

<http://www.astronomytower.org/restrictedsection/fic.php?fic=at:/authors/myetigoo/secreature/ASVAH.html>

The feather-like snowdrops kept sticking in Hermione's lashes, catching in her hair, adhering to the rough weave of her cloak, sinking in and melting away, disappearing almost as soon as they landed. "First snow is early this year," she said, her breath gathering in a great misty cloud in front of her mouth, as though the words were floating in it. "When are you going to be back?"

"I have no idea," Viktor said bluntly. "I get back when I get back," he added with a shrug, sounding resigned. The snowflakes were beginning to pile up in his dark hair, stark white against black.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked, not really expecting a specific answer. She had primarily employed the question as another tactic to delay the inevitable goodbye that was coming.

"Quite a distance," he replied, avoiding her eyes and watching the snowfall against the backdrop of the castle instead.

"I'm tired of questions with no definitive answer," she sighed, the frustration evident in her voice.

"Now, that's not true," he chided gently, turning his attention back to her, just the slightest hint of a smile curling up one corner of his mouth, "or you wouldn't be so fond of the question 'why'? And that one hardly ever has a definitive answer."

"I'm tired of not knowing anything for sure! Of all these hints and... and... non-answers... and... and... just because we're still students! We've done as much or more than...Moody acts like we don't deserve to kn-"

"He'll change his mind soon enough," Viktor interrupted, the regret heavy in his voice. "Believe me. I wish I didn't know the half of what I do. Soon enough. Don't rush getting involved." He stood a moment in the unseasonably cold early October air, folding his arms across his chest as though bracing against the wind, giving a barely perceptible shudder. She knew better than to think he was actually cold. Suddenly, as though on impulse, he blurted out, "How about I ask *you* a question with a definitive answer?"

"Pardon?"

"I want you to answer a question. A simple yes or no usually suffices," Viktor said, cocking his head and studying her, as though she were a particularly

interesting curiosity he had just happened upon. “If this place that I’m going to, far, far away, happened to have a jeweler, would it be worth my while to look at the rings?”

“What exactly are you asking?” she forced out finally, still stunned by the unexpected question.

“I’m asking, for future reference purposes only, mind you, if you would marry me if I asked,” Viktor said evenly.

“Are you proposing?” Hermione asked, equal parts incredulous and absurdly amused by the way he had stated it. As though he were offering to bring back a dime store souvenir from a two week holiday. Not going off who knew where for who knew how long on Order business.

“Not formally. I haven’t got a ring. And a gentleman would never propose a thing as weighty as marriage without a genuine pledge of his intentions. Let’s say I’m proposing that someday I propose. Would the lady look favorably at all upon such a proposal?” he said, solemn and formal, the mischievous look in his eyes the only thing that gave him away.

“The gentleman is a loon,” Hermione protested. “And I would agree to marry him anytime he asked. Ring or no ring,” she added softly.

“Ah. Something to file away while I’m gone, then. Along with the lady’s ring size. I’ll miss you something terrible,” Viktor said, sobering, the forced levity dropping away.

“Keep safe,” she ordered, slipping her arms around his waist.

“I won’t tell you goodbye. I’ll just see you later,” Viktor said quietly into her ear. He kissed her temple, then gave her a quick kiss on the lips, pulling away, disentangling himself as though he didn’t dare hang on any longer, for fear of not being able to let go.

“You had better,” Hermione said firmly. She stood and watched him walk off the grounds, until she was squinting at nothing but white and the space where he had disappeared over the horizon. A void. She managed not to cry until then, the tears warm and wet on her cheeks, scraping and stinging her skin with their salt in the cold. Hermione reached up and scrubbed the back of her hand over her wet cheeks...

The texture was rough against her skin. Too rough. She slowly became aware of

a soft tickle alongside. Hair... No... whiskers. She swam up through the darkness, squinted through half opened eyes, and caught a glimpse of ginger fur, Crookshanks perched on the pillow next to her head, licking at her cheek. The insistent clanging of the alarm clock cut through her sleepy haze, and Hermione pushed him away, struggling up from the pillow and sheets to silence the alarm. Crookshanks gathered himself up from the soft mattress, and gave her a slightly indignant look before studiously ignoring her in favor of licking down a rumpled bit of fur.

“Sorry,” Hermione mumbled, giving him a quick petting to apologize for the rumpled fur, and for ruffling his feathers by shoving him aside. Dignity restored, Crookshanks haughtily hoisted his tail in the air and stalked off to the end of the bed, then made his way to his dish in the corner, a silent demand for breakfast. “Wedding planning is for the birds,” Hermione lamented, stretching before she forced herself out of the comfortable bed.

“Wedding planners should be banned, and they certainly shouldn’t be making appointments with couples before eight in the morning. This process brings up every memory you ever had involving the two of you, this wedding business...” she said, putting a serving of dry cat food into the bowl from the sealed canister she kept by the dish. “Not that it’s an entirely bad thing, to keep dreaming about your marriage proposals... informal and formal,” Hermione mused, twisting at the ring on her finger. “Grant you, I liked the formal one better. Not because there was a ring the second time or because it was the day before Easter, either. But because we weren’t saying goodbye, we were saying hello, again, I suppose... And why am I talking to the cat about this when he’s more interested in the food bowl?” she added over the enthusiastic crunching. Crookshanks paused and looked up at her a moment before going back to his bowl.

“I have never been so tired in all my life,” Hermione sighed, pulling on the robes that she had put on the trunk at the foot of the bed the night before. “Who knew just trying to put a wedding together could be so exhausting? And we haven’t even gotten started, really. Maybe we should have signed up for the Auror training. Would have been a picnic compared to this rubbish. Who am I kidding? Boot camp would be a picnic by comparison.” She went to the window and pulled the curtain aside, shaking her head when she caught sight of a very familiar figure zipping around the lawn behind the dormitories in the extremely dim morning light. Even upside down, she could easily pick out the way he hugged the broom, lower and closer than most riders, knees turned out farther. She had no idea when she had started noticing such things. “I swear, he would pay them for the privilege of playing if it were the only way he could get on a broom.”

Neither one of them had hesitated much in turning down Moody’s offer to stick

around the Auror training facility after the wedding and turn it into a career. They had politely insisted that they would tie up as many loose ends as possible between now and the wedding, but no more. Viktor had eagerly accepted the contract to return to the Quidditch pitch as soon as professional league play resumed in the late fall, instead. Never mind that the pay was probably not going to be quite what it had been before the war had interrupted. At least, not for a few seasons. Money had been the least of the considerations. Both of them had saved diligently. Viktor had hardly touched most of his Quidditch earnings from the first stretch he had spent in the league, and Hermione still had the bulk of her inheritance. Neither of them were much given to wild spending. There hadn't been much time or opportunity for spending money in any case, even if it had been in their natures. Still, they would be far better off financially than most couples this side of twenty-five, even after purchasing the house. Bills wouldn't be a problem while they waited for their respective paychecks to grow.

It hadn't been all that hard for Hermione to turn down the offer, either. Come fall, she would be starting a new job, as well. Hermione and Viktor had talked it over and decided to allow themselves the luxury of doing something completely selfish and self serving. The luxury of doing what made them happy. The luxury of letting someone else worry about putting the world right and keeping it safe. Leave that to people like Moody, Harry and Ron. Viktor would be back on a broom full time and she would be buried in her beloved books, doing research for a publisher. Hermione was looking forward to worrying about the mundane for a change. Anything that didn't carry such an awful responsibility with it. Things like deadlines, what color the living room walls should be, where to put the furniture, claiming a side of the bed and what to fix for breakfast.

"Breakfast... I had better be getting mine! The appointment is at seven," Hermione said, taking the opportunity to wave at Viktor through the window before putting the curtain back into place. She hurried down to the dining hall, determined to at least lay in a bit of toast and jam and a good, strong cup of Turkish style coffee before going off to face the wedding planner. The coffee habit had been picked up from him not long before Viktor had gone off the second time. Hermione suspected he had started drinking it more as a way to cling to some part of home at the table while at Hogwarts, rather than out of a taste for it. He had conceded the plate to British fare out of necessity and practicality, but he had drawn the line at the coffee cup, opting for something else when all there was on offer was "weak, muddy water". She admitted to herself that she often poured the cup out of a longing for something that reminded her of him as much as any longing for caffeine she might have had. Still, the habit had persisted long after he had come back.

Hermione felt a bit guilty for it sometimes, when she thought about the house-

elves at Hogwarts scrambling for a samovar after she had dared mention in front of Dobby that she missed the coffee and had no idea where Viktor's had gotten to since he had gone. It had been little surprise that the first morning at the training facility she and Viktor had been promptly ushered to a table with a samovar already on it. Hermione suspected that Moody had passed along the word. He would have seen Viktor, at least, down countless cups of it before she had gotten here, even if he didn't know about her penchant for it. She wasn't quite sure there was room for the coffee this morning, due to the ridiculous butterflies she kept chiding herself for having. She couldn't help but wonder; if there were already butterflies at the thought of the wedding planner, when the wedding wasn't until August, would there be veritable Hippogriffs in there by the time the real thing rolled around?

"Porridge, madam? We've got a lovely porridge with preserves and-" a squeaky voice intruded into Hermione's thoughts as she entered the dining hall. She looked down at her feet to see a small house-elf clad in a neat, uniform-style apron, holding up a bowl hopefully. She hated to interrupt, but she didn't think she could bear hearing the entire menu. Her stomach had wobbled at the mere sight of the porridge.

"No, thank you, Abby. I think I'll just fix myself some toast and jam-" Hermione began, but the house-elf was already sprinting to the table and soon came running back with a large platter of freshly made toast, neat pats of butter, and tiny jars of jam, which she deposited on one of the dining tables.

"And madam's coffee is already fixed and waiting on the table. Madam's gentleman hasn't been in for his yet, either. Out in the damp on that broom instead," the house-elf lamented, shaking her head and crossing her arms. "Doesn't take care of himself. Be having a cold, he will."

"Thank you, Abby. He's been on that broom winter and summer all his life, I doubt he's gotten that delicate of late. He'll likely be in any minute now. I waved to him before I came down. This is plenty, really. For both of us, most likely, unless he's a lot hungrier for toast than I am. I think an entire platter of toast should be enough for anyone," Hermione protested, putting a smear of butter on her first slice.

"Abby still says young couple is making a big mistake, not buying a house-elf to take care of them after they get married," the house-elf said in a huff.

"My parents managed just fine their whole lives without a single one, Abby, and you know how the future Mrs. feels about owning house-elves, so I imagine you might as well give up the argument," Viktor said from behind Hermione, leaning

over her shoulder to give her a peck on the cheek before rounding the table and settling into the chair opposite.

“But who will be getting your breakfasts and cleaning the house and doing the laundry? And who will be watching the babies when they is coming?” Abby said indignantly. Hermione had blushed at that for perhaps the first dozen rounds of this same argument. Repetition had softened the embarrassment. It was an argument they all knew by rote, now. It had been repeated often enough. Nearly every meal since they had both been here. Nearly every meal since Abby had learned they planned to marry, at any rate. Except on Abby’s days off. Those days, she ambushed them with it elsewhere. Most of the other house-elves probably harbored the same sentiment, but didn’t bother arguing the point much, perhaps afraid Hermione would suggest they shouldn’t be happy with their lots. Half of them still wouldn’t admit that the facility didn’t actually own them, but provided days off, room and board in exchange for their services. The possibility of formal wages still made most of them wail.

“Smack that Bludger when we get to it. I think we can probably manage a breakfast, between the two of us. I managed my own when I was elsewhere. And any babies coming are a ways off, yet. Let us at least get the wedding planned before we go filling up the house we haven’t even painted, furnished, or finished paying for, hmm?” Viktor replied, taking a sip of coffee.

“Don’t you like working here and not being owned a lot better? Besides, Ron’s mum and dad managed just fine, too, and they had seven babies, not just the one. If they can do it, we can. Don’t you want anything other than toast?” Hermione asked Viktor.

“No, toast is fine,” Viktor protested. Hermione noticed that he was picking at the toast almost as reluctantly as she was, when he normally kept pace with Harry and Ron at breakfasts. “Here,” he added, slipping something into Abby’s hand, “thank you.”

The house-elf took it without looking at it and said, “Tell Abby if you is wanting anything else,” before walking off.

“That Knut will be back in my room before I get done with this toast,” Viktor said with a sigh. “That is one very well-traveled Knut. Been from my quarters to the dining hall and back a blue million times. Should be worn right through by now.”

“Still, it’s worth trying, isn’t it? Maybe she’ll forget to put it back, one day. I know the Ministry got them to take days off, but they really should get paid something, too. Seen Harry and Ron?” Hermione asked, looking around the nearly deserted

dining hall.

“This side of seven in the morning? Hardly likely. Be lucky if you see them before we leave. Why?” Viktor asked, taking another small bite of toast.

“Just wondered. Did you hear anything else from the agent?” Hermione replied.

“Final closing would probably be five weeks before the wedding, assuming all the paperwork is in order. And assuming we still want the house,” Viktor added.

“Of course we still want the house! Why wouldn’t we want the house?” Hermione asked, sounding a bit more shrill than she intended.

“That phantom sixth bedroom. The one intended for a house-elf. The agent seems to think that might be a deal breaker as far as you’re concerned,” Viktor said with a slight smile.

“Oh. That. Turn it into a closet. Problem solved,” Hermione said emphatically. “He can sell us a five bedroom house or none at all. I don’t care what knocking a bedroom off the listing does to his selling record. If he thinks he can just use us to win a dinner from his colleagues he’s got another think coming. We are not paying for a sixth bedroom you couldn’t assemble a model ship in.”

“He also thinks he can talk us into a ‘little summer place’... pffft. Bunch of nonsense. ‘Don’t you want to have a nice getaway for holidays and such? For when you come back from trips?’ No, if I want to go on holiday, I want it to be somewhere that I don’t have to pay to keep up all year for the sake of two weeks away just so I can brag we’ve got a vacation home, and when I come back from trips, I want to bloody well go home. But he thinks he can sneak a bungalow or a cabana in the small print somewhere. Do you want to be the one to disabuse him of that notion once and for all, or shall I?” Viktor said, breaking off one of the corners of his toast.

“Hit him over the head with a broom about it, for all I care. If we don’t get this house and I have to listen to his smiley-faced sales pitch about another dozen places, I’ll scream, anyway. At this point, I’m willing to go beg the builder on my hands and knees to accept the offer just to avoid dealing with the agent any more than we have to. He reminds me too much of Lockhart. All teeth and coif,” Hermione replied.

“I see you’re as enamored of him as I am. Is it just me, or does he seem like he would include his mother in the deal for another thousand?” Viktor asked.

“And throw in the dog and his firstborn for good measure. Tell him we’ll go to the closet for holidays,” Hermione said dismissively. “Good morning, Alastor,” she added, hearing the distinctive footsteps approaching from behind.

“Still bent on this planner nonsense?” Moody snarled.

“Are you going to do it for us if we don’t use the planner, Moody?” Viktor said lightly. “I’d love to see your ideas for the reception hall.”

“Molly would be every bit as good as a planner,” Moody insisted, “and not nearly as expensive.”

“Let us worry about how deep our pockets are. And Molly would have a nervous breakdown a month in. She would drive herself mad trying to make sure everything is perfect, never mind the rest of us. And she wouldn’t exactly be able to devote herself to it full time, so it would hardly be fair to ask her to get this together in such a short time. Besides, she’s got seven of her own to marry off eventually. Eight if you count Harry. No fair making it nine weddings with us, so let’s not. I want guests at the wedding, not people who are also trying to run it. And we won’t let the planner make you wear something you hate so you match the flowers,” Viktor pointed out.

“Mad business, weddings,” Moody grumbled.

“Now, Moody,” Viktor cautioned. “If it makes you feel any better, Dumbledore is more than willing to let us use Hogwarts for the whole thing. That won’t cost us a Sickle. He thinks it would be good to have a supposedly happy event there, for a change. You know, one where the worst you have to worry about is drinking too much and getting a hangover. A great deal of the student body will be attending with family, anyway. Some of the lot from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons would be staying there for a few days, if they came for the wedding, so Dumbledore figures he would be just as well off to kill two birds with one stone and host them all for a week or so for the heck of it, if they want to stay on the grounds. We just have to get all the actual wedding things in place. We’ve got a shade over two months. It’s a shame none of the Muggles will be able to come. Wouldn’t see anything if they did. I imagine some of the Muggleborns in the upper years might attend.”

“I still say it’s a mad business, lad, and you’ll be wishing you had gone to the registry office and been done with it before July,” the old man replied in an ominous tone before shaking his head and stalking off.

“Remind me we don’t want him giving the first toast. ‘Congratulations and I hope

you won't be at each other's throats before the first anniversary! Don't make me have to come clean what's left of you two off the carpet!" Hermione said, pantomiming a toast and dropping her voice into a gruff imitation of Moody.

Viktor smiled faintly. "I suspect it's more sour grapes about the fact that we said no and he's got to find someone to replace the two of us. Hadn't we better go? Madam Whatsherface isn't going to wait all day."

"Madam Wilhelmina," Hermione corrected. "I suppose we had better." They both left a good portion of their toast lying on their plates, unfinished.

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"This is it?" Viktor asked incredulously.

"According to the directions, and the sign in the window, it is," Hermione said uncertainly.

"Are you sure she isn't related to Trelawney?" Viktor pressed, peering into the window, then looking at Hermione and arching an eyebrow.

"Well... are we just going to stand here gawping, or are we actually going in?" Hermione said, avoiding the question in favor of reading the sign with fancy lettering once more. It read 'Madam Wilhelmina' in swirling letters, then beneath, 'Tailored Gatherings and Events Planning For Groups Large And Small'. But what screamed for Hermione's attention even more loudly was the window display. It did tend to remind her of Sybil Trelawney. Madam Wilhelmina seemed as enamored by scarf-draped lamps as the Divination professor. And the pictures of some of the events propped in the window gave her pause, as well. It seemed the events planner favored large doses of pink when doing her tailoring. Tailoring of her clothing, and of her events. In each and every picture, the witch with the elaborate bouffant swathed in pink waved enthusiastically from decidedly pink decors and different smiling groups

"Might as well go in," Viktor said reluctantly, reaching out to grab the doorknob. "All the pink scaring you half as much as it does me?" Viktor queried.

"I'm sure that's not the only color she uses," Hermione said, sounding more certain than she felt, before ducking into the open doorway.

"Darrrrlings, do come in! Have a seat, have a seat, sweethearts, and we'll get right to it. Can I get you anything? A nice cup of tea, perhaps?" came a warbling voice. It sounded almost as insubstantial as the figure's wispy robes, floating

around her in great clouds of chiffon. It reminded Hermione altogether too much of a walking pile of cotton candy. The elaborate and tall blonde bouffant only served to reinforce the image, and the jangling silver jewelry seemed to be the only thing anchoring Madam Wilhelmina to the ground. Copious bangles and spangles seemed to pour off of her in every direction.

“No, thank you,” Hermione said, declining the offer, while Viktor mutely shook his head.

“Very well, ducks. Oh, young loves! Planning a wedding, aren’t we? August the fifteenth is the target date, is it? Wonderful, wonderful, should be lovely weather and positively divine alignment of the heavens. Venus in the fifth house,” Madam Wilhelmina said, clapping enthusiastically, which set her pink bracelets jangling that much harder. She cut herself short at Hermione’s curled lip. “I can do absolutely anything you want, dears, anything you *want*. Heaven *knows* we can all use a lovely, lovely, big, splashy wedding after what this place has been through the last few years... I can see it now! The crowds! Heaven knows everyone you invite will be there, and half the population you didn’t invite will still be there... no matter. Madam Wilhelmina will take care of everything! It will be the biggest wedding in the history of weddings! Biggest one I ever did, and that’s saying something, since I married off the lead singer of the Weird Sisters. The marriage only lasted a fortnight, but the reception went half that.”

“Err...” Viktor started to protest weakly, but Madam Wilhelmina went on as though she hadn’t heard.

“Oh! That would be absolutely perfect! I’ll get them to provide music! They played at the Yule Ball, for your first date, didn’t they? Oh, it would be a positive *coup* and a third if I can get them. What am I saying? Of course I can get them! I’m Madam Wilhelmina!” she added, as though that settled things completely. “They can share time with the full orchestra. Silk drapes for the altar. Trumpet player and organist for the entrance of the bride, perhaps. No! Too mundane! I’ll think of something else! And I’ll have the orchids brought in from-”

Hermione took the opportunity to raise a protesting finger and interject, “We... ahh... weren’t really looking to have a wedding quite so... elaborate. It’s not really... us.”

“Nonsense! It’s your *duty* to have a big blowout of a wedding! If it isn’t enough that one of you is little more than four years removed from a record setting and memorable appearance in the World Cup, and about to go back to the pitch, if the papers are any indication, you’re both war heroes. One of you was a Triwizard Champion! One of you has been best friend of the Boy-Who-Lived

since he reentered the magical world! If there was any witch or wizard alive who didn't know about the two of you four years ago, they do now! The whole world expects it! *De-mands* it! They're clamoring for a chance to wish you well! And don't your family and friends deserve a chance to wish you well? Are you going to deprive them of the opportunity to attend a once in a lifetime celebration for the two of you? How could you be so cruel to the people who have stood by you, in thick and thin, through peacetime and war? Now, where were you planning on having it?"

"Well..." Viktor began, then floundered. The random thought that Madam Wilhelmina displayed the personality of an Erumpent in pink chiffon flitted through his mind. "Hogwarts. The Great Hall. Dumbledore was kind enough-

"Oh, *no!* That will never do! How *tacky!* Never mind, I've got lots of other absolutely cavernous venues you can look at, where no one will get crowded. And the fabric swatches! I've got simply dozens of potential color schemes I want you to look at, too. Let me grab my sample book..." Madam Wilhelmina said firmly, heading off toward the counter in a floaty, and yet, somehow efficient manner. "We'll look at some today, and some again in two weeks. Can't possibly ask you to decide without seeing them all!"

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"How can a dozen color schemes all center around pink?" Hermione said, sounding slightly dazed, as they walked back toward the main section of Diagon Alley. It was already very nearly lunchtime, and what she had managed to eat of her toast was long gone.

"A dozen! More than a dozen," Viktor argued.

"I was generously counting rose and fuchsia as separate colors," Hermione admitted reluctantly.

"Pink," Viktor said emphatically. "Reminds me of an Erumpent in a tutu if you ask me."

"The color schemes?"

"The wedding planner. Tell me we're not picking any of those monstrosities she put forward," Viktor said, shaking his head.

"One or two of the dusty rose ones weren't too horrific. I'm sure we could talk her into tweaking some things to be more to our liking. We *are* paying *her*, after all. It

all depends on what Ginny and I... Oh, dear. Ginny won't be wanting to wear pink, will she? If there's one color she won't touch with a ten foot pole, it's pink. I suppose there are other colors that would go with pink. Madam Malkin should be able to come up with something, shouldn't she? How about we just let Ginny pick her robes and work around the colors from there?" Hermione said. "Surely," she added, as though trying to convince herself. "And maybe we *should* at least look at some of the other sites she suggested. I'm not at all sure we should be imposing on Hogwarts, anyway. Especially so close to the beginning of a school year. Maybe she has a point..."

"The Leaky Cauldron?" Viktor asked.

"Nonsense. That would never be big enough," Hermione said dismissively.

"I meant for lunch. And you'll be happy to note, Moody was completely wrong," Viktor said, taking her elbow and steering her across the street.

"Wrong?" Hermione echoed, looking confused.

"I'm already wishing we had just gone to the registry and been done with it. Anything to avoid Madam Wilhelmina," he grumbled.

"Oh, she's not that bad," Hermione protested weakly.

"We just spent three hours discussing why our venue of choice is a- and I quote - classless, crowded, dank rathole compared to her marvelous preferred staging areas, which, coincidentally, cost a fortune - and another two being subjected to every nauseating shade of pink known to humankind. And she wants another appointment to pitch menus at us. And song lists. And invitation styles. And Heaven knows what else. At this rate, we'll be three months solid just setting things up. And then she had the gall to say getting the Bulgarian Minister and Dumbledore to do the ceremony was fatally unfashionable? Do you really want this woman in charge of anything bigger than a flea circus?" Viktor asked.

"She was the only one in the country who was available. No one else would be able to do it in less than a year. It's either let her, or postpone the wedding. Anyone else with enough contacts was booked solid and couldn't work us in, or couldn't pull off an entire wedding with that many people on such short notice. And August fifteenth was the only date that gave us half a hope of getting things mostly wrapped up for Moody while still being able to work the wedding and a decent honeymoon in before Quidditch season starts. Besides, we couldn't go gallivanting all over the countryside every time we needed to plan a detail. She was convenient. I'm afraid we're stuck," Hermione said ruefully. "I'm sure she'll

listen to reason. We're the clients, after all. It's our wedding. Besides. The alternative is setting Molly on it, and she would have a nervous breakdown and take half of us with her. I think we'll stick to keeping our friends our friends and hiring people to do the dirty work on this one."

"Hope you're right. I'm starving," Viktor complained.

"I am, too. I could positively murder a stew," Hermione said.

"A stew isn't what I would pick first," Viktor muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing."

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"You don't like it?" Hermione asked, her face falling. She dropped the handful of fabric she had gathered up from the skirt and stood stiffly in the robes she had slipped on just a few minutes before.

"I never said that, dear," Molly said soothingly, putting a finger to her lips and considering Hermione for a moment. "It's just... you don't think they're awfully... plain?" she prompted gently.

"Plain?" Hermione echoed, looking pained. "I... I... didn't think they were plain. Ginny, did you think they were plain?"

"I... err..." Ginny stammered, looking nervously from her mother to Hermione. "They're very nice. It's just... I think Mum was expecting something a little more formal," she added in a conciliatory tone.

"Formal? But... I... I wanted something simple. Elegant," Hermione said, sounding slightly stubborn. She smoothed down the straight skirt once more, then brushed some non-existent lint from the unadorned bodice.

"Well, it's only that your Yule Ball robes were fancier than that. And that was only a school dance," Molly pointed out. "This is your *wedding*, dear. People will expect a bit of... glamour, I suppose."

"Glamour," Hermione echoed, a hint of disbelief creeping into her voice. "I can't believe everyone has nothing better to do than lose sleep over how my wedding robes lack glamour."

“There *will* be certain expectations...” Molly began, but then she changed tacks. “Oh, come on, dear, it’s a once in a lifetime event! Live a little. Get something with a bit of sparkle. She needs a bit of sparkle, doesn’t she, Ginny? I bet Madam Malkin agrees,” Molly insisted, and the seamstress nodded her agreement.

“I can add a few things in a jiffy,” Madam Malkin pointed out. “Out of them,” she ordered kindly. “And let me know when you’ve picked a pattern and a fabric,” she added to Ginny.

“Well, they’re all so lovely. Are you sure you don’t mind what color I pick? I don’t want to clash with anything,” Ginny asked tentatively. “I admit I rather like the emerald sheath in the satin.”

“Wear what you like and what looks good on you. I won’t insist you match the flower arrangements. Silly. We haven’t even decided on a color scheme at any rate. We’ve slowly graduated from all shades of pink to several shades of purple. Viktor and I are trying to shove her beyond those two colors, but she doesn’t seem to be budging. Except for one scheme that featured a horrid pale yellow. We’re holding off on the colors until we can decide on a site, too. We haven’t seen more than three of her dozen suggestions, and we’ve hated them all. They’re all either too small to actually have any real fun in, or too... too... not us. And she’s bound and determined we shouldn’t have it at Hogwarts. I hope the next ones are an improvement. Or we’ll be having it out with her over staging it at Hogwarts.”

“And how will you know when it is ‘you’?” Molly asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“We just... will,” Hermione insisted, gathering up her skirts and ducking back behind the curtain.

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“I’ve seen Quidditch stadiums with less ceiling clearance,” Viktor muttered darkly, crossing his arms and eyeing the vaulted beams of the gothic cathedral.

“It’s a shade impersonal,” Hermione added, looking around the large building. Though it was adorned with fancy marble and stonework, with highly polished, dark wood trim, Hermione couldn’t help but feel it was a bit soulless. There was nothing of the cheerful, if somewhat battered and timeworn warmth and charm of the Great Hall in it. Though the room was far more elaborate than the old castle,

it seemed remarkably distant, like a haughty countess that wouldn't deign to speak to the commoners.

"It's a museum-quality room! It's one of the finest churches still standing in Britain!" Madam Wilhelmina countered. "It's the most positively elegant venue you could choose to host the wedding of the century! Kings and queens would get married here if they had an inkling it existed! The wood trim alone!"

"Then you can book them here when you do their weddings," Viktor bit off.

"It's not really what we had in mind, somehow. I still say Hogwarts—" Hermione began, but Madam Wilhelmina interrupted with a long, elegant finger, tipped with an immaculately manicured dusty pink fingernail.

"You don't like it. We can change it. It's the frescoes, isn't it? They're just too plain. I can have someone in here to redo them in a week—" the planner said, snapping her fingers.

"It's not the frescoes," Viktor said tartly. "It's that the place has no personality. The seats are a mile back from where we would actually be getting married, up there, and you could have a Quidditch match in the back and not interrupt the ceremony, this place is so big. And what emotional attachment are we supposed to have to this place, anyway? I never heard of it before you dragged us in here."

"I think what he's trying to say is that we had hoped to have our wedding somewhere special," Hermione amended.

"But this is special! Only one of Madam Wilhelmina's finest clients could manage to book this place," the witch sniffed. "They don't just let any old riffraff in here!"

"Ah. Well, that's a problem, then, because we know quite a lot of riffraff, and we still plan to invite them to the wedding," Viktor replied.

"And when I said special, I meant special to us, particularly. It's a lovely architectural example of gothic meets the Renaissance, I'll grant you that, and it's definitely got more than enough space, but if it doesn't even make us want to do something significant inside it, it's not much use as a wedding venue, now is it? We rather had our minds set on doing this wedding somewhere that our hearts were in. I can't see us doing that, here," Hermione explained, trying to sound conciliatory. "We were hoping for a bit of history with the place. Or at least some feeling that we wouldn't feel completely lost... Frankly, this place feels cold. I wouldn't hold a wake here, much less a wedding."

“No matter! We can pop in and look at five more of the potential sites today. The next venue is a lovely ballroom. Smaller than this, of course, but the personality! Personality dripping from the walls, love. You might have to trim down the guest list a shade, but trust me, it would be worth it. The inn around the ballroom is simply to die for! Turnbull’s Turnkey is absolutely slopping over the brim with character. Lots of intimate weddings staged, all participants guaranteed satisfaction,” Madame Wilhelmina said, recovering herself and making a quick note on her clipboard before bustling off again. “Come on! After me!”

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“This is...it?” Hermione asked, looking around the room.

“This is it,” Madam Wilhelmina said, beaming.

“It’s so small,” Hermione observed sadly. “We would have to cut down the guest list over half just to get everyone in here, without the chairs or tables. Really, Mr. Turnbull, it’s a positively gorgeous ballroom, and the hotel is simply charming, but I don’t think so. I hope you understand. We have a lot of people we want to invite.”

“Aye. I understand. Congratulations and good luck to yeh at any rate,” the burly proprietor said, offering a hand to each of them in turn and giving a good-natured shrug.

“But it’s a positive gem! The chandelier alone will have people straining their necks. And imagine the exclusivity! If you let slip that you need to trim the guest list, people will be selling their grandmothers to get an invitation! Especially once they find out where you’re having it!” Madam Wilhelmina argued, looking stricken.

“Wouldn’t want that weighing on my conscience,” Viktor sighed. “Grandmother selling... Do you happen to do other events? Anniversary parties and such? One of my teammates has a tenth anniversary coming up in a few months, and he’s been going mad trying to find a place like this. Wants to have a dinner,” Viktor said to Mr. Turnbull, ignoring the hard glare from the planner.

“Aye. Be glad teh give yeh a list of dates available and a price list before yeh go. Be glad teh put it on if the date’s open,” Turnbull said, turning for the door. “I’ll fetch it.”

“So, no negotiation on the guest list size? Madam Wilhelmina trilled. “I wish you had told me that.”

“Actually, we did,” Hermione said meekly.

“Repeatedly,” Viktor added. “You were too busy-”

“Right! Well, why don’t we focus on other things for a while, and I’ll see if I can’t get together another list of venues to look at in a week or two! Ones of suitable size. Once we have the color scheme and the rest of the wedding program in place, the venue is almost an afterthought, anyway,” Madam Wilhelmina said dismissively.

“Not to the bride and gr-” Hermione began, but she was cut off promptly.

“Let’s focus on the music for a while instead, hmm?” the planner said, sounding sweet as honey. “I can bang up a preliminary list and have that to you in a few days by owl.”

“Suits me. I’ve got paperwork I need to finish,” Viktor said, crossing his arms. “Wouldn’t want my paperwork to sit.”

“Actually, I can start on the catering menu at the same time. I’ll let you look at that when you come back to look at the rest of the venues in a couple of weeks or so,” Madam Wilhelmina said.

“Isn’t that cutting things awfully close? I mean, we have little more than a month until the wedding date now. I still have to get my robes fitted the final time, Viktor hasn’t even gotten his fitted the first time, and we have no venue picked out. We have to send the invitations out in three weeks, at the absolute latest. We can’t just put “Location to be announced” on them! We need music and food for the reception, and Viktor’s parents are coming to visit and to meet everyone the week after next!” Hermione said, sounding shrill.

“Madam Wilhelmina Pinkerton has never failed,” the elegant witch sniffed.

“First time for everything,” Viktor muttered.

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“I’m fine with the Weird Sisters playing. Really. I am. In fact, I rather like the idea, full circle and all that, but am I the only one cringing at this list?” Viktor asked, pushing his glass aside so they could put the piece of parchment between them on the dinner table.

“You’re fine with the Weird Sisters playing,” Hermione repeated, blinking. “I did not have that in mind for my walk down the aisle.”

“Not the ceremony! I don’t know what she was thinking, there. Well, actually, I do. She put a note there squealing about the fact that the only other wedding to ever be graced by *that* honor was lead singer’s, imagine the buzz. Like we care. I would just as soon leave it that way. I’m fine with having them at the reception. Just the reception. Are you... you actually... like... this list? Other than the completely insane idea of the Weird Sisters playing the Wedding March and the Recessional?” Viktor asked incredulously.

