

*None of them were good signs. It's never a good sign when it happens so fast, you don't even have time to react. It's never a good sign when you see the hoops go flying by so far into the fall. It's never a good sign when you're not sure how you're going to land. Or when you're going to land. But if you come off the broom, about all you can do is hope for the best and brace for the impac...*

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"Pack him off," Vulchanov said in Bulgarian, after considering a moment.

"Do you really think that's the best idea? What if we make it worse?" Volkov shouted over the crowd noise.

"Look at it. Do you really think us picking him up and packing him a few meters is going to do any more damage? Do you have a better idea? A fifth of the damned crowd is on the pitch, wanting to lynch Gonzales. No way the mediwizards can get down this end, anyway, with that mob. Might as well take him to the locker room, where someone can actually come around and see to him. And if it makes things worse, he can give me hell over it," Vulchanov said firmly.

There was a weak tap on Volkov's arm. "It was an accident... I swear it was... I never knew we were that close until we had already hit..." Gonzales said in uncertain English.

"You know that. Ve know that. Would be incredibly stupid to risk killing yourself over a stunt like that, and you're not that stupid. But a good portion of the crowd would like to haff your hide right about now, stupid or not," Vulchanov said, nodding his head down the field where security was struggling to contain the group that had come past the barriers. "I suggest you get yourself to either your locker room or ours, but hurry up and make up your mind. I suspect it might be better to go to ours. Ve'll use the cape," he added, kneeling down on the pitch.

"We'll forfeit, obviously. Only decent thing to do," Manuel, the Spanish team captain said, walking up beside Gonzales. "Bien, Raoul. I'm sure once cooler heads prevail, everyone will know it had to be an accident."

"Right now, ve really don't care if you forfeit or not. Might vant to get Gonzales off the damn pitch, before some of that lot decide to grind him into it," Vulchanov snapped. "I'll get his shoulders. Two more of you get the end of the cape."

"How bad is..." Manuel began, but he broke off and paled, drained of all color, when he looked over Volkov's shoulder.

Viktor's eyelids fluttered, then flew open. *Final bad sign. Nothing hurts besides my head, where it hit... whatever it hit. And after that fall, something should.*

*Pain was at least a sign that everything was still working. That your body still knew what was going on. No pain... that could be a bad sign. No pain meant either shock or... I don't even want to consider the other possibility. A very bad sign.* "How bad is it?" he wheezed, tugging at Vulchanov's robe.

"Bad enough that you probably don't want to look," he replied in Bulgarian.

"Well, now you just made me want to look twice as bad. At least let me know what the hell I'm lying on," Viktor insisted.

"Dmitrov, you and Volkov, I think. You don't want to know," he told Viktor.

"Tell me, or I'll look, Konstantin." He only used Vulchanov's first name when he meant business.

"The pitch."

"Very funny. You know what I meant."

"You'll figure it out soon enough. I'll lift, then you two move," Vulchanov ordered, hauling Viktor up off the ground slightly, holding him under the arms. Viktor felt so dizzy from the fall, he couldn't lift his head enough to look. Sure enough, Vulchanov had been right. The pain when they moved him to get him situated on the cape was blinding. It made him wish for the previous, curious numbness. It only took a couple of minutes to carry him to the locker room, but even after they put him down, he still screamed a steady stream of Bulgarian curse words. Gonzales had looked so remorseful as they packed him off, that Viktor might have felt sorry for him, in other circumstances. As it was, he was a little too busy protesting the absolute agony of being moved. On the other hand, it did clear up one mystery. He had figured out what the hard object was. It had been wedged most uncomfortably up behind his thigh, pinned beneath him before Dmitrov had pulled it free so they could move him. It wasn't the broom handle, as he had first guessed. He had been lying on what could only have been the outside edge of his own boot.

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"I can't see anything. Not beyond the lot of them standing around him," Hermione complained, bringing her Omnioculars down.

"Well, I could see them all talking, so at least he was awake. Surely that's a good sign?" Susan asked her husband.

"They're packing him off. If he were hurt too badly, I shouldn't think they would do that. Of course, I don't think we can say the same for Gonzales if he doesn't

get off the pitch pretty soon. At least, if those barriers don't hold. You reckon he really did that on purpose?" Ron asked, lowering his own pair once more.

"Oh, I would think not. Viktor's known him since before he got onto the Spanish national team, and always thought he was pretty decent. Just a stupid lapse of attention, not a deliberate collision. Silly to do it deliberately. He would risk knocking himself off the broom just as much, probably more. A second or an inch either way, and it never would have happened. Wonder if Harry's alright? I mean, he was down there on the sidelines next to the locker room when that mess broke out," Hermione said anxiously.

"I'm sure he's fine. I'm sure both of them are fine," Ron said dismissively.

"Well, I should hardly think Viktor would be up to much at present, after that kind of fall. But you're probably right. They wouldn't have moved him if he were hurt too badly," Hermione agreed. *I hope*, she added silently.

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Harry peered anxiously over the crush of people, trying to catch a clear glimpse of the pitch, but he had little success. Instead, he wended his way closer to the Bulgarian locker room door. He had only just finished his conversation with Coach Boyar and started back toward the box where he had left Hermione, Ron and Susan, when it seemed like the entire stadium had sucked in its collective breath. He had caught sight of Viktor partway through the fall, almost even with the hoops, then lost sight of him again close to the surface of the pitch. A good portion of the home crowd had taken exception to what they felt was a deliberate attack on their Seeker by Gonzales, and left the stands. He struggled to look over the crowd as he worked his way back toward the locker room, but he couldn't see well enough to tell much of anything. He was heartened, however, when he caught a few familiar faces shuffling by, and heard a familiar voice doing a fairly lusty piece of cursing in Bulgarian. *It means he is awake at least, if not exactly comfortable*, Harry thought in relief, excusing himself past a few more people crowded in the sidelines.

Even after the locker room door had closed, he could still hear with crystal clarity a steady stream of words, some he was familiar with, others that carried quite enough hint of their meanings in the way they were spoken. Or screamed, more like. *Nothing wrong with his lungs, vocal cords or vocabulary, at least*, Harry thought to himself with a short laugh. He had just fought his way to another gap in the crowd when the door opened and Vulchanov stepped out, along with the team manager, and held a hurried consultation with Coach Boyar.

"Medivizards?" Boyar asked.

“Coming around through the locker room. No way they could get down the pitch. He’s asked for Hermione,” the team manager replied.

“I’m going to go get her. Top Box. Probably take a while,” Vulchanov said, plowing off into the crowd and having a great deal more success at making a path than Harry had, given his Beater’s build. Harry had seen part of the fall, heard the cursing, but he hadn’t really considered how serious it might be until hearing that Viktor had asked for Hermione. Usually, he would be more likely to ask to be put back into the match and tell them not to bother her. If he had *sent* them after Hermione, he had to be in *real* pain.

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“Why haven’t they at least made an announcement? About whether or not the match is over officially?” Hermione asked nervously, pacing along the railing.

“With that mob? Like anyone could hear. I imagine they’ve all cleared off until security can get the crowd off the pitch, and then they will,” Ron assured her. *Or they’re too busy figuring out how many pieces one of the players is in*, he added to himself. He snuck another glance at his watch. It had been a good ten minutes since Viktor had hit the pitch. Not one of the mediwizards that had gone into the locker room had come back out. Ron wasn’t sure why, but that made him nervous. It was too long. Typically, if it counted as a catastrophic injury, it was obvious and the team captains settled it in short order. If not, play usually resumed in a few minutes. Nothing would get that angry bit of the crowd back off the pitch and into the stands like having the injured player come back into the match, even if just for show. Or at least, back onto the pitch, even just the sidelines. *No, it had been too long. Something was really wrong.* Twenty years ago, he would have risked telling a boldfaced lie and assuring her again that Viktor was fine. Now that Viktor and Hermione had been married to one another for nearly fifteen years, Ron knew better. Problem was, Hermione knew better, too. By now, she had probably been around more Quidditch than he had. He could tell by the look on her face that she knew it wasn’t good. “You’re going to wear a hole through the bottom of the box, and that won’t do Viktor a bit of good,” he told her as she paced the railing that much harder.

“I agree,” came a deep, accented voice, and a broad hand fell on her shoulder. She nearly jumped the railing in surprise.

“Vulchanov! You nearly put me clean out of my skin! How-”

“He’s asking for you,” Vulchanov interrupted in an even voice.

“That bad?” she whispered.

“He must have landed square on one leg. Managed to wrench it around and break it pretty badly. Bone’s sticking out of it,” Vulchanov explained in a low tone.

“Sticking... out?” Hermione asked, grimacing. In response, Vulchanov laid one index finger a few inches behind his thick wrist, measuring off the distance to the end of his extended hand. Hermione shuddered.

“Come on. I’ll see if we cannot get you back to the locker room before they take him to the hospital. You two coming?” he asked Ron and Susan.

“Didn’t happen to see Harry, did you?” Ron asked, nodding and standing.

“No. Just a few thousand other angry people. I might be glad I brought this,” he said, leading Hermione by the hand, reaching into his sash with his free one, and pulling out the Beater’s club he had tucked there before leaving the locker room. He led Hermione down the stairs to the ground level exit of the box, paused a moment as though steeling himself, then yanked the door open. “I would not go getting separated,” Vulchanov warned. Rather unnecessarily in Hermione’s view. If her hand had been anywhere near as big as Vulchanov’s, she had no doubt he would be asking her to loosen her death grip on his hand. She had seen the crowd from up in the box, but nothing compared to preparing yourself to go wading through them. She groped behind her for Ron’s hand, and she saw that he already had a wide-eyed Susan in tow.

“Where are we going?” Hermione asked loudly, hoping he could hear over the ruckus.

“I’m hoping we can get across to the back entrance to the locker room! Closer!” he shouted in answer, not turning back, but instead elbowing steadily past the group between them and the far wall of the stadium. It was slow going. After a couple of minutes of frustratingly slow progress, Vulchanov pulled up short, and Hermione started once more when he raised the club up over his head and shouted “Hey!” in a booming voice. A good chunk of the crowd within hearing distance quieted and turned to look. He switched off to Bulgarian once more. “If you want to be pissed off over an accident, fine, but have the decency to go be pissed off about it elsewhere! Get yourselves out of the damned way!”

“And if we don’t?” one of them shouted back in an argumentative voice.

Hermione couldn’t understand precisely what the answer was, but it provoked some impressive blanching on the part of several members of the crowd. “If you have a scrap of decency, you’ll move so his wife can get to him,” he added, stepping aside slightly so they could see Hermione. Duly chastised, some of them reddened, ducked their heads, and moved. Near the stadium wall, Vulchanov commandeered a slightly queasy looking security guard and

demanded, "Got a key to that locker room? Then open it!" The security guard looked awfully reluctant to argue with someone that big who looked ready, willing and able to take his head off with a club, if he didn't comply.

Stepping into the back entry of the locker room, Vulchanov slammed the door behind them. "Did you just threaten to store that club where I think you did?" Hermione asked. "I thought you promised Natasha you were going to stop cursing."

"Not too fussed where I put it if they didn't move. And what she doesn't know won't hurt her. Two doors," he told her, taking her by the hand again and leading her through the warren-like confines of the locker room. It wasn't really necessary for directions. She could have followed the shouting well enough, even if she hadn't been back here countless times over the years, but she couldn't seem to force herself to move without a nudge, and Vulchanov had figured that out. When he opened the door to the open locker room where they had put Viktor down, an avalanche of voices assaulted her, a confused jumble of medical consultations and some of the other players talking among themselves, but mostly, Viktor. Apparently breaking out every Bulgarian curse in his usual repertoire and maybe even adding a few new ones. It was a rare thing to hear him really curse in English. Rarer still in his native language. It took a real head of steam to get him started in Bulgarian. That, or being in real pain.

Vulchanov reached out and gave her shoulder a heartening squeeze, then jerked his head toward the open door. She forced herself to walk through it, toward the table they usually used to sort out equipment and lay it out before matches. When one of the mediwizards stepped aside to fetch something out of his medical bag, she could see Viktor, lying there. Or rather, Viktor and the mangled wreck of his leg.

