

“It was wonderful. So romantic. The hot Bulgarian moon pulsing down-“

“Moons aren’t hot,” Harry interrupted from his armchair.

“Shhh!” Hermione scolded.

“And they don’t pulse,” Ron added, looking up from his homework on the desk.

“Shh! You’re ruining it! I know moons aren’t hot and they don’t pulse! It’s a metaphor, you dolt! Well, at any rate, it was a nice walk, and very romantic, if you like that sort of thing. I felt a bit like a Brontë,” Hermione told Ginny.

“That’s nice. What’s a Brontë?” Ginny asked, looking puzzled.

“It’s a large, furry animal, I think. Why should taking a walk with Krum over the summer make you feel like a large, furry animal? I didn’t think it was that hot in Bulgaria, even in if it was summer,” Ron said.

“I give up. I try to tell my lone female friend about my last nice, romantic evening in Bulgaria, while sitting in the Common Room with these two about, and this is the thanks I get. For your information, Ron, the Brontës were a family of Muggle writers. They wrote some lovely novels and romantic poetry. And if I were half as sappy as the Patils and Lavender, I would probably go around spouting long passages of their work,” Hermione complained. “The point is, it was a lovely walk, and very romantic, and I had a very good time talking. Contrary to what some people think,” Hermione said, glaring at Ron, “some men know how to act civilized. You know, like they’ve actually read a book at some point and can walk upright instead of dragging their knuckles. And some people like to talk about the future, rather than communicating solely in grunts and pointing. Some people actually plan for the future instead of waiting until the Potions essay or whatever it is comes up and bites them on the bum.”

“So I forgot. I pleaded until he got tired of hearing me whine, and now it’s due tomorrow morning... You always have a good time talking. You sure do it enough. And it’s bad enough you go around spouting *Hogwarts, A History*, still,” Ron shot back.

“I wouldn’t have to if the two of you would actually read it!” Hermione said.

“Errr... so he’s definitely coming this weekend? Viktor?” Ginny said hastily, in an effort to change the subject.

“Oh, he’s definitely coming...” Hermione said, looking wistful for a moment before snapping out of it. “Err, he should arrive tomorrow afternoon, by the time classes end, hopefully. We want to spend some time together. And talk some

more,” Hermione said.

“Talk?” Ginny asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Oh, lots of talking. Long conversations. We got in lots of talking in Bulgaria. I’m just sorry he didn’t get to come to Britain over the summer like he planned. We could have gotten in a great deal of talking while my parents were at the office,” Hermione said. “Letters and the occasional quick session over the Floo is a poor substitute for a good, long, hard face to face personal conversation. No, just no substitute for a heart to heart.”

“What do you bloody talk about all that while? All that yammering? Do you quote whole textbooks at him? Explain Muggle science? What?” Ron asked impatiently. “And why do you girls always want to blab? You don’t see us recounting whole conversations with our girlfriends, now, do we, Harry?”

“No, but-“ Harry began.

“You haven’t any, Ron, so there are no conversations to recount in the first place. Besides, you have to be able to actually form a sentence to do that. And yes. Yes, I do. I reel off everything from astrophysics to Arithmancy. Viktor loves me for my brain, and he likes that sort of thing. Really... likes... that sort of thing,” she said significantly, arching her eyebrows at Ginny, who ducked behind her Witch Weekly in an effort to hide her grin.

“Well, okay. But if he weren’t such a bloke about everything else, I would think he’s awfully twee and girly. All that talking you do,” Ron grumbled, going back to his Potions essay.

“Trust me, there’s nothing girly about him. Especially not when we’re talking, Very skilled tongue. I mean mouth. He’s a wonderful conversationalist.” Hermione said firmly, returning her attention to her textbook. Harry and Ron did give Ginny a curious glance when she gave a hiccupping giggle from behind her magazine.

“The accent doesn’t get in the way at all?” Harry asked curiously.

“Oh, no. In fact, the accent is a plus. When we’re talking,” Hermione explained.

“Sorry. Reading the horoscopes. They’re sillier than Trelawney,” Ginny insisted, looking guilty before curling up again and pressing her lips together.

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“Where did you get this thing again?” Ron asked, looking curiously at the beige

hat he held in his hand, turning it around and around. "And what's it called?"

"It's a Stetson. A cowboy hat. I already told you all about cowboys... and could you put that back in the bag? You'll get the brim all crumpled," Hermione cautioned.

"I don't know why you went and got all this stuff for him. It's just a visit, not his birthday. You would think you were having a party for him. Picnic stuff and butterbeer. Some sort of punch. And you got your nightgown or something in here by accident. I mean, you even got balloons and everything. Funny looking balloons... I've never seen any individually wrapped, before. You want me to help blow them-" Ron began, reaching down into the bag.