“Yes. No. I mean... I like the songs, but... it’s so... formal. All Beethoven and Bach and minuets and waltzes. Don’t misunderstand, I want some waltzes and formal dances, but... not nearly the whole thing! She has the Weird Sisters playing all of three songs. You hate it?” Hermione asked tentatively.

“Yes. It’s... not what I want,” Viktor said in a clipped tone, his chin shifting forward subtly. Ron and Harry, seated across the table from them, gave each other a look, then looked back to the couple, who were totally ignoring the rest of the room, engrossed in the list.

“We’ll talk to her about it when we have the next appointment, then,” Hermione said, rolling up the parchment. “We have to hammer out the location once and for all, at the very least. We need to make out the invitations. What?!” she asked sharply, noticing Harry and Ron’s scrutiny.

“Nothing!” Harry protested. “Your parents still coming day after tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Viktor said.

“Ah. Be nice to finally meet them. Pity they had to delay coming two days. Saw Ginny’s robes. Nice,” Ron said in an effort to change the subject.

“Speaking of which, did you reschedule getting your robes? You still haven’t gotten them fitted, you know,” Hermione said.

“Yes. I can hardly help that Millhouse got the flu and I had to work a double shift to fill in for him!” Viktor protested.

“I never said you could!” Hermione countered.

“So! Your parents are staying a whole four days?” Harry asked loudly, sounding slightly desperate to switch the topic back.

“Four days,” Hermione answered instead, biting her lip and looking apprehensive.

“Sounds nice,” Harry said weakly, turning his attention back to his plate.

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“Going to strangle one another before it’s over, they are,” Ron said, staring into the cold fireplace in the common den and nursing his Butterbeer.

“What makes you say that?” Harry asked, swallowing a bit of his coffee.

“They’re both tight-lipped as all heck these last two weeks, especially. And they’re snapping at each other like a couple of cranky dugbogs. That dippy wedding planner’s to blame, mostly, if you ask me. To hear them tell it, she isn’t listening when they tell her what they want. Doesn’t even want them to have it at Hogwarts, like they planned. And did you see those awful colors she suggested? Bleh!” Ron said, making a face. “But they’re afraid to tell her off for fear of having her quit completely.”

“They were pretty horrid. And that’s from me, who’s practically colorblind. They’ve all got nice robes, though. I liked Ginny’s. Green looks good with that Weasley hair. And Hermione’s... wow. Your mum was right to tell her to go for the fancier ones. Madam Malkin put all these little glass beads on it. Hermione complained she would look like a chandelier until she put it on. Even Hermione has to admit it’s beautiful on her. And the four of us, the fellas, how can we go wrong with black robes? Mention her robes, you’ll see. Grins like a Cheshire cat when she thinks about them,” Harry pointed out.

“Hmmp!” Moody said, not elaborating any further before tipping his flask and hunching his shoulders even more in the overstuffed armchair he occupied.

“Well, she’s about to have kittens over Viktor’s parents coming. She told me. She won’t tell Viktor,” Ron said.

“Why? They liked her well enough when she went to meet them in Bulgaria! Why’s she all nervous, now?” Harry asked.

“Apparently, she’s worried they won’t like anything about the wedding... little danger there. They haven’t got much of the wedding actually planned but what they’re wearing and who is doing what, so what’s not to like? And I gather Hermione’s thinking the rest of us may say or do the wrong thing and blow it

completely. Seems to think her shaky popularity with the Krums is hanging by a mighty thin thread. And in her eyes, we're all running about blindly with scissors. Say or do the wrong thing and snip! Her future in-laws hate her guts. Or worse. Wash their hands of the whole thing. Harry, you know as well as I do she lost a few nights worrying about the possibility that they might disown the two of them completely. She thinks they're just saying they like her for Viktor's sake," Ron said. "So, try not to be an embarrassment, eh, Harry?"

"Speak for yourself," Harry said with a laugh.

"Rubbish, weddings," Moody snarled. "People lose their fool heads. Worrying over nonsense!"

"Hardly nonsense when you think you might be responsible for someone's parents never speaking to them again," Harry insisted. "Maybe running off the only grandparents your future children will ever have. Hermione knows how it feels to lose your parents. Don't imagine she wants Viktor to find out how it feels."

"Stupidity, weddings! Don't see why two normally sensible people are going in for such frippery!" Moody said, sounding as though he were in an even more ill mood than usual.

"Well, most people kind of like sharing the first day of the rest of their lives together with friends and family. I gather it's rather popular. Even among sensible people," Harry mused. "You could at least pretend to be happy for them. Even if you hate weddings. They're trying to get things here wrapped up, plan a wedding on short notice, and get a house ready and start new jobs. Hermione's already changed her mind twice on the color scheme of the paint. Cut them a bit of slack, hmm?"

"Their own faults," Moody growled. "Nobody said they had to go running off willy-nilly and get married as soon as they got half a chance! Right this instant! They could have stuck around beyond the next new recruit enrollment date. No excuse for rushing!"

Ron narrowed his eyes and gave Moody close scrutiny. "One would almost suspect you don't want the two of them getting married at all," Ron said, looking over the old Auror.

Moody's normal eye widened in surprise. "What? Balderdash! You've been nipping at something other than Butterbeer," he protested. If Harry hadn't known better, he could have sworn he saw a slight blush on the leathery cheeks.

“Yeah... you know, the more I think about it, you’ve been complaining about this every since they said they were going to do it now and not wait. All that talk about them being too young to be getting married and wasting their money on nonsense things for a wedding... Ever since they turned down the jobs and told you why,” Ron said. “You’re jealous, pure and simple,” he added adamantly.

“Has young Weasley taken a lick to his great pudding of a head recently?” Moody asked Harry indignantly, standing. “Because he’s scrambled his brain! Jealous! Hmmp,” Moody added, shaking his head and giving a derisive snort before hurrying off.

“He only ran away because I’m right,” Ron said after the footsteps faded.

“Jealous? I’m with Moody on this one. Have you taken a lick?” Harry said lightly.

“I’ve got nothing to take back. He’s jealous for Viktor’s sake. Harry, who’s he worked with the longest, out of all of us? Us younger ones, I mean,” Ron said.

“Tonks,” Harry replied.

“And right behind her?” Ron pressed.

“Viktor,” Harry said.

“And while he’s been close enough to Tonks, who do you think he really has a bit of a soft spot for? And Tonks isn’t the one getting married right now. Ole Tonks doesn’t take things seriously enough for Moody sometimes. Well, none of us do, according to him, but Viktor’s his pet pupil, even if he wouldn’t admit it for a million Galleons. Viktor actually took all that constant vigilance business to heart and never laughed at him for it. Asked for more training than Moody doled out on his own. Paid attention to detail. And Viktor doesn’t have any folks around here, either, so he was almost always here. Mark my words, Harry. Our old leatherneck there is a bit squishy in the center over Viktor. Hermione, too, but Viktor especially. He’s only complaining about all of this because them getting married so soon means they’re moving out of here. He’s awfully attached to Viktor, though,” Ron mused.

“You know... that’s just crazy enough that it might be true,” Harry said, his jaw going slack.

“Well, it’s Mum’s theory, not mine. Sounded nutty to me at first, too. It’s just that tonight I realized she might be right. Every time you bring it up around Moody, he

goes on about how silly it is. Fusses about the whole thing. Closer it gets, the more he fusses. He's not about to say he's going to miss them. You know Moody only gets worked up over things he cares about. I touched a nerve," Ron said, draining his glass.

"I'll be," Harry said softly. "Who'd a thunk it? Moody's an old softie."

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"That's just... uncanny," Ginny said, stirring her punch with a finger, then tasting it.

"What is?" Neville asked, draping an arm around her shoulders.

"How Viktor is so much like Petar. I mean, that's going to be Viktor about twenty years from now. I thought Hermione was exaggerating," Ginny said, gesturing with her cup across the room, where Arthur was enthusiastically greeting Viktor's parents. "Not so much different from right now, but still. If it weren't for the broken nose, he would be a near-perfect copy. Well, that and the smile. You notice Petar's is lopsided?"

"I hadn't noticed. If you've seen either of them crack a smile since they've been here, it's more than I've seen," Neville observed.

"Well, they did just get in an hour ago. It's a long trip. They had to use ship and Floo. You know the Floo network still isn't up to scratch after the war. I think they had to bounce all over the continent just to get here. And considering they can't understand a lot of what we're saying without Viktor translating it and the fact that they don't know most of us from Merlin except for Viktor and Hermione, it's hardly as though we can expect them to be all grins twenty minutes into this thing. He smiled a bit when he came in. We really should get over there and introduce ourselves," Ginny prodded.

"They intimidate me," Neville said quietly.

"Well, Viktor seemed awfully intimidating until we found out he was a mere mortal, too. Come on, they're just people. With a son. That's about to get married," Ginny soothed. "And you're about to stand up with him at his wedding."

"Fine way to make me feel like a coward," Neville sighed. "Okay, you talked me into it."

The two of them made their way across the room to join Mr. Weasley, the Krums, and Viktor, and Ginny waited patiently for an opening in Mr. Weasley's prattle to say, "We came over to say hello." Hermione hung nearby, looking nervous.

"Ah. Go ahead. I'm just going to get some of that," Viktor said, pointing to her cup and striding off toward the refreshment table.

"Err..." Ginny started to protest, but it died on her lips when she found herself pinned by Mrs. Krum's dark gaze. Ginny fished around in her memory for the woman's first name. "Ekaterina!" She flushed a bit when she realized she had blurted it aloud. "Hello... I'm Ginny... Ginny-" Ginny broke off to swap her punch to her left hand, so she could offer her right, cursing herself for not doing it earlier. She snatched it away when she realized that the glass had left it cold and wet with condensation. Finding no napkin handy, she hurriedly wiped it on her own robe, noticing that Hermione looked positively mortified when Ginny offered her hurriedly dried hand.

"Veasley," Ekaterina supplied, clasping her hand weakly and drawing back quickly, almost as though touching a dead fish.

*Well, I certainly offered it to her like one,* Ginny thought. "Eh? How did you...?" she began, fading away again when Ekaterina's dark brow arched questioningly. Ekaterina gave her a pointed look. *I've botched it already, somehow... Hermione's going to kill me.*

"Hair. Red hair. Veasley. Ginny Veasley?" Ekaterina said, and the second eyebrow joined the first.

"Oh! Right! The red hair! Of course! I suppose Viktor told you we all had the red hair. That's right, I'm Ginny Veas... er, Weasley, and this is Neville. Neville Longbottom," Ginny said hurriedly, trying to mask her nerves and doing a poor job of it.

"Hello," Neville squeaked, sticking his hand out and giving both Petar and Ekaterina a handshake consisting of far too much enthusiastic pumping. "Pleased to meet you," he added, still pumping. Petar finally steadied Neville's pumping hand with his left. "Sorry," Neville apologized lamely.

"Tova e dobre, is okay," Petar assured him, in a voice that was surprisingly soft and friendly, given the solemnly thoughtful frown he wore.

"Did you have a nice trip?" Neville asked, withdrawing his hand.

“Well, that’s two Weasleys down, and more of them trailing in, I see,” Arthur said pleasantly, oblivious to Hermione’s red cheeks. “Come here, Molly girl, and meet Petar and Ekaterina!” he called out when Molly and the twins entered. “Neville was just asking about their trip. This is my wife, Molly,” he added, giving Molly a squeeze when she came up.

“Oh, you’ve got to be Petar and Ekaterina, so nice to finally meet you! Hello, Hermione dear. Just like one of our own, she is. Those are our boys Fred and George over there talking to Viktor. Ron and Harry were supposed to be right behind us, late as usual. Hope you had a pleasant trip! Did you?” Molly reeled off, leaving the two of them looking slightly overwhelmed.

“Dobar den... hello, nice to meet you... err... ne razbiram,” Petar said, looking at Hermione, drawing his thick eyebrows together and looking thoroughly puzzled.

“Trip... trip... I can’t remember the Bulgarian word for trip... I’m sure they got it just fine up to trip...” Hermione said in a rush, reminding Ginny altogether too much of how she used to panic at the thought of not doing well on exams. Hermione threw up a hand and frantically waved Viktor back over.

“What?” Viktor asked, and he looked almost ridiculously relieved when Hermione explained. He gave his parents a quick explanation and a look of comprehension came over both their faces.

“Oh, long trip. Two hours on ship, and hop, hop, hop by Floo. So long, now. So many holes in route,” Ekaterina explained.

“Well, still, you got here in one piece, and that’s what counts,” Arthur said cheerily. Ginny looked to the doorway, and saw Moody, Ron and Harry entering. Even from here, she could tell that Moody was muttering and grumbling like an ill-tempered tomcat. Harry and Ron were shushing him, rather unsuccessfully. Ginny prayed that they would have him silenced by the time they got within earshot.

“They had a rough time even finding a ship going in the right direction. A lot of the regular passenger routes from Eastern Europe fell through during the war. Can’t really Apparate that far when you don’t know where you’re going. Wasn’t safe,” Viktor said, laying a protective hand on his mother’s shoulder. “Um, Mama, this is Ron. Ron Weasley, of course. And that’s Harry Potter, I imagine you remember him from Hogwarts. Taller now. And this is-”

“Mad-Eye!” Ekaterina said fiercely, snatching up his hand and giving it a firm

squeeze. So firm that it left her knuckles white and made the grizzled old wizard start.

“Ease up, Mama, you’re not out to break his hand!” Viktor scolded. “And I imagine he prefers Alastor,” he added, coloring.

“Wrote about you. A lot,” Ekaterina said, loosening her grip slightly and peering into Moody’s face with keen interest. She gave him an obvious appraisal, eyebrow going up slightly as she seemingly catalogued each scar and mark, until she was satisfied she had taken in every detail. Her jaw shifted forward subtly, and she took on a stubbornly defiant look, eyes narrowed slightly, as though daring Moody to speak or call her to task for it. Ginny couldn’t help thinking that even Moody could be cowed by this petite woman in a standoff.

Moody considered her back for a moment. “Don’t think I don’t know even you call me that half the time behind my back,” he said gruffly. “Fits, don’t it?” he said with what passed for a short laugh. Ekaterina’s face didn’t budge. “Call me whatever’s easier. Two of you produced a hell of a son. Wish I had a dozen like him,” he said solemnly, and Ekaterina’s face softened slightly. “Going to be hard to replace these two. They’re all hamscam fools like Potter and Weasley these days,” Moody added, not unkindly, as Ekaterina turned loose of his hand.

She pounced on Harry’s next. “Harry Potter,” she murmured, giving him the same narrow-eyed appraisal, making Harry feel like a bug pinned to a wall. He nearly winced when she squeezed his hand the same way, a hint of desperation to it. “Four years,” Ekaterina said softly, looking from Harry back to Moody.

Harry racked his brain, gaped mutely for a moment, then realized what she was referring to. “And I appreciate every single one Viktor spent here more than you can imagine,” Harry said sincerely. Seemingly satisfied, Ekaterina nodded and dropped his hand. Petar followed with murmured and slightly less confrontational greetings for all three of them. The tension drained as they all lapsed back into small talk for a few minutes, mostly Arthur and Molly enthusing about the wedding. “Well, I’m going to pop over there and get myself some of that punch, anyone else?” Harry volunteered after a while.

“I could use a refill,” Ginny said, considering her empty cup.

“Me, too,” Hermione said, seemingly torn between standing there and practically fleeing with the other two.

“Whew! Anybody else think Ekaterina could give Snape glaring lessons? She makes him look like a rank amateur by comparison when it comes to giving you

the staredown,” Harry said once they were out of earshot.

“Harry!” Hermione said sharply.

“I don’t mean anything bad by it, I just mean she gives new meaning to the word ‘intense’. No wonder Viktor boggles opposing players and used to scare the bejeezus out of me. He took intimidation lessons from her. Little surprise you’re nervous. Guess it makes it harder with the language barrier,” Harry said sympathetically while filling his cup. “Suppose we know where he got the chin thing, too, now. Looks like Petar, mostly, but definitely has some of his mama in him, doesn’t he?”

“What language barrier? They don’t need much English. They all speak fluent ‘eyebrow’. Speak volumes just by looking at you,” Ginny observed.

“I still can’t read them,” Hermione said anxiously. “I can’t tell if they’re just being awkward or wishing everyone they meet would drop dead.”

“Hermione... they’re meeting the people that kept their son away from home and in the middle of a war for four years... Bound to be awkward for them,” Harry said gently.

“If Mama wanted anybody to drop dead, she would just tell them so to their face,” Viktor said, stepping up behind Hermione. “By the way, you might want to keep it down. They don’t speak fantastic English, but they’re not deaf, either,” he added lightly. “For that matter, Papa would too. Politely feigning a liking for someone they detest isn’t exactly their style. Mama once told the Minister of Finance that he was a fool and he should do something extremely rude with his canape at a banquet for the national team. When the Minister told Papa he should do something about his wife’s mouth, Papa told him to do something even ruder with it. Trust me. If she hated your guts, she wouldn’t hesitate to let you know.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Oh, Heavens, Hagrid’s talking to them,” Hermione said, going rigid. “Hadn’t you better get over there?”

“And I’m sure he’ll acquit himself quite nicely. He’s capable of introducing himself. Relax. You act like we’re setting mad dogs on my parents. They’re just people. Next you’ll be tackling Minerva and Dumbledore over there and lecturing them about behaving themselves. If they need me to translate, they’ll yell. They get by better than they let on, sometimes. And what’s the matter with Fred and George? They hardly seemed themselves when I talked to them,” Viktor said, picking up one of the grapes from the fruit tray and chewing on it thoughtfully.

“Ron tells me Molly threatened them within an inch of their lives if they didn’t behave with absolute decorum this evening,” Harry said.

“Really? I think Papa’s rather disappointed they haven’t lived up to my letters. I think he practically expected them to be swinging from the rafters. So... who are we missing, yet? Tonks and Martino? I’m wanting them to put out the rest of the buffet,” Viktor said, looking over the crowd in the room, taking stock.

“How can you think about eating at a time like this?” Hermione asked.

“Easy. I’m hungry,” Viktor replied. “We worked through lunch, remember?”

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“Great news, positively wonderful! Congratulations! I look forward to it more than you can imagine,” Kingsley Shacklebolt enthused, shaking Hermione and Viktor’s hands in turn. “Sorry I have to leave the party so early. Duty. Nice to finally meet your parents.”

“Thanks for coming while you could, Kingsley. See you later,” Viktor said.

“Is this some kind of disturbing trend, or am I imagining it?” Hermione said, watching him go and taking a sip of her punch.

“Trend of what?” Viktor asked.

“Everyone who has come over here to congratulate us has acted like our wedding really is the event of the century,” Hermione said. “If I didn’t know better, I would swear Madam Wilhelmina had gotten to all of them.”

“Nonsense. Harry’s will be,” Viktor replied dismissively.

“You can hardly blame people for latching onto a bit of unadulterated happiness after such a rough few years,” said a very familiar voice. “Even if it’s not their happiness,” Dumbledore amended, sinking into one of the open chairs across the table. “Why else would one small boy living be such a cause for celebration all those years ago?” While the old Headmaster looked older and more timeworn than she remembered from her school years, he still had that familiar, vaguely playful twinkle in his eyes when he smiled.

“And if a wedding’s not a bit of happiness, pray tell what is, Miss Granger?” Minerva McGonagall added, taking the chair beside him. The professor was positively beaming, as though she had been assured the House Quidditch Cup

wouldn't be leaving her mantle for a decade, at least.

"At the moment, planning it is anything but happy. Does the offer to use Hogwarts still stand?" Hermione asked with a sigh.

"If you still wish to use it, I should think the old place could use a touch of celebration. Surely you two wouldn't deprive me of the privilege of providing the staging area for the event of the century, would you? I hardly think Dobby and the rest would be able to contain themselves, given a chance to help put that on. Do you still need an escort down the aisle, or have I been planned right out of it as being too tattered and highly unfashionable?" Dumbledore asked with a smile, straightening his tall hat.

"You don't get off that easily. You're walking me down the aisle if I have to drag you kicking and screaming," Hermione replied. "But seriously. It's only a wedding. Nothing special about it."

"Only a wedding! Joy's contagious, Miss Granger. Everyone's hoping to come down with a case of it," Minerva said, nodding for emphasis. "Everyone's looking forward to this. We've had two dozen inquiries into the rooms and you haven't even sent out the invitations, yet!"

"First one since the war. No one dared hope we would have one this soon," Dumbledore added conspiratorially, leaning in closer. "We all worried it might be years and years before we had anything like this. Might be years until the next one, for that matter. And one with a Durmstrang graduate and a Hogwarts graduate! Many of us never dared hope we would see the likes of that in our lifetimes, much less six years after reviving the Tournament! But young people can always overcome old prejudices a lot easier than those of us who are so old and stubborn and set in our ways. The Tournament certainly opened a lot of doors we never expected. Thank goodness, or we would have been a lot more shorthanded, particularly the Order. It's a case of life going on, better than before," he explained, nodding sagely. "I think you two will find we all needed a bit of assurance, there, and it's quite special in the extreme. Quite special," Dumbledore repeated, studying them both over his spectacles. "I enjoyed talking to your parents again, Viktor. Last time, the circumstances weren't nearly so joyous. Not nearly."

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"I'm afraid we haven't actually planned much of anything," Hermione confessed in a low voice, barely above a whisper.

“Yeh are havin’ it at Hogwarts...? Wouldn’ be right ter have it anywhere else...”  
Hagrid said, crouching down slightly, so he could whisper back.

“I expect we will. We’ve hated everything else she’s shown us. Or they won’t hold the half of the people we need to invite. I’m having nightmares about the date rolling around and nothing actually being set up, by now,” Hermione confided, chewing her lower lip.

“What’s ter plan, really? House-elves would take care o’ most o’ the reception, if yeh would just let ‘em,” Hagrid said.

“We still need to get them the supplies. And tell them what to fix. There has to be some kind of organized menu. And even the house-elves couldn’t be expected to do the whole thing. We did some figuring. It would take them two days solid to prepare enough food and drink for that many people, even if they weren’t responsible for anything else. They’re going to need some outside help. At this point, *we* need some outside help. Between this and trying to get the house ready... we’re going mad,” Hermione admitted. “Tomorrow, we become the official owners of an almost completely empty house still in need of painting. The fact that we own practically nothing that could be called furniture isn’t helping. A few things in storage for me, that’s about it. And Viktor’s trunk could hardly be termed furniture.”

“If yeh need anythin’, anythin’ at all, yeh let us know. Olympe said ter tell yeh the same. Anythin’,” Hagrid repeated.

“It’s furniture shopping tomorrow. I have half a mind to just let him go with Ekaterina and pick out all the furniture and forget it. If it’s anything like picking out paint... Viktor’s going to strangle me before I settle on anything. I’ve sent him back with the paint twice already. At least we had the good sense to say that we’re just going to worry about the essentials for right now. Leave the other rooms for later. Pity we can’t do the same with the wedding. Couldn’t the rest of you be persuaded to do it without us?” Hermione asked in a strained voice.

Hagrid gave a rumbling laugh. “Have a weddin’ an’ no bride an’ groom? Can’t have our Hermione an’ our Viktor gettin’ married with no big weddin’!”

“Seems the more we try to get things ready, the less actually gets done. And I’m not sure exactly where I stand with them,” Hermione said, nodding her head to where the Krums were talking with Fred and George, who were still being absolute models of decorum. Molly had given them more than enough stern, reminding looks over the evening. “Actually, the last couple of weeks, I’m not entirely sure where I stand with Viktor, either. He doesn’t seem too happy with

me, lately,” Hermione said glumly, looking across the room at Viktor, who was having a conversation with Remus Lupin.

“Just goes ter show, I was right when I said it, six years ago,” Hagrid said. “The less yeh lot 'ave ter do with these foreigners, the happier yeh'll be. Yeh can't trust any of 'em.” Hermione laughed weakly. “Oh, cheer up, Hermione. The two of yeh 'ave already bin through more'n most couples 'ave in fifty years. Don' tell me yeh'll let a little thing like plannin' a weddin' scare yeh off.”

“Maybe that's the problem. We've already used up all our crisis management skills. We're tired of people wanting so much of us. I never expected there would be so many... expectations... attached to the two of us marrying. Seems everyone wants a lot out of this wedding but the two of us,” Hermione said ruefully.

“Best thing that's happened in almost a decade! Best thing since Harry's come back ter us, sure! Never thought I'd live ter see it in my lifetime! I've seen the Tournament an' now, this! I'll 'ave yeh know, Olympe an' I intend ter be there with bells on! Can hardly wait!” Hagrid said, all cheer and enthusiasm.

“Wish I could say the same,” Hermione murmured, taking another sip of punch. “I'm beginning to wish we hadn't said, ‘Oh, we can plan a wedding in two months, can't we?’ like it was nothing. Because according to everyone else, it's not ‘nothing’. It's something. It's a very big something.”

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“It's just...” Lupin began.

“Wonderful?” Hermione supplied, looking at Moody, who stood by, listening in.

“I was going to say ‘spectacular’, but I suppose ‘wonderful’ will do,” Lupin replied, looking slightly puzzled. “I imagine you're bored with hearing how excited everyone is about your wedding, by now.”

“It's getting to be a familiar line, I'll give you that,” Viktor agreed.

“I suppose the two of you will be pretty busy, getting the wedding organized and getting things wrapped up here. And a new house, to boot. Decided where you're going on the honeymoon, yet?” Remus asked pleasantly.

“Hadn't given it much thought, yet. We might not even leave right after the wedding. Might wait a few days. Just stay at the house. Provided we get some

furniture into it. Institutional living doesn't exactly lend itself to gathering up lots of furniture along the way," Viktor admitted. Moody gave a nearly inaudible snort.

"What have you got, already?" Remus said.

"Me, personally? The single bed I had at home, if I asked for it. I never had the heart to tell them my feet hung off the end if I stretched out all the way after fifth year. So... A trunk," Viktor said after a moment's consideration. "And that's admittedly seen better days. One of the handles is nearly off."

"I know that feeling," Remus said, nodding. "You?"

"My old school trunk has about had it, too. Not much more besides that. Some furniture I kept. Not much, though. A couple of tables. A desk. It costs too much to store. I didn't feel like keeping many things," Hermione replied quietly. "Seemed easier to sell most of it."

"I understand. Sometimes it's better to take more memories and fewer things when you leave," Remus said, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder for a second. He smiled reassuringly, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "If it's any consolation, it hurts less, after a while. More good memories, fewer bad ones. The good ones start crowding the rest out. You'll see. In a few years, the two of you will have made so many good memories, there won't be much room for the bad ones."

"Thank you, Remus," Hermione said, "and thank you for coming."

"Safe trip back. See you in a few weeks. A few very short weeks," Viktor added, more to himself.

"My pleasure. It's grand to have something to really celebrate for a change, after all this gloom and doom and rebuilding," Remus said. "Moody," he added, nodding his goodbye to the older man.

"Lupin," Moody returned the gesture.

"Did you want something?" Viktor asked Moody once Lupin had gone.

"Not a thing. Just wondering when you two are going to call it a night," Moody amended.

"I can't speak for her, but I'm going to gather up my parents, put them to bed, and then put myself to bed. We have to get up at the crack of dawn tomorrow.

Full day,” Viktor replied, stifling a yawn against the back of his hand.

“I’ll do the same. I’m tired,” Hermione admitted.

“Wearing yourselves out with all this fool wedding planning,” Moody observed, snorting again.

“And the house. Don’t forget the house,” Viktor said wearily, leaning over to give Hermione a quick kiss on the cheek. “Night, all.”

“Goodnight,” Hermione murmured, heading for the stairs.

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“And the best thing about this place-” the real estate agent enthused, before being cut off.

“We’ve already bought and paid. Cut the sales pitch, Beaumont,” Viktor said.

“I thought your parents might like to hear a little something about the house,” Beaumont said, flashing what was meant to be a winning smile.

“They’ve got eyes of their own. And mercifully, they don’t speak much English, so a third of it would go over their heads,” Viktor said sharply.

“But-” Beaumont protested, his smile not budging.

“I already helped buy them a house in Bulgaria a few years back and they’re not looking to move,” Viktor added, shifting his chin forward. Anyone who knew him very well knew that when the chin shifted forward, the mind was made up and the heels were dug in, as well.

*There’s the obstinate chin again. I’ve seen more of that chin in the last month than I ever care to in a lifetime. Ekaterina’s chin,* Hermione thought, sighing to herself.

“If I can ever interest the two of you in a summer house...” Beaumont said, changing tacks.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, just give us the deed!” Hermione found herself snapping impatiently. She felt slightly ashamed when she saw that Petar and Ekaterina had stopped their wanderings through the kitchen and were looking on curiously.

“Let us sign already and get lost. It’s seven in the morning, we have a long day ahead, and I am running out of patience with you,” Viktor added, raising a warning eyebrow, his voice dropping.

Beaumont made no move to pull anything from his pocket. “Okay, okay, but if you ever-”

“If the words ‘resell’, ‘summer house’, ‘vacation cottage’, ‘bungalow’ or any words other than ‘Here’s your deed, sign here, have a nice day’ come out of your mouth in the next two minutes, I’m going to eviscerate you,” Viktor said, his voice so low that Beaumont had to lean in to hear. The sparkling smile wavered slightly.

“Here’s your deed, sign here. Have a nice day,” Beaumont said hastily, handing over the rolled up parchment from his robe pocket. He barely stuck around long enough to witness the signing.

“Well, we own a house. Now what?” Hermione said quietly, clutching the deed.

“Put something in it, I suppose,” Viktor said, considering the empty living room. “As soon as you decide what colors you want it.”

“It’s your house, too. You could suggest something,” Hermione said.

“I wouldn’t give a flying fig about what color the house is,” Viktor replied, raising an eyebrow and folding his arms across his chest.

“More? Upstairs? This big?” Petar’s voice came from the hall.

“Da. Attic. Closet. Two more rooms,” Viktor called back.

“We’ll stop by and I’ll look at the paint samples again,” Hermione said.

“I can pick it up sometime in the next couple of days,” Viktor said. “Then, I’m painting it or bust, with or without you. I’m not going back a fourth time.”

“Need this much? Two of you?” Petar asked, frowning worriedly and pulling his brows together.

“Need a guest room. For when you two come,” Viktor explained, sounding weary.

“Rest wasted?” Petar pressed.

“Not wasted. It will not always be just two of us,” Viktor elaborated. Petar hardly

looked placated. The worried frown relaxed only a small notch. “No point in moving again. Later. When we run out of rooms. We liked this one. Spend the money now so we don’t have to later.”

“Lot of money,” Ekaterina said, joining them from the kitchen once more, wearing a near-identical frown.

Viktor heaved a sigh. “Let us worry about that.”

“Beautiful. Big. But a lot of money,” Ekaterina said again, folding her arms much like Viktor’s and giving a worried shake of her dark head.

“Would you two stop worrying about our bank accounts? We have plenty to live on. Even after the wedding, the house and some things to go in it,” Viktor pleaded.

Petar and Ekaterina looked dubious, at best, but Ekaterina unfolded her arms and said, “Vot else? Next?”

“Furniture. Please don’t catalog every Galleon spent,” Viktor replied.

“Am your mama,” Ekaterina said with a shrug, heading for the door before it was out of her mouth, as though it were the supreme trumping argument.

“Going to be a long day,” Viktor muttered under his breath.

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“Does this hutch do something positively mesmerizing, because if it does, I missed it when I looked at it earlier,” Viktor said, laying a hand on Hermione’s arm.

“Hmmm? What’s that supposed to mean?” Hermione asked, looking up at him.

“Well, you’ve been standing here, staring at that for the last five minutes, so, do tell. What’s so fascinating?” Viktor pressed.

“It’s beautiful. I’d love to get it. But we can’t afford it right now. Or rather, we *shouldn’t* afford it right now. It’s nonessential. It would look nice in the living room, but we don’t need it. We made a budget, and we said we were going to stick to it. Maybe later,” Hermione said firmly.

“Maybe in a couple of months, if we have anything left over from the wedding

budget. And we should. We probably set aside enough for two weddings. Even Madam Wilhelmina's weddings. Bed?" Viktor asked.

"Yes, I wish I were back in mine," Hermione lamented.

"I meant, do you want to go pick out a bed, now? Unless you want to sleep on the floor..." Viktor cajoled. "Big as that sofa is, I don't think we can both sleep on it at once."

"How much is left in the furniture budget?" Hermione asked.

"More than enough for two beds. If we take care of the beds and a couple of bedside tables, that should do it for now. That would be our bedroom and a guest bedroom. Spare, but that's all we absolutely need right now. Between trunks and closets, there's plenty of storage. We have somewhere to sit and eat, something to eat off of, something to cook the something to eat in, and somewhere to sit in the living room. And a few bookshelves for good measure. The rest can wait, can't it? So my parents don't have a heart attack about the possibility of us standing in the charity line before we start work?" Viktor prompted, gazing across the store to where his parents stood, browsing the furniture in between bouts of watching Viktor and Hermione instead.

"The rest can wait. I couldn't possibly furnish an entire house in one go, even with an unlimited budget. I can't even decide on colors. I've never done anything like this before. Are we going to pay for it and tell them to hold it until we paint?" Hermione asked.

"Seems easiest. Come on. Beds," Viktor prodded, nudging her toward the bedroom furniture.

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"Green. They're all green. Just pick one," Viktor pleaded.

"We're going to spend a lot of time in this room, I'd like to get the color right," Hermione argued, considering the paint sticks.

"A great deal of it asleep, so it won't matter," Viktor said, earning a hard look. "Just saying," he added, raising his hands.

"Which one do you like best?" Hermione asked.

"Is it a trick question? Because they all look the same to me," Viktor replied,

earning another look. “That one, then.”

“Are you just saying that so we can leave?” Hermione said.

“Yes. Because I wouldn’t turn around for the difference. Pick one, already. We have fifteen minutes before we’re due to meet Ginny and Neville at Madam Malkin’s, and as you keep pointing out, I need to be measured, so she knows what size I need. And we need to give her the deposit on all the robes. Then Madam Wilhelmina after lunch. We actually need to get something set in concrete, you know. Like a location,” Viktor said.

