

“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 in the restaurant,” 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 only 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 of 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 your 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 if 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 and 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, 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, cuddled 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 tendril of auburn 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 that 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, for a short while maintaining a respectful distance from wherever Hermione and Viktor were, 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 of 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. Ginny talked me into putting in extra spikeweed, too. She thinks maybe Hermione actually has trouble keeping in that condition rather than getting in that condition," Neville said, then paused and grimly cleared his throat. "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. 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. The spikeweed is supposed to ensure healthy growth. It's also a component in Vigor-Gro Potion that you give children, particularly infants, when they're not thriving. A lot of women don't so much have trouble getting pregnant, they have trouble staying that way once they do. I've wondered a few times if Hermione hasn't been pregnant when she suspected, then lost it before the appointment..." Ginny said, trailing off and biting her lip. "Where was I? Oh, rosehips. So, you put the rosehips in, and 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 and make it stick 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, then, raising the decanter, she pantomimed the offer of juice to her husband. “Here you go, then,” she murmured, pouring him a glass when he nodded. He picked up the back glass and drank. 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’ve had it. I feel like a limp dishrag.”

“I think I’m done. If it were going to do any good, it would have by now. You’ve felt off, too? 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, life exploded into existence, on its secretive journey to taking root and growing.

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“I know it’s my turn to take care of dinner. Any preferences? The thought of standing in front of a hot stove does not appeal, too much, though. 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?” Hermione remarked, patting him on the hand. “You’ve been about as worthless as can be this week. Not that I blame you. Actually, I’m wanting a nap right now. And you would think I would be fine. I took a nap this afternoon.”

“And last night. I caught you at it,” he teased. “It’s the heat. I’m all hot-blooded, remember? What’s your excuse? Slaving over a hot quill?” he added, giving her a little squeeze.

“Hard work, pushing ink. So, are you buying?” she asked. “I could eat the table legs.”

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

“You could always eat a Hippogriff! 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 bedroom. If we’re going out, I need to go collect some money. That, or we’ll be washing dishes later,” he observed, ambling down the hall.

“Okay, I’m going to the loo, first!”

“You’re living in there this last week!”

“It’s because I’ve been drinking all this water! This heat’s killing me. I don’t get a chance to sweat all of it off like somebody I know,” she told him when they passed in the hall.

“Must be drinking like a camel, then,” he teased, kissing her on the nose before she darted past him.

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“I’m so sorry,” Hermione murmured as they stepped into the kitchen, Viktor flicking his wand to get the light on. Involuntarily, she crossed her arms over her churning, rolling middle and hugged herself tight, as though willing it to be still and stop rebelling. Her forehead felt strangely cool from the fine sheen of sweat on it.

“Don’t apologize. It’s not as though you did it on purpose. I mean, there are easier ways to get out of eating at a restaurant,” Viktor soothed, pulling out a chair at the table for her.

"It just hit me all at once. It was that seafood smell. I came over all funny and it's a wonder I made it to the ladies first," Hermione sighed, swallowing hard.

"I know. I was there," Viktor said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. "Maybe you should try to get something down. Why not try something exotic like weak tea and dry toast?"

"Oh, alright," she assented, propping her forehead in her hand.

"You're not taking the flu, are you? Do you want to see if we can get Ginny to come over? Or if she'll work you in, tomorrow?" Viktor asked, toasting the bread and setting the saucer in front of her. "Tea will be just a minute," he added.

"No. It's probably that virus that's going around. She'll just give me some Pepper Up Potion and tell me to take it easy for a day or two. I've got some of that, already," Hermione protested.

"Want some ginger in this?" Viktor asked, pointing to the cup.

"Sure, I'll take some," Hermione replied, propping her chin instead.

"Admit it. You haven't felt well at all for a week. At least," he said, putting the cup down on the table. "Have you?" he prompted.

"Alright, I haven't," she agreed, taking a tentative sip of the tea. "It's not helping that my hormones have apparently gone completely insane this month. I've broken out worse than I ever did in school and I have an oil slick on my forehead. I thought it was deadline stress to start out with. Seems I was preparing to get ill, instead. You men get all the breaks. No hormonal funhouse every time you sneeze," Hermione complained, breaking off a small bite of toast. "I'm all bloated and sore. I bet I'm going to skip this month completely. Being sick throws everything out of whack for me. Never fails."

"Sweet talker," Viktor said, kissing her temple. "I apologize on behalf of males everywhere for having it so easy. You want me to bring you anything else? Preferably anything that will go in your mouth and prevent you from sharing quite so much."

"No. I'll finish this and take a bath. Maybe go to bed. The bath ought to make me feel better. I'll be fine," she insisted.

"I'll eat a sandwich while you're in the bath. I don't really feel like testing your reaction to ham right now," Viktor replied.

"I don't really feel like testing it, either," Hermione said, shaking her head and taking another swallow of tea.

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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’ll take whatever you have that’s cold and wet. Happy birthday, Harry,” Viktor added, giving Harry a playful pat on the cheek.

Hermione sighed and shook her head, “Oh, what about one of those lemonades I see Neville drinking, if you have it, Hannah? And something for a headache, if you have it handy,” Hermione said, offering the gift bag she was carrying to Harry after Hannah had nodded her approval of the drink order.

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. “All I’ve got is this Headache Potion. Not very stout, but it does the job on most of them. Tastes terrible.”

“You not feeling well?” Harry asked, setting the prototype on the mantle.

“Just a headache. If you want to talk terrible, I felt terrible last night. We were going to eat at that new restaurant, but the seafood smell did not agree with me. All I saw of the restaurant was the foyer and the facilities. Seems to have passed, today, though.” Hermione took an experimental sip of the lemonade. “That... is absolute heaven. But then, anything wet and cold is heaven right now.”

“I’ll second that. I managed to just about kill myself at practice today. Got overheated. Thank you,” he said, taking the other glass from Hannah 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. I had to lay out on the field in the shade for twenty minutes,” Viktor said with a little shake of his head.

“I think they’re trying to kill all of them, anyway. He’s been about half dead at home this last week or so. Then again, I’ve been about half dead this last week or so, and I don’t have that excuse,” Hermione laughed, giving Viktor’s knee a squeeze.

“Guilty as charged. Personally, I think we’re getting old,” Viktor said.

“Speak for yourself,” Hermione admonished.

“I tried to get her to come in and see you, today, but she insisted she was fine. I wish you wouldn’t be so stubborn about not wanting to go to the mediwitch. Even when she’s been your friend for half your life,” Viktor countered.

“You’re one to talk! You could get your head taken off, and you would insist it only wanted a plaster, if you thought you could get away with it! Besides, I felt fine this morning. It just came and went, sudden like. I would be fine now, if I could just get rid of this headache,” Hermione said, putting her fingertips to her temple.

“Well, all of you get in here, dinner’s ready,” Hannah called from the doorway. Ginny watched Hermione closely as she got to her feet, seemingly reluctant to move, and shuffled off into the kitchen. Ginny noticed that Hermione was quieter than usual throughout dinner, barely joining in the conversation at all. By dessert, her head wasn’t drooping nearly as much as it had been, the headache seemingly improved, but she still picked halfheartedly at the food on her plate, as though she felt ill.

Hermione declined when Hannah offered coffee, instead excusing herself from the table. She had made it no further than directly behind Viktor’s chair beside her before she crumpled.

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Hermione jerked her head, trying to get away from the pungent smell. She put a hand up and weakly tried to push Ginny’s hand away. “No. Not until you’re good and awake,” Ginny said softly. Hermione dragged her eyes open and put her fingers to her throbbing temple.

“What happened?” she asked, looking around the bed, where the rest of them had crowded around, and Ginny perched on the side of the bed, next to her, capping a small vial.

“You scared the living daylights out of all of us by passing out. And from the feel

of it, knocked your head on my chair,” Viktor explained. “Unless you got that goose egg elsewhere,” he added, running a finger under the hair falling over her forehead, over the tender bump there.

“Okay, folks, show’s over, shoo,” Ginny said, standing up. “Let me examine her and give her some room to breathe, already. Viktor can stay, but the rest of you, back to the kitchen,” she ordered. Harry, Hannah, Ron, Susan and Neville reluctantly filed back out of the bedroom, Neville pulling the door shut behind him. “Is there something you’re not telling the rest of us?” Ginny asked, looking at Hermione, then Viktor in turn. Viktor simply crooked an eyebrow at her curiously.

“Not telling you? What on earth are you talking about?” Hermione asked, examining the knot on her forehead herself.

“Never mind. Did you eat properly today? Been having dizzy spells before tonight? What about frequent urination? Fatigue?” Ginny probed.

“I ate breakfast and lunch, just like I always do. In fact, I probably ate more than usual. And I can’t really say I’ve been dizzy, either. I just got up and went all wooly in the head, and next thing I know, I wake up in here,” Hermione answered. “And I’ve been drinking gallons of water in this heat, so I’m not sure how frequent would be frequent. I’ve taken a few more naps, lately,” Hermione allowed.

“So. You’ve not felt particularly well, appetite’s been coming and going, nausea, fatigue, and visiting the loo a lot. Now, add headache and fainting to the list. That pretty well narrows it down to two things. Now, for the tie breaker question. When was the last time you had your cycle?” Ginny queried.

“Y...you know when I did. I mentioned it,” Hermione said quietly.

“Was it normal? No lighter or shorter than usual?” Ginny pressed.

“It was normal,” Hermione protested.

“Well, either you’re diabetic, or you’re pregnant, then. Could be a bit anemic, I suppose. Fainting usually doesn’t come into the picture until later, but I’ve learned never to say never,” Ginny said matter-of-factly, pulling her wand from her pocket. “What would you be? Five weeks gone, at the most? If your last cycle was normal.”

“I’m not,” Hermione said faintly, staring at her hands. Ginny shifted her gaze to meet Viktor’s, but he, too, dropped his eyes to look at Hermione on the bed. Ginny had the fleeting thought that the two of them seemed almost ashamed.

"You don't know that," Ginny said gently.

"I know I'm not," Hermione said in that same tone, her voice cracking slightly on the last word.

"Well, why not let me determine that, for sure? It's a lot easier to test you for being pregnant than it is for being diabetic. Just let me rule it out, first, then." When neither Hermione nor Viktor answered, Ginny grimly decided to get it over with. Viktor even turned slightly, facing the head of the bed more fully, almost as though turning his back completely on the whole thing, his jaw set resolutely, chin jutting out with a slight, defiant edge. Hermione tucked her chin further into her chest, as though she wished she could curl into a ball and disappear. Ginny was struck by how the two of them carefully avoided one another's eyes. It reminded her of two people bracing themselves for the worst. "*Provera Graviditas!*" she murmured, and the wand tip blazed forth in a strong blue light. "I hate to tell you two, but for once, Miss Know-It-All is wrong. Positive."

Hermione lifted her chin slowly, staring blankly at the wand tip hovering over her middle. Her lower lip quivered slightly, then, the dawning comprehension lit up her face. She reached out beside her and grabbed Viktor's left wrist, latching on so hard that her knuckles whitened, and Ginny nearly winced in sympathy. "Pregnant..." she whispered, seemingly unable to force out any more words. Hermione clamped her lips shut, swallowed hard, then blurted out, "Viktor... pregnant... we're ...", trailing off and looking up at him. "Baby..." she breathed.

Viktor turned and looked Ginny straight in the eye, unblinking. "You're sure?" he asked softly, and Ginny nodded slightly. She squirmed a bit, as much because of the plea there, as the intensity of his gaze. Ginny breathed an internal sigh of relief when he shifted his eyes from hers, staring down at no particular spot on the bed. After a moment of silence, he raised his free hand and passed it over his mouth and chin. "Positive," he said in a hoarse voice, barely above a whisper.

"Positive," Ginny echoed. "If you'll promise to come in to the office tomorrow, so I can give you the once over, I'll step out in the hall, for now," she offered, jerking her thumb back over her shoulder at the bedroom door. Viktor and Hermione both nodded numbly, the movement barely perceptible. "I'll go tell the others you're okay. When you tell them the rest of the story is up to you two" Ginny said, walking toward the door. Five anxious faces turned to her when she entered the kitchen. "She's fine. Nothing serious. It's nothing a bit of time won't cure," she announced.

"But, what was wrong with her? You don't just go fainting for no good reason," Hannah insisted.

“It’s really Hermione and Viktor’s place to share it, when and if they choose,” Ginny said in a tone that brooked no argument. “She’s fine, though. I’m going to have her come in tomorrow. just to check on some things. Nothing serious, I swear.” She looked around at the group, and sank back into her chair at the kitchen table. “Honest. It’s nothing to worry about. Completely benign. They’ll probably be out in a few minutes. She’s just having a lie down to make sure she’s okay before she gets up again. I’ll take that cup of coffee, now, if the offer still stands.”

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Viktor eased down onto the edge of the bed, sitting gingerly, almost as though afraid to jostle the mattress. “We’re going to have a baby,” Hermione whispered, finally loosening her grip on his wrist. “A baby.” Wordlessly, Viktor raised his left hand from the bed, and moved it hesitantly, haltingly, finally bringing it to rest lightly on her belly. His fingers curled, catching the folds of her robes for a second, then relaxing, and he gave her a small pat.

“A baby,” he said, his voice cracking. He leaned over and they held one another, completely silent. Words simply seemed unnecessary.

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“She’s pregnant, isn’t she?” Neville asked finally. He had managed to hold the question in until they had arrived back at Hogwarts, in their quarters. He had been of half a mind to ask Viktor and Hermione, when they had finally come out of the bedroom. Probably would have, if Ginny hadn’t laid down the law about it, first. Neville was positive he wasn’t the only one dying to ask, either. Instead, they had all sat there while she almost sheepishly apologized for taking a powder on the kitchen floor, and she and Viktor had excused themselves to head home. Only after Ginny had elicited a promise from Viktor to have Hermione at the office in Hogsmeade the next day, but all in all, it had seemed so anticlimactic. For once, Neville had found himself inwardly cursing just how taciturn Viktor and Hermione could both be.

“You know I can’t tell you,” Ginny answered calmly.

“You swear it’s nothing bad? Nothing that could be bad?” Neville pressed, catching her by the shoulders, looking her directly in the eye.

“I swear it’s nothing bad,” Ginny said with a soft smile.

“Then, she’s pregnant,” Neville insisted.

“I can’t tell you. But if she were, and I’m not saying she is, don’t you think it might

be nice to at least *fake* giving the two of them a chance to adjust to the news before we go asking them what colors they're going to do the nursery in?" Ginny asked raising her eyebrows pointedly.

"Can we ask after tomorrow? Is that it? You're confirming it tomorrow? Just taking her vitals? What?" Neville said.

"Hopeless. Keep your nosy questions to yourself," Ginny said good-naturedly, "and go to bed, already. Rest assured, I don't think there's anything vitally wrong with her, the fainting should be a passing thing. Should probably never happen again, in fact. Why she fainted is their news to tell. If they tell it."

"Spoilsport!" Neville called after her as she shut the door to the bath, to get ready for bed.

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"You think she's pregnant?" Hannah asked, settling into bed. "What gives you that idea? Fainting because you've got a bun in the oven is a bit too 'dainty female' for Hermione, isn't it? Awfully old fashioned notion that women go wilting right and left due to their 'delicate condition'."

"Usually, I would say yes. But, Ginny insisted it was nothing serious. So, that leaves the harmless. She sure didn't get overheated, it wasn't exhaustion, so what's left?" Harry asked.

"Who says Ginny categorizes pregnancy as harmless? No guarantee it wasn't exhaustion. She's been ill, maybe she is exhausted. She looked tired. Dehydration. Anemia. Low blood sugar. Low blood pressure. High blood pressure. Vertigo," Hannah rattled off. "I'm sure there's more."

"Baby sounds nicer," Harry said softly, stepping up beside the bed and taking her hand.

Hannah sighed. "For their sake, I hope you're right. I just don't think you should get your hopes up too much when there are other relatively harmless explanations that aren't quite so happy."

"Got to have a little hope, or life isn't worth living," Harry protested.

"I'll try to think happy thoughts, then. Heaven knows they could use some," Hannah conceded, giving Harry's hand a squeeze.

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“She’s pregnant,” Susan said emphatically, sounding rather self-satisfied.

“Why do you say that?” Ron mumbled sleepily into the pillow.

“It’s the only explanation that makes sense,” Susan insisted. “I just can’t figure out why she hasn’t told it before now. I don’t know why I didn’t pick up on it earlier. I mean, all the signs are there. I should have picked it up just from her face.”

“Maybe it’s none of our business,” Ron sighed, still not opening his eyes.

“You just want to go to sleep, or you would be over there, pecking at their front door, insisting they tell you,” Susan complained. “Ron? Ron?” Ron’s even breathing was the only answer. *I can’t believe I didn’t notice it before tonight. Might as well have been a flashing sign. Her face is fuller, she’s been tired, sick, and if I’m not mistaken, she’s put on a bit of weight. She must be well over two months along, I bet. She must be waiting to get over the rough bits of the first trimester,* Susan thought to herself, punching the pillow before settling into it.

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Ginny walked around the corner toward the front door of the office. She was only a little surprised when she saw two figures already standing by the door in the morning sun. “Did the two of you just sleep out here?” she asked, as she turned the knob.

“Who could sleep?” Viktor said with a wan smile.

“Better sleep now, while you’ve got the chance,” Ginny warned. “Babies don’t exactly follow a neat schedule. Come on in. I don’t have any appointments scheduled for thirty minutes. I can probably get done with you before the first of them gets here. Old Matthias doesn’t schedule an appointment before noon, bless him. Grant you, that’s the benefit of being semi-retired. More time for his wizard chess and his grandkids. Still, it helps having someone to take up the slack when Lavinia and I get behind.”

Ginny led the two of them back into the first exam room. “Hop up on the table and I’ll give you the full working over. Starting with just how long you’ve been carting that little stranger around with you. *Cronos Graviditas,*” Ginny intoned, pointing the wand at Hermione’s middle, once she had settled onto the edge of the exam table. The wand flashed five times. “Conceived somewhere around five weeks ago, then. Now, I’d like to see if you aren’t a little anemic. And a few other things.”

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“But... I don’t understand... how could there be that many things wrong with me?”

Hermione said forlornly, looking up at Ginny from the chair beside Viktor.

“It’s not like it’s fifteen things. None of them are uncommon. For that matter, you might have been a bit anemic even before you got pregnant, and being pregnant makes it worse. Or at least more noticeable. Easy enough to take care of that one. I’ll make sure to put on the order for the apothecary that you need the prenatal vitamins with the extra iron in them. And your blood pressure is only slightly elevated. That could be a lot of things. Heredity. Being pregnant tends to boost your blood pressure a bit above the usual norm. Stress doesn’t help, either. For that matter, it could be nothing more than ‘white coat hypertension’. Some people walk in here, they get all nervous, and they have high readings. Try not to worry so much. I know I’m wasting my breath, but try not to worry so much,” Ginny explained. “As for the blood sugar, I am a little surprised on that one. You didn’t have a lot of problem with morning sickness, and you say you’ve been eating properly. Your blood sugar really shouldn’t be low. But for all I know, it might always have tended to be low. Try eating a smaller snack in the early afternoon and middle of the morning. That should keep your blood sugar up. No skipping breakfast,” Ginny scolded.

“I don’t,” Hermione protested.

“Coffee on the run is not breakfast,” Ginny countered.

“I always eat something,” Hermione insisted.

“She does,” Viktor agreed.

“Well, try spreading the food out a bit to keep your blood sugar level more constant. And try eating just a bit better, too. I mean, you’re almost at malnourished levels on some vitamins. Between that and the prenatal vitamins, your tests should be better next time you’re in. Any more dizziness or faintness, you tell me, okay?” Ginny added.

“I will,” Hermione said.

“Other pushy mediwitch-type advice, try getting some more rest. Don’t let yourself get so worn out. Get a full night’s sleep while you still can. Naps are your friend. And a smidgen of exercise wouldn’t hurt, either. Maybe a few short walks when you feel up to them. I know you like to be in control, but from now on, someone who is currently about the size of a grain of rice is going to be doing a lot of dictating to you from in there. I’m not going to tell you to go into confinement and put your feet up for the next nearly eight months, but don’t go running any marathons, either. Try listening to your body and finding a nice, happy medium,” Ginny said, raising her eyebrows.

“Thank you,” Hermione murmured, smile creeping across her face. “Ready to go?” she asked Viktor. He nodded.

“Oh! Here’s the order for the apothecary, and I completely forgot to tell you something in all the fuss. Congratulations. And please tell me I can tell the rest what’s up with you, because Neville alone is about to drive me mad, and I expect Harry and Ron will be at me next, begging to know exactly why you fainted,” Ginny said.

Hermione and Viktor shared a look, then Hermione turned back to Ginny. “It’s fine. I think you can tell them, when they ask,” she said. “You know. They might as well.”

“Come on. We’ll take one of those short walks down to the apothecary,” Viktor said, standing and offering a hand to Hermione. They walked through the waiting room, and out onto the street, the sun shining brighter than it had been earlier.

After a moment of silence, Hermione said, “Funny. I thought I was really healthy.”

“You are. It’s just hard on you, growing a whole other human being,” Viktor said, squeezing her hand as they walked past the shop windows. “Don’t suppose you want to go to France with me, now, do you?”

“I’d like to. I was planning on it. We always have a good time in France. And even if it’s not a Cup year, it should still be a good match. Last one of the season. But now...” she trailed off.

“Maybe you had better not,” Viktor finished for her. “It’s okay. I’ll just come home each night. I won’t stay overnight.”

“You can’t go Apparating back and forth for three days. You’ve still got that autograph session, don’t you?” Hermione asked, looking up at him.

“I could probably get out of that altogether if I really put my foot down. But I hate to do that to Boyar at the last minute. Besides, that’s only a few hours. I should be able to take a ship part of the way back, then the Floo. I’m not sure I could take three straight days of Apparating that far. Two would be bad enough. While I’m at it, I’ll go ahead and break the news to Boyar that I’ll be taking parental leave next season. You wouldn’t want to go do that for me, now would you?” Viktor said with a small smile.

“Not on your life. I don’t like to watch a grown man cry. Just... just stay after the match. You know it will probably go long. No point in wearing yourself out just to get back here for nothing. Come back after the session and the practice, if you have to, but just stay after the match and come back in the morning. I wouldn’t

worry so much if you did that,” Hermione said.

“Well, on mediwitch’s orders, I’ll do that, then. You stay home and take care of yourself. But you are definitely not ‘nothing’.”

“You don’t have to worry about me. I’ve got to think of someone else, now,” Hermione responded.

“Sure. You won’t want to go full tilt clear up until the baby’s practically out. And I just won’t breathe for the remainder of the duration, either,” Viktor said. “Wait. Hold up,” he added, pulling at her hand.

“What?” Hermione asked, coming back to his side and looking up at him curiously as he stood and gazed into the front window of one of the shops.

“Let’s go in,” Viktor said abruptly. “Let’s look.”

“Look at wh-” she broke off, when she looked into the shop window. The name painted on the glass suddenly leapt out at her. “N... no. No,” she protested, shaking her head.

“Oh, come on. Why not? What’s the harm in looking?” he asked, looking her in the eye.

“But then... they’ll... they’ll know...” Hermione said in a low voice, her cheeks flushing.

“Who? Who’ll know? There’s not another soul on the entire street. And much as I hate to admit it, I don’t think the shopkeepers are so interested in our sex life that they’re haunting the front windows to see if we ever go in here,” Viktor said, nodding his head toward the door.

“In there. They’ll know,” Hermione explained.

“Has to get out sometime. You’re not ashamed of it, are you?” Viktor asked lightly.

“No! Don’t be silly...” Hermione said.

“I think you’re the one being silly. It’s not like they do a full background check before they’ll let you look. Tell them we’re looking for a friend if it bothers you so much,” Viktor said with a grin.

“Oh... alright,” she relented, stepping in front of him and pushing open the door to Wee Wizards & Witches, ringing the bell above the door.

“See? No armed guards,” Viktor whispered in her ear, laying a hand on her shoulder. Hermione walked slowly around the first display table, which was stacked with stuffed animals of every description. She trailed her gaze over the walls, toward the back of the shop, where the sign high above the shelves and racks and tables read ‘Newborns’. Hermione picked her way through the unfamiliar shop, and Viktor shadowed her. Not only had she never been inside the shop in all the time it was here, she had expressly avoided it. She had always purposefully crossed the street and determinedly window shopped at the antiques dealer on the other side when she noticed the window.

“May I help you two?” a pleasantly plump, dark-haired witch with round wire-rimmed glasses asked as they passed.

“No, thank you, we’re just browsing,” Viktor answered.

“For a friend,” Hermione blurted out, a shade too rushed. “Who is expecting.”

“Well, I was just going to suggest that we have some lovely gift baskets if you’re looking for a nice shower gift. Or we can assemble a custom one if you decide you don’t like what we have prepared. They look really wonderful, and the basket is useful, too. Let me know if you need help finding anything, though,” she added. “My name’s Maybelle. Just yell if you need anything,” she called over her shoulder as she walked off.

“Remind me to never actually commit a crime with you, Miss Nonchalant,” Viktor murmured in her ear, stepping around her to stand in front of a display table full of tiny baby outfits. He held up a white one that had a duck applique on the front, considered it a moment, then refolded it and placed it back on the table.

“What, exactly, are we looking for, anyway?” Hermione asked, planting her hands on her hips.

“I don’t know,” Viktor replied, laying a small yellow robe out on the table, holding it by the shoulders, then laying it back on the pile. “Something we can hold onto... to ... to make it real. Seems too much like a dream, right now,” he said, making a face at a hooded pink jacket with floppy bunny ears and button eyes sewn on the hood. “Think that would fit?” he asked, holding a pint-sized green onesie up against her belly, smoothing it against her with his right hand.

“Stop that!” Hermione scolded in a low voice. “She’ll see,” she said more quietly, taking the outfit from him and rubbing her fingers over the sewn-in feet. A soft smile broke across her face.

“She will not. There are a dozen racks between her and us,” Viktor said

dismissively.

“It is adorable. The baby will need clothes. And green works for either,” Hermione admitted. “Let’s buy this, visit the apothecary, and go home, hmm?” Hermione said eagerly.

“Absolutely. No baby of ours is going completely naturist. Or being color coded,” Viktor teased. “Works for me. Why do you want to get back home so badly?”

“We’ve got a call to make. Ekaterina will absolutely kill us if we don’t tell her that she and Petar are going to be grandparents pretty soon. And then, we need to call Molly and Arthur. They’re sort of honorary grandparents. I’d like to tell them before they hear it elsewhere. Even from Ginny. I ought to get to tell *someone* first,” Hermione said, holding the onesie to her chest.

“Mama and Papa will absolutely not care how long it took us to call if we’ve got that kind of news,” Viktor said. “But let’s get home and tell my parents, first, or Molly will beat us to it. And then, there would be real hell to pay.”

“Don’t think I hadn’t thought of that,” Hermione said, walking toward the front, where Maybelle stood at the till.

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Hermione wandered into the kitchen and pointed her wand at the radio, filling the room with the announcer’s voice over the wireless. She stood in front of it for a moment, feeling a small pang of disappointment that she wasn’t at the match herself. Hermione rubbed a hand over the soft mound of her belly beneath her loose trousers, hoping to quell the aching there. Her abdomen had felt tender ever since she had found out she was pregnant, and she was beginning to wonder if it weren’t mostly in her head. She dismissed the thought and decided that even if she couldn’t do anything about the tenderness, she could do something about the growling.

She had been strangely hungry all morning, even though she had eaten a large breakfast. Hermione grabbed a large red apple from the fruit bowl, a nearly full jar of peanut butter from the cabinet by the sink, and gathered up a spoon from the silverware drawer. Pulling open the icebox, she took out the milk and poured herself a large glass. Finally, she laid the paring knife at her place at the table.

By the time the match was well under way, she had a neat pile of apple slices, which she ate one by one, after slathering them with a thin layer of peanut butter. When she had finished the apple, she absentmindedly ate a spoonful of peanut butter, directly from the jar. By the second unsuccessful jockeying for the Snitch, ninety minutes into the match, she was surprised to note that she had eaten

nearly all of the peanut butter that had been in the jar. Hermione gazed into the jar, at the small dab of peanut butter lurking in the bottom. Giving a shrug, she carefully scraped up the rest from the jar, sticking the spoon into her mouth, licking it clean. She would just eat a lighter snack for lunch. The curiously hollow feeling in her middle had gone away, at least.

But by the time lunch and the fifth hour of the match rolled around, her resolve had crumbled. She fixed herself a large salad, full of boiled eggs, chopped ham, and everything else she could find. She felt vaguely ashamed of herself, but the grinding hunger overcame any misgivings she had about eating so much.

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Viktor ran his fingers through his damp hair and pulled his duffle bag from the locker. He set it on the bench and stretched. The match had been long, but not nearly as long as everyone had anticipated, thanks to the completely crazy dive he had taken after the Snitch. With a bit of good luck, he had actually managed to catch it by the edge of a wing. It wasn't something he would try under normal circumstances, but he had felt so incredibly... there was no other word for it but 'high'... during the match. The kind of mood where you would try something completely crazy for no reason at all. It didn't hurt that he knew Hermione wasn't there to see it, either. He was sure she had listened, but that wasn't quite the same. The match had ended at a shade over eleven hours. Not nearly soon enough to go on home, but better than the late night or early morning end they had been expecting.

"What's up with you?" came a low voice behind him, in Bulgarian, echoing a bit in the otherwise deserted locker room.

"What do you mean, what's up with me?" Viktor responded, turning to face Vulchanov.

"There's something up with you, sure as my first name is Konstantin. I thought there was enough evidence before today, but this cinches it. You pulled off a dive that you only attempt when you're feeling like a giant on Billywigs. It was bad enough that you go around here for three whole days grinning like the cat that ate the canary, but that seals it. Come on, come with me and let's get a drink. Won't be seeing you for several weeks," Vulchanov said, beckoning with a hand.

"Are you buying?" Viktor asked lightly.

"Give me a good reason, and I might," Vulchanov countered.

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“Still haff not given me a good reason that I should buy,” Vulchanov goaded after they had given the waitress at the hotel bar their drink orders.

“Got you out of that match in less than twelve hours,” Viktor pointed out.

Vulchanov waved a hand dismissively. “Bah! Luck! Seriously, vhat is up vith you? Haff not seen you grin that hard and that long in ages. Especially not vithout Hermione here. Vhat does a man haff to do to get a hint?” he said conspiratorially, leaning across the table.

The corners of Viktor’s mouth twitched, then he broke into an even broader smile. “It’s nothing,” he protested.

“Bollocks! Spill it!” Vulchanov insisted, sitting back up straight and thanking the waitress when she put the glasses in front of them. “She’s gone. Spill it!” he repeated when she had stepped out of earshot.

“Promise... you won’t make a big deal out of this... no shouting it out to the entire bar...” Viktor said, laughing, while fiddling with his glass.

“Me? Make a big deal? Nooo...” Vulchanov said in an exaggerated manner.

“It’s Hermione,” Viktor said.

“She land a big writing assignment?” Vulchanov prompted when Viktor hesitated.