They had cut the top part of the boot away, as well as the bottom of the uniform trousers. Sharp, white bone stuck out of the skin below the knee, looking jagged and twisted, surrounded by a gaping wound. Blood had soaked the table and the floor, and the leg looked hopelessly wrenched toward the outside, held on only by a bit of skin and the muscle. If not for the high boot, Hermione suspected it would be terribly swollen. As it was, the knee was twice the size it should be, and they seemed to be trying to twist things back into some roughly normal configuration. She steeled herself once more and kept walking toward the head of the table where Viktor was arguing with one of the mediwizards. In between, it was muttered, random profanity, but in the argument, there seemed to be one expletive of choice.

"... still think it would be best to just go ahead and amputate-"

"No! You are NOT amputating my fucking leg, not if it could be fixed!"

“But then we could at least spare you the pain-”

“I’d rather have the fucking leg, thanks!”

“Five more minutes at most is all we can spare-”

“Then fucking spare it!”

“No guarantee even if we save it that you can use-”

“I’ll take my own fucking useless leg over a prosthetic any day!”

“We can try, but I can’t guarantee-”

“Did I ask for a fucking money back guarantee!?”

“Would you explain to me what you can’t guarantee?” Hermione interrupted, stepping between them and slipping her hand into Viktor’s. She might have yelped at the solid squeeze he put on it, if she hadn’t been expecting it. If she hadn’t seen. As it was, he grabbed so hard that she felt like the bones of her hand were grinding against one another.

The mediwizard looked a bit relieved at the prospect of being able to talk to someone more reasonable. “I still say, it’s probably a lost cause, we’ll have to end up amputating, anyway, and should do so now. There’s a chance, an infinitely small chance, that if we get him to the hospital without too much interruption to the blood flow and nerve damage, maybe it could be repaired. Why anyone would want to lie there and suffer while he tries to get it lined up just right, I’ll never know, though. There’s a window of about twenty minutes. Then it’s too late. Nine times out of ten, it’s twenty minutes of torture for nothing. My colleague over there is just *sure* he’s about to get it lined up, and-” the obviously frustrated mediwizard began, but Hermione arched her eyebrows at him and stopped him midsentence.

“Well, I’m his wife, and you had better use every damned second of that window of opportunity if he wants you to, and you know what’s good for you,” she said coldly. She forced herself to look down the table again, where the aforementioned colleague was slowly twisting the boot toe back toward the sky, carefully scotching the heel with one hand.

“Feel that at the toe?” the mediwizard at the end of the table asked anxiously, giving the toe of the boot a firm squeeze.

“No,” Viktor replied, pausing in the constant stream of patter just long enough to

answer.

Hermione bobbed her head slightly, caught the mediwizard's eye and mouthed a silent 'please' before he added aloud, "Three more minutes."

"Just go ahead and move the fucking thing wherever you fucking think it needs to fucking go!"

"I could do more damage if I turn it too far!" the mediwizard protested shrilly.

"I'll take my fucking chances!"

The mediwizard licked his lips nervously, then gave the boot a hard turn to a more normal orientation, toe more or less upward, like the other. Hermione winced a little as her husband tightened his grip. "Feel that, at the-" the mediwizard began to ask, but there was no point. The second he clamped his fingers down, Viktor kicked hard into the tabletop with his other leg. The booted heel left a sizable dent. "Splint it!" the mediwizard told the others.

Two more who had been standing along the wall rushed over and stabilized the leg while the first held onto it. "Mrs. Krum? Would you like your hand back first?" a soft female voice asked at her ear. She turned to look the young, dark haired mediwitch in the eye.

"Hand back?" Hermione echoed.

"Before I put him out so we can move him. He won't be able to turn loose once I do," she explained.

"No. Not really," Hermione answered, turning her attention back to the end of the table. She saw Vulchanov stepping back through the door from outside, with a pale, distraught looking Harry in tow. Harry joined Ron and Susan in the corner, all three looking a bit lost and confused among the rapid volley of Bulgarian. She glanced back down at Viktor's face, sweaty and pale, and brushed his hair back with her free hand, giving his hand a gentle squeeze with the other. He already seemed incapable of turning loose.

"Let go," he whispered, licking his lips and letting the running commentary die.

"I *will* not," Hermione chided.

"Twenty minutes on the nose! Moving!" the mediwizard at the end of the table announced. They simply knocked him out on the table and moved table and all, taking the Floo connection to the emergency room.



Harry, Ron and Susan blinked for a moment after them, then Harry finally managed, "How long should we wait before we follow?" to Vulchanov.

"A couple of minutes," he said with a sigh, tossing the Beater's club down finally and sinking onto one of the benches. "Haff not heard that many 'fuckings' out of him in one day, since that time Marquise vas stupid enough to call Hermione a 'Mudblood' during a match."

"First I had heard of that," Ron said in a dazed voice, sitting down as well.

"Thought he vas being clever, the little French bastard. Didn't really know what he vas saying, stupid, young punk. Needless to say, Viktor educated him on the usage of that vord," Volkov added with a snort. "His own team hated the grimy little ferret. No vonder he only lasted half a season. And why are you only counting the 'fuckings'? I haff not heard that many of *anything* out of him in years."

"Vell, I missed most of the rest of the show. I take it there vas dissenting opinion on the leg?" Vulchanov prompted.

"One thought it a total loss from the beginning. The medivitch is just an intern, I think she expected to be consulted about sprains and such. The other two offered a slim chance. One never said. Too busy turning green and losing his lunch," Ivanova said.

"I vill pull hospital duty. No point in all of us going," Vulchanov said.

"Ve vould all be glad to go," Popov protested.

"I know. But it vill be hours. If then. And you might as vell be home vith your family, the rest of you. I vill let you know as soon as I find out anything," Vulchanov said with a shake of his head. "Go home, the rest of you. You three ready?" he asked Ron, Susan and Harry. "Come on, then."

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"I forgot to thank you for coming to get me," Harry piped up, desperate to fill the gaping, echoing silence of the waiting room.

"Don't thank me. If Ivanova had not heard you pounding on the door, I vould not haff known to come get you in the first place," Vulchanov said offhandedly. "The Spanish hospital has a wonderful unit for injuries like that, you know," he added after a moment, garnering long, hard looks from the other three. "Too bad ve vere playing in Bulgaria, instead."

“Do Bulgarians always have such a morbid sense of humor?” Ron asked.

“Morbid? No, morbid would be saying maybe he could fly faster without the right leg. Probably should have tried to talk him into getting it lopped off. If we had put it that way, he probably would have agreed, and they wouldn't have had to bother splinting it. Morbid? Maybe just the ones who know that something like that can happen to them. All of us have had plenty of close calls. It's just that Viktor's luck ran a bit short, today. All but one time out of a thousand, they would have missed each other, anyway, or he would have been able to keep hold of the broom, or he would not have landed on the leg that way, but today was the one time in a thousand that none of it went right,” Vulchanov said, sighing heavily and rubbing his chin. “Damn it.”

“You lot aren't mad at Gonzales?” Harry asked.

“Does no good to be. Besides, it was an honest, stupid mistake. We have all made them. Viktor included. Gonzales was just very unlucky that his honest, stupid mistake resulted in an injury. Viktor will tell that to the papers, we will tell that to the papers, and hopefully, next time he has to play a match, no one will want to wring his neck. It happens. It could happen at better times, but then, it could happen at worse times. Could have been two weeks into the season instead of two weeks before the end. We should still finish... third in the standings, even if we have to forfeit the rest. Not too shabby,” Vulchanov replied.

“You're working out where you're going to finish?” Susan asked in a disbelieving tone.

“Bet you it will be one of the first things Viktor asks,” Vulchanov said with a shrug. “I swear, time changes in a hospital. Seconds take years.”

“Amen to that,” Harry agreed.

“Did you call Hannah, let her know where you were?” Ron said.

“Right after we got here, remember?” Harry answered.

“Oh, yeah. How long has it been?” Ron asked.

“An hour. Five more minutes since the last time you asked,” Harry said.

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“That's all we can do,” the mediwizard that had taken over once they reached the hospital told Hermione. “We'll move him to a room in a bit. If you would like to sit in the waiting room for a few minutes, we can come get you when we have

him settled...”

Hermione nodded numbly. “I really should go. I imagine there are some people there waiting for news. Thank you.” She turned and reluctantly walked out into the hall, and headed for the waiting room, listening to her shoes echo against the walls, hugging herself. She was not surprised to find Vulchanov pacing just inside the door when she let herself in. It seemed to be a requirement when any member of the team was in the hospital. Someone else from the team was there. Pacing.

“Well?” he asked expectantly, pausing in his pacing.

“It’s still on. That’s about all they can promise this instant. They’re moving him to a room right now. They’ve got him in traction to keep it from swelling too badly. He’s in for a few days in the hospital, at best. They won’t even speak about transferring him back home to St. Mungo’s until they can be fairly sure it’s not going to need amputating, anyway. If it sets up infection, they’ll need to take it. Or he’ll get blood poisoning. Oh, and to top it all off, he’s got a mild concussion. They’re supposed to come get me when they get him in a room,” Hermione said.

“You’ll stay,” Vulchanov said. It wasn’t a question. Hermione nodded in reply. “You need someone else to stay? In case you need an interpreter or if you just want some company...”

“No. You’ve done too much already...” Hermione protested.

“Not enough, if you ask me. Very little, really.”

“Natasha’s at home with the children. You should be, too.”

“The children were in bed an hour ago, and Natasha knows how it is. He would do the same if the situations were reversed.”

“I can’t ask you to stay the night. I’ll be okay. Really. I can manage. The doctors know I’m not a native speaker. They avoid the more obscure words.”

“And if something happens that they cannot avoid the more obscure words? I’ll make some calls. I told the rest I would call as soon as I knew anything. I’ll let Natasha know I’m staying.”

“Not going to be dissuaded, are you?” she called after him.

“It was rhetorical!” he called back over his shoulder.

“You three might as well go home. He’s stuck here for a while. No point in

everyone being piled up here,” Hermione sighed.

“What sort of chance did they give?” Harry probed.

“It depends. It all depends. It depends on whether or not his bones will heal at all. It depends on how bad the swelling is. It depends on whether or not he gets an infection. It all depends. In other words, they can’t hazard a guess, yet. It’s all wait and see.”

“Is he in much pain?” Ron asked.

“At the moment? No. Of course, right now, they’ve got so much Painkilling Potion in him that he couldn’t correctly answer the question ‘when’s your birthday?’ for a bet. He’s totally out of it. Which, for right now, is how I would prefer it, if it weren’t for the fact that it means I’ve got to make all the medical decisions,” Hermione said.

“Because you don’t know what he would decide?” Susan said.

“No. Just the opposite. I know exactly what he would say. And it isn’t always what I would say. His first question would always be ‘what gives me the best chance of keeping the leg?’ and mine would always be ‘what gives him the best chance of living, one leg shy or not?’ I’m content enough to stick with that for right now, but there might come a time when the two of those conflict. There would come a time when I would say ‘Screw the damned leg, I’d rather have the rest of him in good working order’. He might be pissed off at me for a while, but at least he would still be around to be pissed off,” Hermione said, running her fingers through her hair.

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Hermione sat in the chair next to the bed and checked her watch by the overhead light once more. Three in the morning. Vulchanov was asleep on the bench in the hall, Ron, Harry and Susan had long since gone and were probably asleep at home. Viktor... well, she could only wish he were asleep. Between the moaning, random snatches of conversation, and the periods when he went back to the colorful running commentary, she couldn’t be sure if it was the pain or the pain prevention that was more responsible. She had the curious experience of holding a perfectly ordinary conversation about what they would need to buy when they went grocery shopping next, if one could call discussing groceries in the pre-dawn hours “ordinary”, and then having it dissolve into the completely nonsensical in the next sentence. After a while, she just went with the flow of the conversation, regardless, be it about groceries or what might have been half remembered tidbits from newspaper stories over the last few days.

