

“Molly will want to trim your hair within ten minutes of us arriving,” Hermione insisted, pausing in her tracks a few moments to get her bearings after Apparating to the hill in Ottery St. Catchpole, just a short walk from the Burrow.

“Not if she has Bill to harass, instead,” Viktor said, taking a couple of steps in the crunching crust of the snow, then pulling the edges of the light cloak he was wearing a little closer together, against the wind. It made Hermione colder just looking at it, thin as it was. He was probably quite comfortable in it, even with it blowing loose in this bitterly cold and windy weather. “Besides, she would rather tell us all what to do than eat when she’s hungry, so who am I to deny her the pleasure of at least telling me I should get a haircut?”

“How come Ekaterina doesn’t give you grief over that ponytail? I thought it was a mother’s privilege to pester her son about his hair,” Hermione teased, reaching up to give Viktor’s ponytail a light tug.

“I think my mother decided a long time ago that the state of my hair was the least of her worries, considering,” Viktor said, tucking his arm around Hermione’s shoulders. “The walk to the Burrow isn’t getting any shorter.”

“Next thing you know, you’ll come home from an away game against Romania with an earring, too,” Hermione said. “A big dragon fang, or something.”

“No way. Too big a coward. A ponytail is one thing. You tie that back. But an earring during a match would just be asking for trouble,” Viktor said. “Too tempting. Too convenient to grab hold of and claim it was a complete and total accident that they ripped a hunk of your earlobe off,” he added, setting off down the hill, carefully picking his way through the drifts. They had come to the Burrow this way enough times to be quite familiar with the best trail down the rise in all sorts of weather. Except for an unfortunately muddy tumble down half the slope one dim night during a cloudburst, their luck and their footholds had held pretty well.

“Your parents were very understanding about us spending our first Christmas somewhere other than Bulgaria,” Hermione observed.

“Well, we are spending all of next week there,” Viktor allowed. “Mama would just as soon celebrate on the Orthodox dates. Probably wouldn’t turn around for the difference. She’s not pushy.”

“Are you saying Molly is?” Hermione asked, putting a hand against his arm to steady herself down one of the steepest parts of the hill.

“All I’m saying is that it’s not my mother who called us up and insisted we come for dinner on Christmas Eve and spend the night so we would be there for

Christmas morning, or else we would be... What was the phrase she used? Positively and absolutely ruining Christmas for her, and how could we live with ourselves or sleep at night if we did that?" Viktor said with a bare hint of a smile.

"I admit we were ordered more than we were invited. The only one that bucked her on staying all night was Moody. And I wouldn't count her out on getting him to stay, yet. But it's rare Molly gets a chance to have all of us at the Burrow all at once, any more. We scared her by getting married this past August, you know. She's got visions of all of us marrying off and scattering to the four winds, never to return, now," Hermione replied.

"Hardly likely when Harry isn't even seeing anyone of the female persuasion. Or any persuasion. And Ron... well, just mention the word 'marriage' around him and you would think he had been hit with a full body bind. I doubt he and Susan are going to elope on six months of sporadic dating history. Ginny doesn't have time to get married. She just about lives at St. Mungo's. Neville practically has to stage a Potions accident to get an evening with her. And he's busy doing advanced study, anyway. Aren't you glad we don't have any homework these days? Well, you do, but it's all self-imposed," Viktor amended.

"Hard to do research for other people's writing without doing some homework," Hermione protested. "Besides, what are those gut-busting practices if not homework?"

"After the last few years, a bloody welcome break, that's what," Viktor said grimly, thoroughly serious.

Hermione couldn't help but let her eyes stray down to the wand he carried, mostly hidden from casual view by the edge of his cloak. She carried her own beneath her heavier cloak, as well. Once, it would have seemed like a ridiculous amount of overkill to refuse to put your wand away for a quick walk through part of Ottery St. Catchpole. These days, it seemed sheer madness to leave home without at least a pocket Sneakoscope and wand at the ready. As soon as they stepped away from the base of the hill and into the open, they both automatically lapsed into silence without consulting the other. Alastor Moody, at least, would have been proud of just how much being on the alert had been ingrained in everything they did, still, despite the war proper being over.

It was sheer force of habit, and a good idea, Hermione knew, but she longed for the day when such constant vigilance might be a thing of the past. The safeguards and wards on the new house alone would just about put Gringott's to shame. No Apparating within range of the house, except for a select few people. No Apparating within the walls of the house at all. Various warnings and alarms on the garden, the doors and the windows. An extra bowl of Floo powder within easy reach in the guest bedroom, in case of an emergency. They had purposely

chosen the one bedroom on the ground floor that lacked a Floo for themselves. It meant less possibility of being surprised by an unexpected visitor via the Floo. If anyone Flooed into the house, they had adequate warning, this way. They still only used the Floo for communication and travel when it was absolutely necessary. Apparating was so much harder to trace, and therefore, safer. Even Moody had been impressed when Viktor had reeled off the list of precautions in place at the new house before the first piece of furniture had been moved in.

But there was no sound, now, save the cracking of the packed snow beneath their boot soles, and the walk to the front door of the Burrow was without incident. Hermione relaxed slightly at the sight of the lopsided and haphazard house where she had spent so much of her time away from Hogwarts and home. Molly might not be subtle, or for that matter, all that inviting, in her invitations, but there were few places Hermione felt so at home as in the Burrow, crowded with that whole mess of Weasleys.

Not that she wouldn't have been just as pleased to spend Christmas with her new in-laws, but there was still so much about that relationship that was uncomfortably new and awkward. She still felt as though she needed to be on her best behavior around Ekaterina and Petar, so as not to ruin their acceptance of her. It was sometimes hard for her to feel close to them when, on occasion, the only tenuous verbal link between them all was Viktor. She had once suspected he did a bit of editing along with the translating, when the situation called for it, though he had denied doing so. The frequent language barrier wasn't quite all of it, she felt. Even when the language barrier wasn't an issue, she still sometimes felt that the only real link was Viktor. The cultural barriers, her "foreignness" on both counts, surely had made it harder for Petar and Ekaterina, but Hermione had been pleasantly surprised at the lack of opposition to their son's choice. Viktor had made no secret of the fact that he had expected more fuss, as well. Hermione had been downright mystified with the apparent ease of their welcome, given how frank Viktor had been about the likelihood of at least some initial resistance to his bringing home a British Muggle-born who hadn't so much as set foot in Eastern Europe before the end of the war.

Hermione raised her hand and rapped on the door. She nearly let out a yelp in spite of herself when the door abruptly swung open and instead of the expected redheaded Weasley, she was confronted with a wildly rolling electric blue eye in a craggy, scarred face, lips peeled back in a vicious snarl. "You two get in here before that madwoman sends out a bloody search party," Moody muttered under his breath, turning around and stumping back into the house without further ado, tipping the flask he always carried to his lips as he walked. He discreetly tucked it back into his pocket before entering the crowded living room ahead of them. "Krums are here, so you can quit wondering where they are every two minutes, woman!" Moody announced sourly, slumping into one of the overstuffed armchairs. Mad-Eye looked about as thrilled to be in the midst of the cozy

domestic scene as a mountain troll invited to a knitting circle.

“Oh! There you are! I was starting to get worried you weren’t coming after all!” Molly exclaimed, pouncing on them in the kitchen doorway before they were fully out of their cloaks.

“Actually, we’re five minutes ear-” Viktor began, but Molly went on as though she hadn’t heard him.

“I was going to send Arthur over to the house. I had just told him to go get his cloak when you knocked.” Arthur, who had joined them in the doorway, nodded and smiled weakly, hanging up his own cloak before holding out his hands for theirs, as well as the small overnight bag that Viktor had slung over his shoulder. “Dear, you look lovely in that red jumper. The color suits you. You should wear red more often, Hermione. And I feel like I haven’t seen you two in months, you’ve been so busy between getting settled in the house and traveling hither and yon. I *do* wish you would let me give your hair a proper trim. I expect you’ve been so busy you’ve neglected to get it done,” Molly added firmly, shuffling some of the pots and pans on the counter and the stove.

“I take it Bill hasn’t made it, yet?” Viktor said, ignoring the remark and raising an eyebrow at Hermione instead. One corner of his mouth twitched subtly, and she pressed her lips together to keep from laughing out loud in response. It had taken her a while to catch on to the subtlety of his expressions, but Viktor could convey exactly what he was thinking with a hardly noticeable change in his face. You simply had to be paying proper attention to catch it.

“Always late. Thinks you can make it here from France in the blink of an eye whenever you want. Probably put off leaving until the last minute. I don’t know why they want to make it so hard on themselves. They could at least *try* living in the same country, couldn’t they? Or spending all of a holiday in the same country,” Molly complained. “I still don’t see why she couldn’t come here for Christmas.”

“Maybe Bill and Fleur like having a long distance relationship. You don’t fight nearly as much. No chance,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“Extremely hard to have a shouting match in a letter. Without resorting to Howlers,” Viktor agreed. “In fact, maybe all relationships would be better if conducted solely by owl and Floo. They would be quieter, at the very least.”

“Big talk from a couple that’s darned near been joined at the hip since they got married and before,” Harry called out from his perch on the sofa arm.

“It’s not as though we don’t spend some time apart, too. She’s not sitting around

the stadium and watching the practices. She's always off somewhere else, sightseeing, finding a bookshop or a museum. Occasionally, she takes me along, but nothing like every time. We're not sick of one another, yet. Talk to us when that happens," Viktor shot back, draping an arm around Hermione's shoulders.

"And when should that be?" Harry asked. "Funny, but you two always seem to be in the same bed when night comes, despite all those separate trips."

"About a hundred years from now. On a Tuesday," Hermione said, reaching up to give Viktor's hand a pat. "Unless you lock us up together and don't let us get away when we need to. If you do that, about a week. Touched as I am by all this togetherness, can I help with anything, Molly?"

"No, dear, have a seat wherever you can find one outside the kitchen. It's all under control in here," Molly protested. To Hermione, it looked anything but, considering the plethora of dishes scattered all about the kitchen. But she held her peace and took it on faith that Molly would have everything ready by the appointed dinner hour.