“No. She’s pregnant,” Viktor blurted out.

“She’s pregnant? You two are expecting a baby?” Vulchanov asked, his jaw dropping.

“Well, I should certainly hope we’re both expecting it. Otherwise, I’ve got a big problem,” Viktor laughed.

“Waitress! I owe this man as many drinks as he can take! Put them all on my tab!” Vulchanov called out with great gusto to the waitress across the room.

“Very subtle, Konstantin. Very subtle,” Viktor said, cocking an eyebrow at him as he took a drink.

“Subtle be hanged! Congratulations! Cheers!” Vulchanov said with a laugh, raising his own glass.

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Hermione walked through the quiet house, heading toward the couch with her book. She was looking forward to being able to just sit and read for pleasure, rather than for work. But she pulled up just short of the sofa, running a tentative hand around her navel. A harsh cramp gripped her, then passed, as quickly as it had come. *Probably indigestion, given how much I ate today*, she told herself. She took another step, but the tightness in her abdomen stopped her. Hermione pressed her fingertips against the lower curve of her belly curiously. The book fell from her hand and she doubled over, the pain radiating outward, the sweat popping out on her forehead. She dug her fingers into the arm of the sofa, propping herself until she regained her breath. When the overwhelming wave of pain ebbed, she went straight to the bowl next to the hearth.

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Viktor jerked awake, sitting upright and looking around the room in the darkness. There was nothing, no sound, no sign of anything that could have woken him. He held his breath for a moment, listening. He was just about to settle back onto the pillow when he heard the insistent pounding on the door to the room. Slipping out of bed and throwing on his dressing gown, he walked to the door, glancing through the peephole before flinging the door open. The night manager, who had been standing behind the front desk when he and Vulchanov had finally gone to their rooms stood there in the hall, looking anxious.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you, sir, but zere ees an emergency call at ze front desk for you. May we 'ave it forwarded to your room?" he asked quietly.

"Emergency call?" Viktor echoed, barely able to get the words out for the lump in his throat. It felt as though his heart had leapt straight up it.

"From St. Mungo's. We can 'ave it forwarded to zis Floo if you like, or you can take it at ze front desk. If you need to leave, we can check you out immediately," the manager explained.

"Forward it up here," Viktor pleaded, swinging the door open wider and beckoning him inside.

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"Ginny? Gin?" Neville said, shaking her by the shoulder.

"Mmmph... wha...?" she mumbled sleepily.

"Ginny! Wake up, you're being paged," Neville said urgently.

“What time is it?” she asked, sitting up.

“Just past midnight,” Neville replied, yawning.

“Why do these things always happen when I’m trying to sleep?” Ginny complained.

“Like I’m not trying to?” Neville grouched, falling back on the pillow as she threw back the covers and walked to the living room, where the monotonous voice kept repeating the same phrase over and over.

“St. Mungo’s paging Ginny Longbottom. St. Mungo’s paging Ginny Longbottom. St. Mun-”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Harrison, I’m awake. What is it?” Ginny asked, fumbling with the tie on her dressing gown as she left the bedroom. Neville could only hear the drone of indistinct voices in the other room. He was nearly drifting off again by the time Ginny threw open the cupboard door and yanked out her clothes and a cloak. She fumbled with the broom and dropped it noisily on the floor.

“Where’s the fire? Myra Breckinridge having her third, finally? She’s what, four days overdue?” Neville asked.

“I wish! Hermione came through the emergency room,” Ginny said frantically.

“Hermione! What for?” Neville asked in alarm.

“I don’t know. Lucas evidently drew her and he asked the front desk to page me, I have to get to the office and Floo in!” she said, throwing the cloak on top of her robes, then snatching up the broom.

“Call me if you know anything!” Neville called after her as she ran out the door.

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Ginny scrambled through the brightly lit emergency room at St. Mungo’s, intent on getting to the admittance desk. But she stopped just short of the desk when she saw Lucas standing a few feet away, calmly perusing a chart. “Lucas! Lucas! How is she?” Ginny panted breathlessly.

“Hermione Krum? She’s fine,” he said dismissively.

“Fine? Fine? Then what was she doing in the emergency room?” she snapped.

"It was nothing," Lucas said nonchalantly, turning back to the chart.

"If you don't tell me what was wrong with her, I'm going to shove that chart up your nose," Ginny threatened, putting her hand over the parchment.

"Hysteria," Lucas said bluntly. "I know she's your friend, but I did every test I could think of, and there's nothing really wrong with her," Lucas insisted.

"Then, why did she come in?" Ginny pressed.

"Look. She said she had pains, she called the transport service on the Floo and asked to be transported to the hospital. She kept calling them severe cramps. She was afraid there was something going wrong with the pregnancy, but she came in, I examined her, and I can't find a bloody thing wrong with her, aside from a little low blood sugar and some anemia, and she said you had already found that. You might want to up her iron another notch. Other than that, she and the baby are healthy as horses. And I've told her that. Repeatedly. But she and that husband of hers insist on talking to you before she's released," Lucas sighed, shaking his head. "I admit, you're a lot easier on the eyes than I am, even at this hour, but they way they keep chucking me to the side like I don't know my own business is enough to hurt a bloke's feelings," he added in a light tone.

"What tests did you perform?" Ginny demanded.

"Basic vitals. Checked her for bleeding and premature labor, even. She's got no infection, no toxemia, nothing to indicate a problem. She's not even cramping any more, and there is not a sign of a contraction. She's carrying a perfectly healthy baby at twelve or thirteen weeks of development. It was probably a bad case of indigestion, Ginny-bean," Lucas said more gently.

"Beg pardon? How far did you say?" Ginny asked, blinking.

"Twelve weeks, easy. Maybe thirteen. Why? Didn't you date her pregnancy? I got the impression you were the one who had told her she was up the pole to start out with," Lucas countered.

Ginny shook her head slowly. "Did you use *Cronos Graviditas* or *Cronos Infantus*?" she probed.

"The second. You know I like to date the development, not the conception. I know parents get the warm fuzzies about thinking they know the exact day they hit the lottery at the baby factory, but I think dating the development is a lot more accurate. And less sentimental. Are you okay, or are you trying to catch flies?" he teased, seeing her jaw drop.

Ginny worked her mouth soundlessly. "You're sure she is fine?" Ginny stammered.

"Come on, Gin. You know me. I might not have the best bedside manner in the world when I'm on graveyard shift, but I don't miss a trick when it comes to an exam. She and that baby are sound as a Sickle, except for what you already found. Weigh the evidence. She's pregnant for the first time, her husband was off in France, she was home alone, late at night. Nervous. Scared. She has a twinge or two and panics. Face it, Ginny. It was probably just gas. She needed a digestive aid, not a trip to the emergency room," he replied, squeezing her shoulder.

"You're sure... absolutely sure of your dating?" Ginny insisted.

"What's up with you lot tonight? Why does no one believe I can properly perform a spell that any intern ought to be able to do in their sleep? Mum-to-be in there didn't seem to believe me, either," Lucas complained. "I mean, crikey, if she tells you what she ate today, you won't wonder why her belly's giving her gip."

"She... she's been through a lot, Lucas. Give her a break," Ginny said halfheartedly. "What room is she in?"

"Exam Three. Could you go talk to them and move them on out, already? It's a bit slow right now, but we might need the room before morning. And there's no reason she needs to be here. I've tried telling her that, but she doesn't seem to think I'm as trustworthy as you are. Nobody trusts this face, evidently," Lucas said with a smile. "Say hello to Nev for me. I've got a twit who ran his Comet smack into a pine tree in Exam One that I need to get to. Bit scrambled in the head. Thinks he's a cauldron. Tah," he added.

"Thanks, Lucas," Ginny called over her shoulder as they headed in opposite directions. She hesitated a moment in front of the door, her mind racing. *Why did I ever think of messing with the recipe?* she chided herself, still hoping that her hunch was wrong. A couple of spells should be enough to tell for sure. Ginny breathed deep, put her hand against the door, and pushed it open. Her heart gave a squeeze when she was confronted with two very anxious expressions in two very pale faces. Pale, except for the dark smudges below their eyes. Funny how she still hated that part of her job. The times when she was just as anxious and uncertain as the patients looked and felt. When she didn't have any answers for them, just yet.

"Hermione... are you okay?" Ginny asked tentatively.

Hermione swallowed hard, then said, "I'm not sure," in a small, thin voice, barely

above a whisper.

“I already talked to Lucas, but I want to go over this with you. Let’s start at the beginning. Why did you call for the transport?” Ginny said, walking up beside the hospital bed where Hermione lay. She glanced up at Viktor’s drawn face on the other side.

“I... I was walking toward the sofa, to read, before I went to bed and... I had this... this cramp. At first, I didn’t think much of it, but then I had another, a lot worse. It was so bad, it doubled me over. It felt like... like something tore or gave way. And when it wasn’t cramping, there was this burning. It kept on, until about ten minutes after I got here. It can’t have been indigestion. It was too low. It was right here,” Hermione said, laying a palm just below her navel.

“Could I take a look?” Ginny asked, picking up the hem of Hermione’s top. Hermione nodded mutely. Ginny folded the top upward, out of the way, then tugged the waist of Hermione’s trousers lower. To her surprise, Hermione’s belly stuck out between the fabric in a firm curve, far more prominent than Ginny had been expecting. She pressed the flat of her fingers against it, finding that it gave little, and prompting a pained wince from Hermione. “Pain?”

“It’s sore. It aches. But that’s not what bothers me most,” Hermione sniffled. “He said I was thirteen weeks pregnant. I can’t be... it’s impossible. I’m not that crazy, am I? I can’t be, can I?” she asked, looking at Viktor.

“It’s impossible,” Viktor echoed, looking Ginny in the eye. “Isn’t it?”

“Maybe not so impossible. *Cronos Graviditas*. Six weeks going on seven. *Cronos Infantus*. Twelve going on thirteen... This is all my fault. The spikeweed. It’s speeded up the development. Two to one ratio, probably. I owe you two an apology...” Ginny said nervously, licking her lips.

“I think you owe us an explanation, first,” Viktor said, voice low and edgy.

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“So, I think the extra spikeweed has made the baby develop faster. If all the guesses I made are right, roughly two weeks of normal development and growth for one week of pregnancy,” Ginny concluded.

“I don’t understand... does this mean the baby’s going to come in... twenty weeks altogether? What about after it’s born? Is it going to keep growing like that?” Hermione said, clamping a hand over her mouth.

“Yes to the first, no to the second, I think. All the materials we found indicated

that the Fecundus Potion only has an effect in the time leading up to conception, if there is a conception, then the pregnancy. All influence ceases when the connection between the mother and child is severed. Once the umbilical cord is cut, that's it. The baby should grow normally after that. That would put your new due date somewhere around the tenth of November. I think the pain you felt was a more severe form of round ligament pain. Around the third month, your womb starts to expand, and it stretches the ligaments that hold it up. Most women ache a little. Yours are probably being... forced aside a lot harder than most, and the hormones haven't kicked in enough to soften them up. You might be a bit longer than twenty weeks, going into labor. Seems the hormone levels might be lagging behind somewhat. It would explain why you're having such a hard time keeping up with your body's nutritional needs, too. It would explain the hunger you described..." Ginny said, trailing off.

"So, we... what? Tell people we managed to keep it from them for... twenty-four weeks? We forgot to mention it? I really don't show much? After waiting all this time, I'm not even going to get to enjoy being pregnant for nine months..." Hermione breathed, a couple of fat tears spilling over and running down her cheeks. A shuddering sob rattled her shoulders before she started crying in earnest.

Viktor fumbled in his pockets for a moment, finally coming up with a handkerchief, which he handed over, taking a moment to brush her hair back from her face with the same hand. "Hall," he said bluntly, looking across the bed.

"Pardon?" Ginny said, caught off guard.

"I want to speak to you in the hall," Viktor explained, narrowing his eyes, voice dropping even more. Ginny nodded and walked out into the hall, Viktor close on her heels, and she turned to face him the instant he pulled the door to. "You've got a lot of nerve," he said through clenched teeth. "Do we look like a couple of fucking laboratory rats to you?" he demanded, dark brows pulling together.

"What? No," Ginny stammered.

"Obviously, we do, because you went and played God on us, here. What gave you the idea that you had the right to go making us have a baby on *your* timetable?" Viktor bit off, taking another step toward her.

"I just wanted to help..." Ginny said, taking a step back, bumping into the wall.

"And what was wrong with *telling* us? *Asking* us!" he hissed, leaning closer. Ginny's mind flashed back to Harry telling about Viktor cornering him to ask about Hermione. She was beginning to rue ever laughing at Harry for being so intimidated then. Her knees felt like they were about to buckle when she looked

him in the eye.

“We’re talking about one of my oldest, best friends ... I would never deliberately do anything to hurt her, in any-” Ginny pleaded, but Viktor interrupted.

“And we’re talking about *my* wife and *our* child! And you treat it like... like it’s a game! How *dare* you think that you can just jerk us around to suit your purposes like a couple of puppets on a string and then say ‘Oh, I didn’t mean anything by it’ and make it all *better*! You had better hope to high Heaven that this turns out alright, because if she ends up crying because of anything bad happening to that baby, or if anything happens to her because of this, I will have your heads on *pikes*! All four of you!” Viktor spat, jabbing her in the shoulder with a finger for emphasis. “I wouldn’t be out here when we leave,” he tossed over his shoulder as he stalked back toward the door.

“What can I do to make this right?” Ginny asked, her voice cracking.

“I’m not sure you ever can,” he said simply, “since we obviously can’t even trust you in our own house,” before pushing the door open. Ginny caught one of Hermione’s sobs before the door closed again. Ginny managed to make it to the lounge, which, thankfully, was empty, before her own sobs escaped.

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Harry stood outside the house, looking it over. There hadn’t been a sign of movement or life in the entire twenty minutes he had been here, trying to psyche himself up enough to go knock on the front door. All four of them had tried calling on the Floo, and there had been no response. In desperation, Ginny had pleaded with Molly to call, but it had been the same, no answer. Running out of options, Harry had even talked Hannah into calling Ekaterina and Petar, but they had politely declined to reveal anything helpful, either, citing Viktor and Hermione’s wishes to be left alone, for the time being. So now, here he stood, having drawn the figurative short straw, on the front lawn of the house, trying to force himself to go knock on the door.

It would have to be him. Neville and Ginny had brewed it in the first place. Ginny had suggested adjusting the mix. Bringing the whole thing up simply made Ginny burst into tears, and Neville had protested that the other three had known them longer, would be better able to figure out an approach. Ron insisted he would simply fumble the apology and make things worse, not being overly blessed with tact. Much as he hated to admit it, even Harry had allowed that he was probably the best one to go and see if they would talk. So Harry stood here, alone, not having spoken to either one of them in nearly a week, wondering what to say to make it all better. And the more he thought about it, the more certain he was that there was nothing to say that could make it all better. All he could do was hope

they were in a forgiving mood. He had rehearsed a dozen speeches in his head, but none of them felt right. Finally, he decided to dispense with the speeches and just go knock on the door.

Harry raised his hand and rapped his knuckles on the door a third time. He was just about to give it up as a lost cause when he heard the rattling of the doorknob and the door swung slowly open. Viktor stood there, looking more careworn than Harry ever remembered, even back when the Order had been active and the war had been raging. "I'd just like to talk," Harry said softly. "Please. We're all worried about you two." Harry peered up through his glasses, wishing that Viktor's face weren't so damned unreadable.

"Fine time to start," Viktor replied, but he stepped back and held the door open. Harry stepped in, sitting on the nearest chair, perching on the edge.

"I can't possibly understand what this is like for the both of you," Harry blurted out when Viktor sat on the sofa, looking equally uneasy.

"I imagine not. You're not the one who had to find some way to explain to your parents and one of your oldest friends that the baby you found out you were expecting no more than a week ago is now coming in about three months. And not sleeping nights," Viktor sighed, leaning back tiredly.

"How is she?" Harry inquired.

"Not good. She aches something fierce. She won't take anything for it," Viktor replied, staring blankly at the ceiling. "Afraid to."

"Why wouldn't you even answer any calls for the past six days? From anyone? We've all been worried sick," Harry said.

"Serves you all right," Viktor said tersely, but then he dropped his eyes from the ceiling and his jaw relaxed. "We just needed some time to think. By ourselves," he added, picking at a non-existent hangnail.

"Look, it's all our faults. We all went along. But Ginny is really taking this hard. You know she wouldn't deliberately hurt you and Hermione for anything. She insisted on not telling you because she couldn't bear for the two of you to be disappointed if it didn't work. Heaven knows we can't make it up to you, we can't take it back, but... do you really wish we hadn't?" Harry said earnestly.

"No," Viktor said, voice barely above a whisper. "But I wish you had gone about it differently. I think what I resent the most is that you four seem to think Hermione and I can't handle a disappointment, when you should know better. In the past two decades, we've both buried more friends and acquaintances than I expected

to before I was a hundred. I've seen a few where there wasn't enough left to bury. Hell, I helped gather some of them up. I helped recruit some of them in the first place. Hermione lost her parents when she was barely of age, and I'm the one who had to go tell them which pile of scraps belonged in which coffin so she didn't have to. I did things in the damned war that I would have been ashamed to even think of doing, otherwise. And we've put up with being disappointed on the baby front month after month for a good decade. Come up with a better excuse than 'we didn't want to disappoint you'."

"It's not a good excuse, but that's all Ginny and the rest of us wanted. To give you two a pleasant surprise," Harry said. "We never meant to give you something else to worry about."

"You got the surprise half down, certainly," Viktor said with a derisive snort. "Twice over."

"Ginny's taking this really hard. I haven't talked to her yet that she hasn't been crying," Harry said desperately.

"And Hermione hasn't taken it hard? She feels like Ginny took her confidence and stomped all over it. You four made a decision for us that you shouldn't have made. I keep telling her she's going to have to talk to Ginny sometime. At the office, at least. If we went anywhere else with this story, they would have us committed. Or it would get out and turn into some... freak show," Viktor said, all the anger gone from his voice. Instead, it sounded heavy with regret. "All these years... and when it finally happens, we can't even really enjoy it... I'm beginning to think the universe just likes fucking us over on this, Harry," Viktor added, lip trembling slightly.

Harry rose from the chair, ducked his head for a moment, then asked, "Would the two of you talk to Ginny if she came by tomorrow? She wanted me to ask... she says she really needs to examine her. The malnutrition is the only thing that has her concerned very much..." Harry trailed off as Viktor stood.

"Give me a day to work on her. I haven't much tried, because, frankly, I haven't wanted to talk to any of you, either. Least of all Ginny. I still shouldn't have said what I did. In the hospital. Tell her I'm sorry," Viktor said, swallowing hard.

"You can tell her yourself, if you let her in the house tomorrow. If you need anything... the same stupid bastards who got you into this mess in the first place are still willing to muck it up even worse," Harry said with a wan smile, spreading his arms.

"Thank you, anyway, you stupid bastards," Viktor said, leaning over for a quick embrace.

"I need to go. I'm on lunch," Harry said when they parted. Viktor followed him to the door, showing him out. When the soft pop of Harry's departure sounded on the front lawn, he walked back to the bedroom and opened the door, looking at Hermione. She lay propped on the bed, wearing a loose nightshirt, a hand-me-down of sorts that had belonged to him. Anything else was unbearable at the moment. She didn't look up when he came in and sat on the bed. Her attention remained fixed on the small, green onesie they had bought in Hogsmeade, which was now smoothed out over the sudden bulge of her belly. In retrospect, her abdomen had seemed to pop out almost overnight. The discomfort and the exhaustion had kept her in bed a great deal over the last few days.

"Harry was just here," he began tentatively. "Ginny wants to come by and see you. Tomorrow." She didn't respond. "We can't hide the rest of our lives and never talk to those four. No one else will put up with us."

Hermione looked up, met his gaze. "I don't know what to say."

"Neither do they. We've all goofed. Mea culpas all around. Just tell her the truth. We're ashamed of ourselves," Viktor said, brushing her hair back behind her shoulder.

"I think my being ashamed is what got us into this mess in the first place. Ginny might not have felt like she had to 'help' if I had gone when we had the first appointment, and found out earlier-" Hermione began, but Viktor laid a finger over her mouth.

"Can't change the past. No good beating yourself up over it. We've both made plenty of mistakes. Too numerous to count, probably. You had better eat something, soon," he said, peeling the tiny article of clothing from the nightshirt, folding it neatly and laying it on the bed. "Or you'll be all wobbly, later."

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Ginny hesitated in front of the back door. She had almost come to the front door of the house, but decided against it. She hadn't bothered to use the front door in years. The front door was for company. She hadn't considered herself anything so formal as company in years, either. She pecked tentatively at the door, swallowing hard. Her eyes had still been red rimmed this morning, when she had left Hogwarts, but she hadn't bothered trying to charm it away. More than one patient had asked her what was wrong over the last few days, even with the charms. One had asked her if she were battling a cold. Viktor pulled open the door and wordlessly stepped aside, letting her in.

"I'm sorry," they both blurted out, tripping over one another. "Go ahead," Ginny

insisted when they both paused.

“I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have said...” Viktor stammered, floundering. He still had the pinched look of someone who hadn’t slept enough.

“I deserved every word of it,” Ginny protested. “I shouldn’t-”

“Okay, look, we’re all big idiots who did things we shouldn’t. Even?” Viktor offered, raking his hair back with his fingers.

“I think that’s a fair enough assessment,” Ginny countered. “Where’s Hermione?”

“In bed. The aching is pretty bad. Hurts her to be up, much. And she won’t take anything, for fear of... doing something else. She’s not nearly so tired, the last couple of days, though,” Viktor explained.

“I’m sorry I made her angry,” Ginny said in a small voice.

“I don’t think you made her angry so much as you hurt her feelings. Made her feel like you couldn’t *talk* to her. To us. We trusted you with something very few people know, and you didn’t trust us to be able to handle it,” Viktor replied.

“I’ve got no excuse but good intentions. And we all know where those lead,” Ginny sighed, trudging off toward the bedroom. “Hermione?”

“Ginny... I’m so sorry...I-”

“I’m sorry, too. Now let’s both shut up before we turn into complete blubbering messes,” Ginny interrupted. “Let me get to work on you instead. Sounds like you’re not nearly as anemic, at least, if you’re not so tired,” she said, opening her bag.

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“Okay, a potion for the soreness, that bottle there takes care of the extra vitamins, your anemia is better, and I guess that about does it... oh, wait! One thing I forgot to do. No guarantee this will work, yet, but I wanted to try it, anyway.” Ginny cleared her throat and whispered the incantation, putting the wand tip against Hermione’s belly, high up on the gentle slope. Ginny trailed the wand downward, slowly tracking back and forth across the surface.

“What are you doing?” Viktor asked curiously, but she shushed him gently, listening instead of answering him. She traced over another inch, then paused when she heard the first hollow sounding beat. Ginny pressed the wand more firmly against the flesh, and a rapid, rhythmic whooshing noise filled the room. “Is

that what I think it is?" Viktor asked after listening for a brief space.

"The baby? The heart?" Hermione said, raising her gaze from the spot where the wand was pressed against her middle.

"That," Ginny said, "is your baby's heartbeat. Funny, you would think I would, but I never get tired of being a part of this moment." She grinned and put her free hand against the subtle curve of Hermione's abdomen. After a couple of minutes, Ginny pulled the wand tip away. "Like Lucas said. Healthy as a horse. And speaking of horses, since this is something of a shortened race, are you two going to need some help, getting the nursery ready? Anything else?"

"Well... we were thinking of clearing out the spare room and using that as a nursery... I wouldn't turn any help away on getting that done. Painting it first would be nice, too. Mama and Papa have agreed to come stay when it gets close to time... or when we think it's close, at least. Frankly, under the circumstances, I think we can use all the help we can get," Viktor said, biting his lip.

"I'll volunteer for all of us. I think we owe you," Ginny said, nodding her head.

"Good. We'll put you all to work. Soon as we figure out what we need done," Hermione said with a laugh, covering Ginny's hand with her own.

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"We have an offer of help, you know," Viktor said uncertainly, looking over Hermione's head into the spare room.

"Ron, Harry and Neville can help you move the furniture. Least we can do is get the rest of this stuff out of here. What's the matter? Chickening out on me?" Hermione asked.

"Just procrastinating. Guess opening the door and throwing in every spare bit that doesn't qualify as rubbish is a thing of the past, hmm?" Viktor observed, pushing aside a box of photographs with his foot.

"Lots of things are going to be a thing of the past. Give it another week and my waistline is going to be a thing of the past," Hermione complained, rubbing a hand down her front.

"Will not. It just won't dent in right about there any more," Viktor countered, putting his arms around her from behind.

"Oh, so it will still be there, it will simply be shaped more like an egg," Hermione

said.

“Egg shaped... hadn’t thought of it that way. Maybe that’s why they call it being broody,” Viktor allowed, kissing her behind the ear.

“Stop stalling. Time for that after we get some of this mess straightened up. Much as I hate to put it off,” Hermione sighed.

“So, you admit, spending the day in the not-so-spare bedroom is more appealing?”

“It’s not as though it’s a tough choice. A day spent going through a room full of the detritus of almost eighteen years of marriage, or doing what prompted having to redo the room in the first place. Gee, I wonder what most people would pick?” Hermione responded.

“Why don’t you sort through some of those books, and I’ll see if I can’t wrestle some of those boxes out and at least see what’s in them,” Viktor said, stepping across some of the boxes that weren’t stacked. He paused in front of the bicycle that was propped against the wall below the window. “I’m all for not wasting things that are still good, but there’s got to be a limit. Can we at least take this over to the Burrow, where it might get some use? You haven’t ridden this thing in ages.”

“Probably needs a new chain, first. Maybe some grease. Oh, alright, put it by the back door. I’ll see if I can’t get a chain and take it over there,” Hermione said.

“Sold,” Viktor said, picking it up and packing it out of the room. When Viktor returned from the back door, Hermione was deeply involved in a book, slowly leafing through it. He stood there for a moment, bemused expression on his face. He crept up behind her and peered over her shoulder for a bit. She didn’t look up, just turned to the next page. “You can’t read them all, or we won’t have this room cleared out in time for any of our grandchildren to sleep in here,” he murmured in her ear.

“Most of them are probably old research books, anyway,” Hermione said, reluctantly closing the cover.

“Why not sort them into definitely keep, definitely chuck, and look before you chuck?” Viktor advised.

“I’m not chucking them! That would be wasting perfectly good books,” Hermione said.

“Heaven forbid!” Viktor said in mock horror. “By ‘chuck’, I mean chucking them

into a box and seeing if Flourish and Blotts would take them. Get rid of ten, and I will pronounce it a small miracle, provided I don't have to pry your fingers off the box. What you really want to keep, we'll put on the shelves in the guest bedrooms. Once we get the shelves in there, of course," Viktor amended. He waded back into the boxes, opening flaps and tops at random, glancing at the contents and shuffling them around. "Why do we never label anything?"

"Makes it more of an adventure to look for it," Hermione muttered, pulling another book from the shelf.

"Yule decorations. Those can go to the attic, for sure," Viktor said.

"Well, go ahead and label them and take them now, or they'll never get there," Hermione countered, flipping through a few pages.

"You seem awfully eager to keep getting me out of the room. You kind of look like you need patting down. What are you doing, smuggling books down your front when you get me out of here?" Viktor asked lightly, packing one of the boxes toward the door.

"You!" Hermione complained, taking a swat at him with the book.

"Ow! You can keep 'em if you're that attached. We'll start our own library! Maybe we can hire Madam Pince!"

"I didn't even touch you, you big baby!" she called after him while he walked down the hall.

"One big box of Yule decorations, labeled even, stowed in the attic. Management hits me again, I'm going on strike for the rest of the day," Viktor warned, opening another box. "Oh, now, these look familiar," he said, drawing a set of periwinkle blue robes from a box.

"Yule Ball. Seems like another lifetime, sometimes," Hermione replied.

"It was. We were still in school. Which was about a hundred years ago, wasn't it?"

"Feels like it. Seems completely impossible that there was ever a time when it was of crucial importance who asked you to a dance. And what you wore. What your hair looked like. I can't believe I spent three whole hours getting ready," Hermione murmured. "Never before nor since," she said with a laugh.

"I'm honored I prompted a once in a lifetime event, then. You didn't even spend that much time before our wedding, did you?" Viktor asked.

“Two hours, tops. Most of it trying to get my hands to stop shaking.”

“Didn’t need it.”

“Did too. My goodness, all those people! I thought I would fall straight over when I walked in and all these faces turned around. I mean, the entire Great Hall full. I was actually glad Molly had insisted I get something a little fancier for the wedding robes. I would have been mortified, otherwise. All those people looking at me and thinking ‘Couldn’t she have gotten something better?’.”

“I would have married you in a potato sack at the registry,” Viktor said emphatically.

“Some days, I was willing to do that. Planning a wedding ought to be enough to scare people into staying together forever. I, for one, never want to have to plan another one. I would have been happy eloping.”

“Tried to get you to. We’ll do that someday and renew our vows, then. And speaking of wedding robes, they’re in here, too.”

“Label them and put them in the living room. Next time I’m in Hogsmeade, I’ll get something to put them in. Something better than a cardboard box. I’m thinking of asking Ginny to go shopping with me sometime soon. I need some maternity clothes. I can’t keep jury rigging things much longer. Maybe I’ll see if Hannah and Susan can go. Make a real girls’ day out of it. Not offended, are you?” Hermione said, looking up at him.

“Oh, no, not at all. I know exactly zero about maternity clothes. You’re on your own, there. Clothes in general, actually,” Viktor said, reaching out and tapping a small end table buried among the boxes. “Are you still planning on refinishing this, some mythical ‘someday’? If so, I’ll put it in the attic and you can tell me when you want it brought down.”

“Sometime,” Hermione said noncommittally, going back to the bookshelves and kneeling in front of them. They sorted through things for a couple of hours, packing, unpacking, and repacking various boxes.

“Lunchtime. Hadn’t you better eat something?” Viktor announced.

“I’m starved, actually. Are you really surprised?” Hermione said, wiping the sweat from her forehead with a forearm. “Is it hot in here, or is it just me?”

“It’s not just you. August heat. Come on, we’ll get something cold,” he said, coming over and offering Hermione a hand.

“Nnngh... my legs are asleep,” Hermione complained, bending over to rub at her calves where the pins and needles prickled. “Oh!” she said in surprise, straightening up abruptly.

“What? Hermione?” Viktor said anxiously.

“I just felt it. At least, I think I felt it... there! There it is again. There... feel?” Hermione said, snatching up his hand and pressing it against the swelling. “There?” she asked eagerly.

Viktor shook his head, rubbing his thumb back and forth lightly. “No. Be a while yet, before I can feel it, I think, if you’re just now feeling it,” he said in a disappointed tone.

“Oh,” Hermione said, sounding let down.

“This is all moving so fast,” Viktor murmured, leaning over and kissing her damp forehead. “Let’s take a break. Mess isn’t going anywhere. Unfortunately,” he added, steering her toward the door.

