in a moment, and she stepped into the room. "Coming downstairs? We're just about to watch a movie. Or are you worn out and don't feel like it? I know you've been busy, would you rather have the rest?" she asked, the concern plain on her face.

"I did not want to intrude," he said softly. "You get so little time..."

"Nonsense. They're asking where you are. All for launching a search party if you weren't hiding out up here. Come on. It's kind of our tradition to watch It's A Wonderful Life during Christmas holiday. It's about the only thing on television on Christmas Eve anyway. It's an old movie in black and white, yet. I want you to come watch it with us," she pleaded.

"Are you sure I will not be in the way?"

"Honestly! I invited you here expecting to actually see you a bit. You could never be in the way. What did you expect? To see my room, eat dinner, and then hide out in here by yourself the rest of the evening? No more questions, I promise. They ran out during dinner. They've got everything but your shoe size by now," she chided gently. "Did you feel like I was intruding when I was at Pavlova?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then, why would you think you're intruding here?"

"Because I am no part of this world. I can visit for a little while and get

away with it, but..." he trailed off.

"Every time I come home, I feel more and more like a visitor. Come visit with me and let me have the best of both worlds for a little while," she replied quietly. He gave a short nod of assent and followed her down the stairs to the living room without a word.

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### Chapter 63

"Must've left at the crack of dawn," Ron mumbled, reaching for the orange juice.

"She said they wanted to leave early. Hermione hasn't seen her parents at all since summer. We just didn't get up early enough, now did we?" Harry soothed Ron. It had, after all, been Ron's idea that they try to get up early enough to see them off. The Great Hall was largely deserted for breakfast on Christmas Eve morning. Quite a change from last year and the Yule Ball that had kept nearly everyone at Hogwarts over the holidays. They sat so close to the staff table, they could overhear everything without even trying. Not that Harry particularly wanted to overhear Umbridge's sharp voice and her nosy questions. Even the staff table looked a bit lonely and deserted, with so many gone and so many still in bed this early.

Since Snape did not look to be in the mood to talk, and McGonagall and Dumbledore had already finished their breakfasts and were in the thick of a discussion over the merits of thick, woolly socks, Umbridge was left to talk to Hagrid. They were both looking surprisingly cheerful, considering their mutual dislike of one another. Or maybe, Umbridge was cross examining Hagrid, more accurately.

"Professor Delacour? Has she gone home for the holidays?"

"Aye. Gone back to France. Seein' her fam'ly," Hagrid said with booming enthusiasm. He waved to Dumbledore and McGonagall as they left the Great Hall, still chatting about whether sock toes were better reinforced.

"Professor Trelawney?" Umbridge sniffed.

"Sleepin' in, I expect. She don' eat wi' us too often, any rate. Disrup's her aura, or somethin'," Hagrid said with a grin, spearing a kipper with his fork.

"Interesting, Hogwarts having all the Triwizard Tournament champions back on campus this year," Umbridge remarked.

"It's tha', alrigh'. Certainly hasn' been dull since Viktor got on campus. Couldn' accuse us o' tha'," Hagrid replied with a twinkle in his eye. Harry nearly choked on his orange juice before stopping his laugh.

“Speaking of which, where is Krum? Gone back to Bulgaria, or wherever it was he was from, I expect?” Umbridge asked.

“Not ‘til tomorrow,” Hagrid said. “He’s got Christmas to visit ‘ome, Boxing Day he has an exhibition match.”

“Sleeping in, then?”

“Nope. Gone. I’ve got ‘is dogs for the next three days.”

“Where’s he gone to then?”

“Gone wi’ Hermione Granger,” Hagrid said calmly. Both he and Ron nearly tossed their forks over their heads in their surprise. Harry knew Hagrid was terrible at keeping secrets, but he had just handed that one over to Umbridge. What was he thinking?

“Wwwwhhhhaaaat!” Umbridge screeched. For once, Harry agreed with the sentiment. He and Ron froze, eyeing one another across the table, mouths full, mid-chew.

“Gone wi’ Hermione Granger. Left abou’ forty minutes ago. On ‘is broom,” Hagrid replied in the same, even tone. So, they had only missed seeing them off by a few minutes, then, Harry thought.

“Gone where?” Umbridge asked, her bulging eyes going even wider.

“Haven’ a clue. They were headed toward Hogsmeade. From there, the easiest way to get anywhere if you can’t Apparate is by Floo, from the Three Broomsticks,” Hagrid said, giving full attention to his plate.

“What’s Hagrid playing at? He knows as well as you and I do that they were going to see Hermione’s parents!” Ron hissed across the table under his breath. Harry put a finger to his lips, shushing Ron.

“You mean to tell me that you don’t know where they were going? You let a teacher go off with a student and didn’t ask where they were going?” Umbridge said.

“We tend to trust the teachers we hire wi’ the students roun’ here. Besides, I’m not the headmaster. I assume Viktor’s cleared wherever they’re goin’ wi’ Dumbledore. Got no reason to think he didn’t,” Hagrid said airily.

“Well, I’ll just have to go talk with Dumbledore about it!” Umbridge huffed, getting out of her chair.



“Can’t. He’s gone by now. Said somethin’ ’bout ’im and McGonagall takin’ in an opera somewhere. They jus’ lef’. Can’t rightly remember where they decided to go, neither,” Hagrid replied.

“Well, we’ll just see about this! I intend to get to the bottom of things, even if no one around here is interested in the truth!” Umbridge said, flinging her napkin down and storming off.

“Has Hagrid completely lost his mind? She already thinks Viktor and Hermione shouldn’t even be living in the same tower, and now he’s made it sound like they might have been eloping, for all he knew,” Harry whispered. Hagrid was getting up from the staff table, and heading right for them.

“Harry! Be in the common room in fifteen minutes! Ye’ll be havin’ a visitor! In the fireplace!” Hagrid said to Harry.

“Visitor?” Harry said, now completely perplexed.

“Shh! Just be there. Floo,” Hagrid said knowingly, laying a finger next to the bridge of his nose. “Couldn’ ha’ Umbridge hangin’ aroun’, watchin’ the Floo network. Had to keep ‘er busy on a trail tha’s gonna end up somewhere completely ‘armless. Wi’ any luck, keep her busy an hour.”

Ron and Harry dawdled over their toast for a few minutes, then walked as quickly as they dared up to the common room, which, like most of the castle, was completely deserted. Harry sat in one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace.

“Who you reckon it is?” Ron said.

“Who else? Sirius, I guess. Couldn’t be anyone else, could it?” Harry answered. Sure enough, a few minutes later, the head of one Sirius Black appeared among the flames.

“Harry! Happy Christmas! A day early, but happy all the same,” Sirius said.

“Sirius, look, what’s going on? I mean, Umbridge is here and Hagrid said she was watching the Floo network and...” Harry began.

“Enough of that. Don’t worry. Umbridge is on a little impromptu fact finding mission, let’s say. She left a few minutes ago for Hogsmeade. Trying to find out where one of her precious students is,” Sirius said sarcastically.

“But Viktor ...”

“...has agreed to leave a trail even she can follow but not to be too obvious about it,” Sirius said, then gave a short barking laugh.

“Beg pardon?” Harry said.

“Not that he wouldn’t have taken Hermione home using pretty much the same route anyway. The tricky bit was how to get her from the Leaky Cauldron to the Granger house. He decided to have a quick chat with Tom the innkeeper about where they were headed. Tom always asks anyway, and like Dumbledore said, if one of the patrons happens to recognize him, all the better,” Sirius beamed.

“Why would getting Hermione from the Leaky Cauldron to her parents be the tricky bit? I mean, they were just planning on taking the underground, then walking if they had to,” Harry said, scratching his head.

“Not Hermione. Umbridge. She’s sure to follow and see that the Granger house is where they actually end up. You know how suspicious she is. Lucky the Ministry knows a bit about the underground. Umbridge shouldn’t have too much trouble figuring out which station is closest to the house. She’s almost sure to ask Tom first, but if one of the barflies in there happens to tell Umbridge they’ve seen Viktor Krum today, all the better. Harry, Viktor’s kind of doing double duty. He’s making sure Hermione’s safe, and he’s getting Umbridge off Hogwarts grounds for a while. So I could talk to you, see you,” Sirius explained.

“So that’s why Hagrid acted like he didn’t know where they were going in front of her? But what if she comes back? Catches you here?” Harry asked.

“I’m sure the old bat will at least make sure Viktor and Hermione ended up with her parents. The way Dumbledore describes her, she might knock on the door and demand to know where they’re sleeping in relation to one another to see if it meets her approval. We’ve got a few more minutes at least. Even if she knew exactly where she was going, went straight there and straight back,” Sirius said, pursing his lips.

“What are you up to? Where are you?” Harry asked.

“Unfortunately, nothing much. Hiding out in this blasted house. I’m working on getting a meeting place fit for a meeting of the Order, if we should need it. Sorry I can’t tell you any more Harry, but you’ll find out soon enough. So, what’s going on with you?” Sirius said.

“Quidditch, homework, more Quidditch and homework,” Harry said with a sigh.

“No more funny dreams like last year? Nightmares?” Sirius asked,

narrowing his eyes and studying Harry.

“No. No funny dreams about Voldemort,” Harry said. It wasn’t a lie, exactly. Those dreams he had been having weren’t about Voldemort. They weren’t nightmares. They were wonderful.

“Scar still burn?” Sirius asked, concern etched onto his face.

“A lot of the time. I expect it now,” Harry replied.

“Speaking of which, Dumbledore tells me he wants you to take a new class. Occlumency,” Sirius said.

“Occlumency?”

“Sort of mental self defense. Keeps others out of your mind, Harry. Dumbledore’s concerned that soon enough Voldemort is going to figure out that the link goes both ways. He could try to use that, Harry,” Sirius warned.

“The last thing I need is another class!” Harry said bitterly.

“Unfortunately, Snape is the one who is going to teach you...” Sirius said, screwing up his face into a look of distaste.

“What! Snape?”

“I know. I wanted Dumbledore. Or even... well, but I expect he has enough on his plate as it is...got enough things of his own...back and forth... But I’ve told Snape that if I hear he’s using these lessons to give you a hard time, he’ll have to answer to me. I’m your godfather, after all.”

“But...”

“Harry, Dumbledore thinks it’s necessary. But don’t let anyone know, least of all Umbridge. Starting in the new year. Everyone will think you’re going for Remedial Potions lessons, alright?”

“What?”

“Harry,” Sirius said with a reproachful note in his voice. Ron, who had been standing near the portrait hole, ran over and shook Harry’s shoulder.

“Sounds like someone’s coming!” he hissed.

“Sorry Harry. Need to go, even if that isn’t Umbridge. Take care of yourself, Harry. Happy Christmas,” Sirius said.

“Happy Christmas, Sirius, wish we could have talked longer,” Harry said gloomily.

“Enjoy your couple of days out,” Sirius added, looking a little envious before disappearing. The portrait hole opened and in walked a mournful looking second year Gryffindor who was staying over the holiday. He had shuffled downstairs for breakfast just as Harry and Ron were leaving. Couldn’t have eaten much. He was probably very confused as to why Harry was shooting him such an awful look, but frankly, Harry didn’t care.

By lunch, an extremely irritated Umbridge was back in the Great Hall, and by dinner, she was sitting next to Dumbledore, who had also returned. Once again, Harry and Ron found they could hear every word of the conversation as long as they stayed quiet. “Dolores, if I had known it would concern you so much who accompanied Hermione Granger home to make sure she was safe, I would have sent out an announcement. Then you and Hagrid would have known where they were headed. All my fault, really. I should have made it clear to everyone on staff who might see them leaving this morning that Viktor was taking Hermione home. Viktor travels so much, I hardly see how he keeps up with his own schedule, much less how Hagrid can be expected to keep up with it,” Dumbledore said calmly.

“And why exactly did you feel it was necessary to send a student home personally accompanied by a teacher?” Umbridge huffed.

“Uncertain times Dolores. Uncertain times, as you well know. All the other students went home on the Hogwarts Express with all the professors who were traveling home as well, and they were met at the station by their parents. I wanted to afford Hermione the same protection rather than let her travel alone, so I was quite willing to let her be accompanied by a member of my staff. And I believe she and her parents invited him over, Dolores. Christmas Eve worked best for all of them, and Ted and Helen were quite gratified that Viktor was willing to accompany their daughter on the journey,” Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye and a soft smile. “In fact, I have a letter in my office where they stated such to me. I believe that young man made an extremely favorable impression on them when he visited last summer. She could have gone home for the holidays on the Hogwarts Express if her parents had wished. Instead, they gave their permission for alternative arrangements.” Harry smiled to himself, noticing that Dumbledore had not added what the rest of these arrangements entailed. He wondered if Dolores Umbridge would be having a similar meltdown tomorrow when she found out Viktor had taken Hermione, Harry and Ron to Pavlova and the Burrow. And that Boxing Day, they would be sitting in a stadium in Bulgaria watching the National Team play an exhibition match against Ireland. Bulgaria had won the home stadium advantage by winning the Internationals. Seamus Finnigan would be as green as a shamrock with envy when he found out. It

would feel a bit strange, rooting for Bulgaria this time around, but after seeing them play this summer, Harry felt sure Bulgaria would have no trouble taking on Ireland this time.

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## Chapter 64

Noisy. If he could sum up the Muggle world in a single word, it would have to be noisy. It seemed like every substitute for magic made noise. The racket in the train station had been incredible. Stadiums didn't even seem that noisy. He was used to lots of voices, crowd noise. So much of it here was artificial beeps and squeals and engines and horns and bells. Constant background noise. He stretched his arms up toward the ceiling as he lay in bed and listened to the sparse traffic on the wet and slushy street. It had let up considerably in the last few hours. At least there was no stack of papers waiting, for what seemed like weeks. No match of any kind until Boxing Day. And no having to worry about Harry getting out of bed and wandering the halls. That was McGonagall's worry tonight. He had told Dumbledore all he knew, all his suspicions, now he can do with it what he will. They were just suspicions until proven. He didn't feel quite as ill at ease here as he had thought he would. One of Durmstrang's oddities did come in rather handy. They made sure you could defend yourself with or without a wand, so it didn't feel quite so vulnerable when you knew your wand was an absolute last resort.

Paying attention in physical self defense was what had enabled him to get the jump on that seventh year that made that first year cry. He had only been in fourth year at the time, and a good foot shorter. He couldn't remember either of their names, but he could certainly remember the lesson it had taught him. That being able to defend yourself physically was just as good as being able to hex someone in most circumstances. Better really. Most wizards relied too much on their wands. Funny how stuffing one loudmouthed bully into a rubbish bin had probably garnered him more respect than all his high marks, if not quite as much respect as being good on a broom. It made him feel a little more secure about traveling so much, as well, being so many places where he wasn't supposed to make use of his wand. Still felt a little odd to think that he didn't have to worry about those restrictions anymore.

As was his habit when he went to bed, he lay there and took a sort of final mental inventory before sinking into sleep. Alarms around the house, alarms around her door, magic might be a last resort here, but no point in being stupid, no chance of being able to get away with staying in the hall for the night, so do the next best thing, nothing to do in the morning but to get up, return to Hogwarts to collect Harry and Ron, and visit at Pavlova and the Burrow, none of the vague unease he had felt about going to sleep the last few weeks, even if he was still straining a little to hear the alarms tripped here. He thought it fairly unlikely that anything would happen here. The most that might happen is Umbridge gets too

nosy and trips the alarm later tonight while trying to find out the sleeping arrangements. Probably just drove by and made sure they really did end up at the Grangers. That Ministry car following them from the train station and circling the block afterwards wasn't exactly discreet. It was killing two birds with one stone, really, this trip. Maybe his head wouldn't ache tonight from being overtired and overworked, trying to do too much, as it had sometimes over the last few weeks. His head felt strangely and pleasantly quiet for the first time in some time, he thought, twirling his finger in the chain of the locket around his neck. It was so stuffy in the room, he tossed off the sheet and blanket, let the cooler air hit his bare limbs and chest, welcomed it. Viktor then closed his eyes and slept, completely undisturbed and relaxed, none of his dreams set on that foggy path in the Forbidden Forest, no unidentified screeching and no pain to wake him.

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## Chapter 65

"Ready to go back?" Viktor asked Hermione, standing in the train station.

"Yes and no. I wish the visit could have been longer, but at the same time, Hogwarts feels like home. And I can't wait to see Nikolas and Anya and the lot of the Weasleys and it's been a while since I've seen you play any Quidditch. You haven't seen the Weasleys since your birthday," she replied quietly, smiling.

"Sleep well?" he asked, pushing her hair back from her shoulder, where it was caught in the collar of her coat.

"Actually, now you mention it, I did. One of the best nights of sleep I've had in a while. You?"

"Me too. I am glad we could take a break. I needed it. A whole week without a paper to grade and without having to write anything myself is getting to be a rare thing," he said with a subtle smile.

She swallowed and asked the question that she had been wanting to ask for the last week. "Viktor? Why didn't you say something about how Bulgarians don't usually get birthday presents?"

"We get presents. Small ones, usually. We just do not make a big fuss over birthdays. In fact, you usually get a little something for other people on your birthday," he allowed. "Chocolates or some such. I usually send my mother roses, since she loves them so much. And if I told you that, it might have deprived me of the enjoyment of getting you something for your birthday. Besides, where did you find out about that, anyway?"

“Read it. Made sense when I realized you didn’t seem used to having a fuss made over your birthday. I figured it was where you were never home for it,” she said.

“A book. I might haff known. We do a lot of things that everyone else seems to think is backward,” Viktor laughed a little under his breath.

“Like what?” Hermione asked.

“You weren’t in Sofia enough to notice the head nodding and shaking?” Viktor asked, smiling.

“What about it?” she prompted.

“Usually Bulgarians do this when they mean ‘yes’,” Viktor said, shaking his head slowly from side to side, “And they do this when they mean ‘no’,” he added, nodding his head up and down.

“Now you’re pulling my leg! Seriously?” Hermione asked, open mouthed.

“Seriously. You do not know how many misunderstandings I had at school and when we traveled before someone else on the team let me know that most everywhere else, people do the opposite. Took me even longer to get used to nodding my head when I meant ‘yes’ and shaking it when I meant ‘no’,” he said.

“Anya and Nikolas knew what it meant when we nodded,” she challenged.

“Because I told them that if you shake your head, take it to mean the opposite. Now, I am in such a habit of it, I tend to confuse Bulgarians. And my mother sees some tourists in the museum, remember. A lot of confused tourists end up lost in Sofia because of that. A lot of missed trains when they ask ‘Is that the train to the border?’ and the Bulgarian just does this,” he said, shaking his head back and forth, “instead of answering ‘da’. It is really fun watching them come through customs. Speaking of missed trains, is that one ours?” he asked, pointing to the open doors.

“Oh! So it is! Come on, ready?” Hermione said, grabbing his hand. He shook his head slowly back and forth, with a sly smile. “Great, now I’ll never know what you mean by that. Are you ready or not?” she laughed.

“Da, Sokrovishte, da,” he replied with a laugh, and they slipped through the crowd and onto the train, heading back to the station near the Leaky Cauldron and the entrance to Diagon Alley.

“Did that lady track you down? Must have been urgent to come looking

for you on Christmas Eve,” Tom called as they walked in the front door.

“Thanks for passing along where we were headed,” Viktor said, nodding, and kept moving. After they had stepped back into Diagon Alley, he leaned over and whispered, “So maybe Harry got his Christmas present a day early after all,” in Hermione’s ear, and she nodded.

“Did you see her after that? Or was it just the few circles around the block?” Hermione whispered back.

“Just a few circles in that Ministry car. They might haff only gotten a few minutes, but at least that is something. Just wishing one another a Happy Christmas would be better than nothing, would it not?” he said, pausing to hand her their cloaks out of the pack.

“I suppose so,” she replied, fastening her cloak around her shoulders once more before they continued walking down Diagon Alley. “Funny trying to be unobtrusive on the one hand and trying to leave a trail a mile wide on the other,” Hermione mused.

“Comes in handy, being known in here, but not out there, sometimes,” Viktor replied, fastening his own cloak as they walked.

“Why Floo from Hogsmeade, and not Hogwarts? Other than to lead Umbridge on a longer wild goose chase?” Hermione asked.

“Floo from Hogwarts, and Umbridge is more likely to figure Dumbledore sanctioned the trip. Maybe she does not even come after us to see where we went. Looks more suspicious if we left on a broom. And she figures out where we went quicker. She is watching the network, you know. Maybe an unnecessary step, but there you are. The Hogwarts fireplaces are rarely used for travel. Occasional calls do not draw too much attention, they usually go to teacher quarters or the headmaster’s office. Anyone traveling to or from Hogwarts by Floo is going to draw a lot of attention from the Ministry, even in the best of times. It is difficult to get into Hogwarts for safety reasons. The fireplace in the common room has to be added to the network each time even a call comes through it. No one wants students to be able to pop in and out, or for anyone to come popping into the common room fireplaces on a whim. The attached fireplaces in offices and quarters just about give the Ministry a heart attack as it is. They would prefer it if the only mode of communication were owls. And frankly, I would not be surprised if she is watching that, as well. Good thing Arthur Weasley has a friend who can temporarily add a fireplace to the network, as a favor,” Viktor answered.

“Still writing to Elena and Alexei?” Hermione asked.



“Certainly. Putting the sensitive bits on the back and wiping them ‘clean’ with this handy charm we talked about before I left. Like to see Umbridge figure that one out, since what you need to make it reappear is in Russian. They graduated with flying colors, even Alexei, so I am sure somewhere, there are a few headmasters spinning in their graves. Alexei decided to take the post with the Ministry, and Elena wants to train as an apothecary. No caterpillars in most medicines, thank goodness. I give them a year before they either kill one another or get married, or maybe both. Alexei’s father is not hearing much. It is awfully quiet. Just rumors, mostly. They might make it to the match. Maybe we will get to see them. Could be a while before we do again,” he said in a low voice.

“You miss them, don’t you?” Hermione said, looking up at him.

“Every bit as much as I missed you, “ he replied, then he opened the door to the shop and followed her in.

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## Chapter 66

“Christmas, Harry, another year, another jumper. What color did Mum stick you with this year?” Ron asked, grinning.

“Brown. And Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia are up to their usual standards. They sent me a cheese grater,” Harry laughed. Hermione had provided them both with talking homework planners.

“Maybe Viktor got off lucky, not getting anything from Hermione,” Ron muttered. Just then, the portrait hole swung open and Hermione walked in.

“Oh, so I see you two can get up early for Christmas presents, but not to say goodbye to me, huh? Get into your clothes, Viktor and I are going to grab a change of clothes, then we go. Pancakes are supposed to be waiting for us. Portkeying,” she called over her shoulder, walking up the stairs to the girls dorm.

“We missed you by ten minutes!” Ron yelled after her. “Ten measly minutes! And it was my idea to try to see you off in the first place! Doesn’t that count for something?” He and Harry then walked up the stairs to their dorm and changed out of their pyjamas and dressing gowns.

“You didn’t even tell us you were trying to get Umbridge off campus, either,” Harry said accusingly when she came back downstairs to join them again after an extra few minutes to unpack and repack.

“Didn’t really know myself until yesterday,” Hermione said indignantly. “When Viktor pointed out the Ministry car outside the station. No way they could have seen us if we had called my parents and gotten into the car. We had to walk and darned near freeze to death to make sure we got them to my house.

Didn't want Umbridge to go off saying she couldn't find us and calling out half the Ministry to my house to talk to my parents, only to find out they came and drove us from the station to the house. Or worse, Umbridge just making up the story that we hadn't gone to my parents. And she would have, too. Clever, really, killing two birds with one stone like that. Did you get to talk to Snuffles long?" Hermione added.

"Not long. That droopy second year that's staying came in too soon," Harry said bitterly.

"Well, at least it wasn't all for nothing," Hermione said gathering up her pack. "Led old Nosy on a merry chase, anyway." They all gathered their things and stepped through the portrait hole. Viktor was already standing in the hallway, with his equipment bag this time.

"So, we can portkey from Dumbledore's office, no need to go to Hogsmeade. Might not want to spread it around that you can portkey off the grounds from there," Viktor said quietly.

"But you can portkey off the grounds, anyway" Harry insisted. "I did it. Last year."

"Honestly Harry! The restriction was lifted for the tournament final. Normally, portkeys won't work at Hogwarts. Except in the headmaster's office?" she asked, puzzled, looking up at Viktor.

"They leave that bit out of the book. Cannot go putting everything in there. Some students actually read the thing. Portkeys are harder to trace than travel by Floo. Besides, I need to talk to him anyway, before I go," Viktor replied, shouldering his equipment bag.

Giving the password, "cockroach cluster", they headed up to Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore was seated at his desk, fingers tented, as though he were expecting them.

"I take it from what Tom said that Umbridge did not get too frustrated yesterday?" Viktor said with a soft smile as he slid into one of the chairs.

"Not too frustrated. Nicely done. Too bad that won't work a second time. I might like a vacation from her later. Are you still willing to do what you agreed to earlier? If necessary?" Dumbledore asked with raised brows, studying Viktor over his glasses.

"Certainly. I just do not think the first alternative is going to work. No offense meant. He can try it if he wants. If I remembered it, I suppose it would, but then there would be no reason to try it in the first place. I do not think it will

work since I might as well not have been there. We have already established he cannot do it without me letting him even on things I definitely remember. Made him twice as fond of me as he already was, finding out I could block him," Viktor said in an offhand way.

"I can't imagine why you would say that," Dumbledore said with a suppressed laugh. "He admits you do a fantastic job covering for him."

"To you, maybe, but not in front of me. I think it has more to do with the company I kept. And keep. But we can worry about that later. Now," Viktor said, pulling a small tin cup out of his pocket, "I need to get to us all to Bulgaria, so with your permission?" Dumbledore nodded. "*Portus*" Viktor said, waving his wand over the cup, which glowed bluish for a moment, then returned to its usual tin color. "Wish Umbridge a Happy Christmas from the four of us," Viktor laughed.

"And a Happy Christmas from me to you four. And to Nikolas and Anya. And Molly and Arthur," Dumbledore said with a smile.

"Okay, come on," Viktor said, beckoning Ron, Harry, and Hermione over. Soon they had jerked to a stop on the rise overlooking Pavlova.

"What was all that about?" Harry asked, "back in Dumbledore's office?"

"Long story short, Snape wants full permission to go shuffling through my head to see if he can figure out who or what I heard in the maze. Snape tried it once before just to see if he could get in, and I kept him from doing it. Ever hear of Occlumency? It was a regular class at Durmstrang. Keeps people from shuffling through your head unless you want them to. Dumbledore is worried that it might be someone still at Hogwarts that was in on it. Only problem is, if it does not work..." Viktor trailed off.

"If it doesn't work, what?" Ron said.

"The alternative... is not... as easy. Get inside. Cold out here," Viktor said shortly, holding the front door of the inn. Harry noticed Hermione giving Viktor a very curious look, and Viktor's expression quickly changed into the inscrutable brick wall that Harry had not seen for some time, but neither one of them said anything. Anya and Nikolas were waiting in front of the fireplace for them, and indeed, there were pancakes waiting for them on the table. Anya embraced each one of them warmly in turn, and discreetly made over Hermione's ring.

Over breakfast and after, they all talked, a flurry of Russian, Bulgarian and English flying across the table in all directions. The mood was lighter and more raucous than any Harry remembered from the visit in the summer, but it was a pleasant racket and they all enjoyed it a great deal.

“Did the two of you open your presents this morning?” Hermione asked brightly during a lull in the conversation.

“Errr, yeah. Thanks Hermione,” Ron said without too much enthusiasm.

“If you write your assignments in there, you’re sure not to get behind,” she added.

“Right. Well. Get anything exciting for Christmas, Viktor?” Harry asked, loudly, trying to change the subject.

“Oh, this is it, I am afraid. We are not terribly exciting at Christmas. Could not afford to be most years. It was either a trip or exchange presents, not both. Used to manage the trip to St. Petersburg most years, but not enough time this year. So all I asked for was pancakes and mutton stew, and that they go to St. Petersburg without me next week if I got them the tickets. I haff not had a real stew for ages,” Viktor said with a short laugh.

“Why don’t you ask the house elves in the kitchen? They take requests,” Ron said.

“First of all, I am sure they haff better things to do than to make me happy, and second, I would probably end up with a kettle big enough to swim in, knowing them. A cup of tea or something like that is one thing, but stew is not exactly easy to make in small batches suitable for one or two. Besides, it is not quite the same thing as haffing your mother make it,” Viktor said softly, swinging a long leg up and draping it haphazardly over the arm of the chair. “I can wait a few months for my mother’s stew and a real Bulgarian winter, thanks,” he added, slouching comfortably across the chair, nearly sideways.

Anya reached out from the neighboring chair and tapped his knee and spoke in rapid Bulgarian, pointing at Harry, Ron and Hermione, then turned and spoke to Nikolas “She wants to know if any of you want coffee. She forgot to offer it at breakfast. Would I be too far off if I figure the answer is no from you two? I will warn you. It is really strong,” Viktor added, inclining his head toward Harry and Ron. When they murmured their refusals, he looked at Hermione. To Harry’s surprise, she nodded her head. “With or without the cream?” he asked, slipping his leg off the arm of the chair and standing.

“With, thanks. I could have gotten it. You were already comfortable,” Hermione replied.

“And haff my mother skin me alive in front of all of you for daring to let a guest go get their own coffee? I think not!” Viktor said with mock seriousness, following Anya off into the kitchen.

“Since when do you drink coffee?” Ron asked Hermione, his mouth hanging open.

“Since I tried it a few months ago. Viktor drinks it every once in a while. It is really, really strong, though, the way they drink it here,” she replied. “Keep you awake for a week if you drink it too close to bedtime.”

“Watch it, it is hot,” Viktor said, handing Hermione one of the mugs in his hands after returning from the kitchen. A little unnecessary, Harry thought, since big billows of steam were rolling out of it. Anya followed with her own mug and one for Nikolas. A few more hours of conversation in front of the fireplace, then lunch, with the promised stew filled up the rest of the visit to Pavlova.

“I hate this. It feels like we’re just eating and running,” Hermione said anxiously as they stood near the door, waiting to leave.

“We are, Hermione,” Ron replied.

“Ron, honestly! I like visiting Nikolas and Anya. Funny, I understood about ten words they used all day, and yet I enjoy talking to them more than I do a lot of people. Still, it’ll be nice to go to the Burrow,” Hermione mused.

“Could be the translator,” Ron muttered under his breath while Harry stifled a laugh.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“Waiting on the translator,” Ron said innocently, pointing across the room where Viktor was bidding his parents goodbye. “You like visiting the Burrow too, though, right?”

“Of course I do. I wish we could have gotten more time both places,” Hermione said indignantly, crossing her arms. Viktor and Anya exchanged a final kiss on the cheek and the group trooped outside.

“Not sure I’d let Mum kiss me goodbye in front of everyone,” Ron said. “Or kiss her goodbye. I mean, you have to have some pride.”

“Az ne sym kato vas,” Viktor said.

“Huh?” Ron replied.

“I’m not like you,” Viktor said, laughing. “I hate to tell you, but your mother does whatever she wants, even if you outweigh her several stone and stand more than a foot taller and think you are your own person. And you let her, if you

know what is good for you. Mama might look like a sweet little thing, but she can boss Papa around, and he does not take to bossing. Besides, since when is your Mama liking you well enough to kiss you goodbye something to be ashamed of?"

"Mrs. Weasley isn't much of a kisser. More of a vicious hugger," Harry said, snickering.

"Oh yes, squeezes ickle Ronniekins to pieces before he gets on the train," Hermione interjected, laughing as well.

"Oh, a patented Elena Keznova python death squeeze, I see," Viktor added.

"Oh shut up," Ron muttered, turning bright red.

"Come on, man, have some pride when your mother hugs you in public!" Viktor said loudly, while Hermione and Harry fell about laughing. They finally regained control of themselves long enough to gather around the portkey and head for the Burrow.

"The Burrow ought to be bursting at the seams," Hermione said as they approached the back door, and sure enough, the racket of several Weasleys could be heard in the kitchen. Crowded around the kitchen table were Mr. Weasley, Ginny, Fred, George, Bill, Charlie, and Percy, and Mrs. Weasley immediately pounced on Ron and hugged him so vigorously that his hair was standing on end when she released him.

"Ron! And Happy Christmas Harry! And Hermione!" Mrs. Weasley squealed as she hugged each one of them around the neck in turn. Harry readjusted his glasses, which Mrs. Weasley had knocked askew. "Thank you for seeing them home, come on in dear, get warmed up," she told Viktor, clapping a hand on his arm and steering him further in. Hermione laughed to herself when she thought, I bet the only reason she didn't hug Viktor is because she would need a stepstool to manage it.

Harry could hardly keep a straight face when Viktor leaned over and murmured, "Check your pride at the door, man," between he and Ron and Ron flushed even redder than he had been when Mrs. Weasley squeezed him.

Percy had been working when Viktor had last been to the house, and he made such a fawning nuisance of himself upon being introduced that Harry was embarrassed for him. "Of course, you'll remember me from last year, the work I did with the Triwizard Tournament," Percy finished up pompously.

"Of course," Viktor replied, bemused expression on his face.

“Never mind Percy the Ponce, the really important question is how easy is it for you to get tickets?” Fred piped up.

“Fred! What an incredibly disgraceful thing to ask a guest! And...” Percy began, but Viktor interrupted.

“No, actually, he has a point. See, I haff this big box for tomorrow that I will not haff half full if I do not recruit a few more people. Say, maybe eight or so more than I am currently taking. Potenko will probably be there, he was still coming last I heard, but Elena and Alexei might not make it, and it is just an exhibition match but still, it is a World Cup rematch so tickets are kind of hard to come by,” Viktor said, soft smile creeping across his face.

“Sold! We can go, can’t we Dad?” George pleaded.

“Well...” Mr Weasley began.

“Oh come on! Ron already gets to go!” Fred added.

“I suppose we could go and root for Bulgaria, it would only be right...” Mr. Weasley said carefully, though Harry could see he was just as eager to go as the twins were.

“Root for whomever you want. Wear green, for all I care, just do not let Volkov and Vulchanov catch you in it near the equipment racks,” Viktor said with a smile, and the twins laughed.

“How gauche... Fred, George, don’t get any ideas that you’re going to go wearing shamrocks head to toe after accepting an invitation from...” Percy began in a self-righteous tone, but again, Viktor interrupted.

“Root however you like, I am still going to run Aidan Lynch headfirst into something. Did not stop me the first time. And I warn you, the rest of the team is much improved. I did not see Ireland in the finals this summer,” Viktor said lightly.

“Bet you can’t get Lynch to fall for it again,” Fred said eagerly.

“Fred Weasley! Don’t you dare gamble for money in front of me!” Mrs. Weasley warned.

“If I cannot, tickets to the match of your choice, even if I haff to go stand in line and buy them myself. Whoever you want to see. If Lynch hits anything other than his broom or the snitch during the match because I feint you two owe me a favor. And I promise it will be reasonable. I will run it by you first, and you

can refuse if you like. Nothing embarrassing or horrible. I think I might like haffing you in my debt, though,” Viktor reasoned.

George nodded, rubbing his chin. “Sounds fair enough. Even if we lose though...”

“I’ll still see what I can do for tickets. Just warn me ahead of time, what match you want to go to. Enough other players owe me ticket favors I can probably get you in anywhere, anytime. Assuming your parents approve,” Viktor replied, raising an eyebrow.

“Much as I would like to keep all of you close, could you all please go out into the living room so I’ll have room to finish Christmas dinner? And no more wagers,” Mrs. Weasley pleaded, shooing them off. They all resettled there, on the furniture and on the floor, seemingly taking up all the available space. Viktor, Charlie and Bill seemed to have taken a great liking to one another and talked in a huddle of chairs in the corner, and Hermione went off with Ginny to her room. Harry remembered that Charlie was once quite the Quidditch player at Hogwarts, so it was little wonder that soon enough the conversation in the corner turned to the sport.

By nightfall, Harry was stuffed, he felt as though he had eaten more good food than he could possibly hold, and Mrs. Weasley would not accept no for an answer when she asked Charlie, Bill and Viktor to stay overnight. Viktor opted for the cot in the room with Bill and Charlie in their old room, rather than the guest bed in Percy’s new private room and office, and Harry could hardly blame him.

“Didn’t want to put him out when he might want to work, oh, that was a classic,” Charlie laughed as he tugged the blankets down on his bed. “You are a terrible liar.”

“Unoriginal, but what else could I say? I admit it was Ron’s idea,” Viktor said with a smile.

“Could have volunteered for the couch, but that would have looked even more suspicious,” Bill interjected. “Perce can be a bit much sometimes. I think even Mum knows that,” Bill said, waving a hand dismissively.

“Are you sure you don’t want a blanket. Loads in that cupboard over there,” Charlie said, pointing.

“No thank you,” Viktor replied.

“Blimey, you are part polar bear, then. We thought Ron was exaggerating,” Bill said.



“Used to cold worse than this, Britain is practically tropical by comparison,” Viktor said, shrugging, settling into the cot.

“Still, mate, just shorts?” Bill exclaimed, giving an exaggerated shiver.

Soon after drifting off to sleep, he began to dream. Vague images of robed figures, wearing masks, a figure standing in the midst of them. “Excellent, soon, we will have plenty of company,” came the high, cold voice from the center. “Thank you for the report, Bellatrix,” it added. Then he woke to the splitting pain in his forehead. It felt as though an axe were buried in it, hot and searing, blinding for a moment, then it faded so promptly, he convinced himself he had imagined it, dreamed it as well. Viktor rubbed a hand tentatively over his forehead in the dark, no noise in the room but what seemed to be Bill’s even breathing and Charlie’s soft snoring. Next door, Harry and Ron were both doing the same, their backs to one another as they lay in bed, each not wanting to wake the other for a silly nightmare. In Ginny’s room, Hermione let out her breath and lay back down, putting her hand to her forehead once more before rolling over and trying to get back to sleep.

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## Chapter 67

The day of the match dawned cold and crisp, but sunny. It was pleasant enough in the midday sun in the box. Much to Percy’s relief, Fred and George had refrained from decking out in shamrocks and green head to toe. Of course, their affection for Viktor had only won out by a bare inch over the temptation to assault Percy’s sense of decency. Harry thought Mrs. Weasley’s threatening might have been a deciding factor as well. All the Weasley family, even Mrs. Weasley was perched in the box with them this time. Viktor spent several minutes secluded in the corner with the current headmaster of Durmstrang, their deep low voices nothing but an indistinguishable murmur from where Harry was sitting. Curiously, Viktor had come to the stadium already wearing his uniform and equipment, and he hadn’t even been to the locker room, instead heading for the box and Potenko as soon as they had arrived, more than an hour before the match was scheduled to begin. He wondered what they could be talking about, both looking so serious. After a bit, he suspected it was all in Russian in any case.

“Harry! Hermione! Ron!” called a clear female voice with a Bulgarian accent. The three of them turned to see Elena and Alexei standing beside their row of chairs, waving. “Where is... never mind...” Elena added, beaming, heading for the corner that Potenko had just come from, practically hurling herself around Viktor’s neck.

“Oh...oh, I think you can let go. While my neck is still on,” Viktor said

laughing, prying her arms off. "If I had known getting away from you would make me like you so much, I would haff gone away a long time ago! You know, I haff not been nagged nearly as much the last few months."

"I need to nag Hermione to nag you then! Goot to see you," she said, stepping back from him. "You do not know how goot it is to see you," Elena repeated in a low voice.

"I haff an idea. I missed you two something awful. What on earth did you threaten him with to make him pass so easily? Still tolerating this menace?" Viktor said, pointing to Alexei, before they embraced and pounded one another on the back.

"Viktor! I need to talk to you..." Alexei began, steering him further back into the corner, where their voices dropped into droning noise, and Harry could hear no more of the conversation, no matter how much he strained. Elena and Alexei did not return to their seats until Viktor accompanied them back and gave Hermione's hand a squeeze. Before leaving, he turned to Fred and George.

"Still willing to bet Lynch cannot be fooled?" Viktor asked lightly, tossing his scarlet cloak back off his shoulder.

"Sure, why not? Can't see how we can lose. He can't be that thick, can he?" George said, grinning.

"He might not be, but I bet I can still do it, regardless of how bullheaded he might be. Someone gave me an idea about what might work as well as ploughing Lynch," Viktor said with a subtle smile, then left to warm up.

"Seriously, Lynch can't be that thick, can he? I mean, hitting the ground twice in the Cup was bad enough," Ron echoed.

"Lots of things he could run into besides the ground, anyway," Hermione replied mysteriously, and no matter how much Ron and Harry prodded or pleaded, she would not elaborate.

"I do not know vwhether to compliment you on taking such goot care of him or ask if he is taking goot care of you so I can give him the business if he is not," Elena said to Hermione, laying a slender white hand on her forearm. "That vicked boy is up to no goot, I tell you. I almost feel sorry for Lynch."

"No need for a lecture. What makes you say he's up to something?" Hermione replied.

"Because that was the exact same vicked grin he used to get vhen he and Alexei vere planning on doing something they had no business doing. Like going

swimming at midnight in dead of winter. Professors ought to have been able to catch them before they ever snuck out every time. If Viktor was not glaring a hole through walls, they were up to no good. No good trying to go by Alexei, he always look like he is up to something. Because he always was," Elena explained, turning to the other side and giving Alexei's hand a squeeze.

"You act as though we were always up to no good," Alexei said defensively.

"Often enough for my taste. Is it a wonder you two did not get expelled or kill yourselves anyway," she chided gently.

"Now, Viktor pretty much behaved himself. I was the vicked one. He kept my neck off the chopping block more times than I talked him into nonsense. Although, the midnight swimming was almost always his idea. And he did have that look, did he not? Now I feel sorry for Lynch," Alexei said.

"I was just telling Viktor that Poppet wrote us earlier today. She apparently ploughed Konrad but good in the first match between them. Her letter probably has not gotten to Viktor yet. Pushkin I think is seeing the error of his ways in not listening to Viktor right away about letting her try out," Elena said with a grin.

Soon, the announcer had introduced the teams, and the players took to the pitch. The lineups were identical to the World Cup game, and Connolly, Ryan, Troy, Mullet, Moran, Quigley and Lynch were on the field for Ireland. While Troy, Mullet and Moran were still the seamless team they had been at the Cup final, the Bulgarian chasers were matching them this time play for play. Soon the score was tied at ninety points each, and though Viktor had fainted a couple of times early on, Lynch always held back far behind, reluctant to be ploughed again, and the crowd, including some wearing green, jeered him mercilessly when he was at his most hesitant. If he had seen the snitch, Viktor could have easily beaten Lynch to it, the way he was holding off. Watching through his omnioculars, Harry caught the sharp jerk of the chin that passed between Viktor and Ivanova as Viktor and Lynch hovered near the Bulgarian goal beside the mass of chasers and beaters. Then Levski had the Quaffle and began streaking toward the other end, all the chasers and beaters in hot pursuit.

When Ivanova had passed midfield, Viktor suddenly flattened against his broom and rocketed off in her wake, soon reaching top speed, closing the distance between them rapidly. Lynch started and headed off after Viktor, convinced he must be going after the snitch, rather than toward a meeting with the pitch. With the jump she had on the two seekers, Ivanova had already reached the other end of the field, and she hovered below the mass of players in front of the goal, cloak billowing behind in the wind, turned side on to Viktor and the approaching Lynch.

"He's going to hit her..." Ron began.

“No, he’s going to win his bet...bullfighting...” Harry interrupted, suddenly understanding what Viktor was doing. At the last moment, Ivanova flew off at full steam, her cloak still smacking Viktor in the face as they passed, then Viktor spiraled off to his left, passing so close to the goal post that his own cloak was whipped back by the pole. Harry could have sworn that his sleeve grazed it. Lynch was unable to change direction quickly enough by the time he realized he was headed for the post, and it clipped him full in the shoulder and leg, knocking him off his broom like the loser in a jousting tournament. Medi wizards rushed the field and began plying Lynch with cups of potions, during which time Viktor circled the field and looked for the snitch undisturbed. Lynch had barely gotten his wobble straightened out after remounting his broom when Viktor caught the snitch at midfield, giving Bulgaria a 160 point advantage.

“Aw nuts,” Fred muttered.

“I think we owe Viktor a favor,” George said.  
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Chapter 68

“So where’s Viktor this fine morning?” Ron teased, looking around the Great Hall.

“Partial staff meeting. Umbridge has called one. He looked about as thrilled as if he were attending an execution,” Hermione said, reaching for a slice of toast. “I gather that evaluations are back. Fleur, McGonagall, Hagrid and Viktor. What a way to start a new year. Two weeks in,” Hermione sighed.

Inside the staff room, Dolores Umbridge paced the room in front of the rest. “Hem, hem. The Ministry agrees with me that there need to be some changes around here. For a start, Headmaster Dumbledore is on probation,” Umbridge said smugly.

“Probation! And what exactly would prompt that?” McGonagall said sternly.

“Primarily, the performances of some of the people in this room and his actions regarding the classes they teach,” Umbridge replied, pausing and rocking back on her heels.

“Explain please,” McGonagall said, arching a thin brow.

“For a start, while you are a fine teacher, Professor McGonagall, you seem to have a problem with authority, as you showed when I sat in on your class. Authority other than Dumbledore’s, that is,” Umbridge said, lifting her chin.

“If your evaluations were anything beside a crup and hippogriff show, perhaps I could take them seriously,” McGonagall replied, pressing her lips together tightly.

“I rest my case. Nevertheless, you are a more than competent teacher, and I am willing to let your insubordination pass. Defense Against the Dark Arts has been a disgrace in years past. Incompetent teacher after incompetent teacher, one a dangerous werewolf, one an insane imposter. Teaching the students the Unforgivable curses, putting the Imperius on them in class, teaching them material that is far above their level... Remus Lupin might have thought that precocious. The Ministry finds it dangerous. Luckily, Professor Delacour agrees with me and has adjusted her class accordingly,” Umbridge said with a horrible smile.

“*Oui*,” Fleur interjected.

“I see,” McGonagall replied coldly.

“As to his actions regarding Mr. Krum, I hardly know where to begin. Hiring another teacher who has failed to graduate,” Umbridge said, giving a pointed look at Hagrid before continuing, “It is most unusual, even with a substitute. And letting him live in such close proximity to a student he is seeing, letting him accompany her home, I’m surprised her parents aren’t after the headmaster’s head on a pike,” Umbridge added, crossing her stubby arms.

“We can hardly advise the students on what company they choose to keep off of school grounds!” McGonagall said indignantly. “That is a job for their parents!”

“They did not seem to have a problem with it. Or her visiting my home. Twice. They seem to trust both of us. In fact, the only people who seem to be concerned are people from the Ministry. Who do not know either of us very well. Unless I missed the issue of the Daily Prophet that announced otherwise, I thought her parents would still be primarily responsible for raising her, just like mine were for me, not the Ministry. And Dumbledore seems to think my behavior is honorable enough. I take it you do not agree?” Viktor said in a low tone, crossing his arms across his chest and glowering at her.

“Let’s just say that I question Dumbledore’s judgment,” Umbridge said, tenting her fingers together.

“I suppose you question the judgment of the Grangers too? Dumbledore has the best judgment of anyone I have ever met. I can think of a few more people who need their judgment questioned,” Viktor said simply.

“You say that even after last year?” Umbridge said, surprised.

“Especially after last year. He was the only one with enough courage to call a spade a spade. Still is,” Viktor said in a reproving voice, raising both brows significantly.

“You say zat even after he hired Crouch masquerading as Moody? Let four wizards into ze *Triwizard* Tournament? ‘E could ‘ave gotten us all killed! Mon Dieu! And zese ridiculous stories about the death of Diggory. All to protect ‘is pet,” Fleur said in an exasperated tone.

“Some of the students have trouble understanding you when you teach,” Umbridge insisted.

“Let me guess. A couple of Slytherins named Crabbe and Goyle? They haff trouble understanding English period. Grunts and stick figures are more their speed,” Viktor retorted.

“Let’s be honest. Your English is not perfect...” Umbridge began.

“Neither is yours I bet. And I do not hear you complaining about Miss Delacour’s accent,” Viktor muttered.

“You can ‘ardly compare my Eenglish to yours,” Fleur said haughtily, tossing her hair.

“Oh, really? And why iz ze fact zat you talk like zis any different zan my ackzent? Or do zey not need to underztand because zey just read ze book?” Viktor mocked, his brows drawing together.

“Well, you can ‘ardly compare the music of the French language to zat...zat guttural Bulgarian!” Fleur sniffed.

“As a part-veela, you must be Bulgarian somewhere in that family tree of yours, sister,” Viktor said through gritted teeth.

“French for generations. I cannot believe zat you would be loyal to an old fool who goes around spreading fairy tales. You are blinded by that girl and ‘er friendship with Potter,” Fleur said airily.

“Quite a change from your tune about ‘Arry at the end of last year!” Viktor shot back.

“I ‘ad several months to come to my senses. And ze Ministry does not believe your precious ‘Arry Potter! Nothing ‘as ‘appened, and Dumbledore still insists You-Know-‘oo is back! Where is ze evidence? All you ‘ave to go on is words. Ze word of a dotty old man and ‘is pet pupil, ‘oo probably did break ze

rules to get into ze Tournament! And Dumbledore let 'im! You are twice the fool 'e is if you believe it... this... this nonsense!" Fleur said loudly.

"Well, you can kiss my guttural Bulgarian..."

"...As an individual, Professor Delacour," McGonagall interrupted hastily, "you are certainly entitled to your opinion. But I will remind you that you owe a certain amount of loyalty to Professor Dumbledore while he remains headmaster. And I will thank you to watch your language, Mr. Krum," she added with a subtle twitch at the corners of her mouth.

"And speaking of incomprehensible teaching, Hagrid has neither graduated nor taken much caution when teaching his students. Half the students in his observed class had trouble understanding him. He has brought dangerous animals into his lectures, there has been at least one injury to a student in the past, and I am investigating rumors as to, well... the dangerous nature of his parentage," Umbridge finished triumphantly.