"So, do the two of you have to use a Marauder's Map when you get separated in that house?" Fred teased as Viktor settled on the floor, leaning against the wall next to the door to the kitchen.

"It's not that big," Hermione insisted, tucking herself in beside Viktor.

"Likely story. You could fit at least two of the Burrow in it," George said with a grin. "If I didn't have my own flat with Fred, there, I would be begging the two of you to adopt me. You'd never miss just one bedroom in all those dozens."

"Only five. Six if you count the large closet that the agent insisted was a bedroom," Viktor said.

"Still, I bet it must be nice, having all that room," Ginny said. "If you feel like breaking in a spare bedroom, I might like to volunteer myself."

"We would be thoroughly glad to have each and every one of you stay in a guest bedroom. Just not all at once. And preferably when we're away somewhere, so you don't disturb us," Hermione teased.

"So you two don't disturb the guests, more like," Fred snickered. "Newlyweds can get awfully noisy."

"And how would you know, seeing as I don't even see an engagement ring on Angelina's finger? She deserves a ring simply for not murdering you, at this point, never mind getting married," Viktor said with a smirk.

"I keep trying to tell him that, but do I get an engagement ring? No. Nothing but a Magical Moods ring that keeps announcing I'm 'peeved'. Wonder why?" Angelina teased, giving Fred a playful poke in the shoulder.

"It would be a great seller if it wasn't always stuck on 'peeved', I tell you. The colors change but we still haven't worked out all the kinks," Fred admitted.

"The colors change, alright. It turned my finger green," Angelina replied.

"I'm telling you, once the shop gets reestablished-" Fred began, but Angelina interrupted.

"I know, I know... we can afford to get married. In the meantime, I'll settle for a green finger and always being peeved," Angelina said.

The chiming doorbell interrupted the conversation, and Arthur clambered from his seat and headed to the door. "Bill's arrived, Molly!" Arthur shouted back from the door. "And he's brought someone with him!" he added, following Bill and Fleur into the living room.

"Hello, Mum," Bill said pleasantly, leaning over to embrace her.

"Hello, Fleur, dear. You're *late*, Bill," she scolded. "And I need to get another place setting," Molly added with a start, dashing back into the kitchen.

"Hmph, not a word about my hair," Bill said quietly, with a shrug. "Is she not quite well?"

Viktor raised a hand. "Took care of that, already. I was hoping you would beat me here," he volunteered.

"Ah. I see. Filled the ponytail complaint quota, already," Bill muttered.

"I see you're still wearing that awful earring! I don't see why Gringott's lets you go to work looking like that!" Molly shouted from the back of the kitchen.

"Couldn't you be persuaded to get an earring, too?" Bill asked Viktor pleasantly.

"Not me. Occupational hazard," Viktor protested, giving his earlobe a tug.

"Well, the management doesn't exactly win any beauty contests, either, Mum!" Bill called back. "One of them has a big ring in his nose! Size of a door knocker! And that's the least of his worries, looks-wise!"

“So, is this all of us, or not? I lost count about fifteen minutes ago, and I’m starved, personally,” Charlie said. “I’ll volunteer to eat in here, if I can just eat soon.”

“Yeah, I passed peckish about an hour ago,” Ron said.

“You sure you don’t want some help in there, Molly?” Neville volunteered, not sounding very hopeful.

“I’ve got it all under control! You can just be patient!” Molly insisted.

“I thought you weren’t coming, Fleur,” Hermione said. “What changed your mind?”

“A very persuasive owl,” Fleur murmured, jerking her head in the direction of the kitchen. “I figured eet would make ‘er ‘appy.”

“It would, if she weren’t mad enough to be fixing dinner for... seventeen people all by herself,” Hermione said, doing a quick tally of the people crowded into the tiny space. “I still haven’t figured out where she’s planning on putting us all tonight. That’s... fifteen beds, if all of us stay. She wouldn’t even let me bring a dessert, or something, to lighten the load.”

“Because this is Christmas, and I want to take care of my family on Christmas,” Molly protested, standing in the doorway and planting her hands on her hips. “Besides, the two of you were in Denmark until late last night. You didn’t even have time to come by and pick up Crookshanks, so when would you have had time to fix a dessert? Now, are you all ready to eat, or not?” she added, wiping her hands on her apron. “I’m afraid the seating arrangements will be a bit slapdash. A few folding tables and chairs for in here, leaning there in the hall. Charlie, you’re so keen to eat in here, why don’t you set them up?”

“Speak of the devil, where is he? I haven’t spotted so much as a ginger hair,” Viktor asked.

“Probably sprawled out on my desk. He seems to have taken a liking to sleeping on my papers from work,” Percy sniffed indignantly.

“Be thankful he hasn’t taken a liking to clawing your things from work,” Viktor replied, standing up.

“It was just a Nimbus,” Hermione chided, “and it’s not as though you don’t have more than a dozen other brooms everywhere in the house.”

“Nimbus?” Ron asked curiously.

“Crookshanks decided it made a good scratching post. Chunk out of the handle that big,” Viktor said ruefully, holding his fingers apart a couple of inches.

“Ooh,” Harry said, wincing.

“Honestly. The way you three act... It was just an old broom,” Hermione said, going into the kitchen to help Molly arrange things.

“Just a broom,” Viktor agreed. “Just a limited edition classic model,” he added more quietly, so only Harry and Ron could hear.

“Ouch. My heartfelt sympathies,” Harry said, laying a hand over his chest.

“And that cat’s still alive?” Ron asked, disbelieving.

“Wouldn’t do any good to kill him now. Taught me to put doors on the racks. I’ll reserve ‘honestly, it was just a book’ in the eventuality that he gets at her library, someday. Besides, for reasons I still can’t fathom, the whiskered menace likes me. Better than you two, at any rate. Doesn’t try to bite my ankles every time my back is turned,” Viktor said.

“He only did that to me the once. It’s Ron’s ankles he finds particularly tasty,” Harry said with a laugh.

“Then again, maybe it’s because I tend to wear boots... No matter. Stuck with him, at any rate,” Viktor said. “It’s not likely my wife’s going to get rid of a cat she had even before she met me. I can’t expect that. She puts up with brooms everywhere that I won’t get rid of, I put up with the cat deciding my lap makes a good bed every time I sit down to read and making scratching posts out of broom handles.”

“What’s wrong with him getting in your lap?” Harry asked.

“Besides the hair? Ever have a cat knead your leg?” Viktor asked.

“Oh,” Harry replied.

“And he somehow always manages to flop on the bottom half of the paper... By the way, where’s Penelope?” Viktor asked Percy.

“With the Clearwaters in Torquay. It’s likely Grandfather Clearwater’s last Christmas, so she opted to go along with the entire family and spend Christmas there,” Percy explained.

“Oh, so they’re jockeying for a place in the will, then,” Fred said, earning an elbow in the ribs from Angelina.

“What a relief. I thought she had finally come to her senses and left you. The two of you have been ‘planning a wedding’ since before Viktor and Hermione even got engaged. They’ll be married a decade before you two decide what shade of beige the napkins should be,” George said.

“We want it,” Percy said slowly, “to be perfect. Perfect. Tasteful. Flawless.”

“Well, you can just get over that notion right now. Because that’s never going to happen. Trust me. Been there, done that, have the scars to prove it,” Viktor said blithely.

“Scars from what?” Hermione said, wending her way back into the group in the living room while several others moved to the kitchen to fill their plates.

“Wedding planning,” Viktor replied.

“Oh! Dirty phrase! Don’t bring that up again. No offense, but if I never have to marry you again, it will be too soon. No wonder some people elope. Have the two of you set a date, yet?” Hermione asked.

“Penelope’s still deciding on the linens. We want all the finer details taken care of first,” Percy said. “Our wedding will be perfection.”

“Ah. Well, you’ll never get married at that rate, then. You just have to roll your sleeves up, jump in, and hope everything goes fine. And somehow, it usually does. Even if everyone’s pulling a swan. Smooth and calm on the outside, but paddling like heck underneath. Trust me, there is no such thing as a perfect wedding,” Hermione insisted.

“Ours will be. We intend to plan every detail,” Percy said firmly, sweeping off toward the kitchen.

“Poor deluded man. Hasn’t got a clue, does he? It’s much better if you just accept right from the beginning that it’s going to be a battle royale getting it together in the first place, something big will go wrong, and no one will notice, anyway, because they’re all too busy wondering why you spent a small fortune on something that lasts all of fifteen minutes,” Viktor said.

“Poor Grandpa Clearwater. Can you imagine? The whole mess of Clearwaters under your feet when you’re trying to croak in peace?” Ron said.

“Ron! Honestly!” Hermione hissed under her breath.

“Seriously! If they’re all like Percy and Penelope, they’ll probably tell him he can’t croak like that, his head’s at the wrong angle! It needs to be at precisely thirty-five degrees for proper croaking,” Ron complained.

“She’s not that bad,” Hermione protested, though it was a bit weak.

“Percy’s rubbing off on her, I tell you,” Ron insisted.

After they had filled their plates, Hermione and Viktor found themselves crowded in at one of the small folding tables in the living room with, of all people, Percy and Moody.

“Rank foolishness, all of it,” Moody griped.

“What? Christmas or dinner? Or Christmas Eve dinner in particular?” Hermione asked lightly.

“Weddings! Bunch of frippery for nothing! Waste of perfectly good money and time!” Moody said, giving his serving of goose a vicious stab with the fork. Percy looked as though he would have preferred to argue the point with anyone besides Moody.

“Oh, now I imagine a lot of the trappings could be done without, quite well, but I wouldn’t say that it was a total waste of time,” Hermione said in a conciliatory tone.

“The two of you spent Heaven knows how much, and you’re not a bit more married than Arthur and Molly, and they got married at the registry office,” Moody pointed out, raising a shaggy white eyebrow.

“Never said we were. But you know what? It was worth every Knut to see you badger Minerva into dancing and to actually see you drink out of a real, live glass of champagne instead of that flask of yours. Besides, I seem to recall someone who sounded an awful lot like you telling me I would seriously regret it if we eloped, instead,” Viktor said mildly. “Something about not ever getting a second chance at getting married a first time and how cheated everyone else would feel if we deprived them of the chance to wish us well publicly. Or did I imagine that?”

