

“So, anyway, that’s about all that went on at the Healer’s conference. Hermione? Hermione? Earth to Hermione...” Ginny said, waving her hand across the restaurant table.

“Hmmm? Oh... sorry. I was a million miles away. What were you saying?” Hermione replied, snapping back to attention and blotting her lips with her napkin.

“I was gabbing on about that stupid conference. Nothing of importance. Am I that boring? You okay? You’ve been distracted all the time we’ve been here,” Ginny said, drawing her brows together in concern.

“I suppose I have been. I went to the mediwitch while I was in London,” Hermione whispered, studying her plate.

“Something wrong? You’re not sick or anything, are you?” Ginny pressed.

“No. I wish I were. Morning sick, particularly,” Hermione said softly, blinking back the tears.

“Oh, love... did you have another false alarm?” Ginny asked gently, laying her hand over Hermione’s.

She nodded wordlessly in reply. “I thought for sure... this time... I mean, I was three weeks late and I almost convinced myself that...” she trailed off, biting her lip.

Ginny blotted her own lips with her napkin, trying to think of what to say. “How did Viktor take it?” she asked carefully, her heart giving a little squeeze of sympathy.

“I didn’t even tell him. I couldn’t bear to get his hopes up. We’ve gone through this so many times already. I was hoping I could just tell him when I was sure. Three weeks... I was so positive,” Hermione said, her voice cracking.

“I’m so sorry. I truly am,” Ginny said, and she meant it.

“But what’s three weeks against seventeen years? Seventeen *years*, Ginny. I had them do some tests,” Hermione added.

Ginny cocked her head. “Tests? What kind of tests? You know that we usually recommend that the man get tested first...” Ginny lectured, then mentally kicked herself for sounding so detached and professional.

“It’s not him, Ginny. It’s me. Scar tissue. In my fallopian tubes. Only a

miniscule chance that I can ever get pregnant. I don't know how I'm going to tell him. We've wanted a baby so long now, and it just kills him when we have these near misses. He's fine with it in front of me, tries to be strong, but then he just disappears off somewhere, by himself, for a while, and broods over it, I suppose. What's this going to do to him? And it's not like we can just adopt, like you can if you're a Muggle. I mean, we can't adopt a Muggle baby, too many questions, too many problems. And wizard adoptions are few and far between. Wizards take care of their own for the most part. Ginny, I can't tell him that he'll probably never be a father," Hermione sobbed.

"Now, you don't know that for sure," Ginny soothed, "you might get pregnant next month for all you know. Have you looked into seeing a specialist?"

"There's one of our kind in all of Britain. And the waiting list for an appointment is three years. Bare minimum. And no guarantee he can help," Hermione sniffed.

"If there's anything I can do, let me know, hmm?" Ginny asked. "If Neville and I can help in any way at all... make some calls, hunt down some names, or if either you just need to talk, we're here."

"That's very sweet, but I don't think words are going to make it any better," Hermione said, giving a bleak smile.

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"Poor things. You would think if there were any justice in the world, the two of them would have had a dozen babies by now," Neville said, shaking his head. "There they are, a couple that would make wonderful parents and would give their right arms for a baby, and she can't get pregnant. Think she's shared that with Viktor yet?"

Ginny studied her husband as he laid his tea bag on the saucer and took a sip. "I doubt it. I don't think she even told him that she suspected she might be expecting the last two or three times it happened. I think when she shares it, the two of them start hoping so hard that they can almost taste it, and then finding out she isn't just crushes them. Last time he went with her to the appointment, they both dragged around for a week afterwards like someone had died. You would think there would be a Fertility Spell or something they could do."

"Fertility Spells are no walk in the park. They're some of the most complex spells there are. You don't mess around with spells that deal with life. Ending it or beginning it. Fooling with something like that is just as dangerous as practicing the killing curse in the back garden for fun. There's usually a lot of aspects to fertility treatments, so I remember from my graduate work. As should you,"

Neville pointed out.

“Still... if someone could at least do some research...” Ginny began.

“Someone who is Herbology professor at a boarding school with a well appointed library, you mean?” Neville sighed.

“Someone like that, yes. His wife would probably be very grateful,” Ginny grinned.

“Oh, alright. I’ll look. But no promises.”

“No promises. I’ll try not to get my hopes up, either. Did I mention you’re the best husband in the world?”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“I’ll flatter you silly if it might help Viktor and Hermione have a baby. Imagine, seventeen years of marriage, and so many heartbreaks.”

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“Shhhh... it’s alright... don’t cry...” Viktor whispered, rolling onto his side to wrap an arm around her, spooning behind her in the bed. In the years since they had married, a year after her graduation from Hogwarts, his Bulgarian accent had softened to a much more subtle hint of his foreign origins, a rounder, softer inflection. It was only a shade exotic and interesting, like his facial features.

“W...w... wh... why n... not?” Hermione sobbed.

“Because... if you do then I’ll want to and we’ll both be messes for no good reason. It’s not the end of the world” he soothed, talking low into the shell of her ear.

“So... me not being able to get pregnant is ‘no good reason’?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth. I didn’t say that. It won’t help matters that we both get torn up over it. It’s not as though they said absolutely not. And even then, they could be wrong. There’s still a chance,” he protested.

“Miniscule. That’s actually the word she used. And the specialist, that’s a three year wait. You realize we will have been married maybe almost twenty years by the time we even get in? Oh, excuse me, *I* get in... after all, *I’m* the defective one.”

“Now what’s to say there’s not something wrong with me, as well?” he said,

choosing the little white lie over the truth. He still hadn't told her that he had been checked out five years ago. And given a clean bill of health. No reason whatsoever you couldn't become a father, given the right partner, they had said. "Besides, even if we have to be married thirty years first, wouldn't it be worth it?"

"I suppose you're right. I've just got no patience left. I've used it all up," she replied, sniffing.

"A lot can happen in three years. Come on, now. We may laugh about this some day. How we worried and fretted over it and didn't need to."

"Lord, I hope so. I'm getting tired of being let down. We've got to go to the Burrow tomorrow. I don't know if I can take it. I know it's been a month since I went for the appointment and I should be over it, but I don't know if I can take watching all those little Weasleys running around."

"You feel what you feel. Don't apologize for it. You want us to excuse ourselves? We could probably come up with something, like an emergency team meeting that I have to go to... or one of us could get 'sick'."

"No. That won't be necessary. It will be a while before we see Bill and Fleur again. I couldn't bear not to see them off. And Molly's expecting us. You know she wouldn't rest until she found out the straight of why we weren't there. Ginny and Ron knowing, that's enough of the Weasley family being in on our problems, and Harry and Neville. I'm not interested in broadcasting it anywhere else. Easier to show up." She suspected Hannah and Susan both knew, but she didn't care to ask Harry and Ron if their respective wives knew she was barren. That's the way she thought of it now. Barren. Like some mountain devoid of life. Cold, empty and unwelcoming, offering no purchase, no haven. No longer just unlucky, but barren. And it hurt too much to bear thinking about.

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Hermione was just about to rap on the door again when a flushed but happy Molly Weasley appeared in the open doorway. Nearly everyone else would have come by Floo, Neville and Ginny from Hogwarts, the couples with children had to, since the little ones weren't licensed. Not that she missed the dizzying whirl of the Floo and the smudges she always got on her clothing, but still... We've got no reason not to Apparate, Hermione thought sadly, looking around at the skiff of late November snow on the grass. Just the two of us. "Hermione! Viktor! Come in dears, out of the cold, out of the cold. Come on, sweetheart, do let go of Grandmum's leg and get out of the way so they can get in," she prodded Jeremy. Fred and Angelina's five-year old gave the trademark Weasley grin and rushed at Viktor instead.

“Bring me anything?” he asked shamelessly, after Viktor had scooped him up.

“Might have. Check my pockets in a minute for you. Molly, would you be entirely horrified to have certain things flying about your living room today?” Viktor asked with a smile.

“Would these be Quidditch-related things that someone’s been begging for all these months? About this big? On little brooms? Wearing orange?” Molly asked, holding her thumb and forefinger apart.

“That would sound about right,” Viktor replied.

“Cool! Thanks! You brought the Cannons team figures!” Jeremy exclaimed, “Now Peter and I can play the Cannons against the Puddlemere United!”

“Now how did you know?” Viktor teased, fishing the bag out of his cloak pocket and handing it to him and setting him down.

“Thank you, he’s been about to talk our ears off about those things for months,” Molly said as they walked into the living room.

“Glad to get them. They won’t be in the shops for another two months, but the company owed me. If I hadn’t agreed to it, they couldn’t have done the entire Bulgarian national team,” Viktor laughed. “Little do they know I was the lone holdout on the team just so I could get pre-production toys.” As usual, the Burrow was stuffed with Weasleys of all shapes and sizes, Peter and Jeremy already setting up the tiny Quidditch rings on the coffee table.

“Peter! You two don’t let those things go all over the house, alright? And did you thank Viktor and Hermione for bringing them?” Charlie called out, coming in from the kitchen, wide eyed little girl in his arms.

“Jeremy did, Dad!” Peter yelled, not looking up.

“True. He did. I was there. I witnessed it. And besides, I had nothing to do with it,” Hermione interjected, looking around the room for a free seat. She hurriedly settled in the corner, away from the middle of the room. More and more over the last few years, Ginny noticed, Hermione tended to avoid getting too close to babies, while Viktor seemed to be drawn to children more than ever. He had doted upon, coddled and comforted the various Weasleys that had come along as much as any of their blood relations. Hermione had become more and more distant with each addition. She had only held Alice the once, and then, it was almost under duress.

“She’s just excusing herself in case something gets broken later. That can’t be

Alice, can it? Have you been taking her by Hogwarts so Neville can put fertilizer on her? Last time I saw her, she was that big,” Viktor said, holding his hands apart.

Alice babbled happily and put her hands out, reaching. “Last time you saw her was almost eight months ago. She’s fourteen months, now. Walking. And talking our ears off. Between her and Peter, Cassie and I don’t get a minute’s peace. Must be nice to have the house to yourself, and some quiet,” Charlie mused, as he shuffled his daughter over to Viktor.

“Peace and quiet is overrated,” Viktor said softly, taking Alice, who was reaching for him, into the crook of his arm. Ginny, Neville and Ron, all seated on the sofa together, winced inwardly. Harry, perched on the chair arm next to them, also cast a significant glance at the trio on the sofa.

“And traveling whenever and wherever you want must be fantastic, too. Rumania was great, but now, with the kids, we just thought it was time to move back to England for good. I’m all part of the conservation and education program now. Dreadfully dull and boring compared to the wrangling job. But then, those are the sacrifices you make when you have children,” Charlie added.

“I suppose so,” Viktor murmured noncommittally.

*Shut up, Charlie. Shut up, shut up, shut up,* Ginny thought.

“You two are lucky. No one to worry about but yourselves, no need to consult anyone but each other, no schedules to follow but your own, vacations for a month at a time in Paris... you two have it made,” Charlie prattled on.

“I guess we do... but I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t take any number of vacations in exchange for your children, now would you?” Viktor asked flatly. “And Paris wasn’t all that spectacular.”

*Shut up, Charlie,* Ginny thought, willing him to be quiet. Hermione was already curled up almost defensively in the chair in the corner, and Ginny could tell she wasn’t particularly happy, but was fighting to keep her face impassive.

“No, but a short vacation away from them would be nice, sometimes. And the expense! Whew! I don’t know how Mum and Dad managed at all with the whole mess of us!”

“You manage what’s important and let the rest go. Just like being married,” Viktor murmured, taking a long finger and tenderly tucking a stray auburn tendril of hair back behind Alice’s ear, away from her face, then caressing her cheek while she clenched a fistful of his robes.

*Shut. Up. Please. Charlie,* Ginny pleaded in her head.

“Amen to that. But still, you two won’t miss all that time you had until it’s too late. But holding that little one more than makes up for it,” Mrs. Weasley added.

*Don’t do it, Mum. Please don’t do it,* Ginny thought, *don’t ask them...*

“So when are the two of you going to be making an announcement about a baby on the way?” All the residents of the sofa shifted uncomfortably. After a long, silent look between he and Hermione, Viktor finally spoke.

“When the time is right, I expect,” he offered. It was the old standby. His stock answer by now, all ready for when Molly asked the question.

*Now leave it be, Mum. Don’t press for details, don’t offer your opinion, don’t keep twisting the knife. For Heaven’s sake, you’ve already cut them to the bone,* Ginny thought.

“Oh, there’s no good time to have children. No perfect time for them to come along. You wait for the perfect timing, you’ll never have any,” Mrs. Weasley lectured.

Viktor heaved a heavy sigh. “Right now just doesn’t seem to work so well. Someday soon enough, when the time’s right,” he said. Ginny felt a fresh pang of sympathy as she realized the answer was too practiced and so often used. He had used it with Molly several times that she could remember, just in the last couple of years.

“Mum, hadn’t you better go check on the roast?” Ron asked loudly, in an effort to change the subject.

“Oh, it’s fine for another twenty minutes at least,” she protested. “How long is it now, you two have been married, Hermione, dear?”

“Seventeen years last August,” she responded quietly, twisting nervously at her engagement and wedding rings.

“Well, at this rate, then, Ron and Susan or Ginny and Neville or Harry and Hannah are going to beat you to it, and they’ve only been married three,” Mrs. Weasley said. In their haste to cover the awkward atmosphere in the room, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Neville all stepped over one another.

“Not for a while yet, Molly,” Harry said, taking Hannah’s hand.

“Five years for us Mum, nearly six,” Ginny said.

“... yes, five and more...” Neville added.

“Mum! Stop nosing into when we’re all going to have babies. I mean, you make it sound like we should schedule them for your convenience! Stop hassling all of us about when we plan on making announcements!” Ron protested, a touch irritable.

“Only making conversation,” Mrs. Weasley said, “Come on into the kitchen and we’ll start loading our plates.” Ginny couldn’t help but notice that Hermione, at least, looked much relieved.

“Speaking of announcements, we’ve got one of our own,” Bill said, pulling Fleur close.

“We just found out *we’re* expecting,” Fleur said in a burst, breaking into a wide smile. After a moment of stunned silence, most of the Weasleys and guests descended on them to offer congratulations.

“Excuse me, I need some air,” Hermione said softly to no one in particular and slipped out the back door to the garden.

“Poor dear, is Hermione alright? She looked a little flushed,” Molly asked, laying a hand on Viktor’s arm.

“She’s not been feeling well. Probably got too hot. It’s a little stuffy in here. Here, take Alice, I’ll go check on her,” Viktor responded. He still offered a quick handshake and a murmured word of congratulations to Bill on the way to the back door. Despite Viktor hiding it so well, Ginny knew the both of them must be heartsick.

“Ginny, dear, maybe you had better go check on her, too, if she’s not feeling well,” Molly ordered.

“Sure, Mum. I’ll get my cloak,” Ginny said, and slipped through the crowded kitchen and out the back door. Easy enough to humor her by stepping out the back door, maintaining a respectful distance from wherever Hermione and Viktor were for a short while, then heading back inside. Neville caught her eye on the way out and slowly shook his head back and forth. Outside the door, she was rather surprised to find Viktor still standing there, no cloak, bare arms folded in the cold wind. All the way across the garden, Hermione stood at the wall. “What are you doing? I thought you’d be over there by now.”

“Standing here trying to decide if my walking over there will make things better or



worse,” he said grimly. “What do you think? I’m afraid to trust my own judgment any more.”

“Go on. And what do you mean by not trusting your own judgment?”

“Seems like I can’t do anything right this last month or so,” Viktor said softly. “Everything I say sits wrong.”

“She doesn’t mean it. She’s just taking it out on you because she doesn’t like talking about it with anyone else, much,” Ginny said soothingly.

“Doesn’t make it any easier to take. Look, tell them she just got overheated or something. We’ll come back in shortly,” Viktor sighed, trudging across the back garden. Ginny stood for a moment, watching the two of them stand together at the garden wall, before going back in to make her excuses.

“I’m sorry for bailing out on you. I just couldn’t be in there any more. I know it’s awful of me, but I hate her right now. With a passion. So help me, I don’t think I can take it again,” Hermione said, planting her hands on top of the low wall and blinking back the tears.

“Take what, exactly?” Viktor asked, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and giving her a gentle squeeze.

“Watching someone else go through it. Again. They’re going to go to Egypt for two months, and then they’ll come back, and every time we’re over here, or at Hogwarts to see Ginny and Neville, or over at Ron’s or Harry’s, we run a pretty good risk of running into them. And Molly means well, but she’s driving me crazy asking us every time she sees us if we’re pregnant. And Fleur will be there, with her morning sickness stories, her backache complaints, swollen ankles and cravings, going on and on about getting kicked in the kidneys, not sleeping and how all maternity clothes look like tents and I’ll sit there and silently hate her and let the jealousy eat me alive.”

“Well, how could you not hate her? You make all that sound so glamorous,” he said with forced levity and she choked out a slightly hysterical laugh and wiped at her eyes. “Better?” he asked, smoothing the hair back from her forehead.

“Passable. Let’s go in before Molly comes out here. Next she’ll be offering to come by and watch us in bed to see if we’re doing it properly. You know, the other day at the shops, I saw this pregnant woman, and I couldn’t stop myself staring at her. She had to be nearly due. Looked like she was about to pop. And I hated her with a passion, too. I kept thinking ‘Look at her, and she’s a good decade younger than me, at least. Probably doesn’t have a clue what she’s getting into, and may not even want it.’ But at the same time, it was all I

could do not to go up to her and ask to feel. I kept sneaking looks at this big, round tummy under her robes and the way she kept rubbing it and putting her hand on it. I think I looked at it the way starving people look at food. She probably thought I was a real sicko.”

“Well, I *know* you are and it doesn’t stop me from loving you, anyway. Well... Fleur’s not got a tummy yet. Can you get through dinner? We’ll put off avoiding them for a while yet, hmm?” he asked as they turned back to the house.

“Just a matter of time before she does,” Hermione said ruefully.

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“So, what have you settled on, then?” Ron asked, swirling the contents of his teacup around before downing the last of it.

“Hmm? Settled on?” Ginny asked, flopping onto the sofa next to her brother.

“Settled on. What were you and Nev here so hot and heavy about going over with Harry and me? You called on the Floo and practically begged us to get over to your quarters at Hogwarts in ten seconds flat. Where’s the fire?”

“Oh. I’m not sure how to bring this up, actually,” Ginny said.

“And why aren’t Hermione and Viktor here? I don’t think I’ve ever been here without them here, as well, except when they were out of the country. No match today, is there? I thought off season for the national teams was longer this year, not shorter,” Harry said.

“I didn’t ask them to come, because this concerns them,” Ginny replied.

“Now how does that work? You didn’t invite the two people we’re here to talk about?” Ron said, putting his cup on the table.

“It’s complicated, Ron. Look, are Neville and I the only ones who can’t stand it when we go to the Burrow and Viktor’s juggling three kids at once like he’ll never get another chance to be around one and Hermione’s avoiding them like the plague? Do you have to bite your tongue to keep from yelling at Mum to lay off and stop twisting the knife by asking them over and over again when they’re going to have a baby? Do you watch the two of them when they have to stand there and listen to another pregnancy announcement from one of our lot that doesn’t have a clue how badly they want the same thing? Do you watch Hermione’s face? Sure, Viktor hides it better, but it kills him just as much. What are they going to do when any of us start having children? They’re running out of people to avoid at this point. Actually, maybe Viktor’s not keeping it so well

hidden now. When Alice came, he couldn't even get Hermione to come to the hospital with him, he told me later. He went by, saw Charlie, Cassie and Alice, made excuses as to why Hermione couldn't come and left. And you know what a bad liar he is, but he's getting better at the excuses. I thought he had gone home hours before, but when I went home for the night, I saw him out on the floor. Out in front of the glass window for the general nursery. Standing there, arms crossed, just watching the babies. With this look... like he would give anything...I never let him know I saw him. I couldn't even begin to think what to say to him about it. I mean, this must feel like some bizarre merit competition in which no one tells you the rules. Where you stand in a room, and awards are announced and prizes handed out. Imagine knowing you deserve one and probably want one worse than anyone else in that room. You can just see the two of them dying off a little inside every time someone else gets one and they don't. Every time she thinks she is and goes to the appointment and finds out she isn't. Imagine how everyone else doing this good natured complaining about getting one must bother you. Hermione, I think she dwells on that a lot. I've heard her ask 'Do you think she even wants it?' when she sees really young, pregnant women. Three weeks ago they took Dumbledore up on those opera tickets he offered all of us. The five of us went to that show, and it just so happened there was a pregnant woman about six seats away. Do you know they both watched her more than the opera?" Ginny said.

"For a while there, I thought he wasn't going to come back after intermission," Neville added. "I thought he had dashed off because he couldn't stand it any more. He did come back, but only after the house lights went down."

"So what do you suggest? Staging an intervention to tell them they shouldn't be so grumpy about a little thing like not being able to reproduce? Or worse yet, tell Mum? She'll just pry more. She means well, but you know for the most part, she never lets a thing rest. Especially if there's sympathy to be handed out. Bad idea, I think, Gin," Ron pointed out.

"No. I suggest we do something about it," Ginny replied. "We know they want babies desperately. So I say we help them out. And Neville's found a way we can."

"The Fecundus Charm. It's a Fertility Spell. Complicated stuff. There's a potion component that each of them have to take, and it requires some hair from each of the potential parents, a bit like Polyjuice. Takes six months to mature. Ginny and I've been brewing it since a couple of weeks after Fleur's little announcement. Actually, it's mature tonight. That's where you two come in," Neville said. "There's an incantation that needs to be said over it, and the more power you get behind it, or the more wands you have waving, the better. Four wands are better than one. Or two. Supposedly, four saying the incantation would make it practically a lock. Anything more would be overkill. As it is, she

ought to get pregnant if they so much as put their knickers in the same load of laundry after drinking it. We know Hermione's got a problem conceiving, courtesy of Ginny and their lunches and conversations that we've all been dubiously privileged to have with them, so I made it extra strong. All that's left after the incantation is separating out the doses and putting the rosehips in her dose, and the dried mandrake in his. I'm going to put the maximum amount of rosehips in there. Anyway, we thought that as two more of their oldest and closest friends, you two would probably want to be in on it."

"I still don't understand why Viktor and Hermione aren't here. I mean, looks to me like they would want to be involved," Harry interjected.

"Harry, there's no absolute guarantee it will work. We dug through the Restricted Section for days trying to find anything. Imagine if we go to all this trouble and it doesn't work. Think how crushed they would be. I can't bear the thought of making them even more heartsick over it," Ginny said.

"Aren't they going to find out when you get them to drink their Potion? How exactly does this work?" Harry pressed.

"Not necessarily. They never have to know, really. Neville and I are going to stay with them for a week when school lets out. It gets out so early this year, and they invited, we accepted. We'll be right there in the house, able to get at their brushes and sneak it into something they drink or eat. See, you do the incantation, put the hairs in, separate it into two doses, and then you add a little pinch of dried mandrake to the man's portion, and rosehips to hers, for receptiveness to conception. Then the next time they make love, it should work. It's supposed to be effective up to a month. If we're lucky, hey, presto, they're making an announcement of their own in a few weeks and they're none the wiser that we helped out, just happy. And if it doesn't work, well, then they don't get their hopes up. Maybe we try it again or move on to something else. Can't hurt to *try* to get her pregnant before they get the appointment with the specialist," Ginny added.

"Not to put a damper on things, but what's the least amount of time it could be effective? Wouldn't they have to, errr, make use of it while it's in their systems?" Ron asked.

"Oh, you mean giving it to her when she's, ah, in the wrong bit of the cycle? No danger there. I worked it out. Girls tend to share these things with one another. That should finish at least ten days before we get there. Just about right," Ginny pointed out.

"It lasts at least a week, according to the source I have. I think that's really all we can count on, since supposedly a more powerful witch or wizard metabolizes it

faster. And I would bet the two of them would burn it off in a week easy. But on the other hand, the more powerful the witch and wizard who contribute to it and ingest it, the more potent it is for the amount of time it lasts. So let's just count on the week. I suppose if they didn't make love in a week, the effort was wasted. But this *is* Viktor and Hermione we're talking about. Do you think they ever went as long as a week without having a go at each other?" Neville asked in all seriousness.

Ron and Harry laughed in spite of themselves, Harry nearly choking on his tea. "I have to admit, probably not," Harry spluttered. "In fact, I doubt they've ever gone much more than three days without a shag since getting married, if they were on the same continent and both of them were on their feet. In fact, I'm not sure they didn't still fool around even when Viktor had that awful compound fracture and was laid up. Wouldn't put it past them, even when he was in traction. You know, I think they even had a shag in the cupboard at our wedding reception. Or at least, they were gone a long time and their robes were seriously rumped and they were suspiciously sweaty when they got back," Harry laughed.

"Harry! Surely not!" Ginny exclaimed.

"I don't think they were dancing. Besides, we know for certain they had a shag in the back room before your ceremony. Ron, Neville and I accidentally opened the door on them while trying to find the room they set aside for us to get dressed in and just about fell over ourselves trying to get back out and get the door shut before they realized. We did manage, but I think that was only because they were a little preoccupied at the time. All the panting and moaning probably drowned us out. He had her on one of the extra tables they had stashed back there. Oh, don't worry, we didn't really see anything, they just had all the necessary clothes tastefully rearranged a bit and the robes had them covered up, but they were definitely shagging. It wasn't waltzing," Harry snorted.

"Whatever did you think!?" Ginny pressed.

"I believe my exact words were 'My, aren't weddings romantic?'" Neville giggled, "Once I had regained the power of speech, anyway."

"And I said that I hoped my wife and I were still panting after one another that much, after being married a decade and more," Ron wheezed.

"Well, I guess that explains that lovely, healthy glow she had during the ceremony. I kept asking what makeup or Charm she had used to color her cheeks and she would just smile and shake her head. I guess that answers that," Ginny laughed.

"Don't complain. Neville here probably picked up some better technique for the

honeymoon from that. I know I did. I didn't even know you could *do* it at that particular angle. By the time my wedding rolled around a couple of months later, we figured out that if Viktor and Hermione both disappeared at the same time, don't open unfamiliar doors. Or familiar ones, even. I'm just about positive they even made love under the Christmas tree that first Christmas Eve they slept at the Burrow. Remember? The year I let them have my bed and I slept out in the downstairs hall? The year right after they married. Would still have been extra-randy newlyweds. I didn't get up to see, of course, but I don't think Father Christmas makes a rhythmic thumping noise while delivering presents. I always figured they both got up for a drink of water and couldn't wait until they got back to bed. Mum shouldn't have hung all that mistletoe that year. Oh, and Percy was sharing the room, so I suppose they didn't want to assault his sense of decency by daring to have a good time in the room where he was sleeping. Heaven forbid Percy find out that a married couple was engaged in sexual congress anywhere within ten miles of him. I'm pretty sure he's convinced himself Mum and Dad managed to have that many kids without ever actually touching one another," Ron said.