Hagrid opened his mouth to defend himself, but McGonagall cut in instead. "Hagrid has done nothing wrong, and you could no more call him a danger than a flobberworm nest. And no one is more knowledgeable about magical creatures. Professor Dumbledore would trust him with his life, as would nearly any of us here at Hogwarts. Some of us already have. Many of the longtime residents could tell you several stories, and some of the recent arrivals could add one or two. Anyone who wouldn't just doesn't really know him," McGonagall announced. Hagrid drew himself up proudly at that remark.

"Nonetheless, he is on probation too. Mr. Krum has a week to complete the requirements for his graduation, else he will be placed on probation as well. If three people from Hogwarts go on probation, Dumbledore will be removed as headmaster. I remind you that Dumbledore himself is on probation as well. The Ministry agrees," Umbridge pronounced, then swept out of the room, Fleur close behind with her nose in the air, slamming the door.

"A week. Can we even get the examiners here in a week?" Viktor asked faintly.

"We'll get the examiners here if I have to go drag them here by the collars! Can you do it in a week?" McGonagall asked in return.

"The practical exam is not a problem. The paper... if I do not travel or fill in and do not sleep much... maybe. The written exam, also not a problem. It is the thesis they added on because I am not actually taking the class here...I was expecting more time..." Viktor trailed off.

McGonagall's nostrils flared. "Well see that you get it done! Live in the

library if you have to! And Viktor...”

“Yes?”

“For heaven sake, do not nearly make me laugh in front of Dolores again. She hates us all enough as it is.”

“Sorry. I lost my head,” Viktor said with a sheepish grin.

“Besides, it’s not the French farce you should be cursing at. It’s Dolores we should be inviting to kiss a certain part of our anatomy.”

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## Chapter 69

“A...week? But that’s... that’s nearly impossible!” Hermione exclaimed.

“I think that was the idea! So forgive me if I do not stop writing while you are here,” Viktor said, his dark head still bent over the parchment on the desk and the quill moving steadily along.

“I should go, you need the time to write...” Hermione began, putting her hands on the arms of the chair.

“No, for goodness sake, stick around and talk to me. Or I will be climbing the walls later. Stayed up late last night. Got up in the middle of the night to write on it. Could not sleep anyway for worrying about it. I haff been in here all afternoon and most of the morning writing on this thing. That is why I was not down for lunch. Went and got a sandwich from the kitchen, which was more trouble than it was worth, because I had to spend ten more minutes refusing other things to go with it. And Dobby would hardly let me go when he found out I knew Harry,” Viktor said, blowing a strand of hair out of his eyes.

“I take it the staff meeting was as much fun as you expected, then?” Hermione asked, leaning back in her armchair once more.

“More. Dumbledore’s on probation. We pretty well expected it, but still... Hagrid too. Me, three, if I cannot convince the examiners less than a week from now that I deserve to graduate and hand in a finished thesis that actually makes sense and meets the guidelines I agreed to. She even threatened McGonagall with probation for smarting off to her when she observed her class. Umbridge and Fleur were their usual charming selves,” Viktor said bitterly.

“What’s got you so peeved at Fleur? Besides the fact that she’s wrecking our O.W.L. year?” Hermione said, cocking her head.

“She is toeing the Ministry line. All the way. Agrees with Umbridge on



everything. Suddenly believes Harry is a crackpot and Dumbledore is mad at best, dangerously incompetent at worst. But you read the Prophet. Maybe it is a good thing Harry does not," Viktor replied with a sigh.

"They still won't bend? Maybe if we talked to someone other than Dolores Umbridge?"

"No. We say black, they say white. And if anyone starts listening, they start reeling out the... the...what was the word?" Viktor paused and raised his eyes off the parchment.

"Propaganda?"

"Propaganda."

"Surely we have a little credibility..." Hermione trailed off weakly when Viktor's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Who would believe us if you listen to half of what the Ministry says about us? According to the Ministry line, Dumbledore is a dotty old man who allowed a dangerous half-giant who never graduated, was expelled, in fact, to remain here as a gamekeeper, then promoted him to professor. Said professor let a hippogriff maul one of the students, the son of a respected Ministry official and patron of St. Mungo's. He hired a DADA teacher that ended up dead under mysterious circumstances, and we are saying that Voldemort, who no one had heard from in a decade, was living under Quirrel's turban and snacking on unicorn blood in the forest because he was a might bodiless. Oh, and not only do three first years get involved, but a couple of first years who always thought they were Muggles helped run him off. The Dark Lord! Sure! And a house elf might beat a mountain troll in a wrestling match! But wait, it gets better! To do it, they had to get past guards and traps set by most of the professors in school. Professors who have anywhere from a few years to a few decades of experience! Stop me when I start sounding believable to anyone who does not know you and Harry and Ron and Dumbledore."

Viktor rubbed a hand over his face. "Then the next year, he hires Gilderoy Lockhart, a witless fop who does not know the first thing about defense against dark arts, who is currently mumbling away in St. Mungo's, from what I hear. Who put him there? Ron and his broken wand! Mind you, he was trying to put a memory charm on two of his students at the time, and they were only trying to defend themselves, but all we have is their word on that. And Voldemort's diary ends up here. Who passed it on? Lucius Malfoy again. Respectable, rich Lucius Malfoy from one of the oldest pureblood lines in Britain! Did I forget to mention it was Malfoy's house elf who disobeyed his master and went to Harry's house and exploded a pudding or two while he was there, to warn Harry not to go back to school because someone was trying to kill him? Oh, and then Harry

finds out he's a Parselmouth, when he does not even know what a Parselmouth is! Sure, most wizards trust Parselmouths! You might as well be wearing a sign proclaiming you are a dark wizard! Then there was the little matter of the basilisk loose on school grounds. Hagrid does a stint in Azkaban for it! One of the professors has been to the wizard prison! No matter he was falsely accused! Both times! Does he get a 'Sorry Hagrid. Sorry we broke your wand and expelled you fifty years ago, sorry we sent you to prison'? No! Basilisk stunned a cat and some ghosts and some students, you among them, only the dumbest luck kept anyone from getting killed, and who saves the day when one of the students gets kidnapped and nearly sacrificed by this possessed diary? Harry Potter! Then he tricks Malfoy into setting Dobby free, and now we have a house elf who wants wages! Most people think that is a scandal. Hell, the elves think it is a scandal! So not only does Dumbledore hire fruity professors, he hires fruity house elves!" Viktor ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath before continuing.

"Let us look at third year, shall we? He goes and hires a werewolf! A werewolf! Most parents would agree he was a fantastic teacher, he taught you all things that you typically do not get until fifth year, maybe later, but parents have a tiny problem with the prospect of their children being attacked by one of their professors, preventative potion or no preventative potion! And the Ministry suspects Harry had something to do with Black and Buckbeak escaping! They cannot prove it, but by now they believe he could make the planet reverse course if he wanted to and get away with it! They are willing to believe anything when it comes to Potter, but nothing to do with Voldemort! They can expel a stroppy fifteen-year-old and take his wand on pretty bare evidence, if they could just figure a way to do it without looking like monsters! Easier to intimidate Harry. What are they going to do with Voldemort if he is back? Tell him he cannot graduate and he will never get a job if he does not behave himself and stop being such a naughty boy!?"

Viktor spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Oh, and what about last year? He hires Mad-Eye Moody! Wonderful auror. Legendary, but the punchline to a lot of Ministry jokes these days. Everything is a plot! Dark wizards behind the dustbins and poison in the pancakes! Not that I blame him, I am right there with him at this point! I would not trust anyone further than I could throw them either with half the justification he has. But wait, it was not even Moody! No! It was the Death Eater son of yet another Ministry official that broke out of Azkaban years ago and spent an entire year taking Polyjuice Potion out of his pocket flask and plotting how to kidnap one of the students right out from under Dumbledore's nose. While the real Moody was locked in his own trunk! And while he is here, he throws in a few lessons about the Unforgivable Curses, which at best, makes the Ministry a tad nervous, at worst, gives them fits. My word, the students might be going around torturing one another now! Next they will be striking one another dead over Quidditch games! Making each other put stunned frogs in the teacher desks against their will! The tournament returns

after I forget how many years off because of the death toll, so they put in an age restriction. At least that way we cannot complain we did not understand what we were getting into. The kinder, gentler Ministry of today only kills those seventeen and older! Not only does someone get around the age restriction, they get around the fact that there are only supposed to be *three* champions in the *Triwizard* Tournament! And who is it that fills the spot? What name comes out of the Goblet of Fire? Potter!”

Viktor shook his head and paused briefly. “And let us not forget that the Ministry knew Karkaroff was a former Death Eater. They took his confession! But Dumbledore did too. Let him into Hogwarts without blinking, all of them. What the hell were they thinking? Rita Skeeter made Harry out to be pitiful orphan or dangerous whack job, depending on the day of the week. She made you out to be a trollop playing both sides against the middle. Oh, and one of the competitors was so pitiful she came in last on every task, even though she had just as much built in favoritism as I did. Her headmistress was a judge too! On the third task, she drops out first, all of about ten feet from the entrance, I torture one of the Hogwarts champions but I did not mean to, so I guess that makes it okay! Imperius curse, you know. Then I get stunned, Potter claims he and Diggory made an unlikely deal to tie and both win the tournament then they supposedly portkey to a cemetery full of Death Eaters who perform a rite with blood from The Boy Who Lived and resurrect Voldemort! Put him in a brand new bleedin’ body! We will skip how he got away from a crowd of adult Death Eaters, Cedric dying, sibling wands, seeing and talking to his dead parents, all that, and just cut to where Harry comes staggering back out of the maze dragging a dead body. A dead boy barely of age. Whose father works for the Ministry. And the bit where the idiots at the Ministry take the one and only viable witness outside of Hogwarts staff and students, the one person who could most easily convince the wizard world of the fact that Voldemort is back and has a body and they let a dementor kiss him! That part makes me want to scream! But let Dumbledore complain that Fudge was a fool for letting the dementors suck Crouch’s soul out of him after a weak ten minute interrogation, and *he* is the one being unreasonable!”

Viktor snorted softly. “ And what about this year, Hermione? This year is no better! Dumbledore has been removed from the wizard court, he hired the champion that came in dead last for a job that most people are beginning to say is cursed, a class where all you do is ‘read ze book’ now! Good thing too, since Umbridge would probably say no one can understand her when she lectures because her English is not picture perfect. Hagrid cannot win with Umbridge, because she hates any half breed she thinks might be dangerous. And giants are on her list. McGonagall and the rest of the longtime staff are all just blinded by their loyalty to Dumbledore, according to her. And me! Oh, I am the worst! Foreigner with no diploma and dubious English skills! I speak two whole other languages, if that is not suspicious, I do not know *what* is! Dumbledore is letting me live in the same tower with my girlfriend, who is a whole three years younger,

oh, the scandal! And we visited at home without our parents chained to our ankles twenty-four hours a day! You are in my room now with the door closed, her head would probably explode if she knew that! Never mind that half the students get to do the same thing and our parents trust us! Who cares if half the students in school are shagging in all the empty classrooms, if the two of us spend ten minutes together unattended, I might take advantage! Like anyone would believe Voldemort is back because I do! What credibility, Hermione? Haff not graduated yet, dare to be nineteen, which seems to be too old and too young at the same time, *and* I am a former student of Durmstrang, which is supposedly Dark Arts capital of the world. Oh, and I play a game for money... heaven forbid we take anyone who does that seriously! Everything can be twisted! If I tell some of the biggest reasons why I believe, it gets worse. Then I am bitter, emotionally and mentally scarred and driven by revenge. And I killed my former Death Eater headmaster, right? Without a wand! Guess where! Hogwarts! And no one quite understands how that worked! And if you tell that bit about the dementor ending up a 'squidgy pile of goo' as Ron called it, Umbridge would probably haff us all committed to St. Mungo's in one of the nice padded rooms! Rita Skeeter might not be the one haffing the field day this time around, but someone would! Fudge would see to it. Fudge controls the press. I hate to say it, but until something undeniable happens, Dumbledore and any friends he has are pretty well forced underground," Viktor finished up, gritting his teeth.

"Well... when you say it like that..." Hermione began uncertainly.

"Say it however you like, we all look like a pack of kooks against the Ministry. Dangerous kooks, yet," Viktor sighed.

"Do you realize that is more words than I usually get out of you in a week?" Hermione said, smiling in spite of herself.

"Do not say the word 'week'. Reminds me of Umbridge and her fine ultimatums," he replied sarcastically.

"You are in a towering temper. But no wonder you're grouchy if you didn't sleep," Hermione said calmly.

"Az se izviniavam. I apologize. Sorry. I do not mean to take it out on you. Either that or kick the dogs, I suppose," Viktor said softly.

"Nothing worse than what I've done to you. Going on about O.W.L.s and such. I'll gladly sacrifice my ears to save poor Ivan and Natasha from the boot. Nervous about the practical exam?"

"Not really. Between you and Harry and Ron, I ought to be able to take it. I haff all the basics down. *Protego, Impedimenta*, stunning, all the fun stuff, Anti-Disapparation Jinx, even, just for laughs. Dumbledore threw that one in.

Boggarts also included. And I could probably bring up some curses and hexes and countercurses and defensive charms and jinxes in this essay that would haff the person who reviews it running to the bookshelves. A corporeal Patronus is supposed to be worth extra. Speaking of which, how is your otter shaping up?" he asked, picking up the quill and returning to the essay.

"Lovely. Just lovely, just as solid as the hawk and stag these days. Oh! I need to go," Hermione said abruptly as she caught the time.

"Do not let me run you off. I am all out of steam by now."

"Not you. Arithmancy and Runes waiting for me. Don't stop writing on my account," Hermione said lightly, walking over to the desk and giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Look, I will pass up sleep, but not that," Viktor said somberly, laying down the quill and putting a finger to his lip. She leaned over slightly and kissed him softly on the mouth, putting a hand to his cheek.

"Get some sleep. You have big black circles under your eyes."

"Had bigger ones the first time you saw me up close," he said, a smile curling up one corner of his mouth.

"More like around your eyes. And you were dripping blood everywhere too. You were a terrible mess. But you clean up pretty well, I admit," she laughed.

"Go on then. Cannot haff you doing poorly on your O.W.L.s. You might haff to support me, remember? Sorry for snapping your head off."

"You didn't snap my head off. Problem is, you're right," Hermione said, dropping her hand and turning to walk to the door. She was halfway there when Viktor's voice stopped her.

"Hermione?"

"What?"

"Snape is working on a Paralyzing Potion. In small doses, you are supposed to still be able to talk. Takes four months to mature. Dumbledore is willing to wait that long if nothing happens that warrants worry. And Snape is going to keep trying. He gets some things, just not that. He is convinced I like making a fool of him. Blocking him. He keeps trying to surprise me."

"Doesn't make it completely safe, though, does it? The potion?" she

asked, not turning.

“Safer. Dumbledore still has to know what he is doing,” he admitted.

“I wish you wouldn’t agree to it at all. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. Spite dobre. Sleep pleasantly.”

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## Chapter 70

Harry raised his hand to knock on the door once more. Odd, he could hear Ivan and Natasha barking up a storm on the other side, and he knew Viktor should be in there. The light had been on when he crossed the lawn after Quidditch practice. He rapped once more, tentatively, and looked up and down the hall, bouncing a little on his toes. Deserted. He was bursting, he had to tell someone and Ron had decided to go raid the kitchen, Hermione must be in the library or her dorm...

“What?” Viktor’s voice came sharp and irritable from behind the door as soon as it began to swing open.

Harry jumped guiltily, as though he had been caught red handed at something. “Oh. Sorry. I...” he trailed off when he looked at Viktor’s face. Ron’s remark about Viktor looking like he could bite a spike nail in two suddenly seemed very apt.

“Harry. Come on in. Don’t just stand there,” Viktor said, stepping back from the doorway. The voice softened somewhat, but Harry still thought he hadn’t seen Viktor looking this angry since the Quidditch match against Wales.

“If this is a bad time...I could go...I mean...I have a DADA test I need to study for and...” Harry stammered.

Viktor snorted incredulously at the mention of DADA, but did not elaborate. “It is a bad time. But nothing to do with you. At least you woke me up. Or rather the dogs did. Sit down,” Viktor said, flopping rather limply into one of the chairs. Harry perched timidly on the very edge of the cushion opposite. Harry swallowed and studied Viktor’s face, waiting for a further explanation. Why would I be waking him up at this time of day? It was barely early evening. More like late afternoon. The only reason it was dim enough outside to require a light was the thick winter cloud cover. Then Harry noticed the dark smudges under his eyes and the wan look, but he was hard pressed to say whether Viktor looked more tired or irritated. His jaw was set, scowl in place, eyes narrowed, brows low. Suddenly he raised one eyebrow and said, “Well?”

“Huh?”

“I assume you knocked for a reason?” The other brow went up to join the first.

“Sorry, you’ve got a bit of ink right there...” Harry said distractedly, pointing at Viktor’s right cheek. Viktor gave a halfhearted swipe at it and inspected his fingertips for an instant, then dropped his hand. It seemed all his fingertips on that hand were already smudged with ink. Harry thought it best not to mention that most of it was still there on his cheek too. “Err... I woke you?” Viktor’s only response was to lean over to one side a bit, looking over Harry’s shoulder to the corner desk, covered in open books and pieces of parchment. “Working on something?”

“Hermione did not tell you?” he asked at last.

“Tell me what?” Harry asked in return, casting a glance back over his shoulder.

“I haff a week to graduate. No, wait, less than that... what is today?” Viktor said, narrowing his eyes further.

“Friday...” Harry ventured cautiously.

“Three days then,” Viktor said, leaning his head tiredly against the side of the armchair.

“Three days! I thought you had the rest of the year if you wanted it?”

“Not anymore,” Viktor answered weakly.

“Why?”

“Umbridge,” Viktor replied, as though that explained the whole thing.

“But the agreement was with Dumbledore!” Harry complained.

“No, really, it was with the Ministry. Everything goes through the Ministry now... and if I do not get finished on time, I become responsible for Umbridge becoming headmistress,” Viktor said, sighing heavily. “Two days, really.”

Harry made a mental note to ask Hermione for the details of this development instead. He didn’t seem to be getting many details this way. “Why’s it keep shrinking, when you just said three?”

“Hmm? Oh, well, Monday I haff to take both parts of the exam. No hope

of really getting any real writing done then,” Viktor said. “I need another scroll’s worth, at least. Heaven knows if what I haff so far makes sense. Last night I caught myself writing a whole sentence in Russian. Two days... need to allow at least a day for proofreading and revision, finishing up the references...and I still haff to find time to sleep somewhere in there. Poor Hermione’s stuck proofreading it.” At last he shifted his dark eyes from the desk back to Harry. “What did you want again?” Viktor asked, not unkindly.

“Oh! To tell you that Cho talked to me! When I was coming back from practice!” Harry exclaimed.

“Sorry... is this a startling new development?” Viktor said, looking puzzled.

“Well... I mean, she’s talked to me before, obviously, but she...she asked me on a date the next Hogsmeade weekend! Valentine’s Day! What do I do?” Harry asked in a panicky tone.

“Say...yes?” Viktor said, sounding just as uncertain as Harry had earlier.

“Well, I already did that bit. I mean, what now?” Harry said impatiently.

“Go!” Viktor said so bluntly that at first, Harry took it for an immediate order and almost jumped out of the chair.

“But what do I do when we get there? Where do I take her? Do I try to kiss her or just talk to her or hold her hand and what do I need to do to make sure she has a good time and she doesn’t think I’m a complete prat?” Harry asked in a rush.

“Avoid acting like a prat. As for the rest of it, remember what I said about barking up the wrong tree?” Viktor said slowly.

“But you’re supposed to know these things! What to do with girls! All those girls that wanted to be with you...” Harry wailed.

“Those girls did not exactly want to be with me so much as they wanted to be with somebody... That was not what I was looking for. I do not know about girls, I know about Hermione. Figuring one out is about my limit. And I do not fool myself that I haff her completely figured out. I haff this method that works pretty well, though,” Viktor replied, considering Harry.

“What?” Harry pounced on the opportunity.

“Talking to her. Works pretty well when the girl talks back. Why on earth would you think I haff all the answers? I know a grand total two females anywhere near your or my age well enough that I think I could predict their



behavior five times out of ten. You want Alexei for this. Or are you sure you would not be better off talking to Hermione? Or how about Cho? She might have a good idea of what she would like. Suck it up and talk to the girl, Harry,” Viktor said flatly.

“But you can’t just go asking a girl ‘may I kiss you?’ on a date!” Harry insisted.

The ghost of a smile flitted over Viktor’s face, then was gone, leaving Harry to wonder what was so funny. “Why not?” Viktor asked, suddenly serious again.

“Well it... it... makes me look like I don’t know what I’m doing!” Harry said indignantly.

“Do you?” Viktor asked softly.

“Well, no. But I don’t want her to know that,” Harry said sheepishly.

“Why lie? Just be who you are and try talking to her. She will either like you or not. No changing that. And do not think that looking like you know what you are doing is worth getting slapped. Better to ask. Ask Alexei, he got slapped plenty,” Viktor said, closing his eyes and heaving another sigh.

“But she does these mad things and I don’t know what to do and can’t think what I want to say. The last time she talked to me in one of the unused classrooms, and she ended up bawling about Cedric...but she did kiss me and that was kind of nice and Hermione said I was an idiot for not talking to her some more and comforting her or something but I didn’t know what to do. I mean, I patted her on the back a bit but I don’t know what to do when a girl cries! I don’t even know what to do when Hermione cries! Well, I mean...*she’s* a girl, too, obviously, but it’s *Hermione*, that’s different... Viktor? Viktor?” Harry paused and studied Viktor for a moment, confirming his suspicion. Asleep. Harry blinked a few times and looked around the room. Ivan and Natasha trotted over, encouraged by Harry’s eye contact and eager for a bit of attention. Feeling rather foolish and wanting something to do, he patted the both of them.

Harry was just about to leave as quietly as possible when a movement at the window caught his eye. It was a big, gray barn owl. Baramir. Harry moved to the window and slid it open. “Here, let me take that,” Harry said, reaching to untie the roll of parchment around the owl’s leg. He was rewarded with a hard nip on the finger. “Ow! I just want to get it off!” Harry jostled with Baramir for some minutes and finally managed to get the parchment off despite the wildly flapping wings and hooting. Harry thought it an awful racket, but Viktor never stirred. Baramir fixed him with one last reproachful glare and swept back out the open window. Harry moved to lay the letter on the desk when he paused. Why

was Baramir so reluctant to give it to me? he thought to himself. The spidery writing on the parchment was unfamiliar. Eaten up by the curiosity, Harry guiltily checked to see that Viktor was still asleep.

He unrolled the piece of parchment and read

I hope this letter finds you well and enjoying your time at Hogwarts. Having done the research you requested, I regret to say that I can find nothing that seems to match the key words you provided other than the connection to the ancient Greeks you already cited. Perhaps if you can provide more of the context or the book where you encountered the words I can conduct another search. I assume you need this for your second research paper?

On your second request, I had more success. There are indeed recorded cases of wizards focusing power for higher spells through objects other than wands, but they are isolated. Full accounts of such cases are extremely rare, and they are all relegated to the status of "legend" or "uncorroborated". Scepters, glass spheres, rings, and other articles of jewelry were some of the objects mentioned as "objects of power" in these accounts. I can provide references and the passages later if you like and may even be able to send you a package of books if you feel more extensive research is necessary.

Third, the use of potions that restrict movement in combination with the Echomensa is workable, but risky. The dosage must be minimal enough to allow the person on the receiving end to communicate in some fashion, preferably speech. Hexes such as full body binds and the like are, of course, completely out of the question because of this. While one could argue that allowing the person on the receiving end to have unrestricted movement is more risky, that argument only holds water if the person administering the potion is a highly proficient potion maker who can calculate the correct dosage. This does not even take into account the risk of damage should the person performing the spell return control too quickly or too slowly. If you are asking for this information for a passage on Ministry interrogation techniques for your thesis, I can recommend an excellent book that should be in the Hogwarts library as well. Glad to be of some small assistance.

Madame Durshenkova  
Durmstrang

P.S. On the other piece of parchment is Mr. Gregorovitch's response.

Harry shuffled the pieces of parchment and read

Wandmaking is an honored craft that cannot be done justice in a mere paragraph or two, but the basic concepts I will attempt to convey here. A highly

personal craft, all wandmakers have their own preferred techniques, but some things do not vary in quality wands. The shaft should be made of wood, a living material with characteristics and personality of its own. Trees represent life. For best results, cores are also taken from living sources, and their personalities also figure into the general character of the wand. A good wand should serve as a focal point for a wizard or witch's own powers. A good fit can only be attained by allowing a wand to "choose" its master or mistress. Therefore, most modern wandmakers follow this practice. It allows a wizard the chance to use a wand with a compatible "personality", thereby making best use of their powers. While I suppose it is theoretically possible for another object made out of natural materials of some sort to serve as a similar focus of a wizard's power, I am unaware of any craftsman actually trying it. Magical swords, capes, rings and the like tend to be made for very specific purposes only, not the general. For best results in general spellcasting, I should stick with wands.

Gregorovitch

Harry rolled the sheets of parchment back up and stood a moment, considering what to do. While he waited, Baramir flew back in the window, dropping a dead mouse into his open cage. Swooping across the room, he perched on the chair back and yanked roughly at Viktor's hair with his beak. Viktor swore softly under his breath before opening his eyes. "Ow! I hate it when you do that! Harry? Sorry...I fell asleep on you, did I?"

"Not long. Letter came for you...err... I just got it off," he said, passing him the letter.

"He let you? Normally, he does not take too nicely to other people taking my mail," Viktor murmured.

"Well, he didn't seem to happy about letting me have it. Anything...interesting?" Harry asked in a strained voice after Viktor had read for a few minutes.

Before answering, Viktor pressed his locket between two fingers, lifted it out of the neck of his robes, and considered it silently for a moment. He dropped it and gave a strand of his own hair a soft tug, as though thinking. "No. About what I expected. Not much of any use. I had Madame Durshenkova do a little research for me. I thought maybe Durmstrang's library would haff something a little more concrete... it is all still just theory and speculation. Oh, well," Viktor said, looking slightly dejected.

"Well, I guess I'll go... so you can get some sleep. Sorry I woke you earlier," Harry called on his way to the door.

"Never mind that. Sleeping on top of it was not doing any good. Desks

are not too comfortable for sleeping anyway,” Viktor said dismissively.

“Viktor?” Harry called back, hand on the knob.

“What?”

“Good luck if I don’t see you before you take your exam.”

“Thank you Harry. And Harry?”

“What?” Harry answered, holding his breath.

“Thank you for wishing me good luck too.”

uploaded Aug 10

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## Chapter 71

“Has Viktor lost his way to the Great Hall? I haven’t seen him down here for meals for days,” Ginny asked Hermione at dinner.

“Writing, still, I expect. You don’t produce a decent six scroll paper overnight, you know. And he was hoping to have the paper itself done tonight, one day for revisions and all that,” Hermione replied.

“Six! But the last one just had to be two!” Ginny exclaimed.

“Difference is, he took a class entitled History of Magic. I suppose the only difference in the two might have been him having a professor that was slightly more lively than Professor Binns. Since he didn’t actually take a class called Defense Against Dark Arts at Durmstrang, and he isn’t taking it here, they wanted more proof that he had the material down. Which wasn’t such a big deal when he was supposed to be getting almost six months to finish it. But six days, well, five days to write it... really! Umbridge did it on purpose you know. She wanted him to have to do it or risk Dumbledore getting put out. I imagine it’s not worth it to mention Dolores Umbridge around Viktor this week, unless you want your head bitten off, not that I blame him. Of course, staying up most of the night every night might have something to do with it. If he came down for a meal, I get the feeling he would just pass out in the soup. Every time I’ve gone by the last few days, he looks like he’s about to drop. Besides, I think Dobby’s been taking him more food than he can handle, anyway. Told me he fed part of it to the dogs because he couldn’t possibly eat that many sandwiches. I take it Dobby provided him with a whole picnic basket that put the one we got at Durmstrang to shame,” Hermione said.

“You know, he fell asleep while I was there the other day. Sitting up in the

chair. Before that, he was sleeping on the desk,” Harry pointed out. The words had no sooner left his mouth than a large gray barn owl glided to a halt in the middle of the table.

“Now why would Baramir be stopping off for me?” Hermione wondered out loud. Harry noted that Baramir patiently and quietly submitted to Hermione’s fumbling to get the thick roll of parchment off of his leg. The second she had it off, she gave him a bit of toast and he flapped away from the Gryffindor table and back outside. Unrolling the outermost piece, she read

Done. Thesis attached. Sleeping until you get done reviewing it.

Viktor

“Well then, I suppose that’s what I’ll be doing this evening, then. Reviewing this. All I have is a bit of reading for Defense Against Dark Arts, otherwise,” Hermione said, rolling the parchment back around the bundle.

“You call a whole chapter a bit of reading?” Ron asked sarcastically.

“Ron, honestly! If you spent half as much time reading as you did complaining about it, you would be done twice as quickly! Suppose I had better get to this, then,” Hermione said, pushing her chair back and taking leave of the hall.

“Six scrolls worth of essay in one evening. That is love and dedication,” Harry laughed, shaking his head.

“Madness. That’s what that is. Absolute madness,” Ron countered.

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## Chapter 72

Hermione knocked a little louder than usual, just in case Viktor was asleep, but in short order, he opened the door and let her in. “So, you’re up?” she asked brightly.

“I think so. I would not count on my being awake in any fashion other than ‘bodily’ at the moment,” Viktor replied, sinking back into the chair. “So, how bad is it?”

“Not much needs to be changed. A couple of sentences could probably be reworded, there’s one misspelling, one paragraph needs a bit of work, and one of the goblin names I wasn’t able to decipher, you’ll probably know who you meant when you read it, but otherwise, it’s surprisingly solid for something you did on almost no sleep and in five days. Is that coffee?” Hermione asked,

pointing at his cup.

“Yes. I admit it is a fairly futile attempt to get enough caffeine to become capable of conducting a conversation,” he answered, nodding and taking another sip. “Oh! Did you want some? There is a thermos around here somewhere, no telling where I haff put it down...”

“No, thank you. Lunch is in an hour anyway. Fifteen, twenty minutes, that should be all the rewriting time you’ll need, really. I marked the bits you need to look at,” she said, handing it over.

“Good. Then I can actually get some sleep,” he murmured.

“When did you get up?” Hermione asked.

“Fifteen minutes ago. Did not want to then, but I figured you would be here soon, the way you read,” Viktor said.

“You really didn’t sleep, did you? You couldn’t have and gotten this done,” Hermione insisted.

“Two or three hours here and there. Mostly there,” he replied, jerking his head toward the desk.

“Coming down for lunch or dinner?” Hermione asked.

“If it’s all the same to you, I think I will let this suffice and go back to bed,” Viktor said, gesturing with his mug. “Besides, why deprive Dobby of the joy of dragging enough food up here to feed four people?” he said, a weak smile curling up the corner of his mouth. “Ever had the coffee here?” he asked absently.

“No,” Hermione answered.

“I wouldn’t recommend it, then,” Viktor said, screwing up his face. “Or maybe it is just me,” he mused, peering into the cup.

“Stop that. You’re reminding me too much of Trelawney and her tea leaf reading nonsense.”

“Grounds reading maybe. No danger, I haff no... ummm... what is it called?” he asked, knitting his eyebrows together.

“Second sight? Third eye? Ability to make up blatant lies on the spot?” Hermione ventured.

“No! The thing you would need to do it...”

“Cup and saucer?” Hermione guessed.

“No, no... the other thing... what you need to make the tea in the first place, like a samovar but not so fancy looking...” Viktor said, miming a pouring motion.

“A teakettle?”

“Teakettle! That is it!” He paused for a long moment. “Notice I did not say it would be an intelligent conversation...”

“Get some sleep before you rewrite. Rest today, rewrite tomorrow. Then rest up for Monday. It would be quite passable as it is anyway, even if you don’t get to it. How about I go to lunch and let you finish your horrible coffee and go back to bed? You’re exhausted, aren’t you?” she asked, the concern evident on her face.

“I never thought I would be almost happy to hear you say you were leaving, but I could fall over right now if I were not talking,” Viktor allowed.

“Then put the horrible coffee down and go to bed. Put it down before you fall asleep in the chair and scald yourself. See you tomorrow at breakfast?”

“I think so. If I can still find my way downstairs that is.”

“Don’t get up. I can see the door from here,” she said, giving him a quick peck on the lips. Walking down the staircase, she wondered if he would even manage to get back out of his robes before falling into bed.

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## Chapter 73

“All done then?” Ginny ventured at Sunday lunch.

“All done. Every bit of it. References, rewrites, the whole nine yards, “ Viktor replied emphatically. “Let us see Umbridge mess this up.”

“I hate to tell you, but she’s headed this way...” Neville whispered urgently across the table. Ginny could hardly tell which one of the three stiffened most, Neville, or Viktor and Hermione across the table.

“Hem, hem. Mr. Krum? What are you doing at the student table?” Dolores Umbridge asked in a falsely sweet and girlish voice. Harry and Ron both shivered slightly at her wide, Cheshire cat grin.

“Well, I believe you people who speak better English than I do call it ‘eating’ or possibly ‘lunch’, or perhaps that was ‘tea’. See, I always get it confused, the tea you eat and the tea you drink, but I do not think those are served in the Great Hall, except for the tea you drink, sometimes,” Viktor replied in a low tone.

“But you usually eat at the staff table,” Dolores Umbridge insisted, her horrible parody of a smile not budging. Viktor’s frown was looking equally stubborn.

“But this week I spent the entire week studying and writing. I am feeling sufficiently studious to eat over here. And Neville asked for some advice on an essay. I will be too busy to do it any other time, I want to study this afternoon since I am done writing, so I thought I would eat over here. Besides, I think you made it pretty clear that I was not a welcome member of the staff until I manage to graduate. Remember, that is why the students do not call me ‘Professor’? Good thing the Ministry had the sense to put in a grandfather clause, else Hagrid would be eating over here too. Oh, and there is nothing in the rules about teachers haffing to eat at the staff table. I looked. I might even start going to the common room, since you seem to insist that I live in the dorm anyway. No rule against students or staff being in there either. I checked that as well,” Viktor said sourly, not bothering to look up at her now.

“Done then?” Umbridge asked in great surprise, a frown dragging down the corners of her mouth. “Already?”

“Done. The examiner is getting a six scroll paper complete with references tomorrow. Feel free to look a little happier about it,” Viktor said flatly.

Umbridge quickly pasted her false smile back on. “Wonderful! Just sitting on your desk, waiting to go, then? I’m sure you needn’t worry about the tests if you’ve done the essay... Not anxious about giving it to the examiner right away? Maybe owling it?”

“Hard to send your owl to someone when you do not know who will come to do the exam. Where is it going? Anyone stupid enough to go into my room right now without my say so is going to haff to deal with one big, extraordinarily cantankerous barn owl, because I seem to recall leaving Baramir’s cage open. And two malamutes who are not exactly kind to strangers, either, because I forgot to shut Ivan and Natasha into the bedroom. They haff not had lunch yet, either. I apologize again for the way they growled at you last night in the hallway, I still do not know what got into them. Probably cranky from being upstairs so much. And that says nothing of the other precautions, but I will not go into that. And Dobby knows not to touch it. Rest assured, the examiner will get the thesis tomorrow,” Viktor said, raising an eyebrow.



“Good. Good,” Umbridge replied, her smile not reaching her eyes. “Good afternoon, then,” she called as she walked off.

“Well mine just improved mightily,” Viktor muttered under his breath, going back to his plate.

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## Chapter 74

On Monday morning, Harry thought Hermione was by far the most nervous one. While Harry and Ron simply wished Viktor well at breakfast, Hermione bombarded him with a barrage of “Oh, did you remember to...” and “You did reread that chapter that...” and “Do you remember who...” until Viktor, looking slightly bemused by the whole thing finally said, “Too bad the examiner is not here already. He or she could skip the oral portion.” Harry could sympathize. Hermione’s nerves tended to make both Harry and Ron more nervous on exam days.

The words were no sooner out of Viktor’s mouth than Dumbledore walked into the Great Hall accompanied by a short, bald wizard with a long beard trailing down to his knees. “I would bet money that’s the examiner,” Ron observed, buttering his toast.

“I bet you would win. Better get over there before Umbridge goes telling him my English is horrible and he ends up spending the rest of the day shouting at me. Why is it you English speakers think that if you speak louder and slower, people who do not understand your language are going to suddenly be able to?” Viktor asked, shaking his head.

“Hurry up, she’s on her way. Good luck,” Hermione said, giving his hand a squeeze.

“Longer legs. And I am closer. See you all later,” Viktor said casually, and struck out through the aisle between the tables. Hermione spent the rest of the day anxiously spouting her worries whenever she was around Harry and Ron, saying, “Oh! I hope he remembered the distinguishing characteristics of a werewolf! And the incantation for...” at every opportunity.

“For Pete’s sake, Hermione! He’s already taking the test, nothing you can do about it now!” Ron grumbled, rolling his eyes. “He’ll make it fine. He’s as much of a bookworm as you are, already,” he said more gently when they started down the stairs toward the Great Hall for dinner.

“Oh, look, he must already be done,” Harry said, pointing to Dumbledore, Viktor, Umbridge and the little examiner clustered just off the end of the staircase. But on closer examination, he saw that Viktor’s scowl was firmly in place and his arms were crossed. All three of them were watching the examiner

with interest, and they were just getting close enough to catch snatches of what he was saying.

"...don't know what could have happened... other room....sure of it..." the voice of the examiner filtered up through the other conversations taking place on the stairs.

"Hey! Hey! Slow down Ron! Hermione! Something's up!" Harry hissed. They dawdled as much as they dared, letting the others on the stairs off, until they could soon hear the examiner clearly.

"I really can't apologize enough. I've never had anything like this happen in all the years I've been an examiner, but I've looked everywhere. Of course, usually I don't collect theses, do O.W.L. exams mostly, but I put it in my satchel, I am sure of that, and I've been over the satchel and the room a dozen times. I'm sure it was excellent, I skimmed through a portion of it while you did the written exam, but I can't find it now," the examiner stammered. "It had to disappear sometime while I was administering the oral and practical portions. I'm sure we can work something out," he added pleadingly to both Viktor and Dumbledore.

"You lost my thesis," Viktor said evenly. There was no anger in the statement, in fact, it was so flat that at first Harry did not register what Viktor had just said. Beside him, Hermione came up short and clutched at her chest in her panic. He had to nudge her with an elbow to remind her to keep creeping steadily down the stairs. Arriving at the bottom, Harry tried not to make too big a production of untying his shoe by stepping on it with his other foot and then stooping to tie it back. But Harry figured his shoe tying was probably lost in the racket of both Ron and Hermione dropping their books and papers. Hermione, of course, had more than enough to keep them both busy picking things up for a while.

"Again, I apologize. I am sure the Ministry would be willing to give you an extension to replace it, surely?" the examiner looked questioningly at Umbridge. She looked positively rapturous, like the cat that had just eaten the canary.

"Unfortunately, the Ministry has no proof that this thesis ever existed, so I am afraid..." she began, tenting her fingers together in front of her horrible pink sweater.

"Oh, yes they do," Viktor said quietly.

"...we will simply have to place you on...what?" Umbridge seemed to register Viktor's statement late.

"Oh, yes they do," Viktor repeated. "Ample evidence."

“The examiner’s having seen a thesis of some sort is no proof. The examiner merely skimmed a bit, and he has no proof until he takes it back and checks it that you had no help writing it or did not copy it from somewhere, no offense, Pullman,” she said graciously to the examiner.

“None taken, Dolores. It is true, I merely took a quick look, I didn’t have time to read the whole thing or perform the necessary charms to see if it was written solely by him, but the young man did take the time to hand something in, so surely...” the little wizard trailed off, looking at the other three faces, none of which were looking at him. Instead, Viktor was giving Umbridge a look that would cut stone and she was looking back at him with that awful self-satisfied look. Dumbledore seemed to be taking in the standoff with some suppressed amusement. How could he look so calm when he knew that not only Viktor’s position, but his own depended on that thesis being handed in?

“Are you implying I would cheat?” Viktor asked, mouth barely moving, tone low and dangerous.

“I’m implying no such thing but with no essay...” Umbridge trilled.

“Then I will just have to give him another thesis,” Viktor said evenly, clenching his jaw. Harry got the distinct feeling that Viktor would be having a much bigger fit of temper if he and Umbridge weren’t in the hallway in front of the examiner and the three of them bungling about among Hermione and Ron’s scattered things. Hermione and Ron, though they were slowly gathering things up one piece at a time, were nearly done. Hermione was wandering around distractedly saying, “Oh, where did that extra quill go?” a little too loudly, pausing to sneak glances at the other group occasionally.

“Ah, see, I told you there would be no worries about it, Pullman. It happens to the best of us. Just the other day I lost my glasses, only to find them in my pocket,” Dumbledore said cheerfully. “And just last week I managed to misplace Hagrid. Thought he should be in his cabin and it turned out he was in the garden. And if one can misplace something as obvious as Hagrid, the occasional bundle of seven scrolls are sure to come up missing sooner or later.”

“But the Ministry cannot give an extension...” Umbridge stammered, paling and looking about wildly, as though she were stranded in a foreign country and couldn’t really be sure what language the natives were speaking.

“I do not need an extension. I just need another copy. *Accio thesis*,” Viktor said casually, and a roll of parchment shortly came winging down the staircase from Gryffindor. “There you go. And if you happen to lose that, there should be a copy waiting for you when you get back to your office. I sent one to each examiner on the list, since I did not know who would be coming. And should that disappear between now and your arrival at the office, Dumbledore

has a copy in his office. He was kind enough to look over it for me and make some suggestions,” Viktor said calmly, offering the roll of parchment.

“But you said you couldn’t owl it!” Umbridge spluttered, her eyes bugging.

“No, I said it was difficult to send my owl, when I did not know which examiner was coming. With ten of them, it was quite impossible to send one owl. That would have been sixty scrolls in one trip! Luckily, the school has lots of owls. I sent them,” Viktor said, relaxing visibly. Harry was almost sure he saw the barest twitch of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

“And you expect us to believe you copied out that many sheets of parchment by hand? That alone would have taken a week, wouldn’t it?” Umbridge asked in a thin, weak voice.

“No, I would not expect you to think me stupid enough to try to copy all that out by hand. You see, I was a fair Charms student as well. I got the equivalent of a N.E.W.T in it. I don’t know about here, but they teach *Replicatum* in your sixth year of Charms at Durmstrang. Took a small fortune in parchment, but that is my future there, and I was not about to take any chances that it might get damaged or...” here Viktor paused significantly, clearing his throat, “...mislaid. I also sent a copy to Cornelius Fudge. I think he might find it interesting reading.”

“Well, I’ll be heading back now, Albus. You all should hear the final results in a couple or three weeks. But if your written exam and the rest of this paper are half as good as your oral exam, practical demonstrations, and the small bit I read earlier, you should have no problems passing. It was a pleasure. Not many students manage a Corporeal Patronus these days. Or even know what an Anti-Disapparation Jinx is,” he added, smiling at Viktor.

“Thank you. I had a great deal of help studying and practicing, though,” Viktor replied, shaking his hand and taking leave of the group and heading toward Harry, Ron and Hermione. “Your other quill went clear over here,” Viktor announced loudly, picking it up from under the edge of the stair, ending the big false production Hermione had been making of looking for it.

“Do you think she...” Hermione began when they had made it out of the hallway and into the Great Hall.

“Oh, I know she did. She took it, sure as I am standing here,” Viktor answered.

“Well, tell me how it went, then,” Hermione asked eagerly.

“Quite well. Sorry, you will have to settle for the shortened version at the

moment. I promised I would eat with Dumbledore, he got first rights on hearing how it went, so that means up there tonight. You three come up later and we will raid the kitchen or something, and I will go into more detail, okay?"

"Oh, all right. Umbridge looks like she has a right case of indigestion," Hermione said, watching the stubby woman stomp to the front of the room.

"Oh, she was all set to put me on probation and remove Dumbledore. Now by the terms of our agreement, she has to wait at least two weeks, until she finds out the results of my exams. Then, if I pass, she has to find a new victim. Probably take three weeks. A lot of the examiners are on vacation, and from what I understand, at least five of them have to review my essay. Could be three weeks, easy. Valentine's Day at the latest," Viktor said with a subtle smile. "Let her stew. We can celebrate something besides the holiday, I guess."

At the mention of Valentine's Day, Harry's stomach gave a weak little lurch. Maybe he would have to do what Viktor had suggested and talk to Cho. He still had no idea what they would do in Hogsmeade.

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Chapter 75 (uploaded Aug 15)

Things were back to relatively normal in the three weeks leading up to Valentine's Day. Umbridge mostly hung about in the background. However, now when she and Viktor ran into each other in the halls, they made no secret of looking daggers at one another. Strangely, Viktor seemed to give Fleur Delacour just about the same look when Harry saw them pass, but Harry didn't feel like asking. Harry had resolved to talk to Cho, but every time they were together or ran into one another in the hall, he found himself unable to force the words out. Instead, he let her do the talking and mostly nodded enthusiastically, trying to push aside the idea that he must look a fool to keep bobbing his head about that way, as though it were on a spring.

Hermione and Viktor had been making plans for the last week to have lunch somewhere in Hogsmeade, but Harry mostly tuned it out when the two of them were together, usually over in the corner of the common room, sprawled in a couple of armchairs, lobbing ideas back and forth about how to spend the day in between talking about exams and classes. The exam talk made him nervous enough, though they were months away, and the Hogsmeade plans reminded him too much of the question of what he and Cho would do together. And it made him jealous of the ease with which the two of them talked to one another. Viktor had taken to coming into the common room in the evenings to read with Hermione or quiz her when she studied. Truth be told, Viktor was the only one still brave enough to attempt quizzing Hermione. Harry and Ron had lost the stomach for doing it. When the two of them did it, Hermione tended to snatch the book back and look at it every few questions, certain Harry and Ron weren't doing it properly. Harry didn't have the patience to nitpick on the difference

between Gorlack the First and Gorlack the Second. Frankly, he and Ron were even more relieved when the common room proved too noisy for Hermione and the two of them went to the library instead. It meant Hermione couldn't nag them about their own studying.

Harry wished he and Cho were as comfortable around one another as Viktor and Hermione were, meandering from subject to subject, often while both of them had their noses in books. Or even just reading and being together, not talking at all. Or rather that he were at all comfortable with Cho. Or that they were both as sweetly shy with one another as Neville and Ginny were. The more he saw the two of them together this year, the more he suspected that Neville and Ginny were more than just friends. It seemed the whole world was pairing off around him and everyone knew who to ask and how to go about it but Harry. Hannah Abbott had even asked Ron to walk with her around Hogsmeade, and Ron seemed rather pleased by the invitation.

He felt he would scream if he heard one more girl talk about what she was wearing on her Valentine's date or another boy talk about how the girl he had asked said 'yes' when he approached her for the fifth time, so he decided to leave the common room and go to the library. He gathered up his homework and set outside, stomping as loudly as he could manage, but he doubted he could be heard through all that infernal giggling. It was almost as bad as the Yule Ball hysteria the previous year. Harry was beginning to agree completely with Viktor on the subject of giggling, he thought, as he settled into a table near the stacks.

Harry was just beginning to understand the passage on aging in potions when his thoughts were interrupted by a soft female voice just on the other side of the shelves, saying, "But what does it mean?" If that's another smoochy couple, I'll shriek, he thought to himself, but then he realized he knew the voice. Hermione? She and Viktor had gone to the library, but that had been hours ago...

"Not sure really. Tell me if this theory sounds crazy. Gold is a natural material, is it not? Not alive, like wood, but it could serve the purpose if any of those stories Madame Durshenkova found were true." Viktor's voice, just as soft and nearly impossible to hear, despite them being so close.

"Sure, but what about the core? What would serve the same purpose in this case? I mean, the letter says there has to be a core from a living thing, doesn't it?" Hermione again. Harry flushed as he realized they must be talking about the letter from Gregorovitch. The one he had sneaked a look at.

"Prod it three times. With your wand. Hold on a minute. *Silencio*. Be careful when you do it the third time, keep it level, I do not want to lose what is in it." Looking guiltily around him, seeing no one, Harry put his eye to a gap in the

stacks. Across the way, he could see Hermione with Viktor's locket open on her palm, tapping it with her wand. She considered it for a long moment.

"Hair," she said at last. "Not yours?" Hermione asked, looking up at him.

"Hers. Too curly for mine," Viktor replied, shaking his head.

Hermione seemed to think for a moment. "Would hair work?"

"Cores usually come from a magical *creature*, but I do not see why that would not work as well. She would haff been a witch too. Fleur is always yammering about her 'grandmuzzer's' veela hair being in her wand."

"Sounding less crazy all the time," Hermione said, not taking her eyes off him.

"Still does not explain why I could...do what I did. Dumbledore said even he could not do it, even with the same charm. I am no Dumbledore. No way I should haff been that... powerful... even under duress. But it might at least explain why it worked without a wand. That served the same purpose. Something personal, made out of natural material, encasing something from a living thing, and I was holding it."

Hermione had put her wand back in her pocket, and picked something up from the open locket. Harry squinted, and finally made out a small black curl dangling from her fingertips, tied with a thin white thread. "Your mother saved it all this time? To put in this locket?"

"From her first haircut. Kept all of it. Mama is sentimental beyond belief. She has baby books on both of us that were the size of unabridged dictionaries. She still has pressed, dried roses from the first real date she and Papa had. She saves things. Occupational hazard of being an archivist. You end up archiving your entire life. Little wonder she put a lock of Violeta's hair in it," Viktor said, giving a small shrug.

"How did you find out about it? When?"

"She wrote me just a few weeks ago and asked me if I had found it yet. I had to write back and admit I had not. The more I started thinking about it... the more I wondered if maybe the locket had more to do with it than just reminding me of the right words," Viktor replied, gesturing with his hands.

"Why, though, do you think she put it in there?" Hermione asked, snapping the locket closed again, lock of hair in place.