“Never said it had to be a big wedding and hullabaloo,” Moody protested.

“And I got my money’s worth by getting five dances out of you, myself,” Hermione said. “Twice over if I count getting to see you dance the horo and try rakia. I call dibs on first dance with you at Percy and Penelope’s wedding, whether it be horo or waltz.”

"We're *not* having the *horo* at our-" Percy began indignantly, before stopping himself.

"And just what's wrong with the horo, might I ask? It was good enough to have at our wedding, and every other Bulgarian wedding I've ever been to," Viktor said.

"It's all well and good for that, but it's a bit... undignified. We want a reception that reflects the solemnity of the occasion," Percy explained.

"Oh, I see. I'll remind myself not to have a good time at your wedding, then, provided it ever actually comes off. Might ruin the dignity and solemnity of the occasion," Viktor said lightly, giving Hermione a quick wink.

"Did you remember to put a ward on the-" Moody said, swallowing his mouthful of plum pudding.

"Yes," Viktor said indulgently, not waiting for him to finish. "If it's within a quarter mile of our house, I imagine it has a ward on it. More than one, most likely. I would even speculate that we've got more wards per inch than the Auror training facility, and I don't hear you carping at Harry and Ron."

"-roof?" Moody finished determinedly.

"Yes," Hermione and Viktor answered in tandem.

"Good. You could learn something from these two, lad," Moody said, giving Percy a solid, jarring clap on the shoulder, much to Percy's evident annoyance. "Quite possibly two of the best I ever had the privilege of working with."

"No, those two are," Viktor argued, pointing to the next table, where Harry and Ron sat.

"Hey! I resent that!" Hermione said, giving him a playful tap on the arm

"I'm sure any shortcomings of the team were solidly on my side of things," Viktor protested, holding up his hands.

"Potter and Weasley were always too impetuous! It's a wonder they didn't get their heads hexed off a dozen times, running into things without bothering to take any sensible precautions!" Moody lectured, pointing with his fork.

"Agreed! Pure chance we've got any buttocks left, either! And if you think we're among the best you've ever worked with, your memory's definitely going!" Ron shot back.

"I said 'best', not 'smartest', with you two!" Moody said.

"Ouch. Laurels back to your table on the smarts," Harry said.

"Potter might have something, there," Moody said, considering the couple.

"Her, maybe. I was just smart enough to marry up," Viktor protested. "And I had that very conveniently travel-intensive first job and was born in a very convenient part of the world, for some reason."

"Good thing, too, because once we got out of Romania, I had no idea what anyone was saying. All those Slavic languages sound the same, to me. And my German is hopeless," Charlie said with a shake of his head. "They could have all been saying, 'Hey, get a load of the freckle farm with the wacky hair!' for all I knew. I just had to rely on what you told me."

"Funny you should say that, I had been meaning to tell you..." Viktor interjected, with a mischievous grin.

"Man, I stood out a mile, this freckled redhead trekking around all these Slavic countries. I almost died that time you told the bartender at that inn that I was your cousin. I don't think he quite bought that I was adopted. I think he twigged when he heard my awful attempt at speaking Russian. Besides, you gave the freckle farm someone to talk Quidditch with. Heaven knows all the rest of the local population had heard enough. The dragon preserve was about to declare it a taboo topic on me. And that guide we had wouldn't have known a Bludger from a Quaffle if it had come up and bitten his bum. Speaking of which, have they ever decided when your bum is going to be on a broom in a Cup year?" Charlie asked eagerly. "Or anyone else's bum? I'm not picky."

"No. The International Magical Gaming Commission has still got a moratorium on both the European Cup and the World Cup. Suspended until further notice. I think they want to try to get a full season under their belts without incident before even talking it over again. Won't be this season or the next, from what I hear. They might reinstate the cycle on the old schedule, or they might just start the counters fresh. Could go either way. But in any case, not for a while. Don't hold your breath," Viktor said.

"Being back on a broom beat the job you were offered?" Moody asked quietly, raising the shaggy eyebrow over his electric blue eye.

"To me, yes. Even if you offered it to me," Viktor replied softly. "I don't want to be an Auror. Got enough of that in the war, thank you. I like having a job that isn't always a matter of life and death, despite what some of the fans think," he

added, picking at his plate with the fork. "Might be selfish, but we both want boring jobs, for a while."

"Can't say I disagree, except with the boring part. And the selfish part. No good to do what your heart isn't in," Moody said in a low growl. "Beats pushing paper in some bureaucrat job, at any rate, doesn't it?" Percy looked near apoplectic, but managed to hold his peace.

"In my book," Viktor said hastily, "but others probably disagree. I love being on a broom. I'm lucky enough to get paid to do it. End of debate, I think."

"You filled the entire house up with books, yet?" Moody asked gruffly.

"Working on it. All part of my job. At least, that's my excuse. I love reading up on things. I'm lucky enough to get paid to do it. End of debate for me, too, I'm afraid," Hermione said. "You ever going to fully retire, Special Consultant to the Department of Aurors?"

"When the fool youngsters can manage without me, I'll quit," Moody said emphatically, taking a swig from his flask.

"In that case, you'll be there a good, long while, then," Hermione replied.

"If you two ever change your mind..." Moody said, letting the sentence dangle in the air, unfinished.

"Don't think we will," Viktor said firmly.

"Mmm. Our loss," Moody grunted. "Your parents? Haven't heard anything from them since the two of you got hitched."

"Doing well. We're trekking to Bulgaria in a few days and spending a whole week. I've only seen them three times since the wedding, myself, really. When the Bulgarian team had games at the Bulgarian National Stadium. They're supposed to come sometime soon and stay at the house, once we get it sorted out where everything goes once and for all. I'll tell them you asked after them," Viktor said.

"So... Percy, what's under way at the Ministry? What are you working on?" Hermione asked, trying to coax a sulking Percy into the conversation.

"A manual on the regulation of magical building codes," Percy said, perking up slightly.

"Sounds... important," Viktor prompted.

“Absolutely. Wouldn’t want the offices falling down around my ears for want of a regulation,” Moody said, taking a long pull from the flask.

“Exactly! If you didn’t put restrictions on materials, there would be chaos...”

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“Did you want custard or eggnog?” Hermione asked, taking two cups down from the kitchen cabinet.

“Eggnog,” Viktor said without hesitation, “because I need the booze. If I never hear another word about the angles of magically erected girders-”

“Honestly! Percy deserves a chance to discuss his work, too,” Hermione chided.

“For two hours!? He just recounted the whole manual! About thirty minutes in, I was tempted to ask Moody for a slug of whatever he’s packing. It’s probably rotgut, but at this point, I’m willing to lower my standards if the eggnog doesn’t have enough kick to take the edge off,” Viktor whispered loudly.

“I’m surprised at you! You’re not a big drinker.”

“I’m willing to make an exception and get soused right now if he doesn’t shut up about the subject, soon,” Viktor warned.

“I’m sorry I asked, okay? But there’s nothing for it now but to wait him out until he runs out of steam on the subject. Considering the meal and refreshments Molly put together, and the fact that it’s Christmas Eve, I suppose it’s the least we can do to hold a civil discourse the rest of the evening. Please, do me the great favor of not taking the edge off so much that you pass out on the floor. Try not to leave pleasantly tipsy in the dust. Because if you do, I’ll be tempted to keep up. I don’t fancy having a hangover to deal with on top of Christmas morning. Yours or mine,” Hermione cautioned, ladling the eggnog from the large bowl on the counter.

“Okay, but you owe me. Big. You’re just waiting for me to sit down somewhere so you can have a go at ripping my trousers off, anyway,” Viktor murmured.

“I beg your pardon? Are you sure you haven’t been at a flask of your own, already?” Hermione said, blinking and handing over one of the cups.

“As much as I wish I were referring to you, I was talking to our cat. Who seems awake and determined to stalk me to a chair and stake out my lap,” Viktor said, pointing to the ginger cat winding between his ankles and purring softly.

"Guess we woke him up with all the talking," Hermione said with a grin.

"Got bored stiff from lying on top of Percy's papers, and smelled the goose, more likely," Viktor said, reaching down and scooping up Crookshanks. Hermione slipped the cat a bit of goose from the platter in the icebox, gave him an affectionate scratch between the ears with her free hand, and he purred all the louder. "Be glad you can't read," Viktor muttered in the cat's ear as they headed back toward the living room.

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"Not to... err... ruin a wonderful evening or anything, but it's late, and frankly, I'm wondering where the heck you're going to put us all, Mum," Ron said, stretching.

"I've got it all worked out. Susan and Ginny in Ginny's old room. The beds are still up from when Hermione used to stay, and there's plenty of space," Molly said. "Fleur and Angelina can stay in Fred and George's old room, in their old beds. And that still leaves plenty of room to put three to a room in spots."

"Provided none of us actually move," Ginny said with a laugh.

"Enough of that!" Molly scolded. "Bill, Neville and Fred can stay with us. There's a foldout sofa in there, and two cots."

"Hey, Mum! You've got all the blokes with girlfriends here in with you..." Fred said, looking around the room and doing a quick tally.

"Exactly. Percy, Viktor and Hermione can share a bed, and Alastor, they can all fit in Percy's room... I mean, office. We put the beds back in there from when Bill, Charlie, and Percy shared the room. So it shouldn't be too crowded," Molly said.

"In the room, maybe, but if they're in one of our old beds, they'll be stacked on top of one another," Charlie pointed out.

"Won't hear me complaining," Viktor blurted out, draining his cup.

"And Harry, George and Charlie can just squeeze in Ron's old room," Molly added, putting her hands on her hips.

"Mum, you seem to have forgotten where your youngest son's actually going to sleep," Ron said, waving a hand.

"Well, if Alastor had refused-" Molly began.

“You won’t let me, woman!” Moody growled.