"Oh... oh... we shouldn't be making light of it," Harry said, gasping for breath.

"We're not making light. Stating facts is all. They have a healthy sex life. They go at it like bunnies... crazed, hormonal bunnies in heat... they just need a boost in the breeding like bunnies department. And we can do that, maybe. I always chalked it up to the fact that they waited so long for one another. You know, not one of us ever caught them so much as groping one another inappropriately before they married. If they had waited much longer to marry, I think they both would have exploded. Apparently they could have taken out a solid city block, so we never knew just how much danger we were in," Neville explained, still laughing.

"Oh, alright. I'm in," Harry said, wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes.

"Me too," Ron added.

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"What is all that thumping?" Viktor asked, his dark lashes fluttering slightly, as he rolled over in bed and stretched.

"Oh, Ginny and Neville insisted they were going to fix breakfast for all of us. I was too tired to argue by the time we went to bed. I wasn't a good hostess. We all stayed up talking until two in the morning," Hermione answered with a yawn, nestling up against him.

"Mmmm... how long do you think we have?"

“The door’s locked, so as long as we want,” she murmured, slipping a hand beneath the covers.

“You wicked hostess, you,” he laughed, cupping her breast and covering her mouth with his.

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“Are you sure this will work? That drying it and reconstituting it with milk or juice will work?” Ginny asked, looking at the two apparently empty glasses on the counter. If you really looked, you could see a bit of film on the glass. The residue of the dried Fecundus Potion.

“Probably makes it less potent, but it should still work. Make sure you take the label off hers and keep them straight. Set hers out toward the front. You said she usually gets hers first and that a lot of times, Viktor doesn’t even drink milk or juice. So we might have to wait until lunch to get his in,” Neville said. They finished the breakfast preparations by nine, and shortly thereafter, Hermione and Viktor came into the room. Hermione went to the icebox and pulled out the orange juice. When she got to the glasses on the counter, Ginny had to turn her attention back to the plate of bangers she was carrying to the table, for fear of her broad grin giving her away.

Hermione poured some juice into the front glass, but before raising it to her lips, she pantomimed the offer of juice to her husband. “Here you go, then,” she murmured, handing him the full glass when he nodded, and reaching for the other. Neville could hardly suppress his grin either when they turned back from the counter, each with a glass of juice in hand. Ginny was sure they had both grinned like idiots throughout the entire breakfast. Hermione had even remarked on it, “Well, you two are certainly in a good mood this morning. You must have gotten more sleep than we did.”

“I doubt it. Just feeling chipper this morning. Happy,” Ginny laughed.

“We’ve just done our good deed for the day,” Neville added, sipping his own juice, while Ginny did the same. They had poured theirs first thing.

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“It’s hot in here. Is it hot in here? I’m hot,” Hermione complained, flapping the sheets.

“I’m hot, too,” Viktor replied, kicking the sheet off. “I know it’s almost July, but for Pete’s sake, these Cooling Charms are doing approximately squat for me,” he

agreed, raking his black hair back from his forehead.

“I can’t cast any more, can you?” Hermione asked.

“I think I’m done. Done done. I’ve been kind of wobbly all day, anyway. Tired out and feeling funny. Besides, if it were going to do any good, it would have by now. Must be this heat.”

“Seeing as we’re already hot and sweaty, would you be completely averse to taking up where we left off this morning? Sort of a round two?”

“You mean before we had breakfast with our insanely happy houseguests?”

“True, I don’t know what got into them,” Hermione laughed.

“Maybe they had been doing what we had. A ‘school’s-out-early’ celebration, perhaps. Frankly, I don’t much care. Right now, all I can think about is peeling that chemise and those knickers off of you and working you over.”

“Be my guest. It’s so wet, you can see right through it anyway,” she said, obligingly lifting her arms over her head.

“I am fully aware of that, already, thank you very much. Why do you think that’s the only thing on my mind right now?” Before long, his shorts joined the chemise on the floor, and they moved together in a comfortable rhythm, stroking and kissing, familiar and easy with one another after so many years. When they finally broke apart, the sweat was streaming from their temples, their hair soaked, and their breath came in short pants. And as they collapsed on the mattress in a sweaty tangle of limbs, unknown to each of them, a tiny life exploded into existence, on its secretive journey to taking root and growing.

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“You know, I know it’s my turn to take care of dinner, but I feel about as worthless as I ever have. The thought of standing in front of a hot stove does not appeal. Why don’t we go out?” Viktor purred in her ear, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind.

“What’s up with you this last week? Are they working you that hard at practice? I caught you napping last night. In the chair, yet,” Hermione remarked, patting him on the hand.

“Beats me. No harder than I remember from years past. Maybe I’m getting old,” he teased. “Or it’s the heat. I’m all hot-blooded, remember?” he added, giving her a little squeeze.

“So are you buying?” she asked.

“But of course. Frankly, I could eat a Hippogriff right now. Tell you what, you pick someplace, I’ll be right back.”

“Remember, tomorrow’s Harry’s birthday dinner! Can we stop and pick up his ‘little something’? And where exactly are you going to be right back from?”

“The loo.”

“You’ve been vacationing in there!”

“So I drank a lot of water at practice!”

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“So, anyone heard anything from the Krums, then?” Ron asked.

“Just that they would probably be a few minutes late and not to wait for them. She probably thinks I’ve gone completely whack-adoo anyway. I kept staring at her at lunch yesterday. She was in Hogsmeade while Viktor was at practice, she needed to pick up some research material for this article she’s writing, and we ate together. I kept looking at her like there might be some flashing neon sign on her forehead if she were you-know-what. You would think being a mediwitch, I would know better,” Ginny said with a laugh.

“Would she even be having any symptoms yet if she were you-know-what?” Harry said, perching on the sofa beside Ron. Hannah and Susan were busy catching up with one another in the kitchen, out of earshot.

“Oh, sure. But I doubt you would really recognize them as such. Some women get a bit fatigued and visit the loo a little more often by three weeks after conception. A lot of women get that when their ‘monthly visitor’ is due, anyway. Some of them are even mildly morning sick already, or starved, or both. I’m sure she would just be dying to share with us that she’s being sick or eating the table legs off or having a pee every ten minutes, now wouldn’t she? And this heat would suck it out of anyone,” Ginny said, sipping at her pumpkin juice.

“Sometimes I find the fact that you are a girl and a mediwitch a dubious benefit. Like when you start mentioning ‘monthly visitors’ and such. Ewww,” Ron said.

Harry stood up when the doorbell rang. “Ooh, the door. Probably them. Shush on all the talk about ‘monthly visitors’ and whether or not they should be expecting a visit from a ‘little stranger’ yet. I don’t think I can keep all these

delicate euphemisms straight, anyway. Come on in, we were just wondering when you would get here!" he added after he swung the door back.

"Sorry. We got held up a few minutes. Happy birthday," Hermione said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Don't expect me to kiss you," Viktor said with a soft smile.

"Well, thank goodness. You're too tall for me, anyway. I'd have to start wearing heels," Harry teased. "Besides, Hannah would get jealous."

"Hannah would get jealous about what?" Hannah called from the kitchen doorway.

"That I might run away with an international Quidditch star if he kissed me happy birthday," Harry replied.

"Wouldn't surprise me. You two want something to drink while we wait on dinner?"

"I gave my order to the waitress on the way in. Happy birthday, Harry. Excuse me for a minute, I'll be right back."

Hermione sighed and shook her head as she watched Viktor head down the hall. "Oh... how about one of those lemonades I see Neville drinking, and a ginger ale for an upset stomach, if you have it, Hannah?" Hermione said, offering the gift bag she was carrying to Harry after Hannah had nodded her approval of the drink order. Ginny raised her eyebrows questioningly at Neville and Ron.

Harry let out a low whistle. "Whoa, the original prototype for the Nimbus 2000... that must have set you two back a pretty penny, thank you," he said, pulling the bronze casting out of the bag.

"Viktor suggested it, I made some calls and finally tracked it down, and we had it engraved for you. Only three of those in the world, and one is staying in the company museum, they told me. What else could we get you? And you're welcome," Hermione said. "Thank you, Hannah."

"No problem. Anyone out here need a refill?" Hannah asked, polling the room. They all shook their heads.

Hermione took an experimental sip of the lemonade. "That... is absolute heaven. But then, anything wet and cold is heaven right now."

"Should you be drinking lemonade if you're queasy? I think that would make me

worse,” Ginny said.

“Actually, the ginger ale is for me. I managed to just about kill myself at practice today. Got overheated. Thank you,” he said, taking the glass and sitting in the chair beside Hermione.

“Heatstroke?” Ginny asked.

“Not quite, but pretty close, I think. Not that I was the only one. Just about everyone had to give it up once or twice or risk passing out. It hit me before I knew it. But I did seem to be the only one who had to go crawling off to... well, never mind, you don’t want to hear about it this close to dinner,” Viktor said with a little shake of his head.

“Oh, come on, I’m a medical professional,” Ginny pressed.

“Let’s just say I don’t remember getting that good a look at my stomach contents for quite some time. In fact, I think I pulled something. Like my entire ribcage.”

“I think they’re trying to kill all of them, anyway. He’s been about half dead at home this last week or so. Caught him napping like somebody’s grandpa the other night,” Hermione laughed, giving Viktor’s knee a squeeze.

“Guilty as charged,” Viktor said.

“Well, all of you get in here, dinner’s ready,” Hannah called from the doorway.

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“So, no news is good news, right? I mean, just because she hasn’t got ‘pregnant’ stamped on her forehead yet, it doesn’t mean anything, right?” Neville said, as they walked up the stairs to their quarters.

“I suppose so. Plenty of time yet, before we would know for sure. Viktor needs to be more careful though. I know he’s dedicated to practicing hard, but no point in him killing himself before he and Hermione become parents,” Ginny said with a yawn. “He’s lucky he didn’t really get heatstroke, if the practice facility was as hot as it was everywhere I went today. When she asked for the ginger ale, though, I was just sure.”

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“Could you move your head just a little? Not that I want to complain when a beautiful woman wants to put her head on my chest in bed, but I need you to move,” Viktor murmured sleepily.

“Sorry, is my hair up your nose? Scoot down?” Hermione mumbled back.

“To the left, actually. More on my arm. My chest is sore.”

“Pull something in the game?”

“I guess.”

“Just a regular Calamity Jane these last few weeks, aren’t you, honey?”

“A who?”

“Muggle reference. I’ll explain it in the morning. Suffice it to say, I meant, ‘Gee, aren’t you injury-prone these last few weeks.’ You darned near give yourself heatstroke, try to turn your stomach lining inside out and get sore, all in three weeks or so.”

“Am I the only one who’s hungry?”

“Yes, you are. Good on you for suggesting sweet and sour chicken. I know some people say Chinese burns off in an hour, but I’m still stuffed. But you’re a regular metabolic furnace and bottomless pit under the best of circumstances, anyway. Can’t you wait until breakfast?”

“If you don’t mind my stomach growling in your ear.”

“Tell you what, how about I get off your chest completely and go fix some toast?”

“Would you? I’d be eternally grateful.”

“Absolutely. There’s no limit to the lengths I am willing to go to for my husband, including going all of fifteen feet into the kitchen and fixing toast at eleven at night. I might even bring back butter and jam. Especially when he’s being completely useless and lying there like a wet blanket.”

“Hey, I resemble that remark. Besides, I had a seventeen hour game. No fair. You got to rest. And we were busy an hour ago.”

“Sorry, just teasing. Are you seriously that hungry?”

“Yes.”

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione carried a plate of toast back into the bedroom. “Viktor?” But from the even breathing, she could tell he was asleep. She stood

a moment beside his side of the bed, studying his face in the moonlight from the window. "I still don't like how peaky you're looking lately," she sighed. "Now what am I going to do with this toast?" she asked aloud, putting the plate on the bedside table. "Oh, for Heaven's sake, wake up and eat this toast!" she scolded good naturedly, shaking him awake.

"Hmmm? Sorry..." he said sheepishly, scooting up against the headboard.

"You know, for a second there, I was just going to let you sleep. But then I simply *had* to wake you."

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"For one thing, I don't want the toast, I'm about to explode already. And for another thing, your stomach just growled."

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"Darn! I hate to do this, but could you check your purse?" Hermione whispered across the table in Madam Puddifoot's.

"What? Don't have enough to cover the bill?" Ginny laughed.

"No, I need something. I forgot I was due this week," Hermione hissed.

"Due?" Ginny said a little thickly.

"You know. I need something to wear. So I don't get my clothes all bloody. Why else do you think I came back from the loo so fast?" Hermione asked.

"Sorry. Here, take my purse with you. Side pocket," Ginny said, watching her head back to the toilet. Doing the calculations in her head, Ginny figured it had been well over two months since the Fecundus Potion would have worn off. She found herself depressed, but still a little glad that she had insisted that Hermione and Viktor were not to be told. She couldn't take too many more crying sessions over tea. *Tea and sympathy, it's all I can offer, unless we try it again*, Ginny thought, as Hermione came back.

"Now then. Thank you. Look, the tea's my treat. See you for lunch next week?" Hermione asked.

"Sure," Ginny replied. She would have to let the boys know that the Potion might need another go around.

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“What’s good for heartburn?”

“Eating too much spicy food, running laps, jumping up and down in this heat, and then standing on your head,” Hermione teased.

“I was really hoping for a way to get rid of it, rather than getting it. I’ve already got a pretty good case of it without doing any of those things, thanks, you smart-aleck,” Viktor said, giving her a peck on the cheek. “Good thing I have high self-esteem, or I would never survive you in one piece.”

Hermione set light to the stove beneath the coffee pot. “Seriously, you’ve got it again?” Hermione asked, sobering.

“Not seriously. Mildly. But it’s still no picnic,” he replied, rubbing his chest.

“Ha ha. We’re both just regular comedians this morning. You really should get yourself seen to. That’s not normal. Don’t turn me into a vicious nag, Viktor.”

“You started it. Go running for an appointment for heartburn? Sure, I’ll just pop into the office and tell them I must be dying because I’ve had heartburn three times this week, shall I then?”

“Well, at least let me ask Ginny for some advice when I see her at lunch today. You’ve really not been well for at least a month.” she said, checking once more on the coffee heating on the stove, which she was just beginning to smell.

“Oh, come on. It’s just heartburn, not a brain tumor. I don’t think it’s anything to get wor...” he started to protest, but instead he suddenly paled and leaned over the sink, retching horribly. Hermione put a hand between his heaving shoulder blades until it had passed, leaving him limp and leaning against the sink.

“Just heartburn, hmm? You okay? Need a wet towel or are you just going to keep this up until you collapse on me like one, and make me take you to St. Mungo’s? Look, I’m going to see if Ginny will make a little house call, alright? Would that meet with your pigheaded Bulgarian approval? Better than swallowing your pride and admitting you’re really sick and going to see someone else?” Hermione said gently.

“You are the only person I have ever seen who can both insult and soothe at the same time. Okay, fine. I give. You win. Get Ginny to come by,” he sighed, splashing water on his face. Hermione noted he was oddly flushed now.

“Viktor Krum agreeing to see a medical professional almost willingly. Now I know you’re sick. What caused that, anyway?”

He shook his head slowly, before answering, "I smelled the coffee. And suddenly that seemed like the most disgusting smell I could possibly think of and I had to heave."

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"If Hermione's not here, who hogtied you so you couldn't get away from the house?" Ginny asked, when Viktor opened the door.

"Like I could run. Hermione's got my arm up behind my back, no escaping now. Besides, I admit it. I feel rotten this week," Viktor shrugged. "I have never before thrown up at the mere smell of coffee, much less like that. I think my life literally flashed before my eyes. Along with a whole lot of black dots. She'll be back in an hour most likely."

"Gone to get groceries?" Ginny asked.

"Don't mention food."

"Sorry. You really feel that badly?" Ginny asked, setting her bag on the coffee table.

"This instant. Now, in ten minutes, I might be willing to eat a four course meal," Viktor replied, shaking his head. "It seems to come and go. One minute I'll be fine, the next I'm over a sink, or whatever's available, gagging like nobody's business. I've lost it in rubbish bins, the bushes out back, toilets, sinks, and several other exotic locales this week. I also had the really fun experience of getting out of bed and not quite being able to make it out of the hall to the bath first. You've not lived until you've been hot, dizzy, sweaty and completely wrung out at three in the morning and had to clean up after yourself. Which, by the way, thank goodness for Cleaning Charms. I mean, the alternative was to wake Hermione up and say 'Morning, dear, I seem to have managed to get sick and vomit in the hallway, because I didn't stagger to the bath fast enough. You mind getting that? Thanks, I'll just be over here, dying.' I think this week reminded me why I was never a big drinker. I dislike vomiting intensely. I've drunk enough ginger ale and eaten enough saltines and graham crackers to supply an army. Thanks for taking time out to come over."

"Well, hopefully I can figure out what's wrong and fix you up. Besides, the office in Hogsmeade is pretty dead right now. Just typical school vaccinations and checkups and a few ear infections. Nothing they can't handle without me. You seem to be the only one within the confines of Great Britain, much less Hogsmeade, that decided to get sick this week. You know, this would be easier if I had an exam table, but you can lie down on the bed and I'll take a look at

you,” Ginny said, marching him into the bedroom. “Take your shirt off.”

“Normally, I would make a smart, pithy remark just about here, but I can’t manage it right now, so you fill in your own, okay?” Viktor said, his voice muffled as he pulled the shirt over his head.

“Fine then. How’s ‘You probably poisoned me just so you could get me flat on my back in bed with my shirt off’? Good grief, you’ve got some black smudges under your eyes. Are you just not sleeping or did you get in the way of another Bludger?” Ginny said lightly.

“Thank you. You look lovely, too. I’ve slept. And slept. And slept. It just doesn’t seem to do any good. I’m still tired. Hermione accused me of hibernating during the wrong season a while back,” Viktor replied.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it, you just look off... well, you know what I meant,” she said, feeling his glands. “I would bet you had mono if it weren’t for your glands being fine. They’re not swollen at all, at least not around your jaw,” she added.

“No offense taken, I am fully aware I look like hell. Death warmed over. I feel like it, too ... ow.”

“Sorry, sore there at the side of your chest?”

“A little. I pulled something a few weeks ago and nothing seems to help. It’s not strained exactly, just tender. Probably from staying on the couch all week.”

“Does that hurt?” she asked, pressing the flat of her fingers into his side.

“No.”

“What about your right side? Now?”

“I regret to inform you I had my appendix removed when I was ten, if that’s what you think it is. I similarly regret to inform you that if you poke me in the stomach like that much more, I’m going to be forced to vomit on your shoes. Or eat a roast. Could go either way. Or both.”

“Darn. You sure you don’t have a spare appendix?” she teased.

“Positive.”

“Fine, I’ll do some tests for the other most likely suspects, then,” Ginny said, pulling out her wand.

“Well, medical professional?” Viktor said when she put it down and began scribbling on a piece of parchment.

“I eliminated the flu, mono, your garden variety viruses, bacterial infections, your thyroid’s fine, blah, blah, blah. I even checked to see if you were diabetic. Your pancreas are fine. According to my calculations, you’re either perfectly well and doing a marvelous job of faking it for sympathy, or dead, because nothing is turning up.”

“I pick dead, then.”

“Let’s go over this again. Fatigue. Intermittent nausea and lack of appetite. Sensitivity to smells...”

“And how. I’ve smelled things the last week I never paid attention to before.”

“Remus been over here nibbling on you?”

“Ha ha. The other day, Hermione finally had to go take a shower. Her perfume made me sick. And I mean that literally. Outside yet. That was when I got up close and personal with our landscaping. Normally, I love her perfume.”

“Okay... so increased sensitivity to smells, with dire consequences, like unexpectedly seeing your meals twice. Any weight gain or loss in the last few months?”

“Both.”

“Explain that one.”

“Lost about four or five pounds a few weeks ago, but I put that down to practice and games in the heat. Probably water. Since the season ended, I’ve gained at least seven more back. I don’t think any of that’s water. But I suppose making the rounds of the bed, kitchen, couch and bathroom isn’t much of a workout. And I’m ravenous when I’m not gagging my insides out.”

“You always did eat a lot.”

“Not this much. I mean absolutely starved. Even for me. Like ‘eat the table legs’ hungry. Even in the dead of night. Hermione is probably sick of me making a trip or two to the kitchen every night at weird hours. No wonder she didn’t pay any attention the morning I got sick in the hall. On the nights I’m not going to the kitchen, it’s something else getting me up. If I’m lucky, I get about two or three hours straight in peace, no eating and no having to get up to make a trip to the

toilet.”

“Frequent urination, too, then? Check. All that ginger ale Hermione’s been making you drink, most likely. Eating makes you feel better?”

“Usually.”

“Maybe you’ve got an ulcer, then.”

“I *have* had heartburn. Pretty mild, but it’s there.”

“How often?”

“Oh, about three times this week. Once or twice last week. Had it this morning.”

She spoke a few more Diagnostic Charms. All negative. “Well, you can check ulcer, acid reflux and a few other ailments off your list. Or actually, I can. You don’t have any of them. Can I palpate your abdomen without worrying about my shoes now?”

“That sounds vaguely dirty.”

“It’s all the rage in Paris. Just lie back, relax and try to breathe deeply through your nose. I know it’s probably not too comfortable, if you’re sore from all that heaving, but I have to do it in order to figure out what’s wrong with you. Close your eyes and pretend you’re on the French Riviera. The beach, though, so it doesn’t make you seasick,” she said, placing her hands between his hips, around his navel. He laughed weakly and complied. *Hmmm, he is a little thicker around the waist than I remember back in the summer, when he was in his swim trunks at the lake*, Ginny thought to herself. There was a small, soft curve to his belly now, whereas normally it was almost sunken, concave between two prominent hipbones. He hadn’t been as shockingly skinny as he was that winter he first swam in the lake at Hogwarts for some time, but he had always been rawboned and slender, even after he had finished maturing and gotten a bit stockier. She pressed her fingers gently against the flesh there, and she had to stop herself from gasping when it gave very little. She felt out the shape of a solid mass beneath the wall of muscle, about the rough size and shape of a grapefruit seated well below his navel. Above it, her hands encountered little resistance, as she expected. “Could you hang on a second while I run your symptoms against a list?” she asked, forcing her voice to stay steady. He shrugged and closed his eyes again, resting. Her heart squeezed in panic when she began thinking of the possible seriousness that mass foretold. She added the mass to the list on her parchment, then slipped it into her Mediwitch Desk Reference behind the front cover and whispered an incantation. In a moment, the original piece of parchment and a second popped out the top, next to the

back cover. She pulled it out with shaky, sweaty fingers and skimmed the contents.

Ginny's heart pounded as she read each line, and performed the listed Diagnostic Charms in turn, picking the most serious first. And at each negative result, she said a short, silent word of thanks and scratched through the line with her quill. Lymphoma. Negative. Malignant growth. Negative. One by one, she ticked them off, working her way through the list. Each one was less serious. She could handle any of these. But none of the tests came out positive. Until finally, she was left with one unchecked line. Well, it can't be that, she thought to herself. It would be ridiculous to even perform the test for that one. But still, for laughs, she would do it. To be thorough, she would do it.

She peeked over the edge of the parchment. She wasn't much surprised to see that he was asleep by now, exhausted as he seemed. He was breathing the even, deep breaths of sleep, hands folded and resting below his ribs, long, elegant fingers curved and loosely interlaced, the dark circles under his eyes looking slightly purple against the sickly pallor of his complexion. It reminded her of a lot of the patients she had seen early in her training, somehow. Silly thought, she scolded herself. Those patients were in a condition he couldn't possibly be in. Women who had been given a particularly rough time of it for a few weeks. But still, an uneasy, nagging feeling at the base of her skull made her raise her wand over his lower abdomen and whisper the words as softly as possible, to avoid waking him. He would surely recognize it if he heard it, having been to all those appointments over the years with Hermione, when the wand had done nothing at all. "*Provera... Graviditas...*" She nearly fainted in spite of her vague suspicions when the tip of the wand fairly ignited in a strong, steady blue glow.

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Ginny gaped at her wand, openmouthed. *Positive. Pregnant. He was pregnant. Oh, Merlin's beard, they switched glasses somehow. But he couldn't be...* she argued with herself. "*Finite Incantatem,*" she whispered frantically, then repeated the test. "*Provera Graviditas!*" she said more firmly. Once again, the wand tip promptly blazed forth in a blue ball of light at the tip. She figured in her head. *Ten weeks at the most. Ten weeks since they had come to stay. Ten weeks from conception?* she asked herself. "*Cronos Graviditas,*" she whispered, and the light did ten slow, stately flashes before fading. *Ten weeks from conception. No wonder his symptoms had seemed familiar.* They were the fatigue and so-called morning sickness she had seen countless female patients for since she had started her medical training. "*Incantatem Parentis*" she whispered, curious. Both Hermione and Viktor's faces flashed behind her eyelids.

Hundreds of women must have come through the St. Mungo's maternity wing

when she had done her internship there, with the same dark circles and similar complaints about heat, food and smells, never being able to get enough sleep, ravenous hunger and wildly seesawing weight. How many women had she heard lament that their husband's favorite cologne was suddenly intolerable now? How many of them had complained of raging heartburn early on? Mild dizziness? Being violently ill at the drop of a hat, then starving right after? The coffee should have tipped her off, she scolded herself, how many men got sick at the smell of coffee? But then, how many men had morning sickness?

She stared at the gentle curve of his stomach. She had felt out a womb there. A womb with a baby inside. Ginny giggled nervously as she thought, *I liked thinking I might be the one to tell them they're expecting a baby, but this is not the way I would have pictured telling them.* She felt her palm drawn to that soft bulge, and she laid a hand lightly on it, feeling the warmth of his skin. Ginny had loved working in the maternity wing. Was almost sad to leave it for her own office in Hogsmeade, nearer Hogwarts. She never quite lost the wonder of observing a new little life take root and grow, cradled inside a body, a delicious, treasured secret between two people until a few months in, then a shared miracle that the whole world could see. "People like touching pregnant women's tummies, because they like feeling a part of that miracle," one of the head mediwitches in the department had told her. "You'll really understand when you deliver your first. Or have one of your own." And Ginny found she agreed, after she cradled that first howling baby in the delivery room. This was completely virgin territory, though.