“Hunter green, then. That one. One of us will pick it up, sometime in the next few days,” Hermione said with a sigh, handing over one of the paint sticks. “Suppose your parents are just thrilled. Watching me waffle over furniture and paint all morning. Almost as much fun as watching paint dry.”

“They’ve seen worse, I’m sure. A few matches come to mind...” Viktor allowed, steering Hermione toward the door by her arm.

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“Surely she’s not that bad!” Neville exclaimed.

“Every bit that bad,” Viktor argued, shaking his head.

“I admit, she is a piece of work, Madam Wilhelmina is,” Hermione said. “Now, shush about her. There’s the shop,” she added, pointing to the door. The entire group, Neville, Ginny, Viktor, Hermione, Petar and Ekaterina filed into the cushy lounge, and in short order, Madam Wilhelmina fluttered in among a swirl of baby pink satin.

“Running errands with part of the marital party, hmm? I wouldn’t worry about a thing, pets, it’s all worked out. Not only do I have the perfect site picked out, I have the playlists finalized for the performers. And,” Madam Wilhelmina said, looking positively rapturous, “the catering-”

“Look, we’re having it at Hogwarts, and that’s final,” Hermione said firmly.

“We’ll talk about that after you look at the playlists,” Madam Wilhelmina countered, deftly handing out the appropriate sheets of parchment. “And here’s the menu.”

“About the music... I’ve been thinking-” Viktor began to protest, but the wedding

planner simply plowed right in again.

“And I’ve decided the Bulgarian Minister simply has to go from the ceremony. It’s simply *de rigueur* that you have the perfect ceremony. I’ll let Dumbledore pass, he is, after all, a well respected, if eccentric, oddball figure in this part of the wizard world,” Madam Wilhelmina insisted, her jewelry clanging together musically. “He’ll do. Some people would even envy you the chance to get married by him, but I’d prefer one of the more dashing Wizengamot members, myself. That new member would cut quite the figure in rose dress robes. It would bring out his eyes.”

“We wanted the ceremony to stand here and in Bul-” Viktor said distractedly, while skimming the pieces of parchment.

“You can have your tatty little Minister do a private ceremony. Problem solved,” the planner said, waving her hand as though wiping a troublesome smudge off a window.

“Now, see here! I’ve known Minister Oblansk since I was in school, and he’s a member of the Wizengamot-”

“Oh, no one here cares if he’s a member of a foreign Wizengamot. It’s hardly an Order of Merlin, now is it?” Madam Wilhelmina said sweetly.

“He’s got-”

“It’s not as though the right people here are going to care what he’s got back home,” the perfunctory witch interrupted.

“Britain awarded him one,” Viktor muttered through clenched teeth. “After the war.”

“Still, he’s hardly the dashing figure Dumbledore could cut if he lets me have an hour of his time, I put the properly spun biography in the wedding program, and lets me set a stylist on him,” Madam Wilhelmina insisted. “That beard’s going to need professional fluffing. And the ratty hat is definitely gone!”

“Look! You-” Viktor spluttered, before Hermione interjected.

“I like the menu!” Hermione blurted out hurriedly. “It’s fine. We can take this menu. It’s something, at least,” she amended, more quietly. “And maybe we shouldn’t have two people presiding,” Hermione added in a conciliatory tone.

“I beg your pardon!? Have you looked at the blasted menu?” Viktor snapped.

“What!? Yes, I’ve looked at it! You just stood right there and watched me! And it’s fine!” Hermione snapped back.

“Really? Did you really look at it? Take a good look, what’s missing?” Viktor said, waving the piece of parchment at her. Hermione snatched it and read through it.

“Nothing! There’s nothing missing. It looks perfectly fine to me! What are you on about?” Hermione replied, planting her hands on her hips.

“Oh, really? All fine fare?” Viktor asked, crossing his arms and narrowing his eyes.

“It’s perfectly fine! There’s nothing wrong with anything listed here!” Hermione countered.

“All fine *British* fare, hmm? You notice, every damned thing on that list is British. Not one speck of anything Bulgarian, right down to the liquor,” Viktor shot back, lowering his eyebrows. The rest of the group exchanged uncomfortable looks with one another, and Ginny even cleared her throat, but the couple was oblivious.

“*That’s* your problem?! That the menu’s not *Bulgarian*?” Hermione asked, her voice strained.

Viktor thrust his chin forward mulishly. “It’s not just the menu! It’s the whole bloody thing! Music, food, drink, wedding attendants, not one damned nod to the fact that I’m Bulgarian, if I let you two have your way! I didn’t say one rotten word about the fact that you never once considered we could have this wedding at Durmstrang just about as easy, and they would be just as glad to let us use the grounds! I didn’t say a word when you said you had your heart on having it at Hogwarts! If I keep my mouth shut, you two are going to excise the Bulgarian Minister right out of the ceremony, and the music and the food never even bothered to acknowledge that one of the parties involved didn’t set foot in Britain until he was seventeen! Keep my mouth shut much longer, you’ll be cutting everything Bulgarian in the quest for the perfect little British wedding, including the groom!” Viktor fumed. “I’m sure she’s already got someone more suitable in mind! Someone who looks better in that horrid pink!”

Hermione glowered and took a step forward, raising her voice. “Damned right you never said a word! You just stand back and leave this whole thing to me, the wedding and the house, and you only say something when it doesn’t suit you!”

Hermione jabbed a sharp forefinger into his chest, punctuating her words. “Well, I’m not a mind reader, like you seem to expect me to be, you blasted, hot-headed, close-mouthed... pig-headed Bulgarian!”

“Oh! Now that *is* unfair! Maybe I would have said more if I hadn’t been taking all the unmanned shifts that came up this last month so *you* didn’t have to! So you could work on the absolutely *exhausting* work of picking out three different paint combinations on the house and deciding we needed Madam Bulldozer here to put together a wedding! You know, you can be a real *kuchka* when someone calls you on something you didn’t think of first!” Viktor spat. Even without the raised eyebrows from Viktor’s parents, Ginny thought she could have guessed by the tone that the unfamiliar Bulgarian word wasn’t exactly a compliment. Judging from the eyebrows, it was very rude indeed.

“Thank you *very* much! For calling me *that* in front of...” Hermione began, then trailed off, sliding her gaze back over the silent observers. She stared at them for a moment, then muttered. “We need to go somewhere to work this out. Somewhere private.”

“Hall,” Viktor said shortly, heading for the door to the hall.

“Okay, look. Insulting one another is getting us nowhere. On the wedding, or otherwise,” Hermione said, running her fingers through her hair.

“I’m sorry, that just popped out... I didn’t even know I was going to say it-”

“I shouldn’t have said what I said, either. Truce?” Hermione offered.

“Truce. I can’t believe we just did that. And in front of everyone... Shows what stress will do...”

“Look, do we still want to get married or not?” Hermione said abruptly, with a sigh.

Viktor considered a moment. “That’s never changed. The ‘how’ seems to be the sticky bit. Can we at least agree on one more thing, beside the fact that we definitely want to get married?” Viktor asked.

“Depends. What are you offering?” Hermione asked, sounding skeptical.

“How about this; let’s tell her to hold off on everything. We walk out of here, go home, and spend this evening deciding what we want. Whether that be eloping or deciding we want the most elaborate wedding ever. When we get the details,

assuming we decide to go that route, we bring it back here and tell Madam Wilhelmina she can do it our way or forget it," Viktor said tersely.

"Agreed. We need to decide something. And soon. After dinner? Give us a chance to cool off? And think about what we want?" Hermione said tentatively.

"Agreed. I'm satisfied with that if you are," Viktor said, and Hermione nodded her agreement. "Even if it takes us all night. Now, come on, let's tell Miss Fancypants that we're satisfied with not being satisfied, for the moment," Viktor bit off, swinging the door back and striding back into the lounge. The group there looked to be frozen in the same wide-eyed, gawping tableau as before. "Look. We've decided we're quite satisfied to go home and have a think on this. Maybe sleep on it. More than one night if necessary. When we decide *exactly* what we want for the wedding, *if* we have a formal ceremony, we will be back with the details. And that's the way it will be. No *tweaking*, no *improving*, just our way. If you don't like it, tough, you're fired. We'll just go back to Bulgaria with them and get the tatty Bulgarian Minister to do the ceremony and be done with it! Get back to you when we get back to you," Viktor calmly told the stunned witch before stalking off toward the door, Hermione right behind.

"What he said," Hermione tossed over her shoulder as she exited. "Hold off on contacting anyone!"

"Err... sorry," Ginny said, not quite sure who or what she was apologizing for. Or to whom the apology was directed. She tugged at Neville's sleeve and made to follow the bride and groom. It took a moment, but finally, the Krums trailed along behind as well. Their expressions, especially Ekaterina's, were as inscrutable as ever, Ginny thought. They had both watched the argument intently, and Ginny was quite certain that even without any English skills, they would have recognized it for the rip-roaring argument it had been. And she was positive they had caught the single Bulgarian word that had been lobbed around. Quite positive. And Ginny couldn't help but wonder what they had thought about the whole affair. But Heaven forbid she actually ask. She might not want to know.

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"Any way to go straight to the marriage and skip the wedding completely?" Viktor asked with a sigh, collapsing into one of the squashy armchairs by the fireplace in Hermione's quarters.

"Not quite," Hermione said.

"Damn it. Moody was right. We were crazy to think we could do this on such

short notice, wedding planner or no wedding planner. Sane wedding planner, mind you,” Viktor elaborated, leaning his head back tiredly. For the first time in a few days, Hermione took the time to really study his face, particularly the dark, tired smudges beneath his eyes. She felt slightly ashamed when she realized just how many times over the last few weeks he had filled in on open shifts that should have, by rights, been hers. Crookshanks promptly occupied Viktor’s lap, making himself a comfortable perch, kneading the robes with his claws.

“I wish I had never suggested her,” Hermione said forlornly.

“Oh, it just didn’t work out. We’re not compatible with her. Or she’s not compatible with us, however that works. We should have just taken the path of least resistance, gone to the registry office and been done with it,” Viktor said. “No one to impress, no expectations to meet, no worrying about offending anyone. Just... us. None of this... insanity.” He absently petted the ginger head while Crookshanks purred contentedly and attempted to shred the robes beneath his claws.

“You’re really set on having the marriage stand in Bulgaria... and having some Bulgarian touches? Why didn’t you say so?” Hermione asked, tentative.

“Silly me, I thought it went without saying,” Viktor replied, shrugging. “I didn’t stop being Bulgarian when I moved here. I just gave up living there, not my nationality,” he added softly. “I know it’s just a formality, for all intents and purposes, if we marry here, it’s recognized there. But I like the idea of it being formally registered there.”

“I’m sorry. I never once gave a thought to the fact that you didn’t insist we get married anywhere other than where I wanted to. Or live anywhere else once we married. You gave up everything and I’ve given up no-”

“You gave up plenty, already,” Viktor interrupted. “Plenty. I couldn’t ask you to give up everything else so soon after... Not fair to ask you to pack up and leave everything. For me.”

“But you did. You left home and family. For me,” Hermione added, her cheeks burning. She was beginning to feel thoroughly ashamed of just how much she had ignored that lately.

“If you’re going to fight the war, you have to go where the battlefield is,” Viktor said with a mirthless laugh. “Besides, your Bulgarian is still rotten. I fancy my English, dodgy as it is on some things, is still miles ahead of your Bulgarian. In a funny sort of way, this is home now, too.”

“Let’s just go back with your parents when they go. Get the Minister to do a small private ceremony. We’ll have a reception or something later,” Hermione blurted out. Her heart sank, just saying it, but she tried to keep her face neutral.

“Elope? Would you? I’d be eternally grateful,” Viktor said, raking his hair back with his fingers. “Assuming my mother doesn’t still want to strangle me for using that sort of language in public earlier today. In that case, ‘eternally’ shouldn’t be long.”

“I’ll pack a bag and we can just leave... whenever,” Hermione agreed, prying Crookshanks up from his comfortable spot.

“Fine with me,” Viktor said. “I’ll pack mine,” he added, getting up from the chair.

“Get some sleep,” Hermione cautioned, watching him walk out the door, pulling it closed behind him. “Crookshanks... for a man whose mother said he absolutely hates cats, he puts up with you clawing his lap every opportunity far more patiently than you or I deserve,” Hermione said, gathering up the purring cat against her shoulder.

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“What exactly do you think you’re doing coming out of there, this time of night, lad?” a gruff, familiar voice said from the end of the hall. “Debating what shade of pink Madam Wildebeest thinks everyone’s knickers should be at the wedding?” Moody snorted, stumping down the hall. “Or just up to something you shouldn’t be for a few weeks yet?”

“Now, you know better than that last, or that would be going off,” Viktor countered, reaching into one of Moody’s robe pockets and deftly plucking out a pocket Sneakoscope. “You’ve been packing it in your right pocket for a week. Somebody told me you shouldn’t carry it in the same pocket all the time. Get used to it and start ignoring it,” Viktor said lightly, tucking it back into the opposite pocket.

Moody’s shaggy white eyebrow arched. “Just when I think no one pays any attention.”

“Oh, everybody listens to you. We figure if someone who is always on about being on the lookout as much as you are ends up with that many missing or replaced bits, we had better learn to be on our guard even better. It’s just no one likes giving you the satisfaction of knowing you’re right. You’d get the big head

and stop lecturing us, and that would be no fun at all,” Viktor replied, continuing down the hall to his quarters. “Now what were *you* up to, lurking at the end of the hall?”

“Going to come up and see if you could take Shackbolt’s-”

“Don’t think so,” Viktor interrupted. “I might not be here. And even if I am, I need some sleep. Get Tonks to take it.”

“She’s so bloody hamscam-” Moody began to protest.

“She is not. You know you love her, you just hate her hair and her piercings,” Viktor said blithely.

“Do not,” Moody muttered under his breath.

“Do too, you big marshmallow. It’s just patrol,” Viktor shot back.

“And what do you mean you might not be here?” Moody asked, waiting for Viktor to open the door, then following him inside.

“Might be in Bulgaria. You’ll be happy to note you were right all along,” Viktor said, taking one of the armchairs.

“Of course I was... What on earth are you talking about?” Moody prodded, hobbling to the opposite chair. “In Bulgaria...”

“You’ll be gratified to hear we’ve decided we’re just going to give up on this whole idea of having a big wedding. When my parents go back, assuming they can find a bleeding ship, whenever that is, we’ll go with them and have a little ceremony there and forget it. That way, no one can be disappointed. Maybe we’ll have a small reception or something when we get back. Happy?” Viktor asked pointedly, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes... no! No! You can’t elope!” Moody blurted out, looking alarmed.

“What?! Okay, who are you and what have you done with the real Mad-Eye Moody? You’re the one who has been saying all along we ought to have eloped! Muttering about how it was nonsense to spend all that money on a wedding! You as good as called me a fool for so much as wanting to have cake and punch, much less an actual ceremony! Complaining about us wasting our time on nonsense! Give me one good reason we can’t elope!” Viktor snapped.

“Because... you just... can’t,” Moody floundered.

Viktor gaped. “Oh! Brilliant argument! Because we just can’t!? Is that all you’ve got?”

“Well, why do you want to elope all of a sudden?” Moody snapped back.

“Because people are driving us barmy! Everyone acts like this whole thing is some big ‘end of the war’ party, not *our* wedding! Like if it isn’t picture perfect, everyone’s going to be disappointed in us! And frankly, I already had enough to worry about what with just wondering how many of my extended family are going to throw a hissy fit and not come! I’m tired of everyone expecting so much of us. I’m just plain tired. I’m tired of everyone making us out to be more than we are. We just slogged along best we could like everyone else did. We’re getting married, not saving the world, damn it. We’re nothing special. It’s just a wedding,” Viktor said. “You were right. It’s all a bunch of insanity for nothing.”

“I was wrong.”

“Beg pardon?”

“I was wrong. It isn’t just a bunch of nonsense. Do what you want as far as the wedding itself, but we need a chance to wish you well. We deserve it. Don’t take that away,” Moody said quietly.

“Excuse me?” Viktor asked, leaning forward.

“I was wrong! How many times do you want me to admit it!” Moody growled.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” Viktor said, narrowing his eyes.

“We spent four years hoping for something like this. Anything... happy. Do you know how many damned times we old fogies wondered if there was ever going to be anything worth celebrating again? How many times we wondered if we were going to end up putting all you young people in the ground? Been a few times I wouldn’t have accepted even odds on enough of you living to ever get married. Do whatever the hell you want. Hold the wedding in a broom closet and serve nothing but Fizzing Whizzbees! But don’t deprive the rest of us the chance to be there. To wish you well. And say thank you. It isn’t much, but it’s a gesture. We can’t come close to thanking you for what you’ve done. But let us try. This isn’t just a wedding. Nothing the two of you do from now on is going to be ‘just’ anything,” Moody said, looking thoughtful. “No sir. Your names are going to be in history books. Right alongside Potter’s. I wouldn’t be surprised if your children

have to do homework on you.”

“We don’t want that,” Viktor protested weakly.

“Tough, boy. Comes with the territory. I would have thought you had a taste of that in Quidditch. Son, don’t try to hide from gratitude well earned. And Heaven knows you two earned it. A dozen times over. Besides, ask yourself... you know Hermione really wants a wedding, don’t you? Even an old, unsentimental fool who is about as romantic as an infestation of wood lice could see that,” Moody grumbled. “Surely you could stand a day of it, couldn’t you? Of us poor, foolish old prats being happy over you?”

“That’s it. That’s why people are so worked up?” Viktor asked, propping his chin in his hand.

“That’s it. Do it for Hermione. For that matter, do it for me. I deserve to see you happy for a change. You deserve to be, you know. You worked hard. And admittedly had a bit of luck. Not your fault you lived and so many of the rest of them didn’t,” Moody said gruffly. “I wish you would stop punishing yourself. It doesn’t bring them back.” He had long since avoided mentioning certain names. Names that still tended to make Viktor brood in absolute silence for hours.

“But... I recruited a lot of them. A lot of other people who might be getting married... otherwise,” Viktor said, grimacing and picking at the chair arm.

“Fleur did, too. You don’t see her moping about every time one of them’s mentioned. Lay blame squarely where it belongs. With them that started it. Not them that finished it. Hell, boy, show a little gratitude yourself by getting on with your life. Even if I didn’t much want you to. People are going to miss you two around here,” Moody said, sounding nearly wistful.

Viktor let the slipped in “I” pass without commenting on it, beyond a momentarily raised eyebrow. “I imagine we’ll miss people around here, too. But they can visit the house,” Viktor said, composing himself and looking Moody in the eye. “I imagine they would be pretty welcome. So... we need to plan a wedding. On even shorter notice than before.”

“Plan it to suit yourselves. Don’t worry about what we think,” Moody cautioned, sounding more like himself. “You know there’s plenty of people willing to give you two the shirts off their backs and whatever else they can muster if it would do any good for the wedding. Call in some of those markers. I imagine the Hogwarts folk would pull out all the stops given half a chance.”

“So, I’m supposed to worry about what other people think, but not worry about what other people think?” Viktor said with the slightest hint of a smile.

“Only on things that matter. Like who you share your wedding day with. You’ve done the hard part, finding the bride. Hardly think what color the tea cozies are really matters,” Moody said with a derisive snort. “Or what the robes match.”

“Actually... maybe it does. Everyone wants this to be a big postwar party. Maybe we should give that a nod. And best of all, it wouldn’t involve pink in any shape, form or fashion...” Viktor said to himself.

“What are you on about?” Moody asked.

“Nothing, maybe. I need to go work something out. With my fiancéé. But before I do, I need you to assure me I’m not going to have to fill in for the next couple of days. My days off actually stay my days off. This is going to be a long night if we try to do this right,” Viktor said.

“Fair enough. I imagine Tonks can-” Moody began.

“Thank you! If you don’t mind, send one of the house-elves up to Hermione’s with some coffee. It could be a long night,” Viktor repeated, jumping up and dashing for the hall.

“Never really understood that foreigner. Not completely,” Moody said, shaking his head and getting up to head to the kitchen. “Boy’s kind of funny in the head sometimes, even if he is sensible.”

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“Hermione! Open up,” Viktor said, tapping at the door.

“What’s the matter? What’s wrong?” Hermione asked, swinging the door open and still tying her dressing gown.

“Answer me, and tell me the truth. Do you or do you not want to have a wedding? A real one. Here, at Hogwarts,” Viktor asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said quietly. “I want a wedding. And I would love for it to be at Hogwarts. Is that so wrong?”

“Then let us figure out what we want. And tomorrow we tell that heinous old biddy here is our list, she can do it how we want or not at all. If it takes pulling in

every favor the two of us can muster, let us do it. I want to be able to send my parents home with assurances that we actually have something planned for them to come back to. What do you say?" Viktor prompted.

"Well, that sounds wonderful. Except for the fact that we don't know what we want. And there's no way we'll be able to please everyone," Hermione said meekly.

"I've got an idea that should please most everyone. If it pleases us, that is. Thanks to Moody."

"Thanks to Moody?" Hermione said, cocking her head curiously.

"Long story. I'll explain later. So... wedding planning?"

"Oh... come on in. I'll get out some parchment and ink," Hermione said, turning to go back in.

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"Everyone wants this to be some sort of postwar celebration. So why not take advantage of that? That would take care of the decorations, and best of all, no pink," Viktor said as Hermione settled in next to him at the desk with her cup of coffee.

"What exactly have you got cooked up in that head of yours, then? I'm afraid I don't follow," Hermione said, taking an experimental sip.

"What color are Ginny's robes?" Viktor countered.

"Green. Is this some sort of trick question?" Hermione said.

"No. More specifically, what color are they?" Viktor elaborated.

"Sort of a dark, emerald green... but that's not the answer you're fishing for, is it?" Hermione asked.

"Slytherin green. They're Slytherin green if ever I saw it. And you know how Madam Malkin said she would be glad to make you an inner robe in whatever color you liked, soon as we settled on a color scheme? What would be wrong with red? Good enough for Bulgaria, Durmstrang and Gryffindor, isn't it? For that matter, why can't most of the wedding be red? Works for the Chinese, doesn't it? And don't see why we couldn't have yellow roses. Madam Sprout offered. Says

she has tons of them in the greenhouse.”

“Hufflepuff... yellow roses?” Hermione said haltingly.

“And don’t Muggles have some sort of superstition about having something blue, anyway? A few bluebells... some drapes... that would take care of Ravenclaw and Beauxbatons. Or for that matter, why not have Harry, Ron and Neville wear blue inner robes? They could wear Ravenclaw blue, Dumbledore could wear Beauxbatons blue. Neville could even wear Slytherin green, so he matches Ginny. Some House and school banners, let the house-elves take care of the exact details... I would trust Minerva to oversee that, wouldn’t you?” Viktor asked. “She wouldn’t set the whole place buzzing with twee little fairies.”

“And this has to do with the war... how, exactly?” Hermione said.

“We just came off of a war where there were people from every one of those schools and every one of those Houses who fought bravely. Why not acknowledge the fact? Besides, who said weddings had to be all pastels, and especially pink? What? You hate it?” Viktor replied.

“No... actually, I rather like the idea. We could have the House and school banners at the reception. And the House colors could carry on from the ceremony to the reception in the decorations and table coverings... Red, yellow, green and blue bows and flowers... it could work. It *would* work,” Hermione said, rubbing her chin. “I like it! It’s rather brilliant, actually.”

“You must finally be rubbing off on me,” Viktor said.

“Now... the business of the music. Can we agree that Madam Wilhelmina might be onto something with the trumpet player and the organist? And maybe a string quartet? At least for the ceremony, if not for the reception? Traditional sort of Muggle classical wedding marches and recessional, and be done with it. And to tell the truth, I wouldn’t mind them playing at the reception. Not the whole reception, mind you, but some of it. Some of these waltzes and things she’s got on here, I would like to put them on the list. And I wouldn’t begrudge The Weird Sisters playing a few. I’m not picky. They could play what they like, couldn’t they? What people don’t request?” Hermione mused.

“Fine with me. Well, pick what you like off that list she gave us for the quartet. If it goes longer, they can play what they like, too. But where exactly do we come by the quartet?” Viktor queried.

“Let Madam Wilhelmina hire the lot she was going to in the first place. I mean,

they must be competent. She keeps using them,” Hermione said.

They spent some time poring over the list of songs, discussing and placing tick marks and checks on some, striking through others. “That takes care of that list, doesn’t it?” Viktor said.

“I think so. As for the Bulgarian music... that’s your problem. Who did you have in mind?” Hermione asked, shifting a snoring Crookshanks off of Viktor’s lap and into her own.

“There was this little Bulgarian band that did a cousin’s wedding about a year back... Mama and Papa raved about them for a week. I’m sure Mama would remember the name. I’ll write the band if she can remember the name. They did a bit of everything. I would be willing to just turn them loose. Let them play what they want. I don’t think they had a formal playlist. I think they winged it,” Viktor admitted.

“Well, that would take care of music. And decorations. I trust Dumbledore and Minister Oblansk to work out the details of the actual ceremony, don’t you? And we get a rehearsal. If they do something we absolutely can’t stand, we’ll speak up. We’ll write and tell them to work it out between themselves. Any doubts on their part, they can write us or Floo. You, Harry and Ron can come in first, together, Ginny and Neville, then me. And Dumbledore’s walking me down the aisle, shabby and unfashionable or not. And Dumbledore and Oblansk can decide what color they want their robes to be, too. We’ll let them in on the theme, and they can do as they see fit. Fair enough?” Hermione asked.

“Fair enough,” Viktor agreed. “Now... reception. Food and drink. What are we going to do, there? We can’t do a sit-down meal that’s going to please everyone.”

“Who said we had to do a sit-down meal? Other than Madam Wilhelmina, that is,” Hermione said dismissively. “Why not just do buffet? What would be wrong with having a bit of this, a bit of that? Let the house-elves and the caterers do whatever they want in the way of British fare, finger foods mostly, and throw kebapcheta and Shop salad in there. Moussaka if we’re feeling frisky. And whatever else you might think up. Give the caterers and the house-elves the recipes, tell them to fix enough food for half the guest list each, problem solved. Top that off with some rakia, vodka, champagne, punch and Butterbeer, I think we have ourselves a reception.”

“Buffet?” Viktor echoed, arching an eyebrow. “Madam Wilhelmina’s going to scream ‘tacky’.”

Hermione snorted. “Madam Wilhelmina can bite my big toe. We’ll ask to see the caterer’s list of party snacks and go to town on those. It might be tacky but no one will go home hungry. Maybe a selection of starters, like soups and salads, then just a big buffet of whatever strikes our fancy. The caterers can calculate the proportions and get the supplies. Surely that sort of thing is built into the contract. Possibly we could talk the house-elves into doing a small menu on the side, and if the buffet doesn’t appeal, guests can order something. Like, maybe pork chops or chicken. Something simple and quick. I don’t think they would mind, do you?”

“Mind? They would probably arm wrestle you for the privilege,” Viktor said, watching Hermione jot down a few more notes under the heading “Catering”.

“Is that it?” Hermione asked, laying down the quill.

“Cake! Wedding cake...” Viktor elaborated.

“Caterer should take care of that,” Hermione said, adding the notation.

“They’ll want us to choose something. Lob a hundred designs and flavor combinations at us,” Viktor said warily.

“If we have plenty of money left, we’ll tell them to go all out and surprise us as far as the design goes. As for flavors, we both like chocolate, right? What would be wrong with a chocolate cake and white icing?” Hermione asked.

“Not a thing. Well... that’s the overview. I suppose the details will take care of themselves?” Viktor said.

“I suppose they will. If Madam Wilhelmina will let them,” Hermione said with a sigh.

“If she won’t, there’s nothing preventing us doing the coordinating on our own. But time. If we have to, I imagine we can finagle a few days out of Moody,” Viktor mused.

“Speaking of which, what did he say that made you change your mind all of a sudden?” Hermione said.

“Tell you tomorrow. When I’m not so sleepy. No offense, but I wanted to be in bed two hours ago,” Viktor answered, looking at the clock. “And by the way, no good giving in and pretending you didn’t care whether you got a wedding or not.”

“Compromise,” Hermione said with a shrug. “We had better get used to it. I thought it would make you happier, just getting it over with.”

“Compromise is fine. Letting me walk all over you just because I can doesn’t make me happier in the long run,” Viktor said, standing and stretching.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Hermione questioned.

“Just that you’re not a natural-born doormat, so don’t bother trying to be one, even occasionally. It doesn’t suit you. Or me. One of the things I love about you is the fact that you never backed down from giving me a good raking when I needed it. Goodnight, Miss Granger,” Viktor murmured, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

“Goodnight. Remember, united front tomorrow. No waffling at Wilhelmina’s” Hermione cautioned.

“That will not be a problem,” Viktor said, stifling a yawn before heading for the door.

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“So, where is he? You haven’t *actually* strangled him, have you?” Harry asked, sliding into the chair opposite Hermione in the dining hall.

“Believe it or not, sleeping in,” Hermione said, smiling.

“Is he ill, then?” Harry said with mock surprise.

“No, we stayed up late last night planning our wedding,” Hermione explained.

“Call me silly, but I thought that was the wedding planner’s job,” Harry said.

“Long story. There for a while, we weren’t going to have a wedding at all, but then we decided we were, and it was going to be *our* wedding, by golly, and... well, you probably don’t want to hear it right now. Let us get things all straightened out with the various parties involved, and we’ll let you in on what’s happening. Slight change of plans, but I think you’ll approve,” Hermione said, finishing off her toast.

“Doesn’t involve me wearing any shade of pink, does it?” Harry asked.

“No. No pink. Absolute ban on pink. The future Krums have spoken. The Granger-Krum wedding will be a completely pink free zone,” Hermione said solemnly.

“Then I wholeheartedly approve. Speaking of which, what about the present Krums? They haven’t said anything about the little... err... blowup? Ginny told us what happened,” Harry said sympathetically.

“I’ve barely seen them. We took them out to dinner, they gave Viktor a lot of home news about a bunch of people I don’t know, and after that they retired. Said they were tired. Haven’t said a word, at least not to me or that Viktor’s mentioned, surprise, surprise. I can’t tell if they’re holding their breaths because they want us to blow up at each other, don’t want us blowing up at each other, or what. When do they say anything about anything? It’s like facing down a brick wall. Funny, I rather fancied they liked me when we visited them in Bulgaria, but then, sometimes, I’m not so sure. Sometimes I wonder if they could like me but still not want me marrying their son. Maybe they just don’t want to say anything to Viktor for fear of making him angry and losing him completely. From what I understand, Viktor’s got Ekaterina’s stubbornness and temper, and they all know it. Petar warned me that going at it with either of them was pretty useless. Know what he said?” Hermione asked with a laugh.

“No, what?” Harry prompted.

“He said when either one of them did that thing with their chin, he just stepped off. Because it was easier to move a mountain with a tablespoon than to change their minds when they had it made up. And when that chin was set, their mind was set. And he laughed, believe it or not,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like he likes you well enough. You don’t give advice like that to someone you don’t like. I bet Ekaterina likes you, too. You said she fed you like it was going out of style. Viktor claims she likes you. He doesn’t usually sugarcoat things. I figure if she hated you, Viktor would just say ‘By the way, my mother hates your guts, pass the jam’. It’s just... you’re the new woman in Viktor’s life, and she’ll always have to share him with you from now on. Bound to be hard to accept that he’s not hers, alone, ever again, even if she loves you to pieces,” Harry said simply.

“Why, Harry James Potter, when did you get to be such a sage about women? Or mothers for that matter?” Hermione asked, astonished.

“I haven’t. I just listened to what Arthur said about why Molly still doesn’t treat Fleur too well, sometimes. Arthur thinks she’s jealous over Bill. And they’re not

even engaged. Can't wait to see how Molly flips her wig when one of her children actually decides to walk down an aisle. Don't get me wrong, she loves you two to pieces, but neither one of you were ever her bayyyy-bie, know what I mean?" Harry explained. "Can you imagine the screeching?"

"I think I would prefer it," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Come again?" Harry said.

"I think I would prefer it. Molly has this way of yelling at you, but it's just noise. You know when she's blown a gasket, and she definitely makes sure she lets you know what she wants... she's loud, but you can ignore it and do what you want, and she gets over it soon enough. The twins always did, but... Ekaterina... She has this way of taking up the entire room without raising her voice or making a fuss. Ekaterina can either be completely unreadable or make her entire position known by cocking an eyebrow. She doesn't just enter a room, she commands it. She doesn't raise her voice to get attention and respect, she just... demands it, somehow. Well, Petar does, too, but there's something softer about him. It's unsettling. She says it, you do it, no questions, unless you've got the same kind of mettle. Ask Viktor which one of his parents he minds butting heads with. I think he would argue with Petar and not think a thing about it. Ekaterina... I'm not so sure. I think he picks his battles with her. I thought he was exaggerating at first when he called her a force of nature, you know how some men are about their mothers... but after meeting her, I agree. I'm half surprised she didn't have the Minister of Finance apologizing to her for being a fool and asking for exact instructions on what he should do with his canape while bowing and scraping," Hermione said.

"Ah. Funny, she sounds a whole lot like the man you're about to marry, and you never backed off from him even when he was having one of those fits where he goes from barely audible to loud all of a sudden and starts whipping out every Bulgarian curse word in the book. In fact, I think that's why he likes you so much. You're one of the few people that will give him a verbal pasting occasionally. Maybe Ekaterina just needs you to yell at her once," Harry said with a grin.

"I am *not* going to test that theory," Hermione protested.

"Ask some of the people Viktor trained. Some of them would have preferred Moody's boot camp. A few of them were afraid to so much as tell Viktor they had to visit the loo for fear of getting their heads bitten off. And Viktor never once raised his voice at any of them that I know of. You could have heard a pin drop in any of his training sessions. I should know. I was one of the people afraid to get my head bitten off. And I knew him. Martino practically had kittens the first time

Viktor called him out for not paying proper attention. 'Are you somehow under the impression that I'm talking for my health, Martino?'," Harry said, dropping his voice to little more than a whisper. "I thought Martino was going to drop and kiss Viktor's boots. Bet you Martino would agree that your description of Ekaterina reminds him a whole lot of Ekaterina's baby boy."