Once, when she thought he might have dropped off, and might have dropped off herself, given half a chance, the nurse came in and insisted on administering something to prevent infection. And of course, that led to more moving around, which in turn led to more pain, and finally, to Hermione standing at the nurse's station at four in the morning begging them to give him something else. Anything else. Finally, around five in the morning, completely exhausted at last, he had slept. It was a restless, fitful sleep, but better than nothing. By six in the morning, she was exhausted enough herself that she dozed in the chair. For a few hours, at least, it was a bit of peace.

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"They tell me you were up still at four this morning." Vulchanov's voice from the doorway roused her from her half-awake haze a bit faster. "Did you sleep at all?"

"I slept," she said.

"Liar. You didn't sleep worth a damn, and neither did he, I bet. I heard him clear out in the hall."

"Okay, fine, we were discussing groceries at three in the morning. When he wasn't completely insensible. I'm sure your camping on the bench couldn't have been too comfortable, either," she grouched, stretching.

"Groceries? Gah. Worse than I imagined, then. Any change?" he asked gently.

"Between the pain and the nurses or mediwizards poking at him every couple of hours, they kept him stirred up all night. Or they were busy waking him up to give him something else to keep him soaked to the gills so, supposedly, he could rest. He only slept at about five o'clock because there was nothing left. He just had no more in the reserves."

"I'll sit for a while if you want to go get breakfast," Vulchanov offered.

"Oh, it's alright, I-"

"You need to eat. Being sleep-deprived *and* hungry does him not one whit of good. And bad leg or no bad leg, he would kick my arse if I didn't make sure you ate. So at least go get a decent cup of coffee. You need something in *your* reserves."

"But, he might-"

"He wouldn't wake up right now if you lit a ton of dynamite under him. And if he does, I can talk about groceries. What? Afraid he's going to run off?" Vulchanov

asked with a grin.

"I wish I were," she said.

"Go get something. And not in the hospital cafeteria, either. Get something decent. Or better yet, why don't you go to my house? Natasha would be up by now, and she's always on me to get you over there for breakfast, anyway. Rugsrats won't be up for hours. It might be nothing but coffee and cereal, but you could get breakfast and maybe a nap. Don't make Natasha bust my chops over not sending you there."

"Oh, I couldn't impose--"

"You won't be imposing. Go on. We still owe you two for dinner. Don't make me break out the club," he warned.

"Oh, alright! I'll go! You Bulgarians and your hospitality!"

"I know! We're awful, we practically go kidnap random tourists and treat them to Turkish coffee, pastry and tours of Sofia. Now get your bum over to my house. He's not going anywhere. I'll be here. I promise to call if anything happens. Stay at least an hour, or Natasha will get me when I come back home," he said, crossing his arms.

"Fine. I'm going, I'm going. Humor him. It's easier. Not that I think he would notice if you didn't. I don't think half of what you say gets through."

"Always do."

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"How was he?" Hermione asked upon walking back into the hospital room. She had to admit she felt better after some coffee, fruit and muffins and a little tea and sympathy of sorts on the side.

"Supremely easy to humor, because he slept the whole time you were gone. Feel better?"

"Have to admit that I do. You should go home, Konstantin. The munchkins are up and asking where you are," Hermione said, flopping into the second chair.

"I will, but only if you promise to call or come by if you need something. Or want something. And don't tell me you can't. If I were lying in St. Mungo's, Heaven forbid, you would be setting Natasha and the kids up in those spare rooms of yours. So, if you need somewhere to stay tonight, come by. We don't have much

room, but we could put you up in one of the kid's rooms and they can sleep with us. Promise me, Hermione," Vulchanov said sternly, straightening up as he rose out of the chair.

"Fine. I promise."

"Good. Take care of yourself. Does no good if you get completely down as well. He'll be fine. Whether he loses the leg or not. Knowing him, he would probably figure out a way to fly better without it."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"I hope it doesn't. But if it did, he would be fine. Boy barely seemed to need the broom first time I saw him fly. What would he need with two legs? It will be fine. Really," he said, stooping to give her a kiss on the cheek. "Now take care of yourself," he added with mock sternness.

"Yes, sir. And thank you."

"I didn't do anything," he protested, as he walked through the door.

"Yes, you did," she said to herself, after he had gone. She drowsed a bit in the morning quiet of the hospital room, with only the far off voices of mediwitches and mediwizards, as well as the nurses, intruding on the silence. "Not that, again," she complained when the nurse walked in with the tip of her wand already alight.

"Sorry. We have to do it every four hours. Come on, then. Have to check your pupils," the nurse said, shaking Viktor by the shoulder, rousing him enough to shine the light in his eyes. To Hermione's surprise, he was uncomplaining about it, if you didn't count the pained squinting and nearly jerking away when the bright light hit. "Okay, all done," the nurse said, stowing her wand and walking out with the bustling, officious manner that nurses everywhere seem to possess. Hermione decided to hazard another conversation.

"So. How are you feeling?" she probed, sitting on the edge of the hospital bed. Viktor squinted up at her tiredly, then shaded his eyes with a hand. "Sorry. Would you rather have the light out?"

"If you could put the sun out, too, that would be just fabulous," he said a little thickly. She flicked her wand, putting out the light and drawing the heavy drapes over the window.

"Better?"

“Much. Is that the second or third time?”

“The second or third time for what?”

“That. With the light.”

“More like the fifth, by now.”

“Hurts.”

“I imagine it does.”

“What does?”

“Everything, I would bet.”

“Get someone to see after the cat?”

“The cat?”

“The cat. Crookshanks.”

“Viktor, I don’t imagine we’ll have to worry about the cat. The cat won’t be hurting for a thing while we’re gone,” Hermione assured him, brushing the hair back off of his forehead. *Particularly as he’s been dead for about six years.*

“They didn’t, did they?”

“Didn’t what?”

“Take the leg.”

“No. It’s still there. I swear. In fact, it’s rigged up to a bunch of hardware and there’s a fifteen pound weight swinging off of it.”

“I can’t feel it.”

“Well, thank goodness for small favors, then. Because when you were feeling it, you weren’t too happy about it.”

“I’m really on a lot of pain medication, aren’t I?”

“That might be the understatement of the century,” she answered, laughing a little in spite of herself. “You’re on a terrible lot of it. What clued you in?”



“Feel high as a damned kite.”

“Probably because you are. And before you ask, the owl was out of the cage when we left, so she’s fine, too. Hecate can fend for herself a few days. Unlike the cat.”

“Wha’ cat?”

“The cat we don’t have anymore that you were so concerned about earlier.”

“Stop talking,” he begged plaintively.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Please... stop talking... I can’t... makes my head hurt trying to follow,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut and turning his head back into the pillow, toward the window.

“Sorry. I’m sorry,” Hermione said, leaning over and tucking her head into his shoulder, giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

He wrapped his arm around her and rested his hand on her back. “Just stay here. Please.” They dozed together a bit, off and on, between the constant parade of nurses and mediwizards that made their way in and out over the course of the day.

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“You might want to step outside for this. It’s going to be ugly,” the mediwizard said bluntly.

“What are you going to do?” Hermione asked, casting sidelong glances at Ginny and Neville, who had come to visit.

“We’re going to see if we can get the bone the rest of the way back in, like we started doing the first night. So, unless you’re interested in staying while we do that, and seeing that again, I suggest you step out in the hall for twenty minutes.”

“Viktor, will you be okay if I go out in the hall?” she asked in English.

“I prefer it,” he said, sounding almost sleepy, the words slightly slurred and indistinct. It at least explained why they had been gradually upping the Painkilling Potion all afternoon, despite the fact that he wasn’t complaining of any discomfort.

“Ginny, Neville, I think we had better step out into the hall,” Hermione said, walking toward the door.

“What are they getting ready to do?” Ginny asked, as they stepped out.

“They’re about to see if they can get the rest of the bone back in,” Hermione said with a sigh, “which, frankly, is the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen in all my life. I was around for it the first time. That was plenty. And he was finally getting some rest. Loopy as a drunken squirrel most of the time when he was awake, but at least he wasn’t screaming profanity the whole time today. One ‘damned’ all day. I have a feeling if you have tender ears, maybe we had better move down to the end of the hall. Even if they do have him soused pretty well. I wish they could put him out for this bit.”

“Why do they need him awake for this?” Neville asked, grimacing as a yelp of pain sounded behind the door.

“Same reason they left him awake until they splinted it when they moved him. If they move something the wrong way and leave it, cutting off the blood flow or pinching a nerve, it might be useless to bother with trying to repair it. The tissue would just die and they would have to remove it, anyway. They’ve got to move it a bit, make sure he can still feel everything from the knee down, then move it a bit more. If they move it the wrong way and slice an artery, he could literally bleed to death before they noticed, if he were out. They’ve got him on something to keep him from getting blood clots. His knee is still as big as two. The whole thing’s swelled and solid purple and black from the knee down. It looks like it would just split wide open if you bumped it too hard. Trust me, be grateful they’re keeping it draped when they’re not working on it,” Hermione said with a shake of her head, closing her eyes against the stream of curse words that you could barely hear out in the hall. “I don’t believe he’s seen it since they got him into the room. To tell the truth, I’m sort of glad. He’d worry over it to no end, I think, if he could see it.”

“So,” Neville said, swallowing hard, “they’ve been keeping him on a lot of pain medication?”

“It’s like seeing him on the worst drunken bender ever. He never did take real well to pain medication, he always was a touch goofy when they had to give him a lot of it. It’s why he’s pretty much always toughed things out if he could. He wasn’t entirely all there for a couple of hours that time he broke the three fingers, but they never gave him this much, either. It would be funny if it were for any other reason. One second, he’s perfectly reasonable, the next, he’ll ask or say something completely off the wall. Earlier, he asked if I had gotten someone to come see after the cat,” Hermione said with a soft laugh.

“Crookshanks? The cat that’s been dead five years?” Ginny asked.

“More like six. He forgot he had ever even said it, a minute later. Then he begged me to stop talking. Said it made his head hurt, trying to keep up. Later, he outright told me to shut up. He had better be glad he had the excuse of being doped up on that one, because he got kind of nasty about it. Grant you, at the time, Nurse Oh, Toughen Up in there was giving that torture rack an adjustment, and she wasn’t exactly being gentle about it. Frankly, I think too much coming at him right now just completely overloads him and he doesn’t know what to do, so when it’s too much he just wants everything to be still and quiet. He’s not shy about saying it, either. And being on all that Painkilling Potion, I think all his internal filters are on holiday. He thinks it, he says it. In fact, I’m not sure he’s even thinking it first. Never take a man who is used to being up and going and put him flat on his back. Never was a more pitiful creature than an athlete that’s been put to bed. Funny, I thought that time he got completely down with pneumonia was as bad as it could possibly get. I never imagined he might get hurt this badly,” Hermione said.

“He’s had enough in the way of injuries over the years,” Ginny said, casting a nervous glance at the closed door.

“But all of the quickly healed variety. Sure, breaking your fingers is no picnic, but he was a bit wonky for all of an afternoon while they worked on them, and then stiff a couple more. I mean, he was out of the match all of three minutes while they splinted them and he went back. Didn’t even get them healed until the next day. You expect things like a bashed nose here and there, or even a broken arm or the occasional concussion, but never anything where they start threatening to remove a limb. Heaven knows I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy,” Hermione murmured. “I suppose when you get right down to it, he’s been lucky since we married. Just the fingers. And that was years ago. Aside from that, he’s broken his nose a couple of times, and the arm once, when he was learning the Wronski Feint, so I suppose he’s been extra lucky when you consider it. It just doesn’t feel too lucky right now.”

“Done,” the mediwizard announced, as he stepped out the door. “It’s back in. We’ll let it swing overnight and see if we can’t get some of the swelling out. Then we’ll start attempting to graft the bone back together. If that goes well, then we’ll talk about transferring him,” he explained in Bulgarian. “I’m sorry this has been so painful for him. Most people would have had it amputated to avoid all this trouble. I admit, it’s gone better than I expected, but I still can’t offer much of a guarantee,” he added apologetically.

“He’s not most people. And I appreciate you at least acknowledging that it’s been rough. Is he in very bad shape right now?”

“You might want to give him a few minutes before you go back in. I doubt he would be in much of a company mood at the moment. Even for his wife. Goodnight, Mrs. Krum,” he said, giving her shoulder a consoling squeeze.