Viktor stirred restlessly in his sleep, and she withdrew her hand. Her first impulse was to Floo Hogwarts, talk to Neville, or Poppy, Floo anyone, talk to Harry, talk to Ron, but she fought it down. Viktor and Hermione deserved to know first. Should have known first. She knew that without a doubt now. And she would have to start with Viktor. "Viktor... wake up. We need to talk."

"Hmm? So are you done diagnosing, or do you just have a tired wrist?" he asked, stretching and sat up, propping against the headboard.

"Viktor, I know what's making you sick now. And I'm afraid it's partially my fault. I don't know if it will be all right, or if you two will ever forgive us, but I can give you an answer," Ginny gulped.

"So how bad is it then?"

"It's not so much a matter of 'bad'. It's that... I don't know how to handle this. Or even how to tell you, really."

"I assume someone might? A specialist or whatever? Unless I've got something they're going to name after you or me someday," Viktor said with a raised

eyebrow, in an even voice. *Well, you might name it after someone*, Ginny thought wildly.

“I have a confession to make first. Back when Fleur announced she was expecting Etienne, I talked Neville into doing something for you two. He didn’t really want to, he said it wasn’t something to mess with, but I talked him into it, anyway. We wanted to make the two of you the next couple with an announcement. He found a Fecundus Charm. A Fertility Charm. It had a potion component. It was complex, took six months to mature, and it required a hair from each of you and then it had to be ingested. We got Harry and Ron to help in the incantation over it. And Neville and I slipped it to you two when we stayed,” Ginny blurted out, shamefaced.

“That morning you two were grinning like a couple of insane pixies? Well, you had good intentions I guess, but it didn’t work. Hermione’s not pregnant,” Viktor said carefully, keeping most of the disappointment from his voice. “And I fail to see what the one thing has to do with the other.”

“I’m afraid it didn’t work too well. Not the way we planned. I understand now why they say the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Who got the front glass? From the counter?”

“How would I remember? That was over two months ago...”

“Just replay that morning in your mind! What happened?”

“We walked in, said good morning, Hermione poured a glass of juice, offered it to me, I took it. We had breakfast, end of story,” Viktor replied, a touch irritable.

“So you probably got the front glass. And that night? Did the two of you make love? Or any time that week?” Ginny asked desperately.

“I suppose we did. We don’t normally keep records. I think we did that night, because it was godawful hot and neither one of us could sleep, anyway. Why?”

“You got the front glass,” Ginny repeated, her face stricken.

“And what was so damned special about that front glass?” Viktor demanded.

“It was supposed to be hers. The Potion had to be split into equal doses. To the man’s portion, you added a pinch of dried mandrake, to strengthen for a cell for transfer. To the woman’s, rosehips, to make her conceive. We dried your respective doses in the glasses and labeled them. And I arranged hers so it would be in front. You always let her go first. I’ve not in almost twenty years ever seen you pour your own juice first. Half the time, you don’t drink juice,

anyway, you just drink coffee. We thought in that case we would make sure you drank from that glass at lunch.”

“So, are you saying my drinking the dose that was intended for her made me sick?” he asked, plainly puzzled.

“Not exactly.”

“Then spit it out in plain English.”

“The Potion worked. It worked, anyway. You two conceived a child. A cell was transferred from one body to the other, where it combined with a second, and implanted itself in a womb. Only, the cell that got transferred must have been an egg,” Ginny said in a low voice. “It could be why the two of you felt off that day. In particular, you. I think your body was getting ready. You know, I wanted desperately to be the one to tell you all this, and I wanted it to be a long time ago. I’m sorry. I don’t know whether to apologize or congratulate you. I don’t know how you’re going to handle this, mentally or physically, in the long haul. Or if you’ll even decide to attempt it, at all. The male body isn’t really designed for it. Our good intentions may have just sentenced you two, you in particular, to Heaven only knows what.”

A look of dawning comprehension passed over Viktor’s face. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying? That... that... I... *I’m ...*”

“You’re pregnant. *You’re* pregnant, Viktor. Ten weeks. You and Hermione are expecting,” Ginny said softly. Ginny had hardly thought it possible, but Viktor went even paler, all the color draining from his face, lips almost white. He went ashen next, hand flying to the spot where Ginny had laid her palm previously. He quickly rolled over to the edge of the bed, facedown, and retched over the opposite side. Ginny sat on the near edge and rubbed a tentative palm between his shoulders. The gagging sent shivers up her spine. *I’m responsible for that*, she thought, *my fault*.

“Be grateful I thought to miss your shoes,” Viktor choked, not raising up. “For Heaven’s sake, why did you not ask us? We would have leapt at the chance... you didn’t... need... to sneak...” he gasped.

Ginny made sweeping circles with her palm and fingers. “I thought the two of you would be so disappointed if Hermione didn’t get pregnant. If it didn’t work...”

There was an edge of hysteria to his voice. She was a little grateful she couldn’t see his face. “It *worked* and she’s still not pregnant! I am! You think that’s going to be easy for her? She bawls sometimes when she sees strangers with big bellies! *She* wants to carry our baby! How is she going to take *this*?”

Somebody in the same *bed* with her wh-o... oh..." He trailed off as another wave of nausea overtook him, then subsided into dry heaves.

"You should drink some water. You'll get dehydrated and make things worse," Ginny murmured.

The anger made his voice unexpectedly sharp. "Drink some water? Drink some water?! Pardon me, but I just vomited off the side of my bed because I couldn't make it out the door, because, of all the reasons in the world, I'm up the poke, thanks to you, and all you can say is 'Drink some water'?"

"Don't say it like that...it sounds so ugly..." she protested meekly.

Viktor's voice sounded strangled and strained, hoarse. Angry. "What? Up the poke? What would you prefer? Up the duff? Bun in the oven? Pegggers? Up the pole? Up the spout? Expecting a little stranger? Enlighten me. I'm not up on my etiquette on announcing *my* pregnancy. At this point, I had completely given up on ever announcing my *wife's* pregnancy any time soon, so this is kind of a new idea to me. And stop trying to make me feel better. Just get the fuck out," he spat, still hanging off the bed.

"Viktor... please... I'm sorry...I never meant for something like this to happen..." Ginny sobbed.

For a long moment, he lay there, completely still. Then he drew in a shuddering deep breath that she swore she could feel rattling by under her palm. "Oh, for Pete's sake... don't cry. You'll make me sick again. And I can't afford that. I don't have anything left," he said more gently. Weakness crept into his tone. "Oh...how am I going to tell Hermione about this? I can't... I just can't..." All the anger was gone from his voice. He sounded almost on the verge of weeping now, and Ginny had the fleeting thought that she preferred his anger.

"Shh. That's not your job. That's mine. Now come on, sit up and I'll bring you a wet washcloth so you can clean up. You need some rest, and to get a little something back in your stomach. I've got something which should help with the nausea, that I can give you. It's probably worse for you because your body is definitely not designed for that cocktail of pregnancy hormones. That stage should pass soon, anyway. And I promise I'll take care of telling Hermione. And she can hug me or strangle me as she pleases and I'll tell her not to take it out on you," Ginny soothed.

He was panting as he sat up, a sheen of sweat on his face, pale except for the flushed, red, almost feverish spots on his cheeks. "I've just got one question."

"Go ahead," Ginny said as she fluffed the pillows and settled him back onto

them, rearranging the bedclothes.

“What kind of a chance is there? You said yourself I’m not designed to do this...” he asked, his voice cracking.

She folded the cool white sheet over him and smoothed it with her hands before answering, stalling. In the end, she decided on the truth. “Honestly, I don’t know. I couldn’t hazard a guess. I imagine we’ll have to take it as it comes.”

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Hermione slipped through the front door, with both hands full. She sat the bags of groceries by the door so she could remove her cloak, pausing a moment to listen. There was absolute quiet in the house. *No noise, no talk, no... nothing.* She idly wondered if Ginny had come by, after all. Hermione went to the bedroom door, turned the knob, and slowly opened the door, trying not to break the quiet of the house. Viktor was in bed, tucked in beneath the sheet, obviously asleep. Ginny’s medical bag sat on the floor, and on the bedside table there was a mostly empty plate with the half-eaten remains of a piece of toast, a small soup bowl, and a drinking glass. She shut the door with a soft click to avoid disturbing him, and walked into the kitchen.

“Well, I see *you* didn’t have to strap him down to get him to lie down and rest, so what did you do, stun him?” Hermione laughed as she spotted Ginny at the table.

“He felt pretty badly, I didn’t really have to encourage him too much to lie down,” Ginny replied, shaking her head.

“Is it serious? I mean, I know he’s been sick for a few weeks, he thinks I didn’t notice until it got to the point that he was leaning over the bushes at the drop of a hat, but to tell you the truth, he’s not been well since that day he got overheated at practice... Ginny?” Hermione trailed off, drawing her brows together. She had picked up on Ginny’s red rimmed eyes.

“Hermione... I need to tell you something. And first, I want you to promise me you’re not going to take this out on Viktor... if you want to get angry at anyone, get angry at me, or at all four of us, if you have to, but he’s going to need you to be there for him something fierce for a while. And if anyone can pull this off, it’s you two. It’s all my fault this happened in the first place. Me and my damned good intentions. Hermione, sit down, and please don’t interrupt. I suppose I should start with that day you got back from London, and we had lunch...” Ginny said, taking a deep breath and wringing her hands.

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“So, you’re saying I poured the juice into the *wrong* glass and then handed it to him? And the Potion that was intended for me is what’s making him sick? What on earth could rosehips... rosehips aren’t poisonous... or is it because of the magic?” Hermione asked, puzzled.

“Right on the first count, apparently, but it’s not got to do directly with the Potion itself. It’s the consequences of the Potion.”

“And exactly what consequences could a potion that is supposed to enhance conception have on a *man*? You said ‘for a while’ earlier, are you saying that time’s going to cure this? That it’s just a matter of time until it gets out of his system? Ginny, what the hell’s going on? When you started going on and on about taking it out on Viktor, you made it sound like you two slept together or something. Now, you’re saying we drank the wrong doses, but I’m fine, and he’s not. You don’t act like he’s going to be well anytime soon. Ginny, for Heaven’s sake, spit it out.”

Ginny had to suppress a hysterical laugh when Hermione’s words reminded her of the patient who had asked what was wrong with her during her first week of sitting in on exams at the hospital. Nothing that about nine months won’t cure, the examining mediwitch had told her briskly. “Exactly. What consequence *could* a conception potion have on anyone?”

“Ginny... this is all riddles... you make it sound... oh my... Ginny, you’re not saying what I *think* you’re saying, are you?” Hermione asked, looking horrorstruck.

“Depends. What do you think I’m saying?” Ginny squeaked out.

“You don’t mean to tell me... he... he’s...?” Hermione let the question dangle uncertainly in the air between them, then her voice came shrill and sharp, “It’s impossible! It’s just not possible! He couldn’t be! Pregnant?” Ginny nodded slowly, and the stricken look on Hermione’s face dissolved into an expression of anger. “Get out,” Hermione muttered, her lips tight.

“Hermione... I know I can’t make this right just by saying I’m sorry...”

“You heard me. Get out. Get out of our house. Right now. Before I hex you out!”

“Hermione...”

“Out!” Hermione forced out between bared teeth.

“Hermione...I’m sorry,” Ginny pleaded, not sure what to say.

“Damned well you should be, too! You go sneaking potions into our drinks, you go risking his life, without so much as *consulting* us? Do you realize what this means? He’s risking his life, Ginny! For Heaven’s sake, he’s a *man*, he’s not meant to be pregnant! You go meddling in our lives without so much as a ‘by your leave’, put my husband in a life threatening condition, and all you can say is ‘sorry, I didn’t mean it’?” The hot tears began spilling over her lashes, dripping down her cheeks. “You had a solution to me not being able to get pregnant, and you didn’t even *tell* me. You knew we were desperate. Seventeen years, Ginny,” Hermione whispered.

“Hermione...”

“Get out. Now. I’ll send your medical bag. Just get out of my sight right now, and let me think,” Hermione said in a strangled voice.

“I left something for the nausea on the counter. Instructions are on the bottle. He should try to keep something in his stomach and drink plenty of water. That will help with the heartburn, too,” Ginny murmured.

“We’ve had quite enough of your *help*, thank you,” Hermione bit off.

“I hope you two can find it in your hearts to forgive us. To forgive me. We meant well,” Ginny said in a low voice, pausing a moment to resituate the chair. Hermione sat silent and stock still until she heard the back door swing shut. Then she lay her face in the cradle of her folded arms and wept in earnest.

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Hermione pressed the towel to her face and took a long look in the mirror. She couldn’t do much about her reddened eyes and nose, from all the crying. Casting a Charm to get rid of them wasn’t worth the effort, really. He always knew somehow, when she had been crying. No matter how carefully she washed her face and got rid of the red eyes and the red nose, and kept her voice light, he knew. He always heard it in her voice afterwards. *One of the drawbacks of being married for so long*, she thought ruefully, *he knows me better than I know myself, sometimes*. Maybe she would be lucky and he would stay asleep. But somehow, she expected it when he spoke her name, right after she had crawled onto her side of the bed. The weight shift, the soft protest of the springs, the sense of her being in the room, whatever clue woke him, he rarely slept through her coming to bed. She could only remember a handful of times in their marriage.

“Hermione? What time is it?” he asked, not rolling over, his back still to her.

“Ten.” Her voice sounded dampened, deeper from the crying. Defensive.

“You’re tired this early?” The question was experimental, testing the waters.

“Yes.”

“I see she told you,” he said matter-of-factly.

“What gave it away?” she snapped.

“The monosyllabic answers and the fact that you’ve been crying.”

“How would you know I’ve been crying?” She felt a little prick of shame when she realized how accusatory she sounded.

“I’ve got ears, haven’t I?” he replied, then lay silent for a long moment. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Well, I guess I don’t have to ask how you took it, then?” he sighed, rolling onto his back. Hermione studied Viktor’s face for a moment. While he looked much better, he was still pale.

“How could she do that? She might as well have raped one of us...both of us...” She could hear the anger in her voice, ragged from the crying. She was fully aware of how shrewish she sounded, and she didn’t care.

“I think there are a few more people involved, if you want to spread the anger around. And in her defense, she *was* trying to give us something we wanted,” Viktor replied softly, not taking his eyes off of the ceiling. Normally, he made a practice of arguing while looking her in the eye. Fight, argument, or heated discussion, they never lasted long once you started looking one another in the eye.

“Well, she’s risked your *life* for you. Without so much as a ‘by your leave’. You’re *pregnant*, Viktor. For Heaven’s sake, it... it could *kill* you. You *can’t* be pregnant. It’s too big a risk.” Her heart pounded and her throat threatened to close in her panic. *God, please, let him see reason.*

“Too late. I think I already am,” he said calmly, not looking at her. His jaw shifted forward subtly.

“Viktor... you can’t be serious about going through with this... you *have* to get it taken care of...”

“And is ‘taken care of’ a euphemism like ‘put down’? Like something you would do to an unwanted pet?” His voice now sounded almost as wan and pale as he had sometimes looked over the last few weeks.

“You *can’t* mean you’re going to try to carry it...”

“It?” he asked curiously, finally turning his head to look at her.

“You can’t have it, Viktor.”

“Why not? And ‘because you’re a man’ isn’t allowed as a valid answer. You’ve got to give me a better reason than that. That used to be a valid answer to why I couldn’t be pregnant in the first place and even contemplating this, but since we blew through that barrier a few miles back, I think we can abandon that argument.” She hated that he sounded so bloody reasonable right now. He was seeing reason, just not her reason. She wanted to scream. Rage about the unfairness of it all. The way fate seemed to enjoy kicking them at every opportunity, kicking them when they were down, not fighting fair. Taunting them. Taunting her.

“For a start, the fact that being pregnant could *kill* you. There’s *any* number of things that could go wrong. You could be in the hospital under observation and *still* die. I’m not willing to risk that.”

“*You’re* not? You were when it was you. We talked about this, you know. Pregnancy is inherently dangerous. There’s any number of things that could go wrong, true. But that is also the case with traveling and Quidditch and catching a cold and eating at a new restaurant and just walking out the door in the morning. It’s probably *more* dangerous, I’ll give you that, but ‘risking your health’ is not a valid argument any more than ‘you’re a man’,” Viktor said, scooting up against the pillows and the headboard.

She snorted incredulously, “You’re going to give up a *season* of Quidditch to have it? *You*? When you got antsy after having to take two weeks off because half your damn shinbone got jammed completely out of your leg when you broke it? You fell the equivalent of three stories, spent two days in St. Mungo’s and *still* wanted to go to *work*.”

“I was going to give up a season if *you* got pregnant. I didn’t want to be off in Zimbabwe or something if you needed me and weren’t with me. I could usually Apparate, but still... And *why* do you keep saying ‘it’? Funny, I remember all our previous conversations about having a baby involving the terms ‘he or she’, ‘the baby’ and ‘our child’. Not once did we say ‘it’ like we were talking about buying a new couch. And those were just hypothetical. This is *reality*.”

“You *can't* have it, Viktor,” she repeated. Maybe if she said it enough, she could convince him. Convince herself. That it wasn't what it really was. *Lord, let him not ask me what I really mean...*

“So, say it then. Say what you *really* mean,” he said in a low tone, searching her face. She squirmed uncomfortably under the intensity of his gaze, skewered on it. Pinned to the wall.

“What do *you* mean?” she stalled.

“Say ‘you can't have the baby’, or ‘I'm sorry, but I think you should abort him or her’ or ‘there's no way you're going to be able to give birth to our child’. Stop beating around the bush by saying ‘it’,” Viktor insisted, voice even.

“You can't have it. You can't *mean* you want to try to have it.”

“Say it.”

“No,” she said petulantly.

“Just say ‘baby’ then,” he pleaded.

“I can't,” she said, a wrenching sob almost cutting off the words.

“Fine then. So tell me what you're *really* upset over. You're not mad at Ginny because she lied, or because there was a mix up, you're mad at *me*.”

“Mad at *you*?”

“Because I'm pregnant and you're not.”

“I am not.”

“You are too. Say it. Go on. Say ‘baby’ just once.”

“Baby,” she choked out.

“Now, can you make the same argument without saying ‘it’?” She shook her head numbly in reply. “Didn't think so. I couldn't either,” he sighed, breaking off his gaze to stare straight ahead at the wall, absently cracking his knuckles one at a time, soft little pops in the near dark of the bedroom.

“You couldn't?”

“I laid here for about an hour this afternoon, staring at the ceiling and telling

myself it would be *crazy* to try to do this, that I should get it taken care of, get rid of it and we would forget about it and try again later. Then I made the mistake of thinking 'get rid of the baby' instead of 'take care of the problem'. And I realized I just lost the argument with myself. Once I stopped focusing on the situation and thought about the result, I realized something. Isn't this what we've been willing to sell our kidneys for? What we've wanted for at least the last ten years so bad we could taste it? Why we've spent all that time and money on appointments and books? The reason we've avoided perfectly nice people, whom we usually happen to like, when they were expecting because we can't stand watching them get something we want? Because it seems to come so easy to everyone else? Why we stand around and stare at pregnant women we don't even know and stare at other people's children? Why we've hemmed and hawed and outright lied sometimes when people asked us when we were planning to start a family? This is the thing we've fought for, fought over, cried over, agonized over and finally just about given up on. Forevermore, Hermione, we've tried these stupid positions and a dozen old wives' tales and even making love on schedules. A couple should *not* plan their time together on a calendar, but you know what, we tried it anyway, just in case! And my personal favorite had to be the propping up your hips with pillows afterwards. It was all silly and we probably knew it was pointless all along and wasn't going to work, but we were desperate, so we did it anyway, just on the off chance that it might work. Hell, the only reason you and I didn't go the Restricted Section ourselves is because they won't let us in the library anymore. I'm surprised neither one of us thought to go there and apply for a position only to get a look at the library! Or to beg Neville and Ginny to look before now! Probably would have thought of it, if you and I hadn't been so damned worn out with the whole thing. You and I *agreed*. It was worth the risk of *you* getting pregnant. So it must be worth the risk for *me*, too. There are ten million little things that could go wrong. He or she might not be healthy, the baby might not be what most people call normal, but that was true all along. Going to let a little thing like the baby possibly not being perfect scare you off now? Didn't put us off when we talked about adopting, did it? We agreed. Why should a little thing like not being completely healthy bother us? We could afford medical care, and in any case, any child of ours might not be perfectly healthy, either. Same for you. Toxemia, eclampsia, bleeding, premature labor, we've both read all the books. Tiny chance of those happening, but still, they *could* happen. And we thought it was *worth* the risk. We were willing to adopt, if we could find a child in need of adopting. Older, obviously not ours, black, white, Asian, African, European, we didn't care, right? Hell, we even thought about surrogacy if the specialist didn't offer any hope. Well, we were just *handed* what we want, on a platter. A baby. A child. *Our* child, even. It's just not coming in the conventional fashion. Do you really want to turn that down? Can you look me in the eye and tell me you don't want to give our baby any chance at all?" he asked, turning back to her. After a moment's silence, he added, "It's okay to be jealous, you know... I would be, a little, I think, if the tables were turned. Not that I ever thought I could seriously know what it was like."

"It's *supposed* to be me," she whispered, the tears starting again. "It's supposed to be *me* that's pregnant." Hermione put her head on his shoulder and sobbed. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be jealous..."

"Like hell you shouldn't. You've wanted this for a long time. I wondered what it felt like, I guess now I know, I can find out. We know the Potion works... and against some pretty tall odds, like not having a womb in the first place. Tell you what, you can have the next one," he cajoled.

She let out a short, hysterical laugh. "What's it feel like? Really," she sniffed, giving him a bleary, weak smile.

"So far, sort of like a cross between coming off the flu and a ten day drunken bender. But I hear it gets better." The two of them laughed nervously and held on to one another tighter.

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"Neville! Neville!" Ginny shouted as she came through the door.

"What? What's the matter? Honey?" Neville asked, as he walked out into the living room.

"Neville, we've done a horrible thing..." she sobbed, as he embraced her and rubbed a hand between her shoulder blades.

"Shhhh... now what is it we've done that's so terrible?" Neville soothed.

"I made a mistake... a horrible mistake. We should have told them," Ginny squeaked out.

"Told who what?" Neville prompted.

"It worked, Neville... it worked, anyway..." Ginny said, pulling back to look up at him.

"What worked?"

"The Fecundus... only Viktor got the glass... and Hermione probably hates all of us... I don't know about him, right now he probably can't work up the energy to hate all of us...he feels so poorly..." Ginny babbled.

"Whoa... whoa... one thing at a time, who, where, when, what, why and how?" Neville said, smoothing her hair back.

“You’re not going to believe this... but I tested Viktor and he’s pregnant! Ten weeks. Neville... all these weeks, he’s been *morning* sick, of all things. He got the wrong glass. They were both terribly upset when I told them, Hermione threw me out and...”

“Whoa. Did you say what I think you said? I think we had better get Harry and Ron caught up, at least,” Neville interrupted, knitting his brows together. “I’ll Floo,” Neville said grimly. “It’s late, but hopefully they’ll both still be up.”

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“Scared me to death, when I felt it. I mean, a million bad things went through my mind, but all of them came up negative. Then, one came up positive. One I didn’t expect,” Ginny sniffed, hugging her knees to her chest. She and Neville had come by Floo to Ron’s, and Harry had met them there.”

“What was it?” Ron asked, taking a sip of his tea.

“Put the tea down first. Down? Swallowed? Good. It was the pregnancy test,” Ginny replied.

“Begging your pardon? I thought you said ‘pregnancy’,” Harry said, blinking.

“I did. That morning, at the breakfast, she poured the juice into the right glass, but for some reason, she offered it to Viktor and poured herself the other glass. They each got the other person’s dose. And this Potion overcomes some pretty big odds, evidently. Like providing the womb if you don’t have one,” Ginny mumbled.

“Dear, sweet Lord,” Ron breathed, “how did Hermione take it?”

“Not well. Viktor didn’t either, at first. I think, if he hadn’t been busy choking up what little was in his stomach, he would have been itching to get his fingers around my neck. As it was, he did everything but curse in Bulgarian at me. But then he started thinking about how Hermione would take it, and he got worried. For her. For the baby. I couldn’t really give him any answers. And by then, I think he felt so rotten he couldn’t get angry any more. Maybe by morning he’ll be ready to kill us all, I don’t know. Hermione, she definitely didn’t take it well,” Ginny murmured.

“But it’s what she wanted, isn’t it? A baby? How could she not be happy?” Ron gaped.

“Well, brother, I don’t think she’s quite gotten to the ‘thinking of it as a baby’

stage yet. Right now, all she knows is that the four of us found the solution to her problem and didn't tell her. Instead, we sneak around behind her back, botch it, and we've put her husband in a life-threatening condition, because pregnancy is dangerous enough when you're designed to do it. A man being pregnant, well, there's not a mediwitch alive that wouldn't call that a code red, as far as erring on the side of caution goes. Hermione knows that. Heaven knows she's read enough books and articles and listened to me talk about medical conventions and conferences. She probably knows more about potential maternity complications than I do. They both do. And as Viktor pointed out, she expected to be the one carrying it if they had their own. She wanted to be pregnant. It's one thing to consciously choose a surrogate, or to adopt someone else's child, but quite another to have someone else make the decision for you and then live with your husband doing what you thought was exclusively your job. Something you've wanted to do for so long. She threw me out. Not that I blame her. I would hate me, too," Ginny said, wiping at the fresh tears at the corners of her eyes.

"It's not all your fault, Ginny. We went along. And you meant well," Harry soothed.

"The road to Hell, Harry. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions. I never understood what that meant until today. The least I can do is apologize when and if they ever talk to me again, and offer to be there for medical care. All they wanted was a baby, Harry. I don't know if I would have the courage to do it," Ginny sighed.

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Hermione thought the quiet must have woken her, more than anything else. Actually, it had been one of the best nights of sleep either of them had enjoyed for some time. At least whatever Ginny had left with them seemed to help with the nausea, and she assumed he was too exhausted to be woken by much else. They had stayed up fairly late, just sitting and staring into the dark, not saying a word, just holding each other. Suddenly, that had seemed the only thing they were capable of doing. The decision had been made. Was made for them. Viktor was right, really. Once you thought of it as a baby, there was no question. A baby. Our baby. Her eye was drawn to the black medical bag on the floor as she slipped out the door. She would Floo. Apologize. After breakfast, though. She would fix something, and possibly he would feel up to talking. Maybe they would even eat in bed, but they needed a good long talk. They had a lot of decisions to make. And soon. It wouldn't be all that long before Viktor would have to notify the team of his status for the season.