"Well, if Petar and Ekaterina's baby boy will get up sometime before lunch, we'll go see if we can't gang up on the wedding planner and get our own way, now that we know what that is. And maybe swing by Madam Malkin's. We've decided on colors for the inner robes. Might take along the elder Krums for additional intimidation factor if they're willing. If Madam Wilhelmina could turn back the tide of all three of them combined, I shudder at her willpower," Hermione said.

"Poor lamb's all exhausted. But, no wonder. He's taken all your slots for covering open shifts the last two weeks or more. I'll be glad when the new recruits get in here and start training. Maybe some of us can actually get a day off more than once every three weeks," Harry admitted.

"Don't remind me. I feel guilty enough already," Hermione replied.

"You can make it up to him on the honeymoon," Harry said.

"Honeymoon! I knew we forgot something last night! We haven't even thought about the honeymoon!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Calm down. It's just a holiday. I don't figure it matters much. I bet you won't even leave the hotel. You two have been far too well behaved," Harry said, wagging his eyebrows.

"Get your mind out of the gutter," Hermione admonished, blushing.

"It's not in the gutter. It's in the bed," Harry said, laughing.

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"But... but..." Madam Wilhelmina spluttered, looking over the lists.

"No buts. Unless you want to be known as the wedding planner that got fired by the two of us, that's what you're going to do. You can book what we want and get your fee, or forget it," Hermione said in a tone she hoped brooked no argument, crossing her arms.

"But... Hogwarts? When you could have it anywhere?" Madam Wilhelmina said,

looking positively ill.

“We don’t want to have it anywhere. We want to have it at Hogwarts. And you know, you seem to forget that the chief aim of the wedding planner should be to make the bride and groom happy. And we were not happy. This,” Hermione said, pausing to gesture at the lists with a hand, “would make us happy. If you won’t do it, we will. Without you.”

Madam Wilhelmina looked at the three Krums, a silent plea, as though she were hoping to appeal to them to intervene on her behalf with the clearly misguided bride. She was met with three stony faces. “Don’t look at me. I’m with her,” Viktor muttered. “Do it or don’t. The wedding sketched out on those lists can go on with or without you. Even if we have to write Durmstrang and plead for their house-elves to help do the catering, and the Hogwarts students have to arrange the flowers. Your call.”

“Very well,” Madam Wilhelmina sniffed, straightening her pink robes in a determined fashion. “I’ll make the most of it. I’ll make sure you have the best possible wedding-”

“Within those parameters,” Viktor interrupted. “Anything we weren’t specific on, go to town. Except, no pink.”

“Within these parameters... that you can possibly have. I’ll supervise the wedding cake design personally. They’ll talk about that alone for months-”

“Just so they can eat it. No getting bizarre and fancy. Just a plain old chocolate cake and white icing would do. No sneaking in fourteen different layers on us. Just a nice, straightforward cake. No architectural marvels, either. Just a nice wedding cake. Got that?” Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Got it,” Madam Wilhelmina said, looking indignant. “I’ll exceed expectations. I’ll put on the best wedding possible with what I have to work with. Hogwarts... nay, Britain... the magical community, dare I say it, will never see the like again! I’ll make sure the Great Hall is decorated to perfection as well, of course.”

“Just meet our expectations, and that will do,” Viktor said tartly. “Now... travel agent?”

“Give me the strength,” Hermione assented, nodding wearily.

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“Rome’s nice this time of year. I have this great villa that the owner rents out. All kinds of suites to choose from. I bet he would even give you two a discount for being honeymooners,” the wizard behind the desk said.

“Well, that sounds attractive. Any reason we shouldn’t go with that?” Hermione said, consulting Viktor.

“There’s just one problem,” the wizard pointed out.

“Arrgh. What?” Viktor asked impatiently.

“Well, if you don’t want to Apparate, you would have to sail overnight. You wouldn’t arrive until the next morning. And there’s likely only going to be a week’s vacancy,” the wizard said, sounding remorseful.

“Not a problem! Really. We can sail overnight just as well. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I would be up to Apparating across the room after the wedding, much less all the way to Rome. I would be fine on a ship overnight. Just like old times, even. What about you?” Viktor asked, sounding relieved.

“I think so,” Hermione said. “Let’s just book that one, and be done with it. Rome sounds fine to me.”

“Rome it is, then, for no apparent reason. Book that one,” Viktor said.

“Honeymoon suite?” the wizard asked, quill poised.

“Sure, why not? Go crazy. Madam Malkin’s?” Viktor questioned Hermione.

“She should be the easy one,” Hermione said, nodding.

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“Why don’t we just publish it in all the papers and say ‘Open to the general public’ instead?” Viktor said, nodding at the table full of blank invitations.

“For fear we’ll offend someone, and Molly, for one, would never let us hear the end of it. Besides, we need a rough head count for the food and the chairs. Oh, did your parents make it back fine?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Late last night. They woke me up when they called on the Floo. The ship back took four hours longer than they expected. So... about eight million rounds of filling these things out and hauling them to the Owl Post and we can get them out

in under a decade,” Viktor said ruefully.

“I figure if we do at least a letter a night from the alphabetical list, and maybe get Ron and Harry to do a few, we ought to have them all filled out in plenty of time to send them,” Hermione said, trying to sound more sure than she felt.

“You think maybe we had better break them up into batches? We want them to actually have some owls available to carry the general post within a thousand mile radius, you know. Take all of those at once, they’re liable to go on sit down strike. And I don’t think I would blame them. No, not one bit,” Viktor said solemnly.

“Maybe every couple of days, then. That would give the owls a bit of a break,” Hermione admitted.

“Not to mention the people who have to tie them onto the owls,” Viktor said.

“That, too,” Hermione agreed.

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“Well, I never thought I would live to see the day, but I have to admit it. Rita Skeeter did have some use,” Viktor said wearily, inspecting the frayed end of the quill in his hand. “If it weren’t for the Quick Quotes Quills, we would all have lost use of our hands by now,” he added. “Well, the nib on this one has had it. No wonder the one to the Lovegoods is splotchy.”

“Another one used up?” Hermione asked. “We’re going to run out. I think I have one left,” she said, rummaging around in the desk drawer. “Here you go, a fresh one.”

“How is it you two have been doing this for days and days, and I’m doing the D list?” Harry piped up. “I think I was led here under false pretenses. You two said if Ron and I helped out, you should be able to finish tonight and get the rest of them off to the post. Did you misspeak? Did you perhaps mean this month?”

“We didn’t bother doing it completely alphabetically. We just separated them out by last name and then tackled the bigger lists first. Be glad we didn’t give you the W list! The Weasleys alone would have worn your quill out,” Hermione scolded.

“Um... is there a mistake on the D list?” Harry said quietly, over the scratching of the quills. “The Diggorys are on here.”

“I don’t exactly relish the thought of talking to them again, but I can’t *not* invite them, Harry. They were altogether too kind to me at the memorial,” Viktor said softly.

“What would they have against you? *I’m* the one that got their son killed,” Harry replied.

“I tortured their son. A few minutes before he died,” Viktor elaborated, licking his lips and not taking his eyes off the parchment in front of him.

“You were under the Imperius. It wasn’t really you,” Harry said.

“And you weren’t the one who killed him, either. See, it’s easy to absolve other people. Not so easy to absolve yourself. Fill out the invitation. If they feel comfortable coming, they can,” Viktor said, his voice a shade raspy and barely audible over the four scratching quills.

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“Mate, I don’t know if we can get all of these out today. Hey, Mildred! We got any postal owls on reserve back there? Any ones that don’t already have their talons worked to the bone and their feathers molting?” the stubby, plump wizard behind the postal counter shouted.

“If it’s any more than fifty, we might need to wait until tomorrow! Unless some of them are in close areas! Then we can send ‘em with one on each leg!” the invisible Mildred shouted back, her voice muffled.

“You lot are killing us. I’ve got calluses from tying knots!” the wizard complained, waving his hands.

“You don’t use a wand?” Viktor asked, setting the last box of rolled parchments onto the counter.

“I am using a wand. I’ve got calluses from waving the wand, by now! I hope these are the last batch,” he grouched.

“You and me, both. As far as we know, they are,” Viktor said calmly. “Unless someone discovers a new continent or something, I think we’re set.”

“Got to be. Can’t be anyone else left to invite. Do us a favor, mate. Don’t get married again,” the wizard insisted, scooting the boxes off the counter.

“Don’t intend to,” Viktor replied. “Definitely don’t intend to. I don’t think my heart could take it. My fingers, either, or my sanity,” he added, rubbing at his ink-stained fingertips. “Especially not my sanity.”

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“So that’s fourteen counts he’s in for, for possession of goods he’s not allowed to trade. To tell the truth, I think Mundungus turned him in, because he cut him out of the deal,” Viktor pointed out, cutting into his pork chop.

“Now, you can’t prove that. Surely Mundungus wouldn’t do that,” Ron said, reaching for the butter on the other side of the dinner table.

“I heard Mundungus muttering something about a deal on dragon eggs over the Floo. He comes back the next night muttering about Mariano Kettlebottom being a two-faced back-stabber. A day later, the Ministry gets an anonymous letter saying Mariano Kettlebottom’s got a stash of Dark Arts supplies. You put two and two together and see if you come up with anything other than four,” Viktor said. “Heads up, owl coming this way,” he added after a moment.

Harry, Ron, Viktor and Hermione all leaned back from the table, allowing the large eagle owl enough room to land between Viktor and Hermione. “Invitation response?” Hermione questioned, raising an eyebrow.

“I imagine. Well? Are you going to just let it sit there, or are you going to take it off and read it?” Viktor asked, holding up a tidbit of meat for the owl.

“I suppose I could,” Hermione assented. She quickly untied the bit of twine and pulled the parchment loose. “This is so silly. I’m nervous,” she admitted. Hermione unrolled the piece of parchment and scanned it, then burst out laughing. “Very funny, Alastor!” she called out to the other table.

“It said ‘respond by owl post’, so I did!” Moody called back.

“Well, you’re our first response! I’m going to frame it!” Hermione said, shaking her head.

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“I haven’t bothered reading them as they come in,” Hermione said, shuffling the large pile of parchment rolls on the coffee table. “I’m going to go get the list, you start opening, and we can check them off as we come to them,” she added, dashing back toward her bedroom.

Viktor sank into the couch, picking up one of the rolls before leaning back. Crookshanks immediately bolted from the corner and leapt onto the couch, then into Viktor's lap. "Not now," Viktor muttered. "Why do you always head for my lap the instant I sit down? Hermione wants you in her bleeding lap, and you ignore hers!" Viktor hissed. Crookshanks blissfully ignored it, opting instead to bat at the invitation response with a paw. "Cats, you all want to cuddle up to people who detest you, and ignore people who actually like you," Viktor added. "Harder to understand than girls, if that's even possible."

"What's that?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing," Viktor replied, turning his attention back to unrolling the parchment. The two of them sat for some time in silence, checking off names as they unrolled responses and piled them neatly into a box that Hermione had placed beside the table.

Hermione unrolled another and stared at it for a few moments. "The Diggorys are coming," she said softly. When Viktor didn't respond, she studied his profile. "Are you going to be okay?" Silence. Hermione reached up and brushed a strand of hair back from his forehead for something to do with her hands.

"Sometimes I wonder if I even know what that means any more. Okay," he said without looking at her. Instead, he unrolled another piece of parchment from the pile in his lap, where they were propped haphazardly around and on top of the ginger haired cat.

"You've got to stop beating yourself up. Moody's right, it doesn't bring any of them back. I'm responsible, too. For a lot of things. We all are. Things are changing. They're getting better. People are starting to move on. We're starting to move on and put some of the bad things behind us. I'm not saying it's ever going to go away completely, but maybe it gets better. It has to get better," Hermione soothed.

"Stop recycling speeches," Viktor said with a strangled laugh.

"I thought it was pretty good when you used to give it to me," Hermione said with a weak smile.

Viktor heaved a sigh. "And some things never change. Mark one cousin off the list, Aleksandra," he said, tilting the sheet of parchment toward her, so she could see the reply. A hastily written 'not attending' stood out on the reply card.

“It’s okay,” Hermione said with a shrug, but her voice quivered slightly.

“Whole world goes mad for a few years, and here I am stewing over whether or not a cousin I haven’t even seen for more than five minutes since I was fifteen is coming to my wedding. I never liked her anyway. She was always too spoiled. Used to complain to everyone who would listen that I got her dirty on purpose, the little drama queen,” Viktor said, giving Hermione a wan smile.

“Reason enough to write her off the list, then, telling lies on you,” Hermione said, marking through the name, which appeared on her list.

“Shh, don’t tell anybody, but I did get her dirty on purpose. I used to go out and ride during the hottest part of the day when she was around just so she would squeal about how disgusting I was and leave me alone,” Viktor whispered in Hermione’s ear, dropping his arm behind her shoulders. “She was a real whiner. Nothing suited her.”

“Then I wouldn’t want her at our wedding,” Hermione said, leaning her head against Viktor’s shoulder. “She must take after that other side of the family.”

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“So, dear, how have the responses been?” Molly asked, handing Hermione a pile of cucumbers to chop for the salad.

“We’ve gotten a lot of the closer ones back. All attending but two, so far, and one is because of health,” Hermione explained, carefully avoiding the subject of the other refusal. “Actually, I’ve got some in my bag, there, that I’m going to open when I get the chance.”

“I’m so glad you two could come for dinner. Pity Harry and Ron couldn’t have the same days off. Then it would be almost like old times. The house seems so empty without any of you here. Ginny and Neville hardly ever come to visit, either,” Molly said, looking at the couple in question, who were digging out silverware, plates and napkins.

“Apprenticeship is hard work. They hardly let me out of the greenhouse at the institute, Molly,” Neville protested. “It’s a wonder I don’t have seedlings sprouting out of my ears.”

“And I’m doing shadowing on rounds most of the time. It’ll get better, you’ll see,” Ginny assured her.

“At the rate they’re increasing, we’re going to have to start carrying a Beater’s club to turn back the tide of the owls. What did we get yesterday? Thirty?” Viktor asked, bringing in the final chair and setting it at the table.

“At least. It’s nearly as big a job opening them as it was sending them out,” Hermione admitted. “You can’t get a spare minute from it. There, all done chopping. Salad’s ready.”

“Well, the brisket needs about twenty more minutes,” Molly said, peering into the oven.

“Then there’s enough time for all of you to come out to the shed and see my latest project,” Arthur announced, looking pleased. “I’ve taken a Muggle fellytone apart and turned it into a burglar alarm.”

“Telephone,” Hermione corrected absently, rummaging through the bag of parchments. “Was that one of the projects in that science book I got for you?”

“It was. Blasted clever things, those telephones. And I understand Muggles don’t usually make their own burglar alarms. Can’t understand why. It was fascinating, to say the least,” Arthur insisted.

“I’ll pass for the moment. I’ve seen them before. Maybe after dinner,” Hermione said, continuing to lay out parchments and quill. “You all go ahead.”

“Arthur, that thing’s not dangerous is it?” Molly said anxiously, trailing after the rest.

“Of course not, Molly! I haven’t got it charmed to spring the trap, yet!” Arthur called back cheerfully. Hermione could barely stifle her laughter until the door closed. She settled into the now familiar routine of opening, reading, flipping through the lists and checking off responses. Hermione paused when she reached a parchment that was thicker than it should be. She examined it, found it had been resealed as sent and marked with a terse looking Bulgarian phrase on the outside. She fished out the Bulgarian phrasebook she had owned for some years, ordered through Flourish and Blotts. It had gotten worn and dog-eared from frequent use when she and Viktor had been exchanging letters and still occasionally struggling for some common linguistic ground. She had kept it handy lately for looking up the responses from his family. It seemed they were hardly ever content to simply mark the card, they always passed along a sentence or two of congratulations when the response was in the affirmative. Hermione flipped the pages, located the matching phrase. Translated “return to sender”. The invitation itself hadn’t been opened.

*Perhaps we shouldn't have put our names on the outside after all,* Hermione thought dejectedly. She found the name, read the notation "cousin" beside, and checked the "decline" column. Hermione debated discarding the returned bundle completely, but it hadn't escaped her notice that Viktor had made it a point to actually lay eyes on all the responses from family, so far, even the ones he had barely seen in better than a decade. He would be interested in the ones marked "decline" especially. No point in hiding it, she decided, slipping it into the pouch in the bag she had set aside for the opened replies.

It still jolted her when a few replies later, she stumbled onto the second decline. Hermione skimmed the card, picked out the name. Dimitar. She wracked her brain for a few moments, trying to place it. Aleksandra's older brother. Only after she had satisfactorily placed the respondent in perspective on the family tree did she allow her eyes to wander the rest of the card, the words scratched out all over it, the ink nearly obscuring the original words.

She might not recognize the majority of them, but Hermione could tell an insult when it was staring her in the face. Finally, her gaze fell on a familiar word. She had only heard it a few times, when Viktor had been cursing like a sailor. She had needed to look it up because he wouldn't even tell her what it meant at the time, embarrassed that he had slipped and said it within earshot. Another she thought she recognized after sounding it out, though she had never seen it in writing. Determinedly, she put her fingertips to the edge of the phrasebook, doggedly determined to find out what each and every one of them meant. She was so absorbed in looking up each epithet that she didn't even hear the door open behind her.

"He's got Neville off looking at blueprints for an automatic sprinkler. I pleaded having seen one before at your house, and took that as my cue to I—" Viktor's hand fell across the reply card and he leaned down to look her in the face. Hermione determinedly kept her eyes glued to the phrasebook. "What are you doing?"

"Looking them up," Hermione replied as evenly as she could.

"Why?" Viktor asked, settling into the chair, leaving his hand in place. He looked positively mortified.

"If someone's going to call me names, I at least want to know what I've been called," Hermione insisted.

"Please... stop," Viktor pleaded.

“Ah, he’s called me a slut, there. I *would* like to see what’s next. Move your hand, if you please,” Hermione said. When Viktor neither replied nor complied, she reached out and grasped his wrist, sliding it a few inches to the side. “Harpy,” she said after a moment spent consulting the book. “Original.”

“Stop... doing... that,” Viktor said haltingly.

“He’s got a few choice words for you, too. Blood traitor, of course. No package of insults meant for the two of us would be complete without *that* one. Oh, he goes a bit incoherent, there. Disgraces. Wonder if he accidentally pluralized it? Could have been talking about just you, or maybe both of us are-”

“Stop it.”

“Bastard,” Hermione whispered.

“Stop.”

“That was me,” Hermione said, looking Viktor in the face.

“Well, good for you, but stop letting my bad language problems rub off on you. Dimitar’s a self-important, puffed up idiot who couldn’t find his own arse with two hands, a flashlight, a map and a hired guide. What’s he know about anything? He’s done nothing his whole life but sit on his own behind and live off of his father’s money, and he hasn’t even done much of a job of that,” Viktor said gently, putting his hand over Hermione’s on the table.

“He’s part of your mother’s family,” Hermione pointed out.

“I was quoting Mama just now,” Viktor said.

“Your mother expected you to bring a pure-blood home, didn’t she?” Hermione asked on impulse.

“I imagine she did. Because I went to Durmstrang and what else was I going to bring home from there? How many times do I have to tell you? If she really didn’t like you, she would let you know it in no uncertain terms,” Viktor explained.

“I suppose,” Hermione said with a strangled laugh. “No one in your family seems too shy about expressing themselves,” she added, picking up the reply card and waving it.

“No, the Krum clan tend to be very big believers in say what you mean, mean what you say. You’re marrying a big mouth, you know. You’re probably going to want to strangle me for some of the things I come out and say sometimes,” Viktor said.

“I imagine that might be a two way street. That will just keep us from having to go to too many boring social events,” Hermione said, tucking the card into the bag once more.

“We’ll be the most unpopular couple to invite. We can just stay home and be disagreeable and anti-social together,” Viktor said, smiling.

“Promise?”

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“You’re not going to believe this,” Hermione said, studying a sheet of parchment before her while Viktor tossed some things into a bag.

“What am I not going to believe?” he prompted, fastening the flap and swinging the strap onto his shoulder.

“We’ve only got thirty-five invitations that haven’t been returned yet,” Hermione said slowly.

“I don’t believe it! Good job, too, since we have to have the final count to the caterers in what? A week? I’m half tempted to just count that final thirty-five as present and accounted for and give them the number, now. Let them get on with it,” Viktor said, putting his hand on the back of the sofa and leaning over to kiss her on the cheek. “Close my door when you go, or Crookshanks will be in here.”

“Must be your cologne. He can’t seem to leave your clothes alone,” Hermione said absently. “Be careful,” she cautioned.

“I’m just getting on the ship to Bulgaria, not steering it. If I were better rested, I would just Apparate and forget the ship altogether. I know my way to the stadium pretty well.”

“Don’t you dare. I’m not having you get yourself splinched twelve days before the wedding. Twelve days. That sounds so... short,” Hermione said with a shudder.

“I’ll be back in plenty of time for the rehearsal and the rehearsal dinner. I might even be back in two days. What are you going to do while I’m gone?” Viktor said.

“Ginny and I thought we would go to London and pick up some last minute things, maybe. And I need to pick up the gifts for Dumbledore and Oblansk,” Hermione said. “Don’t go getting a black eye or breaking anything, either.”

“It’s just a team meeting, not a brawl,” Viktor protested.

“I know you. You lot will be on a broom trying to see how close to the ground you can get within an hour of arrival,” Hermione warned.

“Well, if you insist,” Viktor said with a smile.

“Be safe,” Hermione reiterated.

“Yes, madam,” Viktor replied. “Close the door when you go.”

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It felt curious, being in front of the stadium again. The last time he had been here was well before the war. Before he had gone back to Britain. During part of a scattered, tense season more significant for the amount of behind the scenes negotiations and back room meetings than for any Quidditch-related events. By the time Fudge had acknowledged that Voldemort was back, Quidditch had been just about the last thing on anyone’s mind. Travel and meeting people had its benefits, after all, he had to admit. It had enabled him to drum up support with less trouble and with less suspicion aroused.

“Stop staring at it and go in, already, momche,” a familiar voice rang out from nearby. It even felt slightly odd to be addressed in Bulgarian so much of late, after so many months of nearly exclusive English.

“Konstantin,” Viktor said, turning to face the Beater. “You haven’t replied, yet.”

“I thought I would save the owl a trip and put it in your hand. Save me a seat,” Vulchanov said, producing his reply card and handing it over.

“Just you? No guest?” Viktor asked curiously.

“No. I think there’s hardly a girl this side of China you two have managed not to invite, anyway. Expect to get the rest of those back, today. As far as I know, we’re all coming. Have you worn out that picture, yet?” Vulchanov said with a grin.

“Don’t need the picture any more. Have the real thing.”

“But it doesn’t mean you’ve stopped carrying it, now, does it? It doesn’t even move,” Vulchanov replied.

“Okay, no, it doesn’t,” Viktor admitted, drawing out the photograph from an inside pocket, considering it a moment, then tucking it back. “And at the time, she was home. She couldn’t send me anything else.”

“I still can’t believe you’re getting married. You’re little more than an infant, what’s the rush? Speaking of which, if I didn’t know you better than that, I would suspect there were three people headed to the altar at this wedding,” Vulchanov said mischievously.

“Because, Vulchanov. If there’s one thing these last few years have taught me, it’s that time is short. Never expect to be able to just do something tomorrow, because you don’t know if tomorrow is even going to get here. And when you find someone you want to spend tomorrow with, you had better get to it. The world doesn’t stop spinning for your convenience. I don’t expect to get this lucky a second time, so I’m not willing to risk losing her. Good enough reasons?” Viktor asked lightly.

“I changed my mind.”

“What?”

“I changed my mind. Add a guest to mine. That little speech was so touching, I’m going to ask Natasha after all,” Vulchanov said, socking his hands in his pockets and heading for the stadium entrance.

“Ooh, Natasha. First I’ve heard of her. Is she new?” Viktor asked, following.

“New to me. Like my list of prospects is long. Who do you think I am, anyway? That Malatov with his chippie of the week? He can’t even keep them straight. Last one slapped him because he got her name wrong.”

“He’ll grow out of it,” Viktor said.

“Grow out of it! He’s thirteen years older than you!” Vulchanov exclaimed, laughing heartily.

“Takes some people longer to mature than others,” Viktor said defensively.

“And some people never do. He’s a good, solid player, if he would quit chasing the booze and the women. He could be on the National Team if he would straighten up,” Vulchanov said, shaking his head.

“Tell him there’s women to be had,” Viktor said. Vulchanov laughed all the way to the locker room.

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“You know, when I go back home, I’m going to have to tell Hermione she was wrong,” Viktor said, checking the stadium clock.

“I don’t envy you, then, telling a woman she’s wrong. Even your Miss Granger,” Vulchanov replied. “What was she wrong about?”

“She said we would be out here doing breakneck maneuvers within an hour of arriving. She was off by at least five minutes,” Viktor said, picking up one of the brooms and clipping it into the equipment rack behind the bench.

“Just because the administration had to go and have a staff meeting about nothing of importance for an hour,” Vulchanov pointed out.

“I’ll take a technicality. It’s probably the only way I’ll ever win an argument with her outright. Now, there’s one thing I definitely didn’t miss,” Viktor said, nodding toward the cluster of reporters milling about outside the locker room. They had been catching the players as they headed back to their lockers after the impromptu scrimmage. There was little hope of being able to avoid them completely. It seemed the best he could hope for was a few stock questions with short, stock answers, and being left alone after he answered them.

“Buck up, momche. Can’t be as bad as what you did the last few years, can it?” Vulchanov said, looking sympathetic.

“I don’t know but I prefer the people you bump into doing Auror’s work. At least you always know what their intentions are. They always admit they’re out to get you. Reporters lie about it,” Viktor argued.

“Tell them to shove their questions, then,” Vulchanov said offhandedly.

“Worse. They’ll make it up, then,” Viktor argued.

“I’m going to wait a few minutes to run the gauntlet. Be my guest,” Vulchanov said, holding his hand out in silent invitation. Viktor put his head down and

charged for the locker room door, hoping that he looked anything but eager to talk. He tossed a few short answers over his shoulder in response to the shorter questions, played deaf to some of the rest.

He had just about breathed a sigh of relief at getting off with “Yes, but this will always be home, too,” in response to one of them demanding to know if it was true that he was going to take up residence in Britain after his wedding, when it happened. One of them was standing in front of the door. Younger, eager, looking fully prepared to latch himself onto the door facing by his fingernails before giving up on getting his question answered. And wearing that awful look that reporters always got when they smelled blood in the water. That self-satisfied, cat that ate the canary look. “Move, please,” Viktor said shortly, glowering at him.

The blue eyes behind the wire rim glasses were bright. Flinty. Unperturbed. If there weren't a couple of dozen witnesses, Viktor would have been tempted to remove him bodily from in front of the locker room door. Anything to avoid answering what he was going to ask. That look was never good news. “One question, if I may-”

“I'd rather you didn't,” Viktor said, hoping it would at least throw him off guard. The reporter just ran his hand through his sandy blond hair and never missed a beat.

“I was wondering if you would care to comment on what your great-uncle Branimir has said about your impending marriage to Miss... Granger, wasn't it?” he said, consulting his parchment as though he needed to, as though he were so busy covering so many stories that he couldn't possibly be called upon to remember anyone's name, and giving a sickly smile. Obvious hallmark of a new reporter eager to appear a jaded old hand.

“I wouldn't care to, actually,” Viktor said, taking another step toward the door. The reporter didn't budge. Viktor reached out and nudged him solidly in the shoulder, not hard, but enough to take him by surprise. He staggered a bit, but righted himself, and didn't take the hint. Or move enough to allow Viktor by. Viktor turned sideways and began to slip by him, but not quickly enough to avoid the reporter grabbing his forearm.

“What? No comment on the fact that a family member called Miss Granger a,” here he broke off momentarily and consulted the parchment again, reading loudly, “vile, manipulative harpy who doesn't think this country is good enough for her?”

Viktor could actually feel all the eyes settling on him. “I beg your pardon?”

“You *are* passing up moving back here in favor of living in Britain... for *her*,” the reporter pointed out, with a gleeful air.

“My reasons for living where I choose to live are no one’s business but my own,” Viktor said, tight-lipped. This one wasn’t going to be happy with that, but at least it was an answer that gave no quarter, admitted nothing, cast no unflattering light on Hermione.

“He said more,” the reporter added happily, “about how he finds it disgraceful that you’re even thinking of sharing your last name with that Mudblood. And that’s the *niciest* thing he called her.”

“Don’t you *ever* let me hear you use that disgusting term around me again. Quoting or not. Or I will string and gut you,” Viktor hissed in his face, a mere inch away. For the first time, the reporter’s glee and self-confidence seemed to waver. No matter, aside from the personal satisfaction. The whole pack of them were on it, now. There was no way they would let him alone and not let him comment. Fair enough. Forewarned was forearmed. “When does it go to press?”

“Tomorrow. He seems to think she’s thoroughly beneath you. When you could have had your pick of Bulgarian women with bloodlines that-”

“I’m very sorry my great-uncle feels that way. But it doesn’t change the fact that his opinion is thoroughly wrong. Considering he hasn’t met her, I think his opinion to be misinformed,” Viktor forced himself to say, voice even, but loudly and slowly enough that they could all hear and copy it down. He wrenched his arm loose and grabbed the door, giving the reporter a look that dared him to grab again and risk losing an arm. Viktor resisted the urge to slam the door, instead shutting it firmly behind. Saying any more would be useless. Just tossing chum to the sharks. Giving them more fodder for more stories. He stood for a moment, surveying the empty locker room. The other players that had preceded him had already taken the Floo or Apparated home.

Almost before he knew it, he had snatched up one of the Beater’s clubs from the rack and bashed it into one of the lockers. It produced a most satisfying dent. He kept it up until he was too winded to continue, his knuckles sore and his forearms twanging from the vibration. Viktor stooped for a few moments, leaning his hands on his knees, no noise but the ringing, metallic echo of the lockers and his own ragged breathing in his ears. “Well, that will teach those fucking lockers.”

“What?” Viktor asked, turning to face Vulchanov.

“I said, that will teach those fucking lockers. Seriously... what prompted...?”  
Vulchanov gestured helplessly at the dented bank of lockers. Viktor sank onto the bench and replayed the encounter.

“Ah. They just wanted a headline,” Vulchanov said soothingly, sitting next to him.

“I just want my life back. Where no one wants a piece of me,” Viktor replied. “Or worse. A piece of her.”

“They can want forever. Doesn’t mean you have to give them the satisfaction of handing it over, gift wrapped. You didn’t,” Vulchanov pointed out.

“What do you do... when they do... that?” Viktor asked, pointing toward the door.

“You tell them to go to Hell as politely as possible. Then take it out on something that can’t talk back or do a story,” Vulchanov said, surveying the lockers again. “But you don’t need me to say that. Whatever those lockers did to you, they won’t be doing that again. You taught them a lesson. They won’t be giving you any guff or looking at you funny from now on,” Vulchanov deadpanned, managing to keep a straight face for a few seconds before both of them dissolved into laughter.

“I don’t even know why I did it,” Viktor said breathlessly. “It’s not as though it did me any good. The story will run tomorrow, and I’ll bet the British paper picks it up.”

“Because you would get taken in for doing that to that reporter’s head! Feel better, don’t you?” Vulchanov asked, rubbing at the corner of his eye.

“Not until I call up the old man himself and give him a piece of my mind. I imagine he’s already had me cut out of the will and resolved never to mention me or acknowledge my existence. Might as well get my money’s worth cussing at him,” Viktor said, heaving a sigh. “Might have to resort to a Howler if he won’t take my call. He probably will, though. He probably orchestrated it to knock some sense into me and thinks I’ll come crawling back and ask him for forgiveness.”

“You’re going to have to pay for those lockers, you know. And that splintered Beater’s club. They covered wanton damage to team-owned equipment in the team meeting. While you were busy counting ceiling tiles,” Vulchanov said with a derisive snort.

“They can take it out of my first paycheck,” Viktor said truculently, tossing the

club down.

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Viktor crept up the stairway as quietly as possible, trying not to wake anyone. It was past midnight, and he had little doubt that everyone was in their quarters, and likely in bed. He had made it back later than he had planned, but the ship had made good time, considering the wind. Viktor opened the door to his quarters, slipping inside and shutting the door behind him as softly as possible. It made no difference however, since at the first step he took from the door, the complete silence was broken by an indignant, pained and undeniably feline yowl of epic proportions followed by the slapping of paws on the floor and the faraway tinkle of broken glass after a few moments.

“Crookshanks,” Viktor muttered, holding up his wand. “Lumos.” He nearly dropped it when the light from the wand illuminated a shadowy figure on the sofa, rummaging between the cushions. “Merlin’s beard! You’re lucky I didn’t just blast you, sitting there in the dark! I guess if I hadn’t stepped on Crookshanks, I would have,” he said after he had caught his breath. “Why on earth didn’t you put the light on?”

“I dozed off,” Hermione said, squinting into the light. “I thought you would be in earlier. And I have no idea where my wand has gotten to,” she added, feeling on the other side and coming up empty.

“Here, *accio wand*,” Viktor said, and the errant wand rolled from beneath the edge of the sofa, on the floor. “Your cat’s a pedestrian hazard,” Viktor snapped.

“Oh, when you step on him, he’s *my* cat,” Hermione replied, sounding slightly indignant.

“We haven’t married, so I don’t own part of him, yet. Assuming any of him is owned. You might own about one whisker, when he lets you. In fact, I think he owns the lot of us. Get off my shelves in there, you half-Kneazle menace! Put on some lights, already, we’ve probably woken half the place, by now,” Viktor said, dropping his bag and heading toward the bedroom. After several minutes of perching on a chair, coaxing and being grumbled at by a thoroughly affronted feline, he was able to drag the reluctant ginger cat from the top of the wardrobe, where he was busy sulking and licking his bruised bottlebrush tail. He could always repair the broken lamp later. “Right, there,” Viktor said, walking back into the sitting room and preparing to hand Crookshanks over. He paused when he took a good look at her face. “What?”

