

A tie. All that for a rotten tie, Viktor thought to himself, sitting down on the bench in the locker room, studying the fresh scrapes on his knuckles from one of the several bouts of jockeying for position with the Scottish Seeker. The rest of the Bulgarian National Team trailed in behind and the crowd noise muted when the door closed.

“I shouldn’t worry about it. Would have been an outright win if they hadn’t counted that last goal,” Volkov said in rapid Bulgarian, nudging Viktor’s shoulder as he breezed by to the showers.

“But now we have to play them again to break the tie, unless Latvia beats Ireland, and we all know that isn’t going to happen,” Viktor said gloomily.

“Pfft. It happens. Tell me you don’t want to play Scotland again. Don’t you love that alternate they have, Oliver whatever, hopping up and down and yipping like an excited rat terrier that’s about to wet himself every time he sees you? And nearly pumping your arm off?” Vulchanov cajoled, grinning. One corner of Viktor’s mouth twitched subtly.

“Wood,” Viktor corrected, enunciating carefully and recovering himself. “I know why he did it. He just wants to be within easy traveling distance to Hogsmeade for another week,” Ivanova said in a singsong rhythm. “Come on. Confess! You caught it a second late on purpose!” Lara added, scrubbing her knuckles over Viktor’s sweaty hair, her usual congratulatory gesture.

“Did not. I can’t help it the referees can’t see when I’ve clearly got my hand on the Snitch before the Quaffle leaves the Chaser’s hand. Go tell him to get glasses, you know so much,” Viktor said ruefully, opening his hand to look at the pitifully fluttering Snitch. He had grabbed it so forcefully, one of the wings was bent and nearly broken off. He gave a casual shrug and set the Snitch down on the bench, where it wobbled around in a small, limping circle.

“I know you don’t mind being stuck here another week,” Ivanova said, nodding knowingly. “You can do some visiting. Still studying at St. Mungo’s, is she?” Ivanova asked, arching an eyebrow.

“You know she is,” Viktor said meekly.

“Then I suppose we had better be glad you didn’t deliberately take a Bludger in the head to get to see her before the match was over,” Levski said with a hearty laugh. “Oh, come on. Cheer up. We should have had them by six goals. We were off, today. Won’t happen again.”

“I take it you’re going to sit there and have a good sulk? Fair enough. Means the rest of us can shower and be gone before you get done moping over not getting

to that thing two seconds earlier,” Vulchanov said. “I figured you would be in a big hurry to get out of here. Dinner and dancing or something.”

“She doesn’t get off until late. We’ll be lucky to get dinner,” Viktor admitted, smiling a little in spite of himself.

“Knew it had to be something,” Levski said, running his fingers through his thick brown hair, which always seemed to stick out in untidy fashion in the back. “Don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m getting my shower and getting out of here while the afternoon is still young.”

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Viktor stuffed the last piece of his uniform into the duffle bag, put it on his shoulder, and brushed back a strand of damp hair. By the time he had gotten out of the shower, all the rest of the team had taken their leave, and he imagined that no one but the grounds crew and a few stragglers would be left outside the locker room. He ducked out and hurried across the pitch, heading for the area outside the stadium where he could Apparate.

A moment later, he was standing on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, an easy walk away from The Three Broomsticks. Viktor had plenty of time to waste, yet, and enough extra money for a drink or two and a more than decent tip, certainly. Enough to make Madam Rosmerta agreeable to his request to use the Floo for the next leg of the trip to Diagon Alley. It wasn’t that he couldn’t Apparate the distance, if need arose, but with needing to fill up the time until evening, why bother hurrying? They certainly couldn’t complain he was wasting their Floo powder. He carried his own.

Viktor nursed the two bottles of Butterbeer as slowly as he dared, fending off the multiple offers of something to go with them. Finally, when he had completely tired of the scenery and didn’t think he could take a third bottle, he moved on, Flooing to one of the shops in Diagon Alley and slowly making his way to The Leaky Cauldron, wasting as much time as possible looking in shop windows along the street. By the time he ambled past Tom the innkeeper, he was glad to sit for a while. “Just a little mead, thank you,” he insisted when Tom offered him something. Already, a few of the earlier diners were lingering over light suppers at the tables.

“You’re sure that’s all you’ll be having?” Tom asked, bringing the mug back to Viktor’s stool.

“For now. Maybe we will come back for supper,” Viktor allowed. He didn’t linger nearly as long over the mug, since afternoon was rapidly turning into evening, and the trip to St. Mungo’s would take a fair amount of time. By the time he had

wasted a few minutes here and there over the mug of mead, gathered his things and found himself in front of the lonely looking mannequins in the plate glass window, it was nearly dark.

He checked in both directions for anyone being too attentive, before melting through the seemingly solid glass. The halls of St. Mungo's were bustling and busy as always. Visitors were milling about, dodging mediwitches and mediwizards hurrying along with clipboards or gurneys. There was a line at the reception desk, and a frustrated wizard was arguing with the equally frustrated receptionist. Viktor paused a moment to let a frazzled looking witch troop by with a brood of little ones that put even the Weasleys to shame before ducking down a side corridor. Not one of them had looked anywhere near old enough to be off at school.

A slight smile crept across his face when he spotted Augustus Pye, mouth agape in fascination, listening intently while the person talking to him animatedly bobbed her head. The bushy hair was caught back in a completely unruly, loose ponytail, tendrils escaping from it everywhere. The two of them were standing in front of the door marked "Medical Research". Augustus had surely latched onto Hermione to hear about another Muggle approach to medicine. He was drawn to Muggle medical treatments like his former patient Arthur Weasley was to Muggle gadgets of all kinds. "With... with a beam of *light*?" Augustus stammered, disbelieving. "Like a *spell*?"

Hermione cocked her head and appeared to think for a moment. "Well, no, not exactly like a spell. It's called a *laser*. And it's a concentrated, high energy beam of-

"-light that can be used for things like cutting," Viktor finished for her, stepping alongside.

"Oh! Hello, I didn't realize it was that late... Exactly! That's still an oversimplification, of course," Hermione gushed, pausing just long enough to offer up her cheek for a quick kiss, "but that's the general idea. You can use it to reshape things, burn them away, or to cut, almost like a scalpel. Only much more precise."

"Really!? Fascinating. And they do surgeries with them..." Augustus said, nodding to himself. "Muggles do some absolutely fantastic things..." he mused, rubbing his chin.

"Absolutely. Some of the things they use them for, we haven't even figured out how to do any other way. For instance, some Muggles can get laser surgery and not even need glasses, any more. And Muggles-" Hermione went on enthusiastically.

“Muggles do this really wonderful thing known as dinner, too. I hear they do it in the evenings, just about the time you tend to get really hungry. There are these things called restaurants dedicated to the whole exercise,” Viktor interrupted. “Maybe we should try it sometime. Before the both of us starve.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, it *is* late. Maybe we can talk about it tomorrow, Augustus,” Hermione said apologetically.

“That’s fine. I should be getting home, too. See you tomorrow,” Augustus said, waving and hurrying off.

“Goodnight, Augustus. So, has the match been over long?” Hermione asked. “I heard it was a tie.”

“You heard right. It ended hours ago. I wasted time at The Three Broomsticks and The Leaky Cauldron. Speaking of, I all but promised Tom we would be back for dinner,” Viktor admitted, starting back down the hall.

“That’s fine. So... another week in Hogsmeade, then? Did it on purpose, did you?” Hermione teased.

“Much as I would like to say I am that good, no,” Viktor replied. “The official obviously cannot see very well.”

“Do remind me to poke him in the other eye before the next match, too,” Hermione said with a laugh. “Just as well. I have a little favor to ask for next week.”

“What?” Viktor said, pausing as they checked to make sure the street outside was deserted before stepping onto it.

“I’ll explain when we’ve gotten our dinner.”

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“Well?” Viktor prompted after Tom had gone, leaving them with their plates of fish and chips.

“Well what?” Hermione said. “Oh! The favor! Well, it’s not so much a favor as it is a project of sorts... And it’s not so much a favor for me, per se, but they asked me to bring it up with you.”

“Who asked you to bring up what with me?” Viktor asked, looking puzzled. Hermione took a deep breath. “It’s ever so clever an idea, really. And it’s for such a good cause, I know you can’t possibly say no. It’s for the hospital, you see. St. Mungo’s. You know that they lost a lot of the charitable contributions they used

to be bringing in, when one of their most, quote, generous benefactors, unquote, ended up, not to put too fine a point on it, in the hoosegow. They need to-

"I'm sorry... what now?" Viktor interrupted.

"They're pretty well skint since Lucius Malfoy and several of his cronies got tossed into Azkaban. Heading toward flat broke in some departments. There's talk of some of the departments being closed down if they can't bring in new funds," Hermione explained.

"Oh. Well... I can make a donation, but-

"And it would be highly appreciated, but I'm afraid that's not going to be enough by itself. Between the debts racked up during the war, rebuilding, and the expansions and renovations, the coffers are lower than they've ever been. What we need here is a really massive fundraiser. And the Office of Advancement and Institutional Fundraising came up with the perfect thing. The absolutely perfect thing. The proceeds from the first one are going straight to benefit the two departments in the most trouble. The Children's Wing and the Medical Research Department. If it brings in even half the money they expect it to, it would be enough to fund both departments for a whole year. A whole year!" Hermione said, beaming. She had the same beatific expression she often got when she was explaining an exciting discovery in a book or in the lab, or when she had made headway in convincing someone of the importance of house-elf rights.

"A whole year?" Viktor echoed. He couldn't for the life of him imagine what he could be involved in that would bring in that kind of money. Nothing *legal*, in any case.

"A whole year! And the best part is, it would only take a few days of your time. Just a few days. Afternoons, probably. Just a very little time, really. Everyone else they've asked has already said yes, and I told them I just knew you would, too. I mean, you couldn't possibly refuse to give up just a few afternoons during what's going to be the off season anyway for such a wonderful cause, now, could you?" Hermione gushed, with a faraway look in her eyes. The sort of look she got when her gaze was already firmly locked on where this whole thing was going. She paused for just a second as though expecting a response.

"Er... no?" Viktor said tentatively. He was dying to tell her to just come out and explain what it *was* he could not possibly say no to, but he resisted the temptation. There wasn't much point in saying anything else when she got like this. Hermione was wont to get altogether giddy and oblivious when she got carried away on the tide of an idea or aboard a train of thought. He had found it sometimes didn't make much difference whether you agreed, disagreed, or simply mumbled "purple hedgehog" when she paused, so long as you made

some indication you were still following along, interested in the eventual conclusion to be drawn. When she was in the worst throes of an attack of reason, Hermione tended to develop a bad case of selective hearing. If you weren't outright poking holes in her logic with your interruptions, she usually barreled on like a charging Erumpent. And how could you poke holes in her argument when she hadn't even told you what it was, yet? She was uncomfortably reminiscent of his agent when she got on a particularly good roll, in fact. Except she didn't usually throw around phrases like "return on investment", "airtight contract terms", "proper compensation" and "ten percent" while negotiating.

"No, of course not. Not when it could fund two departments for an entire year or more. The one alone, that would be enough, but *two*... It could be the difference between me having a job next year and not having one, and you know how much that job means to me. And *think* of the *children*," Hermione continued.

"Absolutely, think of the children," Viktor agreed. He still couldn't resist sparing an extra thought wondering what it was, exactly, he was expected to *do* for three afternoons while he was thinking of the children.

"And it will be such a wonderful thing to do for the children that are actually in the Children's Ward when it happens. I know they'll just be thrilled to be a part of it. I know you hate crowds, but you won't mind this a bit. And so many players they asked have already said yes," Hermione enthused.

"What, *exactly*, have they said yes to?" Viktor pressed, feeling a bit desperate by now.

"Oh, the whole three days! Oliver Wood is probably going to be more excited than anyone, I think. And the director of fundraising was so excited when I said I would ask. I didn't have the heart to tell him no. And some of the children have already got wind of it, too. I couldn't possibly face them if I had to tell them you turned it down. You couldn't possibly disappoint them like that, could you?" Hermione asked plaintively.

"No... I suppose not," Viktor said with a sigh. The pleading look on her face was worse than a dozen wards full of big eyed moppets with endearing lisps. He got the feeling she had already tendered his answer before asking, anyway. "I'll do it, whatever it is," he conceded, bracing himself. He had the secondary sneaking suspicion that whatever it was, he probably wasn't going to like it. Not one bit. Or there wouldn't be so much shrewdly deliberate avoidance.

"Wonderful! You can't possibly imagine what this means to me. And to the children, of course," Hermione added hastily, turning her attention to her plate.

"I think I can imagine. What I can't imagine is what it is I've actually agreed to do... Do I at least get a hint?" Viktor prompted, tensing.

"Oh, it's just a little exhibition match," Hermione said dismissively, concentrating intently on her pile of chips. "Various players from the pro teams. A nice mix you would never get to see together, otherwise. All proceeds from the tickets to benefit St. Mungo's, of course."