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The atmosphere in the kitchen was muted and subdued. They had decided to eat in the kitchen, but stay in their dressing gowns, something they rarely did. "Coffee? Or do you even want it after yesterday?" Hermione asked.

"I'll just get milk. I probably shouldn't be drinking coffee now in the first place... sit down, I'll get it. It's... it's not like I'm an invalid," Viktor grouched. *Cranky about being waited on, he must feel better*, Hermione thought.

"You look better, do you feel it?" Hermione observed. And it was no lie. He looked better rested now, less pale.

"Quite a bit. Look, can I just say one thing before we get started?" Viktor asked, coming back with the glass. Hermione nodded. "I... I don't want... you to think... I don't want you to think that I would have reacted any differently," he said at last.

"Yes, you would have. I don't believe you would ever completely flip out just because I got pregnant," Hermione protested.

"Not exactly the same, but if you had and I thought it was dangerous... maybe life threatening... I mean... I guess that would be my first thought, too... that I would rather have my wife than... than..." Viktor trailed off.

"...Than some vague notion of a baby?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Exactly."

"So are you saying you're just as selfish as I am?"

"Well, we've known each other longer, haven't we? And like you said, right now, the baby's more of a vague notion. Hard to stack a vague notion against a spouse you've known and loved more than half your life."

"How did you stack it against 'I might die', then?"

"Realized it had never stopped me from getting on a broom, being in a game, entering the Tournament or becoming a member of the Order. This was at least as important as some of those, and definitely more important than some of them, so surely I could at least try it. I do something for a living where you hurl yourself at the ground as hard and fast as you can, where you can fall a few stories, and get hit by big lead balls that don't take 'no' for an answer, and I don't even have to do that. I think we owe it to the baby to at least try, don't we? And to each other? Not going to be much in the way of parents if we bail at the first possibility of trouble."

"Eggs are getting cold. Speaking of your job, what are you going to do?"

Hermione asked, taking a bite of her own eggs.

“Only one thing I can do, isn’t there? Take a leave of absence. I’ve never used mine. I still have another couple of weeks where I can exercise the option to sit out the season and come back next season. Knocks me out of the international team play, too, but considering, not a big loss. It’s not like it’s even a Cup year. Besides, I could hardly play in that condition even if it were.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“The truth, I guess. That I’m taking a season off because my wife and I are expecting a baby. No more, no less. Vulchanov did it two years before he retired, Levski’s managed it twice, Ivanova did it. It’s not like Vratsa isn’t used to replacing players for a season due to parental leave. They don’t need to know how involved my bit’s going to be.”

“And how, exactly, are you going to keep them from finding out? You think none of your teammates are going to come visit, or Floo us, or anything? For a whole six more months or so?”

“I didn’t say I was never going to tell them. I might have to. I’m not worried about any of them telling anyone that we don’t want to know.”

“What do you mean ‘that we don’t want to know’?”

“Hermione, do you really want everyone to know? I mean, think about Harry and his childhood. Being marked as different isn’t always too pleasant. Do you really want newspapers writing articles and trying to get pictures and have them go through life labeled like that? Bad enough other kids are going to know *who* their parents are, imagine piling ‘unusual birth circumstances’ on top of that. And it’s not like our last name is Johnson or Smith. I still say, if we’re half lucky, Harry and Ron will have kids that will at least be in school at the same time. Take some of the attention off. The names Potter, Weasley and Krum kind of carry some expectations with them now.”

Hermione smiled slightly. “Not easy being the child of an international Quidditch player, then?”

Viktor sighed, “No easier than being the child of ‘Best Student Hogwarts Ever Graduated *and* Best Friend of The Boy Who Lived’. Do we really want to pile any more pressure on, by making them ‘The Boy or Girl Who Was Born To Their Father Instead of Their Mother’?”

“I suppose you’re right. So who do we tell?”

“Teammates, as necessary. One at a time. Just the ones I’ve known for some time, who are likely to come by if they have a match anywhere in Britain. That rookie hardly dares talk to me, much less come visit. I’m not doing a big announcement. My parents, certainly. Can’t expect to tell them we’re expecting their first grandchild and then tell them not to ever visit until it’s born. The Weasley clan, almost certainly all of them. No avoiding that. You tell one Weasley, you might as well tell them all. And of course, our well-meaning fairy godparents who sort of caused this whole mess, I’m fairly sure they might know by now anyway. And Susan and Hannah will have to know. Just people who come to the house, really, or that we visit. I mean, if I’m not working, I don’t really have to leave the house. Freelance writing means you don’t have to go out a terrible lot. Maybe said fairy godparents can make up for bungling this whole business and deceiving us, by running our errands. I guess if we travel by Floo when we visit the aforementioned and don’t go to any fancy dress balls for a few months, no one has to be any the wiser that it’s me doing the gestating.”

“So you’re suggesting we practically go into hiding?” Hermione asked.

“You have a better idea? I mean, isn’t someone going to notice that you’re surprisingly slender for being, I don’t know, six or seven months pregnant? And that I’ve put on a lot of weight? I hardly think we can hide that. You suggesting I should just suck it in for five or six months, and we stuff you with a pillow? I might be able to get away with it for a while, but not a chance once it looks like I’ve got a Bludger under my robes.”

“No, but surely there are Charms ...”

“Disillusionment Charms? Well, sure, but first, you have to remember to cast them every day, anytime you want to fool someone. Do you really want to have to remember to do that every time you want to go out for milk? Second, they don’t change physics, Hermione. People are still going to notice that you don’t move the way you should. And if anyone bumps into you... well, they’re going to notice that you either seem awfully solid a few inches further out than you should, or they’re going to notice that they don’t feel anything where there should be something. Hermione, complete strangers can and do come up to pregnant women and ask to touch. Some people just help themselves, for that matter. Disillusionment Charms aren’t as good as Polyjuice, not for big, physical changes, and in this case, that would be absolutely no help. I think we have to just accept, that after it becomes readily apparent which of us is pregnant and which of us isn’t, we’re going to have to be careful who we let in the house and where we go. Disillusionment Charms might be a last resort, but those are hard to maintain. They take a lot of energy.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Well, what if I’m not up to keeping up that kind of effort by the time I need to? Are you going to do it for the both of us? I don’t know what’s going to happen with me, but nearly all pregnant witches have... fluctuations.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Mama went both ways. Her powers went kind of haywire the last two months. For a couple of weeks of it, she was actually stronger. Would go to *Accio* the tea kettle and break out a window with it when it went flying on by, that sort of thing. Then she sort of tapered off, got weaker and weaker. Things didn’t always work without a lot of effort. She said she did most things by hand the three weeks before I was born, because it actually took less energy. Or got Papa to do them.”

“What about the hospital?”

“I say we delay that decision until later on. Maybe with some input from the owner of that black medical bag that’s still in our bedroom. There’s nothing to say I couldn’t have the baby here.”

“I need to Floo and apologize.”

“Big of you.”

“I was just so angry.”

“Don’t feel bad. I cursed at her. What’s so funny?”

“In English or Bulgarian?” Hermione laughed.

“English. I hadn’t worked up enough steam to curse her out in Bulgarian.”

“What did you say?”

“Invited her to get the fuck out.”

Hermione laughed again in spite of herself. “Oh, Lord, we’ve got terrible tempers.”

“I think there were extenuating circumstances, thank you very much.”

“Still, we should apologize,” Hermione said, endeavoring to keep a straight face.

“Fine. Floo her. After we get dressed. Then I suppose we had better go see my parents, and then maybe I had better go to the team office first and get all that

worked out. I am not looking forward to telling my parents I'm pregnant. We're going to have a lot of explaining to do," Viktor said, shaking his head.

"I'm sure they'll be shocked for a little while, but then, they'll just get used to the idea. Your parents are lovely, reasonable people under it all, even if they did manage to produce the most entirely stubborn man I have ever met," Hermione teased.

"You flatter me, dear. Besides, I need to be to stand up to you," Viktor jabbed back, finishing off his milk.

"Why the big hurry to tell your parents then, if you're not looking forward to it?"

"Would you rather they come by and start asking why I'm not at practice? Why they had to find out via the wireless or the newspaper that I was sitting out the season? Or better yet, why I'm developing a mighty big bulge all of a sudden? I've already put on a few pounds, less than two weeks now before it's the second trimester, and I don't expect my belly will get any smaller as time goes on. If we wait much longer, the alternative is hoping they don't notice, the chances of which are approximately naught, and then springing it on them during dinner. The chances of Mama and Papa not noticing anything are slim to none, they've both got eagle eyes. I can just see how that conversation would go, anyway. 'By the way, we're having a baby, could you pass the peas? Oh really, that's wonderful, when are you due, Hermione? Oh, not me, him, and he's already four or five months gone because we wasted most of the first trimester not recognizing the symptoms. Took a bit longer to realize, him being a man and all, and then, we couldn't think of how to tell you. It's the craziest mix up. More tea?' That would be rich."

"Well, we've eaten our breakfast... let me call Ginny in a few minutes, and we'll eat crow."

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"That went well. Not," Viktor sighed, sitting down on the edge of the bed and pulling off his boots.

"Oh, come on. I thought they took it rather well, considering. What makes you think it went so badly?" Hermione said, ruffling his dark hair off his forehead.

"The general massive discomfort in the room. And the stunned silence. Followed by the yelling. I felt like saying, 'Is it just me, or is it really, really awkward in here?' the whole time," Viktor answered.

"They weren't really yelling...they were just a little upset."

“Okay, then, play semantics. Let’s call it a really loud questioning session, then. But it was still yelling. Saying ‘Here, kitty, kitty’ to a skunk doesn’t change the way it smells.”

“Okay, fine. They yelled. Can you really blame them? I mean, we yelled when we found out. I think the last thing they expected was for their son to end up pregnant. They’ll come around soon enough. After all, it’s their first grandchild. They’re just a little... Well, look at it this way. There was no cursing, that’s an improvement,” Hermione cajoled.

“Only because you were in the room. Otherwise Papa would have let fly. In fact, Mama might have let fly. They both wanted to, I could tell. Maybe I should have opened with ‘We’re expecting a baby’ instead of ‘I’m pregnant’, and sort of eased them into it. But I didn’t want to have to disabuse them of the notion that you were pregnant right after making them think that. Sure recipe for cursing,” Viktor complained, pulling off his robes.

“Oh, I see! I wasn’t there as moral support, I was there as a human shield! Let’s face it. There was no good way to tell them. Give them a night or two to sleep on it and they’ll be out in Sofia buying baby blankets and things,” Hermione soothed, sitting next to him. “Maybe we should have said ‘We have good news and we have weird news’,” she said with a laugh.

“Or just acted like men being pregnant wasn’t at all out of the ordinary. Just play naive. What’s wrong with you two? You act like this is a shock. Happens every day, doesn’t it? I mean, men have babies all the time.”

“Speaking of which, how do you feel?”

“Fine. A lot better than I have in weeks. Today wasn’t so bad really, except for having to excuse myself so much.”

Hermione suppressed a laugh. “It’s all that water. I admit, I just about lost it when you told your father he was either going to have to stop ranting for a minute while you went to the loo or simply carry on without you.”

“Convenient excuse, I’ll have to remember it. I’ll just play the ‘shut up, I have to go have a pee’ card when someone’s telling me something I don’t want to hear. No one questions it when you’re pregnant.”

“I see... I see... already playing off, are you? Next it’ll be, ‘oh, I can’t get that up off the floor, I can’t bend over’ and ‘lay off, I’m tired’, and ‘can’t fix dinner, I’m too busy gestating’, huh?” she teased, putting her arms around him.

“I’ll let you play off when you get pregnant.”

Hermione sobered momentarily. “Does it feel different?”

“Not really. I mean, my stomach’s out a bit farther than it’s ever been before, and I realized that if I press really hard, I can make out a lump below my navel that wasn’t there before... you want to feel?” he asked, looking at her.

“Oh... no... I couldn’t...” she protested.

“Oh, come on. I’m not made out of glass. Here, put your fingers right there, then press... feel it?” Viktor asked, covering her hand with his own.

“Oh...” she breathed, then released, leaving her cupped hand over the flesh and rubbing. “Our baby.”

“Ours. This is going to be strange. More medical exams than I’ve had in years all rolled into less than one.”

“Ginny decide to come once a week, then?”

“At least. More, if there’s any reason to worry. I told her I thought moving in with us would be overkill. Not that she’s not welcome, Neville too, if they wanted, but... wouldn’t you like for life to be as normal as possible? I think it would make me nervous. Make me worry more.”

Hermione snorted, “Normal! That’s rich,” she murmured, kissing him on the lips.

“Let’s go to bed,” he whispered, his voice husky.

“Did the mediwitch clear you for that?” Hermione teased.

“Anything I felt like doing within reason, she said. I think it’s perfectly reasonable to want to make love to your wife when she starts coming on to you. Besides, we had better enjoy this while it still doesn’t take any extraordinary gymnastics. Or before we have to start listening for the baby.”

“Ah, yes, perfectly reasonable, but you think if I’m so much as breathing and conscious, I’m coming on to you,” she replied with a smile. “Perfectly reasonable, as well.”

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“Round ligament pain,” Ginny said.

“Round what?” Viktor asked, pulling his robe back down.

“You’re achy because the ligaments that hold up the womb are stretching a little. Other than that, you’re healthy as can be. And that’s perfectly normal, anyway. Or do you have any other complaints you haven’t let me in on?”

“No, no. That’s all I wondered about.”

“Have you two given any thought to whether or not you want to find out what it is ahead of time?” Ginny asked, putting her things back into her bag, and studying Hermione in the chair on the other side of the bed.

“We’re leaning toward not finding out. Where’s the mystery if you know ahead of time?” Hermione shrugged.

“Dare I ask if your parents are speaking to you again?” Ginny ventured.

“They are. With a vengeance. Call two or three times a day. They’re driving me nuts now. Maybe I preferred it when they were angry and stunned and not talking to me because they couldn’t think of anything to say,” Viktor laughed.

“Oh, come on. They were sweet about it once they got used to it. And they’re just worried about you,” Hermione scolded.

“Fine then, I’ll sic my mother on you when you get pregnant and she can drive you bonkers about whether or not you need to be taking more vitamins or exercising or putting your feet up or sleeping more or wearing full robes or keeping on with the short robes and trousers or taking baths that are too hot or too cool and so on and so on. And that was one call! Then she wanted to know if we had picked anything out for the nursery. Nursery! We haven’t so much as spoken the word ‘nursery’, but Heaven forbid we put off picking out a color another week, the baby will be here in only six more months or so. Never mind that the baby could not care less what color the nursery is,” Viktor complained.

“Did you always take so poorly to mothering?” Hermione asked.

Viktor arched a dark brow. “You forgot the ‘s’. The word you are looking for is ‘smothering’.”

“Guess that answers my question,” Hermione smirked.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love Mama, but she’s driving me mad. Stark raving mad. Look, if she calls again today, I’m asleep. You two debate the relative merits of robe lengths and cuts and trousers and such without me, and let me know later. And if *your* mother sends over one more book on being pregnant, I’m going to

scream.”

Ginny suppressed a laugh. “She’s just trying to be helpful. She’s had a lot more experience at it than you. A lot more than most people, actually. She could write her own book. The Weasley guide to breeding. Rather we all ignored you and left you to your own devices?”

“Right now, yes.”

“And for the record, I think after a certain point, you’re going to have to go with long robes and be done. Simply because I don’t think you’re going to find trousers that will fit and be very comfortable. Not that I would know from experience,” Ginny giggled. “And you can tell your mother that was advice from a bona fide medical professional.”

“Who got me in this predicament in the first place,” Viktor pointed out.

“That was low,” Ginny laughed, “very low.”

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“Do you think we’re doing the right thing?” Viktor asked as Hermione scooted into bed.

“I’m sure we are. Now what are you talking about?” she said lightly.

“I mean not finding out. If it’s a boy or a girl...”

“Do you want to know?”

“Well, sort of, but not really. I think I would be disappointed. No big surprise at the end. Do you?”

“If you want to find out, we can.”

“But do you want to? You could find out and I wouldn’t have to know and ...”

“For Pete’s sake, Viktor. Just answer the question. Do you really want to know, yes or no?”

“No. Not until it gets here.”

“Well then, neither do I.”

“But if you could find out without me knowing...”

“Viktor, darling, in the most loving, supportive way possible, I am going to tell you that you are driving *me* mad now. Look, I’m just as much up for a surprise as you are. I could live with it if we found out now, but I just don’t see what benefit it is. We’re not going to color code the nursery based on the gender of the baby or anything. We’re not color coding their clothes, and we’re not picky about what we get, so why bother finding out ahead of time? All we really care about is that all the vital bits are present and accounted for.”

“You’ve got a point.”

“Just like I did the last three times we had this conversation. I’m not just humoring you, you know. I really don’t need to find out.”

“Sorry. I just thought maybe you really wanted to know and were afraid to say anything.”

“When was I ever shy about expressing my opinion?”

“Point taken. I think I’ve completely lost it.”

“No, you haven’t. It’s an important question. Which we just answered. Again. So don’t worry your pretty little head over it,” Hermione said as she curled up against him and laid a hand on his belly. “Don’t have to press much this week.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Oh, come on. It’s kind of cute. I never imagined you with a tummy. And it’s for a good cause. This baby, which we have definitely decided we are not discovering the gender of until the birth.”

“I heard you the third time.”

“Don’t seem to remember it long. Does being pregnant affect your memory?”

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“Oh, the yellow, definitely the yellow,” Ron said emphatically.

“You can’t use yellow, it’s more for kitchens and things! What about blue?” Neville countered.

“Doesn’t using blue sort of imply it’s definitely going to be a boy?” Harry asked, shoving his glasses back up his nose.

“Harry Potter! Are you saying you can’t paint a girl’s room blue?” Hermione asked.

“I’m a girl and I like blue. Besides, that one’s nice, it’s sort of a midnight blue. You could do the moon and the stars on the ceiling. It would look nice. Or use the lighter sky blue and do clouds and maybe the sun,” Ginny mused, looking at the sample book. “Get your nose to stop bleeding, Viktor?”

“Yes, but I’m going back in there if you all don’t stop. You lot are beginning to make me rue the day I asked your opinion. You were supposed to make this decision easier, not more complicated. Maybe I want the nosebleed back,” Viktor complained, sitting down heavily in the free chair at the kitchen table.

“All that extra circulation. Come on, this is supposed to be fun,” Ginny murmured, flipping the page.

“What? Listening to all of you disagree? Whoo, it’s a real thrill,” Viktor replied with a smirk. “You all make me want to paint it red with big purple polka dots just to spite you.”

“There is a nice lavender in here...” Ginny said.

“Nothing... frilly. No salmon, no puce, nothing dear or twee or cutesy,” Viktor said.

“Why not?” Ginny pouted.

“Ginny, you’ve known the two of us how long, exactly? Over twenty years. Did either one of us ever like anything dear or twee or cutesy? By the way, good terms, Viktor, I was having trouble coming up with anything other than ‘girly’. Seriously, we’ve not gone all mushy in the head just because we’re going to be parents. No darling little teddy bears or cartoony animals marching around the walls, please,” Hermione said, sipping her tea.

“Oh, you two are no fun anymore,” Ron teased. “I still vote for the yellow, really, but I can stand the dark blue. Or you could just paint it white and be done. Put the poor child in a boring all-white room and scar them for life. And I’ll sneak over here and put clowns all around the walls.”

“Okay, you are definitely off the godparent list, then. Clowns? Honestly, Ron,” Hermione replied. “Harry?”

“The blue’s nice. The darker one. I like that idea about the stars and the moon. I also like the forest green, but that might be a bit dark. The tannish one, what was it? Taupe? Might do for a nursery, but kind of boring,” Harry said.

"I like the blues best," Ginny said, nodding.

"Me, too. But you could do it in gold and red, with a big Gryffindor lion mural, maybe the Durmstrang crest on the other wall..." Neville laughed.

"Neville! Next you'll be suggesting we put the Fat Lady on the door..." Hermione sighed. Drawing a deep breath, she added, "I guess I would have to go with some of the blue, too. Viktor?"

"Don't look at me, I just got pregnant. It didn't turn me into an interior designer. That's why I suggested the committee decision," he said with spread hands.

"But if you had to choose?" Hermione pressed.

"I admit, I kind of like the idea of the dark blue and the moon and the stars. I could stand to sleep in a room like that. Not too frilly, but still nice for a nursery. Now, can we go ahead and set the paint list aside and play cards, like usual?" Viktor asked, surveying the table.

"That's not nearly as much fun as decorating a nursery," Ginny sighed.

"Fine then. We'll put you down for volunteer work when we get the supplies," Viktor retorted, and the rest laughed. "Open mouth, insert foot, Virginia."

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"How does twelve pounds manage to feel like so much more?" Viktor asked, flopping back onto the pillow, resting a hand on the curve of his stomach.

"Because it's all in one spot. What? Worried about losing your boyish figure?" Hermione teased, covering his hand with her own. "Don't worry, I'll still love you."

"How can I ever repay you? Would you let me see if I can still manage what got us in this mess in the first place?" he teased back, propping over her.

"What? Pouring orange juice?" she laughed, putting her hands on his shoulders.

"Oh, shut up," he murmured, planting his mouth on her throat and nuzzling along her jaw. Then he kissed her mouth, occasionally nipping at her lower lip with his teeth. He had just brushed her wild tangle of hair back from her face and nipped at her earlobe, when he gasped and uttered a surprised "Oh!" in her ear.

Hermione froze, "Are you okay? Viktor?" He raised back up, where she could study his face. She couldn't really read his expression, and it panicked her.

“Viktor? Answer me!”

“Sorry... I... I think I just felt it.”

“Felt what?”

“Moving. The baby,” Viktor breathed, putting a hand to the bulge. “It just surprised me, that’s all. I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Is that the first time?” Hermione asked, awe creeping into her voice. Viktor simply nodded in reply.

“Stopped now,” Viktor said finally, then after another long pause, “would it be really horrible of me to ask at this point, where we were before we were interrupted?”

“I think you were somewhere around my earlobe, and you were about to get the go ahead to remove every scrap of clothing I’m wearing and discard them on the floor with abandon. Or something like that. Or you could go pour some orange juice.”

“Yes, madam,” he said with a half smile.

“Could you let me know next time? Next time you feel it?” Hermione asked softly.

“I couldn’t feel it with my hand just then. But I’ll be sure to let you know,” he said solemnly.

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“Okay, Ginny, I hesitate to ask, but what the hell is going on in there?” Viktor asked, sounding exasperated, pointing at his midsection.

“Why? What’s the matter?” Ginny said, drawing her brows together.

“My stomach’s jerking, but it doesn’t feel like the baby’s moving, exactly... see! There! I’m not completely crazy,” Viktor said, crossing his arms.

Ginny giggled, “I never said you were, but I still reserve the right to debate the point later. Anyway, it’s probably hiccups. Babies can have them by now.”

“Hiccups? And what precisely do you do for hiccups at this stage?”

“Wait them out. It’s not like you can give the baby a glass of water. Look, don’t

overdo it on moving things. Let Harry and Ron do all the heavy lifting. I still wish you would come with Hermione, Susan, and I over to Harry and Hannah's."

"And listen to you and them debate wallpaper for Hannah's kitchen? No thanks. I've heard enough decorating talk. Harry gets out of it, so I do, too," Viktor said.

"Declining our company? Rather do manual labor than get out of the house with us?" Ginny asked with mock surprise.

"Rather have toothpicks shoved under my fingernails," Viktor said cheerfully. "I'm climbing the walls just sitting around. And you four will just want me to lie down, put my feet up or talk wallpaper. Or worse, all three at once. Sorry, I'll take clearing all the junk out of the future nursery."

"Well, behave yourself," Hermione warned, giving him a peck on the cheek. "I'll be back sometime before dinner. Call if you need anything, keep Harry and Ron off the roof, play nice, so on and so on. Bye, love you."

"Love you, too. And I always behave," Viktor protested.

"Maybe I should have specified 'behave nicely'," Hermione called over her shoulder, as she gathered up her handful of Floo powder and left with Ginny.

"Okay, Ron and I are ready and reporting for duty. Which room are you two going to use for the nursery, then?" Harry asked, peeking in from the hall.

"I apologize in advance, but it's the spare bedroom we never used, next to ours," Viktor sighed.

"What's to apologize for?" Ron said.

"Well, you know what tends to happen with spare rooms. They become the 'see no evil' room," Viktor replied.

"The what?" Harry said, looking puzzled.

"You know. Everything you don't know what to do with, you toss in there and shut the door so you don't have to see it. We've been doing that for the past, oh, eighteen years or so. Since we got married and moved in. There's furniture, books, shelves, Quidditch equipment, you name it, it's in there, I imagine," Viktor said.

"And where exactly are you going to put all this?" Ron queried.

"Some of it can go to the attic, the furniture that's still good, Hermione keeps

swearing she's going to refinish it eventually, photo albums will probably actually get put on the shelves in the living room. Some of it, most of it, probably, can be chucked. Well, not the photos obviously, but some of the Quidditch equipment has seen far better days, and Hermione even has a bicycle in there she hasn't ridden for years. Could probably be fixed up and one of the kids could have it, if they want it. Might need some grease and a new chain," Viktor added.

"Eighteen years of stuff?" Ron gulped.

"Eighteen years of stuff," Viktor said, nodding. "Wishing you hadn't volunteered?"

"Depends. I'll let you know when you open the door," Ron said.

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"You all okay in here?" Hermione called, sticking her head in. Several hours had passed since she and Ginny had gone to see Hannah. "Looks like you're making good headway... What do you have there?"

Viktor was sitting cross-legged on the floor, in the midst of several cardboard boxes. "Big box of photos, some of which we never put in albums. Some old clothes over there. That has hereby been christened 'The Wedding Box', our robes are in there, better keep up with those if you want to save them. That would be the 'Stuff We Can No Longer Wear And Have No Sentimental Attachment To Box', which is currently empty except for a pair of Quidditch boots with the soles worn right through. I tossed anything I couldn't still wear long ago, aside from anything I might have outgrown in the last few months because of extenuating circumstances. And all I've found that you can't get into is this certain set of periwinkle blue dress robes, and I know better than to touch those, because I value my life."

"What are they from?" Ron asked, as he and Harry paused in moving the final set of bookshelves in the room.

"Ron, you big dolt, they're the ones I wore to the Yule Ball. I'm not getting rid of them," Hermione said emphatically.