“Nothing,” Hermione said, giving him a gloomy look, then staring at her shoes.

“You can’t be upset because I stepped on the bloody cat in the dark! You would think he would learn not to sleep right in front of the door! He’s fine, which is more than I can say for the lamp at the moment. He’ll live. Nothing bruised but his tail and his dignity,” Viktor said, sitting down next to her.

“I’m not,” Hermione protested weakly, not looking at him. Viktor set Crookshanks down on the cushion between them and the cat promptly hopped onto the coffee table instead, amid a general rustle and crinkling. Viktor followed the noise to a copy of the Daily Prophet, crunching beneath the ginger fur.

“Move, you,” Viktor said, tugging at the edge of the paper. Crookshanks hoisted his tail and marched off haughtily to the other end of the table, nose in the air, as though he had planned to move all along. “News travels fast. And gets stretched,” Viktor said after a few moments skimming the folded paper, sounding disgusted. “Is this what’s bothering you?” Hermione shrugged halfheartedly. “I hate to tell you, but get used to it. And I hardly need point out to you that half of this isn’t really accurate. I think you know the two of you have never actually met, so he can’t have formed an opinion. She deliberately left that bit off.”

“I hate her. It was bad enough when she hinted at all that back in school... but this...” Hermione said, lifting the paper weakly and waving it slightly. “This is low.”

“And it has the added advantage of being absolutely true. If heavily edited. Every bleeding, stinking word he said plus speculative commentary, but nothing of what I said. No direct comment on it, indeed. She’ll claim it was for space only,” Viktor said bitterly. “I said he was mistaken. Seeing as he hadn’t met you, he couldn’t have formed an opinion of you.”

“That’s why I hate her so. I can’t complain she made this up. Your great-uncle really said those things.”

“I called him up and cussed him until I was blue in the face, if that makes any difference,” Viktor offered, draping an arm around her shoulders.

“Impressive. I’m more impressed by what you said to the reporter. Or maybe more importantly, what you didn’t say,” Hermione said, putting her head against his shoulder with a sigh. “How was the trip?”

“Pleasant enough, bar the sharks outside the locker room. You were wrong. It took over an hour for us to get out and risk breaking our necks. And I get my first paycheck in time for us to make the first payment on the house, so that helps the

Gringotts balance considerably. Minus the cost of a bank of lockers.”

“Bank... of lockers?” Hermione asked curiously.

“And a Beater’s club. Suffice it to say they stood in for a certain reporter’s head... Good thing there aren’t any here.”

“Can we never buy a paper ever again?” Hermione asked plaintively.

“I always skip any section with a Rita Skeeter byline. Healthier for us and the lockers, I imagine. Can we never leave this couch again?”

“You’ll just trip over the cat. Healthier for the both of you, I imagine,” Hermione said.

“However would that look? You coming out of my quarters in the morning?” Viktor asked lightly.

“Better leave, then. I can’t afford any more bad press because I’m consorting with you,” Hermione replied, standing.

“Oh, you’re no fun, any more. Seriously, don’t let this bother you. At least the story in the Bulgarian paper was evenhanded. Since when do you care what anyone thinks? Much less some old stuffed shirt who never met you?”

“What he thought never bothered me. It was wondering what you thought,” Hermione said softly.

“How could you possibly doubt what I thought? I’m marrying you in a few days...”

“Not about me. About what reporters *say* about me. You never gave two darns about what reporters said about you. They could have printed you kicked puppies and pinched orphans and you wouldn’t have paid the slightest bit of attention...”

“That was me, though. This is you,” Viktor protested.

“Try not to give two darns about what they say about me, either. I shouldn’t,” Hermione admitted.

“I picked the public job. You didn’t. They had better watch where they’re pointing their grimy little quills,” Viktor said.

“So your great-uncle blew off some steam,” Hermione said with a smile and a small shrug.

“And showed what a great prat he is. End of story. It doesn’t reflect on you. Everyone’s too busy thinking about the Wedding of the Century, aren’t they?”

“Oh, absolutely. Wonder if we’re invited?”

“Afraid we can’t wiggle out of it. See you at the rehearsal dinner tomorrow?” Viktor asked.

“Just might squeeze it in to my schedule. Never did make it to London, yet. Might go tomorrow morning. While you sleep. Beating up lockers is hard work,” Hermione said with a laugh. “I assume we’re still going to start moving in a week before the wedding? I might want to rethink the paint in the-”

“Leave it. Take your doorstep cat with you,” Viktor replied.

“To London, or just to my quarters?”

“I’ll settle for your quarters, for right now. Anywhere he’s not underfoot.”

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“You ought to buy something slinky,” Ginny prompted, nudging Hermione’s elbow.

“Something slinky? Do they make slinky kitchenware?” Hermione asked.

“I was talking about the lingerie department over there. For the honeymoon, not sink mats,” Ginny said, sounding disgusted.

“Oh, I couldn’t! Let’s just get the extra guest book and be done with it!” Hermione said, blushing.

“Come on, go take a turn through the lingerie section before you move on to the stationery. You shouldn’t be embarrassed! You won’t be wearing it long enough to be embarrassed,” Ginny teased.

“Ginny... I... “ Hermione stammered uncertainly as Ginny dragged her along by the wrist.

“At least look at the nighties or something!” Ginny insisted, thrusting one of the

hangers from the nearest rack into Hermione's hand.

"Well, maybe..." Hermione said, feeling the material between her fingers, then exchanging the hanger for another.

"Here, let me hold the shopping basket and let you look in peace," Ginny said, taking the basket from Hermione. Hermione browsed the rack for several minutes in silence.

"Hermione Granger!" a sharp female voice said from behind her. Hermione started guiltily and put the hanger back. "That is you, isn't it? Do you remember me at all?"

"Mrs. Hendricks! Ginny... this is Mrs. Hendricks, she used to sit with me when I was small. This is Ginny Weasley, a school friend," Hermione said, hurrying to make introductions. The plump, older woman peered up at Hermione through cat's eye glasses.

"I suppose you've graduated from that boarding school? Scotland was it?" Mrs. Hendricks asked.

"Yes, I've graduated from that school in Scotland, by now, Mrs. Hendricks. Last year," Hermione explained.

"And are you off to university, now?" the woman asked, beaming.

"No, I've taken a job. Doing research for writers at a publishing company," Hermione replied, careful to stick to her safe answers. She tensed as she put her guard up, trying to think ahead and omit anything that might be suspicious.

"Oh! How lovely! One I'm familiar with, dear? Mills and Boon? Bloomsbury?" Mrs. Hendricks prompted, adjusting her glasses.

"No, probably not one you've heard of, but it may lead to some bigger writing jobs, later. Not books, articles, most likely," Hermione said, wondering why she sounded slightly apologetic.

"What a beautiful ring! Would that be an engagement ring, love?" Mrs. Hendricks asked, seizing Hermione's hand and inspecting it.

"The ring? Oh, yes, actually, I am engaged. In fact, I'm in London picking up some last minute things for the wedding. It's in a few days," Hermione said carefully, a hot flush creeping up her neck. She felt like a child about to be

caught out eating sweets when she hadn't brought enough for everyone.

"I had no idea! Congratulations! Church somewhere around here?" Mrs. Hendricks inquired.

"Actually, we're holding the wedding at the school. It's the only place we can manage that's big enough for the group we're expecting, and we still didn't get to invite everyone I might have liked," Hermione said, the regret clear in her voice. *Like an entire segment of my life. The Muggle bit. The bit that wouldn't see a blasted thing but a ruin where our wedding is being held. The bit that would goggle at the fact that my husband-to-be usually wears wizard robes, carries a wand and is about to go back to riding a broom for a living... And that we spent the last few years fighting to save us all... a war most of you never even knew existed...*

"Sensible, dear, sensible. You're young, no point spending a fortune hiring a church when you can pick somewhere smaller that fits your budget... Would you do me the courtesy of mailing me a picture of you in your wedding gown? I can't believe you're old enough to be getting married," Mrs. Hendricks said.

"Certainly, I'll mail you a picture. I suppose you're here visiting with your nephew?" Hermione said in a desperate bid to change the subject. She mentally reviewed the way her wedding robes would look to a Muggle eye. They would likely pass quite well for a slightly exotic wedding dress. She would just have to remember to stand quite still during one of the portraits, so she could mail something that didn't move...

"Of course. I'm still off in Torquay, now. Have been since not long after you went off to school. I bet you met your young man in school, didn't you? I suppose he's Scottish?" Mrs. Hendricks asked, coming back to the same line.

Hermione took a deep breath, considering whether it was worth fudging the truth. No, she decided, the truth, as devoid of detail as possible, was easier to remember. "Meet him at school? As a matter of fact, I did. Scottish? No, Bulgarian, actually," Hermione said with a smile, guiltily enjoying the look of total surprise on her former sitter's face. It was certainly one of the last places she would have considered... once.

"Bulgarian!? Well, that's certainly far enough away that I never would have expected a fellow student to be from there! You did say Bulgarian?" Mrs. Hendricks asked, astonished.

"Yes, Bulgarian, of all things. Quirk of fate, I suppose. He came with another

boarding school for an academic competition, and we attended a dance. We wrote one another after he graduated,” Hermione said, with a *c’est la vie* shrug she hoped would fend off further questions about the nature of the competition.

“Oh, is he a year older, then?” Mrs. Hendricks asked.

“He’s a few years older,” Hermione said dismissively.

“What’s he do, dear? For a living,” Mrs. Hendricks elaborated.

“He’s involved in international sport,” Hermione said vaguely.

“International sport? Well, I suppose that pays well. Would I know who he is?” Mrs. Hendricks said, puzzling a bit. Her old sitter hadn’t exactly been an avid follower of sport back then. Hermione doubted things had changed.

“Quite reasonably lucrative, but I doubt you would have heard of him. Viktor Krum. He still plays on a Bulgarian team. He’s awfully well known in parts of the world, not so much in others,” Hermione explained. *He could stroll down Privet Drive at high noon and not draw a second glance. Little Whinging couldn’t care less who he is, for the most part. At least four-fifths of Devon couldn’t tell you who he is for a bet. But I shouldn’t stand next to him in certain parts of Sophia or anywhere near the Pirins, there are so many of our kind there. You could be trampled. And if there’s anyone over the age of eight in Hogsmeade who can’t reel off at least a year’s worth of statistics and three Ministries he convinced, I’ll eat your hat.*

“Really? That must be hard on the two of you. All that travel. He must be away a lot, and I imagine the travel eats into the paycheck a bit,” Mrs. Hendricks said, her tone sympathetic.

“Yes, the frequent travel is a bit of a strain, but travel has improved a lot recently, hasn’t it? He loves what he does, and we can afford it, thanks to what they pay him,” Hermione said. *When they get the bleeding Floo network back up completely and the passenger routes for the ships and maybe when he gets to the point he’s not so dead tired all the time, he can just Apparate and skip the ship most times... it won’t be so hard.*

“Well, you’re lucky, then. Not everyone is lucky enough to do something they love for a living. Or to find the one they want to spend their lives with so young,” Mrs. Hendricks pointed out indulgently.

“Lucky? My word, you have no idea how lucky...” Hermione said softly.

“Good luck with your wedding, dear. And with married life. I hope he realizes how lucky *he* is. Landing you,” Mrs. Hendricks said, patting Hermione’s hand.

“He won’t stop talking about how lucky he is, actually. He’s about to give me ego problems. I wish we could have invited everyone...” Hermione said.

“I understand, dear. You can’t invite everyone in the country and still afford the marriage. Nice to have met you, too, dear,” Mrs. Hendricks said to Ginny, turning to go.

“Nice to have met you,” Ginny parroted. “Declare yourself a supporter of Bulgaria, miss?” she cajoled in a silly, squeaky voice after a few moments, nudging Hermione with a hanger. “All the Quidditch groupies are wearin’ their loyalties on their knickers this year!”

Hermione burst out laughing. “Honestly, Ginny, you can’t be... serious? Oh, my gracious, you *are*,” she said, taking the hanger holding a silky red chemise and a matching pair of lacy knickers with a Bulgarian flag flying on the front. “How on earth did these end up here? If it were somewhere closer to home... I shouldn’t be surprised, but a regular department store?”

“Oh, come on. Buy them. Viktor would probably get a kick out of them, even if he is going to be more interested in what’s in your knickers than what’s on them,” Ginny teased.

“Ginny!” Hermione scolded. “Will wonders never cease... Look, if I buy them, will you get off my back and let me buy the other guest book and go home? We’ve got the rehearsal dinner in a few hours.”

“If I absolutely can’t interest you in something else,” Ginny allowed.

“You can’t,” Hermione said firmly.

“Right, so this is it? You know, these things have been surprisingly popular,” the cashier commented as she bagged the chemise. “I guess I’ll have to apologize to my daughter. Right, sweetie?” she added over her shoulder to the girl digging bags from beneath the counter.

“Your daughter?” Hermione asked, fishing around in her bag for the wallet that held Muggle money.

“She’s the one who ordered these things when I had her put the inventory orders in to the supplier. I gave her a right going over for doing it without even telling me. Told her no one around here would be buying unmentionables with Bulgarian flags... but she insisted. She’s got this funny thing about a Bulgarian athlete, you see... well, you wouldn’t understand. Not even if I explained it to you. I barely understand the sport he plays, much less why she’s so taken with it. Or him. Kids...” the woman said, shaking her head.

“Mum! You wouldn’t understand! And I’m not a kid! I’m twelve!” the girl complained, turning around. She gaped upon seeing Hermione and Ginny.

“Close your mouth and finish checking this customer out, hmmm, love?” the woman said, chucking her under the chin and walking off.

“I go to Hog-” the girl began.

“I know! I know! I remember you coming last year, Katherine Allberry!” Ginny said urgently, making shushing gestures with her hands.

“You’re *marrying* him!” Katherine squealed, looking positively rapturous. “He *is* going back to playing this season? It’s the best sport ever and that’s my favorite team! I’ve read up on it, that World Cup final is supposed to be the best match ever-”

“Yes! Yes, he is! Now keep it down,” Hermione cautioned, handing over her money. “So, you’re responsible for ordering those, eh? I’ll have to tell him where I got this.”

“I suppose he’ll think it’s funny, some little kid ordering them when they haven’t even played a pro game since I found out I was a ... you know...” Katherine pouted.

“It’s not funny at all. And you’re not a little kid. I wasn’t much older than you when I met him,” Hermione said soothingly, taking her change. “You’ll see some matches that will rival that other one, yet. I’m taking this on my honeymoon. You did well. And enjoy school. Trust me, you’ll be out before you know it. And I know how tough it is... not being able to explain everything... to your parents,” Hermione said, feeling awkward.

“Yeah, they don’t get it,” Katherine said, handing over the bags. “They’re not even letting me go early so I can go to the wedding.”

“They try. It’s just hard for them. They can’t see it, not like we can,” Hermione

said. "Goodbye, Katherine."

"Bye," Katherine called after them, waving as they passed by on the sidewalk.

"It was nice, what you said. To that Muggleborn girl," Ginny said when they had exited the store.

"I hope that's the worst thing she ever has to explain to them. That she has a minor crush on an athlete that plays a sport that defies the laws of physics," Hermione said ruefully.

"Better watch those younger women. That's your husband she's talking about," Ginny said, her tone light.

"How can he resist me when I'm flying the colors of his native country? On my knickers, even?" Hermione shot back.

"How, indeed?" Ginny laughed.

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"Well?" Hermione asked anxiously, grabbing Viktor's sleeve as he entered from the hall and walked into the dining hall, where a makeshift practice area had been set up.

"It's not good. They're stuck. The ship had to turn around and dock. Weather. The Black Sea isn't a lark this time of year. They sent an owl to Vulchanov from port explaining what was going on. I just got off the Floo with him. They're not going to make it," Viktor said.

"How far did your parents make it?" Minister Oblansk asked, leaning in.

"The port in Russia. No further," Viktor said with a sigh. "They're going to see if they can find a Floo route back home and just wait for the wedding."

"Pity they didn't wait, I could have arranged for a Portkey with them. They owe me. I'll do that for the wedding, of course," the Minister said cheerily, as though that settled it.

"We should have just done that to begin with, but with all the other Portkeys you're having to arrange for the wedding itself, and not thinking about how bad the shipping routes are-" Viktor began. "We just thought they would have no trouble getting here well ahead of time, but after the last two trips, maybe they *do*

need a Portkey.”

“Done. Need vone for the honeymoon? I can arrange for flexible departure and return. All of them,” the Minister offered.

“The others are enough. I told them not to worry about getting here for the rehearsal and the dinner. It’s not as though they have anything to rehearse. I just thought it would be nice if they came. I know Portkeys take a ton of paperwork these days. You practically have to sell your mother to get a permit for an international one. Besides, the honeymoon is in Rome-” Viktor began uncertainly.

“They owe me, too. I can arrange for it. Anywhere you vant,” Minister Oblansk insisted. “Do not take a ship,” he added dismissively.

“Good grief, who all owes you?” Viktor asked.

“Who *doesn’t* owe me?” Minister Oblansk said offhandedly.

“Rather Portkey than take the ship?” Viktor asked Hermione.

“Do you really have to ask?” Hermione replied.

“Portkey, then. We would be tremendously grateful if you could manage it,” Viktor told the Bulgarian Minister.

“Consider it part of the vedding gift,” Minister Oblansk said. “Now, then, practice so ve can eat? I’m sure Albus vonts to get back to the school. Organize last minute details. And I vont to eat, frankly. Hungry vork listening to International Commissions giving boring reports.”

“We have *got* to stop being shy about asking people to do things for us,” Hermione said, watching the Minister bustle off back to the front of the dining hall. “Life would be a lot easier.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” Viktor said. “Well, let’s run through this. This isn’t exactly the Great Hall, but it will have to do.”

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“No, no, and no,” Viktor said firmly, crossing his arms and glaring at Harry, Ron, Fred and George. “I am not going out and getting soused the night before my wedding.”

“Oh, come on, it’s just a few drinks, and besides, we told Neville we would meet him. You don’t want him thinking we all stood him up, do you? The women had a little hen party for Hermione the other day,” Fred argued.

“I hardly think tea, sandwiches, and a bridal shower hosted by your mother are equivalent to a visit to the Sleazy Weasel,” Viktor said, sounding skeptical.

“It’s a perfectly reputable establishment! You act as though we’re going for something other than a few drinks,” George said indignantly.

“You aren’t?” Viktor said, cocking an eyebrow. “Angelina might think otherwise.”

“No! Course not!” George protested.

“You wouldn’t dare!” Fred said, gaping.

“Try me,” Viktor replied lightly. “I am not visiting a place the Ministry shut down not six months ago. I am not going to be caught dead in the Sleazy Weasel, much less go there the night before I’m supposed to get married, got that?”

“Got that,” George said grudgingly.

“Good, then. Make it The Three Broomsticks, and I’ll go have a few drinks. A few. As in less than the quantity it takes to make me pass out dead in the floor. Agreed?” Viktor asked.

“Oh, alright. But I never heard of a harmless little lapdance being fatal!” Fred groused.

“I’ll let you make that argument with my mother and yours, then, and we’ll just see how fatal it is,” Viktor replied. “Never mind explaining that line of reasoning to Hermione.”

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Hermione paused while walking across the front lawn of the castle. The sun was just beginning to come up, burning off the last of the morning fog, so common in muggy August. The thin morning light strengthened, pale yellow, then red, then orange behind the clouds, gathering and becoming substantial, cutting through the quiet dark in front of the school. Hogwarts was curiously quiet and still in the early summer morning. The only students on the grounds were some of the Muggleborns who had arrived early, sent ahead without family escorts, to attend

the wedding. A great many of the group from Durmstrang were on hand already, and the Beauxbatons contingent had already arrived, as well. She gazed up at the castle. It was almost like coming home in a way. Home, but not quite home.

“Hermione?” Ginny’s soft voice was nearly a whisper. “Coming in? Can you manage some breakfast? Or are you too nervous?”

“I could manage a little something. Wonder if everything’s here? Ready, I mean,” Hermione said.

“I imagine we’ll find out soon enough. Come on in,” Ginny said, reaching her hand out. “Get some peace inside while you still can. Before Mum gets here.”

“I’ll do that,” Hermione said with a soft smile.

Hermione was relieved to find that her appetite had won out over the butterflies fluttering in her stomach once she got a whiff of the toast and eggs. “Everything is all ready to go. And then some,” Dumbledore said brightly, cutting into his eggs. “I think you’ll find that faculty and staff alike have gone all out. I hope you don’t mind that some of us have taken a few... liberties and done more than was asked. If you don’t like anything, don’t hesitate to say so. After all, it *is* your wedding,” he added.

Hermione found she felt oddly calm. “I’m sure everything will be perfect. Or as perfect as it can be,” she said, giving a shrug.

“Miss Granger, you’ll find that your robes are all laid out in the various quarters. Professor Sprout has graciously donated her quarters for you to use as a staging ground. Miss Weasley can use mine. Professor Flitwick thinks the groom might like to use his, and Madam Hooch has allowed that the groomsmen might find her quarters suitable enough, as they have rather a lot less primping, in general, to be done,” Professor McGonagall interjected.

“That’s wonderful. Anywhere would be fine, I’m sure,” Hermione said, finishing the last bite of her toast. By now, a few of the students and the foreign groups were starting to trail into the Great Hall for breakfast. Hermione let her attention wander to the ceiling, to the image of morning sky outside that was plainly visible. Clear and blue. A few wispy clouds. Molly had fretted about a possible rain until Hermione had been nearly convinced it would sprinkle.

“Got a surprise fer yeh,” Hagrid’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Got a couple o’ critters yeh might find useful.”

“Surprise?” Hermione echoed, startled. The possibilities raced through her mind. And none of them were particularly good.

“I figure yeh deserve ter arrive an’ leave in style. So I arranged fer a fancy mode o’ transport. Yeh’ll have ter leave the grounds before that Portkey they’re bringin’ yeh two will work. Might as well leave in comfort,” Hagrid said proudly.

Hermione couldn’t fathom what Hagrid might be suggesting. “Transport?” she said dazedly.

“Come with me,” Hagrid said eagerly. He looked nearly as unable to contain his glee as he had been when he had been showing Harry, Ron and Hermione his dragon egg in her first year here. She certainly hoped this surprise was nothing like Norbert...

“Where are we headed?” Hermione asked, hurrying, struggling to keep up with Hagrid’s long strides without running outright.

“Down next ter the pumpkin patch,” Hagrid said. Hermione was so determinedly fixed on Hagrid’s broad back and keeping him in sight that she very nearly bumped straight into him nose first when he stopped. “I think that’s fittin’ fer a bride. Don’t yeh think so?”

Hermione stepped out from behind Hagrid, and her jaw literally dropped when she spotted the source of his pride. What she took to be the Beauxbatons carriage, and the Beauxbatons horses, as well, if looks were any indication, stood next to the patch. Horses and carriage alike were draped in decorative, bright red silk and matching red roses. The flowers and fabric were even expertly weaved in among manes and tails. The deep brown horses fairly gleamed, they had been brushed so well. The interior of the carriage, even from here, was obviously upholstered in matching red velvet. “I... it’s... it’s... Oh... Hagrid...” she breathed, and she could feel the tears welling up in her eyes unexpectedly.

“Olympe thought yeh’d like that. Curried ‘em an’ trimmed up their manes an’ tails myself. They’re spirited, fer sure, but she’s brought the feller that drives ‘em, too. Glad ter loan ‘im out fer the trip. Since so much o’ the weddin’s red-” Hagrid began, breaking off abruptly when Hermione threw her arms around his broad waist and wailed noisily.

“Oh... Hagrid... it’s beautiful!” Hermione managed between sobs, burying her face in his shirt.

“Now,” Hagrid said awkwardly, patting her shoulder with a broad hand, “it’s nothin’ ter get all torn up over. Yeh needed somethin’ nice. Can’t have our Hermione jus’ walkin’ up ter the front door. Yeh come down before the ceremony, whenever yeh get ready, an’ Dumbledore an’ yerself can ride up ter the castle in style.”

“It’s wonderful. I can’t possibly tell you how wonderful it is,” Hermione said, pulling away, sniffing and trying to pull herself together.

“Yeh haven’ seen the decorations yet. An’ Professor Sprout grew those roses. Size o’ dinner plates, they are. An’ wait ’til yeh see the yellow ones!” Hagrid said proudly. “Hogwarts has outdone itself. Makin’ the Yule Ball look a piker! Yeh should see what Sprout’s got in the greenhouse.”

“Well,” Hermione sniffed, “let’s go see, then.” She dabbed at her eyes with the checkered hanky that Hagrid produced from a pocket as they walked.

“Just putting the finishing touches on some of these bouquets,” Professor Sprout called out as the two of them entered the greenhouse, Hagrid with some maneuvering. “I thought these looked simply lovely with the blue bows. I took the liberty of putting one of each on all the bouquets,” she added, gesturing to the rows upon rows of roses arranged in large sprays in marble planters. “Ravenclaw and Beauxbatons blue, exactly.”

“They’re marvelous,” Hermione said, reaching out to cup one of the blossoms gently, hardly daring to breathe on it lest it disintegrate. The velvety petals were perfect in every way, looking moist and dew-kissed, as delicate and demanding of attention as any fairy.

“And for your bridal bouquet,” Professor Sprout interjected, bustling over to one of the tables where Hermione had once repotted Mandrakes while sporting earmuffs, “Minerva and I thought this made for an interesting spray.” Professor Sprout raised a tissue-wrapped bundle, as gentle as cradling an infant, and peeled the tissue back slowly. Within, there was a perfectly enormous bouquet, anchored with gladioli, white, red, blue, and yellow, with generous sprays of baby’s breath, greenery, and small bluebells tucked in among the other blossoms. “We’ll tie it with a red ribbon, if you like it.”

“If I like it?! It’s... incredible. I can’t imagine... that is... is everything going to be like this?” Hermione stammered.

“I think you’ll like what Minerva has planned for the decorations. She wants you to review them after the breakfast crowd has cleared. Everyone quite cheerily

agreed to skip lunch in favor of the reception fare. Won't take but a few minutes for the house-elves to change the Great Hall over from the ceremony to the reception. In the meantime, there will be a few light refreshments on the lawn. You'll probably need them. It's going to be one long receiving line," Professor Sprout said.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered, feeling it was a wholly inadequate phrase, but the only thing she could possibly say.

"No, dear. Thank you," Professor Sprout insisted.

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Viktor opened his eyes and squinted across the room toward the window. The headache was surprisingly mild, even though he suspected Fred and George had insisted more than a few of the drinks be supplemented with more than a bit of vodka. The fact that he had taken a headache potion the night before and kept well hydrated had probably helped. But not nearly as much as insisting Fred and George not be responsible for retrieving every round. Viktor had stacked up just as many empty tumblers at the end of the night, but he hadn't let on to Fred and George that half of them were water, not vodka. He checked the clock. Hermione was certainly already at Hogwarts, if Molly had gotten her way. And he assumed she had. Little reason to suspect otherwise. Molly had been ridiculously insistent about the two of them not seeing each other before the wedding.

Viktor suppressed a laugh at the unrestrained snoring coming from the other room. He imagined Fred and George would have headaches the size of Bangkok. Neville, Ron and Harry had at least been a shade more responsible. Good thing, too, as that had meant there were enough semi-sober hands to help get the twins somewhere for the night. Somewhere farther away from The Three Broomsticks than the sidewalk directly outside, at least. As the two of them weren't entirely unconscious, they had been rather tetchy about having a wand used on them. But out of necessity, there had been a great deal of propping because of the rubbery knees.

Viktor slipped out of bed and rummaged in the nearly empty wardrobe for some clean clothes. Most of their things, such as they were, had been moved to the new house, by now. He dressed hurriedly, deciding to save the bath for Hogwarts. Viktor was just pulling on his boots when the pecking on the door cut through the truly thunderous tandem snoring in the living room. Walking briskly through the living room, Viktor had to stifle a laugh again, looking at the two sprawled bodies, one in the chair, one on the couch, both open-mouthed.

“How’s your head?” Harry asked as soon as Viktor had gotten the door open.

“Considerably better than theirs will be,” Viktor replied, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “I think the ache is due more to the late hours than the drink.”

“Just wanted to see if you needed help blasting Gred and Forge there off your sofa,” Harry said, brandishing his wand.

“Better have a bucket of hangover remedy and a pot of coffee at the ready, first,” Viktor said, looking the two of them over. “Ron and Neville?”

“Both up before I was, in fact. Mild headaches, but they’ll live. They felt pretty nearly human after a quick wash and brush up. In fact, they tell me that both those remedies, and a decent breakfast, await those hardy enough to struggle downstairs. Good thing we didn’t end up at The Sleazy Weasel, or those two wouldn’t have a Sickle left between them,” Harry observed, pointing to the two limp but noisy bodies.

“Hey,” Viktor said, reaching out and shaking Fred by the shoulder, “come on. Wake up.” Fred let out a soft moan and his head lolled, but he didn’t wake.

“Move it, George. Morning. Up and at it. Rise and shine. Get up and go. Eggs and bacon,” Harry added, shaking the other twin.

“You’ve slept late enough, get up,” Viktor insisted. Fred squinted a bit, but didn’t open his eyes, instead, he screwed them shut even tighter.

“Don’t mention eggsh and bacon,” George slurred, throwing a forearm up over his eyes.

“Hangover remedy, then. Told you to lay off the vodka,” Viktor said lightly.

“How come you’re sho shober, then? You drank jush as mush,” Fred complained.

“Who said I got vodka when I went up and got them?” Viktor said with a grin. “Water looks the same.”

“Shneaky bashtard,” George said sourly.

“I wouldn’t complain. It kept your bar tab down to something manageable, didn’t it? I told you I could pay for my own drinks,” Viktor argued.

“You were NOT going to pay for your own drinks on last night out before you get married, you! It is NO fair! You cheated! That was damned sneaky, getting water every other round. You put one over on us. You have to get up pretty early to do that to Gred and Forge, and you are a rotten bastard for pulling the wool over our eyes. You should be as drunk as we are!” Fred said, jabbing his finger to emphasize his point.

“Calling me out for a minor deceit after I tell you I don’t want to get soused? Pot, meet kettle,” Viktor said blithely, putting out a hand and hauling Fred up from the chair where he had sprawled the night before.

“Well, I for one am going downstairs to get some eggs, and anyone who isn’t as drunk as I am can get stuffed. The lot of you are wet blankets. All of you. Wimps,” George slurred, shambling off toward the door.

“I’m going with you, brother,” Fred sniffed airily, struggling up from the couch with all the dignity he could muster and staggering after George, not even bothering to shut the door behind them.

“I’d be deeply hurt if that weren’t the booze talking,” Harry said, looking after them with mock solemnity, holding his palm over his heart. “Do you want to be the one to go after them and point out that they’re still in their boxers? I imagine that Union Jack and those Snitches will go over really well with the female breakfast crowd.”

“Nah! They’ll probably figure it out when the screaming starts or when Moody blasts a buttock off, depending on who spots them first. Besides, I wouldn’t want them accusing me of being a wet blanket for suggesting they put their trousers back on before eating breakfast,” Viktor said with a laugh.

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“Shouldn’t you be getting a bath?” Molly asked sharply, pulling Hermione out of her reverie at the window.

“I suppose I should. But I was wondering when they were going to arrive-” Hermione said, watching the front lawn.

“They’ll take care of themselves! And you’re not supposed to be seeing the groom in any case!” Molly scolded, guiding her away by the elbow. “Is she, Arthur?”

“It’s all superstition-” Hermione began to argue.

“Still, better to stick with tradition,” Arthur said. “Molly, why don’t we step downstairs and leave Hermione to have a bath in peace? You can send for them when you get ready for Molly and Ginny to come back in.”

“I’ve got to be going and getting that girl heading toward the bath! Knowing her, she’s still dawdling!” Molly said, striding off toward the hall like a woman on a mission.

“Don’t let her push you,” Arthur said indulgently. “It’s your day. And you deserve it,” he added, his eyes twinkling.

“I don’t think I can ever thank you two enough-” Hermione began.

“Be happy. That’s thanks enough. And visit occasionally,” he said in a soft voice.

“We will,” Hermione replied, slipping into Mr. Weasley’s embrace for a quick hug. “We will. And our door will always be open.”

“Now, get your bath,” Arthur said, heading for the door and pulling it together gently. Hermione stood for a moment, awkwardly surveying Professor Sprout’s feminine and flowery quarters. Flowery in the literal and the figurative sense. Plants, real and artistic renderings both, adorned nearly every available surface. Hermione prodded herself to the adjoining private bath. The tub wasn’t nearly the size of the Prefect’s Bath, but it was deep and generous. She tested the tap, then after considering a spell, added a measure of liquid from one of the many colored potion vials beside the tub. This one was marked “Rose Oil”, and the rich scent billowed through the room as the steam began to rise.

“I’m getting married, today,” she said out loud, her voice sounding thin, girlish and uncertain in the cavernous stone room, as though she were testing it out on her tongue. Hermione felt a bit foolish. Like a child play acting. “Today, I become Hermione Krum. Hermione Granger Krum. Hermione Granger-Krum,” she said, her voice a little more forceful. “I haven’t even thought about what I prefer to be called. I’m getting married, today,” she whispered, sounding hushed and awed. “After today, I’m a wife.”

She disrobed and dropped her clothing in a heap beside the tub. By the time she had removed the last scrap, the bath was full, so she leaned down and turned the water off. Hermione hugged herself, unsure whether the slight chill was due to nerves or the cool stone beneath her feet. She rubbed her hands over her own bare shoulders and surveyed herself in the full length mirror on the opposite wall. *Is he going to... will he... like this? Me?* She dropped her arms to her side

and gave herself an appraising look. *I wonder if it's going to be awkward? Suddenly knowing absolutely every inch of each other? Sharing yourself... giving yourself away?*

Hermione shook herself and stepped down into the sunken tub carefully, easing into the hot water. Her mind wandered back, to the times it would have been so easy. So easy to give in. No one would have known. There was enough clamor, confusion and chaos most of the time to cover up such things, during those few weeks they had spent at Grimmauld Place after her last year at Hogwarts. They had even spent a few nights sleeping under the same sheets, which would have thoroughly appalled Molly, had she known, despite the fact that it had been completely innocent for the most part.