"I guess they knew I would haff to stop running from it. And soon. And

when I did, I would want something. To remember her,” Viktor said, putting out a hand and taking the locket back. He considered it a moment before slipping it back over his head and into the neck of his robes.

“Why? I mean why would you have to?” Hermione said.

“You. Impossible to keep it from you forever. I could do that with Alexei. He let me get away with it. Elena too. And if I had kept it up, he and Elena would have been out of my life after we all graduated. There would have been nothing left to talk about. Hard to keep up much of a friendship when you do not know all the other person’s ... for lack of a better word... secrets. Maybe being around you made me realize I did not want that to happen. You slam the door in everyone’s face long enough, they leave. Not that I would go around announcing it, but at least it does not hurt to mention her anymore. Did you need anything else? More books?”

“I think the ones I got already will keep me plenty busy. I need to get back and start writing it. Eighteen more inches on History of Magic. I’m running out of room in my head for all these goblin names. They all seem to be named Urrrrgh, or something.”

A soft smile broke across his face. “You are forgetting all the Morlocs, and the Urgags. Oh, and my favorite, the Barandir the Bloodthirsty line. There were what, twelve of those?”

“Oh, good grief, you mean there are four more? We’re just up to the eighth,” Hermione said, slapping herself in the forehead with her palm.

“Come on, I need to go back and get the dogs, you need to write. Let us go get your things,” Viktor said, putting an arm around her shoulders and guiding her out the end of the stacks. Harry scrunched down as far as possible behind his open Potions book and held his breath until he heard the door swing shut and they had gone.

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#### Chapter 76 (not uploaded)

The morning of Valentine’s Day arrived sunny enough, wetter and warmer than most of January. Cold dread squeezed at Harry’s stomach all through breakfast, as he watched various students receive Valentines in the owl post and wondered if he should have gotten something for Cho. He was a little relieved when Hermione received no owl at breakfast, despite the fact that Viktor wasn’t eating with them.

“Where’s Viktor got to, then?” Ron asked.

“Taking care of something before he leaves. We’re just going to meet



when we get ready to go,” Hermione said coolly.

“Letting Viktor off with a warning for not sending you something?” Ron asked mischievously.

“Honestly, Ron! We’re spending the whole day together! No need for those silly singing Valentine cards and a ten-pound box of chocolates!” Hermione scolded. But Harry couldn’t help but notice that she looked awfully pleased when Viktor came into the Great Hall from the lawn and discreetly presented her with a nice box of truffles. She only protested weakly, “I’ve just barely finished the first box,” before they left for her the tower to go get her cloak. Harry felt like kicking himself for not thinking of getting something for Cho earlier.

When he spotted Cho leaving the Great Hall, after all but the latest risers were done with breakfast, Harry forced himself to get up and move to the line where Filch was checking off the students who were allowed to go. On the walk to Hogsmeade, he felt awkward and gawky, as though his hands and feet were far too big for his body, and he searched for something to talk about to fill the awkward silence. He thought he could even hear the pounding of his heart in his ears, that he would fly apart into a million pieces if he didn’t open his mouth and put some noise into that void. “Potter and Chang!” screeched Pansy Parkinson, when she spotted them together. “Can’t say as I like your taste, at least Diggory was good looking!” she called, dissolving into laughter. They ignored her and kept walking. Luckily, they landed on Quidditch, and the subject kept them occupied for the entire walk to Hogsmeade. At one point, during their talk about the World Cup the previous year, he looked around hopefully for some glimpse of Viktor and Hermione, but they had almost certainly left quite a bit ahead of he and Cho. Harry doubted Viktor would be any more eager to take up the conversational slack than he was, anyway. They spent the entire morning simply wandering the streets and shops, and Harry couldn’t have answered anyone who asked what they talked about on pain of death.

Near noon, the cold rain started, and Cho ventured tentatively, “Um...d’you want to get a coffee?”

“Yeah, all right,” Harry agreed, “Where?”

Cho recommended Madam Puddifoot’s, a small, cramped tea shop that Harry had never visited. Everything inside seemed to be festooned with frills and bows and cherubs were flitting about here and there, dumping pink confetti over all the occupants.

“Cute, isn’t it?” Cho said happily. Harry was reminded unpleasantly of a cross between Pepto Bismol and an explosion in a bridal shop, but he only nodded instead. They took the last empty table, right next to Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain, who was holding hands with a very pretty blonde

girl. Harry felt more and more uncomfortable by the minute, wondering if Cho expected him to hold her hand. He was more discomfited when he realized that all the tables were for couples.

Madam Puddifoot, an extremely stout woman with a shiny black bun, squeezed between the two tables with great difficulty, and took their orders for coffee. By the time she returned, Roger and the girl were kissing over the sugar bowl. Harry fervently wished they wouldn't, as he felt it was setting a precedent he would have trouble living up to. He tried staring out the window, but it was so steamy, he could see nothing. To delay looking across the table, or at Roger and his date, he stared at the ceiling for a moment, receiving a face full of confetti from their hovering cherub. Brushing a hand over his face, he settled for staring fixedly at a point just past Cho's shoulder, toward the corner table. It seemed the couple in the corner was just about as fond of the confetti as he was, since their cherub was determinedly throwing handfuls of it at what appeared to be an invisible shielding bubble. None of it was going anywhere near the couple hunkered down at the table. They seemed to be hiding under the charm like most people outside had been hunkered under umbrellas to shield from the cold rain. At least he assumed it was a couple. All he could see from here was the back of a dark, male head. Harry smiled in spite of himself. Cho gave a tentative smile back and his mouth went dry.

Cho finally mentioned Umbridge, and they spent a happy few minutes abusing her and talking about what a horror she was, but soon the subject was exhausted, and Harry was back to staring silently at the couple in the corner, wishing Roger Davies and his date would stop making those slurping noises and come up for air. Digging, searching for something to say, he stared that much harder, willing himself to come up with something fascinating or witty to say. Why couldn't he be pithy and well read and come up with something to talk about?

"I came here last year with Cedric," Cho said softly.

"Oh," Harry said, once again tearing his eyes off the back of the dark head in the corner and back to Cho. She seemed to be expecting more, but Harry could come up with nothing else.

"Did he... well, I've been meaning to ask you for ages, did he mention me at all? Before he died?" Cho's voice seemed high and strained. Harry's insides went ice cold. That was the last thing he wanted to talk about, least of all with Cho.

"Err... no, um, not really. There, uh, there wasn't really time. It all happened so quick..." Harry stammered. To his horror, her eyes were all sparkly again, and she looked ready to cry. He forced himself to stare over her shoulder again, at the cherub futilely throwing handful after handful of confetti at the

couple in the corner who obviously didn't want it anywhere near them or their coffee cups. They seemed to be the only other couple in the shop that wasn't currently following Roger Davies and his blonde companion's lead, snogging or giggling at one another like mad and holding hands. In fact, they seemed to be carrying on a sensible conversation instead. Harry wondered idly how Roger and his friend were able to breathe at all.

Harry turned his attention back to the corner and made himself scrutinize little details, like the fact that the boy was easily a head taller than the boy directly behind him. That his gray cloak was damp and so long it pooled on the floor behind him, around the legs of the chair it was hanging on. That he kept rotating the cup in front of him by the rim, with the tips of his long fingers. That he had casually planted one large, booted foot out in the aisle, as though only one long leg would fit comfortably under what Madam Puddifoot no doubt thought was sweet, dainty, and intimate table. Harry felt a nagging interest in them flitting around at the back of his head, that he couldn't quite shake. Suddenly every detail seemed important. Maybe if he stared hard enough, he could count the number of threads woven into that boy's robes...

"It's just that I thought maybe... maybe you needed to talk about it," she said, dabbing at her eyes with her napkin. "I just wondered if...if he had been better at defense..."

Greatly relieved that Cho hadn't tried to make Cedric's death out to be any fault of his, Harry said, "Not really. I mean... he was really good at it... he made it to the middle of the maze, didn't he? It's ... it's just that if You-Know-Who wants you dead... there's not much you can do..." He trailed off helplessly, but was gratified to see that she seemed to be trying to clean up her wet face with her frilly napkin. His eyes shifted back over to the couple in the corner, the girl, whom he now caught a glimpse of, was talking animatedly to the boy across the table, leaning across to touch his hand, which now rested in the middle of the table, to emphasize a point. He would watch them a bit and give Cho time to compose herself before looking back.

"You wouldn't like to talk about it? What happened?" Cho insisted.

Harry squinted through his glasses at the table in the corner. He had caught a glimpse of the girl, but it couldn't be... they were supposed to be eating an early lunch by now, he thought. "No, no I don't need to talk about it. I mean, I have talked about it some, with Hermione and... and... Let's talk about something else. Did you get to see much Quidditch over the holidays?" Harry asked, desperate now to change the subject.

When the dark headed boy in the corner accidentally nudged his napkin off the table with an elbow and turned slightly to the side, leaning a bit and snatching it with astonishing speed before the napkin was even close to hitting

the floor, Harry no longer doubted he recognized them. That had been Viktor's sharp profile, and that was Hermione in the corner, her normally bushy hair pulled back into a neat plait that had kept him from recognizing her right away. Harry felt himself break into a stupid, relieved grin as Madam Puddifoot approached their table in the corner. Count on the two of them to be practical and decidedly unromantic about confetti-tossing cherubs hovering over their coffee cups. Maybe he could excuse himself to go say hello and beg them to let he and Cho come along wherever they were going next. He was feeling desperate. He was heartened somewhat when Hermione spotted him and gave him a little wave while smiling broadly. He hardly realized that Cho had said something to him. "Hermione," he breathed in his relief. She would be sure to know what to do. He would ask her what he was doing wrong, what he should be doing, he had been a fool not to ask earlier, he...

"What!?" Cho's voice came cold and sharp from across the table.

"Huh?" Harry said, turning back to Cho.

"I *said*, is there someone you would rather be here with? Obviously there *is*!" Cho said in a huff, whirling in her chair. Harry was confused, then slightly relieved. When Cho saw that Hermione was sitting with Viktor, surely she couldn't think he was flirting with Hermione, could she? To his absolute horror, though, when he followed her gaze, Viktor was nowhere to be seen. Hermione gave another cheerful little wave, and another broad grin, and Cho whirled back on him. "I see! So you can talk about Cedric with Hermione Granger, but not me!" she hissed, tears streaming down her cheeks, "Well, I hope you're happy!" She pushed her chair back hard, chair legs scraping noisily on the floorboards.

"It's not like that," Harry insisted, but Cho threw her frilly napkin at him.

"I suppose you like her!" she shouted. Roger Davies and his girlfriend actually pried themselves apart to stare.

"W-well, of c-course I like her, she's my friend...." Harry stuttered.

"And you think she's pretty as well, I suppose!" Cho yelled, planting her hands on her hips. She was getting louder all the time.

"I don't think she's ugly..." Harry floundered.

"Go ahead! Flirt with her! I hope Viktor Krum bashes your face in! And good luck to him at it, too! I thought you of all people would understand! That I need to talk about it! You were with him when he died! You think you're too good for the rest of us! Famous Harry Potter!" Harry sat there, stunned, listening to the bell on the door tinkle forlornly as it shut. Everyone in the place seemed to be staring at him. Looking back to the corner, he saw Hermione

frozen, her mouth a small “O” of surprise, and Viktor crawling from underneath the narrow table, pausing in the middle of handing Madam Puddifoot her quill. Harry couldn’t quite force himself to move, either. Or to shut his eyes on the scene. It was mostly a bizarre tableau of faces, in neat pairs, goggling at him, like he had just grown an extra head.

Rising from the floor, Viktor grabbed his cloak off the chair back, handed some money to the stunned looking proprietress, and he and Hermione walked briskly toward Harry’s table, the two of them simultaneously stunning the determined cherub that tried to follow them up the aisle with the casual air of people who did this sort of thing every day. Harry would have laughed at the absurdity of it all, he thought, staring at the tabletop, if only he could make himself move. He roused a little when Viktor leaned over, put a large hand on his shoulder and shook him gently. “Come on, Harry. You can tell me outside why on earth I am supposed to be bashing your face in,” Viktor said softly near his ear. Numbly, Harry rose and accompanied the two of them out, Viktor shooting one goggling couple such a stern look that they both splashed themselves with coffee in their haste to act casual and disinterested.

“The check,” Harry squeaked, pausing, but Viktor just grabbed his shoulder and steered him the rest of the way out the door.

“I took care of it, I am sure,” Viktor murmured once they were outside. “Now, what was that all about?” he asked gently. The rain was really pelting down now, stinging Harry’s cheeks and his neck, streaking his glasses, but suddenly he didn’t care.

“That was all about me being a berk! A weirdo! An idiot! A gibbering twit! She thinks I like you!” Harry shrieked, feeling hysterical, whirling on a surprised Hermione. “She thinks I was flirting with you! What the hell were you both doing in there anyway? I thought you two were going to lunch!”

“Well, that’s just silly. You don’t like me. And they overbooked at the cafe on account of the holiday. We can’t get in until late. Well, they would have bumped us up the list, if we had asked, I think, but we didn’t think it was fair. They said to come back late, we should be able to get in,” Hermione said calmly.

“And what the hell were you doing under the table when she looked? She thought I was waving at your girlfriend! The whole tea shop thinks I was waving at your girlfriend! They probably think you came out here to snap my neck and bury me for looking at her cross eyed!” Harry couldn’t stop himself shouting. Right now he hated them both for not stopping him making a fool of himself. For not telling him exactly what to do. He wanted to bite and kick and scratch something, he was so angry at himself. He half wished Viktor would bash his face in. He wanted them to scream and shout with him, give him something to be angry at.

“Retrieving a dropped quill,” Viktor replied in maddeningly calm fashion.

“So it didn’t go well...” Hermione began again, in a likewise even tone, as though addressing someone obviously stark raving mad and possibly dangerous. “It was only your first...”

“Didn’t go well? Didn’t go well?! That is the bleeding understatement of the century! It’s like saying Napoleon’s trip to Russia was a bit nippy! Or the Great Wall of China was a weekend remodeling project! Or that Voldemort is not so nice! Didn’t go well! Didn’t go well? Hermione, it was a disaster! And it’s all your stupid fault for smiling and waving at me!” Harry shouted. Hermione’s face crumpled slightly before she bit her lip and recomposed herself. Harry was ashamed of himself immediately, but his anger outstripped his shame for a moment.

Viktor raised a hand, and for a split second, Harry flinched, expecting a blow for hurting Hermione’s feelings with what he had said, for screaming at her and nearly making her cry, but instead, Viktor lightly brushed the rain dampened hair off of Harry’s forehead with his long fingers. It was an oddly tender and unexpected gesture, and Harry was reminded uncomfortably of Anya’s cool white hand on his forehead back in the summer. Now his cheeks burned with shame, instead of anger. “We could both talk to her. Explain,” Viktor offered quietly, dropping his hand back to his side. Harry felt all the anger drain from him, leaving him weirdly limp.

He stared at the ground, then forced himself to answer. “No. No. It was never right anyway. Only reason she agreed to come was to talk about Cedric,” Harry mumbled, surprising even himself. He hadn’t known he was about to say that. He had expected to hear his own voice begging for the two of them to go find Cho and explain. The squeezing panic in his stomach eased. He felt strangely lighter, dismissing the possibility of explaining to Cho.

“Come eat, then. No point starving yourself. Should be able to get in by now,” Viktor said.

“Some Valentine’s date for you two. What a fifth wheel,” Harry said bitterly.

“Frankly, I think I’ve had about all the ‘romance’ I can stand,” Hermione said sourly, looking back at Madam Puddifoot’s. “They have decent coffee, but can you believe that dreadful pink confetti?” she asked Viktor.

“And the frilly napkins? The cherubs?” Viktor countered. They could have been discussing a pit of snakes and lizards from their tone of voice.

“Oh, come on Harry. We can eat just as well with you there. It’s not like you’re keeping us from doing anything. It’s not as though we’re inviting you along on our honeymoon,” Hermione scolded, then ducked her head when she realized what she had said. Harry was quite sure that she had turned several shades of pink by the time she raised her head.

“Besides, I need some more help celebrating. You can raise a toast to anything that gives Umbridge indigestion, right? I would go round up Neville and Ginny and Ron and ... what was her name? Hannah Abbott? I would go round them up if I knew where they were and that they hadn’t eaten yet. I suppose I could go to the post office and owl, if need be. We left Hagrid at The Three Broomsticks. We could go by and collect him,” Viktor said, putting an arm around Hermione’s shoulders and setting off up the sidewalk.

“And what exactly is it that’s giving Umbridge indigestion?” Harry asked without much real interest, shuffling along beside them.

“Oh, I got an owl earlier. Here,” Viktor answered noncommittally.

“So?” Harry countered.

“Oh, Harry, don’t you remember?” Hermione prompted. “Three weeks at the latest?”

“Viktor... you heard back? From your exam?” Harry asked, remembering.

“Even Umbridge has to refer to me as Professor from now on. She would sooner eat that horrible hat she wore in here, but she has to do it,” Viktor replied, grin spreading across his face. “Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge said so. Look, we will go by and get Hagrid, you see if you can get all those people I mentioned, and we will go back to the cafe. Tell them I will pay.”

“But why all of them?” Harry asked.

“Neville was the most complicated logic problem I ever handled in school, Ginny is Hermione’s friend, you and Ron I think would be obvious, and unless Ron has made the colossal mistake of waving at another pretty girl, I assume Hannah Abbott is still with him. And if it were not for Hagrid, I would not be in any shape to do much of anything. I guess I owe Dumbledore and Pomfrey something as well, since they are not here. And Hagrid took care of Ivan and Natasha when I could not. I owe him a lunch. Besides, Hagrid promised to buy me a drink when I graduated. Not one of those bucket sized tankards, I hope, but I am collecting. I would feed Fred and George, but I saw them earlier with what looked like a ton of empty chocolate frog wrappers and these huge sandwiches and two girls, so I doubt they want either lunch or company,” Viktor explained. “Give you twenty-five minutes, round them up however you like and

then you can come to the inn and get the three of us.”

“Oh, all right,” Harry said reluctantly, scuffing a foot and setting off toward the post office.

“Why twenty-five minutes? He could do it in five,” Hermione asked, after they rounded the corner.

“Gives him twenty to pout, stomp, kick, whatever it takes to get over it and get it out of his system,” Viktor replied.

“Get over what exactly?”

“Being embarrassed. Being mad at everything and everybody. Picking the wrong girl or the wrong time, or both. Whatever it was.”

“I still say she’s nice. She’s just confused. And a little insecure,” Hermione said firmly.

“We all are. And I did not say she was not nice. Let us just say apparently she jumps to conclusions. And has a violent streak. Shame on her for hoping I would bash Harry’s face in. Like you could not do it yourself,” Viktor said in mock indignation.

“You! Good grief, Harry and Ron are both quite dense when it comes to girls. You should have heard them last year, going on and on about how they didn’t want to get stuck with ‘trolls’ as dates for the Yule Ball. You would think the only thing that matters to them is looks. As long as she looks alright, she can have the personality and intellect of a bed post. Cho is pretty enough, I don’t know much about her otherwise. Nice enough, I suppose. I mean, all Harry had to do was tell her she looked pretty and build her up some. Talk her up a bit and tell her he didn’t like me, go on and on about how hideous I am and how bushy my hair is, all that rot. Harry and Ron think I’m one of the guys, I just happen to sleep in a different dorm anyway. Besides, you have to remember she lost her boyfriend last year. She’s probably feeling guilty for liking Harry. And a bit lost. She may want to find out from Harry what Cedric thought of her and...”

“Is there some sort of secret handbook you females get that we do not know about? With all this in it? And why do so many girls have to be treated like they are the only pretty girl on the planet? Besides, she should remember Harry is the one who had to watch him die. And haul what was left of him back. Plenty of blame to go around if you ask me. But by any standard, that did not go well. Have a little patience. Harry and Ron will get over that, some day. You can only live on marshmallows so long,” Viktor said.

“Suppose you have a point. But how did marshmallows suddenly come



into it?" Hermione asked.

"I probably should not tell you this close to lunch, but to make a long story short, there was this boy in our dorm our first year there who was homesick, so he more or less refused to eat anything at school but these marshmallows his parents kept sending him. Ate them by the kilo. You can only keep that up so long before you end up hideously sick. I will skip the details, but about a week in, he got so sick, it immediately became the stuff of school legend. I saw it, and I still do not believe it. Cured him of ever eating marshmallows again. I used to tell Alexei the same thing. You could only live on those girls who were all air and sugar so long before you have to have some real substance," Viktor said, shaking his head.

"How long did it take you then?" Hermione said mischievously.

"I never liked marshmallows, remember? It took Alexei practically being hit over the head for seven years by both me and Elena, but he eventually decided he didn't like marshmallows either," Viktor replied emphatically.

"Two more years of this, then? Is that what it's going to take before they grow up?" Hermione said with a sigh.

"No, I get the feeling Harry might have just caught on. I bet Ron's not as slow as Alexei either. Frankly, I think Alexei was deliberately slow," he added, opening the door to the inn.

"How do you know Cho is a marshmallow?" Hermione asked.

"I do not. But Harry treated her like one. I tried to talk him into talking to her first. But does he listen to the one piece of advice I can offer? No. I tried to get him to talk to you. Did he? No. Harry is a quick study. I bet he will not make those mistakes again. I bet he picks more wisely next time. And bothers using his mouth. And his head," Viktor said, folding both of their cloaks over his arm.

"Hermione! Viktor! C'mon over 'ere! What're the two o' ye doin' back in 'ere anyway?" Hagrid called soon after they had made it inside.

"Actually, I came to find out if you had eaten lunch yet. And you owe me something," Viktor said.

"Nope. I 'aven' eaten yet. Jus' abou' to order somethin'. An' wha' exac'ly do I owe ye?" Hagrid asked puzzled.

"If you can hold on another fifteen minutes or so, come to lunch with us over at the cafe. And you owe me a drink," Viktor said with a grin.

Hagrid broke into a broad smile as it dawned on him. "Ye heard!" he bellowed, jumping up and grabbing Viktor in an embrace, pounding him on the back. "I'm so proud!" Even as solid as Viktor was, he swayed a bit when Hagrid let go. Hermione had to suppress a giggle when she remembered Hagrid lecturing Harry about going off into the woods with 'ruddy Krum'. "Wha' woul' ye like?"

"I think a butterbeer would be fine. To be honest, most anything stronger puts me under the table. I am a total lightweight. Alexei thought it was funny that one shot of vodka could put me out," Viktor said, pulling Hermione's chair out. "Of course, when he drank, he called that a shot," Viktor added, holding his finger and thumb a good four inches apart.

"And what'll our Hermione have?" Hagrid asked.

"Oh, I'll pass for now, thanks," she replied. "We just came from Madam Puddifoot's anyway."

While Harry wasn't exactly lively during the celebration lunch, he did seem considerably less cloudy than he had earlier. He even joined in almost as much as he would have otherwise by the time they had finished lunch and moved on to dessert. By the return to Hogwarts that evening, Hermione thought he looked more resigned, maybe even relieved.

"Thank you for lunch. And the coffee. Even if it did get us yelled at," Hermione said softly in the hall outside Viktor's door. "And for the emergency Harry extraction. I know that wasn't what you planned to do today, feeding a whole mess of Gryffindors and watching Harry pitch a fit. You think she would ever want to go out again?"

"Either that or let him explode. We did the exact same thing we planned, there were just a lot more people at the table. Getting coffee was a little more excitement than I needed, but no one can accuse the two of us of being dull, exactly. And how would I know what she wants? You are the one with the handbook, remember? Maybe...if she gets past Harry being the last one to see Cedric alive. If she gets past him being The Boy Who Lived. And maybe if Harry stops seeing her as this impossibly perfect girl. They need to realize there is a real person on the other end, imperfections, scars, war wounds and all. She cannot expect him to forget that there are any other females in the world, especially one of his best friends, and spend all his time building her up about what a cute, perfect little thing she is and how every other girl is hideous compared to her."

"Girls need to hear that sort of thing," Hermione said matter-of-factly.

“Exactly. Little girls do. Real women do not need to hear others torn down to build themselves up. I do not recall you complaining or tossing any napkins my way when I described Elena as being beautiful,” Viktor said, raising his eyebrows.

“She’s your friend. Of course you would think she’s beautiful,” Hermione countered.

“So Cho should haff no problem when Harry does not find you hideous. Or because you wave at him. Or smile at him,” Viktor argued.

“Says the man who cornered Harry last year and asked if there was anything between us,” Hermione said with a smirk.

“You did talk about him an awful lot. I couldn’t exactly ask you, now could I? Not particularly gentlemanly to ask a girl if she has more than friendly feelings for that boy she talks about all the time. Besides, I thought maybe you just were not telling me because you thought it might hurt my feelings. Probably would haff asked anyway, though, if I had known you better. Anyway, do not think I blame the whole thing on her, either. He cannot expect her to forget someone she cared for just because he would rather forget about it. I imagine she wonders what happened. Maybe she thinks she loved Diggory. Maybe she did. Widows at least get some sympathy. Do you see anyone giving her any credit for her loss? At the very least, she lost a friend, Hermione. I understand somewhat why she would want to talk about it, but frankly, I understand Harry’s position better. Because I haff been there. And by the way, I do not ever want to hear you use the word ‘hideous’ to describe yourself from now on, much less encourage Harry to describe you that way,” Viktor scolded.

“For someone who doesn’t know anything about girls, you sure do seem to have all the answers about them,” Hermione said.

“No. I wish I did. But I know what it is like to not want to talk about something. No one can force it out of you until you are ready. And what it is like to be mad at most of the world,” Viktor added.

“Grieving. Guilt,” Hermione offered.

“And growing pains. Harry has carried a lot on some pretty narrow shoulders so far. Finding out a girl he liked is not as perfect as he imagined should be fairly minor in the long run,” Viktor said, gathering up her hands in his own.

“He thought she was the right one, though,” she said with a touch of disappointment in her voice.

“The right one will be patient enough. Took me a lot of years to spill it, Hermione. I had to haff the right person to tell. Maybe Cho is not the right person for Harry. Maybe it is just not the right time. Who knows?” he said with a small shrug.

“Who knows,” Hermione echoed. They stood for a long moment in the silence and shadows of the hall before he inclined his head to hers, his right hand spread and braced between her shoulder blades, left curled around her hip as they kissed goodnight. Wordlessly he escorted her back to the corner of the hall containing the Fat Lady and the entrance to the common room. Though they parted at the corner, he stood and watched until she had climbed through the portrait hole, still feeling the warmth of his hand on her back.

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## Chapter 77

Harry studied Hermione’s bushy head over the top of her Defense Against the Dark Arts book. How she could stand to read all this rot in one sitting, he would never know. She actually looked a little lonely sitting there with no one beside her. Viktor was getting back late this evening from a match and probably a visit home, so she was terrorizing Ron about quizzing her, and he was steadfastly refusing. Funny how he had begun thinking of Viktor and Hermione as a unit. Several days ago, before the disaster at Madam Puddifoot’s, he would have thought he would never sleep again. Now, he felt bone tired and weary, like he could sleep forever. For the last few nights, he had been retreating into that blessed dream, that voice. It had returned stronger than ever. “I’m going to bed,” Harry said, rising from the table in the common room and trudging up the stairs. “You two can do homework on your own, can’t you?” he added in a weary voice.

“Just have to finish reading this chapter,” Ron said, stifling a yawn with the back of his hand.

“Me too,” Hermione added, shifting in her squashy armchair, rousing Crookshanks a little.

Settling into bed, Harry soon fell asleep. Once more, he found himself on the path in the forest, that beautiful voice singing, calling. He was walking across the lawn, just a little more, just a little bit further, and he would be there...

Hermione tossed in the chair as that horrid screeching echoed across the lawn again. Then she became aware of a furry paw swatting at her face. She awoke with a start, to find herself in the common room, Crookshanks on top of her, Ron mumbling to himself in the armchair across from her. “Ron!” she hissed, and he jumped, his eyes flying open. Crookshanks leapt off onto the floor.

“Wha? What’s happened? I was having that nice singing dream again. Why’s the portrait hole open?” he asked sleepily.

“Open? What do you mean, open?” Hermione asked irritably, rubbing her eyes.

“S’open,” Ron said, stifling another yawn.

Hermione leapt up from her chair, grabbing Ron by the arm, and ran to the portrait hole. In the hallway, she saw Harry, in his pyjamas, headed toward the staircase. She lunged at his arm, managing to grab it and swing him around, head him back up the hall instead, still plodding steadily along, eyes firmly shut. “Harry! Harry! Wake up! Wake up! You’re in the hallway!” she whispered loudly. Ron flanked him on the other side and took his other arm. She shook him hard when she heard footsteps, and froze when she realized they had come to a stop. Surely it was Filch. They were already almost at the bend in the hall. There was nowhere to hide. She cringed and waited for the tirade to begin.

“What are all three of you doing out here?” came Viktor’s soft voice from the corner of the hall. He was standing there, wand drawn, in his dressing gown and bare feet.

“It’s Harry, he’s ...” Ron began.

“...been sleepwalking again?” Viktor supplied. Harry finally blinked awake, Ron and Hermione each clutching an arm, looking rather dazed.

“The singing...” Harry murmured sleepily.

A plaintive meow cut through the silence of the hall. “Please tell me that was Crookshanks,” Viktor whispered. Hermione shook her head. “Mrs. Norris then. Run, get in my room, it is closer, I head Filch off,” Viktor whispered urgently, then sprinted off toward the common room drawing his wand to shut the door to the common room. Mrs. Norris was already sniffing the floor beneath the closed portrait hole and the Fat Lady when he slowed to a walk. Filch was rounding the corner from the steps, carrying his lantern.

“Up kind of late, aren’t you?” Filch said, raising his lantern and studying Viktor’s face.

“Walking in the halls,” Viktor said as casually as he could. No point trying to lie by saying he couldn’t sleep. The black smudges under his eyes would probably give it away, even if he were a better liar. Mrs. Norris was beginning to look curiously up the hall behind him, and soon made a beeline for the other end. Viktor just managed to scoop her up before she got past him. She gave a

slightly indignant yowl before he could gather her wriggling form up against his chest and give her a scratch behind the ears. Seemingly in spite of herself, Mrs. Norris gave a loud purr.

"I always think you're a student out when they shouldn't be," Filch said quietly. "Evidently Mrs. Norris does too. She came up these stairs lickety-split. Thought I was going to hand out some detentions," he added.

"You make it sound like you are disappointed," Viktor said in a light tone.

"Detentions are alright," Filch grunted, "but I really ought to be given the authority to whip 'em. That would keep 'em in line, that would. Umbridge agrees. Fine woman, that Dolores Umbridge. Knows how to run a tight ship," Filch said admiringly.

"I bet she does," Viktor replied, setting Mrs. Norris back down, trying to hide the look of distaste on his face. That phrase always reminded him unpleasantly of Karkaroff, for some reason. She immediately ran off toward his quarters and Viktor set off at a brisk pace after her, Filch following. "Slave ship," he muttered under his breath to himself. Viktor's heart lurched in his chest when he rounded the far corner and saw Mrs. Norris poking her nose at the opening beneath his door, mewling loudly. They had better be hidden when I open...

"Awful interested in your door, Mrs. Norris is," Filch said, and Viktor froze with his hand on the knob. "Must be them dogs, worrying her," he added, gathering her up himself, and Viktor relaxed.

"She need not worry about my dogs as long as she behaves herself around them and me. They are used to cats. Goodnight," he said, shutting the door swiftly behind him. Harry, Ron and Hermione were flattened to the wall, breath held, eyes screwed tightly shut, where they would be hidden by the open door. Viktor stood for a long moment, running a hand through his hair, seemingly searching for words. "You three are going to get me fired yet! Filch would haff gone straight to Umbridge! No wonder I get heada..." Viktor began, but was interrupted by a pounding knock on the door.

"Expecting someone?" Hermione whispered, eyes wide. She chided herself for the ridiculous question. It was obvious he had been in bed already.

"No. Probably Filch back wondering why I am talking to myself! Get in the cupboard, no noise, I mean it! I may haff to let him in!" Viktor whispered back. Hidden in the large cupboard, among robes and cloaks, Harry found he could see through the opening between the doors. Evidently, Hermione and Ron could see through the folding portion of each door, where the hinges joined, judging by their rapt attention and the awkward tilt of their heads.

"I trust you're not busy at the moment," came a familiar, oily voice, and Harry saw Snape sweep in, his black robes swirling behind him.

"Well, I was about to go to bed, but I suppose I might haff a minute," Viktor replied calmly, sitting down in one of the armchairs. "Haff a seat. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Cut out the pleasantries. You know why I'm here as well as I do. I didn't give you any warning because I didn't want you to prepare. I want you tired. I won't have you blocking me," Snape said sourly.

"So maybe you should haff asked permission the first time. Do you usually go around practicing your Legilimency on people without asking, or just me?" Viktor asked with raised eyebrows.

"I was well advised to. You admitted it yourself. I had every right to be suspicious," Snape replied.

"Still, you could haff asked. Dumbledore thought it was a bit much. Especially since I let you take a good look at my arm," Viktor said evenly.

"You must have been a decent student at Durmstrang. You blocked me completely when I didn't warn you," Snape admitted grudgingly.

"Fair enough at Occlumency. Igor thought I was a tough nut to crack, anyway. He got little out of me when he tried. Go ahead. I haff nothing to hide. Poke around at will and get it over with," Viktor said tiredly.

"Put your wand down first. I don't want you accidentally hexing me," Snape said, crossing his arms, still standing over Viktor.

"Alright. Haff it your way," Viktor said, crossing the room to lay his wand on the fireside table, then returning to the chair and sprawling in it comfortably. A low growl nearby nearly made Harry leap out of the cupboard, until he reminded himself that it was probably one of the dogs. Viktor's head turned to the corner near the fireplace. "Oh. Permit me to put Ivan and Natasha in the other room. Or they will be gnawing your ankles in a bit. They think you are being a little hostile," Viktor added, and Harry could soon see him crossing the den area to put Ivan and Natasha, guided none too willingly by his hands on their collars, into the bedroom, shutting the door behind. Harry could still hear the occasional growl from behind the door.

"Now then. One...two...three...*Legilimens!*" Snape said in a strong voice, and Harry felt a bit weak in the knees. Harry winced as he thought of his own sessions with Snape, the surfacing memories, the pain in his head, the lightheadedness, the feverish way he felt afterwards. He wondered what Snape

could be doing to Viktor, what he could be making him relive, when Viktor leaned forward slightly in the chair.

“Are you sure you’re doing anything?” came Viktor’s voice. He sounded genuinely puzzled, not as though he were fighting to fend off Snape’s advances.

“You’re resisting. *Legilimens!*” Snape spat. After a long pause, Viktor leaned back again in the chair. “*Legilimens! Legilimens! Legilimens!*” Snape shouted, sounding more frantic. “*Legilimens!*” he said once more, staggering back slightly, as though he had been shoved.

“Are you alright?” Viktor asked. Harry thought there was some real surprise and concern in his voice. Harry was secretly a little happy to see Snape run full on into a brick wall, after all of Snape’s taunting in their sessions.

“You are resisting. I’m not getting anything,” Snape said in an accusing tone.

“I swear I am not,” Viktor said plainly.

“Maybe it’s not conscious, but you are,” Snape argued.

“Fine then. What can I do to make it easier?” Viktor offered.

“Get emotional. It’s harder to block when you are experiencing an emotion,” Snape said coldly.

“Happy? Sad? What do you prefer?” Viktor asked, beginning to sound exasperated.

“Actually another emotion works best,” Snape replied, fingering his wand. Harry heard both Ron and Hermione suck in their breath when Snape suddenly cocked his right arm back, slapping Viktor hard across the side of the face, snapping his head around. Hermione’s surprised squeak was thankfully drowned out in the noise of the slap. “*Legilimens!*” Harry had certainly never been slapped by Snape during their sessions. No matter how much Snape hated him, he had never raised his hand to him. Harry half expected Viktor to go retrieve his wand and start in on cursing Snape with most of the contents of his thesis, but he remained in the chair.

Viktor glared up at him from the chair. “Haff you completely lost your mind?” There was only the slightest edge of anger in the question. Snape’s only response was to draw back and deliver another cracking blow, even harder. Viktor leapt up out of the chair, grabbing him by the robes, easily bulldozing him backwards into the wall with a soft thump, holding him there with his left forearm across Snape’s neck, his elbow pinning Snape’s forearm against the wall so he



could not use his wand. Harry almost felt sorry for him, pinned there, Viktor glaring at him like he wanted to snap his neck. Almost. "If you ever hit me again, so help me, I will put your teeth out the back of your head," Viktor said through gritted teeth, shaking Snape slightly by the robes he had clutched in his right fist. Harry could see the angry red marks where Snape's hand and fingers had been even now.

"So you're not doing it consciously then. You were really angry just now, and I still got nothing," Snape said softly, and Viktor slowly lowered his arm and let go of his robes. His expression did not change.

"I see why you wanted me to put my wand down. I would haff skewered you with it," Viktor muttered as Snape readjusted and smoothed his robes.

"Igor must have taught you well," Snape said finally, sinking into the other chair. Now Viktor was towering over him, standing over him.

"What he taught me, he taught well enough, I suppose," Viktor said with a scowl. "What? You think he slapped me around? I would haff put his head through a wall, and he knew it. I give Igor credit. He knew when to stop. Who he could hit and get away with it. Fool though he was about some things, he learned pretty quickly that beating me was not ever going to be a good use of his time."

"You were his prize pupil. I assumed you would be fonder of him," Snape sneered.

"You were mistaken. I hated him. I made the best of the situation because I had nowhere else to go, but I hated him. And do not fool yourself. By the time his mark came back, he hated me too. I did not do what he wanted, so he hated me more and more the longer he knew me. He loved me in public because he had to. But deep down, in the end, unless I gave in, I was worthless to him. Do you forget that in the end he was going to quite happily get rid of me? Must be a common teaching technique amongst you lot, hating your students," Viktor said, continuing to glare at him.

"I don't hate my students," Snape said defensively

"I beg to differ. I could name a few. Potter is just the worst case. Not just for show, is it? I would like to believe it is, but it is not. All Longbottom needs is a bit of encouragement, and you will not even do that. And why do I figure there is no love lost between the two of us, even before tonight? What, when you look at me, I remind you too much of Igor? Does that remind you of what you used to be? Remind you of the good old days, when you went out in robes and masks together?" Viktor asked in a strained voice.

“Nonsense,” Snape spat. “You should be happy to note you don’t remind me of Igor at all. I don’t tend to think of you as just his student and you act too decent for me to believe you were ever under his influence too much, but it pays to be cautious.”

“Longbottom. His parents. That might haff been you that did that, under other circumstances, if you had made a different decision. Is that it? Does he make you feel guilty?” Viktor turned so that his back faced the cupboard, Harry could only tell that his shoulders slumped and his head hung, as though he were exhausted. “I would say the same about Harry, but you hated his father a long time before you even considered donning that mask,” Viktor said softly. There was a heaviness in Viktor’s voice that made him sound worn down.

“I don’t know who you’ve been talking to, but that’s ridiculous,” Snape spluttered.

“You told him. The night Sirius Black got away. You admitted you hated James Potter. Not that you didn’t haff a good reason, since he humiliated you and might haff let you get killed if it would not haff gotten him in trouble, but he grew up after that. They all did. You might want to try it. I hope we haff all improved greatly since we were fifteen,” Viktor said in a reproachful manner.

“Igor was right about you, wasn’t he?” Snape whispered, going paler than usual. “You... you’ve been poking around in my memories!” Snape accused.

Judging by his shoulders, Harry thought Viktor took a deep breath before continuing. “Unlike you, I did not do it on purpose. It just happened. It comes screaming off of you. The hate. That night in the infirmary. I mentioned the name Potter and it hit me in the face. Your memories. You opened yourself up when you tried prodding around in my head. Never advance without blocking, another one of those things they teach pretty well at Durmstrang. In physical and magical self-defense. No Legilimency without Occlumency even if you think your opponent knows nothing about it. It is not a natural thing to haff someone else inside your head. Most people fight back. You should know better, even if you did go to Hogwarts. I know about exam day, Snape. How many days like that over the years? How many petty tortures before you started hating him?” Once again, Harry felt as though he were straining to pick up Viktor’s low words. They threatened to blend together into an indistinguishable murmur.

“You know nothing about what it was like!” Snape bellowed, and Harry jumped. “James Potter was an arrogant, self-righteous swaggering athlete who thought he was owed the world! That he owned it! And Black and Lupin were every bit as bad as he was! He thought he was better than everyone else! They all did!”

“Ah. So that is it, is it? I remind you a bit of James Potter because I am

an athlete. All athletes must be just like him, is that it? Things seem to come so easy to some people. Athletes. The attractive people. Some kind of unspoken election, is it not? Groups move like schools of fish. All of one mind, even though they never talk about it out loud. They get together and elect some of us kings, some of us the court jesters. The popular, the pretty, the jocks, the bookworms, we all get labels. If it is any consolation, I do not understand it either. It would be easy to buy into other people's opinions of you. Good or bad. Best to form your own opinion," Viktor said. Harry was reminded of the hushed tone people used in churches and at funerals.

"I admit you don't have the fat head he did. But then, few people could and live. It's a wonder he could get his broom off the ground," Snape said, grinding his teeth.

"I saw Potter's face. And hers. You hated the two of them the worst, evidently. I didn't even get Black, Lupin, Pettigrew. Harry reminds you of James Potter because he looks too much like him. He is good on a broom. People treat him like he is something special. But Harry is not James. Not when he was fifteen, not when he was an adult. They did not even get to raise him. Harry is just Harry, no matter who he looks like. He's not her, either. He has her eyes. Which did you hate her for first? For being what she was, or for haffing pity on you? She could not help what family she was born into any more than you could," Viktor said in a voice so soft that Harry had to strain to hear at all. "I could haff done it too, you know. Hated. Hated so much that my world shrank to just that one thing. You might be surprised how much we haff in common. Or you and Black, for that matter."

"Don't compare me to him! Like you would know. Coddled and rich even in school," Snape muttered. "What would you know about it? No one can touch your kind, can they? You might not have been the incredible jerk to everyone else that Potter was, but I guarantee you were just as protected! Special treatment even now! Know all about life at nineteen, do you? Lecture me about it, would you? Hardly! I bet you never had a hardship in your life! I'm wasting my time here. You will tell no one about what you saw!" Snape roared, then jumped up out of the chair and headed for the door. He paused with his hand on the knob when Viktor spoke.

"Tell Dumbledore I still give my permission if he thinks it is necessary. He can start preparing. Hundreds against one. Or at least three to one. Even at one to one, it has to be done. But tell him I haff a condition. I get to bring them. I deserve that. And the meeting gets guests. Or I do not talk. I still think being kept in the dark is no good. He will know what I mean," Viktor said without moving. In a few moments, he walked to the door and Harry heard the soft click of the lock. The three of them burst out of the tight, stuffy cupboard, wobbling on unsteady legs. Viktor flopped into one of the armchairs weakly. "Wait a few minutes, then I escort you back to bed. It is two in the morning, and if there is

any luck in the world, Filch is already in bed and Mrs. Norris is with him and Snape is so mad at me he will not hang around," Viktor said, rubbing at his eyes.

"What was all that about just now? With Snape? And what are you giving Dumbledore permission to do?" Harry demanded, hands on his hips.

"That business with Snape is a load of things I do not have the right to know, and neither do you, and the rest of it, I am not going into now. It is not my place to tell Snape's secrets. You will probably find out soon enough what I have given Dumbledore permission to do," Viktor replied with a sigh. "I am tired. Let me have some rest tonight." There was a significant pause while he and Harry stared one another down. "You promised you would tell me when you found out things about me!" Harry said accusingly. "What did you see?"

"Something I should not have. And it is not so much about you. That it is Snape's business to tell, not mine," Viktor said in a tone that brooked no argument.

"What did you see? Why does he hate my father so much?" Harry insisted.

"Let us just say your father and his friends seem to have improved a lot when they grew up, like most of us do. They did not treat some people very well. Anything more would be Snape's place to tell. What were you dreaming about?" Viktor asked, narrowing his eyes and studying Harry.

Harry felt pinned to the wall by that piercing gaze, and swallowed hard. "I don't remember," he lied, not quite sure why.

"You don't remember," Viktor said flatly. There was disbelief in his voice. "It got you out of bed, and you don't remember what you were dreaming. Well, then, like Snape said, I am wasting my time asking. Come on, back to the common room," he ordered.

"I need to talk to you. Alone," Hermione said softly.

"Then do it in the hall next to the Fat Lady. Not in here. Look, I promised not to be alone in here with you after hours. I intend to keep that promise. If I get let go, I would rather it be for me talking to you in the hall," Viktor said tiredly, opening the door and scouting the hallways. In a few moments, he came back to collect them. "Mugwump," he said to the Fat Lady, who started awake and fixed them all with a beady glare. She opened her mouth and Hermione expected a raking like Mrs. Weasley had admitted she got years ago for coming in late, but Viktor cut her off with a quick, "Save the lecture. We know what time it is. Let these two in, and I will prop the portrait. We will be over there, in full view, talking. Just talking. Go back to sleep or not, I do not care." The Fat Lady

harrumphed indignantly, but her eyes were closed again by the time Viktor stuck his wand between the jamb and the frame, and they settled against the opposite wall, across the hall.

“You can’t,” she said.

“Cannot what?”

“Give him permission. To do it,” Hermione said, looking up at him

“I just did. You saw. The other does not work. Although I do not know why he got nothing at all that time. I was not doing anything. You trust Dumbledore. You three might be in danger, maybe more than you three. It could be the whole school,” Viktor reminded her quietly.

“But you’re still risking... you know what you’re risking. It’s not worth it,” she argued. “And why all of us? Ron and I aren’t involved.”

“Neither was Cedric Diggory until he died,” he countered.

“I’m not ever going home alone again, am I?” she replied, finally saying it out loud. She had wondered about it ever since Christmas.

“Not while this is going on. Not if I can help it,” he said, brow furrowed.

“I’m just his friend. What would they want with me?” Hermione said weakly.

“Diggory died for less,” he chided gently.

“You think the sleepwalking is why Dumbledore suggested the Occlumency lessons?” she asked, seeing that it was useless to argue further. Hermione wasn’t sure she wanted to be there when he did it.

“Who do you think recommended them in the first place? I do not like it that he cannot remember what he dreams. Or will not tell them. I had a talk in the headmaster’s office after I caught him out in the hall the first time,” Viktor said, looking the open space across the hall. He rubbed his fingers over his temple.

“You’ve been having headaches too?”

“Too?” Viktor’s head whipped back around.

“In the room, you were about to say something about us giving you headaches. Nightmares and headaches. The fun of fifth year. Maybe it never

goes away after fifth year, huh?” she said ruefully. “Ron says he keeps catching Harry out of bed with them. These dreams or nightmares. And sleepwalking. One night he kept mumbling about the lake, Ron said.”

“Nightmares? What kind of nightmares do you get?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Oh, standard fare, I guess. O.W.L.s, Voldemort, Death Eaters, Harry ending up dead, Ron ending up dead, you ending up dead, all of us dead, and this one really weird one where all I hear is screeching,” she said bitterly.

Viktor narrowed his eyes further for a moment. “And you’re on the lawn? Headed toward the lake?”

“Sorry, have I told you this before?” Hermione asked.

“No, but I haff had one like it. And my head always kills me afterwards, too. Wonder what it means? Wait a minute... what did Harry say when he woke up?” Viktor said, looking at her intently.

“Something about singing, I think,” Hermione answered.

“Singing...I thought maybe he said screeching...” Viktor said, sounding disappointed, shaking his head.

“Wait a minute! Ron too! When I woke him up, he said he was having that nice singing dream again,” she said, looking up at him.

“Wonder if we are all haffing similar dreams. Where does yours start?” Viktor asked.

“Forbidden Forest,” Hermione answered.

“Foggy?” he asked.

“And kind of warm?” she returned, nodding.

“But no singing for you and me. Screeching, with us. Maybe it’s not the same dream after all.”

“But if Ron and Harry are seeing the same thing we are, maybe we *are* all hearing the same thing. Look, I’ll ask Ron later. Could it be something like a thestral? Instead of looking different to different people, it sounds different?” Hermione asked, cocking her head to the side as she considered the question.

“You clever, clever girl! Look, maybe now, we get some answers. In the

meantime, let me worry about what I haff agreed to and try not to worry too much about Harry or me. There is an alarm on the portrait hole. Wakes me up if he gets out. Harry just needs to buckle down for Snape and Snape has to get over himself. Maybe I need to read up on what might make that noise. Things that sound different to different people. Maybe it has something to do with what the Guardian said. Maybe nothing, for all I know. But it is something to do. Some little something. Now, get some sleep," he said in a rush, putting his hands on either side of her face and planting a quick kiss on her forehead. He retrieved his wand and held the portrait open for her to step in, then headed back toward his quarters along the dark hallway.

It only nagged at him slightly that there were enough books in the library to keep a person busy for months, trying to find out what he and Hermione were hearing that could sound like singing to Harry and Ron. Something that could keep drawing Harry out of bed that way. The word 'sirens' kept nudging at the edge of his consciousness, but the merpeople in the lake had never done anything like that before, he thought, sprawling on the bed without bothering to pull the covers down. He didn't even complain when Ivan and Natasha settled into the empty spots. No guarantee Ron and Harry were having the same dream. No guarantee he and Hermione were even having the same dream, but it was something to do.

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## Chapter 78

The Occlumency lessons with Snape continued to be just as horrid as Harry had imagined, and possibly even worse than he could have imagined. He was more and more glad for the days when he walked into Potions to find Viktor at the front, rather than Snape glaring at him. The prospect of the O.W.L.s seemed like a distant nightmare, looming far off in the future, though Hermione or one of the professors seemed to bring them up almost daily. The sick feeling he had after his disastrous date with Cho had faded a bit, and when he saw her in the hallways, his stomach did only a weak wobble, now. Try as he might, he couldn't get Viktor to slip and tell him about what he had seen in Snape's memories. The curiosity was eating him up. And the pensieve that Snape dropped some of his thoughts into before each Occlumency lesson was looking more and more tempting.