“-I would have put you in there. But I have a cot, just no room to put it in, really. Would you mind sleeping in the hall off the living room? The one that goes to our bedroom? I would put you in here, but you’ll be in the way when I put the presents out. And I’ll wake you with all the clattering around in the kitchen for breakfast. Which is promptly at seven, while we’re on the subject,” Molly announced.

“Oh, alright,” Ron said with a sigh. “I guess I should be thankful she didn’t try to put me in the cupboard. You two had better be grateful! By rights, you’re getting what should be my bed!” Ron added to Viktor and Hermione.

“Don’t think I didn’t consider putting you in the cupboard,” Molly said lightly.

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Hermione smothered a laugh against Viktor’s bare shoulder, though it was hardly necessary, given the volume of the snoring coming from the occupant of the bed farthest away. “Did he snore like that back when you had to sleep around him?” Hermione whispered.

“Most of the time, I was so tired, I didn’t care,” Viktor whispered back. “He was always worse when he had a few, though. Sounded like the Knight Bus. Preferable to before Moody dropped off, when Per-”

“Shhh!” Hermione cautioned, laying a finger over his lips. “Still awake!” She cast a glance at the other bed across the room, where Percy sat up, propped ramrod straight against his pillows, his wand illuminating a book he had taken from his desk, earlier.

“I don’t care! It’s not as though he can hear with that racket going on,” Viktor said, jerking his head toward Moody, who, from here, looked like a misshapen lump between the covers. Percy had still been pontificating on the bureaucracy of the magical construction industry in general when they had gone to bed. Charlie’s assessment of the sleeping arrangements had proven to be just a little too accurate. They had discovered that the only position that didn’t leave them uncomfortably close to the edges of the mattress was, indeed, being stacked on top of one another. Much to Percy’s evident consternation, Hermione had straddled Viktor’s hips, draped herself over him, and tucked her head into his shoulder.

She also could have sworn that Moody had found the whole thing amusing, if he ever found anything amusing. In deference to Percy’s delicate sensibilities, they had pulled the covers up, despite being quite warm enough, already, what with



being crowded together in the small bed. Hermione almost wished she hadn't worn the knee-length blue chemise, and opted for pajamas instead, so they could have tossed the covers off. Her sleeping attire had seemed modest enough before Percy had given it the obviously disapproving once over. Pajamas would have simply served to make things sweatier, though. The covers were uncomfortably warm, and Viktor hardly ever slept under more than a sheet, even in winter.

"At least when he started snoring, Percy had to shut up," Viktor hissed in her ear.

"Behave!" Hermione scolded.

"What did behaving ever get me?" Viktor whispered, sliding his right hand from the small of her back to her bottom, circling his palm and fingers over it, then tugging the hem of the chemise up, out of the way. He kneaded her bottom through the thin fabric of her knickers for a few moments, before slipping his hand beneath the waistband for skin to skin contact. It was probably the warm fog of just a touch too much eggnog clouding her judgment, but she didn't protest at all when his hand stroked toward her front, near her hipbone. Instead, she compliantly lifted herself enough to allow him to tuck his hand between them, then tilted her pelvis enough to allow him room to work.

He cupped her soft belly for a moment, then smoothed his fingers through the dense, wiry tangle of curls, tucking his middle fingertip between her legs, massaging her there. In spite of herself, Hermione gave a strangled moan, parting her legs further when his finger sought entry. It was nestled firmly inside her, his mouth against hers, his tongue slipping past hers, when Percy made a noise of disgust and Hermione remembered just where they were. Though he couldn't possibly know what was going on inside her knickers, and probably hadn't heard the moan over Moody's buzzsaw snoring, Hermione blushed and returned her head to Viktor's shoulder. "Stop," she said meekly.

"But-"

"Stop, we're bothering Percy," Hermione insisted.

"So, we'll put a pillow over his head. I volunteer," Viktor said thickly.

"We're both drunk," Hermione said.

"Thanks to him. We're both horny. Percy's a big boy, he would live," Viktor said, wriggling the finger inside her. The muscles there gave a small spasm in response. "Tell me you don't want to."

"Not in front of him! What do you propose we do? Ask him to turn around?"

Hermione hissed.

“Couldn’t hurt to ask,” Viktor said blithely.

“Boy, you are drunk, aren’t you? Just how much eggnog did you have?”

Hermione whispered, planting a kiss along his jaw.

“Enough that all that talk about building codes turned into background noise,” Viktor replied. “Come on. Let’s go get a drink of water,” he said, shaking her shoulder with his free hand.

“Not until you remove your hand from my knickers, and I get rearranged!” Hermione insisted. After a few moments, she was able to wrestle the chemise back down enough that she felt safe in crawling to the side of the bed and slipping out from beneath the covers. “We’re going to get a drink of water!” she told Percy in a soft voice.

“What?” Percy asked, an edge of annoyance and impatience to his voice.

“A drink of water! We’re going to get one!” Viktor snapped, his voice sounding loud against the previous whispering. Hermione winced and waited for the snoring to come to a halt, but it hardly missed a beat. Hermione noticed a fine sheen of sweat on Viktor’s skin in the moonlight from the window. If she had been overly warm beneath the covers, he had probably been smothering. She hurried after him as he padded down the hall and down the stairs to the living room, their bare feet silent on the floor. “You really want a drink of water?” he added in a whisper, after stopping to consider the winking Christmas tree for a few moments.

“I could do with one,” Hermione allowed, fanning herself with her hand and sinking onto the sofa. They drained the glasses in silence, Viktor finishing first and leaning forward to put his empty glass on the coffee table, resting with his elbows on his knees. Hermione took the opportunity to study him in the dim light. Sometimes it still shocked her, just how much he had changed since that first stilted conversation in the library at Hogwarts, over five years ago. He was still lanky, angular and dark, though not nearly as shockingly skinny as he had seemed in swim trunks by the lake, despite the fact that he was far from bony, even then. His trousers, like his pajama bottoms now, always seemed to ride low on his narrow hips, as though barely hanging on. His stomach was still concave, flat and sunken between his prominent hipbones.

But he had ‘filled out’ as Molly had put it, the narrow shoulders getting just a bit broader, his frame stockier and the lean, muscled limbs going a bit more solid. It was almost as though his body had finally gotten enough of a breather from shooting upward a few inches a year during adolescence to catch up with the

large hands, long fingers, and what he had frankly called big feet. She had been slightly taken aback by the difference when, after over a year of having contact through letters only, he had shown up at Hogwarts in late winter of her sixth year for a few days, part of an ever changing parade of wizards and witches that had stopped in for a few days to see Dumbledore before heading out to the next assignment.

Even the planes of his face had softened slightly by then, the razor sharp cheekbones just a little less prominent, but still high and exotic. She had searched his face for the familiar, found comfort in spotting the same prominent hook and small crook that made his profile so readily identifiable, the same slight tilt to the corners of his eyes, the same dark, thick, expressive eyebrows. The irises so dark that they often obscured the pupil, and seemed to bore right through you, give you nowhere to hide. But somehow, they could be soft, just like they had been when he had stammered out an invitation to the Yule Ball. And on occasion, the same thoughtful frown, though it seemed a good deal less sullen than it had in fourth year. He smiled a little more often and a little more easily.

His face wasn't the only thing that had softened by then. The accent had, too, still there, but having a slightly different quality. She hadn't known it at the time, but a lot of the credit for that was due to Charlie Weasley. They had naturally hit it off with one another in a way that might have seemed surprising to anyone who would have pegged the circumspect, solemn, dark young man as a polar opposite to the cheerful, bubbling redhead with the freckled skin. The unlikely rapport and diminishing accent was mostly due to the time they had spent together on Order business, and the free time bonding over Quidditch talk. The accent had given way to the same determined diligence Viktor had displayed in learning so many other things, now applied to improving his diction in English. The same businesslike approach he had put to use in learning so many of the things that hadn't been a priority at Durmstrang, like the corporeal Patronus and other advanced defense spells that had been blissfully neglected by the faculty in a time of peace as a luxury to be picked up after graduation.

Sometimes, she took a secret pleasure in his minor stumbles over unfamiliar words. There was something comforting about hearing his diction as it had been when they first met. More natural. It reminded her there was something beyond the walls of Hogwarts. Beyond the school that had become so much like a locked down fortress by now. It reminded her that they weren't alone in this. That she wasn't alone. She had clung to these small things even harder when her parents had been murdered a few short months later. He had volunteered to be part of the team of escorts that took her off school grounds for the necessary formalities. The police investigation that was nothing but an empty gesture, given that they all already knew it would come to a dead end, committed by "suspects unknown" and filed away in a drawer, the funeral arrangements, the burial, selling the house and sifting through the contents, deciding what to store. Tiny

details like the fact that the calluses in his palm were exactly the same as she remembered from their dancing at the Yule Ball kept her anchored, sometimes. It gave her faith that the entire world hadn't gone tilting completely off its axis.

There had been others along, of course. Mr. Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Tonks, even one of the early recruits from the Durmstrang group at the Tournament, a Russian named Stefan Poliakoff, but they had all been quite happy to step into the background. Especially when there was nothing they could do to quiet her or comfort her. Her grief made them uncomfortable in the extreme. Most of them either tried to shush her or simply avoid her when she couldn't stop herself breaking down. Even Mr. Weasley sometimes discreetly fled in the wake of her emotions when it got to be too much. He hadn't been used to handling that sort of raw, blatant heartbreak within the Burrow. Viktor, on the other hand, had simply been content to let her cry it out without turning away. To cry until there just wasn't anything left to grieve with, anymore.

On the other hand, he and Mr. Weasley hadn't been content to let her lie in bed all day and avoid living, either. The rest wouldn't have touched her with a ten foot pole in the mornings, but Arthur and Viktor had taken turns forcing her out of bed, when necessary. Pushed her forward. Mostly Viktor, but Arthur had gently prodded her along as well, in his dear, slightly inept fatherly fashion, his genuine concern making up for his one major shortcoming. The fact that he wasn't really her father.