"Oh. Well, that's not so bad- Wait a minute. That's not going to take three days, is it? Or is that a maximum?" Viktor pressed.

"No, that's probably just the first afternoon. They don't expect it will be a long match," Hermione admitted. "A few hours, probably over well before dark."

"So what's on tap for the *second* afternoon?" Viktor asked, more suspicious than before. Hermione suddenly found her fish terribly engrossing.

"An autograph session. The fundraising people seem to think that's going to bring in as much or more money than the match, itself. And the lot of you can visit the Children's Ward. It would be wonderful publicity, and people would be eager to line up and buy an autograph. Especially for charity," Hermione said.

Autograph sessions were not exactly his most favorite thing in the world, but it didn't sound *too* terribly bad. At least he wasn't going to be stuck at this one by himself, and it *was* for a good cause, after all. There were far worse ways to spend an afternoon than trying to find a way to accept compliments that didn't make you sound like a pompous git and explaining for the millionth time that there was no truth whatsoever to the rumor that he and Hermione had secretly eloped off to some Buddhist temple, while she was still underage, in order to avoid the photographers. Nor was there any truth to the one about the drunken orgy with five sevenths of the Holyhead Harpies.

It wouldn't even be so ruddy annoying, but the ones who asked always seemed so earnestly *hopeful* that you really *had* done something so completely idiotic as to sneak off and marry when one of you wasn't even old enough to legally Apparate and there was a bloody war on, or to bed that many women at once. Heaven knew dealing with *one* woman properly was difficult enough, in bed or out. Viktor supposed the teenage girls tended to go all swoony over the theoretical whirlwind romance of a secret elopement, and the teenage boys were simply heartened by the idea that someone, somewhere was possibly having sex. If they could confirm someone had gotten some, it meant they might eventually stumble into some of it. It was enough to make you cringe at the mere mention of the phrases "I hope you don't think I'm being nosy", "if it's not too personal", and "I just wanted to ask if it's true".

Still, spending an afternoon at a general autograph session where he wasn't the sole focus of attention wouldn't set his teeth on edge *too* much, and if Hermione didn't mind the questions, he figured he could weather it for a few hours. It seemed almost too much to hope for, getting off that lightly. "And that's it, is it? Just an autograph session? Just a quick chat, answering the same old awkward questions, asking how Aunt Brunhilde spells her name and fending off writer's cramp?"

"That's the two day fundraising event," Hermione answered. She appeared to be committing the entire topography of the third chip from the left side of her plate to memory.

"We're going to be signing autographs for two days? Seems a bit excessive," Viktor observed.

"Just the one day of signing," Hermione answered, shaking her head.

"Just one? But you said it was *three* afternoons. And I don't see how it's going to raise more money than the match, unless they charge less than usual for the tickets," Viktor said.

"Well, it's *what* you'll be signing that they think will really bring in the money," Hermione said with a not-so-casual shrug, redirecting her scrutiny to the small bite of fish on the tines of her fork.

"Not memorabilia... I *hate* signing memorabilia. Do you know how *hard* it is to write anything legibly on a broom handle? Especially after it's been junked up with polish? And Snitches? Impossible with the little buggers flopping around all over the place! Nothing shows up on gloves, and let's not even *talk* about certain *other* parts of the uniform some people bring in... And those loony witches who want you to sign something they're planning to have tattooed, I could do without. Or the "sign my crup" ones. Programs and posters are one thing, but-

"Well, there *might* be collectible programs and posters. No brooms, if that makes you feel better. They have to buy what gets signed there. And you can write on a *calendar*, can't you?" Hermione said tartly.

"Calendars aren't so bad... Calendar? What sort of *calendar*? Team photos or something like that?" Viktor pressed, ducking to catch Hermione's eye. She deftly bit the piece of fish off the fork and turned her attention instead to dabbing madly at her mouth with the napkin, mopping up imaginary grease.

"Something like that," she mumbled behind the linen.

"Something like that, but not that," Viktor said flatly. "Are you ever going to tell

me what's *in* the calendar, or do I just expect a nasty surprise on the second day of this two day fundraising venture that is somehow taking up three of my afternoons in some mysterious fashion you've yet to explain?" he added in a weary voice. "Calendars almost always have a theme. I assume this one is no different. Come on. Out with it. What is the theme?"

Hermione popped a simply enormous chip into her mouth and mumbled around it while chewing. "Minnakwidtch."

"Beg pardon?" Viktor replied. He had a sinking feeling in his stomach that had absolutely nothing to do with how heavy the food at The Leaky Cauldron was.

"Mennakwidditch," Hermione mumbled, almost as indistinct the second time around as she had been the first

"Ne razbiram. I don't understand. Try it in real English. Without the chip in your mouth," Viktor insisted, halting her arm on its way up to her mouth with another gigantic wedge of potato.

"Men of Quidditch," Hermione said softly, putting the chip back onto her plate.

"And *why* is this calendar going to bring in so much money? And *why* am I signing it? And *where* is this third afternoon coming in?" Viktor asked, narrowing his eyes.

Hermione squirmed uncomfortably. "It's a perfectly respectable and tasteful calendar featuring pictures of some of the men from the professional and international leagues who tend to appear at the top of lists when polls are done regarding who is the most attractive and desirable and whatnot," she recited, with considerably less conviction and confidence the longer she spoke. "Out of uniform. And I might have volunteered you to pose for it," she added in just over a whisper.

"Might have? Or *did*?" Viktor said, voice dropping low, mouth pursed.

"Did," Hermione squeaked.

"Tell me 'out of uniform' *doesn't* mean-"

"Of course it doesn't! I said it was tasteful! And respectable!" Hermione protested.

Viktor heaved a sigh. "I seem to recall those exact same words coming from the mouth of that tabloid photographer who managed to get those topless photos on the beach. 'Oh, the article on your girlfriend's gazongas being bared at the beach

will be completely tasteful and respectable!‘ Right before I offered to painfully separate his limbs from his body one by one if he didn’t hand them over. Like you insisted,” Viktor countered. “Do you know he still squeaks and runs every time he sees me, even if he doesn’t remember *why*? I mean, I had to resort to threatening a nostalgic return to practicing some Advanced Human Transfiguration from school and gnawing his throat out with some exceedingly sharp, pointy teeth that didn’t belong to me before he caved. I had to remind him where I attended to six years of my education. And imply that since we were on a beach, after all, no one would think twice if he happened to wash up slightly shark-nibbled. Stubborn little rat, he was. He wouldn’t *be* bought off... Bad enough I had to threaten him, but to top it all off, I have to go and Memory Charm him to keep him from going to court over it, which would have meant *more* attention on the pictures...”

“This is *completely* different. And they don’t want pictures of you in the altogether,” Hermione argued. She paused a moment and blinked in response to Viktor’s dubious expression. “Well... they do... but not for *this* calendar. It’s all perfectly granny-safe, I promise. And taking off your swimsuit in the supposed privacy of a changing tent does *not* count as voluntarily posing,” she snapped.

“Neither does being volunteered by your fiancéé before she bothers even telling you,” Viktor replied drolly.

“*Stop* that!”

“What? Being logical? Can’t stand a dose of your own medicine?” Viktor shot back. “Do you *know* how much teasing I am going to have to put up with when this gets back to the team? I mean, Zograf did a clothing ad and didn’t hear the end of it for *months*.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but this could be the difference between the department being there or not! And the Children’s Ward! And Colin Creevey was so excited by the possibility that you would say yes. Everyone was. Oliver Wood’s got his share of tittering teens, but let’s be honest. He’s not going to sell that many calendars on his own, now, is he? For a start, *he* doesn’t avoid photographers like they all have the Dragon Pox. I *couldn’t* just say ‘Oh, he hates being photographed more than Gilderoy Lockhart hates not being asked for an autograph,’ now could I? It’s just a few hours spent getting a stupid, *completely clothed*, photograph that spotty little thirteen-year-olds can kiss before they go to sleep at night! Anyone would think I was asking you to donate a kidney! I’m not asking you to enjoy it, just to do it. It’s not for me. Okay, it *is* for me. But it’s not *just* for me. *Please*,” Hermione begged, grimacing and reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. “For me.”

The two most dreaded words in the English language were surely ‘for me’, Viktor

mused. There was little you could say in response to them that didn't lead to more trouble than agreeing to do whatever it was. Besides, she was doing that puppy dog eyes thing again. "Well, okay, but you owe-" he began in a warning tone.

He was cut off when Hermione lunged across the table and planted a kiss on his mouth. "Oh! Thank you! Thank you, thank you! Tomorrow afternoon, The Creevey Brothers Studios, at two-thirty. You won't regret it. I promise," Hermione pledged.

"Oh, I'll regret it, I'm sure. You had just better make sure I forget that I do," Viktor said ruefully, with a weak squeeze of her hand.

Hermione leaned forward and said in a low, conspiratorial voice, "If you help sell as many calendars and autographs as they seem to think you will, and keep two departments afloat for a year or two, you might not remember your own name by the time I'm through with you." That wasn't the sort of pledge Hermione made lightly, and certainly not *sotto voce*. In public, yet. "You know how much this long term research means to me. I've already invested so much time and effort into it. I could never pay you back properly if this salvaged it."

If Viktor wasn't very much mistaken, that was her bare foot slowly running up the inside of his leg, under the table. *I'm going to regret it. I just know it. In fact, I think I already-* Viktor started guiltily, coughed, and determinedly turned his attention to committing the entire topography of the third chip from the left edge of his plate to memory. It was the only way he was going to be able to walk out of here at the end of the meal with his dignity intact. Or most of it, at least.

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Viktor slogged up the sidewalk toward the photography studio as slowly as possible. If he were going any slower, he wouldn't be moving at all. He felt like the guest of honor at a hanging, heading toward the gallows. The lack of sleep wasn't helping. Not that he was *complaining* that Hermione had spent most of the evening and well into the night "expressing her gratitude", mind. But it certainly hadn't made things easier in the getting up department. At least not in the rise and shine sense of the phrase... In the other sense, it was a completely different story, at least until Hermione had needed to leave for work, almost annoyingly chipper and excited.

The scrolled writing on the glass entrance was rather twee and darling, bordering on the too cute, just like the owners. The Creeveys were a shade wearing, really. Optimistic and perky to the point of being tiring, making you feel as though you had to look at things on the bright side and smile a great deal in their presence, or risk being called out about it. They had the additional unfortunate habit of

reminding Viktor of miniature Gilderoy Lockharts, with the oversized ego removed, of course, all grand, sweeping gestures and dramatic entrances in fancy, swishing robes that were probably from Milan. At least they had the good grace not to announce it to you, unlike Lockhart. They simply always seemed to be “on”, ever the “artiste”. Which was faintly ridiculous when you considered that Colin had started his photography career as a paparazzo for one of Milan’s biggest celebrity rags. Dennis had become his personal and business manager once Colin had put in enough years rifling through people’s garbage and hiding in toilets, hoping to catch someone in a private moment, to afford the studio.

He would just about bet the two of them wore lifts in their shoes, self-conscious about their height. And when they attended cocktail parties they always seemed to be surrounded by a few towering females twittering over how pinchable and cute they were. Like most of their other habits, it smacked slightly of overcompensation. He felt a bit guilty about it, but Viktor usually gave them and their breathy little harems a wide miss at gatherings, unless Hermione dragged him over to say hello. One or the other of them was not so bad. Together at the same time, they were just about tolerable. Hermione had made it slightly easier to come down here by lamenting that Dennis was still in Italy, negotiating for space inside Milan’s biggest gallery which was soon holding an exhibit of wizard photography. Viktor had bitten his tongue rather than say what he was thinking. Negotiating for space inside the dark-haired gallery *owner*, more likely.

Viktor braced himself for the torrent of cheerfulness and pulled on the door handle. The receptionist might as well be an honorary Creevey, frankly. She was all teeth and fluttering eyelashes the instant he was inside the door. “Oh, my goodness! I just don’t know if little old me can *stand* it today! All these handsome Quidditch players in and out all day,” she chirped, fanning herself with a hand. “I just didn’t believe it. *Couldn’t* believe it! When Colin said you were going to be coming in for a picture in this thing, I out and out called him a naughty liar. A terribly naughty liar for leading me on like that! ‘Colin, darling, don’t tease me so, telling porky pies like those, saying Viktor *Krum* is coming in *here*, and I’ve got a chance to not only go and get that calendar autographed, but to actually *meet* him!’ I said! Are you really, truly, honestly taking a picture for the calendar? I just couldn’t *stand* it if you weren’t!” she gushed.