"Well, then you get to find a place to store them. I made the mistake of suggesting it once years ago. 'Why do you want to keep these? It's not like you're ever going to wear them again, are you?' Nearly got my head taken off. I pleaded fatigue and temporary insanity, and got a reprieve from execution," Viktor said.

"It's all I've got to remember it by. We ought to be whipped for not getting at



least one picture,” Hermione said forlornly.

“Hello? All you’ve got? I seem to recall you’ve still got the escort around here somewhere. What am I? Chopped liver?” Viktor asked.

“But I can’t conveniently shove you in a box somewhere, and just trot you out occasionally, no matter how badly I might have wanted to sometimes. You didn’t get rid of yours, did you?” Hermione asked in alarm.

“No, they’re over there with yours. I’m no fool. I am not touching anything that could possibly have any sentimental value attached, whatsoever. It’s why I am sorting through, not throwing away, mind you, these pictures. Maybe we ought to owl Colin Creevey and see if he’s got a picture. He spent most of his school years with a camera practically grafted onto his face, didn’t he? Here, extra wedding album, duplicate of the one on the shelf, I think,” Viktor said, handing it to her.

Hermione flipped through the pages, “I was so nervous. You can actually see me shaking in the one where I’m walking up the aisle. I was so worried I would trip and fall with all those people watching. The entire Great Hall was full. It’s a wonder Dumbledore didn’t have to physically haul me up to the altar. Actually, I’m not sure he didn’t,” she murmured with a smile.

“Well, there was that one point where Harry poked me and whispered that he thought we were going to have to meet you halfway and each take an elbow and I nearly lost it,” Viktor laughed. “Come to think of it, Ron did. He had to fake a coughing fit.”

“It was a long aisle! Besides, none of you had to walk, and you were all used to having people stare at you and having all those flashbulbs going off in your face. World Cups and Triwizard Tournaments and all that jazz. I never had to do anything like that before. I was petrified until I got up there,” Hermione argued.

“Once we got you up there, you couldn’t back out. Your knees wouldn’t have carried you, anyway. I tried to get you to elope, but oh no, you had to have a wedding. Then it spiraled into an Event with a capital ‘E’. I still think we didn’t invite about three hundred of the people that were there. Even if you added up my side, your side, and the Durmstrang, Beauxbatons, and Hogwarts contingents, there shouldn’t have been that many. Oh, here are some of your school pictures. You really should put these in an album, you know,” Viktor observed.

“We were still recovering from the war. Everybody was in the mood for a big party. Well, except maybe the bride and the groom. We should have eloped and gotten married on the beach and just let them have the big wedding without

us. We could have crashed the reception, and that would have done me. I can't stand the thought of putting all those school pictures in an album. Can't stand the thought of so much awkwardness and geekiness compiled all in one place," Hermione said, shutting the wedding album.

"Look, here, you were so cute with your big teeth, why did you lose those?" Viktor teased, holding up a picture of her in her first year at Hogwarts.

"They were monstrous," Hermione protested. "I was nothing but a mass of hair and teeth. That at least improved things by half."

"They were slightly larger than average, like most people's teeth are before they grow into them. I liked you even with the big teeth," Viktor countered as she took the photo from him and studied it.

"My parents never even noticed the difference. After they gave me all those lectures about teeth not being the sort of thing that should be fixed by magic," she said softly, looking at the picture, blinking hard.

"Miss them, don't you?" Viktor asked gently.

"I wish they had at least lived to see us get married. Of course, if they had done that, they would have lived through the war, wouldn't they? They were really fond of you, you know," she murmured, sniffing.

"They knew we were planning to marry, at least. Let me go get you an empty album. We had some in the bureau..." Viktor trailed off as he stood, then swayed a little. "Whoa."

"You okay?" Hermione asked, laying a hand on his arm.

"Just a little dizzy. Stood up too fast. All that extra circulation, as Ginny says. You know, by the time the baby's ready to go off to school, we might have this room ready to paint," he added.

"Why don't you all come on and eat and then decide if you want to take it up again tonight or leave the rest until tomorrow?" Hermione said.

"I wouldn't say no to something to eat," Ron replied. "Would you Harry?"

"Oh, no, sir. I wouldn't," Harry said, nodding.

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"Ooh, I felt that one... That's so amazing... doesn't that feel bizarre?" Hermione

asked, rubbing her hand over the brief fluttering movement as they lay in bed.

“Kind of,” Viktor agreed. “I still can’t quite get my mind wrapped around the idea that there’s a person growing inside me. It’s odd. Sometimes I completely forget about being pregnant for a while, and then, it sneaks up and hits me like a ton of bricks. Like I’ll be doing something in the kitchen and I run into the counter before I think I should. Or bend over to pull my boots on and bending over isn’t quite as easy as I expected it to be. Or to get dressed, and I’ll reach for something and then realize that what I just pulled out won’t really fit anymore. Or I’ll feel this wriggling and think ‘What the heck was that?’ for a second before I remember it’s the baby moving. The other night I rolled over to sleep on my stomach and found it wasn’t such a comfortable sleeping position any more.”

“Well, at least you’re tall and have some room for it to grow without it all sticking straight out. I’m so short I would probably look like I had a watermelon under my robes by now. You’ve got... a small cantaloupe going on there, maybe. Or a cabbage,” Hermione said.

“What is this? Pregnancy as produce? And what’s got you convinced you would look so big?” Viktor asked, propping his chin on top of her head.

“I’m no taller than my mother was. She had this one picture of herself, late in the summer before I was born, and she was absolutely enormous. I’m not talking just this plump, cute little baby tummy, I mean she looked like she was pregnant with twins. Shaped almost like a barrel. She claimed she gained forty-five pounds with me. She blamed it on the fact that I weighed eight and a half pounds. She told me she felt like a beached whale for an entire two months before she had me. I’ll probably swell up like a balloon, too, I guess. She swore she ran into an old schoolmate when she was six months gone and her friend assumed she was due any day.”

“I hate to tell you this, because I think it seriously reduces the probability of this child ever getting a sibling, but I weighed ten. And Mama got pretty big, too. Being pregnant tends to make you a bit rounder in the middle, I hear. Some people even develop bellies.”

“Ten? Ouch.”

“Yes. Ouch. Although she said it wasn’t so bad. I suspect that may be a lie concocted to make me feel better.”

“Why?”

“Because she didn’t start adding that remark until recently. Which, I also suspect, means that it really, really hurt like hell and she’s not about to tell me

that now.”

“Your mother’s a good woman,” Hermione murmured, idly running a fingertip around his navel, which was already starting to flatten out.

“Yes, but she’s a terrible liar. I mean, she really stinks at it. She’s worse at it than I am. And that’s saying something.”

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“What are you reading?” Viktor asked curiously, sinking into the chair across from Hermione in the living room. They had finally finished moving everything out of the spare bedroom, which was about to become not-so-spare. It had taken most of the day to get the lingering boxes and piles sorted through and hauled off to the attic or set out to throw away.

“One of those books Molly brought. Fairly fascinating. Tells about every stage of development, and some of the things to watch out for. Let’s see...twenty-one weeks after conception... baby weighs a pound, and they already have hair... and I guess we should talk about some of these tests... whether or not to test for certain things like some of the problems the baby could...”

“Ginny already asked,” Viktor said with a yawn.

“Hmm?” Hermione asked, surprised.

“Ginny already asked me and I told her no,” he said in a casual tone.

“Ginny already asked and *YOU* told her no,” Hermione parroted, just a hint of disbelief creeping in. Viktor didn’t seem to notice.

“Last time she was here. She asked if I wanted to, and I said no. Didn’t see much point, given that it isn’t going to change things,” Viktor said, stifling another yawn. “I don’t know about you, but we’re going to bed. That cleaning up knackered me.”

“Go on, then,” Hermione said softly, “go on without me.” Viktor pushed up out of the chair, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, and headed back down the hall. Asked *me*. *I* told her. *We’re* going to bed. She had been tired, too, but suddenly, going to bed seemed like the last thing she wanted to do.

By the time she had finished another chapter, at least an hour had passed. Her shoulders were tired, she was numb from sitting so long, her legs tingled when she stood. She didn’t want to sleep, really, but the idea of stretching out and propping up against the pillows instead appealed too much. Hermione slipped

into the bedroom as quietly as possible, and managed to get into the bed without waking him. In the light from the bedside lamp, she could study him. He was curled onto his side, face almost buried in the pillow, one arm curled protectively around the upper curve of his belly, more prominent now. Actually, there was no mistaking it for anything other than what it was any more. A pregnant tummy. It had taken on that peculiarly ripe quality, round and full and surprisingly solid to the touch. What she had heard one of her mother's friends refer to as the stage where you could no longer suck it in, and no longer pretend it was just the fact that your diet wasn't working.

He had taken, more and more, to curling up around it, practically cradling it or draping at least one arm or hand over it when he slept on his back. It seemed odd, really. He had always been such a languid sleeper, a "sprawler", she sometimes told him. Limbs draped here and there, completely limp and relaxed and unguarded, stretched out and almost ridiculously casual. He nearly always rested at least a hand on her, spread on her arm, tucked around her waist, cupped on her hip, even twined in her hair. Usually more, a draped arm, a leg up against hers. Better were the times he spooned around her, both arms pulling her in close, chin tucked over the top of her head or on her shoulder, couched against her, the two of them an easy tangle of limbs in a messy but comfortable heap. He hadn't done that in at least three weeks. Since the baby had really started moving. It seemed out of place, seeing him folded in on himself.

He always reminded her of a little boy when he slept, somehow younger and more vulnerable. Lips pursed slightly, face relaxed, long dark lashes brushing his cheeks, dark hair falling over his forehead and the pillow. Sleeping with a vengeance, she had called it once. Years ago, it had seemed like such a startling contrast. So guarded and closed off and wary, almost fiercely private when he was awake, so completely open when he slept. Now, framed between his sternum and the waistband of the shorts that he had deliberately pulled down below the lower curve of his abdomen, the bulge of his belly seemed roped off, enclosed, like something he wanted to hide in the curl of his body, the knees tucked up below, the arm tucked around above. Nothing's really comfortable around it any more, he had complained when she asked about the shorts. Everything itched or was too tight for comfort or just plain worried at him because of the tenderness. Complaints she should have understood, but didn't.

Oh, she nodded and tried to be sympathetic, it wasn't as though she had no practice. She had years of practice, clucking sympathetically and murmuring platitudes at Heaven only knew how many of the Weasleys over and over, and other friends they didn't see much anymore, pretending she understood their complaints about sickness, aches, pains, swollen ankles, sleepless nights, unexplained crying, feedings at all hours, the ways children ate up your time and how lucky everyone thought you were when you were 'just the two of you' and

'you can do anything you want'. Some of the complaints she should have had by now. *Would have had by now*, she corrected herself, *if...* She blinked hard, her vision suddenly blurry, and to her surprise, a scalding hot tear spilled over her cheek, dripping onto her lap, darkening the sheet in the dim moonlight and the glow of the lamp.

He stirred slightly in his sleep, resituating. And she stared. Studied the curve of it frankly, the way she had so many others during the years. Difference was, this one wasn't hidden under a robe or hurriedly flashed by a friend complaining about the weight gain or squealing for her to feel the baby knocking about inside. The skin rippled and bulged slightly, a sharp little heel or elbow or hand pressing, testing, stretching. He had become a lot more accustomed to it lately, no longer coming to a complete standstill at whatever he was saying or doing at the time, but just taking it in stride. It had become just another part of his body, surely, this small, nearly hidden stranger, going about its secretive little life and performing acrobatics in the middle of the night.

Well, not so secretive to *him*, she supposed. *He* could feel every flutter, every kick, every stretch and hiccup and the weight of it, the heft of it, curled up and growing and nestled inside. It was real for him. Ginny had asked him, not her, if they wanted certain tests. And he had made the decision. Without even asking. It's not like he couldn't. It was inside his body. He could do as he wished, shelter, protect, subject it to everything he did to himself, whatever he wanted. She was shut out of her own child's existence. Its world went no further than this secretive miniature universe between his ribcage and his pelvis, and no one let her in. She only got a glimpse when the baby deigned to move under her hand, sometimes after hours spent patiently waiting, breathing shallow, frozen and poised. Sometimes he even fell asleep while they were waiting. He didn't need to hold his breath and hope and pray for some sign that he wasn't imagining it. Hoping it so hard that it was what passed for tangible. It was always real for him. All the time. The silent tears started up again, tickling as they trailed under her chin, then falling. She would get up before he did. Clean up. He wouldn't notice. He was too wrapped up in other things, surely. Ginny was supposed to be by in the morning. She didn't worry about waking him now. She had long since learned how to cry silently, there had been so much practice over the years, even if she still didn't know how to cover up the evidence. Maybe she could pass it off as lack of sleep. Damn him for always being able to hear it in her voice, anyway. Damn herself for crying. Damn...

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It was strange to wake up... well, tired. Not tired, exactly, but with so much already taken out of your body before you had even used it that day, so reluctant to drag your eyes open, so content to stay cocooned in the bed, so weighted down to the mattress, so willing to leave your heavy eyes closed and so wanting

to leave your face buried in the pillow. So... Who was he kidding? Tired. But the light was already bright on the other side of his eyelids, and that twitchy, energetic, enthusiastic morning kicking and stirring was fluttering behind his navel... or what used to be his navel, and he had a sense of it being later than it should be, almost as though he had slept too hard. Ginny was supposed to be coming by early. He didn't want to be asleep when she came. Bad enough to still be stumbling around in your dressing gown, but he was determined to at least be awake, even though she kept telling him there was no shame in resting so much if you needed it. It felt... lazy somehow. So he dragged his eyes open.

He had expected her to still be in bed beside him. The sheets were ruffled, the pillow flattened, so she had been to bed, but must be up already. He could hear the water splashing in the sink, must not be as late as he had first thought, or she would have woken him. She knew he hated to sleep too late. He breathed deep and arched his back, stretching, and was rewarded with that peculiar jostling, rippling sensation that one of the baby's more vigorous movements tended to produce. He gingerly rolled to his back and closed his eyes again, briefly. Everything felt heavy. Heavy and dull and slow. *Deadly dull*, he thought to himself, sighing. He hadn't felt this bored, antsy and cooped up since being laid up with the broken leg two years ago.

"Morning," Hermione said in a clipped voice, coming back into the room and around the bed to collect her shoes, "better get a move on if you want to get dressed. Ginny should be here any minute."

He glanced at the clock and was startled to note the time. "Two minutes, if that clock is right. Why didn't you wake me?" Viktor asked irritably, "I mean, all you had to do was poke me with a stick on your way to the bath. It's not like I was down the road." He swung his legs off the edge of the bed and pulled on his dressing gown.

"Maybe I had better things to do. I had to go fix breakfast so you would actually have something to eat once you woke up," she bit off.

"Well, pardon me, for being such an inconvenience, then. I'll try not to eat so much. I know I'm not exactly earning a lot right now, but I think it's enough to cover basic room and board and then some. Maybe you can recycle it for tomorrow morning and not put in so many long hours," Viktor snapped back.

"I'll let *you* make that decision. You seem to be pretty good at making decisions without consulting me," Hermione said with an arched brow, turning on her heel and walking toward the door.

"You've been crying." It came out more accusing than he had intended. But he didn't have the time, the energy, or the inclination right now.

“Like you would notice,” Hermione tossed over her shoulder, leaving the room.

“Don’t you *dare* go stomping off on me like that!” he yelled, following her out the door.

“What do you mean ‘stomping off’? It’s not like I’ve got anywhere to go to get away from you, now do I? And Ginny will be here any minute to see to you,” she said, pulling up at the kitchen counter.

“Well, Ginny can wait or take a hike. What the hell’s the matter with you?” he hissed.

“What’s the matter with me? No, I think the question is what’s the matter with you! I let you sleep and you bite my head off!”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly a pleasant ‘good morning’ I got, either! Now why have you been crying?”

“I’ve not been.”

“Rotten liar.”

“Why would you care if I had?”

“I would give half a damn if you would just admit you were,” he said, crossing his arms. If anything, it emphasized how rounded out he had gotten.

“You could at least have consulted me!” she snapped.

“Consulted you on what?”

“The tests! You just go telling Ginny without even bothering to *tell* me she asked! I would like to be let in on a few things, you know! You already get everything! You got my job! You get to feel it growing, you get to feel it kicking, you get to make all the decisions! You get to be mother, father, everything! What am I? I’m nothing but a... a... cell donor!” Hermione spat.

“A cell donor!” Viktor shot back, openmouthed. “Is that... So that’s what you would have thought of me if this had happened the right way around? Was that what I would have been? Just a sperm donor!?” Ginny and Neville, who had been standing in the kitchen doorway for some time, cleared their throats loudly, but Viktor and Hermione barely glanced at them. “Just a damned sperm donor, eh? Not fit to have any input, opinions, or feelings on the matter just because your job’s done and it wouldn’t matter if you got hit by a train, the baby’s already

made, good show, go home?”

“You wouldn’t understand. You two are your own little world there, and I’m not part of it. I’m on the outside with my nose pressed against the glass!”

“Well, excuse me for not thinking you wanted to hear me complain about every twinge and catalog every ounce and coo over every time I get nudged in the kidneys!”

“Well, maybe I do! It’s my baby as well! Or at least I used to think it was! You made such a big production out of making me call it ‘our baby’, silly me, I thought you meant it!”

“And what’s that got to do with whether or not we test it to see if it’s perfect? I thought we agreed that no matter what, we would give it a try!”

“Doesn’t mean we might not want to know what we’re facing, if there’s something wrong, God forbid! But does Ginny consult me? Do you? No! Because you’re the one with it inside your body, that’s why! If possession is nine tenths of the law, it must be a hundred percent of parenthood!”

“I didn’t ask for this to happen, you know! Frankly, if you want the exhaustion, the aches, the pains, the discomforts, the puking your guts out and the being kicked all hours of the night when you’re trying to sleep, you’re more than welcome to them! I wish I could give them to you! I did for about seventeen years!”

“Yes, well, that’s all my fault now, isn’t it? Blame me! After all, I’m the one who’s barren, aren’t I? I’m the one who couldn’t get pregnant! Apparently, I’m the only one in a five hundred mile radius who can’t get pregnant! Go ahead! Say it, I’m barren!”

“Fine! You’re barren! You’re the fucking Sahara! Make you feel better!? At least somebody wanted to do something about it finally! All you did was avoid it for seventeen years and then when you found out, you wanted to wallow in it! Wallow in the fact that we wasted seventeen years beating ourselves up and coming up against a brick wall and we would have to wait another three before even getting a whiff of hope! Know when I figured out *YOU* were the problem? Five years ago! Five years ago, when I tried to get you to go and be tested. And ‘*we*’ backed out. Because you decided *YOU* didn’t want to go. Only, I actually went and kept the appointment, anyway, unlike you, and they told me *I* was fine! No problems whatsoever! You could become a father any time you wanted, with the right partner! And I kept my big, fat mouth shut, because I didn’t want to hurt your feelings! I didn’t want you to find out until you were ready to do something about it besides pretend it wasn’t there! Until you were ready to admit we had

tried absolutely everything, and something had to be wrong! Until you woke up!"

"Well... got what you wanted now, didn't you? Actually, you got what I wanted, too..." she said, eyes narrowed, then whirled and headed back for the bedroom, with Viktor right on her heels. The door slammed, and Neville and Ginny could only hear muffled, angry voices, the words indistinct.

"Aren't you... going... to go... try to break that up?" Neville said, a little dazed.

"I'm not getting in the middle of that... are you?" I say we wait for them to have it out. They'll probably be over it in fifteen minutes. You know how they are... Sound like they're ready to kill one another, and two minutes later, it's all worked out like they never even had it out. They've had some standoffs, though, haven't they?" Ginny said with a short laugh.

"Oh, sure. Some real doozies. I still remember when the two of them got into it over the wedding arrangements. I'll never forget her calling him 'pigheaded Bulgarian' right in front of the wedding planner and him calling her a 'kuchka' right back. Even though that witch didn't know a word of Bulgarian, I think she got the gist from the way Viktor said it, that it wasn't exactly a term of affection one usually uses with their fiancée. The wedding planner practically fainted, she could just see her commission disappearing, but in about three minutes they had it all worked out and both of them were satisfied. I can't remember them having any real shouting matches after getting married, though."

"Sure you do. Remember the one they had a while back where they wouldn't tell anyone what they were fighting about? You know, they arrived at the Burrow already mad. I thought they were going to light into one another during Mum's birthday dinner for Bill. They glared at each other something fierce the whole time, and then they went out in the back garden afterwards for 'some air' and we could hear them inside, arguing. Let's see, we hadn't been married long, and Justin was just a few weeks old. Must have been, what? Five... oh... five years ago...oh..." Ginny trailed off, the realization stopping her short. They stared at one another for several long moments.

"They don't yell at one another over anything that's not important. And they always work out things that are important... Is it just me, or did it go all quiet in there?"

"I don't hear anything either," Ginny said, shaking her head. "Reckon they've finally worked it out? Or just strangled one another?"

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Viktor slammed the door a little harder than he intended. "You... you... you have

the gall to be shouting at me for something I can't help any more than you can!? Damn it! Po diavolite!"

She was sitting on the far edge of the bed, back to him, stock still, silent. Then, it burst forth, accusing, "I wanted to be pregnant worse than anything!" And her shoulders heaved.

He dragged his fingers through his hair, then let his hand drop. All the anger drained, leaving him limp. "And I would have given my right arm if it had done any good. If it would have made it happen," he said softly.

"I know. You're right. I wasted it. I wasted all that time."

"Five years. What's five years in the big scheme of things?" he sighed, and sank heavily onto the near edge of the bed, twisting and putting a hand on her shoulder. "God knows I didn't want to hear it either. About either one of us. Potion works. Now it's just 'family planning'. Deciding when you want to add the second piece. Assuming we can do that without ending up screaming at one another..."

She let out a strangled laugh. "Ginny and Neville will probably be lined up to turn us in for child endangerment... I'm sorry... Let's chalk it up to the strain."

"I am, too. I shouldn't have bitten your head off. It's just, I've been cooped up... we've both been cooped up so long, and we can't really get away from each other, and we're worried to boot. It's sure recipe for the two of us to go explosive on one another. We don't even get to talk to much of anyone on a regular basis but Ginny. Neville, Harry and Ron rarely have an excuse to come over, lately. We told them it wasn't necessary until we paint. Maybe we need to go back to having card games once a week like we used to, when they were all poor, courting couples and newlyweds and couldn't afford to do much of anything else. Stress is unbelievable, isn't it?"

"Now was that so hard?"

"What?"

"Sharing a little something with me. You know, I never thought I would complain about this, but you don't complain. You never do. You're always fine. You cope. You deal. You always did. And you make me do the same, sometimes dragging me along kicking and screaming, but you make me do it. Like with my parents... And I'm always ashamed of myself for not handling it as well as you do. I guess I was hoping you would let me share some of the burden this time around. Instead, you've been hauling it all around yourself and not uttering a word of complaint unless I drag it out of you."

“Well... I’m *not* fine. I’m petrified something’s going to go wrong. Do you know why I used to pull up short every time the baby moved? Because I kept thinking, ‘This is it. This is the beginning of where something goes completely, horribly wrong and I lose it, and we’re right back at square one, only worse’. And I’ve got no idea what kind of role I’m supposed to have... I’ve never been a father before... much less under these circumstances. But I want you to know... I’ve never thought of you as anything but this child’s mother. And not any the less this child’s mother just because it’s not your belly that’s swelling.”

“But you’re good with children. You’re crazy about them. For that matter, they’re crazy about you.”

“I’ve still never been one’s father before.”

“It’s just been so... tangible... lately. I mean, you’ve gotten bigger and the baby’s moving a lot where you can feel it... and I just seem to have no luck really feeling it. It’s almost like the baby’s doing it to spite me. And you seem to just take it in stride. I watch you lie there at night all curled up in a ball around it with your hands on it and sometimes I even see your belly move... and you don’t... touch me any more. I don’t think I ever spent a night in the same bed with you that you didn’t touch me or hang onto me or where we didn’t at least sleep close enough that I could feel your breath on my skin. I don’t mean... you know... we do that plenty, even now. I just mean *sleeping* next to me... *with* me. Holding me. It’s like these last couple of weeks you curl up and go to sleep and shut me out, and it’s just the two of you in there in your own private little world.”

“Hermione... I’ve been doing that because it hurts. Well, not hurting exactly, but it’s been tender. I couldn’t stand anything pressing on it or up against it much. Made it hard to sleep all piled up together like we usually do. But it’s better now. I think I could stand the shorts up, if I could pull them up now at all. About six days ago, they passed the point of no return, anyway, tender or not. You didn’t notice? I couldn’t pull them up if my life depended on it, I’ve gained so much weight. I wasn’t trying to keep you away from me, really. Not permanently. Look,” he added, swinging his legs up onto the bed and stretching out, propping against the headboard, “lean straight back. Lie down.”

“Why?”

“Trust me,” he said, guiding her head down with his hands, cradling it onto his lap and brushing her hair back out of the way. Her cheek and ear were up against the lower swell of his belly.

“What now?”

“Just wait,” he replied, and he had no sooner finished than she could feel the movement under her cheek, a little limb gliding along under the skin, then jabbing sharp. She rolled to her side, leaning her head against his middle, adding a hand on the firm bulge of his abdomen. He stroked her hair with one hand, the other resting just below his sternum, where the curve of his stomach now began. “Baby really goes at it most mornings. Usually right about the time I wake up. Not just little twitches, either, but real belly flops and solid, healthy kicks. In fact, I think it has a trampoline in there. Feel free to feel me up any time. Awake or asleep. It’s my belly, but it’s your baby, too. Don’t wait for an engraved invitation.”

They both started a little when the sharp rap came on the door. “You two okay in there?” Ginny called.

“We’re fine! We’re just fine!” Hermione shouted back, “We’re all just fine,” she murmured.

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“Who’s the extra chair for?” Neville asked, pointing to the extra chair at the kitchen table.

“Me,” Viktor replied, setting the bowl of pretzels in the middle of the table.

“Oh, come on. You’re bigger, but surely you don’t need two chairs,” Ron teased.

“Just the lower half. We don’t have any footstools that work. Besides, my waistline is nothing but a distant memory, my navel’s inside out, and I don’t care if my ankles *are* swelling, I’m eating *one* stinking pretzel, Virginia Longbottom, so you can just save the lecture,” Viktor said, popping a pretzel in his mouth.

Ron gave a low whistle. “Cranky and assertive, aren’t we? I could use you when she goes on at me about not eating so much candy.”