Her escort group hadn't been quite as big or as motley a crew as Harry's had been, that year they had first fetched him to Grimmauld Place, but it had been motley enough. A couple of Durmstrang-educated Slavs, one who barely spoke a word of English if he could avoid it, though he was talkative beyond belief in Russian, a bald black man who had something of a gypsy or bohemian air about him, a pink-haired woman who looked like a punk rocker gone slightly mainstream, and a middle-aged man with fiery red hair who couldn't help being fascinated by the ordinary Muggleness of the house, even while the authorities were there.

It still struck her funny in a bizarre sort of way that the coroner had been so shaken by the state of the bodies, the oddly dressed group in the hall, and the fact that Viktor had done the identifying while she sat numbly on a bench outside the morgue, he had initially recorded that the identifying party designated by the next of kin was a Belgian friend of the family. Viktor had spent the morning before the appointment at the coroner's unobtrusively studying photos of the two of them. Something that wouldn't have seemed necessary, except for the fact that the authorities had made no secret that the bodies barely resembled the two people in the photos. She wondered what the coroner would have written if she had told him the identifying party had really only met her parents a handful of times. Only a couple of times with her. Stolen days over some of her school

holidays, when she dashed home under escort for a few hours before heading back to school. Yule and Easter. He had stopped by a few times on his own, more than anything, she suspected, so he could owl her and tell her they were fine. They had been fond of him. Even a little bit enamored of him, in the same way she was. Infatuated by the fact that he was charmingly earnest. Such a small gesture of thoughtfulness, to stop by for a few minutes when he could. Such a priceless gesture to her.

Hermione had to explain the presence of the oddball group to the police and the neighbors offering condolences. Even the edited truth sounded hollow and ridiculous in her ears. Friends and associates of the Headmaster, along to ensure her safety and offer a bit of support while she was away from school. Father of some school friends, who was gracious enough to allow her to spend part of each summer with them. There were moments when she was certain that the investigating officers were itching to slap the cuffs on her, convinced that she had to be part of some strange cult. When the neighbors wondered about her stability. Her choice of company in the house surely proved that she wasn't on an even keel. She had avoided her old life as much as possible after selling the house. Not so much out of pain, but out of necessity.

Every syllable needed careful tailoring to the hearer. Every sentence had to be previewed in her head, searched for some hint of the aspect of her life that she couldn't reveal to the old friends and neighbors who remembered her only as that overly bookish little girl who sounded far too old for her own good, even in primary school. The part of her life that was taking over more and more. Becoming her whole life. It had been a relief to marry and resign herself to not having to straddle the border if she didn't want to. To look forward to a home where magic wasn't a dirty word. Where magic was appallingly ordinary. Where it didn't have to be hidden from the neighbors or the relatives. Viktor just accepted her, Muggle quirks and all. She suspected Harry had felt a similar uneasy freedom upon leaving the Dursleys.

By the time she had run into Mrs. Hendricks from down the street, mere days before her wedding, she had developed a well vetted and thoroughly prepared set of stock answers for those increasingly rare moments when her old life bumped into the new. And even those must have seemed equal parts strange and spare, curiously lacking in detail. Talking to the plump, older woman who often babysat for her when she was small had been almost like playing a familiar role in a stage show.

*Yes, I've graduated from that school in Scotland, by now, Mrs. Hendricks. Last year. No, I've taken a job. Doing research for writers at a publishing company. No, probably not one you've heard of, but it may lead to some bigger writing jobs, later. Not books, articles, most likely. The ring? Oh, yes, actually, I am engaged. In fact, I'm in London picking up some last minute things for the*

wedding. It's in a few days. Actually, we're holding the wedding at the school. It's the only place we can manage that's big enough for the group we're expecting, and we still didn't get to invite everyone I might have liked. Certainly, I'll mail you a picture. I suppose you're here visiting with your nephew? Meet him at school? As a matter of fact, I did. Scottish? No, Bulgarian, actually. Yes, Bulgarian, of all things. Quirk of fate, I suppose. He came with another boarding school for an academic competition, and we attended a dance. We wrote one another after he graduated. He's a few years older. Do? He's involved in international sport. Quite reasonably lucrative, but I doubt you would have heard of him. Viktor Krum. He still plays on a Bulgarian team. He's awfully well known in parts of the world, not so much in others. Yes, the frequent travel is a bit of a strain, but travel has improved a lot recently, hasn't it? He loves what he does, and we can afford it, thanks to what they pay him. Lucky? My word, you have no idea how lucky...

Lucky. It was a word she didn't toss around lightly, these days. Lucky used to be guessing at the right answer. Studying the right page twice before the exam. Picking the right, nearly deserted matinee showing of a good film. Finding a bit of forgotten money in the pocket of your coat. Stumbling on a good book. Lucky, now, was just being alive. Not having to bury everyone who meant something to you. Having come through the eye of the hurricane relatively unscathed. At least physically. At least on the outside. But the outside barely told the tale.

Every once in a while, she marveled that he could still pass himself off as a teenager rather easily. A few bartenders, waiters and innkeepers in a hurry on both sides of the magical divide had made the mistake over the last couple of years. Then she would chide herself for thinking something so ridiculous, since he really was hardly out of his teens. He wouldn't even be twenty-four for nearly another year. He had turned twenty-three just before they married. She, Harry and Ron were still in their teens, for Heaven's sake. If someone had told her even a few years ago that she would be married at eighteen and feeling occasionally ancient before nineteen, she would have scoffed.

But, then, hadn't they all felt ancient? Dumbledore, Moody, Lupin and some of the rest of the old Order might have been the first to show it, even before the younger ones had gotten into the thick of it, but by the end, it had told on all of them. As the standoff had built to a climax, she spotted old eyes on them all. Old eyes on Harry, first of all. Old eyes that had seen death, and that had caught a glimpse of the future. What lay in store for him. What was expected of him. Old eyes that held himself responsible for what had happened to Cedric and Sirius.

And before long, old eyes seemed to be everywhere, in young faces, even. Old eyes on Arthur and Molly, dealing with one temporarily misguided son, and two in the Order. Two more of their own not far removed from being in it, Ron and Ginny. And two more they considered almost their own, Harry and Hermione. By the end of the war, a third they almost considered their own. Viktor had spent

many a night under their roof when he and Charlie were passing through. Old eyes on Neville, full of the pain and the shame over his parents, tempered by a bit of defiant pride in what their names represented. And eventually, a new self-confidence. Old eyes on Ginny and Ron, brimming with worry over a father and two brothers who were often gone on Order business for weeks at a time, Heaven only knew where. Worry for Harry, too. Old eyes on Viktor, some of the same tired guilt over Cedric's death, and before long, fresh guilt for some of the names he had recruited that had ended up on gravestones. For some of the people he had stood beside who hadn't been so lucky. For things that he was not proud of, that had to be done out of necessity. She wasn't much surprised, then, when she had spotted old eyes in the mirror, too.

In the end, all of them had plenty they weren't proud of, that had to be done out of necessity. Their own personal nightmares and guilt that might have been crippling, except for the fact that you had to keep on living, whether you wanted to or not. And you could always convince yourself that someone else had it worse. Maybe even the person you curled up next to at night. Some of that haunted look had faded over the last few months. She knew Viktor still had nightmares. Ones he often didn't share. He still didn't speak about that last night in Godric's Hollow. Not that any of them did if they could help it. She didn't press the issue when he got out of bed and walked around the house in the middle of the night, then simply stayed up until dawn. All she had gotten the few times she had asked was a clipped "I don't want to talk about it," when he had woken in a panic. She was content to let it lie. They were still feeling out when to push and when to let it lie, like you felt out so many things in those first few months of marriage. No matter how well you fit, already, you had to sand down the edges gradually to dovetail your lives together.

Even crusty old Moody had insisted on putting the two of them together when he decided he needed people to work in pairs. She knew Viktor had protested it, protested her being involved at all, of age or not, maybe even given Moody a right cursing out for even thinking of it. When Hermione had questioned Moody as to why he had paired Charlie with Tonks and failed to put her with, say, Ron, the answer had surprised her. "Because I never saw two people so independent need each other so much. If I divide the two of you up, neither one of you will have your mind on your business." And she supposed it was true. The first thing they had done when it was evident it was over, really over, was to cling to one another in the middle of the cold rain and the muck, desperate to hang onto something real, solid and warm. Something alive. Something with a familiar smell, sound and texture. It didn't matter that it was wet hair and muddy skin, it only mattered that underneath, it was somebody real. Somebody you loved. It meant everything wasn't gone.

Hermione reached out and touched his bare shoulder, and Viktor started slightly before leaning back into the sofa once more, dropping his arm around her

shoulders. She sipped at the water, staring at the glowing tree, a bit distant, as though deep in thought.

Viktor watched her, running his eyes over her face, softly lit by the tree and the moonlight, curved, round and full. A sharp contrast to his own angular features. But why should the difference in their features be any less than the differences in the rest of their lives? One was a pure-blood who hadn't so much as knowingly shaken hands with a Muggle-born prior to meeting her. The other was a Muggle-born who hadn't so much as known about the possibility of the existence of what he deemed everyday life before receiving a letter before her eleventh birthday.

What were different countries of origin, a language barrier and attendance of rival schools with curriculums and Headmasters that couldn't possibly be more different on top of that? He had once speculated that about the only way they could possibly have been more different from one another was to have been from different planets. Or to be of a different species. As it was, they practically were, according to some people. Not that being labeled different was new to him. Even before he had set foot on the Hogwarts grounds, Viktor had dealt with different.

First, it had been the way he handled a broom. That had captured everyone's notice. Especially the Headmaster. Different. That boy is different. You can't teach love of flying like that. And it hadn't been. It had been born of the rides he had begged out of his mother and father. The unrelenting pestering for a broom of his own. Of his parents resigning themselves to the fact that he loved it, and he might as well be taught to handle it properly, old enough or not. Then the scouts. He's different. We would like to sign him. He can't be only fourteen. Don't make us wait until he's fifteen, we want to sign him now. That boy's different. Anyone else would have given up on getting it lower or faster by now. He stays after practice.

