

The Three Rs

by Bambu

Viktor Krum is a famous Quidditch player, witches throw themselves at him often.
Why isn't he happy?

Reflect

Chapter 1 of 3

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Disclaimer: The Potterverse belongs to J.K. Rowling and her assigns, I'm merely playing with the words and the characters, and I will put them back when I'm done.

Author's Notes: I have borrowed the propitious use of a certain word from my dear SnarkyWench, who has not only graciously given me permission, but has then been my second set of eyes for this piece. I thank her for all of her patience and hand-holding.

For other sundry details, I named one of the French Quidditch Teams, the Buzzards, for Lillithj; and the last little quip is entirely for A_Bees_Buzz.

This story is for Rozarka.

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Chapter One: Reflect

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He languidly folded his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling while listening to his companion snore. It came as something of a shock to realize that he was vaguely discontented with his life. It defied reason. Why would a handsomely paid, celebrated Quidditch star -- one with comely witches vying for his attention in every city -- be unhappy?

A snort pulled his attention from a spider spinning an intricate, gossamer web in the far corner of the ceiling to the blonde sleeping at his side.

A slight sneer crossed his thin lips and he plucked a long tendril of hair from his chest. Stealthily he slid from the bed. As was his custom, Viktor had gone to the witch's hotel room; he never invited dalliances back to his. Padding silently across the thickly carpeted floor to the gauzy curtains at the window, he looked out onto the street below, his nakedness hidden by the hotel's Privacy Charms.

Black eyes idly tracked pedestrians in Britain's most famous wizarding alley. A young girl with wild, curly brown hair followed her parents into the seasonally decorated Flourish and Blotts, and Viktor almost spat a curse.

He hated England.

He hated the cold, the damp, the rigidly civil populace.

A rustling noise from the large bed reminded him of the lithe figure he'd spent the night with. Thank the stars she was still asleep. Abruptly, he felt unclean. Then, as swiftly as he would snatch a Snitch in flight, Viktor gathered his clothes, dressed, and slipped from the room.

He felt as if he couldn't breathe. It was like this every time he played in Britain. It was too close to Hermione Granger.

After Albus Dumbledore's death, Viktor had sent Hermione a letter, asking her to come to Bulgaria for the summer -- to recuperate from the trauma of her sixth year. But she had declined. She had written, telling him that she was going on a fact-finding mission with Ron and Harry. Viktor had never read the rest of her letter, burning it with an *Incendio* so hot it had crisped the rubbish can.

He hadn't known then that she and the boy heroes were planning to save the world; that they would indeed succeed. After her letter an endless stream of Quidditch groupies had graced his bed. He hadn't cared for any of them then and he cared even less now.

He would never forget reading *Le Monde Magique* the morning after Harry Potter had defeated Voldemort. It had been breakfast; and Viktor joined his Vratsa Vultures teammates in the Hotel Sofistique's dining room. He had just cut into his first sausage when the coach burst into the room waving the newspaper. In vivid color on the front page was a candid photograph of the three young people who had barely survived the last battle of the war. The trio clung to one another, battered and wounded, with blood and soot smeared across their faces. They were crying and laughing and hugging. But the one thing Viktor always remembered -- as if the memory squeezed the air from his lungs -- was the way Weasley cupped Hermione's face and kissed her cheek. It was a gesture so tender that, at that very moment, Viktor had learned the meaning of hate.

Even years later, the mere thought of that image caused one of his hands to clench the leading edge of his dress robes, crushing the fine material in his fist.

That was then, this was now, he told himself grimly.

Viktor released the material, ran his hand through his shaggy hair, and strode to his room. He stripped his soiled clothing as he crossed the opulent suite, neither noticing nor caring for its luxury nor the colorful trail of fabric he left in his wake. He took a long, scalding shower ... scrubbing himself as if soap and water could somehow restore his self-esteem.

He had no doubt that Weasley had taken every advantage of his situation after Voldemort's fall and married Hermione. The red-head had loved her for a very long time. Viktor had played Quidditch amongst cut-throat professionals long enough to recognize a challenge when he met one. He'd known Weasley was his most dangerous competition, but he hadn't counted on his own petulance to further his adversary's cause.

Shampoo stung his eyes and he pretended it was that which caused them to burn. He leaned his brow against the slick tiles while hot water streamed over his head, sluicing down the smooth expanse of his back, carrying suds and heartache with it.

After the shower he wrapped a towel around his narrow hips and left the *suite*, steam billowing into the bedroom behind him. A small red glow pulsed from a sheet of complimentary stationery atop the bedside table. He had a message. It was probably his coach reminding him of an event where his presence was required.

It was.

It was but one of dozens of events he attended each year as a representative of his team and country, yet Viktor's hand trembled and the parchment shook when he read the name of the honoree printed in bold black ink: Hermione Granger.

Granger.

Not Weasley.

Viktor's heart lurched. Perhaps there was a way to make up for five years of heartache after all. Perhaps

He needed a plan.

Summoning the hotel-elf, Viktor asked for a meal to be brought to his rooms, then he handed an affirmative reply for the small elf to deliver to his coach. Next, he requested every newspaper or periodical which included an article covering the Ministry's event or its honoree. After the hotel-elf departed, he paced the large room like a caged Golden Snidget, detouring around chairs and the piano with a fluid grace he'd finally gained after years of practice.

The meal and reading material arrived at the same time. The hotel-elf had gathered every periodical from the past five years in which Hermione Granger appeared. After that first article declaring Voldemort's defeat, Viktor had refused to read another story about her. It was simply too painful.

Later, he would have no idea what he'd eaten in the way of food as his soul feasted upon the minutia of Hermione's post-war life. By teatime, newsprint, parchment, and foolscap littered the seating area of his suite. The table was covered with several articles which he had spelled out of their original publications. The gray velvet sofa held the tattered remains of *Witch Weekly's* most recent issue, the cover still in pristine shape. It held a headshot of Hermione which elicited a smile when he noticed her hair couldn't be contained within the frame.

Viktor allowed himself a moment of indulgence, counting the faint smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, his long fingers tracing the outline of her generous mouth.

Her image reacted to his touch. She smiled and he was suddenly unable to draw a breath.

Air.

He needed some air.

Rather than descending into Diagon Alley, which would be an exercise in public relations, Viktor took the gloriously empty elevator to the hotel's rooftop gardens. There were three to choose from: an herb garden with low-lying box-wood hedges between the herb beds, a floral garden with a riot of color and fragrance, and a small wood.

Viktor chose the trees.

Following a rustic footpath through the woods, he came to a tiny glade. It was utterly tranquil. To complete the fantastical image, a ray of sunshine broke through thick cloud cover, casting its warmth upon the single hand-hewn sandstone bench next to a carefully planted, single tree.

It was irresistible. The world-famous Quidditch star sat on the bench for a long time. Thoughts long repressed swirled through his mind, consolidating with information gleaned from the articles he had so eagerly read.

Hermione Granger First Muggle-born Hired by Malfoy, Ltd

She had been beguiling when she'd descended the steps from Gryffindor tower, her long blue dress swirling about her nascent womanly figure. Viktor's mouth had gone dry the moment he'd seen her.

Malfoy Ltd's Youngest Head of Research and Development, Hermione Granger, Says Diversity is Key

How she captured her lower lip between her teeth when writing an essay or reading a class assignment, the lip plumping on either side of perfect white teeth. His palms had grown sweaty, itching to touch her.

Granger-Weasley Nuptials Called Off!

Hours spent by the Black Lake at Hogwarts, studying, talking, laughing; the sun shining off her hair, her warm brown eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. Viktor had been captivated.

Hermione Granger, Recipient of the Mungo Bonham Medal for Cruciatus Cure

His eagerness whenever he received one of her letters, hiding from his teammates to read what she had to say. Fingers shaking, heart beating frantically, he had savored each neatly quilled word.

Hermione Granger, Wizarding Britain's Most Eligible Witch

He had been in love with her at eighteen and trying to forget her since he was twenty.

She was single.

Viktor had stared at the *Witch Weekly* magazine cover for a long time - heart clenching every time Hermione's image smiled at him -- before carefully cutting out every photograph of her he could find. She had matured into a slender woman with round hips and full breasts. Her hair had the tendency to escape the loose chignon she seemed to prefer during the day and, to his eyes, she was lovely wearing either form-fitting dress robes or utilitarian everyday robes. Her face had changed though. It was the same mouth, same nose, same freckles, but her eyes were different, very different from what Viktor remembered.

Hermione looked as if she had an intimate knowledge of hell. Considering the trials she'd endured, Viktor thought perhaps it was an apt description.

Clouds thickened over the small glade, oppressive and gloomy, but the darkness suited his melancholy mood. Once he had been the well-known personality and she merely a schoolgirl he fancied, but she was no longer a girl and he was just a jaded Quidditch player. There had been too many sexual encounters with women who only wanted the distinction of having bedded him.

Overcome by an unusual feeling of worthlessness, Viktor contemplated not attending the gala. He would be fined by his coach, but it might be worth it not to have to see her.

"*Typak!*" he called himself before rising from the bench in sudden determination.

His stomach was in a free-fall Wronski Feint by the time he reached his room. Within moments Viktor sought an age-old remedy for nerves and a healthy three-finger measure of vintage Armagnac swirled in the bottom of a glass. Holding the snifter in his palm, the warmth of his hand released the heady aroma of the liquor after several minutes.

Black eyes studied the muted champagne and red shades of the room. The suite had been tidied in his absence, the papers and cut-out articles organized in a neat pile, the *Witch Weekly* cover sitting atop the small stack. Then his attention moved to the bedroom. Through the open door Viktor could see his evening's dress robes suspended mid-air, hanging as if from a three-dimensional mannequin.

Viktor sloshed the liquor against his mouth as he recognized the cloak waiting for him to don. It was Durmstrang red, a replica of the one he'd worn to that Yule Ball so many years ago. He gulped the cognac, feeling it burn a path to his stomach and spread a welcoming lassitude through his tense muscles.

Resolutely, he set the glass on a small table, squared his shoulders, and stripped as he strode toward his past.

~oOo~

"Come on, Hermione. Why won't you give him another chance?" Ginny Wood whined. "He's terribly unhappy."

The object of her petulance glanced around the Ministry's gaily decorated ballroom, noting the size and number of cliques, the lavish dress robes representing a rainbow of color, the empty platform where the band would be performing in just a few minutes. The light from the wall sconces and chandeliers gave the cavernous room a warmth and charm it would have otherwise lacked. Hermione and Ginny seemed to be isolated in a corner near one set of windows. Slipping her wand from a slender pocket in the skirt of her gown, Hermione flicked it in a long-practiced manner, murmuring, "*Muffliato*."

For the past six months, the evening's honoree had been avoiding this conversation, but while this might not be the best location for such a private disclosure, the public venue would act as a restraint against Ginny's volatile nature. Neither witch liked negative publicity as each had been the focus of vitriol-dipped quills in the past.

Affectionately Hermione looked at her friend. The younger woman's burnished copper-colored hair was swept up in an elaborate twist and her champagne-colored dress robes showcased her Quidditch-toned body to perfection. Ginny Wood *nee* Weasley had inherited the best of each of her parents' features and had grown into a beautiful woman.

As the newest Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies, Ginny had almost as large a fan base as her husband. However, following the nightmare of her first year at school, she didn't particularly enjoy being in the spotlight. It was something she and Hermione had in common.

"Well?" Ginny asked, displaying the impatience for which Molly Weasley was well-known and had passed on to her daughter.

Hermione ignored the hard ball of tension forming in her stomach and took the plunge. "Would you take Oliver back if he cheated on you?"

"That's different," the red-head replied immediately. "We're married."

"Ginny!"

The younger witch pouted. "Oh, all right. But Ron didn't mean it. He was drunk."