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“Oh, my gracious, you’ve actually got a baby tummy!” Hannah exclaimed when Hermione pulled the baggy top she was wearing snug against her new shape for a moment. The four of them were sitting on the Underground in an otherwise deserted car, having walked from the Leaky Cauldron.

“Shush! Don’t announce it to all of Muggle London,” Hermione chided, but the smile that spread across her face belied her words.

“Not that I’m complaining, but why go shopping in London first? Why not go to Madam Malkin’s?” Susan asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because I haven’t been to London in forever, seems like. Maybe because I don’t want to tell anyone else, just yet. Maybe because I miss totally Muggle clothes, sometimes. Besides, it was a good excuse for the four of us to take a day off from work and take a trip to London,” Hermione replied.

“Last one’s a good enough reason for me,” Ginny interjected.

“Amen. This our stop?” Hannah asked, looking out the window of the train.

“This is it,” Hermione said, getting up from her seat. They filed off the train and

walked a block to the shop Hermione had planned on visiting first.

“Mind if we look in the non-expectant section for a bit? Holler when you have something for us to look at. I want to see you in it,” Hannah confided. “I might try something on, myself.”

“Something you’re not telling the rest of us?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Not telling? Can’t say I haven’t thought about it a few times. Not for a while, yet, though. Mostly, I just wondered what it would feel like. Wonder if they’ve got one of those pillow things so you can see how they’ll look? Later on, I mean. Might be good for a laugh,” Hannah said.

“Most shops do,” Hermione allowed. “I’m going to go look,” she added.

“I’m coming with you. I don’t need any new clothes,” Ginny said. “What are you looking for, exactly?”

“Anything easily expandable. Things with stretchy panels. Multiple sets of buttons. Tie waists. Anything that goes from ‘slightly pregnant’ to ‘really pregnant’ to ‘massively pregnant’ in less than a minute,” Hermione sighed, pulling some hangers from the racks. “I always thought these were cute. These maternity overalls,” she observed, pulling a blue denim pair from the rack.

“Some tops over here. Elastic panels. And some jeans,” Ginny called out. “These look to be your size, Hermione.”

“Hermione? Hermione Granger?” came a female voice behind Hermione.

Hermione turned to see a blonde woman about her age, with a couple of girls in tow. “Yes?”

“I thought that was you! You probably don’t even remember me. I used to be-” the woman began.

“Karen Harper. You used to live four houses down,” Hermione supplied.

“Exactly! We used to go to school together until you went off to that boarding school in the Alps or whatever it was. It’s been simply ages. It’s Karen Pinkerton, now. Mrs. Donald Pinkerton, we run the Pinkerton Accounting Agency. These are my girls, Lucy and Valerie,” she said, and the two girls peered out shyly from behind their mother.

“Hello, there,” Hermione said, smiling.

“The boys are at football practice. Ten and twelve, John and Carter are. What about you? Married?” Karen probed.

“Oh! Yes, my last name’s Krum, now. Well, it is when it suits me. He used to tease me that I only used his last name when the wind was blowing in the right direction. Never bothered him much, though. In fact, our anniversary is this month. Eighteen years,” Hermione answered.

“Reeeally? Well, that’s just great! What do the two of you do? Are you living around here?” Karen asked politely.

“Not exactly. I, err, do a bit of freelance writing. He’s... he’s involved in... international sport. Kind of a natural fit. He’s Bulgarian. We travel a lot,” Hermione said.

“Oh, really? Well. That’s interesting. How on *earth* did you ever meet a Bulgarian?” Karen said with a laugh.

“At school, actually. He was there for a... an academic competition, and we started writing one another, and well, one thing led to the other and we ended up married not long after I got out of school,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“Shopping for *maternity* clothes?” Karen asked, raising her eyebrows.

“I’m afraid I’m in need of them, so, yes,” Hermione said.

“Well, congratulations! How many does that make for you?” Karen enthused, raising her hand to touch.

“Thank you... it’s our first, actually,” Hermione said, crossing her arms protectively over her stomach, effectively fending her off.

“Oh. When are you due?” Karen asked, dropping the hand.

“November,” Hermione blurted out without thinking.

“November,” Karen repeated blankly, looking Hermione over again. “You certainly aren’t showing much,” she said slowly.

“Late November,” Hermione amended lamely.

“Well... I really should be getting back. Donald will wonder where we’ve gone. It was nice to see you again,” Karen said pleasantly, herding the girls away.

“Are you okay, or did that land shark take a chunk out of you?” Ginny said,

coming up behind Hermione and laying a hand on her shoulder.

“Ginny! She’s not that bad. She always was nosy. And that probably just confirmed the suspicion she had when I was a child that I was a first class weirdo. I went off to some weird boarding school and married some weird foreigner, and didn’t get my two point five children into the world at the approved intervals. She was always saying I had warped my brain reading all those books. But why do people seem to think that being pregnant is an open invitation to manhandle you?” Hermione said, sounding flustered.

“Beats me,” Ginny said with a shrug, reaching out to pat Hermione’s middle.

“Do that again and I’m hexing your hand off!” Hermione teased.

“One of the women I worked with in the Delivery unit had a theory. She always said it was because every baby was a miracle, and everyone liked being some small part of it. Like you could take away a little piece of the magic and the mystery by touching. Grant you, every time she said that around Lucas, he would always put forth his own theory, tactless bloke that he is,” Ginny laughed.

“And that was? I’m almost afraid to ask,” Hermione said.

“One of his favorites was that people liked touching because it was their way of saying, ‘Gee, I’m glad I’m not that fat and don’t have some little alien living in me. That’s just weird!’. He had other, even less tactful versions, too. There’s a very good reason he’s still single. He’s a giant lunkhead about interacting with others,” Ginny replied.

“I don’t want to know,” Hermione sighed. “I’m going to try these on. Grab a couple of those tops off the rack and meet me at the dressing room in a couple of minutes,” she called over her shoulder as she trudged off. “Well, what do you think?” Hermione asked Ginny when she stepped out of the dressing room, biting her lip.

“You never felt the need to ask my opinion on clothes before, but I think it looks good on you. The pregnancy and the overalls. Here, have some tops to try on.. Where to, after this?” Ginny asked.

“Somewhere to eat. I’m already getting hungry. I’m always hungry,” Hermione said apologetically.

“Got an excuse, love. Those look too cute for words on you. You *are* allowed to be cute, you know,” Susan said, coming over with a couple of things draped over her arm.

"I don't want to be cute," Hermione complained. "I'm a grown woman, not a four-year-old. I don't need to look cute."

"Personally, I settle for anything I can get. Enjoy it. It's the one time in your life you can look cute with minimal effort," Susan said.

"Please," Hermione replied, rolling her eyes.

"I'm serious. All you have to do is stick your belly out and people swoon at your cuteness. You're like concentrated puppies. I think it's the thought that pretty soon, you're going to be carrying around a pinchably cute baby. Why else do you think people grin like fruitcakes at pregnant women?" Susan countered.

"Because they're fruitcakes?" Hermione asked, taking some of the hangers from Ginny and trudging back to the dressing room.

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Hermione shoved the loaded cardboard box closer to the door with her foot. "That's the last of the books. And that," she said, bending over and pulling another box of odds and ends from the corner, "can definitely go. Hey, look, there's a floor in here! Who knew?" She straightened up and mopped her forehead with her arm.

"Leave the boxes be! Stop shoving, pulling and yanking on things. You're making me nervous," Viktor scolded. "Well, all that leaves is furniture, then, and Ron and Harry and Neville can help with that. Then I suppose we'll have to start picking out *more* furniture to drag *in* here, all of which they'll promptly outgrow, and so on, and so forth, in ever descending circles. Our attic isn't big enough," Viktor observed.

"That's not the problem," Hermione said, straightening the strap on her overalls. "The problem with having space is, you think you never have to throw anything away or store it properly. So you don't."

"It's almost eleven. Truth be told, I didn't think we would be done before midnight," Viktor said, stretching.

"Let's go to Fortescue's and get ice cream," Hermione said abruptly.

"I beg your pardon? I thought you said you wanted to go get ice cream," Viktor said, cocking an eyebrow at her.

"I did."

“There’s ice cream in the kitchen.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It’s from Fortescue’s!”

“That’s not what I meant. Oh, come on. Let’s go,” Hermione pleaded, tugging on the hem of his robe.

“Not that I’m complaining, much, but why on earth would you want to make a trip to Fortescue’s at eleven at night, just for ice cream?” Viktor said with a puzzled smile.

“Because. We haven’t done anything completely frivolous in ages. For weeks it’s been all adulthood and planning and responsibility. Let’s do something completely mad and irresponsible and not adult, like going and eating ice cream in the middle of the night. Besides, I’m hungry. I’m dying for some ice cream,” Hermione insisted.

“You wild woman,” Viktor teased, pulling her toward him by hooking his fingers in her overalls, giving her a peck on the mouth. “Is this one of those fabled pregnancy cravings?”

“I used to laugh at women when they said they had cravings. I thought it was just an excuse. I don’t think it’s an excuse, any more. I don’t know if it’s solely pregnancy-related, but I seriously *need* some ice cream. Some Honeydukes wouldn’t be unwelcome, either. It’s Saturday. They both stay open until midnight. We spent all day cleaning. It’s August. I’m hot, I’m pregnant, and I want ice cream. Don’t argue with me,” Hermione warned.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Far be it from me to stand in the way of being frivolous,” Viktor sighed, heading for the door. “Or between a pregnant woman and her ice cream. Too dangerous.”

“Where are you going?” Hermione called after him.

“To get some money,” he called back from the bedroom. “You really want to go out for nothing but ice cream at this time of night?” he asked when he came back.

“What? Worried I’m going to ruin my figure? Fat chance. Literally. I’ve got a pot belly already,” Hermione said, putting her hands on her hips.

“That is not anything so common as a pot belly,” Viktor insisted, cupping his hand over the swell of her front, where it arched out beneath the maternity

overalls. There was little doubt, even for the casual observer, what the cause of the expansion was. It had the peculiarly ripe and round look of pregnancy. "And I was going to suggest we might eat at The Three Broomsticks."

"I don't want anything from The Three Broomsticks. I want chocolate and ice cream. And Floean Fortescue located his second shop in Hogsmeade a whole six years ago just for our convenience this evening. How can you possibly argue with that kind of planning and forethought? Come on. Live on the edge. Be wild. Not only eat dessert first, *just* eat dessert. We don't even have to go to Diagon Alley any more. We can do this all in one Floo stop. *Please*. I'm begging," Hermione said, smiling and tugging on the neck of his robe.

"No need to b... Was that your stomach growling?" Viktor laughed, looking down at the bulge between them.

"Yes, right on cue. Now, move it," Hermione said with a sheepish grin.

"Yes, madam! Can't have your belly growling and going unrequited. Think you can stand the walk from the inn to Honeydukes? Might be we could buy you a bar of chocolate to tide you over between there and Fortescue's," Viktor said, draping an arm around her shoulders and steering her out of the room toward the Floo.

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"Okay, I know this is going to sound insane, but you wouldn't possibly be able to sell me some milk, would you?" Viktor asked hopefully, leaning against the bar at The Three Broomsticks.

"Milk?" the barman asked incredulously. "Would you like that in a dirty glass?" he smirked. When Viktor didn't laugh, he sobered. "Seriously, mate, this is a bar."

"I'm well aware of that," Viktor sighed, turning sideways to look back at the overstuffed armchair where Hermione was sitting with her back to them, waiting. "That is a pregnant wife. Who decided somewhere about three hearths back that she simply had to have milk to go with the chocolate that we are about to go down the street and buy. Which is just the momentary layover before going to Fortescue's. Now, rather than pointing out the obvious to me, could you answer the question? Could I possibly buy some milk? From you, from the bar, from your Aunt Fanny. I don't really care where it came from, as long as it's milk. We're wasting ice cream time, here," Viktor said calmly, raising his eyebrows.

The barman let out a low whistle. "Been there, done that, mate. Look, I've probably got a fresh bottle in the icebox. Keep it back there for me tea. With my missus, it were Chinese takeaway. I took the Floo to London for enough sweet

and sour chicken to feed half of Birmingham by the time our third got here. And always after nine. Never before,” he groused good-naturedly as he stepped into the back. He came back clutching a glass bottle. “Here, mate. On the house. It’ll be my contribution to the future of the species,” he laughed, waving away Viktor’s attempt to pay.

“Ready to go?” Viktor asked Hermione, offering her a hand up out of the squashy armchair. “Honeydukes?”

“You mean they actually had milk?” Hermione said, pointing at the bottle.

“Sure. All the best bars stock a full range of dairy products,” Viktor said with a shake of his head. “They serve camembert, too.”

“The sarcasm,” Hermione sighed, taking the bottle.

“He happens to keep some here for his tea and he took pity on us,” Viktor explained as they walked toward the door. They walked in silence for most of the trip.

“Is it just me, or is it ever so much cooler out here? The night air feels so much better. It’s been so hot the last few weeks,” Hermione said, tilting her chin up into the soft breeze as she walked the last leg to the front door of Honeydukes.

“Good thing it is, or this chocolate wouldn’t even last the walk down the street to Fortescue’s,” Viktor pointed out, holding the door for her. They spent only a few minutes inside, soon emerging with a small bag of Honeydukes wares and continuing on to Floean Fortescue’s Ice-Cream Parlour.

Fortescue’s was relatively deserted. There was a handful of local Hogwarts students, tucked away in the corner, enjoying one of the last weekends before school began in September, and one woman with a small girl, who was determinedly licking at an ice cream cone that seemed likely to melt and soak right through the waffle cone before she would finish. “Okay, you organized this trip, so, do you know what you want, or do you need to browse?” Viktor asked her.

“Let’s just sit and think it over for a minute,” Hermione said tiredly, sticking her bottom lip out to blow a stray tendril of hair away from her eyes. She stepped over and sank heavily into one of the booths in the front window.

“You okay?” Viktor asked in a low voice, slipping into the other side of the booth.

“Oh, I’m fine. I think cleaning all day just caught up with me,” Hermione said, pushing her hair back with one hand while peering down into the bag. She fished

around for a few moments, coming up with a Chocolate Frog. She opened it and nibbled at it while studying the long list of ice cream flavors. "What were you thinking of getting?"

"Hadn't really thought about it. Probably do what I usually do, tell them to surprise me," Viktor said, reaching across the table and opening the milk. "Are you going to drink any of that, or what?"

"Oh," she said, grabbing the bottle, tipping it to her lips and absently taking a swig. "You might want to think twice about telling them to surprise you. I see that Bertie Botts has branched out into ice cream. I shudder to think about some of them. Euuugh!" Hermione exclaimed, shivering slightly.

"Well, that's one of the hundred and fifty choices eliminated. Eliminate about a hundred and forty-eight more before closing, and we're in business," Viktor said with a smile.

"Very funny," Hermione mumbled indistinctly around a mouthful of chocolate. She took a deep draught from the bottle, then set it down, running her tongue over her lip. "I'll take the Peanut Butter Ball, then," she said finally, nodding to add emphasis.

"Fine. I'll be right back," Viktor told her, getting up and going to the counter.

"Right. What can I get you?" the young witch behind the counter asked.

"A couple of Peanut Butter Balls, I suppose," Viktor said.

"Two bowls?" she asked.

"Yes. Two bowls. Why?" Viktor asked slowly.

"Well, I didn't know if the lady with you wanted one, or you were the only one ordering. Never seen someone bring a snack to the shop to tide them over, before," she said lightly. "We're not generally *that* slow."

"No reflection on you. Pregnant woman. Don't question it. I've learned not to," Viktor replied, giving a 'what can you do?' shrug.

"That's different, then," the witch behind the counter allowed, putting the bowls on the counter. Viktor paid and carried the bowls back to the booth.

Hermione tossed an empty candy bar wrapper into the bag, then the empty Chocolate Frog wrapper. "Now, see, that wasn't so bad, was it?" she asked.

“Relatively pain-free, I suppose,” Viktor admitted, handing her a spoon from the cup on the table, then taking one for himself.

“Speaking of which, we need to paint. Soon,” Hermione said, thwacking her spoon against the hardened chocolate shell surrounding the peanut butter ice cream, which split into two perfect hemispheres.

“Need to move the rest of the furniture, first,” Viktor countered, doing the same.

“Need to decide on a color, first,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “We really should pick up a sample book.”

“This isn’t going to be like when we painted the rest of the house, is it?” Viktor asked warily, nodding politely at the witch walking out with the little girl. She had managed to get nearly as much of the ice cream in her mouth as she had gotten around it.

“What do you mean ‘we’? You came over and did the whole thing behind my back, Mister Impatience,” Hermione said.

“It was either that, or take another set of cans back to the paint shop. I had already made three trips. I was sticking with that color scheme or bust,” Viktor said firmly.

“I couldn’t decide what I liked best,” Hermione said defensively.

“Must have liked those colors well enough. They’ve stayed,” Viktor observed. “I had to paint it, or we would still be waiting to move in.”

“It’s too overwhelming doing a whole house at once. It should be easier, picking out a color for just one room,” Hermione said, scraping another spoonful of ice cream from inside the chocolate shell.

“Ooh, redecorating! That sounds exciting, pets, what are you redecorating?” came a voice from just behind Viktor. Hermione froze for a second, hoping she was mistaken, that she didn’t recognize the voice. But she could almost feel Viktor stiffen up on the other side of the booth, so she wasn’t much surprised nor disappointed when she raised her head to look into the bespectacled face of Rita Skeeter. He always had roughly the same reaction to Rita Skeeter that he would have had to nails scraping a chalkboard. Viktor had once whispered to Hermione that Rita literally set his teeth on edge since he heard what she had pulled on Hermione and Harry in fourth year.

“Look, we’re too tired to play nice right now, so why don’t you run along and we’ll skip the fake politeness and save ourselves a lot of time and trouble all around,

hmm?" Viktor muttered into his bowl.

Rita ignored him and instead slipped into the booth right beside Hermione, who immediately regretted not moving out to the outside edge of the bench as soon as she picked out the voice. "Painting, are we? Painting something new or simply tired of the old?" she asked eagerly, addressing herself to Hermione while whipping her quill and parchment from her handbag.

"We're just painting a bedroom. I think you can skip the 'stop the presses' call," Hermione sighed, sticking the spoon into her mouth to get a bit of chocolate off.

"Well, do tell, anyway," Rita pressed, licking the tip of her Quick-Quotes Quill and setting it hovering over the parchment.

"What could there possibly be to tell about repainting a bedroom?" Hermione snapped irritably.

"Darling, there are people who would be interested in what color your toenails are painted, even more so what you're doing to your house," Rita said, casting her eyes downward. Hermione felt her cheeks start to burn when she realized that Rita was staring intently at the solid bump beneath the overalls. When she had thoroughly inspected Hermione's newly added bulk, she lifted her gaze and gave Hermione a self-satisfied smile, rather like the cat that ate the canary. "If I'm not mistaken, you've put on some weight since I saw you last," she pointed out almost gleefully, touching Hermione's abdomen, a quick pat.

"I suppose I have," Hermione said through gritted teeth, giving a warning glare and a shake of her head when Viktor opened his mouth and looked to be ready to give Rita a thorough raking. He lowered his eyebrows and went back to silently fuming in Rita's direction instead, while Rita dug through her handbag again, fishing out a compact and powdering her nose, oblivious to the silent exchange.

"I thought so when I walked by the window. Why, I said to myself, there are the Krums, I simply must go in and say hello, and if I'm not mistaken, she's put on weight since I saw them at that charity dinner. Not that a bit of extra weight looks bad on you. Actually, it seems to suit you, being a shade plump. Makes you look all domestic and Rubenesque. Been making a lot of late night ice cream runs lately? And Honeydukes trips?" she added pointedly, looking at the bag on the table.

Hermione gave Viktor a sidelong glance, and he lifted one eyebrow ever so slightly. He evidently agreed with her suspicion. Rita had no idea yet that she was pregnant. Hermione had to struggle to maintain a straight face. "Been under a lot of stress, lately, what with the end of the season, charity dinners and

redoing the bedroom,” she said carefully. If she played it just right, they might get out of this yet without Rita splashing their news all over the papers. “Haven’t even decided on a color, yet, and it’s about to drive me mad,” she said, shoving a large spoonful of ice cream into her mouth.

“Oh, I knooow,” Rita droned nasally, in what passed for a sympathetic tone, snapping her compact shut and tossing it back into the handbag. “Redecorating can be so stressful. So, which of the houses are you redoing?”

Viktor sighed heavily, “We’ve just got the one.”

“Still haven’t gotten a summer house? Pity. How boring, having just one house. Someone needs to teach you two that if you’ve got it, you should flaunt it. Well, which one of the fourteen bedrooms, then?” Rita pressed.

“There are only six, if you’re generous. One of them is a glorified closet, so that’s what we use it for,” Viktor said wearily. They had never considered one of the rooms upstairs a bedroom. Hermione had been appalled to learn that it had been intended to house staff of the house-elf sort, when the house had been designed. They had promptly installed a few shelves and a bar, and mostly rotated seasonal clothing in and out of it. The fourth and fifth were still completely empty. They had been held in reserve for the “someday” when they started running out of bedrooms on the ground floor. She had gotten used to the empty rooms upstairs, though she always felt a small pang of remorse that they hadn’t been put to use, yet, whenever she had to visit the closet. At one time, they had even spoken about how easily the attic could be converted into a bedroom, or two, with a divider, if need be. In recent years, she had tried to block out the fact that there was a rather large upstairs not getting much use. Very little of the downstairs, either, except when they had houseguests.

“Colors under consideration? Buying any new furniture?” Rita asked.

Viktor gave a soft, derisive snort under his breath. “Hadn’t thought about it, much, and yes, I imagine we’ll put some new furniture in it,” he said, one corner of his mouth giving a subtle twitch. Only Hermione and a few other people could possibly spot how close he was to laughing outright. “Not much of use in it, right now.”

“Reeeally. Why not?” Rita said, looking Hermione in the face.

Hermione put on what she hoped was an innocently wide eyed look. “We’ve been more or less using it as a junk room for too long. Decided it needed to be put to some use fina-” she broke off mid-word and a look of concern flickered over her face. She regained control and amended, “Finally.” Her tummy had given a curious jerk, nothing like the small, localized flutters she had been feeling

from time to time, when the baby moved.

“Why get a wild hair about it, now?” Rita said, raising one eyebrow suspiciously. Hermione was uncomfortably reminded of the look Crookshanks used to get when he was stalking something, and was just about to corner it. Cats got that look when they smelled a mouse or a garden gnome. Rita Skeeter got the same look when she smelled a bigger story. Her belly gave another quiver, almost like the first, but with an added sinking feeling that had nothing to do with the new resident.

Hermione swallowed hard and glanced at Viktor, who was studying her intently. She felt a gentle bump against the side of her left leg beneath the table. Hermione nudged back softly, the nonverbal equivalent of ‘Are you okay?’ and ‘I’m fine’. For a second, it was all she could do to keep from pressing her foot on top of his, what they had always jokingly referred to as ‘pressing the panic button’. It had been a handy way of saying ‘I most certainly am not fine, get me out of here, somehow’ over the years without drawing too much attention. She had exercised the privilege a lot more often in the first few years they had been married, when public events were still such a new thing to her. When Viktor did it, it was usually to escape a boring or fawning conversation. “Well... it’s a wonderful little room, and it’s a shame we neglected it all this time. We’ve been there the whole time we’ve been married, and not done a thing with it. Eighteen years is too long to let it languish.” Her middle gave another couple of stuttering movements, not painful nor unpleasant, really, but strange.

“Mmm,” Rita said, as though disappointed with the answer. “Are the two of you still not doing anything exciting for your anniversary?” she probed.

“Nothing you’re invited to,” Viktor said lightly. “Thought we might have a dinner for a few people. Nothing big. Might not even be on our anniversary.”

“No gala dinners or anything?” Rita pouted. Hermione took advantage of Rita’s diverted attention to inspect her own front. As she watched, the mound of her belly gave another odd little fluttering jump.

“Not a gala in sight,” Viktor countered. “Some people don’t need to have a big event every time they tie their shoes,” he added.

“Whatever happened to rewarding yourself for a job well done?” Rita said loftily.

“Whatever happened to people meeting their responsibilities without needing a pat on the back every two seconds?” Viktor countered. “I didn’t get married with the expectation of getting a medal for every year we spent together, did you, Hermione?” he asked.

“Hmm? No,” she answered distractedly, looking up.

“I was hoping that the two of you had changed your mind since I asked three weeks ago,” Rita said sourly. “You two are no fun at all. Well, I-” Rita broke off abruptly and whipped around to face Hermione. “That charity dinner *was* a little over three weeks ago, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Hermione answered slowly. She felt like a bug pinned to the wall.

“And did I, or did I not just see those overalls shift?” Rita asked, planting a palm firmly against Hermione’s abdomen, sly smile breaking across her face.

“Hiccups,” Hermione said lamely. *Technically, it is the truth. It’s just that the baby is the one with the hiccups*, she told herself, finally realizing that she was far enough along for that explanation to be possible.

“Then why didn’t I hear you?” Rita asked sharply. “I can’t believe it! You’ve... you have gone and gotten pregnant and not told me, haven’t you?” she added accusingly. “You’re having a baby, aren’t you?” she said so loudly that she drew the attention of the students in the corner.

“What makes you think it’s any of your business either way?” Hermione spat back, glowering at her. The intimidating effect was rather ruined when her stomach gave another synchronized twitch right against Rita’s hand. “And get your hand off of me!” she ordered.

“So, that’s why you’re redoing the bedroom! Making a nursery, aren’t we?” Rita said smugly, setting the Quick-Quotes Quill off at a furious pace. “I should have known you couldn’t have put on that much weight since I saw you last. Not without something out of the ordinary going on! I don’t see how I missed it in the first place, but you didn’t seem to be showing much, then. It’s nearly impossible to miss now, what with you being all plumped up like a little brood hen. And to think, I had you two figured for the ‘we’ll just focus on our careers all our lives and get ourselves a cat when we retire’ types. Tell me, was the bun in the oven a complete accident?” she asked eagerly.

“We’re not answering anything! I can’t believe you!” Viktor said, his jaw dropping. “How crass can you get? Oh, I forgot. With you, that’s not a rhetorical question, it’s a personal challenge...”

“Oh, come on! Don’t play up the wall of silence with me! Do you really think you two can keep this from me until she’s obviously carrying the bass drum, looking like she’s about to pop? I haven’t seen this mentioned anywhere else, not even in the Bulgarian papers. Don’t think I don’t keep an eye out. And if *you* think I’m not going to beat everyone to the punch, if I can, you’ve got another think

coming! Now, tell me, how far along are you? Is that kicking, or is that really hiccups?" Rita exclaimed, rubbing Hermione's belly again.

"Now, see here! Don't you have even a scrap of decency? You make up wild tales about us when we were in school, you printed unsubstantiated stories about us, variously, depending on the day of the week and your mood, dumping, marrying, cheating on, sleeping with and fighting with one another. You crash our wedding, despite *not* being invited, and about a dozen other cockamamie things I could think of, if I bothered. But using our baby as a *story* takes the cake! You *take* your overly manicured hand *off of* my wife and take a hike!" Viktor said in a dangerously low voice, leaning across the table.

"No, *you* see here," Rita said, shaking a manicured finger in his face, "I need a story. And you two are one. Or should I say 'you three'? Like it or lump it, I make my living off of people's lives."

"So do leeches," Viktor interrupted through clenched teeth.

"Now, either you two can give me some details, or I *will* print that the two of you are expecting a completely unplanned and wholly unexpected 'whoops' and that you're anything but happy about it. Won't that make something lovely for them to look up in the Daily Prophet archives in a few years?" Rita said with a smirk. "Or better yet, maybe I'll just happen to imply that perhaps you were somewhere else when the deed was done? Wonder where Harry Potter would have been around that time? You might have been visiting the greenhouse at Hogwarts, too. Or it might turn out to be a redhead when it gets here," she added airily.

"Why, you-" Viktor began, voice dropping even lower.

"What do you want?" Hermione sighed, sounding resigned. "Each time I run into you, I regret more and more not squashing you when I had the chance."

"I'm flattered. Oh, tell me every little detail you can," Rita said sweetly, cupping her hand against the bulge of Hermione's belly again. "Dates, times, gender, hopes, wishes, dreams. Place of conception, if you have any idea... Whatever you've got."

"But you have to agree to some conditions, first. One, no implying this child is anything but completely loved and wanted, because it is. Our child is *not* an unfortunate accident! Two, no implying anything *else*, either. If you so much as psychically will people to think such a thing, we will personally hunt you down and disembowel you. Or I will. And there's not a single Wizengamot that would convict me, because they all know you. That is *not* the hormones talking. Viktor's already wanted to do it a few times. I'm sorry I ever talked him out of it. And finally, stop touching my belly without asking! I am *not* a petting zoo!" Hermione

said indignantly, fixing Rita with a look that made her scoot away slightly.

“Dandy. Now first, when are you expecting the little...” Rita began, but then trailed off, looking puzzled. She absently brushed at the back of her legs, then straightened again. “As I was saying, when is the nipper...” she said, again trailing off to brush at her neck. She stiffened, pressed her lips together so tightly that they turned white, then reached out and swiped the quill and parchment into her hastily opened designer handbag. Some poorly stifled laughter from the Hogwarts students over in the corner filtered over. One older boy with sandy hair was suspiciously red, barely able to contain his snorting laughter, and certainly not able to hide the tears running down his cheeks from the effort. “You little brat!” Rita screeched, jumping up and pointing at him accusingly. “I know who you are, and when I speak to your parents, you’ll be sorry! Oh, yes you will!” she yelled, jerking spastically, trying to scratch between her shoulder blades, then frantically scratching at her thighs. “I’ll run with what I’ve got. Congratulations. Sorry, I’ve got to dash,” she said apologetically to Hermione and Viktor, then sprinted full speed for the door, stylish heels clicking on the floor.

Hermione and Viktor looked at one another, stunned. “What do you suppose that was all about?” she asked.

“Haven’t the foggiest notion,” Viktor replied, wide eyed. The sandy haired boy stood and walked over to the table and giggled uncontrollably for a second while the rest of the group with him filed out the door.

“Mr. Krum, I don’t expect you remember me, do you?” he gasped, wiping the tears and regaining control of himself.

“No. Can’t say I do... Should I? Jog my memory,” Viktor replied.

“I expect I look a bit different. Let’s see if this does it. ‘Boy, if you don’t quit being afraid to open your eyes and pay attention to where you’re going, you’re going to get up close and personal with a tree!’” the boy said with a grin, then waited expectantly.

“You’re not! No! You should be that tall and have a big gap between your teeth!” Viktor said, holding his hand off the ground a good sixteen inches less than the boy’s current height. “Myron Prickett, right?”

“I can’t believe you remembered,” Myron said, looking pleased.

“Well, clue me in, because I have no idea what’s going on,” Hermione said in a dazed voice.

“Myron was one of the kids that came to the Quidditch training day camp that

first year I helped out. Must have been, what, six years ago? Maybe seven.” Viktor said, looking up at the grinning boy.