Then, the favoritism. Set apart by the professors and the Headmaster. Fawned over. Flattered. Doted upon, though he hated it, deflected it when possible. All of it empty and meaningless. The only place he felt he was dealt with truly and honestly was at practices with Vratsa, and eventually, the national team. The other players didn't ooh and ahh over him simply because they were told to. They had seen too many supposed 'next big things' come and go over their careers. They pushed him to the limit and beyond, and he welcomed it. The only way he was different there was that he didn't bend or break under the pressure, like so many other promising prospects did. Viktor proved himself to be something more than empty hype. A compliment received there was a compliment truly earned.

By the time he had stepped off the Durmstrang ship and onto Hogwarts grounds, he was used to being marked as different. There were times, in fact, he felt



completely alien anywhere but on a broom. Times when he wanted to curl up and disappear, become invisible. Get some peace. By then, the girls fawning over him had become old hat. Viktor had found it completely incomprehensible, at first. The way some girls found him something special, simply because he got out on the school pitch and did a job well. Then because he had attracted attention from outside the school. He couldn't reconcile why they made a fuss over him when they didn't over anyone else on the team. Not the same way, at least.

His mother, Ekaterina, had been careful to warn him about buying into the false trappings of fame. She was forever cautioning him to never believe his own press, whether good or bad, and to ignore it completely whenever possible. And to be careful about how others viewed him. To discern who was seeing him through the filter of his fame and talent, and who could be bothered to take the blinkers off. His performance in the World Cup seemed to bring out the blinkered masses in even fuller force than before. And he found it twice as incomprehensible. If it hadn't been clear before, he was now positive that females, in particular, were impossible to understand.

It was startling enough when boys who knew what you could do on a broom asked for your autograph, or enthused about what kind of player you were, or how they positively idolized you, or talked as though they knew you. Sometimes he felt as though he must be experiencing amnesia, all these people who seemed so confident they knew exactly who he was, really was, when he didn't know the first detail about them. About who they really were. There was no certainty in it. He no more knew who the Minister of Magic in Britain really was than the pompous fool knew about him. Difference was, Fudge had the face to cozy up to a name and not care about the person. The way Fudge had related to Harry, then later turned on him, had proven that. Viktor played politely puzzled foreigner, when appropriate. When he couldn't think of a response that didn't sound dismissive, ungrateful or downright conceited, which was often. But the girls were worse. They so often seemed to want something more than a momentary handshake or a comment or a signature.

Worst were the wolves. Viktor had started to think of them as wolves, by then. They traveled in packs and stalked you, cornered you, hungry and snarling at each other for dominance. Like you were something worth fighting over. It wasn't so bad when they were too young to see you as anything but a distant figure in a newspaper picture, a famous name so depersonalized and unattainable that they could barely form a coherent request for an autograph. The only way those girls could approach you was in groups that egged each other on, until someone did the talking, usually in an abnormally high-pitched voice. They didn't think beyond getting a signature, and running off together squealing over what you had signed, talking to one another about you as though you were deaf, out of earshot, or didn't speak the language at all. Because to them, you were that

distant. Beyond reach and not quite real.

But the wolves were awful. They calculated and schemed. Ganged up and prowled as a team. Occasionally, they turned on one another. Trapped you and touched you without your permission. Looked at you with hungry eyes and sometimes, offers. It was bad enough to look at those girls and see those gaping chasms behind their eyes, a yawning space that they expected you to fill. Missing, unformed bits that needed completing. They wanted reassurance. They had big empty places that could swallow you whole if you tried to fill them. If you tried to complete them. Because they were looking to be completed in all the wrong spots. That was frightening enough.

Even more thoroughly horrifying were the rare occasions when he realized that something was being offered, too. A promise that you could take whatever you wanted. It was probably offered more often than Viktor realized. Vulchanov had once taken him aside at an open practice and pointed out that he seemed completely ignorant of when a girl was going all moony over him. Worse yet, he didn't seem to understand when a girl was outright throwing herself at him. Konstantin had warned him that he had better learn to tell the difference, if he didn't want trouble, someday. Viktor had insisted it was blissful ignorance and he didn't really want to know, as he had no intention of acting on either one. If wading through that was the alternative, he preferred to stay thick about the difference. He made it a practice to avoid either one with fairly equal diligence after that.

Viktor had, in fact, avoided girls in general all he could manage. Overeager boys could be tolerated better than those packs of girls and their awful, inane giggling. At least in the library, if they got too loud, the librarian shushed them. He could lose himself for a while among the shelves, and when he finally had to give it up and sit down, between the covers. It could be tuned out. The looks ignored. The requests for autographs could mostly be avoided if you kept your eyes on the page and pretended you were invisible. They had to catch him in the Great Hall or in the halls of the castle between classes. Viktor had ducked and dodged them with the determination he had when avoiding getting knocked off the broom or catching a Bludger in the face.

Until he had seen her. Glaring in his direction like she wanted to melt him on the spot. Not that he hadn't attracted looks like that before. From angry opposing fans, from opponents, from people on the grounds who weren't so happy that improving relations between the schools meant inviting Durmstrang and actually being civil to them. Sometimes, from boys who were jealous of the attention he desperately wanted to get rid of. But this was different. So fierce and direct that he had actually turned around to reassure himself that the giggling twits he had seen her give the exact same look on other occasions were still behind him. They were. Still giggling. And for some unaccountable reason, he had stared

back.

She wasn't what anyone would call beautiful, exactly. She was firmly entrenched on that slightly awkward borderline between childhood and adulthood, still growing into everything at a different rate. At least girls got the luxury of having everything catch up quicker. She probably wouldn't have long to wait until everything harmonized. Viktor had given up hope of that happening for him before leaving Durmstrang. She had bushy hair that probably looked slightly unkempt regardless of what she did to it. Front teeth that were just a shade overlarge. She was decently tall for her age. Malfoy had complained about "Granger" enough that he knew she was in his year. In Potter's year. What had kept him staring wasn't the way she looked. It was how she carried herself.

Something about her face changed when she became engrossed in a book. It held the promise of being truly beautiful, someday, when her face relaxed and her fingers twirled a strand of her hair absently. Something about the way she totally lost herself in a book without shame. The way she could stand to be alone, comfortably quiet, when so many girls would be vainly trying to fill up the quiet with nonsense and noise, lest you have an accidental thought in the silence. Like if you let a silence remain undisturbed, someone might notice you're a fake. Speaking when you had nothing to say was only a way to distract people. Distract them from the emptiness you were afraid they might discover. He couldn't help but think the more useless noise that came out of a person, the less substance there was to them. It had proven true in the leagues. The more bragging, the less actual talent. Talented and dedicated players didn't have to brag. They let their work do the talking.

This girl walked with purpose. She did everything with purpose. She was quite content to be what she was. Comfortable in her own skin. She had the confidence in herself that he had on a broom or in a competition, only all the time. So often, he felt overgrown and clumsy when he wasn't competing, like he didn't know what to do with himself. Viktor was content when he was competing. When all that mattered was that you had competed to the best of your ability, because that was all anyone could ask. All you could ask of yourself, even. Without that structure, he sometimes felt at a loss for what to do.

He had a hard time picturing her at a loss, no matter what the situation. When she looked at him, he didn't see what he saw with the other girls. No yawning chasm. She wasn't waiting for someone to come along and complete her, to assure her she was fine the way she was or to tell her what to change to make herself acceptable. If this girl couldn't hold an intelligent conversation and bother to take the blinkers off in regard to who he was, he would give up all hope of ever finding one who could. Consequently, it petrified him to even think about talking to her. Viktor was afraid he might have gotten fooled. That she wouldn't be interested in looking any deeper.

It had taken forever to work up the courage. A hundred repetitions in his head of what he wanted to say. He dodged all the girls that wanted him to ask them to the Yule Ball until he could finally approach her. And she had proven to be everything he had hoped. More, for that matter. He had used the word “beautiful” at the ball, and meant it. Events, of course, had proven to be less than kind, in the months that followed. Even if they hadn’t, maybe he had leapt in a bit too fast, losing a little too much of his usual objectivity. He had blinded himself to what was really going on around him. Not that they all hadn’t. A handful of people on the grounds might have understood what had really taken place at the time.

At the time he had been thinking that his biggest problem was getting the truth out of this girl on how she felt about him, and unraveling the mystery of the opposite sex, even the most sensible among them. By the end of the Tournament, he had the burdens of having lost his head over a ridiculous newspaper article, torturing Cedric Diggory, and realizing he had displayed the same blinkered ignorance that would later infuriate him in Cornelius Fudge. He hadn’t let himself trust in what he knew, deep down, to be true. That Dumbledore and Potter were trustworthy. That something bigger than the Tournament was brewing. That when Hermione said a thing, she meant it. No dancing around the truth or hidden truth between the lines.

But he had given it another chance when they said goodbye. Screwed his head on straight and resolved to go slower, to take a crack at getting to know one another through letters, instead. Viktor knew he wouldn’t be seeing her for a while, even under the best of circumstances. He had been pleasantly surprised and relieved when he had said his piece, apologized for his transgressions, and timidly asked if Hermione minded if he wrote. He had felt nearly faint with relief at her reply. “I was just going to ask if you would.”

Not that it had been easier through letters. Just different. Not so much pressure to pick the right words out of midair and put them together sensibly, odd as they felt in your mouth, but pressure to cram in everything you wished to say on a single sheet of parchment, without any unintentional meanings or gray area. English was an awful language sometimes. So many words that mean so many different things. It at least meant not worrying about your expression, or your courage failing and the words dying in your throat. But it meant teasing things out over weeks and months, assembling a fuller picture of one another. It meant swallowing his pride and admitting that he wasn’t capable of some of the things Harry already was. It meant puzzling over some of the things she wrote, and cursing his own ignorance. Sometimes of English, sometimes of Muggles, sometimes, his continuing ignorance of her. It was like trying to crack a code without the key, at times.