Brushing a stray curl from her face, Hermione said, "That was his excuse the first time I caught him."

Ginny practically choked on her drink in a classic moment of real-life slapstick comedy. "S-sorry ... *first time*?"

Hermione's eyes were large and dark and held her friend's gaze. "I moved out of the flat after the second time, when I found him entertaining someone else ... in our bed."

Ginny's grip around her glass tightened, showing bloodless peaks where her knuckles were. Surprisingly the glass didn't shatter. Hermione looked away, across the sea of brown, blonde, and red hair twisted and coiffed in the height of wizarding fashion. She had been certain Ron lied to his sister about their break-up. Now she had confirmation, although it brought her very little satisfaction.

The two women were silent for a time, intermittently sipping their drinks. Hermione chewed her bottom lip, entirely unaware that she was doing so. After several moments, it was the younger witch who finally broke the silence.

"I always wanted you for a sister, you know."

Hermione glanced at her friend. "Me, too."

"Couldn't you give him another chance anyway?" Ginny's expression made it clear she already knew the answer, but it wasn't easy to relinquish her long-time fantasy.

"No," Hermione answered softly. "After that first time, I was pretty broken-hearted. I couldn't understand why I wasn't enough for him."

"Hermione, don't say that!" Ginny *Evanesc*o'd her glass in order to wrap her arms around her friend. It was tighter than a public embrace should be, but suddenly neither cared if others realized a fairly serious conversation was taking place. Onlookers wouldn't be able to hear what was said. Snape might have been a triple agent during the war, but he'd been brilliant and his spells were impervious to interference.

Once again silence fell as the awkwardness of the situation wound tight. A small group of witches drew near, but then collectively lumbered toward a bar farther along one wall as if they had been Confunded. Swallowing the last of her Blackthorn, Hermione's eyes rested upon an elderly wizard as he escorted his wife from the ballroom, a gnarled hand on the small of her back, her attention riveted to her husband's conversation. A wistful smile curved Hermione's mouth as she watched the couple.

"That's how I felt at the time," she murmured, "but then ... you know how I am. I started examining our relationship for what worked ... and what didn't." With a non-verbal Vanishing Spell, she disposed of her glass before turning her head toward the red-head. Intense hazel eyes stared back at her and it was easy to see beyond the surface fire to the depth of Ginny's distress. "Do you know what I realized, Gin?"

The younger witch shook her head.

"We were held together by a series of adventures we'd had as children and young adults, but after we destroyed Voldemort we had absolutely nothing in common."

"Don't tell me that was all you had."

"Well, there was sex. But until Ron realizes he's more than just Harry's sidekick, he won't be able to turn down the offer of an easy shag. And I won't be his consolation prize."

"You were never" Ginny's chin quivered before she gritted her teeth and plastered a neutral expression on her face.

Hermione touched her friend's arm, feeling the taut muscles. "But I was, Gin. It took me a long time to realize that. After I did, I started to notice other things. We never talked about anything that interested me. It bored Ron, likely still does. He never wanted to hear about my work aside from how many galleons I brought home, and he certainly didn't mind spending them. But that wasn't the worst thing."

"Godric's ghost! What else?"

Sadness lurked in the depths of Hermione's brown eyes. "He may have loved me, but he was never in love with me. If he had been, he would've made the time to listen to my dreams and hopes. Before you get angrier with him, Ginny, let me say that I'm not sure I was ever in love with him either. He was safe and he wanted me when--" she broke off abruptly.

The younger witch had always been quick on the uptake. "When what?"

Hermione shifted uncomfortably and re-settled the shoulder of her sleeveless dress robes.

"When what, Hermione?" Ginny asked insistently.

"When someone else didn't."

Hazel eyes widened. "Who? Who didn't want you? You've never said anything. How could they not want *you*? What was wrong with them?"

Hermione smiled, her heart warmed by her friend's staunch defense, even if the wound was years old. "It doesn't matter any more. It was a long time ago, and now I'm a free woman and able to do as I choose."

"Free woman," Ginny muttered. "You spend all your time at Malfoy's."

"And look where it's gotten me." Hermione rolled her hand at the crowded room.

"Up on a dais," Ginny retorted, "with a gold medal hanging from your neck!"

Hermione's hand automatically flew to the deeply scooped neckline of her gown. "No! That's not what I meant and you know it." She gestured across the room to where Neville Longbottom was seated with his slowly recovering parents. Frank and Alice Longbottom were seated at a table with four other recently revived patients from St. Mungo's Long-term Spell Damage ward.

"I know, I know. You did it for a good cause." Suddenly Ginny shifted away from the wall, smiling widely at someone across the room.

Hermione extrapolated the line between Ginny and the recipient of her smile and saw Oliver Wood disentangle himself from a small group of people congratulating him for his team's most recent victory.

Obligingly, Hermione ended the anti-eavesdropping spell as he wound his way through the crowd. Before he was near enough to hear them Ginny said softly, "I just want to see you happy in something more than a career."

Hermione replied equally softly, "Someday. Maybe." Then she greeted her friend's husband with real affection. "Oliver, thank you for coming to this thing. I know how busy you are."

"Hey, Hermione. Wouldn't have missed it." His accent was as lilting as when he'd been at school and he brushed her cheek with a kiss. Then he greeted his wife properly and asked, "How is it you birds get to hide in the corner when you're the witch of the hour? It's brutal out there."

The number of wizards and witches gathered in clutches around various political and sports figures had dwindled as the evening's festivities wound toward a close, but there was still something of a crush. There would be dancing for the next hour while people discretely took their leave.

A Ministry house-elf brought another round of drinks and Oliver took a long pull of his ale before making an observation. "I don't think Harry's come up for air since they put that pretty little bauble around your neck."

Hermione lightly touched the heavy golden medallion nestling between her collar bones once more. She'd chosen her robes with the medallion in mind. The black dress dipped to her cleavage, was scooped in the back, hanging below her shoulder blades, and fell to a swirl of silk around her feet. It gave her the appearance of a figure while disguising her flaws, and Hermione was vain enough to enjoy how feminine the elegant dress made her feel.

She dropped her hand, eyes searching the ballroom for the sight of a familiar tousled head of hair. She couldn't see Harry for the crowds, but it was safe to assume he was at the center of the largest crush of bodies. She had been so happy to know he was attending. Ron wasn't present as she still wasn't on speaking terms with him, but Hermione's success wouldn't have felt real without Harry there.

To her right, Ginny brushed imaginary lint from the sleeve of Oliver's forest green dress robes. The robes suited his coloring, and the two Quidditch players made a handsome couple. Ginny said, "Give them another five minutes and Gabrielle will swoop down to retrieve him."

"I know," Hermione agreed. Two years after the war ended, Harry Potter had surprised most of the wizarding world by marrying eighteen-year old Gabrielle Delacour, the winsome younger sister of Fleur Weasley. While Hermione was occasionally envious, she never begrudged Harry a single moment of his happiness.

Shaking off her momentary melancholy, she smoothed one hand down over the soft fabric of her dress, her fingers catching on an occasional crystal placed for maximum effect. Smiling indulgently, she described a scenario they had all witnessed on more than one occasion. "Gabrielle will toss her silver hair and say in that charmingly accented English of hers, '*Pardonnez-moi, Mesdames et Messieurs*, may I 'ave my 'usband back.' The men will stumble all over themselves in awe, the women will suck in their tummies, and Harry will have just enough time to escape."

Oliver snorted and draped an arm around his wife's shoulders.

Ginny laughed. "Where is 'Elle now?"

"Talking to Pansy Malfoy," Oliver replied. "Malfoy left her to talk to the Minister, or maybe it was the Minister who dragged Malfoy away. I'm not sure."

Hermione glanced across the thinning yet still moderate-sized crowd and found the platinum head of her employer. He was deep in conversation with the new Minister of Magic, Peter Marchbanks. Marchbanks was the son of Griselda Marchbanks, the redoubtable witch who, at one-hundred-seventy years of age, still sat on the Wizengamot and oversaw the annual O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. testing at Hogwarts.

Not far from the two men, Pansy Malfoy could be seen chatting with Gabrielle Potter, Daphne Greengrass and her *fiancé*, Roger Davies. Sensitive as always to her surroundings, Pansy's head turned sharply, but she relaxed when she noted it was Hermione watching her. They shared a brief smile before Pansy picked up the thread of her conversation with her former housemate.

Hermione reflected that her own successful employment with Malfoy Ltd had grown from her unexpected friendship with Pansy Parkinson. After Pansy's parents had been killed by Voldemort, the young, seriously wounded witch had sought shelter with her mother's cousins, the Weasleys. They, in turn, had brought her to the Order of the Phoenix headquarters to recuperate. After the first week, Pansy had joined Hermione in the Black family library.

Pansy was known to have said of their friendship, "I stepped into that Nimue-cursed library to look up a counter-jinx, stayed there for two years, and came out with a friend and a new life."

Initially distrustful of one another, Hermione's opinion of the cunning and highly intelligent witch had changed as a result of Pansy's steadfast loyalty to Draco Malfoy. He, in turn, adored her, placing himself in Order custody shortly after Pansy's family had been killed. Thereafter, an uneasy truce had settled upon the former adversaries, but that had been followed by respect and finally friendship.

Across the room, Daphne and Roger took their leave of Pansy. Hermione nodded in their direction. "Should I keep her company?"

"If she wanted company, we'd all know it," Oliver commented dryly. "Considering how close she is to her confinement I'm surprised Malfoy has left her side for a second."

Good-naturedly Ginny remarked, "Now there's a strategy for you. Get pregnant to keep your husband within arm's reach at all times."

Hermione shifted to make room for a group of merrymakers. "I can understand it tonight, though. These things are a bit of a crush."

The merrymakers hadn't been interested in moving past the three well-known friends and the following five minutes was spent glad-handing. Hermione had difficulty keeping a straight face as a middle-aged wizard tried to look down Ginny's dress robes while his wife pinched Oliver's admittedly delectable bum.

When the group finally left, Hermione broke out in giggles while Oliver rubbed the offended portion of his anatomy. He grumbled, "The one I really feel sorry for is Krum."

Suddenly Hermione's heart pounded in her ears. It was a name she didn't hear often, but it never failed to trigger a reaction.

"Viktor Krum?" Her voice cracked a bit on the second syllable.

Ginny gave her a questioning look and for a wildly improbable moment Hermione thought the redhead looked very much like Fawkes with her bright eyes and head tilted at that angle.

"Yeah," he replied. "He was named Seeker for Bulgaria's World Cup team yesterday, and when last I saw him he was surrounded by a wall, five deep, of middle-aged Quidditch groupies with no one to come to his rescue. Poor bugger!"

"Oliver!" Ginny admonished.

"What?" he said innocently, but there was a twinkle in his eye. On occasion, his teasing was strongly reminiscent of the Weasley twins. Fred and George had both been killed during the last year of the war, and Hermione often wondered if it hadn't been Oliver's sense of humor which had pulled Ginny's affections from Harry's more brooding nature.

"I didn't know he was supposed to be here tonight," Ginny tried to see over the remaining crowds, attempting to locate the dark-haired Bulgarian.

"The Vultures are playing Falmouth day after tomorrow. Those Falcons are brutes in the air, and Aleksander Bogomil wanted to acclimatize his team before the match. He's a brilliant coach, y'know. If Puddlemere was to trade me, I wouldn't mind going to Vratsa. In any event, the team's been here for a couple of days already."

Across the room, musicians stepped onto the dais. The crowds began to shift, making space on the dance floor as the opening strains of a song blanketed the cacophony of gossip and chatter. Hermione waved her hands at Ginny and Oliver. "You two should dance."

"What about you?" Ginny asked.

"I'll be fine."

Ginny crossed her arms. "You can still dance."

"Of course I can, but I like a cozy corner. You know that."

"Don't be a wallflower, Hermione. You're too gorgeous tonight to hide over here."