“More like seven. It was the year before I went off to Hogwarts, and this is my last year. I was ten. I was also petrified of flying. Dad thought it would be a good idea to send me to the camp. Have me face my fears and all. I don’t figure your husband expected to have to spend four hours just coaxing one of the kids to get onto a broom in the first place and then another three days trying to get him to open his eyes to see where he was going when he was more than two feet off the ground,” Myron said with a laugh.

“Want to hear something funny? I’m right with you on that. I let him take care of the flying,” Hermione pointed out.

“You weren’t half bad by the time you left. At least I wasn’t worried you were going to kiss a tree at high speed, anymore,” Viktor laughed.

“I got quite a good grade when I went to Hogwarts. It’s not as though I’ve ever been house team material, but I didn’t kill, maim, or embarrass myself in class, either, thanks to you,” Myron allowed.

“Look, did Rita Skeeter’s rather premature exit have something to do with you?” Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“I admit, it did. Used these on her,” he said, handing her a small box.

“Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes Trained Flea Circus,” Hermione read aloud. “Guaranteed to put a bug in their ear or in their underpants!”

“And why did you set fleas on some woman across the room, pray tell?” Viktor asked lightly.

“Looked like she was harassing the two of you. She had that look like she was smelling blood in the water. Mum always says that when Rita Skeeter gets that look, it can’t be good for whoever she’s talking to. And you two looked like you would just as soon be rid of her, so I obliged,” Myron explained. “Was I wrong?”

“Oh, definitely not. Very astute observation. Mum?” Hermione said questioningly.

“That’s right... your mother’s Eleanor Prickett. Associate Editor of the Prophet,” Viktor filled in.

“Yep. Mum says she’s dropping that woman like a hot potato if she gets the Head Editor job when the current one retires next year,” Myron said, charming grin growing even wider.

“Not that I’m complaining when a knight in shining armor rescues me, but why? It’s not as though it were your problem,” Hermione said, handing the box back.

“Simple. I owed you,” Myron said to Viktor. “All these other kids were bigger, older, whizzes on brooms, out there practicing plays, maneuvers, and formations and all that jazz, and I was a quivering ball of jelly, afraid to get more than three feet off the ground. And you never made me feel like a coward or an idiot because of it. You were real patient with me. Worked with me one on one. It was supposed to be for kids who could already fly, and you had to teach me how to get on the thing, even. By rights, you could have sent me home, if you wanted. I didn’t meet the requirements. I’m probably the only person who ever took flying instruction from you that is that rotten on a broom, but you didn’t care. And you told me it wasn’t important that I wasn’t a dive bomber because I was good at lots of other things. That meant a lot to me. Dad had already given up on teaching me himself. You would have thought I had given my parents a new house when I managed to fly around in the backyard after that camp and not break my neck. Look, Mum and Dad probably won’t be real thrilled that I did this. Or that I spent my allowance at the joke shop, either. But it was worth a grounding,” Myron said modestly, ducking his head.

Viktor stood and clasped Myron’s chin, lifting his face. “Myron, I always said you were a good egg. Look, when Rita calls your parents, and she will, you have them call me to confirm her story.”

“I don’t think Mum and Dad will care that I did it for a good cause,” Myron said with a shrug.

“If you tell anyone I did this, I will deny it to my dying breath, but... kids? What kids? Didn’t see any but that little girl, and she left ages ago. Those students left long before she did, and I know Myron was with them, because he came over and said something on his way out. Rita’s gone off her rocker. I didn’t see any kids, did you?” Viktor said, turning to Hermione.

“Oh, no. Pack of students? She must have stopped by The Hog’s Head for a nightcap or three before she stopped in here,” Hermione said with a grin.

“You’ve got no idea how grateful I am,” Myron said with a sigh.

“I think that was supposed to be our line,” Hermione said, draping a hand across her belly.

“Not to be rude or anything, but... did I hear her screeching something about the two of you expecting a baby?” Myron said, coloring slightly.

“We might as well rent a billboard,” Hermione said with a rueful smile, then she nodded and rubbed a hand over the bulge beneath her overalls.

“Well, congratulations. They’ll be very lucky,” Myron said earnestly.

“What makes you say that, Myron?” Hermione countered.

“You were great with us,” he said simply, looking at Viktor. “And I’ll never forget what he said about you. He told me I shouldn’t worry about not being able to fly all that well, because, well, neither could his wife. But he was still madly in love with her. Otherwise, he talked about you like you hung the moon. I figured if somebody that good on a broom was that wild over someone who couldn’t fly worth beans, it must not be such a big deal that I stunk at that one thing. You’ll make great parents. I need to go. Curfew,” he added with a shrug.

“Thank you, Myron,” Viktor said, offering his hand for a handshake. “Now go, before you get into trouble.” Myron walked out the door and jogged down the sidewalk, giving a friendly wave when he passed by the plate glass window. “What’s the matter with you?” Viktor asked with concern, noticing the tears rolling down her cheeks. He slipped into her side of the booth and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“Who knew that between Rita Skeeter and Myron Prickett, Myron would be the one to make me cry?” she said, sniffing and dabbing at her face with a napkin. Hermione let out a strangled laugh, “And that we would get busted by the baby’s hiccups.” As though right on cue, her middle gave another visible twitch and she laughed in earnest. “Did you really say that about me?” she asked, sniffing.

“Yes. I really said you couldn’t fly worth beans,” Viktor said, kissing her temple. “And all the mushier stuff, too. I had no idea any of it was getting through. Must have. Now, they’re going to close in ten minutes, we need to go. So, here, take what’s left of your milk with you, and I’ll get the Honeydukes bag. Let me leave a little credit for Myron Prickett at the counter, too. He won’t have to worry about ice cream on Hogsmeade weekends for the whole year, if I can help it. Nor will any of his friends.”

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“Truth be told, I’m tired of looking at paint swatches,” Viktor sighed, flopping down in the chair next to the end of the couch where his father sat. “They all look like the same shade of blue to me. I wouldn’t spit for the difference. Seriously, if I shuffled those five around, would you be able to tell?” he asked, pointing to the paint sticks on the coffee table.

“I would not. But she thinks she can. And that is the point,” Petar said, blowing

the steam away from his coffee cup.

“And she’s been this way over everything. Took four trips for curtains,” Viktor complained, leaning his head back and draping his forearm across his eyes.

“She wanted to get them in the right shade, too, maybe,” Petar ventured.

“In the right shade of *white*?” Viktor asked incredulously, dropping his arm. “Are they all like this?”

“Women or mothers?” Petar said, the barest hint of a smile curling up one corner of his mouth.

“Either,” Viktor replied.

“I expect so, to some degree. Nesting. With your mother it was knitting. Ekaterina laid in enough booties, hats, and afghans to last a lifetime by the time she was six months along. You would have thought we lived in the Arctic. And you were not exactly born in the middle of winter!” Petar said with a laugh, taking an experimental sip of the coffee. “I always said that was the reason you hated being bundled up later. Got enough of it when you were a baby. You were probably eight months old before you slept under the same afghan three times. Don’t worry. You get to go insane later. It just won’t be over things like curtains.”

“I hate to say it, but Mama’s welcome to this shopping trip,” Viktor said with a shake of his head.

“Am I to take it you don’t have any furniture picked out yet, either?” Petar asked, cocking a thick eyebrow at him. “If not, I brought something for you.”

“You didn’t...” Viktor began but Petar cut him off with an impatient hand.

“Don’t tell me what I didn’t and shouldn’t. It’s yours. I doubt very much Ekaterina and I will be getting any further use out of it,” he said, getting up and walking toward the back door. There, tucked in beside the wooden bench and the coat rack, was an ornately carved cradle, out of hornbeam. It gleamed softly, and the smell of fresh polish could be detected. “Is not as though we cannot afford a new one for when the baby sleeps over. Was not true when you came along. We could barely afford the baby to go in it, then.”

“But your grandfather made this...” Viktor protested, laying a hand along the rail and setting the cradle to swinging silently in the frame.

“And he was your great-grandfather. Pity to let it sit in the attic or the spare bedroom and gather dust when it could be rocking a baby again, full time,” Petar

mused, touching it with a finger and stilling it once more. "You and Hermione take it. Put it in the nursery, whatever shade of blue it ends up being, and use it," Petar ordered.

"Oh, alright," Viktor sighed. "Not going to let me decline it, are you?"

"No. Now that is out of the way, what is really bothering you? Isn't paint," Petar said bluntly.

"What?"

"What is really bothering you. It isn't paint. Or cradles. Or furniture. I know you," Petar said, narrowing his eyes. "Now, what is it really?"

"That Skeeter woman. You would never believe what she tried to pull last night. Unbelievable, even for her," Viktor spat, crossing his arms.

"So, tell me, anyway," Petar said with a shrug, walking back toward the living room.

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"Anyway, if it hadn't been for a bunch of fleas and a lucky coincidence with a kid I made an impression on in Quidditch camp, she would probably be over here now. Taking pictures of the bed, knowing her," Viktor said with a grimace.

"Has that boy's mother called yet?" Petar asked, finishing his coffee and setting the cup down.

"No. I'm guessing she'll call this afternoon. I bet Rita isn't up before noon. Too busy going to events evenings. I need to bail Myron out. I owe him that much," Viktor said.

"So, bail yourself out, too," Petar replied, rubbing his chin.

"What? What do you mean about bailing myself out?" Viktor asked.

"This Rita Skeeter, she is interested only in what she can print first, yes? So it looks like she knows more than everyone else. So, if you were to, say, offer to talk to an Associate Editor for a feature piece before Skeeter's next column, would make her item worthless, hmm? Less than worthless, maybe?" Petar said, arching an eyebrow.

"That's brilliant! That idea is pure evil. Only problem is, it would still be selling out," Viktor murmured.

“Cat is out of the bag. One way or another, it is going into the paper that you and Hermione are expecting a baby. Now, it can either be a possibly nasty piece that woman mostly makes up, or it can be on your own terms. Offer this Prickett woman first baby picture. A picture of the nursery when it is finished. Nice, short interview. What could it hurt? Couldn't hurt to slip a sentence or two in there about mud slinging journalists, either, hint, hint. Maybe the Head Editor happens to read it? Who says Hermione even has to talk to them? Could just be you,” Petar pointed out.

“I'll talk to her about it. No guarantee she isn't as bad as Skeeter. Her son's a good boy, so that's one mark in her favor. She didn't seem too fond of Rita, either, so that's two marks, I suppose. Couldn't hurt, I guess. Just seems wrong, trading your baby for the best offer like a... a... commodity,” Viktor sighed.

“You do what you have to do. When it was just you, you could tell them to go soak their heads. Changes when you get a family. You have to compromise, sometimes,” Petar observed. “Fight fire with fire. Just don't get down into the gutter with her. Only gets you both dirty. When was the last time you spoke to a journalist?”

“Willingly? Four years ago, when they profiled the camp and I was volunteering again. That, I didn't mind. I was happy to talk about that,” Viktor said with a shrug.

“Why should you mind talking about how happy you and Hermione are to be starting a family, then? Not as though you need to say a lot. If you dole your time out only every four years, *any* interview is a big deal,” Petar said significantly.

“Seriously, when did you start sitting around thinking these things up?” Viktor laughed.

“I had a lot of time to reflect on how I should have handled people who asked about you when you were still in school. I should have been a bit more clever about dealing with them than I was. Not so much telling them to jump in lakes and a little more thinking about when it might be a good thing to talk,” Petar allowed. “Maybe it would have given you a better chance on handling that Skeeter woman at Hogwarts, building up a few markers here and there.”

“Little chance there. Someone determined to lie isn't going to be turned to your advantage. And she was the only game in town at the time. It wasn't as though I could call a press conference then. I think you did far better teaching me to ignore it completely when possible. Now, if only I had listened,” Viktor said, grinning. “Bet Harry wished I had, too.”

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“Well, that’s it. Somewhere a touch warm must have frozen over,” Ron said wonderingly, staring at the paper he had carried in.

“Why’s that? And for the third time, did you want some coffee or not?” Harry said, lifting the pot and giving a shrug to Hannah across the breakfast table.

“You will never believe what’s in the paper,” Ron responded.

“Well, I won’t if you never let me look at it. What’s got you so fascinated? It’s not Rita Skeeter, is it? Hermione told me about their run-in with her. If she’s so much as implied...” Harry trailed off as Ron handed him the paper. “I’ll be. Hell must’ve frozen over. Viktor did an interview with the Prophet.”

“What? Voluntarily?” Hannah said, getting up and reading over Harry’s shoulder.

“Hmmm...” Harry said, skimming the article. “Short, not overly sugary or simpering, no melodrama, just a nice personal piece, so it can’t have been written by Skeeter. And he’s not hogtied in the photo. Byline, Eleanor Prickett, Associate Editor. What gives?” Harry asked, looking puzzled. Hannah snatched up the paper and began to read, then flip the pages. “Last time he talked to anybody even resembling a reporter for more than two minutes was the last time he volunteered for the Quidditch camp. Wouldn’t have done it then, but it was the only way he could get them to talk to all the volunteers. And I’d sooner guessed that I would see a pig wearing ballet slippers, playing the banjo and whistling Beethoven’s Fifth, than see Viktor voluntarily let someone come in and take pictures of the house. I don’t get it.”

“Flip on over to Rita’s column, and I think you’ll have your answer,” Hannah said, stifling a laugh. “How he got in with the Associate Editor, I don’t know, but I think she had a chat with her higher ups...”

Harry skimmed for a moment, then read aloud, “So, my dear pets, this is Rita’s last column. She’s retiring and heading for the coasts of Spain, to live out her retirement in the lifestyle to which she’s become accustomed. Not a word about Viktor and Hermione or the baby... he did it to get her fired. Retiring, my Aunt Fanny! He got her fired!”

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“Here! Feel, feel it?” Hermione said excitedly, grabbing Viktor’s hand and pressing it against her bare stomach, across the navel, which was starting to flatten out.

"I don't feel anything. It's hopeless. Finish getting dressed," Viktor said, shaking his head. He took his hand from her belly and planted both hands on her shoulders, instead. "Paint. We need paint. No changing your mind fifteen times, no sending it back to be remixed over and over, pick a color and stick with it, because we don't have the time... I'm wasting my breath, aren't I?"

"I'm beginning to think this baby just likes messing with my mind. I say something and it stops moving," Hermione pouted, buttoning up her blouse and smoothing it over the dome of her belly.

"I don't know what you're complaining about. I'm the one being slighted," Viktor complained. "You get moving all over the place, and what do I get? Nothing. Squat. Lays low every time I put my hand on there. Have you considered the possibility that they're shy?"

"Won't be long before I'll be complaining about how much it kicks, I suppose," Hermione allowed. "Remind me to get some lotion while we're out. This itching is driving me mad," she added, scratching her belly through her blouse. They took the Floo to The Three Broomsticks, and walked the couple of blocks to Enchanting Interiors.

"Ah. Got your paint samples all ready. Three different shades of light blue, take your pick," the owner said cheerfully when they stepped through the door, ringing the bell above. He indicated the samples on the counter. Hermione considered the three paint sticks for a space, and when no decision seemed imminent, the wizard cleared his throat and announced hopefully, "Be right in the back when you make up your mind."

"Hermione, pick one already. Just pick one. Neville, Ginny, Harry and Ron are all showing up to help me paint in three hours. Which they will have a decidedly hard time doing, if there is no paint. The baby will not be scarred for life if you choose the wrong shade of blue," Viktor sighed.

"I can't even make a decision about paint. How am I going to make a decision about anything else? What kind of mother am I going to make? I'm going to be terrible at this..." Hermione said, lower lip trembling.

"Now, stop that. It's just paint. It can be fixed later if we hate it. Or if they hate it. It's not a decision of earth shattering importance. Life is just one little decision after another, and you seem to have done fine with it, so far. Would it help if I chose? You're okay with all three of those, right? You won't jump off a bridge if it's any of those three?" Viktor probed. Hermione shook her head slowly. "Fine." Viktor closed his eyes, swung his arm around in a slow circle, and dropped a finger at random onto the paint stick on the far right. "That one. Is that one alright?" Hermione nodded mutely. "Can we tell him to mix it?" Hermione nodded

again. "What's the matter, then?"

"This is all going so fast," Hermione whispered. "I don't feel prepared. At all."

"Not as though they come with an instruction manual that you can figure out. There's no exam. They're more of an experiment in prog... why do I get the feeling we're going to be stopping by Flourish and Blotts before we go home? Would it make you feel better if you had something to read while we're painting? Something to study?"

"Maybe," Hermione said with an uncertain shrug.

"Let's go pick up the lotion while he mixes this, and then we'll go by the bookshop. Can't hurt to have something to read," Viktor said, draping an arm around her shoulders and steering her toward the back.

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"Finally get all the paint off?" Hermione asked when Viktor came out of the bath.

"I think so. Short of taking a bath in turpentine, I think I'm as clean as it's going to get," he said, finishing toweling his hair. He stood next to the bed, looking at Hermione, who was perched on the edge of it, unbuttoning her blouse from the bottom up.

"What?" she asked, grinning nervously.

"Nothing. Just glad that's done," Viktor replied, grinning back.

"No, really. What?" Hermione insisted, picking up the lotion from the bedside table.

"Let me do that," Viktor said, tossing the towel across the chair beside the bed and kneeling in front of her. She obligingly let him take the bottle, putting her arms by her sides, spreading the open sides of her shirt around the swell of her belly. Viktor poured some lotion into his palm, then rubbed his hands together to spread it out, smoothing it onto her tummy, then worked it into the skin. He ran a fingertip around her navel, then cupped his hands against the warm curve of her abdomen. Suddenly, his eyes grew wide.

"There! Did you feel that?" Hermione asked.

A slow smile broke over Viktor's face. "I did," he breathed. He rubbed his palm over her pregnant belly, near where he had felt the first kick, and another fleeting thump passed under his hand. "I felt it." He spread his hands wide, covering as

much of the area of her middle as possible. Another couple of gentle, fluttering movements could be detected on the other side of the skin. "I felt our baby," he whispered in an awed tone. They froze there, both unmoving and silent for several minutes before Hermione broke the quiet.

"I think that's it for now... You felt it... you finally felt it," she whispered, the excitement evident in her voice. Viktor leaned forward and rested his forehead against her belly for a moment, then his cheek, while Hermione twined her fingers in his dark hair. He planted a soft kiss just above her navel, then raised up to put one on her lips. He pushed her gently back toward the mattress, crossways on the bed, right hand braced between her shoulder blades, the other cupped around her bulging side. She used her hands to push herself back further onto the bed, and his hands moved to her chest, fingers plucking at the top two buttons, freeing them and peeling the fabric away.

She raised herself, allowing him space to reach behind and unhook her bra, slipping it off after the blouse. He cupped her breasts, teasing the darker, more sensitive nipples with his fingertips, then trailed kisses down her neck and collarbone, slipping his hands lower to caress the bulge between them. He peeled the waistband of her knickers down the slope of her lower belly, kissing the underside of her swollen middle. Then he slid them down her thighs, below her knees, and she shook them off her ankles, letting them drop off the edge of the bed. Hermione's hand snaked down through the narrow space between them, to cup him, the angle somewhat awkward because of her changing shape. "Mmmph... let me..." Viktor murmured into her ear, before raising back up to kneel on the mattress between her tented knees. He peeled his boxers down, then leaned over her once more and discarded them, much as she had.

Viktor stroked her nipples lightly, kissing her chin and neck when she threw her head back and closed her eyes. Hermione let out a soft moan when she felt him brush against the curve of her belly, warm and hard. She tilted her face to his and they brushed lips, then kissed in earnest, lips parted, tongues tasting and testing. Hermione's eyes flew open with a jolt when he pulled away for more than a second, and she could no longer sense him over her. She met his eyes and held out her arms to him, kneeling between her knees, in a silent plea.

A puzzled look crossed his face, then he leaned over her again. "Sorry, were you not ready to move on, yet?" he asked, nuzzling against her ear.

"Move on?" she echoed, rubbing her hands between his shoulder blades.

"From foreplay to the main event," Viktor elaborated.

"I am," she answered evenly, slightly puzzled herself, now. It didn't dawn on her, the reason why he had pulled away until he did it the second time, stroking his

hand over her blossoming belly as he raised up. She felt a prick of self-consciousness that made her lay her own hands on the swell of her stomach. It had grown so much and so fast, that she barely even realized. Hadn't realized it already made their usual closeness when making love completely impossible.

"Are you sure you're okay with this? You wouldn't rather try some other position?" Viktor asked hesitantly, resting his hands on her thighs. She nodded mutely, and he entered her, propping well back, his body and his weight completely off of her.

*Ridiculous how a few inches can seem such a lonely distance. You get pregnant, you get bigger. You knew that, Hermione,* Hermione chided herself. But it did feel strangely lonely, until he raised his eyes to hers once more and began caressing the curve of her belly in time with his thrusts.

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Hermione woke to the curious sensation of the baby stirring beneath her skin, and a strange feeling at her navel. She rubbed her hand over it, but it didn't abate. Groggily, she finished rolling onto her back and peeled the sheet away, looking down at her belly, which stuck prominently between her ruffled, wrinkled pajama top and bottom. It took a moment for the change to register, but she finally pegged the difference. Her navel, instead of being a fleshy dent, as it once had been, was now a fleshy knob, turned completely inside out from the pressure of the baby growing within. Tentatively, she pressed her fingers around it, and was rewarded with a solid kick from inside, as well as a feeling of tenderness. She smiled softly, then tucked herself back into the curve of Viktor's sleeping form in the thin early morning light.

She slept on until later in the morning, when Viktor shifted on the mattress, endeavoring to disentangle himself from her without waking her. "Sorry... go back to sleep," he murmured when her eyes fluttered.

"No, no, don't get up yet," she pleaded, throwing her arms around his neck.

"I have to. We can't have eight people over to dinner tonight if we have nothing to feed them," he protested, pecking her on the lips and gently prying one arm loose.

"I popped," Hermione mumbled sleepily, her eyes already closed again.

"Beg pardon?" Viktor replied, pausing halfway up out of the bed.

"My belly button finally popped," she explained dreamily, burrowing back down into the pillow.

“Well, congratulations, then. I think. Happy anniversary,” he said, then waved at her dismissively when he realized she had already fallen back into the even breathing of sleep. He walked tiredly to the kitchen for a much needed cup of coffee.

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“Now what was it you wanted again?” the teenaged witch behind the butcher’s counter asked idly, then blew a bubble, the size of which rivaled her head.

“Pot roast. Same thing I asked for the other three times you’ve been over here. And... could you... put that back in your mouth, please? It’s rather putting me off of buying pot roast, should I ever actually get any,” Viktor said wearily.

“Right, Bub, keep yer robe on,” she said, after carelessly sucking the gum back into her mouth and enthusiastically setting in on it like a cow, instead. The glistening ring through her nose reinforced the image. “How big a one didja want?”

“Enough to feed ten,” Viktor replied.

“We ain’t gonna have one that big,” the witch protested, studying her nails, which were a length and shade that would have given even Rita Skeeter pause. Her short, spiky hair matched them perfectly, a bright, neon green that would have been a bit loud even for Tonks, back in her early days as an Auror.

Viktor heaved a deep sigh. “Maybe I should elaborate. I don’t require that this pot roast be all in one cohesive unit. I don’t care if it’s ten individual roasts, if that’s what I have to settle for, but I want enough pot roast to feed ten people. Doable?” he asked patiently, raising his eyebrows. Across the store, another high pitched shriek rang out, followed by a fresh demand for candy, from a little boy named Reginald. Or at least, that’s the name his mother kept using to scold him, in a tone and volume that would have put a Molly Weasley Howler to shame.

“My, what fancy words. I’ll ask. Be with you in a minute, lady, don’t get your knickers all in a twist,” the young witch added to the older woman alternately browsing the other end of the counter and then browsing the younger witch’s outfit, then walking off toward the back.

“Hmph. No respect,” the older witch said quietly.

Viktor planted his elbows on the counter and put his face in his hands and muttered to himself, “There *are* good ones. Myron. Myron for one. Not all of them are like that, even the teenagers. And the Weasleys. They don’t all go running through stores, shrieking like banshees... so there are some good ones. Keep

telling yourself that. Dear Lord, let us get one of those.”

Viktor felt a tap at his elbow. “Excuse me, are you alright?” came a soft voice. He looked up to find that the woman at the end of the counter had moved down beside him.

Viktor was just about to answer when the by now infamous Reginald came barreling by, ducking back down an aisle at top speed, carrying a bar of candy. His mother ran after him with her shopping basket, yelling, “Reginald! You get back here right this instant! I said you couldn’t have that! Reginald! I’m going to put you in the naughty chair when we get home!”

When the racket had died down, he looked back at the older witch and said, “No. No, I’m not. I think I’m having some sort of market-induced nervous breakdown, but other than that... well, I’m still rotten. Look, am I the only one who wants to go *buy* whatever the heck it is that Reginald wants if it would just shut him up?”

“I’ve been biting my tongue for the last forty minutes,” the witch allowed. “Some children just have no self-control and some parents have no control over them. And some people who aren’t *children* just have no respect. I’m beginning to think you should have to get a license to raise children. Parents don’t teach them anything, anymore. All too busy thinking of themselves. Think you can get all the things you need out of books, instead of using their God-given sense. Youth today. All trashy and disrespectful. Parents want to go in for all this touchy-feely nonsense, be their friends and no spanking. Heaven forbid you spank them! And that’s the result! Why, in my day-” the witch began, nodding significantly at the punk-haired teen in the back, seemingly just getting wound up.

“Now, I’m sure when I was her age, I was just about like her, a real pain in the... No. No, I wasn’t. Not like that. But I’m sure I gave my parents plenty of grief, anyway,” Viktor interrupted, suddenly feeling defensive on her behalf. It was only a moment before she popped back through the swinging doors, balancing two wrapped packages.

“There you go. Sorry you had to wait so long. Two roasts. And sorry if I sounded shirty, earlier. I closed up for Mum last night to give her a night off ‘fore I go back to ole Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,” the teen explained, jerking her thumb over her shoulder at the witch in the back. “Kinda tired. Wow, Reginald’s a real rounder, isn’t he?” the young witch observed as Reginald and his mother made the circuit in the other direction, still in full voice.

“Yes, yes, he is,” Viktor agreed, settling one of the wrapped roasts into the shopping trolley. “He’s been entertaining, to say the least,” Viktor added with a weak smile.

“Good spanking is what Reginald needs,” the older witch asserted.

“My parents never laid a finger on me. Didn’t need to,” Viktor said, putting the other roast in and shooting the older witch a look. “They thought that all spanking taught you was that it was okay to hit your child. Sometimes, I would a lot rather have *had* a beating.”

“New age parenting books, they’re all to blame,” the older witch sniffed, as though she hadn’t heard. “No one knows how to raise kids, any more. They all have to *read* all the so called *experts*.” Viktor simply trudged off without saying anything, pushing the trolley toward the till up front.

At the till, a young woman was juggling her purse in one hand, while shushing a crying baby on her shoulder. “He’s got colic,” the woman said apologetically to the wizard as she handed over her money. “Hasn’t slept properly in a week. I haven’t, either. What I wouldn’t give for a solid eight hours. Or two, even,” she added, accepting her change and walking off.

“Ready to pay, or not quite, yet?” the wizard behind the till prompted.

“Ready to pay? That, I’m ready for,” Viktor admitted. “For the groceries, at least.”

“Must be a full moon,” the wizard observed placidly, as Reginald and his mother took another round.

“Maybe it’s the heat. Gotten everyone cranky,” Viktor said, wiping the beads of sweat off of his forehead and upper lip with the back of his hand before taking his change.

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“Is it just me, or is this heat insane?” Hermione asked, sitting down at the kitchen table and fanning herself with her free hand.

“No, it’s fecking hot. I was broiling by the time I got up this morning, and that’s plain wrong. You should be able to put the carrots and potatoes in there about thirty minutes from now,” he added, shutting the oven door and coming over to sink limply into the chair next to her.

“I thought maybe it was only me. All the baby insulation,” Hermione said, plucking the sweat-soaked top she was wearing away from her belly. The instant she let go, it stuck to her skin again.

“If it is, call the Prophet, because I must have one in the oven, too. Let me see,” Viktor interjected.

“Let you see what?” Hermione asked, plainly confused.

“Your new outie,” Viktor said with a grin.

“Ohhh. Here,” she said, holding her top up, revealing her plump, round tummy and the new shape of her navel. Viktor stroked his hand over it, his palm coming away damp. He didn’t even bother to hide wiping his hand off on his robe. “I never thought I would say this, but thank goodness autumn’s coming. I feel completely grotty in this heat,” Hermione complained. “Want me to make the salad?”

“No. Go on and get ready, if you want,” he said after a moment’s consideration.

“Are you sure? I mean, about all I’ve done is chop the vegetables,” Hermione asked, wiping at the sweat on her forehead.

“I’m sure.”

“A bath would be great. Get out of these sweaty clothes...” Hermione said, seemingly reluctant to get up.

“Go on. Take a bath. You made the dessert,” Viktor said dismissively, taking a drink from the glass of ice water he had sitting on the table.

“I’d kiss you if we weren’t both disgusting,” Hermione said, getting up and walking toward the bath, pushing her damp hair back. For the first time, Viktor noted that her gait had changed slightly. When she had disappeared down the hall, he put the cold glass against his forehead and closed his eyes.

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“Is it awful of me not to want to dress up?” Hermione sighed, holding her hair out of the way while Viktor fastened her necklace. She had finally settled on a pair of capri pants and a light peasant blouse, the coolest looking thing in her wardrobe.

“I think they’ll understand. Why on earth did we volunteer to cook? We should have just taken everyone out,” Viktor said, giving her shoulders a squeeze.

“Because we didn’t know it was going to be a thousand degrees. Maybe we should have just begged them all to bring two dishes each, instead of one. Or sandwiches,” Hermione allowed. “What do you reckon Molly’s bringing?” she asked. After a long pause, she prompted, “Hello? Something more interesting elsewhere?”

“Hmm?”

“Never mind. Doorbell,” Hermione announced, heading out of the kitchen to the back door. She propped it out of the way, allowing Arthur the room to maneuver a large glass casserole dish through the doorway.

Molly, right behind him, fell on Hermione almost immediately, hugging her about the neck then putting a palm on her middle. “Put it on the table, Arthur... Hermione! Look at you! You look the absolute picture of health. How are you feeling, dear?”

“Right now? Melted,” Hermione admitted, “positively melted.”

“I know. This heat is a menace,” Molly observed, taking in Hermione’s flushed cheeks. “I still say, you should have let me do the cooking and taken it easy-”

“Actually, truth be told, Viktor did most of it. Besides, we didn’t really want to eat out and make a big fuss,” Hermione demurred, looking down at Molly’s hand resting on the swell of her stomach. The baby made a jerky movement and Molly gave it an affectionate rub.

“Feeling the baby kick a lot?” Molly asked, smiling.

“Quite a lot, lately. Mostly in the mornings,” Hermione replied. *Odd how an uninvited touch from some people can set me so on edge, while this feels so... natural.*

“You look completely lovely. You’re starting to really get that glow,” Molly said, taking her hand away and cupping Hermione’s cheek instead.

“That glow thing is a myth,” Hermione argued. Already starting to get clammy from the heat, despite all the last minute Cooling Charms, she currently felt anything but ‘lovely’.