"No! I mean, no, that's okay. I don't think I'm even going to blow the balloons up, after all. Silly idea. And I was going to drop that off at the laundry," Hermione said, reddening and snatching up the bag. "The balloons were just if we could get somewhere alone... but we probably won't be able to until tomorrow," she added hastily.

"To talk," Ginny pointed out, smiling conspiratorially.

"Oh, absolutely. We plan to converse for several hours this weekend," Hermione said, then headed out of the Common Room. "Going to wait on the lawn."

"Has she been acting awfully odd this year? Or has she always been this odd and I'm just now noticing?" Ron asked.

"What do you mean, odd? She hasn't seen Viktor for months. She misses him. She's excited that he's going to be here for the weekend and they can spend some time together. What's odd about that?" Ginny said defensively.

"Ooooo-kayyyy," Ron said, holding his hands up and taking a small step back. "You don't have to get all defensive. I still say she's been weird since she got back from Bulgaria."

"She just found someone she loves... to talk with. You'll understand. Someday, dear, thick, older brother," Ginny said lightly.

Harry leaned a little closer to the window, looking out on the front lawn. "She has been kind of acting strange. But, if it makes her happy, who are we to judge? She sounded like she had a great time, in all of her letters. Sounded like she didn't spend the whole trip buried in a book, at least. Viktor's made her a little more well rounded. I mean, she even sounded excited about Quidditch. She actually wrote about taking rides on the broom and hunting for the Snitch and all- Are you okay?" Harry added when Ginny made a strangled sound.

“Sure. Piece of chocolate frog just went down the wrong way,” Ginny replied, thumping her chest.

“You were eating a chocolate frog?” Ron asked, looking at her suspiciously.

“Yes. Last one. And I imagine they’re taking precautions to make sure she doesn’t get *too* well rounded. Like those balloons...” Ginny added to herself under her breath.

Harry eyed her as though he were about to ask her to repeat herself, then thought better of it. “Well, I guess she’s happy. He’s made it. Come on, Ron. He’s a nice bloke, and you know it,” Harry teased.

“I never said he wasn’t. Well, not for over a year, at least. It’s just... I don’t know why she acts all odd about him since summer. Odder than usual, I mean.”

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“So, where did it come from, again? It sounded like ‘L-M-O’ to me,” Viktor said with a bemused smile, turning the Stetson over in his hands. His English had improved greatly in the time since she had first talked to him in the library, but he still had a very distinctly Bulgarian accent. There was no mistaking that he was ‘not from aroun’ here’, as Hagrid was wont to say. No matter. Hermione actually found it terribly endearing that he typically displayed a politely puzzled but honestly curious reaction to unfamiliar words and Muggle culture. His open attitude toward new things was nothing like Ron’s, thank goodness. And he was just as eager to explain the things she still found puzzling. She actually understood a fair number of Bulgarian words by now.

“An old fort called The Alamo,” Hermione said, enunciating carefully. “I bought it when my parents and I went on holiday in Texas. There’s a book on it, too,” Hermione said, reaching into the bag and pulling out a slender volume, then handing it over to him.

“Thank you. This part in front?” Viktor asked, settling the hat on his head and tipping it back slightly when she nodded.

“Looks a bit odd with wizard robes,” Hermione said with a laugh. “I should have invested in some cowboy boots and a pair of jeans, as well.”

“I’m grateful, all the same,” Viktor said, leaning back against the tree and thumbing through the book. The late fall afternoon was unseasonably warm enough for them to leave their cloaks on the ground. “You do not need to buy me something on every trip,” he demurred, nonetheless looking very pleased with

the presents.

“It was no trouble. You’re always sending me things. You’re welcome,” Hermione said, looking very satisfied with herself and flushing a slight pink.

“What else do you have in that bag of yours?” Viktor asked with a soft smile, peering at her from beneath the brim of the Stetson.

“A bit of picnic fare, and a few things for us if we managed to get a few moments alone. I’m hoping we can find someplace to be alone for a good, long while, if you catch my drift. It won’t exactly be easy on school grounds, so I wouldn’t necessarily get my hopes up,” Hermione said ruefully.

“I see you covered all the necessities and then some,” Viktor said, riffling through the bag.

“Of course. I mean, I do plan ahead,” Hermione replied. “Like my laundry?”

“And thank goodness for that. And your... errr... laundry looks very interesting. Better eat first, though. We might need our strength if we find anywhere interesting to be together,” Viktor said with a sly smile.