She paused, all breathlessness and heaving bosom, evidently winded by all that unbridled adoration. He assumed a response was expected to that massive avalanche of inquiries, and falling back on his usual tactic of answering the question that required the fewest syllables, and presumably, the least command of English, Viktor answered simply, “Yes.” He was still apt to adjust his English skills to the situation. The more annoying the inquisitor, the more confounding English became. Once, when he had gotten shanghaied by Lockhart himself at a fundraising dinner for S.P.E.W., Viktor had forgotten how to speak it altogether for a good two hours. Not that Lockhart had noticed. Lockhart had just prattled

on about his favorite subject, himself, and Viktor had happily drunk himself into a slightly deaf stupor by the end of the evening. The things he did for Hermione... Sometimes, it was damned handy being a foreigner. Wait someone out with a puzzled expression and absolute silence, and even the heartiest among them usually gave up in a few minutes. Besides, he imagined Fanny had worked up this patter and mentally written "insert appropriate name here" for everyone coming in, today.

"That's incredible! Simply incredible! Let me go get you something! Can I get you something? Water! You drink water, don't you? I'll get you some water!" the receptionist stammered, rushing off without waiting for an answer. "And tea! I can bring tea!" she shouted back from what was apparently the break room. "Or coffee! We have lemonade, too! And pumpkin-"

"Water is fine!" Viktor called back, dismayed by the ever increasing list of possibilities. He shifted uncomfortably in front of the reception desk and looked around. What he supposed were arty, softly lit black and white photographs of the more famous among their kind hung in sleek, silver frames on every wall. One of them, oddly enough, was just enough of The Man Who, Pre-Puberty, Was The Boy Who Lived to be recognizable. Viktor was sure Colin tried to pass off the palm to the lens as a playful, "oh stop, I'm blushing" sort of pose, but Viktor knew for a fact that picture had earned Colin a swift punch in the nose afterward. Viktor had been there. And had testified in favor of the restraining order. Hermione swore Colin had taken counseling since. The chairs looked more uncomfortable than standing; narrow, angular leather seats on thin chrome rails. Each wall was dominated by either black or white splotches, and no two adjoining walls were the same pattern. All in all, it had the crazy feel of a postmodern take on a dairy cow.

"Here's your water," the receptionist said, handing over a glass and standing uncomfortably close. "I'm Fanny, by the way," she added in what might have been a seductive voice, if you were into being ravenously pounced on by women who didn't require any sort of work, and made to lay a possessive hand on his forearm. Viktor headed her off by grabbing her hand and shaking it. At least she had aimed for a forearm. Some of the cheekier ones had gone straight for squeezing the bum or checking to see if he was still wearing the cup. Viktor had flinched for two weeks every time someone had extended a hand after that one.

He had threatened to purchase a pair of Weasley Wizard Wheezes boxers outfitted with a loud, obnoxious alarm for self-defense from drunken cocktail party attendees of both sexes before Hermione started holding the second round of these fund raisers. Hermione had talked him out of it on account of decorum and likely malfunction, but he half suspected she was more worried that people would be less likely to make a donation if it were suddenly announced while the pate was making the rounds and everyone was drinking themselves toward a

pleasant tipsiness that someone really should remove their blasted hands from someone else's arse. Particularly if they were the owners of the blasted hands. He had settled for accidentally on purpose spilling his drink on the last female offender, and threatening to break the wrist of the last male offender. Then work his way up the arm, one bone for every millisecond that groping hand wasn't removed. He would have liked to have made the same offer for the lady, really. As if it weren't hard enough to perch on a broom all day when someone *hadn't* pinched your bum black and blue to see if it really "did wonders for your posterior"... It was the occupational hazard of being a professional Quidditch player that no one warned you about, having your bum rudely manhandled by strangers who thought they had the right because they had bought a ticket once.

Or some of the bolder girls would flat out ask him what he could possibly see in Hermione over them. Usually accompanied by rubbing some rather rude portion of their anatomy up against him. None of them seemed to understand that, lovely as testing the mattress springs was, you *have* to get out of bed *sometime*. Any female could be a challenge in bed. Heaven knew they were all given complicated enough anatomy and puzzling enough operating instructions to begin with. But a girl who presented you no challenge out of bed wasn't much to write home about. Confounding, exasperating and enervating Hermione might be at times, but one thing he could say for her; she was never boring and he had never felt the urge to gnaw his own arm off simply to escape a conversation with her. He had considered it once or twice, or even a dozen times, with quite a few Fannys over the years.

Hermione's unbounded enthusiasm about even the driest academic and social subjects was somehow contagious. She could even make, Heaven help, Arithmancy and legislation about House Elf treatment sound kind of sexy. If you got her inside a library, even now, and books simply flew off the shelves. Not always for research, precisely, either. And at least the things he still puzzled over about her weren't on the order of 'Why, exactly, does she need so bloody many pairs of shoes?', or 'What's the difference between these three seemingly identical pairs of black trousers that somehow manage to be casual, dressy, and business-wear?' for instance. How some of the rest of the players in the leagues stood insipid groupie after insipid groupie, Viktor never could figure. They must not talk, afterward. They must stick to drinks, cigarettes and other oral activities to keep the silly bints from making any more conversation than they had to.

Fanny's face fell slightly when Viktor shook her hand. She had obviously intended to start with a forearm and work her way onward and upward. Or downward and aroundward. Or something else decidedly unpleasant. Luckily, you could just about see the little mental hamster wheels churning away on a girl like Fanny a minute in advance, so when she reached with her left hand, Viktor thrust the water glass back into it. "Hello, Fanny. Could I have some ice in that, please?"

“Here, now, you’re not manhandling my Fanny, are you?” someone called out cheerily. In the doorway to the studio, towheaded Colin stood, grinning and vamping in just as annoying a fashion as always. Viktor bit his tongue and fought the urge to reply in any number of exceedingly rude ways. “I see you two have met! Good, good. I’ve just about worn dear Oliver down to a nub, and he’s dressing in the back of the studio, so I’ll just pop off down the hall to recharge my creative juices, and I’ll be back with you all momentarily. *Do* get Viktor some ice, Fanny, dear,” Colin said before breezing off. “If she’s doesn’t do as she’s told, you have my complete permission to spank my Fanny!” he called over his shoulder, laughing at his own wit.

“If by ‘creative juices’ he means ‘Firewhiskey levels’, yeah, he’s going to need a few minutes to recharge his creative juices,” Fanny muttered, taking the glass of water and heading back toward the break room.

*Gah, I hope Oliver comes out before Fanny gets ba- Wait. Oliver. Not Oliver Wood... he’s got a bloody one-track mind and he acts like he’s going to wet the carpet if I so much as give him the time of day... Maybe I prefer Fanny...* Viktor thought, rolling his eyes. Maybe sitting in one of the torturous looking chairs would at least keep her hands off his backside. But it would leave you with less room to-

The door to his right opened and the familiar figure of Oliver Wood stepped out of it. Oliver eyed the empty reception desk warily, and unconsciously slipped a hand behind him, cautiously rubbing over the seat of his trousers, in what looked to be an attempt to soothe the likely result of Fanny’s roving, bruising fingers. Oliver spotted Viktor and froze, gaping rather stupidly for several moments, hand still seemingly glued to his posterior. Viktor raised an eyebrow and coughed politely. “It’s safe for a moment. She’s gone to get ice,” he added quietly.

“Thank goodness,” Oliver murmured, creeping out cautiously, like he might start and head for the woods at the merest sign of the receptionist. “She’s a right- Well... Good match, wasn’t it? I never would have figured us for hanging on to a tie. I mean, scoring being off lately and all, and Bulgaria’s Chasers really putting them in the last few minutes,” Oliver remarked. “Hell of a catch, by the way. Hell of a catch!”

*Lasted a whole tenth of a second longer than I thought he would,* Viktor mused while Oliver worked away at his arm as though he were priming a pump. *Might as well get it over with.* “It wasn’t that-” Viktor began to protest.

“Wish our Seeker were half that dedicated. Doesn’t put in near enough time practicing. If he would practice more, he might be fit to polish your boots. Just barely fit to. I try to tell him, but does he listen to me? No. Try to tell him to put in a few extra hours after everyone else has gone home, like I do, but does he? No.

No, he doesn't. If you want a thing, you have to work for it. Practice, practice and practice some more, I say. I mean, take you. How much extra time do you put in after a team practice?" Oliver pressed.

*I don't know which I hate worse. Bulldog mode or yapping Jack Russell terrier mode...* "Maybe an hour. Once a week. If that," Viktor said, feeling slightly fatalistic. "Working too much is just as bad as working too little. You burn out," he added flatly. *I never thought I would say this, but where the hell has Fanny gotten to? Or Colin? Or any-bloody-one in this dairy-themed madhouse?*

"Yeah, well, I mean, you, that's different! I mean, our Seeker's no Viktor Krum, now, is he? Once you have... *attained...* that sort of... *perfection...* there's no improving upon it. But he could practice from now until Doomsday and probably not ever get up to that level. But, take any Seeker-"

"Beautiful weather we've had lately, isn't it?" Viktor interrupted rather desperately. Anything to get him off the subject. Not that he had much hope of it. Viktor had once brought up the completely random topic of ice cream with Oliver in a similar bid to steer the discussion elsewhere, and he would be damned if the obsessive bopper didn't turn it into a conversation about the expanded concessions at the last World Cup.

Oliver blinked and paused slightly. "Weather. Yeah. Perfect for Quidditch practice. Not too hot, not too cold, breeze has been nice..."

*Oh well. Worth a try.* Viktor let Oliver's voice turn into an indistinct drone in his ear. It's not as though he needed to pay attention. Oliver would prattle on about Quidditch until it made you want to be sick on his shoes, and still wouldn't tire of it. If you nodded occasionally, he would go for ages without any additional input from you. You could mention you had seen a couple of Erumpents in purple tutus dancing the tango in the street just outside, and he would bet Oliver could drag the subject back to Quidditch inside a minute, somehow. Following his first prolonged conversation with Oliver outside a stadium, Viktor had asked Hermione if it were possible Oliver needed a nice, long rest in the very special section of St. Mungo's for some dedicated deprogramming. As it had earned him a hostile "Shusssh!" and an elbow to the ribs, he hadn't bothered to bring it up again. It was one thing to be dedicated to Quidditch, quite another to literally eat, breathe and live the stuff day in and day out. There was a fine line between being committed and needing to be committed. The only trick, really, was to tune back in when it sounded as though a question were coming. If you missed it, you had to force him to ask it again, somehow. Not that he noticed, really.

"... got talked into this posing business, too?" Viktor turned back and looked at Oliver for a few seconds in silence, treating the question as though it were obviously rhetorical. It had the desired effect and Oliver elaborated slightly. "I



take it they asked Hermione if you would? With her working at St. Mungo's?"

"The things I do for her, sometimes," Viktor remarked, almost to himself, shaking his head. *Like not calling you a total loony to your face. Why she cares, I don't know. I suppose because you made Harry Seeker first year and you've made donations... And she's usually fatally nice to people unless they press the wrong button...*

"I can't tell you how honored I am that we're both going to be in the same calendar. Golly. I mean, it's one thing to be asked at all, but to be in the same one with you..." Oliver trailed off and shook his head as though marveling. "Real honor to be asked to do something like this, isn't it?"

"If you say so," Viktor agreed half-heartedly. *If you think being asked to look vapid on camera and having people discuss whether your buttocks have been retouched is an honor. Sure.* Oliver's face fell so hard that Viktor felt a small twinge of guilt. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to be doing something nice for charity. Particularly this charity, but... it's not as though it's advanced Arithmancy or finding a cure for Dragon Pox they're asking us to do, now is it? The autographs and the match is one thing-" Viktor began in a conciliatory fashion, taking the freshly iced water from Fanny, who had returned. She looked slightly put out all around.

"Ah, the match! I had almost forgotten about the match! That's going to be a real kicker, now, isn't it? It puts the calendar bit to shame! Don't get me started on the *match...*" Oliver babbled, starting over again with such enthusiasm that Viktor tuned him out again.

*Wish I hadn't,* Viktor thought, concentrating on drinking the water instead. *Didn't mean to.* He was almost grateful when Colin breezed back into the foyer and interrupted.

"Not that you lot aren't just simply *scrumptious* looking together, darlings, but the day is short and I have a calendar to shoot. Oliver, dear, the prop shots ought to be just wonderful. I've never seen anyone sit in a big ring while holding up a British flag with more aplomb. You and Fanny can talk to your heart's content, but I've got to drag mister tall, dark and foreign away from this positively scintillating conversation and back into the studio. I know you understand. Give Fanny the empty glass and come along, quickly," Colin said brusquely.

Viktor mouthed "Props?" silently to Oliver, who was so busy still exclaiming over the prospect of playing the charity match that it didn't seem to register. He doubted it would register he had even gone for a good four or five minutes. Viktor gave a shrug and trailed Colin back to the same door Oliver had exited earlier. If the fumes blowing back off of the pint-sized photographer were any indication, he had topped off his Firewhiskey reserves and then some.