“Nonsense! There’s something about carrying a life inside you. If there’s any time when a woman looks even more beautiful than on her wedding day, it’s when she’s pregnant. You look beautiful, honey,” Molly insisted.

“Don’t argue with the Weasley matriarch. Gets you nothing but grief,” Ron said, poking his head in the back door. “Can we come in? We come bearing an offering of mashed potatoes.”

“Get in here and don’t go letting all the cool air out, Ron Weasley! And I brought sweet potato casserole, dear. I know you love them,” Molly added to Hermione.

“Funny. That was our reasoning with the mashed potatoes. Hope you like lots of potatoes,” Susan said with a shrug, lifting the bowl she carried.

“Obviously, it’s well known I love potatoes, then,” Hermione said with a limp shrug.

“Wait! Don’t shut the door!” Harry squeaked, sticking a foot between the door itself and the jamb. “Green beans coming through, and fresh baked bread right behind us,” he added, jerking his head back toward Ginny and Neville behind. Ron held the door and let them through.

“Right. Well, this is all of us then, isn’t it? When do we eat?” Neville asked eagerly.

“Neville! You could at least say hello first!” Ginny scolded.

“Hello. When do we eat? I’m starved. Been smelling bread all afternoon and was threatened within an inch of my life if I so much as looked at it cross eyed,” Neville said defensively. “You would think there was gold in that breadbasket,” he said, nodding at the basket Ginny had hooked over her arm.

“I’m going to put something in your breadbasket in a minute,” Ginny complained, tapping him lightly with the corner of it. “Here, put it on the table if you’re so all-fired impatient,” she ordered, thrusting it into his hands. “Happy anniversary, how are you?”

“Soon as it all gets on the table, we’ll eat. I’m fine. Starting to feel a tad like a Christmas turkey, though,” Hermione said as they all walked into the kitchen.

“Christmas turkey?” Ron echoed.

“You can get these turkeys at Muggle markets that have this little spring loaded pop-up thing stuck in it that’s supposed to show you when it’s done. I think I’m done,” Hermione said with a short laugh, lifting her blouse to reveal her navel.

“You’ve gone and turned inside out on us? What do you do for an encore?” Ron teased, leaning over to get a closer look.

“Expand at an astounding rate,” Hermione deadpanned.

“You may have ‘popped’, but I hardly think that’s ready to come out of the oven, just yet. Have to be cooked at least... what, ten more weeks? Eleven, maybe? Feel odd?” Harry asked curiously.

“To me or to you? Feels fairly odd to me. Want to feel? Baby’s awfully active.

Kicking up a storm right now, in fact,” Hermione replied. Harry and Ron both put out a tentative hand, resting against the curve of her belly on opposite sides.

After a moment, Ron spoke. “That is completely weird, Hermione. I mean, that’s a part of your navel no one’s ever seen,” Ron said, running a finger over it lightly. Well, I’m ready to eat, now. I’ve done it all. Felt a human being inside another human being. Can’t be anything left after that.”

“It is a lively little thing, isn’t it? I’m surprised you can’t *see* your belly move, it’s kicking so hard,” Harry said with a grin, removing his hand as well, after running the palm over her belly button.

“Might yet,” Molly interjected. “Ron there bounced around like a Bludger before he came.”

“Enough warm and fuzzy baby stories about me, Mum. Seriously, let’s eat,” Ron pleaded.

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“So, you came in to four hundred frogs in the house?” Harry asked, his jaw dropping with disbelief, pausing halfway to his mouth with his loaded dessert spoon.

“At least that many. Maybe five hundred. We were tossing frogs out in the back garden for three weeks. I still don’t know exactly how Fred and George managed it, but they really did want a pet frog pretty badly, seems like. I don’t think they even did it on purpose,” Arthur said, laughing. “They were ten at the time, weren’t they, Molly?”

“Sounds about right. That was an awful year! They were bad enough once they got their wands and could halfway control what they did. But ten! Worse than toddler years for sheer unpredictability! Explosions of uncontrolled magic all over the place. Once, I turned my back and they ‘accidentally’ wished Ginny up the chimney. Took me a solid hour to pry her back out, and she wailed the whole time,” Molly explained.

“She probably deserved it,” Ron teased.

“Ron! It wasn’t funny, being stuck up there in the dark. I was terrified I was going to stay in there forever. And it didn’t help, having the three of you down there, laughing your heads off!” Ginny scolded.

“I wanted to butter her up, but Mum didn’t think it was a good idea,” Ron snickered.

“Oh, go butter your big, fat head, Ron,” Ginny said with a smile and a gentle shove of Ron’s shoulder. “Could have buttered it when you got it stuck through the stair railing, too, Mister ‘I just wanted to see if my head would fit between there’. You got yourself into that predicament.”

“Well, it was wonderful, but hadn’t we better get home, Molly girl? We have to get up early. We were roped into visiting the zoo with some of the grandbabies,” Arthur said, putting his napkin down.

“We had better go, too, hadn’t we?” Neville asked, nudging Ginny’s elbow. She nodded and dabbed at her lips.

“Might as well make it all the Weasleys at once,” Susan allowed. “Some of us don’t have a day off tomorrow, like some people I know,” she added, looking significantly at Harry, who stuck his tongue out mischievously.

“Don’t all of you run off at once,” Hermione protested, but when the three couples insisted, she and Viktor bid them goodbye at the door. “We haven’t run you two off, have we?”

“Oh, no, we can stay a while longer, if you’ll have us. Gotten much more done on the nursery?” Hannah asked, finishing her coffee.

“Got a rocker and a changing table, at least. And some baby clothes. Want to see?” Hermione countered.

“Love to. Harry?” Hannah said, getting up.

“Sure, I’ll look at the furniture. Haven’t seen it after the painting, either. Not since it dried. Coming?” Harry said to Viktor, shoving his chair back and following.

“I’ll clear this off,” Viktor said, shaking his head.

“We decided on the oak with the hornbeam inlay, where we can get it. To match the cradle,” Hermione said, pointing.

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Hannah breathed, setting the cradle in motion.

“You said that was Viktor’s when he was small? Must have taken great care of it. It is beautiful,” Harry said, running a hand down one corner post.

“And Petar’s. And Petar’s father’s. That thing is older than the lot of us put together,” Hermione said. “Let me show you the catalog. We narrowed down the dressers to three choices,” she added, picking up a furniture catalog from the

changing table and thumbing through it. Harry and Hannah perused and admired the furniture in the room and the catalogs for some time.

“Well? Baby clothes?” Hannah asked eagerly.

“And there’s my cue to exit and talk to Viktor instead. Try not to stay until midnight, oohing and aahing over booties,” Harry said lightly, kissing Hannah’s cheek.

“Go on, then. Don’t know what you’re missing,” Hannah insisted. Harry ambled out the door and into the kitchen. He was surprised to find it deserted, the table already cleared and the dishes in progress. He wandered on to the living room, and found it similarly deserted. He came back and stood in the middle of the kitchen, puzzling over where Viktor might have gone when a movement out in the back garden caught his eye. He walked softly to the back door, looking out onto the moonlit lawn. On the garden swing, back to the house, sat a tall figure, swinging languidly back and forth. Harry hesitated a moment before putting his hand on the door and opening it, stepping out into the back garden. It was much cooler than it had been earlier in the evening, but still humid and close.

“Hey. This a private party, or can I join you?” Harry prompted.

“Sit,” Viktor said simply, not looking around.

“Wondered what had happened to you,” Harry replied, and when several seconds passed without response, he cleared his throat and tried again. “You’ve been awfully quiet tonight. Even for you... Hardly said six words all evening. Something wrong?” All Harry got in response was a barely perceptible shake of the head in the negative. “That was a mighty weak denial,” Harry cajoled. “Come on. Really. Something’s wrong,” he pressed.

“No... yes... maybe... I don’t know,” Viktor sighed. “Needed some air.”

“Well, something’s bothering you. Heck of a lot cooler in the house,” Harry insisted. “Can’t hurt to talk about it. Unless it’s me or something I did, in which case, by all means, lie and don’t tell me.”

“Funny. It’s all turned around, now. Week ago, it was *her* being insane. Now it’s me,” Viktor murmured.

“Hmm?”

“I don’t know what it is, but... the last few days especially... this has hit me like a ton of bricks. This whole thing,” Viktor said.

“What whole thing?” Harry prodded.

“That we’re going to be parents. We have a baby coming. In ten weeks or so, maybe. That... that we’re going to be responsible for a child from here on out. An entire life. That I’m going to be a father... and I have no idea what I’m doing... all of it,” Viktor explained, making a helpless gesture with his hands.

“Err... I hardly think you failed to notice that having a baby meant all that came with it, before now. I thought you were the one busy being sensible about just how much you can’t possibly know before you start trying it out with a real live kid. I mean, Hermione told me about the little paint choice crisis...” Harry replied.

“It’s not as though I don’t know... didn’t know... that it’s all part and parcel of the deal. That kind of responsibility. I mean, that whole seventeen years of responsibility line is a crock. It’s the rest of your life. You don’t stop being a parent just because someone has another birthday. And I know babies don’t come with instruction manuals. You’re dealing with a wholly unknown quantity, someone who is their own person and their own mind. And two weeks ago, I felt perfectly prepared. Well, not perfectly, but as prepared as I could get. I... what kind of person wants a baby for eighteen years and doesn’t at least think about what it really means? What you’re really taking on... It’s just... it’s seemed so... *real*, lately. Inescapably real,” Viktor said, picking at a hangnail that Harry suspected wasn’t really there.

“What brought that on?” Harry queried.

“Feeling it, I suppose. I... I hate to say this Harry, but up until then, it was more a concept. Something way out there in the future and a bit of a vague notion, really. Kind of hard to convince yourself that this new bulge in your wife’s figure is a whole other person. Until you feel it move. Then... bam... it’s real, alright. And you realize you’ve got little more than two months before it’s here. *Here* here. In your face here. And you haven’t the foggiest notion what kind of father you’re going to make, and you start looking around and wondering how the hell you manage, how other people manage, the good or the bad. I mean, this morning, I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown in the damned market. Sure, great father I’m going to make if I can’t even go to the market without having some sort of mental episode over roast. And I hadn’t considered the half of what Molly and Arthur told over dinner tonight, either-” Viktor gushed.

“Whoa. Whoa there. One thing at a time. Let’s start with the market and what happened there,” Harry said, holding up his hands.

“The girl behind the butcher’s counter. Have you seen her, this summer? She makes Tonks and her pink hair look tame. Neon green. Ring in her nose. Chews a wad of gum as big as your head. And so help me, I wanted to strangle her this

morning. She was sloppy and rude and she got on my nerves, and I was just about to scream the third time she asked me what I wanted, and I had this horrible thought where I hoped to Heaven no child of mine ever turned out remotely like that. And there was this little boy screaming and crying over wanting some candy, and his mother couldn't control him. After twenty minutes of that, I was willing to buy him whatever he wanted, if he would just shut up. And the witch out there with me starts spouting off her parenting wisdom, which apparently consists solely of beating sense into your kids. Then the girl apologized, and I felt awful for even thinking what I did. Turns out she was short because she was tired from closing for her mother the night before. But I still wanted to choke Reginald... candy boy... And by then, the old biddy who thinks spanking is the be all and end all of parenting. And to top it all off, there was a woman with a colicky baby at the till. Wishing she could get two hours of sleep. Then add on this stupid heat, and trying to get a nursery together, and worrying... and it's a wonder I haven't flown into a million pieces. And you know what? No one ever bothers to stop and ask how *you're* doing because you're not pregnant. Just because you're not carrying it around twenty-four hours a day, people think it doesn't affect you. You're just the father, after all. *You* could get hit by a train, and it wouldn't matter at this point. Your job's already done," Viktor said in an exasperated tone.

"I'm sorry. Would you like for me to put my hand on *your* belly?" Harry asked with a mischievous grin. The two of them laughed uncontrollably for quite some time.

"If you do, I'll break it," Viktor wheezed, wiping at the corners of his eyes. "But I wouldn't be too hurt if someone would ask occasionally if I'm about to put my foot through a wall."

"Sorry, I think we *have* sort of forgotten you in the shuffle. You're allowed to have nerves, you know. I bet even Molly's wanted to strangle some random squalling brat at the market. Especially in heat like this. Call us on it. I wouldn't be too hurt, either, if you occasionally asked me for a bitching session. You don't have to have an engraved invitation, you know. We aren't used to either of you needing a bitch session with the rest of us. You and Hermione usually just bitch at each other and leave the rest of us out of it. You two are normally this lovely little self-sufficient complaint unit, unless it's about each other. Usually, the both of you don't need an invitation to complain about each other, you just let fly when you're tempted to strangle one another. And you take turns being nuts, at least. You know, when Hannah and I first started seeing each other and coming over here, she asked me if the two of you had some sort of clause in a secret prenup squirreled away somewhere, stating that at least one of you was legally required to be completely sensible at all times. Only in dire circumstances could either one of you lose it, and then only if you requested permission first from the designated sensible party. I mean, she couldn't believe the two of you were so rational all the time. Then she saw the two of you have a real argument and

decided the prenup must also contain a 'protection of non-combatants' clause," Harry said, chuckling under his breath. "I explained I thought it was just the regular rhythms of spending the rest of your life with someone. If you didn't take turns, all hell would break loose. Oh, and Molly and Arthur are a special case. I mean, you two aren't planning on having seven, right in a row, are you? And you're certainly not planning on having a Gred and Forge, are you?"

"Let us get the first one here, and I'll get back to you on the final target number," Viktor sighed. "And I don't think you get to pick what you get. No returns. Just pure stuck with whatever you end up with. And they're stuck with you. I don't know if I can do this."

"That's a load of bollocks, and you know it. Besides, you have to do it, or Hannah and I can't have any," Harry insisted.

"Beg pardon? I'm afraid I don't quite follow," Viktor said, studying Harry with a puzzled expression.

"I'll let you in on a little secret. Ever wonder why the rest of us waited so long to get married, so much longer than you two?" Harry asked.

"Hadn't thought about it much. Ginny was busy doing an internship. She didn't really have time to get married until that was well over. And then she was setting up a practice. Ron... perpetual cold feet about getting married. You... well, you and Hannah weren't even seeing each other until four years after Hermione and I got married. And I figured you wanted to take your time," Viktor said, shrugging.

"I guess all of that was part of it. But really, we were all sort of waiting to see if the two of you could do it. You and Hermione were like the trial run. Especially to me. During the war, I kept thinking there was no way anyone could be normal, after all that. No way they could be happy. No way they could just pick up, move on and do things like get married, live through the mundane and the far too exciting. Have babies. Tuck them in at night and rest their head on the pillow and shut their eyes. The both of you proved me wrong. I used to wonder how either of you could concentrate on a relationship with all that mess going on. How you could write one another when you were apart and take what you could get when you were together and make time no matter what. Now, I understand it. Life goes on, and people don't really change. They still have wants and needs. And you do what's important. Back then, I just wanted to see tomorrow. You and Hermione were thinking beyond tomorrow. You had hope for a future. It's what kept the two of you going, sometimes. I remember thinking the two of you were crazy to want to get married. Talking about the possibility when she wasn't even out of school, yet. That was nutty enough even without everything else that was going on. I couldn't understand how the two of you could be so sure. But then, after a bit, I realized that the two of you could prove to me that it could be done. That you

could do what we did and see what we saw... and be something rivaling normal afterward. Be happy. Let's face it. If anyone has seen the half of what I've seen, it's you and Hermione. You've been our marriage role models. If the two of you could get married and live a normal life, then maybe I could, too. Maybe we all could. Maybe there was hope for me," Harry said with quiet conviction.

"I suspect Molly and Arthur might be a better choice. And more of an influence on Ron and Ginny, at least," Viktor protested.

"Oh, I won't deny Molly and Arthur make good role models. Been married forever, raised seven children, all of them fine and decent people, weathered two wars, and took in a load of strays, whether they needed it or not, me included. They've been happy. But it's different. It's not you two," Harry said, shaking his head.

"I still don't see the difference. Molly and Arthur went through the same war we did," Viktor replied.

"The difference is, they were already married. War was just brewing up when you first met Hermione. Not that we really knew that, back then, but it was. Anyone with a lick of sense about self-preservation wouldn't have done what you did. Ask out a completely foreign girl from a rival school, and a rival house, who is anything but what everyone would expect, and guaranteed to make your headmaster seethe just because of her parents. And on top of that, her best friend's a complete and total wacko, according to most people. He gets involved in what's supposed to be a nice, friendly little friendship-building competition, and that presence is largely responsible for a completely innocent bystander getting killed and you getting sucked into it. One who wasn't even as old as you were. Not only does that not completely spook you off, you keep writing to her, even when said wacko is partially responsible for getting his godfather killed. I mean, forget her parents liking you, you had to worry about her friends getting you snuffed. And to top that all off, you're bonkers enough to join the Order on our say-so. Let's not go into what a pack of fruitcakes and losers most of the world thought we were back then, when you first wrote Dumbledore and asked how you could help. And somehow, in addition to all this gallivanting around all of Eastern Europe recruiting support and listening to Charlie prattle about dragons constantly and practically getting your arse hexed off a dozen times before you even made it back to Britain for more of the same and worse, you manage to put together a marriage with a female who obviously took the same multi-tasking course. I saw it, and I still don't believe it. I still don't know how the two of you did it. Or do it," Harry summed up. "But, somehow, watching you and Hermione gave me the delusion that I could do it, too."

"Oh. Easier to finish something you've started rather than begin something new?" Viktor ventured.

“Precisely. Once you’re in, you’re in. Takes a hell of a lot more courage to jump off the cliff, knowing what’s down there. Once you’re off, no stopping the fall, no getting off the ride without making an awful mess. From there on in, it’s all about sticking the landing. You will make fine parents, because you want to, and I’ve never seen either of you set your minds to anything that you didn’t do, and do well. Whether it made sense or not. And because you have to be. I need someone to call for advice when I’ve got a cranky toddler on my hands. Someone who knows there are things out there a Hell of a lot more terrible than the terrible twos. Molly and Arthur are great, but sometimes you want your friends to make it all better, not the closest thing you’ve got to parents. And when I’m scared out of my mind about it, and I probably will be, remind me you’ve been there before me,” Harry said.

“I’m not entirely sure I feel comfortable being a role model,” Viktor said, just a bare hint of a smile curling up the corners of his mouth.

“Like it or not, you have been since I met you. Even before I realized it. If anyone taught me how you really should handle fame and notoriety, it was you. You were the anti-Lockhart. Him and his ‘Fame is as fame does, Harry,’” Harry said with a laugh. “Nothing behind it but a puff of smoke. No substance, with him. You were there before me. You knew what it was like to be glorified and vilified, sometimes in the same week, even the same breath, and sometimes by the same people who were of the opposite opinion the last time you heard. How you took that in stride as well as you did, I’ll never know. Petar and Ekaterina must have done some number on you.”

“Well, that makes me feel better, then. What we said about starting something new... I think that’s what makes this so scary. It’s so completely new. New baby, new member of the family, new person to deal with, new problems, new role. New, new, new. I’ll be a bit relieved when it becomes old hat. And now, not completely changing the subject, are you and Hannah talking about it?” Viktor asked, raising an eyebrow.

“We’ve felt each other out about it, but nothing’s really happened yet,” Harry admitted. “We’re not sure we’re ready just yet.”

“Longer you put it off, the harder it gets. You think too much when you get older. You actually kind of suspect what you’re getting into,” Viktor warned.

“Well, you can return the favor and talk me out of thinking too much,” Harry said with a yawn. “Ooh! Perhaps we had better bugged off and let you spend some time with the reason you’re having an anniversary. And a mental breakdown. They come as a package deal, right now, you know. A two for one,” Harry said, getting up. “Provided I can get Hannah to stop squealing over baby clothes,” he

said, heading for the back door. "You coming back in the house, or have you decided to live out here?" Harry asked, propping the door.

"I'm coming," Viktor said, rising and walking over, ducking inside ahead of Harry.

"Han! We really should go!" Harry called out. "The two of them might actually want to be alone together on their anniversary instead of gawking at us all night!"

"Coming... coming... Thank you for having us. It was a wonderful dinner, I'll get the bowl when it's empty. Hope we didn't stay too late," Hannah said to Hermione as they walked in.

"We were glad you could come," Hermione protested.

"Happy anniversary, young lady," Harry said, ducking to give her a hug.

"Happy anniversary. Take care," Hannah advised, embracing Hermione in turn.

After the twin pops sounded in the back garden, Hermione planted her hands on her hips and looked around. "Well, I was going to offer to help clean up, but I don't see anything left to clean. I'm kind of glad that's over."

"Me, too. I'm with Diado on this one. Company is like grandchildren. You sure are glad to see them coming, but sometimes, you sure are glad to see them leave. I am so ready for bed. How about you?" Viktor asked.

Hermione slid her arms around his waist. "Depends on what we do once we get there. Still have an hour of anniversary left, you know."

"And it would be a pity if it weren't properly celebrated," Viktor said, leaning over to kiss her mouth. "Happy anniversary."

"Happy anniversary," Hermione said, then added softly, "Thank you."

"For what?" Viktor asked, looking puzzled.

"For putting up with me when I'm not always easy to put up with. And this dinner. And this baby. For being crazy enough to stay married to me for eighteen years."

"Thank you for having me," Viktor whispered back, kissing her forehead.

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"So Neville's survived the first week back, hmm?" Viktor asked Ginny as he helped Hermione raise up from her reclining position on the exam table.

“Relatively unscathed. Although, he’s got one first year he already thinks is going to have a black thumb. Says he hopes she’s pretty strong on the written material because she seems capable of killing a cactus. Says she’s probably great at Potions, though,” Ginny laughed. “Looks good. Your nutritional levels are fine, you’re well within the desired weight range, the baby’s active and the heartbeat’s strong. And that terrible heat of August is long gone. For which, frankly, I am very grateful, myself. You can hop off of there, if there’s nothing else you want to bring to my attention. Gotten yourselves any more nursery furniture?” Ginny asked.

“Just some dressers. I may wander by today and see if I can pick up a mobile that goes with everything,” Hermione said, sliding off the table and straightening her top.

“What else do you need besides dressers?” Ginny asked curiously.

“Thought we might get a toy chest, and maybe some shelves,” Viktor said. “Speaking of which, if we’re going to look for that mobile, we had better get a move on.”

“I’ll walk out with you. You were my last appointment today,” Ginny said, pulling off her outer robe and folding it over her arm. She followed the two of them down the hall to the waiting room, noticing that Hermione’s figure had changed drastically enough by now that it was detectable from behind, to most observers, that she was probably carrying a child. Her figure might still leave some slightly in doubt, but her face left none. It had gotten fuller along with her waistline, her cheeks flushed with a healthy color, and Ginny had decided that the bigger her middle had gotten, the bigger the smile that went with it had gotten. She had also started to develop that curious roll of the hips that would later change into an even more pronounced waddle of sorts. Ginny swapped her robe for the broom she had ridden to work that morning in the cupboard. “Goodnight,” Ginny said, giving them a wave before straddling the broom and taking off.

They walked in silence for a while. “Feels absolutely heavenly out here, now, doesn’t it?” Hermione said. “Even if it does seem a little odd not seeing any of the Hogwarts students about.”

“Mmm-hmm. Looking in here, I assume?” Viktor asked, his hand already on the door to Wee Wizards and Witches.

“I suppose,” Hermione allowed, walking in when he opened the door. They were engrossed in the mobile display when a familiar voice rang out in the small shop.

“Wotcher! No fair, I’m shopping for you two! Get away from those mobiles!”

“Tonks! How are you!?” Hermione said, turning around into her embrace.

“Ah! You *do* have one in the oven, don’t you? Although, evidently you didn’t use near as much yeast in yours as I did mine. You don’t hardly look big enough to be due in November. Then again, if you were going by me, neither would an Erumpent,” Tonks said with a wide grin.

“Oh, come on now, you weren’t that bad,” Viktor argued, leaning over for a hug.

“Easy for you to say. You didn’t see me after the seventh month either time. Martino swore he was going to charm all the furniture to eject me when I wanted to get up, to keep him from putting his back out permanently. I was a blimp by the time Stella was born. This big, easily,” Tonks insisted, holding her arms out in front of her, in a rough barrel shape. “Seriously, I got wedged under the desk at the Ministry, literally, during the last week I worked desk duty before I went on maternity leave. I had to send a memo down the hall to Arthur to come help me get out. He’ll tell you. His eyes nearly popped out of his head when he came to see what was so urgent that I had asked him to come to my office immediately. I thought he was going to have to do a Reductor Curse on the desk to get me out. Last time I ever try to retrieve a dropped quill with anything other than an *Accio*. Of course, it didn’t help that he was alternating between laughing hysterically and apologizing profusely while I was alternating between laughing and crying hysterically. I’m glad Arthur was in. Or I guess I would have just stayed there. I would have been too embarrassed to let anyone else see me like that. Bless his heart, he swore he wouldn’t breathe a word of it to a soul if I didn’t want him to, and I don’t think he ever even told Molly until I spilled it. Alastor Moody bumped into me once, when I was six months gone with Antonio, and had the gall to tell me I should go ahead and get out of the field and go on desk duty because I already looked like a bear. Of course, he was right, I did look like a bear about ready to hibernate. Couldn’t have run if my life had depended on it. Arthur told me you two were expecting your own addition. Seemed like he couldn’t have been any more pleased if it had been an official grandbaby. I reckon your parents are tickled?” Tonks asked Viktor.

“Thrilled. They’re coming to stay before the first week of November,” Viktor replied.

“Well, I suppose the cat’s rather out of the bag. I might as well go ahead and give you this,” Tonks said, handing over the bag in her hand to Hermione.

“It’s beautiful,” Hermione breathed, drawing out a mobile hung with stars and the moon.

“Go with the nursery?” Tonks pressed.

“Perfectly,” Viktor said, reaching out and setting it in motion with a finger. “How old is Stella, now?”

“Eight, if you can believe it. Going on sixty. Kid’s way too smart and grown up for her own good, sometimes. Be nine in another week. Antonio is already five.”

“Hey, what are you doing tonight? Want to come over and have dinner? It wouldn’t be anything fancy, but-” Viktor began.

“Oh! My!” Tonks interrupted, fanning herself with a hand in an exaggerated manner, “I haven’t been asked what I was doing tonight by a handsome foreigner since before Martino and I got married. One good thing about the Foreign Legion, sure improved the dating pool, eh, Hermione?” Tonks said with a laugh. “If you don’t mind said foreigner and previously mentioned rugrats coming, too, I would love to have dinner. They’re down the street looking at Quidditch equipment. Actually, Stella would straight out lose her jaw in the dust if you would tell her what kind of broom to get for her birthday. I still don’t think she believes her old Mum could possibly be cool enough to have ever walked the same earth with Viktor Krum. She won’t listen to either of us, and she can’t make up her mind. Martino and I apparently don’t know anything about Quidditch equipment, according to her. And well, grant you, we don’t, really. Been dragging this out for four weeks, going to every Quidditch shop we pass.”

“Depends on what she plays, if anything, and what she weighs...” Viktor said.

“Well, save it for dinner, because she’ll ask you nine million questions, and I can’t answer the half of them. Maybe you can. Besides, she insists on being the one to make the final decision. Let me go round up my Spaniard and young wards, and I’ll be right back. You know, if it hadn’t been for you and Fleur doing all that recruiting, life sure would be a lot different for a lot of people,” Tonks tossed over her shoulder as she went out the door.

“Right... Some of those people I recruited might still be alive and talking about *their* kids...” Viktor said softly.

Hermione reached up and cupped his chin. “And if you hadn’t recruited them, maybe *none* of us would still be alive and talking about our kids. Don’t start that,” she scolded gently.

“I can’t help it. I started counting the other day-” Viktor began.

“Well, stop counting. It doesn’t do a speck of good. If we all added up everything we might be responsible for, we’d never end the tallying. Stop feeling so responsible,” Hermione murmured, hooking her arm through his. “They all knew

what they were signing up for, same as you did. I only wish they all could have come out of it as lucky.”

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Hermione wet her thumb with her tongue and turned the page in the book she was reading. The baby gave another energetic roll, a movement so vigorous that not only could she feel it, she could actually see her belly move beneath the robe she was wearing. Hermione started a bit when the doorbell rang, and she slowly pulled her feet down off the footstool and put her book on the coffee table, pausing to listen. The doorbell rang again, insistent, and for a moment she considered shouting upstairs for Viktor to come answer it. *Don't be silly*, she chided herself, walking to the door and peeking out through the peephole into the early evening. She could see no one at the door, but even as she looked, the doorbell rang again, more shrill than before. She drew her wand and breathed deep, her hand resting on the doorknob for a few seconds before she turned it and swung the door back. As far as she could tell, the space directly in front of the door was deserted. She felt equal parts foolish and terrified as she quickly shielded herself behind the door and stuck the tip of her wand beyond the doorframe, training it on the small hedge by the door, the only place anyone could possibly hide and announcing, “You have two seconds to make yourself known, or I'll hex first and identify what's left later,” in a voice far more steady than she felt.

“Pays to be cautious,” said a familiar, gravelly voice, “and it's good to see you haven't gone all soft just because you're in pup.” She still couldn't stop herself from letting out a small yelp of surprise when the craggy face and electric blue eye became visible as the owner of the voice walked through the door.

“Moody! For Heaven's sake, you just scared the *bejeezus* out of me! It's a wonder I didn't just *have* the pup!” Hermione burst out, clutching at her robe where it draped over the swell of her stomach. As the relief flooded through her, her knees actually went soft and she slipped down the doorframe slightly before Moody caught her elbow.

“You wouldn't believe how many people have gotten all sloppy! Think they can just let the wards on the house lapse and leave the door unlocked! Why, anybody could just come waltzing in and take the place! Think there's no need for Aurors and such anymore! Hellfire, I think the two of you have some new ones on, don't you? Seemed thick enough to trip over, and I don't recall it being that fortified last I was over here. New wards?” Moody asked in his customary low growl, carrying on as though company normally came popping out of the bushes.

“What? New ones? No,” Hermione protested weakly as he started to steer her back across the floor to the sofa.

“Yes, we do,” Viktor said from the top of the stairs.

“Good. Never did have to do much talking to convince you that an ounce of prevention was better than a pound of cure,” Moody said emphatically.

“You didn’t tell me that,” Hermione said, looking slightly irritated.

Viktor shook his head. “Didn’t see the point of worrying you over it... What brings you here?” Viktor indicated the chair and settled himself on the couch next to Hermione.

“Just visited young Potter, and thought I would make it a regular old home week by stopping over here while I was out. Still got it so only a select few can Apparate within range of the house?” Moody quizzed, raising a bushy white eyebrow.

“You know we do,” Viktor answered simply.

“Is there something I should know? I mean, you go and put new wards on the house and don’t tell me. And *you*,” Hermione said, narrowing her eyes at Moody, “come leaping out of the bushes and nearly give me a heart attack, testing me like you’re still a combat squad leader. What gives?”

“Just heard you had a new reason to be cautious on the way. That’s all,” Moody said, with what passed for an innocent look on his marred face, eyeing the bulge beneath her robe.