“Oh, I agree. I feel the urge to go research something in the library coming on. Way back in the stacks, maybe in the Herbology section,” Hermione said. “And researching between the covers always takes a lot out of me.”

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“Darn Snape. I’m one measly day late with my essay, and six measly inches short, and he adds on another twelve inch essay. On milkweed. Milkweed! Where in this stinking library do you find a book with twelve inches worth of information on milkweed? And he goes and makes me work on it on a Friday night. When there is no one in the library. Everyone is out enjoying the weekend, and I’m stuck in the library. I mean, even Hermione isn’t in the library on Friday night. At least not when she’s got company. This place is completely dead. Even Madam Pince is unconscious,” Ron said, waving at the drowsing librarian propped against the checkout counter. “Somebody probably left that cloak on the chair earlier in the week. What kind of evil professor makes an essay due on Saturday?”

“You wouldn’t have an essay due on Saturday if you hadn’t put the first one off,” Harry pointed out.

“Don’t go all reasonable on me. You’re starting to sound like Hermione. Just help me find something on milkweed. Milkweed, the most boring Potions ingredient

known to man,” Ron grouched. “I think there’s all of a page on it in that *A Thousand and One Potions for Weeds* book.”

“Don’t go all whinging on me, or I’ll leave,” Harry cautioned. “And why did you wait until thirty minutes before the library closes to come down here in the first place?”

“Bloody milkweed,” Ron grumbled, stalking toward the back of the library, turning down an aisle at random and skimming the titles. “Hermione would know where a whole passel of books rhapsodizing on the millions of uses of milkweed are located.”

“She told you to do your own bloody homework this weekend,” Harry said.

“Yeah, well, you would think she could stop talking to Krum for ten minutes and perform an act of charity,” Ron insisted. “Oh, bum. I think the Potions section starts in the next aisle,” Ron said loudly, taking no care to be quiet since there didn’t seem to be anyone to disturb. But then, Harry was quite sure he could hear some shuffling around in the aforementioned next aisle, and a book being hastily yanked off of the shelf. He and Ron ambled around the end of the shelves, and Harry could tell that Ron had heard it, too. Ron cocked his head curiously, then peeked around the corner. “Oh, guess I was wrong,” Ron said. “Hermione is in the library. I don’t know which of us is most pathetic, now.”

Harry stepped out from behind Ron, and spotted a somewhat breathless looking pair standing in the aisle. “Oh! What are you two doing in the library at this hour? We were just talking. Somewhere quiet,” Hermione said, her voice sounding a bit strained and falsely bright. Viktor stood just behind her, clutching a book in front of him so tightly that his knuckles were white.

“Research for another Potions essay... Look, it’s a long story. Sorry if we startled you two or interrupted the conversation. Didn’t hear you talking. Hey! That’s the book I was looking for, I think! *A Thousand and One Potions for Weeds*! Err... are you through looking at that?” Ron asked. Viktor took a slow, stiff step right behind Hermione before holding out the book, extending his left arm over Hermione’s left shoulder while placing his right hand on her right shoulder, then returning his empty left hand to her shoulder, giving her a little warning squeeze before scooting up right behind her.

Hermione stiffened, her eyes widening in surprise for a second before she recovered herself. “Ahhh... is that all you wanted?” Hermione prompted when Ron paused to scan the pages.

“Yeah. Why?” Ron said innocently.

“Hadn’t you better go find somewhere you can take notes? Or maybe check it out before the library closes?” Hermione added.

“Oh! Sure! Come on, Harry. Let’s check this out,” Ron said, slamming the book closed and heading for the checkout desk.

“Riiiiight...” Harry drawled, giving the pair in the aisle the once over, then following Ron.

“Now. Where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?” Hermione said, turning around and slipping a hand between them, preparing to slip her hand back beneath the hem of his robe and into his trousers.

“I think we had better call it an evening. Or find another book for cover,” Viktor said, catching her wrist gently. “I do have to walk out of here, and I think Madam Pince would find it odd if I’m already wearing my cloak before we leave. Besides, I left it up front.”

“Pity. Maybe we can find a better spot. So... maybe we can really talk for a few minutes before the library closes, then?” Hermione said hopefully.

“As long as it’s a nice, neutral subject,” Viktor allowed. “Something decidedly unexciting, if you know what I mean. Like milkweed. On second thought, not milkweed. I don’t think I’ll ever look at milkweed in quite the same light. Maybe we had better just wait quietly until we can make our exit, instead.”

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“So, how was the library?” Ginny asked when Harry and Ron walked through the portrait hole.