Colin began circling Viktor, looking him up and down. "Right! Now, what *am* I going to do with you? Well, anything I do short of stripping you off naked and offering you up on a big, silver platter isn't going to be enough for some people, but I'm certainly going to see how close I can get to that. Oh, relax. I can't do nudie shots. Not that I didn't ask. Not allowed, unfortunately. Someone's granny might have a coronary or something. I pointed out they were going to be at St. Mungo's, anyway, but no joy. I told them they could make a lot more money if they promised a few broomsticks, but they wouldn't listen." Colin stopped in front of Viktor, stroking his chin. "Hmm... You're tall. Lanky. I think we'll want you either standing up or stretched out. Something relaxed. Nice arms and shoulders," Colin observed, stretching up to lay his hands on Viktor's shoulders. "Very nice. No gut or love handles... Not like some of those Beaters. Some of them let themselves go completely to pot once they get in the pro leagues. Do you know how hard it is to get a decent picture when they look like bouncers at a strip joint, with all those rolls of flab? Ooh! You do some crunches or something, don't you?" Colin blurted out, after running a hand down Viktor's chest and stomach.

"If you touch me an inch lower, anywhere, you are going to draw back a smoking nub," Viktor warned, looking at Colin's hand.

"Right. I forget myself. Well. I think we'll want you shirtless, at least. I promise I'll keep my little paws to myself if you go ahead and take that shirt off and let me get a look at you. Come on, now, don't be shy," Colin urged, removing his hands. Viktor hesitated a moment, then unbuttoned his shirt, shucking it off. "Trousers, too. Let me have a good look at you."

"Trousers!? Are you insane?" Viktor barked.

"You're not going commando, are you? Oh, come on. You lot wander around locker rooms in tiny towels, you can strip down to your skivvies just as well," Colin said dismissively. "Besides, you're going to need to change. Into whatever I decide to put you in."

"For goodness sake..." Viktor reluctantly unbuckled his belt and pulled off his boots. He tossed his socks into them and stepped out of his trousers, tossing them onto the pile with the rest.

"Well! Secure in our manhood, aren't we?" Colin said brightly.

"What?" Viktor asked, crossing his arms and staring Colin down.

"*Secure* in our *manhood*, aren't we? The pink boxers. Funny, I thought most of you... err... jocks... were so violently and aggressively heterosexual that you

wouldn't be caught dead in anything pink. Well, most wizards, really. Unless you're Gilderoy Lockhart, but he's a raging pouf, now, isn't he?" Colin chirped.

Viktor looked down and colored. He started to protest "Hermione bought them, and so what if they're pink? I like them just fine," which was true, but that seemed unduly defensive. Or embarrassing. One or the other. Besides, he *hadn't* seen anything wrong with them. He settled for somewhere in the middle between the truth and a lie. "Robes must have faded on them in the wash," he said through clenched teeth. Well, further toward the lie end of the scale, truth be told.

Colin waved dismissively. "Don't have to lie to *me*, Sweetcheeks. I doubt a pink pair of boxers is enough to make *me* think you're poufy. It's not as though Hermione hasn't told me *stories*. The way you two knock boots, you're apparently *straighter* than an arrow. Actually, after hearing a few of them, I'm not sure how you manage to stay on the *broom* for an entire match. I thought the usual wisdom was to *avoid* sex right before a big game, not to try to shag yourself out completely the night before. No wonder you're not tense during matches. Too bad one of our teams can't lure you away. That way, at least Hermione would be bonking for Britain, wouldn't she, love?" Colin tittered at his own joke. "Well, bonking for Britain, bonking for Bulgaria, what's the difference, as long as you're bonking? That's what I always say. And my stars, apparently you two bonk for team and country like nobody's business, if what I've heard is any indication. By the way, the pink sets things off nicely. Very nicely. Very 'sensitive, enlightened wizard of the new century'. Très manly, yet in touch with your feminine side. If I didn't know better, I would swear you were carrying an emergency pair of thick, wool socks. If anyone could make skintight, pink, curve hugging... er... well..." Colin trailed off and coughed uncomfortably, then gestured helplessly.

"When the hell do you two talk?" Viktor asked, gaping. He felt twice as uncomfortable as Colin looked, but frankly, covering up in front of someone who wasn't even Hermione's size, even with the suspected lifts, seemed a bit silly. Well, maybe not that silly. Viktor settled for awkwardly resting his hands on his hips and trying not to think about Colin inspecting him.

"We get together for lunch, sometimes. When I'm at St. Mungo's to see my analyst," Colin said with a shrug. "Girls talk."

"For your court ordered appointments?" Viktor prompted, raising a thick eyebrow.

Colin cleared his throat. "Yes. Well... water under the bridge and all that. Are you sure you wouldn't like to do just one shot in the altogether? Not for the calendar, of course, but the *poster sales*... we would make more money than what's in Gring-

“No! And if you bring it up again, me and my pink shorts are leaving! If you suggest, say or even *think* ‘nude picture’, I am out of here, and you, Hermione, St. Mungo’s and the calendar can all go hang,” Viktor said in a low voice.

“Dear me, you are an old fashioned boy. Modest to a fault. Right... well... back on track, then. Fly by assessment... let’s see... nice chest, good abs, wonderful all around in the *limb* area... I could take my tea off that behind! You Quidditch players and your perky little bums... Face... You’re not Wood and his fresh scrubbed Wizard Scout, wide-eyed, boy next door face and goofy, idiot grin, but that’s okay. Better, actually. Sweet boy, easy enough on the eyes, but he’s not exactly Mister Danger or all that much upstairs, now is he? Wood can bring in all the sweet old grannies who want their calendar boys slightly dim, non-threatening and safe for the kiddies, and you can be my scowling, edgy, mysterious and slightly dangerous, dark foreigner. All... cheekbones and... muscles and... danger and... angles... and... sex...” Colin was making vague, groping motions in midair, looking a bit distant and lost in ‘the artistic vision’.

“But-” Viktor started to protest.

“Shh! Don’t interrupt me, I’m on a roll,” Colin snapped irritably. “Now, where was I? Oh, yes... sex! Sex personified. Sex on legs. If I had a John Thomas costume and I could get away with it, you would be in it. Sex... sex... sex... No shirt, obviously. I’ve got the perfect idea for something that would simply ooze sex, but pity of it is, I would have to cover up those legs. No matter, we’ll get them in the second picture. This settles it. You’re definitely one of the players getting two months. One of them has to be summer, so I can get you in as little as possible and not be accused of trying to give you frostbite. Not that I think you would notice, Mister I think I’ll go for a dip in the lake in January... Oh! Don’t look at me like that! It won’t be the pink boxers! You still swim, don’t you?”

“Yes. Why?” Viktor answered tentatively.

“Swim trunks. One of the pictures *has* to be in swim trunks. You’ve got fabulous thighs. And calves. It would be a crime to let those calves go to waste. A positive sin to ignore those thighs. How *has* Hermione managed not to get crushed like a grape all these years? And it has to hug your tush. Must work the tush in, even if it is just a side on view. Gah, the muscle tone on you. I simply have to show off those sex-toned muscles of yours. Oh, don’t blush, from what Hermione says, that must be your main exercise regimen. All that mad, Tantric Slavic sex must do a body good, is all I’ve got to say. Hasn’t hurt Hermione’s physique, either. Though how you’ve managed not to accidentally get her apron up by now must be a testament to modern birth control. I *must* go talk to Fanny and send her to wardrobe for a few things. Yes, smut. That’s where this is going. Tasteful smut, but smut all the same. Women will want you. Men will want to be you. Actually, a

good number of men in gay London will probably want you, too. I'll be right back, quick as two shakes of a lamb's tail. Just stand there and look manly. Think manly thoughts or something," Colin said, hurrying toward the door.

"How long is this going to take?" Viktor asked.

He paused in the open doorway. "Not long. See, now, this smut is just rolling along like... a smutty thing rolling down a very steep incline. Like the two of you in Rome, eh? I'm all for taking a good tumble outdoors when you're on holiday, but *really!* Good thing the birth control didn't fail when the two of you slipped and went flying down that hill, now, isn't it? I mean, imagine explaining that one to your little bundle of joy, someday. 'Sweetheart, I'm afraid you were an accident in every sense of the word... your mother even broke her arm in two places when she tried to catch herself...' Rome is built on seven hills... good thing the two of you didn't decide to take a tumble on all of them, or there wouldn't have been enough Medi wizards in Italy! I don't know how our girl could *walk* after the two of you got back from that holiday. For several reasons. The *thing*... you did... in the *jacuzzi*? Sounded downright painful to me. But what do I know?" he added airily, before ducking out and shutting the door.

"I *really* need to have a talk with Hermione," Viktor said out loud to himself, sighing. The heat in his face meant he must be blushing something fierce. "Several talks, actually. First subject, why it's not a good idea to discuss our sex practices with Colin..." He shuffled around uneasily. "Second subject, why I am never again standing within a quarter mile of Colin while in nothing but my shorts... Third... no more pink shorts. I'm not sure why, exactly, but anything that unnaturally attracts the intense attention of Colin Creevey is out of my wardrobe. Fourth... why I am owed a further evening of 'expressing your gratitude' for putting up with this whole miserable experience." Viktor paused in his slow pacing and looked down. "Fifth... what the hell did he mean, 'emergency pair of socks'?"

After what seemed a prolonged absence, Colin stepped back in, holding a small cloth bag. "Fanny and I have picked out a lovely selection of swimsuits from which you can pick. Frankly, Fanny and I have our favorite, but I imagine you'll go with the most Puritan option," Colin said with a small frown.

Viktor took the bag from Colin. "Misplaced your marble bag in addition to losing your marbles?" Viktor asked dryly, dangling the miniscule black thong that had been placed near the top from an index finger, with only slightly less repulsion than he might have shown for a dead animal. "Or is it an eye patch?"

"Har har. I knew you wouldn't wear that one. Probably wouldn't be half big enough, anyway... There are bigger ones," Colin said, gesturing impatiently. Viktor soon picked through and discarded several pairs of briefs which more than

earned their names, until he was left with a single pair of swim trunks. They were, not surprisingly, cut slightly shorter than the mid-thigh length shorts he was currently wearing, but they were definitely the least brief among the choices. They were, in fact, fairly decent. Deep red with gold trim. Suitable for Gryffindor, Durmstrang or Bulgarian National Team affiliations, Viktor supposed. Or suitable if you just plain liked red. "Sigh... I'm not surprised. That will do. At least you're not covered head to foot. Go on, get changed. I need to think about proper setting and lighting," Colin ordered.

"Change where?" Viktor asked, looking around the dimly lit, mostly empty studio.

"Right there's fine," Colin replied. "It's what most models do."

"I'm not a model, and if you think I'm going to put this on right in front of you-"

"Fine. Here, have a privacy curtain," Colin said, making a face as he conjured up a curtain on a small, circular frame. "You would think a man willing to wave his wedding tackle around in Rome wouldn't be shy about-"

"There was nobody around for miles! And more importantly, *you* weren't there," Viktor griped, yanking the curtain aside. "Not that you could tell, the way you keep yapping about it..."

"Whatever you say, love. All I know is, anyone willing to take a roll down a hillside because they were making the beast with two backs in broad daylight in the great outdoors ought not be pleading modesty. And according to Hermione, you've got nothing to be modest about. I used to think she was exaggerating. And that locker room talk couldn't be believed by half. Having seen you in those things, though-"

"Kindly shut it," Viktor muttered through the curtain.

"I thought you athletes liked getting compliments on the size of your broomstick. Or your Beater's Club. Or whatever the kids are calling them this year. That dreadfully butch little sweetheart from the Harpies was simply tickled pink when I told her what a nice pair of Quaffles she had," Colin confided.

"I'm surprised Gwenog didn't put your teeth down your throat," Viktor said.

"Oh, she ate it up. It's a sad day when you can't even tell a girl she's got a nice pair any more. Not that I expect you to notice when a girl's got a nice pair, Mister Boring and Reliable. Our Hermione doesn't even worry you're going to cheat on her, you're so glued to her. Or maybe you're just too shagged out to cheat," Colin mused. "Hermione might not like to fly, but evidently she rides the broomstick on a regular basis. Exhausts me just to hear about it. I take it a white dress is out of

the question at the wedding, considering you've pretty much had her every way possible in about a dozen countries by now?"

"One, she is not *our* Hermione, you freaky little man, and I would appreciate it if you didn't call her that. Two, I do not cheat, and no portion of our sex life is up for discussion. At least not with me. And three..." Viktor pulled the curtain open, "... get this over with, already. I'm trying really hard to be a good sport about this, and you are not making this easy. Take the damned picture."

"Oh, calm down. I'm just trying to put you at ease with friendly banter. Now... setting. We can't simply have you standing there, holding a beach ball or something silly. Swimming... water... wet... we need some water, somewhere. Besides, water's sexy. And sand. Sand and water. Shower on a beach!" Colin said with gusto.