“Goodnight. Thank you.” She had to admit, she liked the mediwizard who had handled Viktor’s care here at the hospital. He had been nicely optimistic, but still realistic. He offered hope, and was willing to try everything he could to salvage the leg, but he hadn’t whitewashed anything. She relayed the news to Ginny and Neville.

“Neville, maybe we had better go. We just wanted to come by and let you both know we were thinking of you,” Ginny said.

“I appreciate it. It’s not easy to come all this way. And I’m sure Viktor would, too, if he were completely at himself,” Hermione replied.

“If you need anything, just let us know,” Neville said.

“Thank you. I will.” She walked them to the end of the hall, where the doors leading out of the ward were located, then wandered back up the hall to the room. She loitered for a few moments in the hall, then steeled herself and opened the door. To her relief, he was unconscious, sleeping fitfully. Hermione walked to the end of the bed and cautiously peeked beneath the drape. The leg was still as bruised and swollen as ever, if not more so, but at least the jagged point of naked bone wasn’t sticking out of it anymore. A fresh bandage circled the calf and shin where she knew the wound was located. The ankle was suspended in a sling of sorts, and most people would think the foot was turned a shade too far to the outside, but to her eye, it was at a normal orientation. He had always possessed something of a turned out foot, which accounted for the slightly odd gait that seemed so familiar by now. She put the drape back down and settled herself back in the chair beside the bed. If he seemed likely to sleep through the night she might take Natasha up on the offer of a bed or the couch. Or maybe she would ask for a cot. It hadn’t occurred to her to ask, that first night, if a cot could be moved into the room.

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Viktor woke to the thin, dim light that barely filtered through the heavy drapes. The overhead light was still off, and frankly, he was grateful. Judging by the dull throbbing in his head, it would still be painful to look at a bright light. He turned his head toward the cot beside the bed, and studied Hermione’s sleeping face. Her eyelashes fanned out over her cheeks, her full mouth slack in sleep, the heart shaped face framed in wild curls and burrowed into the pillow. Some of the fog in his head seemed to have cleared, and the dull ache pulsing up his leg with each heartbeat confirmed the suspicion that a lot of the painkillers they had been

giving him had worked their way out of his system. He looked back at the drape, which curtained off his leg from just above the knee on down.

He cast another glance at Hermione, who seemed to be sleeping soundly. Then back to the drape. Curiosity was getting the better of him, and he latched onto the bed railing, trying to pull himself up without jostling the suspended leg too much. He was a few inches from the end of the drape when Hermione stirred and the cot squeaked. Viktor dropped back to the bed and winced as the vibration carried up his leg. "Viktor?" Hermione's eyelids fluttered, then flew open.

"I'm awake," Viktor said in a rush.

"Welcome back to the world of the living," she teased, as she sat up and stretched, when she realized his eyes no longer had that slightly distant, unfocused look to them.

"How bad was I?" Viktor asked reluctantly.

"Depends on what you mean by 'bad'. Remind me to never let you seriously injure yourself near anyone under the age of majority."

"Why?"

"Because you curse like a drunken sailor with a bad attitude, for a start. You make Vulchanov sound like a nun when you get wound up. Aside from telling me rather bluntly to shut up, though, you were actually pretty harmless."

"Oh no. I'm so sorry," Viktor said earnestly.

"Don't be. You weren't yourself at the time. Better you tell *me* that than the nurse who was working on you at the time. I don't think she would have taken it as nicely," Hermione said, perching on the side of the bed. "And seeing as how she had hold of your leg at the time, I don't think you wanted to tick her off."

"So, where will we finish?"

"According to Vulchanov, third, even if you forfeit the rest. And shame on you. He said it would be one of the first things you asked..." she said, giving him a playful poke in the shoulder.

"I can't help it. You wonder about these things when it's your job. What's he want to forfeit for, anyway? He could substitute Golowodecky and play. She's not bad and she would be eligible-

“Don’t look at me. I’m not your team captain. Complain to the captain. And I’m not sure he’s decided to forfeit, yet. He’s got two more days to think about it. And it’s not much of your concern, anyway, because play or not, you’re not going to be there. If you’re lucky, you might be back in Britain by then, but you’re not going to be out of the hospital. So you might as well park the competitive attitude with the broom for right now. Got that, bub?”

“Yes, miss. Move that drape, will you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“If it looks anything like it did yesterday, you don’t want to see it. It was all horribly swollen and bruised and it looked terrible. That should be enough information for you. At least, now, all the bone’s on the inside where it’s supposed to be, though.” Hermione took a peek under the drape. “Ooh. You’ve added a new color. It’s got a bit of yellow today. Trust me. You don’t really want to see it.”

“What’s he not want to see?” Vulchanov asked from the doorway.

“That awful looking leg. You’re out early,” Hermione said.

“Need to talk to him. You all there today, or are you on about groceries again?”

“Very funny. I talked about groceries?” Viktor asked Hermione.

“Just to me. You were surprisingly in tune with what we’re missing in the cabinets at home. Look, if you’re going to be here a while, I’m going to go catch a shower and get a change of clothing. Maybe eat breakfast,” Hermione said.

“Ve haff a shower. Feel free to use it. Natasha’s home. And I’ll probably be here until you get back. Ivanova’s supposed to be here in a bit, too,” Vulchanov said, settling into the chair.

“Which means she’ll be here by noon. Maybe,” Viktor said.

“Oh, no, she said she was supposed to be here thirty minutes ago, so she’ll probably be here in ten,” Vulchanov argued.

“Well, I’m going to be gone for an hour or so. Behave yourself,” Hermione said, leaning over and giving Viktor a quick kiss on the mouth. “And don’t you go moving that drape for him. Or getting Ivanova to do it,” Hermione warned, picking up her cloak and draping it over her left arm and hand.

“Von’t touch it and von’t let her touch it. On my honor,” Vulchanov said with mock solemnity, holding his hand up.

“Sorry, should I come back?” the orderly asked in Bulgarian, hovering in the doorway, halfway in and halfway out. He gave Hermione an appraising look.

“It’s okay. I was just leaving. Well, if that’s his breakfast, he’ll probably be wanting it,” Hermione responded in Bulgarian, pointing to the tray in his hands. “Although, it looks like cereal and muffins and juice, so I guess it would keep if you wanted to wait,” she called back toward the bed.

“Doesn’t matter,” Viktor said offhandedly.

“Would you mind your own business, Miss Granger? He’s a big boy, he can take care of himself. Go on and get your own breakfast, Miss Granger,” Vulchanov teased, falling back on the more formal mode of address the entire team had adopted for her until they could practice wrapping their tongues around her first name. They all still teased her with it, sometimes. When Popov had come onto the team, he had even jokingly called her “Mrs. Viktor” a few times, rather than butcher her first name, before getting comfortable with it. At the name, the orderly perked up a bit and looked her up and down with even keener interest.

“I admit, I am pretty hungry. Didn’t have much of a supper last night,” Hermione said with a smile.

“I could recommend some nice local restaurants. For dinner,” the orderly said eagerly, leaning closer.

“Oh, no thank you. I’m pretty familiar with all the local spots, myself. Did you need something?” she asked him when he didn’t budge from his spot.

“No, miss,” the orderly responded, looking a bit moony.

“Well, I’m going then. Bye,” she said, waving at Viktor and Vulchanov, and then edging by the orderly in the doorway, nodding goodbye to him as well. He watched her walk down the hall.

Viktor cleared his throat. “Excuse me? Could you bring that over here?” he said evenly.

“Oh! Sure,” the orderly said, hurrying over and setting the tray on the table. “Want anything else?”

“Just one thing. Come close. Closer,” Viktor said, beckoning with a finger, then hooking it lightly into the front of the orderly’s robe and giving him a little tug

closer. "Pardon me, but could you please stop ogling my wife?"

"Ogling your wife? What are you talking about?" the orderly asked nervously, sliding his eyes over to Vulchanov, as though he thought perhaps the patient was a bit off his rocker.

"My wife. Please stop ogling her. Ogling. Wife. You've got the meanings of both those words down and understand why they shouldn't go together unless the wife in question is yours, right? Then stop doing it," Viktor said evenly.

"Who's your wife and when was I ogling her?" the orderly stammered.

"Just now. The woman that was in here. Don't think I don't know what you were thinking, and you did everything but ask her on a date. That woman is my wife, so you can just bench what you were thinking," Viktor said in a low voice.

"But *he* called her 'Miss'! He called her Miss Granger! I heard him. Twice!" the orderly protested.

"That's her maiden name, and she still uses it professionally. She gets called Miss Granger about as much as she gets called Mrs. Krum. I assure you, however, she's quite married, and we've got the matching jewelry to prove it," Viktor said, raising his left hand to show his wedding ring and wiggling his fingers at the orderly's eye level. "So I would appreciate it if you would keep your eyeballs in your head when you're around her."

"If I were you, I'd just go ahead and agree with him, put your tongue back in, and keep your roving eyes to yourself from now on. He's right, your tongue was practically dragging the floor when you were looking at her. Not that I blame you, but remember, he knows a lot of people who carry Beater's clubs for a living," Vulchanov said, giving the orderly a friendly little wave, then pointing to himself and grinning exaggeratedly.

"S..s... sorry. Won't happen again," the orderly said.

"Just so it doesn't," Viktor said, narrowing his eyes and unhooking his finger. The orderly hurried from the room and Viktor rolled his eyes. "And Hermione says *I'm* dense when it comes to being hit on! He did everything but hump her leg!"

"You've got room to talk! Hermione has to point out the females that get all cow-eyed over you, or you'd never notice. You never did," Vulchanov said dismissively. "Hell, Hermione practically had to thump you over the head with an unabridged dictionary to convince you she liked you that way. You know you don't deserve her, don't you? She sat in here with you all night on this lumpy chair when most people wouldn't haff so much as spit on you and your nasty leg.



Or maybe I should just say you and your nasty mouth,” he amended, waggling his eyebrows.

“I’m well aware of the fact that I don’t really deserve her, thank you. And what do you mean me and *my* nasty mouth? I learned all that profanity from you, anyway. I didn’t know any before I started playing with you,” Viktor protested.

“Oh, but you were in rare form with that leg. Let me put it this way. It made that raking you gave Marquise that time sound like his mama putting him to bed by comparison, and that time, I swear you blistered the paint clean off his broom handle. And some of what you said wasn’t even in my vocabulary. I’m not sure you didn’t invent some new words.”

“Okay, out with it. What did you come to talk to me about?” Viktor asked, shifting a little on the bed. “Decided?”

“Not yet. I think it all depends on what you say about Golowodecky. What do you think of her? It’s either her or Federova, and I’m not letting that pathetic Seeker-woman on my team. I’ll forfeit first. I like that kid, Petrenko, I’d take a chance on him just to see what he’s made of, but he’s not eligible. Hasn’t been in the league long enough. I checked,” Vulchanov said.

“I could have told you that. He’s been there seven months, maybe eight. Federova, they’re dropping her at the end of the season, she’s done so poorly this year. Don’t blame you there. No one else I can think of that’s played in enough matches and who would want the job. Sokolov would just turn it down. He’s not interested. Golowodecky, I don’t think you could end up any worse off if you use her. You might not improve things any, but I don’t think you could go too far wrong, getting her to fill in. At worst, she gets a couple of international matches under her belt and you don’t have to forfeit them, and you still finish third. You might even get a good enough match out of her that you get up to second,” Viktor reasoned.

“That’s about the best I can hope for, under the circumstances. With you, it was pretty feasible to hope for a good enough gap for a possible finish in first. Or a tie and a playoff possibility. Not betting on that, now. Second, I think, is the best we could hope for. And that’s if Golowodecky doesn’t get a case of nerves. But you’re right. We should probably at least give the kid a chance. Seems like just yesterday I was saying that about you,” Vulchanov said with a sly smile.

“I haven’t been a kid in a very long while,” Viktor said with a short laugh.

“Oh, you’re still a good shake off from forty. You and Hermione are practically babies.”

“Sure as hell doesn’t feel like it right now. I’m feeling plenty old at the moment. Golowodecky’s what? Twenty? Twenty-one? That’s youthful. She probably hasn’t even broken anything interesting in a match yet,” Viktor said, shifting a bit, sucking his breath in sharply as the pain coursed up his leg.