"Never mind about me." The brunette pursed her lips. "Go on. I'm sure to find something to keep me occupied."

With a smile and a laugh the Woods smoothly navigated the nearby tables and crowd. They moved sinuously together, and Hermione felt a pang for something she'd never had, even in those few months she and Ron had lived with one another.

She uncrossed her arms, absently noting the faint indentation marks on her forearms where she'd pressed against the crystals on her gown.

Waiting until Ginny and Oliver were lost in the swirl of other couples on the dance floor, she finally spoke. Her voice was low and clipped, and she seemed to be talking to the empty space in front of her. "Whoever you are, you can come out now. I do hope you're not a reporter because --" Hermione gasped when a man stepped from behind

the draperies where he'd been hiding. "Viktor!"

~o0o~

Repent

Chapter 2 of 3

Viktor watches Hermione at the Awards Banquet ... What will he make of his opportunity?

Chapter Two: Repent

~o0o~

Viktor kept a low profile when he entered the Ministry, ducking most of the press and the hot hands of his admirers. It was always an unpleasant surprise to realize the most aggressive fans were the middle-aged witches.

He made his way to the first floor, finding a spot near one of the columns which gave him an excellent view over the balcony and into the reception foyer below. A group of owl-eyed Quidditch fans followed him. It was easy to accept congratulations on his selection for his National Team and to staunch the eruption of questions about his upcoming game against Falmouth; after all, he'd held a thousand similar conversations over the past several years. Answering as if a Dicto-Quill had seized control of his tongue, Viktor took the opportunity to scan his surroundings.

Old fashioned lamps and chandeliers hung at discreet intervals, casting soft light over new arrivals. Since the war had ended, the wizarding world embraced peacetime with a gaiety reflected in festive robes and easy smiles.

Long-practiced at finding hidden treasure, it took Viktor exactly forty-five seconds to locate Hermione.

She was standing between the Minister of Magic and Harry Potter; unexpectedly Viktor's mouth became dry as he stared just as it had all those years before. A rainbow of light sparkled from the evening's honoree as if she had been marked by the hands of a god. He licked his lips reflexively and regrettably didn't get his fill of the sight of her as a particularly knowledgeable fan tugged on his sleeve.

When his eyes sought Hermione again she had begun to climb the stairs leading up to the ballroom. Viktor realized the rainbow-halo surrounding her was a result of candlelight reflecting off the gemstones decorating her dress.

He watched hungrily.

She was laughing at something Potter said, her head tilted back, revealing a smooth expanse of throat and collarbone. Viktor swallowed with some difficulty and tried to dampen his body's entirely visceral reaction to her. Even in those first, innocent days sharing textbooks under the gimlet-eyed stare of Irma Pince, the Hogwarts' librarian, he had reacted strongly to Hermione's presence.

When the Minister escorted Hermione through the huge double doors, Viktor excused himself from his clutch of fans to find his table assignment. The ballroom was sumptuously decorated, multiple round tables dressed in golden linens and fine crystal. The ceiling above had been charmed to glow with the colors of sunset, mauve, peach, and hints of darker grays and indigo.

Viktor deftly wound around other attendees bent on similar quests, but it took twice as long to find his seat because he kept following Hermione's progress. She was guided toward the broad side of the room where a long table had been set. Near it was a small podium. Hung on the wall at either end of the long table, obscuring mirrored panels beneath, were two tapestries; one representing Malfoy Ltd, the other the Ministry of Magic.

Only interested in watching Hermione, Viktor stared until his eyes burned and an elderly couple asked his pardon as he was standing in their way. Heat flooded his cheeks, embarrassment at having been caught gawking.

"*Smeshnik*," he muttered to himself under his breath. He wasn't some star-struck wizard meeting his childhood hero for the first time ... and, yet, he was.

The elderly couple recognized him and asked about Bulgaria's weather. They spoke briefly, but Viktor kept looking over their heads. For a fleeting moment his attention was rewarded with an unobstructed view of Hermione walking with Minister Marchbanks. It was only then he noticed her limp. It wasn't pronounced and it wasn't a figment of his imagination.

Questions dipped and rolled in his mind: was it a recent injury, was it a war wound, why hadn't he read about it, why hadn't he known? In all the years she'd been lost to him, never had he felt so bereft. Never had he been so angry with himself. The woman he'd loved for years was practically a stranger.

Viktor seriously considered leaving, but he couldn't bring himself to miss the presentation of her award.

Dinner was an exercise in patience. He wasn't talkative and his eyes constantly strayed to the long table, settling on the young witch seated between the Minister and Draco Malfoy. Viktor noticed that Hermione toyed with her food and still had the nervous habit of chewing on her lower lip. Recognizing the mannerism brought a wistful smile to his lips; after that, he simply could no longer feign eating.

When Hermione accepted her award, Viktor pretended she was speaking directly to him, and he memorized every word which crossed her lips. She was charming and sincere, introducing the Longbottom family as her inspiration and Draco Malfoy as a benevolent taskmaster. The laughter which greeted her latter remark was scattered between two tables and three people sitting at the long table, one of them being Malfoy himself. However, there was no mention of her infirmity and Viktor listened for one.

As soon as the speeches were concluded he excused himself from his innocuous table companions. When he met Oliver Wood amidst the throng of people at the bar, he was surprised to see him.

"Krum!" Oliver practically shouted over the crowd.

Viktor nodded. "Vood."

"Good of you to come. I'm surprised Bogomil let you off your leash."

"My leash?"

"You know, like the lead you use to walk a Crup." Oliver gestured with his hands.

Viktor laughed before ordering cognac. "My coach is the reason I haff come tonight. It is good to see old friends."

Oliver turned a shrewd eye on his professional adversary. "Old friends? I wasn't aware you'd stayed in touch with Hermione."

To cover his embarrassment Viktor took a hasty drink of his cognac, the pungent aroma flared his nostrils. "No, ve haven't stayed in touch, but she vas my friend and I am happy for her to receive this recognition."

"She's done well for herself, but we always knew she would ... she's Harry's friend, after all."

Affronted, Viktor said stiffly, "Hermione does not need recognition for her friendship with Potter. She is formidable vitch in her own right."

Oliver buffeted Viktor's shoulder, his good nature unruffled. "She's a right peach, that bird."

The bartender handed an old-fashioned tumbler filled with a generous portion of Firewhisky to the Scottish Quidditch star before he and Viktor moved out of the press of thirsty event-goers. Once in the lee of the crowd, Viktor seized the moment. "I never knew Hermione vas hurt. Vat happened to her?"

"Oh, that. I'd almost forgotten." Oliver sipped his drink and grimaced. "Terrible stuff, but it almost makes the groping bearable."

They shared a moment of solidarity two public figures commiserating over the effusiveness of their fans but Viktor wasn't to be dissuaded from the main topic. He was a Seeker; he knew how to keep his eye on the Snitch. "Vat did you almost forget? Vat happened to Hermione?"

"She almost lost her leg in the last battle." Oliver nodded his head at Viktor's startled reaction. "It was iffy there for awhile, but you know her, she wasn't about to let an injury stop her. When Ginny started training seriously for the Harpies, Hermione joined her. She's not fond of flying, but you know how much we use our legs in the air. She said it was great physical therapy."

"Physical Therapy?"

Oliver chuckled. "It's a Muggle term, or so Hermione says. It's a form of athletic rehabilitation."

"Clever." Viktor swirled his cognac in the snifter and avoided looking at the other man.

"She is at that. She's a very clever girl."

The crowd jostled them then and their moment was over. They congratulated one another for having been tapped for their country's World Cup teams before being swept away by the inevitable tide of enthusiastic fans.

Shortly after Viktor left Oliver, he made his escape to the relative solitude of the men's lavatory. For a long time he stared at himself in the mirror. Impatient fingers brushed shaggy hair from his brow before splashing water on his face.

He made a decision.

Withdrawing his wand from the narrow pocket in his dress robes, he made certain he was alone for the moment then flicked his wrist, and with a swish and a hard rap atop the crown of his head, he cast a Disillusionment Spell upon himself. He returned to the ballroom. Regrettably an Auror guarding the entrance stopped him the Ministry's security was designed to detect such an infiltration. However, once the man recognized Viktor, he'd laughed good-naturedly, asked for an autograph, and allowed the famous Seeker to pass.

Upon re-entering the enormous room, Viktor deftly skirted the wall as easily as he maneuvered his broom through opposing teams in the air, his slightly pigeon-toed walk easily corrected by the weights in the heels of his shoes and years of practice. He worked his way to a corner where he concealed himself in the shadows of the heavy drapery by a large window. He was more than a bit embarrassed by his unorthodox behavior. Never before had he done such a thing at a public function, but his hiding place gave him the ability to watch Hermione without interruption or notice.

She was magnificent.

He had always thought her pretty, and when she'd dressed up for the Yule Ball he'd thought her stunning. Tonight, it was as if the early promise of the girl had come to fruition, blossoming into the self-assured woman who carried herself like a queen ... except for the limp.

His stomach churned with bitter recrimination. How had he not known she almost lost her leg? How could he not have sent her an acknowledgement of all she had done for their world?

Across the room, Hermione greeted Ginny Wood with all the affection of sisters, and they made their way toward his private niche. Viktor almost panicked, but he couldn't take his eyes off Hermione. The black gown she wore rippled as she walked with her noticeable-but-not-handicapping limp, and the gems affixed to the bodice glittered in the flattering candlelight. Her hair was piled atop her head in a riot of curls, held in place, he was certain, by a Stasis Charm of some sort.

Painful as it was to be so near her -- it felt as if his heart was being shredded -- Viktor refused to walk away or to reveal himself. He was the one who had initially chosen to spurn her; now he hadn't the right to claim friendship or intrude upon her private conversation.

He shifted closer to the heavy draperies, nose twitching at the fusty smell of decades' old dust worked into the fabric. As a result of his position, he was enclosed within the range of Hermione's anti-eavesdropping spell and the unwitting recipient of her conversation with Ginny Wood.

Viktor had never liked Ron Weasley and when Hermione said the red-head had broken her trust in such an ill-bred manner, he clenched his hands. After she said she'd caught Weasley cheating a second time, he dug moon-shaped divots into the flesh of his palms. But he remained quiet and soaked up every word, every gesture, and wished with every beat of his heart that he hadn't thrown her regard into the rubbish.

When the Woods chose to dance, Viktor knew he needed to leave, but he couldn't bring himself to move. His eyes greedily memorized Hermione's every feature, fuel for his future fantasies.

When she challenged his presence, his palms grew slick with nervous embarrassment. He should have remembered how astute she was. Squaring his shoulders, he dropped the Disillusionment Charm and stepped forward.

She gasped his name.

"Hello, Hermione." He cringed when her name came out almost as mangled as the first time he had ever said it. He knew how to pronounce it properly, but when he got nervous his accent was heavier.

They stared at one another for a long moment before Viktor noticed how pale she had grown. He frowned. "Are you ill?"

"No! No, I'm fine, thanks." Belying her answer, Hermione captured her lower lip between her even, white teeth. "I didn't know you were here until just now."

"My team is playing in Britain this week." He flushed. Oliver Wood had just given her that information.

But it seemed his *faux pas* relieved her uneasiness, and a small smile curved her lips. "I know. Good luck. Ginny that's Ginny Wood hates playing against the Falcons. She says they're brutes in the air."

"Out of the air, too," Viktor agreed and dared a step closer. The fresh scent of her citrus-based fragrance was invigorating and he inhaled deeply. "Congratulations on winning the award."

Her fingers flew to the medallion at the base of her throat and her cheeks tinted pink. "Thank you. My team deserves it as much, if not more, than I do."

He smiled then. She had always been generous in sharing credit. "Maybe, but it was your idea, was it not?"