He had already tried begging, pleading, cajoling, surprise tactics and direct questioning with Viktor. It all ended up the same. A polite "It is not my place to tell," and that stony expression that meant the matter was closed. Viktor was just as infuriatingly uncooperative about talking as Hermione had been the previous year about her Yule Ball partner. They made a good couple that way, Harry thought ruefully. They could both work for MI6.

Harry was tired. He had spent the night tossing and turning, fighting off a feeling of vague unease, then a dream of wild, uncontrolled joy which was

strangely at odds with his own foul mood. His scar had felt on fire, and he was almost sure it wasn't just a dream. Hermione and Ron had asked him point blank why he was so pale and wan this morning, and he had told them, even though it earned him a lecture from Hermione about how he should practice his Occlumency more. Harry picked at his eggs disconsolately, thinking about his upcoming lesson this evening, shifting the eggs around the plate, not really eating them. Instead, he watched the rather more busy than usual comings and goings at the staff table, as professors went off together in various groups, stringing back at irregular intervals, gathering up others and heading back into the halls. After about twenty minutes of the front table looking more like Grand Central Station, Viktor came back in from the hall and walked over to the Gryffindor table, and came to a stop between Fred and George. "Look, you two would not happen to know what happened to Crabbe, by any chance?" he asked casually, trying not to look at them directly.

"Heard earlier he might've sort of vanished," Fred said, snickering.

"No clue where he's gone, mate. Could be anywhere. And I'm hurt that you automatically suspect us," George added innocently.

Viktor heaved a sigh. "With good reason, I think. And why exactly could he be anywhere? The Gray Lady seems to think he was last seen on the first floor near a certain cabinet with a couple of people with decidedly red hair. I do not want to know if you did it, do not tell me if you did, but at least give me a hint what happened to him so Snape can be pacified. He is all ready to dismantle the castle."

"He met with a tiny accident. Tripped a bit," Fred replied airily.

"And sort of fell headfirst into the Vanishing Cabinet," George said.

"Did he haff help getting into this Vanishing Cabinet? And how did you get away from goon number two and Malfoy? Wait, never mind, do not tell me. Just tell me, did he get a boost?" Viktor asked with a raised brow, looking fixedly at Hermione instead.

"Just a smidgen of one. Not our fault he's that clumsy. Never would have tripped if he didn't have such a big mouth. He kept saying Hagrid was getting the sack and laughing about it. Trelawney, he says she's getting the boot today, and Hagrid's next," Fred said indignantly.

"I only gave him a bit of a shove and Fred sort of put out an ankle for him, and he 'timbered' right into the cabinet. It wasn't really on purpose," George added.

"Nothing for it but to wait until he turns up, then," Viktor said with a shrug.



“Well, you can’t go telling them where he went without telling where you heard,” Hermione said sensibly.

“Suppose I can suggest it as a possibility. Maybe he went in the Vanishing Cabinet. Bet he tripped,” Viktor said in an exasperated voice.

“What about ze Vanishing Cabinet?” came Fleur’s voice. None of them had seen her come up behind Viktor.

“There is a Vanishing Cabinet on the first floor. He went in there. The Gray Lady says she saw him near there. Makes as much sense as anything. Only logical explanation,” Viktor repeated.

“And *why* would ’e do such a thing?” Fleur said in an accusatory tone, folding her arms over her chest and eyeing Fred and George suspiciously.

“How should I know? ’E is not exactly ze brightest in ze pack, now ees ’e?” Viktor mocked, shifting into Fleur’s accent. “Got lost and mistook it for the library door in all likelihood. He rarely sees that up close,” Viktor said in a sour tone.

“Not very concerned about ze students, are we?” Fleur asked, tossing her hair.

“Must be Snape rubbing off on me,” Viktor retorted.

“Oh, I forgot. You only are concerning yourself with certain of ze students. Ze poor workman blames ‘is tools, ze poor teacher blames ‘is students,” Fleur sniffed, shifting her gaze from Harry to Ron to Hermione, and then resting on the twins for a moment..

“Funny, I thought poor teachers, zey told zeir students to just read ze book. Heaven forbid they actually learn how to do something. I can see it now, your top students will become famous Aurors... the first ones in history to haff to tell their opponents, ‘Could you ‘ang on a moment, I just ‘aff to look up zis section on defensive charms and quote you ze theory be’ind it’ or ‘It would be ever so ‘elpful if you would refrain from sucking my soul out for a minute, Monsieur Dementor, I seem to ‘ave misplaced my bookmark’! Or do you think Dolores Umbridge can drown anything nastier than a grindylo in her educational decrees and paperwork? Or maybe she can threaten them with letting Filch horsewhip them? Oh, pardon me, you probably did not understand me, what with my impenetrable accent and all. I meant ‘orzewheep zem,” Viktor shot back, glowering at her. Hermione very nearly coughed up her orange juice and Ron smothered a giggle behind his napkin.

“Blind,” Fleur hissed under her breath. “Blinded by love and sentiment,” Fleur spat. “It is just a matter of time before ze old madman gets put out, and that great stammering oaf as well. Maybe you too. You two Weasleys ‘ad zomething to do with zis, I know! And you are covering up for zem! Troublemakers! I knew I should ‘ave questioned the ghosts myself, not let you volunteer for it! We will never get ze truth out of zem now! And you get out your biggest blinders for ‘Arry Potter! Must protect ‘Arry Potter, even if it means at ze cost of everyone else! Great, untouchable ‘Arry Potter! All of us must throw ourselves in front of the ‘ogwarts Express if it means saving ‘Arry Potter from any discomfort! Give your blood for ‘Arry Potter, because dotty old Dumbledore says so! Paranoid, the lot of you,” Fleur snarled, reaching up and poking a finger into Viktor’s chest for emphasis. Harry, who had, up until this point, been keeping a fairly straight face, very nearly lost control when Viktor leveled a narrow-eyed look at her that made her snatch her finger back as though it had been burned.

Just then the morning owl post arrived, various owls landing on the tables here and there with letters and packages. As it did every morning, the delivery owl dropped off Hermione’s Daily Prophet, she tucked the fee into a pouch on its leg, and took the paper. She opened it up and began skimming the front page. Harry, for his part, found the faceoff far more interesting. “Die for ‘Arry Potter, zen! Die for ‘im!” Fleur said, and Harry went cold. Her face contorted into a look of absolute fury as she said, “Fawn over ‘er zen! Ruin yourself! See if I care! Waste your time fawning over zat bushy haired leetle ...”

The look that Viktor had worn that night with Snape made a reappearance, and Hermione had already blanched and reached up and tugged at Viktor’s wrist when Fleur finished the first sentence, saying in an urgent tone, “Viktor...” Harry suspected Viktor might want to bulldoze Fleur up against something and threaten to put her teeth out the back of her head. Instead he interrupted her before she could finish.

“Shut up, you stupid tart,” Viktor said coldly. Hermione tugged that much harder, as though she were working a bell pull. Viktor stood there as though he hadn’t noticed.

“You will be sorry you ever said zat,” Fleur replied, narrowing her eyes.

“Why? Going to run and tattle on me to Umbridge?” Viktor asked, curling his lip as though the name itself was bitter.

“You and your filthy ...” Fleur muttered, glaring at Hermione, but Viktor cut her off again, Hermione yanking at his wrist and repeating his name the whole while.

“Take that attitude somewhere that someone still gives a damn,” he snarled, “Or better yet, shove it up your...”

“Viktor...for God’s sake, look at this,” Hermione pleaded, shoving the paper over toward him. Viktor finally turned, took one look at her face and snatched the paper. Suddenly, he went nearly as pale as Hermione.

“Paranoid, eh?” he said softly. “I suppose this is our imagination?” Viktor added, holding the paper up in front of Fleur. Her eyes went wide, then she flushed. “Your precious Ministry confirms it.” Fleur glared at him once more, then turned on her heel and stalked off. “I need to go talk to Snape, then Dumbledore. Assure him Crabbe will show up sooner or later, then break this to Dumbledore, if he does not already know, though I imagine he does. Probably did before the Prophet,” Viktor said, tossing down the paper and striding off between the tables at a fast walk.

Harry looked at Hermione, puzzled. “Well, now I suppose you know what made him so happy,” Hermione said flatly. Harry turned to the paper on the table. It had fallen so that all he could see was the headline. **MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN.** It was the talk of the halls everywhere Harry went all day. Twelve Death Eaters, on the loose. It was all he could think about, until his Occlumency lesson with Snape. When they had come and fetched Snape, to get Crabbe out of the toilet upstairs, Harry could not keep himself away from the pensieve. He would later wish he could have, and Snape catching him at it was only a small portion of the reason why.

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## Chapter 79

Harry didn’t stop running until he had put three floors between himself and Snape’s office. Then he leaned against the wall, panting and rubbing his bruised arm. Snape had been right. What he had seen in the pensieve ... James Potter had been every bit as awful as Snape had always told him. He wandered the halls in a daze, his stomach seeming to drag along somewhere around the soles of his sneakers, until he had wasted enough time. By now, the match would be in full swing, and he could only hope that Viktor, Hermione and Ron were all at it with the rest of Gryffindor. Instead, the common room was deserted except for Hermione, Viktor and Ron, all waiting for him to get back from his lesson. Nearly everyone else on the grounds was at the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff Quidditch match. Except the three people he absolutely, positively did not want to talk to right now.

Stepping through the portrait hole, he ducked his head and tried to charge for the staircase to the dorm, but Hermione’s voice stopped him. “Harry? Look, have you been having this singing dream?” Harry stood stock still for a moment.

“What?”

“Have you been having this singing dream?” Hermione repeated. Harry

forced himself to turn and face Hermione and Viktor in the corner. "Ron has," she added.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry said.

She and Viktor exchanged a sidelong glance at one another that reminded him infuriatingly of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, when they were questioning the twins and they protested their doubtful innocence. They didn't believe him. The fact that he was lying hardly softened the realization that they did not trust his word. Hermione stood and planted her hands on her hips. "Harry," she said warningly. "You mumbled something about singing. When you were sleepwalking. I heard you."

"Me too," said Ron.

"Why are you all so nosy about my dream?" Harry snapped peevishly.

"Because it is not just yours," Viktor said quietly, picking at a thread at his knee. "We are all having it."

"What? The entire school? You think the entire school is having the same dream? Not that I've had any dream that's any of your business..." Harry began in a harsh tone. He couldn't say why he was so jealously guarding that dream, but suddenly it seemed important that he deny having it to the last. Ron couldn't possibly be having his dream. Neither could Viktor or Hermione. She only sang for him. Just for him.

"The four of us. More or less, we think. Now, you can either stop outright lying to the three of us, or I can be another Snape. Which will it be, Harry?" Viktor asked softly. Harry could tell Viktor's heart simply wasn't in the threat.

"You wouldn't!" Harry challenged. They couldn't be having his dream. His dream of... her. That voice.

"I do not want to, but if you keep lying to me like that... maybe I have no choice. If you would just answer," Viktor said sadly, looking up at last. To Harry's surprise, he didn't seem angry at all, just... hurt. Harry squirmed a bit under that gaze, but his arm was throbbing where Snape had grabbed him, his scar throbbed and burned, his head ached, his heart was nearly bursting with the pain of the knowledge that Snape had not been lying about James Potter. He was every bit as arrogant, self-centered and cruel as Snape had made him out to be. And to think that he had been proud when people told him he looked like James... that he was just like him...

"Shut up! You people have no right to be in my head! None of you! Not Voldemort! Not Snape! Not you! I wish you would all go away and leave me

alone!” Harry found himself shouting. He was shocked into silence when it was Hermione’s loud voice that came crashing back at him, not Ron’s or Viktor’s.

“Harry, you self-centered, ungrateful, selfish git! Let someone try to help you for once! And to think... him... he’s... willing to... risk... for you!” Hermione shouted back, going toe to toe with him, finally spluttering and settling for shoving him hard in the chest before storming up the stairs to the girls dorms. He was caught off balance and off guard, toppling unsteadily onto the chair behind him. What caught him even more off balance was the look on Hermione’s face. She had been angry at him, of course, but he was certain that those had also been tears brewing in her eyes. Good riddance, he tried telling himself. I’ve had enough crying females to last a lifetime already.

“I thought you trusted me,” Viktor said, eyes on the staircase, pursing his lips and frowning slightly as though thinking, or weighing something in his mind.

“I do,” Harry said, slightly ashamed of himself. “What’s gotten into Hermione anyway? Why the waterworks?” he offered, looking at Ron. Ron offered him a halfhearted shrug, as though he couldn’t possibly explain it in words. Finally, he jerked his head in Viktor’s direction, as though referring Harry back to him.

“Ever wonder why I can see the thestrals?” Viktor asked, seemingly out of the blue, not shifting his eyes. His voice sounded a little strangled.

“Your sister,” Harry said dismissively.

“Then why can Hermione and Ron not see them? They were there when Karkaroff died. Closer to him than I was to her when she died. I wasn’t even looking at the building when she died,” Viktor said flatly, finally turning to look at Harry.

“But... I...” He hadn’t considered that Hermione and Ron were no more able to see the thestrals than they had been before being present at Karkaroff’s death.

“You have to see death, Harry. They weren’t watching Karkaroff. They did not see his eyes go cold. You watched the life go out of Cedric. You saw it in his eyes. You watched him die. Ever wonder who I watched die?” There was an edge of bitterness now.

“The square... there were so many...” One of them. It must be one of them, one he had left out in his descriptions of the scene.

“You are a smart boy, Harry. Put two and two together and come up with four. Cannot haff been in the square. They were all already dead. None of

them lived long enough for me to watch them die. It was ten years later, Harry. Hermione knows. Maybe I should not have told her. Would have saved her a few weeks of worrying. But then, I did not know I would have to do it when I told her. Too late now," Viktor said, sounding a little angry and impatient. Almost the way Snape did when he thought a student was being impossibly slow and thick about grasping what he found to be the simplest concept. It alarmed Harry to see Viktor lose patience with him this way. He had expected anger outside of Madam Puddifoot's, but had gotten compassion instead. He had wanted it then, the anger, some excuse to be angry back. Now that he had it, he felt his own anger ebbing away in the face of Viktor's. Harry felt as though his eyes were locked, he could not tear them away.

"Do... what?" Harry stammered.

"I told you Karkaroff knew I was good at memory. Ever wonder how he found out, Harry? Ever wonder how he tested his prize pupils? Ever wonder what he made us do? Surely you were a little curious?" Viktor's voice had gone strangely dead and cold. "Ministry demonstrations. Know what the Ministries used to do with the Death Eaters that would not talk, Harry? Think the Death Eaters were the only ones who tortured people? The Ministry was not much better. You can justify a lot of cruelty in the name of preventing more. Know how rare it is for someone to be a really accomplished Legilimens? Occlumency is one thing. Legilimency, quite another. Did Professor Snape tell you that Legilimency is as much art as anything? That you cannot read thoughts like you do a book, that you always have to interpret what you see there?"

"Yes," Harry whispered.

"He lied," Viktor said plainly. "Not lied, exactly, but that is not the whole truth. For most people, that is the best they can accomplish. To break in if they are stronger, pick up some random things close to the surface, piece together a puzzle. But I picked up things like that without even trying, Harry. I forced things back onto people without even doing Legilimency. Karkaroff noticed. He always noticed things that might be turned to his advantage. He took me to be tested. I do not think he really expected me to be able to do it right away, that is why he did not bother training me at it first. I do not even know what his name was, but I killed him, Harry. I killed him because I did not know how to do it. I let go." The last was almost a whisper.

"What are you talking about?" Harry forced out.

"Some people can do more. They can do *Echomensa*. The same person may not even be able to do Legilimency, but most can. Remember what I said about the body remembering? Your mind records everything, even things you do not consciously remember. Performing *Echomensa* is like turning your mind and body into one of those Muggle tape recorders Harry. It all comes back out,

just like you heard it. Veritaserum is all well and good when you ask for names and get them. They caught on, stopped giving their names. Stayed anonymous even with each other. Wore masks. The Ministry had to get creative. Start identifying them by voices alone. Problem is, *Echomensa*, you take control to do it, you shove the other person aside completely, force them into the background of their own mind. You take over. It is not natural to haff someone in your head. You fight back. With everything in you. Physical and magical. If the caster does not know what they are doing when they try to back out, does not listen, they can leave you a jabbering mess, if not worse. You can rip a person's mind apart, if you do not know what you are doing. Or you can just let go," Viktor said with a spread hand. "It requires hand to hand contact. You lose touch, you lose the link. If the person at the receiving end is not back in control by the time you lose the link, he never comes back. It all just shuts down. He was a Death Eater, Harry. Could not haff been much over thirty, I suppose, but he looked even younger. They just trussed him up like a goose and put him on a cot and turned me loose on him. I do not think they really expected me to get in, much less to get what they wanted out of him. He talked... they talked... the rest of his group... but he also bucked and hit and kicked and screamed and cursed at me. I heard things... He was a full grown man and I was fifteen years old. He broke the leather straps they used on him in about ten minutes. I let go. I had no choice. He was pulling away even if I did not. Trying to get away from me, away from his memories. And I watched his eyes go cold afterwards. I watched it ebb out of him, like the tide going out. I killed him Harry. But what did that matter? They had the information they wanted. The Ministry knew where his friends were, who they were, Karkaroff knew I could do it, and they were going to execute him anyway. No Azkaban for him. Death. See, he killed an Auror that happened to be the brother of the Russian Minister of Magic at the time. No getting off light for him. Who cared if a scrawny kid who had no idea what he was doing let go of him and he died and saved them the trouble of having to execute him? They all went home happy. All they had to do was tell the press that they had executed him. The Minister was happy, he had his revenge and some more people to arrest, the other one got a chance to see something you rarely even read about, and Karkaroff got his bargaining chip. His insurance. And a week later, we had a Care of Magical Creatures class where I found that I no longer had to rely on drawings to know what a thestral looked like. Hard to fake not seeing them, but I did. Thank goodness no one asked me directly, though I think Elena suspected. Heaven knows I did not want to haff to give the real explanation, or even the one you assumed." Viktor was back to the hushed, disgusted tone he had used that night in his quarters with Snape. His shoulders were dropped, limp.

"And Hermione is just now finding this out? It wasn't your fault, if they made you..." Harry squeaked.

"No. I told her during the summer. I felt it only fair to warn her that I had done a lot of things I am not particularly proud of. What she is upset about is the

fact that I am going to let Dumbledore do it to me. And I never said it was my fault. I regret it, but I was just doing what I was told. I had no idea then that if you let go, you might as well snap their neck. Probably would have pulled out too quickly, anyway. I would have bungled it in any case. He was uncooperative. I would at least have left him... damaged. If I ever had it in me to kill on purpose, that took it out of me, watching him," Viktor replied. "Hagrid's hut, one week from tomorrow night. Ten o'clock. You had better show up, Harry. I spent a lot of weeks convincing Dumbledore to talk to you. Tell you why we are all doing this," Viktor said, sounding somewhat weary. He rose and started toward the portrait hole.

"Why are you doing this for me?" Harry asked, puzzled, "Risking..."

"Because I am tired of people dying. Because I am tired of people dying for ignorance. My ignorance killed that man. Even if he deserved it, I suffered for it. I will not have someone else dying because of ignorance if I can help it. Learn from mistakes, Harry. Even when they are not yours. They are usually big, ugly lessons, but they are valuable lessons," Viktor said, his jaw firmly set. "And who says I am only doing it for you? I recognize it now. You and Ron get singing. Hermione and I get screeching. Screeching that now reminds me an awful lot of what little I do remember hearing in that maze. That is what you see? A path in the Forbidden Forest? Fog? Warm and wet? Something making noise near the lake?"

"Yes," Harry whispered.

"I would swear it was sirens, if we were all hearing singing," Viktor said, shaking his head.

"I know about Snape. My father," Harry found himself saying in a strangled voice.

"Professor Snape. And why would he tell you? He did not seem too keen to share..." Viktor said, puzzled.

"Never mind. He was... he... I guess I got my own big, ugly lesson, huh? Treat others nicely, you never know when they might be teaching your children. He was awful," Harry whispered.

"Most of us were at fifteen, one way or another. No offense."

"I never thought I could feel sorry for Snape," Harry said glumly.

"Professor Snape."

"And she hated him. Why would she have married him?" Harry asked,



thinking of his mother.

"I bet he improved a lot. Women usually do not willingly marry and have children with someone they hate," Viktor said softly.

"Sure. I'm sure they were both wonderful judges of character, weren't they? They picked Peter Pettigrew as their secret keeper, and we all know how well that turned out! What good did it do them to die?" Harry spat.

"You lived."

"And what good has that done? I've killed Cedric Diggory! Helped give Voldemort his body back! Made everyone miserable! What the hell good did it do?" Harry shrieked.

"Enough! Stop this feeling sorry for yourself! At the very least, we had nine years of peace. Nine years where people could laugh and get married and have children and not have to worry about the future quite as much. Nine years where people could pick up the pieces and mourn and heal, if nothing else. Nine years where people have talked about what heroes your parents were. Does that mean nothing to you?" Viktor seemed a little offended.

"And what practical good have all those stories been?" Harry asked, more calmly. "My parents are fairy tales. Someone else's memories."

"They prompted me to make a better decision. It was the lesson of Lily and James Potter, was it not? Pick your secret keeper very carefully. Does not matter which version, who betrayed them. Sirius Black or Peter Pettigrew. Did you not wonder why Karkaroff thought my parents were untouchable? Why he threatened Hermione, not them? He already knew where her parents lived, or he never would have said it. He never made threats like that which he could not carry out. He would not have taken a chance that we could get to them first and protect them." Harry felt as though Viktor's eyes were boring into him.

"Why? And what does it have to do with my parents?" Harry said.

"He could not find them. Or Pavlova. Unless I spoke its name. And I was never foolish enough to do that. I told them it was to keep nosy reporters away, Harry. I lied to my own parents. Might be the only convincing lie I have ever told, maybe because there was a grain of truth to it. It was useful for that as well. And they were afraid enough of the possibility of reporters hounding them about Violeta that they agreed to it," Viktor said plainly.

"You were secret keeper for your parents," Harry breathed, "How long?"

"Since I was twelve. I did not trust anyone else. It was the lesson I

learned from hearing about the Potters. Pick a secret keeper who will die with you if they slip. Or at the very least, pick someone so that... if they betray you deliberately, you would want to die. I think if your own son hands you over to someone who wants to kill you, that fits the bill. They trusted, Harry. They just happened to trust the wrong person. Your parents may have saved my parents. Knowing Karkaroff, he would have killed them off just to keep me from leaving anywhere else to turn but him. Your parents are more than just fairy tales, Harry. One week from tomorrow night, ten o'clock. Do not bother yelling at me about how little I tell you if you do not show up. I fought for a month to get him to agree to tell you this much. To get him to agree to let you three come and watch. Do not expect me to keep it up if you reject the opportunity," Viktor said.

"Why is it so important? The three of us being there? To you, I mean?" Harry asked.

"Because I would hate to die alone, if I did. I almost did that once, and it was very lonely. At the very least, I would like to go with someone trying to get me to stay. And Alexei is not available."

"But Dumbledore is a great-

"Still no guarantee," Viktor said, matter-of-factly, before turning on his heel and stepping through the portrait hole. Harry was too stunned to go after him.

"She's just spent the last half hour trying to talk him out of it. Again. I get the feeling they were both rehashing the same old argument," Ron said glumly. "I've never seen two people argue when they were sad at each other instead of mad. He thinks he has to do it for some reason, she wishes he wouldn't anyway. I can't get the straight of it."

"And she's mad at me because he's risking that..." Harry said.

"No. She's mad at you because you don't seem to appreciate it. Because you outright lied. About these dreams," Ron said gently. "Harry, you can get away with a lot of things with Hermione, but outright lying isn't one of them. Especially when Viktor's been getting up all hours of the night to chase you down in the halls after you've set off the alarm he put on the portrait hole and he's been willing to put up with Snape pouncing on him every opportunity and slapping him, and now he's risking someone jabbing around in his head because it might be someone still trying to hurt you. A little gratitude might buy you some goodwill."

"When did you get so smart about girls?" Harry asked.

"I didn't. I just sat here and listened to her say all that to Viktor. I think she was trying to get him to believe he had done quite enough already and back

out. Oh, and great timing, this. A week from tomorrow. That will be exactly six weeks before the O.W.L.s.”

“I suppose Hermione complained about that interfering with her studying?” Harry said.

“Never mentioned it. I get the feeling she’s more worried about other things. Nope. Figured that out on my own in my head. Scary.”

“Scary,” Harry agreed, though he wasn’t quite sure what he was referring to.

The next morning, Harry looked for some opening to apologize to Hermione, but she seemed determined not to make any eye contact with him. Or even acknowledge his existence. She was ignoring him like a champion, in fact. He gathered from Fred and George that though they were the prime suspects in Crabbe’s unfortunate trip to the upstairs toilet via the Vanishing Cabinet, no one could prove it. Crabbe’s memory was a bit scrambled, and no reliable witness could be found. Umbridge had threatened and grilled them, and even questioned all the ghosts herself as to what they had seen. The Gray Lady seemed to recall having seen Crabbe near the Cabinet, but now, she failed to mention any redheads in the area. Harry suspected Viktor had something to do with that. He had noticed just this morning that he seemed awfully friendly with Nearly Headless Nick, and was, in fact, having a chat with him out in the hall when Harry went into the Great Hall for breakfast. Harry wondered if he was similarly friendly with the rest of the house ghosts as he was with “Sir Nicholas”.

He fleetingly thought about the fact that they were lucky Moaning Myrtle had seen nothing. He wasn’t sure Viktor could have pulled off changing her testimony after his bluffing her out in the Prefect’s Bath. Or maybe he could at that. Just a few weeks ago, Hermione had complained that Myrtle took it by turns to tease her about Viktor and then anxiously question her about what he was doing. “If I didn’t know better, I would swear she had a crush on him, she’s driving me so mad. Worse than Lavender and Parvati put together after the Ball last year. But I would hate not to go in there a bit. She seems so lonely. She keeps asking why he doesn’t swim so much this winter. I told her he was kept pretty busy, and she said ‘I bet you do keep him pretty busy’ and flew off in a huff back to her stall, wailing to beat the band.” Harry chose to keep it to himself what happened in the bath. It probably wouldn’t make Hermione feel any more charitable toward Myrtle to hear that she had tried to spy on Viktor in the bath.

Just when Harry thought he could stand Hermione’s icy silence no longer, he opened his mouth to beg for forgiveness, he would throw himself on her mercy, apologize for being a selfish git. Instead of hearing his own voice, he heard an ominous “Hem hem,” across the table, behind Hermione. The squat

figure of Umbridge, clad in her horrid pink cardigan, was stationed behind the empty chair beside her, where Viktor usually sat. “Mr. Fred and George Weasley, I will have you know...”

“Pardon me, but you are in the way of my chair,” came Viktor’s voice behind her.

“Mr. Krum, I don’t know why ...” Umbridge began in a huff, whirling on him. She trailed off when he turned his head and scanned behind him, as though looking for someone else whom she could be addressing. Taking the rather obvious hint, she sighed and began again, “*Professor* Krum, I don’t know why you insist upon eating at a student table when there is a perfectly good staff table right up...”

“Oh, I had some tea up there. Talked to Hagrid, found out a little about our new Divination professor, Firenze. Fascinating, centaurs, but the ones in the Forest, they’re not too happy with Hagrid now, I gather,” Viktor enthused, and slipped by her and into the empty chair next to Hermione. “Sybil deigned to eat with us this morning. You’ll be pleased to hear she’s stopped crying and plans to continue living here. Good thing you fired her directly instead of putting her on probation, or Dumbledore would haff been put out. Good thing Dumbledore, Minerva and I caught that and pointed that out during our meeting, hmm? Dumbledore, in fact, is considering rehiring Sybil as the co-teacher of Divination. A new position, I believe. Minerva also tells me Gryffindor will win the Quidditch Cup this year, or she’ll eat her hat. I hope so, because she only has the one. Unless she meant the tartan tam. But I agree with her that they should, especially after Ravenclaw beat Hufflepuff,” here he paused and gave what Harry thought was a subtle wink to him, unless Harry was imagining things. “That took in the oatmeal I had up there, I guess. Oh, and I had a sausage or two at the staff table. By that time, *Professor* Delacour had gotten enough beauty rest and stumbled down for breakfast, and since I seem to give her a bad case of indigestion these days, I thought I had better move. Besides, the toast and the orange juice taste better over here. Must be something about the relative humidity,” Viktor said in a rush, pouring a glass of juice to go with the toast he had been fixing while talking. Umbridge had been going more and more tomato-colored the whole while.

“Yes... yes... good thing you pointed that out... else I would have had to remove Dumbledore ...” Umbridge said dazedly.

“And we would not haff wanted that, now would we, Dolores? Embarrassing for you to not be able to correctly interpret a Ministry decree written in plain English.” Viktor seemed almost gleeful about using her first name. Harry noticed, for the first time, that Viktor suddenly seemed to be referring to almost every one of the teachers on a first name basis. A liberty he had not taken before his graduation. When he had mentioned ‘Professor

Delacour', though, the slightest hint of sarcasm was detectable. "Did you want something from Fred and George? Or did you come over here from the perfectly good staff table for the superior juice and toast? Do not let me interrupt you, either way," Viktor said, biting into his toast.

"Just know that I'll be watching you two. Very closely," Umbridge warned the twins, who were doing their best to look angelic, then gave an exasperated glance at Viktor, who was paying more attention to his toast. She looked like she was having to bite her tongue to keep from saying more.

"Viktor, could you pass the jam?" Fred requested sweetly, and Viktor promptly complied.

"Professor Krum, I find it disturbing that you allow the students to refer to you by your first name," Umbridge sniffed.

"I am not teaching them at the moment. I gave them permission to call me whatever they felt comfortable calling me outside of class. All of them. Lee Jordan will insist on saying 'Vik' instead, but I can live with that. In class, Mr. Krum before, Professor Krum now. You haff no right to tell me what I can request to be addressed by outside of class. Others choose to retain their titles, but I feel a bit silly insisting, since, as you so helpfully pointed out all those months ago, I am not much older than most of the students and I was one until a few weeks ago. Would still be, if not for your, shall we call it a request, that sped up my education. You could call me Viktor, if you like, Dolores," Viktor said with a soft smile. Umbridge turned, if possible, even redder.

"And the butter, Viktor," George added, grinning wickedly. Viktor had no more than passed that when Ginny got a sly grin as well.

"Oh, Viktor, the juice, I can't quite reach it," she said, making no move for it. Viktor reached out with a long arm and nudged the carafe all of three inches over the tablecloth, until it butted against her glass. She nonchalantly poured another glass, then set the carafe back down. Further away than it had been before.

Neville flushed slightly, then piped up, "Viktor, could you possibly take a look at a Potions essay for me later? One paragraph is giving me trouble." Viktor nodded wordlessly in return.

"So Viktor, what's the chances of Hufflepuff making a comeback in the Quidditch matchups," Ron asked, planting his elbows on the table and propping his chin.

"Do not go to sleep at the goal during the match with them, they are still close enough to catch up," Viktor replied, and Harry could swear that he ducked

into his juice glass to hide a laugh.

“Viktor, is your match next Wednesday or Thursday?” Hermione said at last. Harry was startled to finally hear her speak this morning.

“Wednesday.”

Harry couldn't resist getting in on the act either. “And who will you be playing, Viktor?” Umbridge, by now, was looking apoplectic.

“Quafflepunchers.”

“Professor Krum,” she muttered, then turned on her heel.

“Pleasant morning, Dolores!” Viktor called after her. “Heaven help me, but it does my heart good to annoy her,” he said quietly in the direction of his plate, suppressing a laugh, but not the grin. Harry was reminded of his glee at calling Moaning Myrtle's bluff once more.

“Viktor... Hermione... look, I'm sorry. I don't mean to seem ungrateful. And I'm sorry I... I'm sorry, okay?” Harry said, his cheeks flushing.

“Apology accepted,” Hermione replied softly.

“Look, Harry... she is going to be there, Ron, probably, too, so if you want, you can wait for Dumbledore to get back to his office and talk to him there. It is okay if you do not want to come,” Viktor said, finishing off his toast. Harry got the distinct feeling he didn't really mean that, but Harry was relieved. He wasn't quite sure he wanted to be there. “I need to go. I have first years in a few minutes, and I need to get there before they blow anything up,” Viktor said in a rush, finishing off the juice as well. Harry was a little shocked when instead of the usual squeeze of her hand, he planted a quick peck on Hermione's cheek before getting up out of the chair and heading off toward the dungeon classroom. He had been gone only a few minutes before the owl post arrived. Harry was a surprised when a large eagle owl settled in front of him, with a package, marked “Harry Potter, Great Hall To Fuel Study For Exams From Snuffles”. Harry pocketed the note and the large package of Honeydukes chocolate, feeling quite warm and fuzzy, knowing that at least Sirius was still thinking of him.

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## Chapter 80

Harry couldn't seem to keep his mind on class that day, not even Potions. Reviewing his notes in the common room later, he could not for the life of him make out what he had written about dried salamander tails. Restless, wanting some excuse to roam around, he decided to walk down the hall and talk to Viktor. What was the good of having the person who had done the lecture down the hall if you couldn't go talk to them whenever you wanted? Ron was off with

Hannah Abbott, Hermione was already in bed upstairs, Ginny and Neville had gone for a walk around the lake. Hermione would have been his first choice for notes, but she had been yawning at dinner in the Great Hall. She had bid them all goodnight right after. Harry had felt about as attentive this afternoon. Even Neville's notes were probably better than his own today, Harry thought ruefully. Viktor should be there. He and Hermione often spent a little while in his quarters about this time of the evening when neither of them were busy. He could break into his new chocolate stash when he returned, and then finish his studying. He didn't feel like talking to anyone else in the common room, so he sighed and heaved himself out of the chair and toward the portrait hole.

Near the corner of the hall leading to Viktor's room, Harry heard a sharp rap, as though someone were knocking on a door. Sidling up beside the suit of armor there, he peeked around it and was surprised to see Fleur Delacour, knocking on Viktor's door, casting a furtive glance around. Harry tried not to breathe, willing himself to be invisible behind the suit of armor. As Viktor's door swung open, Harry caught his voice saying, "I thought you were... Oh. You." Viktor stepped out into the hall and clapped his door shut sharply. "What do you want?"

"A civil conversation," Fleur said lightly

"I tried that a few times, Miss Priss," Viktor said acidly, his expression reminding Harry of someone who had been asked to suck lemons.

"I deserve zat, I was not ze most civil woman. Truce for a few minutes?" Fleur said, fluttering her eyelashes prettily.

"What do you want?" Viktor repeated, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Will you not invite me in?" Fleur asked softly, laying a hand lightly on one of his arms. Viktor seemed to flinch slightly.

"I am sorry, but I do not think it proper. You can speak to me out in the hall," Viktor said firmly.

"You invite 'er in," Fleur replied, looking just a smidgen pouty, leaning out a bit as though trying to catch a glimpse of the doorknob behind him.

"Does this conversation haff a point at all? Or is this just about my social schedule? Whom I occasionally invite in there for a few minutes to haff tea or coffee? I go to the common room more often than not these days, if you want an update," Viktor stated, not moving from his spot in front of the doorknob.

"No 'ospitality for me, zen?"

“I can take you to the kitchens if you want tea or coffee,” Viktor said, not unkindly. “Or are zey still ‘olly inadequate compared to Beauxbatons?” he snapped.

Fleur chose to ignore it. “Well, zen, I suppose I can say what I wish to say out ‘ere. I wish to apologize for my be’aviour earlier. I should not ‘ave argued in front of ze students or Umbridge. I ‘ave my reasons, but I want to make it up to you. ‘Ear me out,” Fleur purred, slithering up closer. She was nearly touching the front of his robes. Harry was beginning to feel the same lightheaded vacant feeling that he had for the Veela at the World Cup. He bit his tongue to keep his mind on staying still. She must really be turning up the Veela-charm, Harry thought to himself, concentrating on the bead of sweat preparing to trickle down his forehead.

“I do not think I like where this is going,” Viktor said, sliding over and away from her, away from the doorknob that had been pressed into his back when he had leaned away.

“‘Ear me out, please. A gentleman owes a lady zat at least, does ‘e not?”

“Talk fast,” Viktor replied, sounding frustrated.

“I admit, I was unfair. I was terrible about you in front of Umbridge, but only because I am confused. Confused as to why you waste your time and persist in zis nonsense,” Fleur said gently, leaning forward a little. Her thigh was actually brushing up against Viktor’s leg. He shifted uncomfortably, further along the wall, further away from her.

“I would think that newspaper would show you it is not nonsense...” Viktor began, but Fleur began shaking her silvery-blond curtain of hair around her shoulders as she shook her head in the negative.

“No, no, no. Not zat. ‘Er,” Fleur said simply, grasping his upper arm again.

Viktor’s brows drew together. “Now, do not start in on...”

“She’s a child. A mere child by comparison,” Fleur purred, but there was a hint of contempt in her voice.

“Three years and a bit of change is the difference. Who are you and Umbridge anyway, the age patrol? Does not bother us. Should not bother you,” Viktor said shortly.

“Oh, zat is not what I meant by it, zat she is a child compared wiz you. Well, she is, but zat is not what I meant. Why waste your time waiting for ‘er?”



Fleur asked, nose in the air.

“Because some things are worth waiting for,” Viktor shot back.

“But you deserve someone your equal. Someone who could give you what you need. Meet all your needs,” Fleur said, crossing her own arms.

“Give her time, she will probably be more than my equal, soon enough.”

“But why wait when you can ‘ave zat now?” Harry was trying to make sense of what she was getting at through the roaring in his head, and his knees were growing weak, so he slid down the wall to hide behind the base on which the suit of armor rested, still peeking around the corner of it. She couldn’t mean what she thought he meant...surely. Fleur reached up with slender fingers and picked a stray something off of the front of Viktor’s robes, then turned her back to Viktor and Harry for a moment, as though gathering herself. Her left hand idly played with the small purse-like pouch dangling from her sash for a few seconds.

“What are you talking about?” Viktor asked, looking down at the spot where her fingers had been. She turned back to him, then pressed against him lightly once more, hands on his shoulders.

“I could fill up some of your time. Why deprive yourself while you wait for ‘er? Why not enjoy yourself wiz a real woman? I bet I could make you forget zat bushy-‘aired leetle girl...” Fleur began in a breathless rush, pressing against him harder than before. She seemed to be grinding her hips against his thigh.

“Hardly,” Viktor said coldly, stiffening against the wall.

“I could. At ze very least, I could... relieve some of ze... tension of waiting...” Fleur said slyly, her right hand trailing down the front of his robes. She had made it past the sash around his waist when Viktor grabbed her wrist firmly and held it back up at her shoulder height.

“Keep your hands to yourself,” he said bluntly. “Remember yourself and where you are.”

“Shy? Worried someone will catch us? You could remedy that by opening your door. No one would ever be the wiser, you know. Just let me ‘ave one ‘and, you do not even ‘ave to do anyzing ...” she said in a low, throaty voice, bringing her left hand back toward him. He captured that one before she could touch him at all.

“Do not make me want to break your wrist,” Viktor growled, grinding his teeth. “What...part...of...‘no’...do...you...not...understand?” he asked, leaning closer to her face, biting off each word.

Her only response was a whispered, “Ze fact zat you are saying ’no’ to me. To zis.” Her tongue darted between her lips and fleetingly touched the corner of his mouth before he jerked away.

“Never...touch me... again,” he said firmly, steering her away to arm’s length by her wrists. “Never come to my door again, either. I told you no last year. And I meant it,” Viktor said, uncurling his fingers from around her wrists, turning on his heel and putting a hand on the doorknob.

“You just say no because you are afraid to take what you really want,” Fleur mocked.

“This might come as news to you, but not everyone wants you,” Viktor muttered, rubbing the back of his hand over his mouth.

“Zat Mudblood is not even worth rutting wiz,” Fleur said viciously. Viktor’s lips peeled back from his teeth, and instead of the tirade Harry was expecting, he cursed her with one word, Bulgarian or Russian, Harry could not tell, he just suspected it was very rude, and spat on the floor at her feet. He glared at her a long moment, then stormed into his room and slammed the door so violently that Harry half expected the stone wall to buckle. Fleur never even glanced in his direction when she went stomping off down the hall, nose in the air.

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## Chapter 81

Harry didn’t say a word about what he had seen outside Viktor’s door. Instead, he asked Ron for his notes when he got back to the dorm, copied the passage, and went straight to bed. He certainly didn’t want to be the one to tell Hermione that Fleur had been propositioning Viktor. He certainly didn’t want to tell about her wandering hands. It did seem to explain why Viktor didn’t care much for Fleur at all. Looking at Viktor this morning, propped up on his elbow, placidly studying the back page of yesterday’s Daily Prophet over Hermione’s shoulder, he could hardly believe Viktor had been on the receiving end of such a ... a ... groping. Harry had been so upset, he had forgotten completely about raiding the stash of chocolate Sirius had sent. He had settled for slipping a bar of it into his robe pocket this morning, planning to eat it after breakfast.

Harry had just finished his toast and unwrapped the bar when the owl post arrived. The Weasley family owl, Errol, landed rather clumsily on the table, skidding along, taking plates and glasses with him, knocking the bar off the table. “Errol! I can’t eat that now! It’s been on the floor!” Harry scolded.

“Oh, give him a break Harry, he’s old as the hills. Dumb luck he can fly at all. Looks like Mum’s sent a care package. Give Errol something, would you?”

Ron said, untying the twine that attached the package to the leg of the owl. Fetching the chocolate from the floor, Harry broke off a square and fed it to Errol, who accepted it eagerly. "She's sent blueberry muffins, even!" Ron enthused, shifting the packets around inside the larger package.

"I had better go. Practice," Viktor said to Hermione. He rose from his chair and turned to the rest to say goodbye, but instead, he paused, openmouthed, studying something on the table. "Did your owl injure his wing?" he asked finally, nodding toward the middle of the table. There, Errol was floundering on the wooden tabletop, flapping awkwardly, as though he weren't able to coordinate his wings.

"He was fine a minute ago," Ron protested, "You think we should go get Hagrid?" Errol flapped more frantically, staggering about, letting out doleful hoots and screeches.

"I will go," Viktor said, and in a few moments, Hagrid had followed him back from the staff table.

"He was fine when he first landed, and then I gave him some chocolate, and then he just started flopping around!" Harry said in a rush.

Viktor's head whipped around. "Chocolate? Where did you get it?" Viktor asked.

"It's from Honeydukes - Siri... errr... the person I told you about on the back porch... sent it," Harry said.

"Anyone could have signed his name to it, Harry. Keep away from it until we get this straightened out, okay?" Viktor ordered with a raised eyebrow. "There could be anything in it. I need to go. Owl me?" Viktor asked Hagrid.

"Soon as I know anythin'," Hagrid said, nodding. He gathered up Errol as Viktor walked away.

"But it was signed 'Snuffles'. No one knows about that but us..." Harry trailed off.

"Yeh'd be surprised wha' other people know sometimes, Harry. Keep away from it fer now. Maybe it's alrigh', maybe not, but it looks bad," Hagrid replied, tucking Errol under his arm and heading outside.

"Concentrated Doxy venom, so says Professor Snape," Hagrid told them when they stopped by his cabin during lunch. "If yeh'd eaten the whole thing, coulda killed ye, Harry. I'm sorry Ron, bu' Errol, 'e wa' pretty old... I've sen'a letter to yer mum and dad abou' 'im." Hagrid laid a big, comforting hand on

Ron's shoulder.

"Hagrid?" Harry said at last, "You knew my father... what was he like?"

"No finer two people than James and Lily Potter," Hagrid said proudly.

"But what was he like when he was my age?" Harry pressed.

"Oh, a bit rambunctious. Always inter somethin'..." Hagrid trailed off with a grin.

"He and Snape didn't get along, did they?"

"No, rubbed one another the wrong way from the start, they did," Hagrid said, shaking his shaggy head.

"He was a bully, wasn't he?" Harry squeaked out.

"James Potter was a fine man..." Hagrid began, but Harry cut him off.

"When he was my age. He was a bully," Harry insisted.

Hagrid let out a sigh. "He was a bit too big fer his britches when he got full o' himself. His parents spoiled him a bit. On'y child. Indulged him. He was used to gettin' wha' he wanted. Him an' Sirius both ..."

"They picked on Snape... why?"

"He stood out a bit. Like me Harry. Yeh stan' out, yeh make an easy target," Hagrid said softly. "Now, yeh'd be'er let me owl Viktor, or it'll never get there 'fore the practice is over an' the game starts this afternoon, and he'll be Apparatin' back wantin' ter know what's goin' on an' havin' my head fer not owlin' like I promised."

"So, someone knows who we were referring to as 'Snuffles' then," Hermione mused as they walked back toward the Great Hall. "How would they? I mean, Viktor doesn't even know we call him that. He doesn't even know why we would call him that. You didn't tell him," she added, looking at Harry.

"How would you know what I told him?" Harry asked.

"What do you think we do when we're together, Harry, just goggle at one another and never say a word? We do talk, you know," Hermione shot back.

The day dragged. Ron moped about Errol, Harry moped about what he had seen James do, and Hermione moped about Viktor, although Harry could

never quite be sure whether she was moping because he was away or because of what was scheduled for tomorrow night. Harry was becoming more and more resolved to be elsewhere at ten o'clock. Anywhere else.

It simply seemed par for the course when Viktor arrived back in a foul mood, sporting a huge purple Bludger mark on his right forearm. "Three hours worth of that for a tie!" he complained at dinner.

"You should go to Madam Pomfrey and get her to see to that," Hermione said, but he waved the suggestion off.

"Only a bruise. It will go away soon enough," he protested, tugging at his sleeve, only succeeding in covering a small portion of it. "Look, this is pretty obvious, but I am going to say it anyway. No more opening your mail out here, no eating anything you might get, no matter who it is from, no more care packages from the Weasleys," Ron had opened his mouth to protest but seemed to think better of it immediately, snapping his mouth closed, "Even though that one from this morning checks out, no more being so trusting. You eat nothing that does not appear on this table or that you see come from the kitchen and one of the house elves. I mean you see it come right from their hands. Be suspicious as hell, Harry. I haff to go now," Viktor said in a rush, shoving his chair back.

"Where? Company?" Hermione offered.

"Library. If you do not mind helping me look through two more volumes on magical beasts," Viktor replied, sounding a bit less strident.

"If you don't mind helping me find something on Arithmancy." They set off for the library, Viktor's arm draped across her shoulders. Harry was a little glad to see them go. He was tired of being told to be sensible about everything, when nothing seemed to be sensible anymore. He and Ron went off to their own Quidditch practice without a word between them.

\*\*\*\*\* Chapter 82

"Ready? Come on Ron, you're dawdling. Viktor's already out there on the lawn, I saw him out the window. Harry's obviously not coming," Hermione said anxiously.

"I thought maybe he would change his mind," Ron said from the portrait hole. "I mean, I saw Viktor with him downstairs, earlier, outside the kitchen. I figured he would have twisted his arm a little by now. Guilt-tripped him into it."

"Well, I don't think he has. And we don't guilt-trip people into things," Hermione said firmly. Ron opened his mouth to protest that Hermione wasn't above laying on the guilt, then thought better of it. "Close the portrait hole before

the Fat Lady gives us what for,” Hermione said calmly. She certainly sounded more calm than she felt. The lawn seemed almost as bright as at was during midday, what with the large, pale moon in the cloudless sky and the light from it spilling over everything.

“Couldn’t talk him into it earlier, eh?” Ron asked Viktor when they joined him.

“Did not try. Do not suppose he is ready,” Viktor said simply, giving Ron a curious look.

“We’ve read every book in the library with anything about magical beasts in it at all, and we’re still stuck on what’s making that bloody screeching,” Hermione complained as they walked down to Hagrid’s cabin.

“I keep telling her it is probably Umbridge. No one I haff ever met could screech half so well when she is mad,” Viktor said softly, “You should haff heard her at the staff meeting when we all started pointing out to her that her darling Cornelius Fudge forgot to make any provision for firings, only probations, when she canned Trelawney.” He dropped into a nasally whine, “What do you meeeeeeean there is nothing in there about firing?’, ‘Do not tell me my own job, Minerva,’ and ‘There is something going on here that the Ministry will figure out! We will find out what you all are playing at! Something highly suspicious is going on here at Hogwarts and the Ministry will squash it!’. I thought I would die when Snape muttered, ‘Probably referring to us trying to educate the students,’ under his breath. And I used to think team meetings were bad,” Viktor lamented, shaking his head. “Where were all those Ministry suspicions last year? When we had a Polyjuiced imposter running amok?”

“I offered to get you a pair of earplugs. *Silencio Umbridge*,” Hermione teased. Viktor pulled up short ten feet from the cabin door.

His eyes grew wide and he started talking to himself, as though working out a logic problem aloud. “Earplugs! Sirens! Earplugs! Not a beast! Why it is in none of the books... hearing it based on how we react when we are awake... why did I not think of it, that there is a partial one right here? Why did you say ‘earlier’?” he asked Ron in an urgent tone.

“Earlier. Harry snuck off to the kitchen to get away from us all, and I thought I saw you corner him in the hall outside. Maybe not, then,” he added hastily, seeing Viktor’s expression. Viktor’s eyes widened, he ran a thoughtful hand across his chest and robe, then reached up and rubbed a strand of his hair between his fingertips, moving his lips as though figuring aloud again.

“Go on down to Hagrid’s, tell them I will be there in a few minutes, I haff to check on something. No, wait, scratch that. Tell them to call out everyone to

look for Harry. And me. Tell them if they find either one of us and we act odd, stun first, ask questions later. Both of us! But especially me! Actually, just stun us both on sight!" Viktor called back over his shoulder, running toward the castle.

"What was that all about?" Hermione said to Ron.

"You've got me. That's just like you last year with Rita Skeeter. Running off after you figured out she was an Animagus without telling us. Now you see why that's so annoying when you do it? I mean, it would take either one of you all of ten extra seconds to tell us what's going on, but do you? Noooo..."