Viktor had leapt at the chance to join the Order when it had been offered. The owl from Dumbledore had followed not long after the leaving feast and the Headmaster's conciliatory speech, preaching unity in the face of evil. A few short months later, Viktor was trying to sell the same concept against some very tall odds. He had been their inroads to Durmstrang and Eastern Europe. He already traveled extensively, with the teams, to all the right spots. He could do it without drawing undue attention, for a while. He had contacts. He had reputation. He had influence. He spoke the languages. He knew the cultures. He had name and bloodline. And he had been willing to put all that on the line to recruit support for a man whose own Ministry was publicly calling him a madman. To defend a boy the Minister in Britain was calling unstable. A boy who had seen the impossible. All for the possibility of having a few more minds, bodies and wands on the Order's side when the time came. When the war well and truly got under way and it was time to take a stand. When the Death Eaters declared themselves and Dumbledore would need a real army. Something more than a school club.

And he didn't fool himself. Part of it was for Hermione. Possibly to make up slightly for not completely believing it before the third task. To make amends for not being prepared for what Crouch had done. And because he couldn't bear the thought of abandoning her to it. Of standing back at a safe distance and not helping. If there was such a thing as a safe distance, which he doubted. In his more honest moments, though, he admitted it was mostly because he loved her. And one simply did not ignore the ones they loved in times of trouble.

It had taken a long while to write the words. He had debated over writing them for hours. Agonized over the possible reply for days. Had wished he could have his letter back a dozen times. Kept the well worn piece of parchment that was her return letter in his pocket for months. Until he had seen her face to face again. Until he could tell her he loved her in person, without parchment and ink in between. Still, he felt he had sometimes underestimated her, even after all that. Her strength in the wake of losing her parents had stunned him, even as he insisted she get out of bed and get dressed in the mornings. The way she had fought in the war, he never could have imagined. There was no one he would rather have watching his back in a fight. Physical, magical or verbal. She scrapped like a champion in any of them, when the occasion called for it. He gathered that she had conducted quite a few of the latter on his behalf with Ron before it had come out that Viktor was, at the time, probably sitting on a mountainside with Charlie, trying not to freeze to death.

And he could personally attest that she still didn't back down from an argument in the slightest. Fair enough. Viktor loved the fact that she didn't automatically bend to his wishes, like so many others had. In fact, he suspected sometimes she disagreed for the sole purpose of keeping him on his toes. He liked that she was willing to go nose to nose with him in a shouting match, not to meekly step aside in the wake of a fit of hot Bulgarian temper. He thought that might also

have been a major factor in bringing Ekaterina around on the matter of Hermione. His mother had asserted to his bride on their wedding day that her son needed someone willing and able to stand up to him, to push when he needed pushing. Someone who wouldn't go running on the rare occasions when he blew. His mother ought to know. He had inherited the temper, lock, stock and barrel, from Ekaterina.

By the time he had returned to Britain, during her sixth year, in his mind, it was likely for good. Even without considering her, there was no other choice but to come back until the war was over, at the very least. There was nowhere safe to hide, anyway, even if he had wanted to. By her seventh year, marriage had stopped being a possibility and started being discussed as a certainty. When we get engaged. When we get married. When we have our wedding. It was a way to wrestle the future into submission, talking about a certainty. The "if we're still alive by then" went unspoken, by tacit agreement. That spring, not long before all Hell had broken loose, he had given her a ring. Promised her a home, whenever she wanted it. He and Charlie had just come back from Eastern Europe for the last time, both cold and hungry and worn thin around the edges. Frazzled down to nothing, almost.

Home. It had so many unexpected meanings now. Viktor had thought it sentimental tripe, that saying about home being where the heart was. Before, home had been where you had your roots. Where you came from. Where you always went back to. The people who shared your name, your blood, and your history. But the war had gifted him with that, at least. A lot of places to call home. A lot of people to call home. Some of them a fairly unlikely crew. Most of them a fairly unlikely crew. By the time the war had ended and he had set foot back in Bulgaria with Hermione, he had come to think of so much of Britain as home as well. Even the Burrow and the Weasleys, though at first, he had been almost knocked off balance by the crowd and the clamor in the ramshackle house when even half of them were there. It had made his family home look cavernous and stoically quiet by comparison. Besides, he hadn't had the heart to ask her to give up country, too. Hermione had already given up so much of what had once been her life, by then.

There had been, thankfully, and surprisingly, little objection to Hermione's presence in the house. Any strenuous resistance that might have been there had long since been worn down by the letters he had written about her, and the fact that time passed but the affection didn't wane. If they had been hoping he would snap out of it or outgrow it, they had been reminded by each letter he wrote that it only grew stronger. Viktor had worried that they might still stubbornly hold out for what they had expected, even after meeting Hermione in the flesh, because they refused to show their cards at all on the matter. Stubborn as they both were about some things, especially his mother, they knew that ordering or dictating to an equally stubborn son was a waste of breath. Viktor could dig in and set his

jaw with the same fierce stubbornness Ekaterina possessed. But he knew he could relax about it when Ekaterina had exhorted her to eat something within thirty minutes of their arrival, and Petyr had marveled about her character that same evening. Ekaterina didn't feed people she didn't like. Petyr didn't compliment people he didn't respect. Empty flattery or polite, prattling small talk wasn't an art practiced in the Krum household. You generally said what you meant and meant what you said. No dressing it up to look like something it wasn't. There had been an openly wary and awkward appraisal, then quick acceptance. He still didn't know what to chalk it up to, exactly.

Still, it hadn't been a worry entirely without merit. Some of the extended clan had been frankly appalled at his choice, and a few of them had made no secret of it. A couple of the cousins had made their feelings clear by semi-polite means. An unopened invitation simply marked return to sender. A curt "not attending" on the reply card. One was a not so polite reply card covered in epithets, just in case they had missed the subtle point of the other two refusals. Hermione might not have recognized all the words at first glance, but she knew an insult when she saw it. He had cringed when he found her sitting at the table in the Burrow, diligently looking up each one of them, determined to find out exactly what had been said. After receiving that one, he had made an effort to try to open them first, to beat her to them, in case it wasn't an isolated incident. She had just as doggedly tried to beat him to them, trying to prove that she didn't need or want protecting. Everyone he had truly wanted to come had attended. The ones who hadn't... their loss. He had barely seen some of them in years, anyway. Hermione had shrugged off the idea of people who were willing to dismiss her without meeting her. Even if they were part of his family.

One of his father's uncles, who hadn't bothered to meet her, either, had made it a point to be quoted in the paper that in his opinion, Viktor was a disgrace to the name Krum for even thinking of sharing his last name with that Mudblood. Grant you, that had been downright affectionate in contrast to everything he had said about Hermione. "Vile, manipulative harpy who doesn't think this country is good enough for her" had been the nicest thing quoted. Viktor shuddered to think what he had said that didn't make it into print. Publicly, when the reporters had cornered him outside the locker room and sprung it on him, Viktor had politely said he was very sorry his great-uncle felt that way, but that it didn't change the fact that his opinion was thoroughly wrong. Privately, he had gone in and smashed the fire out of one of the banks of lockers with a Beater's club and told the old man where he could put his opinion. He was sure his great-uncle had promptly cut him out of the will and stopped mentioning his name, as though that mattered. Viktor was convinced that the old man had decided then and there that Petyr and Ekaterina had no son. No one to drag the name through the mud in his eyes.

The biggest irony of it was that she often didn't use his name. As many of her

correspondences and pieces of work went out with the name Granger on them as Krum. More, perhaps. And it bothered him surprisingly little, he found. Once, it might have been perceived as a slight, as something vastly important, for his wife to always share his name. A name that could be traced all the way back to Bulgaria's first proper ruler, the Khan. One that had inspired such pride in one of the Khan's descendants that they had turned what was technically a Christian name into a family name. By now, names and bloodlines seemed like such a petty thing, an accident of birth, at best. And how could he begrudge her one of the last connections, outside of memory and a few photographs, that she had to her parents? When she chose to use Granger, he found that the rings on their fingers, the shared house, the shared bed at night, and the intertwined lives were enough. When she chose to use Krum, he was mildly flattered that she had a bit of pride in sharing his name. It would be selfish to insist that she always be Hermione Krum in any case.

Not that a bit of selfishness was all bad, as long as you agreed on it. Turning down the opportunity to become full-fledged Aurors hadn't been the only slightly selfish thing they had agreed on. The decision to put off actively trying to have children for a few years had been a relatively easy one. Surprising, given that they both wanted them so much. But the mere thought of such responsibility so soon after what they had been through had seemed exhausting. The thought of planning it even more draining. It didn't stop them dreaming of it and hoping for it, and a happy accident wouldn't have been unwelcome, either, but they agreed that three or four years of not willingly bringing it on themselves would do no harm. In fact, in the long run, it might be...

"Better?" he asked as she finished the water and placed the empty glass on the table.

"Much," she said, reaching up and twining her fingers in his as they draped over her shoulder. Hermione rested her other hand on Viktor's knee, then stroked up his thigh.

"Don't do that unless we're staying down here," Viktor murmured, moving the mass of her hair aside and nuzzling her neck. Hesitantly, she moved her hand over slightly, rubbing against him, prompting a soft moan. She paused momentarily, unsure. They still did a lot of talking when they made love, asking for feedback, feeling each other out, newlywed enthusiasm still tempered somewhat by the lack of easy familiarity that would come with time and practice. They had determinedly held off until after the wedding, tempting as it had sometimes been to give in. Just for the comfort and to prove you were alive, if nothing else.

"Is that....?" Hermione whispered when he pulled back from her neck.



"It's fine," Viktor said, cupping his hand over her own, pressing it closer against him, guiding her movements for a brief period, then ducking back to her neck, his hand stroking her bare thigh, slipping beneath her chemise, his touch light. Hermione planted her palm against his chest, trailed down his stomach, slipped her fingers between his warm skin and the elastic waist of his pajama bottoms. He was bare beneath. She followed his front to the soft nest of black curls, gripped him, massaged him, felt him harden the rest of the way. She felt her nipples tighten in response. His fingers sought them out, teased them through the thin, buttery fabric, coaxing them to stiffen further.

When his hand darted into her neckline and he cupped her breast in his hand, rubbing his palm against the nipple, then a single fingertip, the pleasurable jolt went straight to the hollow between her legs. "Not here," she whimpered when he scooped up her hair and nipped at the nape of her neck with his teeth.

"Then where?" Viktor panted in her ear.