“You know what I said about you the first time I saw you play? I turned to the professor sitting next to me and said you were obviously extremely good, but I thought it was awfully unfair to let a seventeen or eighteen-year-old loose on a bunch of kids who couldn’t be over fourteen. That professor looked at me like I was from Mars. ‘He’s just turned fourteen himself, a few weeks ago,’ he said. I just couldn’t believe a kid of fourteen could fly that way. I thought they had to be lying, just to make you look more impressive. And I’ll be damned if I didn’t go talk to you, and all I got out of you was this indifferent grunt. And the way the professors talked, I was lucky I got that. Until I mentioned flying. That got you started. Got a whole sentence out of you. I still say Ekaterina must have snuck out and gone flying every night she carried you,” Vulchanov laughed.

“Not to hear her tell it. She swears she couldn’t bend over, much less do anything else, from about six months on. If she did, she’s not letting on. Although, I admit, she did plenty of riding me around on broomsticks after I got here, so maybe that’s to blame,” Viktor countered.

“So... Golowodecky?” Vulchanov asked with raised eyebrows.

“Golowodecky. That’s what I would do. But then, I’m not the team captain,” Viktor said.

“Well, that’s your own damned fault. We offered it to you.”

“And I don’t want it now any more than I did then,” Viktor said with a shake of his head.

“Don’t want what any more than you did then?” Ivanova said from the doorway.

“Not bad. You’re almost on time, according to your time-telling method,” Vulchanov teased, taking an exaggerated look at his own watch.

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Viktor hauled himself up hand over hand, along the bed railing, and stretched. He could just brush the end of the drape with a finger. He braced himself and prepared to pull up just a bit further when he heard the sound of a throat being cleared in the doorway. “Hopeless. Blooming hopeless. I might as well have asked you not to breathe while I was gone,” Hermione sighed.

Viktor turned loose of the railing in surprise and swore under his breath as he hit the mattress and the pain raced up his leg. "You know, technically, you didn't tell me not to look. You just made Vulchanov promise not to move it."

"Speaking of which, where is he? Ivanova make it?"

"They left about fifteen minutes ago. Wanted to go talk to Golowodecky. And you took more than an hour," Viktor said petulantly.

"Technically, I was back in less than an hour, but they caught me at the front desk and made me fill out some paperwork, Technicality Boy. And even with Translation Charms and more than a passing familiarity with the Bulgarian language, medical paperwork is fairly incomprehensible at best. It wasn't so much the Bulgarian as the medical jargon. They should make a Translation Charm for medical gobbledygook. You really dying to see it that badly? That you're willing to keep risking jostling everything? Because I bet that isn't the first time you've tried to sneak a peek, now is it?" Hermione asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Makes me wonder what everybody's so keen to hide from me," Viktor complained.

"Well, the first two days, a big, raw hunk of bone that wasn't supposed to be sticking out of your shin. Today, just a swollen, bruised, awful looking leg. I'm telling you, honey, it's ugly. You're not missing anything. But if you're going to be willing to kill yourself to get a look, maybe I should just show you. Hurt much today?" she asked.

"It's like the worst toothache you can imagine, only from the hip down. But it's still preferable to being so completely pickled on pain medication that I don't know which way is up."

"Have breakfast yet?" Hermione asked, patting his hand.

"Had it while you were gone. Ate most of it. I wasn't really all that hungry," Viktor said.

"Well, good, then, because otherwise, I think this would make you lose your appetite," Hermione said, reaching up and flipping the drape out of the way. The swollen knee was a deep shade of purple, almost black, and splotches of black and blue dotted the leg all the way down, broken only by the clean, white bandage at the top of the calf and shin. A solid mass of bruises marked the leg down to the ankle, and some of the bruising had already turned a sickly yellow, and even the ankle was slightly swollen. "Well?"

“Eurrgh. And you’re telling me it looked worse than that?”

“Sure did. Or, at least, I prefer it with the bone on the inside. Maybe you don’t. Want me to put the drape back?”

“Curiosity satisfied. You can put it back. It does look awful. They stopped by this morning and told me the delightful news that they’re going to make me take Skele-Gro. Seems a good portion of the bone went missing. Probably still on the pitch,” Viktor said.

“Well, Harry can commiserate with you on that. He had to do that second year. Only he had to have absolutely all the bones in his arm regrown. So count yourself lucky,” Hermione said, giving his hand a sympathetic squeeze.

“Count myself lucky I’ve still got anything below the knee to work on. Thank you for stepping up for me, by the way.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“With the mediwizard in the locker room. That butcher just wanted to take it off without even seeing if it could be healed. He thought I was being unreasonable, even wanting to wait and see.”

“The rest of the team had already done that before I even got there,” Hermione demurred.

“But they couldn’t pull out the big stick. Nothing puts the fear of God into an overzealous medical official like the words ‘I’m his wife’ or ‘I’m her husband’ do. Otherwise, they can just do what they like and say you were completely off your rocker at the time and they did what was best in the long run. ‘I’m his wife’ puts the kibosh on that. It’s someone they’ve got to clear everything with. And you were very formidable. You even pulled out the eyebrows of doom on him and everything. I couldn’t manage anything but cussing at him, and that wasn’t really working. He never stood a chance once you showed up,” Viktor said with a grin.

“I did not!” Hermione protested.

“You did, too! You did that arching your eyebrows thing that makes grown men tremble, women weep, and children run for cover.”

“I never!”

“Did too. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost. You and your ‘if you know what’s good for you’,” Viktor laughed.

“Oh, come on. How would you remember, anyway?” Hermione asked.

“I was very lucid at the time, unfortunately. And I was very grateful that Vulchanov managed to sic my mad dog wife on that sawbones. They’re probably still trying to coax him out of cowering in the corner of the locker room. I should threaten to turn you loose on opponents. They would all forfeit out of hand. Seriously, thank you for saving me.”

“Aww, you would rough up a medical official on my behalf, wouldn’t you?”

“A whole dozen, if necessary.”

“Well, just make sure it’s not necessary again. Stay on the bloody broom next time!”

“Yes, madam. I’ll be sure not to nearly plummet to my early demise next time I get hit by a wild Seeker.”

“Good,” Hermione replied, planting a kiss on his forehead.

“Excuse me? I’m supposed to give him a dose of Skele-Gro?” one of the younger nurses said uncertainly from the doorway. She blushed a furious pink to the roots of her brassy hair and everything seemed to come out as a question.

“Oh, sorry. I’ll get off of him, then. How much are you giving him?” Hermione asked, standing beside the bed.

“I’m giving him one dose, for right now?” the nervous nurse answered, twirling a lock of her hair.

“Are you? Any more later?” Hermione prompted.

“I might have to give him another dose later?” the nurse said, turning a deeper shade of pink.

“Well, don’t let me stop you,” Hermione responded, endeavoring to keep a straight face when she noticed the wobbly knees.

“The mediwizard is supposed to come see him late this afternoon? Then they decide about the second dose?” the nurse said, as she inspected her own shoes intently.

“Excuse me, he can hear. And he still speaks Bulgarian pretty well, even though he’s been out of the country a while,” Viktor interrupted. “He doesn’t need to be referred to like he’s not here. He’s not real thrilled about having to refer to

himself in the third person, either.”

“I’m sorry?” the nurse responded, putting the bottle and spoon on the bedside table and halfheartedly fluffing one of the pillows. Then she went back to shyly studying her shoes.

“Err... he doesn’t bite, you know,” Hermione said, pressing her knuckles into her mouth in an effort to keep from laughing. “Hard.”

“My wife, the comedian,” Viktor said, rolling his eyes. The nurse abruptly let out a sob and dashed for the door. “Something I said?”

“I think it was ‘my wife’ that did it,” Hermione said, chuckling under her breath.

“What was wrong with that?!”

“Shattered the fangirl illusions. Let’s put it this way. A few years ago, she would have been hanging out in the library with a scarf around her waist. And later, hollering at me for stealing you. Let me go see if I can find you a less easily impressed nurse. Or one that’s more jaded. That one would have poured half the bottle trying to get a teaspoon full, anyway. At least that older one didn’t go all trembly at the mere thought of touching THE Viktor Krum and drop your leg!” Hermione snickered.

“I will never get women,” Viktor said with a shake of his head.

“And you had better not be getting any, either, if you know what’s good for you! Or I’ll pull out more than the eyebrows of doom on you!”

“I think you like doing that.”

“What? Shooting down groupies? Not particularly. They’re too easy,” Hermione said with a dismissive wave of her hand on her way out the door. “Most of them get reminded you’ve already got a wife, they fall apart!”

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“Sweet-”

“Don’t say it,” Hermione warned.

“Don’t say what?” Viktor asked.

“Unless you were about to say ‘sweet and sour chicken’, or something equally innocuous, which I very seriously doubt, keep your thoughts on what’s going on

from the hip down to yourself, please. Little wonder the nurses tend to make themselves scarce. The ones that aren't already all damp and nervous at the mere thought of being in the same room with you are probably scared witless. Only one you've got left that's not afraid to come in here is Old Ironsides. They probably think you're cursing *at* them, Viktor," Hermione said.

"Well, you'd curse, too, because it damn well hurts. It fecking hurts. It hurts spectacularly. I have completely run out of adjectives in all three languages I'm proficient in to adequately describe how badly this damned leg hurts. If Harry had to go through this with a whole arm, he still owes Gilderoy Lockhart a swift kick in the bollocks with a steel toed boot for causing it," Viktor grouched.

"You didn't want to be on all that pain medication again," Hermione pointed out calmly.

"I might like to reconsider that decision. I'd seriously consider a bottle of high octane vodka and a Beater's club applied swiftly to the back of my head, instead."

"You keep that up and I might be willing to oblige you. Would you like to ingest the vodka or would you just like the entire bottle applied directly to your head, as well?"

"May I offer you a big, fat 'stuff it' in response to that?" Viktor muttered darkly.

"Offer whatever you like, just be advised I might respond in kind," Hermione replied. "Look, I know your leg hurts. It's probably agony. But you needn't go announcing it all the time. Especially not in language that would make a mountain troll blush, let alone a poor, defenseless nurse that's just trying to do his or her job. I'm sorry they had to give you the Skele-Gro in the first place. I'm twice as sorry they decided you had to take a second dose. But, could you either decide to just take something for the pain, even if it does make you goofy, or express how much it hurts some other way? Or I'd be perfectly willing to go hunt down some vodka and smuggle it in here if I really thought you would drink it. But you don't like being drunk any more than you like being on pain medication, so I think it unlikely. I mean, at least when you were on the pain medication, I could make excuses. Somehow, 'I'm sorry, he just can't seem to keep from cursing like he wants to take your head off with a broadsword because his leg hurts, he doesn't mean it personally' just doesn't have the same ring as 'I'm sorry, he's not really himself when he's on that much pain medication', you know."

"Fine. Keep it to myself, then," Viktor spat.

"Would it cheer you up any to hear that the mediwizard thinks you're going to be transferred tomorrow?" Hermione offered.

“Oh, joy. A *different* hospital room to lie in. That should be exciting,” Viktor said sarcastically.

“Could you stow that? Honestly! You’re starting to make me want to go sleep on the bench in the hall!” Hermione chastised. “Try to get some sleep,” she added more gently, giving him a quick kiss on the mouth before climbing into the cot.

Viktor heaved a deep sigh. “Sorry. I know I’m being a pain.”

“Yes, you are. Well south of the neck, too. Now stop it. You didn’t do that when Petar and Ekaterina were here,” Hermione said lightly.

“Because they hadn’t given me the Skele-Gro yet, and I didn’t want my mother to snap my neck. Besides, I was half asleep the whole time they were here. That cot can’t be comfortable.”

“That hospital bed doesn’t look so hot, either. I’ve slept better places. But we’ve not been apart a night in the entire time we’ve been married. You always come home for the night, or I end up going to the hotel with you. Be a pity to break that streak. Somehow a lumpy cot looked pretty good by comparison. Get some rest,” Hermione murmured sleepily, her eyes already closed.