Frankly, they had both been lonely. There was something about the uncertainty of it all that made a body lonely. Who could blame them for wanting something... someone... concrete to hold onto? There had been times when she had been tempted to ask for it. When that little voice in the back of her mind had nagged at her, *And the two of you might be dead, next year or tomorrow. What good does it do to wait? What does it matter if a hand wanders a little too far south or north? What does any of it matter? Why not? What have we got besides right now? What we can give each other?*

But something had always stopped them. Good sense, Hermione supposed now. But there had been the one time, when they had very nearly stepped over the line. When kissing turned to touching, lying on the bed, his hand beneath her blouse, then tucked into that hollow between her legs, her hand against him, nothing separating them but a couple of thin layers of fabric, and she hadn't wanted it to stop... "We'll regret it," he had whispered in her ear, sounding as reluctant as she felt. It had taken several seconds for him to actually remove his hand, as though he were trying to convince himself, as well. They had slept in separate beds the rest of the night. For the rest of the stay, actually. They had been afraid to risk it again. Afraid they wouldn't be able to stop the next time.

Hermione leaned her head back against the tub, letting her mind wander, trailing her fingers over her soapy skin, just enjoying the warmth of the water. *What's it going to feel like? When someone else is doing the touching? When there's nothing stopping you? When there's nothing between you? Or should that be when there's everything between you?* Hermione ducked her head beneath the water, preparing to wash her hair. She had debated for the last several days on what to do with it. Until Viktor had almost insisted she leave it down, no wrestling it into a bun or dousing it in Sleekeazy's.

After a quick shampoo and rinse, she reluctantly got out of the bath, toweling off.

She wrapped one around her body, tucking the corner in, then vigorously toweled off her hair, wrapping that in a towel as well, careful not to drip too much as she gathered up her discarded clothing and headed back to the bedroom. She actually laughed out loud when she passed her wedding robes, laid out neatly on the bed, on her way to the bag she had packed for today. Ginny's suggestion had been good for breaking a bit of the tension, at least. One couldn't help but feel faintly ridiculous when wearing a country's flag on your knickers. *Hard to take yourself too seriously in these*, Hermione thought, laying out the undergarments beside the robes.

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"You five go ahead," Viktor said. "I'll be in shortly," he added, pulling up short halfway across the lawn.

"Getting cold feet?" Ron called back.

"Don't *do* that," Fred muttered, putting his fingers to his temple and rubbing.

"Hardly. My parents should be here in a few minutes. I wanted to make sure they got here. Go on," Viktor added, making a shooping motion with his hand.

"We'll start primping, then," Neville said lightly. "And Fred and George here can nurse some more coffee. Speaking of nurses, maybe Pomfrey has some more... err... cure. Or you could ask your sister."

"Oh, shut up," George shot back, stalking across the lawn. Viktor shook his head as he watched them go. He took the small bag he had packed for today off his shoulder and set it in the grass, crossed his arms and regarded the castle.

Hogwarts. *The place where my whole life changed*, Viktor thought. *The place where I stopped being a child*. Many people could name the place where they shed the last remnants of their childhood, over a period of time, but few could pinpoint the exact moment when they stopped being children. *I can. I can name it exactly. When I woke up not too terribly far from where I'm standing and heard the words 'Diggory's dead'*.

It was awful to feel responsible for something you don't even remember doing. The Quidditch pitch had long since been free of any trace of the hedges that had formed the maze by the second time he set foot here. But it had still given him a hollow, cold feeling in the pit of his stomach to stand on the edge of it and wonder where it was. Where the exact spot was, where he had raised his wand and done it. The same hollow, cold feeling he had gotten at the memorial, when

Amos Diggory had assured him he believed Dumbledore's account. Amos had said it, but he hadn't believed it. Not really. Right then, Amos Diggory didn't *really* believe, deep down in his heart, that Cedric was dead and gone, much less that the rest of it was true. It took a while to believe. It always did. Viktor had unfortunately gotten a crash course in grief with Hermione a couple of years after. Maybe the Diggorys accepting the invitation meant it had all sunk in. That all truly was forgiven. *I hope so. One less thing on my conscience. One less thing to feel guilty about.*

Viktor very nearly leapt out of his skin at the wholly unexpected soft touch on his elbow. "Shouldn't you be inside, getting ready?" Ekaterina asked in Bulgarian.

"Don't suppose I can say the same thing to you, now, can I? You look wonderful," Viktor said, when he had recovered himself. And it was true. She was decked out in a long, flowing red dress robe, with elegant, simple lines, her glossy black hair swept up in a neat French twist. "You, too." Petar had formal black robes with a matching red sash.

"What are you doing out here? You should be getting dressed," Petar said, jerking his head toward the castle.

"I was waiting for you. I worried you weren't going to-"

"Make it? The Minister took care of it. No ship this time. No weather to worry about. No rerouting. If we had to swim most of the way, we would have made it, in any case," Petar said, smiling softly, reaching out and laying a hand on Viktor's shoulder.

"Wouldn't miss it for anything," Ekaterina added. "Now stop standing out here on the lawn," she said sternly, nudging his elbow again, "or you'll miss it."

"Yes, madam," Viktor replied, picking up his bag and starting across the grass.

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Viktor sank into the warm water of the bath gratefully, trying to relax. At least that was one less thing to worry about. His parents had made it. Several things he could stop worrying about, really. All the robes were there, and in fact, by the time he had gotten inside, Neville had already been walking around in the hall with his green inner robe and black outer robe on, fumbling with the green sash. Just to ease his mind about the Great Hall, he had even taken a turn by there before heading to Flitwick's quarters. Minerva had been busily supervising a room full of volunteers and house-elves, and most of the chairs, banners and

drapes were already in place. It had been far more pleasing to the eye than he had expected. Hogwarts had truly gone all out. The flowers alone were mind boggling enough. He would never have imagined that many flowers could come out of the greenhouses in a year's time, much less on a few short months of notice.

Flitwick's quarters had surprisingly few concessions to the occupant's size. The only hints were a few stacks of books in various chairs, a pair of steps beside the bed, and some of the shelves being hung a tad low. Viktor scrubbed off hurriedly, washing his hair, as well. He paused for a moment after raking his wet hair back from his face, holding his hands up and regarding them. Today would be the last day the left one would look like that. Unadorned. No ring. No outward sign that you shared everything with someone else.

He wondered how long it would take for the ring to no longer be a foreign thing. When it would become just another part of your hand. His parents had long since worn permanent grooves in their ring fingers, the skin paler beneath the metal, and working them over their joints was near impossible, they had been in place so long.

They had recommended the jeweler where he had bought the Russian-style tri-color band wedding rings for today. The jeweler had even remembered the two of them, their names, all these years later. He had let them pay in installments and take the rings up front because they couldn't afford to pay for them all at once back then. The proprietor had seemed rather pleased that he was waiting on a second generation customer, the product of a union for which he had provided the rings.

Ignorant as he was about such things as jewelry, he had to admit, the man made beautiful wedding rings. He and Hermione had needed little prompting to choose the same style Ekaterina and Petar had. Three different colors of gold, tucked and weaved among each other like a grapevine wreath from the outside, one white gold, one yellow gold, the last a warm, almost coppery color, all smoothly polished and continuous, never ending, never beginning, just infinite. Inside, just a smooth, infinite circle. The bands were thick and heavy, sturdy and substantial. The rings his parents wore were just as true as they were when they had been purchased more than two decades before.

Viktor flipped his hand over, inspecting the palm. He ran the opposite thumb over the slight callus at the base of his fingers. It had softened a great deal over the last few years, when he hadn't been on a broom nearly as much. Once the broom had become more a diversion, less a job. It had seemed quite odd, having them fade. They had been a constant since long before he went to

Durmstrang, almost as much a part of his hands as the long, tapered fingers and the prominent knuckles. It probably wouldn't take long for it to come back on both hands. A couple of months on the pitch at most, and they would be back as hard and thick as ever.

They were his father's hands, really. Same fingers, same nails, same knuckles. He just hoped he could live up to the rest of the example his father set, not just the hands. He knew it hadn't always been easy on the two of them, being married to one another. There hadn't been a lot of support on either side, more indifference than anything. For that matter, Viktor hadn't always been easy on the two of them. They had been just out of Durmstrang when they had married, and barely twenty when he had come along. Certainly unable to easily afford a baby. He had not been worked into the budget before they had discovered he was arriving, as it were.

His parents had made no secret of the fact that both sets of his grandparents had been responsible for a great deal of the money that went toward their first house. Other than helping to provide the first roof over his head, his relationship with his grandparents had been a bit distant and formal. He saw them briefly every couple of years, they sent him decently lavish Christmas and birthday gifts once a year, and they sent occasional letters, but they had never been particularly close-knit. Viktor had often had the thought that he would have preferred more visits and fewer presents. Petar and Ekaterina had both been late-in-life babies, the family had been large and widely scattered, and both Petar and Ekaterina had been perfectly frank about the lack of closeness. Viktor had gotten the impression that both sides of the family had eagerly shipped their last child off to school, wished them luck, told them to live up to the family expectations and offered little else. He had often thought it rather curious that such seemingly cold, passionless and distant people had managed to produce his parents. His grandparents had been, thankfully, pleasant enough when he had taken Hermione to meet them. They hadn't begrudged him his choice, at least, not openly. That had been the most he had hoped for. That they would keep any disapproval to themselves. If there had been any snippy reprimands passed on to either Petar or Ekaterina, they had mercifully kept silent on the matter.

Yes, if there had been any grumbling on their parts, it had been kept decorously behind closed doors, completely private. Viktor had almost been thankful that Ekaterina's mother had passed on a couple of years prior. She would have been the most likely to be stirred to complain where anyone could hear. Petar's father had declined to come to the wedding due to his health, and Viktor doubted it was an outright lie. Convenient excuse, perhaps, but not a lie. He suspected that, deep down, the old man wasn't much happier about his choice than his brother

had been, simply less vocal. Grandmother Krum and Grandmother Marievskaya would attend, play the perfectly charming and formally congratulatory old family matriarchs for a few hours, give them a sizeable enough sum of money as a wedding gift, most likely, then promptly wash their hands of the matter and seemingly disappear off the face of the earth until it was time to send Christmas cards. Or at least that had seemed to be the routine at other weddings in the family over the past few years.

It had always been in the back of his mind that the first thing he was going to do, if Quidditch worked out as well for him as everyone else seemed to think it would, was chuck in a sum of money toward a larger house for the two of them. One that didn't owe a speck of its existence to any one of his grandparents. It had taken several years of insisting, but he had finally gotten them to accept his making a down payment on a new house for them. It had easily been the most satisfying purchase he had ever made. Maybe one of the most satisfying he would ever make. *Unless you count the Howler to Dimitar. That was pretty satisfying. Nobody insults my wife like that without getting an earful back,* Viktor thought, smiling to himself. He roused himself and stepped out of the tub, toweling off before heading back to the bedroom to dress.

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“What are you going to do with your hair, dear?” Molly asked.

“I've pretty well done it. I thought I would let it dry, brush it, and perhaps pin it back a bit with the veil, but for the most part, leave it as is,” Hermione said.

“You're not going to pin it up?” Molly said uncertainly. “Not just a bit of tonic? Just to help smooth it down a-”

“No. I'm wearing it like I usually do. Viktor said he would like it down,” Hermione said firmly. “Well, maybe a tiny bit of potion if it's being uncooperative. Ginny, would you do up the buttons in the back?”

“You look amazing in that. Red works for you. You're marrying a man with the right team colors. And I've seen the lads, all but Viktor. They look pretty sharp, as well. Getting any of the pictures done before the ceremony?” Ginny asked.

“A few. Just the quick ones, you and me, Dumbledore and Oblansk, and I imagine they'll do the same with the groomsmen, too. Could... could you brush my hair? I don't think I can manage. I'll just bush it up every which way,” Hermione asked softly.

“I’ll do it, dear, while you do your makeup,” Molly volunteered, picking up the brush from the vanity table and setting in on Hermione’s hair methodically.

“Ginny... I’ll put my eye out. You do it,” Hermione pleaded, trying to steady her hand as she held up the lipstick. It was wobbling something terrible despite her best efforts to hold it still.

“There, you look wonderful,” Ginny said after a few minutes. “At least, I hope you like it. Take a look in the mirror.

“You two do wonders. I just need to pin the veil-” Hermione stopped abruptly at the sound of brisk footsteps in the hall, clacking and echoing sharply along the stone corridors. Hermione’s first thought was that it must be McGonagall, come to relate some minor crisis or change in details, but the rapid, insistent knocking changed her mind. McGonagall would have simply entered. She knew Hermione was already dressed.

“Get that, Ginny,” Molly said, “it’s probably one of the boys.”

But when Ginny opened the door, she merely uttered a surprised, soft “Oh.” Ginny swung the door back completely, announcing rather unnecessarily, “It’s Ekaterina, Hermione.”

“You made it! Does Viktor know you made-” Hermione began.

“Da. I need to talk to you,” Ekaterina said, giving a perfunctory nod to Ginny and Molly.

“Something... wrong?” Hermione asked, her heart leaping up into her throat. Ridiculous to be completely cowed by the thought of being alone with this woman who was several inches shorter than her, especially when there had been far worse things out to get her in the last few years, but she was. *Please don’t say-*

“Alone,” Ekaterina added, looking at Ginny and Molly expectantly.

“Anything you need to say-” Molly began, bristling slightly, as though she were about to go into protective mother bear mode.

“I want to talk to Hermione alone,” Ekaterina reiterated briskly, crossing her arms and looking about as easy to budge as the castle itself. She still struggled to pronounce Hermione’s name, most of the time, but it was obvious that she put a concerted effort into getting it correct. Hermione felt strangely touched that she

bothered at all. Ekaterina arched her eyebrows imperiously at the two redheaded women.

Hermione had the overwhelming urge to curtsy and say “Yes, Empress, right away, Empress.” Instead, she gathered her courage and said, “It’s fine. You can come back later. All I really need is my veil pinned. You two can step out for a few minutes.” Molly looked as though she would protest, but then thought better of it. Ginny gave Hermione a sympathetic look and nudged Molly toward the door.

“Sit,” Ekaterina said, gesturing to the sofa. It was a polite, gentle enough request, but somehow, she could make it sound like a direct order from a drill sergeant. Such an air of authority. Hermione wondered how this same delicate woman could make her feel like a clumsy, graceless, overgrown cow and a small, wayward child all at the same time.

Hermione sank into the sofa, wondering what was about to come. *Maybe Ekaterina really had hoped all this would go away. Maybe she really had still hoped it was a passing thing, and the wedding wouldn’t come off, that Viktor would change his mind. Maybe...*

“I need to tell you something,” Ekaterina said, smoothing the back of her robes before sitting next to Hermione. She looked as elegantly well-pressed as though she had just stepped out of a box, not a fold of fabric or a single hair misplaced. Fine, high cheekbones, a slight tilt to the corners of her dark eyes, so exotic looking. And so young. It still jarred Hermione when she realized just how young these two people who had produced Viktor were. They looked little older than he did. In a manner of speaking, they were very little older. Her own parents would have been more than a decade older. Add in the longer life span for magical folk... they were tremendously young to have a son that age.

“What?” Hermione squeaked out. She cursed her nerves, swallowed hard.

“You are very stubborn. You haff a hard head,” Ekaterina said without preamble.

“I suppose I do,” Hermione replied forcefully, somewhat shocked. It certainly was a funny way of condemning her. *Why pick that if there are so many other things she could nitpick...?*

“When you argued, you did not back down. Haff you ever backed down?” Ekaterina asked, arching an eyebrow, quizzically. Lying was out of the question at the end of that gaze. *I suppose Viktor will get a kick out of it, at least. His mother stepping in to keep me from beating up on her baby boy... after he called*

*me that right in front of his mother...*

“No. No, I haven’t,” Hermione said stubbornly, determined to stand her ground.

“No matter how much he loses his temper?” Ekaterina prompted, and the second eyebrow joined the first. Hermione had the uncomfortable feeling of being a curious specimen, just minutes away from being skewered on a pin for further study.

“He can yell all he wants, I’m not going to change just because he has a temper. I’ve got one of my own,” Hermione said, suddenly feeling very fatalistic. She braced herself. *If there’s to be a lecture, she might as well get it out of her system. We’ll both feel better...*

“Good!” Ekaterina said emphatically.

“What?!” Hermione blurted out.

“Good. My son needs that.”

“Beg pardon?” Hermione replied, feeling completely confused. That hadn’t been what she was expecting at all.

“He needs someone willing to stand up to him. Someone strong. You are the single most stubborn *other* woman I have ever met. You need that. Viktor needs that. No giving in just because. No giving in easy. No just letting him win because he is like me,” Ekaterina said, narrowing her eyes. “Not easy to stand up to us. Proud. Too proud, sometimes. Stand up to him for me,” Ekaterina said softly, reaching out with a slender white hand and cupping Hermione’s chin, her dark eyes softening as well.

“I will,” Hermione whispered.

“You love him,” Ekaterina said. It came out as a statement of fact, but there was a bit of searching in her eyes as she scanned Hermione’s face. Just the slightest hint of a question.

“I do,” Hermione said fiercely.

“Wish I had gotten to know you better, first,” Ekaterina lamented, letting her hand drop. “He loves you. Is enough,” she said with a shrug, as though convincing herself. “You were not done with your hair.”

“Molly was brushing it. My hands are all shaky,” Hermione admitted. “Nervous.”

“I can do that. Chair,” Ekaterina said, standing and moving back toward the vanity, where Molly had abandoned the brush, earlier. Hermione followed obediently, relieved, but somewhat torn between laughing and crying in response to this wholly unexpected development. She sat in the chair Ekaterina had pulled out, and settled in, watching the woman that was soon going to be her mother-in-law carefully smooth the brush through her hair, one small section at a time.

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“You ready for pictures?” Neville asked, sticking his head in the door.

“Just about,” Viktor said, fumbling with his sash. “I’ll do.”

“Well, come on, then. Groomsmen. Then they’ll add Ginny in, and you and your parents,” Neville elaborated.

“I’m coming! You do have the rings, don’t you?” Viktor asked anxiously.

“As I rather value my life and my limbs, yes. I’ve got Hermione’s, Ginny has yours. Photographer’s waiting,” Neville added.

“Harassing me is not making me go faster,” Viktor said.

“No, but it’s more fun. Just like poking Fred and George. They look almost human after Pomfrey had a go at them, by the way. Molly’s even apt to let them live. You look fine,” Neville insisted.

“Then let’s get it over with,” Viktor replied. They hurriedly posed for the various photographs with the attendants, the photographer arranging them to his liking.

“Now, then. Your parents? Where are they?” the photographer asked pleasantly.

“Actually, I’ve rather lost track of them,” Viktor admitted.

“Your father’s around the corner. He was talking to Dumbledore and Oblansk,” Harry said.

“Right,” Viktor said, popping around the corner and beckoning to Petar. “Where’s Mama gone?” he added, looking around for her.

“To see Hermione,” Petar answered on his way by.

“To see her? See her about what?” Viktor asked, looking surprised. Petar gave a miniscule shrug without pausing. “How long ago?”

“Half an hour,” Petar said with another shrug.

“Ah. Be right back,” Viktor said, hurrying off toward Professor Sprout’s quarters. “I hope,” he added under his breath to Harry.

“Just where do you think you’re going!?” Molly demanded when Viktor passed her and Ginny in the hall outside Professor Sprout’s door.

“I’m going to knock on this door, fetch my mother, and find out what the heck they’ve been talking about for the last half hour,” Viktor muttered. He knocked on the door insistently. “Hermione?”

“Hermione, don’t you dare open the door right now!” Molly ordered, pulling Viktor back by the arm.

“You do realize how ridiculous this is, don’t you? I mean, in Eastern Europe, the bride and the groom usually stay in the same room together for hours before the wedding!” Viktor argued, obviously flustered.

“Well, this isn’t Eastern Europe!” Molly countered, planting her hands on her hips.

“What on earth is going on out there?” Hermione said from behind the door.

“The... err... photographer is ready to take the pictures with my parents... only I seem to be missing one of them. And the one I’m not missing says the other one came over here to talk to you. Half an hour ago,” Viktor added, the unspoken questions evident in his voice.

“More like forty-five minutes,” Hermione replied.

“And she’s still in there?” Viktor asked, trying not to sound apprehensive. “Look, could you at least crack the door? I’ll stand on the other side of the door frame,” Viktor offered, glaring at Molly, “while it’s open. Just so I don’t feel so much like I’m conducting a hostage negotiation.” Viktor slid to the side of the door, with his back to the wall.

“It’s fine. We just had a little talk, that’s all,” Hermione said through the crack in the door. “A really nice talk.”

“A talk?” Viktor prompted, raising his eyebrows at Ginny. She shrugged in response.

“Sure. And she brushed my hair and fixed my veil. It’s fine. She’s just showing me some earrings she brought to lend me. She’ll be out in just a second. When you all get finished, send your parents over here with the photographer, so we can get ours done, would you?” Hermione requested.

“I’ll do that,” Viktor said, shrugging back at Ginny. After a few moments, the door swung open wide and Ekaterina stepped out, crossed her arms and surveyed Viktor.

“Nice. Vot?” she asked, raising her chin.

“Nothing. Photographer’s waiting,” Viktor explained.

“Then, hurry,” Ekaterina said, making a shooing motion with one hand and pulling the door shut behind her with the other.

“You can open the door!” Molly shouted after Viktor and Ekaterina’s footsteps had faded completely.

“What was that all about?” Ginny asked as soon as Hermione had opened the door.

“Will wonders never cease? I think Ekaterina just officially welcomed me to the family,” Hermione said, looking stunned.

“How?” Ginny prompted.

“She called me a hardhead, said she wished she had gotten to know me better, first, asked me if I loved him, brushed my hair, pinned my veil and said she wanted to provide the ‘something borrowed’ in that silly bit of wedding superstition *we* silly Western Europeans have,” Hermione said, touching the small pearl earrings in her ears. “Trust me, if you knew Ekaterina, you would understand just how big a compliment all that is.”

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“Last one!” the photographer exclaimed. “At least until the ceremony starts!”

“Thank goodness! I’m all smiled out,” Hermione said. “How long do we have until

it starts?"

"About twenty minutes until the time you listed on the invitations. You and Dumbledore should probably be heading down to Hagrid's, actually," Ginny said, consulting the clock. "I'll go get everyone inside ready."

"Thank you, Ginny. Are you ready?" Hermione asked Dumbledore.

"I thought that was supposed to be my line," Dumbledore said pleasantly, offering an arm. "Care to take a stroll across the lawn? I imagine the carriage will meet us about halfway."

"Good. I don't think I could walk that far. My knees already feel like jelly," Hermione admitted.

"Perhaps we'll just step out the door and flag Hagrid down, then," Dumbledore replied. "He'll fetch the driver. We can take the circuit completely in the carriage."

"Seems a bit silly," Hermione observed.

"But it makes for better pictures, does it not?" Dumbledore tossed over his shoulder to the photographer.

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"The pre-ceremony music's started, Oblansk is ready to go when we are, Ginny and Neville *still* have the rings, and Ron and I are ready. Photographer is in there staking out a good spot, so I think everything's actually going to come off on time..." Harry said, walking up behind Viktor, who was stationed next to one of the side entrances to the Great Hall, peering between the drapes. "Are you okay? You look awfully peaky. Surely you're not nervous! If the World Cup didn't bother you, walking down the aisle in front of that lot shouldn't."

"Didn't have to walk in the World Cup," Viktor murmured, not taking his eyes off the gap in the curtain.

"Come on, now. What's really bothering you?" When Viktor didn't respond, Harry stepped up beside him and followed Viktor's line of sight. "Oh," Harry said flatly, "I see." The head of Amos Diggory was plainly visible, a great deal grayer than it had been a few years ago, his slip of a wife barely noticeable in the chair beside him. He jogged his foot up and down impatiently, as though waiting on a train with an appointment to make.

“See what?” Viktor said blandly.

“You didn’t invite Rita Skeeter, did you? She’s sitting not six seats away,” Harry said in an effort to change the subject.

“I’ve seen her, and if you think I invited her, you’re mad,” Viktor said, not taking his eyes off the Diggorys. “And the empty chairs over in the family section, and.... I’ve seen more than I wanted to,” Viktor said, heaving a sigh. “Am I doing the right thing, Harry?” he added abruptly, looking Harry in the eye.

“What? What do you mean ‘are you doing the right thing’?” Harry asked, alarmed.

“That,” Viktor said, gesturing toward the curtain with a hand. “That... that in there, in a nutshell, is what I’m condemning her to... she doesn’t know the half of it...”

“Pardon?” Harry asked, blinking.

“Harry, she’s going to have to put up with a dozen Rita Skeeters. All the time. From now on. And maybe worse. If there is such a thing as worse. Everything’s going to be like this. People like that trying to elbow into everything you do... and she’s got no idea what she’s getting into. And you can’t always get something on all of them. Damned woman sets my teeth on edge, her and her false face. And you know how crowds are... opposing crowds can get nasty-”

“I think she realizes that,” Harry said softly. “And if you think our Miss Granger can’t stick up for herself, you need your head examined.”

“She shouldn’t have to. But she will. And my family... at best, I’m teaching her to swim by throwing her in the deep part of the lake. Here. Meet your new family by marriage. The ones that don’t detest and won’t talk to you because of something you can’t help don’t understand three out of five words out of your mouth, but you’ll manage. It’s not like you have any family of your own to distract you any more.”

“Stop it,” Harry pleaded. “She knows what she’s getting into there. You didn’t give a damn what your parents thought, you had your mind made up. And since when do you give a damn what anyone else thinks?” Harry asked.

“I don’t,” Viktor said deliberately, “about me. I find I care very much what other people think of her. I haven’t been completely honest. There are some things about me she doesn’t know. Things I did. I don’t know if she ever will. Maybe if she knew... she wouldn’t want... Harry... I can’t do this.”

“Listen, it’s just jitters talking,” Harry insisted.

“I can’t do this without talking to her first,” Viktor insisted.

“Molly will keelhaul us, skin us, and roll us in salt if I bring Hermione in here before the ceremony,” Harry said in a low voice.

“I won’t tell her if you don’t,” Viktor countered.

“You really need to talk to her?” Harry asked, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

“In the worst way,” Viktor said, looking distraught. Harry noticed for the first time just how pale he was, even his lips white and drained of color.

“I’ll go get her and bring her around,” Harry said, trying not to sound too grudging. Harry turned on his heel and headed past the rest of the waiting wedding party, who were milling about in the corridor, toward the outside of the castle, where he knew the carriage was to bring Hermione and Dumbledore, just outside the doors to the Great Hall. When he spotted the carriage, he made a mad dash for the side window, hopping up onto the running board, alongside Hermione’s seat.

“Harry! Honestly! You scared the living daylights out of me!” Hermione exclaimed. “What on-”

“No time! Look, we’ve got a bit of a mini-crisis of sorts. I need you to come in and talk the groom off a small ledge, so to speak,” Harry blurted out.

“Talk him.... what?” Hermione asked.

“He’s got some mad idea in his head he needs to talk to you before you go down the aisle. Now, move it, chop, chop. As it is, the string quartet will have to throw another number in there before the ceremony. Make it snappy! Let him get whatever it is off his chest and get on with this thing!” Harry hissed.

“What’s he on about?” Hermione asked, throwing open the door and stepping out of the carriage.

“I don’t know. He’s being all Eastern European, or something. He wants to talk to you first. Nerves, I think,” Harry said, tugging her along by the hand. They hurried past the very surprised looking wedding party, back to the side entrance.

“I’ll go back around there, with the rest,” Harry said, leaving the two of them alone.

“What’s this all about?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Are you sure you want to do this? Viktor asked, licking his lips.

“The wedding? I think it’s a tad late to elope,” Hermione responded.

“Marrying me. You really know what you’re getting into?” Viktor countered.

“I believe I do. I’ve seen the good, the bad and the ugly, and I’m still here, aren’t I?” Hermione said firmly.

“That. All that in there. Crowds. Rita Skeeter. Those seats over on my side that should have someone in them. When the two of those meet,” Viktor said.

“Rita Skeeter? Who invited her? Silly question, isn’t it? She invited herself,” Hermione said, peering into the hall. “Besides, they’ll run out of nasty things to say about me after a while. Or the press will get tired of hearing it. Either way. And I imagine, after a while, it gets less bothersome. I got rather used to some people calling me Mudblood, after all. Eventually, it rolls off you like water off a duck’s back,” Hermione said. “You and I know perfectly well there are people who are going to be idiots, but those people are going to be idiots whether I marry you or not. You learned to ignore crowds and such. I think I could manage the same. You said you cared little about what any of them thought, save your parents, and they’re trying. We’ll just need a little more time to get used to each other. Not speaking much of the same language and all. Your mother was very sweet,” Hermione added, unconsciously touching one of the earrings.

“She lent you her... But we make a much bigger target if you marry me,” Viktor pointed out.

“Only if we stand side by side. If we stand stacked two deep and side on, I’m probably wider than you are,” Hermione said, prompting a weak smile from him.

“I haven’t told you everything,” Viktor said forlornly.

“About?” Hermione prompted, raising her eyebrows.

“The war. Me. Some of the things I did. Of which I’m not very proud. Seeing the Diggorys... and some more... brought it... I still have nightmares...” Viktor whispered.

"I hate to tell you, but if people knew absolutely everything there was to know about each other before the wedding, I doubt anyone would marry. And the marriage would be dead boring," Hermione said.

"I'm being serious. I... I'm not fit to marry you... you don't know what I did," Viktor said, taking her hand.

"And you don't know some of what I did. And I'm not terribly proud of some of the things I did, either. I imagine if you polled that room in there, you would find a lot of people who feel the same way," Hermione said, gesturing with her bouquet. "We'll talk about it when we're ready."

"I don't know that I'll ever be ready to talk about it. I'm responsible for so much. Godric's Hollow. I'm not fit to be with you. I'm not fit to be married to you. If you knew—"

"If I knew, I would still think you're spouting nonsense. You're not getting off with that weak line, you hear me? You're stuck with me, and I'm stuck with you. I imagine we'll both get some nasty surprises after we get married, and we'll live. Viktor," Hermione said, taking her hand from his and cupping his face with it, "I love you. It's not conditional, it's not based on you being perfect, I love you, flaws and all. And you had better feel the same way about me, because I've got a number of flaws, some you've seen and some I've probably neglected to mention. We both do. Never scared us off before. Having to keep secrets from each other never did, either. If I had needed to know absolutely everything, I would have run away screaming long before now. I didn't even know what continent you were on for months on end, or if you were even still alive, half the time. Viktor, is the world a better place because of what we did? Whether we knew what we were doing or not."

"Not for some people," Viktor said, glancing toward the Diggorys, "but for most."

"Innocent people sometimes get hurt in wars. And we always did what we thought was best, right? One of the things I love about you so much is the fact that you're willing to do what's right, even when it's not best for you. You risked everything, when you didn't have to. Am I part of the reason?"

"You were most of the reason," Viktor answered softly. "You were *the* reason."

"Then, that's all I need to know right now. We're already late getting started, and the crowd is getting restless. I still want to get married. I would kind of like to get this over with so that I can start getting to know you the rest of the way. What say

you?” Hermione asked.

“I say we had better get started. And you’re the most gorgeous bride I’ve ever seen,” Viktor said. “I wish we hadn’t let Molly win that argument. I wish I had gotten a few more hours to stare at you.”

“You look fairly handsome yourself. Just don’t let Molly know you saw me beforehand if you value your life. She already made Dumbledore swear that when we get started, and you lot come outside to enter the Great Hall, he’s going to have the shades on the carriage closed,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“Silly Western Europeans,” Viktor said, shaking his head.

“Shush! You’re marrying one of us silly Western Europeans!” Hermione tossed over her shoulder as she dashed off. She paused for a moment in the other corridor to tell the gaping wedding party, “I was never here, as far as you’re concerned, at least if Molly asks!” before hiking her robes and hurrying back outside.

“All settled?” Dumbledore asked lightly as she clambered back into the carriage.

“His nerves are. Mine aren’t,” Hermione replied. “You may have to carry me. The whole Great Hall is full. I feel as though I’ve never seen so many people in all my life.”

“All here to wish you well,” Dumbledore observed. “No need to be nervous. Now, I have a promise to keep. Shades down, if you please.”

“Rather silly, considering I just got back from talking to the groom,” Hermione said, pulling the shade on her side of the carriage.

“I never promised Molly I wouldn’t let you out of the carriage,” Dumbledore said blithely. “If you want to step out and get some air before they open the outer doors to go in, what business is that of mine? I have no idea where you went. Didn’t catch what Harry said at all.”

“You’re terribly naughty, Headmaster,” Hermione scolded.

“No, just very selective in what I choose to see and hear,” Dumbledore pointed out. “You live longer that way.”

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“So... I take it we’re having a wedding?” Harry asked, popping his head around the corner.

“I suppose so. Couldn’t talk any sense into her,” Viktor said with a shrug.

“I’ll go give them the sign, then. See you outside,” Harry said, parting the drape completely and stepping into the side entrance. He trooped over to Madam Wilhelmina, a determined island of bright pink in the sea of the crowd and tugged at her sleeve.

“Are we ready to get started? I think they’ll find the cake absolutely to die for-” Madam Wilhelmina began, whispering excitedly.

“I think they could care less about the cake at the moment. Give the string quartet the sign and break out the trumpet player and the organist. Let’s get this show on the road,” Harry muttered.

“I must say, the blue robes look nice,” Madam Wilhelmina observed grudgingly.

“Everything looks nice. You might consider adding these colors to your repertoire,” Harry said, shaking out his Ravenclaw blue inner robe. “Make a nice rest from pink.” Harry wandered back through the drape, shutting it behind him. “Okay, Madam Motormouth knows we’re ready. Line up?”

“If we’re going in, we had better. Right, then,” Viktor said, facing the group and gathering himself. “Back to front, it’s Oblansk and myself, Mama and Papa, Harry and Ron, and Ginny and Neville lead off. Mama, Papa, the seats are on the left, front row,” Viktor said, laying a hand on their shoulders. He paused a moment, regarding his parents. “Blagodaria...thank you,” he whispered.