“Shut up, Ron, before I do something really awful to you that I can blame on hormones,” Viktor replied, plopping in the chair and propping his feet up.

“What are you going to do? Punch me in the nose, in your condition?”

“Worse. I’ll cry on you,” Viktor said lightly.

“Oh, gracious, anything but that,” Ron said with a shudder.

“Kicking a lot?” Harry asked curiously. Viktor merely raised an eyebrow, silently picked up the empty teacup and saucer on the table in front of him, leaned back

slightly and balanced them on the crest of his belly. He had no more than taken his hand away than the teacup gave a jump and rattle. It stilled for a moment, then jostled again, continuing to make little clattering noises at irregular intervals.

“Answer your question? Alright, enough parlor tricks,” Hermione said, setting the cup and saucer back on the table, then giving his middle a pat. “Would you actually like something in that teacup or would you prefer to keep using it as a baby detector?”

“Tea, I guess. Moves like crazy. Usually when I’m trying to sleep, or concentrate on something. You haven’t lived until you’ve seen your stomach actually move when you’re not doing it. Not that sleeping is all that easy with twenty-five pounds that *isn’t* moving on top of you, either,” Viktor complained.

“Funny, I don’t remember you complaining when I slept on top of you and I weigh a lot more than twenty-five pounds,” Hermione teased.

“But you were a lot more fun,” Viktor countered, “and you never once in all the time we’ve been married kicked me in the pancreas in the middle of the night. Or planted your heels in my ribcage to stretch.”

“I’ll give you that,” Hermione said. “In fact, the other night, his belly happened to be up against my back and the baby woke *me* up by kicking me in the kidneys, which I think is entirely unfair.”

“Don’t talk to me about ‘unfair’,” Viktor warned, “I’ve got you outstripped on ‘unfair’ for the next three years, no matter what happens. And don’t you dare think you can accuse me of being unsympathetic if you ever get pregnant, either.”

“You have any unusual complaints then, or just the standard ones?” Ginny asked.

“Other than the two of us going a little squirrely on each other from not being outside the house and out of each other’s hair for so long? Vulchanov visited a few days ago, you would have thought it was the event of the decade. Which was extremely kind of him. But then, he probably did it because he wrote to ask how I was doing, and I wrote him this pitiful letter about how I was going absolutely bonkers with nothing to do. You could just tell he wasn’t quite sure how to act about the whole thing yet, but still, it was nice to talk to someone different, no offense,” Viktor said.

“He does plenty that he has absolutely no business doing. Like sneaking and moving that last set of bookshelves in the nursery. And you can just forget painting in there too, before you get the notion to do that. Those fumes can’t be

good for you. That's my project. Ginny and Neville are going to help, that's quite enough hands," Hermione scolded.

"And what precisely does that leave for me to do then?"

"Gestate. Your project is to get the entire purpose of the nursery out into the world whole and healthy. Now, argue with that," Hermione said with a raised eyebrow.

"Fine. Match over. You win. So I won't paint," Viktor shrugged.

"Twenty-five pounds? Surely not?" Ginny asked.

"Don't start. Just don't. I'm starved half the time and you all jump my case every time I try to do anything more strenuous than standing up, so it's a wonder I haven't gained forty already. Hermione set Mama on me for the 'bookshelf incident', which was fighting way below the belt, if you ask me. I moved it all of half a meter. And there was nothing on it. One of the photo albums she left on it fell behind it. Oh, and for good measure, Molly came over here specifically to yell at me for it. And to bring another jumper. This child will never catch a chill, that's for sure," Viktor said, taking a swallow of tea.

Ginny laughed, "How many baby afghans has she brought over?"

"Three, unless I miscounted," Viktor replied.

"It was pretty funny when she worked you over about the bookshelves," Hermione snickered.

"Oh, really? I don't remember you laughing when she busted you over the fact that I was the one who cooked dinner. The way she took you to task over it, you would have thought you had sent me to a Siberian gulag for a month. Apparently, lifting a thirteen pound turkey out of the oven counts as 'strenuous' with Molly. By the way, if anyone wants a sandwich, help yourselves," Viktor added. "Now, is anyone going to actually deal the cards, or am I suddenly not allowed to play cards, either?"

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"This is really pathetic, you know. But then, the aspect of our social lives involving others are pretty much down to a once-weekly cards night and whoever knows and takes pity on us and comes by to visit, so how much lower exactly could we sink?"

"Oh, come on, now, it's not that bad. It's not like we never went to bed at nine

thirty before. Your back hurts. Enjoy the backrub. Simple as that. Just keep repeating to yourself that you're three weeks past halfway, so it's all downhill from here," Hermione said.

"Bad choice of words. All downhill," Viktor replied.

"Not if you had grown up riding a bicycle instead of a broom," she laughed.

"Still, it sounds bad. And usually, the only reason we went to bed at nine thirty had nothing to do with resting. Life of leisure sounds great until you try to live it, and then it's pretty dead boring. Heard any more from Remus?"

"Evidently he gets in tomorrow. Might even stop by here. Or so says Molly. She and Arthur have been keeping in touch with him while he's been on his little tour of the various Ministries."

"Not so little tour. Fourteen countries, wasn't it?"

"I think so. It was fairly whirlwind. Barely a week at best in most places to meet and greet and get his feet on the ground and then deal with the local Ministry councils and factions. And to convince them that werewolves aren't all bad. I don't envy him that. Feel better?" she asked, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

"Very much. Thank you," Viktor murmured.

"Grant you, I've got ulterior motives," Hermione laughed.

"So what's the going price of a backrub these days?"

"Roll over and find out. I'll let you know when we're even," she whispered, planting a kiss behind his ear.

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Hermione dried her hands on the tea towel as she went to see who it might be at the door. A quick look through the peephole revealed the thin, gray face and the silvering hair of Remus Lupin. Over the years, he had gotten less pinched looking, but he still had that slightly haggard look that had impressed itself in her memory when she had first seen him on the Hogwarts Express. His robes, not ragged and tattered as they had been years before, were neat, and he carried a small bag.

"Remus, come in, come in! I was just finishing up the tea," Hermione said, pulling the door back. "Are you in port long, or just breezing through?"

“Oh, I’m in port for a good, long shore leave,” Remus laughed, stepping back to study her, “and I just had to come by and see you two, offer my congrat...” but he trailed off, looking slightly puzzled, then concerned. “Have I just committed a horrible faux pas?”

“Faux pas? Depends on what you were about to say, but I doubt it, Mr. Ambassador,” Hermione said with a smile.

“Well, it’s just that... I was operating under the impression that you were... well, Molly gave me some news about you two not long after I left... pardon the... errr... Well, it *was* a terrible connection, but I thought you were pregnant, she said you two were expecting,” he said at last, gently. “I mean, this may be horribly rude of me, but even if Molly had called with the news an hour after it happened, you don’t look far enough... You’re too thin. Not that I’ve had a lot of experience, but by this stage, most women are showing, aren’t they? Was Molly wrong? Or... something hasn’t happened has it?” he added, looking horrorstruck. The thought that she might have been pregnant and lost the baby in the meantime had just occurred to him.

“Remus, sit down. You mean all you heard Molly say was that the two of us were going to have a baby?” she asked, sinking onto the sofa next to him.

“The connection was terrible. Madagascar’s Floo network is a joke. I didn’t hear half of what she tried to tell me. But I distinctly heard that part. And just this morning, when I got in and saw Harry and Hannah, they were talking about you all painting a nursery soon...”

“Um, Remus... Viktor and I *are* expecting, but I’m not pregnant. Exactly,” Hermione said softly.

“Thank goodness. Not that you’re *not* pregnant, just that I didn’t... well, I thought maybe something had gone wrong and I hadn’t heard and...” the words tumbled from his mouth in a nervous rush. He felt a pang of sympathy and embarrassment. No one had ever told him outright that the two of them had trouble starting a family, but he had always suspected. Especially the last few years. *Seventeen... no, eighteen by now... years was a long time to be married without producing at least one child, even in the magical world.* Couple that with the looks he sometimes caught them giving some of the Weasleys over the years...

“Remus, it’s alright. You didn’t stick your foot in your mouth... I’ve not had a miscarriage...” Hermione said evenly.

Remus breathed deep, sucking in his breath through his nose in his relief. What he smelled gave him pause. The air held a curious tang, *that* curious tang, he

thought... *someone* pregnant had at least been in the house recently... he racked his brain... Molly hadn't mentioned anyone else. None of the Weasleys were expecting again, were they? No one else had been mentioned, he didn't think. In any case, this smell was too strong, too sharp to not be far beyond the maybe sixteen or seventeen week stage he had been expecting, anyway. "Did the two of you decide on something else, some alternate method? Adoption? Surrogacy? Of course, it's none of my business if you don't wish to share..." he prodded, ashamed of himself for digging. *Being a werewolf with a sensitive nose wasn't always much of a blessing. Maybe the woman carrying the child had been here... or was still here.*

"I suppose you could call it an alternate method... you mean Molly didn't tell you?" she asked.

"Tell me what? All she told me was that the two of you were expecting, and Viktor was taking the season off."

"I think you had better stay here a moment. I'm going to go fetch Viktor," Hermione said, rising. "Actually, go on to the kitchen and have tea with us," she added, heading for the bedroom. "Viktor? Guess who's here." Viktor was sitting in a chair, reading a book while idly folding and putting away the laundry with his wand.

"Remus stop by already? How long has he been here?" Viktor asked, closing the book and hauling himself out of the chair.

"Long enough for me to find out that he thought I was pregnant all this time."

"I thought Molly told him!"

"I think she did, but he didn't hear. He said the connection was awful when he spoke to her. Couldn't hear half of what she said. Poor Remus. He came by to congratulate us, then he nearly had a panic attack when he realized I wasn't showing. I think he thought maybe he had put his foot in his mouth up to the knee, because I had miscarried," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"Well, he'll have a heart attack sure enough if I just waltz out there pregnant!"

"He can probably smell it, you know. He asked Cassie if she and Charlie wanted a boy or a girl before she even suspected she was pregnant the first time. I thought it might be better if you told him. Break it to him gently, maybe? Disillusionment Charm?" she suggested, lifting her wand.

"Oh, I see, shuffling it off on me?" Viktor asked with a sigh, "I suppose you had better, then. Do the Charm. I'll tell him." She murmured the words, tapping him

on the forehead, and he felt the curious, cold, dripping egg sensation that the Disillusionment Charm gave you. “Half convincing?”

“Like your old self. But keep your new front well clear of anything for a few minutes. He’s going to be smelling a rat if first thing you bump into the table with nothing at all,” Hermione warned.

“You might want to get St. Mungo’s on standby,” Viktor shot back over his shoulder.

“Viktor! Bored out of your skull with sitting at home yet?” Remus asked, jumping up from the kitchen table and offering his hand for a shake.

Viktor took it and gave it a firm squeeze. “You could say that. Although, certain things have been a little more exciting than I would have liked. Sit down, won’t you? I’ve got something to tell you, and it’s not easy. You don’t have any heart problems, do you?” Viktor joked weakly. He pulled a chair out and sat in it slowly and heavily, maneuvering into the chair from the side, bracing a hand on the tabletop to lower himself down. Hermione winced inwardly, thinking back to Viktor’s argument at this same table that Disillusionment Charms didn’t change physics.

“No, no. Now what’s this business about the two of you fixing up a nursery?” Remus asked pleasantly. He marveled at the way that Viktor had sunk into the chair, almost as though he were exhausted, achy or weak. Strange, too, given that he probably looked healthier in the face than Remus remembered for some time. He had always been on the verge of being just a shade too thin for comfort. The normally sharp cheekbones were a little softer, as though he had put on some weight, and his face a little more flushed and ruddy than usual. He looked well rested, too.

“Who told you that?” Viktor asked curiously.

“Harry mentioned Ginny and Neville were probably coming over to help you out with painting the nursery soon. Stopped by there this morning. Is something wrong?” Remus said, drawing his brows together.

“Ah. Well. Wrong. Not exactly. Different. Really different from how these things usually go,” Viktor said awkwardly.

“Look, there’s no shame in the two of you adopting... or... or... other alternate methods of starting your family...”

“No one said there was. And believe me, if we could have managed it, I guess we would have adopted long ago. But... well... you know how hard that is. Errr...”

I assume you've put two and two together and figured we've had some trouble having children?" Viktor asked.

"Well, I had summed up as much, recently," Remus admitted. *Good grief, the smell was stronger now, almost heady in here. Had they asked the woman expecting the baby they were adopting to move in with them? Was that what they were so reluctant to admit? Or was it a surrogate? No shame in that either... if it suited them... but why all the hemming and hawing?*

"The only people we really shared that fact with were Harry, Ron, Ginny and Neville, because they've known us what seems like since forever. Ah... the four of them cooked up this little Potion to help us out in the baby department, but problem is, they didn't tell us about it. Thought we would be too disappointed if it didn't work. Snuck it into our juice glasses when they were staying. Only problem is, we mixed up the glasses and they didn't notice," Viktor paused, casting his eyes back down to his hand drumming restlessly on the table.

"So it didn't work," Remus said sympathetically, clucking his tongue. *Maybe they were ashamed of having jumped the gun to alternate methods when possibly the Potion could have worked, administered properly.*

"No. It worked. Too well," Viktor said flatly.

"Baby already come then? Pregnancy faster than normal? Or has it been slower?" Remus guessed, "No, it would have to be faster, you said you weren't pregnant... exactly...what?"

"No. Got the wrong one of us pregnant," Viktor said bluntly. Remus only blinked, blank expression on his face while Viktor leaned forward, watching Remus's face for a long moment. "Nope...not registering, is it? *Finite Incantatem!*" Viktor said, pointing his wand at himself. He sat for a short space, lips pursed, expectant, waiting. "You can start laughing any time now. Funny, that's the reaction I keep expecting, and most people just sit there gawping at me like you are now, like I've told you I've got cancer," Viktor added, leaning further back in the chair and resting his folded hands on top of the swell of his stomach under his robes.

Remus worked his mouth soundlessly for a moment, reminding Hermione of a fish. "It's not funny," Remus whispered at last. "You're pregnant?"

"Well, that or Ginny's wrong and I've had the world's longest, strangest case of indigestion," Viktor replied with a shrug.

"Is it... I mean... is everything alright?" Remus asked anxiously.

“Far as we know,” Hermione interjected, resting a hand on Viktor’s shoulder. “We’re trying to keep the details of the switch decently quiet, but so far, he and the baby seem fine. Ginny’s been coming once a week.”

“Well then, I suppose I *can* give you two this bag then. It was supposed to be a small congratulatory gift. Maybe the two of you can put it in the nursery,” Remus said, shaking himself and setting the bag on the table. Viktor reached in and pulled out a small mahogany box. When he flipped the lid, soft music drifted out. Für Elise.

“A music box. Oh, it’s beautiful, Remus, thank you,” Hermione murmured.

“I guess I’ve learned to take you two seriously when you ask if I have heart trouble,” Remus said with a hearty laugh.

“It was kind of a shock to us when we first heard, too,” Viktor agreed.

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“Well, the top of your womb’s about two, two and a half inches above your navel, right about there. I’d estimate the baby’s a good two pounds, and probably roughly nine inches, head to bottom. Just the right size for this stage. Had any false contractions?” Ginny asked, resting her hand lightly on Viktor’s exposed belly.

“No. At least I think not,” Viktor replied with a shake of his head.

“I think you would notice if you had. They would probably feel like menstrual cramps, kind of a funny squeeze. Might teach you some sympathy for what we poor women go through every month,” Ginny teased. “You can pull your robe back down, now. So, are you ready to stay out of the way next week when we paint, or am I going to have to go all ‘stern mediwitch’ on you and order you out of the way?”

“I’ve already gotten quite enough lectures, and I’ve already got enough sympathy to last me a lifetime, thank you. And besides, I don’t feel like it, anyway. Unless you could rig a way for me to do it sitting down the whole while.”

“Told you it wouldn’t be long before you would be begging to sit. You’re not really built to hold all that up. A man’s pelvis and shoulders aren’t designed to do the job, really. Besides, fumes. Paint fumes. Horrible, choking paint fumes. You don’t want that, anyway,” Ginny said, shaking her head.

“Put vanilla extract in it. What? It works,” Viktor said with a shrug.

“He should know. He came over here and painted the entire house for me the week before we got married. Of course, then the house smelled like a big bun the day we moved most of the furniture in. Looked great, but we had to go get baked goods for lunch. We’ll keep that in mind, but you keep that nose of yours out of the nursery painting,” Hermione scolded.

“Yes, madam. Absolutely. Not touching it with a ten foot pole. You three get that job. I’ll do something else, far, far away from all those deadly paint fumes,” Viktor said lightly.

“Like what?” Hermione asked.

“Anything I can do while sitting down, probably.”

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“So how is he getting along? Really?” Ginny asked idly, swishing her wand at the paintbrush and setting it to work on a new patch of wall.

“He’s a tad short of breath lately when he does too much. Feeling a bit crowded in the middle for the first time, I think. And he probably wouldn’t admit it for a million knuts, but he’s got cravings. Two nights ago it was peanut butter. I’ve never seen him eat peanut butter directly out of the jar before, even if it was almost empty. He ate a peanut butter sandwich maybe once every six months before. That was new. And he’s been on about Chinese food like an absolute fiend since before we found out, even. Just out of the blue every few days, now, he has to have Chinese. In the last two weeks alone, we’ve had egg rolls, pork fried rice, snow peas, sesame chicken, sweet and sour chicken, General Tso’s chicken, detecting a theme? Oh, and stuffed mushrooms, crab Rangoon, various stir fry, and pork on a stick. I half expect him to ask for it for breakfast one of these days,” Hermione replied with a laugh and a shake of her head.

“Not gotten you up in the middle of the night for it, has he?” Neville said.

“Oh, no, he sleeps like a log these days. I think he’s usually so done in by the time he gets to bed that he could sleep through most anything, even a craving. I’m not complaining, though. He cooked the most of it, he’s no bother. Not that he didn’t always eat like a teenage boy, either, quantity-wise, but he was never too picky about what it was before. It’s odd to see him that hung up on food all of a sudden, zeroing in on one thing,” Hermione murmured. “I think he’s felt fairly well the last few weeks, just knackered by nightfall. I believe I dread the second trimester ending,” Hermione said.

“Why?” Neville pressed.

“Because, every book I’ve read says it’s the ‘good trimester’. No more nausea, and yet you’re not so big as you’re going to be, so your tummy’s not in the way all the time. He’s starting to complain about that. His belly being in the way. And he does keep bumping into things. It’s like he forgets his front extends that far out these days. I’ve threatened to put a padded bumper on the kitchen counter and the hall table,” Hermione answered.

“Speaking of bumping into, what did you do with him that we haven’t bumped into him yet?” Neville asked.

“Sent him off to his parents. Let them fuss over him a little while. He hadn’t been in some time. I figure it won’t be long until he won’t really be up to traveling, even by Floo. It was the only way. Otherwise he’d be moping around here, feeling useless because he’s not helping,” Hermione replied, finishing off her section of wall. “Second coat done, then. We can charm the moon and the stars up on the ceiling after it dries. Come on, we’ll go see if dinner’s done.”

“Good, I’m feeling distinctly like a teenaged boy myself,” Neville said, putting the tops back on the paint cans.

“Looks like the chicken needs a few more minutes,” Hermione said to Ginny and Neville as they entered the kitchen. “Well, when did you get back? You mean they let you go before nightfall?” she called out into the living room. Viktor was sitting in one of the chairs flanking the fireplace.

“Just a minute ago. Pleaded fatigue,” Viktor answered.

“Shame, lying to your dear old parents like that,” Hermione teased, walking into the living room.

“Who says I was lying?” Viktor asked with raised eyebrows. “I *am* tired. And besides, there is only so much stew one person can eat in a day. Which reminds me, there’s about a gallon of stew in the icebox now, I was ordered to bring it home,” he answered, leaning his head back against the chair.

“I always did like your mother. She can send us stew anytime she likes, she does know that, right? Got a bit of soot on your robes, there,” Hermione said with a mischievous grin, laying her hand on the big black streak across Viktor’s front and rubbing. “Just can’t keep that tummy of yours clear of anything, can you, Pumpkin?”

“No, I can’t, Sugar,” Viktor replied sarcastically. “Judging from the amount of paint you’re wearing, it’s a common problem in this house. Did you get any of it on the walls?” he asked, pointing at the streaks of paint on her robes.

“Enough of it ended up on the walls. Why do I worry, when you two start throwing around pet names?” Ginny laughed. “Give it an hour more to dry and you can go take a look at it. Then we’ll charm the moon and the stars on.”

“Eating anything?” Hermione asked.

“I just got away from my mother... what do you think?” Viktor asked in return.

“I won’t set a plate then. You two want some stew? I wouldn’t recommend passing up the offer,” Hermione called over her shoulder.

“Sure!” Neville and Ginny answered simultaneously.

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“Ummm.... would you stop that? You’re making me nervous,” Harry said.

“It’s just a crib,” Viktor protested, nudging it another few inches.

“Exactly. It’s a crib. A piece of furniture. And you’re moving it. And that makes me nervous. I do not want you throwing your back out or hurting yourself on my watch. Because first, Hermione will kill me. Then, Hannah will... well, she’ll kill me again. And I suspect Ginny might, as well. I don’t even want to think about what Molly would do to me. Something worse than killing. So protect me from all the females in our lives by just leaving the crib where it is and telling me where you want it instead,” Harry pleaded, shooing Viktor away.

“And what exactly would I hurt? My back’s already killing me, I get leg cramps, muscle aches, feel like I can’t catch my breath, I get indigestion, heartburn, probably have bruised kidneys, and if I didn’t sit around with my feet propped up half the time, I couldn’t get my boots on. Not that I didn’t already admire women who do this way above and beyond the call of duty, but at this point, I think I owe my mother a second house. About another foot that way,” Viktor added absently, sinking into the rocking chair in the middle of the room.

“That bad? Resting any?” Harry asked, shoving the heavy wooden crib across the floor.

Viktor shrugged and set the rocking chair in motion. “Sleeping, yes. Resting, not much. Try getting Hannah to poke you in the ribs or the stomach, every twenty minutes, maybe not even enough to wake you up, but enough that when you get up in the morning, you’re wondering what the heck went on. That’s kind of what it’s like. And the worst part is, I hate carping about it. It seems like such a petty thing to complain about, in exchange for what you get. I could sleep all day if I wanted, it’s not like I need to go anywhere. And it’s not like I usually get them all



at once. It's usually just one thing at a time, thank goodness."

"Absolutely." Harry wandered over and stood next to the rocker, surveying the room. "Now then, crib by the window, curtains up, all the furniture in the room, it looks good, don't you think? I admit, I like the midnight sky theme. Nice choice with the oak furniture, too. So, am I to take it you don't recommend being seven months gone?" he asked, laying a hand on Viktor's shoulder.

"Not if you like being comfortable. To tell the truth, I'm stuck halfway between wishing this had never happened and not being willing to trade it for the world," Viktor said, draping a hand over the bulge beneath his robes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Selfish both ways, isn't it? If I wish it had never happened, or at least happened the right way around, it makes it sound like I'm not willing to sacrifice being comfortable for a little while in exchange... for the baby. Or that I'm wishing this on Hermione instead. And honestly, there are times when I almost would. Times when I think 'I am *not* meant to do this' and wish I weren't. Doing it. But most of the time, I think I wouldn't be willing to take anything in exchange for the experience or the result. Then I feel selfish for wanting what should be Hermione's privilege. And for playing fast and loose with the baby's health, safety and well-being. I mean, let's be honest, Ginny would be a lot less worried if it were Hermione that was pregnant and giving birth and not me. At least she started out with all the equipment for it," Viktor said with a sigh.

"Sounds pretty normal to me. I bet every pregnant *woman* thinks something similar. Look, Hannah and I had better get going. It's pretty late. Don't go moving the furniture any more. You've got at least ten more weeks or so. Get one of us to do it. For that matter, make Hermione do it. And get some rest, hmm?" Harry added, moving toward the nursery door.

Viktor looked over his shoulder and replied, "Thanks, Harry."

"Take care. See you later. I'll show myself out and collect my wife, provided I can tear her away from squealing over all those adorable teeny clothes and eensy blankets and itsy bitsy socks she brought over," Harry said, giving a wave and shutting the door with a soft click.

"Do stop worrying at me in there, would you?" Viktor murmured, circling his palm. "And stop planting your heel in my side, would you, please? Look, I swear the nursery's bigger. More room to stretch. Hang on a few more weeks, and no more being so cramped."

"Talking to yourself, now?" came Hermione's soft voice from the doorway.

“Looks nice, doesn’t it?”

“Talking to the baby, honest, so I’m only halfway around the bend,” Viktor replied.

“Likely story. I’ll have to remember that. I was talking to the baby,” she laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck and giving him a peck on the cheek.

“I seem to recall someone else in this room carrying on conversations with my navel or something in the vicinity, just the other night.”

“And if you try to tell that to anyone else, I will deny it to my dying breath. I like the crib over there. Now keep your hands off of it. And anything else weighing anywhere in the neighborhood of a stone or more. Coming to bed?”

“Maybe. It all depends on whether or not I can get out of this rocking chair,” Viktor replied sheepishly.

“Oh, give me your hand and I’ll haul you out. There you go. Back bothering you?”

“A little.”

“Come on to bed then. And g-”

“And get some rest. I know, I know. I should be rested enough for three by the time the baby gets here.” He slept fairly soundly until two in the morning, when he sat bolt upright in bed, panting. He counted himself lucky that he had only managed to wake himself up. Hermione slept through it. The first week or so.

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“I don’t want to talk about it. That’s all I get out of him,” Hermione murmured, sitting down at the kitchen table with Ginny.

“And he’s done that every night this week?” Ginny asked.

“And probably before that, knowing him. He’d never say anything about it if he thought he could get by without letting me in on it. He’s exhausted, that’s the only reason he’s sleeping right now. You know he hates naps. Would sooner be horsewhipped than sleep during the day.”

“Do you think it’s something to do with the baby...or...?” Ginny trailed off when Hermione gave a slow shake of her head.

“He hasn’t really had nightmares in years. There were only two... he was never really willing to talk about... he hasn’t had that one for a good ten years, though.”

“What nightmares?” Ginny pressed.