“Okay. Goodnight,” Viktor said, reaching up to grab a fistful of the pillow as another sharp pain stabbed his shin, squeezing hard. “Love you,” he added after a moment, when he regained his breath.

“Goodnight. Love you, too.”

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Hermione swiped at the tickling sensation next to her nose. The itch abated a moment, then came back with a vengeance. She wriggled her nose, then brushed at it with her hand again, certain she would encounter a stray strand of hair. Instead, she was surprised to find that something came away with her fingers, and it didn’t feel like hair. She pried her eyes open and squinted at her fingers in the dim light. *A... feather?* She squinted into the mass of her hair as well, and there were scattered feathers trapped among the curls. Hermione patted her hand over the pillow, searching for the source of the feathers.

A few feathers strewn along the floor caught her attention, and she followed the trail of them with her eye, noting they were thicker further away from the cot. She sat upright and slipped off the edge, creeping across the floor as softly and quietly as possible. “Possibly I owe you a big, fat apology,” she whispered, when she saw where the feathers had come from. Viktor slept, head turned away, face



relaxed, breathing even, right hand flung up over his shoulder, fingers curled and buried in a small pile of feathers, right next to the jagged rip he had obviously torn in the pillow. A few stray feathers were stuck in his hair. She slipped her shoes back on for the walk down to the nurse's station, and he never even stirred when she lifted his head, slipped the old pillow out of the way and replaced it with the new one, then cleaned up with her wand.

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"Viktor? Wake up," Hermione said, squeezing his shoulder.

"Nnngh. Leave off," Viktor mumbled, voice thick with sleep.

Hermione smiled apologetically at the nurse, who was standing with the wheelchair, looking a bit confused. "Viktor... it's ten in the morning, and they're ready to transfer you to St. Mungo's. They're already here with the wheelchair," she said in his ear. He dragged his eyelids open, and she let go of his shoulder.

"What now?" Viktor asked.

"They're transferring you to St. Mungo's. Unless you decided you didn't want to go? I don't know about you, but I prefer being close enough that I can run home without too much trouble. So I can quit imposing on Natasha and Konstantin," Hermione explained, patting his hand. "They're going to get you down off that metal gallows, first, then they're going to wheel you down the hall so you can sign out, and then they're going to transport you to St. Mungo's." She leaned over and lowered her voice. "And then they'll probably have a party because they're rid of you," she said with a smirk.

"Very funny," Viktor complained.

"Oh, come on, I was just teasing. Most of the team's out in the hall, wanting to tell you goodbye, and the mediwizard wants to talk to you before you go. They won't have a party. They'll probably do something much more tasteful, like a commemorative banner," Hermione said, kissing the bridge of his nose. "You're cranky as an old sore-tailed cat this morning. How's the leg?" she asked, sobering.

"Still on, I presume. Not as bad as it was last night, but still no picnic," Viktor answered.

"Little wonder you're cranky, though. You destroyed the pillow last night. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything," Hermione said apologetically.

"Hmm?"

“Never mind. Tell you later,” she said, straightening back up. “Okay, have at him,” she told the nurse in Bulgarian.

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“What *is* that?” Viktor asked, poking at the little pile of food on his supper plate with his fork.

Hermione leaned over closer, tucking her arm around his shoulders, and picked up the menu from the tray. “According to the menu, it appears to be masquerading as some sort of beef and vegetable casserole,” she announced.

“Does that look like beef to you?” Viktor said, sniffing at a tiny forkful.

“I’m not going to say what I think it looks like,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“You want it, then?” he teased, sticking the fork up to her mouth.

“Eww. No, get it away from me,” she said, clamping her lips together and turning her head. “It even smells suspect.”

“I think I’ll skip supper, if it’s all the same to you,” Viktor said, wrinkling his nose and pushing the tray away. He had slept a surprising portion of the afternoon after getting settled. Lunch had been just a quick sandwich.

“Molly brought some muffins, over there in that basket. She didn’t want me to wake you, she brought them while you were sleeping. And there’s still some of those little quiche things that Ekaterina made. Could heat them up a bit if you asked real nice, since your leg’s still swinging,” Hermione said, fingering her wand.

“Only if you eat with me,” he replied.

“Hmm. Eating your mother’s cooking and Molly’s... I don’t know if I could make a sacrifice like that... do you really have to ask? I’ll arm wrestle you for the little spinach ones if there are any left,” Hermione said.

“Tell you what. You can have all the spinach ones, if there are any left. But I get the bacon ones,” Viktor countered.

“Oh, no you don’t! Split them both with you,” Hermione responded.

“Fair enough. Beggars can’t be choosers. And people with their legs swinging up over their heads can’t cross the room and get their own food, so I guess I’m

stuck with whatever you give me. Especially since no one's given me my wand back," Viktor said.

"Those first few days, I was afraid to, because you would have been a menace. To yourself and others. You were a big enough bother without a wand. Your wand's still in your equipment bag, and I dropped that off at home. I might get it for you tomorrow. Provided you behave yourself," Hermione said, digging in the pile of things over in the corner, pulling out some containers and a small wicker basket.

"Oh, now that's too much to ask."

"Apparently," Hermione said, packing the basket and the container left by Ekaterina back to the bed. "Oh, there's plenty of each, so knock yourself out on the spinach ones and the bacon ones," Hermione said, opening the container and offering it to him.

"So, do I get sprung day after tomorrow or what?" Viktor asked, picking one out.

"How would I know? Ask the mediwizards," Hermione said, picking one out for herself.

"Well, I thought maybe they had told you. They don't tell me anything. I'm just the guy attached to the leg," Viktor said.

"Which looks considerably better, today. The leg, not the guy. Although, come to think of it, you do look better. Not nearly so pale and worn out. Feel any better?" Hermione probed.

"Eh. I guess," Viktor answered, not sounding very enthusiastic.

"That's something, then," Hermione consoled. They ate in silence for some time, cleaning out the container. "These muffins are very nearly as big as your head. Want to just split one?"

"I'd be thrilled to. What kind have you got?" Viktor asked, draping his right arm around her shoulders as she dug in the basket.

"Looks like pumpkin ones, there. Blueberry... ooh! Banana chocolate chip!" Hermione blurted out.

"I guess I don't have to ask which one you want, then," Viktor said with a laugh.

"That okay with you?" Hermione asked.

“Fine with me. Here, I hope the milk is less suspect,” Viktor said, handing her one of the cartons of milk from the tray.

“Here, yourself,” she told him, tearing off a bite of muffin and popping it in his mouth. “You know, you’re going to be stumping around at not quite top speed for a while. Think you’ll get bored?”

“That was rhetorical, right? Give anything to be in that match Saturday,” Viktor mused.

“You know, most people would be happy to be out of the hospital by then,” Hermione scolded.

“If I were in that match, it would mean I hadn’t broken my leg in the first place, which I would find far preferable. Lucky as I am to even be getting out by then, if I am, which we haven’t established yet, because no one’s told us anything,” Viktor pointed out.

“Fair enough point. I’ll give you that,” Hermione answered, finishing off her milk.

“Got a little chocolate on your mouth, there,” Viktor said with a grin.

“Well, get it, then,” she said, leaning a bit closer, compliantly offering her face to him. He cupped his left hand beneath her chin, and rubbed his thumb lightly over her lower lip, then planted his lips on hers and kissed her. “Get it?” she asked, when he pulled away, smirking.

“I don’t know, chocolate’s awfully stubborn, I might have missed a spot,” Viktor responded, kissing her again, running the tip of his tongue lightly over her lower lip. He slid his fingers beneath the hem of her top and traced a line up her torso, to her ribcage, cupping his hand around her side.

“That is *not* muffin-related,” she murmured.

“Could have fooled me,” he mumbled back, sliding his hand back around to the front, stroking her through her bra.

“You need your eyes checked,” she chided.

“I wasn’t looking, I was just feeling my way along,” he protested, pushing his fingers beneath the underwire of her bra, putting his hand into the cup.

“Better watch where you’re putting that hand or you risk pulling back a bloody stump,” she warned.

“Wouldn’t even be the first limb I’ve risked this week,” he replied, kissing her neck instead. Hermione reached behind and unhooked her bra, giving him more room to work inside her shirt. He rubbed his thumb across her erect nipple, and she gasped. He pried her bra away from her ribcage, shifting to the other breast and giving it the same attention. She rolled more onto her left side, tucking in closer to him, while he slid his right arm from around her shoulders and put that hand beneath the hem of her top as well, cupping both breasts, stroking and kneading.

Hermione sighed and draped her right leg across him, careful to avoid putting any weight against his suspended leg. He reached down with his left hand and gathered up the front of her skirt, shucking it up her hips, pressing his fingers against her, then tucking his hand inside her knickers, wriggling a finger inside, caressing and fondling between her thighs. “And what exactly do I do if someone comes in?”

“Dive under the sheet,” he said with a laugh, “anyway, they won’t see a thing but your back.” He pulled his right hand back from beneath her top and wrapped it around her shoulders again, pulling her to him.

“And your hand shot up my skirt,” Hermione protested.

“Not unless they come around this side of the bed,” he said, putting his mouth on hers again. For several minutes, there was no noise in the room but the rustle of cloth and their breathing. When she tensed and tilted her pelvis into his palm, she let out a quiet moan. He pulled his finger from her slick folds when she stilled, rubbing against her as he withdrew his hand from her knickers.

“Now I *know* you feel better,” Hermione laughed when they parted. She tucked her head into the hollow of his shoulder and kissed along his jawline, near his ear, as her hand slipped beneath the sheet.

Viktor cleared his throat and said, “I don’t think I got any chocolate all the way down there.”

“Crumbs can end up some awfully funny places. Don’t argue with your wife,” Hermione warned.

“I don’t want to, but I can’t help but think about what we’re going to do if someone walks in. It’s not like I can shift anywhere.”

“Tell them to wait in the hall until we’re done. Physical therapy,” she responded, pulling the hospital gown out of the way.

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. I’ll lock the door. They’ll have to knock first.”

“Well, hurry up and lock the door, then.”

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“Good news, they’ve decided you don’t have to swing, any more,” the nurse announced. “I’m taking you out of traction. We just prop you with pillows from now on.”

“Does that mean I can turn over? I’m getting sick of staring straight up at the ceiling,” Viktor said. “It could use some dusting, by the way.”

“Dusting’s not my department. Take it up with Housekeeping. I’d say you’d want to avoid rolling over onto your right side. Might give your left side a try, I suppose, if you think you can do it without hurting that leg,” the nurse said with a shrug, working with the pulley and sling. “Putting a pillow between your knees and calling a nurse to help would probably be a good idea if you decide to try it. No dancing just yet, though. If they release you tomorrow, it will be with crutches,” she warned. “You splintered into a lot of pieces, remember.”

“Don’t have to remind me, I was there. I was lying on it to start out with,” Viktor complained.

“What do you mean, lying on it?” Hermione asked.

“Boot was tucked clear up under my thigh. Don’t make that face. It’s not terribly attractive,” he teased, when Hermione grimaced.

“Well, neither is the idea of your boot being clear up under your thigh, thank you,” she countered.

“Dmitrov had to pull it out from under me before they could move me and-”

“Stop it! Sometimes I think you just like seeing how gruesome you can get,” Hermione interrupted.

“What fun is it, getting a gruesome injury, if you can’t disgust everyone within earshot? Of course, by the time Dmitrov gets done embellishing it, my leg will have made it to the other end of the stadium and my head will have come completely off.”

“Oh, stop it, he’s not that bad,” Hermione said, waving her hand dismissively.

“He is, too. You remember that time Ivanova had to get that three-inch-long cut

on her head healed when she clipped the ring? I heard him tell that in a pub once, and by the time he finished it, she was in critical condition with a brain injury,” Viktor said, shaking his head.

“Before or after the drinking?” Hermione asked, turning back to her magazine.

“At about the point where he starts singing. Loudly. And off-key,” Viktor said, wincing a bit as the nurse settled his leg onto the pillow. “And talking to everyone like they’re slightly hard of hearing,” he added.

“Oh, so he was well into his cups, then. That explains it. He does get a bit windy when he’s had too many,” Hermione agreed.

“Not so much windy as creative,” Viktor said. “Takes a bit of creative license.”