Hermione glanced out toward the dancers twirling about the room. The music was loud but not penetrating. "Perhaps, but I couldn't have done it without their help."

The song came to an end, blending into the next tune. A harpsichord and flute began the introduction of a baroque air and Viktor recognized it. It had been the second dance they had shared at that long ago Yule Ball.

He caught and held the look she flicked in his direction. The mask of polite indifference had disappeared from her serious brown eyes, and he thought his assessment that she'd seen hell was accurate. His heart hammered in his chest, leaving him feeling unusually naked and vulnerable.

She said nothing, closing her eyes slowly before she faced the dancers once again.

Viktor wiped his sweaty palm on his dress robes and swallowed hard. "Would you like to dance with me, Hermione?"

She stiffened. "No, thank you."

"I beg your pardon," he stammered, mortified. He took a step away from her.

"No! I'm sorry, Viktor." She placed a slender hand on his forearm and he froze. Softly she said, "I didn't mean that I wouldn't dance with you, it's just ... well ... I don't dance very often any more, and when I'm tired"

As if he'd been hexed, he suddenly understood. "It's all right. We don't have to dance. May I offer you coffee?"

Her smile robbed him of breath.

"I'd like that," she replied simply.

He could see the effort behind the smile and he wondered whether she meant it. "I understand if you are too tired, Hermione." He managed to say her name without mangling it. "Is not an obligation."

She turned to face him fully and light shone off a scar on her left arm. He hadn't seen it before. It was approximately ten centimeters in length and wrapped diagonally around her bicep. It was shiny in the way that old burns sometimes heal, and it completely unsettled him. Without forethought, he raised his hand to trace the ridge of scar tissue.

Hermione jerked away from him.

Before he could explain, they were besieged by three couples offering their congratulations to Hermione. Feeling extremely awkward and completely out of his depth for some reason, Viktor edged to the side of the group, wishing fervently that he hadn't come and cursing his oafish approach to her. He had a sudden, fierce desire to soak his head in a vat of Old Ogden's.

He turned to leave.

"Viktor?" Hermione's voice stopped him mid-step. He whipped around and was taken aback by the hurt and disappointment etched upon her face. "Do you ... do you not want to have that coffee then?"

He felt as if a giant had throttled him, choking off his ability to speak. Instead, he nodded.

"I understand," she whispered, turning back to her small audience to answer a question, but he'd seen the sheen of tears in her eyes.

What had he done?

Oh.

What a twice-damned fool he was.

"Hermione," he interrupted, "that is not what I meant. I would love to have coffee with you." Authoritatively -- something he hadn't been all night -- Viktor addressed Hermione's audience. "Will you excuse us, please? I haven't seen my friend in a long time and we are going for coffee."

As he smoothed his calloused hand down the back of her gown it caught on the radiant stones scattered on the bodice before his palm nestled perfectly in the small of her back as if it was *his* place. Using his fingers he guided Hermione away from the small group of fans toward the massive double doors. Viktor felt the hitch in her gait through their contact and noticed her limp was more pronounced than earlier in the evening. "Are you sure you are all right?"

"Yes, thanks. Just tired."

He dropped his hand from her back, offering his arm instead. There was a brief hesitation before Hermione wrapped her hand around the crook of his elbow and leaned on him. Protectiveness surged in his chest. He had no idea what his face looked like, but people made way for them without asking for autographs or impeding their progress. In moments Viktor retrieved her outer wrap from an attendant at Ministry's cloakroom.

"I thought we were going to have coffee at one of the tables," Hermione said.

Wrong-footed once more, Viktor was abruptly exasperated. "I cannot ... I beg your pardon ... but what is it about you, Hermione Granger, that leaves me fumbling like an adolescent wizard?"

She smiled, and, for the first time, he knew it was real.

"I've never thought of you as fumbling, Viktor." Taking a quick look at their surroundings her eyes landed upon the nearby painting of a group of influential Aurors from decades past. Every single brush-stroked Auror pretended an interest in something other than Hermione and Viktor's conversation, but it was obvious they were listening. With a defiant toss of her head, Hermione said, "I'm perfectly happy to go somewhere else for coffee. It would be nice."

They walked past the renovated statuary of magical brethren, and although it was molded gold, the house-elf appeared to eye Hermione's every movement suspiciously. They paused for Viktor to drape the velveteen cape around her shoulders, but he stepped in front of her to fasten it beneath her chin as well. It was a gesture so reminiscent of their early relationship that his hands paused mid-air. Their eyes met and he was shocked by her vulnerable expression. Forcing his shaking fingers to

complete their action, he spoke softly. "I haff missed you, Hermione. Please forgive me."

An inarticulate little cry escaped her lips and she wrapped her arms around him, her face buried in his neck. Viktor's stomach swooped like a rogue Bludger but he gathered her close, drowning in the scent of her perfume and the feel of her in his arms. He was so entranced by the feeling of her lips moving against his neck that he almost didn't hear her voice. "... you so much."

A cough echoed around the Ministry's atrium and Viktor gently disengaged her arms. Several people were overtly watching them. "This is too open," he said.

"Public," Hermione automatically corrected, and then flushed.

He clenched his fist to keep from touching her face. She had often corrected his English when they first met, she had told him once that it meant he mattered to her. "Right," he said, quietly. "It is too public."

"Where should we go?"

"Would you like to come to my hotel? I haff a sveet."

Her head shot up, her eyes wide.

"I do not mean ... that is ... I haff never asked a vitch to my rooms." At her frankly disbelieving look, he nodded earnestly. "It is true. Never. I pledge this to you, Hermione."

She tucked her hand around his arm as she had earlier in the ballroom. "All right."

Relief flooded him. "I was only thinking of a quiet place to talk. There is much to say."

"Will you tell me why you stopped writing to me?"

The question was soft, hesitant, and Viktor was taken aback. He had forgotten just how sensitive she had been as a young woman. The publicity and newspaper articles he'd read earlier coupled with her manners during the evening had shown a confident, assertive witch. But he knew - as few others did -- just how superficial and inaccurate the media's assessments could be.

He pointedly looked over Hermione's shoulder at a witch blatantly staring at them. The woman blushed and turned toward the bank of enormous fireplaces along one wall.

Hermione noticed his shift of attention, but said nothing as they crossed the large room, their shoes clicking on the wood-paneled floor. Viktor chose the fireplace in the center, several beyond the one chosen by the nosy witch. Two bright flares of green later and they had Floo'd to the hotel.

Regardless of the late hour there were a number of guests in the lobby, a few were seated among small groupings of club chairs reading the evening edition of the *Daily Prophet* or other periodical, and some guests were crossing the highly polished marble floor to enter the pub or the all-night restaurant. A number of hotel guests and employees eyed Viktor and Hermione, but no one spoke to the couple, and they were in silent agreement to hold off on their conversation while in such public surroundings.

Stopping briefly at the front desk, Viktor requested coffee and dessert sent to his suite. Once alone in the elevator, however, he turned to his companion. He brushed a bit of ash from her hair and said, "The answer to your question is simple. I can tell you now."

"Wait," Hermione said, then explained further, "I'd like this to be a truly private conversation."

He nodded. A comfortable silence settled over them until the chime announced their floor. It occurred to Viktor that he was no longer as anxious as before. Somehow being near her, knowing she was single and available and had accepted his invitation, had settled his nerves.

As they stepped into his suite Viktor looked critically at the pale gray couch and the rich dark upholstery of the chairs. The room was immaculate, and there was nothing for which he should feel uneasy. He swept off his Durmstrang red cloak, and watched Hermione's eyes follow the hem as it flared in an arc of fabric.

When the weight of her gaze settled upon him, Viktor didn't recognize her expression. Hermione pulled her wand from the hidden pocket of her dress, her arm parting the open seam of her cloak, and, with a fluid efficiency he had rarely seen, she cast a series of diagnostic and privacy spells around the room. At last she came to the stack of newspaper and magazine clippings, her eyes settling on the image of her own face for several beats of Viktor's heart.

When the silence pulled taut between them, she raised those curiously intelligent brown eyes to him. He answered her earlier question easily enough. "I was jealous and afraid."

"Oh, Viktor," she whispered. Circling the low table, Hermione sank into the sofa's comfortable pillows as if seeking a good hug. "There was no reason for you to have been either."

"You chose Ron Veasley." He had never known a smile could be bitter and self-mocking, but she had taught him many things, and it hurt to see such an expression on her face.

"There was no choice to make. You stopped writing to me. I'll admit I was confused about my feelings for Ron during my sixth year at school, but my heart practically leapt from my chest every time you sent me a letter. Then you stopped writing and Ron was there, and he wanted me when you didn't."

Viktor crossed the room as if he were flying on his Firebolt. "No! I always wanted you. Always. Ven you left vith Potter and Veasley, I thought that was your decision. That I was never going to be what you wanted or needed."

Her fingers flew to her mouth, her words indistinct. "Didn't you *read* my last letter?"

Viktor couldn't meet her eyes and sat on the edge of the sofa, ignoring the upholstery's enchanted invitation to make himself comfortable. "Vell ... uh ... not all of it."

"Not all of it?"

"I never read beyond the sentence *I haff to go away vith Harry and Ron. I can't tell you vat ve haff to do, but it's very important ...*"

"You remember the words I used?"

"Of course!"

"I don't even remember exactly what I wrote. Do you remember anything else from the letter?"

He still wouldn't meet her eyes, but he watched her finger the velvet of her wrap. "You see I was so angry that Veasley was vith you ... I didn't read the rest."

"Not even after you calmed down."

"Er ... no. You see ... I burnt it." He heard her breath whistle past her teeth and rushed through the rest of his explanation. "I was so angry ... so sure you had chosen him over me ... I tried to forget you." He stared at his Quidditch roughened hands as if he'd never seen the scars marring his knuckles before. "I tried very hard."

"I'm so sorry."

"Vy would you be sorry? It is I who am a fool."

One of her hands covered his. It was pale and delicate next to his weathered skin. "You're not a fool. Well, you did a foolish thing, but, Viktor, you're not a fool."

He finally met her eyes. "I didn't know what you were doing until the day you defeated Voldemort. I read it in *Le Monde Magique*."

Her discomfiture was obvious and she shifted on the sofa. "Yeah, I think it was in every newspaper. I don't remember much about that day."

"After that picture ... the way Veasley touched you ... I was sure you were his."

"I wasn't."

He snorted in disbelief. "Don't tell me ... I know what I saw."

"What we were doing was too dangerous." Her grip on his hand tightened and she looked across the room, staring into the fire flickering in the small fireplace. It was too small to add any real warmth to the room, but the crackling of the logs was a cheery sound. Hermione shivered. "We couldn't afford a single distraction. It was terrifying searching for all those pieces Voldemort had secreted away ... never knowing who our allies or our enemies were. All those stories you hear about people getting together the night before a battle are bollocks. We had a number of those nights before the end, and I spent each and every one of them writing letters to --"

"Your parents?" he asked gently. He'd read, just that afternoon, about her father having been killed by Death Eaters near the end of the war.

"And you," she replied.

"Oh." He clenched his teeth.

"I never sent any of them. I couldn't after you ... when you didn't answer my last letter." She angled her head to look at him and her eyes were glossy. "I missed you then. So much, Viktor. I've never had many friends. Even now I can count, on one hand, the number of people I trust with my life. Losing your friendship was very painful." Abruptly she looked back at the fire, as if she had revealed too much.

Except Viktor was an astute observer of people and he had known this woman very well at one time. There was something she wasn't saying. Something important.

The room grew quiet save the popping of the wood as it burned and Viktor tried to figure out what he had missed. It was as if a Snitch had ducked into cloud cover; he knew it was there, but he couldn't see it.

Wood shifted in the grate and a tongue of yellow flame leapt chimney-ward. Moments passed in silence and Viktor stared at the flames.

The answer came then and he stood abruptly.