“You’re just now hearing? It was in the Prophet...” Hermione said.

“Prophet! Quit reading that rag decades ago! Back when it wasn’t fit to wrap fish in. Bits of it still aren’t,” Moody snarled. “Potter told me,” he added more gently.

“So you decide to come straight over here unannounced and see if you can put me into labor?” Hermione asked lightly. “Our Floo does work.”

“Can’t have you being all complacent just because you’re big-bellied! Too many of you young witches think you’re indestructible, even when you’re carrying! It’s a wonder Tonks didn’t get hexed a dozen times over when she was still waddling around out in the field. Tried to tell the fool girl she should go on desk duty earlier instead of trusting dark wizards to say ‘Oh, how cute, a baby on the way, don’t suppose I’ll blast you, then,’ because she was expecting!” Moody lectured.

“Now, see here, Alastor, first of all, I’m not an Auror-” Hermione began, slightly indignant.

“Think some people forget that you don’t have to be an Auror to get killed! And just because the war’s over doesn’t mean everyone observes the cease-fire!” Moody shot back. “I just had to check you two were keeping safe, what with a baby on the way and all,” he said gruffly. “And I reckon I wanted to add my congratulations,” Moody added after a short space, looking slightly embarrassed. “You look in fine health.”

“Alastor, that’s so sweet,” Hermione blurted out without thinking, her irritation dissolving, and she could have sworn that Moody’s leathery cheeks flushed a bright crimson for a second. She immediately wished she could have it back.

Viktor cut in hastily, “Thank you... nice of you to come over here just for that.”

Moody’s dignity seemed recovered, so he cleared his throat and said abruptly, “Saw Amos Diggory last week. He inquired after you. Imagine he already knows you two are anticipating a blessed event.”

Viktor took a deep breath, then said quietly, “He’s been on my mind a lot, lately. How is he?”

“Better than most would expect. Retired now. Him and that wife of his. Said they were looking at doing some traveling. You would hardly guess, just to look at him, these days,” Moody said. “I don’t imagine you ever get over something like that completely, though. He wanted me to pass on good wishes, if I saw you before he did. Said he hadn’t spoken to you or Potter in a while.”

“Haven’t spoken to him since early this year, I guess. Saw him at a charity dinner. I really should owl him or something...” Viktor trailed off.

“Would you like a cup of tea, or are you afraid I might spike it after you nearly spooked me out of my robe?” Hermione offered.

“I’ll take one. Wouldn’t take one from just anybody,” Moody said. Then he chuckled low and added, “You’ve still got good technique, even if you have got one on the way. You disappeared behind that door faster than a lot of people who aren’t on the nest could. I couldn’t have hit you if I had tried. Even if the target is a lot bigger than when I saw it last.”

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“Feel better?” Viktor asked, kneading at the muscles in her lower back.

“Better,” Hermione agreed, stretching out a little on the bed, lying on her side, testing for the tightness in her back that had been creeping in all day. Now that

she had passed into the equivalent of the third trimester, her back sometimes bothered her when she stood too long. Viktor ran his fingers up her back, beneath her camisole style pajama top, trailing a light circle between her shoulder blades, then back down and around her side, his hand playing over the curve of her swollen belly. He tucked his mouth into the hollow between her shoulder and neck, kissing the warm, bare skin, cupping a soft, full breast, fingertips caressing the erect nipple through the cotton fabric. “You can’t want me,” Hermione said flatly.

“You mean you don’t feel up to it?” he murmured near her ear.

“No. I mean you can’t possibly *want* me right now,” Hermione said softly.

“Funny, I thought that’s what this meant,” Viktor said, pressing himself up against her bottom. “Are you telling me I have a medical condition of some sort?”

“I’m pregnant...”

“I’m fully aware of that. In fact, I’m pretty sure I was involved. It may even have been an activity very much like what I’m proposing that was responsible for getting you in that state, from what I remember of biology,” Viktor said lightly.

“But,” Hermione said, rolling over heavily and draping an arm over her belly where it jutted out between the top and her pajama bottoms, “I’m pregnant. Really pregnant.”

“I’m not slow. I got that part. Please explain to me how this has any bearing on-”

“I feel enormous,” Hermione said meekly.

“Oh. Is that an ‘I feel enormous’ as in ‘No position I can imagine sounds inviting at all because I can’t lie on my back while doing this any more’ or an ‘I feel enormous’ as in ‘You can’t possibly find me attractive like this’?” Viktor asked, sitting up.

“Stop making fun,” Hermione said in a glum voice.

“I’m not. I swear. I just want to know which argument I’m up against,” Viktor replied evenly. “Because I am all for trying out anything you want if it’s the first-”

“It’s the second,” Hermione countered.

“Ah. May I point out here that I find you incredibly sexy? Even pregnant? Maybe even *especially* pregnant?”

“Sure. You like me fat,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

“You are *not* fat!” Viktor said in a scandalized tone. “You’re pregnant, there’s a difference.”

“Not much of one,” Hermione said, crossing her arms firmly in front of her.

“Is too. For starters, I’m not completely averse to what’s going on in the chest area these last few months. Not that I didn’t like what was already there, but these last few months have been kind of interesting... but that’s a whole other issue... and baby tummies are awfully cute.”

“Fat,” Hermione said bluntly, pouting slightly.

“Are not! Totally different. Pregnant women are so lush and curvy and ripe. You can’t call it anything so common as ‘fat’. Nothing more sensual than a pregnant figure. If there’s anything that should bring sex to mind, it’s a blossoming pregnant woman. She had to do something to get that way,” Viktor argued, rubbing a hand over her bare stomach and wagging his eyebrows lecherously.

“Are you listening to yourself?” Hermione huffed.

“Alright. Look. I’m saying one more thing, and that’s it. If it doesn’t convince you, fine, I’ll give up, go to sleep, and just figure on living like a monk the next six or seven weeks, because you have some crazy idea that I think you’re fat and unattractive. Right,” Viktor muttered, first kneeling closer to the foot of the bed, then turning to face her on his knees. “Hermione, for Heaven’s sake, you are arguing with a man with a tent in his shorts that he doesn’t find you sexually attractive. You don’t find this a smidgen ridiculous?”

Hermione burst out laughing, then struggled up to kneel in front of him. “Does seem to be a bit of a trumping argument,” she snickered, looking down between them and raising an eyebrow.

“Those things never lie,” Viktor said with a grin.

“Get your shorts off before someone gets hurt,” Hermione ordered, starting to disrobe herself. She pushed him backwards onto the mattress, his head still pointed toward the foot of the bed, then straddled him. He braced his hands on her hips and helped guide her down onto him. His hands roamed her hips, thighs and belly while she rocked on top of him. They didn’t even bother resettling on the bed when they finished, she simply sprawled with her legs on top of him, body curled and tucked around him, her pregnant belly pressed into his side.

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“We have any chicken left over?” Hermione mumbled sleepily, shifting slightly.

“Mmmph? What?” Viktor asked, brushing her hair back from her face, off his chest.

“Chicken. Got any? I’m hungry,” she replied.

“I don’t know, but you’re going to have to get off of me before I can go see,” Viktor insisted.

“Leg’s asleep,” Hermione protested.

“Well, here, then,” Viktor said, unceremoniously prying her leg off of him and rolling her over onto her back, toward his left, then rolling off the right side of the bed. It didn’t register that because they had slept the wrong way around that it was her side until his shin had already made contact with the chair beside the bed. “Ow,” he breathed, biting back the word that he would have preferred to utter.

“Wrong side,” Hermione mumbled.

“Thank you. That’s very helpful now that I’ve already crippled myself,” Viktor said bitterly, lighting the lamp. He bent over to collect his shorts and stalked off into the kitchen. “Not a speck.”

“Why not?”

“To put it bluntly, because we ate it all,” Viktor said, flopping back onto the bed. “It’s one thirty in the morning.”

“I thought it was six,” Hermione said, squinting at the clock briefly. “I really wanted sesame chicken,” she said plaintively, burrowing her face into the covers.

“Well, we haven’t any,” Viktor said, a little more sharply than he intended. “You really want it that badly?” he asked more gently.

“I’d like it, but it isn’t absolutely necessary. I could get up for something else.”

“Be right back,” Viktor sighed, getting up and heading for the hall.

“You don’t have to go,” Hermione called after him.

“I might as well. Not as though I could sleep with my shin throbbing.”

“You can’t go just in your shorts.”

“Well, I was going to grab some shoes, trousers and a cloak, but thank you for looking out for me fashion-wise. Can’t have the poor sod working the late shift thinking I don’t know how to dress,” Viktor shot back, going to the bedroom door with a slight limp. He was back within twenty minutes, setting the takeaway bag down on the bedside table long enough to discard the cloak, boots and trousers, then crawl into bed next to her, where she sprawled in the middle of the bed, now oriented right way round. “Here. Okay, shove over, you’re hogging the bed,” he complained, handing her the bag after she had scooted herself up and propped against the pillows.

“You don’t want any?” Hermione asked, offering the open container.

“No! I don’t want any! Not at two in the morning,” Viktor replied, not bothering to open his eyes.

“Suit yourself,” Hermione said with a shrug, then looked down into the container. “You know they gave you General Tso’s?”

“What?” Viktor asked, not budging.

“This is General Tso’s, not sesame chicken. That’s alright. I can eat this just as well,” Hermione amended hastily.

“I could go back,” Viktor said tiredly, sounding like he would rather do anything but.

“Go to sleep,” Hermione chided gently. Viktor had just nearly drifted back off when Hermione’s tentative voice nudged him back awake. “Viktor?”

“I’m not going back, you had your chance,” he grouched, not opening his eyes.

She sounded equal parts apprehensive and puzzled. “Why is the lamp purple?”

He suddenly thought he couldn’t possibly be any more wide awake. “Because there’s someone in the yard,” he said softly.

“I beg your pardon?” Hermione asked after he sat bolt upright.

“Because there’s someone in the yard,” he repeated, swinging his legs out over the edge of the bed and hurriedly pulling the trousers on again.

“Call,” Hermione said urgently.

“Fat lot of good that will do. They can’t Apparate within range of the house and

you know they won't come to the Floo anymore for fear of getting jumped. And flying... well, whoever it is would probably be long gone..."

"Ron or Harry, then," Hermione insisted. "You are not going out there by yourself. Either one of them goes with you, or I do."

"You are not!"

"Then I'm calling," Hermione said, ditching the container beside the lamp, then scooting off the bed and hurrying to the living room, throwing on her dressing gown along the way.

"Fine, but there is no way in Hell you're going outside!" Viktor muttered, more or less to himself as he pulled his boots on and laced them up.

"Ron's coming, he's closer. And don't think I didn't hear that!"

"Well, don't think you're going outside!"

"I am if you don't wait until Ron gets here!"

"You probably got him up for nothing. If there's ill intent, that thing's supposed to be—" Viktor began, but a muffled ringing, almost like an alarm clock, cut him off. It started out low, gradually getting louder.

"You were saying?" Hermione said, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow.

"Ringing like a claxon," Viktor said, raising his voice over the increasing noise, until he could walk around the bed and touch the lamp. "Damn," he said flatly.

"Some of these new wards you didn't see fit to tell me about?" Hermione asked.

"Could I please find out what in the bloomin' 'ell is goin' on?" Ron said from the bedroom doorway, still in his rumpled pajamas, hair standing up in all directions, his eyes only half open, shoes haphazardly pulled on.

"Wards went off," Viktor said grimly, walking past him while steering Hermione to the hall by the upper arm.

"Shit," Ron swore, his eyes snapping open.

"Wh—" Hermione began, but she stopped short when a single loud whoop sounded. Viktor picked up his pace and almost pushed her through the door to the guest bedroom across the hall, snatching up a bowl from the table by the door and shoving it into her hand. It had been there since they had moved into

the house. A backup to the bowl on the mantle. Easy to grab in an emergency. No fumbling around among the other bric-a-brac over the fireplace. Every once in a great while, she even considered eliminating it. It had seemed overkill as more and more years piled up after the end of the war and the only purpose it served was to gather dust.

“Call. Wait five minutes, no longer. If we’re not back, anything happens, you hear anything at all at that window, you go straight to The Burrow, understand?” Viktor ordered.

“B-“ Hermione started to protest.

“Lock the door behind us,” he added, pulling it shut.

Only two or three minutes passed, but it seemed like an eternity before she heard Viktor and Ron’s voices from the living room and the bedside lamp flashed a blue ‘all clear’, meaning the wards had been reset. Warily, Hermione put her arm down, shaking it slightly, then uncurling the clenched fingers of her left hand to drop the compressed lump of Floo powder in her hand back into the bowl on the mantle. Her hand ached from the strain of holding it at the ready, her knuckles white. A bit of the grit had worked its way beneath her rings and worried at the skin there. She reluctantly lowered her wand as well, from where she had trained it on the closed bedroom door, unlocking it first. She almost swore at herself for letting her hand shake slightly when she returned it to her side. Hermione felt faintly ridiculous, just standing there, gawping at the door, by the time Ron knocked, turned the knob, and stuck his mussed head in. “You can come out, now,” he said, swinging the door back all the way. “It’s alright,” he added when she just stood there and blinked, “nothing to be scared of, now.” He sighed and ran his fingers through his wild red hair, making what hadn’t already been standing on end join the rest.

“Nothing?” she forced out finally. The disbelief was thick in her voice.

“Something,” he allowed, “but it’s trussed up out in the front yard and not going anywhere.”

“Where’s Viktor?”

“Out there with him,” Ron answered quietly.

“Him? You left him out there by himself with some... some-“ Hermione floundered indignantly, charging past him into the hall.

“Because he threatened to relace my shoes with my intestines if I didn’t get back in here with you,” Ron complained, “and you can just get your uppity pregnant

arse back here, because he'll have my danglies mounted if you get within ten yards of the front door!" Ron caught her arm and spun her around before she had made it out of the hall. "It was some stupid kid trying to break in. About three sheets to the wind. Damn it, he's got about a dozen jinxes on him, and between what the two of us laid on him and what he's laid in him from the pub, he's not going to do anything, now. We let him have it with both barrels. He can't wiggle a pinky, much less hurt somebody. Here's his wand," Ron added, dangling it between his fingers. "You called the Aurors, right? They should be here any minute. Sit tight," Ron pleaded.

She reluctantly walked back to the main bedroom and sank into the chair by the bed, waiting. Ron sat on the edge of the bed until he heard the loud voices out in the yard. "Sounds like Mardougan's still on night shift. Dad always did like him," Ron announced to no one in particular before ambling back toward the hall. Hermione finally prodded herself to look at the clock. No more than twenty-five minutes could have passed since the first ward went off. She would have bet it had been forever.

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It was creeping up on half past three by the time Viktor walked back into the bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed without a word, unlacing his boots. "Are you alright?" she asked, kneeling on the bed behind him, putting her hands on his shoulders. They were cool and slightly clammy from standing outside, bare skin to the night air for so long.

"Fine," he bit off, tossing one boot onto the floor a little harder than was necessary.

"Then why are your knuckles all split?" she pressed, noticing the blood on his right hand for the first time.

"Because that kid had a rather hard head," he said simply, tossing the other boot down beside the first. "You try to be nice and not truss him up like a goose right off the bat..."

"Really a kid?" she said, sitting on her heels.

"Not much more than. I'd be surprised if he turns out to be over twenty," Viktor sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "Drunk as a skunk. Turns out he thought he was about to burgle the Podmores."

"What? Their house is four miles down the *other* branch of the lane," Hermione marveled.

“Well, being drunk and it being two in the morning don’t exactly help your sense of direction, Hermione. He thought he had the right house because the bedroom lamp was on. I told you them leaving theirs on was just advertising they’re gone for two weeks.”

“You wouldn’t lie to me. This isn’t something else,” Hermione said flatly. “Between Moody popping up and you putting wards on and not telling me I would almost swear you knew something was up...”

“What? No. It was some stupid kid with more Firewhiskey in him than sense who picked the wrong damned house to break into. That’s all.” His voice kept dropping each time he spoke. Normally, she wouldn’t force it. The quieter Viktor got, the more dangerous it was to pick an argument with him.

“Then why did you put on the extra wards? What we had on before was good enough for over a decade-“

“You want to know why I put new wards on? Because you’re pregnant, and I worry, okay? You’re pregnant. And I worry.”

The strain made her voice grow sharp. “I think you’ve been around Moody too long. You act like there are wizards in all the hedges and I can’t take care of myself-“

“I’m cautious.” She could barely hear him, even with the short distance separating them. But she couldn’t resist responding.

“You’re paranoid is what you are. I thought you weren’t as prejudiced as Moody used to be about what witches are capable of doing. You’ve told Moody more than once that enough witches had helped save your bacon on enough occasions for you not to complain about what their assignments were or quibble when you got one as a partner-“

This time she didn’t have any trouble hearing. No one in the house, would have. “Damn it, Hermione! It doesn’t take a conspiracy of Moody-like proportions for you to get hurt! All it takes is one drunken fool! One drunken fool! You hear me? That light was on the entire time I was gone! What would have happened if he had broken in when I wasn’t here? Do you really think he would have just apologized and left? He didn’t even back off when he knew there were two of us and he could have run! You want to compare me to Moody, fine! I agree with him that Tonks shouldn’t have stayed out in the field as long as she did! But that was her decision, and none of my business. Hell, sounds like even she agrees with him, now! You want to call me an overprotective jerk, fine! I’m a little more interested in keeping you in one piece so you can call me whatever you like!” Viktor drew a deep breath and dropped the volume. “Look. Normally, if I had my

back against a wall, I can't think of *anyone* I would rather have with me than you. Six months ago, I would have said you were as good as you ever were. Maybe even better. Even now, I bet you're not far off. But you can't deny the fact that being pregnant changes things. If wizards got pregnant, I would say the exact same thing about them. But they don't. Facts are facts. Being pregnant makes it harder to defend yourself, and only witches get pregnant. If nothing else, it brings this whole other person you have to be aware of at all times into the equation. It means you can't *do* some of the things you used to. I have *always* known you could take care of yourself. I have *always* trusted you to take care of yourself. No matter how bad things were, or how much I worried, I have *never* been guilty of mollycoddling you, or expecting any less of you just because you're a witch. Let's face it. The baby changes things. If you get hurt now, it's not *just* you. It's not just one person I love. It's two people I love. And if you don't like it, tough."

He could tell she was on the verge of crying from her voice. No need to turn around to check. "It's all my fault in the first place. If I hadn't asked for chicken-

"Don't start that," Viktor said gently. "Might as well say it's the Podmore's fault for going on vacation and leaving their bedroom lamp on and making it easy for this kid to case their house. And speaking of the chicken, considering what I went through because of that request, it might be kind of nice if you actually ate it," he sighed, finally swinging one leg back up onto the bed, not bothering to pull the trousers off. Hermione sat propped against the pillows in silence for several minutes, picking forlornly at the takeaway container, her lips tight, expression strained. "You're not going to cry, are you?" he cajoled, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"I can't help it," she sobbed, her face crumpling. He pulled her into his shoulder, taking the container in his right hand and setting it on the bedside table before rubbing her shoulder and cradling her head. "What was the long whoop?"

"He was trying to pry the bedroom window," Viktor said softly.

"Which bedroom?"

"Ours."

After a couple of minutes, she let out a strangled laugh. "You're going to have an awful bruise from that chair."

He took his hand off her shoulder and rested it on the prominent swell of her figure instead. "Go with my split knuckles. And at the risk of getting a busted lip to match... Scoot over, fat lady, you've got practically all of my side of the bed and yours, too."

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“Jumping bean,” Hermione muttered into the pillow, rubbing a hand over her swollen belly and the flailing little limbs beating an energetic tattoo from the inside. It seemed that lately, the baby had been the most active when she would have preferred to sleep the most. The first few nights, she had chalked it up to lingering nerves from the incident with the burglar, figuring her edginess woke her so often in the middle of the night. The baby was perhaps picking up on her anxiety and acting accordingly, she thought. But, as the nights stacked up, she changed her mind and decided that the wild bursts of activity just below her ribcage in the wee hours might be the cause of her wakefulness, rather than the effect. It certainly wasn’t because she wasn’t tired.

On the contrary, the more gravid she became, the more tiring it was. She had even conceded to the fatigue by allowing herself some short naps during the day. Often times, they took place whether she “allowed” them or not. She would sit to read or lie down “just for a few minutes” and drift off in spite of herself, book dropped, forgotten, or even still propped open on the mound of her abdomen, the bookmark still on the original page. It was very nearly embarrassing, how hard it was for her to stay awake, sometimes. How she would struggle to keep her eyelids from drooping on occasion, even when someone else was there. Hermione had even joked that she suddenly understood what Harry and Ron had meant about getting leaden eyelids during a patented Professor Binns lecture.

Strange, how expecting a baby tended to bring together the future and the past in one neat and tidy package. A tiny piece of hope for the future, and a reflection of the past. More and more as the pregnancy progressed, Hermione found herself remembering so much. Mostly the lost. Perhaps part of it was due to cleaning out the room for the nursery, and sifting through so many years worth of things and memories. She could chide Viktor all she liked for dwelling on past regrets, but she had done it, too. Wondering about so many things that might have been. So many other marriages and births that might have been, if not for the loss of someone. And though she scolded herself for the selfishness of it, she wondered what it would have been like to still have her own parents. *You’re lucky enough to have Arthur and Molly, Petar and Ekaterina. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.*

And though she continued to visit Hogwarts on a fairly regular basis, it sometimes seemed a million years since she had actually been a student there. Even if Minerva continued to address her as “Miss Granger“, as though she were still the overly prepared girl with oversized front teeth who had gotten off the Hogwarts Express that first year. *I’ll blink and you’ll be off at Hogwarts*, she thought, staring down at the curve of her bulging belly. *Wonder what you’ll look like... who you’ll look like.. be like. Black hair? Brown hair? My mum’s sharp*

chin? My dad's squared off fingers? That slightly lopsided smile of Petar's when you're feeling shy? Are you going to do that thing with your chin? Jutting it out like Viktor and Ekaterina do when their minds are made up and there's no changing it? Are we going to have it out with you over things? Arguments we already know we've lost because that chin is as set as your mind?

Going to be a mess, pure and simple, aren't you? she thought, smiling. *You won't be spoiled, oh, no sir. Between Arthur, Molly, Petar, Ekaterina Ron, Susan, Harry, Hannah, Neville, Ginny and the two of us having a go at you, you'll be so thoroughly rotten, you won't know which end is up. You won't be worth two pence.* She grinned even harder when the baby gave her a solid, jarring kick in the side, as though agreeing. "Stop getting cheeky with your mum," she whispered, letting her heavy eyelids close once more.

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"Should you even be doing that?" Viktor asked tentatively, watching Hermione rub dark wood stain on the small end table she had carted onto a drop cloth in the back entryway.

"It's a water based stain. It's supposed to be safe," Hermione protested, using a rag to wipe up the last drops pooled on the surface. "And all the windows are up."

"You could have gotten me to pack it back here."

"You could stop acting like I've become an invalid. It's only an end table. I'd be surprised if it weighed two pounds," Hermione said dismissively, straightening up, pressing her hands to the small of her back and stretching. Her sore stomach muscles twanged, strained by the rapid weight gain and the ever increasing load they carried. "Going out to the garden and see if I can get the flowerbed cleaned out," she added, looking out the back door at the tumbleweed tangle of dead and dying flowers.

"Do you want-"

"No."

"Now, how would you know? You didn't even let me finish-"

"Don't have to. No, I don't want you to help. You haven't touched that flowerbed in the entire time we've lived in this house. No reason to start now. I wouldn't complain if you got rid of the gnomes, though. Not today, though, because I am in no mood or condition to avoid the little buggers if you get them riled up, but sometime soon. And I'm certainly in no mood to get bitten," she shot back over

her shoulder, pushing the door open. "I wouldn't be entirely disappointed to have you sit in the swing while I work, though."

"I thought you said your back and stomach were sore," Viktor said, following after her. He almost laughed out loud when Moody's remark about Hermione being "on the nest" came back to him, unbidden. It was becoming a more apt description as the weeks passed. As she had grown steadily, she put him strongly in mind of a plump little nesting bird, her gait making it evident that she carried a baby, her swollen sides visible even from directly behind. The pregnant walk had definitely settled in, her hips swiveling in a more exaggerated manner than usual.

"A little," she allowed, lowering herself down carefully to kneel at the edge of the flowerbed, then sitting on the grass and tucking her legs in beside her. "But it certainly isn't from gardening."

"So I'm just supposed to sit out here in the swing and watch you work, then, hmm?" Viktor said, settling in it and setting it in motion, swinging lazily back and forth. "What next? You feed me grapes?"

"Could discuss baby names. If you have any bright ideas, I'd be glad to entertain them, because I am wide open to suggestions," Hermione said, tugging at a tenacious clump of stubbornly green weeds that hid among the curled brown stems.

"Alouicious," Viktor blurted out.

"Maybe I should clarify that I will entertain serious suggestions," Hermione said with a laugh.

"Bridey."

"Oh, good grief, no. Be serious... Clementine."

"Ugh. Clarabelle."

"Desislav."

"That was trendy once, but no one names their kid that, anymore. Dragomir Edmund."

"Franklin."

"Georgina."

“Graham.”

“Horst.”

“Wrong nationality. Heinrich.”

“Still the wrong nationality. Iona.”

“Ima.”

“Irma.”

“Janelle.”

“Kelsey.”

“Kelsey *Krum*?”

“Alliterative,” Viktor said with a shrug.

“Jedediah. No, wait. Lula.”

“Lola.”

“Lulabelle.”

“Michelina.”

“Mario.”

“Nelly.”

“Nikephoros,” Hermione said mischievously.

“No! Lord, no. Unless you’ve suddenly decided you want my entire family to disown us. Opal.”

“While that’s a lovely name, I think not. Persephone.”

“Oh, that won’t lead to any teasing. Persephone Krum... What on earth would you use as a middle name?” Viktor laughed.

“We could just drown the kid in ancient Greek names and recycle mine,” Hermione said, adding more brown stems to the pile. “Persephone Hermione Granger Krum, now that would be fun, wouldn’t it?”

“Good luck teaching them to spell it. Reginald.”

“Funny name for a girl,” Hermione teased, wrinkling up her nose.

“Something you’re not telling me? Convinced it’s a girl?”

“Haven’t any idea. I’m more convinced it’s a Bludger, considering how it flops around like a hyperactive fish out of water when I’m trying to sleep. It’s the right shape, too,” she said ruefully, rubbing a muddy hand down the front of her already streaked and stained top.

“Seraphina.”

“Funny name for a boy... Trevor.”

“Reminds me too much of Neville’s toad. I say we just name it after your all time favorite person. Umbridge.”

“Are you trying to make me vomit in the flowerbed?” Hermione asked, shaking her head. “Viktor.”

“We are *not* recycling my name. Bad enough when you do it for a middle name. Totally unoriginal when you just slap the same name on a child. It’s like you didn’t even bother. Even the Weasleys managed to avoid that.”

“I was addressing you, silly. Come here,” Hermione said, crooking her finger and leaning over slightly, almost lying on her side.

“Am I going to need excavating equipment to get you up?” Viktor asked, coming to squat behind her.

“I don’t want up,” she scolded quietly, then backhanded his knee lightly, “and that’s for implying I’m fat. Look.”

“I’m not. I’m saying the baby’s a load and a half, you’re light as a feather... what am I looking for?” Viktor asked, puzzled.

“Under the hedge... you may have to get lower,” she said, spreading out on her side, pillowing her head on her arm, keeping it off the cool grass. With a shrug, Viktor stretched out behind her, propped his elbow on the ground and put his head in his hand. There, beneath the leaves of the hedge, sat a small brown rabbit, eyes wide, nose twitching. As they watched, it took a tentative hop further out from the hedge, scenting the air, then ducking to sample a bit of the grass. It studied them both for a long moment, then went back to grazing, unconcerned.

“We’ve probably got a rabbit warren in the hedge,” Viktor murmured, slipping an arm around her and her belly, hugging her to him.

“It’s not a rabbit, it’s a bunny,” Hermione argued.

“Last I checked, a rabbit was a bunny. Someone go and change the English language on me?”

“You realize we’re going to have to start doing that. Bringing everything down to baby level. Bunny, kitty, puppy, ducky, birdie, fishy. We’re going to start sounding like simpletons,” Hermione sighed, putting her hand on top of his.

“Now, I don’t buy for one instant that your parents talked to you like you were a simpleton. Even when you were a baby. And if so, so what? Munchkin will be a multilingual simpleton. Can’t be too shabby to know how to say ‘bunny’ in five or six languages.”

“Where are you getting the six? English, Russian, Bulgarian...”

“You and Fleur know French. And I can still dredge up some German and Polish when the occasion calls for it. Although, I’m getting rusty,” Viktor admitted.

“What’s happened to your Rumanian?” Hermione teased.

“Never had any need to get anyone else to yell ‘Bunny!’ at Charlie while we were there. Now, the word dragon... I can probably still say that in pitch perfect Rumanian. Not that it did any good when I was scouting. Local guide just stood there gawping. ‘What do you mean, go tell him there’s a dragon? I don’t see any dragon.’ He was not the world’s brightest, that one. Mountain, dragon, Rumania, I had just gotten back from a scouting trip to see if there were any dragons, what was there to not understand? I think Charlie had to stop me from strangling him more than once. Silly sod just looks at me, after I’ve spend a good forty minutes coming back down off the darn mountain without getting up above the treeline, just in case there’s anyone watching, and trying not to brain myself on a branch. I’m about half falling off the broom, begging him to go back and tell Charlie there was a napping dragon in the way, and all he does is stand there picking his nose. I wanted to scout out a spot to bury him instead of a way over the mountain, and Charlie wouldn’t let me. Spoilsport,” Viktor complained.

The rabbit started a bit at Hermione’s soft laugh, but soon settled back down to eating. They were so engrossed in watching it, that they didn’t hear the soft pops a short distance away, the opening of the gate, or the footsteps on the grass.

“And I thought you had a Hungarian roommate third year,” Hermione continued.

“I don’t want any child of mine knowing the words I picked up from him in *any* language,” Viktor asserted. “He had a filthy mouth. I can only cuss in Hungarian.”

“You’ll catch your death of cold, lying on that damp ground!” Molly snapped in a shrill voice. “Get up right this instant!” The rabbit skittered beneath the hedge and disappeared down a hole concealed there. “What on earth do you two think you’re doing?!”

Viktor rolled over and propped himself up in a half-sitting position, hands on the ground behind him, knees tented, and looked sheepish. “We were watching... we... there was... Apparently we’ve got a bunny in the plot. I mean a rabbit in the garden plot,” he stammered hastily, reddening and looking guilty as a schoolboy caught in a kiss after curfew.

“What?” Molly pressed, watching Hermione struggle up to the same position and looking at the two of them as though they had gone completely insane. Ron, who was standing behind her, raised his eyebrows and grinned, as though he would give anything to laugh. He sobered when Molly turned her head to look at him, disbelieving.

“I finished refinishing the end table, came out here to clean out the flowerbeds, we were discussing baby names and... oh, never mind... it sounds even loopier out loud,” Hermione said breathlessly, grinning.