“Dead. Deserted. It was Friday night, what did you expect? Only other people there were Pince, Hermione and Viktor. They were off in the back talking about improving International Relations, or Arithmancy, or Muggle poets or something,” Ron answered. “They very helpfully already had this book off of the shelf. It was like they read my mind. Lucky they were in the back of the Potions section. Saved me some looking.”

“Discussing International Relations, hmmm? More like improving on them, I bet,” Ginny chuckled to herself as Harry and Ron clomped up the stairs.

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“Ant on a hot rock,” Ron said, giving the pass phrase to enter the Prefect’s Bath. He was still in awe of being among the privileged few to use the special bath.



Such a seemingly small perk to most people, but he still couldn't believe his luck in being named a Prefect during fifth year. And now Head Boy. Mrs. Weasley had been so proud. Even Percy the Ponce had been impressed. He was still humming absently to himself and fiddling with his wand, robe and towel when he heard the noisy splash and a high pitched shriek that sounded very familiar. He dropped all three in his surprise.

"Ron! For Pete's sake, it's occupied!" Hermione yelled.

"I... I... I'm sorry," Ron stammered, looking at an equally horrified Hermione, who was strategically hiding herself behind the edge of the full bath and the bubbles floating on the water's surface. Her damp hair was plastered down, and she had gone pale except for her fiery red cheeks. Just beside the bath was what appeared to be a very large pile of her clothes and several towels piled and draped on top. Beside the pile was the same large gift bag she had been carting around the prior evening.

"Turn around!"

"I'm so-"

"Hurry up and turn around!" Hermione insisted. Ron whirled around, putting his back to her. He heard more splashing around in the deep bath and wondered what she could be doing.

"I didn't see anything, I swear!" Ron blurted out.

"She just wants you to turn around because-" a mournful voice began.

"Shut up, Myrtle," Hermione said sharply.

"But she's got-" Moaning Myrtle protested.

"Shut up, Myrtle, or I'll tell everyone you have a crush on Harry! Or worse, Gregory Goyle!" Hermione threatened.

"You wouldn't!" Myrtle said, scandalized.

"If you don't keep your mouth shut, I will!" Hermione insisted.

"Oh, very well. But I only wanted to say it because no one ever listens to anything I have to say. Even if it *is* really interesting," Myrtle wailed.

"Oh, stuff a pudding in it," Hermione griped. "No one is interested in listening to you complain about being a ghost. It's getting old. And if you tell anything



interesting about me to anyone, you'll be sorry."

"Typical. No one considers my feelings! I can't stuff a pudding in it, being dead and all! I don't have a body, unlike some people in the bath! I just wanted to watch something I can't enjoy any more, and you won't even let me!" Moaning Myrtle whined. "I'm going out to the lake," she pouted, gliding into one of the faucets.

"Well, good riddance. And Ron, are you going to camp out there for the weekend or leave? It's a beautiful fall morning, what are you doing inside getting a bath? I figured you would be out doing Quidditch drills or something," Hermione said, an accusing edge to her voice.

"I already did my drills! Got up early. I still need to finish that essay before the end of the day. And I could ask the same of you! You never take a bath on Saturday morning. And you forgot to set the ward on the door, or I wouldn't be in here!" Ron said.

"Maybe you shouldn't ask *what* she's doing in here, but wh-" the mermaid on the wall began, giggling.

"No one wants to hear from you, either," Hermione snapped. "I wanted a bath, so I came to take one! Now, could you leave, already?"

"Sorry! I need to turn around to get my wand. I dropped it with the towel," Ron said.

"Oh! Hang on a tick," Hermione said, and there was once again a great deal of movement in the bath. "Okay. It's safe."

Ron turned and hurriedly scooped up the towel and wand. "Again, I'm sorry. I never would have walked in on you on purpose. You know that."

"Me, too. Sorry, I mean. Didn't mean to snap," Hermione said tersely. Oddly, she didn't seem to have moved from her first modest hiding spot, despite all the splashing.

"I mean, it is partly your fault," Ron said.

"Oh, yes, definitely. I take full responsibility for not resetting the ward so another student couldn't walk in on me. All is forgiven. I'll let you know when the bath is free," Hermione said hastily.

"Well, I'm still sorry. And what was up with Myrtle?" he pressed.

“Just being Myrtle. You know how she is. Goodbye, Ron,” Hermione said firmly.

“Bye. Sorry,” Ron said, ducking out of the bathroom as fast as he could, pondering Hermione’s strange behavior. Hermione waited for the click of the door before reaching into the water and tapping his arm. Viktor came up panting, propping his elbows on the edge of the bath.