“Molya... az se gordeia s tebe. You’ve made us so proud,” Petar replied softly.

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Inside the Great Hall, the trumpet player and the organist shuffled sheet music, preparing as the string quartet finished up. After a moment’s silence, the trumpet started in on the Bach piece chosen for the entrance. Hagrid stepped to the back and propped the wide doors, careful not to rumple the new suit Olympe had picked out for him too badly. Even his unruly hair and beard looked exceptionally neat, considering. Most of the room twisted in their chairs and craned their necks toward the doors, murmuring a bit when they spotted the carriage parked outside.

“That’s our cue. Ready?” Neville asked, offering his arm.

“As ready as ever,” Ginny said, drawing a deep breath.

“More importantly, still have the ring?” Neville added on impulse.

“I’m going to paste you if you ask that again,” Ginny muttered. “It’s in my pocket. Now, are we going or not?”

“You look nice in that green. Maybe you should have been in Slytherin,” Neville said with a grin.

“Are you trying to get me to hurt you? Move it, Longbottom,” Ginny insisted, nudging him. “Time enough for flattery after the ceremony.”

“Oh, you’re no fun,” Neville pouted, stepping forward into the doorway, then turning to face the aisle. “Good crowd,” he murmured.

“*Huge* crowd,” Ginny whispered back as they started down the aisle, walking briskly, toward the heavy wooden podium that had been set up at the far end. Ginny kept her eyes locked on it, trying not to let herself take in all the pairs of eyes on the two of them, to let her nerves take hold. Nevertheless, she heard a few shocked whispers and gasps, and much discussion of the deep green robes she wore, and the matching inner robe Neville sported, snaking through the crowd. She also caught more than a few thoroughly puzzled looks, though she tried to concentrate harder on the vast banks of bright yellow roses all over the hall, especially those surrounding the podium.

“They haven’t caught on, yet,” Neville said as they took up their positions to the left of the podium, angled back toward the aisle. Hagrid stuck a large hand out the door once more and gave a short wave, to signal their arrival at the podium. “They will in a minute.” As they watched, Harry and Ron stepped into the doorway, with their dark blue inner robes, which matched the Ravenclaw banner hanging on the wall. The pair of them marched toward the front, Ron going considerably slower than he was capable of going on his long legs, so Harry didn’t have to hurry unduly. Again, there was a low buzz of discussion in the hall, people puzzling over the robe choices or pointing out The Boy Who Lived, nudging their children and drawing their attention to the scar. Harry and Ron took up their spots on the other side of the podium.

Hagrid signaled again, and Petar and Ekaterina stepped into view. There was a dignity and an unhurried air about the way they walked to the front, slipping into the open chairs at the front, a few feet from the podium. The glances from the

guests were due more to curiosity at seeing them for the first time than anything else. Hagrid signaled the final time, slipping discreetly to the side and taking his chair beside Olympe at the very back. Minister Oblansk and Viktor stepped around the corner, lining up beside one another and matching strides up the aisle. There was no trace of the nerves that were displayed earlier, Viktor walked up the aisle, head held high, steps sure.

“When did he stop slouching?” Ron whispered, nudging Harry lightly with an elbow.

“I didn’t notice. When did Ginny stop being your baby sister and Neville stop being the pudgy boy Snape picked on? When did all of us grow up?” Harry whispered back.

“Good point,” Ron admitted before Viktor took his place in front of them, one level down, and the Bulgarian Minister stepped up onto the top of the tri-level platform in front of the podium. By now, the guests looked even more puzzled at the robes, with Minister Oblansk wearing powder blue and Viktor wearing red beneath his black outer robe. The trumpet player and organist wound up the first theme, then blasted the opening of the bridal march. The whole Great Hall rose in massive waves, standing for the entrance of the bride, causing a horrible racket that nearly drowned out the music completely.

The carriage door swung open, and Dumbledore bounded out, wearing powder blue robes that matched those Oblansk wore. He held out a hand, steadying Hermione as she stepped out of the carriage. Finally, there was a look of dawning comprehension on several faces, as they looked at the house and school banners around the hall, then the wedding party, comparing and nodding their approval. Hermione slipped her arm through Dumbledore’s bent elbow, and before they started up the aisle, Dumbledore took a moment to push his glasses up his crooked nose.

Under the scrutiny of the room, Hermione trembled visibly as she walked, slow and deliberate, obviously trying to concentrate on the podium and ignore the numerous flashbulbs and murmuring. Harry leaned over slightly, poking Viktor’s arm. “I think we’re going to have to meet her halfway and each take an elbow,” Harry whispered. The corners of Viktor’s mouth twitched subtly, and Ron stifled a series of suspiciously fake sounding coughs with a hand.

Dumbledore reached over with his free right hand and covered Hermione’s, which seemed to steel her a bit, or at least disguise the way her hand was shaking. After what seemed a small eternity, the two of them finally reached the end of the aisle, where Dumbledore gave Hermione’s hand a final comforting

pat, before lifting it from his arm and deftly stepping aside before tucking it onto Viktor's arm instead. The headmaster took his spot beside the Minister, facing the crowd and the couple before giving a subtle gesture, cueing the crowd to be seated. The racket was almost unbelievable, and Dumbledore waited for the noise to subside and for the couple to ascend the steps to their appointed spot, before once again steadying his glasses and surveying the Great Hall.

"I should like to take this opportunity to welcome everyone, and I do mean absolutely *everyone*, to Hogwarts on this happy occasion. This must be the largest crowd this Hall has ever seen, by far. I can't say I'm sorry for the crowding, because I'm not," Dumbledore announced to scattered, good natured laughter. "The soon-to-be-wed couple asked that I also take this opportunity to thank all of those who made today possible, who, thankfully for the lot of us, are too numerous to name individually. You know who you are. I think the staff of Hogwarts, seen and unseen, played no small part, and guests, friends and family contributed as well. Now, having milked this opportunity for all it's worth, I propose we get on with the reason we're all here in the first place!"

"There is little about this union that could be called conventional, so I suppose it is only fair that we have a wedding that is not so conventional. It just would not do," Oblansk pointed out. "If you are all willing to bear with us for a few moments, Albus and I have a bit of reminiscing to get out of the way, first, sentimental old fools that we are."

"I was lucky enough to first make Miss Granger's acquaintance when she came here as a first year student, more prepared and more eager to learn than we usually dare hope for. She proceeded to not only become our most accomplished student in some time, but to make an indelible impression on most of our staff here at Hogwarts. Hermione probably challenged us more than we challenged her. When these two finally decided to hold the ceremony here, I was up to my ears in volunteers to get things ready! It's rare to have a student that demands so much of a school. And gives so much back. I've had the privilege of watching you grow from an anxious student to a wonderfully prepared, self-assured young lady. I think we all count ourselves lucky to have known you," Dumbledore said. "We only hope you feel the same about us."

"It was much later that I made your acquaintance, but I was every bit as impressed. Such an articulate, intelligent young lady is a rare find. I heard enough impressive stories about you from *someone*," Oblansk said significantly, "that I felt I knew you long before I really knew you very well. I can only wish you great happiness. You have already done so much in such a short time, lobbied for and worked for so much change for the better. You put some of us older folks to shame." The Bulgarian Minister gave a gracious nod to Hermione before turning

to Viktor. "And I still remember the first time I met you, young man. You were little more than fourteen, and the head of International Sport pointed you out on the sidelines at a match. Looking like you would just as soon the ground open up and swallow you whole. And he swore to me that I would be seeing you in the next Cup final, or he would eat his hat. Needless to say, he still has his hat, and I did not doubt his word once I saw you on a broom. More importantly, you were willing to speak up for what you believed in, even if the rest of us had a hard time believing it. We were lucky you did. Otherwise, I hate to think how things might have turned out. But I think I speak for most of us when I say I will not be too sorry to see you back on a broom, either."

"When I met you," Dumbledore said, "you were already quite the young man. You always competed with class and integrity, and that's a rare thing. You only spoke when you had something important to say, something most of us could use lessons in, and you accepted being in an admittedly strange place like Hogwarts with great aplomb. I got the privilege of watching you finish growing up. Lucky for us, you decided you agreed with me on some of the things that were important to say. You were a great friend to have in time of trouble. I think I speak for several people in this room on that score. I think I also speak for them when I say it's been nothing short of an unexpectedly wonderful privilege, knowing you. The both of you."

"When talks began to revive the Trivizard Tournament," Oblansk continued, "there was a great deal of hope that it would lead to greater things than just a competition. Many of us hoped that it would lead to better relations down the road, between the schools. Between the countries involved. Between the people involved. I think, at best, we hoped that it would get some of the Ministries and school administrations talking to one another. That it would lead to great things, eventually. We didn't count on the very first one leading to such success. Lucky for us, some young people forget to be so short-sighted. They refuse to see foreigners, or other schools, or the competition, or the enemy. They just see other young people."

Dumbledore cleared his throat before taking up the thread again. "I think we hardly dared hope that a single good, long term friendship would come from the revival of the Tournament. A bit less suspicion, yes, a bit less rivalry, and a greater cooperation, we hoped for all of those things. Tossing aside centuries of suspicions and prejudice, that was too much to hope for all at once, in so short a time. I find myself pleasantly proven wrong. As Minister Oblansk pointed out, young people are so much better than we old fogies are at looking beyond such nonsense. A rather wise fellow once wrote that love looks not with the eyes, but the mind. And the younger among us tend to have a lot less rubbish cluttering up their minds that gets in the way of an honest look. Thank goodness for that. We

gather here today, not even a handful of years later, to marry two people who met because of that Triwizard Tournament. Heaven willing, we'll see at least a couple more unions, eventually, that have their roots in that year."

"I think we all know that this union is bigger than just the two people involved," Minister Oblansk continued. "For many reasons, which, thankfully, I will not go into. Rather than do that, I think we had best move on to actually formalizing that union. You have chosen a bonding ceremony with rings. We all serve as witnesses to this bonding. First, I ask that each of you confirm that it is your wish to enter into the bond of marriage, here, in the presence of this company, registered and formalized with both the Ministries of Great Britain and Bulgaria, sacred and unbreakable. Viktor Nikolai Krum, is it your wish to enter into marriage with Hermione Granger?" Oblansk then repeated the question in Bulgarian.

"Da. It is," Viktor replied.

"Hermione Granger, it is your wish to enter into marriage with Viktor Nikolai Krum?" Oblansk prompted, repeating the question, once again, in Bulgarian.

"Da. It is," Hermione echoed.

"If you don't mind, the rings, which I am absolutely sure are in your pockets, please?" Dumbledore said, holding out his hands to Neville and Ginny, who each placed a wedding ring in one of Dumbledore's palms. Dumbledore transferred the larger of the two rings to Oblansk.

"The two of you have chosen a tricolor wedding ring, an appropriate choice. Three different kinds of gold, all twined together into one perfect circle. The symbolism of the wedding ring is manifold. Past, present, and future, combined from now on," Oblansk observed, holding up the ring.

"Two lives coming together to form a third, new, shared life," Dumbledore added, holding up the ring from his palm.

"An infinite circle with no beginning and no end, just as love should have no beginning and no end," Oblansk added.

"A token of your commitment to one another. An outward symbol to the world of an inner commitment. If you would be so kind as to place your wand on this ring?" Dumbledore said, letting the ring lie flat in his palm once more. Viktor slipped his wand out of his pocket and placed the tip on the edge of the ring. "And repeat the vows? With this ring..."

“With this ring...”

“I pledge myself...”

“I pledge myself...”

“... completely, heart, mind and soul...”

“... completely, heart, mind and soul...”

“... in an eternal and unbreakable bond of matrimony. From this moment forward...”

“... in an eternal and unbreakable bond of matrimony. From this moment forward...”

“... this symbolizes my promise, steadfast and true.”

“... this symbolizes my promise, steadfast and true,” Viktor finished.

“Now seal this bond declared in front of these witnesses by placing the ring on Hermione’s finger, please,” Dumbledore said, offering his palm. Viktor replaced the wand in his pocket, while Hermione handed over her bridal bouquet to Ginny. Viktor slid the ring into place on Hermione’s left hand, giving her hand a soft squeeze afterward.

“And now, the other half of this ring exchange,” Oblansk said, holding out his palm and the ring atop it. “Your wand, please,” he prompted. Hermione fumbled for a moment, then fished her wand from her pocket, placing the tip on the ring. “Repeat the vows, please. With this ring...”

“V... err... with this ring...”

“I pledge myself...”

“I pledge myself...”

“... completely, heart, mind and soul...”

“... completely, heart, mind and soul...”

“... in an eternal and unbreakable bond of matrimony. From this moment forward...”

“... in an eternal and unbreakable bond of matrimony. From this moment forward...”

“... this symbolizes my promise, steadfast and true.”

“... this symbolizes my promise, steadfast and true,” Hermione concluded.

“Now, seal your promise by placing the ring on Viktor’s finger,” Oblansk said, offering her the ring. Hermione plucked it from his palm and slid it onto Viktor’s ring finger.

“Now, then. As the two of you have declared your intent, here, before these witnesses and to one another, there will be no wriggling out of it! May those rings on your fingers not only remind you of the promises you made to each other today, but the wishes of those assembled here. I’m sure there is not a single person here today that does not wish you the greatest happiness possible. And perhaps a bit of minor aggravation just to make sure you appreciate the happiness,” Dumbledore said, adjusting his glasses once more. “So, as the ceremony draws to a close, there’s not much else the two of us can do, save personally wishing you the best and officially sanctifying this marriage. Therefore, through the authority of the British Wizengamot and the British Ministry of Magic...” Dumbledore said, pausing.

“As well as the full authority of the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic, and the Bulgarian Vizengamot...” Oblansk interjected.

“...and all the other thoroughly pompous titles and official hats the two of us can dredge up between us, we can now pronounce you married to such a thorough degree that it has never before been approached by anyone in all of Europe, I think! Ladies and gentlemen, Minister Oblansk and myself say this with great pleasure and great pride,” Dumbledore declared with a benign smile, pausing for a second before the two officials joined together in saying, “We now pronounce you man and wife, you may kiss the bride.”

Viktor leaned down, brushed a stray lock of hair back from Hermione’s cheek, cupped her tilted face in his hands, then put his lips to hers. After a moment of silence, the crowd broke into thunderous, continuous applause, with a few scattered catcalls and loud whistles.

Harry cleared his throat and leaned forward. “Are you two coming up for air any time soon? Or should we just start the receiving line without you?”

Viktor pulled away reluctantly. “Shut up, Harry,” he said with a laugh, planting

another quick peck on Hermione's cheek.

"Oh, I have to walk that aisle again," Hermione said anxiously.

"Just pick up your robes and walk," Viktor said with a shrug, turning and offering his other arm. "Or am I going to have to haul you over *that* threshold?" Viktor added as the recessional music started up.

"I think I'll make it," Hermione said "I think we'll make it just fine," Hermione said.

"First step together as old married folks. Better start off on the right foot," Viktor said.

"Literally?" Hermione asked, arching a brow.

"Silly *Eastern* European superstition," Viktor admitted.

"Ah, I see," Hermione said as the two of them started toward the back door, past the crowd that was now standing and applauding. Hermione took in a few of the faces as they hurried past. The row of redheads, broken up only by a single, fair blonde head beside Bill. Fred and George had apparently recovered enough to whoop and whistle shrilly without doing too much damage. Arthur was doing his best to console a thoroughly damp and weepy Molly with one hand, while slapping the other against his thigh. And at the end of the same row, two dark heads, clapping every bit as hard as any of the Weasleys. Professor McGonagall determinedly dabbing at the corner of an eye with a tartan handkerchief before applauding madly. Professor Sprout bouncing up and down excitedly. Even Professor Snape was clapping politely, disinterested and disdainful as he looked.

They had barely gotten three feet when the first loud bang rang out from near the ceiling, the red and gold sparks showering down around the group below. Soon followed more bangs, blue sparks, and green sparks. The two of them immediately looked back questioningly at the row of chairs they had just passed. Fred stood on his tiptoes and shouted "You're welcome for the fireworks!"

"Wouldn't want your recessional to be boring, now would you!?" George added. "Good job on the color scheme! Would have looked bloody ugly in pink, wouldn't they?" Madame Wilhelmina looked a bit put out, but soon recovered her dignity. Hermione and Viktor looked at one another, shook their heads and walked to the propped door, lining up outside, with Harry, Ron, Ginny and Neville right behind. Ginny carried both of the bouquets in the crook of her arm. Hagrid and Madame Maxime rushed out the door so soon after, they very nearly met the receiving line before it had become a proper line.

“Congratulations, zis was a beautiful wedding,” Olympe said in her deep, rumbling voice, clutching her lacy handkerchief to her silky powder blue robes, her dark eyes shining. Hagrid mopped up his wet beard with a large red bandana, then blew his nose noisily before tucking it back into the inside pocket of his jacket.

“I can’t believe yer old enough ter be married! Our Hermione jus’ can’t be all grown up an’ marryin’! Yeh three should still be knee high!” Hagrid wailed, sniffing.

“Well, in your case, we really were just about knee-“ Hermione began, stopping abruptly when Hagrid swept her up in a crushing bear hug that knocked her veil askew.

“Yeh come by an’ visit us plenty, yeh hear?” Hagrid warned, setting her back down. “An’ yeh take good care o’ our girl. I know yeh will,” he added, giving Viktor a similarly fierce squeeze.

“I’m sure we’ll be by occasionally. And you know where we live, now. The doorbell works,” Viktor said, swaying a little when Hagrid straightened up.

“We are ‘olding up ze line,” Olympe cautioned, tugging at Hagrid’s arm.

“Righ’, righ’’. Best be settin’ up the tent an’ the snacks out there on the lawn, keep the sun off. So people can mingle ‘til the reception proper,” Hagrid allowed, wandering off after her.

“Well... that was... bracing,” Hermione said, straightening her veil once more. “Can you still breathe?”

“A bit. I don’t think I can stand to be congratulated quite that heartily by everyone,” Viktor said, surreptitiously rubbing his side.

“This is going to be a long afternoon,” Hermione said, leaning out to watch Ginny shaking the hand of one of the first guests trickling out the doors.

“Just shuffle them along as quickly and politely as possible. Besides, some of them are sure to skip us and head right for the appetizers, don’t you think?” Viktor asked.

“I can only hope,” Hermione muttered.

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“Thank you so much for the flowers. They are absolutely beautiful. Really, we can’t thank you enough,” Hermione told Professor Sprout.

“Oh, dear, it was my pleasure. And Minerva and I had a simply wonderful time deciding on the decorations, didn’t we, Minerva?” Professor Sprout said, turning to Professor McGonagall, who was trailing behind her.

“Absolutely. We treasured the opportunity,” McGonagall said, pressing her lips together tightly. “It will only take the house-elves a few minutes to get the food out and ready once everyone has cleared out. The caterers have everything on their end prepared as well.”

“Well, good, because the occasional nibble from the table over there is not keeping me from being hungry,” Hermione said.

“Thank Heaven this day is almost over. Things can get back to normal around here, instead of everyone twittering over decorations and accommodations like this is some sort of hotel! Perhaps this could even be a decent school by the time September rolls around!” a familiar, oily voice said.

“Severus, everyone could use a little distraction now and again,” McGonagall cautioned.

“I think this counted as a big distraction, Minerva,” Snape said, the corners of his mouth pulling down even farther.

“If it’s any consolation, we don’t intend to ever do it again,” Viktor offered.

“See that you don’t. You would think no one had ever gotten married before, the way people around here have behaved! Just because the two of you crook your fingers, the whole of Hogwarts drops to its knees and-“

“Gran! I wondered if you were going to make it!” Neville called out when the severe old witch stepped out of the doorway into the sunshine, adjusting her ever present hat with the stuffed vulture perched on top.

“You were saying?” Hermione prompted when the distracted Potions Master trailed off and stared.

“I was saying... oh, forget it! Congratulations,” Snape murmured as an afterthought, barely audible, before turning on his heel and sweeping off, as

though eager to get away from Neville's grandmother.

"Never mind him. He's just miffed that we didn't consult him on every little detail," Professor Sprout said lightly.

"I bet," Hermione said with a smile. "He just about slipped up and was nearly halfway pleasant, there for a second. I would have laid million to one odds that he wouldn't even come out of his quarters for it."

"We had best move along. The last stragglers are coming out," Minerva said, straightening her robes and walking off purposefully.

"Of course I made it! I told you I was coming, didn't I?" Neville's grandmother said sternly.

"I just thought maybe you wouldn't feel up to it, Gran. Glad you did," Neville said. "New hat?" he added, tone light.

"Of course not. Ginny, Ron, Harry," she said, voice crisp as her greetings. "And the new couple. Hearty congratulations. I wish you all the best. Now I'll get out of the way of the rest and make my rounds."

"Are we supposed to salute?" Viktor asked softly. "I feel as though we just passed inspection."

"Congratulations. And thank you for the invitation," a soft male voice said, as a hand touched Hermione's elbow.

"Well, you're very w-" Hermione said, turning her head. "Welcome. Mr. Diggory. Mrs. Diggory," she added after recovering herself, nodding to the angular, fashionably dressed woman with him.

"It was a lovely wedding. Congratulations. I'm just going to step over to the refreshment table," Mrs. Diggory said, slipping off into the milling crowd like a wisp of smoke.

"Mr. Diggory," Viktor said, biting his lower lip and offering his hand.

"Please, call me Amos. It was very thoughtful of you to include us. Not a lot of people do, any more," Amos said, looking around the lawn. "Afraid we'll bring up Cedric, I suppose. People don't know what to say, so they don't say anything at all. Everyone just pretends the white Erumpent in the middle of the room doesn't exist."

“Except... pretending doesn’t make it go away. I... I appreciate the two of you accepting the invitation. More than you know,” Viktor replied.

“Hard to believe it’s been so long. That Cedric should be about your age. This sort of thing would have tickled him. Having all these foreigners on the grounds and staging a wedding and everything. He would have been proud of the way you people fought this thing. And won,” Amos mused. “Heroics of any kind were right up his alley. I suppose it’s why he liked Quidditch so much.”

“He was one. Is one,” Viktor blurted out. “A hero, I mean. If it hadn’t been for him... absolutely none of us would be here. None of us.”

“I suppose you’re right. He was a good son. Maybe someday, other people won’t be so reluctant to remember him with us,” Amos said, looking a bit surprised that the subject hadn’t already been changed. “It hurts when no one is willing to remember the good things with you.”

“He was such a kind young man. A genuinely fair competitor. He had absolutely no reason to treat me that nicely, but-”

“But that was Cedric. Often a better man at seventeen than I am now. We’re very happy for the two of you. Truly. It’s nice to have some good news, for a change,” Amos said, offering his hand once more. “And for someone to look me in the eye when I bring him up... I had better be finding my wife.”

“That wasn’t so bad,” Hermione whispered.

“Better than it could have been,” Viktor admitted, still watching Amos move through the crowd.

“I think it’s all forgiven, as far as he’s concerned. Now try forgiving yourself,” Hermione said in a low tone.

“Easier said than done,” Viktor allowed.

“Brilliant! Bloody brilliant! It could be a whole side business!” Fred whooped, running outside, grabbing Ginny and whirling her around.

“What could be? And put me down!” Ginny demanded. “You’re rumpling me!”

“Weasley’s Wizard *Wedding* Wheezes, of course. No wedding too big or small for a few fireworks. We could even do a few of those fiddly, fancy little frou-frou

designs, like wedding bells and things like Madam Whatsit mentioned,” George said, whipping out a pad and jotting down a few notes.

“You two look considerably perkier than when I saw you last,” Ron observed.

“Oh, we’re just peachy keen, ickle Ronniekins! Pomfrey’s got this fabulous headache cure! And we had about a pot of coffee,” Fred enthused.

“Each,” George amended.

“Still, stay away from the booze. I’m not carrying you anywhere, tonight,” Viktor cautioned.

“We’re still not speaking to you. You violated the spirit of the lads’ night out,” Fred intoned solemnly. “You were supposed to get at least as drunk as we did.”

“Well, you did make it look so inviting... By the way, how’s your arm... you masher?” Harry asked slyly.

“I get the feeling I’m missing something,” Hermione said, sounding curious.

“Let’s just say little Anna Khorikina packs a pretty mean punch when met with a strange man stumbling around the Auror facility in his boxers at breakfast,” Viktor said. Hermione put a hand over her mouth to stifle the laughter.

“Oh! It was so beautiful, sweetheart! You were all so beautiful!” Molly exclaimed, coming out of the Great Hall, falling on Ginny’s neck. “You’ll all be marrying before you know it!”

“Now, Mum! Really, get hold of yourself,” Bill said, laying a hand on her shoulder. “It was a wedding, not a funeral! Speaking of which, congratulations are in order. Was lovely. And I spotted some of the food they were laying out. That’s some cake.”

“We actually haven’t the foggiest notion what it looks like,” Hermione admitted. “We only told her what flavor to get.”

“Really? Hmm... well, it’s nice. Mum, please stop dampening all the wedding attendants. Harry’s probably soaked through by now, and Dad’s all out of dry hankies. Fleur, have you got another one?” Bill asked.

“Zis is ze last one,” Fleur said, fishing a small white hankie out of her handbag.

“Speaking of congratulations, are we ever going to get to lob any at you two?” Viktor queried. “And when are you getting a haircut?”

“Oh, not for a while yet on either of those things. Afraid to upset the status quo. And Mum,” Bill said with a wicked grin.

“Now, Molly, girl, stop that. Honestly,” Arthur said, holding her hand.

“I can’t help it. The thought of my babies getting married. And I apologize for Bill’s hair. I tried to get him to let me trim it before the wedding,” Molly wailed.

“Let’s go get a drink and calm ourselves, hmm?” Arthur said soothingly. “We’ll talk to you later at the reception,” he added over his shoulder as he led her off.

“I ought to do you for that,” Bill said good-naturedly, socking his hands in his pockets while Fleur ducked her head and smiled.

“The relationship question or the hair?” Viktor countered.

“Both. Look, Charlie’s about here, somewhere. He’ll see you at the reception, I guess. I think he slipped off to talk to some of your teammates. Probably boring them stiff with Quidditch stories and whatnot. He was talking to Vulchanov and that girl with him, last I saw him,” Bill said.

“Natasha. She must have said yes. At any rate, thanks for coming, both of you. Bring more hankies, next one you attend,” Viktor said blithely.

“I don’t zink zere are enough ‘ankies in ze world for Molly at a wedding,” Fleur said with a shrug before she and Bill headed off toward the tent. They had gotten only a few feet away when Petar and Ekaterina slipped out the doors and politely greeted Ginny, Neville, Ron, and Harry. Petar stooped and gave Hermione a quick hug before shaking Viktor’s hand, then giving him a quick embrace. Ekaterina also gave Hermione a quick hug.

“I think the line can stop, now,” Petar announced. “No vone else.”

“Well, good, because my feet are killing me. I say we all go get a drink and find a chair,” Neville said, breaking rank.

“I second,” Hermione sighed. “Coming?” she asked Viktor.

“Go on, I’ll be there in a minute. I want a word with you,” he told Ekaterina. “First, are you seriously the last person through this line? Or at least what was this line

before they all ran off?"

"Da."

"Then, I'm doubly glad to see you," Viktor declared, leaning over and folding her in an embrace. "Thank you," he said in her ear. "For mostly stepping aside for the ceremony. So Hermione wouldn't feel so left out with no parents to take part. I know that's not how you pictured it."

"Vos nothing," Ekaterina protested.

"And next you'll be telling me that lending her your earrings was nothing. I would recognize those earrings anywhere, and it is *not* nothing to go lending out the first anniversary present Papa could afford to give you," Viktor scolded, straightening up. "Don't lie. You're no good at it."

"If it is okay, I brought pitka and white cloth. I thought... the reception..." Ekaterina said, uncertainly, gesturing back toward the propped doors.

"I think Hermione would like that. I know I would. Thanks, Mama," Viktor said, leaning to plant a kiss on her forehead. "Let's go get a drink. I don't know about you, but I could use a shot of rakia."

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"Could I ask why you seem to be playing statue for this one?" Ron asked curiously as Hermione posed for a photo alone on the lawn.

"Because! I need to send one to my old sitter, and I get the feeling that it would disconcert her a tad if I don't stay put in my wedding photo," Hermione answered once the photographer had given the sign. "Muggle photos stay still."

"And that does it for the wedding attendants. A few with the bride and groom, and I'll be all finished," the photographer announced.

"Thank goodness. I'm all grinned out," Harry said, fanning himself with a hand. "I'll be over there with my head in the punch bowl. Who's with me?" Harry asked. Ron, Ginny and Neville all raised their hands silently. "Right! Most everyone has drifted back inside. Should be a clear shot. When you two get ready for the triumphal entry and all, come get us."

"Speaking of the triumphal entry and all, would you be willing to agree to something a shade unorthodox?" Viktor asked Hermione.

“How unorthodox? It’s not as though anything else about this wedding has been particularly orthodox,” Hermione pointed out.

“Mama brought pitka bread and a bolt of white cloth. You remember what I told you about Bulgarian weddings? I think it would make her extremely happy to meet us when we go in,” Viktor pointed out.

“I don’t see why not. All it entails is her putting down the cloth for us to walk on and feeding each of us a bit of bread and honey, isn’t it?” Hermione asked.

“That, and making sure you step on the cloth first when you go in, and making sure you do it with your right foot. Or every Bulgarian in there would be coming out of their seats. I think-” Viktor began.

“I think I can handle that,” Hermione interrupted. “Who am I to argue if your mother wants to meet us and wish us a sweet life? It’s not as though we’re going to have a long line of dry, boring family toasts, now, is it? That’s one thing I’m not going to miss at this wedding. Bulgarians don’t really do drab and boring celebrations, do they?”

“Not if they can help it. You put enough food, drink and Bulgarians in one room, it’s generally a good time. Those earrings look nice on you,” Viktor added on impulse, brushing her hair back, then resting his hands on her hips.

“Remind me to give them back before we leave,” Hermione responded. “I definitely don’t want to lose them. That would most certainly not be starting out on the right foot.”

“We may have to see if we can find you some like those,” Viktor said.

“After we finish the house,” Hermione said, reaching up and smoothing the edge of his outer robe. They both jumped when the photographer cleared his throat.

“I got some nice candid shots. Now, if the two of you are done discussing bread and Bulgarians and houses and earrings, I can finish up the formal poses in a jiff,” the photographer offered.

“Well, by all means, do,” Hermione said with a laugh. “Then we’ll send in someone to tell Ekaterina to roll out the white carpet!”

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"I have officially seen it all. I really have. Alastor Moody dancing the horo. I can die knowing I haven't missed a single trick, now. By the way, it's nice to finally meet you, Natasha. All I had before was a name. Now at least I've got a face to put with it," Viktor said, and Natasha smiled and blushed prettily. On the small stage that had been set up, The Weird Sisters were finishing up their current set with "The Cow Is Back", before making way for the string quartet once more.

"Is he still miffed at you? Moody?" Vulchanov asked.

"Not too much, I think," Viktor replied. "Not that you can really tell, with Moody."

"You haven't seen it all. None of us have ever seen him drink out of anything other than that pocket flask," George pointed out.

"Bet I can get him to," Viktor said.

"Right! This I have to see! If you can, I'll shut up about the lads' night out business. Bet you twenty Galleons you can't," Fred interjected.

"Not that I wouldn't be interested in seeing it, but I think you've had too much to drink when you start thinking you can get Moody to give up that flask," Hermione said mildly.

"Come with me. See if we can't," Viktor invited.

"How did it suddenly become 'we'? I don't recall accepting a bet," Hermione said.

"Married me. Stuck with half my assets, half my debts, and a fifty percent interest in all my bets. Come on. He needs to try rakia, anyway. He promised me he would. Grab a few glasses. I'll get the rest," Viktor said, grabbing her hand and pulling her toward the refreshment table, where the elaborate cake sat. Madam Wilhelmina had actually demonstrated a bit of restraint, for her, at least. The main cake was a rather subdued affair, a mere three tiers with cascades of icing roses and butterflies, surrounded by an entire table full of matching sheet cakes. The confectionary butterflies fluttered their wings slightly, hovering atop the icing roses.

"It was a lovely wedding, dears. And this reception is going to be the death of me, yet, if I don't stop eating," Arabella Figg called out from her seat next to Moody as Viktor and Hermione sat down.

"Join the club. I believe I owe you a drink. You told me you wanted to try rakia," Viktor said, putting the bottle in front of Moody. "Fresh bottle. Never been

opened. Still sealed.”

“And what does that have to do with anything?” Moody grumbled, taking a swig from his pocket flask.

“You’re going to drink a toast, out of a glass, yet, that’s what it has to do with anything. Look, my parents brought this bottle with them. It’s the one we’re supposed to use when we cut the cake. The caterers haven’t even touched it. I’ll even test the glass out if you’re still worried,” Viktor offered.

“Stop that nonsense,” Moody replied. “I had my wedding gift sent to your house. I think you’ll find use for it. Said your trunks were worn out. Got you one with seven compartments.”

“Really? Alastor... thank you. You didn’t have to get us anything, really,” Hermione said.

“It’s not much,” Moody protested.

“It’s something we needed,” Hermione countered. “Come on. Just one little toast from a glass,” Hermione pleaded.

“It’s the least you can do, Alastor, to drink a decent, proper toast,” Minerva said.

“Oh, all right! Pester a body to death, why don’t you!” Moody growled, and beside him, McGonagall’s lips twitched slightly, as though she were trying to suppress a laugh.

“I’ll even let you dance with my wife if you ask nicely,” Viktor offered, opening the bottle and filling enough glasses for the people at the table.

“From what I remember, you were pretty good at it. And you’re better at the horo than I am,” Hermione said with a mischievous smile. “Come on, dance at least one dance with me.”

“Only if Minerva dances with Viktor,” Moody said slyly. “Then, with me.”

“What?” Minerva said, looking slightly alarmed.

“Come, now, Minerva. It’s the least you can do, to dance a decent dance,” Moody scolded.

Minerva looked slightly cornered, then resigned. “Oh, very well. Let’s drink our

toast and get on with it.”