"The wall by the tree. At least if someone comes in, they won't see right away," Hermione said, half pushing him toward the spot when he stood.

"Where-" he began again, but stopped abruptly when she pressed him back into the wall in the niche by the tree with a soft bump, hooking her fingers into the waist of his pajamas and tugging them even lower on his hips, below the tent at the crotch. Hermione clutched his wrist with her left hand to steady herself and knelt in front of him. "You don't have-

"I want to," she said, pulling the pajama bottoms the rest of the way down, so he could step out of them. She wove the fingers of her left hand between the fingers of his right, pressing her palm to his. Hermione brushed the back of her right hand over the inside of his thigh, stroking upward, her fingers just brushing dark hair before she took her hand away and repeated the gesture, starting beside his knee. She did the same to the other thigh, letting her hand wander slightly higher this time, barely brushing him, then tucking her fingers between his legs, fondling him for a moment before running her fingertips along the underside of his shaft. Light caresses, at first, then firmer strokes, her fingers wrapped around him. Viktor's hand gripped hers a little tighter.

Soon after, she followed the same path with her tongue and lips, fingers still stroking. As Hermione attended to him, Viktor gently brushed his free left hand across the soft, full curve of her cheek, then cradled her face in his palm. His fingers slipped into her hair, buried in it, the wild tangle coiling around his fingers. He sucked his breath in sharply as she pressed her tongue against him, his hand falling from her hair, fingertips trailing down her neck, palm falling onto her nearly bare shoulder, giving her a soft squeeze.

“Enough,” he whispered on a breath. Hermione pulled away and looked up at him questioningly. “Come here,” he pleaded, prying his fingers loose from hers and cradling her jaw with his right hand, thumb rubbing along the fine ridge of her jaw when she rose. Viktor planted a light kiss on her forehead, brushed her hair back with his left hand, traced the contour of her brow with his index finger, then the outline of her lips. He cradled her face in both hands, tilting it up toward him, rubbing his thumbs over her cheekbones, feeling out the lines of her face as though taking her in through his fingers, his skin. Hermione sighed and closed her eyes, sank into the sensation of warmth from Viktor’s hands, the smoothed down calluses at the base of his fingers, the sharp contrast of the softness of the rest of his palms.

Viktor dipped his mouth to hers, lips skimming, then pressing against her own. He worked his way down her throat, pausing over her pulse, tenderly kissing the soft, yielding flesh, then ducking his head to her collarbone, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her closer to him, pressing against her. Hermione compliantly lifted her arms when he pushed the chemise up around her waist, bunching the fabric, then stripping it from her, peeling it up her body and over her head, discarding it on the floor. She peeled her knickers down, let them fall to her ankles. Stepped out of them.

Viktor considered her for a moment, skimming his eyes over the roundness of her figure, the full curves, one curve flowing into the next, no harsh lines. His fingers rubbed against her breasts, lingering over the hard nipples, before trailing down to grasp her waist. He put his lips to her nipples next, taking them into his mouth one at a time, swirling his tongue around and over them, suckling gently, warm and wet. He started sinking to the floor, lowering her with him, easing her back to the floor, their discarded clothes beneath them.

Hermione let her legs fall apart, welcomed him, tilted her pelvis slightly to ease his entry, gasped as he bumped against her cervix, seated fully inside her. She pressed her legs tightly around him, clung to him, held him against her with her hands as he began to thrust. They were cheek to cheek, their breathing ragged in each other’s ears, the diffuse glow of the tree lights blurry through her half closed lids, filtering through her crisscrossed lashes. Hermione was dimly aware of the noise, past caring, now, the soft rhythmic thump a background to the noise of their breath and the blood rushing in her ears.

Before long she tensed, her muscles tightening in jerky, irregular spasms at first, then a forceful, rhythmic clutching, embracing him as he pushed inside her, the sensation growing stronger as he arched his pelvis into her, tilted his hips to create more friction. Finally, his hand slipped between them, his fingertip massaging her clitoris in time with his thrusts. She gave a strangled cry of pleasure, suppressed and choked off in her throat, fearful someone would hear. She lifted herself to him, met him in his thrusts, muffled herself against his

shoulder, kissed his neck when she could catch her breath.

After a few more minutes, he lifted himself off of her, propping over her. Hermione let her limbs fall away, sink uselessly to the floor, the muscles warm and soft and weak as though they were melting. Viktor's thrusts slowly became more sporadic, but deeper and harder. He knelt and braced her hips with his hands, his fingers sinking into her soft flesh. His hips driving into hers until he spilled inside her, warm and wet. They panted together for a few moments, each studying the other's face, Viktor propping on his elbows above her, still nestled inside her.

"Kiss me. We're under the mistletoe," Hermione whispered, noticing for the first time that one of the dozens of bunches that Molly had scattered throughout the house happened to be directly above them.

"With pleasure. Where would you like me to kiss you?" Viktor said with a subtle smile, tracing a fingertip over her chin.

"I think it had best be on the lips, and we had best be going back to bed. The last thing we want the Weasleys finding under their tree on Christmas morning is the two of us. Naked," Hermione said drowsily, returning the smile. By the time the two of them had donned their clothing and padded back up the stairs, Percy had extinguished his wand. He slept open-mouthed, head lolling to the side on the pillow. Moody, in a different position now, snored on, his magical eye now resting on the bedside table, pointed at the ceiling. He was a little quieter, but they were still able to slip back into bed without raising the noise level in the room too much.

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"How's your head?" Hermione murmured, slipping by Viktor in the small bathroom, gathering up her clothes.

"A touch fuzzy. I've had worse. I imagine it's more due to Moody sawing away all night than the eggnog. Yours?"

"Tolerable. Mostly, I have a crick in my neck," Hermione replied, rubbing at the tight muscles there.

"Come on. Crick or no crick, breakfast is promptly at seven. Orders of the lady of the house. And it's ten before seven. Don't want her sending a search party up here to determine where we've gone," Viktor said, catching her arm and steering her toward the door.

Most of the Weasleys and the house guests were already downstairs, talk

subdued in the pre-breakfast hour. Breakfast was an informal affair, sprawling through the house, plates balanced on chair arms and glasses tucked onto end tables. It melted seamlessly into the opening of presents soon enough, unhurried and organized, since there were no little ones to go tearing into everything. Before noon, a great many of them had drifted off. Gone back home, to other family gatherings with girlfriends, and others to prepare for long treks back to foreign parts.

"I hate to rush off, Molly, but we need to get home. We've imposed enough. Thank you so much for the afghan you knitted. It will look fantastic in the house. And thank you for keeping Crookshanks for us. I know it was last minute," Hermione said, embracing the older red haired woman.

"You're welcome, dear. Any time. I think of it as practice for when everyone starts calling me up, asking me to babysit," Molly said. "Come into the kitchen and let me fix you two something to take home."

"Oh, we couldn't..." Hermione protested.

"Nonsense! Come on, let me fix you something," Molly insisted, pulling her toward the kitchen.

"Viktor... afghan..." Hermione said, holding out the gift bag for him to take before allowing herself to be tugged into the kitchen. Viktor hooked the bag on his left arm.

"Arthur... thank you for having us," Viktor said, extending his hand for a shake.

"It was a pleasure. Almost like old times, all of you in the house. We miss that," Arthur admitted.

"Moody, if you're planning on staying here until the last cat's hung, I hate to tell you... we're taking our cat," Viktor said mischievously, watching Moody stomp across the room.

"Just leaving, lad. Had all the family togetherness I can take, no offense," Moody grumbled to Arthur.

"Well, if you haven't had all the Christmas cheer you can take, my parents just sent a bottle of rakia and I brought back some bourbon. Can't promise we'll hang any cats, much as I might want to sometimes, but I can get you pretty snookered..." Viktor said, letting the offer dangle.

"And why on earth would you want to invite a battered old wreck over to your house on Christmas?" Moody said, his voice milder than usual.

“Fondness for historical monuments. And maybe to let him inspect the darned house for himself and be satisfied there are enough wards on it. Besides, we never properly thanked you for the wedding gift. That seven compartment steamer trunk is the thing to have. We have it at the foot of our bed. And maybe I never properly thanked you for bashing some sense into my head about who I should be paired with. And why I shouldn’t elope with her,” Viktor said. Moody simply grunted in reply. “I’ll take that as a yes,” Viktor said hastily.

“Your wife won’t mind?” Moody said with a short laugh. “I suspect I might get in the way of whatever you two have planned around the Christmas tree at home. I wouldn’t want to interfere with your enjoyment of the holiday, or any activities you might have all laid out for yourselves.”

“Believe it or not, she likes you. Besides, she wants an excuse to open the rakia, too,” Viktor replied.

“Viktor! Could you come get part of this? I don’t have enough hands!” Hermione called from the kitchen.

“Only if I can bring Moody home!” Viktor shot back, already heading for the kitchen.

“Sure! I like strays! You can keep him! Make him pack part of the goose, for all I care!” Hermione said.

“You know,” Arthur said quietly, “you never did explain to me why you insisted on putting the two of them together. I always figured they would do just fine with anyone.”

“Would have,” Moody allowed, picking up Crookshanks from the sofa and petting him absently. “But any old fool could see they would do best together. Gave them a bit more confidence, being together. A bit more incentive to watch one another’s back. Made them happier, too, being together. Some of the best Auror teams we ever had were married couples. You know that. Arthur, old eyes see a lot that young eyes miss. Old eyes see a lot.”

“I suppose that’s true. I’ll go fetch cloaks. We put them in the hall closet last night,” Arthur said, heading off.

“Yes, old eyes see a lot,” Moody said to Crookshanks. “Unless you blind yourself to it willingly. Particularly when you’re faking being asleep to get away from a dreadful bore and your bed happens to be directly above the Christmas tree... Newlyweds...” Moody said, giving his head a good natured shake. “They’ve got a better way to get away from a bore, I’ll grant you. The two of them always were

resourceful. Wouldn't put the old eye on the bedside table out of respect for just anyone. But don't tell them that, hmm?" Moody scratched the ginger cat under the chin affectionately. Crookshanks just purred louder in response.