“I thought he was never going to leave!” Viktor said after a few moments of catching his breath. “Good thing I swim a lot! I would have kept the damn wand handy if I had known I was going to have to do that. Any longer and I would have needed gills!”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I tried to get rid of him, and he just stood there gawping. Myrtle just had to go wake up Miss Gigglyfins over there and blab to her, too. You needn’t think you’re going to tell anyone, either, Missy, or I’ll come in here with turpentine and a wire scrub brush, or tell the Fat Lady exactly what happened to her favorite necklace! Looks lovely on you, by the way,” Hermione said to the painted mermaid, who sniffed and turned her back on them, looking sufficiently cowed.

“I’m sorry, but nearly drowning and gaining a record breaking audience has sort of put me off this particular idea. Not that the buildup for the main event wasn’t fun while it lasted, but I think the Prefect’s Bath is right out, even if technically there is no problem with me coming in here, because I’m not a student. Can’t we find somewhere else? Another loophole in the rules?” Viktor pleaded, already reaching under the pile of towels to pull out his robes and wand.

“I suppose we can try. I’m getting all prunish by now, anyway. And I’m not too keen on the kleptomaniac mermaid and Moaning Myrtle getting a front row seat, either,” Hermione added. “We can’t both hold our breaths for the entire thing.”

“No, I think we have established we cannot,” Viktor agreed, leaning over to kiss her on the nose, his sodden hair dripping on her face. He put his palms on the edge of the bath and climbed out.

“It’s a shame,” Hermione said with a sigh, following. She would have to fetch her simplified replica of the Marauder’s Map from the bag after drying off and make sure the coast was clear. Hers might not name the person nearby, but at least it would alert them to any eyes that shouldn’t be seeing Viktor leaving the Prefect’s Bath just a few minutes before she did.

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Harry slumped into the Common Room just ahead of Ron. He had gone along to the library after Ron’s bath to help look for anything on milkweed. They had given

it up as hopeless pretty quickly. Hermione had insisted that there were references to be found, if only they would look long and hard, but Madam Pince had been less hopeful. The resources they had found were meager, at best.

“I thought you were at the library. Why aren’t you two at the library?” Hermione snapped. “Or outside! Everyone else is outside, enjoying the nice weather!”

Harry looked behind him, to Ron who was standing in the portrait hole, then back to Hermione, seated at one of the heavy wooden desks in the common room. Harry gave a shrug. “He’s decided he’s never going to get the essay done on just milkweed, so he’s gone to Snape and begged another assignment.”

“Know anything about mortar and pestle manufacture?” Ron asked, smiling weakly.

“Mortar and pesss...tle? It’s not as though I know... oh! Errr... know anything about it right... *riiiight* off the top of my head,” Hermione said, squirming a bit in her chair and slouching back even further from the desk than she was to begin with.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked, looking at her suspiciously.

“Oh! Oh-okay? Sure, I’m fine. I’m just having a... leg cramp,” Hermione insisted. “Ohhhh.... my thigh...” she moaned.

“Maybe you should go see Madam Pomfrey, then,” Ron said. “Usually they’re on the calf...”

“Why would h-... the calf? I mean... why would I need to go see anyone?” Hermione panted.

“It could be serious,” Ron said, looking concerned.

“Serious... oh... yes... No, no. Oh! I don’t need to see anyone. In fact, I think I would feel better if I could be alone ..oh! No one... right now!” Hermione blurted out, her cheeks flushing slightly. “I was trying to take advantage of the Common Room being empty. By studying. In the quiet. With no one else around.”

“Are you sure? I mean, it sounds like a bad one. Maybe it just needs rubbing,” Ron offered, taking a step toward the desk.

“No! No. Trust me. Nothing... under this desk... needs any more rubbing,” Hermione protested.

“More?” Harry asked curiously.

“I was getting quite enough massaging before you two came in,” Hermione said.

“What are you studying?” Harry said.

“Herb...ah! Herbology,” Hermione amended.

“That’s not your Herbology text. It’s your Transfiguration book,” Ron said, looking at the volume open on the desk.

“Well, of course it’s not my Herbology text! I’m quizzing myself! And I can’t do that if I’m looking at the answers,” Hermione said, pressing her lips together tightly.

“Oh. Sure you shouldn’t go see Madam Pomfrey for that cramp?” Ron added.

“I’m quite sure the situation will resolve itself soon enough. Quite soon,” Hermione said. “Just a little bit more.”

“Sure you don’t know anything about mortar and pestle manufacture?” Ron pressed.

“No! And while we’re at it, I don’t know of any good books on it, either. I would try the library,” Hermione said, crossing her arms.

“We just came from there,” Ron whined. “And I figured you would be stuck on Krum like a house-elf on housework, anyway. What are you doing studying? What? Run out of conversation? Where is he?”