“To your health and happiness, then, I suppose,” Moody said, raising his glass. “That’s not bad stuff,” he said after downing it.

“Told you. Minerva?” Viktor said, offering a hand.

“I’ll be back, in the not too distant future, Arabella. These young folks have no stamina. I imagine they’ll be begging for mercy before we are. And then, we can dance,” Moody said, rising and stumping around the table.

“Take your time. I’ve got to let two plates of food settle, first,” Mrs. Figg protested.

“You and Mrs. Figg seem awfully tight. Are we going to be dancing the horo at your wedding?” Hermione teased when they got out of earshot.

“Mind your own wedding,” Moody growled, but Hermione could swear the grizzled old Auror blushed just a little bit.

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“Err... is there some way to cut this monstrosity that doesn’t put us in danger of being crushed under a ton of baked goods?” Hermione asked Madam Wilhelmina.

“Just cut a slice out of the top tier, it should be fine. Now, then, do I know how to put on a wedding or do I know how to put on a wedding? It seems the day is a raving success!” Madam Wilhelmina declared.

“That question was rhetorical, right?” Viktor said, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Viktor...” Hermione warned. “It all turned out just lovely in the end. Just what we wanted. Couldn’t be lovelier. Cake’s a bit daunting, architecturally speaking, but as long as the structural integrity holds long enough for us to do the cake cutting, and it tastes well enough, I don’t particularly care,” she added, considering the tall wedding cake.

“Glad to hear it, darlings, glad to hear it all suits you! I’m sure today was the absolute social triumph of the decade at the very least!” a familiar voice called out from several feet away.

“That’s not... tell me it’s not-” Hermione muttered.

“Rita Skeeter. Hand me the knife,” Viktor said dryly.

“Viktor!” Hermione hissed under her breath. “Not to be rude or anything, but who, exactly, invited you?” Hermione asked evenly as Rita approached.

“Who didn’t? When Wil told me she was doing your wedding, I simply had to come. I couldn’t miss seeing how she married the two of you off. Not one of her flashier weddings, but I suppose if you two liked it...” Rita said airily, twirling her wrist in the air.

“Might have known you two were friends. It was just what we wanted. Not too flashy. Period,” Viktor said.

“Suppose you two will be going off on honeymoon and looking for vacation cottages and second houses and so forth, soon,” Rita observed, inspecting her long nails.

“No, we’ve decided to be dreadfully boring and live in only one house. Do I really need to remind you that you’re not exactly welcome company for the two of us?” Hermione asked sweetly.

“Look, cookie, I hate to break it to you, but you don’t have a thing on me, any more. I registered. Spill it that I was unregistered for years if you will, no one’s going to believe you. And if you do, I might just have to keep an ear and an eye trained for any possible spousal wanderings, mightn’t I? I would hate to see a nasty rumor like that hanging over your bushy little head, now, darling,” Rita said with a menacing air.

“Not worried about your journalistic reputation these days?” Viktor bit off.

“Honey, no one cares any more how you got the dirt, just that you can get the dirt. And I can find dirt. Even if I have to invent a little, now and again,” Rita said smugly. “In fact, telling on me might even lend an air of credibility to the embellishment.”

“You-” Viktor began, but Hermione interrupted by laying a hand on his forearm.

“Say what you will. I don’t care. Print whatever you like, it doesn’t make it true. The only people I care about are our friends and family, and they’ll all know that you’re full of it. Everyone else can think whatever they want to. They will anyway,” Hermione said, nodding fiercely.

“Is that so, now? I suppose I’ll just have to hold any real dirt back for when I want to know something important, then, won’t I? You’ll be hearing from me, sometime in the future, I’m sure,” Rita said, waving. “Ta for now. Enjoy your honeymoon. Might not last long. Come along, Wil, we’ll have a drink.”

“I wish you had just let me stab her. Could have hidden the body in the lower tier of that cake,” Viktor complained.

“I meant what I said. I don’t care what she prints. Everyone knows she’s full of lies. She’s not as popular as she once was,” Hermione said, as though trying to convince herself.

“She was popular?! I must have missed the memo. Popular like a case of boils?”

Hermione laughed softly. “I meant with her readers. She was never popular with her subjects. At least not that I could tell. Let’s take our hostility out on the cake, shall we? Those twee little butterflies are mocking me, now. I feel like hacking their wings off. You?”

“I just want a piece of the cake, thanks,” Viktor said with a ghost of a smile. “Aren’t you glad we’re only getting married the once?”

“More than you could ever know,” Hermione sighed. “Wave the photographer over and let’s get this bit over with. Some of the guests will be leaving before you know it.”

“Good riddance to some of them, too,” Viktor replied.

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“It’s well past midnight. Past one, in fact. Are we going anytime soon?” Viktor asked.

“I feel a bit rude, skipping out like this when there are still so many people here. Let me guess. Common practice at Bulgarian weddings?” Hermione countered, carefully removing the earrings and laying them on the table in front of her.

“Some of them will probably still be here come morning. Actually, it’s already morning. I don’t know about you, but I’ve had about all the wedding I can take, personally. I say we tell Dumbledore and Oblansk a final time that we’re grateful, wave at the wedding party, tell Mama and Papa goodbye, and tell Moody’s table we’re going. Those are about the only people sober enough to miss us,” Viktor

observed from the chair beside her. He rested a hand on her knee. "In fact, I'm not sure we're sober enough to miss us, to tell the truth. Besides, just about everyone else here has wished us well and told us to have a good honeymoon and a safe trip, and that's about all there is to say."

"Did you thank the musicians?" Hermione asked.

"All of them."

"Caterers?"

"Done. And the house-elves. Twice. Which reminds me, Dobby wanted me to give you this," Viktor said, reaching in his pocket and fishing out a small knitted piece.

"A tea cozy! Oh my. He didn't take it right off his back, did he?" Hermione asked with a laugh.

"I understand he's taken up knitting. Seems they have quite a few hats, thanks to someone, but no sweaters," Viktor pointed out.

"I never could get the sleeves right. Well, that's lovely. We'll stick it in the bag when we get in the carriage," Hermione said, smoothing the tea cozy out over her lap.

"He also wished the Missus great happiness and at least a dozen babies, so I didn't quite have the heart to tell him we were probably going to aim for just slightly less than that number. I'm not even going to tell you the number Winky named." Viktor draped an arm across her shoulders.

"That's nice," Hermione murmured tiredly, leaning her head against his shoulder. "You know, Dumbledore and Oblansk are conveniently over there at Moody's table. One less stop to make. And then I can return the earrings, and we can go."

"Let's go, then," Viktor agreed, giving her shoulders a quick squeeze before rising. As they drew closer, they could hear Moody animatedly recounting something to a crowd of rapt listeners that included most of the Weasleys, a great deal of the faculty, Dumbledore, Oblansk, Arabella Figg, Remus Lupin and the entire wedding party.

"...fourteen of them, there were! They were so thick you could almost trip over them-"

"I don't think I believe a word of it!" Viktor interrupted.

"Should," Moody said gruffly, taking a slug from his flask. "You and Lupin were there," he added, raising a shaggy white eyebrow.

"Now I know I don't believe it, then," Viktor said mischievously, looking at Lupin, who dissolved into laughter. "I don't think we were ever half that exciting, were we?"

"Speak for yourself," Remus countered.

"We're leaving. We've had all of you people we can take," Viktor announced.

"Right. Likely story. Just want to get the honeymoon under way, more like," Charlie teased, lifting his glass and ignoring the disapproving glare Molly gave him when Hermione blushed. "What? Aren't we a pretty enough crowd for you?"

"I hate to break it to you, Charlie, but the bride is out of your league entirely, and I'm off the market. I would much rather spend the rest of the moonlit hours with her," Viktor said blithely, holding up his left hand and wiggling the fingers. "Terribly sorry to disappoint you. You were fun to freeze my arse off with in Romania, but I don't think I want you on my honeymoon."

"I'm wounded," Charlie said with a grin. "So what are the two of you doing wasting time over here?"

"Came to say goodbye and thank you. Especially to the wedding party and the people who conducted it. And to find out where and what the Portkey is, for that matter," Viktor said.

"We can't thank you two enough.. well, the entire school, really, for doing all this. It was wonderful," Hermione said, nodding. Several of the professors exchanged satisfied, pleased looks with one another.

"I think I speak for everyone when I say it was our pleasure. And our sincerest wishes for a pleasant honeymoon," Dumbledore said, raising his glass. The members of the faculty murmured and followed suit while the wedding party clambered from their chairs and rounded the table.

"The driver has been notified of where and what the Portkey is. It is on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. Short ride, but long enough to be scenic," Oblansk offered. "And it was indeed a pleasure, not little I did."

“So...” Ron said awkwardly, “I would welcome you two to the family, but I think you became a part of it a long time ago. So I’ll just congratulate you on becoming your own family.” He offered his hand and shook hands, then embraced Hermione. “Take care.”

“Oh... Ron, thank you,” Hermione said. “Harry,” she acknowledged him, then hugged him fiercely.

“No, thank you two. For giving us something to celebrate... Mrs. Krum,” Harry insisted, breaking the embrace and offering Viktor a hand.

“Thank you, Ginny... Neville,” Viktor said, stooping to give Ginny a hug. “Maybe we can return the favor someday.”

“Someday, maybe,” Neville admitted, shaking hands while Hermione and Ginny hugged. “Congratulations, Hermione,” he said when it came his turn.

“I want a word with you two,” Moody growled, stomping off from the table without bothering to look back and see if they were following. Viktor and Hermione exchanged looks, then hurried after him. When out of earshot of the table, he suddenly halted and whirled around. “Now... don’t the two of you go getting all lax just because I’m not going to be around you much to remind you not to turn into a couple of careless pudding heads like Potter and Weasley can be sometimes! No letting your guard down just because you’re not Aurors and the war is supposedly over! Not everybody observes a cease fire, you know! I don’t want to find out the two of you aren’t keeping the wards up and-”

“Moody?” Hermione interrupted.

“What?”

“We love you, too,” Hermione said softly, pausing for a long while before adding, “I’ll just be dropping these off with your mother.”

“Silly women! Get all... all... sappy and emotional over nothing,” Moody said gruffly, watching her cross the room.

“Exactly. Over nothing. We’ll be careful. Really. And you’re more than welcome to come visit. I know you’ll be busy, trying to rebuild the Auror program and so forth, but we can drop by every once in a while. If you’ll have us. Maybe in a few months when we’ve got the house in order and things settle down, you can visit and see it,” Viktor offered.

“Two newlyweds don’t want an old relic dropping in all the time,” Moody said dismissively.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I kind of like old relics,” Viktor protested.

“Go on. You two don’t want to spend the rest of the moonlit hours here at Hogwarts,” Moody ordered. “And congratulations. I’m happy for you two.”

“You? Happy? I’m stunned. I didn’t think it possible,” Viktor said lightly, then he sobered. “Thank you. For everything.” Moody simply grunted in reply. “Scare the bejeezus out of a few new recruits for me. You’ll be running over with them, you’ll see. More than you know what to do with.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Bunch of raw simpletons that couldn’t... are you going to stand here all night? Get yourself over there and tell your parents goodbye and get in the carriage!” Moody ordered roughly.

“I’ll do that,” Viktor said, shaking Moody’s hand. “Now get back to the table before Arabella gets lonely.”

“Oh, shut up,” Moody shot back, heading toward the table. Viktor hurried across the room to where Hermione was standing with Petar and Ekaterina.

“You didn’t wound his dignity too badly,” Viktor said.

“It just sort of popped out,” Hermione replied.

“Mama, Papa, thank you. For everything,” Viktor said, hugging each of them in turn.

“Safe trip,” Petar cautioned. “Write tomorrow. So ve know for sure.”

“We will. Come on, let’s go get Hagrid to roust up the carriage and the driver, and if we’re lucky, he won’t hug us to death,” Viktor told Hermione, threading his fingers through hers.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Hermione said.

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Hermione leaned against Viktor, who in turn was leaning tiredly against the carriage door, his head resting beside the window. “Pretty ride in the moonlight,” Hermione observed.

“It is,” Viktor agreed. They looked out the window, half-drowsing throughout most of the ride, the cool, damp night air feeling refreshing after the crowded, overly warm hall. Not long after, the carriage pulled to a stop.

“Zis is it,” the driver said, opening the door for them. “Ze Portkey is ze brass bell, tacked beside ze door of Ze Three Broomsticks,” he added, pointing. “No need to zank me, zis was my pleasure,” the driver said eagerly. “Can I get ze bags?”

“No, thank you, it’s just the one,” Viktor said, gathering it up and putting it on his shoulder.

“I will wait with ze carriage until you leave, just in case,” the driver insisted, climbing back up into the seat and taking the reins. “Pleasant trip,” he called out as they walked to the door.

“Thank you,” Hermione called back. “So. That’s it, is it?” Hermione asked, eyeing the small brass bell hanging on a nail beside the door.

“Suppose so,” Viktor said. “According to Oblansk, it’s supposed to take us to right outside the gate of the villa. Shall we?” he asked, taking her hand in his. When she nodded, they raised their clasped hands and brought them up beneath the bell. Moments later they came to a staggering stop, the bell clanging to the ground with a muffled tinkle in the grass. Hermione shook her head and tried to get her bearings. Finally, she steadied herself against the small gate and fence in front of her, then looked up at the dim outline of the villa in the moonlight.

“I hope they have someone at the desk at this hour,” Hermione said.

“Only one way to find out,” Viktor said, swinging the gate open, then crouching to gather up the bell. The two of them walked quietly into the tidy entryway, taking in the check-in counter and the call bell that bore the legend “Ring for night assistance” over it. Viktor gave Hermione a questioning look, shrugged, then pulled the string attached to it. After a few moments, a witch in a dressing gown and a remarkably neat, black bun stumbled out, bleary eyed and half asleep.

“Sorry to bother you at this hour-” Hermione began, but the woman waved it off.

“Confirmation card?” she asked briskly. While Viktor fished it out of the side pocket of the bag, she added, “Honeymoon suite?”

“Why, yes, how did... oh... we’re still in our robes. Sorry,” Hermione said.

"Top of the stairs, turn left, suite three," the witch said, laying a key on the counter. "Want anything, tell us."

"At the moment, just a bed," Viktor said.

"I bet! Honeymooners," the woman called over her shoulder as she closed the door behind her.

"I shouldn't have said that," Viktor said, coloring slightly as he realized how it had sounded.

"I know what you meant. Besides, we are on our honeymoon, aren't we? Let's go see what this honeymoon suite looks like, hmm?" Hermione said soothingly, picking up the key and taking his hand with her free hand.

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"Any particular foot I should stick in the door first?" Hermione asked with a laugh. "Or is it a hand or an elbow? Or do we have to do the hokey pokey before we enter the honeymoon suite?"

"The ho... what?" Viktor said, setting the bag down on the floor.

"Silly Muggle thing. I'll explain it later," Hermione murmured, fiddling with the key in the lock.

"Actually, I thought we would just fall back on your tradition for this. Here," Viktor said, leaning over and sweeping one arm behind her knees, the other behind her back and picking Hermione up off the floor.

"This is nice," Hermione observed, putting her arms around his neck.

"The villa? Hard to tell in the dark," Viktor said.

"No. This. I think I'll just have you carry me wherever we go," Hermione said, letting go with one arm long enough to push the door open the rest of the way.

"Broom's going to get a little crowded during matches," Viktor countered. "Darn it, I knew there would be a drawback," Hermione said. "I'll settle for across the threshold."

"That can be arranged. Watch your head," Viktor cautioned.

"You watch my head. I'm busy keeping my hands and feet inside the ride at all times," Hermione said.

"Now I know you're tipsy," Viktor said. "Put on the light."

"Done!" Hermione replied. "And you're about four blocks south of tipsy. We both are."

"Then I had better put you down before I stagger over something and kill us both," Viktor said, setting her down.

"It's a lovely suite! There's a balcony and French doors! Oh, look at the laurel and ivy. It looks so nice in the moonlight," Hermione said, walking across the room and peering out the glass doors.

Viktor pulled the bag in from the corridor, retrieved the key and pushed the door shut. "It is beautiful. So," he said, stepping behind her and resting his chin on top of her head while rubbing her shoulders, "what now? Do we collapse in an almighty heap and sleep for a week or go ahead and stay up until dawn?"

"I thought we would... you know..." Hermione said awkwardly. She could feel her cheeks turning red.

"Are you ready for that?" Viktor asked frankly, putting an arm around her waist and pulling her closer to him.

"Well, we are married, now. Heaven nor hell nor a raking from Molly Weasley's tongue can do a thing about it if we want to-"

"Doesn't give me the right to ask for it if you're not ready," Viktor said in her ear. "You didn't answer my question."

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I suppose there's only one way to find out. Try it and see. You remember that time at Grimmauld... when we almost...?"

"How could I forget? We were idiots... thinking we could do that and not... be tempted. It was like lighting a match and throwing it into a fireworks shed," Viktor said with a sigh.

"Just out of curiosity," Hermione said, turning around and leaning into Viktor, "why did you stop? I didn't really want you to stop, to tell the truth."

"I didn't really want to... Because that's not the way I wanted it to be. I wanted it

to be like this. When you were ready. When we were both ready. Not because we were both needy, Hermione." He twined his fingers in the mass of hair cascading down her back.

"I thought maybe I did something wrong," Hermione said softly.

"No! I did. I never should have touched you that way. And I should have stayed in my own bed," Viktor insisted. "I should have known better."

"I didn't exactly protest. In fact, I seem to recall touching back. Or maybe I touched first," Hermione said, untying the sash around Viktor's waist. "We can touch all we want, now," she added, dropping it to the floor. Viktor hesitated a moment before gathering up his outer robe and pulling it over his head, letting it fall to the floor as well. He reached up and slipped the hairpins securing her veil away from the netting, then carefully draped it on the back of the chair near the bed. Viktor considered her silently for a short space, then gently nudged one shoulder, prompting her to turn around. Hermione turned, facing the French doors, looking out into the moonlight shining silver off the leaves.

He gathered her hair at the nape of her neck and tucked it around her shoulder, out of the way. Viktor slowly unbuttoned the back of her outer robe, then ran his hands over her bare upper back, slipping the outer robe off her shoulders. She stepped out of her shoes, then Hermione slid the sleeves and the bodice down, until it fell to the floor, pooling around her ankles. Viktor put his lips to the nape of her neck, then lower, leaving a trail of soft kisses down her spine. Hermione shivered slightly when he reached the spot between her shoulder blades. "No?"

"Yes," she whispered back. "Bed?" she added, before stepping out of the heap of her outer robe and shoes, hurriedly folding down the covers of the bed to reveal the sheets, easing onto the edge of the bed, looking up at him with a silent invitation. Viktor knelt and untied his boots, sliding them off and setting them on the floor next to their robes, socks tucked inside them. He rose and sat on the bed next to her, tracing a finger over the line of her jaw before leaning forward to kiss her. Hermione fumbled with the ties cinching his inner robe around his waist. She loosened the robe and he rose slightly, bunching the robe up around his hips before sitting back down on the bed and skinning out of it. He tossed it onto the growing pile.

Hermione studied his bare upper body, trailing her fingers over his collar bones, then down his chest. Viktor captured her left hand, cradling it and threading his fingers through hers before kissing the back of it lightly. Then a slower, more deliberate kiss, on her ring finger, near the new ring seated there before resting her hand back on his shoulder.

Viktor tugged at the end of the tie securing her inner robe, and the bow loosened. She slipped the robe over her head, throwing it blindly in the direction of the chair where her veil was draped. Viktor stroked a finger around the neckline of her camisole before bending his head and putting his mouth to hers once more. He buried his fingers in her hair while she slipped her arms around his waist. By the time he pulled away from her lips, Hermione felt rather breathless. She slid back slightly, leaning back and arranging herself on the mattress. After a moment's hesitation, Viktor propped himself on his elbow, leaning over her.

"Funny. Once I could barely stop myself. Now, I don't know where to begin," Viktor said, brushing her hair back from her forehead.

"Begin wherever you like," Hermione said, cupping his face in her hands. He lowered himself again, kissing her chin, then her throat, wandering to the hollow of her shoulder. He stroked his fingers over her breast, and her nipple tightened beneath the fabric of her bra and chemise. Viktor nuzzled against her other breast, then slipped his hands down toward her waist, working his way down her torso, kissing her through the chemise while shucking it upward, bunching it beneath her chest. Hermione curled her fingers in his hair when he kissed the soft curve of her bare upper belly, then ran a finger around her navel.

She had just closed her eyes and leaned her head back when she heard a soft snort. "Hermione... what the hell?"

Hermione's eyes flew open. "What? What's wrong?"

"I know... I said... I wanted a little something... Bulgarian at the wedding," Viktor said, starting to laugh breathlessly, "but honestly... that's taking... national pride a bit too far, don't you think?"

"What on earth are you... Oh! Oh, I forgot! It's all Ginny's fault. And a twelve-year-old girl who has a crush on you, in a way, but that's neither here nor there—"

"Since when do Ginny and twelve-year-old girls have anything to say about your choice of knickers?" Viktor said when he caught his breath.

"Some poor, deluded twelve-year-old Muggle-born who has a crush on you ordered them for her mother's store and Ginny spotted them and insisted I buy them. I had to do it to get her to stop hassling me about buying something slinky," Hermione said with a laugh, propping herself up on her elbows. "And I will eat your hat if Mrs. Hendricks didn't recognize me right when I'm digging

through the slinky rack!”

“Mrs. Hendricks... the name sounds... isn’t that the lady that used to sit with you?” Viktor asked, sobering.

“Yes. I practically jumped over the rack when she called my name. I felt like I had been caught at the cookie jar. She told me she hopes you know how lucky you are,” Hermione said with a wide smile.

“Sounds like a smart lady. Speaking of which, you’re a married woman, now. You can buy whatever sort of knickers you want. Ones with the Bulgarian flag... or the Union Jack! Fly the colors of the entire European continent for all I care,” Viktor said, still chuckling.

“Oh, get stuffed,” Hermione said good-naturedly. “Now, are you going to get on with it, or am I going to just listen to you giggle over my pants for the rest of the night?”

Viktor sobered. “Oh, I’ll get on with it. Just warn me first if there’s anything I should be aware of before I get to your bra,” he added before dissolving into laughter again, and sprawling onto his back beside her. “You don’t... you don’t have a Bulgarian flag on that, do you?”

“Separate purchase, thank you very much,” Hermione said curtly.

“There’s not something else on it, is there?” Viktor asked, rolling onto his side and tucking his head next to hers. “I mean, I’m not going to make the shocking discovery that your brassiere actually supports Ireland or something, am I?” he asked, snickering.

“You’re rotten,” Hermione said with a sigh. “What am I going to do with you?” She turned her head, putting her forehead against his cheek.

“Hopefully something a lot more exciting than giggling over your pants,” Viktor said, kissing her. “Maybe something that involves taking them off, even. Did I tell you how beautiful a bride you made?” He draped an arm over her and rubbed a palm over her bare back, beneath the chemise.

“Once or twice. You could tell me again,” Hermione whispered.

“Or show you,” Viktor replied, ducking his head to kiss just above the neckline.

“I wouldn’t complain,” she admitted, rolling onto her back once more, then

stripping off the chemise.

“I’d prefer the bra not be supporting anything, country or otherwise,” Viktor said, rolling over and propping himself over her.

“That can be arranged,” she replied, reaching behind her and unfastening it before lying back down.

“Going to take it off?” he questioned, raising an eyebrow.

“I prefer you take it off,” she said, looking up at him.

“That can be arranged, too.” Viktor traced his fingers over the curve of her bust, slipping the bra away from her skin, slipping his hands between the fabric and her body, cupping against her for a moment before sliding the bra away, the loose straps trailing off her arms. He drew a small circle around her areola, then teased her nipple with his thumb. Hermione sucked in her breath when it stiffened. Viktor leaned over her, stroking her breasts as he kissed the hollow of her throat. Slowly, he moved lower, brushing his lips over the soft flesh of her breast, kissing, then suckling the erect nipple before turning his attention to the other breast.

“Come here,” Hermione pleaded, cupping his face once more, stroking his cheekbones with her thumbs before kissing his mouth. Emboldened slightly by his response and in no small part by the pleasantly warm fuzziness of her head from the day’s drink, Hermione slid a hand between them. She cupped him through his boxers, still tentative, brushed her fingers over the fabric, over him. Viktor moaned softly, then slid his own hand between her legs, fondling her through the thin knickers, and she let her hand drop. He pressed against her thigh, and she could feel him hardening. They both paused for an instant, considering one another silently before Viktor tugged his shorts low on his hips, pulled them off and discarded them. Viktor tucked his fingertips into the waistband of her knickers and raised an eyebrow questioningly. Hermione lifted her hips, giving him the space to remove the last scrap of fabric between them.

Viktor peeled the waistband down her hips, then gently slid them down over her thighs, and free. Hermione felt her cheeks flush slightly while he studied her frankly, the smallest insecurities clamoring at the back of her mind for a moment. His gaze traveled up her body slowly, until it met hers. Her unease melted away when he smiled softly at her, then ducked to kiss her forehead tenderly. She curled a hand behind his neck, running her fingers through his slightly wavy, dark hair. Hermione gasped when he touched her there again, stroking lightly, shallow and easy for some time, then more insistent.

She started slightly when he parted her folds, dipping a fingertip into the hollow there, caressing, short strokes at first, then longer, more languorous, deeper.

He soon after pushed his finger deep, and her muscles twitched, and Hermione felt warm and wet, as though she were melting. A small gush of moisture bathed Viktor's finger and the mass of curls between her legs. Viktor withdrew and massaged the small nub with his fingertip again, prompting her to moan softly. "Hermione..." he said in her ear, his voice very nearly drowned out on his breath. She could feel him now, pressing hard against her thigh, fully erect. Ready.

*Am I ready?* "Inside me," she whispered back, her voice still sounding thin and uncertain.

"You're sure?" Viktor prompted.

"I am," Hermione assented, sounding more certain than she felt. She tented her knees further and let her legs fall limp on either side of his hips, trying to relax as much as possible. To offer as little resistance as she could. He carefully opened her with his fingers once more, then tentatively positioned himself against her, hands planted on the mattress to either side of her torso. She nodded her encouragement and he pushed his hips forward slowly but steadily, parting her, entering her. She nodded again when he met resistance and could go no further. "Push hard," she said, swallowing, "it's okay. It has to break sometime."

"I don't want to hurt you," Viktor said.

"It's not supposed to hurt much. It's just the once, and then it's over," Hermione replied, her voice betraying some of her nerves.

"There's nothing we can do to keep it from hurting?" Viktor asked earnestly.

"Numbing charm. But then I wouldn't be able to feel anything at all. It's fine. Really," Hermione insisted, putting her hands on his shoulders. "Just do it fast. I'll be fine," she repeated. After a bit of hesitation, he thrust his hips forward harder, and for a few seconds, made no headway. She felt pressure, resistance, that part of her body holding stubbornly against his advance for a short space before she felt a small, keen pain that made her suck in her breath sharply. The barrier gave way and the keen jolt went with it, replaced by nothing more than a dull, throbbing little sting, almost drowned out by the new feeling of being completely filled.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly, freezing in place.

“I’m okay. Just a little sting. It’s fine, really. You’re fine,” she insisted, the sting already fading. Hermione tugged at his shoulders lightly, urging him closer. Hesitantly he lowered himself to prop on his elbows instead of his hands, their torsos just brushing. Hermione felt a rush of heat, as though she were blushing from the roots of her hair all the way to her toes, when his chest brushed against hers.

Viktor paused atop her, inside her, not moving, barely daring to breathe, just taking in the curves of her face, the way the strands of her hair caught the moonlight filtering through the drapes, the silvery reflection off the leaves framing the view. To study the way she was looking back at him, equally uncertain, the sensation of her wrapped around him, warm and wet, tight against him, clamoring for his attention. Finally, he forced himself to trace her parted lips with a fingertip, slide it down over her chin, her throat, down to the cleft between her breasts. He let his fingers wander to the curve of her breast again, soft and warm, pliable except for the hardened nipple.

Hermione closed her eyes, tilted her head back and reveled in the new sensation in the deepest part of her, the feeling of being filled in a manner that she couldn’t accomplish on her own. The feeling of his hand kneading and stroking her, his body against her and inside of her. She sucked in her breath between her parted lips, squeezed her eyes shut even tighter in response to the little prickles of heat bursting like fireworks on her skin. Viktor’s thumb stroked over her nipple once more, and she arched her back jerkily, pushing her pelvis tight against his.

*If she hadn’t moved, I could have stayed like that all night... now...* “Hermione,” Viktor rasped out, his voice husky and breathless, “I need...” He trailed off, tried to find the words while she opened her eyes and gazed up at him. His pelvis felt strangely heavy and restless, the niggling want at the back of his head growing into full blown need. The drive to move inside her, to push, to thrust. “I need... to move,” he said almost apologetically. “Inside you, I mean.”

“Move, then. I want you to. Move inside me,” Hermione replied, putting a finger to his lip, tracing over it lightly. “You won’t hurt me. It doesn’t even sting, now.”

Viktor propped on his elbows more securely, cautiously drawing part of the way out of her, watching her face for any sign of discomfort, pausing before pushing himself timidly back between her folds. She let her hands roam over his bare back, tilted her pelvis upward, opening herself to him even more. After a few more faltering, unsure strokes, he felt secure enough to put his mouth to hers again, kissing her lightly. “You’re okay?” he asked, nuzzling her cheek, pausing once more in his thrusting.

“It feels good. Go ahead, don’t worry about hurting me,” Hermione urged. Viktor nodded, moved his hips once more, soon falling into an easy rhythm, his strokes deeper and more forceful. Hermione cautiously moved to meet him, alternating working with and against him, trying to concentrate on the feeling inside her, the new sensation of the blood rushing through her groin, the hot throbbing between her legs. There was a strange tension, like a spring coiled too tightly, building deep and low in her pelvis, a curious sort of ticking there, a constant tattoo clamoring in her brain.

There were other sensations, broken and disjointed, his prominent hipbones against her, the tickle of the black nest of curls between his legs, the skin of his chest brushing against hers, pressing into hers, his mouth and breath on her mouth and cheek, warm and gentle, the occasional tickle of a strand of his hair trailing over her face. But these things were just background noise to the awareness of his arms cradled beneath her shoulders, his hand tucked behind her head, fingers in her hair, his flesh buried inside her. The way he was cleaving her and cleaving to her at the same time. She gave a mewling little cry when he pressed against her clitoris, pulled him closer, her thigh muscles shuddering involuntarily, clamping around him.

Viktor put his mouth against the pale shell of her ear, so close she could feel his ragged breath. “Ti si hubava... supruga... ti si hubava... Hermione... zavinage te obicham...” Hermione felt as though her heart were swelling in her chest. *You’re so beautiful... wife...* He had always reserved the Bulgarian endearments for private, just between the two of them. The syllables were exotic, even her name taking on that curiously soft, foreign feel, the r rolling slightly, the words sounding far more beautiful to her when he said them than they did coming from her still shy, clumsy tongue. Still, she tried, for she knew it pleased him when she attempted it, no matter how badly she botched it. And to encourage him to speak it more. Every one of the words made her want to beg for another.

“Zavinage te obicham... I love you... forever,” she echoed, her own panting becoming more uneven.

“Molia te... dai celuvka, molia te... hubava... dai celuvka... give me a kiss... kiss me...”

Hermione complied, cupping his face with her hands. “Viktor...”

“Haresva li ti? Like it? Boli li te? Does it hurt? Hermione...”

“Dobre... good... it feels so good... obicham te... nnngh...”

“Obicham te... I love you... I can't... much longer...”

“It's okay... tova e dobre... do it...” she begged, giving a small, high pitched cry when the ball of tension that had been building inside her exploded, and the muscles between her legs shuddered, leaving her legs strangely weak and out of her control, her hips bucking slightly. The feeling drained away slowly, leaving her muscles feeling melted and buttery soft, her body limp and damp beneath him.

Viktor's thrusts became irregular again, but not tentative. Hermione could feel his body tense, the way he was often holding his breath while heaving his hips forward, into her, inside her. He tucked his cheek against hers, his ragged pants blending with her own in her ears. Viktor gave a strangled cry, his own hips bucking against hers. There was the subtle consciousness of a new, wet warmth deep inside her as he stilled. They both froze for an instant, holding their breaths. Finally, he moved, trailing his nose over her cheek, putting his mouth at the corner of hers. “Dai celuvka... hubava...” he breathed, placing a gentle kiss there.

Hermione turned her head slightly, stroking his cheek with her hand before deepening the kiss, struggling to breathe deeply enough through her nostrils, the curious flush of heat in her body fading, the night air cooler against her sweaty, damp skin. “Not so bad for a first time, eh?” she asked, smiling softly.

“You tell me,” he countered, brushing her damp hair back from her sweaty forehead.

“It was as perfect as it could be,” Hermione insisted. “I don't know about you, I'm exhausted but happy... If I were any more content, I would be purring.”

“We'll work on that tomorrow, then,” Viktor said, returning the smile before rolling onto his side, tucked in beside her on the mattress. Her muscles twitched subtly around the new, sudden void between her legs. She rolled to her side, facing him, then curled as tightly as possible into the curve of his body. He rested his chin on top of her head, his arm draped over her, around her, hand against the small of her back pulling her tight against him, secure. His other arm tucked beneath her, pillowing her head.

For a long moment, Hermione just pressed her ear into his damp chest, listening to his breathing, slowly returning to normal, and the thrumming of his heart beneath her palm. “You're going to have to teach me more Bulgarian. I think you could just talk to me and make me feel this way. It's beautiful, I love the way it sounds,” she said drowsily, snuggling in even tighter.

“Ne sega... not now. Later. We have all the time in the world, later. A lifetime. An entire lifetime,” Viktor replied in a low tone, the fatigue thick in his voice. “Leka nosht... goodnight.”

“Leka nosht... obicham te, Viktor,” Hermione said, closing her heavy eyelids.

Viktor glanced at the French doors again, at the silvery leaves reflecting the moonlight. “Obicham te... I love you, Hermione. Obicham te,” he whispered, closing his eyes, the two of them drifting off, their bodies intertwined as tightly as the tri-colored bands on their fingers.