"Shower... on a *beach*?" Viktor parroted.

"You're right. A shower nozzle on a beach is too silly. Too silly. Rain! That's it. Rain. Some nice sand, a nice, steady drizzle... Instant beefcake. Just add water. Besides, women are all on about long walks in the rain, aren't they? Hold it just a moment, and I'll run up here to the staging area and arrange it all," Colin insisted, dashing toward the open space surrounded by a few spare lighting rigs. Within a few minutes, with several flicks of the wand, he had it transformed into a passable imitation of a piece of shoreline, with soft, brown sand. "Come on up, then, don't hang about back there all day. Brown sand, I think, not white. White, while striking, would cause glare, and probably wash you out. You're more of a fall than a winter, I think. And has anyone told you how much healthier you look since getting out of school? The jaundiced, sallow look just wasn't you. And you definitely eat better these days. Ten bloody months of winter and dungeons up there at Durmstrang can't be healthy for a person. Besides, the brown goes with your tan. Here, just stand right here. Nice and straight, shoulders back, arms relaxed, but not too relaxed, flexed just a shade ... that's it. I would tell anyone else to pull those feet in, but no one would know you if you weren't duck footed. And I would catch all hell for it. Women. The ridiculous things they find cute, hmm? There, now, how does that feel?"

"Faintly absurd," Viktor replied, scowling.

"Good. That's how you know you're modeling properly. Wonderful pout, by the way. Or scowl. Or grimace. Something decidedly edgy and dangerous. I'll kick your shin if you dare smile," Colin said.

"I doubt there's any danger," Viktor sighed. "I couldn't be enjoying myself less."

Colin ignored this remark. "Right. Now, the water. A gentle, steady shower, I

think. Enough to wet the sand and make the girls practically wet themselves,” Colin said, flicking his wand. A warm, gentle shower fell within the confines of the staging area, and it soon had Viktor’s hair soaked and plastered down, curling slightly. Colin considered him for a moment. “*Do* try not to look so lost and forlorn. I mean, you look like a lame, abused and abandoned puppy I’ve left out in the rain at the moment. Let’s try looking slightly dangerous, here. Where’s the look you get when one of those dreadful little harlots grabs your bum? Where’s the look you probably got when Hermione admitted she volunteered you for this thing? Where’s the look reserved for crunch time in a match, when the opposing Seeker is horning in on your space? Where’s the look I got when I suggested those other swimsuits? You’re angry at me! Channel that anger. Use it. I’ve been talking to your fiancée about the size and usage of your tallywhacker for years! I would have you in the buff, oiled down and drizzled in chocolate sauce for this shot if I thought I could get away with it! This calendar thing is going to be so popular, you’re going to be stuck doing it for years. Years! Marvelous!” Colin exclaimed when Viktor’s dark brows knit together and the corners of his mouth pulled down something fierce. “Now, if you could just reach up and run your fingers through your damp hair, raking it back, in addition to looking murderous, I could die a happy man... Fab! Just fab! You look like you could positively choke me. And if you asked looking like that, I *just* might let you do it, if you know what I mean. Talk about the dew on the lily...”

“Are you *quite* done?” Viktor interrupted, narrowing his eyes and pursing his mouth in displeasure.

“With this shot, I suppose. I have to be. You won’t let me wax poetical about the physique, so I guess I’ll have to keep my rhapsodies about how those swim trunks go even more skintight when wet to myself, won’t I? You’ve still got fabulous hipbones, by the way. Cast a few drying charms, and I’ll see Fanny about the next bit of wardrobe. Don’t want you catching a chill. For a start, Hermione would have my hide. Shan’t be long,” Colin said. “Toodles. Don’t go away,” he added on the way out the door.

Viktor stepped out of the still-drizzling drizzle and shook his head vigorously, sending water droplets spraying in all directions. A few flicks of the wand soon had things set to rights. Or at least gotten them drier. “Next bit of wardrobe had better be a bigger bit,” Viktor muttered darkly, looking down at the swim trunks.

“Perfect, perfect, you’re already dry,” Colin observed, bustling back in with a bag in one hand, an enormous broomstick in the other. The sinuous, curving shaft had been stained a rich, dark brown, bringing out the red highlights in the wood, and it had been polished to within an inch of its life to give it the sort of gleam you usually only saw in sales ads. It was mahogany, unless Viktor missed his guess. “Fanny’s managed to find exactly what I wanted, and just perfectly in your size, too,” Colin said, with a significant look, raising an eyebrow. “And this, I’ve



only got this because I just shot the promotion ad for it. It's not even coming out until next fall. One of only four prototype models for the Firebolt Elite. Polished. Fast. Phallic like you wouldn't believe. Hold this monster, would you?" Colin said, shuffling the broom over to Viktor's hand.

"Hmmp. Not bad. Good, solid weight, the balance is nice," Viktor said, sighting down the handle. "They've changed it a bit since I saw the preliminary sketches last year. I like how they tapered off the twigs a lot better than the old design, really. Nice. Do I get to pose with this, then?"

"If you don't pose with it, I'll scream, actually. And thank you for not pulling an Oliver. I thought he was going to hump my leg or piddle on the floor just for hearing I was the person to take a picture of it. I didn't dare mention I still had the thing here. Now, here's what I want you to wear. Oh, and the Quidditch boots are in there, too, of course," Colin added.

"I thought this was a no uniform thing," Viktor said, taking the bag. He reached in and pulled out the boots. They, too, had been polished within a hair's width of their existence, and the ebony shine was pristine.

"If there's a team somewhere that wears those as part of their uniform, let me know where I can get season tickets," Colin said, as Viktor reached in and pulled out the other item.

"It's a leather trousers thing?!" Viktor asked incredulously, holding out the offending piece of clothing. "You're joking. Surely."

"Why? What's wrong with leather trousers? They're cake. Well, actually, you're the cake and they're the icing," Colin explained.

"They're overkill is what they are," Viktor griped. "Leather?"

"No! No! Not at all! Now, an entire leather outfit, that would be overkill. Not to mention sweaty. Not that I'm opposed to sweaty, but I imagine you would be. And it would mean covering more of you. The key is getting just the right leather to skin ratio going. I mean, leather is like cake icing. A little goes a long way. Icing is wonderful complement to cake, but it doesn't bear up much on its own. Too much can make you ill. You have to have a decent cake. Better yet, a fantabulous cake, with just the right amount of icing. Get a cake good enough, you don't need icing, but there *is* no *sans* icing option, as we've already established. So... cake, meet icing," Colin said.

"You lost me somewhere around the time baked goods came into the picture," Viktor said ruefully, fingering the trousers. The leather gave a tiny, protesting squawk. "I'm going to look ridiculous."

“No, you won’t. Most people will be too busy staring at your torso to notice the leather trousers anyway. For a few minutes... And they’re the sex.”

“I’ll feel ridiculous,” Viktor continued.

Colin crossed his arms stubbornly. “Can’t help you there. Look, it’s that, or something worse. I can put you in a plastic mac and galoshes or something. Cater to the fetish cr-”

“Fine! I will *wear* the bloody leather trousers! It’s the least scary thing you’ll probably come up with. Here, hold my broomstick,” Viktor huffed, gathering up the boots after shoving the Firebolt back into Colin’s hand.

“Whew! I just might be faint,” Colin said, waving his free hand at his face once Viktor had stepped into the privacy curtain once more. “Do you know how many people would positively die if you told them to hold your broomstick? And I’m not just talking Oliver Wood, either... Don’t rush yourself,” Colin cautioned over the noise of the leather. “Oh, and I’ve just changed my mind about the boots. Leave them off. I want your feet bare.”

“This is crazy,” Viktor said, yanking the curtain aside once more. “They’re noisy. They skrawk every time I move.”

“Well, of *course* they’re noisy. I think you’re missing the entire point of leather trousers. The fact that they’re noisy is the reason they’re the sex,” Colin said emphatically.

“Would you stop saying ‘the sex’, like it’s actually a sanctioned phrase?” Viktor complained.

“Fine. They’re sexily attractive, then. They make people want to shag you. More than usual, that is,” Colin explained.

“Do tell,” Viktor said skeptically. “Why would trousers that make more noise than the wearer and smell like upholstery make people want to shag you?”

“Elementary! Colin Creevey’s theory on the appeal of leather trousers, beyond just the obvious visual appeal in the way they hang and hug... err... curvy things...and... bulges...” Colin quoted, trailing off. He shook his head and continued, finger in the air, “Anyway, I posit that, one, leather trousers smell somewhat reminiscent of leather couches. And swinging bachelors with bachelor-type flats often own leather couches. Big, fat leather couches upon which they generally make out with their girlfriends in front of fireplaces. Leather, after all, is easier to clean than those awful, tweedy couches. Or fur rugs. Don’t

bother denying you've got both the leather sofa and the fur rug, by the way, because Hermione's mentioned what you've got in your flat, too. Second, furthermore, and more importantly, I posit that leather trousers are noisy. As we have observed, they tend to make a 'skrawk' noise upon any movement of the wearer. Meaning, that if you are strutting around in leather trousers, you make a steady and annoying 'skrawk... skrawk... skrawk...' noise."

"Is this actually going somewhere?" Viktor interrupted.

"Of course it is. So, leather trousers are noisy. So noisy, in fact, that you wear them in the hopes of someone asking your sexy self to remove them. Or better yet, they just rip them right off of you. So you can shag. Trouserless people always shag," Colin said proudly.

Viktor shook his head slowly. "I should have asked if it was going somewhere *sensible*. Your world must be a happy place. Maybe the rest of us can visit it, sometime... Are you mad?!"

Colin shrugged in a blithe manner. "Probably. Most artistic geniuses are. But I know what I'm talking about when it comes to visual appeal. Shirtless you plus leather trousers plus big, phallic, shiny broom equals feast for the eyes. And enough calendars to keep Hermione's department and the Children's Ward in the black for a good, long while. And that would make Hermione happy. And I know for a fact that when she's happy, she tends to make you happy a lot, if you know what I'm saying. And I think you do. Now, are you just going to stand there, motionless, glaring a silent hole in me, or are you going to skrawk your way over to the nice, softly lit red backdrop over there?"

"Will it get me out of here faster?" Viktor retorted.

"Much," Colin replied pleasantly.

"And what, precisely, am I meant to be doing?" Viktor asked, snatching the Firebolt back and walking in a rather noisy fashion over to the backdrop.

"I'm quite happy for you to set that giant of a broomstick hovering in midair and straddle it, for a start. And I heard that!" Colin snapped when Viktor muttered something in Bulgarian under his breath while complying. "I don't know what you said, but I'm sure it was rude. And you're doing it all wrong."

"Doing it all wrong? Are you trying to tell me I've spent well over a couple of decades on a broom, several of them professionally, and I've been doing it wrong all this time? Somehow, I find that unlikely. Especially considering the source," Viktor remarked.

"I don't want you all hunkered down for dive bombing, for goodness sake. Look... sit up... try to be less aerodynamic. I don't give a damn how much drag you're producing. It's just a picture. Up... up... and don't pull your knees in so close. Let them relax a little. That's better. Oodles better. Loosen up that death grip on the handle, too, while you're at it. Don't choke up on the shaft," Colin snapped. "And lift your head. Look up. Toward the camera... that's better. Now... we're missing something..."

"You're missing something, you mean," Viktor said. "Like your sanity," he added under his breath.

"Silly me. The Snitch. I would never hear the end of it if I didn't include a Snitch. A well trained practice model, of course, but a Snitch, nonetheless. And... err... a bit of wind..." Colin said to himself while opening the small box containing the Snitch.

"Plenty windy in here already. You're providing plenty of it," Viktor mused.

"Ha. Ha. You're in terribly witty form, today. Must have eaten razor soup for breakfast, you're so sharp. You're on a broom. You should look windblown. Wind there will be," Colin said, waving his wand. "Now, remember, I don't give a damn about your technique or usual good form. Loose and relaxed... just set your heels back there... knees out and limber... good. Now. Distracted and windblown and sexy. Don't bother looking at me. Watch for the Snitch or something. Act bored-"

"It's not acting," Viktor insisted.

"All the better. *Be* bored," Colin encouraged. After a seemingly interminable wait, Colin still hadn't said anything. Or taken the picture. Finally, Viktor gave a sigh and rolled his shoulders, preparing to settle in for a long wait, then idly followed the rather fat, lazy looking Snitch on its slow path across his field of vision for what must be the twentieth time. He very nearly leapt off the broom when Colin unexpectedly snapped the picture and yelled "Perfect!" at top volume.

"You nearly gave me a coronary," Viktor griped.

"You snapped the wings right off!" Colin complained, pointing to the two small, golden wings that were lying in a crumpled, twisted ruin on the floor. "Did you crush the thing into dust when you grabbed it?"