“Oh, he’s around. Probably right under my nose. Or... something like that... He’s taking care of some personal business.. He’s right in the middle of something this instant, in fact.... mmmph. Yes, right smack dab in the middle of something. All very hush-hush. You two understand?” Hermione said, raising her eyebrows in a silent query.

“Oh! I see! Hush-hush. Right. Contract up for negotiation?” Ron said, laying a finger next to his nose. “We see, don’t we, Harry?” Ron said.

“Definitely. Our lips are sealed. Won’t hear a peep out of us about that,” Harry said, shaking his head solemnly.

“He is negotiating something, right? Could it possibly lead to something with the Cannons?” Ron asked eagerly.

“He is doing one heck of a piece of negotiating as we speak, but I seriously

doubt it will lead to anything Cannons-related,” Hermione said emphatically. “Working on the oral contact... I mean... oral *contract*. Negotiation.” She bit her lower lip between her teeth.

“Right! Well, off to the library, then. Mortars and pestles. See you at lunch, if you’ll be able to hobble down?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I haven’t yet had half a chance to get to the ‘I can hardly walk stage’,” Hermione protested.

“So your leg’s not so bad after all?” Ron asked.

“Leg? Wh... oh! Oh! Oh! Ohhhh...yes, leeeeg! It will be fine, I’m sure,” Hermione insisted. “All finished doing that well before lunchtime, I think. In fact, I think it’s pretty well over already. See you two then,” she added with a wide smile.

“See you,” Harry said, stepping through the portrait hole, and Ron gave her a quick wave before the portrait swung shut.

The broad hand resting on top of her knee stroked up the outside of her thigh. “You are cruel, you know that? How am I supposed to concentrate on having a conversation when you’re down there with your head beneath my skirt, and the tamest thing you’re doing is kissing the insides of my thighs? Bad enough my knickers being around my ankles under there...”

“I don’t recall you asking me to stop if anyone came in,” Viktor said, his voice muffled by the fabric of her skirt and the smallish space beneath the heavy wooden desk. “What were you going to do if I had? Casually ask me out from under the desk and pull your knickers up?”

“No, but I might have been able to string together a coherent sentence,” Hermione chided gently. “I think you had better come out and the knickers had better come up. Before the whole of Gryffindor decides to come back in. I’d like to have my knickers up before that happens, or we’ll both be stuck at this desk indefinitely,” Hermione said, scooting her chair back.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing...” Viktor said, coming out from beneath the furniture.

“True... If you were doing what you were doing just then, I can’t think of a better place to be stranded for a while,” Hermione said with a smile.

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“You reckon if I went and talked to him again, he would add on another subject?”

I mean, I've barely got three inches on mortar and pestle manufacture," Ron lamented. "And I've got a ruddy parchment cut like you wouldn't believe. Maybe I should just go ahead and sign my death warrant in blood and get it over with."

"Oh, come on, now! Get Madam Pomfrey to give you something for that, we'll go have lunch, everything will look a bit better, and you can go grovel in front of Snape again with a full stomach. We have that note from Madam Pince stating that you used all the sources in the library," Harry protested.

"If I didn't bleed all over it. Wonder if-" Ron began, but stopped short when they heard a muffled rattle and clatter, almost like a pile of wood being thrown together into a huge jumble, or falling firewood. They turned their heads slowly to the source of the sound. The broom closet near the hospital wing, which they had passed just a few moments before.

"Ron, did you hear that?" Harry asked, tightening his grip on his wand. "There's something in there."

"Sure did. Come on, let's go see, I'm right with you," Ron insisted, drawing out his wand. They set off back up the hall, their footsteps echoing loudly in the emptiness, scuffing along the stone floor. There was some more muffled movement, then the door to the broom closet popped open, with the last person they expected to see stepping out and hastily closing the door behind him.

"Viktor... what were you doing in there?" Harry asked curiously, lowering his wand.

"Oh! Ahhh... in there? Wrong turn!" Viktor said, sounding a bit breathless.

"Wrong turn? Into the broom closet?" Ron said incredulously. "Where were you headed?"

"Where were you headed?" Viktor shot back.

"Hospital wing," Harry said.

"What a coincidence. Me, too. I was... going to get something for that leg cramp of Hermione's. I haven't been down here in a while," Viktor said.

"Oh! Well, come with us, then, we're on our way to see Madam Pomfrey for the mother of all parchment injuries," Ron said, holding up his sliced finger. "It might not look like much, but it burrrrns. It is confusing around here if you're not familiar with the place."