Hermione's fingers twitched as if she were controlling an urge to draw her wand. It was her instinctive reaction which decided him. He had left his outer cloak at the door, but now he unbuttoned his dinner jacket so hastily he fumbled some of the buttons. Hermione's eyes were huge in her pale face and she watched his movements carefully. He recognized the expression as that of a seasoned duelist.

"I will not lie to you, Hermione." He dropped his jacket across the table and unbuttoned the cuffs of his starched dress shirt. "I am glad you wrote me those letters. I am glad you still cared for me. I was not good. I am not a saint." First the left sleeve then the right. "I have spent the past ... since your letter ... I have tried to forget my feelings for you. But I have never," he rolled the sleeves up to his elbow, first the left then the right, "never been a Death Eater."

Her voice was choked with tears and they glistened in her eyes but didn't fall. He wondered how many times she'd cried over the years. She stared at his pale, unmarked forearms. "I know that. But back then ... when you didn't write to me any more I wondered. You don't know how much that hurt." She flicked her eyes to meet his and her hands settled once more in her lap, her fingers clutching each other, knuckles white. "I cared for you very much, Viktor."

He sank to the sofa once more, thinking it was an appropriate metaphor that he was practically bare while she was still wrapped in her cloak like an enigma. "Those feelings are still there. They have never vent away. I just buried them."

Her cheeks were red, but she said dryly, "I'll just bet you buried them. Eight inches deep."

"Hermione!"

"I'm not a little girl any more. I know what you've been up to these past few years. A new witch at every game, isn't it?"

"Not every game." He ran his hand through his hair, nervously. "But there have been many. I didn't care for them. They distracted me."

"You used them," she said, her voice a little frosty, her posture stiffening.

"They used me as well. Do you think I was so ... so cruel? I have never pretended to love them ... any of them." She gave him a frankly skeptical look and it incensed him. He spoke vehemently, bitterly. "How could I? I never lied. I couldn't tell them I loved them ... I was already in love with you!"

Hermione jumped to her feet. He stood once more, thinking absently that his knees were going to hurt in the morning.

She whispered, "How is this possible?"

"How could I not? You are very lovable witch, Hermione."

"There is so much ... so many things have happened since we last knew one another."

He put his hands on her shoulders, the fabric was the finest velvet, but all he noticed was the heat emanating from her body beneath the cape. "I would like to listen if you will tell me."

"Would you?"

He gestured at the stack of magazines and newspaper cuttings. "I have tried to catch up, as you see. But there is still much to know. Will you give me a chance, *mila*?"

She fingered the edge of her cloak and bit her lip. Her eyes darted beyond his shoulders and she turned slightly. He allowed his arms to drop while she absently scanned the elegant appointments of the room, the comfortable seating, the large picture window overlooking Diagon Alley, the baby grand piano, the large mirror over the hearth. Viktor tracked her line of sight and their eyes met in the mirror, black to brown. The color might have been different, but the intensity behind their expressions was identical. Holding his attention in the mirror, Hermione unfastened her cloak. Viktor pulled his eyes from hers in the reflection, and his hands shook as he slipped her wrap from her shoulders.

"Viktor, I cared for you deeply and you hurt me."

"I have asked your forgiveness once. I will ask again and again."

Her eyes searched his face, pausing as she noticed the lines around his mouth, the small scar on his jaw which hadn't been there when they'd known each other before. "You should know ... I mean ... I have a condition."

"Vat is wrong with you? Are you ill?"

Despite the seriousness of their conversation she was amused, but there was affection in her look as well. "That's not what I meant. In this case, a condition means that I have a requirement more or less."

"Ah. All right. Vat is your condition?"

Her eyes were fixed on his mouth. "I won't be one of many."

"I would never --"

"Please, hear me out." She placed her fingers over his lips and his stomach lurched. He nodded, all his attention mental, visceral, emotional -- focused on her.

Her voice was unsteady, and she dropped her hand from his mouth. "Ron ... cheated on me ... more than"

"I already know," he reminded her gently.

A blush stained her cheeks, her throat, and the skin over her collarbones. "I forgot you heard all that." Her fingers twined together nervously. "This is difficult for me. Two men whom I loved broke my faith."

"Oh, God, Hermione." Viktor felt actively ill. Earning her trust now would be impossible. "Vat haff I done?"

Wrenching himself from her side, he stalked to the window and leaned his brow against the cold pane of glass. He saw nothing of the late night couples wandering the torch lit alley below. In all the years Hermione had been lost to him Viktor had never cried, but the tears came now: hot, choking, like acid etching his cheeks.

He startled when he felt her hand on his back, only then realizing she was saying his name. "... Viktor ..."

He closed his eyes, ashamed, but then her hand was touching his face, turning him toward her, fingers brushing away the evidence of his weakness. "I would be willing to try," she whispered, "but I'm afraid and I couldn't bear it if ... if you found someone else, someone better ..."

That was the proverbial straw.

Viktor straightened as if she'd cast a Stunning Spell. He cupped her face between his hands and stared deeply into her eyes. "There is no one better than you, Hermione Granger. No one."

Her chin wobbled and he succumbed to temptation.

He kissed her.

It had been years since he'd touched her lips. They were still soft and plump, and she responded fully, one hand snaking around his neck to pull him closer. Viktor slid his fingers into the riot of curls perched atop her head and they came tumbling down like a stack of Exploding Snap cards.

He groaned and pulled away, but Hermione followed his body with hers, pressing against him. He couldn't refuse her. He'd never been able to refuse her, except once.

Her tongue flicked out to taste him and heat seared a path from his lips to his groin. This was not the schoolgirl he remembered. This was a woman. This was Hermione. He opened his mouth to meet her halfway. Tongue met tongue and she whimpered.

Like the letter he'd incinerated years before, Viktor felt as if his body had erupted in flames. Tightening his fingers at the back of her head, he took charge of the kiss. This kiss ... her taste ... was what he'd been Seeking all these years. There was no comparison to any of the women he'd used to fill his bed and block his real desire.

She whimpered again and it vibrated against his tongue.

A telltale burn in his testicles warned him to stop, and almost abruptly, Viktor broke from the kiss. He angled his lower body away from her, breathing hard, as if he'd just played a twenty-hour match. Knowing how disastrous it would be to allow this moment to progress to sex, he needed to exert some control over his body's fierce yearning. He would not tarnish what they were going to build with the taint of his previous night's encounter clinging to him. "I would like to try, Hermione, very much. I haff already said that I loff you."

She smiled, her lips glistening from their kiss. "And I would be lying if I said I didn't still have strong feelings for you, but ..." she hesitated.

"You are afraid. You wouldn't be you if you weren't cautious. And I haff given you reason to doubt me. For that I beg your forgiveness once again."

Her fingers caressed his cheek, rasping over the late night growth of his beard. "That you have. I think we must get to know each other again. There's so much about you I no longer know."

"But you do." He rested his brow against hers, his large nose nudging the dainty bridge of hers. "I am the same man."

"Perhaps, but, Viktor, I'm not the same girl. I'm very different. What if you don't like who I've become?"

"Stop! Hermione, I admire you." He slid one arm around her waist, pulling her close, pretending his body hadn't reacted to hers. "It is I who haff to worry. I am the Seeker ... I don't haff any avars from the Ministry of Magic. Vat could you possibly see in me?"

She moved more fully into his embrace, and he saw the moment she felt the length of his erection, a tiny tug at the corner of her mouth gave her away. But she didn't pull back, instead she nestled closer. He'd forgotten how persuasive her voice could be when she wasn't concentrating on her studies or trying to save her friends' lives.

"Maybe I see the same things I did when I was younger. A lonely man who needs a friend, who has ideas no one seems willing to listen to. A man who wants to learn, but has parents to support so he puts them first. An honorable man, Viktor. An honorable wizard."

Sharp exultation bubbled in his chest at hearing her assessment of him, but he wouldn't allow her to forget reality. "Not so honorable that I haffen't slept around."

"Well maybe you're a bit of a slag ..."

"Hermione!" he gasped.

"What?" She giggled and batted her eyes suggestively. "I think we have a lot to learn about each other."

"I agree. You haff a vicked sense of humor, Hermione. Ven did that happen?"

She arched an eyebrow at him. It was a mannerism he'd never seen her make, and it underlined what she had said before. Things had changed. She was no longer a little girl.

Hermione said softly, "When you fight for your life every day and aren't sure you'll ever walk again it tends to add a bit of perspective to your life."

"Perspective?"

The doorbell rang. Coffee had arrived.

Viktor answered the door while Hermione crossed to the sofa to pick up her discarded cloak. The hotel-elf entered behind a large serving tray. Protuberant eyes grew rounder when the small elf recognized Viktor's guest. Instantly it looked at the stack of cut-outs before returning to the task of placing the coffee service on the small table in front of the sofa.

Viktor noticed Hermione's limp was more pronounced, and he stepped to her side, coaxing her onto the sofa before removing the cloak from her hands. While he draped the heavy black velvet across a nearby chair, the hotel-elf served Hermione a small slice of orange blossom cake and a cup of coffee, flavored exactly as she liked it.

Hermione blinked and really looked at the elf. "Winky?"

"Miss Hermione!" the hotel-elf gushed. "You is remembering Winky? You is too, too kind."

Viktor was completely bemused by the turn of events and asked the hotel-elf, "You know Miss Granger?"

A face bearing a nose like a squashed tomato turned toward him. "Yes, sir. Miss Hermione is helping Winky when she had no family. Miss Hermione is finding me a place here ... at the hotel. Here I have many families to take care of. I has never been so happy."

"I'm glad you're doing well, Winky," Hermione said delightedly. "Thank you for bringing us dessert."

Winky added a dollop of whipped cream to Hermione's plate before departing with a small *pop*.

"It seems you haff friends everywhere."

Hermione flushed. "I just want to help. There was so much ... we paid a very high price to end the war, you know."

"You didn't cause the war, Hermione."

Her eyes settled on his bare forearms. "I know, but we ... I had to do some terrible things, Viktor. Make some awful choices."

She seemed to retreat within herself and Viktor's stomach clenched. He knew nothing of this woman, the one with haunted eyes and shiny scars. For a moment he floundered, not knowing the right thing to do or say. Then his eyes lit upon the scar on her bicep and he dragged a calloused finger across it gently.

Instantly, Hermione was back with him, her coffee slopping over the rim of her cup and into the saucer.

"Maybe if you tell me it won't hurt so much."

Her eyes widened.

"Why don't you start with this scar. How did you get it? Who gave it to you?"

She swallowed hard. "You may not like me very much if I tell you."

He scooted closer to her. "I will always honor the sacrifices you haff made. But you - you and Potter and Weasley and the others - did what was to make my life safe to live. How can I not like you for that? Not respect you? I will listen to anything you have to say."

Hermione's breath caught on a sob and she carefully placed her coffee cup on the table, alongside her uneaten cake. "Are you sure?"

Viktor placed his cup and saucer next to hers; it was a sight he hoped to have many times in the future, but it was too soon to count victory. He hadn't yet captured the Snitch, even though it was within arm's reach. "Will you tell me about your hopes and dreams, Hermione? I will tell you mine."

She launched herself into his arms and he was flung backward against the far arm of the sofa. Fortunately it was as padded as the rest of the furniture or he would bear a mark on his back. "I've missed you so much, Viktor. You always listened to me."

Suddenly she seemed to notice the suggestiveness of their position, draped across his chest as she was. His eyes strayed to the golden medallion hanging from her neck, swinging as if to draw his attention to her exposed cleavage, but Viktor knew better. He dragged his eyes back to her face in time for her to brush her lips across his before she sat up.

"I have a lot to tell you and it's quite late. I don't want to keep you up."

And suddenly Viktor knew they would be all right. He raised an eyebrow and teased her. "You don't want to keep me up?"