"I ought to crush you into dust," Viktor said, tossing the body of the Snitch to Colin, "scaring me like that. Act like you're in a coma for ten minutes, and then screech at me out of nowhere when I least expect-"

“Worked, didn’t it? The lulling part, anyway...” Colin mused, studying the small, shiny ball. “Ripped them right off at the joints... Remind me never to bet against you in a walnut cracking contest...”

“Are we done here?” Viktor asked anxiously.

“Yes... yes... we’re done. Unless I can actually talk you into a little something al fresco... Doesn’t have to be completely starkers, mind. It could be starkers but with a strategically positioned broom-”

“No. N-o, no. Ne. Nyet. Not on your life. I’m getting out of these things and-”

“Oh, keep them,” Colin said dismissively. “They were tailored to fit you, specifically, anyway.”

“Me, specifically? And how did you manage that?” Viktor asked curiously.

“Had things on file for whatever I might want the tailor to whip up on short notice. Hermione does know your *other* measurements. And even if she didn’t, you *do* wear a uniform. I could have called the team manager. I like to give the models a little something to take home. To remember me by. Take them. Besides, I owe Hermione. She got you to do this, after all. You barely do the mandatory team posters in uniform. All the photographers in the business would have put their own danglies on the line for a chance to shoot you in what I just did. If I don’t get at least double the poster session requests I normally get in the off season, I’ll eat those leather trousers. The rest of them will be dying to have the same photographer who did your calendar shoot. I’ll make a small fortune on preening players who fancy they’ll sell a few posters in the next few months,” Colin explained. “They’re a little token of my esteem.”

“Sure. I’ll... put them in the bag after I change back,” Viktor said, heading toward the curtain again. “And maybe burn them,” he added, his voice camouflaged under the protesting creak of leather.

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Hermione had been positively ecstatic that he had gone through with it. The trauma of the photo session had been mostly forgotten by the time the rematch rolled around, dulled in the day to day grind of practices and scrimmages. The trousers had been tossed in the back of the cupboard as soon as he had arrived home. Viktor had been glad to put them, and the entire experience, out of sight, out of mind. He might have blissfully put it all out of mind for a whole fortnight, until the preparation for the charity match, if it weren’t for the poorly stifled sniggers and stares that turned into exaggerated cat calls within a few minutes of his entering the locker room. “What!?” he snapped.

“Going to wear the entire uniform today, or will you be playing shirtless? I’m not sure Wood can take it if you do,” Volkov forced out between wheezes. “He’ll be fainting. And I don’t mean in Wronski’s style, either.” The lot of them practically rolled helplessly at that.

“I beg your pardon?” Viktor asked, getting a sinking feeling. *They hadn’t... they wouldn’t... not already...* He had been hoping the season would be over before it got much of a public mention at all, and the off-season would allow it to be old news by the time play started up again.

“Have you seen the fliers for the calendars for St. Mungo’s?” Ivanova asked innocently. “Has previews of most of the shots. And one... very big... featured picture.”

“No...” Viktor said warily. *No, no, no, no, no! He didn’t. He damned well better not have...*

“Quite the little... sexpot... got picked as the official spokesmodel,” she answered, arching a dark, well-groomed eyebrow over a heavy-lidded eye.

“Really?” *She’s really going to rub it in, isn’t she? Going to get her own back for the teasing about landing on that Playwizard top ten poll...*

“Really. Camera just ate him up. I’m sure the girls in the crowd want to, too. Once they’ve seen the flier, anyway,” Ivanova said evenly.

“Is that so?” *No. He didn’t. He couldn’t. He didn’t even ask. For fuck’s sake, he didn’t even warn me... didn’t ask...*

“Make sure your form is better than this, today. That’s all well and good for pouting at the camera, poster boy, but not so good for matches,” Ivanova warned, plastering the small flier in her hand to Viktor’s chest. The corner of her mouth curled up subtly, and the rest of them absolutely guffawed. Reluctantly, he took it out of her hand. *Shit. Damn it. Merlin’s left testicle...* He tried to find something to say, but his mouth just worked soundlessly as he stared at it. This was a hundred times worse than all the attention being focused on him that first World Cup.

“Try not to wiggle your shapely arse too much out there, or none of us will be able to keep our minds on the match,” Vulchanov pleaded, unable to keep a straight face.

“And for Merlin’s sake, whatever you do, don’t scowl. There are females on the other team who might not be completely prepared for the onslaught of... what

was it? How did they put it? Oh, yes, 'raw animal magnetism', and they'll disqualify us!" Levski whooped.

"I didn't ask for this," Viktor protested weakly. "I didn't even know... my arm got twisted... that damned Colin Creevey..."

"Poor, put upon things, you two! One of the Ten Most Shaggable women in the pro leagues and Mister Raw Animal Magnetism, stuck on a team with the rest of us mere, unattractive mortals. However do you cope?" Volkov teased. "Do the two of you get together after matches and bemoan all the fans wanting to jump your bones?"

"Oh, shut up," Viktor muttered darkly, balling up the flier and lobbing it at him. "Get your mind on your business in the match this time and maybe we won't have to ask why we didn't beat them again!"

"Oh, now... don't pout..." Volkov said in a conciliatory tone. "I'll be forced to leap on you and kiss you madly in the face of your sexy aura..." he added, dissolving into helpless tears again.

"And you used to call *me* immature! Children! You're all overgrown *children*," Viktor fumed, yanking his shirt over his head in order to change into his uniform.

"Ahhh! No! Not the fabulous abs! I'll dissolve into girly giggles and lose the ability to use my brain for the entire match! It will melt into a puddle of goo!" Ivanova squealed, waving her hands as though fending something off.

"Oh... stuff it," Viktor shot back, throwing the shirt at her.

"Eeeee! Something he touched! And it touched me! I'll never wash it! I'll never wash anything ever again! I'll frame it! I'll marry it!" Ivanova continued, in a passable imitation of a silly teenaged girl.

"Who needs hecklers from the opposing team when I have you lot?" Viktor sighed. *It's going to be a long match. Ten seconds would be too long today.*

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"We *did* win," Vulchanov pointed out.

"By *twenty*. And I damned near missed the thing. Couldn't concentrate for Wood yakking in my ear every time I was down that end of the field. I wanted to plough *him*. If I hear one more word about the poster, the calendar, or that damned match, from *any* of you, I swear, I am going to pick your teeth with my broom handle," Viktor fumed. "I've had enough wolf whistles and cat calls to last me a

lifetime.”

“Oh, come on. All in good fun,” Vulchanov said with a shrug.

“For the rest of you, maybe,” Viktor said, slamming the locker door. “And that charity match is going to be hell. I’m stuck with Wood on my squad, wouldn’t you know. And then there’s the signing. Stuck in there, all day, right across from Wood, again, with a whole line of those... *girls*... sticking their *cleavage* in your face, and *squealing* at you!”

“The horror,” Vulchanov deadpanned. “I won’t pretend to understand why that bothers you so. But if it’s so horrific, why didn’t you just say no? Or at least say so. Have a damned good gripe about it.”

“It’s Hermione. I haven’t the heart to complain or back out. She doesn’t fight fair. One, she volunteered me. And two, she’s been... been... so... damned *happy* about it! Going around humming and all cheerful and grateful, like I’ve single-handedly rid the world of Dragon Pox, or something,” Viktor lamented.

“That’s positively devious! Smiling and being happy! And thankful! Does her evil know no bounds? Seriously, mate, that’s why I stick to groupies. Less complicated. They don’t ask any favors. You just kick them out of bed in the morning and get on with life. No making you do things you don’t want to do. And then making you act like you like it,” Vulchanov said.

“She’s not *making* me, exactly. It’s just... if I said so now, I would feel about this big,” Viktor explained, holding his thumb and forefinger apart. “She would give me the big eyes and probably the wobbly lip, and ask why I can’t do this one *little* thing for her and her department and the Children’s Ward without complaining. And don’t get me wrong. I think I’ll enjoy the visiting... And I would be glad to do just about anything else but the calendar bit... No, I think it’s suffer in silence on this one. It’s safer. No danger of setting off the crying, that way. I just have to make sure *I* don’t cry when I’ve been sitting there for hours and some doddering old dear comes in and pinches me while asking me to sign a picture of myself in leather trousers,” he added with a sigh. “It’s an embarrassment. Humiliating, is what it is. Or I might smack him the millionth time Wood practically orgasms about Quidditch.”

“Worse things than some old dear pinching your cheeks,” Vulchanov consoled.

“Depends on which set of cheeks it is, doesn’t it?”

“Oh. Keep the table between you and them. And bring earplugs.”

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“Thank you *so* much for the heads up,” Viktor said through gritted teeth, practically slamming the locker door through to the other side after pulling out the bag with his regular clothes. The teams had played the charity match in their respective professional team uniforms, with matching sashes to distinguish one from the other. Blue for one team, red for the other. His left upper arm was throbbing something fierce, tight and bruised where a Bludger had slammed into it. He hadn’t been able to hear the shouted warning from Broadmoor about it being headed his way over Wood’s nattering on about the longest match in history, or some other Quidditch-related nonsense that had nothing to do with the match they were currently playing. Wood had finally deigned to take a break from the annoying chatter to warn him, but by then, Viktor had taken to mostly filtering him out, so it had been too late to avoid it completely by the time the whole thing registered.

Rolling to keep his arm from being broken had been about the best he could hope for. It had hurt like a total bastard the final twenty minutes or so of the match, when, thankfully, the Snitch had led them down to the opposite end of the field from Wood and Viktor had been able to hear it as much as see it whiz by his ear and end the whole thing with a fifty point lead already under their belts. He supposed it made the fans feel like they had gotten their money’s worth, at least, seeing a few bruises and collisions. “Oh! Thanks! Well, I only wish I had seen it in time to-” Wood began.

“Not you! Well, okay, you, too, but I was being sarcastic, and I was talking to *you*,” Viktor corrected, staring down Colin, who was trying to look innocent.

“Head up about what? I haven’t the foggiest idea-”

“The fliers! And the billboard! An entire billboard?! In the whole bloody end of the English Fecking National Stadium! Was that really necessary? What were you thinking!?” Viktor fumed, stripping out of the top of his uniform.

“I was thinking that a nice, big shot of you up in leather trousers would likely raise a lot of interest in purchasing a calendar or five,” Colin explained. “And considering the number of calendar reservation slips that got put in the collection bins, I think I thought right. We’re going to have to go back for another printing or two overnight to keep up with the anticipated rise in demand. Hope you’re not prone to writer’s cramp.”

“Funny, I don’t *see* the trousers at all in the billboard,” Viktor said, crossing his arms. The whole upper part of his arm was mostly deep purple. “Or these fliers. I look naked.”

“I was also thinking that if I pretty much left them in suspense about the trousers

completely, and it looked like you were starkers, that might generate even *more* interest. So I cropped the shot for just the torso. Luckily you have those hipbones that go on forever and peek up over the trousers. I'm so glad I specified the low rise models. Ten points to me," Colin said flippantly.

"Hopeless. Completely hopeless... You could have asked for permission. You could have at least been half decent and *warned* me," Viktor replied.

"Oh, dear. I would think you had learned by now. Decent I'm not. And proud of it. They're all going home with a feeling the ticket price was well spent and looking forward to how much they can spend tomorrow. I just came to congratulate you on a match well played," Colin said.

"Yeah, great match," Zamojski, the Polish Chaser interjected in his oddly lilting accent, punching Viktor's arm lightly. It still produced a flinch.

"Lay off! Is the bruise the size of your head not obvious enough?" Viktor complained.

"Well, remember, we are being your first preseason match coming up. Are you sure is not broken or going to fall off? We could use advantage," he said mischievously. "Or could just buy billboard when they take it down... Put it up, put some nice lights on it, maybe two of them, one for each end of the stadium. Have to bring it with us when we come for away match."

"You do, and I'll torch it," Viktor said emphatically, one corner of his mouth curling slightly. "*And* you," he added, rubbing the smarting arm.

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"Couldn't we skip this bit and go straight to the visit to the Children's Ward?" Viktor asked plaintively, looking around the still empty executive conference room in the English National Stadium. Empty of fans, at least. There were dozens of people milling about, getting ready for the anticipated onslaught when the doors opened.

"That's tomorrow. I'm sorry, but this is probably going to be an all-day event. Maybe part of the evening. They gave up on trying to get them to line up all at once and they're seating them and lining them up by sections, for crowd control. I need to get over to the calendar sales table and get set up. Try not to let it get to you. I've seen very few crups in the crowd, so there shouldn't be that many to sign. Maybe I'll see you when I get relieved for lunch. I can go get us something to eat and come over here," Hermione said, blearily running a hand through her wild ponytail and draining the remains of her coffee. "And just tune him out," she added under her breath when Oliver Wood waved boisterously and in an

annoyingly awake and thoroughly perky fashion from across the room. "I know he's a bit preoccupied-"

"Preoccupied? That's an understatement. It's like saying Merlin's been heard of around town," Viktor replied.