"Ron! Cabin!" Hermione scolded, snatching his sleeve and tugging him toward the door.

The kitchen. The kitchen would be as good a place as any to hide out. Hermione and Viktor had been in the library most of the day again. Down there, maybe they wouldn't look for him down there and he wouldn't even have to refuse to come. He didn't want that... that *look* again, the one that Viktor and Hermione had been giving him for the last solid week. That "be sensible, this is what you've been begging for the entire time you've been here, answers, and now you're running away from it" look. That disappointed look. At least Ron wasn't doing that. Not that he wasn't pressuring in his own subtle way, either. Ron had been following him about most of the day, and even now, down the hall, he was peeking around the corner, to see where Harry was going before heading back to the common room. Hermione, at least, was giving him some space to make his decision.

"We need to talk." Viktor's voice. Behind him.

"I was just going to the kitchen. Hot chocolate. It's chilly tonight," Harry defended himself lamely, without turning.

"We will talk in the kitchen, then," Viktor replied, coming up beside him. Harry waited for Viktor to open the door, but Viktor made no move. "Go on, open the door," Viktor said impatiently, nodding at the portrait. Harry tickled the pear, which turned into a knob, and opened the door. Inside, Dobby made a beeline straight for them.

"Harry Potter! What can Dobby do for Harry Potter and his friend?" the diminutive house-elf cried, wrapping himself around Harry's legs. "What will Harry Potter be wanting?"

"Hot chocolate, please, Dobby," Harry muttered.

"Coffee," Viktor said shortly. Harry was rather surprised, since Hermione

had told him that Dobby's coffee left something to be desired. In fact, he and Hermione had both taken to avoiding Dobby's coffee like the plague since Viktor had tried it the first time. It was one of the reasons Viktor had returned from one of his trips with the small samovar for his quarters and usually stuck with the tea from the kitchen.

They sat together in silence for some time, Viktor taking only a small sip of the coffee, then making a face and setting it aside. "You can hardly be surprised, you said it was awful before," Harry whispered across the table. "Oh, and that's Winky over there, asleep in front of the fireplace."

"Winky?"

"Yeah, you remember, the house-elf Hermione didn't tell you about?"

"Oh," Viktor said dismissively. "I want to talk to you in private, really. Not in here with all these elves," he added, looking around with almost the same expression of distaste with which he had regarded the coffee. Funny, seeing him this morning in the hall, Harry would have sworn that the foul mood from the game had faded. Viktor wasn't one to pout over unsatisfactory games for too long these days, since there was always another one just around the corner. And he usually didn't take it out on others in any case. "Come for a walk with me." Harry only nodded in reply. Better to say 'no' once and for all and forget it, no matter what look he got in return. He just didn't think he could stand watching.

They ambled along in silence for some time, until they had reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest. "Cold? You? I mean, it's not forty below out here," Harry asked curiously, pointing to the cloak Viktor was clutching around his shoulders, and especially over his bare forearms. He had been in shorter sleeves most of the winter, even at its coldest. It was still rare to see Viktor in long sleeves.

"A bit. You have the note you got from Snuffles still?" Viktor asked abruptly, stepping in front of Harry, their toes nearly touching, leaning over him.

"Sure. I've even got it in my pocket right now. Figured someone would be asking for it soon enough," Harry replied, fishing out the crumpled parchment between his fingers. He shook off the odd feeling nagging at the back of his head. Maybe Viktor was getting ill. That would explain the short manner, the chill and the cloak being pulled so tight.

"Give it to me," Viktor said, reaching out from between the folds of his cloak with his bare white forearm almost glowing in the bright moonlight. For a moment, Harry couldn't figure out why the alarm bells were ringing in his head, warning, warning, warning, something's not right. And then it dawned on him,



causing him to step back a small distance.

“Your arm. Did you go see Madam Pomfrey after all? That was a pretty nasty bruise,” Harry asked as evenly as possible. Calm. Be calm. You’re probably overreacting. It was that arm, wasn’t it? Wait. Snuffles. He said Snuffles. But Hermione said he didn’t know about that name. I never told him. Hagrid, would he have mentioned it in the note to Viktor? Oh... oh... remember to breathe...

“Of course,” Viktor said flatly, not moving his outstretched hand. Harry’s eyes flicked over the collar of his robes, the top of the cloak. No telling from that, the locket was usually tucked in out of sight anyway. Harry gripped his wand tightly in his pocket with his right hand, trying to force himself to relax. Viktor’s words from yesterday kept echoing in his head. Be suspicious as hell, Harry, be suspicious as hell. Since when would Viktor go running to a mediwitch for a bruise, no matter how big, purple, and sore it was?

“What are you going to do with the note? Just curious,” Harry asked, taking another small step back, hoping he wouldn’t notice.

“Dumbledore wants it,” Viktor said, narrowing his eyes.

“Why not wait and have me give it to him tonight, then?” Harry said, trying to keep his voice light, edging back once more and starting to ease the wand back out of his pocket, hopefully hidden among the folds of his robes and inside his cloak.

“Why are you asking so many foolish questions? Give it to me. Trust me,” Viktor said. A quiet rustle of movement beneath Viktor’s cloak gave Harry the sinking feeling that Viktor’s wand was also out.

The sirens in his head whooped all the louder. “Not what you were saying yesterday. You all but told me to not trust anyone. I’ll give you this piece of parchment, if you can answer me one question. That, or show me the one thing you hardly ever take off,” Harry forced out of his dry mouth. “What do you call Hermione, what does it mean, and where did you get it?”

“What foolishness is this? Riddles and questions about pet names? Silly little boy. Give me the parchment, Harry.” There was an edge of danger to the voice now.

“If it’s just a foolish question, then you ought to be able to answer it. Answer even one piece of it, and I’ll let you have it. What do you sometimes call Hermione? What does it mean? Where did you pick it up?” Harry insisted, his voice quavering. The wand came out so fast that Harry hardly had time to think “*Expelliarmus!*”, much less say it. Both of their voices overlapped, echoed over

one another, and two wands went flying off into the darkness of the trees. Harry could only see enough to tell that it was almost certainly not the sturdy hornbeam and dragon heartstring by Gregorovitch. He had seen that wand enough times to identify it as readily as his own. That wasn't Viktor's wand. The alarm bells were claxons now. For a moment, they both froze, considering what to do. Harry scouted around for some means of escape. The wide open lawn was brightly lit and inviting, but there was no way he could easily outrun Viktor's long legs in the open, no matter who had them at the moment. Turning and sprinting off into the dense trees, Harry looked for the narrowest possible openings, ones he could barely squeeze through, in hopes of losing his pursuer, who always seemed to be right behind. He had only been running a few moments when he heard Hagrid's first call of "Harry?" echoing from somewhere in the trees.

Harry tried to head for the voice in the dark, but the forest sounds and thick trees made it impossible to track down. No other voices presented themselves, and Hagrid's seemed to be getting farther and farther away. No one but Hagrid would dare make that much noise in the Forbidden Forest. Harry was panting so hard, it hardly registered when the arrow twanged into the tree trunk he was attempting to squeeze past into a small clearing.

"Who are you human?" growled a voice nearby, and a pair of strong arms snatched him up and whirled him helplessly around. The world wobbled crazily for a moment, then righted itself, and he could make out the forms of ten or so centaurs, their bows raised and loaded.

"A student... please..." Harry panted.

"We do not attack foals, Ronan," one of the centaurs said calmly.

"This one is not so young. Nearing manhood he is," Ronan argued. "Magorian, if we continue to let these humans invade our forest ..." but Ronan was interrupted by footsteps and a voice.

"But he is not a man. Still a boy. Please forgive him the trespass. I am sure he did it only because he had no choice and through ignorance."

Harry turned his head to see Viktor standing at the edge of the clearing. Harry recognized Bane as the centaur with his drawn bow pointed directly at Viktor's face, no more than six inches away. "And why are you trespassing in our forest, human? You cannot hope to pass for a foal," Bane prompted.

"Only because I was looking for him. He is in my charge, I am responsible for his welfare. Even in the forest. I apologize for the trespass into your woods. I meant no disrespect," Viktor said softly. Harry had been swung around so violently when he had been seized, he had no hope of telling which direction he had come from. He couldn't tell if the figure he was looking at had followed or

come from another direction entirely. Harry calculated his options. He wasn't holding a wand, but that told Harry nothing, Viktor often didn't draw his wand until it was absolutely necessary. And waving a wand at centaurs was no way to make friends, even under the best of circumstances. It sure wouldn't be advisable when one was pointing an arrow at your face. In the dim light of the clearing, Harry could not tell much about his cloak or robe at this distance. What had he been wearing in the kitchen? Harry couldn't remember the color of the robe. It was a safe bet to say "scarlet" but that hardly narrowed it down any. Most of his robes were some shade of scarlet. Gray cloaks were a dime a dozen, too. But at the moment, imposter or no, Viktor seemed intent on keeping him from being torn to shreds by the centaurs, so he would play along. Friend for now, at least if he keeps me from getting a hoof upside the head.

"And what would you know about respect for our ways?" Bane growled. "You think because the traitor Firenze is at the school, you know all about us?"

"No. I do not fool myself that I know much about you at all. But I do know that centaurs are a proud and ancient people. They do not serve, nor do they stand for insults. Neither do they take much interest in wizarding ways or events, or humans at all. Not that they should. Wizards have not been too respectful of centaurs either. I would say we are mutually ignorant of one another, for the most part. Wizards do not bother to find out much about centaurs and their wisdom, and centaurs have no reason to find out about wizards," Viktor's even voice came back.

"You speak as one who respects our ways," Ronan said approvingly. "If you will take this foal," he said as he shoved Harry practically at Viktor's feet, "out of here quickly, we will let you live. Never come back though. We might not be so generous next time." The centaurs gathered and slowly walked out of the clearing. Harry looked up at Viktor, who had taken a small step closer to where Harry was lying.

"Stop! You get any closer, I'll scream bloody murder that you just insulted every one of those centaurs by calling them dumb animals, dirty half-breeds! They'll come back and kill us both!" Harry hissed, which brought Viktor up short, looking anxiously around.

"Harry..."

"Shut up! Let me think a minute..."

"Harry, we need to move," Viktor insisted, thrusting his right arm from his cloak, stretching it toward Harry. Harry's chest fluttered, then seemed to flop as he spotted the purple among the paler flesh of the forearm.

"You're bruised, but you could have just done that. What did you call

Hermione?” He was desperate now to hear it again, in Viktor’s voice. Hermione had only whispered the word to Harry, one evening in the common room. She hadn’t even told Ron, she said. Ron would only laugh at how silly she was being over a word. Over the word. Over what he had called her, the form of address he used only rarely. Harry had thought it a bit sentimental, but not all that silly. He couldn’t see Viktor bestowing that title on much of anyone. Hermione had been almost giddy, relaying it to him.

“What?” You mean last year when I could not pronounce...” Harry could already hear footsteps out among the trees. It could be anyone. Hagrid, Viktor, the imposter... he had to know who was standing in front of him before he could trust.

“No! Foreign! Answer me!” Harry said, nearly frantic by now.

A look of comprehension passed over Viktor’s face, and he nodded. “Sokrovishte,” he answered quietly, and Harry’s body went limp with relief.

“*Impedimenta!*” a familiar voice cut through the trees, and Viktor collapsed stiffly back into the loose leaves with a muffled thump. Harry hardly had time to register who the voice belonged to before the curse was repeated, and he knew no more.

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## Chapter 83

Harry jerked awake lying crossways on Hagrid’s large bed. Viktor lay rigidly beside him. Clustered around the bed, he could see Ron, Hermione, Hagrid - still holding his crossbow, Snape and Dumbledore. “Potter, would you like to explain to us all why exactly you were out of bounds yet again and why I was told to go traipsing through the woods to stun you and Krum on sight?” Snape asked coldly.

“It wasn’t him. It wasn’t him to begin with...” Harry said weakly, sitting up. Viktor, also on the bed was still stunned. Silly, but he was comforted when he noticed that the person lying beside him obviously had a round, gold locket lying at the hollow of his throat.

“I think perhaps we had better wake Viktor first. Surely since he gave permission to the rest of us to go stunning him, which is not entirely pleasant, I think it might be wise to get his input on this,” Dumbledore interrupted. “*Enervate!*”

Viktor’s first words were a muttered, “Damn! Half and half...and they do get me...”

“Now perhaps we can get some light shed on this,” Dumbledore said

cheerfully, settling down in a chair with the air of someone who was about to be entertained by a good story. "Harry?"

"The kitchen. Viktor wanted to talk to me, took me out near the woods, but there wasn't a bruise, so it couldn't have been Viktor, you see?" Harry babbled, aware he was making little sense. "I mean, first it was little things that nagged me, like not knowing how to get the doorknob to the kitchen open, and being surprised about the coffee, and looking at the elves that way. It was somebody else!"

"Potter, what fairy tale are you telling now?" Snape sneered.

"I was not even near the kitchen earlier. Polyjuice. Hair. Got the hair before I got the bruise, then. I couldn't take the chance that you would see 'me' with Harry and assume it was okay," Viktor interjected.

"And who would be the person who supposedly did this?" Snape said, "Same person you said you didn't trust further than you could throw them? I think you might be letting your own feelings about this person get ahead of you. Age alone..."

"Does not matter. Look around in a few weeks and check ages. There's fresh blood on all sides. All I have are my suspicions, which, according to you are worth nothing. Just give me the potion, do this and get it over with so you can get your precious proof. You are worse than the Ministry," Viktor snapped.

"Very well. Four drops, in that glass of water, drink it all, it should take effect within a few minutes. Should take out all the larger muscles, but not affect your ability to talk. Don't be standing when it does, unless you like crumpling to the floor and want the rest of them trying to gather you up. I need to get back to the castle, to do rounds in the halls," Snape called, sweeping toward the door.

"You would be better off checking up on that person," Viktor warned.

"I'll think about it," Snape said with a raised brow.

"Severus, I think it might be wise to stop by and keep tabs," Dumbledore said, "Given the circumstances."

"Very well, Headmaster. As you wish. You can meet me there afterwards and let me know if this fantasy proves reliable," Snape said, in a more conciliatory tone. "But I imagine I shall simply be disturbing a quiet evening for no reason," he said before disappearing into the night outside the door.

"Give me a minute with Hermione. I need to tell her something. Be back in a second," Viktor said, grabbing Hermione's hand and striding off toward the

door to the cabin with Hermione in tow. Their silhouettes were plainly visible in front of the window, with the bright moonlight behind. Viktor seemed to be pleading a quick case, relaying facts and counting them off on his fingers, as though stacking up incriminating evidence against a defendant. All of the occupants of the cabin were extra quiet, hardly breathing, and he suspected the rest of them were watching and listening just as intently as he was. And pretending just as hard as he was that they were doing anything but watching the proceedings outside.

Strain as he might, Harry could only hear a few snatches of one side of the conversation, including Hermione's surprised "That's why it wasn't in the books!" and her curious question, "Are you sure it was hair?" followed closely by her comment, "Well, of course it was, what else makes sense? You think this will prove it? That it was... all along?" Harry could tell that Viktor nodded vigorously, and then he caught the murmur of his voice, louder now, but still infuriatingly low enough as to mingle the words together into a blur. He felt his cheeks burn red when he realized what it meant when the two shadows merged into one. He was kissing her. Maybe goodbye, Harry thought, his stomach dropping. They broke apart quickly and came rushing back in, nearly identical grim expressions in place. Hermione took up a firm stance between Ron and Harry, arms crossed, as though steeling herself for what was to come.

"Okay, give it to me," Viktor said flatly, and Dumbledore handed him the glass.

"You can still change your mind you know," Dumbledore said evenly.

"After tonight? You must be kidding," Viktor replied incredulously.

"Just offering," Dumbledore replied.

"An' what is my job in all this?" Hagrid asked.

"You keep our hands together. Break them, crush them if you haff to, but keep them together. Better to wake up with a crushed hand than to not wake up," Viktor said matter-of-factly, perching on the edge of Hagrid's bed with the glass in his hand, drinking it as soon as he had finished.

"First?" Dumbledore asked, shifting his chair closer to the bed.

"First, let us see if Snape's done his job as advertised," Viktor replied, handing the empty glass back. They sat in silence for what seemed a small eternity before Viktor flopped limply back onto the bed, bouncing up off the mattress a little. "Well," he said after some seconds of lying there awkwardly, considering the ceiling, legs dangling off of Hagrid's high bed, "I think he did. I cannot move at all, except for blinking, swallowing and talking."

“Paralyzing potion,” Hermione remarked to Harry and Ron, in response to their curious looks.

“Hagrid, you might want to put his legs up on the bed before we get started, that can’t be comfortable,” Dumbledore said, adjusting the glasses on his extremely crooked nose. Hagrid carefully rearranged Viktor the right way around on the bed, and Dumbledore clasped his right hand, fingers intertwined. “Now then, it’s your job to keep those together until Viktor’s back with us fully, alright then?” Hagrid nodded and wrapped his large hands around them both. “Whatever you do, don’t let go until it’s absolutely over. Ready?”

“As I will ever be,” Viktor replied softly.

“Very well then. *Echomensa*,” Dumbledore said evenly, wielding his wand in the air. At first, Harry was sure that absolutely nothing had happened, until Viktor’s eyes rolled back a little and Dumbledore set his mouth firmly, as though concentrating very hard. “Repeat what you said last,” Dumbledore ordered.

“As I will ever be,” Viktor replied softly, with exactly the same tone and pitch and volume as before.

“Further in, then. Can you still talk to me right now?” Dumbledore asked.

“Yes... not for... much... longer... though,” Viktor replied haltingly and with some effort.

“Just a bit farther then. And then we’ll see. How about, oh, let’s see, what is it you told me just last week about Ron’s Keeper’s technique?”

“He dives too early, more experienced Chasers can see it coming and adjust. But he will improve that soon enough,” Viktor said in a conversational tone. The words flowed freely and easily.

“I do not! I ...” Ron clamped his mouth shut in the face of the glares coming from Hermione and Harry.

“Do... t...” Viktor stopped abruptly, mid syllable and never resumed. Dumbledore waited patiently for a moment before speaking.

“Too far in now for him to talk on his own. I’ll need to move along. Alright, something from last year. Let’s try what you said the night you arrived at Hogwarts. Something Harry would have heard. That way we can check it with something other than my poor overtaxed memory. You’re younger Harry, not so many years to remember as I have,” Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye.

Harry knew a moment of panic when Viktor neither moved, blinked, nor spoke. He was so relieved when he realized the reason why that he gave an embarrassing, braying laugh. "Sorry... it's just ... well, he never said anything in front of me that first night."

"Oh! Well, then, let's try the next night, in the study after the names were drawn." Silence again.

"Professor... I don't think he said anything that night either. Karkaroff did all the talking. He just... well, he just looked at me a bit oddly. Like he couldn't quite figure out how I got there, but he never complained. I mean, not like the other champions and Madame Maxime and everyone else. He just looked kind of puzzled. Which I guess he had a right to. I was the fourth in the Tournament that's supposed to have only three competitors, and I was obviously too young."

"Well, Viktor is quite economical with words. Why don't you tell me when you first heard him speak, instead, and we'll go from there. Either of you, actually." Dumbledore said, looking from Harry to Hermione.

"Errr, library," Hermione said weakly.

"Very well then, first thing you said to Hermione in the library," Dumbledore said in a sprightly manner, as though he were making conversation over tea.

"...box...Minister...Cup" Viktor muttered, almost under his breath. Hermione gasped as he repeated the first three words he had uttered to her. Then, strangely, he narrated what seemed to be his own thoughts, "Oh, brilliant opening, Viktor. She probably does think I am a simpleton, now."

"Good enough. I assume he didn't say that last bit out loud when he was actually talking to you?" Hermione shook her head numbly. "One more quick test then. Harry, what did he first say in front of you?"

Harry gushed nervously. "Oh! Err... ummm... well, let's see... the next time we were together was the weighing of the wands, but he just nodded there. Saw him in the library a lot at lunchtimes, when Hermione and I were looking for something to do about dragons. Remember, when you said he wasn't even good looking and said none of those girls would giggle like that if he couldn't do that Wonky-Feint thing?" he babbled at Hermione, who only blushed furiously in answer. "Sorry. Ummm... there was... the first task... where he..." Harry heaved a sigh, "Where he said absolutely nothing. Come to think of it, I think the first time I ever heard his voice was at the Yule Ball... when he was telling Hermione about Durmstrang."

"Very well then. The conversation about Durmstrang," Dumbledore said,



screwing up his face in concentration.

Harry hadn't realized until Viktor began to speak just how much his voice had changed since more than a year ago. It was noticeably deeper now, than the lighter, more boyish, enthusiastic tone he took on to recreate his comments about Durmstrang. "Vell, ve haff a castle also, not as big as this, nor as comfortable, I am thinking. Ve haff just four floors, and the fires are lit only for magical purposes. But ve haff grounds larger even than these - though in vinter, ve haff very little daylight, so ve are not enjoying them. But in summer ve are flying every day, over the lakes and the mountains -" Harry nodded along in unison as the words he remembered came tumbling back in the thicker accent of last year.

"Now, now, Viktor! Don't go giving away anything else, now, or your charming friend will know exactly where to find us!" Harry froze as Karkaroff's words came back. In Karkaroff's own voice.

"Igor, all this secrecy... one would almost think you didn't want visitors." Dumbledore's voice. Only Dumbledore's lips weren't moving. Only Viktor's as he formed those same words and stared blankly at the ceiling.

"Well, Dumbledore, we are all protective of our private domains, are we not? Do we..."

"That's enough. I remember that conversation all too well. Well then. I suppose we can proceed. Seems to work well enough," Dumbledore said brightly.

"His voice..." Harry began, "Karkaroff's voice ..."

"The body remembers, Harry. Now then. We had best hurry. I can't keep this up all night. Keeping one old body going is quite enough work, thank you," Dumbledore said briskly. "Now then, the third task, the maze. I think we should start with something nice and neutral beforehand. Talking with your parents, maybe," Dumbledore decided. He was met with a barrage of rapid Bulgarian in three different voices, sometimes overlapping, while Viktor's lips hardly ever stilled. Harry marveled at the way the syllables that Viktor wasn't even forming with his mouth still came out clear as if he had formed them. "Oh dear. I had forgotten. They would have spoken in Bulgarian, wouldn't they? Ah well, scratch that, then. Little good Bulgarian does me, I don't know a speck of it, unfortunately. How about Minerva's little speech, then?"

"We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze. If you get into difficulty, and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?" McGonagall's voice, as clear and brisk and accented as it was each day in class. Viktor nodded slowly, as all three of

the champions had last year, in response to that echo of last year.

“Oh dear. I fear that potion might not be doing quite the job we hoped. Young, strong, he’s going to fight it. Hagrid, you might have to do a bit more than hold hands,” Dumbledore said warningly. “From your whistle, then, Viktor. Anything and everything you might have heard, thought, or sensed that might help us.”

The quiet was deafening for a moment. Harry was sure he could hear his heart in his ears. Then Viktor drew a short breath, moved his lips, and Harry caught the murmur of Karkaroff’s voice, fading in and out, *join me Viktor, join me Viktor, don’t be a fool, you can buy my way back in, back into their good graces, your present fame is nothing compared to what he could give you, you never want to be attacked like you were the other night, do you?, he can protect you, you could give Mad-Eye Moody a run for his money with your skill, I need you, I made you, you would be nothing without me, I treated you like my own son, give in to it, join me ...* growing steadily weaker with each word. His eyelids fluttered, and Harry noted the perspiration condensing on Viktor’s lip, though the cabin was cool.

The third whistle blast. The signal for Fleur to enter the maze. All the champions would be in now. Nothing but murmurs for a moment, then Harry’s own distant voice crying “*Expecto Patronum!*” as he encountered the Boggart which had been masquerading as a Dementor, the words once again formed by Viktor’s mouth. Silence again. Then Fleur’s piercing scream, another space of silence, and again, Harry’s voice, yelling. “Fleur?” Then the second noise began. At first, it seemed to be a distant menacing rumble, like thunder rolling through mountains, drowned beneath the constant whining patter of Karkaroff’s voice. Then it changed. Grew. Swelled like a tsunami.

The horrible, screeching shriek reverberated off the walls in Hagrid’s cabin, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione clapped their hands over their ears in pain. Fang howled mournfully and dived under the table in an effort to get away from it. “Oh! It’s awful! It’s worse out loud!” Hermione yelled. Karkaroff’s voice had disappeared now, drowned in the swell of the second. Viktor gritted his teeth and convulsed on the bed, eyes rolling back, eyelids half closed, head smacking against the pillow, small choking noises coming from his throat. With apparent great effort, he tented his left knee, shoved his booted heel against the mattress, heaved himself onto his right side, and curled his free left arm tightly up over his ear, as though trying to shut the noise out, still jerking slightly. Then, as abruptly as it began, the noise stopped. The twitching stilled, the eyes opened, and the arm came down, resting the curled fingers on the pillow in front of the face. If you didn’t look too closely, he was simply casually draped over the bed, taking a rest. As long as you didn’t look at the eyes. Harry was reminded most uncomfortably of the times in the infirmary, when Viktor’s eyes had been open, but there was nothing behind them. No spark. No life.

From looking blindly past the fingers, the eyes shifted and fixed on the fingers. Viktor flexed them experimentally, as though he was new to using them. A smile curled up the left side of his mouth when he saw them bend, and there was no warmth in it. He twitched again, and at first, Harry took it for more convulsions, but then he realized there was a low, deep chuckle that was responsible. Viktor parted his lips, and carefully formed the words. "Come on out, my pet. I told you it would take the both of us together to get in. No sparks now. Let them hunt a cold trail for the time being. Follow close, but not too close." Mad-Eye Moody's low growl. Barty Crouch Jr. casting the Imperius Curse.

"Oh... oh... he was right then ... no sparks..." Hermione squeaked, putting her hands over her mouth. Harry was reminded of those statues of monkeys you often saw. Well, we've had 'hear no evil' and 'speak no evil', we just need something to make us cover our eyes now, and we will have covered 'see no evil', he thought crazily.

"Right about wh..." Ron began, but Hermione shushed him frantically. Harry was so busy watching them, it did not register at first, the second laugh. Throaty. Rich. Almost musical, like tinkling bells. Very, very female. And hauntingly familiar. Harry's stomach lurched when the words began.

"Pity. Zis would 'ave been so much easier if you 'ad just given in to my Veela-charm instead."

"Fl..." Ron began, but Hermione shushed him once again, actually smacking the flat of her palm against his shoulder.

"It could 'ave been so much more pleasant. 'oo ever 'eard of a teenage boy saying no to a Veela? I suppose you get used to zem, playing near zem so long. But still, I wonder if it would 'ave made a difference if I 'ad gotten to you before you started visiting the library? Before that shaggy leetle Mudblood? I tried ratting you out to Karkaroff, but 'e evidently 'ad no more success zan I did, persuading you to drop 'er. Yule Ball partner, indeed! No matter. You will 'elp us anyway. Get up. Diggory needs to be taken care of. We need to get 'im out of ze way," Fleur's icy voice ordered. The fingers flexed. Curled into a fist. Unfurled slowly.

"Come on then, help me get him up. He's proving harder to control than I expected, too. Together now." Moody's voice again.

Both voices together, "Up!" Onto his back again, legs moving restlessly, but still weak. The potion had to be wearing off.

"Forward, I heard Diggory just ahead," Moody's voice snarled. Harry

noted that there should have been several of his own jinxes and defensive spells in that space. Viktor apparently hadn't heard his yells when he had been so deeply under. Harry cringed, knowing what must come next, after the long silence.

Cedric's voice. "What are you doing? What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

Then Viktor's. "*Crucio!*" Then Cedric's yells, while Viktor flailed horribly, almost as though someone were performing the curse on him now. Harry felt himself shrivel in the face of the memory, the frantic search for some break in the hedge, some way to get to Cedric. Harry felt his knees soften and go weak. Beside him, Ron and Hermione both looked extremely pale, washed of color.

"Stop! You're hurting him, and you already got your answer!" Hermione yelled.

"Shh! Hermione, it's Cedric you're hearing, just a memory..." Ron whispered, but the words had no sooner left his mouth than the first set of screams were joined by a second set. Viktor's. They overlapped and echoed around the hut, and the cacophony was made worse when Fang howled and barked along with them, and was answered by distant barks outside the cabin. He jerked and convulsed more violently, yanking and twisting at the joined hands so hard that Harry could see his bicep flex and bulge under his sleeve with each spasm. He seemed to have regained almost full use of every muscle in his arms at least. Hagrid actually teetered a little at one particularly violent jerk, when Viktor half sat up. The half-giant's knuckles went white as he increased his hold, and Harry hoped he was imagining the noise that sounded like grinding bones as Hagrid tugged him back toward the bed. It looked something like a bizarre arm wrestling match with three contestants, with Hagrid wrestling Dumbledore and Viktor's clasped hands lower, below the level of the bed, leaving Viktor's shoulder and arm in an awkward twist, but still yanking at the cluster of their hands. The knuckles on Viktor's left hand were drained of color as he clutched a fistful of the quilt covering the bed. The barking outside grew louder and even more frantic.

"Ivan... Natasha ..." Hermione breathed, "Please... stop it..."

"It needs to be finished. I can't just yank back," Dumbledore protested, and Harry began to see the strain on him as well. Beads of sweat were forming on his upper lip and forehead, and Hagrid was beginning to sandwich the pair of hands between his own even more firmly together. The muffled crunch that reached Harry's ears was most definitely not just in his head.

The screaming went on and on. It hadn't gone on that long in the maze, had it? Harry once again had that curious feeling of being outside himself when

at long last he heard his own voice from Viktor's lips. "*Stupefy!*" Viktor jerked again, then was still. No blinking, no twitching, only ragged panting and sweat running down his temple. Harry found himself willing Viktor to at least blink, but for a moment, the tableau froze, Viktor on the bed, Dumbledore clutching at his hand, bent over him, Hagrid hugging their hands together so tightly that it looked like he was trying to make diamonds from coal.

"Now then lad, I wish I could tell you not to fight me just yet, but I suspect that's a ways off," Dumbledore said quietly. "Let's try something a bit happier from this past year. Give me the first thing you said upon picking up these three in London for their summer visit."

"So you are all here already. Good. Milkshakes?" The words were the same as they were all those months ago, but Viktor struggled to get them out. He jerked. He fought.

"Okay. Backing out now. Say something," Dumbledore said, panting. Viktor's lips twitched, but no words came. "Fine, then. Random memory from the summer, instead."

"The same artist has a painting in the museum in Sofia. It is a landscape with a meadow on the left and ...a vind... a vind... a vindmill..." Each word was wrenched from his lips like it was a gut wrenching effort.

"Enough," Dumbledore cut him off after a bit.

"He said that this past summer. On his first trip. We went to the museum ... " Hermione half whispered.

"Backing out more. For heaven's sake, say something of your own accord," Dumbledore pleaded, and for the first time, Harry felt really afraid about how long it was taking for Viktor to come back to himself. He was heartened when some noise came from Viktor's lips.

"S... S... S... Se... Se... Se zabavia," he gasped.

"Say what?" Ron burst out.

"Say it again," Dumbledore insisted, "In English."

"S... Se... Se... Se zabavia!"

"English? Any English word?" Dumbledore asked, sounding frantic.

"Se zabavia!" Viktor scabbled at Hagrid's wrist, trying to get past it to Dumbledore's. He finally rolled onto his side, threaded his left arm through and

clutched at Dumbledore's loose wrist, shaking it, as though he could get his meaning across by touch alone. After a moment, he let go, forming a fist and pounding it against the bed. Whether in pain or frustration, or both, Harry couldn't tell.

"Slow down!" Hermione demanded.

"I admit, I had not foreseen this possibility, that he might not regain the English right away, but I need him to guide me back out..." Dumbledore mumbled, more to himself than anyone in the room.

"No, it means 'slow down'! In Bulgarian!" Hermione explained.

"Since when do you know Bulgarian!?" Ron shrieked.

"I don't! I mean, just a few words and phrases here and there. Things Viktor taught me. Just to get the way verbs work down. Se zabavia. Da. Got it," she said, stepping closer to the edge of the bed. She tentatively touched her fingertips to his shoulder.

Viktor rested for a moment, then writhed as though in pain, murmuring, "Iz... iz... izliza... izliza." He was pecking weakly at Hagrid's wrist again the whole while, then waved impatiently at Dumbledore, as though shoing him away.

"Get out!" Hermione burst out at last. "He's saying 'get out'." Dumbledore's face became grim once more with the apparent effort of backing away.

"Ssss... sss... spir... spir..." Viktor grimaced harder as he tried to form the word.

"Spirane? Is it spirane?" Hermione asked.

"D... da..."

"Stop, then," Hermione supplied. It seemed an eternity went by before Dumbledore spoke again.

"I really do need to be getting this over with," Dumbledore wheezed.

"Viktor? Can he? Back out more? Izliza?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"Ochakva," Viktor murmured. The word was barely audible, thin and weak, slipping out between increasingly white lips. Viktor's eyelids seemed to have gone very heavy, his eyes nearly closed, opening only with a considerable effort. Harry was hard pressed to decide which of the two had gone more pale,

Dumbledore or Viktor.

“I can’t,” Hermione breathed. Dumbledore looked at her expectantly. “I can’t remember what it means! Viktor?”

“Ochakva,” he repeated, eyelids fluttering.

“Izliza?” Hermione burst out after a moment. Viktor’s only response was a slow nod.

“Right then ... I’ll back...” Dumbledore began, but Hermione interrupted.

“No! Wait! He might not mean yes!”

“What are you on about, Hermione?” Ron asked.

“Well, he’s speaking Bulgarian, maybe he’s nodding like a Bulgarian too,” Hermione explained.

“What?” Ron said.

“He told me in the train station, when we were coming back from my house, that Bulgarians usually do that when they mean ‘no’ ... look, Viktor, no nodding or head shaking, use words. Da or ne?” Hermione insisted.

It seemed to take forever for the word to come out. “N... n... ne.”

“Wait, then. Ochakva must mean wait,” Hermione mused. Another long moment of silence passed before Viktor spoke again.

“Izliza ...pozvoliava da otiva...” he said in a strangled voice.

“Get out... all the way, let go? Can he let go?” Hermione asked, making exaggerated gestures with her hands, clasping and unclasping.

“Da... Sokrovishte ... da ...” Viktor replied, and he and Dumbledore once more seemed to be under great strain. Viktor’s fist pounded the mattress again. His voice came back full force as he repeated, “Yes... Pozvoliava da otiva ... pozvoliava da otiva ... pozvoliava da otiva... Pozvoliava da o... oh, fu... let go already!” The second Hagrid let go, Dumbledore began cradling his hand to his chest, and Viktor rolled to his side and did the same. The next few Bulgarian words that Viktor spoke, Harry was quite sure he hadn’t taught *those* to Hermione.

“Sorry,” Hagrid mumbled, looking a little abashed.

“No... no... do not apologize. Like I said earlier, better a broken hand than not waking up at all,” Viktor said, gritting his teeth and sitting up.

“True, Hagrid. Now then, I suppose we had better be getting back up to the castle and checking on Severus. And letting Poppy do something about these hands. Hagrid, why don't you go see about Severus, in Fleur's quarters, and we'll get our wand hands seen to before we need them, eh?” Dumbledore said a little thinly, gathering up his cloak with his left hand and draping it over his shoulders. Hagrid was already out the door by the time Viktor was out of the bed and gathered up his cloak. Ivan and Natasha very nearly bowled everyone between the door and the bed over in their haste to get to Viktor. Except for the dogs, it was rather a grim march back to the infirmary.

The only words spoken were Viktor's muttered, “And I thought broken bones were something. Crushed ones put them to shame.”

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## Chapter 84

“On'y thing lef' up there was the furniture,” Hagrid said, shaking his shaggy head. “Gone by the time Snape go' there.”

“Must have doubled back to the castle while we were all out in the woods, then,” Dumbledore said distractedly. “Thank you Poppy. That will do quite nicely,” he added, flexing his fingers.

“Great, so all of this for nothing,” Ron groused.

“No, not for nothing. Would you rather she had stayed and we had not found out?” Viktor answered, bending his rather stiff fingers experimentally. “Let her drag Harry off into the woods or send him some more sweets? It at least explains one thing.”

“Well, do let me in on it then, because I still don't understand it,” Ron said peevishly.

“Honestly, Ron. It explains the dreams. Why you and Harry heard singing and we didn't. Fleur was using her Veela-charm and we were picking up on it. Harry and you heard singing. Something attractive. Viktor and I, well, we heard screeching. Her true nature,” Hermione explained.

“Of course, it still does not explain why all four of us had the dream in the first place. I can see why she would want to work on Harry, but why the three of us as well?” Viktor said. “Seems like too big a risk. Obviously, it was not going to work on Hermione. And after us knocking heads last year, I thought she had gone off me completely and would not bother to spit on me if I were on fire, much less try to mess with my head. And Ron ... why would she bother with... well, I



suppose she could try to lure the both of you off because where one of you goes, the other is almost sure to follow ... but why did Ron never sleepwalk, then?"

"What made you figure it out?" Harry asked.

"The remark Hermione made about needing earplugs for Umbridge. It made me think about the earplugs at the Internationals. And the Veela. And how I compared them to sirens. I kept saying that if I didn't know better, I would have thought the singing sounded like sirens. You two were the only ones who needed the earplugs. And it suddenly made sense why we could find nothing that seemed to fit in all those books. Veela aren't beasts. Exactly," Viktor responded. "Why didn't I figure it out sooner?"

"None of us did. I didn't know Veela could get into your dreams," Hermione said soothingly.

"But if anyone should know anything about Veela and what they would sound like..." Viktor began.

"Stop that. What's done is done. Did you know they could do that? In your dreams?" Hermione answered.

"Never heard of it before," Viktor admitted.

"Well then. There you are. And she was in on it last year with Crouch. She was sandbagging. She was sandbagging all along, wasn't she?" Hermione mused.

Viktor leveled a long, silent look at Dumbledore. "I believe you owe Harry a conversation. If he wants it."

Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably, but opened his mouth to reply. All of the occupants of the infirmary stiffened when they heard an ominous "Hem, hem." Umbridge stood in the doorway with two wizards, one tall, black and bald, with a single gold hoop in his ear, the second, Umbridge turned to and drew herself up to full height. "Dawlish, here he is."

"Dolores, dear, what are you doing in the infirmary at this time of night?" Dumbledore said pleasantly, as though this sort of thing happened all the time.

"Here to see you on a most grave matter. I regret to inform you that the Ministry has called an emergency meeting, and they quite agree with me..."

"Why, I'd think you would be quite happy that they agree with you, Dolores," Dumbledore said with a smile.

“Stop interrupting! We’re removing you as Headmaster, effective immediately, due to Ministry Decree ...”

“NO!” all three of the students shouted and would have added more, if not for the warning look and short shake of the head from Viktor. They all looked at him expectantly, but he stayed silent.

“Now, now, don’t get yourselves in a tizzy. Why would you be removing me, Dolores?” Dumbledore said in a soothing voice.

“Miss Delacour has come to me with some most interesting allegations. First, there were the unwanted advances toward her ...”

“Ha! Toward her...” Harry exploded.

“Oh, that’s rich...” Hermione began sarcastically.

“Be quiet or you will have to leave,” Viktor interrupted softly, with raised eyebrows. Harry, Ron, and Hermione all gaped at him, surprised.

Umbridge cleared her throat and began again, “And then we have the ridiculing of her teaching abilities. Not a firing offense, but cause for concern. Subtle hostility, outright attacks, she’s had nothing but trouble since she came here. Why, just tonight, she came to my office sobbing and saying you attacked her, tried to hunt her down out on the grounds, and this was under the influence of Veritaserum. She also says you’ve tried to poison the rest of the staff against her. And I believe it. Why, Professor Snape was in her empty quarters soon after she left, and it was on your orders, he says.” She turned to Viktor, “You two never got along, from what I saw in staff meetings, and frankly, she was afraid of what rumors and wild stories you all might be cooking up about her. She half expected you to assert she was dangerous! She resigned on the spot and vowed never to come back. I’ve no choice but to remove you, Dumbledore, considering this on top of your past behavior. We’re out a perfectly good Defense Against The Dark Arts professor.” Here, Viktor let out a soft, derisive snort, but said nothing further. “You’ll take over the position next class.”

Viktor finally spoke again, “What!?”

“You’ll take over the position next class. You’re qualified. They need a teacher,” Umbridge said, not sounding too convincing.

“I get six weeks to get them in a position to pass their OWLs?” Viktor asked incredulously.

“I suppose you do. Now, what are the lot of you doing down here?” Umbridge asked sharply.

“Lots of headaches and upset stomachs this time of year Dolores,” Dumbledore said, not sounding in the least upset.

“I’m taking you to Azkaban,” Umbridge said with a glee that Harry hadn’t seen for some time.

“Now is that really necessary? I’ve got so many other things to be doing, and breaking out of Azkaban would simply keep me from them,” Dumbledore said.

“Charges of assault, misuse of authority, negligence of duty, and possibly plotting to overthrow the Ministry,” Umbridge said with a self-satisfied smirk.

“Ah, well, then, I suppose I had better not get arrested in the first place,” Dumbledore said, as though discussing the weather. “Viktor, do take the position, please. I would feel much better knowing you accepted. Hagrid, do see to things in my absence. I think you’ll both carry on just fine without me here. And Harry, do listen to your elders and betters, even if sometimes the elder aren’t better, and the better aren’t elder,” Dumbledore said with a small adjustment of his glasses on his crooked nose, drawing himself up to his full height. With a loud pop and a bright flash, Fawkes appeared in the air directly over his head.

“Shacklebolt, Dawlish... take him,” Umbridge growled, and the two wizards moved forward, wands raised. Almost languidly, Dumbledore raised his own wand and stunned the two of them. Umbridge began shooting stunning spells at Dumbledore, but he dodged them easily, finally stunning her as well.

“I apologize for stunning Kingsley, but I had to or it would have looked suspicious,” Dumbledore said. “I trust you’ll know what to do when the time comes, Viktor. Remember what I said, Harry. Now, I’ve got to go. Wake them after I’ve gone,” Dumbledore added, grasping the feet of Fawkes and disappearing with a pop.

“Nobody move,” Viktor said, drawing his wand. “Stay as you are and she won’t know any time has passed. Anyone haff anything they need to say right now? Before I wake them?”

“So... are you going to take the job?” Hermione asked.

“If it weren’t for the three of you still being here, I would tell her where she could stick her job. Now, I think I haff no choice but to take it,” Viktor mumbled, his attention on the three bodies on the floor.

“Umbridge an’ her Ministry! Accusin’ Dumbledore...” Hagrid began,

gritting his teeth.

“Shh, now. Harry, I am sorry. Can I take the spell off now?” Viktor asked, and when no one responded, he did so.

“Well, Umbridge was in a fine temper,” Ron observed, as Viktor escorted them back to the dorms.

“Wait until she tries to get into the Headmaster’s office,” Viktor said, with a half smile. “And it seals itself against her. She’s been eyeing it the whole time she’s been here. Go to bed now, it’s late.” He stifled a yawn against the back of his own hand, and Harry observed that there were dark smudges under his eyes, as though he hadn’t been sleeping well again.

“But Dumbledore...” Harry began.

“Will be just fine. I bet I know where he’s gone, and he will probably get more done there than he would here. Look, Harry, I know it is hard, but try not to worry about him. Umbridge is Headmistress now, but it does not mean we cannot do things the way Dumbledore would like. I am sure this is not the end of the trouble she will try to stir up. Please, Harry, just keep your head down and stay out of her way. She will hate anyone overly loyal to Dumbledore. For now, just try to think of her as that thing sitting in the office calling herself Headmistress. And look on the bright side,” Viktor replied, laying a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“What bright side?” Harry snapped.

“If she is Headmistress, she will not have time to observe class and find out that I am going to teach you all some real Defense Against the Dark Arts. You had all better bring your wands to my first class. No more book,” Viktor replied with a sly grin.

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## Chapter 85

It was obvious that Dumbledore’s escape was the talk of the school, it seemed everywhere Harry went, it was being talked about. But the news that their Defense Against the Dark Arts professor had changed was just as obviously a complete surprise to the rest of the school when the class filed in and wearily drew out their books. Just in the nick of time for the start of class, Neville came through the door, puffing and red-faced, with Viktor right behind him, upright and purposeful. “Put those ridiculous books away, and take out your wands,” Viktor said, pulling the door closed and murmuring something at it while flicking his wand.

“Wands?” Seamus Finnigan asked curiously, as though Viktor had uttered a completely unfamiliar foreign word. Viktor was at the front of the class, arms crossed, slight scowl in place, looking completely grim and deadly serious. And terribly intimidating, Harry thought. All business.

“Yes, wands. You know, those sort of pointy wooden things you wave around in other classes while doing magic. These things,” he added, wagging his own loosely between finger and thumb. “I realize it has been a while since you used one in here, but surely you haff not forgotten what they are completely. I haff more faith in you than that. Get yours out. You might need it. Miss Abbott?”

Hannah Abbott lowered her raised hand. “I thought this class was all theory now...” she said uncertainly, trailing off.

“That is what it says in the Ministry decree. But, look, you lot haff OWLs in six weeks, and that test has not changed, and the examiners still expect you to be able to do something. And I do too. I do not expect that a real Dementor will go running in the other direction because you can quote that fool book chapter and verse at it. I never heard of a dark wizard literally being bored to death, either. I am going to teach you to actually do what you haff read about. How to actually defend yourself. Umbridge can like it or lump it if she finds out. And as long as she does not catch us at it, she can do neither. So if any one of you lets on what is going on in here now that I teach this class, I will personally draw and quarter you, or the nastiest thing I can think of at the time and deny what I haff taught you to my last breath. And remember where I went to school. Anybody who would rather read about it than do it can leave right now. There is no point in wasting my time and yours by using class time to read the book. You can do that on your own.” Viktor quirked an eyebrow at the whole class. You could hear a slug crawling across the floor if there were one in here, Harry thought. “Fine then. Who in here thinks they could take me in a fair fight?” Viktor asked casually. Everyone in the class seemed frozen, afraid to move for fear it would be taken as a sign of volunteering. One corner of Viktor’s mouth twitched subtly, fleetingly, and Harry thought he might be fighting back a smile or a laugh. But the next instant it was gone, and Harry almost convinced himself he had imagined it. Not with that expression, he wasn’t.

“Has he gone completely mad?” Ron whispered from the corner of his mouth, elbowing Hermione.

“Shhh, Ron! Better than the book, isn’t it? We’re finally *doing* something in here,” Hermione said, propping her chin on her fist and her elbow on the desk, as eager as she usually was during a lecture.

After a few more seconds of complete silence, Viktor sighed. “An *unfair* fight then?” Again, thunderous silence, except for one of the girls clearing her

throat, until Seamus Finnigan poked Dean Thomas in the ribs with his wand, making Dean yelp and jump up off his seat. A wave of nervous giggling spread through the room. "May I take it you are volunteering?" Viktor asked, glowering at Dean. The tone of his voice made it clear that 'no' was not an acceptable answer, the inquiry had merely been rhetorical. Again, Harry thought he saw that subtle twitch, but imagining himself on the other end of that piercing look caused him to shiver a bit. Looking at Viktor's dark, almost black eyes, narrowed as they were now, hooded and slightly slanted at the corners, dark brows lowered over them, the corners of his full mouth pulled down in a pouting frown, Harry was reminded once more of how foreign and vaguely exotic he looked. And just how much bulk he had put on in the last year. Far from being the very skinny, nearly bony, boy he had been the previous year, Viktor looked even more solid and immovable than he ever had, more like his father's slightly sturdier frame. While still slender, he looked far broader and more mature than he had the previous year, or even over the summer. The crossed arms looked thicker than Harry remembered, the flexed biceps plainly visible beneath the short sleeves of his robes. It was little wonder that Dean Thomas stammered uncertainly. Viktor looked even more intimidating than Harry had found him during their first private talk when Viktor had asked for a word alone.

"Well... he... I... I mean... I didn't ..." Dean spluttered, pointing accusingly at Seamus, then dropping his hand weakly in the wake of that glare, gulping hard. "Yes, sir?" he said uncertainly.

"You are standing. Close enough," Viktor growled in a low voice, "Come up here. I will even let you haff first shot. I will not do a thing until you speak. First one is free."

"W..w...what am I supposed to do?" Dean asked timidly.

"You had better defend yourself," Viktor said, almost lightly. With a flick of his wand and a murmured incantation, a thin padded mat appeared on the stone floor, and he stepped onto it. For several minutes, Dean stood at the other end, looking around the room uncertainly. A couple of the girls let out nervous giggles, and some of the students whispered to one another behind their hands. Finally, Viktor spread his hands expectantly and raised his brows once more. "Well? Going to try to outlast me? Stare me down? Wait for me to fall asleep? Die of old age?" Viktor mocked. The uneasy laughter traveled the room again.

"*Ex- ex-expelliarmus!*" Dean managed at last, but his hand was trembling so badly that the spell missed completely and simply flicked a tendril of Viktor's hair back as it whizzed by. Viktor never flinched or made to dodge.

Viktor actually planted his hands on his hips and said in an exasperated tone, "Well, if that is the best you can manage, I might as well not bother... Shall

I hex you now? You haff given me five minutes to take my pick..."

"*Expelliarmus!*" Dean managed a second time, hitting the target this time, but if Viktor had been holding on to his wand with anything more than the thumb and forefinger, the wand would not have budged. As it was, the wand only flopped to the floor midway between them. "I ... I did it!" Dean grinned and sounded relieved. Viktor gave what looked to be a fairly good natured shrug and walked toward Dean, right hand extended, as though coming to shake hands.