“Nothing wrong with creative license. Anyone ought to know better than to believe a drinking athlete in a pub. Especially if he or she is wound up,” Hermione said with a small smirk and a raised eyebrow. “The combined storytelling abilities of the international league alone could probably provide the heat for a block of flats all winter.”

“Athletes exaggerate? Surely you jest,” Viktor said, putting his hand to his chest in mock horror. “Gets pretty deep in pubs in general, but when they start buying Dmitrov drinks, you had better have your hip waders handy.”

“Hullo. Been driven nuts lying flat on your back, there?” came a voice from the door.

“Fred Weasley, those won’t explode or squirt someone, or something else very un-flowerlike, will they?” Hermione asked sternly, nodding toward the big vase of yellow carnations and daisies he was carrying in the crook of his arm.

“On my honor as a prankster, no. And you needn’t get after me for testing Skiving Snackboxes on unsuspecting first years, either, Miss Prefect,” Fred said, grinning, presenting them to her. “Perfectly harmless, otherwise, Angelina would have my ar-... er, head,” Fred amended, glancing down at his three-year-old son, Jeremy, who was hanging back bashfully by his leg. “So, when are they springing you from this hole?” he asked Viktor cheerfully, as Hermione settled the vase on the bedside table.

“Hopefully, tomorrow,” Viktor answered in a rush.

“I’m sure the staff hope so, too. Your sister worked in this ‘hole’, you know, Fred,” Hermione admonished gently.

"I know. Went all pear shaped after she left, didn't it?" Fred asked, beaming. "Lucky you've still got a leg when this lot get done. Here, now, you can't go wallowing around up there! Viktor probably doesn't need you crawling all over him right now," Fred scolded Jeremy, who had clambered up onto the side of the hospital bed.

"Oh, leave him be, Fred, he won't hurt anything," Viktor countered, catching Jeremy under the arms and pulling him up to sit beside him. "And what have you been up to, today?" Viktor asked, ducking his head to look into Jeremy's face.

"Here, Fred, you can have the seat. I'm going to run back home and eat," Hermione said, standing, while Jeremy's high pitched, soft voice reeled off a list of the activities of the day.

"No... why don't you just come back and have supper with us, later?" Fred asked, looking slightly surprised.

"I couldn't impose. I left something in the oven at home, and I need to go check on it. Really. You three visit while I'm gone. I'll be back in an hour or so," Hermione said, grabbing her light cloak and looking at Viktor and Jeremy on the bed for a long moment. Her heart gave a painful squeeze of envy in her chest. *Should be one of ours up there, by now, she thought to herself. Fifteen years...*

"So, you and Grandmum made cookies, hmm? That must have been fun," Viktor told Jeremy. He looked up at Hermione for a few seconds without saying anything. "It's alright. Go on. I can't expect you to sit here all day. Go on home, if you want," Viktor told her.

Hermione nodded at them both and said, "Hopefully, I'll make it back before you go," to Fred, as he scooted into the chair she had just vacated.

Fred watched her go, then turned to Viktor. "Far be it from me to imply that a man's wife wants to get away from him, but she lit out of here like an Augurey with its tail on fire. I thought she might like to come over. She's hardly set foot in our house since Jeremy was born. Something I said?"

Viktor shook his head slowly. "No. She's just been cooped up here all day. She was just saying she should go home and get something to eat right before you got here." Viktor paused for a beat, then looked back down at Jeremy. "So, what kind of cookies did you and Grandmum make, young man?"

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When Hermione stepped back into the hospital room, she felt slightly relieved to find that Fred and Jeremy were gone, then, guilty for thinking it. Viktor was on his



left side, back to the door, and judging from the heap of the sheets, there was a pillow resting between his knees. "Save the fictional roast?" he asked lightly, raising up slightly and looking over his right shoulder.

"I never said 'roast'," Hermione murmured, sinking into the chair.

"Well, I decided it was a roast while you were gone, so if Fred asks, it was a roast." Viktor said in a low voice, putting his head back on the pillow. There was just the slightest edge of irritation to his voice. Most people wouldn't have picked it up, but to Hermione, it may as well have been a waving red flag the size of the bedsheet, it was so obvious.

"I'm sorry. I just had to leave. I couldn't take it. So, did you bother to call the nurse when you turned over?" she asked, hoping to change the subject. She was certain she could guess the answer.

"No. Turned over my own damned self, I am not-" Viktor began in a truculent voice.

"An invalid!" Hermione finished for him. "Why did I bother to ask?" she added, flopping into the chair.

"So we could fight about something else, anything else, and you know it," Viktor replied.

"What on earth do people who haven't been married a million years fight about?" Hermione sighed.

"I have no idea. It's been so long, I've forgotten. I don't think they do, do they?"

"I'm sure they must. What else do they do with their free time?"

"I seem to recall we spent rather a lot of it doing something other than fighting," Viktor said with a short laugh.

Hermione reached out and patted his back, between the shoulder blades. "Still do. Problem is, after you've been married fifteen years, there's not an argument technique you haven't already seen and tried about a hundred times over the years. You know all my moves and I know all of yours. No new players or plays on either side."

"Are you implying our arguments are getting stale?" Viktor asked.

"No. Just a bit more predictable. Not that I'm complaining. They're over faster that way. Less suspense. You're going to be a real bear when I get you home,

aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I'll say this for you, you're honest," Hermione said blithely.

"Didn't see any point in lying. I'll be a right pain in the neck. Always am when I'm laid up, or so you say," Viktor said.

"I would probably place you further south. You are the absolute worst patient I've ever seen. I didn't dare ask earlier, when are they going to give you a maiden voyage on the crutches?" Hermione asked.

"Funny you should mention that. Tomorrow. Mediwizard stopped by not ten minutes before you got back and told me they would try me out on them tomorrow, then maybe let me go in the afternoon," Viktor explained.

"And there was much rejoicing?" Hermione prompted.

"I imagine. Was on my part."

"Most of it by the staff, too, I'll wager," Hermione said with a laugh. "I expect many, many sympathy cards. For me."

"I'm not that bad, am I?"

Hermione stood and leaned over him, hugging his shoulder. "Oh, no, you're an absolute model patient. A real angel. I bet they wish they had a whole hospital full of you," Hermione said, laughing.

"Hand me my hip waders, Dmitrov," Viktor replied, patting her hand. "Getting deep in here."

"Most of the time, you're quite amicable, unless I completely cross you. I suppose you're allowed to get a bit stroppy on the rare occasions when you don't feel well. I can put up with it every few years. And I'm sorry about earlier," Hermione murmured, kissing his cheek.

"It's okay. Blessing in disguise, really," Viktor mused.

"Now, how do you figure?"

"I was getting sick of looking at you sitting there all the time, and Fred and I talked about you while you were gone," Viktor said. "Jeremy, too. You wouldn't believe some of the things he said about you..."

"You!" Hermione scolded, laughing.

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"For Pete's sake, take it easy! You haven't even been upright for days! It's *not* a race. Short swings," the nurse scolded again, for what Hermione thought must have been the third or fourth time. It was all she could do to keep a straight face while trailing along behind them for the trip up and down the hall.

Viktor paused, balancing on his left leg and the crutches. "I don't see the point of going six inches at a time when I can go at something more than a snail's pace," Viktor complained.

"Then don't come crying to me when your arms are sore. Or you've overdone it and passed out. I can barely keep up with you on those things," the nurse said, pursing her lips and crossing her arms.

"I can't help it you've got short legs," Viktor said.

"And I can't help it you're a beanpole," the nurse fired back. "We had a hard enough time trying to find crutches long enough. Go on to that chair at the end of the hall, and sit in it. I've got to go to the nurse's station, and when I get back, you can go back to the room. You have my utmost sympathy when you take him home," she added to Hermione with a grin. Hermione had to cover her mouth with her hand.

Once Viktor had settled awkwardly into the chair and leaned the crutches against the wall, Hermione went over and pulled on the lapels of his dressing gown. "You could give her a break, you know. She's only doing her job. If I were her, I would have cast *Incendio* on those crutches of yours," Hermione said, smoothing the lapels back down. "Or possibly some part of your anatomy. And I'm not talking about the leg."

"Lucky you're not a nurse, then."

"Hurt?" Hermione asked softly.

"How did you know?" he replied in a low voice.

"The being cranky as a wounded Hippogriff with everyone kind of clued me in. Stop pushing so hard. You've got an entire off season to recover. It's swollen," Hermione admonished gently.

"Being injured stinks," Viktor groused.

“Amen to that. And I’m going to injure you worse if you don’t behave yourself. Think of poor old Moody and what all he had replaced. Yours just wants a bit of recovery time,” Hermione said.

“And I’m thoroughly grateful I haven’t got a tenth of that to deal with. Doesn’t make my leg hurt any less, though.”

“What am I going to do with you?” Hermione sighed.

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“Four days! What do you mean, I have to stay off of it at least four days?” Viktor asked. “I thought you said it was pretty much healed.”

“That’s a conservative estimate. Might be as much as a week. And it won’t be one hundred percent, even then,” the mediwizard explained calmly. “The major breaks are fairly well healed. They weren’t as clean as I would like. Big, clean breaks are easy to heal. They did an undeniably wonderful job on it before they transferred you. But, you had a train wreck from the knee down, judging from your medical records. You’ll visit the office for an hour, every day, where I’ll work on making sure the bone is healed, and you’ll use the crutches to get around until I release you. Otherwise, you’re liable to break it again without too much trouble. There were a lot of small, hairline fractures and splinters of bone. And the damage to the knee joint was nothing to sneeze at, either. I’ll be wanting to make sure that’s thoroughly healed before I go letting you take any long walks.”

“Four days,” Viktor said, glowering.

*Black storm clouds moving in on the horizon,* Hermione thought to herself, sighing inwardly.

“Maybe as much as a week,” the mediwizard added.

“A week! A week?” Viktor echoed.

“You’ll just have to be patient and give it some time. Magic can do some wonderful things, but your body has to do a bit of it, as well. You’re lucky you even still have a leg, much less that you’ll be on it in less than a month,” the mediwizard summed up. “Now, for the fun bit. You can go home as soon as you get the paperwork filled out,” he added, handing the folder to Hermione. “You two fight over who gets the honors. But the patient will at least have to leave an autograph on that sign-out sheet.”

Hermione stuck out her hand to shake hands with the mediwizard, leaning over

the chair where Viktor was seated and Viktor's shoulder. "Thank you, so much. Suppose we'll be seeing you in the office, then," Hermione said, pausing expectantly. When the silence went on a beat too long, she subtly nudged Viktor's shoulder from behind.

"Thank you," Viktor said with little enthusiasm, shaking as well.

"Here, your turn," Hermione said, thrusting the folder into Viktor's hand. "I did it in Bulgaria. I'm going to go check on when the wheelchair's going to be here," she said, following the mediwizard out into the hall, then hurrying after him to catch up. "Excuse me," she said, catching his arm. "I really have to apologize. Usually, he's not so difficult as he has been. In fact, normally, he's supremely easy to get along with, it's just he's a terrible patient," Hermione said apologetically. "He always was, on the rare occasions when he has been a patient."

The mediwizard grinned and waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, we don't pay any attention to it. We rather expect it with athletes. They're so used to being up and going. Not having to rely on anyone else."

"Still, he could have behaved better-" Hermione began, but the mediwizard interrupted.

"Listen, Mrs. Krum, there's only one group of people that make even worse patients than athletes. Healers," he said with a laugh. "I'm ten times the bear he is when *I'm* bedridden. And we're a lot whinier. All 'pity me' and drooping lip. At least he's determined to recover. Rather have that than someone who refuses to even try."

"Well, thank you. I appreciate that. Now, I'd better get back. I know him, he'll be climbing out the window to avoid the wheelchair, next," Hermione said, turning on her heel and heading back to the room. "What exactly do you think you're doing?" she asked sharply, when she walked back in. Viktor was standing on the crutches, the tote bag with their belongings draped across his shoulder.

"Leaving. Paperwork's done," Viktor answered shortly.

"First of all, they're coming with a wheelchair," Hermione argued.