"Shhh! He's coming! He's harmless, really. See you at lunch, I hope," Hermione said, giving him a quick peck on the cheek and dashing off across the room toward the table by the door.

"Harmless to all but your mental health," Viktor muttered darkly.

"Fancy that! Next to you again! Just like in the calendar! Speaking of which, wasn't that billboard something?" Wood enthused.

"It was *something*, for sure," Viktor answered reluctantly, taking a pull from the large mug of coffee that he hadn't touched so far. He was beginning to wish he had the presence of mind earlier to spike it. Thinking of the children probably wasn't going to quite cut it in the taking the edge off department.

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"Honestly, I swear we didn't," Viktor said lightly. "I think I would remember it if we did, don't you? Wouldn't do us much good to go off to a Buddhist temple and get married and Memory Charm even ourselves, now would it? What good would that be?" he added, trying not to sound desperate. It was hard to avoid sounding that way after trying to convince a few odd dozen girls about her age of the same thing all morning with the same logic. It was getting a shade painful, dealing with the disappointment evident on their faces when he answered. He had even tried softening the blow a little by using their names, when he could remember them. Silly how such little things could make or break their day. Well, silly if you weren't still a teenager, Viktor supposed.

"A Hindu kush, then?" the thirteen-year-old girl across the table asked hopefully, thinking she had found a loophole in his answer.

Hecate. Hepzibah. Helena. Something beginning with 'h'. He had blanked on her name, even though she had mumbled it earlier and he had just written it not a minute ago. *Too blatant to look down and cheat.* She was looking at him. The quiet, hair twirling ones who alternated between shyly inspecting their shoes or the tabletop and asking thoroughly breathless questions were all starting to run together by now. Well, all of them were, truth be told. Still, this was far preferable to the squealers. "We didn't elope anywhere that I'm aware of. To any location. We might this off-season," he offered in a conciliatory tone. "We're getting tired of trying to plan something without the press mucking it up."

She brightened slightly, taking the calendar when he held it out to her. “Really?” she prompted, peeking out from behind the dark fall of her hair.

“It’s a very distinct possibility,” Viktor replied. It seemed a decently reliable answer. So reliable, in fact, that he had used it on several of the more persistent ones. It did no harm, and it had the additional benefit of being quite true. Viktor would be right up for eloping immediately, to anywhere in the world, if Hermione suggested it when she got back with their lunches. He might even try suggesting it himself.

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“No. Not even one of them at a time. And before you ask, I have no idea if Gwenog’s are real or not. You would have to ask her. But I suggest you hang onto your teeth if you do,” Viktor said wearily, handing the stack of posters back to the boy across the table. Well, he was eighteen, or so he claimed, so he wasn’t technically a boy, but these days, eighteen-year-olds looked disconcertingly young. There was something about getting into your late twenties that made teenagers seem like infants all of a sudden. The baby faced boy seemed to take the answer in stride, said a quick thanks, and rushed off to another table. Viktor turned his attention to prying the top off of a fresh bottle of ink.

“Hand locking up, yet? See, I told you. Artistic triumph. Financial triumph.”

“You can shove your artistic triumph up your ar-” Viktor began, looking up at Colin.

“Now, now. Language. Mind the doddering old granny I just cut line in front of,” Colin warned, waving at her and giving a broad, winning smile to the slightly plump, older woman still standing dutifully behind the line a couple of yards away from the table.

“Fine. You can shove it where the sun doesn’t shine, then. If you *ever* expect me to do this again, you will never pull what you pulled-”

“Won’t have to, next year. That calendar will be on probably a third of the walls owned by the magical population, and next year, I won’t need to pull anything. Except getting Hermione to pull rank on you and talk you into doing it again. Not that she’ll be the only one. Imagine the outcry if you’re not in it next year,” Colin said, gesturing around.

“I would rather I didn’t,” Viktor said.

“Poor dear. She’s exhausted. Exhausted, but excruciatingly happy. They’ve already taken in twice what they hoped for on calendars alone, and it’s just two hours past lunch. There’s still a good portion of stadium left that haven’t even gotten through the front doors. Only way you’re getting out of being in this next year is if you’re dead,” Colin observed happily.

“Don’t tempt me,” Viktor muttered.

“Even then, I might be forced to dig the corpse up and pose it. Hermione sent me over here to see if you needed anything. She can’t get away from the sales table. Water, tea, coffee, pastry... something for cramps...” Colin offered.

“No, thanks. Now, shoo,” Viktor said quietly.

“Right. Well, if you change your mind about doing a poster solo... something with a hint of boudoir...” Colin said, letting the offer dangle with the same casual air as the first.

“I won’t. Get out of the way, line jumper,” Viktor replied.

“I could probably get us a pretty penny for just a plain old picture of you in that mysterious ‘no one’s seen it’ bachelor shag pad of yours, too-”

“No, no and no. Now *move*,” Viktor insisted.

“Right. I’ll let you think it over-”

“Right. Let me think it over... No,” Viktor said firmly.

“You’re tired and busy. I’ll catch you at a better time. Ta,” Colin said, breezing off.

“Next. And before you ask, the rumors of my personal exploits are greatly exaggerated, especially if they’re anything even remotely romantic or sexual. If you like the way I play, thank you very much, so kind of you to notice, I *do* try to work hard at it. If you don’t like the way I play, that’s the way it goes, I understand we can’t *all* be your favorite player or all be on your favorite team. If I somehow made you happy by playing well in a particular match or with a particular team, glad to do it, because it’s my job. If I ruined a highly anticipated match for you by catching the Snitch far too soon, I apologize. If I personally ruined the season of your favorite team or favorite Seeker somehow by doing my job *too* well, I apologize for that, too. But not *very* much, because that’s what I do, that’s how I do it, and if you don’t like it, take it up with *your* Seeker for either being too slow to beat me or too daft to avoid getting ploughed. Did I leave anything out?” Viktor asked the older woman, who seemed to be fiddling with something as she sat.

“What was that, dear? I had my hearing aid on Silencing Charm. All the... squealing was cutting in on it something fierce, don’t you know. Didn’t hear a word,” she said finally, dropping her hand from her ear.

“I asked what, where and how would you like for me to sign?” Viktor amended, sliding the enormous stack of calendars she offered closer to him.

“Well, you can start by signing that one to me. On both of the pages. Gladys... And I have one tiny little question, if it’s not too personal?” she asked sweetly.

“It probably is, but go ahead,” Viktor replied, complying with her request.

“Is your broomstick *real* in that picture?” Gladys whispered, leaning forward and pointing. “Hard to tell. It’s not out.”

Viktor just stared for a few moments. *Does she... did she just... Wait. Broomstick. She must have meant out on the market...not... what I thought... first...* “Erm... Yes. I know... it’s not out... yet, but... the photographer also shot the ad,” Viktor said haltingly after a long silence. “That’s why he had one.”

“Ad?” Gladys said blankly.

“For the broomstick in the picture. The new Firebolt Elite. It’s a working model they sent the photographer for the ad. It’s not going to be on the market for a few months, but the one in the picture is real,” Viktor explained. “It’s not a mockup or faked, I mean.”

“Oh. But I wasn’t asking about the Firebolt,” Gladys said, just as matronly and sweet as ever.

*Always the ones you least suspect...* “Oh. Well... I...” Viktor took a drink of water and tried to gather himself. “I can assure you that everything you see in the picture is actually *there*. All the time,” he said finally, when she didn’t move. “None of it was added or... padded or... lifted or... altered or... *fiddled* with, if that’s what you mean.” His jaw was still slack, if not quite hanging open from the shock. He tried to telegraph a command for it to close, but he wasn’t quite sure it was responding. Nothing else seemed to be.

“I thought not,” Gladys whispered back, patting the hand that was still frozen over the calendar with a quill in it, motionless. “I thought not,” she added more confidently, settling back into her chair, looking satisfied. Once he managed to get his hand moving again, Viktor paid a little less attention to neatness and a bit more to speed for the remaining calendars in Gladys’s pile.

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“Tell me this is the last group,” Viktor pleaded, clutching at Hermione’s wrist after she had put down the fresh bottle of ink.

“I think it is. It had better be. We’re on the last crates of calendars, and that’s the last bottle of ink in the countryside, I think. We’re going to have to do rainchecks as it is, I think. We’ll bribe them with a free, autographed poster for tonight. I’ll check, though, and see if that really is the last-”

“Lie and tell me it is, even if it isn’t,” Viktor interrupted.

“It’s the last group. We need to get done soon so we can turn in. Or, well, you do. Tomorrow morning is the Children’s Ward visit. If you don’t mind too much, I may just sleep in. I’m completely knackered, and I would just be in the way. It will be bad enough with the reporters and the photographers tagging along, anyway. I’ll get out of the way, now. They’re opening the doors,” Hermione said.

“No. Sleep in,” Viktor said, bracing himself.

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If there was one thing this visit to the Children’s Ward was short on, so far, it was actual children. Viktor didn’t think the ridiculously self-important journalist and his accompanying photographer, who had been chosen by lottery to go along with the group on the walkthrough counted. And he was fairly sure the ruddy cheeked, plump, big-eyed little darlings they had hustled in for pictures earlier had been professional models brought in especially for the occasion. They looked a bit too hale and hearty to be patients, and they had been hustled out again afterward with suspicious speed. And the spiels on the modern equipment and the best personnel and the greatest facilities in Western Europe were getting dead boring. Not all the yawns he had stifled behind a hand were because of being bone tired from the last two days. They had been herded, posed and lectured to for hours by now, and they hadn’t spotted a single, certified patient.

“And *this* is our state of the art-” the tour director said for what must be the fifth time, before Viktor tuned him out. He hung back at the edge of the group until the leader of the group had run out of wind about the state of the art whatever and started motioning them on to the next state of the art marvel, whatever that might be. As the rest of them shuffled dutifully on, he found he just couldn’t work up the gumption to move. Instead, on a whim, feeling like a schoolboy out after curfew, he stepped sideways and through the door to his left, shutting it with a soft snick and propping his forehead against it, listening to the distant drone of the director, further down the hall.

He sighed in relief when it disappeared completely. Viktor had no idea how he was going to explain it when and if they missed him, but he had had enough.

Getting some peace and quiet in a dark hospital room for however long he got without having to hear the phrase 'state of the art' suited him just fine. Viktor took his hand off the doorknob and turned, intending to go sit on the bed. Instead, he found it occupied by a small boy who looked no more than seven, with close cropped sandy hair, looking every bit as surprised as Viktor felt.

"Oh! Sorry! I... err... thought the room was empty. The light was off... I'll-"

"You're Viktor Krum!"

"Well... err..."

"You're Viktor Krum!" The boy's keen voice seemed too loud in the room.

"Okay, no need to announce it, I'm Viktor Krum," he admitted.

"What're you doin' here?" the boy asked curiously.

"Hiding," Viktor blurted out without thinking, blushing when he realized that it was, one, the truth, and two, completely embarrassing to admit you were hiding when you were over the age of ten. "What are you doing here?" he shot back, trying to change the subject.

"Spenser... Spenser's my big brother... Spenser tole me to go up inna attic an' get the Dumbombs Mummy took away from 'im, cos Mummy tole him not to buy 'em wiv his 'lowance, an' I fell offa the ladder. An' Spenser tried to fix my arm so Mummy wouldn' know, but it wen' all floppy and now I gotta take Skelegrow to put the bones back innit," the boy explained, scrubbing at his freckled nose with what was evidently the arm Spenser *hadn't* 'fixed'. "Hurts. An' it's itchy. Spenser's in biiiig trouble. Cos he was 'spose to be watchin' me. I don' like it when Spenser watches me. He's no fun an' jus' wants me to stay outta his way an' do what he wants me to do. He jus' wants me 'round when it suits him. Like when the girl he likes is around. She thinks I'm cute an' he's nice to me when she's there. Mos' of the time he pinches and gives me noogies or lifts me up by my shorts. Whatcha hidin' from?" the boy piped up, undeterred. He squirmed around a while before kneeling upright in the bed, evidently tired of being in one position so long.

"A whole mess of Spensers. Grown up Spensers. It's complicated," Viktor answered. The boy looked at him blankly. "Okay, maybe it's not complicated. I would just rather be anywhere than out there, being trotted around so they can talk about how great they are and take pictures and write a story to make themselves look good."

"Why?"



“Because... okay, it *is* complicated. Let’s just say adults can be pretty silly sometimes. And sometimes you get tired of having Spenser show you off to the girl he likes just so he can look good,” Viktor said. “I’m getting tired of what they’re making me do out there. It’s like I’m being asked to be cute so somebody will like them... or something like that.”

“Oh.”