"Adequate, but your aim is horrible," Viktor said, as Dean lowered his wand. The entire class gasped when Viktor grabbed Dean's left wrist in his hand, ducked and twisted, launching Dean flying head over heels, landing him with a solid thud on the mat, flat on his back. Viktor straightened and planted his boot on Dean's wrist, lightly pinning Dean's arm and wrist, rendering him incapable of using his wand. They froze in that pose for a few moments, Dean wheezing slightly, before Viktor shifted his foot back to the floor and offered a hand, the hard look on his face dissolving. "I did not hurt you too badly, I trust? Just got the wind taken out of you a bit?" Dean nodded uncertainly and let Viktor haul him back to his feet. "Go back to your seat then. I can point out a dozen things you did wrong, but let us just stick with the major errors, shall we? Anyone care to point out something Dean did wrong? Apologies, Dean, but you did haff the misfortune of being the first person in class to draw my attention, thanks to Mister Finnigan there. Do not worry, he will get his later," Viktor said with a slight grin. "Miss Abbott?"

"For a start, he just stood there forever," Hannah Abbott volunteered, pointing out the blatantly obvious.

"Fair enough," Viktor said, nodding, "But he made a mistake even before that. Before he ever knew he was going to be up here. Or before I did, even. Miss Granger?" He strode back through the room to stand at Dean's desk, next to a still panting Dean.

"He let you intimidate him," Hermione responded after she lowered her vigorously waving hand, just a hint of pride in her voice. In fact, Harry thought she seemed even more proud than usual of being able to answer.

"True, Dean? Scared?" Viktor asked in a low voice.

"I wasn't scared! I..." Dean began indignantly, but he let out an involuntary yelp when Viktor made a quick dodge at him again.

"No shame in being scared, I haff scared bigger and meaner than you," Viktor laughed. "Being scared is only good sense when you are going to be in a fight. But if you let someone intimidate you, they already haff you beaten. Being intimidated means you think the other person has won already. No point in

fighting if you think you have no chance of winning. So, let's see. You were intimidated, you took too long, you were indecisive. Someone who really means you harm is not going to just stand there as long as I did, waiting for you to make the first move. I could have killed you ten times over in that amount of time, and still had time to make a sandwich. You were hesitant when you finally decided what to use, and your aim makes me think you need to get your eyes tested. And your worst mistake of all, you assumed that just because I no longer had a wand, I was no longer a threat. Let me tell you something. Durmstrang made sure their students could defend themselves, wand or no. In fact, we were taught that there are times when your wand is a last resort. Muggles with guns and knives and their bare hands can be dangerous. You do not need a wand to kill someone. Remember that. Oh, and you sat next to Finnigan. He is always trouble. I imagine all of you need a lot of work. Mister Finnigan?"

"Going to teach us how to do that flipping thing?" Seamus said with a mischievous look.

"I guarantee I can have even the smallest lady in this class capable of beating the snot out of the likes of you in six weeks, if you all pay attention and work hard, so better mind your manners," Viktor replied. "For today, though, I think we had better practice disarming and shielding charms, if none of you are any better at it than Dean was just now. Pair off, and do not think you can always keep the same partner every class. I will be shuffling you around if you do not do it yourselves," Viktor added. "First take turns just disarming, then take turns disarming while the other tries to block. Well... what are you waiting for? Engraved invitations?" The entire class scrambled to find partners, then started looking for space in the aisles to practice. "Let me get rid of the desks," Viktor announced, waving his wand and stacking them quickly and neatly along the back wall, giving them room to practice.

As usual, Hermione was the only one willing to partner with Neville, and Viktor seemed to stop by their corner to check up on them more often than he did the rest of the students, but by the end of class, Harry noticed that Neville had become rather good at disarming Hermione and blocking her attempts at disarming him, succeeding at both more often than not. He pointed out Neville's improvement to his own partner, Ron, and was rewarded for his inattention by being disarmed. "Ha! Gotcha!" Ron taunted.

Viktor had to call out several times to get their attention, they were having so much fun practicing. "Practice both of those before the next class, I expect you to be pretty proficient by then. We will spend a few minutes practicing, then maybe I will teach you 'that flipping thing' as Mister Finnigan so eloquently put it, or something like it." Viktor stood there for a moment surveying the class. "Errr... class is over, you know. You all are free to go. I need to put the desks back. Scram," he added, jerking his head toward the door. "Whoa. Hold up. Not you," Viktor said, grasping Harry's upper arm as he passed.



“What?” Harry asked, puzzled.

“Occlumency,” Viktor said flatly.

“What about it?” Harry asked, feeling a guilty flush rush up his neck.

“I am not going to lecture you on lying about your Occlumency lessons. Or snooping. What is done is done. But you need to get back to studying it. And I am sort of ‘it’. Snape will not haff you back, and Dumbledore is not here anymore. I tried to talk Snape into teaching you again at least a half dozen times after I found out, but he refused. He is a lot better at it than I am, but I suppose someone to practice with is better than nothing...” Viktor said in a rush.

“But...” Harry protested weakly. He didn’t need anything else to practice. Grant you, most of Defense Against the Dark Arts was old hat, but still...

“No buts,” Viktor said sternly. “When you get an hour, even a half hour, come and see me. In my quarters if you want. The office, whatever. Look, I promise to try to be easier on you than Snape, but it will still be tough. I remember I had headaches that made it feel like a rampaging Hippogriff had been let loose in there...”

“But I...” Harry attempted to protest again, but it died on his lips when Viktor looked at him, the concern plain on his face. Harry thought fleetingly that he would have preferred the glare. This look made him ashamed of himself for protesting at all. For not leaping on the suggestion.

“Look, do it for Dumbledore. Your godfather. Do it for me, eh, momche?” Viktor pleaded softly, tapping him lightly under the chin with a curled finger.

“I’m not a boy,” Harry protested peevishly, remembering the meaning of the word.

Viktor heaved a sigh. “No, I suppose you are not. Not for a long while now,” he said sadly, shaking his head. Then his voice lightened and he looked less serious. “So stop acting so much like one when it comes to Occlumency, hmm? I promise I will not toss you to the floor if I can help it. I will put a nice mat down to protect your knees,” he teased.

“Oh, alright. You’re worse than Hermione, you know that? You two could nag an Erumpent to death,” Harry complained.

“Surely not! Nag? Us?” Viktor said with mock indignation. “Go on. Get out of here. I haff another class in a few minutes. First years. I need to run back to my office first and find the attendance roster. And put on my game face.

I need to scare the bejeezus out of the next class too.”  
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## Chapter 86

Harry was pleasantly reminded of third year and of Professor Lupin when he went to Defense Against the Dark Arts these days. The class had become practical once again, and dare he say it, even fun. Of course, the story traveling around the halls of what had happened in the fifth year class for the Slytherins improved his opinion of Viktor’s approach to the class about tenfold all by itself. It seems Draco had been conceited enough to volunteer right off, all ready to show off by besting or at least equaling the professor. Not only had Viktor kept his wand and put Draco on the floor, but he had pulled his wand from his hand, disarming him without having to bother casting a spell. When Crabbe and Goyle had insisted they could do better, Viktor had similarly proven them very wrong.

Their own class was currently trying to learn a bit of physical self-defense, practicing on one another when they weren’t casting cushioning charms all over the hard stone floors. Right now, the girls in the class were at the front, Hannah Abbott with both hands wrapped around Viktor’s wrist loosely, as though she had been handed something she wasn’t quite sure how to handle. “Oh, for heaven sake, Miss Abbott, would you just twist my arm already?” Viktor was saying in a slightly exasperated tone, shaking his arm, her fingertips barely touching his wrist.

“But I can’t pull you over!” Hannah argued, “You’re twice as big as I am!”

“Girls learning how to beat up boys. That’s rich! Poor dainty little things,” Seamus laughed, up to his usual heckling when the girls were trying to learn some of the physical self defense. Parvati stuck her tongue out at him, but he and Dean only laughed that much harder and Seamus flailed a limp wrist at her and minced around for a few steps.

“Look, you do this properly, you do not need to be bigger. Just get my arm in the right twist, and wherever it goes, I haff to go. Any fool who does not want his arm or his elbow broken is not about to stand there and let you twist it that way without taking a dive. And if he does not take a dive and you break something, he is going to be more worried about that than how big you are. Miss Granger is no bigger than you are and she can throw me...” Viktor argued back, pulling his arm back and planting his hands on his hips.

“But I bet he *falls* for her,” Seamus snickered, a little too loudly.

Viktor stiffened slightly, and Harry and Ron looked at one another, certain he had heard. Actually, Harry was pretty sure he had heard all the other remarks too. “Mister Finnigan, I believe I owe you one. Or two by now. Consider this repayment, then,” Viktor said, raising an eyebrow. “Come up here.”

“What? Are you going to use me as an example for them?” Seamus asked, trying to look properly ashamed of himself and failing miserably. He squared off with Viktor, looking as though he thoroughly expected to end up on the mat.

“Not me. Miss Granger. Go ahead. Sic ’im. Beat him to a pulp. I am tired of him making fun of the ladies in the class. We go through this every time. Bash his nose in, for all I care,” Viktor said lightly, backing off the mat and gesturing between Seamus and Hermione, almost as though making an introduction.

“Seamus doesn’t know what he’s in for... I’d almost rather face Viktor...” Ron breathed to Harry, stopping to watch. When Viktor wasn’t tutoring Harry in Occlumency, he and Hermione were often outside in the warmer afternoons, practicing. “Funny way to spend a date, teaching your girlfriend how to beat you up,” Ron had observed one day as they passed the two of them on the way to their own Quidditch practice, practicing in the grass. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, Seamus was facedown on the mat, and Hermione seemed to enjoy putting him there and giving his arm an extra vicious twist.

“Enough. Leave his arm on. Remembering your manners from now on, Mister Finnegan? Good. Good thing she’s such a dainty, weak little thing or I might be sending you to Madam Pomfrey to haff your arm reattached.”

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## Chapter 87

“Funny way for us to spend dates,” Hermione mused as the two of them sat down under the tree and Viktor draped her cloak back around her. The sun was going down and the air was cooler now.

“What? You never grew up dreaming about learning how to lead a man just where you want him?” Viktor laughed.

“Doesn’t your arm feel like it’s about to come out of the socket by now?”

“Not really. You learn how to take a fall. How not to let someone pull your arm right out. Besides, you can twist my arm anytime,” he said, draping the arm in question across her shoulders.

“I wish I could keep you from just tossing me right on over though. I mean, I finesse you down so nicely and then all you do is just grab my arm and flop me right over and I’m on the ground before I know it,” she laughed.

“Sadly, brute strength still counts for something, despite your finesse. My

best advice is, if you ever have to do that to someone for real, when you get him on the ground, immediately plant your heel where it really hurts. Hard. As many times as you can. Fight dirty. No way we are practicing that, though, so you can just forget it," he added.

"And what exactly do I do if it's not a 'him'?" Hermione asked lightly, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"Kick her in the head, I suppose. With big steel toe boots, preferably. Or stomp her in the face, step on her throat, whatever you can get at," he replied in all seriousness.

"That sounds pretty vicious, did they teach that in class?" Hermione asked.

"Pretty much. The instructor pointed out that if someone is trying to kill you in a real fight, the last thing you need to worry about is fighting fair or being polite. You try to find what hurts the most and do it. As many times as possible. Someone worried about getting their next breath or how much pain they are in is a lot less dangerous. Hard to think up a hex even when you hurt. And that is enough preaching about defense, for one night. You have me sounding like Moody and his constant vigilance, or so I hear," Viktor said quietly, propping his chin on the top of her head. They studied the sunset for some time, in total silence.

"I've got another OWL to study for, you know," Hermione said, breaking the silence at last.

"Does that mean we have to go in? Not enough light out here to see your books, is there?" Viktor sounded reluctant to get up.

"No. I think you'll like this one. Astronomy. Let's just sit here a while and watch the stars a while. It's still too nice out to go inside."

"Oh, I can handle that, then. You know, I never had it. I could not help you much there. Astronomy," Viktor murmured.

"Astronomy? You mean they didn't offer it?" Hermione asked, a little surprised.

"No, they offered it. I just had no reason to take it," he replied with a shrug.

"Why not?"

"Enough on my plate already, thank you very much. I was not much

interested anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Is there an echo out here? To tell the truth, maybe because I had no reason to want to look at the stars.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Oh,” he repeated softly, picking up her left hand in his and cradling it there, laying his own on his thigh. After some minutes, she spoke again. The sun had gone down completely, and the moon was up, with few clouds in the sky, and the lawn was brightly lit. Across the lake, another couple was going for an evening stroll, but they could only make out their silhouettes.

“Aren’t you in the least bit cold?” she inquired.

“Now, do you not know better than to ask that?” Viktor scolded gently. “No, I am not. Feels fairly pleasant to me.”

“I suppose not, then. Dare I ask how the suggestion of more Occlumency lessons went over?”

“Like a lead balloon, but he accepted. He even showed up about five times over the last couple of weeks. No set time or anything, just whenever he gets a free hour. I think he figured it would be less trouble in the long run to do so and get a couple of people off his back. He is improving,” Viktor added.

“Who? Off his back?”

“Us. You will be proud to hear that it is official. I haff been told that between the two of us we could nag an Erumpent to death,” Viktor said, chuckling softly.

“Nag!?! Did Harry say that?” Hermione said indignantly.

“No comment, then. If it makes you feel any better, I was called worse than you, so there. And besides, it is true. I had too much practice. And speaking of official and where I got my practice nagging people, guess who wrote me a letter today?”

“Alexei?”

“Remember what I told you in the fall about him and Elena? Technically, I was right. I think. Although, I guess the jury is still out.”

“Right about what?”

“Well, they haff not killed one another. We haff been invited, but they need to stop arguing over the where and the when and the how of the ceremony before I can tell you anything else much. True to form, they agree on absolutely nothing so far, except who the bride and groom should be. And a few of the wedding party.”

“They’re getting married, you mean?” she asked, leaning into him a little closer.

“Soon as they can stop fighting over the details. He asked two nights ago, and she accepted. Funny, Alexei wants a big wedding, Elena would just about as soon elope if it were not for her parents.”

“And who do they agree on in the wedding party?”

“Me and you, strangely enough. Elena really liked you, you know. She gives me the tenth degree about what you are doing every time she writes. I told her if she wanted to know so badly, she should just write to you too. She says you can be a bridal attendant as long as you promise not to squeal too much over things like flowers and dresses and all that other rot and I get in provided I promise not to go out with Alexei the night before and get too drunk to get him to wherever they decide to have the darned thing on time. Oh, and Poppett. I think Elena wants her to be maid of honor. I think I can write her back and tell her there is not too much danger of any of those other things happening, right?”

“He wants you to be best man, doesn’t he?” she asked, shifting her head from beneath his chin and trying to look up at him. By now it was dark enough that the shadow of the tree obscured most of his face.

“Now, how did you know? I did not say that,” he replied flatly. But she was almost positive, even though she could not see it, that he was smiling.

“I’d pick you as best man.”

“Flatterer,” he said, kissing her temple.

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## Chapter 88

“Okay, today, more practice on the Patronus. No need to partner off today, I guess,” Viktor said, standing at the front of the class. “Now, I know some of you can already do it, maybe some of you haff never even tried it before the last class, but put your mind to it and you should at least get the mist. The corporeal one is a bit harder, but once you do it, it is not so hard after that,” he added. He lifted his wand and demonstrated, and a silvery hawk shot across the

room, wings pinned back, streaking toward the far wall, passing right through it.

“Easy for you to say,” Neville muttered, giving his own a try, and getting only a weak puff of silvery mist.

“For your information Mister Longbottom, it is not easy for me to say, because I just learned how to do it this year. We all haff trouble with something, I suppose.”

“I’m going to do it this time, Harry, I can just feel it. I wonder what it will be? I mean, I hope it’s something really cool, like ... like a Sphinx, or ... or maybe a wolf or something like that,” Ron said, flicking his wand. Harry was sending his stag trotting around the room by now, and he noticed Hermione’s otter bobbing by, as well as some of the other Patronuses. He was watching a ghostly looking swan gliding by when Ron’s voice jerked him back. “A ... lizard? I got a stupid lizard?” he said incredulously. Harry turned to see a wispy lizard scuttle by his ear and across the room.

“Hmm,” came Viktor’s voice behind them, and Harry turned to see him standing there, arms crossed, brows drawn together as his eyes followed the bobbing lizard through the air. Harry noticed that the dark smudges were back as they had been when he had been in the middle of writing his thesis.

“A lizard? I mean, come on, how lame is that for a Patronus? Couldn’t I trade mine in? Anything would be better than a lizard...” Ron complained to Viktor.

“Actually, I think that is no ordinary lizard you haff there,” Viktor replied, not looking at Ron, but nodding his head in direction it had gone. Harry and Ron turned just in time to see it burst into ghostly flame and dissipate. “Looks like a salamander.”

“Oh, a *salamander!* Well, that is sooo much better than just a plain old lizard ...” Ron began sarcastically, and one corner of Viktor’s mouth curled up slightly in a weak smile before he heaved a sigh.

“They are useful. The blood is almost as good as unicorn blood. Besides, they pick you, you do not pick them,” Viktor said gently. Harry couldn’t help but notice that Hermione, who had been following the conversation, had completely stopped producing her otter and was scribbling on a piece of parchment instead, moving her mouth as though talking to herself. She wrote and paused, as though figuring in her head, and did not pick up her wand again until some minutes later. When class ended, Harry and Ron lingered, waiting for her to gather her books and head to their next class. She waved them on impatiently.

“Go on. I’ll catch up with you two later. I need to talk to Viktor about something,” she whispered urgently.

“Viktor now, is he? Class isn’t over, you know, Umbridge would simply have a fit if she knew you just called a teacher by his first name and she already put the kibosh on him eating at the student table, even though he eats later on the days we have him for class anyway and you’re probably suffering withdrawal...” Ron teased, stopping only when Hermione leveled a glare at him.

“Oh, shut up, Ron! Go on!” she scolded, swatting halfheartedly at him as he dodged. When he and Harry had walked out the door, she approached the front desk and stood there a moment before addressing Viktor. “So.. how are you? I feel like the only time I get to see you is in class or in the halls or when we can get away from Miss Fluffy Cardigan.”

“About half dead. Thank goodness that last match was the last game for a while. Spring off-season was never more welcome. I got a whole four hours of sleep last night. I haff had enough staying up all hours grading things. Now come on, out with it. I know you well enough to know that you did not risk being late for your next class and the wrath of Umbridge about our ‘questionable fraternizing’ just to inquire after my health when you just saw me last night. What is it?”

“Tell me if this sounds crazy,” Hermione said after taking a deep breath and hugging her books a bit tighter.

“Yes,” Viktor deadpanned.

“I haven’t said anything yet!”

“I am about half asleep. Everything sounds crazy. Okay, sorry, what is it?”

“Have you noticed something odd? About our Patronuses?” Hermione said, looking around the room.

“Well Dean’s is still a pretty shapeless blob that does not look like much of anything as of yet, and I think Neville’s might just be a dragon, maybe a Welsh Green, if he could get over being afraid of it, but I get the feeling that is not what you meant,” he responded, propping his chin on his fist.

“Mine, yours, Harry’s and Ron’s. You said Ron’s was a salamander, right?”

“Believe I did.”



“So... stag, hawk, salamander, otter.”

“Okay, I am still not seeing anything particularly odd. All perfectly reasonable forms for a Patronus to take.”

“Four things. We’ve been trying to figure out four things all these months. Four things that could be associated with four other things. What do you associate a salamander with? The magical kind, that is.”

“Healing. The blood is a restorative. Fire. I mean, they come from fires, they only live as long as the fire they come from burns.”

“And an otter?” she added, raising her eyebrows.

“Well, that is not really a magical creature. They are considered to be pretty intelligent, clever, playful, fast, even on land. But they spend a lot of time in the water. Water... oh... water. Water. And a stag lives on land exclusively... And a hawk...”

“Flies in the air. Sound familiar?”

“So are you saying what I think you are? You haff an idea for somewhere else to look? Something else?”

“Maybe those four things have something to do with what the Guardian said. Those four animals. Or some four animals. Maybe just the magical one, who knows? But it’s somewhere to start again, isn’t it? I mean, maybe it has nothing to do with animals even, but seeing Ron’s salamander got me to thinking... What if maybe there are four magical creatures that fit what the Guardian said? Or some combination of magical races and/or creatures? Like, say, I don’t know, Centaurs, Merpeople, Wizards and Dragons, for all I know. Maybe it takes recruiting all those to defeat Voldemort.”

“Wizards would be the air, I take it, then? Because of brooms? Flying? Interesting theory, I guess. And it fits as much as anything else we haff tried.”

“Makes as much sense as anything else we’ve tried, doesn’t it?” she echoed.

“Sure. See you in the library after I eat, then?”

“Take your time. I had better go. The next class is coming in soon. And I need to get to Arithmancy. And stop depriving yourself of sleep on my account. Take a nap over coming to see me if you want. She’ll be sitting with us in the Common Room next. It half makes me want to act like the rest of the students and talk about sneaking out to the Astronomy Tower just so we could get a

minute's peace together. She's got Filch practically camping outside your door when I go up there."

"Let him. He is not going to catch us at anything out of bounds anyway, unless she makes talking and drinking coffee off limits. Cannot sleep much anyway. Nerves."

"Nerves about what? Vratsa's a lock for the European Cup this summer, and you never get nervous about Quidditch in any case."

"Not Quidditch. OWLs. NEWTs."

"But you don't have to take them, we do."

"But I am being nervous for the lot of you. Even the ones who are not worried yet. Suddenly I sympathize with Mama about how she is at my Quidditch matches. And I haff been staring at that page of notes so long, it should haff a hole in it. It keeps me up at night, wondering about it. Replaying the conversation in my head."

"Well, bring it along when you come to the library."

"Yes, Miss Granger. Now get to class. I do not think Professor Vector will accept a late note from me."

"Yes, Professor Krum."

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## Chapter 89

"Not much, is there?" Hermione said dejectedly, looking at the small pile of books that Viktor set on the table.

"Enough to get started on in one evening. Maybe a handful more, if these do not help. Those are just the ones she thought most likely to help," Viktor replied, "Pardon the complaint, but the Hogwarts library is woefully undersupplied in the Dark Arts-related book area. Considering it was right in the middle of the biggest wizarding war in at least the last four centuries, you would think that would not be so. There's not even much on history. Sort of the 'see no evil' approach, I guess. Heaven forbid the students ever find out there is such a thing as the not-so-nice wizards."

"Maybe Umbridge isn't the only ostrich with her head in the sand," Hermione agreed, "Which ones do you want?"

"Give me anything," Viktor shrugged, drawing a volume from the middle of the pile, then flipping it around to read the spine, "Old Witch Tales: Practical

Uses of Fantastic Beasts and Myths About Magical Creatures. Hmph. Two books in one, then.”

“Defeats of the Dark: Detailing the Downfall of Dark Wizards. Well, this one could come in handy. Maybe someday there’ll be a new volume and Harry will be in it,” Hermione mused, picking her own book off the top of the pile. When she flipped it over, her fingers came away caked in gray, fuzzy bits of dust.

“I doubt Grindelwald is even in that volume, judging from the dust on it. I bet that book was out of date five hundred years before Grindelwald was born, in fact,” Viktor groused.

“Even old books have their uses,” Hermione protested.

“Like swatting flies?” he asked, not looking up. Hermione laughed softly and cracked the cover of her own book. They read in silence for an hour, the only noise the occasional scratch of their quills on parchment when taking notes and the soft swish of the doors when students entered or left. They were both so engrossed that neither one even bothered to glare at the three girls who passed by whispering and giggling behind their hands.

“Hmmm,” Hermione said out loud. Viktor looked at her and raised his eyebrows questioningly. “Oh, sorry. This is interesting. ‘Alliances have almost always been necessary in the defeat of dark wizards. Whether these be alliances of convenience, political, cultural, or even between different species, there are few dark wizards who have been defeated without at least some rudimentary opposition group. Rare is the single light wizard who can single handedly defeat a wizard who has turned to the dark arts. Power alone is not sufficient, as a dark wizard will almost certainly fight without scruples, and decent wizards will only do battle within their principles. Some sort of support system is necessary. In the defeat of Breunhoffen in 236, the most unlikely alliance of a group of German centaurs and local wizards combined to take on the dark wizard, in an effort to counteract his encroachment on the Black Forest region.’ And it goes on, blah, blah, blah, so on and so on. I think the whole chapter is history. Reminds me of your ‘don’t fight fair’ comment. And who knew centaurs ever cooperated with wizards? You finding anything?”

“Plenty about salamanders, but nothing at all on hawks, stags, or otters. Or Patronuses, either. I think we might haff to go at it from the Patronus angle first. So, so far, what we haff is ‘get help from wherever you can get it, if possible’ and ‘if you get a dark wizard down, kick him in the -’” but Viktor stopped abruptly when a high pitched whistle sounded outside the library window. A bright red flash and boom soon followed.

“What on earth?” Hermione said at last, as they both walked to the window, looking out.

“Fireworks! Now who does this make you think of?” Viktor said with a little smirk.

“A certain duo who go by the aliases Gred and Forge, you think? Possibly a new product in the Weasley Wizard Wheezies line?” Hermione said lightly as a bright blue pinwheel screamed by the window.

“Oh, almost certainly. Giving the new Headmistress guff,” Viktor chuckled low.

“They’re going to get into real trouble one of these days,” Hermione said, crossing her arms, watching Umbridge run across the front lawn, Filch right behind, vainly trying to get rid of the fireworks. Especially the one which paused occasionally to scribble out a rude word in yellow sparks.

“I will not say a word if you do not,” he said softly.

“Oh, my lips are sealed.” Even an hour later, there were still random whirrs, zings and booms outside. “Ooh! Here’s a ...” Hermione began, but trailed off when she lowered her book and looked across the table. Viktor’s head was on his folded arms, dark hair falling over his forehead, and he was plainly asleep. “Never mind,” she whispered, “I’ll just write this bit about Khan Krum and Gryndel down, then, and tell you later.”

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## Chapter 90

“So let me see... ‘The Patronus is a particularly unique defense mechanism exhibited by wizards in that the form the Patronus takes seem to have little to do with any conscious thought on the part of the witch or wizard casting the...’” Viktor read, then suddenly his voice dissolved into poorly stifled laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Hermione asked, lowering her own book and looking across the library table.

“Sorry... I... I just looked out the window... and I could not help it,” Viktor snickered.

“Quite the madhouse out there, isn’t it? Which bit in particular struck you funny?” Hermione asked, looking out. The lawn was fairly crawling with students, some sprawled on the grass, frantically studying for the OWLS and NEWTS, which were in progress already, some playing games in the warm late afternoon sunshine, and a cluster of Hermione’s fellow fifth years were busy sending their respective Patronuses galloping, flying, slinking, and running around the lake in preparation for the practical exams. There was also still one

rogue pinwheel, shooting gold and red sparks, Gryffindor colors, skipping along the treetops. It had managed to elude capture all these weeks, despite Filch and Umbridge giving their best efforts.

“I think the fact that little Colin Creevey managed to just about dunk Dean Thomas in the lake right about the time I looked out. And seeing Crabbe and Goyle over there under that tree with a real live book, and the cover is right way up. Malfoy must have helped. And I admit seeing I was right and Neville’s Patronus is indeed a Welsh Green didn’t hurt. Then the Welsh Green took off after the swan and... Sorry... now where was I? ‘...form the Patronus takes... conscious thought... witch or wizard casting the spell... It has been the study of many years to try to determine the deciding factors in the forms a Patronus may choose. One thing has been firmly established in all of this research. A witch or wizard seems incapable of changing the form of a Patronus, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Theories are many, and answers are few. A Patronus seems to be a highly personal thing. A Patronus may seem to reflect some physical or personality aspect of the caster,’ Check there. That sort of takes in the otter and the hawk, I guess. ‘... or some aspect of character, much like Animagus forms. They may also reflect some of the caster’s past experience, or even that of an ancestor, in rare cases.’ Harry’s stag maybe? You said James Potter... Maybe Ron fits in under that personality bit too.... hotheaded maybe?”

Hermione snickered in spite of herself. “Ron? Merely hotheaded? Oh, okay, I’ll give you that one. Anything else? We’re getting a little slaphappy in here. Maybe we should have gone outside.”

“Concentrate in that circus out there? Ahhhhh... Oh! Here’s the other bit I wanted you to hear. ‘There haff been unsubstantiated stories through the ages that certain wizards and witches haff been able to find a way to combine the powers of their respective Patronuses, making the power of the sum greater than the power of the respective parts, but supporting details are so thin that we are inclined to relegate them to the status of mere myth and superstition. In the modern era, many magical folk haff attempted to reproduce this effect under controlled conditions, with no success.’ It was interesting up until that last bit, anyway. Where they completely puncture the idea. But it kind of drew my attention. I do not remember reading anything like that before. That is about all this book has to say on the Patronus. Nothing new in the other one. How many exams do you haff left?” Viktor asked, laying the book on the table and stretching.

“Herbology, Arithmancy, and Astronomy. And DADA of course,” Hermione counted off on her fingers.

“Hem, hem.” Dolores Umbridge approached their table and they both cast a sidelong glance at one another. Neither one had heard her come in. Hermione thought she was looking particularly smug this afternoon, and when

Dolores Umbridge looks smug, she thought ruefully, that can never be a good thing.

“Professor Krum, what might you be doing?” Umbridge asked, giving a horrible grin.

“I *might* be reading, if I were not haffing this conversation. Why?” Viktor asked innocently, and Hermione had to bite the inside of her lip to keep from laughing out loud.

“You’re at a table together...” Umbridge began.

“Oh my Lord! So we are. How about that? I hadn’t noticed, Dolores. Good thing you pointed it out or I might never haff caught on. Was there something else you wanted, or did you just come over here to point that out to the both of us?” he added sweetly.

“Professor Snape said I might find you and Miss Granger here...”

“Well bless me, he was right. So did Longbottom manage not to panic too badly in the Potions test earlier?” Viktor asked Hermione, ignoring Umbridge.

“Well, I didn’t hear any explosions, and his cauldron was still in one piece, but I didn’t get a chance to ask really...” Hermione responded.

“Hem. Hem. I wanted to ask you a few questions,” Umbridge forged on.

“Oh, are you still here, Dolores?” Viktor asked, raising his eyebrows. Hermione slid behind the cover of her open book.

“I understand you’re tutoring Potter. Why? Professor Snape used to tutor him...”

“They had a difference of opinion on the nature of his training. I’m tutoring him in the same thing Professor Snape was. And for the same reason. Surely he told you what he was tutoring him for?” Viktor replied, propping his chin on his hand. Hermione had to suppress a snicker when she realized that he had answered the question with nothing but the truth.

“Of course!”

“Well, sure. Not a thing goes on in this school you do not know about, right?”

“Right. But why are you tutoring just Potter?”

“Now, Dolores, that is not so. Any student can come to me and ask for tutoring, in fact, there is a signup sheet on my office door. In fact, in the last six weeks, I had at least an hour each with about eight students. They finally realized OWLS and NEWTS were upon them when the examiners arrived. But I am sure you checked the signup sheet, right? I must have just put up a fresh one,” Viktor added, cocking a brow at her.

“Of course. I also wanted to ask you if you had heard Potter talking about Sirius Black in any of your conversations.” At that, Hermione nearly dropped her book.

“Cannot say that I have. Not a single mention of the name Sirius Black since I got to Hogwarts. Why?” Viktor asked.

“The Ministry and I have it on good authority that Potter knows where he is. Where he might be hiding. That they may even have been in contact,” Umbridge said, crossing her stubby arms.

“Well, then, why doesn’t your ‘good authority’ know where he is, if he or she knows so much? And why would a fifteen-year-old know where a dangerous wanted criminal is, unless he is hiding under the boy’s bed? Or more like next to his Quidditch equipment in this case. Especially when said criminal supposedly helped murder said boy’s parents?” Viktor asked incredulously.

“Potter hasn’t exactly been the most stable individual...”

“I bet your ‘good authority’ had a French accent,” Viktor muttered.

Umbridge stiffened, sniffed, and said, “The Ministry does not reveal confidential sources! Now, where’s Potter! I need to question him!”

“Try taking a gander straight out that window. And if you plan on taking him anywhere out of plain sight, like your new office, you can expect me to be there in a minute. Surely you wouldn’t interrogate a boy on that serious a matter without an advocate present, Dolores? We cannot invite his guardians. They’re Muggles,” Viktor protested.

Umbridge seemed to give a little shudder. “No, of course not. I just have a few questions for the boy,” she said, turning on her heel and heading for the door.

“She’s not going to rest long on just asking him a few questions,” Hermione fretted.

“That’s exactly what I am afraid of. Got to keep her off of him somehow,” Viktor replied, shaking his head.

“And precisely how are we going to do that?” Hermione asked.

“Never leave him alone. She will probably not try anything if she thinks Minerva will find out about it. She is almost as scared of her as she was of Dumbledore.”

“So... watch him?”

“Like a hawk,” Viktor said offhandedly. It took a second for what he had said to register with both of them. When they had stopped laughing, Hermione shut her book with a clap.

“I say we quit. I think we just crossed the line from slaphappy to entirely useless. I get a break between the Herbology and DADA OWLS tomorrow. What do you say we take it up then?”

“Okay. I need to go in a half hour and get one of the poor little fifth years from Ravenclaw straightened out on the difference between Parseltongue and being a snake charmer anyway. Langdon had a cold last week and missed the lecture.”

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## Chapter 91

“Potter! Potter!” Umbridge called as she bustled across the front lawn toward the group of fifth years.

“Yes?” Harry replied.

“I need to speak to you,” she sniffed, “To question you on a very serious matter.”

“Like what?” Harry asked.

She grabbed Harry’s arm and pulled him aside. “I have it from reliable sources that you may know the whereabouts of Sirius Black. That you may even have been communicating with him.”

“No, I don’t know where he is, and how would I communicate with him?” Harry asked.

“Our source seems to think that you’ve been owling him. And that possibly, you know where Albus Dumbledore is. Or that you might know someone who can tell us his whereabouts,” Umbridge said, narrowing her beady eyes.

“No.” Harry said as evenly as possible, but his heart was thumping as he realized he did. Viktor had said he knew where Dumbledore was, most likely.



“Perhaps you could accompany me to my office,” Umbridge said, tightening her grip on Harry’s arm and walking toward the castle, after a quick scout of the lawn and the library window. Harry cast a look toward the window, where he could see Hermione’s bushy head, now alone at the library table. They were halfway to Umbridge’s office and Harry was frantically searching for any excuse to get away when Umbridge pulled up short.

“Dolores, you wouldn’t be taking Harry to your office would you?” came Viktor’s voice, “Minerva already had an appointment with him.”

“What? Office? Oh, no...no...” Umbridge said absently, and Harry gratefully wriggled from her grasp.

“Good. Because Potter and I need to have a discussion about his future career choices,” McGonagall spoke up, clamping her thin lips together, “You hadn’t forgotten, had you Potter?”

“Errr... no ma’am, the Headmistress just wanted to see me for a minute,” Harry replied, pushing his slipping glasses back up his nose.

“Are you done, Dolores?” McGonagall asked sternly.

“Yes, yes, of course. Do go on,” Umbridge said nervously.

“Get on to your office, Langdon will be wondering where you are,” McGonagall said to Viktor, who simply nodded and strode off down the hall, “And as for you Potter, come along and I’ll give you a biscuit.”

Looking back from the library window to her notes, Hermione remembered the passage she had written down previously. “I really should make a copy of the picture as well,” Hermione murmured to herself, “Now what was that spell? I suppose it works on pictures. *Replicatum!* Oh...it does.” She rolled up the sheets of notes and tucked them into her bag, then exited the library, heading for Gryffindor Tower. The little seal of the alliance Gryndel and Khan Krum had organized had piqued her interest. Maybe Viktor could tell her what the Cyrillic script on it meant when she thought to ask.

The next day, she hurried across the campus to get back to the library. She was already a good fifteen minutes later than she had planned to be. Viktor would already be there, probably wondering where she was. “Sorry I’m late, I was checking my answers for the Herbology exam,” Hermione puffed as she sat down at the library table.

“I would ask how it went, but I am pretty sure I already know,” Viktor said, pausing to look up from the pages of notes in front of him.

“I don’t know about that, I mean some of the questions were fairly tricky, and they-”

“You got 105% on the last test. And Professor Sprout does not give easy tests. I am sure you did fine,” Viktor interrupted.

“Well, I hope so. Find anything else?” Hermione asked.

“Plenty of nothing, really. More on how there are lots of stories about Patronuses and not much to back it up. Or how it works. Pity you cannot buy a simple pamphlet entitled ‘All About Patronuses and How To Use Them’. Maybe even ‘Irking the Incompetent’ or ‘How to Defeat Dark Lords in Three Easy Steps’ or something,” Viktor sighed.

Hermione laughed, “Maybe Fred and George can write the one about irking the incompetent. Oh! You know, I found something interesting in that dusty old book you made fun of. I thought you might like it, considering. It was at the end of that chapter on alliances. Here we are. ‘One of the more mysterious and powerful alliances in Eastern Europe was founded by the combined efforts of four wizards, including Gryndel, founder of Durmstrang, as well as two of his brothers, Gustav and Stoykos. They were joined by a fourth, Khan Krum, widely held to be the first real ruler of the nation of Bulgaria.’ That would be the part I think would be of interest. Anyway, it goes on, ‘Their alliance was formed to combat the rise of a dark wizard, Nikephoros’...”

“Hold on,” Viktor said, “Nikephoros? I never knew he was a wizard... Is that the same Nikephoros? The skull drinking cup?”

“I should think so. ‘Nikephoros, a Byzantine, mustered an army of followers that could have done a thorough job of terrorizing most of Europe, if it had gone much longer without opposition. Because of the early warning and resistance organized in large part by Gryndel, Nikephoros was cut off in the mountains, and finally killed in hand to hand combat with Krum. Some of Nikephoros’s supporters scattered from the battlefield when all four leaders of the resistance were found to be at the head of the opposition, composed mostly of Krum’s Bulgarian supporters, and a sprinkling of other nationalities gathered by Gryndel. It’s said that the four leaders of the alliance in concerted combat were considered more frightening than the whole rest of the army combined. After scattering the majority of the Byzantine supporters, Nikephoros, unaware that all four leaders were present, led the remaining Byzantines in the foolish pursuit of what they took to be the tired and retreating opposition into a narrow mountain pass. There, Nikephoros was said by some to have been stripped powerless by the combined efforts of Gryndel, Stoykos, Gustav and Krum. Defiant to the end, he refused to surrender. To emphasize the totality of the alliance victory over Nikephoros, Khan Krum abandoned his wand and beheaded Nikephoros with his

sword.' And you obviously know the bit with the drinking cup. You mean you didn't know any of that? The other?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Well, you cannot be raised Bulgarian and not know about as much as there is to know about your first ruler, but I had no idea Nikephoros was a wizard, or a dark one, at that. I knew the two of them fought each other for years. The Byzantines invaded, then the Bulgarians turned around and invaded in return. Nikephoros even took the capital then, Pliska, and looted it. Killed several thousand Bulgarian soldiers left to guard Krum's castle. Twelve thousand, I think. Obviously, Muggle history is not going to recognize that. Just that the two armies clashed in the mountains, and Khan Krum came out on top in the end. At least for a while. Established the country, gave it a set of laws for the first time, consolidated it. Turned it into a real unified nation, I suppose. And all any of our textbooks ever said about it was that Gryndel and Krum were involved in some of the same battles, became friends, visited, and that Krum was on the grounds a few times in the early years of the school. Gryndel was supposed to have considered Krum as close as his brothers. Not much else to be known, I thought. Of course, Gryndel wrote the first version of the history of the school, so maybe he was just being modest, not mentioning he was there for the defeat of Nikephoros. Or maybe the Khan just made a better story. More dramatic, chopping off someone's head and making his country's ambassadors drink a toast out of it later," Viktor shrugged.

"Honestly, though, cutting his head off and drinking out of it?"

"He did have it plated first," Viktor teased.

"Still...ugh. Was that really necessary?" Hermione said, making a face.

"You do not get the title 'Krum the Terrible' from your opposition by patting people on the head and sending them home with a promise to behave," Viktor said with a half smile.

"But if they stripped him of his power somehow, did they really have to..."

"Does not say it was permanent."

"True, but still, it seems like overkill."

"Calling my ancestor overly melodramatic?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Just a tad. I mean, drinking out of a skull, really!"

"Well, stop going over it with me, I did not do it," Viktor laughed, "Krum the Great. Krum the Terrible. I guess it all depends on which side you look at it from. In reality, he was probably somewhere in the middle. Remind me never to let you

read about Vlad Tepes.”

“Who’s he?”

“Let us put it this way, he did far worse than turning one body part into kitchenware. Things involving a lot more bloodshed and some rather nasty uses for pikes. You all probably will not study him. Sometimes I wished we had not. I could not drink tomato juice that entire semester for thinking about it,” Viktor replied, shaking his head.

“Well, thank goodness, then. Do you think it was called for?”

“Cutting his head off? Beats me. Maybe Nikephoros had it coming. Maybe he would have been just as bad or worse than Voldemort. Why were you so eager to read it to me if you hate what it said so much?”

“I thought it was interesting. Icky, but interesting. Really, what caught my interest more than anything else was the drawing that went with it. I wanted you to look at it, but I think I left it in my room,” Hermione lamented, digging through her bag.

“Bring it tomorrow, then. You have another OWL today, you know. Better go make me look good.”

“Am I allowed to wallop the examiner?”

“Only if he or she threatens your head. So watch out if they cannot find their coffee mug. I would wish you luck, but you do not need it.”

“Wish me luck anyway. You know, technically... you’re not my professor any more...”

“You know, I think you are right. No more classes, anyway. Well then, in that case...” he leaned across the table and gave her a soft kiss on the lips, “... good luck.”

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“Harry and Ron are in Divination OWLs. I tried to get them to drop that nonsense when I did, but they didn’t listen,” Hermione murmured, pulling out a chair at the library table.

“Better not let Firenze hear you say that. You will get a long lecture on how we puny humans do not pay close enough attention to signs. And he is probably right. We do not until it comes back to bite us,” Viktor shrugged, flipping to the next page of the book on the table in front of him.

“There. Take a look at that. What do you think?” Hermione said, pushing a sheet of parchment across the table. Viktor picked it up and studied the drawing

on it for a moment.

“Good rendering. But you forgot the Nastoinik,” Viktor said absently, sliding it back.

“Forgot... what?” Hermione said after a few seconds of stunned silence.

“The Nastoinik. The Guardian,” Viktor replied, not looking up from the book.

“Beg pardon?” Hermione pressed.

“Well, you got the shield shape, the bear, the eagle, the dragon and the kelpie. But you forgot the Guardian. Although where you found a copy of the crest with writing on it, I would like to know. It is not in A History Of Magical Education in Europe and the only one I know of that has the writing on it is hanging in the main hall. That’s just the name of the school, though, and in German at that. And that one only got put back up after the renovations right before I left, so you could not have seen it,” Viktor replied.

“Only... what?” Hermione asked somewhat thickly.

“Picture of the Durmstrang crest,” Viktor said slowly, raising his eyebrows.

“Durmstrang crest! But that’s not the Durmstrang crest...” Hermione protested.

“Sure it is. I sat right under the tapestry for seven years, three meals a day when I was there, surely I would recognize my own school’s crest. And it was in half my schoolbooks. Maybe The Guardian was not on the original, but it has looked that way since before Gryndel died. He helped design it. Supposedly they each represent a Patronus. Stoykos, Krum, Gryndel and Gustav. Bear, eagle, dragon, kelpie. Then the Guardian down at the bottom,” Viktor explained, moving his finger around the drawing of the crest as he talked about each element.

“But... the book I took it out of said it was the symbol of the alliance they formed... what’s the writing say?”

“Makes sense. They all had at least a small hand in the school’s founding. I guess they adapted it later. The writing is ‘Elementi ot reshenieto’. Elements of the Solution. I guess that is Krum’s contribution, since that is Bulgarian. It is in the school charter. All about preparing students for life and not necessarily giving them the answers to everything, but providing them with the elements of the solution. The charter says it in much frillier language, but that is essentially what it boils down to. But...” Viktor trailed off and pursed his lips.

“But what?” Hermione prompted.

“Bear... land, eagle... air...”

“Dragon, fire. Kelpie, water,” Hermione finished, “But what’s it mean?”

“Maybe nothing,” Viktor said, “but it seems like a big coincidence... what time is the Astronomy OWL?”

“Starts at eight forty-five. Why?” Hermione asked, cocking her head.

“You get Harry and Ron together and plan to meet me in the common room after you three get done. I am going to check out some more books.”

“What kind?”

“History. I can’t help but feel we are still missing something. Something in all that sounds familiar. Very familiar. All that about the four of them together... the Patronuses... Nikephoros. It sounds a lot like what the other book said about combining Patronuses. Maybe they knew how to do it. Maybe they knew how to pair them up. Maybe that is what made the rest so afraid of them. Maybe I can find another dusty old book while you all take your test. Or maybe all of this is just a lot of spitting in the wind,” Viktor sighed.

“Spitting in the wind?” Hermione laughed.

“Waste of energy and you end up all wet. Go on. You need to go eat,” Viktor prodded.

“Aren’t you coming?” Hermione asked.

“I will go let Dobby assault me with one of his picnic baskets later. When I get tired of sitting in the library. Books can be read just as well at the kitchen table,” Viktor said with a half smile.

“I’ll let Ron and Harry know when they come to eat,” Hermione promised.

“I will probably sit here and watch the tower. Just in case Umbridge gets any more funny ideas. Maybe I can sic Minerva on her again, if necessary.”

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Maybe they paired off in a particular order of some sort, complement to complement, or opposite to opposite... the fire and the water, the earth and the air. Or maybe the air and the water, the fire and the earth? Or something about the order they came in on the crest? But was there some sort of specific charm that did it... or... Viktor sighed and doodled some lines across the parchment, connecting the words he had jotted here and there. One theory was just as valid as another, unfortunately. And how would he know when he had the right

answer anyway, short of trying it out? He would just have to arrange it tonight, when they got out of the final. A few hours where they could just experiment and see what happened.

What he wouldn't give to be able to go up the spiral staircase to the Headmaster's Office and just ask Dumbledore. He stuck a finger in his pocket and idly rubbed the small red envelope, sealed with wax, tucked there. He had carried it all these months, just in case, charmed it to stick fast in the pocket, so he wouldn't lose it. He had been afraid to leave it in his room, what with Umbridge snooping around every chance she got. Unless she started frisking him, it was safe in his pocket.

Not that one could ever expect any such animal as a 'straight answer' from Dumbledore, but even an obscure charades game would be better than no guidance at all and these blind stabs. He had the nasty feeling that the answer was flitting around just at the back of his brain, and he couldn't quite lay a finger on it and pin it into place. He put the quill down and leaned back in the chair, stretching, turning his head to look toward the Astronomy Tower, lit in the night, and the lights from Hagrid's hut windows. Not so much time left now, it was just past midnight. He leaned back and studied the ceiling for a moment, easing the crick in his neck from bending over his notes and the books for so long. It took a moment for it to register that something was wrong.

It was just the wee, nagging jolt that one had when viewing a picture that wasn't quite right, but he couldn't say what. He turned back and studied the scene. All as it should be with the tower, well lit, he could even see some of the telescope lenses glinting in the moonlight as they swung back and forth, the shadows of forms near the windows bent low over papers and eyepieces. But as he watched, more and more, the telescopes swung down instead of up, all trained in the same general direction. The hut. There were silhouettes in front of the hut. The roar that went up across the lawn made him leap out of the chair. Hagrid. "Be reasonable Hagrid!" drifted across the grass as well before he heard the rustling from his pocket as the envelope jerked free, sailed out and hovered right in front of his face.

The seal neatly parted and the envelope opened, and he had just enough time to recognize Dumbledore's hand before hearing, "Reasonable be damned, yeh won' take me like this, Dawlish!". His eyes were drawn to the window for a moment, the red streaks of light, stunning spells, bouncing off uselessly. He tore them away and forced himself to read

Take the three of them now, but show them this note first. Minerva and Hagrid and Hogwarts must see to themselves, Filius will see to Crookshanks, Baramir, Ivan and Natasha. Refuge to be found at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London. Advised to travel by unsupervised Floo if possible.

## Albus Dumbledore

Viktor reached up and snatched the envelope out of the air, shoving it back into his pocket. He nearly knocked the chair over in his haste to get out, but did hastily lock the door as he sprinted back toward the castle. Ridiculous to be conscientious about his promise to Madam Pince to lock the door when he left at a time like this, but still. The front doors opened, and light spilled across the lawn as a lone figure ran from the castle to the fray. "How dare you!" the figure shouted as she ran. "How *dare* you!" He could almost see McGonagall's clenched lips go white and her stern expression in his mind. He caught only "Leave him alone!" before he had made the front hall. Already, a passel of students, some in dressing gowns and pajamas, had gathered in the lower corridors, drowsy and wondering what all the fuss was about.

No use standing on ceremony now or trying to disperse them. He would bet anything they were probably the first two down here, them and Lee. "Fred and George Weasley! Out here, now!" Two red heads bobbed in the crowd and the twins pushed forward.

"We didn' do anythin'! Wha's goin' on out there?" Fred mumbled as he yawned and scratched at his wild hair. For a moment, Viktor was reminded of Alexei.

"Never mind! I'm collecting on my bet! Give Umbridge hell! I need a distraction. Keep her busy as long as you can, can you do that in a few minutes?" Viktor asked.

George perked up considerably. "Give her hell? You mean, you're not only giving us permission, you're actually requesting..."

"Fireworks if you have them, force-feed her those Canary Creams and Skiving Snackboxes of yours if you have to, but keep her and those six with her busy!" Viktor interrupted.

"I can stand to lose a bet like this! People, you are about to get a free demonstration of the new fireworks line from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes! Gather round, bring your friends!" Fred shouted. Viktor had little doubt that most of the school would be packed in the front entrance and halls by the time he got back. Which was just perfect.

"Get him! Get him!" Umbridge screamed, and Viktor had just enough time to spot Hagrid's silhouette, running toward the gates, before he set his sights back on the Astronomy Tower and the wind carried her voice to him once more. The words he had been dreading. "And then we question Potter...", but a fresh gust of wind carried off the rest. Didn't matter. She wasn't going to be scared off easily now. The Queen of Hearts. Alice in Wonderland. That's who she reminds me of, Hermione had said. Off with his head! Bring me the head of



Harry Potter! He would have laughed if he could have summoned the breath, but the panic squeezing at his chest prevented it.