“He used to dream about Cedric every once in a while. You know, he and Harry still make it a point to talk to Amos Diggory on a regular basis. But it’s not that one. I mean, that one gets him up, but not that way. It took about six months after we married for him to confess that was what he was dreaming about when he would get up out of bed in the middle of the night and just stay up. He would get it on his mind and couldn’t stop thinking about it and couldn’t sleep, but no, nothing like the panic associated with the other one. Besides, he really stopped having that one, oh, probably two years after we married. At least he stopped having it and then not being able to talk about it. He had it again a few nights ago, but he talked about it. Said he hadn’t really realized what torture it must have been for Amos to bury a child. Not until now,” Hermione said, looking into her teacup.

“Well, I guess it’s natural... to think about that... when you’re expecting your own. I mean, you think you half understand what it’s like to lose a child, I guess, but worrying so much about one who isn’t even here yet, probably reminds him of Amos. You think that’s what’s been getting him up? Worrying about the baby and thinking about Amos and Cedric?” Ginny prompted.

“That’s what woke him the other night. But that’s not what’s been getting him up most nights. It’s the other one. I can tell from the way he acts when he’s asleep. That one always shook him the worst. Ginny, you remember the night at Godric’s Hollow? That last night?”

“How could I forget? I mean, how could anyone? We all had our nightmares about that, I think. How could you not?” Ginny asked softly.

“Took him two years after we married to tell me all about what happened that night. For two years, every few months, he would sit bolt upright in bed, panting like he had just run a marathon, or better yet, half hysterical for a second before he realized where he was, and he would tell me he didn’t want to talk about it and act like nothing happened. Ginny, he and Sturgis got separated and cut off down by the stream after going after a group that was trying to get back around behind our side. Four on two, Sturgis and a Death Eater took one another out, Viktor took one out, the other two ganged up. The one farthest off got distracted with something, the one nearest him, they dueled and disarmed one another. The Death Eater down by the stream bashed him with a rock and kneeled on top of him, tried to drown him. Viktor got hold of his robe and pulled him off. Ginny...” Hermione paused while staring at the tabletop, “he had to pick up a rock and bash his head in. And when he looked around and counted the bodies,

someone had killed the fourth. It almost had to be Hestia. She's probably what distracted the fourth one in the first place, maybe kept him from killing Viktor if the third one trying to drown him hadn't. Viktor hadn't even known she was behind them. He found her dead there on the stream bank. You know how he is. He felt responsible later. Felt guilty because he just got up and came back to the main battle as soon as he was able. He dreams it. Last time he dreamed it before the baby, was, I don't know, about ten years ago, I guess. When he had that awful case of pneumonia. I think it was that feeling of having a hard time breathing. Reminded him of it. I think the shortness of breath now reminds him. He felt like she probably saved him and he didn't stop to acknowledge it right then. Took him a long time to feel comfortable saying that out loud. Stress sometimes brings it back up, maybe a night or two. Worry. When he says 'I don't want to talk about it', I know to leave it alone. That's what he's dreamed, and no amount of talking on my part helps. All the nice little platitudes I can come up with don't change the fact that he saw what he saw and did what he did."

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Drowning. It was the sensation of drowning first. That panicky, smothering squeeze in the center of the chest. That feeling of not being able to draw breath, the lungs thick and full and hot after that initial cold shock, but not with air. And darkness. It was dark. The moon blocked out. The whole thing, from beginning to end couldn't have taken more than a minute or two that night, but in the reviewing, every time he dreamed it, it always took forever. Seeing stars when he took the blow to the temple, his head throbbing, the bony knee grinding into his chest, the weight of the Death Eater full on him, pinning him down, rocks in the streambed digging into his shoulder blades, nothing but the sound of the stream in his ears for a moment, then the rest filtering back in the way the water had seeped through the cloth and wet his skin. The screams, the curses, the rest of the battle.

Reaching. Stretching to get a fingertip on the robe he couldn't even see properly. Desperate by then. He had been lightheaded by the time he had managed to gather up a fold of it and yank hard enough to topple him off. It seemed he had been able to feel the rough weave of it, the threads overlapping and little nubs here and there. There wasn't even time to breathe, just time to lay hands on whatever was in reach and use it. A rock. All that magic flying back and forth, all those wands, and it had been a rock that had saved him. Only after he had put it back down and gathered up his wand again did he allow himself to put his face to the sky next to the little stream in Godric's Hollow and choke. To choke up blood and water and choke down a few wheezing breaths. Air. He couldn't get enough air. He had wheezed for who knew how long. He thought he had still been at it hours later, even after everything else was quiet and still.

He had still been wheezing when the cold fingers of Hestia Jones, curled up among the masked bodies there on the bank, brushed his ankle when he moved and he looked, really looked, at her body. He had been ashamed of that later. That all seeing Hestia had done, at first, was make him panic about Hermione. No matter that he had hardly said two words to her and only met her the once or twice, only heard her middle name at her memorial. Here lies Hestia Elizabeth Jones. She had been dead. The least he could have done was spare a thought for her death. Feel sorry for it. But then, there were so many that night... no time to feel sorry for them all. Still wheezing when he had crawled to his feet and staggered back up the small rise toward where the house had once been. Toward more of it. Toward more of them. Toward where he had left her. Toward where he had last seen her before they had gotten separated. Toward her voice.

“Viktor... Viktor?” Hermione laid a tentative hand on his bare shoulder. She hated to wake him when he had such a hard time even getting to sleep, but he didn’t do so well on his back, these days. His swollen belly and the cramped space beneath his ribcage was enough to make him short of breath, standing or sitting, when he pushed himself too hard. It couldn’t be comfortable flat on his back. Not when he was panting for breath like that. Struggling for it, almost. It had been enough to wake her from a dead sleep, his breathing. He stirred a little, then let out a soft moan. She shook him. Hard. “Viktor!”

He bolted up off the bed, faster than she had thought possible given his condition, panting, palm to his chest, and she noticed for the first time, in the moonlight from the window, the fine sheen of sweat on his face. “Viktor? Are you alright?” No answer. “Viktor? Are you okay? Sick? Do I need to call Ginny?” Finally, a slow shake of the head. No. His breathing was calming down, now. “Dreaming?” she asked hesitantly, brushing the hair away from his temple. He felt hot, almost feverish. A barely perceptible nod. “Nightmare?” She knew it was bordering on the pushy. That if it really were *that* nightmare, she couldn’t expect a real answer.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She knew it was useless to push. She watched him settle back down into the more comfortable position on his side, his breath evening off, but he was still thoroughly wide awake by the time her heavy eyelids couldn’t be held open a second longer.

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“Viktor... you can’t keep this up... waking up four and five times a night. You’re exhausted all the time...” Hermione said softly, brushing the hair back off of his hot, damp forehead. “Let’s ask Gin if she can’t recommend something... maybe to help you rest a little easier...” A sharp shake of the head. “Not necessarily

something to take, just something that might help you get more comfortable. She was telling me about these body pillows that help take the pressure off of-

His voice was hoarse. "I can't do this."

She was taken aback by the bluntness. By the weak protest of it. "You're doing it already. And probably handling it better than I would."

"I can't. I'm not... I... I..." but his voice cracked and he buried his face in his hands.

"Shhhh... you're just worn out... come here." He didn't protest, simply let her pull his head against her shoulder, stroke his hair.

"I... I'm not fit to-

"You're not going to start that nonsense, again, are you?" she chided gently. "I mean, we went through this business when we got married. That load of rot about not being fit to be married to me. Now, look, I told you then, you're not getting off with that weak line. You're stuck with me, and I'm stuck with you. And the baby is stuck with the both of us, so tough luck. No saying you're not fit to be a father, either. Hate to tell you, but we're all amateurs at it. I've never been a mother, and for that matter, the baby is a totally green rookie all the way around. Come on, now... what else is bothering you, besides just being worried and not sleeping half decently for a solid week?" she prodded, planting a quick kiss on the crown of his head. He let out a slightly strangled laugh and raised up, propping against the headboard.

He sat for a moment, silent except for a quick snuffle. "I ache," he said plainly.

"Where?"

"Where don't I?"

"Where's it worst, then?"

"This is going to sound crazy, but my pelvis. The whole thing aches just like a toothache this last week. Every time I try to sleep."

"Not crazy. You're hauling a whole other person around in there. One that is apparently hellbent on kicking the absolute fire out of you every night and is currently displacing most of your internal organs."

"I've gone completely daft, that's what's happened," he protested with a weak laugh.

“Oh, you have not. You were already daft. I’d wager it’s the worry and the stress, and what you can’t chalk up to that, chalk up to hormones gone wild.”

“Can I do that?”

“I do.”

“When it’s you or me being daft?”

“Either.”

“I’m fixating. Know what it was today? Just sitting around wondering whether or not I would be able to carry the baby long enough for the lungs to be okay. I read in that fool book yesterday about the lungs being the last major organ left to form, and I couldn’t get it off my mind today. Obsessing over it. What it would mean if the baby came early. I have got to stop reading all this stuff. Makes me think too much. I think I’m better off being ignorant.”

She pressed her lips against his temple. “And here I am being insane over whether or not he or she is going to have the proper number of fingers and toes in all the right spots. At least you’re worrying about something sensible. Something worth worrying about. Fine pair, aren’t we? Going to be proper nutcases by the time the baby’s here. That’s it, lie down. On your side. Would it help if I massaged a bit?” she asked matter-of-factly, tapping his hip with her finger.

“I never heard of a case where being stroked by a beautiful woman in bed made a man feel worse,” he said with a short laugh.

“Flatterer,” she murmured, cradling him, rubbing his hip vigorously. It was only a few minutes before he was asleep again, breathing even. She put her arms around him, a touch awkward now, trying to comfortably accommodate his new shape. She watched him sleep for a while, feeling the baby occasionally thrashing inside him, wriggling vigorously against her own abdomen where their bodies pressed together. Tomorrow morning she would call Ginny and get her to bring one of those pillows she had recommended. At least he might rest and sleep a bit more comfortably with it, even if they were still going to be complete nutjobs over the next few weeks.

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“They call them sleeping beans. Daft name, but a lot of my patients swear by them, and I tried one out a few nights, just to see what they were like. Pretty comfy. Helps relieve some of the stress on your hips and back, and it helps

support the weight of the baby, rather than letting you do all the work and letting you sag into the mattress in some awful position. Keeps your knees from pulling down on your hips. Keeps you off the flat of your back, too,” Ginny explained, laying out the body pillow on the bed. “See, you lie on your side, and put the curved side up next to you. Top bit under your head, you kind of hug up against it, curl around it, and you can prop the curve under your belly to help support it, and the bottom bit between your knees.”

“Mmmm. Hmmm. What’s that Muggle game with the spinner, the colors and the mat on the floor again?” Viktor asked, looking doubtfully at Hermione.

“Twister?” Hermione answered uncertainly.

“Sounds like a game of Twister,” Viktor told Ginny.

“It only sounds complicated. Might feel odd for a night or two, but I liked sleeping on it. Hermione might beg to differ, but it will probably be nicer for you, at least. Can’t make you more uncomfortable, can it?” she countered.

“Point taken,” Viktor said with a shrug.

“Well, about all the other advice I can give is for you to take it easy as much as possible. I know that’s annoying, but better than me actually putting you on bed rest and forcing you to spend the rest of the pregnancy flat on your back because you refuse to take care of yourself. And to start thinking about whether or not you really want me to do the Cesarean here, and whether you prefer to schedule it or wait and do it when you go into labor. And lest I start a fight, I’ll ask this right before I leave. You two discussed names?” Ginny asked, finishing up the packing of her medical bag.

“Yes, probably, have no idea, ask me later, and yes, discussed, but haven’t settled on anything,” Viktor ticked off thumb against fingers. “About the delivery, what do you recommend?”

“To tell the truth, I’ve talked to a few people at St. Mungo’s and they see nothing especially risky about doing a Cesarean delivery here as opposed to the hospital, given a basically healthy patient and no major complications. Of course, they think we’re discussing a basically healthy pregnant woman, but still. They saw nothing wrong with it, especially given that I know it’s coming and would be prepared. Surgical delivery is a bit more dangerous than a natural delivery, but that would be true regardless. As for the scheduling versus letting nature take it’s course, it’s more convenient to schedule. For me, anyway. I would rather know the day and the hour, of course, no one really likes to be roused out of bed at half past one in the morning to deliver a baby. But when it boils down to it, provided I’m not pulled out of bed in the middle of the night, I



would prefer letting nature take its course. Up to you, in the end, but it's a safer bet if your body's given some cue that everything's ready and the baby wants out. Labor tends to be a big cue. You've got plenty of time left to mull it over. Six or eight weeks easy. Maybe a smidgen more. First babies tend to lurk," Ginny said with a laugh.

"Lurk? What on earth is that?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, hanging about in there longer than expected. First babies tend to go overdue a lot. You might get as much as ten weeks."

"Yipe," Viktor muttered.

"They come when they come. Unless you schedule them," Ginny shrugged. "See you guys for cards at the end of the week."

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Hermione froze when she heard the loud crash and the tinkle of broken glass. "Viktor?" she called. Silence except for a few more pieces of glass clattering to the floor. She sprinted from the bedroom to the kitchen. The scene brought her up short in the doorway. Viktor was sitting at the kitchen table, wand raised, looking a little stunned, gaze fixed across the room. The cabinets above the sink were ripped loose from their moorings, sitting haphazardly across the counter and the kitchen sink, a sea of broken glass scattered on the floor. She gaped for a moment before she could force out, "Are you alright? What happened?"

He nodded hesitantly. "Apparently... I take after my mother..."

"Beg pardon?"

"I only did an *Accio* on a glass... and the whole row of cabinets just... came off... I... I'm sorry," he stammered.

Hermione gave an exasperated sigh. "They're only glasses. They can be repaired. And the cabinets. Are you sure you're fine?"

"I think so. Except for it startling me half to death."

"I think maybe you had better reserve the wand for emergencies only, from here on out," Hermione mused, putting her hands on her hips and surveying the mountain of broken glass. She walked over to the counter and opened one of the cabinet doors, sending a shower of shards into the sink and onto the floor. "Or we'll not have any crockery or glassware left in one piece. There's this Muggle saying. If you need anything, just whistle. I think you had better work on

your whistle and leave the wand be when you can," she said. On impulse, she added a line from an old movie, along with an exaggerated delivery, "You know how to whistle, don't you? You just put your lips together... and blow."

Viktor knit his brows together in confusion. "What *are* you on about?"

"Never mind. Old movie. *Reparo!* Glass? I'll even wash it up first."

"You are a real gem, then."

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"So, you two given any thought to scheduling the Cesarean?" Ginny asked as she walked into the bedroom.

Viktor and Hermione exchanged looks, and Viktor cleared his throat. "Err... yes... about that... Scheduling might not be necessary, exactly..."

"Why not?" Ginny said, plainly puzzled.

"Well... um... how to put this? I think I know now why my pelvis hurt so much," Viktor said, looking embarrassed. "The Potion... well, it seems to cover all the necessities... All... the necessities," he repeated, looking at Ginny with raised brows.

"I'm afraid I'm not following," Ginny replied, shaking her head.

"*All* of...oh, for Pete's sake, just look under my robe! You're going to have to eventually, anyway!" Viktor spat impatiently.

"There's not... something like a springy snake's not going to come leaping out at me, is it?" Ginny began haltingly.

"Pardon? Do we joke? About anything like this?" Hermione asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, sorry, but I did grow up with Fred and George. A guy just telling me to peek up his robe without letting me know why, makes me a little suspicious. I half expect a jumpy spider under there," Ginny soothed. "So what am I looking for?"

Viktor reclined on the bed and tented his knees. "Just look," he said bluntly. Ginny lifted the edge of his robe. When she raised up again, she was slightly pale.

“Well... that... that was certainly... unexpected... If that was happening from the inside out, no wonder you ached... So... the Cesarean isn't a necessity now... Any of those tons of books you two have contain a section on Lamaze?” Ginny asked with a weak laugh.

“Is that going to go away... after?” Viktor asked.

“Not sure. I can't even tell you about the womb, so how can I tell about the birth canal? I've no idea, Viktor... On the bright side, you don't have to have surgery to have the baby...” Ginny said with a sheepish grin.

“So... you think I can give birth... the usual way?” Viktor pressed.

“Certainly looks functional. Well. Now I've got to add checking your cervix to the list, during these checkups,” Ginny added, sounding a little dazed.

“Oh joy. Another humiliation,” Viktor grouched.

“Oh, lighten up. Would have been my heels up in the stirrups, if all this had happened properly. Loads of women have to do it, you'll live,” Hermione teased.

“But they have the advantage of at least being familiar with the equipment, already,” Viktor said, crossing his arms across his chest.

“I'm not going to say a word about how familiar you probably are with someone else's equipment from the opposite angle,” Ginny managed before dissolving in a fit of giggles.

“Think of it as getting a good feel for how the other half lives,” Hermione said with a short laugh.

“Oh, come on, I'll be gentle, I promise,” Ginny snickered, “but we'll have to do without stirrups today. I didn't pack any.”

“Likely story,” Viktor said with a small, rueful smile.

“Just keep repeating to yourself that it's for the good of the baby,” Ginny countered.

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“Parental ages when you found out you were expecting... thirty-nine and thirty-five... we had been married seventeen, almost eighteen years... due date... did Ginny ever pin down a due date?” Hermione asked, looking up from the baby book, quill poised. Viktor was reclining on the sofa, pillows propping his knees

and behind his back and head.

“Not really. Mid to late March. That’s as specific as she’s gotten. March 16th, I think, was her first, best guess,” Viktor answered. “You don’t have to fill it all out right this instant, you know. Not that it wasn’t nice of Ginny to get that for us for Christmas, but it’s sat there the last seven or eight weeks just fine with nothing in it.”

“Just because I can’t pin you down to answer these questions,” Hermione scolded.

“What? You ought to know just as well as I do how old we are and how long we’ve been married,” Viktor shrugged.

“Sure, but I still don’t know what it’s been like to be pregnant. Morning sickness... check. Violently ill. Horrendously. Made his wife take a shower to get rid of the perfume that he suddenly couldn’t stand. Also couldn’t stand the smell of coffee. Anything else?”

“That morning you mentioned bacon...” Viktor said with a shudder.

“I wondered why you’d suddenly gone off bacon. How about this next one... how far along when you found out? Well, I know that one.”

“Ten weeks after the deed was done. We’re slow, dearie. Our child’s going to think we were a bit slow on the uptake as far as the birds and the bees go,” Viktor laughed.

“With good reason. We weren’t trying to get *YOU* pregnant. I think I can answer the next, too. Were you surprised?”

“Shocked us both straight out of our socks, I think. And you can quote me on that one.”

“What did you say or think upon finding out?”

“Unprintable.”

“Well, we’ve got to make up something we won’t be too ashamed to show them someday,” Hermione said with a laugh. “Cravings?”

“Nothing in particular, food in general. Maybe peanut butter.”

“Viktor...”

“Okay, Chinese, too. Although, lately, anything that’s not moving.”

“No good looking at the next one, it’s ‘When did the baby drop?’, and that’s not happened yet.”

“Any moment, I hope. I can’t take much more of this huffing and puffing for breath all the time. But how’s it going to drop at all, seeing as I’m rarely ever vertical these days except when I’m on my way from here to the bed or vice versa?”

“Oh, it will, stop your carping. Can I get you to shuffle from here to the bed? Hope you don’t mind, I let myself in the back door. Filling out the baby book?” Ginny called from the kitchen door.

“Attempting it, but he’s not being too cooperative,” Hermione said, laying the book on the table.

“Bit hard when it’s not due for another five weeks,” Viktor complained, pulling the pillows from beneath his knees and tossing them on the floor.

“Gonna save me the trouble and confess how much you’ve gained?” Ginny asked lightly.

“Forty. Five. Or six. About. Feels like a ton. All right under my diaphragm,” Viktor complained, putting his feet on the floor.

“Hand up?” Ginny asked, offering her hand, “Well, you are a tall fellow, you’ve got some room to put it, but I’d really like it if things had kind of leveled off sooner. At another pound a week, that’s going to put you over fifty, total. Bit higher than I would like, but no putting you on a diet right now.” Viktor struggled up off the sofa. “Still having Braxton Hicks contractions?”

“On and off. Moves around. Or it could just be indigestion. Or muscle spasms. Beats me.”

“Couple of weeks, the baby will have dropped, and you’ll be able to breathe, but instead you’ll be complaining it’s sitting on your bladder and that it feels like the baby’s going to fall out every time you stand up,” Ginny said, rubbing his tummy affectionately.

“Something new to look forward to, then. Give me a few minutes. I’ll be in the bedroom. On the bed, no shorts, propped up on the pillows and under the sheet. You know, that used to be a lot more fun to say,” Viktor said, walking down the hall and putting his hands to the small of his back.

"It's a date," Ginny called after him. "How's the edema been?" Ginny asked Hermione, after the bedroom door clicked shut.

"Better, but his legs and ankles are still swelling something terrible if he spends much time at all standing. I've kept him out of chairs and off his feet as much as I dare. Some days he only sits in a chair to eat, maybe to read the paper. And his hands... most mornings his wedding ring is practically cutting into his finger," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"Not much in the face?"

"Not really. His face looks a little fuller the last few months, anyway. No more than that, as far as I can tell."

Ginny shook her own head. "Hermione, I hate to do this, but could he eat from a tray instead? In bed or on the couch?"

"Sure. He'll grouse something fierce about it, but he could. I don't mind."

"I'll check his blood pressure. If it's only slightly elevated, I'll stop just short of putting him on complete bed rest. If it's very high, though, I am going to put him on full bed rest. No getting up at all. He hasn't been nauseated or shaky or anything?" Ginny pressed, walking down the hall.

"No. None of the full blown symptoms of eclampsia. He's even been resting pretty well, too. Considering. Main complaint now is his ligaments going all soft and stretching. Says it feels like his hips are going to come straight out of the sockets sometimes."

"I suspect his pelvis is spreading, getting ready to let the baby drop. Ready for me?" Ginny asked, opening the door. "Sorry I couldn't get here until so late, the office has been a real bear today. Seems like everyone was sprouting green ear hair, had gotten a wand stuck up their nose or their head wedged in a cauldron today. On the bright side, though, you can just stay in bed and not have to fool with getting in it again. Okay, robe up, sheet down, we'll measure and listen to the heartbeat and I'll poke and prod your belly and see if I can figure out which way the baby's lying. Cross your fingers for head down," Ginny said, putting her hands down and feeling. After a minute, she said, "Well, you're lucky on that count, head down."

"How can you tell?" Hermione asked.

"Here, put your hand right there, and press. Feel that? That, Hermione, is your baby's skinny little rump under your palm. Okay, put your knees up and I'll put you in the portable stirrups," Ginny said, going to her bag. A few minutes later,

she was finished, and she perched on the edge of the bed after packing the stirrups away again. "For the good news, baby's headed the right way, the heartbeat's strong, you're not swelling as much as you were a few weeks ago when you were trying to go full tilt, and your blood pressure is only slightly elevated. For the slightly bad news, you're still swelling and your blood pressure's still too high. And that is one *healthy* baby."

"How's that last bit slightly bad?" Viktor asked.

"Ask me that again when you're in labor. Baby could quite easily be a ten pounder and then some. Definitely going to be over nine. Your torso's a bit more roomy than most. Probably going to be a long baby as well. Better hope your pelvis spreads a little wider than most, too. Now then, you want the news that should neither depress nor cheer you? You're starting to efface, you're even dilated a centimeter or so."

"And that means?" Hermione queried.

"Almost absolutely bloody nothing. They're supposed to be signs your body's getting ready for labor, but I've had patients who dilated halfway six weeks before they were due and still went two weeks over, and some women, showing no signs of anything during a morning appointment, who came in that afternoon in full blown labor. Viktor... I'd really like for you to try staying in bed or on the sofa for at least one meal a day. Off your feet and out of a chair. Legs and feet propped up. I don't like the fact that you're still swelling," Ginny said meekly.

Viktor heaved a sigh. "I practically only get up for meals and baths as it is..."

"I know. It's a giant pain in the bum. Do it at lunch. That way you can get up and stretch a bit for breakfast and get up for dinner before you have to go back to bed or the sofa. Could I cheer you up with the news that the baby's probably not going to be kicking as hard now, since it's running out of room in there? You can even get up for a little stroll around the house twice a day, but no staying up more than fifteen minutes at a time. I had better run now. Past ten. Show myself out," Ginny said, picking up her bag.

"Just forward my mail in here," Viktor grouched when Hermione climbed into bed shortly after.

"It will all be over before you know it," Hermione soothed, planting a kiss on his belly. He had pulled a nightshirt on while she was in the bathroom. "Feeling okay?"

"If you don't count being depressed about being confined to bed, as well as can be expected, I guess. "

“So, downright miserable, then? You’re not completely confined. Spent a whole four days in bed, even ate there, once before,” Hermione pointed out.

“But that was when I had pneumonia. I couldn’t get out of bed and stand up. Not that I’m not far off from that now. Or are you talking about the leg?”

“Our honeymoon, actually. I don’t think two people ever saw less of Rome. I couldn’t even describe the city until we went back for our anniversary five years later,” Hermione said, stifling a giggle.

“It was a great villa,” Viktor said with a smile.

“We didn’t see any more of the villa than we did of Rome. When we checked out, the proprietor didn’t even recognize us as having been there. He only recognized you from Quidditch. ‘So, when will you two be checking in?’ I was almost ashamed to tell him we had already been there a week and we were leaving!”

Viktor laughed again, “Every time I think of that place, I remember all that laurel that hung around the doors to the veranda. Silly, but the main thing I remember, aside from the obvious, from the first time we made love, is all that laurel on the veranda doors and the moon shining on it. It was bloomin’ everywhere. Well, the bedroom was simply lovely. Great mattress. And the bath. The tub was very roomy. And the room’s veranda was very... private.”

“The maid didn’t think so,” Hermione replied, dissolving into a fit of laughter.

“Well, it was the honeymoon suite, she should have known better than to just come barging in...”

“I expect she didn’t figure on finding a naked couple on a blanket out there on the veranda among the laurel and the ivy.”

“We left her a big tip. I suspect it made up for the trauma. And we were getting tired of the bed and the tub by the fifth day. The weather was too fabulous to pass up that opportunity. Warm... that breeze off the water. Remember how big the moon looked and how clear it was?”

“And how red her face got?” Hermione snickered.

“She lived,” Viktor protested, rubbing his side. “You know, we’ve got to decide on a name sometime soon. Or at least some likely candidates.”

“We’ve got some time, yet. Nothing reaches out and grabs me yet. You?”

“Not really,” Viktor said, shaking his head and rubbing the upper swell of his belly instead.

“Braxton Hicks bothering you?” Hermione asked, rubbing her own palm over his lower belly.