Laughing, Hermione said, "Not that way. With your record I should have known you'd think it was a sexual innuendo."

"You are the one who made comments about my virtue."

"For all your noble qualities, I don't think chastity is one we should discuss." Her smile was genuine, with no hint of jealousy. "I meant something entirely mundane. I know you have a game coming up, and I don't want to interfere with your schedule."

"The game is in two days. All I have to do, *mila*, is to sleep and listen to you tell me about your hopes and dreams and anything else you want to talk about."

Hermione uttered a small, glad cry, similar to the one earlier at the Ministry. Viktor's blood raced through his veins, metaphorical fingers had grabbed the elusive golden orb. He tucked her against his side, and she pulled his arm around her shoulders, linking their fingers together.

"I have so much to tell you, Viktor."

As Hermione revealed the reasons for her dangerous quest with Ron and Harry, Viktor listened with all the intensity of his nature. Fleeting he mused that while there would be no sexual release for him this night ... somehow what he did have was eminently more satisfying.

~oOo~

Rejoice

Chapter 3 of 3

Six months after Hermione and Viktor re-met, they are guests at the Quidditch World Cup Final.

Chapter Three: Rejoice

~o0o~

Six Months Later

Viktor and Grigor Dimitrov's conversation wove about Hermione, the Bulgarian both soft and guttural, as she cut he *panqueca com manga* into bite-sized pieces. It was late for breakfast, after noon, but she had discovered the restaurant's delicious version of crepes the day before. The French pancakes weren't unusual in Britain, but she'd never had them with mangoes. In fact, she'd never eaten the orange-fleshed fruit before. She speared a perfectly ripe chunk of fruit along with the bite of pancake on her fork, and closed her eyes as she slid the entire thing into her mouth. The fruit blossomed in a pungent explosion of taste.

"Hermione?" Viktor asked, interrupting his Vratsa Vultures team mate.

She opened her eyes. "Hmmm?"

"You made a *sound*."

"Did I?"

He leaned closer to her, ignoring Dimitrov's rather arched comment about true love. Hermione didn't understand it, but Viktor flushed. "You did. It was much like the sounds you make when you are alone."

Her cheeks turned slightly pink under her recently acquired tan. "I really like the mango." She poked another piece of the local *manga*, angling the fork in his direction. "Would you like a taste?"

Black eyes glittered at her as he obligingly opened his mouth. He bit down on the fork though, and the moment was more suggestive than not. Hermione flicked her eyes at Dimitrov, but he wasn't paying any attention to them, instead he was watching one of the Chasers from the Brazilian National Team as she made her way across the elegant dining room. Hermione couldn't remember the witch's name, and, in the next second, she didn't care if she ever remembered the witch's name. For Viktor had leaned into her, his lips practically brushing her ear.

"Fruit is not what I want to taste. Later I want to taste you."

He pulled back and his narrow face was full of mischief as he eyed her heightened color. Hermione felt her blush all the way to her suddenly sensitive nipples. She watched his eyes focus on her mouth as she let her bottom lip slide from between her teeth. "I don't mind skipping the beach."

His expression changed in an instant. Viktor asked Dimitrov's pardon, "*Isvinite*," before turning fully toward her, his fringe falling into his eyes. "Hermione, you have not been to the beach yet. Why is that?"

She glanced around the crowded room, noticing how many people she knew or had met at the World Cup the night before were having lunch. Then she shifted in her chair, suddenly uncomfortable and newly aware of how much her leg ached. "Could we talk about this later?"

From the set of his chin, Hermione recognized that he wouldn't forget. She knew him well. They had been dating seriously for the previous six months. After they had re-met at the Ministry Awards Ceremony, rarely a day passed without them talking or seeing each other, even if it was just an Owl with a quick note of *good luck* as Viktor had toured with the Vultures and played through the World Cup semi-finals.

"After lunch, you will go to our room to talk, *then* you will go to the beach." He pointed out the open window. "It is too beautiful to miss."

Stubborn but observant, he laid a large, calloused hand over hers for a moment, squeezing ever so slightly.

"If you like," she answered. Then turning her attention to Dimitrov, who was eyeing them speculatively, she said, "*Isvinite*, Grigor. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Is all right, Hermione. I am not interrupting you. I should go." His long fingers played with the glass of fruit juice and he flicked his eyes in Viktor's direction.

"*Ne! Tova e dobre*. Please," Hermione pulled a small tote from the back of her chair, "stay and finish your conversation. Viktor and I don't leave until the day after tomorrow, and I know your Portkey is this evening." She withdrew a book -- *The Aerial Life and Times of Queerditch Marsh* -- from the ubiquitous canvas bag which had been a gift to every guest of the Top Box at the Quidditch Finals. "See. I brought reading material in case you two decided to discuss Brazil's win in vivid, gory detail, right down to Abilio's Wronski yes, Viktor, I finally learned how to say it. Feint."

"Thank you," Viktor said, squeezing her hand, once more, before returning to his rapid-fire conversation with Dimitrov. Hermione recognized a few words, including Abilio, *razbiram* which she remembered meant 'I understand' and a sprinkling of *ofdas* and *nes* amidst the Quidditch terminology she had picked up in the past six months.

Instead of opening her book to read, however, Hermione stared out the window, to the distinctive shape of Sugarloaf Mountain and the ribbon of sandy white beach at its base. She let her thoughts drift. When Ron had been a part of her life, Quidditch had held little allure, but it was Viktor's career and that made all the difference. It was a difference which could just as easily find Viktor reading abstracts of Hermione's research to the amusement of his team mates -- as it was for her to study technical aspects of the premiere sport of warlocks. Ginny and Oliver Wood had been excellent, if teasing, living references.

Hermione attended as many of the Bulgarian National Team's matches and Vultures' games as she could fit into her schedule. Viktor understood the difficulties of a demanding career, but he always made certain there was a seat for her in the Top Box of every stadium where he played. Over the past few months, she had become friendly with most of his team mates, and was now reasonably conversant with the game's rules. She had even recognized fifty different fouls during the World Cup semi-finals, when Bulgaria had lost to the French team (fielded by players from the Bordeaux Buzzards and Quiberon Quafflepunchers.)

When he had been invited to attend the Finals held in Rio de Janeiro, Viktor asked Hermione to go with him. She had been more than happy to say yes, and they had padded the trip by four days, calling it a holiday. The first day they'd arrived in Brazil, the two had followed Muggle tourist tradition, riding the cable car to the top of Sugarloaf. For a man who made his living performing death-defying feats of skill on a broomstick, Viktor's nervousness as the cable car swayed while climbing from the mountain's base to summit had secretly amused Hermione.

"Ne."

Viktor spoke rather forcefully, ending Hermione's reverie. He wasn't angry, but nodding his head in earnest. Every now and then she had to remind herself that the nod

meant no. He said something else she didn't quite catch because her attention was momentarily captivated by the pursing of his lips. Quite suddenly she wanted to kiss him.

Instead of following her impulse, she dragged her eyes down across the lightly tanned skin of Viktor's throat, measuring the width of his shoulders before following line of his well-defined arms, hidden under the long sleeves of his navy blue shirt, and to the sinews and tendons of his lean fingers as they deftly diagrammed a play. A visceral need for him ... now ... sizzled in her brain, distracting her from the thought that he would make a good coach.

Grigor's shook his head in disagreement, *Dal*! Then the Bulgarian Chaser plucked the small, Self-Inking Quill from Viktor's hand. He drew two broad strokes across the small parchment.

Rather than returning to her book, which she hadn't been reading, Hermione took another bite of mango and looked around the dining room. Its festive tropical colors and lush floral arrangements set a lively mood. She'd met a number of the diners over the past few days, and in the far corner were two members of the Portuguese team, nursing both their team's defeat and rather vicious hangovers.

Hermione shifted in her chair to ease the dull ache in her right leg. Hiking to the stadium the day before had been taxing. When their host, the effusively welcoming Brazilian Minister, mentioned that the stadium had been built in the Tijuca Forest, Hermione's puzzlement gave him the opportunity to explain how the National Forest was entirely within the perimeter of Rio. He had spent a quarter of an hour waxing lyrical on his country's past and the glory of Rio when it had been the capital of the Portuguese empire. Viktor had come to her aid at that point, escorting her to meet some of his colleagues.

The climb to the top of the hill, alongside the picturesque waterfall cascading to the forest floor, and the sight of the massive purpose-built Quidditch stadium in the hidden valley beyond had been unforgettable. Yet, however rustic and beautiful it might have been, she was now paying the price. Surreptitiously, she rubbed her thigh, feeling the ridges and depressions of the scar beneath her summer-weight robes.

With that keen sense of his, Viktor turned toward her, black eyes instantly noticing the subtle massaging of her hand on thigh. He might have said something, but at that moment, the triumphant captain and coach of the Brazilian National Team entered the dining room. Their faces were still flushed with victory, and they smiled and blew kisses to their fans as the majority of the room applauded their arrival. Brazil's coach was also the coach of the Sao Paolo Swallows, and the rivalry between the Swallows and Rio de Janeiro's Raptors was famous in South American Quidditch circles. The teams' rivalry abated every four years, during World Cup season, when all strife was forgotten. The team captain, the Raptors off-side Beater, was a swarthy, handsome man who had -- much to Viktor's irritation -- taken a liking to Hermione's hair.

One of the biggest differences Hermione noticed between her last long-term relationship and this one was in the way the two men, Ron and Viktor, showed their insecurities. Ron had been suspicious, defensive, and indulged his penchant for verbal cruelty ... always at her expense. Viktor, on the other hand, tightened his mouth into a thin, straight line when he had been pushed too far. Each man had been in the public's eye for years, but Viktor handled the most egregious falsehoods or blatant familiarity without a loss of composure.

The Raptors' captain, Alberto Tavares, surveyed the room, his vivid green eyes slipping past Viktor as if he didn't recognize him. His smile grew wider when he saw Hermione. Abruptly abandoning his coach in favor of engaging in a little out-of-the-air gamesmanship, Tavares threaded through the dining room, pressing the flesh of his fans while eyeing Hermione as if she were the Golden Snitch.

As the threesome waited upon Tavares' invasion, Viktor made a rather unflattering comment in Bulgarian, drawing a snort of mirth from Dimitrov. It was a phrase neither man would translate. By the time the Raptor's captain reached their table, Viktor was on his feet and angled between Tavares and Hermione. She couldn't help but feel rather amused, although amusement turned to pure, feminine pride when Viktor stepped into the pregnant pause which had suddenly dampened all conversation in the room. With his hand outstretched, he said, "Congratulations, Alberto. It was a fine game you played. I trust Abilio has recovered his senses."

Brazil's captain seized Viktor's arm, and, in that effusiveness which was so much a part of the South American charm, he pulled Viktor into a hearty embrace. "Si, Bernardo is fine. He is home with his wife and she is lavishing tender kisses upon his conquering brow."

When he released Viktor, Tavares turned so neatly that he placed himself at Hermione's side. He reached for her hand, which she offered with a touch of reluctance. The Quidditch star counted on her not to make a scene, kissing her fingers longer than necessary before Hermione retrieved her hand. "Perhaps," he said with a little flash of dimple, "I should see about finding an *esposa*. Eh, 'ermione of the hair *magnifico*? Do you think I need a wife?"

Hermione laughed. "I think you need a Keeper. Now, if you'll excuse me," she made to rise and, to her surprise, it was Dimitrov who held the chair for her, "I will wait for you upstairs, Viktor."

She angled her head up to meet Tavares' measuring look. "Congratulations, Alberto. Your team flew an amazing game." Turning to the tall Chaser, she said in Bulgarian, "*Chao*, Grigor. Have a safe trip home."

Dimitrov air-kissed her cheeks, first one, then the other. "*Chao*, Herm-own-knee."