"Yeah, well, go on, lead the way," Viktor said, making a shooing motion with his

hand, then following after them.

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“I see you managed to hobble down to lunch,” Ron said pleasantly, settling in across from Hermione at the table.

“Hobble? Oh, yes. Cramp’s practically gone. That potion will hardly be necessary. But it was very clev... I mean, thoughtful of Viktor to go get it for me,” Hermione said, draining the vial and setting it in front of her plate. “Just finished telling Neville and Ginny about that cramp. And the... errr... negotiations.”

“By the way, you forgot your... handkerchief, earlier,” Viktor said, removing something from his pocket and transferring it to hers. Harry and Ron caught a flash of white lace between his fingers.

“Thank you, I thought it was a bit cold... I mean a bit of a cold. Coming. Coming on,” Hermione said, blushing slightly.

“Fancy hanky. Maybe I could get something like that for Mum’s birthday,” Ron said. “Can I see it?”

“I’ll help you find a lacy hanky... but this one’s all used,” Hermione said, over Ginny’s strangled coughing. “You don’t want to see it. I’ll show you a clean one. Later.”

“Sorry... juice went down the wrong way,” Ginny wheezed.

“So, Neville, how’s your greenhouse project for the NEWTs coming along?” Hermione said in an effort to change the subject.

“Oh, the plants are doing wonderfully, thanks for asking. You should see them. Ten times bigger than they were the last time you were down there, at least. The cacti are standing up so proud, straight and tall, and the melons! Big, round and firm like you wouldn’t believe,” Neville said, gesturing with his hands as though he were squeezing two ripe melons in front of him. “Sorry, are you okay?” Neville asked with a soft smile, pausing in his conversation to gently pat a spluttering Ginny between the shoulder blades.

“I’ll be fine in a minute,” Ginny protested. “Could we change the subject?”

“Sure. Did the oral contract negotiations come to a successful conclusion?” Ron asked, voice low and conspiratorial.

“Mmmhmmm... hmm?” Hermione said absently.



Ron looked at her curiously, then back to Viktor. "Negotiations. Or don't you know whether you're going back yet?" Ron asked.

"Oh. I think it's safe to say I'm going back," Viktor said. "I don't think I could possibly find a better payoff with anyone else, and the fringe benefits... Well, let's say I'm just not tempted to do it with anyone else."

"Oh," Ron said, sounding disappointed. "Personally, I was hoping you might be willing to try something completely new... I wanted to ask when I saw you come out of the closet, but... Good grief, Ginny, are you croaking over there?"

"I'll be alright in a minute! Just let me lie here quietly!" Ginny said, her voice muffled where her face was tucked into her folded arms, which were resting on the table. Neville was once again patting her shuddering shoulders.

"I don't think there's a chance in heck that what you just asked about will happen," Neville said, smiling knowingly.

"A man can daydream a bit about his strongest desires, can't he?" Ron pouted, prompting a fresh round of coughing from Ginny.

"Speaking of Quidditch, do you even get much time to practice? I mean, I know all the teams are on skeleton schedules until this whole thing blows over, but seems like you wouldn't get much practicing, with all the work on the you know what with you know who," Harry said, nodding his head.

"You know wha... who... Oh! The thing! With him! And the group!" Viktor said, following the direction of the nod directly behind Hermione and tracing it to Dumbledore at the head table. "Sure! Well, it keeps us all busy, but frankly, not much busier than when I was traveling all the time for matches and extra practices. Learning to Apparate was a big help. Have more free time now than I did when I was in school. Playing full time then was only a little less time consuming than playing part time and being a member of the thing. With the people. Against the what's-his-face. Besides, you squeeze in a session here and there. When you can. When people will let you," Viktor explained.

"Yeah, I imagine some people just won't let you get a minute to yourself for what's important," Ron said.

"Speaking of which, I'd like to go ride the broom after lunch," Hermione said.

"After lunch? But it will be all hot out there, with the sun beating down," Harry protested.

"I don't care. Best time to take a good, long, hard ride on the broom, then. No one else will be out there. Won't be overly crowded," Hermione argued.

"Suit yourself, but it's Indian summer, proper. You're going to get all sweaty," Harry said.

"With any luck at all," Hermione muttered.

"With any luck at all, what?" Ron pressed.

"This Indian summer will hold out. Lovely weather," Hermione commented. "I'm going to go slip into something else. For broom riding," she added, tossing down her napkin.

"You've hardly eaten anything, either of you," Ron said. "And you had better change. The way Viktor handles his broomstick your skirt would be up around your waist in about ten seconds."

"You can say that again," Hermione agreed, rising and heading for the door. "Meet you near the stands."