“Quidditch Through The Ages? I used to read that when I was your age... Had it practically memorized. Of course, my copy wasn’t in English back then...” Viktor said, gesturing to the dog-eared and creased little volume discarded on the covers. He picked it up and thumbed through it, pausing to look at some of the familiar illustrations. One entry definitely hadn’t been there when he used to read it as a child, though. “And I certainly wasn’t mentioned in it,” he added with a short laugh, perching on the edge of the chair next to the bed.

“Really? You read it? What was your favorite part? I like the Quodpot,”

“I used to read the part about Wronski and wonder what it felt like. To do that,” Viktor mused. “I would close my eyes and try to imagine how things must look when they go by that fast. I got it all wrong. You’re usually not looking at anything going by. Not really. You’re always looking ahead.”

“Would you sign my book?” the boy asked hopefully, pointing to the quill heaped among several scraps of parchment and the patient chart on the bedside table.

“Gladly,” Viktor said, finding he actually meant it wholeheartedly for the first time in what seemed an eon. “What’s your name?”

“Solomon. Spenser’ll be green,” Solomon said eagerly.

“Will he?” Viktor asked, blowing on the ink to set it once he had finished, so it wouldn’t smudge when the pages closed.

“Yeah. He’s always rubbin’ my nose in it ‘bout how his broom’s miles better’n mine cos his is real and mine’s still a toy an’ I can’t stay up late to listen to matches,” Solomon explained. “But *my* book’s better’n *his*, now.”

“If you say so. At least *your* Spenser will probably grow out of it. Spenser probably won’t be so-” Viktor began, stopping when a bright flash lit up the room.

“That one will be a great shot! Use it with the piece, most likely. Adorable. Captured a real moment. They sent me back to find you. They’re just about ready for meeting the Board of Directors, and looking at the Potions Mixing Unit.

Biggest Apothecary in the British Isles, actually. What are you doing mucking about back here, anyway?" the photographer said from the open doorway.

"*Mucking...* about? I was doing something more important. Actually talk-... Never mind. I wouldn't expect you to understand. What could I possibly have missed? The state of the art wand of the Director of Personnel, or something? The big, shiny facility where they crease the bed linens? Couldn't you all manage the rest of this... *visit...* without me?" Viktor asked.

"They want a picture of all of you with the Board of Directors. Sorry, munchkin. He can sign a copy of my picture and owl it to you, later," the photographer offered. "Room 103. I'll get the full name from the front desk. Need it for the caption, anyway."

"Right. Of course," Viktor said, sighing heavily before standing up. "Here, Solomon. I'm glad I picked your door," he added, giving the apparently well-loved book back. "I would shake your hand, but now's obviously not a good time. Sorry, I have to go."

"Thanks!" Solomon said, clutching the book to his pajamas with his good arm. "Bye, Viktor! Bye, Spenser!" he called out as they walked out into the hall. Viktor could barely stifle a laugh.

"Spenser? Where did munchkin get the idea my name is Spenser?" the photographer said, shaking his head as he closed the door behind him.

"Long story. Spenser..." Viktor added under his breath, heading down the hall.

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"You're upset," Hermione finally ventured after what had been, so far, a deathly silent late morning breakfast. So late, in fact, that it would be more accurate to call it early lunch. The two of them had slept in, exhausted, and they were still in their pajamas. The visit, if you could call it that, had been another full day and part of the evening.

"What makes you think that?" Viktor replied tersely.

"Well, for starters, you've just put salt in your coffee," Hermione said, sliding the salt cellar to the other side of the table and replacing it with the sugar bowl. "And if looks could make things burst into flames, the silverware would be smoking. Something bothering you?"

"No."

“You’re a poor liar, Viktor Krum. What’s eating at you?” Hermione asked softly. After a prolonged silence, she added, “Look, I know you hate crowds and being singled out and posing and being made the focus of attention. But I appreciate that you did it anyway. For me. *Mostly* without complaining. Was it really *so* awful?”

“Well... I... It...” Viktor said with a helpless shrug. “Felt like it, at the time...”

“What was so awful about it? Honestly...” Hermione prompted.

“The visit to the Children’s Ward was a sham. It was all about the people who worked there and the equipment and how fantastic everything was. They went on about the art in the boardroom for an hour. It was an utter dog and pony show. I met *one* actual patient, and that was an accident,” Viktor said, shoving the ruined cup of coffee away. “And that photographer even ruined that all he could.”

“Still, it was one, and that’s something, at least. And the department doesn’t have to worry about going bankrupt, now, does it? And you’re at least a little glad of that, aren’t you?” Hermione asked.

“Of course. It just felt like such a... such a... *waste*. I got enough of that ridiculous posturing with Colin. And I’m not sure which of us did the most ridiculous posturing, him or me,” Viktor bit off. “All that pressuring for me to do something else, and the *billboard* and the *fliers* and trying to sell the whole thing by using me. I feel dirty just thinking about it.”

“I know Colin can be a bit much, but he’s mostly harmless,” Hermione argued. “He’s pushy, but it’s all talk. And I’ll give him this, he knows his marketing. He got where he is today by knowing his business. And please don’t say ‘Yes, in court ordered sessions with a therapist,’ either. Colin readily admits he isn’t perfect.”

“About Colin... is it really necessary that he knows everything, and I mean *everything*, about what we do? Together?” Viktor elaborated, his brows drawing together.

Hermione colored slightly. “I didn’t really mean for it to happen. It’s just... Colin was there for the analyst sessions, and we went out to lunch and had martinis... I had a bit too much, and it just sort of... *tumbled* out. And we kept having lunches, and... It felt kind of *nice* to have someone to talk to about those sorts of things, for a change. It’s not as though I have a lot of girlfriends to talk those things over with...” she said in a small voice. “Colin has a tendency to pry these things out of you whether you want to talk about them or not. I suppose it felt kind of good to have someone to gossip with over lunch. Someone who didn’t have to... And he fills a lot of it in on his own. I mean, you know how he is. He... punches things up

when it suits him. But if it bothers you, I'll try to talk about us less. It's not as much as it sounds like. Colin talks about himself, mostly."

"Surprise, surprise," Viktor said, then relented. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize..."

"No, I should learn to keep some things private. I know you value your privacy. What little you get," Hermione admitted. "And I know Colin can be pushy when it comes to getting what he wants. I shouldn't have put you in that position without asking your permission first, but the hospital needed the help desperately. And I did. Surely you at least enjoyed the match?" she said timorously.

"Would have been all right if it weren't for Oliver yipping nonstop," Viktor said. "Couldn't so much as hear the people I was playing with, he was so busy jabbering. Damned arm hurt like a... It was annoying, is all I'm saying. And a few smart alecks just *had* to be comedians about the pictures," Viktor amended.

"You know they were probably just jealous, don't you?" Hermione replied, the barest hint of a smile playing over her lips.

"Jealous? What, you think they wanted to be made fools of, too? As if the whole thing weren't embarrassing and humiliating enough as it was. First, Colin practically going over every nook and cranny with a fine tooth comb and doing a running commentary on it, and suggesting... pictures in the altogether every four seconds.... Then, posing in completely absurd wardrobe against odd backgrounds, and being treated like a piece of meat while you do it. Bad enough if they don't go public, but then to have them... *paraded* up on a billboard, where it looked like I was starkers, I might add, while you're trying to do your job, and having to listen to what people say about it. And the autograph session... I'm thoroughly tired of answering the same damned nosy questions for the umpteenth time and having some of them treat you like a piece of meat or like you're not a real person, sitting right there, practically in their faces. Right when you think you've heard it all, they go and come up with a new one! I'll have you know some sweet looking little old lady inquired about my *broomstick!*" Viktor said in a rush.

"Oh, what was so b- OH! Ohh..." Hermione said, her expression shifting from confusion to comprehension to concern. For a moment her composure slipped, and she had to stifle a grin. They sat for several seconds without saying anything. "Still... most of the day wasn't *so* awful, was it? I know it must get old, but it makes most of them so ridiculously happy. And it's such a little thing. Talking to them for a minute or two and putting your name on something. And you have to remember, it's new to them. I'm sorry. Really I am, but... I'm glad you did it," Hermione admitted, covering his hand on the table with her own. "Not just because of the hospital, either."

“I... I’m sorry, I don’t mean to sound like I’m complaining-”

“Yes, you do,” Hermione said placidly.

One corner of Viktor’s mouth curled up subtly. “Okay. I am.”

“It’s perfectly understandable. If you don’t ever want to do it again, I can’t blame you. But,” Hermione said, standing up and walking around behind him, draping her arms around his bare neck and shoulders, “I’m going to let you in on a little secret, first.”

“What?”

“I thought,” Hermione said, tucking her cheek in next to his, “the pictures were pretty darned sexy. That one with the leather trousers... Let’s just say I wasn’t paying much attention to the Firebolt, either. And I’m not usually a fan of leather trousers. Even in theory. But that picture might have made a convert of me. And the autograph session? Surely you noticed what an enormous hit those pictures were among about ninety-five percent of the women in attendance? How so many of them would have given pretty much anything to be in my shoes? How do you think that made me feel?” Hermione prompted.

“I have no idea,” Viktor said.

“Lucky. Very lucky. You know, sometimes I think you need reminding of something. And me, too. I need to be reminded of it. That you could have pretty well anyone you fancied. But you picked me, even though you didn’t have to. Seeing all those women drooling over that calendar definitely makes me mindful of how lucky I am. In a lot of ways. Not just because of the leather trousers, either. Though I admit they didn’t hurt. So many Quidditch players are players at something else, too. I never really worry about that, with you. It’s not as though you wouldn’t have the opportunity if you were looking for it, but you have enough integrity not to look for something cheap and superficial over something real, with some substance,” Hermione summed up, giving him a little squeeze.

“I don’t need to be drooled over,” Viktor said in such a mournful tone that Hermione had to laugh.

“And that’s precisely part of why I love you. You’re not obsessed with putting notches in the bedpost in your shag pad, like some players,” Hermione pointed out. “Your ego is woefully underfed. You don’t even realize how attractive you are in those pictures, do you?”

“And that’s another thing! Where does Colin get off calling my flat a shag pad? It’s a *den*. One, I bought the leather couch because it went with the paneling and

the stonework on the fireplace, and my *mother* gave me the bearskin rug,” Viktor said indignantly.

“Sweetie, Colin thinks the entire world is his shag pad,” Hermione said, kissing Viktor’s cheek then trailing a finger over his jaw line. “And everyone in it is wearing leather trousers. I apologize, once again, most heartily for all the trauma you endured. Maybe I can make it up to you... Hmmm?” Hermione murmured, kissing her way down the side of his neck and into the hollow of his shoulder. “On the rug, in front of the fireplace, perhaps?” Viktor tilted his head back and closed his eyes while Hermione slid her hand down his chest and into the waist of his pajama bottoms. “It’s the off season. I don’t have to work. We have nowhere to be...”

Viktor moaned softly. “Except on that rug...” He grabbed her arm and stilled it. “Anyone ever tell you that for someone who doesn’t fly, you handle a broomstick awfully well?”

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“Mmmm,” Hermione said, stretching, then turning and tucking herself more tightly into Viktor’s side, burrowing into the thick fur. Their discarded pajamas lay in a heap near the hearth.

“Let’s elope,” Viktor said abruptly.

“What? You’re joking. I thought you were sick of that question,” Hermione said, not opening her eyes.

“I’m serious. Let’s do it. Look, we’re never going to be able to plan something the press isn’t going to horn in on, and we could just say, yes, it’s true, from now on when someone asked. Maybe it being the truth would stop them from asking. Suck all the romance and mystery out of it. Come on, let’s elope,” Viktor pressed.

“Where? Where would we elope?” Hermione asked.

“Anywhere you want. How about we blindfold ourselves and throw a dart at a bleeding map. I don’t care,” Viktor said. “So long as when we get there, we get married.”

“You’re really serious?” Hermione said, lifting her head and looking at him. “I do hear India is nice this time of year. And we’ve never really been. Not for a holiday... We would just need to pack. Pity we couldn’t have those trousers on loan for the honeymoon,” she added with a chuckle, settling back down onto his shoulder.

“I still have them, you know,” Viktor said quietly, after a beat.

“Still have what?” Hermione asked.

“The trousers. Colin gave them to me. They’re shoved in the back of the cupboard,” Viktor admitted.

“Well, pack them, then. We won’t need much, will we? There should be room,” Hermione said hopefully.

“I suppose so. Should I pack some transportation, too, or will we just rely on the local transport?” Viktor said.

“I think we should rent. It would be a pity to go to India and not even try out one of the authentic local flying carpets, now wouldn’t it?” Hermione said.

“We could do that,” Viktor replied.

“I wonder how big those *family* models are... Big and roomy as this one, you reckon?” Hermione wondered.

“I don’t know... why?” Viktor asked warily.

“No reason,” Hermione said quickly. “No reason at all. You *will* pack them, won’t you? And do the calendar next year? They’re already talking about it...”

“For you?” Viktor asked.

“For me,” Hermione replied.

“For you,” Viktor said.