“A little. Actually, a lot. They’ll let up when I get settled down. I’ll take a soak in the morning if they’re still at it.”

“And if they’re not?”

“I’ll probably still take a bath. It’s probably the only thrill I’ve got left, that, and getting you to wash my back.”

“Might wash more than your back if you ask real nice...”

“Don’t promise it if you don’t mean it.”

“Oh, I mean it. I’m responsible for putting that belly on you in the first place. I owe you.”

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*Ridiculous how such a small thing as a baby can change every little thing, before it’s even born, Viktor thought to himself, like, taking a bath. This time a year ago, I would have thought nothing of getting on a broom, going as fast as it could go, and letting my toes drag in the grass. Now... getting in and out of the bath is a scary prospect.* He held tight to the sides of the tub and lowered himself into the water slowly and carefully, scooting back so he could lean against the tub. As though protesting the ‘small’ comment, the baby gave a hard, vigorous nudge right under his ribs. There wasn’t much room to spare for kicking any more, but the baby could still do some fairly lively wriggling, nonetheless.

The aching and cramping made it hard to find any place or position that was even close to comfortable, but soaking in the bath had proven to be a pretty good respite in the last couple of weeks. The warmth of the water relaxed him, eased the false contractions, helped with the swelling, and it even seemed to relieve some of the pressure, the weight of carrying the baby, if only temporarily. *If nothing else, it’s a slight change of scenery,* he sighed, rubbing his damp hands down his face and leaning his head back against the cool porcelain. He closed his eyes for a few moments, and let the water lap around him, most of his belly submerged. He propped his elbows on the rim of the tub and let his hands dangle in the water.

He flexed his fingers, and the joints felt swollen and stiff, the left ring finger raw and stinging when the hot water seeped around his wedding ring. Viktor lifted it out of the water and inspected it, the irritated, pink skin, even a few bloody spots here and there, where the friction had left it completely raw, taken off all the outer layer of skin. He rested it on the high crest of his belly instead, where it jutted out of the water, almost like an island.

The bulk of his belly still pressed up tight and close beneath his diaphragm, making it harder to breathe. It wasn't exactly helping the more frequent heartburn and indigestion, either. It wasn't pleasant at all. Not when it seemed like all he was interested in doing, when he wasn't trying to find that ever elusive 'more comfortable position', was sleeping and eating. Neither one was easy with such a large, active baby shoving everything higher, nudging your ribs and stomach, pushing everything else aside, crowding your lungs. "Be glad when you drop," he murmured, rubbing with his right hand over the spot where it felt as though the baby had planted a sharp elbow, pressing hard into his side, causing a dull, discomfiting pressure. *It's only two more weeks until you're supposed to be due, surely you have to drop soon.*

It seemed like all the discomforts had been magnified in this last week or so, the baby, and consequently, his belly, getting bigger, heavier, more ungainly, day by day. Everything from the entire pregnancy, except it was amplified. All the worst symptoms from the last few months, only with the volume turned up. His muscles protested the strain a bit louder, aching and seizing up. His back felt as though something deep inside was stretched to the breaking point, about to snap or give way. His joints felt looser and softer. His skin a bit tighter, itchier and more confining. He didn't just have hunger pangs, or minor cravings. They weren't just wants, they were needs. Starving, ravenous, all-consuming *needs* for certain foods that seemed to come out of nowhere. He ate, and it sat, heavy and uncomfortable in his crowded torso, at best. An unsettled, boiling burn in his chest at worst, especially when he couldn't sit up in a chair afterward. He would feel jumpy and restless, shifting from position to position, sure the minutes were crawling by like molasses flowing uphill in January, endlessly boring, getting the overwhelming urge to just get up and move, somewhere, anywhere, just not *here*, if only he could shift his bulk, which seemed to pin him to the spot. Of course, five minutes later, he might be exhausted, tired and wrung out, absolute fatigue falling on him like a heavy curtain, waking to find he had slept away a few hours, without ever remembering wanting to sleep or closing his eyes.

He arched his back a little, reached his arms above his head, hoping to ease the knot of tension that lurked in the muscles at the small of his back, and his hips gave an unsettling creak, feeling much like a tight knuckle, begging to be popped, then that same relief that popping a tight joint afforded. There followed a lurching, jarring shift. It felt, for a disturbing moment, as though something essential had given way completely. Failed. He curled his arms around his

midsection protectively. The water splashed and rippled for a moment, from his starting, or what had caused him to start in the first place, Viktor couldn't say. It took a second for the change in the cramped arrangements inside his own body to register. Finally, he put a tentative hand just below his sternum, where the pressure had eased, the second of panic fading. A new weight and pressure nudged at him lower, seated in his pelvis, weighty and solid, and it dawned on him what had happened. The baby had finally dropped, and he could breathe easier. Literally and figuratively.

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Hermione watched him sleep, the sleep of complete exhaustion. That same dead, completely unresponsive sleep that went with extreme youth. Or illness. Late pregnancy, too, she knew now. He slept heavily these days, when he slept. It was a fairly good word for summing up how he did everything. Heavily. He eased from position to position, shifting carefully, straining to maintain the awkward new center of balance. It had changed so radically when the baby had settled into his pelvis. Ironic that it was sometimes known as 'lightening', when it seemed to make him feel so much heavier, as though he would much rather cradle and support his engorged middle in his arms than with his sore pelvis, and aching, tight back, hips and shoulders. She often caught him doing just that, supporting part of the load with a hand when he had to walk. Sitting and standing were difficult. Rising from bed was a lengthy production. One that was being repeated at least three or four times a night, now that the baby had dropped, and was putting so much pressure on his bladder. If it weren't for the fairly high bed, it would be even more difficult. As it was, at least when he got upright and got his bearings, he could more or less slip off the edge, then steady himself.

He was almost apologetic about it, about how uncomfortable he was. For worrying her with the wincing when his womb sometimes seized up, tightening and clenching, prepping and practicing for real labor. He tried to hide it, but she had even called Ginny once, when he had five of the painful contractions in an hour. He felt sorry, and perhaps a touch guilty, she knew, for causing so much fuss. For subjecting her to so many requests for food and pillows, for a little help in easing the stubborn, knotted muscles in his back. For all the late night trips to the loo. For the almost apathetic fatigue he had, when he wasn't restless and tired of the same old scenery from the couch or the bed.

It might have been funny, otherwise, trying to get hold of Ginny, Harry, Ron, or failing that, one of their spouses, to see who could pick up a certain flavor of ice cream, or a certain brand of chocolate, or peanut butter, or Feta. Strangely, he had even had bizarre cravings for things like grapes and cherries, and once, pears and cottage cheese, of all things. More often in recent weeks, he had asked for things his mother used to make, so more than once, Hermione had asked Ekaterina for the recipe to things she could barely pronounce in Bulgarian,

wrapping her tongue around their names with difficulty and having to ask where she could come by certain ingredients. Often enough, especially on the weekends, Ekaterina would simply offer to make it for Hermione and come by Floo, either bringing a covered dish with her, or hauling in grocery bags with the ingredients and taking over the kitchen.

It was strange how such a tiny woman could completely fill a kitchen, but Ekaterina managed. In fact, when she was there, it was like she filled the entire house. If there was such a thing as learning how to have an intimidating presence, there could be worse instructors than Viktor's mother. Viktor might look more like his father to most people, with the same thick, dark hair and dark eyes, the curving, prominent nose, those same sharp cheekbones and the slight, thoughtful frown, the same build, but since meeting her Hermione had always harbored the thought that, deep down, there was as much or more of her in Viktor than there was of Petar. Really, he had her eyes, the exotic, almost Oriental tilt to the corners, the same dark irises that nearly swallowed up the pupils, that same softness that could shift to a look of resolute determination when he set his mind on something. That same quiet, unmoving, unyielding stubbornness that even Petar backed off from when either Viktor or Ekaterina set their mind and their jaw. Petar had once called it their 'don't argue with me' look. "You're just wasting your breath when either one of them get that look. When that jaw sets, easier to move a mountain with a tablespoon than to change their minds."

Petar might have put Viktor on a broom and taught him how to handle it, but having Ekaterina's will was what had kept him getting back on it, if it was still in one piece. It was that aspect of her character in him that made him endure the scrapes, bruises, and broken bones without complaint and keep hurling himself at the ground closer and faster than the last time when learning the Wronski Feint. She had seen that look dozens of times these last few weeks, too. It seemed a million years ago that they had first talked about this baby, when she had tried to argue it wasn't worth the risk. She should have known then that argument was lost when his jaw had set. It always was. He would have argued away the rest of the pregnancy getting her to accept that they were going to at least try, if that's what it had taken. On their wedding day, Ekaterina had even told Hermione she was the single most stubborn *other* woman she had ever met, and she was going to need that. That her son needed that. Only from Ekaterina could that be taken as a compliment. Oddly, the one thing that others figured made it hard for the two of them to be together had been one of their biggest strengths as a couple. Viktor had always liked the fact that she didn't bow to him easily. Somehow, they managed to both be stubborn without being set on always getting their way. And she was thankful that he had exercised that stubbornness in regards to the baby.

The baby was so crowded now that rubbing your hand on the dome of his

distended tummy didn't produce kicking so much as wriggling, a cramped little body writhing in the available space in response to your voice, your touch, or just to stretch. *His belly looks so bloated, like it's under so much pressure from the inside. No wonder he's so uncomfortable,* Hermione thought, stroking a hand over his swollen side, which felt full, firm and unyielding, down to and around his popped navel, which had been forced inside out months ago by the child growing inside. Neither one stirred in response. She knew his belly would give very little, when pressed. In recent weeks, it had reminded her of nothing more than an over-inflated, oversized football, perfectly round and a bit soft looking, but hard and unyielding when pressed. On impulse, she took her index finger and traced a circle around the little nub of flesh that marked where his navel had once been an indent, then down the linea negra, the darkened line that marked the middle of his belly, down to where it disappeared into the loose, low waist of his pyjama pants. They had shifted lower than ever these last few days as much out of necessity as comfort.

He slept on, curled around and on top of the pillow wedged under his belly, mouth slightly slack, a few small strands of hair plastered to his forehead, damp from the sweat. He almost always seemed to be too hot, lately. Not that he wasn't always hot natured, he still walked out in short sleeves in weather that made her run for her heaviest cloak, and he still could have handled a swim in the lake in January, but he was completely overheated even doing nothing, sometimes. It had worried her when she first noticed, made her wonder if he had come down with something, had a fever, but Ginny had assured her that a lot of pregnant women had the same complaint, due to all the extra bulk and the extra circulation. The swollen nasal passages had returned with a vengeance, as well as the attendant nosebleeds. One particularly rough night, he had collapsed back into bed, after a worryingly long sojourn in the bath, with wads of cotton gauze shoved up his nose, to staunch the blood. By the time he had removed it and gone back to sleep, it had been a relief to hear the soft, quiet snoring. He only did it when he had a bad cold, or a nosebleed, or these days, on the rare occasions when he got in the wrong position, the baby cutting off too much of his air. It was only supposed to be another week. She found herself hoping, for the first time, that the baby would actually come a bit earlier than expected, just so he could have some small relief, rather than this constant parade of discomforts. Hermione propped on her elbow in bed and planted a soft kiss on his cheek. She could swear that he at least smiled softly in his sleep, if only for a second.

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Viktor lowered his cards and took a look around the table at Harry, Neville, Ron and Ginny. "Could... could all of you stop looking at me like I'm a Howler about to go off any minute? I know I'm a week overdue, but still... Look, I'm folding this hand. My cards are terrible," Viktor said, swinging his legs off the chair and struggling to his feet, pushing up heavily from the table. He ambled around the

kitchen, hands to the small of his back, stretching.

“Back bothering you?” Harry asked.

“I’ve had the backache all day. Up, down, propped, flat, curled on my side, doesn’t matter. Just aches something fierce. When the baby dropped, it dropped. Feels like it’s about to fall out every time I stand up. Why do I bet I’m not going to be that lucky?” Viktor stood until they had completed the hand.

“Sit down, or you’ll be complaining more later. Anyone want anything? Tea? Show of hands? Anyone? Viktor?” Hermione asked when she got to the counter.

“Water. Just water, thanks,” Viktor said from the table. Hermione bustled back and forth, delivering cups and drinks to the table.

“That’s it for the tea, then,” Hermione said, setting the kettle back on the stove.

“Hermione... my water... “ Viktor said.

“I’ve not forgotten it, just going to get it. Ice or no ice?” she responded.

“No... my water... it just broke,” he amended in a soft voice.

“Beg pardon?” Hermione asked, turning.

“My water just broke.”

“Are you sure?” Ginny prompted.

“That, or it just came a small rainstorm under my robe. I’m soaked. And I felt this odd sort of pop... then a gush...”

“Better check to make sure it’s clear then, and get you to bed. Any contractions?” Ginny asked, standing at his side and laying a hand on his arm.

“No... I don’t think so...”

“Could be hours before they really start. Ron, you and Harry help him to bed. Neville, you had better go and get my bag. Could be a long night. Hermione, you want to go with him? Help him get changed, maybe into a nightshirt?” Ginny asked. Hermione nodded numbly. “Water’s clear. No blood, no meconium. So far, so good. Go on, I’ll clean up in here.”

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“You’re doing great, things are just moving a little slow. First labors tend to be slow. Contractions are ten minutes apart, you’re progressing nicely, already at eight centimeters, and six hours already behind you. I know it hurts, but try not to hold your breath, that just makes it worse. Lean back and rest while you can. I know this is kind of jury-rigged, but it’s the best setup I can come up with, putting you crossways on the bed, attaching the stirrups to the side, and propping you with pillows,” Ginny said, dropping the sheet. “Feel like you’re about to fall off the edge of the bed?” she cajoled, as Viktor let his head fall back on the pillow.

“Right now, falling off the bed is the least of my worries,” he said, panting.

“Hermione, you might want to go lie down a little while. Get some rest. It’s going to be a while yet, and it’s past midnight,” Ginny said tentatively, looking at Hermione. She was sitting at the foot of the bed, next to Viktor, holding his hand, wiping his forehead with a damp cloth.

“It’s okay... go on...” Viktor said softly, still looking at the ceiling.

“Are you sure? I...” Hermione protested. She fiddled with the bowl of ice chips and the spoon sitting beside her.

“Go on... I’m sleeping half the time, anyway,” Viktor said, eyes closed.

“It’s okay, I’ll send someone out to get you if anything happens. Ron, why don’t you go out and swap with Harry? I swear, I’ll send Neville to wake you up if anything happens at all, okay?” Ginny encouraged Hermione.

“You promise? Anything at all?” Hermione said uncertainly.

“Promise,” Ginny said, nodding. Ron guided Hermione out the door, steering her by the elbow, out into the living room.

“Harry, your shift. I think she needs some fresh towels and some fresh water,” Ron said, and Harry jumped up out of the chair. “Hermione’s getting a bit of a lie down while she still can,” Ron added.

“Things haven’t picked up much?” Harry asked.

“Still ten minutes apart. Not much change in the last couple of hours. He’s getting a little rest between the contractions, sleeping,” Hermione said, shaking her head. Harry headed up the hall. “Ron?”

“What?”

“He’s in so much pain...”

“They don’t call it labor for nothing.”

“I know... but...”

“Normally, we’d be having this conversation with him. All about how he feels guilty for putting you through it. He’ll be fine. Really. Mum says you forget all about it soon enough. Else everyone would be only children. He’s not exactly been comfy for several months. Think of this as the last big push, no pun intended, before the relief. And the payoff. Come on, now, lie down on the sofa and get some rest yourself. They won’t leave you out in there. They’ll get you if they need you. You’re the mama, they wouldn’t forget you,” Ron cajoled.

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The tightening several inches above his navel woke him as it blossomed and spread, traveling down and out, the pain settling into his lower back, then his pelvis as his muscles squeezed and his abdomen hardened, knotted, taking his breath. He sucked air in through his clenched teeth, raised his head, and tried to remember to pant. Light, shallow breaths through the pain, in the wake of the hard clutching that his body was doing of its own accord. The pressure made him want to push, but he knew it would be wasted effort right now. Better to rest and save his energy. The pain peaked, then started to ebb, the tension draining as he took a deep breath through his nose, then blew it out. He let his head fall back on the pillows again. He was getting a crick in his neck from the awkward tilt. He turned his head to the side instead.

“Four minutes or so apart now,” Ginny said, massaging his belly lightly through the sheet. A slight cramp curled through the lower part, where the muscles felt so strained, but it simply seemed like a phantom pain compared to the real thing.

“...time is it?” Viktor asked drowsily as Harry bathed his forehead and brushed his hair back.

“Quarter ’til three. Baby’s going to be an early bird, I think. You’re doing fine. I know it doesn’t feel that way, but you’re getting there. Nine centimeters dilated, shouldn’t be too long now before things really start moving,” Ginny answered, and she had barely finished when he fell asleep again. He had found he could even sleep right through some of the less intense contractions, though they were coming harder and more frequent lately.

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“Nnnnngggh... how... far?” Viktor panted. No sleeping now, just a little rest from the worst of the pain, a brief respite between spasms, then the slow and steady buildup to the next. The pressure, always, sometimes stronger, but always there, always prodding you to start pushing. Anything to relieve the pressure. It felt like his lower back was about to split. He’d promised himself he wasn’t going to moan and groan any more than he could help, but it slipped out unbidden. Things slipped before you thought.

“If you mean how far apart, three minutes. How far you’re dilated, still nine. Baby’s not crowning yet.”

“Get Hermione... please... I need her...” he pleaded in a hoarse voice. Wordlessly, Harry slid off the foot of the bed, handed the washcloth to Neville and went to the dark living room.

“Hermione?”

“She’s asleep on the sofa. Any news?” Ron said from the chair by the fireplace.

“Slow going. Hermione?” Harry said, shaking her shoulder. She started and sat up.

“Something wrong?” she asked, alarmed.

“Not exactly. It’s four in the morning, they’re three minutes apart, he’s nine centimeters dilated, baby’s not crowning yet, and he’s asking for you. I think he tried to a few minutes ago and couldn’t get it out. He’s just in a lot of pain, and he needs you. I’m sure you being there and holding his hand will help him more than anything. Go on. Ron and I will be back in soon,” Harry prompted.

“How bad is it?” Ron asked, after Hermione had shut the bedroom door.

“He’s hurting like hell, I imagine. You can actually see his belly knotting up, and he’s not resting in between like he was before. I feel awful that all I can do for him is try to cool him off a little with the washcloth and give him some ice chips when his mouth gets dry. Been a little muttering in Bulgarian. Few ‘lainos’ and ‘shibas’. It had to be bad for him to ask for Hermione. Last time he did that was when he broke his leg. I didn’t see it when they took him off the field, but when the team manager walked by and said he had asked for her, I knew it was bad. That scared me worse than the fact that he was screaming a steady stream of Bulgarian curse words that you could hear clear outside by the time they got the mediwizards to the locker room to take a look at him,” Harry murmured.

“At least he’s not doing that, right?”

“Hasn’t got the energy. He hurt for twenty minutes with the leg, before they just knocked him out. Can’t knock him out for this. Come on, better go back in, in case we’re needed.”

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“Sorry... I’m probably breaking your hand.... “ Viktor apologized, and his knuckles were white, but he wasn’t squeezing hard enough for it to be painful. He didn’t seem to have enough strength to really squeeze. The pressure was steady, insistent, the need to push almost unbearable. “Please... I need to push... soon.”

“You’re fine... really,” Hermione murmured, brushing his wet hair back from his hot temple, “and if you break it, we’ve got a mediwitch on standby, anyway.”

“Good news, you can *finally* start pushing. Fully dilated, I see the top of the head, so bear down nice and steady whenever you feel like it. Don’t overdo it, nice and slow. Just move the head down where I can check to make sure the cord’s not around the neck, first. Then we’ll worry about the rest...” He bore down and felt the baby shift and drop. “Good... that’s it... steady... okay, hold off for a minute,” Ginny ordered. She worked under the sheet for a moment.

He was dimly aware of Hermione’s hand on his shoulder, her arm behind his head, propping it. He leaned back into it, exhausted, his ragged breathing loud in his own ears. Ginny looked up again, “Now... same thing, steady push... steady... whoa... hold up a second...” He had felt nothing shift this time, it was like pushing against a brick wall, no give.

“Something the matter?” Hermione asked anxiously.

“Shoulder blade’s up and hung on the pubic bone, I think. Let me slide a finger in there and see if I can push it back down. Or else we’ll have to get him up on all fours to let gravity do the work, and we don’t want that if we don’t have to. Nine times out of ten, the finger does it. Sorry, I know this hurts.” He moaned a little as she worked her hand inside of him, even though he clamped his lips tight and tried not to.

“Okay, now... take some deep breaths, then do the same thing. Bear down steady, don’t shove all at once, then when the head’s out, I’ll suction the nose and the mouth and you can rest again. That’s it... Good job... Alright, hold it for a minute. Now then... mouth and nose clear, push whenever you feel like it... should be over soon...” He pushed again, hard, felt the baby suddenly slip free, the pressure ease, and sank back. He felt positively lightheaded, so weak and shaky he could barely keep his head up. “Well, don’t just stand there, Harry, bring me that basin so I can clean up their new daughter,” Ginny said through her laughter.

“Is she okay?” Hermione whispered.

“She’s perfect. Just the right number of fingers and toes in all the right spots, she’s pinking up just fine, and she feels like she weighs a blue ton! Born at exactly four thirty in the morning, damn her rotten timing!” Ginny said with mock sternness as she gathered up the towel around the bundle in her arms. He just managed to catch a glimpse of a head of thick, dark hair over the edge of the towel and hear a mewling little cry before the tunnel of his vision went black and he knew no more.

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“Viktor? Viktor?” Hermione. He dragged his heavy eyelids open. He was right way around on the bed, propped up again, Hermione in a chair beside the bed, sunlight streaming in the window. His middle was an empty, hollow ache, and it took a moment to remember why.

“Baby...” he said hoarsely.

“Baby’s fine. You scared us. You lost a lot of blood, you know,” Hermione said with a weak smile.

“Blood? How?” His lips and throat were dry.

“Here, have some water,” Hermione said, tilting his head up and tipping the cup to his mouth. “Better? Good. You bled a lot when the placenta was expelled. Actually, I regret to inform you that you can’t have any more children, at least not in the same fashion, without some major intervention,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“Why not? Not that I’m complaining much, mind...”

“Your womb came out with it. That’s why you bled so much. Ginny worked on you a good hour trying to get the bleeding stopped. She thinks the birth canal will seal itself the same way it probably got put in, from the inside out. The cervix already sealed off. On the bright side, Ginny said it was probably the most easily performed hysterectomy in history,” Hermione said with a soft laugh. “And you won’t be able to breast feed... apparently the Potion takes care of the pregnancy and the birth, but nothing beyond, if you don’t have the proper equipment to start out with. Formula for young miss. So... did you even get to see your daughter?”

“Just caught a glimpse. Dark hair?”

“Black as coal. And she’s an ounce over ten pounds. Solid as a lead weight.

Want to meet her? She's over there in that Moses basket in the corner." He nodded. Hermione went over, gathered up the baby and transferred her to his arms.

"Oh..." Viktor breathed, pulling the blanket away from her face. She was a dusty pink, thick, dark hair lying close to her head, thick, dark lashes fanning over her plump cheeks, rosebud mouth pursing and working. She blinked drowsily when he picked up one of her tightly clenched fists, and kicked a foot straight up in the air. "That looks kind of familiar. You did that a lot before you got out..." he murmured, and she blinked a few more times, dark, dusky blue eyes heavy before settling back into sleep. "Look what we did... We did this... Hermione..."

"You did the worst part. I almost hate to bring this up, but Baby doesn't have a name, unless we want to make her Baby Krum the rest of her life. Any ideas?" Hermione asked, perching on the side of the bed, putting an arm around his shoulders.

"Actually... I think the perfect name just occurred to me. Tell me what you think of naming her this..."

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"Miss Laurel Elizabeth Krum, tell your Mama to get a move on, or we're going to be late for our own 20th anniversary party," Viktor said, stepping into the doorway of the bedroom with their daughter perched in the crook of his arm.

Hermione was stationed in front of the bedroom mirror, brushing her hair. "I'm going as fast as I can. Besides, they can wait for us. You tell your Papa I'm not as fast as I used to be, although I am a lot fatter," Hermione laughed, rubbing a hand down the bulge beneath her dress robes.

"Are not. Babies do not count as fat," Viktor protested.

"According to a loophole you just made up?" Hermione said lightly, turning sideways to study her prominent belly in the mirror, then fastening her earrings.

"Couple of years ago, actually. Pregnancy doesn't count."

"Easy for you to say, you pretty much lost it in three months."

"I'll let you run after the moppet here, you'll lose it in no time. Besides, that's all baby," he said, curling an arm around her and cupping a hand to her stomach. "Feeling alright? Up to this?"

"A little tired. Not bad, though. I expect to be rather weary at the end of the day

after explaining over and over again why we were so eager to have another one when this one here's only seventeen months. Especially after the first one supposedly kept me in bed for so many months. And why this has been such a breeze pregnancy compared to the first. By the way, valiant effort to make me feel better about being the size of a house. I'm not looking forward to being the focus of an entire day, are you?"

"Not really. I guess the more things change, the more they stay the same. Twenty years later, and everyone wants a big party except the bride and groom," Viktor said with a laugh. "And you are not the size of a house. It's sexy. I'd keep the baby tummy, if I were you," he added.

"No way, buster! Besides, why would pregnancy be sexy? Which bit? The not being able to bend over? Looking like a beached whale when I lie down? I stick out a lot farther than you did."

"Isn't sex all about making babies? So what could be more sexy than a woman carrying a baby?" Viktor reasoned.

"There's got to be a big hole in that piece of logic somewhere, but I don't have time to look for it. Let's go."

"Don't look so reluctant. If we get really bored, we'll go find ourselves a cupboard," he said, wagging his eyebrows.

"I don't think I could manage a cupboard right now. Not unless it were a doublewide," she laughed.

"So, we'll find a big cupboard. Or just be really athletic. Ready, moppet?" Viktor asked, planting a kiss on the crown of the small, dark head of curls. "Somebody needs a nap. Izmorena li si? Spinkai, Pilentse," he chided, when she blinked her dark brown, almost black eyes slowly and leaned her head against his shoulder, thumb in her mouth.

"Complete, utterly shameless Daddy's girl," Hermione murmured, brushing a curl back behind Laurel's ear.

"She's a Mama's girl when you get out of her sight, too. Come on, we've got to go by Floo. No Apparating with the moppet, here."

"I know. Isn't it wonderful?"