“I brought some baby books,” Molly sniffed indignantly, “if you’re more interested in that than trying to catch pneumonia,” she added, turning on her heel and walking into the house.

“Oh, no. Now I’ve offended her. She’s been all over me these last few weeks about how important it is for me to take it easy and take care of myself and... and... could you two get me up? I need to go apologize,” Hermione pleaded, sitting up straighter and holding out her hands. Viktor stood and took her right, Ron walked over, snickering under his breath, and grabbed her left. They both tugged her to her feet in short order. “Got to go assure her I’m not skydiving when she’s not around. I’ll let her suggest some baby names. Her ideas have got to be better than what we’ve come up with so far,” Hermione puffed, half jogging to the back door

“We weren’t... we weren’t interrupting... something... were we?” Ron cackled breathlessly after the door slammed shut, leaning over and propping his hands on his knees.

“No! We *were* watching a rabbit... and get your mind out of the gutter,” Viktor

scolded.

“Oh, come on! It wouldn’t be the first time you two have done it in the great outdoors!” Ron wheezed, wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes.

“And how would you know?!”

“Let’s just say girls talk. And they talk a lot more at bachelorette parties when they’ve had a few. Why do you think Susan wanted *us* to get a hammock?” Ron asked innocently, sticking his hands in his pockets and whistling as he ambled toward the back door.

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“I’m coming!” Hermione called, hurrying toward the living room from the kitchen. “Hello, Fleur,” she said a little breathlessly, when she reached the Floo.

“Would it be alright if I came over? I need a favor...” Fleur said in a rush.

“Well, sure...” Hermione said uncertainly, stepping back well out of the way, allowing Fleur the room to step out of the Floo.

“I hate to do this,” Fleur said, turning to Hermione, cradling her son, Etienne in the crook of an elbow, “but I need you to watch him. Gabrielle just called. Maman is in the hospital with the flu. I can’t take him with me, and I think Molly is at the market. I can’t get hold of her. Could you watch him for me? I know you have most of the equipment in the house at least, and there’s no one else,” she added in her lilting voice, tinged with just a slight French accent.

“Well, I suppose I could-” Hermione said tentatively.

“Thank you so much. You’re looking well. Only be a few weeks before you’re doing this with one of your own,” Fleur said, considering Hermione’s figure. “You have no idea how much I appreciate this. I’ll call as soon as I know anything,” she said, setting down the baby bag and shifting the sleeping boy over to Hermione. And tell Viktor thank you, as well.”

“He’s-” Hermione began in a small voice, but Fleur had already stepped up to the Floo and stated her destination, stepping in among the green flames. Hermione blinked at the empty fireplace. “Not here... He’s not here. And I haven’t even *held* a baby this small since... I don’t remember when. What am I going to do with you?” she asked the four-month-old. Unconcerned, he slept on, his lips working as though he were dreaming of nursing. Hermione walked to the kitchen and gingerly sat down in one of the chairs at the table, shifting Etienne up slightly higher, cradling him awkwardly for a moment before resting his bottom against

the crest of her swelling belly and settling his head further up against her shoulder.

For a short space, she fought the rising panic that made her want to run to the Floo and call Viktor home from Vulchanov's. She even considered calling Petar and Ekaterina, then chided herself for being so silly, when her own baby, only a bit smaller than this one, was curled up inside her, right below Etienne's well padded bottom. She relaxed somewhat when a few minutes passed completely without incident, finally releasing the breath she hadn't known she was holding. She almost laughed out loud when her stomach gave a loud gurgle, reminding her of the forgotten grilled cheese sandwich she had left untouched on a saucer on the table.

She leaned a bit and scooted the saucer toward her as quietly as she could, lifting the sandwich and taking a bite. She slipped the glass of milk she had poured earlier to the side of the saucer, pausing to take a drink. Hermione studied the plump face, and the thick blonde lashes that fanned out over the fat, ruddy cheeks. "You're so sweet," she murmured, lifting one tightly curled fist with her free index finger, looking at the perfect, miniature fingers and nails. The resident critic gave her a vigorous knee from the inside. "Jealousy is unbecoming," she sighed, reaching down to give her taut side a rub, then taking another bite of her sandwich.

The raving hunger had subsided a shade in the last week or so. While she still sometimes ate meals that would have done a laboring man proud, it wasn't the nearly full time job it had once been to keep her stomach satisfied. As her womb crowded further and further up into her torso, the less room there was for anything else, including food. She ate hurriedly, anxious about waking the baby, finishing off the sandwich and milk in a few minutes, then simply rocking Etienne gently for a while.

"Stupid. There's a cradle in the nursery. I could put you to bed properly," Hermione muttered in irritation at herself. She carried him into the nursery and laid him gingerly into the cradle, setting it swaying slightly. Hermione lowered herself into the rocking chair, wanting to satisfy herself that Etienne would sleep on. After what seemed a short eternity, the silence broken only by the baby's short, snuffling breaths, Hermione struggled up out of the rocker and walked back to the living room. Not quite knowing what to do with herself, she settled on the couch with a book, one ear trained for any sign of noise from the nursery. When she realized she had read the same paragraph at least three times without it making a jot of sense, she gave up and closed the book, cursing herself for not having bought the nursery monitor, yet.

Idly, Hermione fiddled with the straps on the workhorse pair of maternity overalls she had purchased on that first shopping trip. She was half dozing by the time an

indignant, angry yowl, which would have given Crookshanks a run for his money in his heyday, sounded from the nursery. In her haste to get down the hall, her belly bumped the hall table, rattling the contents. She kept vowing to move it, she had clipped it so often, lately. “Shhh... it’s alright,” Hermione murmured, at the same time thinking she had no idea if it was really alright or not. When a bit of pacing and shushing failed to have any impact, she scolded herself. “Okay, think logically, Hermione. Why would he be crying?” Etienne socked a fist into his mouth and gummed it, wailing all the louder. “You hungry? Is that what’s the matter? Hmm? We’ll just go get you a bottle,” she said, as the baby yanked at one of the straps on her overalls. She pulled up short halfway to the living room. “Oh no. Fleur breastfeeds you... I wonder if she remembered bottles?” Hermione wondered aloud.

A few minutes of rattling around in the baby bag answered her question. “Bottles we’ve got. In spades. Nothing to go in them. No breast milk, no powdered formula... squat. No joy,” Hermione said dejectedly. Etienne flailed angrily, jerking the strap over her own swollen breasts. “Sorry. I’m not quite ready for that sort of thing, yet. They just look promising. Market, then,” she said, grabbing her purse and a handful of Floo powder. The few minutes it took to get to the market, grab a container of formula and stand in line at the till seemed an eon. It was almost worth it, though, when the witch gave her the total, glanced at her, then did a wide-eyed double take, staring at Hermione’s obviously still baby-laden belly, then the squalling infant in her arms. Hermione didn’t bother to explain, she merely paid and snatched up the formula, hurrying back to the house.

“She probably thinks I’m besting your grandmum,” Hermione said with a laugh, picking up the warm bottle she had just tested and heading for the couch again. She settled in against the cushions, rested her elbow against the sofa arm, and popped the bottle into Etienne’s eager mouth. He sucked greedily, plump cheeks working. He had downed half the bottle when the back door opened and Viktor strolled across the kitchen.

“Stopped by the Burrow after Vulchanov’s, I’m b-” he announced, cutting himself off and backpedaling to the doorway. “I wasn’t gone that long, was I?” he said with a bemused grin. “How did that get here?”

“Fleur’s mother is in the hospital. Nothing too serious, I think, just the flu. The mediwizards said yesterday that they thought they were going to need to give her a Rehydrating Potion and put her under observation. Fleur was all out of babysitters,” Hermione explained. “Poor urchin got left on my doorstep. She probably wouldn’t have left him if she had known you weren’t here.”

“Oh, now that’s not so. I’m proud of you. Would have been a time not too long ago that you would have called me and made me come home,” Viktor said, squatting beside the sofa, putting his hand on the small head and smoothing the

fine, strawberry blonde hair. "You know, babies look awfully good on you."

"Oh, stow it," Hermione said good-naturedly.

"I'm serious. I'm beginning to think I understand why Arthur tried to keep Molly pregnant for so long," Viktor said with a grin.

"Why's that?"

"Well, considering the way she yelled at us last week for the garden incident, first, so she would have plenty of other outlets for all that yelling, and second, I bet she was easier to outrun."

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"Step in here, get into the exam robe, and she'll be with you in a few minutes. She's taking some stitches out of a very uncooperative patient," Lavinia said apologetically, beginning to close the door behind her softly. "Went off to London and got himself into a fistfight on the street. Too soused to tell them not to take him to a Muggle hospital," she tutted, shaking her head.

"I hate this," Hermione said, eyeing the folded robe on the exam table warily.

"Which bit? The getting called back here right on time, then having to sit for thirty minutes, or what happens once she gets here?" Viktor said, sinking into one of the chairs in the exam room.

"All of it," Hermione sighed. "Getting out of all this garb and into that flimsy robe, then lying on that ridiculous table in a position no human being should be in while someone pokes and prods and looks somewhere no one wants to be poked and prodded, while everyone tries to cover up how embarrassed they are by engaging in small talk."

"Is that what the small talk's for? I thought it was just small talk. I mean, what else is there to do when you're spreadeagled on an exam table besides talking about the weather?" Viktor said with a laugh. "Come on. Buck up. It's almost over," he added, leaning over to give her a hug.

Suddenly Hermione stiffened and muttered a disgusted, "Ugh," under her breath. She jerked back and pulled at the spreading damp patches on her blouse. "Now, why couldn't that have waited until I was in the exam robe? Or at the very least, last week, when I had Etienne and it would have been useful?" she said.

"You've got to take it off, anyway. I'll clean it," Viktor offered.

“I’ll do it,” Hermione muttered darkly, snatching up the exam robe and heading for the small changing room and toilet. She had no more than shut the door before there was a knock from the hall.

“Decent in there?” Ginny called.

“No, but I’m dressed!” Viktor answered.

“Hey. How’s the patient? More importantly, where’s the patient?” Ginny asked, shutting the door and looking around the exam room.

“In there. Changing and fuming,” Viktor said in a low voice, nodding at the door opposite.

“Fuming? Why?” Ginny probed.

“She’s in a *mood*. It all started going horribly wrong before we even left. For a start, the vase on the hall table is now an official casualty of the pregnant belly. Sorry. You gave us that. And it didn’t improve things when she couldn’t get her cloak closed.” Viktor said quietly.

“I thought Mum brought her an old maternity cloak, didn’t she?” Ginny said.

Viktor cocked an eyebrow. “It *was* the maternity cloak. She’s ungainly, uncomfortable, and unhappy about this exam. She’s a regular barrel of fun, today. Don’t tell her I even thought the word ‘barrel’.”

“That bad, eh?” Ginny said.

“And to top it all off, she’s started leaking for no apparent reason,” Viktor said, gesturing to his chest. “Just enough to be embarrassing and annoying. And she just did, so don’t mention laundry or breastfeeding,” he added rolling his eyes.

“You realize her hormones are going bananas right about now,” Ginny said, crossing her arms.

“No... really? I never would have guessed,” Viktor said sarcastically.

“When are Petar and Ekaterina landing at your place?” Ginny asked in an effort to change the subject.

“Four days. So, if you hear a big explosion...”

“Hermione loves Ekaterina,” Ginny protested.

"I fancy she loves me, too. Hasn't kept her from nearly taking my head off a few times over the last couple of days. She's been edgy ever since you set this up. And Mama doesn't take kindly to anyone aiming for her head, no matter what their excuse is," Viktor sighed.

"It's only natural. Nerves," Ginny said, just as the toilet door opened and Hermione emerged clad in the short exam robe. "How are you?"

"Lousy," Hermione said bluntly. "Be a lot better when this exam is over," she allowed.

"Baby's dropped, hasn't it? Hop up on the exam table," Ginny said pleasantly.

"It's dropped alright. I have to run to the loo every hour on the hour. And I can't hop anywhere," Hermione complained, backing up to the edge of the table carefully. Viktor and Ginny each took an elbow and helped boost her onto the table. After several minutes of scooting and adjusting, she was positioned in the stirrups properly and Ginny tapped the exam table, retracting the end.

"I'm all done. You're not dilated, your cervix is starting to thin a little, and it feels like the baby is head down. I would estimate you're looking at a nine pounder, easy. You're due in less than two weeks. Having any false contractions?" Ginny asked, raising up and extending the table again.

"A lot. And don't get me started on the heartburn," Hermione said.

"I can give you something for that. Won't prevent it, but it does make it feel better when you get it. You can get up, now," Ginny told her, helping her out of the last stirrup. "Hey, lay back and enjoy having people wait on you for the remainder of the duration, hmm? Let Ekaterina do all the cooking. You know she will, anyway. And invite me to dinner while she's there," Ginny cajoled.

"Won't be able to enjoy it for the heartburn," Hermione groused, rubbing at her chest.

Ginny offered her a hand, and Viktor took the other, and they helped her sit up. "Ankles a little swollen?" Ginny inquired, laying a hand on one of Hermione's bare ankles.

"A little?" Hermione snorted. "They're enormous. My fingers are so fat, my rings are cutting in," she added, struggling off the table. "And I'm all sore and can barely breathe," she puffed, rubbing her tight belly as she walked heavily across the room back to the toilet.

"Whew. She *is* in a mood," Ginny admitted when the door shut.

“Told you,” Viktor said lightly. “Probably be alright tomorrow. No offense, but I think you’re mostly the cause of it. Been nervous for the last week. Won’t admit it for anything, but she was,” he said with a shrug.

“Probably just needs some rest. Got a name or two picked out?” Ginny asked.

“Don’t even bring that up! We aren’t mentioning that. When I did yesterday, there were tears and slamming doors,” Viktor said, holding his hands up.

“What did you do? Pick a fight with her over what to name it?” Ginny asked, astonished.

“Pick a fight with a tired, cranky, hormonal pregnant woman? Do I *look* insane to you? No, she cried because she can’t think of anything she likes, and then she got angry at herself for getting weepy over it. If it was a fight, I wasn’t told when to show up and participate. I’m afraid to bring it up, now. If you have any appropriate suggestions, place them in a sealed envelope and wait for the all clear. We should have gotten this out of the way weeks ago. Just didn’t seem all that important, then. Now, apparently it’s taken on an importance of monumental proportions, worthy of emotional outbursts and obsessing. I blinked and it changed. Apparently I didn’t get the memo. I’m just hoping the next stage isn’t holding me at wandpoint and demanding I come up with something,” Viktor muttered.

Hermione emerged, dressed once again, and announced, “I’d like to go to the market before it closes, if you two are done chatting. Bye, Ginny.” Hermione hardly paused, stalking past them both and heading for the waiting room.

Ginny’s jaw dropped. “Make sure she gets some rest... In fact, hit her in the head if you have to...”

“Don’t think I haven’t been tempted a time or two over the past couple of days,” Viktor sighed.

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“I don’t think I-” Hermione began, but Viktor interrupted.

“Whatever you forgot, they can find themselves. Or they’ll yell at me to get it. Lay down. My parents know where everything is better than we do, probably,” Viktor mumbled into the pillow, not taking his arm from around Hermione’s middle. “Relax. They’re not company. Exactly...”

“But what if I forgot-” Hermione protested.

“Then you forgot it. Settle,” he ordered, pulling her closer.

“I should just go-”

“Am I going to have to pin you to the mattress?”

“I already am pinned,” Hermione said glumly.

“Back and belly still bothering you?” Viktor asked, massaging his hand over her hip. She nodded mutely, curling up a little tighter on her left side.

“What are we going to do if we have a girl?” Hermione said, as he pressed his hand against her bare belly, where it peeked out between the pajama bottoms and the maternity camisole.

“You mean namewise? You mean you don’t think Andrei Luben is an appropriate name for a girl?” he teased.

“Be serious. I’m practically ready to pop any minute, and if this child’s a girl, we still don’t have a name. We can’t have a baby and have nothing to call it,” Hermione insisted.

“Why not? I don’t think they come when you call for several months, anyway,” Viktor countered, kissing her right shoulder.

“How are we going to raise a baby if we can’t even name one?” Hermione complained.

“I’ve got one suggestion, if you promise it will provoke neither crying, nor screaming, nor door slamming, nor anything else negative. I think it’s appropriate, I like it, and I think you would, too. But you have to promise me there is not going to be squalling the instant I say this,” Viktor cautioned quietly.

“I promise,” Hermione said.

He massaged her hip absently. “I started thinking about what you said. About drowning the kid in ancient Greek names. I know you were kidding, but why not? Know what I like? Sophia. I like Sophia a lot,” Viktor said softly.

“Sophia. Wisdom. And it’s the capital of Bulgaria. That’s oddly appropriate. Got any middle names?” Hermione asked.

“If you want to go for the full Bulgarian experience, I was thinking Elena. It’s the Bulgarian form of-”

“Helen. My mother’s name,” Hermione finished for him.

“Or we could just use Helen. I like Sophia Elena or Sophia Helen, either one,” Viktor offered. “Or Elena Sophia and Helen Sophia work as well, it’s just that I know you have the same pet peeve I do about recycling names and-”

“I like Sophia,” Hermione interrupted. “Sophia Elena.”

“Settled, then? Andrei Luben or Sophia Elena in there?” Viktor asked tentatively.

“Settled. I like that,” Hermione said, threading her fingers through Viktor’s.

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Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block out the conversation. Her head hurt, her nerves sang like her muscles did when she moved the wrong way. Her nerves felt grated and raw, and Molly’s voice seemed to go right through her. The thought crossed her mind that she dearly wished Molly would shut up, instead of lecturing. “You really should take better care of yourself,” Molly scolded. “All that refinishing furniture and lying on the ground out in the garden, no wonder you don’t feel well, now!” Hermione opened her eyes, hoping the kitchen had gone away, or at least the occupants. No such luck. “And moving things around in the nursery! You’ve got a husband, get him to move the dresser!” Molly continued. She seemed to get increasingly shrill the longer she lectured.

“It was empty-“ Hermione protested weakly, but Molly interrupted. Hermione caught the sidelong glance Ekaterina gave them both before she went back to tying pitka dough inside a cloth. For once, Ekaterina’s expression was completely unreadable.

“It’s still a piece of furniture! You seem determined to ruin your health!” Molly warned. “You mark my words, you’re going to keep pushing until you push too far and wish you hadn’t. And then it will be too late.” Hermione swayed slightly, but just stood there, uncertain and unmoving.

With the dough already floating in a pot of water, Ekaterina wiped her hands efficiently on the dishtowel and whirled around, coming up short in front of Hermione. She hesitated a moment, then put her hand on Hermione’s belly and nudged gently. “I need in the vegetable bin. For the moussaka,” Ekaterina explained. Hermione turned and hugged the table as closely as possible, but Ekaterina was still cramped into a very small space in front of her.

“Ginny ought to have you on bed rest, if you ask me,” Molly insisted.

"I don't feel that bad, for Heaven's sake!" Hermione said, flustered. When Ekaterina raised up with her apron full of vegetables, she bumped Hermione's belly slightly.

"Sorry," Ekaterina murmured, heading back to the counter by the sink.

"You don't want me to chop, or something?" Hermione asked forlornly.

"Not necessary," Ekaterina said crisply, but she did give Hermione a sympathetic look.

"You dropped the bunch of dill," Hermione pointed out, squatting carefully to pick it up. She could just touch it with a fingertip, when her blouse stretched too snug over her belly and the button popped off, bouncing under the edge of the vegetable bin.

"And you're due any minute. You shouldn't be standing so much," Molly added from her chair at the table.

"Got it," Ekaterina said, kneeling swiftly and scooping up both the dill and the button. She had already gotten the dill into the sink and was standing, expectant, by the time Hermione had struggled back up. She quickly charmed the button back on and smoothed the blouse down before heading back to the sink.

"Due three days ago, actually," Hermione corrected her.

"Did your mother go overdue?" Molly quizzed.

"I don't know," Hermione replied tiredly.

"And I don't know why you didn't want to find out if it was a boy or a girl. Helps so much when picking out names," Molly observed.

"We agreed that we wanted it to be a surprise," Hermione sighed. "And we *have* names picked out. Andrei Luben and Sophia Elena."

"Lovely names. I thought maybe you would forego the middle name. Why didn't your parents give you one?" Molly asked.

"Sweet names," Ekaterina murmured, not turning from the sink, where she was tossing the vegetables after doing a whirlwind chopping job on them.

"I imagine they thought the first name was a big enough cross to bear on its own," Hermione said, smiling wanly. She put a hand to the small of her back and rubbed.

“You should sit. You’re going to put yourself into labor, standing around like that,” Molly cautioned.

“At this point, it would be a blessing if I did,” Hermione said, a touch irritated. “I’d like to drop it right here on the kitchen floor,” she muttered more quietly under her breath.

“What?” Molly said.

“Nothing,” Hermione replied.

“I would almost bet you’re having a boy,” Molly said. “You’re carrying big and your belly’s round.”

“What other shape would it be?” Hermione countered.

“Ginny was smaller and mine was more of an egg shape,” Molly said. “Did your mother carry high?”

“I can’t tell from the pictures. And that’s all nonsense,” Hermione insisted.

“Fine, then. How did you carry, Ekaterina?” Molly asked.

“Vas shaped almost like that,” Ekaterina said noncommittally, jerking her thumb over her shoulder at Hermione. “Only bigger, probably.”

“See? And she had a boy,” Molly said, as though that settled the whole matter.

Ekaterina gave a soft, derisive snort. “I think it had more to do with the fact that he veighed ten pounds. If you vant to finish the pitka...” she added, letting the offer dangle.

Hermione fairly jumped at the chance to be useful, finally. “Sure,” she said, hurrying over as fast as she could to fish the cheesecloth wrapped bundle of dough out of the pot of water. She opened the cloth and sprinkled the dough with flour. She was just about to reach for the Feta, which Ekaterina always insisted upon calling white Bulgarian cheese, when she paused. *Why must I go to the loo every time I turn around?* “I’ll be right back,” she said, excusing herself.

When she returned from the loo, Molly was already putting the baking pan aside to let the finished dough rest. “Saved you the trouble. I need to go get my own supper started. Get some rest, dear, or you’ll fall over,” Molly warned, practically pushing Hermione down into the chair after giving her a quick squeeze around the shoulders. Hermione blinked after her, staring at the door for a long moment

after Molly let it swing shut.

Hermione rubbed at the prickly tingling running down the back of her thigh. "Something the matter?" Ekaterina probed.

For a long minute, Hermione stubbornly refused to answer. "Sciatica," she said at last.

"Hmm?" Ekaterina said curiously, raising her eyebrows.

"Tingly and numb. That nerve, back there," Hermione explained.

"Oh. I had that." Hermione straightened up and shifted in her chair, trying to scoot closer to the table. It almost didn't surprise her when the same button popped off and fell to the floor once again. She made no effort to retrieve it. Ekaterina ducked and said a quick "*Accio* button," laying it on the table before sitting down in the chair next to Hermione's. "I couldn't wear anything with buttons after six months, either. You can rest before dinner. Nothing left to do. You should—"

"I'm sick to death of everyone telling me what I should and shouldn't do!" Hermione burst out. "And questioning my every little decision and saving me from myself! Just let me alone, already! You and Molly don't have to mother me! You're not my mother! She's dead! You hear me?!" she shouted. Ekaterina thrust her chin out and she lowered her eyebrows. Hermione braced for the expected tongue lashing, almost welcomed it, the idea of someone not handling her with kid gloves. To her surprise and horror, the set chin softened slightly and she could tell the dark eyes brimmed with tears before Ekaterina walked briskly toward the back door and exited. Hermione was still eyeing the kitchen door with her mouth hanging open when just a second later, Viktor stepped in, casting a wondering glance back over his shoulder.

"I'll have you know, my mother, who is all of five foot two, just planted her hand on my chest and flattened me against a wall when I got in the way of her getting out the door... Who put a bee in her bonnet?" After a short pause he added, "Garden's gnomeless. For all of ten minutes, probably. What's the matter with you?"

Hermione's face crumpled and she sobbed, "I just yelled at your mother," then buried her face in her hands.

"Well, you must have had good reason, else she'd still be in here ripping you up one side and down the other, pregnant or no. She's probably going to kick the fence because she's mad at herself. What did she do?" Viktor said lightly.

“You don’t understand! I made her cry!” Hermione wailed.

Viktor let out a low whistle. “I managed that once. We were having an argument and I told her I hated her,” he said softly. “What did you do?”

Hermione blurted out the entire story. “I don’t know why I said it! It was Molly that was getting on my nerves... you have to go apologize for me-“

“I’m not apologizing for you. She won’t accept it from me, anyway. You’re a big girl, no offense, so do your own explaining,” Viktor said firmly.

“Is she even still out there?” Hermione said in a thin voice.

“I’ll go check. I am not leaving this house again once I get back in here,” Viktor sighed. “I just come back to people trying to break in and babies that don’t belong to us and crying women. Be back in a minute,” he called over his shoulder. “I hope,” he added under his breath. Viktor spotted Ekaterina’s dark hair over the back of the swing. Even though he expected it, it still jolted him to see a tear run down her cheek before she brushed it away with a finger. “She didn’t mean what she said,” Viktor said without preamble, sitting down next to her.

“Yes, she did,” Ekaterina protested.

“Not really. You just happened to be convenient when she blew. Molly can be a little... smothering, sometimes,” Viktor insisted. “It wasn’t so much you, I bet. Or even Molly. She’s about to have a baby in the amount of time most people take to get used to the idea that they’re going to have one. She’s overdue, nervous, big, and pretty damned crabby. She’s stayed royally pissed most of the last three weeks. I know, I’ve lived with her. Not that I blame her. Look, she can’t even believe she said it.”

“I know I’m not her mama,” Ekaterina said stubbornly, setting her chin again.

“But you’re mine. And you and Molly are the closest thing she’s got to her own,” Viktor said, draping an arm around her shoulders. “Ginny’s told her if there’s nothing by the end of the week, she’ll induce, because the baby’s getting too big. If that doesn’t work, it’s off to St. Mungo’s for a Cesarean. She’s scared. And I can talk all I like, but I can’t tell her what any of it’s like. I know she hurt your feelings, but she would take it back, if she could.”

“You think I don’t know it’s scary?” Ekaterina said softly.

“Would you please go back inside so she can apologize? For me, if not for her? Please don’t make my sore, fat, cranky wife waddle all the way out here to

grovel. You go to her, save us all a lot of time,” he said with a laugh, giving her a squeeze and kissing her temple. “Besides, it’s cold out here. Let me know when it’s safe to come back in,” he added. “And there had better not be anyone blubbering in there when I get back,” he warned. Ekaterina smiled softly, then stood and walked back to the kitchen.

“I’m so sorry, I wasn’t even angry at you, it was Molly getting on my nerves. I don’t know why I-“ Hermione gushed, but Ekaterina silenced her with a raised hand.

“Forgotten,” she said firmly, sitting down.

“I feel about an inch tall. I mean, you’ve been nothing but wonderful, and you didn’t have to come in the first place. I don’t even appreciate it,” Hermione said, biting her lip.

Ekaterina brushed Hermione’s mass of hair back behind her shoulder. “I’m not your mama. I didn’t carry you. I can’t tell you anything about what that was like. But I did carry the other half of that,” she said, looking significantly at Hermione’s belly. “I couldn’t love you any more if I had. I never had a daughter. I looked forward to getting a daughter-in-law. She was not what I expected, but then, neither was my son, sometimes. A lot of times.”

“You didn’t have to like me. Shouldn’t have, by rights,” Hermione whispered. “Why did you?”

“You met two of my expectations that I would not compromise. You loved my son as much as I did, and he loved you enough to set his mind and his chin no matter what we thought,” Ekaterina said, smiling softly. “I hated the idea at first. All these letters about this British Muggle-born. But by the time he talked about bringing you home, I had to believe he was serious. So I reread those letters. Got to see you through his eyes. And I liked what I saw,” she said with a small shrug. “Can I go get him off the swing? No more tears over it? Promise?”

“I’m so sorry,” Hermione whispered again.

“Forgiven,” Ekaterina said simply, leaning to embrace her. She stood and paused a moment, picking the button up from the table between her fingers. “Leave it,” Hermione sighed. “It’s hopeless,” she added, running a finger around the gaping fabric, where her stomach showed. “Too much belly, not enough blouse.”

Ekaterina put the button back down, then leaned over and laid a hand on Hermione’s shoulder, murmuring in her ear, “Viktor made me split two robes. I swear he was made of lead,” in a deadpan voice before heading for the back

door. Hermione laughed and sniffed at the same time, wiping at her damp cheeks with the back of her hand. She felt just a tiny bit less miserable, at least.

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Hermione sucked her breath in when her belly tightened, rubbing her palm over the painful cramp. It soon faded, and she relaxed back into the sofa, closing her eyes, but knowing she wouldn't be able to sleep. The Braxton Hicks contractions and the heaviness of the kicking baby in her crowded middle prevented it. She had finally slipped out of bed around two in the morning, pacing the hall for a few moments before coming into the living room and sitting on the sofa, instead. The tossing and turning in bed was doing nothing to help relieve the discomfort, so she preferred to at least be uncomfortable and restless where it wouldn't wake Viktor. "Don't you want to come out?" she sighed, letting her hand fall away as the muscle relaxed. "It's not so bad out here, honest. I can't take hauling you around much longer," she whispered. "Your aunt Ginny's already threatening me with an Inducing Potion."

She drowsed for a few minutes, halfway between waking and sleeping, the pressure in her pelvis making her shift slightly. Hermione flexed her stiff, swollen ankles, then curled her toes against the carpet. She didn't even hear the guest bedroom door open. At first, she thought she was dreaming. "Hermione? Something wrong?"

She had once joked that her in-laws were better than a Time Turner. "I've seen my future," she had declared to Ginny after she met Petar. The resemblance was sometimes uncanny. While Viktor's accent had slowly softened over the years, Petar still pronounced English words with that curiously stilted and lilting Bulgarian accent, some of the syllables far more musical and pleasing to the ear, others a shade awkward. Every time she heard him speak, she was reminded of that first shy and quiet request to sit with her in the library at Hogwarts. May I sit. Three little words. Funny how they weren't the three little words most people would associate with a relationship, but somehow, so much hung on those three little words. The timbre of their voices matched almost perfectly, softer and gentler than most people would expect. She would have expected someone with such a fierce scowl to have a sufficiently fierce sounding voice. Surprisingly, his first words to her had been a soft, uncertain, almost boyish request to sit down next to her in the library. Petar still pronounced her name with the soft vowels and gently rolling 'r' sound that Viktor had used in the beginning, when he hadn't quite mastered wrapping his tongue around it. Viktor still fell back on that more exotic pronunciation when he was speaking in Bulgarian. Let other people call French the language of love all they liked, she preferred a whispered *ti si hubava* any day of the week. "Hmmm?" she answered, rousing herself.