He picked out her voice before he could pick out her form in the moonlight. "That evil woman! Trying to sneak up on Hagrid..." He nearly collided with Ron before he could stop and snatch at their robes and prod them in the direction of the castle.

"No time... walk fast, don't run, try not to draw too much attention, but don't dawdle," Viktor hissed, stepping between them and behind Hermione.

"But what..." Harry began, but Viktor shook his head vigorously.

"Umbridge wants you... move it before she decides to get you while you're out. In front of me, Harry, look neither right nor left, make it to the front hall before they make it back up there," Viktor ordered, steering Harry by the upper arm.

"Poor Professor McGonagall... Four Stunners right in the chest... and she's not exactly young, is she?" Hermione exclaimed.

"She'll be alright," Viktor murmured, as much to convince himself as to convince them. In a few moments, they had made it to the front doors and started plowing through the crowd of students. Most of the professors who were up were either outside seeing to Minerva, trying to find out what had happened, or simply too stunned to try to send the students back to bed. Squeezing past Harry and Hermione, he turned down the hall toward Umbridge's office.

"Where are we going?" Ron asked.

"Umbridge's office. To use her Floo. But you three read this first," Viktor said, handing him the red envelope. "Read it to yourself, then pass it on. *Alohomora!*" he said, grabbing the handle and rattling it. It was still firmly locked. "Too bad she didn't get sloppy," Viktor muttered, while Ron passed Harry the envelope. "*Finite Incantatem!*" The doorknob rattled again as Hermione took the envelope. Viktor swore softly under his breath, "Damn! That would be too easy...I bet she put a password on the thing..." The Reductor also had no effect.

"She's going to be back any moment!" Hermione whispered urgently, and sure enough, he could hear her voice out in the front entry, as well as the one Hagrid had called Dawlish.

"Professor Snape! I was just about to come see you! I need for you to provide some Veritaserum," Umbridge's voice rang out, "and then, you should see about getting these students to bed. No reason the lot of you should be up!"

"And why would you be needing Veritaserum at this hour?" Snape's oily voice

replied.

“I need to have a real questioning session...” He could hear her footsteps getting closer to the other end of the hall, the sharp little clacks of her heels ringing out and echoing off the stone.

He was just about to grab them and head for the opposite end of the hall when the first explosions and high pitched squeals sounded out in the front entry. “What on earth was that?” Hermione asked, raising her voice to be heard over the murmurings and shrieks of the crowd gathered there and the scattered booms, sizzles, and whistles. Umbridge could be heard screaming for Filch.

“That will be the payoff on my bet with Fred and George. Well, we have no time for guessing games, so no point in being subtle. Sometimes direct and doing things the hard way works better! No one will hear over that racket!” Viktor shouted back. He stepped back and smashed his booted heel into the wooden doorjamb, splintering the wood. Four more solid kicks to the jamb and the knob popped the shattered pieces apart from one another. “She will not haff this one monitored, get some Floo powder, get in, go to the address on the note. Move it! Harry first!”

Grabbing a handful of Floo powder from the bowl on the mantle, Harry stepped to the fireplace. “Twelve Grimmauld Place, London,” he said clearly, and the whirling, dizzying trip began. As always, he had trouble staying upright, skidding and banging a knee hard as he shot out of the fireplace at the other end. He dimly registered the three other arrivals close behind him as he panted for breath. Harry pushed his hands into the hearth and struggled up. A pair of black shoes entered his field of vision, directly in front of him.

“Harry... so it’s begun in earnest then, has it?” came a voice. A familiar voice. Harry adjusted his glasses and followed the legs up, up, and up. Into the once handsome face of his godfather, Sirius Black.

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## Chapter 94

Not so haggard as it had been when they had first encountered one another, Sirius’s face still had the drained and worn look that belied the suffering he had experienced in Azkaban. Harry blinked dazedly and looked around, to find himself in a dim kitchen, in a slightly rundown looking house. “Umbridge?” Sirius asked, looking up over Harry, behind him.

Harry turned to see Viktor gathering himself up off of the hearth as well. He stood and gave a grim nod before speaking. “Sirius Black, I presume?” Viktor asked, and Harry forced himself to nod. “Hagrid was running for the gates the last time I saw him... Minerva... four?” he asked Hermione. She nodded. “Four Stunning spells. Right in the chest. The cowards ganged up on her when she

went out to defend Hagrid. They were making arrangements to carry her in when we were crossing the lawn. I haff no idea how bad..." he added with a shake of his head.

"Ronald Arthur Weasley! What *are* you doing out of school? In the middle of the night! And Harry, Hermione! What's the meaning of this?" came Mrs. Weasley's shrill voice from the doorway. She was in her dressing gown, and her red hair was messy. "What *are* they doing here?" she demanded loudly, drawing herself up to full height in front of Viktor. Harry would have laughed if he had the breath, at this small, plump redheaded woman demanding answers of Viktor, when she barely reached his chest.

"Just doing what I was told," Viktor said calmly, waving the red envelope at her between two long fingers. She snatched it and read it.

"Look, Dumbledore and the rest will be back any minute. Several more on the way, too. Harry..." Sirius breathed, folding Harry in a crushing hug, "it's good to see you. Kingsley told us the Ministry folk weren't doing anything about Hogwarts until next week. And you weren't supposed to be here until tomorrow night, Viktor."

"Was I? News to me, either one. A week? Tell that to Minerva," Viktor muttered, stuffing the envelope back in his pocket, "Damn idiots. Prison breaks, impending war, and they are busy picking over who everyone's parents are! Who am I supposed to be talking to, anyway?"

"As many as we can get together. The most of them will be here tonight. Dumbledore will probably want to get it over with, seeing as you all are here already," Sirius explained. "Coffee's on if you all want some," he added, ruffling Harry's hair. "Umbridge leave the door open for you all, or did you have to take one of the other Floos?"

"Used hers," Viktor said simply, sitting in a chair facing the back door.

"She was that sloppy? No password? Simple locking charm?" Sirius asked curiously.

"Used the Muggle approach. Simple and direct. The hard way," Viktor answered, a subtle smile curling the corner of his mouth.

"And what would that be?" Sirius pressed.

"Kicked it in. Couldn't hear it over the fireworks. Although, I would like to see her face when she got back to her office," Viktor said.

"Fireworks? Do I want to know?" Mrs. Weasley said with a sigh.

“Probably not. Would it make it better if I told you they did it on orders from a member of the faculty?” Viktor asked with an arched brow.

“You three should be in bed,” Mrs. Weasley said brusquely, looking pointedly at Harry, Hermione and Ron.

“If it’s all the same, Mum, I couldn’t sleep anyway,” Ron said.

“Me either,” Hermione added.

“I’m not sleepy,” Harry said, flopping into the chair beside Viktor.

“I would prefer the coffee to a bed right now, myself,” Viktor said softly, “if you do not mind.”

“Fine, then, coffee, but as soon as they start to meet, you three scoot off to bed,” Mrs. Weasley ordered. Harry noticed that Viktor and Sirius exchanged looks, but neither of them said anything. Over the next thirty minutes, several unfamiliar figures entered the kitchen door, in pairs and alone. As each entered, Sirius introduced them. Nymphadora Tonks, his cousin, a young woman with violently pink hair, who preferred to go by Tonks. The vaguely familiar Dedalus Diggle, whom Harry had actually met once before, and a pink cheeked, black haired witch named Hestia Jones. Soon after, followed the wheezy-voiced Elphias Doge, a wizard with straw-colored hair named Sturgis Podmore, and minutes after them, Emmeline Vance, a tall, stately witch with a regal bearing and her hair in a neat bun. Menalaus Muggenridge, a grizzled old wizard with steely gray hair that stood up in all directions, and Theodore Nettlewhite, a thin and rather nervous wizard who had shockingly white-blond hair.

The entering witches and wizards would often gape at Harry, then offer up the observation, “You look just like James, you know. Except for the eyes. Those are Lily’s eyes,” or something similar. Then they would move on to one of the other rooms, for a sit down or even a kip or some conversation. Harry was rather relieved when a very familiar Mr. Weasley and Bill came trailing in, knowing he wouldn’t have to act pleasantly surprised about his resemblance to his father once again while talking with yet another stranger.

“Oh, hello, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said distractedly, after Mrs. Weasley had pulled him aside for a hurried consultation with much eye rolling in the table’s direction. “We haven’t lost him, have we, Bill? I’d hate for him to get lost.”

“No, Dad. He was a few minutes behind. Said he’d catch up directly,” Bill replied. The words had no more than left his mouth when a burly figure in a hooded cloak burst through the door, grumbling under his breath and shaking off the dampness from the light mist falling outside.

“Well! What’s this, then?” came a gruff voice beneath the hood, which was pointed at the table. The face beneath was shrouded in shadow, not a feature to be seen. Harry had the curious sensation of being studied by someone he couldn’t see. There was a wondering tone to the voice now, like the figure was thinking aloud in private, not talking to a group. “Ahhh... curious! It’s almost like having the past right here in the present... Nearly like being taken back sixteen years or so. But I expect you’ve heard that you look almost exactly like your father enough times to be sick of it. Except for the eyes. There’s something about the eyes that remind me of her... softer...” Harry had just opened his mouth to reply that yes, indeed, he was most certainly sick of being told he looked just like his parents when the broad hands went up to tip the hood back, to reveal a ruddy face dominated by a bushy walrus mustache topped by wild, thick blonde hair. He reminded Harry rather a lot of a more cheerful and scruffier Uncle Vernon, for there was an amused glint in the dark eyes. “Has anyone ever told you that you had your mother’s eyes, Viktor?”

Viktor narrowed his eyes and took a long, hard look at the figure in the firelight as he took a limping step forward. “A few times,” Viktor said softly.

“Do you remember me at all? You can’t have been anything more than knee high the last time I saw you,” the large blonde man said with a broad smile.

“Lestrev? Mikhail Lestrev?” Viktor asked tentatively, twirling his cup by the rim between his fingertips.

“So you do remember me a bit, then? I’d like to send my regards to your parents, next time you see them or talk to them. Your father was a good man, Viktor. I imagine he still is. I miss having him around. Although, I have to say, young Weasley there is coming along,” Lestrev said with a nod in Bill’s direction. Bill waved a modest and dismissive hand in response. Viktor’s dark eyes slid to Hermione, and they exchanged a look as though they each wished to say something, but still, they remained silent.

“So who are we still missing, then?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“Just Dumbledore, Lupin, and Moody,” Sirius said, “and they should be here any minute.”

After several more minutes of sipping second cups of coffee that none of them seemed to want very much, Harry was beginning to feel extremely tired. It was well past two in the morning already. His head felt very fuzzy. He almost didn’t recognize Lupin until he was standing beside the table. “Prof...” Harry began, but he was interrupted by a shattering noise right beside him. When he turned, he saw that what was left of Viktor’s coffee cup was scattered beneath the table and chairs. He had been returning it to the sink, and he still stood, frozen, pale as if

he had seen a ghost. "Viktor? Are you alright?" Harry asked tentatively.

"Ne poveche... stiga smyrтта," Viktor said in a strangled voice.

"Pardon?" Lupin asked, looking back and forth between Harry and Viktor.

"Ne poveche... stiga smyrтта... you... you were in the cafe that day! You were in the cafe in Russia!" Viktor said urgently.

"Sorry... but I've never been to Russia..." Lupin said rather helplessly, looking around as though he wanted some help figuring out exactly what he was being accused of.

"But you were... I... I haff seen your face thousands of times, every time, it is always the same. I could have described you at the drop of a hat before I even met you... I sat right across from you that day. It was your face..." Viktor trailed off.

"Perhaps it's a coincidence. He just reminds you of someone you saw that day..." Hermione said softly.

Viktor gave a little shake of his head. "It was his face. I am sure of it."

"But I tell you, I've never been to Russia... you've mistaken me for someone else," Lupin said sincerely.

"He wouldn't lie, Viktor," Harry interjected. "We're all tired." Viktor gave him a look that said he doubted he was *that* tired, but instead, he turned his attention to repairing the cup in shards under the table.

"So... who are we missing yet?" Lupin asked Sirius, still looking a bit unsettled.

"Dumbledore and Moody," Sirius answered.

"Well, as soon as they get here, it's bed for the three of you," Mrs. Weasley barked.

"I don't think so, Molly," Sirius said.

"What on earth are you talking about? It's already morning, of course they're going to bed!" she shot back.

"Molly, Harry has a right to hear this. It concerns him," Sirius countered.

"Nonsense. He's a child, and he has no business listening to the business you all are going to be discussing in there," Mrs. Weasley said with a huff.

“I disagree. And as his godfather, I think I have final say,” Sirius argued.

“I agree with Black. Harry deserves to hear what concerns him,” Viktor said softly.

“And why is that?” Mrs. Weasley snapped.

“Because, keeping things from him has not benefited him nor kept him any safer these last four years, now has it? And while you are at it, you might as well let Ron and Hermione in there and save our breath later,” Viktor said evenly.

“You wouldn’t dare go telling them what’s discussed in there!” Mrs. Weasley shrieked.

“I would. And unless Harry, at least, gets to sit in, if he likes, I will not be attending either,” Viktor said with a shrug.

“We’ll see about that,” Mrs. Weasley muttered, and Harry supposed she would have said more, but for the door opening, and the familiar figure of Albus Dumbledore slipping in the back door with Moody right behind him.

“Ah, Harry. I’d like for you to meet someone. This is Alastor Moody. Alastor, this is Harry Potter,” Dumbledore said, not looking in the least surprised to see them in the kitchen at this hour.

“Professor Moody,” Harry acknowledged him with a nod, feeling very odd indeed at being introduced to someone he thought he had already known for a year.

“Don’t know about the ‘professor’. Never got around to much teaching, now did I?” Moody said in a soft but gruff tone.

“These two think that these... these *children* should be allowed into the meeting!” Mrs. Weasley said, pointing an accusing finger at Viktor and Sirius.

“And you already know Sirius, of course, and that’s Ron, Arthur’s boy, and Hermione Granger, and ...” Dumbledore went on, as though he hadn’t heard.

“Well, I do, too, so it’s this whole side of the table, actually,” Harry interrupted.

“This side, too, I think, Mum,” Ron added, to Hermione’s nod.

Viktor stood and walked out around the table, taking his restored cup with him. He put it on the counter, then stopped halfway between Dumbledore and Mrs. Weasley and considered both a moment before speaking. “Look, this whole thing involves Harry, more than it does any of us. It concerns them too, because they

are involved with the rest of us, if for no other reason. He deserves to know what is going on if anyone does. And they might as well, too. There is something going on anyway, with the four of us and we need to figure it out. Treating Harry like a child is not going to help. You know as well as I do that he has the biggest role in this, like it or not. And if you do not let him in there, you can forget about hearing from me,” Viktor said firmly.

“Tonight’s a very important meeting. It brings to an end the old Order of the Phoenix. And establishes a new, hopefully improved, Order. Do you really feel it’s that important that Harry be in the meeting?” Dumbledore asked gently.

“I do. And what did you call it?” Viktor asked, a rather odd expression passing over his face. It was almost akin to the look he had when receiving the jolt of seeing Lupin’s face. Puzzled, with just a hint of something else. Harry chalked it up to the chalky, pinched, sleepless look all of them had developed shortly after one in the morning.

“The Order of the Phoenix. It’s the name we gave our little resistance movement back in the first war,” Dumbledore said with a soft smile.

“I agree. And I say as his guardian, I’ve got more pull than Molly. I’m his godfather,” Sirius said irritably, stomping around the table to join the group and cross his arms defiantly across his chest.

“He’s only fifteen and - “ Mrs. Weasley began.

“Nearly sixteen, and he’s faced as much or more than the rest of us -” Sirius began, his face darkening.

“No one’s denying what he’s done! But he is still just a child!” Mrs. Weasley shrieked. “And as for you, you act as though you’ve got James back! Harry is *not* James, no matter how much you want him to be!”

“I’m quite clear on who he is, Molly,” Sirius said coldly.

“Molly, you must know that Harry needs *some* answers, not necessarily *everything*, but he needs to know,” Lupin spoke up, in a conciliatory tone.

“He’s too young! He has adults responsible for him! And I am still in charge of *my* child, and Ron’s not attending the meeting! I can’t speak for Hermione, but I certainly can for Ron!” Mrs. Weasley shot back.

“Well, I speak for Harry,” Sirius said, his voice even colder, “and I say he needs to hear.”

“What would you know what he needs? Where have you been when he needed



you? Azkaban! Prison! And then in hiding!” Mrs. Weasley shouted.

“Harry needs to know. You cannot blindfold him and expect this to go well. In fact, I think there are several blindfolds that need to be removed,” Viktor said, casting a curious glance at Dumbledore.

“And how would you know? You’ve spent all of, what, a year with them? And you’re hardly more than a child yourself,” Mrs. Weasley said indignantly.

For a moment, there was absolute dead silence in the room, and then, there was a noise so strangely unfamiliar, that Harry had trouble placing it, at first. It wasn’t until Viktor closed most of the distance between himself and Mrs. Weasley with one long stride that Harry realized Viktor was shouting. He had never really heard Viktor raise his voice that way. “I stopped being a child that day in that square! I stopped being a child when I stepped on an arm that had left a body behind! I haff *not* been a *child* since the day they hauled the wreck of what used to be my mother out of that wreck of what used to be a building in Pravda Square all those years ago! I *stopped* being a child when I found out how they had to patch up what was left of her and hope for the best! I *stopped* being a child when she spent all those months flat on her back in the hospital! When she had to come home and *crawl* to get anywhere for months! When she woke up screaming at night because she dreamed we were dead, too! I *stopped* being a child the day I first saw my father cry. I *stopped* being a child the day we buried my sister and I looked in the coffin! There was nothing left of her but a few bloody scraps! I *stopped* being a child when I saw those days over and over in my head every time I tried to sleep! I *stopped* being a child when I had to get a *job*, not just because I was lucky and enjoyed it and it was the chance of a lifetime, but to help keep my parents from being evicted! If there was *anything* of a child left in me by the time I got to Durmstrang, Karkaroff took care of *that*! With his great hopes for me and his ‘treating me like a *son*’ and his demonstrations and his examinations! He thought I wanted to *be* like him, and the only thing I really wanted was to keep my head down and get the hell out! I haff *killed*, Molly Weasley! Not on purpose, but I haff still done it! I did not just *see* death, I *caused* it! Karkaroff and his precious need to know! Him and his need to always be *right*! His need to save his own skin! Your *child* and these other *children* watched me kill my former headmaster! You might make a half decent argument that Ron and Hermione are still children if you discount that, but no hope with Harry!” As Harry listened, he felt himself bristling. Viktor was right, he wasn’t a child! He deserved to know as much as any member of the Order of the Phoenix! Viktor was getting more and more angry, and the longer he talked, the louder his voice got. “Harry is not any more a *child* than I am! Or you are! You cannot *be* a child anymore when *Voldemort* has taken your blood to resurrect himself and you drag the lifeless body of an innocent young man barely of age back with you after fighting him off! We are *both* always going to haff to live with the specter of Cedric Diggory hanging over us! My hand and my wand and my voice tortured him not twenty minutes before he died! Harry took

him along to his death! And it does not matter that we are both innocent of the intent to cause harm, because it did not prevent the harm, now did it? You go look Amos Diggory in the eye and tell him his son's death did not teach you anything! I had to look him in the eye at the memorial service and say I was sorry, and that was hard enough! Try telling him that Cedric's death did not change anything! That it was not *worth* anything! That you are still willing to go along the way things have been, with Harry being the person who obviously has the biggest role in the defeat of Voldemort for some reason that no one who knows seems to be willing to make clear to anyone else, and Harry stumbling along in the dark worse than the rest of us! So you can either let go of this *fantasy* of Harry still being a *child*, or you can get us *all* killed! And if you concede that Harry needs to know, you might as well let the other two in, because there are going to be *no more secrets*! No more secrets, or you can forget about me having any part in this little resistance movement, because all it is going to be good for is flapping their hands when Harry gets himself killed because he does not know what he needs to, and taking no telling how many more with him, because you all are more concerned about him being afraid or getting his feelings hurt than you are about preparing him! Voldemort did not have any mercy on him because he was a *child*, neither should you! Your mercy and compassion is going to be what gets him killed! All of you!" Viktor paused and ran his fingers through his dark hair. His voice was soft once more when he added, "With all due respect... I think I care about Harry as much as any of the rest of you... but I think it is more important to get him through this in one piece than to protect his peace of mind. I think you ought to ask him if he feels like a child. I felt ancient at his age."

Mrs. Weasley blinked a bit, then her face turned tomato red. "You come in here and dictate to *me*!? Harry is not going to that meeting-" she huffed. Harry saw red. Before he knew it, he was up and shouting as well, stomping his sneakers on the kitchen floor as he flew around the end of the table.

"Shut up! Just shut up! You all talk about me like I'm not even here! You all talk about what's best for me, and don't even bother to ask me what I think! Viktor's right! I have a right to know! Sirius wants me to know! Mrs. Weasley, you are *not* my mother! My mother's dead! Voldemort killed her! And I wish you would stop acting like last year never happened! I wish Voldemort had never come! I wish Tom Riddle had never been born! That would have solved all our problems! If he just hadn't been born in the first place!" Harry shouted.

"Harry..." Viktor's voice, but Harry was too wound up, too much was boiling up inside him to stop now.

"What do you say we get a Time Turner and go back and take care of that?" Harry shrieked, realizing he sounded a bit hysterical, "Let's make sure his parents never meet or just take care of him after they send him to Hogwarts! We can do that, right? Send someone back and just take care of ol' Tom Riddle

before he becomes Voldemort?”

“Harry...” Viktor repeated, and Harry felt long fingers wrap over his shoulders, squeezing, but he couldn’t stop.

“Didn’t anybody see it? Didn’t anybody see Tom Riddle turning into Voldemort? Or am I the only one who gets to do that?” Harry said with a short, hysterical, barking laugh. He gathered breath to speak again, but the hands on his shoulders shook him, a little roughly, Viktor’s hands. Viktor’s face swam into focus in front of him, dark eyes wide.

“Harry... what did you just call him?” Viktor breathed.

“Tom Riddle. Tom Marvolo Riddle. It’s what old Lord Thingamabob used to go by before he got the Dark Lord gig and adopted a stage name,” Harry said more softly, and gave a weak laugh, followed by a hiccup. He hadn’t realized until now that his cheeks were wet and he had been crying. Viktor straightened and dropped his hands from Harry’s shoulders.

Viktor took a long hard look at Hermione, then burst out, “Riddle! That’s his name? Riddle? Riddle! English! He insisted on English! Hints... oh, hell, they were hints. He gave me hints, and I missed it!” Viktor dropped his face into his hands.

“Hints?” Hermione said curiously.

Viktor dragged his fingers from his face. “The Guardian. I know what he was trying to get me to see, now. Terrible puns in English, aren’t they? That’s what he said,” Viktor said, sinking into a chair at the end of the table, next to Hermione. “It is us. Somehow, it is us,” he said with a shake of his head, looking at her.

“I don’t remember anything about puns in the prophecy, or whatever you want to call it,” Hermione said.

“No, the day before I left, he insisted on talking to me. In English. Funny language, English. So many words haff multiple meanings... What was it? Earth, air, fire, water. Two escape during the old order, defeat him in the new. Pure-bloods, half-blood, Mudblood, too. Two escape from death, now death pursue. The risen cannot last, not when the past is present, and the present past. The risen. That is Voldemort. The Guardian talked about my parents. The one who rises anew was just a rumble in the distance when they were at Durmstrang. He was giving me hints, the next time, Hermione. Hints. And I missed it,” Viktor said with a sad shake of his head.

“What were they?” Hermione pressed.

“He talked about all of you. Asked me about all of you. ‘Eager to see the Mudblood with the earthen colored hair again? She is a grounding influence on you. Terrible puns in English, are they not?’ And when I protested the use of the term, he said he meant no harm. Just that you had sprung from non-magical roots. All references to the earth. And what about the boy with the messy hair and the sea green eyes? I said we both liked flying, and the Guardian countered with ‘But is he so much the creature of the air that you are? Flies like the wind?’ There’s water. And air. And the boy with the fiery red hair?” Viktor added with a nod of his head at Ron. “Fire. The storm will break and you will be in the eye. Sure has been busy since the four of us got together again. Answer a riddle for the answer to a riddle. What weapon will work, he said. A riddle. For the answer to Riddle. For the answer to Voldemort.” Viktor heaved a sigh, drummed his fingers on the table. He had hardly taken his eyes from Hermione’s, the whole while. “The rising did not happen overnight, neither will the fall. You are already familiar with the elements of the solution to our problem. They just need to be put together properly. That is what he said. We are it. We are the elements.”

“But they don’t match our Patronuses. I have the otter and that wouldn’t be earth. And Harry’s a stag, that wouldn’t go with water... Do you really think it’s us?” Hermione asked, pursing her lips.

“Does not matter. The Patronuses are just another hint. You see? It does not matter which is which. There is nothing special about the type of Patronus, or who is who or which is which. We fit. As a whole. It is not any one of us. We are the elements of the solution. We are the Elements. The solution, it is the sum of us. Too much fits,” Viktor said earnestly. He turned to look at Dumbledore. “You said it, just a bit before. Tonight brings to a close the old Order of the Phoenix, starts a new Order. Two escape during the old Order, defeat him in the new. Harry escaped twice. I did once. Twice, if you want to be generous and count the near miss in the square. Both of us *should* be dead as hammers, but we both survived a direct killing curse. An *Avada Kedavra*. It was not just the right charm to counter, the *Guerda Engelikos*, and the locket acting like a wand because of my sister’s hair in it, it was the fact that the four of us were together. Or I would be dead, too. Or all four of us. There’s something about the four of us together that makes us stronger. I suspect it’s just more noticeable with me, because I am... of age. They are not. Maybe I... I pulled part of the power I needed from them. I even held up under the *Cruciatus* curse better than I should haff,” Viktor said as he turned back to Hermione.

“It *would* explain the wobbly legs! I mean, the night with Karkaroff, that makes sense, we were all scared witless anyway! But the night when Snape went at you with the Legilimency and got nothing, we were all wobbly! I thought it was from being in the cupboard and being hot and nervous... but...” Hermione said

thoughtfully, trailing off.

“He did not get anything because you three were there. It sent him staggering, trying to break through. And I was not even doing anything. It explains the trouble he had, even though I was not doing Occlumency...” Viktor said in the same tone. “And maybe the screeching when Fleur was in Harry’s dreams. She wasn’t trying to get into the rest of our heads. We picked up on Harry’s dreams because... because...”

“Because we’re experiencing the equivalent of whatever it was that Khan Krum, Gryndel, Gustav and Stoykos could do... they were linked somehow...” Hermione finished, open mouthed.

“And the broom at the Internationals. No wand. And still, it came. Because the three of you were there...” Viktor breathed.

“And outside the tent. You knew Rita Skeeter was there,” Hermione added.

“And Karkaroff in Hogsmeade,” Viktor said grimly. Harry was beginning to think he had never felt more shut out of a conversation taking place right in front of him. The two of them hardly seemed aware that there was anyone else in the room. “Between the four of us, there might have been enough power to get rid of a Dementor. The Paralyzing Potion even wore off quicker than Snape expected. That night. Maybe it explains that, too.”

“Pure-bloods. Two of us are. You and Ron. Mudblood, that would be me. And half-blood. That would be Harry. Two escape from death, now death pursue. The two pursuing death, or the other way around, do you think?” Hermione squeaked out.

“Both, I would be willing to bet,” Viktor said softly, “and all four, not just two.”

“What about that whole business about the past and the present? The past is present and the present is past?” Hermione asked.

“No idea. Unless... I still swear I saw Lupin at that cafe in that square...” Viktor said, narrowing his eyes and scrutinizing Lupin’s tired, gray face, pinched in the dim light of the kitchen. “Could I have been seeing the future, or just a coincidence? But he looked so young... could not have been much older than I am now... the man I saw... I could not have been seeing you now... it would have to be then... but maybe that is what it means... the past and the present all crossed up...”

“I imagine you did...” Moody growled at last, stumping forward on his clawed wooden foot. “See his face, that is. Thanks to a Polyjuice Potion, I was wearing it at the time. Even then this face of mine was a little too, err... distinctive to go

unrecognized or unnoticed. So you were the little boy, eh? I never knew for sure if the boy with Nikolas Krum was his son. Was it your father I was talking to? I expect so, the resemblance is pretty startling.” Moody paused and cocked his head to the side, his magical eye scrutinizing Viktor intently.

Viktor gaped at Moody for a moment, then nodded numbly. “It was... you? What would you haff been doing there?”

“All good resistance movements have a foreign legion. I’ve known Lestrev for years. Lestrev put me in touch with your father. Thought he could point us toward a lot of very sympathetic foreign wizards willing to help. Didn’t work out too well, considering what happened that day. We abandoned the idea, given that Nikolas was busy with other important things afterwards, and no one else was willing to help out given what happened. They were too afraid what happened wasn’t just a coincidence. Nikolas was as much a part of the Order as anyone who actually joined. He lost as much as any member. Him and your mother,” Moody finished in a low, husky tone.

“I never remember hearing about any Nikolas Krum being contacted, or any foreign wizards, for that matter...” Lupin began, but Moody cut him off with a fierce look.

Moody snapped back in a gruff voice, “Wouldn’t like mentioning it, now would we? No one knew but Dumbledore and myself. Went wearing your face in case there were any Death Eaters out and about that would recognize me. Fat lot of good it did! Nikolas knew he was taking a risk, even talking to us. If anyone found out, they were likely to do to him and his family what happened by accident anyway. Makes no difference that they weren’t targeting the Krums specifically. We picked Pravda Square because it was so far out from most of the exclusively wizard parts of the country. We thought it would be safe. No one had any idea then how far the Death Eaters had spread. That was their first attack that far out. Nikolas knew it might happen if the wrong person heard. And he met with me anyway. Lot of people buried sons and daughters in the war... but Nikolas and Anya were the only ones to have to actually bury a child. No one likes to talk about burying children. Bad enough when your children are grown and you outlive them.”

“So... then... if Voldemort... took a look at the Order of the Phoenix today...” Hermione began.

“It would look a lot like the one then,” Viktor finished.

“What?” Harry found himself asking.

“Harry, how many times haff you heard ‘You look just like James’? As many times as I haff heard that if I had not broken my nose and did not haff that little

crook, I would look just like Nikolas. And we both have our mothers' eyes. Ron has the trademark Weasley red hair... and Black and Lupin and Weasley and Dumbledore and several others were here the first time. Not many of the ones who came in are too young. Lestrev said it. Just like having the past in the present. The past is present. All the holdovers. The present is past. Or at least pretty reminiscent of it," Viktor said, looking thoughtfully at Harry. "Now, the question is... how much did you know, and when did you know it? Have you known? All along?" Viktor asked gently, looking at Dumbledore.

Harry thought Dumbledore looked particularly wan, tired and old. "I did not put the entire thing together. You all just did. So the Guardian spoke about the four of you, did he? Fascinating. But I admit, I had to suspect something unusual when you killed a Dementor and deflected the killing curse. Would you and Miss Granger kindly explain to me how you managed to find out all that about Khan Krum and Gryndel and his brothers? I've not managed to even establish what made them so feared in battle, only the reason why Krum killed him, but then, I've been cut off from the library for a while, and I never had a reason to want to research it before. I cannot even establish if you are in any way a descendent of his," Dumbledore said pleasantly.

"Not that I think it really matters, but according to the Guardian, I am. And a lot of it was reading and guessing," Viktor replied softly.

"I don't think it matters either, but interesting all the same. I admit, I did not expect Harry to find his complements, if they existed, until he had come of age. Initially, I thought perhaps the Tournament would be revived for his sixth or seventh year, and that rather left the Goblet of Fire out as a method to point out the complements, for Harry would likely be chosen Hogwarts champion. But if he weren't, perhaps the other three would be his complements. Then the talks pointed to it being played in his fourth. It would be five more years before the next Tournament, if it was reestablished, so I felt sure that seemed a likely scenario. He would not be of age, unable to enter the Tournament, impossible to be picked champion, and the other three champions might very well be as compatible as Gryndel and his lot were when standing together against Nikephoros. I still held out hope that the three champions chosen last year would be his complements, eventually, when all four of you were of age. It made sense, Harry would be the last to come of age. But Cedric's death proved that theory wrong. And Fleur's change of heart delivered the final death blow to that idea. It's a coincidence that you were both champions, I feel, now. There are, I fear, a lot of parallels in what your ancestor participated in and what we are about to participate in. And I think you're right. No more secrets. Once I tell the four of you why it is Harry that must, in the end, be the one who does what the Khan did, we'll call the meeting of the Order together, and see if we can't take care of the rest of our business. This business, I should have taken care of years ago. I see that now," Dumbledore said, sinking heavily into one of the chairs at the table. Harry was sure he had seen a single tear escape and fall into

the white beard cascading down the front of the headmaster's robes.

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Chapter 95 - (needs to be beta read)

"Years ago, when I was interviewing Sybil Trelawney for the position of Divination instructor, she had a vision. Much like you experienced when she foretold Wormtail's return to Voldemort two years ago, Harry. She foretold that the one who could defeat the Dark Lord would be born as the seventh month dies. Born to those who had thrice defied him. That's all his spy heard. Eavesdropping at the Hog's Head is woefully easy, but he was luckily thrown out before he could hear the rest. Sybil was staying there, and I agreed to go there for the interview. The rest of the prophecy said that Voldemort would mark this one as his equal. And that one would have to destroy the other. This child would have power that the Dark Lord did not know," Dumbledore said.

"So... that's why he tried to kill me as a baby?" Harry asked.

"Yes. You see, Harry, he thought he could kill the child in the prophecy, and thus keep this child from defeating him in the future. Without the rest of the prophecy, there was no way he could know there was danger in attacking you. That he risked transferring power to you. That scar is the mark he gave you, as his equal," Dumbledore replied.

"I've been stuck as the one to defeat Voldemort because of some prophecy?" Harry stammered.

"Not entirely. You see, Harry, the prophecy could have referred to either of two wizard boys born at the end of July. The other was a pure-blood. Voldemort may just as well have chosen Neville Longbottom," Dumbledore stated, studying Harry through his glasses.

"So... Neville could really be the one who's supposed to defeat Voldemort, not me!" Harry protested.

"No. I'm afraid there's no doubt now as to who the prophecy refers to. Sixteen years ago, it could have been either of you. Two boys, born at the end of July, both with parents in the Order, parents who narrowly escaped Voldemort three times. After he attacked, it was you. Harry, he picked you. He marked you as an equal. When he gave you that scar. He picked the child he identified with most. The one he saw himself in. The half-blood. The scar sealed it. You are the one who has the power to defeat him. It's happened at least once before," Dumbledore finished. "Near as I can determine, Khan Krum, Stoykos, Gustav and Gryndel banded together when they saw the threat coming. It was just kismet that they also happened to be complements. Wizards who proved to be particularly compatible. Able to tap into one another's talents. Talents that



multiplied when they were together. I've long had hopes that Harry would also have complements. Someone who could help him defeat Voldemort. Wishful thinking, as much as anything, I suppose. It's rare. Only a couple of dozen very probable cases in all of recorded history, really. Complements who are truly capable of making such a demonstrated use of their powers, rarer still. Most just drew on one another somewhat when necessary... And not all of them allies. There's a story about four who all managed to destroy one another because of a dispute... but no matter. Not important. Krum and Gryndel were already acquainted, and they saw one particular dark wizard as a mutual threat," Dumbledore said softly, adjusting the glasses perched on his crooked nose.

"That would be Nikephoros?" Hermione asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "Nikephoros. Seems he had something in common with Voldemort. He was a halfblood as well. And he marked himself an equal."

"You are my equal and therefore my enemy," Viktor murmured.

"What?" Ron squeaked.

"It is what Nikephoros supposedly said to the Khan the first time they met on the battlefield. They fought, hand to hand, face to face, and it remained a draw. You are my equal and therefore my enemy. Before the Khan ever fought with Gryndel and his band. That is why Khan Krum had to be the one who killed him, was it not? And it is why he said what he said. Must be true, then. That legend. The Khan, when he left Prishta, he told his army, 'My enemy is my equal in all. My equal is my enemy.' He came back holding the head of Nikephoros. Nikephoros. The name means 'victory bearer'. They marked each other as equals. Equals cancel each other out. They could have spent years fighting and neither one winning. In fact, they did," Viktor added.

"But the complements... they tipped the scale... they made it possible..." Hermione mused.

"They made it possible to corner Nikephoros. To take his army down. To overpower him. But Krum had to kill him," Viktor countered.

"So Harry's been fighting Voldemort essentially to a draw, these last few years. Will do, most likely, until he's of age. But... we still don't know how this complements thing works, do we?" Hermione asked, cocking her head curiously at Dumbledore. He merely shook his head in the negative. "Well... let's look at this logically then. All the rest of the prophecy, or whatever you want to call it, is fairly literal. I mean, the Guardian said exactly what he meant, it's just that all the words had double meanings, and we were looking at them the wrong way. Elements of the solution... how they need to be put together... solution... like a math problem..." Hermione said, pursing her lips.

“Put together properly... solution... added together...well, that would just suggest... there’s no special incantation... just combining... combining... us... our Patronuses?” Viktor mused, arching an eyebrow.

“Have we ever all four of us cast our Patronuses together?” Hermione asked, perking up and looking around the table. Ron and Harry looked at one another, then gave a slow shake of the head.

“One way to find out if it works... Simultaneous, or just... together, do you think?” Viktor asked Hermione, raising his wand.

“Simultaneous is too hard to pull off. Don’t you think just putting them all together in one room would be enough?” she asked hesitantly.

Viktor gave a subtle shrug. “Harry, you first. Cast your Patronus, keep it in the room,” Viktor requested. Harry lifted his wand, spoke the incantation, and his stag trotted out and around the kitchen. “Hermione,” Viktor nodded in her direction. She lifted her wand and soon, her otter was frolicking along the countertops. “*Expecto Patronum*,” Viktor said in a low voice, and the hawk glided around the perimeter of the ceiling silently. “Ron,” Viktor prompted. Ron lifted his wand, wet his lips, and spoke the incantation, and his salamander wriggled from the end of his wand. For a moment, it looked as though all the silvery shapes would continue to bound about aimlessly until they evaporated, but then, as though in response to a silent cue, the stag, otter and salamander gathered motionless in the middle of the room. Waiting.

The hawk suddenly folded its wings against its body and began a steep, rapid plummet straight into the midst of the other three. At first, the four Patronuses seemed to disperse, to dissolve into a foggy mist, shapeless and fading. Then, the rolling billows grew whiter, thicker, drew together, growing, doubling, then growing exponentially. In a rush of air and noise, the mist gathered, forming a large shape. First a scaly, dragonlike snout poked its way out of the middle of the formation, followed by a mouth full of razor sharp, uneven teeth, framed by thick, rubbery lips, pulled back in a grimace. Rushing behind, a long, scaly body, sleek and muscular, shoulders graced with leathery wings spread wide. Folded, Harry could see, they would tuck beneath the scaly, armored plates on the back. Would probably be invisible there. Below hung webbed feet tipped with vicious looking claws.

“Dragon...” Harry breathed.

“No...” Viktor said, with a shake of his head.

“Guardian,” Ron stammered, open mouthed. And sure enough, when the head twisted their way, there was a third eye, between the scaly brows, in the center of

the forehead. The head cocked quizzically on the end of the long, flexible neck, nostrils flaring, long tail curled beneath as it hovered there over the spot where it had formed. The head shot forward, the jaws opening wide, and a blast of hot air and smoke in the shape of flame whipped back the hair of the people at the table.

The roar was deafening, seemingly interminable, it seemed to shake the very foundations of 12 Grimmauld Place. Harry's glasses were fogging, and his ears were ringing by the time the mouth closed, the wispiest-looking representation of the Guardian emitted a somewhat self-satisfied snort, and dissolved in a puff of weak mist. The pans hanging on the pot rack were still clattering together, as though they had been in an earthquake when Sirius said in an awed tone, "If you four can do that now... what are you going to be able to do when all four of you are of age?"

"Glory be," Mrs. Weasley muttered, clutching the edges of her dressing gown together anxiously.

"Nastoinik..." Viktor murmured, open mouthed.

Lupin blinked, looking stunned. "I trust that answers all of the questions you four had?" he asked weakly, "I don't think I can take any more revelations."

Viktor turned to face Hermione. "Inclined to relegate them to the status of mere myth, indeed!"

"Myth, my Aunt Fanny!" Ron burst out.

"On that note, we've a meeting to attend. And you've a briefing to give," Dumbledore said, laying a hand on Viktor's shoulder. "You four had better not be late," Dumbledore said with mock sternness. "Drawing room. Ten minutes," he advised as he was rising. Harry took a quick peek out the windows. The moon was shockingly bright for three in the morning.

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## Chapter 96

"As I'm sure you're all aware by now," Dumbledore said, glancing over the wire rims of his glasses at everyone seated around the table, "the main purpose of this meeting is to ensure a proper beginning of the revived Order of the Phoenix. And perhaps, for some of us, to put the ghost of the old one to rest. We've not had a lot of news, lately, on any front, and I regret to say we haven't much idea what might be in the works. One of the other reasons for calling this meeting is so we can gauge what our hopes of external support might be. It's obvious we can expect no help from our own Ministry, or Fudge, at present. So in that regard, we are in far worse shape than we were for the first war. Our best hope,

therefore, is bringing as much of the foreign contingent to bear as possible. A lesson we learned all too harshly the first time around. Lestrev's given us a lot of leads, and a great many of them are still mulling over their possible participation. We can't count on all of them, or maybe even on a good portion of them joining, but we've hope on at least a couple of fronts. The Bulgarian Ministry?"

Dumbledore asked abruptly, looking expectantly at Viktor.

"Firmly aboard, even if it is only a suspicion. The Minister buried too many the first time around to ignore the possibility of a second war. Ready and willing to do anything you might request. Including leaning on Fudge, if possible," Viktor said succinctly. "In fact, he already was on Boxing Day. Sorry, but he thinks Fudge is an ostrich, too."

"Russian Ministry?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Hazier. Alexei's father seems to think they're leaning toward believing it, just waiting for some hard proof. But given enough time to work on them, he might be able to convince the right person without it. They are, however, reluctant to acknowledge it publicly until they have to. Afraid of looking like fools if it is not so. But, if convinced, I think they would be just as willing to fight. Plenty of them lost loved ones to Death Eaters. But they think it is not sensible to officially support you. After all, your own Ministry says you are a wanted criminal, a little soft in the melon, at the head of a group... well, let us be honest, we are not the most respectable crowd, now are we?" Some nervous laughter filtered around the room. "They want proof. I do not think it has to be something of the caliber it would take to convince Fudge, but remember, they've not been privy to all the events at Hogwarts the last few years. If they could just question Harry for a few minutes, I am sure that would be enough," Viktor replied, casting a sidelong glance at Harry. "I already spoke to some of them. Short conversations. Too short. But if Harry could tell them half of what he's seen..."

Dumbledore nodded approvingly. "Perhaps. Veritaserum wouldn't even convince Cornelius. Perhaps a more sensible man than Cornelius, that Russian Minister... Durmstrang?"

"On a par with Hogwarts, I am afraid. Potenko has politely asked a few people he is in doubt of to leave. A few others, he outright fired. Questioned some of them directly, others were just hunches. Of course, that does not take care of the students... but at least it makes things harder... to affect the school at large. He has increased security. Anyone who showed up looking for a fight would find it. Death Eaters would be crazy to attack the place. It is a fortress at the best of times. Now... even more secure. And unlike Hogwarts, there is no real reason to attack Durmstrang. No Harry Potter at Durmstrang. No Dumbledore. And, no different from Hogwarts, I'm sure there are likely to be children of Death Eaters there. An outright attack on the school, either one, would be ill-advised. No way you could get your supporters out beforehand. No risking killing one of your

own, either. It's why you want hostages, prisoners of war. Different situation, for the schools, having children of Death Eaters there, but the same result. Makes them reluctant to pull anything. Besides, Voldemort is going to harbor hopes that the school will be a source of support. A school full of pure-bloods with skills at Dark Arts... he is thinking it will be... let us say... fertile recruiting ground eventually. He has no reason to think Potenko is any different from Karkaroff. At this point, Voldemort thinks Durmstrang is his apple to pluck when the time is ripe. He thinks Potenko is no more than a simpering toady who would sell his own mother if it were to his advantage. In other words, another Karkaroff. I suppose Durmstrang is at least as 'safe' as Hogwarts, possibly safer."

"And finally, Beauxbatons?" Dumbledore asked, nodding approvingly.

To Harry's surprise, it was Viktor who answered again. "Unless Hagrid has heard differently in the last few days, Madame Maxime is still having trouble convincing her Board Of Governors and her Ministry. They think we are all, to put it bluntly, barmy. Fleur reneging on her support did a lot of damage. When one of the main witnesses to the events of last year changes her story, it is a bit difficult to convince anyone."

"Any word on where she is?" Dumbledore asked the table at large. Uncomfortable silence and shuffling in the chairs.

"I wasn't finished," Viktor said bluntly.

"What else, then?" Sirius asked impatiently.

Viktor bit his lip and looked at the table. "It just occurred to me, I think Beauxbatons is where it starts. It only makes good sense," he said softly, knitting his brows together.

"Beauxbatons? But that makes no sense..." Lupin protested.

"It makes perfect sense. I took Military Strategy for a year. There are two approaches you can take to any enemy. Hit the strongest part first, or hit the weakest part first. Voldemort is going to think Hogwarts is the strongest part. Harry Potter is there. Dumbledore is there. Even when they are not there, physically. Harry is the one who defeated him. As a baby. Dumbledore is the only one he ever feared. I've read the history books, thanks. Hogwarts is the strong link. If Hogwarts manages to convince much of anyone that Voldemort is back, he's had it. All of Europe against him, most likely. Half, anyway. Everyone's still suspicious of Durmstrang. Durmstrang is still pretty suspicious of everyone else. He probably doesn't worry about much of an alliance being initiated there. So Durmstrang is neither the strong point, nor is it the weak point. He might not even see Durmstrang as part of the enemy, yet. Fighting Dumbledore, Harry and Hogwarts so far has gotten him nothing. So that leaves

the other strategy. Go for the weak, show your enemy somebody's head. Get them as frightened of you as possible. Tepes did it with his own people. Heads on pikes, bodies on pikes, what's a few of your own dead, even, if that's all you've got? Better when you can do it with the opposition. The Khan did it. Nothing quite takes the wind out of your sails when negotiating with the enemy like having to take a toast out of the skull of your former leader. That's what Voldemort tried to do by taking Harry last year."

"But... but..." Arthur Weasley protested weakly, paling, and the words died on his lips.

"Let's say he had succeeded. Everything went according to plan. Cedric didn't show up in the graveyard. Didn't get between Harry and the *Avada Kedavra*, it worked and Harry didn't make it back. What would have happened? Chaos. Voldemort would have killed one half of what he saw as his greatest opposition. He would have succeeded in doing it right under Dumbledore's nose. None of us would have known he had his body back. A big wedge between the three schools. Everyone would have been suspicious of everyone else. Lots of finger pointing and accusations. I guarantee... that Durmstrang would have taken the blame somehow. You keep isolating it, suddenly anyone who offers Durmstrang an alliance seems pretty attractive. Or maybe Dumbledore would have taken the blame. And Voldemort had an undetected spy inside Hogwarts, Crouch as Moody. No revival of the Order. No opposition waiting for him. And I guarantee you, when he was ready, he would have shown us Harry. Harry was supposed to be a trophy. He would have claimed responsibility when he wanted to instill fear. Well, he cannot do that now. So on to the weakest part."

"I find it very offensive that you keep saying Beauxbatons is the weak point..." Hestia Jones began, but Viktor tensed his fingers and stared her down for a moment, and she trailed off under his gaze.

"Isn't it? You want to cut Beauxbatons off from Hogwarts. Beauxbatons is the most likely natural ally of Hogwarts. The French and the English have never been the closest, but they pull together when threatened. It's physically closer than Durmstrang. And how many French Death Eaters are there in Azkaban?" he asked, surveying the table. No answer. "That is what I thought. What does he have to lose? No allies inside, it's a damned French cottage, not a fort, almost undefended, all he has to do is get past the gates. And better yet, they do not believe he exists. The damage you can do when someone underestimates you... And if he does even minimal damage, he gets to taunt us with it. Prime 'head on a pike' material. And he's got someone on his side who knows the school inside and out."

"Who?" Theodore Thrippplewhite asked curiously.

"Fleur Delacour. She spent seven years there. I don't think Beauxbatons is as

tricky to know as Hogwarts and Durmstrang. Not so secretive. Not so many secrets inside. I doubt even the headmasters know half of what there is to know about either Durmstrang or Hogwarts.”

“You’re certain she’s... turned?” Thrippplewhite pressed.

“Who said she was on our side to begin with?” Viktor asked heavily.

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## Chapter 97

“Well, speaking of taking sides,” Dumbledore interjected, “we need to take care of some business as to making it clear who is definitely on our side. It’s all very well and good to talk about possibilities and vague, amorphous groups, but names and faces are what largely got us through the first war. I’ve no doubt that it will be the case once again. We have three here with us tonight who have already done a great deal for us, and will probably do a great deal more, but they haven’t been properly inducted.” Dumbledore rose and studied the group around the table over his glasses. “When I look around this table, I see so many familiar faces. Some from the first Order. A little more lined, a little more haggard, a bit more gray in the temples, some of us, but still the same hearts and spirits that we had the first time around. I see so many familiar names, families who gave so much in the first war, who are willing to do more. I think Arthur and Molly might have gone a bit further than most, providing us with new recruits, but so many of you come from lines that sacrificed a great deal the first time around.”