Viktor's sharp eyes had missed nothing, and there was a hint of satisfaction in his expression. Hermione placed her hand atop his crossed forearms. "You," she said, leaning up to kiss him something she rarely did in public, "I'll see you upstairs."

Viktor's eyes met hers. "I will see you soon. Ve haff something to talk about, yes?"

"I hoped you'd forget, but yes we do." Hermione picked up her book and Tavares handed her the canvas tote. Meeting Viktor's glance once more, she then left the dining room, conscious of at least three pairs of eyes watching her, and willing herself not to limp, even though it hurt to walk.

Once in the elevators, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. There was a potion for pain in their room. When the shiny brass doors slid open to reveal an empty corridor, Hermione relaxed. There would be no one to see her awkward gait, and she counted the numbers on the doors until she reached 2528.

The canvas tote dropped from her fingers as soon as she entered the room, and she hobbled directly into the bathroom. The wide marble tub was inviting and the idea of taking a hot bath vied briefly for precedence over taking the potion, but Hermione decided in favor of the longer lasting remedy. Grabbing the green phial containing a single dose of Muscle Ease, she downed its contents in one practiced swallow.

Relief would be swift, leaving her muscles like jelly for the first half hour. She would need to be either sitting or completely horizontal quickly, so Hermione stripped off her outer robes and limped toward the balcony.

She paused at the foot of the bed, her eyes immediately drawn to the small tray of delicacies. Viktor must have arranged for it, she thought, an affectionate smile curving her lips. She plucked the vase with its single antherium from the dark wood, dropping her pale yellow outer robes in a pile next to the tray. The fruit was enticing and the small dish of glistening sweetener was tempting enough that she touched the tip of her finger to the surface of the viscous liquid. Flicking her tongue out to lap at the honey, she made her way onto the balcony. Very little noise filtered up this high, even the sound of the ocean itself was muted, but Hermione found it restful.

Fresh ocean air filled her nostrils with its salty tang. Ipanema Beach was beautiful, and Hermione settled herself into one of the canvas-slung chairs, setting the bud vase on the small table at her side, and angling her legs up on the balcony's railing. Her timing was excellent as lethargy stole through her muscles with a swiftness belying the sudden torpor of her limbs.

Tilting her head, Hermione relaxed against the high back of the magical chair as it conformed to her body. She would rest her eyes for a few minutes.

The warmth of the sun beat upon her closed eyelids and within a very short few minutes she had dozed off.

~o0o~

Viktor let himself into their room with the economy of movement he was known for, his eyes immediately finding the bed, the heap of pale yellow cotton, but no sign of Hermione. It was very quiet and he was much later than he'd intended. In fact, the afternoon was gone and twilight was creeping across the sky. He turned his head to the open door of the lavatory, noticing the empty green bottle.

"*Po dyavolite!*" he swore. He'd seen her rubbing her thigh at lunch, but he'd been so involved in his conversation with Dimitrov that he hadn't really paid attention to Hermione's discomfort.

Where was she?

He stepped further into the room, his eyes automatically noticing the tray of fruit, the lack of rumpled bed linens as he scanned the rest of the room. The glass doors to the balcony were open and he spied her bare feet, propped upon the railing.

Within seconds he had draped his own outer robes atop hers, and stood in the opened doorway, looking down at the sleeping woman. The beauty of the ocean view was not enough to pull his attention from Hermione. She was as neat in her sleep as she was in most things, her ankles were crossed and her hands folded in her lap. Her hair, which brushed the tops of her shoulders, had reacted to the sea air and was curlier than he was used to seeing, but he barely registered its existence. Instead, he noticed the way the thin strap of her dress had slipped from her shoulder to loop around her bicep, across the scar he'd first noticed the night of the Award Ceremony. He also noticed the way the angle of her legs allowed the skirt of her light dress to slide down her thighs, giving the impression that she had longer legs than she really possessed. Viktor eyed her lightly tanned skin, his eyes settling their focus on the dusky color of her longest scar.

It was unlike the scar on her bicep, or the one on her torso from Antonin Dolohov, he reminded himself. The other two had faded over the years, but the scar on her leg was different. It reached in one straight line from hip to knee, as if she'd been pressed against the straight edge of a long blade. Intellectually he knew it had come from her former Potions master a hex of his own creation just before she'd Petrified him and slapped a Portkey into the wizard's hands. It had been keyed to take him to the Ministry's holding cells.

The fact that Severus Snape was serving a life sentence in Azkaban might be gratifying, but Viktor had other things to think about, such as how much pain Hermione had been in to take the Muscle Ease. In six months, he'd only seen her take it twice, and each time it had been after particularly strenuous activity.

"*Kreten!*" he swore. The hike to the stadium hadn't been particularly long, but the hill had been steep and they'd taken the scenic detour next to the waterfall.

"Hi," she said sleepily, awakened by his profanity.

"*Boli lit te?*" he asked, and then corrected himself. "Does it hurt?"

"Not now."

"I am sorry, Hermione. I did not think ..."

"Viktor, it's all right. I'm fine now. I should have taken the potion last night before we went to bed, but," she smiled a tiny, reminiscent smile, "it was your fault I forgot."

"My fault?"

"Yes. You distracted me." She arched her eyebrow and then her back.

"Did I?" His eyes automatically dropped to her chest where her breasts were straining the thin fabric. His body reacted instantly to the physical enticement.

Her voice retained the husky purr of sleep. "You know you did."

He crossed to the rail, halting next to her feet, resting a hand on her crossed ankles. Her skin was warm and smooth. "Vat about now? Am I distracting you now?"

He encircled her ankles, holding them in place, when she would have pulled her legs back. Her eyes flashed. "Viktor."

"You don't haff to get up. I vant to talk to you, and it's beautiful here."

She captured her lower lip between her teeth before glancing beyond him, at the changing colors of the sky. "It is beautiful."

"*Ti si hubava.*" He smoothed his fingers along the silken texture of her shin, looking at nothing else but her.

"Thank you," she said, shifting uncomfortably.

Compliment her intellectual prowess and she accepted with remarkable *savoir faire*, but tell her she was beautiful and it flustered her. It was these contradictions Viktor found so fascinating. "However that is not vat I wanted to talk about. Hermione, vy vill you not go to the beach?"

She looked away from him. "It's just ... It's ... It's difficult for me to discuss."

He patiently waited her out. She was very good at diverting a conversation, especially when she found the topic disturbing. Yet one of Viktor's biggest professional assets was his ability to read a situation, knowing when to wait and when to accelerate into a dive. He could feel her tension under the smooth surface of her skin.

After a minute or two, she huffed. "Fine. I'm embarrassed."

He goggled at her. "Vat? Vy?"

She just glared at him as if he'd asked the stupidest question on the planet, and he supposed he had. He let go of her legs and dropped to his knees in front of her. "Is this about your scar?"

"Scars," she replied, correcting him, confirming his suspicion. It shocked him to some degree. She was so self-confident he sometimes forgot she had insecurities.

"You know vat I think about your scars. You earned them protecting people."

She sighed heavily. "I know I should get over this, but I don't really like to talk about how I got them. Maybe one day I'll become like Mad-Eye Moody, popping out his magical eye to scare the kiddies." She sighed again. "I don't like remembering that this scar," she pressed her bicep, "reminds me of the first person I ever killed ... or that I use the phrase *the first* because there were more. I think by the time he cast *Sectumsempra* on me, Snape had no soul left to divide, and I thank all the powers that be I never once used an Unforgivable. By the end, I had enough hate and anger to cast them all."

Her hands turned under his, squeezing the one he'd placed atop her twining, nervous fingers. Since that first night, they really hadn't talked much about the war. He hadn't realized she might still need to. He kept his mouth shut and just let her talk.

And she did. She talked and cried a little and talked some more. And all through her recitation, Viktor listened, attentively, ignoring his knees which were beginning to ache from his position on the hard balcony

"You know I have trust issues, we've talked about this. Snape was another one who betrayed my belief in him."

This was something he hadn't heard before and he stiffened. "Vat do you mean?" he asked, pulling the second chair over. "I had no idea ... I don't know vat I vant to ask."

"It's nothing terribly unsavory, Viktor." She rolled her eyes and Viktor realized he was glowering at her. "Honestly! There's no scandal, no sordid details. He was someone I had misjudged when I was a first-year, and then, later, when he saved our lives again and again, well, I had more faith in him than I did Dumbledore. Harry always thought I was an idiot." She glanced at him and got a funny little smirk. "A *typak*."

He began to relax. "Who is teaching you all these vords? Soon you vill haff better gutter language than me."

"Roza is surprisingly inventive," she said referring to the only witch on Vratsa's team.

"Ivanova has a filthy mouth."

She laughed. "How sexist of you. You and Grigor won't even tell me what *pederast grozen gyrbav prokazhen* means, and I can't find it in the dictionary."

"I should hope not. It's not a polite term." He chuckled then. "Leave it to you to look up cant."

"You know me. I like to know things. *Pederast* isn't too far from the English translation and I know that *grozen* means ugly --."

"Hermione, you're changing the subject." She'd done it so neatly, too. He'd almost lost the thread of their earlier conversation.

She flushed, and in the growing twilight he thought she was enchanting even with the residual signs of her tears.

"Sorry," she murmured, then her voice grew stronger. "It's just really simple. I'm self-conscious about my scars, especially in public. I'm getting better about it; when people know who I am they point and talk about me, usually within range for me to hear them. I got that a lot at school and I never liked it."

"I remember ven I vas at Hogvarts. There vas that reporter. Vile voman."

"Rita Skeeter. Yes, she was horrid."

They were silent for a few minutes, both remembering the events leading to Voldemort's return to corporeal form.

"Can you accept that I'm learning how to live with the scars and it's difficult for me? I will keep trying, if only for your sake."

"Hermione!"

"I know what a social butterfly you are."

"Hermione, you do not need to change who you are for me."

Abruptly she pulled her legs off the balcony's railing and leaned toward him, her expression entirely sincere. "*Obicham te*."

She didn't say it often, but it always affected him especially when she said it in his language. "I loff you, too."

They stared into one another's eyes and Viktor smoothed his hands up her arms, his thumb hooking into the strap drooping off her shoulder, his eyes latched onto her dark-fringed irises.

And then she licked her lips and the entire moment changed.

"*Dai celuvka, molia te*," he said, and the register of his voice dropped an octave.

Her lips were still warm from the afternoon sun as she pressed against him to comply with his request. Desire wrapped her fingers around him and prickling anticipation awoke in his groin.

Then Hermione rose and stepped past him toward their room. "*Ella tyk*," she said before crooking her finger as if to Summon him.

Viktor surged up from the chair, pulling her roughly to him. She was pliant in his arms and he lowered his mouth to hers; tasting her, touching her, reveling in the fact that she was here after all this time and that she loved him. He shifted on his feet, dropping one hand to adjust his growing erection. Hermione's hand covered his and her fingers curled around the edges of his palm, feeling him through the material of his trousers.

He groaned.

When he opened his eyes, she was staring at him beneath heavily-lidded eyes.

"Let's go to bed, Viktor."

"Ne," he replied, then released her for a moment to draw his wand. With a sharp jab then a flick he Summoned the tray of fruit and honey non-verbally. The dark wooden tray floated in their direction, and then Viktor directed it to the small table between their drawn together chairs next to the bud vase with the single, red, heart-shaped flower. He slid his wand back into the slim pocket of his trousers. "Here. I vant you here. Now." He thrust against her, relishing the sound of her quick intake of breath as she comprehended his meaning.

"Here?" Her eyes darted to the corners of the balcony, then out to the rapidly emptying beach below and across the street from their hotel. "Viktor, I ..."