"I don't need a wheelchair. I'm perfectly capable of making it to the elevator under my own power," Viktor countered.

"Hospital regulations," Hermione said, crossing her arms.

"Phooey on hospital regulations," Viktor said lightly.

“Second, you can’t carry that. You’ll have enough to manage with just the crutches. And how did you get it, anyway? I put it in the corner over there,” Hermione sighed.

“Did an *Accio* on it,” Viktor replied.

“I’m beginning to regret ever giving your wand back... give me that!” Hermione said impatiently, unhooking the strap from the tote bag and taking it. She set it on the floor and rehooked the strap, then hoisted it onto her own shoulder.

“I could carry it just fine. Now, come on, let’s go before they get here with the wheelchair,” Viktor said anxiously.

“I didn’t want to have to do this, but you leave me no choice,” Hermione said through her clenched teeth. “You will sit *down*, and you will *wait* for the wheelchair, and you will *ride* in it, uncomplaining, mind you, to the elevator and the lobby, or so *help* me, I will put you *back* in that hospital bed! I’ve had *enough*! I am not apologizing for you again before we get out of here! And you will let me carry the bloody bag!” she said in a low, dangerous tone, punctuating every few words by poking him in the chest with her index finger.

“Okay, fine,” Viktor said softly, sinking back into the chair. “Just put the eyebrows away.”

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“I’m going to kill him before he bloody recovers. That’s all there is to it,” Hermione sighed, leaning back into the sofa.

“Surely he’s not that bad,” Susan offered.

“*YOU* want to live with him for a few days, then? I thought he was bad in the hospital, but he’s worse here. He does ten things he’s not supposed to do before breakfast, or I’ll eat your hat. Thinks he’s getting away with something, I suppose. I told him I was going to clock him one with the crutches next time I caught him without them, even if it is just for a couple of hops. If he falls and breaks it again, I’m going to snap his neck while I’ve got him down. Three days home and I’m ready to do it. He’s not supposed to be getting into the bath without help, so he makes it a point to get up at the crack of dawn to go do just that,” Hermione complained.

“How’s he getting in, then?” Ginny asked.

“I suspect he’s just Apparating himself in there, but I can’t prove it, and he won’t say. Just comes out of there still dripping just to prove he took a shower. Half

expect him to come over and shake like a dog over the bed one morning just to prove the point. He's pretty quiet at Apparating unless he's tired and gets sloppy, so he could probably sneak that by me when I'm asleep. Although, I wouldn't put it past him to go swinging himself in there by the bar holding up the shower curtain, just to be stubborn about it," Hermione said, glowering, as she took a sip of her tea.

"Men. They're all big babies when they're down. You would think Harry had the black plague when he's got a cold," Hannah said dismissively. "Pitiful, through and through. I think he just likes being waited on."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind if he wanted waiting on! I'd prefer it! Viktor's so... so... *pig-headed* about doing everything for himself that he's bloody infuriating! He overdid it on the crutches and I know sure as I'm sitting here that his shoulders are killing him, but does he admit it and ease up? Noooo! Just goes right on, as fast as he can stand it, like a ruddy house on fire! And the *second* day, the *second day*, mind you, I caught him out back on the broom! I threatened to saw it in half! Not that it would do any good! He's got a closet and attic full of the fool things, in every model ever made. Not even supposed to be outside any more than he can help, never mind balancing precariously on a crutch while trying to mount and dismount a blinking *racing broom*. Honestly! Can barely bend that knee enough to sit in a chair properly, yet, but he's out there, zipping back and forth, trying to get close enough to the ground in a fenced in, landscaped garden to pick up a crutch so he can get off the thing!" Hermione said, a slightly hysterical edge to her voice. "I mean, here I am, inside, wondering where he's gone, worried that maybe he had decided to go downstairs to the basement and fallen down the darned steps and given himself another fecking concussion, and instead, he's out back, trying to give himself another fecking concussion!" Hermione huffed.

"I'm confused. If he can't bend his leg that far, how did he get close enough to the ground to pick up a crutch?" Hannah asked in a soft voice.

"Variation on the Sloth Grip Roll. Fairly neat way of pulling it off, all in all, but that's not the bloody *point*! He still could have crashed into something! He's driving me absolutely mad! And I'm doing the same to him. He's literally snarled at me a couple of times. Told me to get off his back and leave him be, yesterday. We haven't been stuck in close quarters together this long since he was down with pneumonia. And that wasn't so bad, because he could barely crawl out of bed, much less put up much of a fuss. He slept most of the time. He couldn't complain much. We're rubbing each other completely the wrong way. It's why I sent him to the appointment by himself, today. I think if we didn't get a break from one another, there would be bloodshed. I love him, but, so help me, sometimes he makes me want to take a Beater's club to his head while he's sleeping!" Hermione paused and took another sip of her tea. "Besides, I'm tired

of sitting there, nodding, while taking note of a laundry list of doctor's suggestions and guidelines which he will promptly and blatantly ignore. If they tell him to work on bending his leg back ten times a day, he'll do it fifty. Better I don't know what he's doing that he's not supposed to be. Bloody, stubborn, bull-headed Bulgarian," Hermione muttered.

"Well, I'll bite the bullet and ask how the leg attached to the Bulgarian is doing," Ginny said, suppressing a laugh.

Hermione heaved a deep sigh. "Not bad, considering, no thanks to him. The knee isn't swelling much, and the bruising is finally all gone. They've got the soft tissue healed, and he should probably only have another two visits to the mediwizard to get the rest of the hairline fractures healed. The knee is the main concern, now. After that, a few days of walking on it, but taking it easy, which means Viktor will probably interpret that to mean he can run a marathon. Hopefully, by this time next week, the mediwizard will release him completely. And I will not have his head on a platter. The mediwizard said it would probably be a good idea to swim for physical therapy, for a while, until some of the stiffness is gone. Not so hard on it as walking. So, expect him to announce his attempted Channel crossing any day next week," Hermione said tartly.

"I think you can stop being so worried about him. He's going to be fine," Ginny said softly.

"Could have gotten himself killed," Hermione said back in a low voice. "I'll never forgive him for scaring me like that."

"It's not as though he did it on purpose, Hermione," Ginny responded.

"It could happen crossing the street, he said. I could get killed crossing the street, and you don't worry about me doing that, Hermione. That's what he told me. I told him maybe I would, if he had been hit by a bus in front of me. Sometimes I wish he would quit," Hermione said. She laughed softly. "But, then I suppose he would be doing something even more dangerous."

"What's that?" Ginny prompted.

"Living with me full time with no distractions. We would absolutely strangle one another, inside a week," Hermione said with a wan smile.

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"Today's probably it," Viktor ventured cautiously.

"Well, thank goodness for small favors," Hermione said tersely, taking her empty



lunch plate to the sink and setting the dishes to washing themselves with her wand. "Maybe you'll stop driving me up a wall with that leg of yours."

"You could at least act slightly pleased," Viktor snapped back.

"Oh, I'm pleased, alright. It means you can go on doing the things you've got no business doing, but have been doing since you got home, even though you shouldn't have been doing them to start with! You do whatever you want to do, anyway, whether you shouldn't do them or not."

"Was that even English?"

"Ooh! I don't know what it was! Wouldn't matter if it were Bul-fecking-garian, if it's something you don't want to hear, you stick your fingers in your ears and go 'la, la, la, I can't hear you', anyway!" Hermione bit off, setting her coffee cup down hard.

"I have never once, in all my years, gone 'la, la, la'," Viktor countered. "And I have to go, or I'm going to be late for the appointment," he added, standing and putting the crutches beneath his armpits. He winced a bit when he put his weight on them.

"Oh, by all means, be on time. Be early! Go on, so he can tell you the leg's just fine and you can proceed to get ready for another season of near misses and lucky streaks and surviving by inches!" Hermione spat, whirling on him.

"What's your problem?" Viktor asked in a low voice, narrowing his eyes.

"You... don't... *listen!* Go on. Go on! You'll be late for your appointment!" Hermione said through gritted teeth, stalking off down the hall.

"Fine! I'll go!" Viktor said, swinging on the crutches toward the back door, to Apparate to the office.

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Viktor stood outside the back door. It was early evening by now, and it felt a touch odd not to be carrying the crutches. The leg was a bit stiff and uncomfortable, but they had assured him that it would pass soon enough. He tucked his wand back into his robe pocket, then reached up and rubbed the sore shoulder with the opposite hand. The house was perfectly quiet, and he took a moment to breathe deep before pushing the door open and stepping in. The kitchen was dim, and there was nothing but a lone lamp alight in the living room. He could make out her form on the couch, head ducked over a book, like it often was. He made his way into the living room, limping slightly, and sank onto the

couch next to her without a word. She didn't stir.

"Interesting book?" he asked quietly, after a long moment of silence.

"Listen, mister, you needn't think that just because that opening line worked on me back at Hogwarts, I'm going to melt into a quivering puddle of goo at it, now," Hermione answered without looking up.

"I'm sorry."

"For reusing a come-on line?" she asked, her tone lightening.

"For being a complete bastard these last few days."

"You were no bigger a bastard than I was a shrew, and you know it. Besides, you know that's not what I'm angry about."

"The fact that I dismissed your concerns was included in that description," Viktor answered, draping his right arm around her shoulder and leaning closer. She lifted her head from the book and let the pages fall shut, turning to face him, only a couple of inches between them.

"I worry about you. It was bad enough when I worried something like this *might* happen. Sometimes I wish you did something safer," Hermione said. "Never more than when they packed you off the field. For all I knew, you were dead. Then, I really wished you did something safer."

"Like what? Auror? Working with Gred and Forge?" he asked blithely.

She laughed a bit in spite of herself. "Don't make fun," she pleaded.

"I wasn't. I'm mostly serious. Nothing is one hundred percent safe, Hermione. You can be as careful as you can be, doing anything, and still get hurt. I'm sorry I treated it like you were being silly to worry. You're not. But, I love what I do. I would miss it if I quit now. And would you really want us to be at each other's throats constantly, like we were? If I quit now, we would be. Kill each other in a month, under the best of circumstances. As much as I love what I do, though, I love you more. If you absolutely couldn't stand it, me going back, I suppose I could live with not going back," he said earnestly, brushing a lock of hair back from her forehead.

"I could just as well clip Hecate's wings and ask her not to fly. You'll be telling me to get her to walk with the post, next. I knew what I was getting into. It's just that seeing you have an accident that serious, it really brought it home. How you could get hurt. You're not ready to quit yet, are you?" she asked, looking into his

eyes.

“No,” he said with a sigh. “I don’t feel like quitting just yet. I’ll know when it’s time.”

“I can live with that. Just don’t act like you’re indestructible,” she admonished.

“I’ll try not to.”

“So, are you all cleared?” she asked, laying a hand on his knee, and leaning forward to put the book on the coffee table.

“I’m cleared to do what I want, within reason,” Viktor answered.

“Did you explain to the mediwizard that you have no reason when it comes to what you can do?” Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows.

“I’m going to ignore that. And he said I should be back to normal in another four or five days. He prescribed some Potion to take care of the swelling. The knee might take longer,” he added.

“Oh, so back to your usual, infuriating, headstrong self, then?” Hermione said, leaning into him and planting a light kiss on his mouth.

“Yes, you hothead.” He lowered his mouth to her neck and kissed her.

“Better than a hardhead,” she fired back, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Says you.”

“Cleared, eh? Cleared for this?” she teased, pulling him toward her.

“Leg, don’t fail me now,” he murmured into her ear.

“Kind of a narrow couch,” Hermione ventured.

“That can be taken care of,” he said, drawing out his wand and flicking it.

“And I’ll get the light,” Hermione said with a laugh, swishing her own wand at the lamp. For a few moments, the only sounds were their kisses and the rustle of their clothing joining the pile on the floor. “I’m no expert, but your leg feels fine to me.”

“That. Is *not*. My leg,” Viktor said between kisses.

“Humor me, anyway,” Hermione said, pulling him closer as he knelt over her, then wrapping her bare legs around his waist.

“You do that, you can call it whatever you want. But I have nothing to take back, I still say, thank goodness you’re not a nurse.”

“And thank goodness you’re not a patient. Now shut up and kiss me.”