He paused for a moment, fiddling with the end of his long, white beard before continuing. “And, of course, I see so many faces that I watched grow up for seven years at Hogwarts, and beyond. Hestia Jones, stand up.” Hestia hesitantly stood, looking around a bit awkwardly, normally pink cheeks going even pinker. “When we founded the Order, we decided that we would only take those who fit a set of requirements. First, they must want to join. No conscription to the Order, no matter how much we would like to draft the best and brightest and put them to work for us. Second, they must be of age. Much as I would like to pull in some of the students,” his eyes slid momentarily down the table to the chairs of Hermione, Ron and Harry, “clever as they are, talented as they are, brave as they are, they are still my students and worthy of protection. Not children, certainly, but not yet quite adults. Third, they must be prepared to demonstrate one quality above all others. Loyalty. It’s the thing that holds together the fabric of so many institutions. House, country, school, friendship, marriage. It’s what holds the Order together. Talent is nothing without someone willing to sacrifice a bit of comfort and safety for another.”

Dumbledore stopped letting his eyes roam the table, and instead focused on Hestia. “You were a talented student, Hestia. I knew you would make a wonderful Auror. Alastor tells me he admires your skill and the way you’ve

grown into your job. You come of your own free will and truly desire to join the Order of the Phoenix?”

Hestia answered in a soft but steady voice, “Yes.”

“You came of age, when?”

“Eight years ago, now.”

“Are you willing to give your utmost to this Order, your loyalty?”

“Yes.”

“Nymphadora Tonks, stand,” Dumbledore said, lifting a hand in her direction. She wrinkled her face in distaste at the sound of her own name, but stood. “Tonks, you and Sirius have journeyed a long way. The ancient and most noble house of Black certainly wouldn’t have foreseen either Sirius or the daughter of Ted Tonks a few generations back, now would they?” he asked with a bemused expression. “Ted would be so proud if he were here right now. I know he’s proud of you, anyway. It takes courage for a woman to step away from her family, everything she’s been taught, and strike out on her own. You have that same bravery your mother had. Never fearing to do what is right, what you know you must. You, too, have become an Auror, and though still fairly new at it, you’ve demonstrated some wonderful skill. I needn’t ask if you’re of age, I think we all know you are. You wish to join?”

“Yes.”

“It hardly bears asking since you and Sirius both gave up everything to be here, but I’ll ask anyway. Ready to give us your loyalty?”

“Yes.”

“Viktor Krum, stand.” Viktor rose and looked at Dumbledore across the corner of the table that separated them. “But for an accident of fate, I might be congratulating you on following in the footsteps of your parents in joining the Order. As it is, I congratulate you on following their footsteps in everything else. It would have been so easy to follow in your Headmaster’s footsteps. Easier, probably, than things have been this far. You’ve come farther than anyone else here. A few years ago, the idea of a former Durmstrang student sitting at this table with the Order would have been nearly unthinkable. I needn’t ask if you’re of age, anyone with a passing interest in Quidditch knows you are. I don’t think I need to question your loyalty either. You were willing to lay your life down, we can ask no better than that. You wish to join the Order of the Phoenix?”

“I do.” Viktor answered firmly.



“Any opposed to their admittance?” Dumbledore asked, surveying the table once more. “All in favor, indicate so,” and instead of simply saying “Aye”, the group around the table all flicked their wands, generating showers of red sparks. “So be it, then,” Dumbledore said, nodding approvingly, then flicking his own wand. In a burst of flame and feathers, Fawkes appeared in the middle of the table, swooping to perch on Dumbledore’s shoulder. “Meeting called to a fitting end, then. Get some sleep. It’s near four in the morning.” he added pleasantly. But the group milled about the room, murmuring and talking among themselves for several minutes, and many of the old members insisted on welcoming the new ones personally with proffered handshakes and conspiratorial slaps on the shoulders. Harry, Hermione, and Ron were all lamenting among themselves how very heavy their eyes felt and Hermione was wondering where they would fit everyone when the door opened.

“Been an attack!” came Hagrid’s voice. His horrible hairy overcoat was covered in brambles and twigs, and covered in damp, as though he had been crashing through a wood somewhere.

“Attack?” Dumbledore asked, clearly alarmed.

“Olympe owed me. Death Eaters at Beauxbatons. Some o’ the ones who escaped. I think Fudge has his proof,” Hagrid said, shaking his head forlornly.

“He’ll just write it off as panic. A dream. Something. Mass hysteria,” Sirius muttered darkly.

“Can’t deny one thing,” Hagrid protested. “Two dead bodies.”

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## Chapter 98

“Who?” Dumbledore asked in a thin voice.

“Dolohov. An’ Delacour. Think they got in the way o’ their own crossfire. As it was, mos’ o’ the faculty, they met ‘em by the time they got through the gate. Came runnin’ in, yellin’ abou’ how Voldemort was back. He even made an appearance, egged ‘em on, then disappeared. Ten o’ the professors are willin’ ter testify ter it, at least. Olympe were off on business. Board was seein’ ter the school while she was gone. Board o’ Gov’nors invited Delacour right in, invited her ter stay until she could get a new position, or an interview with the Headmistress,” Hagrid spat. “Reportin’ Delacour died in defense o’ the school,” he added, shaking his head.

“They let her stay?! Why?” Harry demanded.

“Sweet young thing, former student, shows up on their doorstep with a sob story about the madman who hired her and made her resign, of course they let her stay. Same madman who keeps saying Voldemort is back. Same madman whose story she disputes now. Same madman who can’t even get support from his own Ministry,” Dumbledore murmured.

“She let them in. She walked right to the front gate and let them in, didn’t she? Set off the alarm Olympe set up, alerted the faculty, got herself killed, and now they’re going to say she was just defending the school,” Viktor said, as though simply thinking aloud. “She’s the new Peter Pettigrew. Traitor hailed as hero.”

“Well, we can put paid to that idea! I mean, they have to believe us now, right? After the Death Eaters at the World Cup, and this, I mean, they were telling everyone he’s back, one of the escaped Death Eaters is dead, they’ve got a body. They saw him! Proof! When we go tell the press that she was really on Voldemort’s side...” Hermione began indignantly, but Dumbledore held up a hand.

“And what good would it do? They already have ample proof of what we wanted to convince them about. That Voldemort is back. That he’s reassembling his Death Eaters. That he’s toying with us. What good would it do to disabuse her parents of the notion that she died a heroine?” he asked gently.

“But... but...” Hermione stammered.

“Actually, maybe they’ve done us a favor,” Viktor said softly.

“I can see ‘no harm’, but ‘done us a favor’? What good does it do us if Delacour *isn’t* a rat, as far as everyone else knows?” Sirius said.

“No one knows we know the truth about Delacour. I assume there will be a memorial service?” Viktor asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I think what he’s getting at is the fact that we’ll be expected to pay our respects. And people talk at funerals,” Remus said, looking around the room. “Speaking of ‘talk’, I think we’ve got a bit of it to do. And none of it too interesting. Molly will have all our hides if we keep the three of you up much longer, so let her put you three to bed, already,” he pleaded. Harry was so tired, he didn’t even bother to protest. The three of them trudged up the dark back stairs to the upstairs bedrooms with the murmur of voices still drifting out of the sitting room and a thin, dawn light just breaking through some of the windows.

Hermione woke after a few hours of sleep, tense and tired at the same time. Feeling headachy and sore, but tired of lying down, she rolled out of bed and pulled on her jeans and T-shirt once more. The clock on the mantle said it was well into the morning, and the sunlight was bright through the dingy curtains of

the spare room. She crept past the kitchen door when she saw that the kitchen was deserted except for Mrs. Weasley. She continued down the hall, peeking in doors as she went, sometimes spotting abandoned plates and cloaks and other belongings, sometimes forms curled up and sleeping in chairs, on sofas, on the floors, wherever there was room. Some of them she recognized from the night before, others were completely new. The sight of Kingsley Shacklebolt, the wizard who had accompanied Umbridge to take Dumbledore into custody, sprawled in a chair and snoring loudly gave her pause for a moment. One room left. The front sitting room. It was so cluttered with shifted furniture that there was little room in it at all.

“May I come in, or is this a private stare out the window you’re having?” she asked in a soft voice.

“I’m not very good company, right now,” Viktor answered, not budging from the spot where he was standing, arms crossed, looking out between the almost completely threadbare curtains. The sunlight streaming through just highlighted how wan and pale and unrested he looked.

“Why not?” Hermione prodded, sidling up to him, looking out onto the street, where there really wasn’t much of interest, save the occasional passing car.

“Tired,” he said simply, turning to look at her, dark smudges under his eyes almost like bruises.

“Still going to treat Fleur like she went down with her ship?” Hermione asked, voice a little icy.

“Did, did she not? We are just assigning her to a different ship,” Viktor said plainly.

“And you’re going along with this?” Hermione said, plainly puzzled. “I thought you, of all people, would want people to know the truth...”

“What good does it serve?” Viktor asked, giving her a curious look.

“People should know the truth,” Hermione said adamantly.

“I can make a lot of arguments against people knowing the truth. For one thing, if we don’t let on that we knew, we can go to that memorial service and see what we can find out. If we tell them we knew, there will be no hope of finding out anything useful,” Viktor said with a shake of his head.

“She was a traitor.”

He bit his lower lip thoughtfully. “I would haff agreed with you, at first thought.

Then, I thought about it a little while. And I pictured something.”

“What?”

“Her parents. How do you think her parents would feel?”

“Her parents raised someone who supported Voldemort...” Hermione began, but she trailed off when he looked her in the eye.

“What good does it do to speak ill of the dead? Speak ill of the living. They still haff a chance to change, before it’s too late. It’s not worth it, Hermione. It might make us feel like we had gotten some petty revenge, telling, but it would not be worth it. It would blow the only chance we haff of finding out anything more. It would do no good to publicly insult their daughter if the Delacours did know. What would her family care, if the Delacours really were supporters of Voldemort?” Viktor said in a thin voice.

“Well, Fleur was a supporter...” Hermione reasoned, but Viktor shook his head.

“Doesn’t mean her parents didn’t raise her right. She was of age. Children make their own mistakes, sometimes. No matter how well you raise them. For all we know, the Delacours are as decent as the Potters were, or the Weasleys are. Guilt by association. If you subscribe to that theory, you’re going to mark a lot of innocent people guilty.”

“But...” Hermione protested, more uncertain this time.

“Dolohov. I sat three feet away from his nephew in Care of Magical Creatures all through school. Quiet. Liked to draw. Never said a nasty word. Big boy. A lot broader than I am. But he failed self defense because he could not quite bring himself to hurt someone else. Even if they happened to be prepared to steamroll him. He just... let them, rather than fight back. He was interested in becoming a mediwizard. He volunteered in the infirmary. Volunteered in the hospital during the summer. Sound like a vicious Death Eater in the making? His uncle was one. Doesn’t make him one,” Viktor whispered, picking at a nonexistent hangnail on his thumb. He heaved a deep sigh, then looked back out on the street at nothing at all. “Let Sirius tell you a little about the most ancient and noble house of Black. Introduce you to the portrait of his dear old mother... Lily Potter came from the same family that produced Petunia Dursley. Fleur made her own decision. Maybe her parents had nothing to do with it. Don’t tar a whole family with the same brush.”

“Why do you keep mentioning her parents?” Hermione asked, touching his elbow lightly.

“Because, I bet even Peter Pettigrew’s mother cried when she buried what she

thought was all that was left of her son, Hermione,” Viktor replied, swallowing hard.

She slid her hand from the elbow to the top of his forearm, giving it a little squeeze. “What?”

“Would you haff the heart to do it? Look them in the eye and tell them that the daughter they’re burying... is not the child they thought they knew? God knows burying a child is hard enough. I could no more do it than... It would do us no good,” he amended, making a helpless looking gesture with his hands, leaning back against the arm of the squashy armchair behind him, slumping tiredly.

“So have you just stared out the window instead of sleeping, then?” Hermione asked, leaving her hand on his forearm.

“Couldn’t sleep. Read the Prophet. Guess what? Suddenly, Fudge acknowledges that ‘Lord Thing’ just might be back, after all. Hard to buck the eyewitness accounts of ten reputable faculty members at another school who all haff the backing of their Ministry. Dumbledore has his job back, if he wants it, Wizengamot position and all. We go back to Hogwarts tonight. Memorial service tomorrow. Classes will be dismissed. Hogwarts will send an official contingent. Dumbledore, certainly. Some of the faculty. I’ll go. Harry will go with me. Tournament Champions, it will be expected, since Harry is not in the infirmary, this time.” Viktor pressed his lips together, turning them as pale as the rest of his face for a moment, before releasing them.

“So, we should at least be a bit happy, right?” Hermione said tentatively.

“A bit. Things could haff turned out worse. Umbridge gets the boot, Dumbledore gets his job back, someone else says Voldemort is back, maybe we can clear Black eventually, if we can prove to Fudge that Pettigrew *is* alive... I’m just tired of attending memorial services, already. One year is one too many. And I’m worried this may be one in a long line of them,” he said with a sigh. She stepped up to him without thinking and wrapped her arms around his neck. He enfolded her in a firm embrace, stroking her hair. They stood for a long while, saying nothing, just standing in the warm, bright sunlight filtering through the threadbare curtains, and only the soft whoosh of the occasional passing car and the muffled clatter of pans from the kitchen breaking the perfect silence.

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Chapter 99

“Molly, it’s innocent enough. I don’t see the harm in leaving them just as they are. Lord knows the boy’s got to be completely exhausted, and I don’t imagine she’s far behind. And they’re out in plain sight, in broad daylight, and fully clothed. I hardly think we have to worry about them. Even out of plain sight, I’ll bet the two of them are more level headed than we ever were,” Arthur argued.

“He’s not a boy, remember? He’s nineteen. I’m not sure I like the idea of it...” Molly warned.

“He’s not even older than Percy. Now, Molly, I seem to recall you getting us both a good raking by suggesting we go for a walk when we shouldn’t and coming back at three in the morning. And we couldn’t have been but a few months older than she is right now. He’s been a trustworthy steward. To all three of them,” he cajoled, voice low.

“Well... I suppose,” she allowed, casting a sidelong glance into the room, at the sagging, bare cot among the haphazard jumble of furniture in the sitting room, where Viktor lay sprawled on his back, Hermione tucked up against his side, bushy head pillowed on his chest. Arthur knew it was fairly hard and uncomfortable, and that they must have been pretty desperate to rest together to even try lying down on it, much less sleeping on it.

*Consequences or no, I would probably have tried talking her into slipping off to the bed in her room, even if all I really wanted to do was sleep. Maybe especially if all I really wanted to do was sleep,* he thought to himself. “Come on, dear, let’s leave them be. They’ll wake up when they get hungry, or rested. Same with Harry and Ron. And we’re all within earshot if any of them need us,” he said, prodding her by the elbow.

“Poor lambs are all exhausted,” Molly agreed, bustling off to the kitchen. He can read his letter later, anyway,” she added, tucking the roll of parchment with Viktor’s name on it back into her apron pocket.

It was late afternoon by the time they woke, reluctant to drag themselves off the cot and into the kitchen, where they could hear Harry and Ron’s voices, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. They both lay perfectly still, save the soft kiss he planted on her temple, for several minutes. It took a quiet, “Come on. We should get up,” from Viktor to motivate Hermione to slip off the edge of the cot, head still feeling heavy and fuzzy. Not surprisingly, Ron and Harry were busy eating, and Hermione found her own stomach equally empty. “Sandwich, dears?” Mrs. Weasley asked them as they sat.

“Yes, please,” Hermione replied, stretching. Viktor simply shook his head ‘no’.

“Oh, and this came for you while you were asleep,” Mrs. Weasley said, passing a scroll of parchment from her apron pocket to Viktor. He looked at it a moment, flicked a finger under the wax seal, unrolled it, and read in silence. When he had finished, he rose and walked to the middle of the room.

“Where are you going?” Hermione asked curiously, and he halted.

“Need to go take care of some things before we go back, and to respond to this. Be ready to go back early this evening, the three of you. Harry, we’re going to be pallbearers, I’ll need to go get us some robes,” he replied softly.

“Who’s it from?” Hermione pressed.

“The Delacours. They worked out what the arrangements are going to be,” Viktor said heavily.

“I’m not being a pallbearer! She tried to kill me!” Harry protested.

“Perhaps you didn’t understand what I said. We’re going to be pallbearers. I didn’t give you the option of refusing,” Viktor said firmly, turning on his heel and walking out the door.

“Well! I’m not giving you the option... really!” Harry complained.

“I don’t think Viktor’s got much of a choice, either,” Hermione pointed out. “I’m fairly sure he’s not overly fond of funerals,” she added, finishing off her sandwich and giving Harry a disapproving look.

The rest of the afternoon was lazy and oppressive, seemingly sapping their will to do much of anything, so they simply lazed in various rooms, not talking to one another, watching the comings and goings of various members of the Order, old and new. They were gathered around the kitchen table, kicking at the table legs now and again, when Viktor walked in through the back door, carrying a large parcel wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. “Are you three in the middle of something important, or can we go now?” he asked.

Mrs. Weasley fussed over each and said her goodbyes, patting Harry on the cheek and admonishing, “Now, you stand tall, tomorrow. Don’t slouch,” before she released him from her embrace.

“See you at the service,” Viktor murmured to her, before offering the bowl of Floo powder to the other three and saying, “Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts.” They each stepped into the fireplace in turn, and Hermione was quite surprised to find that, upon stepping out at the other end, there came a very familiar clearing of the throat behind her.

“Hem, hem. And that doesn’t even begin to touch on what they did last night!” came Umbridge’s voice. When Viktor stepped out of the fireplace right behind her, Hermione turned and found Umbridge seated square between Fred and George. “And this one! When I tell you what he did...”

“Now, Dolores,” Dumbledore said soothingly from behind his desk, “I’m sure there’s a perfectly good explanation as to why Fred and George were setting off

fireworks in the dead of night,” he added pleasantly, adjusting his glasses.

“Of course, there is. I told them to,” Viktor said flatly, as though it made perfect sense and faculty members had students set off fireworks all the time.

“Well, there you go. It was on orders from a member of the faculty,” Dumbledore responded, “and we can hardly fault our students for listening to the faculty, Dolores.”

“And he put a boot heel through my doorframe!” she shrieked hysterically, pointing at Viktor. “I know it was you! No good denying it!”

“I’m not denying it. You’re lucky I didn’t plant a boot heel in you. Now, if you will excuse us, I need to take these three back to the dorm, and I have some business to discuss with Fred and George,” he added calmly, crooking a beckoning finger at the Weasley twins. “Good evening, Headmaster,” he said, with heavy emphasis on the last word, looking pointedly at Dumbledore, then Umbridge. “Tah, Dolores,” he tossed over his shoulder before slamming the door behind all six of them a tad harder than was necessary. They all walked to Gryffindor Tower in silence, and Viktor dropped the three of them off in front of the Fat Lady, telling Harry, “Be in the Common Room when I get back, please,” before walking off down the hall with Fred and George.

“Reckon what that’s all about?” Ron wondered aloud, sinking into a chair. Harry gave him an offhand shrug, while Hermione simply kept her own counsel. Since the weather was warm, most of the students were outside, leaving the Common Room relatively deserted. In a few minutes, the portrait hole opened and Fred and George clambered in, then trotted up the stairs, whispering conspiratorially.

Shortly thereafter, Viktor stepped through, carrying a neatly folded long black robe with a gold sash and a blue sash laying over it. In the other hand, he carried a pair of tall black boots, obviously brand new, so highly polished that they fairly sparkled. He laid them on the arm of Harry’s chair, squatted, looked up at Harry and said, “You’ll go tomorrow. I had Madam Malkin make those from your beginning of the year measurements for your school robes, so they should fit. I guessed on the boots. Better try them on tonight, so we can exchange them tomorrow if they do not fit. You can’t go in sneakers. You’ll put them on, and you’ll go tomorrow. There are only going to be four of us. You, me, Dumbledore and Potenko. I stay behind Potenko, you stay behind Dumbledore. They always lead. It is not that complicated. You get up when I do, you sit when I do, you walk when I do. You will be in that robe, and hopefully, those boots, by noon tomorrow. I will show you what to do with the sashes then. Clear?” His voice was soft and clipped, not commanding or demanding, but the tone made it clear that there was to be no argument. Harry nodded. Viktor looked at Ron, “If you want to go, you can. Your parents will be there, on behalf of the Ministry. You can go with us and meet them there.” He shifted his gaze to Hermione. “If



you want to go with me, you can. Your parents were fine with it. Be ready by noon. Fleur mentioned you two, so I think they rather expect you both.”

“I still don’t understand why I’m being a pallbearer for her and they get to decide! I don’t understand why you think it’s so important. She tried to kill us both. We can go hear whatever we hear without being pallbearers. I don’t want to do it,” Harry said softly.

Viktor stood slowly. “They picked us both because we were in the Tournament. She mentioned us both. Her parents also want both Durmstrang and Hogwarts represented. It is a nice balance. One headmaster and one student of each. Besides, you’re not really doing it for her. You do not actually hold funerals for the dead, you hold them for the living. You do it to show respect for their loss. To grieve with them. If she was on the right side, once, her death deserves grieving over. Even if she wasn’t, it still does. She was still someone’s daughter. Someone’s sister. Welcome to adulthood, Harry. You do lots of things you don’t want to do, because decency demands it. Would you rather we celebrated that a family lost someone every time a Death Eater died? Show a little respect, Harry. It’s what separates us from them. We don’t dance on anyone’s grave. I’m not happy either one of them died, Harry. Not Fleur, not Dolohov,” he added, biting his lower lip.

“Karkaroff?” Harry asked tentatively.

Viktor slowly shook his head back and forth. “Not even him.”

“Why not?” Harry pressed.

“Because, where there’s still life, there’s still hope. Hope that they’ll change. And someone always has to live with it after they’re gone. Someone always gets left behind. You should know that as well as I do,” Viktor murmured.

There was a long, drawn out silence. “Noon?” Harry asked, swallowing hard.

“Noon,” Viktor echoed, then turned and headed for the portrait hole. As evening wore on, more and more students filtered back into the Common Room, from outside and the Great Hall. It seemed like the main topics of conversation were Fred and George’s fireworks and the memorial service. Harry soon tired of the questions, gathered up the sashes, robe, and boots, and went to bed.

“You’re going, right?” Ron asked after he had gone.

“Suppose I will,” Hermione assented, getting up and going toward the portrait hole.

“Tell him I’ll go. Don’t you all go off and leave me,” Ron called after her.

She was a little surprised when he answered after the first light knock. "I thought you might be sleeping," she said. He simply shook his head and stepped back to let her in. Ivan and Natasha trotted over to her, angling for a pat, but they seemed almost as subdued as Viktor. "You don't want to do it, either, do you?" she prompted, as he sank into the chair opposite hers in front of the fireplace.

"Of course not. The only people who are glad of a funeral are the mortician and the gravedigger. I hate funerals. Given my choice, I would never go to another one. But it does not work that way. Tomorrow, I'll carry the casket of someone who helped kill Cedric Diggory. And we will all listen to speeches about how she was part of the first Tournament since its revival and part of the process of joining the three schools closer together, on and on, and we will all nod and act like it's the truth," he said matter-of-factly. "Because funerals are for the living."

"Are you going to get through it okay?" she asked, leaning forward.

"Will because I haff to. Just like Violeta's. Just like Diggory's. Amos Diggory was all wrapped up in that boy. Lived through him. He was so stupidly proud of the fact that Cedric once bested Harry in a match. And what did it amount to?" Viktor asked.

"How did you know about the Quidditch match?" Hermione said.

"Amos Diggory bragged about that the whole time he was here. How Cedric had once beaten Harry to the Snitch. Odd. He could haff been plenty proud of Cedric just for being a decent, intelligent kid with plenty of talent and a good attitude. Seems like he never was, though. At least not when it counted. When Cedric was alive. Made me a little sad to see it. Made me grateful, though, too. That my parents weren't like that," he added with a sigh, leaning forward, propping his elbows on his knees.

"Funerals always make you like this?" she responded.

To her surprise, he gave her a halfhearted smile. "Not when I'm burying old folks who were ready to go. I'm just tired of burying people who are younger than I am. That is not supposed to be something you do at nineteen."

A few moments of comfortable silence followed. "My parents agreed."

"Generous of them."

"Selfish, actually. They really like you."

"You need to get back. Curfew in fifteen minutes," he reminded her.

“Try to get some sleep,” she said, rising. He stood too, then leaned down and put his lips to hers, curling his fingers under her chin, trailing them back and brushing her hair behind her shoulder. cupping his hand behind her head. She slipped her arms around his waist, and they remained locked together for a long while. When he pulled away, he put his cheek next to hers and cradled her there for some time.

“Az vi obicham, Sokrovishte,” he whispered into the shell of her ear.

“My Bulgarian’s kind of rusty, but I love you, too,” she murmured back. She had a hard time pulling away, even though she knew she should go.

She got a reproachful “Tsk” from the Fat Lady when she gave the password with only a minute to spare before curfew, but in her view, any number of rakings would have been worth it.

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## Chapter 100

The weather seemed to have been notified of the events of the day. Thick and oppressive, steely gray clouds hung heavy and low, and it was dark for near noon. Harry’s feet felt heavy in the boots, their unaccustomed weight dragging at his legs. The reluctance dragged at him the same way, a heavy sort of day all around. It felt bizarrely out of place, standing there in long, loose and silky robes, tenting about him, without a hint of Muggle clothing on, plodding boots weighty and yet silent when he walked. They gleamed so, he had been almost afraid to touch them, not wanting to mar them. He scrubbed at his glasses with a handkerchief, vainly trying to get the worst of the smudges off. “Wonder what you’re supposed to do with the sashes,” Ron said, sitting on the bed next to them.

“Your school’s color around your waist, the other across your left shoulder, crossing over your heart,” Viktor called from the doorway of the dorm. The pale blue sash was draped over his left shoulder, draping across and tucked in at the waist, where a wide, blood red sash was wrapped around several times and tied. The short ends of the sashes all hung in a neat, even bunch at his hip, each tail of the sashes about eight inches long. His wand was also neatly holstered there. “You really need someone to help. Here,” he said, draping the blue sash over Harry’s shoulder, then bringing the edges together at the opposite hip, evening up the ends. “Hold it there,” Viktor told him, and Harry pinched the edges between his own fingertips. Viktor took his wand from the sash and laid it very gingerly on the bed while gathering up the gold sash. He knelt in front of Harry and threaded an arm under Harry’s, wrapping his waist with the material. When Ron picked up Viktor’s wand and idly wobbled it between his fingers, Viktor muttered, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Sorry,” Ron said and put it back on the bed. Viktor tied off the sash, and Harry

picked up his wand, preparing to stick it in the folds of the sash at his waist. He froze, puzzled, when Viktor shook his head.

“Not there. Here,” Viktor said, gathering up the folds of the robe and pulling them up over the top of Harry’s right boot. He took the wand from Harry and slipped it into the mouth of the high boot, snug against Harry’s leg. Viktor stood and bent, taking a wand from his own left boot. “That is the one you put in your sash. I wouldn’t handle it roughly. It just might turn into a rubber chicken or some such thing,” he advised, handing Harry a wand which looked remarkably like the one tucked into his boot. “You’ll be asked to surrender your wand when we go to the service in the Main Hall at Beauxbatons. Give them that one. You take the other one out of your boot only if it’s a matter of life and death,” Viktor warned.

“But... why...” Harry stammered.

“If you think all of us are going in there with nothing, you’re crazy,” Viktor said with a little smirk. “Courtesy of Gred and Forge.”

“Harry... you look very handsome,” Hermione said, topping the stairs and walking through the door. She gave a sidelong glance at Viktor, then added to him, “I’ll work on the hair, and the glasses.” A few heavy duty cleaning spells and a bit of Sleekeazy’s later, his hair was lying flat and his glasses were cleaner than they had been in years.

“You do look very nice,” Viktor said, appraising him. “You two go tell them we’ll be there shortly.”

“Come on, Ron,” Hermione said briskly, “let’s go.”

Once their footsteps had faded off the staircase, Viktor put his hands on Harry’s shoulder. “We carry her coffin in, we carry it to the hearse after the service. Just hold your head up, follow Dumbledore, walk slowly, and don’t look around, eyes front. You do this for the Delacours. You do this for the Order. You will be fine.”

“How can you be so sure?” Harry asked.

“Because. This is just one day for you. For them, it’s going to be a long while. Come on, the carriage is probably here. Beauxbatons sent it for us.” Harry couldn’t help but be a bit relieved that he wouldn’t be seeing the thestrals. Another reminder of death was the last thing he wanted. Professor McGonagall, still recovering after being released from St. Mungo’s, sent her regrets but stayed at Hogwarts. Hagrid, who, thankfully, had gone very easy on greasing his hair back this time, as opposed to the Yule Ball, did accompany them.

Harry was very nearly drowning by the time they landed with a thump on the grounds of Beauxbatons, the carriage ride had been so quiet and subdued. Even the Weasley twins had been almost completely silent on the trip. The Beauxbatons grounds looked something like a French fairy village, filled with overgrown summer cottages, sprouting like mushrooms after a summer rain. Madame Maxime and what Harry assumed were some of the instructors, stood to greet them, wrapped in light robes and mufflers over their heads to protect against the light drizzle. "Into ze Main 'All, out of ze rain," Madame Maxime's deep, rumbling voice said, and she pointed a thick finger at the nearest building. They all hustled to get inside and away from the fat raindrops, and Harry had the fleeting thought that he hoped it hadn't washed the hair potion clean off. Once inside, the Beauxbatons group began shedding their rain gear, and Harry's chest gave a funny squeeze when he recognized two of them. Fleur's parents.

"Zank you all so much, for agreeing to do zis," her mother said gratefully, clasping Dumbledore's hand, then Viktor's and Harry's. Her grip had the desperate quality of one who was drowning, and Harry could see that her eyes were rimmed in red, as though she had been crying. Monsieur Delacour could only nod his silent agreement and lean against her, offering his own hand. After a few moments, one of the professors steered the Delacours to the front of the hall, and into a door at the left.

"It 'as been difficult," Madame Maxime explained apologetically. "I trust you are all well, Dumbly-dorr? Wands, please. I am sure you understand?"

"In splendid form, Olympe, other than being greatly saddened by this turn of events," Dumbledore said pleasantly, as they each handed over the wands tucked into their sashes. One of the professors gave them each a claim ticket and bustled off to another room.

"Potenko 'as already arrived. 'E is in ze back room. Just through zere. It is where ze four of you will stay until you come in, wiz ze casket. Feel free to stay back zere until your parents arrive," Madame Maxime told Ron, Fred and George. In the back room, Potenko greeted them all enthusiastically, with hearty handshakes, his booming voice a little more subdued and somber, but still that same deep, strong voice.

When he got to Viktor, he murmured, "And I understand I might be seeing you all again late this summer?" he said with a low chuckle and raised eyebrows.

Viktor's eyes slid to Hermione, they exchanged glances, and Viktor said with a soft smile, "Perhaps." A good twenty minutes were spent, around the small fire, making quiet small talk from the deep squashy armchairs in the room, before Mr. Weasley stuck his head in the door and beckoned to Ron, Fred and George.

"Well, I had better go on out, too," Hermione announced, giving both Viktor and

Harry a quick peck on the cheek before scurrying after Ron. They sat in silence for what seemed a small eternity before Madame Maxime made an appearance in the doorway, holding up ten fingers. Behind her, the sounds of soft harp music and a choir drifted in.

Viktor got up and ambled to the window. "It's pouring. We will be soaked," he observed. "Hope all the Hogwarts lot took care of their glasses," he added, looking at Dumbledore.

"Impervious to wind, rain, and the jabs of those fortunate enough to have perfect eyesight," Dumbledore said lightly.

"Hermione probably took care of yours, Harry," Viktor said distractedly. He stared out the window for several more minutes in silence, then swallowed hard. "Hearse is out front." It sounded horribly grim to Harry, but he forced himself up off the chair when Dumbledore and Potenko rose. "Sides?" Viktor asked, looking back and forth between the two Headmasters.

"I thought it best if the two of us were on the right hand side, carrying with our left. Harry needs to use his right, I think," Potenko said softly. "The casket will be heavy."

Dumbledore nodded his agreement. "I think so, too. Stouter arms on the right hand side." He swept to the door that opened outside, pulled on the knob, and stepped out into the sheets of rain, and the rest followed, Harry dragging reluctantly behind. The hearse turned out to be a low, horse-drawn cart, flat, without a top or sides, draped in black silk and red roses.

"I think we had better find our level," Viktor said, taking Harry by the arm and stationing him near the front of the cart, with his right arm next to the handle of the casket. Dumbledore took up the position next to the other handle on that side, and Viktor and Potenko took up stations on the other side. The three of them, Harry realized, were much taller than himself, and they all three dipped a lot lower than he did to catch the handle. "Okay, up," Viktor said, nodding across the cart to Harry, then straightening. Harry found he had to bend his arm at an awkward angle to keep his handle more or less level with the others, but thankfully, he had to bear little of the weight. The other three seemed to be bearing the brunt of the heavy casket. "Okay, there. Back down until they signal us," Viktor said, at last. By now their robes were damp and their hair darkening from the rain, except for Dumbledore, who wore his customary hat.

They loitered for a couple of minutes before Madame Maxime opened the outer doors and stepped out onto the short front step. A couple of boys who looked to be students in pale blue robes and two pale blue sashes each, much like their own, scurried out behind her and propped the outer doors back, out of the way, so they wouldn't swing shut. Again, the voices of a choir and harp music drifted

out, louder now. The boys scampered back into the foyer and took up stations before the inner doors, picking up lighted lanterns. She nodded to Dumbledore and Potenko in turn, and each Headmaster turned to the one behind, and silent nods were exchanged again. They all bent their knees and seized their handle, hefting the casket to the same level as before.

Harry had been worried about keeping pace with the rest, but he discovered he needn't worry. They moved the casket off the cart in slow, measured, almost military steps, maneuvering it into the foyer, stopping just behind the two Beauxbatons students. Harry shivered a bit when he looked into the hall and saw a mass of chairs, almost every one full, with a wide aisle between. Harry stole a glance at Viktor and found him just as sopping wet as Harry himself was. As he watched, several drops of water ran down the side of his face from his soaked hair and dripped from beneath his chin, but he didn't budge from the upright stance or take his eyes off of Potenko's broad back. By the time Harry fixed his own eyes back front, on Dumbledore, the music and singing came to a halt. A breathless silence ensued, then the bare choir, no accompanying music, struck up again, rose and swelled, sounding three times as loud as it had before, and the boys in the blue robes set off down the aisle, the two Headmasters following at a slow and stately pace.

Harry kept his eyes firmly locked between Dumbledore's shoulder blades, trying to think only of the pace of their walking, the progress they were making down the aisle, not what they were carrying. After what seemed like an eternity, they sat the casket down on a small pedestal of sorts, draped with the same black silk and red roses as the flat cart outside. They all circled and exited toward the left and trailed over to four empty seats in the front row, sitting.

Throughout all the speeches, Harry merely tuned out the talk, turning it into meaningless humming in the background. One thing he couldn't tune out was the sobbing coming from the other side of the aisle, where Madame and Monsieur Delacour sat with Gabrielle between them. He felt very mean and small to have begrudged them the walk down the aisle with the casket earlier.

At the end of the service, they once again filed up onto the pulpit, taking up their respective stations. At a subtle hand-raise from Madame Maxime, who was still standing at the back doors, they all lifted, and began the walk back toward the outside doors. Hermione mouthed a silent "Good job," when they filed past, and Ron and the Weasleys nodded at him encouragingly, giving him sympathetic looks. Outside, they slid the casket back onto the low cart, and the driver clucked to the horses, as the cart trundled away. "Private burial tomorrow," Dumbledore murmured, then turned. "Well, best get back in and dry off, before we all catch our deaths."

Back inside the small room, they stood before the fire, which had been stoked in their absence, and dried out in silence. "Now what?" Harry asked at last.

“We go out, provided we’re dry, and pay our respects. They’ll have a reception, of sorts,” Potenko said, brushing a hand over his thigh. “Actually, I think I’ve dried.”

“Think I have as well,” Dumbledore agreed, adjusting his wizard’s hat on his head. “You two still seem a bit damp around the edges. Come out when you’re ready,” he added, moving away from the fireplace and following Potenko out the door.

The two of them shuffled over, more directly in front of the fireplace, shaking their robes out. They stood wordlessly, until Harry finally asked, “Was it like that, when Violeta...?”

Viktor nodded slowly while still looking straight ahead. “A lot like that. What I remember of it. Sometimes, I am glad that my mother was still in the hospital and did not have to go through it. Dry?”

“Think so.”

“Well, come on, then. We will get it over with,” Viktor said, walking over to the door and holding it open. They stepped out into the milling crowd. Now, the chairs had been rearranged around small tables, and there was food along a side table. At the front, the Delacours stood, accepting condolences. They slipped through the crowd, and Harry felt his mouth go dry, wondering what he was supposed to say. He longed to reach out and tug at Viktor’s sleeve, get him to stop, but instead, he just followed helplessly along, the panic boiling up, not wanting to lose Viktor, either. Monsieur Delacour was busy talking in rapid French to one of the members of the faculty, several feet away, with Gabrielle, looking pale and pinched, tucked into his side. It was Madame Delacour who turned to them and held out her hand. Viktor clasped it and laid his left hand on her shoulder. “I am so sorry for your loss. You have my deepest sympathies,” he said sincerely.

“Thank you. Thank you so much, for agreeing to be pallbearers,” she said with a bleary smile, patting Harry on the shoulder with her free hand. “Fleur spoke of you often, especially in her letters from ‘Ogwarts, after the Tournament started.” She clasped Viktor’s hand with both of hers. “Especially you. You would have thought she had been given the moon when she heard the Tournament was on, and would include you. She went on and on about how she might get to meet you,” Madame Delacour enthused.

Viktor looked a mite uncomfortable, then it passed and he responded, “Really? That’s very flattering. In her letters home from school?”

“No. In the summer. We were on holiday in Albania when the recruiter



approached 'er. Turns out she was on 'oliday and staying in ze same 'otel," Madame Delacour replied, letting go of his hand.

"Recruiter?" Viktor said in a neutral voice.

"Ze recruiter wiz ze Tournament."

"There was no woman that was a recruiter..." Harry began, but trailed off when Viktor shot him a look.

"No female recruiter that talked to either of us. Who talked to Fleur?" Viktor asked evenly.

"A Madame Jorkins."

"Bertha Jorkins?" Viktor said, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

"Oui. You know 'er? Madame Jorkins found out she was a student at Beauxbatons, a rising seventh year, and told 'er she would be perfect for ze Tournament. Zat she would speak to Madame Maxime, try to get 'er in ze group from Beauxbatons. She spent most of ze days we were on 'oliday in ze 'otel speaking to Madame Jorkins. She told 'er zat Durmstrang was also participating and zat you would likely be chosen zeir champion. Fleur 'ardly stayed quiet after zat. Prattled on and on about 'ow she might get to meet you. To tell ze truth, I zink she 'ad a crush," Madame Delacour said with a halfhearted smile. "She wrote about you almost every letter, very fondly. Until ze Tournament took up so much time zat she did not write so much. Around Christmas."

"Bertha Jorkins told her all about the Tournament? About where it would be, who would be participating, so on?" Viktor prompted.

"Yes. Fleur could 'ardly keep quiet back at school before ze official announcement was made. If it 'ad not been for the World Cup, I zink she would 'ave exploded. Gave 'er somezing else to talk about. She was very impressed wiz you. Nearly talked our ears off about you during ze entire match."

"That's very humbling. Fleur was a beautiful young woman. I'm sure you and Monsieur Delacour were very proud of her. I am very sorry," he added softly.

"I'm sorry, too," Harry said, shifting uncomfortably.

"Zank you. So kind of you two to say so," Madame Delacour said, dabbing at her red nose with a handkerchief. They took their leave and wandered over to the corner where Dumbledore, Potenko, Hermione and Ron hovered around a table, eating and drinking. In a low voice, Viktor relayed what Madame Delacour had said.

“When did you hear about the Tournament?” Dumbledore asked Viktor.

“At the opening of school. Like everyone else. Karkaroff called us into his office and made arrangements for all of us to go, the ones he had picked. It was announced that night at the opening meal. Not a word before then. Not even our parents knew until then. Karkaroff found out... when? Around the time of the Cup Final?” Viktor asked.

“Roughly,” Dumbledore said, nodding. “So ‘Bertha Jorkins’ almost had to be Peter Pettigrew. He found out from the real Bertha Jorkins about the arrangements and the speculations. Bertha Jorkins recruited her alright. Recruited her to help Crouch.”

“But what for? I mean, what did she get out of it?” Ron wondered aloud.

“Why did she stop writing about you at Christmas?” Harry asked curiously. When Viktor didn’t answer, it dawned on Harry. “The Yule Ball... She ratted you out to Karkaroff. She wanted you...”

Viktor crossed his arms and ducked his head. “She figured out who I was talking to in the library. And why. A while after they announced the Ball. She asked me to take her the day after I asked Hermione. I told her I already had a partner. A few days after the second task... she... she came on really strong. Offered to... I told her I wasn’t interested, never would be,” Viktor said as his cheeks colored. “She’s the one who planted that idea that there might be something between Harry and Hermione after all. I don’t think I ever would have taken that article seriously, otherwise. I shouldn’t have asked Harry, anyway. Maybe she was supposed to turn me,” Viktor added, pressing his lips together and sinking into the chair next to Hermione.

“Well, a nugget or two of information gained, at least,” Dumbledore observed. “I must go speak to a few more people,” he added, setting down his empty plate and wandering off.

After a moment or two of uncomfortable silence, Ron muttered, “C’mon Harry. Let’s go see what Fred, George, Mum and Dad are up to,” and they drifted off across the room to the cluster of red heads.

Potenko gave Viktor and Hermione a quiet smile, then rummaged in his cloak, which now hung over the back of his chair. “I almost hate to ask you to do this, since you’re not a big drinker, but it would be a pity to skip tradition,” he said, setting two small shot glasses on the table, followed by a glass bottle with Russian writing on the label.

“One shot. Any more and someone will have to carry me out of here,” Viktor

warned.

“What is it?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Vodka. I’d like someone else who speaks Russian to drink a toast with me before I go back,” Potenko explained.

“Wouldn’t happen to haff a loaf of black bread in that cloak of yours, would you?” Viktor asked.

“No. Afraid you’ll just have to bear it,” Potenko said pleasantly, opening the bottle and pouring small shots into the glasses.

“Black bread?” Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Some people smell black bread, or a pickle, after drinking vodka. Helps keep it from taking your breath. Real Russian vodka is kind of... overwhelming,” Viktor responded, picking up the glass nearest him.

“Za vashe zdorov'ye!” Potenko said, raising his glass.

“Za vashe zdorov'ye!” Viktor echoed, and they clinked glasses, then downed the drinks. “That stuff would peel paint, bread or no bread,” Viktor said after setting his empty glass down.

“Multi purpose,” Potenko assented, closing the bottle and sticking it back into his cloak. “I need to get back. Take care, Miss Granger. Enjoy your summer residence, Viktor,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, laying a meaty hand on Viktor’s shoulder. “And maybe I’ll get to see you both late this summer if certain people get their plans together. It would be nice to see you all for a happy occasion, for a change,” he said, thumping Viktor on the back.

“What did the Russian mean?” Hermione asked after Potenko left.

“To your health. Probably say it to keep the vodka from killing you,” Viktor said with a shake of his head, making a face. “Almost ready to go home?”

“Trunk’s nearly packed. Are you going to find this odd?” Hermione asked.

“I am sure I will. I bet you will, too,” Viktor said. “Broken it to Harry and Ron that I’m staying with you this summer?”

“Not yet. Harry wants to go back to Grimmauld Place and stay with Sirius. Dumbledore says he has to go to the Dursleys for at least a month. You all did a wonderful job, today,” Hermione said softly, laying a hand on his knee under the table.

“Hope I don’t get any more practice at it,” Viktor sighed.

The next few days passed in a whirl for Harry. Between resting up from the funeral and getting ready to board the Hogwarts Express, he pushed getting packed to the last minute, and he dreaded returning to the Dursleys. It made him even more morose to think of Ron at the Burrow, Sirius without him at Grimmauld Place, and Viktor staying with Hermione and her parents. There was even talk that all four of them were going on holiday in Bulgaria for a week, for the twin purposes of letting their parents meet face to face, and to help enforce the story they were telling the neighbors that she and Viktor had met last year when he was at school on an “exchange”, and they were now exchanging accommodations for summer holidays. “Think Viktor can pull off being a ‘poor University student on holiday’ for a few weeks, then, Harry?” Ron asked as they struggled to close their trunks.

“Loads more unobtrusive than Hagrid, isn’t he?” Harry allowed, poking at a loose robe that hung over the corner. “And at least he knows what proper Muggle clothing is supposed to look like,” Harry added.

“Sorry you’re going to the Dursleys, mate. Mum says she’s going to try to see if Dumbledore will let you come to the Burrow later,” Ron said apologetically.

When the two of them approached the spot where they had agreed to meet Viktor and Hermione in order to wait for the horseless carriages, Harry was jolted by the sight of Viktor in a pair of jeans, hiking boots, and a loosely tucked in tee, much as he had been dressed when he came to pick them up at the beginning of the summer. “You look very... Muggle-ish,” Harry said approvingly.

“That was the point,” Viktor allowed. The ride back to King’s Cross was fairly uneventful, save Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle poking their heads into the compartment, looking rather maliciously gleeful until Viktor leaned out around the corner and asked, “You boys need something?”

“You’re supposed to be riding in the teacher’s compartment,” Malfoy said accusingly.

“You sound just like Dolores. I didn’t like the scenery up there. Not liking it too well back here, right now, either,” Viktor said evenly. Malfoy stalked off, Crabbe and Goyle lumbering behind him.

When they got off the train, and Harry passed through the barrier, he was surprised to see both Mad Eye Moody, bowler hat pulled low over his magical eye, and a pale, pinched looking Remus Lupin in a shabby overcoat, standing next to the Weasleys, who were decked out in brightly colored Muggle clothing. “Ron! Ginny! Fred and George!” Mrs. Weasley called, hugging each in turn.

“Oh, and Harry!”

“What are you all doing here?” Harry asked curiously, glancing up as Viktor ambled off to fetch a luggage cart for Hermione’s trunk and his. He could have shrunk them down, but Hermione had insisted they would look out of place with no obvious luggage. Her parents fell on her, taking it in turns to hug her, and the Weasleys greeted them enthusiastically.

“Thought we might have a talk with that aunt and uncle of yours before letting them take you home,” Lupin said.

“That’ll be them, then, Harry?” Moody said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. Evidently, he had spotted them with his magical eye. And all three Dursleys looked positively appalled at Harry’s greeting committee. They looked both embarrassed and afraid, and did not budge until Mr. Weasley offered a hand to Uncle Vernon.

“You might remember me, I’m Arthur Weasley,” he said. Harry doubted very much that Uncle Vernon would forget the man who had single-handedly demolished most of his living room two years prior when he had come to pick up Harry, but Uncle Vernon said nothing. He simply turned a darker shade of puce. Dudley, meanwhile, seemed to be trying to look small and be overlooked, a task at which he was failing miserably. Hermione had disentangled herself from her parents and come over to the group as well. “We thought we’d just have a few words with you about Harry,” Mr. Weasley said, still smiling.

“Yeah,” growled Moody. “About how he’s treated at your place.”

“I’m not aware that what goes on in my house is any of your business,” Uncle Vernon bristled, addressing himself to Moody.

“I expect what you’re not aware of would fill several books, Dursley,” Moody snarled back.

“Anyway, that’s not the point. If we hear you mistreat Harry -” Mr. Weasley began.

“-and make no mistake, we’ll hear about it,” Lupin said pleasantly.

“-even if you don’t let Harry use the fellytone,” Mr. Weasley added.

“Telephone,” Hermione whispered.

“You’ll have us to answer to,” Moody warned.

Uncle Vernon swelled ominously, looking even more indignant. “You... you...

freaks and... and... weirdos come in here, dictating to me about what goes on in my house? You oddballs are worse than those foreigners," he spat. "Do I look like the sort of man who can be intimidated?" he asked angrily.

"As a matter of fact," Moody said, "you do." He pushed his bowler hat up, showing Uncle Vernon his madly whirling magical eye. Uncle Vernon jumped back in horror and collided painfully with the luggage cart that Viktor had just wheeled up.

"Call... call security," Uncle Vernon wheezed, "These *people* are threatening me. And I would like to make a complaint."

Viktor gave him an innocent look, then cocked his head to the side. "And why would I want to do that? I'm one of these weirdos. And a foreigner to boot," he added, soft smile creeping across his face. "I'll be staying in London most of the summer. If I hear you've been horrible to Harry, I'll just pop over to Little Whinging and turn your head around backward, shall I? And I might not need the wand to do it," he said pleasantly, shoving his hands in his pockets and leaning over Uncle Vernon, who was half draped over the luggage cart. Uncle Vernon's eyes grew wide, and Harry could almost hear his horror at finding out that this nice, normal looking young man was one of *them*.

"If we don't hear from you for three days, we'll send someone along, Potter..." Moody said. "Give one of us a shout if you need us." Uncle Vernon disentangled himself from the luggage cart, and Viktor tossed their trunks onto it. Aunt Petunia looked stricken at the thought of any one of these people trudging up the front path.

"Take care, Harry," Viktor said, wheeling the cart over toward the Grangers who were still standing off to the side, out of earshot. They greeted him pleasantly, shaking his hand.

"We'll see you really soon, Harry," Hermione said earnestly, and she went to join Viktor and her parents where they stood.

"Soon, mate," Ron echoed, shaking Harry's hand.

"Bye, then, Potter," Moody said, laying a gnarled hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Be well, Harry. And let us know if you need anything. Viktor should be close by most of the summer. We may even get him to pop in on you anyway. When he's not around, some of the rest of us will be," Lupin said in a low voice.

Harry took a look around at them all, standing there, smiling at him encouragingly. He couldn't say what it meant, to have them stand up to the Dursleys for him. Instead, he merely waved at them, then turned and led the

way out of the train station, with Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, and Dudley hurrying along in his wake.