"Let me show you." She allowed him to pull her to the railing. He leaned sideways, scooping up a slice of the mango from the plate. It was slippery, but his fingers were deft and sure, and he held the slender strip of orange fruit firmly. With his other hand about her waist, he turned her to face the beach while stepping closer to her. He nuzzled her hair, inhaling the scent of her shampoo, and spoke softly in her ear. "I know you do not like to fly. I understand it. But this is vat I see ven I fly."

Her soft, "Oh," of comprehension accompanied a little gasp when Viktor stroked her arm with the warm fruit. He followed the fruit with his mouth, sucking the sweet nectar from her skin, sliding the strap of her dress lower, revealing the fact that she wore no Muggle lingerie to support her breasts.

The hand at her waist slid upward, underneath the full, ripe breast, fingers Seeking the budding nipple through lightweight cotton.

He licked the trail of mango juice, pressing his hips against her, his erection fitting neatly between the cheeks of her bum.

She moaned and pushed back into him.

He moved, switching sides; sliding the thin strap of her dress off the other shoulder before following the scrap of material with the mango slice and his mouth. Hermione started to turn toward him. "*Ne!*" Viktor commanded. "I vant you to see, to understand. It is quiet up here, restful."

Hermione arched her neck, giving him greater access. "It might be quiet, but I don't think restful is the word I'd use."

Viktor noticed the playfulness in her smile and his erection twitched. Drawing a glistening nectar line across her chest, skimming the top of her dress, he leaned around her

arm to follow the fruit trail with his tongue. His hands assisted, and when he stood up, he had bared her entire upper body.

He painted the thin silver line of her oldest scar between her breasts, angling toward her appendix, then he lifted the mango, and her eyes watched the piece of fruit as Viktor raised the fruit to his mouth ... and bit.

Hermione's eyes widened, tracking his tongue as it licked the juice from the fleshy orange fruit. He grinned. Then he painted her tight nipples with the blunt-tipped mango.

"Viktor." Her voice was unsteady.

"*Lubya*," he murmured, feeding her the rest of the mango. That same, titillating sound she'd made that morning was his reward.

"Mmmhmmmm."

Viktor's erection was painfully hard, but he dropped his head to her breast, sucking the wandtip-sized nub into his mouth, flicking his tongue against it. She squirmed beneath him, threading her fingers through his hair, holding him in place. The fragrance of her arousal mingled with the salty, fruit-scented air.

He flicked his tongue again and she gasped.

A small hand slid down his back, smoothing over the linen of his shirt, around and under his arm until she reached the placket of his trousers, and found *him*. She squeezed and he almost bit her nipple from the force of his reaction. He released her breast and straightened.

In the variegated colors of the setting sun, Hermione was a stunning image of color and warmth. Her breasts stood proud, and her slender waist nipped in before the curves of her hips caught the draped fabric of her dress. He bucked his hips into her hand and said huskily, "*Iskam da te eba*."

"Yes," she answered and turned, stepping toward their room.

He nodded his head, and she took another step toward the door. She'd forgotten that he didn't mean yes. "*Ne*, Hermione. I want you here, now. I want you to know that I think of you when I'm on my broomstick. I want you to know what I do sometimes thinking of you on that broom."

"Viktor." Her breath caught, her breasts swaying with the movement. "I've never done something quite so ... so ..."

"Public?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I can't ..." but her eyes strayed to the railing and the view beyond.

"You can. You are a witch, Hermione. I can tell."

Her eyes flicked back to him. "You do that to me, Viktor. You always have."

His smile was predatory. "Good to know. *Ella tyk*." She didn't move, her lip firmly clamped between her teeth. So he said it again ... in English. "Come here."

He saw the moment she made up her mind. She released her lip, squared her shoulders and tilted her chin, but he noticed that her hand, when she reached for him, trembled from a mixture of excitement and uncertainty.

Grasping both of her hands he pulled her to the railing, wrapping her fingers round it, holding them in place. "Hold on to this," he said before he grasped her hips. He leaned forward, along the line of her back, nuzzling his way through her hair to kiss the nape of her neck. He felt her shudder, and slid his arms around her, cupping her breasts in both hands. Fingers plucked and fondled the tightly budded peaks.

One of her hands released the railing, to help, to feel.

"*Ne*, Hermione! Do not take your hands from the rail. If you do, I will stop." He stood behind her, and her hand returned to the rail. "*Razbiram?*"

"*Razbiram*." It was a barely formed word, more like a caress carried on the evening breeze.

Viktor rubbed against her bum, his need heavy and demanding. Dropping his hands to her hips again, he pulled her back against him. His body sought that friction, the wet heat which would lead to release.

With one foot he spread her legs; a hand slid over the bunched skirt down to her thigh, feeling the ridge of her scar under his palm, but not really noticing its existence any more. He adjusted her stance so that her bum spooned tightly against him.

A deep, guttural sound was wrenched from his lips when she rolled her hips invitingly.

Abruptly he withdrew his wand from his trousers, and with a practiced swirl and incantation, they were both naked.

Hermione stilled, tension rippling along her back. If anyone looked up they ... she ... would be visible.

"They do not know how to look, *mila*. Do not think to see what is in the air above them." He massaged her tense muscles and she relaxed beneath his hands, enough to enjoy what was about to happen.

Viktor angled her against him, rocking his hips, sliding his erection between the cheeks of her bum. He bent from the waist, his chest brushing against her smooth, unblemished back. Kissing the patch of skin beneath her ear, he whispered, "It is like this in the stadium ... quiet."

One Quidditch-roughened hand followed the line of her hip bone, dipping into her pelvic girdle, fingers threading through her thatch of tight curls. Hermione's breath hitched when he brushed over her hooded bundle of nerves, then slipped between her damp nether lips, gathering liquid excitement on his fingertips.

"The people watching cannot really see what is happening." Removing his hand, he raised it so they could both see the glistening liquid coating his fingers. He licked one finger, then another, but the third, his index finger, Viktor used to coat her lips with her own essence. Her tongue flicked out to taste. "I think of you when I am in the air. Hermione, I think of you often, and wish to share with you my love of flying."

"I'm not ..."

His finger stopped her mouth.

"It's all right. *Razbiram*."

While he positioned her, his erection jutted out from his body, as if reaching for its snug nest. Viktor sampled her body's nectar once again, adding it to his own seminal lubrication. "Many of them never notice the Seeker until the end of the game ..."

He stepped between her legs, noticing her uneven breathing, smelling the sharp tang of her heightened need.

"... after ve haff already seized the Snitch." He thrust hard, sinking into her familiar depths in one powerful stroke.

"Ah! Fuck!" Hermione's hips swiveled and he sank deeper. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the railing.

"Eba!" he swore.

"Yes!" She panted as she spoke. "Oh, Viktor."

He pulled out, half-way, the evening air cool against the heat of his damp phallus. Arching his back, he withdrew almost to the entrance to her body. His lips kissed her shoulder, tasting the remnants of mango mixed with sweat and excitement. "Ven I am in the air, I think of you," one hand found her mons, "of us," he pinched her clit and thrust at the same time. She whined deep in her throat. "... every time I catch the Snitch."

He withdrew again.

"This feeling, Hermione ..."

He bucked his hips, sliding into her hot depths as she rocked meet him.

"There is nothing else like it."

Viktor flicked her clit and thrust deeper. She moaned; a keening note. Then he did it again ... and again, reveling in her tight sheath.

"Nothing is better than this."

He thrust and pulled back, the friction of her body's grip heady and exciting. Sweat dotted his brow and between his shoulder blades. The muscles of his arse flexed and bunched, and his scrotum slapped against her mons and his fingers. The electric spark of pre-release burst in his groin.

Her muscles fluttered under his touch. "Viktor!" It was a rising plaint.

He pinched her clit again and Hermione wailed as her orgasm ripped through her.

"*Zavinage te obicham!*" he shouted knowing it was the truth -- as his own release burst from him in hot, shuddering spurts.

Resting his forehead on her shoulder, he gasped for breath, feeling the burn in his thighs.

It was this last feeling which reminded him of her scar, and he realized she was trembling. Instantly remorseful, Viktor pulled out of her, even though he remained partially erect.

She was his first priority.

"Hermione! Are you all right? *Boli li te?*"

Releasing her hands from the railing, she brushed the hair out of her face. She looked ... sated. "I'm fine. Better than fine actually, but do you think we could sit?"

He did her one better, scooping her up in his arms and carrying her into their bedroom, where he placed her on the bed. She was smiling at him, a broad, unreserved smile which caught at his heart.

"That was amazing," she said quietly.

Viktor ran a hand through his hair. "That it vas." He sank to the bed, alongside her.

Before he could say anything else, she asked, "What did you say?"

"Ven?"

"That last thing, just before your climax."

He tried to think what he'd said, but didn't remember much more than the explosive release ... oh. Heat covered his cheeks, his neck, his ears. At least she couldn't see his ears.

"Viktor, what is it? I thought you were telling me you loved me, but it didn't sound like the way you usually say it."

"It vasn't. This ... it is a different ... a different phrase."

"Care to tell me, or do I have to find my English-Bulgarian dictionary? I brought it with me, you know."

Her expression emboldened him to answer. "It is a similar expression. It does mean I loff you." Her smile widened and softened. "I know ve haffen't been together for very long, Hermione, but I haff loffed you a long time."

"Even during those years we weren't together, I thought about you ... wondered why you'd stopped being my friend--" when he jerked upright, she soothed him with a quick kiss. "I understand. I'm no longer upset; I'm just trying to tell you that I've always had feelings for you, even when we weren't together. I hope you don't doubt that I love you?"

"*Ne!* Not at all. I know you loff me. I don't think it, or guess it, or hope, but, Hermione, I *know* you loff me. Vat I said earlier, it is a sort of declaration." She sat up and wrapped her arms around him; her breasts were slightly sticky from the mango juice which had dried against her skin. He returned her embrace, meeting her eyes fearlessly. "Vat I said means that I vill loff you forever."

Her breath caught in her throat and he saw the instant sparkle of moisture in her eyes. She cupped his face. "Teach it to me."

He held her gaze. "*Zavinage te obicham.*"

"*Zavinage te obicham.*" she said it haltingly, tasting the familiar and unfamiliar syllables on her tongue. Then she leaned in and brushed his lips with hers. "*Zavinage te obicham*, Viktor Krum. I will love you forever."

He kissed her.

She kissed him.

They snuggled on the bed, legs and arms entwined, as their tongues teased and flirted: first in his mouth and then in hers.

After several rather breathless minutes, Hermione laid her head on his shoulder, her fingers stroking the light dusting of hair between his flat male nipples.

He caught her hand, raising it to his mouth, kissing her fingers. He smelled the scent of her on his own hand. "Thank you for indulging me."

"Believe me, it was my pleasure." Her voice practically purred the last word. His erection twitched and her smile became mischievous. "We don't have any plans for tonight, do we? We can suit ourselves, can't we?"

"Yes, we can suit ourselves. What do you want to do?"

"I think I want to see what mango tastes like on you."

"What about the honey?" he asked.

"Too sticky," she replied. "I think the mango is just right."

And in the hours that came after, she proved to him that she was indeed a know-it-all.

~o0o~

Bulgarian to English translations:

Da, yes

Ne, no

Dobre, good (multi-purpose)

Chao, good-bye

Mila, dear

Lubya, love

Isvinite, excuse me

Ella tyk, come here

Boli li te, does it hurt?

Tova e dobre, It's okay

Ti si hubava, you're beautiful

Blagodarya, thank you

Obicham te, I love you

Zavinage te obicham, I'll love you forever

Dai celuvka, molia te, give me a kiss please

Razbiram, understand

Po dyavolite, damn it

Kreten, retard

Typak, idiot,

Smeshnik, clown

Iskam da te eba, I want to fuck you

Pederast grozen gyrbav prokazhen, unsightly hunchbacked leper pervert

Portuguese to English translations:

Si, yes

Esposa, spouse, wife

Magnifico, magnificent

Panqueca com manga, pancakes with mango