"Sorry, I was just going to get a drink of vater. Something wrong?" Petar prodded,

squatting next to the sofa arm and peering up at her. In the moonlight from the window, she could just make out his soft, thoughtful frown. It had been curious at first, thinking that this man who looked only a shade older than Viktor was about to become her father-in-law. As it turned out, he was only a very little older, especially when you considered the long lives of wizards. He had been barely twenty when Viktor was born. Of course, as she had gotten to know him, the differences became apparent, too. As much as she was convinced that Petar was a pretty decent physical preview of Viktor twenty years on, she was just as convinced that Ekaterina's personality would never die as long as Viktor was still alive. The set of their chins wasn't the only thing mother and son shared.

"Just wasn't sleeping well," Hermione said. "Contractions," she added, tugging her pajama top down. Uselessly, as it turned out. It simply crawled back up the slope of her belly as soon as she let go, leaving a good portion of it exposed.

"Just contractions?" Petar pressed, cocking a thick, dark eyebrow expressively.

She almost laughed when she remembered what Ginny had pointed out after meeting Petar and Ekaterina shortly before she and Viktor married. "They don't need to speak any English. They all speak fluent eyebrow," Ginny had said. "They speak volumes just by looking at you, without saying a word."

"Not the real thing. Between the baby, my mind and my muscles, nothing's giving me the chance to rest," Hermione allowed.

"Company?" Petar offered. When Hermione nodded, he slid into the seat next to the sofa arm and slipped an arm around her shoulders, giving her a heartening squeeze. "Mind veighing heavier than the baby?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes," she said simply, resting her cheek tiredly against his shoulder and chest and breathing in the scent of him from his dressing gown. He always reminded her of sandalwood, for some reason.

"Come on. Lie down," he said, grabbing one of the large throw pillows and draping it over his lap. Too tired to argue, she obediently stretched out and rested her head and shoulders on the pillow, lying on her back and looking up at him, suddenly uncaring about how much of her stomach was uncovered by her pajamas. "What seems to be the problem?" he asked softly, stroking the hair away from her forehead, then resting his hand in her hair on the pillow.

Hermione laughed softly. "You sound like a Muggle psychiatrist. Lie back and tell me what the problem is... Nothing. Everything."

"Ve hardly slept the last three veeks before Viktor came," Petar volunteered, smiling softly. His smile was almost always charmingly lopsided, nothing like the

way Viktor and Ekaterina smiled, even, as though it were marked off by level. "Babies haff a funny vay of doing that to you, even before they get here."

"I'm starting to think this baby is never going to come. Funny, when I haven't even been pregnant six months, yet, technically. But it's past due. And it just keeps hanging around in there, getting bigger and bigger and kicking the daylight out of me. I don't want to have to be induced. Or worse. Go to St. Mungo's for a Cesarean," Hermione said plaintively, her eyes half closed.

"They usually come when they are ready. This one might need a nudge," Petar allowed. "Get used to it. Babies do everything in their own time. Children make you wait on some things, others they do vay before you are ready. In the end, they always grow up far too fast for your taste. So be careful about vishing anything would hurry up," he added sagely. "Before you know it, they are grown and expecting their own."

"I can't be a mother. I'm a mess. I'm a worthless mess," Hermione said, squeezing her eyes shut. She surprised herself when a fat tear ran down her temple and trickled into her ear.

"Shh... no, you're not," Petar insisted.

"Is it completely wrong of me to want my mother, right now?" Hermione sobbed. "I feel so guilty and selfish... I mean, Ekaterina... she-"

"She's not your mama. She knows that," Petar said softly, running his fingertips over her forehead.

"You two have been fantastic, right from the beginning, when you didn't have to be...it's not that... I just... I just miss them so much, sometimes. So many times since I got pregnant, I wanted to ask something, or share something... and she's not there to share it with..."

"It's okay to miss them. Ve came into your life later. Not quite the same. Ve may not haff had the privilege of raising you, but you know you can talk to us about anything, right? Anything you vant to?" Petar asked, rubbing away the wet streaks. "You may not be ours, but ve could not love you any more if you vere. You know Ekaterina loves you. But she cannot tell you what it vas like to carry you. Just Viktor," he said, resting his hand lightly on her belly. "I am sure she couldn't love you any more if she had. Ve are both villing to do whatever you vant or need when the time comes. Don't be shy about asking just because ve are not your parents," he cautioned, leaning over to plant a kiss on her forehead. "And it's okay to cry. Good for you, sometimes," he added, taking his hand off her belly to hold her hand instead.

“Thank you,” she whispered, sniffing. More silent tears slipped from the corners of her eyes, and she made no effort to wipe them away, closing her eyes and tucking in closer against Petar’s body on the pillow. When the tears stopped and her breath dropped into the even rhythm of sleep, he let go of her hand and flipped the light blanket from the back of the sofa down over her. He tilted his head back against the couch and closed his eyes, rather than trying to get up without disturbing her.

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Viktor woke and stretched before opening his eyes. He was surprised to find the other side of the bed deserted, and not even warm. He slipped out of bed and walked to the bath, which was equally empty. Grabbing his dressing gown on the way to the door, he tossed it on and headed for the hall. “Papa, have you seen-” he began when he spotted Petar on the couch, pausing when he came close enough to spot the bushy head over the end of the sofa. “Guess that answers my question. What happened?”

“Got up for a drink of vater, found her sitting up on the couch. Ve had a little talk,” Petar explained.

“This one of your patented ‘little talks’?”

“Maybe,” Petar answered.

“Offer you some breakfast? You know, she sleeps heavy enough these days, when she sleeps, you could probably get up and she would never know,” Viktor pointed out.

“Just coffee and toast,” Petar protested.

“Suit yourself,” Viktor said, heading back up the hall. He rapped lightly on the door with a knuckle. “Mama, you awake?” The door opened and he said, “Just wanted to know if you would like some breakfast.”

“Anything’s fine. Your papa already up?” Ekaterina asked, tying her dressing gown.

“We have sneaky spouses, apparently. They both got up in the middle of the night and didn’t wake us. Had a little powwow on the couch,” Viktor said with a shrug.

“I see. Vhen is Ginny coming?” Ekaterina said.

“Later this morning. Last ditch effort with an Inducing Potion,” Viktor said with a

shrug. "Papa's just having coffee and toast, so feel free to add anything you like to that selection."

"Why just that?" Ekaterina asked, puzzled.

"I suspect because he's trapped on the couch. Under the pregnant lady. She may kill me, but I'm going to let her sleep until about thirty minutes before Ginny's supposed to get here."

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"So... how long will this take?" Hermione asked warily, looking at the small blue flask that Ginny put on the kitchen table.

"Anywhere from near instant to almost twenty-four hours. Or not at all. There's really no way of knowing. Funny thing about babies. They're hard to budge, even by magic," Ginny admitted. "They get born when they're good and ready to get born, most times. Your body just doesn't seem to be getting all the cues it should. You're dilated six centimeters already, if the contractions would just kick in..."

"I would deliver the baby. Assuming it's not too big to even get out of me," Hermione said, biting her lip.

"Stop that," Viktor chided gently, squeezing her shoulders from where he stood behind her chair. Ginny couldn't help but let her eyes wander to Hermione's middle, where even the roomiest of her maternity clothing now stretched tight over the arc of her belly. Ginny had measured and estimated all she could, but the human body never was easy to second guess. Hermione had made it clear that a Cesarean was an absolute last resort.

"I'll be at the office this afternoon. I swapped off the morning appointments. Take it whenever you feel comfortable taking it, and call me whenever you think I need to be here. If nothing changes by tomorrow afternoon, I think there's nothing for it but to admit you to St. Mungo's and take the baby," Ginny said apologetically. "It's gaining something like two ounces a day. You can't keep that up."

"Amen, sister. Do I take it all at once?" Hermione asked, picking up the flask.

"Drink it all. All at once, I would suggest, because I'm told it tastes terrible," Ginny shrugged.

"Of course. Why should it taste decent?" Hermione sighed.

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“Well?” Viktor asked, getting into bed beside Hermione.

“Every fourteen minutes or so. I still can’t tell if it’s the real thing or not. I’ve only had the three,” Hermione answered. “How am I supposed to lie down and sleep if this is the real thing?”

“Because you’re tired. And if it is the real thing, you’ll need your strength. I don’t imagine you’ll sleep through much of it if it’s the real business,” Viktor said, slipping an arm behind her neck and cupping her shoulder. “I doubt anyone ever slept through all of a real labor.”

“What if it doesn’t progress? Ginny said that could happen, where they just won’t get any closer together and-“

“And a lot of things could happen. Just wait and see, hmm?” Viktor interrupted.

“Wait and see,” Hermione sighed, settling down into the covers and pillows.

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Hermione watched the clock hand, and right on cue, her abdominal muscles tensed and cramped, the tightness and pain spiraling down her front, wrapping like tendrils around and deep into her back. She moaned softly, muffling herself against the pillow. The last four had come at precise four minute intervals. Her hand flew to her side, and she panted lightly, waiting for the pain to ebb. It receded the way it came, slowly, gradually, like a wave licking the beach. “Viktor?” She groped behind her back for his arm, finally coming up with his hand and giving it a desperate squeeze. “Viktor... I think you had better go get Ginny... every four minutes.”

“Why didn’t you wake me earlier?” he said, sitting up and sliding off the bed. He hadn’t even bothered to get undressed before lying down, just in case.

“They jumped right from eight minutes to four, I didn’t think it was time,” Hermione lamented.

“They’re four minutes apart and you didn’t tell me? You should have said something when they dropped below ten-“ Viktor said, yanking on his boots.

“I wanted to make sure,” Hermione said, curling up into as tight a ball around her swollen middle as she could manage. “I’m sure, now.”

“It’s okay. Hang tight, I’ll be right back,” Viktor said, leaning over to kiss her cheek, noting the fine sheen of sweat on her face, then heading for the door.

“Viktor?”

“What?”

“Could you actually go get her? It would be faster,” Hermione pleaded.

“You mean fly straight there and pick her up?” Viktor asked.

“Yes.”

“I suppose I could. I’ll call first to warn her I’m coming,” Viktor said.

“Viktor? Could you wake Petar and Ekaterina?” Hermione asked in a small voice.

“Sure,” he called back over his shoulder. He stepped out into the hall and rapped at the guest bedroom door. When Petar opened it, he explained, “Four minutes apart. I’m going to go physically get Ginny on the broom and bring her back. Could you two sit with her?”

“I think we could handle that. Go on,” Petar said softly.

After making a hurried call on the Floo, Viktor walked to the back door, grabbing the broom clipped into the rack in the corner. Hermione had laughed when he had insisted on putting the best one he owned out here two weeks ago. Now, he was glad he had. Stowing his wand in a robe pocket, he stepped out the back, swept his leg over the handle, and pushed off, barely waiting until he had cleared the treetops before streaking toward Hogwarts.

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“Ginny?” Neville sat up in the dark bedroom. “Ginny?” he repeated, his eyes finally adjusting enough to see that she was pulling on her shoes while leaning against the wall in the corner of the room, hopping slightly.

“Viktor called. They’re already four minutes apart. He’s coming to get me. I don’t know what I’m more nervous about, to tell the truth. Delivering the baby or getting on the broom with him. He took me for a ‘slow ride’ once that had my stomach somewhere up in my throat and my heart down around my kneecaps, or the other way around. And that was years ago,” Ginny said, shaking her head.

“Why are you nervous?” Neville asked.

“Let’s see... I’m about to deliver the first child of two of my best, oldest friends, a baby they have wanted and have been trying to have for something like a couple

of decades, and I'm afraid she's going to have a hard time having it, because it's a week overdue and I botched things up and it's growing even more like a weed than most overdue babies. Why on earth would I be nervous?" Ginny said in a strained voice.

"Bag's packed, you don't have to worry about doing the flying. Viktor's never killed or seriously wounded anyone on a broom yet, least of all himself, so I don't think you have anything to worry about there, as long as you hang on tight," Neville soothed.

"So, breaking his leg doesn't count?" Ginny asked, bemused expression on her face.

"Well... technically, he wasn't on the broom at the time. He got knocked off. I hardly think you have to worry about any wild opposing Seekers not watching where they're going at this hour of the night, do you?" Neville laughed. "You're not in a stadium, right?"

"True. I'll just hunker down and say my prayers... and probably break a couple of his ribs because I'm hanging on so tight. Oh! I forgot to ask where he wanted to meet! I should probably go out on the lawn, or at the very least, down to the entryway!" Ginny exclaimed, gathering up her bag and taking a quick look through it. She looked up curiously when an insistent knocking resounded through their quarters. She wandered through the sitting room and opened the door, only to find the hallway deserted. "Nobody there," she told Neville when she returned, giving him a shrug.

The knocking began again, and Ginny walked toward the bedroom window, tentatively parting the curtains, then raising the large window. "Getting on the broom or not?" Neville heard Viktor ask. When he scooted toward the end of the bed, Neville could see him hovering outside the window, holding up his illuminated wand.

"Hey! Good luck, you two! Or should I say three?" Neville called out, waving.

"Thanks," Viktor said distractedly. "Well, make up your mind. She all but begged me to hurry, so I don't think we exactly have a ton of time to hang around staring at each other."

"Oh, alright, here, I'll set my bag on the sill. In front or behind?" Ginny asked, swallowing hard.

"I prefer you get behind," Viktor said, coming around parallel to the window.

"Oh, thank goodness," Ginny muttered under her breath, carefully straddling the

broom after crawling out on the wide sill.

“What?” Viktor said over his shoulder, steadying her arm with a hand as she settled in behind him.

“Nothing, never mind. Let me set the bag in my lap and get a grip before you take off!” Ginny said, grabbing the bag and pinning it between the two of them. She threaded her arms beneath Viktor’s holding tightly, locking her fingers together in what she was sure was a white-knuckled grip.

“Hold on,” Viktor said, which was awfully unnecessary from Ginny’s point of view, and banked away from the castle. Ginny couldn’t help but squeeze her knees tight against Viktor’s hips. She closed her eyes and rested her cheek between Viktor’s shoulder blades, to prevent the wind tearing at her eyes. And, she admitted to herself, so she wouldn’t have to see the sickening blur of the trees whirling by when he shot off. “I’m not going to be flying upside down, you know,” he murmured over his shoulder. “I actually do have a stake in getting you there in one piece.”

“I don’t care,” Ginny said, keeping her eyes shut. “Make fun all you like, just fly,” she added, loosening her grip just a shade.

“Okay, you said it,” Viktor muttered before leaning forward and rocketing off. Ginny thought it took a good three minutes for her stomach to catch up.

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Ekaterina folded another warm towel and tucked it into the small of Hermione’s back. “Would you like to go sit in a warm bath, instead?” she asked, rubbing Hermione’s shoulder.

“No... the towels have made it better... I don’t think...I could...sit... in the bath,” Hermione said between pants.

“The water, has it broken?” Ekaterina asked.

“No...I think... I think I need... need to get up and walk, I can’t lie here any more. Please,” Hermione said, rolling over onto her back.

“Come on, then,” Petar said, bracing her and helping her out of bed. Ekaterina flanked her on the other side, both of them supporting her slightly.

“Better?” Ekaterina asked when they were a short distance from the door.

“Better,” Hermione allowed. “I needed to move,” she said, wiping the perspiration from her forehead, then clutching at a fistful of the long, loose nightshirt she wore. They made several wandering tours through the hall, the living room and the kitchen before Hermione came to a stop in the kitchen, reaching out to prop herself against the edge of the sink. “How much longer until they get back?” she asked, doubling over slightly.

“Probably a few minutes,” Ekaterina soothed.

“You two could sit,” Hermione said, straightening and putting her hands to her back. After the two of them settled at the kitchen table, Hermione stayed at the sink, looking out into the moonlit back garden through the kitchen and back entry windows. She weathered another contraction, and found that swaying slightly or pacing helped to ease the stabbing, penetrating ache. “That’s probably them,” she said, gritting her teeth and ducking her head, vainly trying to follow the shadowy shape streaking by the window.

The door opened with a bang, smacking the back entry’s wall, and Ginny barreled through, “Sorry, didn’t mean to nearly take the wall down, just going to the bedroom to get set up, be back in a tick,” she blurted along the way.

“What are you doing in the kitchen?” Viktor asked, breathing a little heavily and rubbing his ribcage.

“What’s with you?” Hermione asked, nodding her head at his hand.

“Ginny’s reedy, but she has quite the grip. Seriously, doing the dishes?” Viktor asked, smiling faintly.

Hermione laughed heartily. “Hardly! I think you owe-“ she began, but she stopped abruptly when she felt the warm trickle down one leg. She leaned over and studied the growing puddle forming around her bare feet. Suddenly, the membrane gave way completely and the rest of her water gushed to the floor. “There’s some blood in it,” she whispered.

“Has your... guess that answers my question,” Ginny finished.

“There’s blood in it!” Hermione said urgently, looking up at Ginny.

“Did you ever have the bloody show? The mucus plug?” Ginny quizzed as she came over and took Hermione’s elbow.

“No, not that I know of. I never saw it if it fell out,” Hermione said, supporting her belly with one hand.

“Careful, don’t slip, let me dry it up first,” Ginny said, waving her wand. “If you haven’t, that might be it. It’s only a little blood, nothing to be too worried over, I think.”

Viktor took the other elbow and they guided her toward the hall, Viktor looking back over his shoulder to mouth a silent “Thank you,” to his parents.

“Right, now, how far apart are they?” Ginny asked as they eased her onto the bed.

“The last ones I timed were every three, I don’t know, now,” Hermione said. “I think they’re closer.”

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“More comfortable on your side?” Ginny asked, and Hermione nodded mutely. “Okay, we’ll try that, then. On your left. Let me take a look. Well, I can see the head up there at your cervix, so it shouldn’t be too awfully long before you can push.”

“How... will I know when it’s time?” Hermione said, drawing in a deep breath.

“They tell me you just do. That you get this overwhelming urge to push... having one? I’ll time, okay?” Ginny asked when Hermione moaned and curled up tighter.

“Contraction?” Hermione panted, gritting her teeth. “Y-y-yes.” Viktor perched on the edge of the bed behind her, rubbing her lower back gently. He reached over with his free left hand and took her right, and she clung to it. Another thirty minutes passed, a steady rhythm of pain welling and ebbing, closer and closer together, until they overlapped, the discomfort and tightness never quite leaving, just growing, peaking, waning, then growing again, the quiet broken only by Viktor and Ginny’s murmured encouragement and Hermione’s heavy breathing. “Ginny... I think this is it. If I don’t push, I’m going to explode. I need to push...”

“Okay, pull your right leg up and let me take a look before you do, though,” Ginny said, kneeling at the foot of the bed once again. “Alright, head’s engaged, you’re dilated, push with the next contraction,” Ginny told her. As Ginny had feared, it was slow going. Though Hermione was pushing with all her strength, it took ten good pushes to reveal the dark, downy hair, damp and plastered down to the scalp.

“I can’t... I can’t push anymore,” Hermione moaned.

“Take a rest, then. It’s alright,” Ginny said.

"I can't like this. I need... I need to be up... more upright..." Hermione protested.

"Come on, then," Viktor said, helping her to sit up, then sliding behind her, propping her upright. "Better?"

"I can't finish. I can't..." she panted.

"Yes, you can. It's almost over, the baby's almost here. You can do this," Viktor soothed, brushing her sodden hair back from her forehead.

"If I could just squat, I think I could push easier..." Hermione said, leaning back into him tiredly.

"Come on, I'll help you," Viktor said, kneeling and lifting her under the arms, helping to hold her up on her knees and legs in a sort of modified squat, doing some of the job her trembling legs couldn't.

"Ready to push again?" Ginny asked her. Hermione nodded mutely, then bore down, and the dark head popped free. "Okay, hold off a second, let me get the nose and mouth clear, then you can push all you like. Cord's not around the neck," Ginny said, running her finger around beneath the baby's chin, to be sure. "Alright. Here we go, push all you can, and when it's over, you'll be parents."

Slowly but surely, the baby emerged from Hermione's body, and within fifteen minutes, Ginny was wrapping up the warm little bundle, who seemed very unhappy about it, indeed, until Ginny handed the baby over to Viktor.

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Ekaterina and Petar looked at one another in silence until the high-pitched cry faded. Perfect quiet flooded back in until the bedroom door opened. Viktor stood in the kitchen doorway for a moment, rearranging the blanket in his arms. He looked back up at Petar and Ekaterina, who each had their eyebrows raised, questioningly and expectantly.

"Well, I have good news, and I have bad news," Viktor said softly. "The bad news is, I think you just lost bragging rights. Ten pounds, five ounces," Viktor added, walking over to the space between their chairs. "The good news is... meet Sophia Elena..." he said with a grin, folding the blanket back and revealing the plump red face, and the dark head of hair. "Hermione's fine. Tired and worn out, but fine. She wanted you two to hold her. You two fight it out over who goes first." Petar gave a silent nod to Ekaterina, and she tucked her arm beneath Sophia, taking her. "I'm going back in. Bring her back in a few minutes. I'll leave the door open when Ginny's finished. See you in a little bit... Baba and Diado,"

he tossed over his shoulder.

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“I can’t believe it, it’s like she’s made out of lead,” Hermione exclaimed, resituating the baby in her arms as she sat propped up in bed.

“At least you can put her down occasionally, now,” Viktor laughed, sitting on the other side of the bed. “You don’t have to lug her around twenty-four hours a day.”

“It’s probably my imagination, but she feels heavier than Etienne did,” Hermione said.

“Wouldn’t doubt it. She’s a big girl,” he said wonderingly, cupping Sophia’s bare heel in his palm.

“She’s beautiful. She is beautiful, isn’t she? I’m not biased,” Hermione said, smiling.

“Oh, no, not at all. I’ve just got one complaint,” Viktor murmured, lifting one of Sophia’s hands and examining the long fingers.

“What?” Hermione said, in a surprised tone.

“I said, I have one complaint. There is no way in this world that green onesie is going to fit her!” Viktor said, laughing.

“We’ll put it up, then. Save it. Plenty of other clothes that will fit,” Hermione declared.

“Ahem, ahem. Can we come in? Ekaterina said it was alright,” Neville said from the doorway. Behind him, Harry, Hannah, Ron and Susan stood, bunched up in the hall.

“Come on in,” Hermione called out. The group filed in and crowded around the bed.

“Whew! She is a big one, isn’t she?” Ron said, laying a hand on Sophia’s head. “Hi, there, I felt you when you were still flopping around inside your mum’s tummy, I did,” he said with a grin. Sophia simply let out a tremendous yawn.

“She’s thoroughly unimpressed, Ron,” Harry teased.

“Ginny still sleeping?” Neville asked.

“She’s holed up in the guest bedroom. She might be awake by now,” Hermione allowed.

“So, seem like forever, being pregnant and giving birth?” Hannah asked.

“Yes and no. Some parts of it seemed to take forever, but on the other hand, I can’t believe she’s already here. How can four months or so be the blink of an eye and an eternity all at the same time? Or a few hours of labor?” Hermione mused.

“Because time’s relative. Man, I tell you, time flies. Seems like just last week you were taking dives at birthday parties, and now you’re already holding a baby. By the time you turn around twice, you two will have been married twenty years. And she’ll be nearly two,” Harry pointed out.

“Bite your tongue! I don’t want to think about her growing up too fast. I just want to enjoy her being a baby for a while. Don’t grow up too fast, hmm, Sophia? Don’t rush that like you did being born,” Hermione said, rocking the drowsing baby slightly.

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“Papa will be right out, soon as the medivizard gets finished, I promise,” Ivanova told Sophia. The solemn little girl didn’t take her wide, dark eyes from the locker room door. “Staring a hole through the door won’t make him come out any faster,” she cajoled, but Sophia simply socked a plump thumb into her mouth and narrowed her nearly black eyes at the door, staring that much harder.

“How about,” Levski asked, crouching down beside her and putting his hands under her arms, “I take you around the stadium vone time on the broom?” He stood and tucked her into the crook of his arm, straddled the broom, and was just settling in on the handle when a voice rang out from the locker room door.

“Get your grubby hands off of my daughter,” Viktor said good-naturedly, coming over to collect her. “What did I tell you about putting her on a broom all the time?”

“You might as vell give it up, she loves being on a broom. Begs for it,” Levski argued.

“She’s not even two. Don’t push it. You ready to go home? Mama should be back from her meeting by now, and you haven’t seen her all day,” Viktor told Sophia.

“Bulger?” Sophia asked, curiously prodding at what was left of the large bruise

beside Viktor's left eye.

"Ow, don't do that. Yes, Papa took a Bludger in the eye. Frankly, Papa should learn to duck faster in practice. However, since Papa didn't get his nose bashed in, I suppose it could have been worse. Now, ready to go home?" Viktor asked.

"Broom?" Sophia said hopefully, plucking at some of the trim on Viktor's uniform.

"Yeah, Papa, broom?" Levski said with a laugh.

"Oh, alright! Once around, low and slow," Viktor sighed, handing her over.

"If you were any prouder of that girl, you would burst," Ivanova said, once Levski had taken off.

"Your point is?" Viktor prompted.

"It's not Levski's fault she's like you all over again," Ivanova said.

"Don't say that. Poor child has a big enough cross to bear without you saying that. Besides, it just isn't true. For a start, her nose is cuter," Viktor said with a smirk.

"She can stare a hole through you just like you used to do. Still do, sometimes. She gives you that same 'drop dead' look when she is angry. You look at her and you can practically see the gears turning in that head of hers. And she is a natural on a broom. She vatches you like a hawk when you're up there. And she's probably going to be light, so you know what position they will expect her to play... Whether you like it or not, in a few years, people are going to be comparing her flying to yours. A lot of people. Favorably, most likely," Ivanova observed.

"The gears thing, that's Hermione. And she sometimes puts her hands on her hips and bosses in a very familiar fashion that I had nothing to do with, either. So, she's going to be a decent flier. She might do this, she might not. I'm fine either way. She's not just me," Viktor said with a shrug.

"So, do you want her to, or not? Be a flier? For more than fun, maybe?" Ivanova pressed.

"Whatever she wants. If she wants to, I'm flattered. If not, well, maybe I would just as soon not have to worry about her getting her face smashed," Viktor said, touching a finger to the bruise.

"Admit it. You're proud she knows how to handle a toy broom before she can tie

her own shoes," Ivanova insisted. "If she were big enough, she could handle the real thing."

"Alright, I am. I'll be twice as proud when she can tie her own shoes *and* fly," Viktor said dismissively, watching Levski walk over with Sophia.

"Bye, Pilentse. Careful, or you're going to break a lot of hearts and kick a lot of other body parts in a few years," Levski cautioned Sophia as he always did when he handed her over after a ride.

"Now," Viktor said, tucking her into his arm, "ready to go home? I bet Mama's dying to see you. See you two tomorrow at the anniversary shindig?" he asked Levski and Ivanova.

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"The Empress not done holding court?" Hermione asked, when Viktor came and sat back down next to her.

"No. She's still over there bending Harry's ear about practice yesterday. Won't say two words a day for a whole week, then she'll babble about something for twenty minutes straight," Viktor said with a shrug.

"Wonder who she got that from? Somebody else I know usually wouldn't grunt three words a week, either, but get him started about anything to do with flying..." Hermione said, laughing.

"Alright, you," Viktor warned, slipping an arm around her shoulders. "I forgot to ask, how did the meeting come out?"

"It went well. It would probably be about three articles a month, no more than five, they're willing to be flexible. I can more or less pick my topics. There might be an occasional assignment of topic, but that would be rare. It was a good deal, I signed. Eleanor said they would probably be distributed through all three of the publications she manages," Hermione explained.

"I see," Viktor said, taking a sip of his punch.

"When we get home, would you be willing to get something out of the attic for me?" Hermione asked.

"What, getting the urge to refinish something?" Viktor asked lightly.

"No, I need you to get something else. You boxed it up, so you should know where it is," Hermione said.

“Fine. What?” Viktor said curiously.

“A certain, small green onesie that never got much use,” Hermione said in a low voice.

“Why?” Viktor asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Because maybe it’s about to. I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure, but I had more than one appointment yesterday,” Hermione said, smiling softly.

“But we haven’t taken anything... have we?” Viktor asked, looking her in the eye.

“People do occasionally get pregnant without aid of Fecundus Potion, you know,” Hermione teased. “In nine short months, we’re going to have two of those little people in our house,” she said, pointing to Sophia, who was still rattling off an account of what she had done the prior day to Harry and Hannah.

“What do you mean, nine *short* months? Nine whole months to prepare is an absolute luxury! Spring baby, hmm?” Viktor asked.

“Spring baby. So we can lie in the back yard and bunny watch. And you and Sophie can get me up with a block and tackle,” Hermione laughed.

“Hey, there, what are you two up to, hunkered down over here in the corner, together?” Harry asked, walking over with Sophia tucked in against his shoulder, Hannah, Ron and Susan trailing along behind.

“Talking about what’s in... our back garden. Did you tell Harry about what you have in the back garden?” Hermione prompted, taking Sophia when she held her small arms out.

“Broom,” she said solemnly, without missing a beat, as Hermione settled Sophia in her lap.

“One track mind!” Viktor scolded, tickling her, prompting a riot of giggles.

“Now, you don’t have an entirely one track mind. Show Mama and Papa how sharp you are,” Hannah said, sitting in the chair beside Hermione. “What’s this?” she quizzed, pointing to Sophia’s right hand.

“Right hand.”

“And this?” Hannah asked, switching hands.

“Left hand.”

“This?” Hannah asked, pointing to her own right eye.

“Right eye.”

“And this?” Hannah continued, tugging at her right earlobe.

“Right ear.”

“This?” Hannah said, pointing to her shoulder.

“Left shoulder.”

“And this?” Hannah asked, laying a hand on her abdomen.

“Baby,” Sophia blurted out.

Hermione colored slightly, then recovered. “Now, you know what that is,” Hermione insisted. “What is this?” she asked, laying her hand on her own abdomen.

“Baby,” Sophia insisted stubbornly.

“Close, honey, come on, what is this?” Susan prompted, pointing.

“Belly,” Sophia said.

“Right!” Susan exclaimed.

“Now, what are these?” Hermione asked, laying a hand on her own stomach, then Hannah’s.

“Baby,” Sophia said again.

“I told you that in confidence,” Hannah said, turning a bright pink.

“Hey! What’s so fascinating over here in this corner?” Neville asked, walking over with Ginny.

“I think Harry and Hannah were just forced into making an announcement,” Viktor said with a grin. “Never tell a toddler anything you don’t want repeated.”

“Oh, well, thank goodness, now I don’t have to worry about letting it slip,” Ginny said, laughing.

“Hang on a minute!” Harry said, stepping over beside Ginny. “Sophia, what’s this?” he asked, pointing to Ginny’s middle.

“Belly,” she said emphatically.

“And what’s this?” Harry pressed, putting his hand on Hermione’s belly.

“Baby,” she reiterated.

“Somebody else has got a bun in the oven and told the sprout,” Harry said with a grin.

“Don’t look at me, I just found out a few minutes ago,” Viktor protested.

“And I didn’t tell her...” Hermione said.

“I’m afraid I might have let that slip, earlier,” Ginny said sheepishly.

“Again, don’t ever expect a toddler not to rat you out,” Viktor advised.

“March seems such a long way away,” Hannah mused, rubbing her middle.

“Trust me, it will be here before you know it,” Hermione said. “Time flies. And before you know it, so do the babies!”