"I think I need to go lie down," Ginny said, lifting her head and wiping at her tearstained cheeks. "I'll be fine, really."

"Don't swallow your tongue," Neville cautioned, giving her a pat on the hand before she left.

"Not all that hungry, myself. I ate something earlier. I'll go... errr... get the broomstick ready," Viktor said, standing and hurrying off.

Neville turned and watched Viktor vanish out the door. "He is soooo gonna get some," Neville murmured.

"Get some what?" Harry asked, wide eyed.

"Yeah, Neville. Get what?" Ron echoed.

"You two haven't figured out... You don't ... You haven't made the association with what they do? What they're going out to do right now?" Neville asked, disbelieving look on his face.

"They're going out to ride the broom," Ron said.

"Yeah. Hermione got really keen on riding the broom when she went to visit him in Bulgaria. It was just about all she could talk about in her letters, riding Viktor's

broom nearly all day, every day. Funny. She still won't ride with either one of us," Harry said.

"No. No, she wouldn't," Neville said, blinking, then taking a sip of pumpkin juice, studying them both. "He's going to get his wand polished." When no look of understanding appeared on the other two, Neville elaborated, "He's going to get his *broomstick* polished. *Polished.*"

"Oh. So he's gonna get some polish, then?" Harry asked.

"Yep. He's going to get some polish," Neville said with a sigh, shaking his head and going back to his steak and kidney pie.

"Why didn't you just say so?" Ron complained.

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"Ron, do you really think it's a good idea to be out here instead of in the library? You still have to get that essay done by tomorrow night," Harry said.

"True. But he gave me until tomorrow evening, and added on dragon's blood and its use in Potions. And five more inches," Ron said. "Popped an owl off to Charlie. He should be able to send me something on it. He gives that song and dance about dragon's blood to the visitors at the dragon reserve, sometimes. Problem solved, Harry," Ron said cheerily. "Plenty of time for messing about on the broom. Viktor and Hermione might still be out here, even. No one else is. Too hot," he observed, swapping his broom to the other hand.

"Don't seem to be. That, or they're not flying around the pitch," Harry said, squinting and shielding his eyes. "Come on, let's sit in the stands and put our pads on."

They had just perched on the lower bleachers when they heard a soft male voice say, "Dammit," followed by a heavy sigh.

Ron turned and peeked through the bleachers. "Hullo. What're you two doing under there?"

Hermione's bushy head peered back between the gap in the seats. "We were... looking for my earring. I think I lost it while we were on the broom." She started walking toward the end of the bleachers, Viktor stooped and following close behind.

"Earring? Well, if you lost it, you lost them both. You're not wearing the other one," Harry pointed out when she had emerged.

“Oh! Really?” Hermione said, reaching up and feeling her earlobes. “Silly me! I wasn’t wearing any in the first place! That explains it.”

“Well, how long did you two waste down there looking for something you hadn’t lost?” Ron asked.

“Oh, twenty minutes or so. And I wouldn’t say we exactly wasted it,” Hermione said.

“Talked while you looked, hmm?” Ron asked.

“Something like that,” Hermione agreed. “It’s lovely flying weather. We spent a good thirty minutes up there. Got me in the mood for a good long talk.”

“It’s hot under there. You got all sweaty and dirty for nothing,” Harry said, pointing to the streaks of dirt on their cheeks and their rumpled clothes.

“Well, like she said, it wasn’t a complete waste. So, are you two flying?” Viktor asked hopefully.

“We thought we might put in an hour or so, messing around,” Ron said, nodding.

“Great! We thought the exact same thing! So, you two are going to fly? For a whole hour?” Viktor reiterated, looking from one to the other.

“Yeah, thought we might,” Harry said warily. “Why?”

“Just wondered,” Viktor said innocently. “I think we’re done for the day. Flying, that is.”

“Ummm... where’s the broom?” Ron asked, finally realizing what had nagged at him.

“The what?” Viktor asked, putting his hands on his hips.

“The broomstick. Where is it?” Ron asked again.

“Oh! The broom! Completely forgot it,” Viktor said, stooping to go under the seats once again, emerging with a sleek, polished broom, attractively carved, and with gleaming, dark wood with a reddish cast.

“Wow! What kind is that? I’ve never seen one like that before!” Ron said, gawping.

“Kind? Haven’t the foggiest idea. Owl just brought it yesterday evening, after I got

here. Some Russian prototype model the company sent to me and wanted me to try out. I'm supposed to give them some feedback on it. It's in the letter that came with it, but I don't have it on me at the moment. If you want, I'll look it up later. Frankly, it's pretty sweet looking, it's fast and it handles fairly decent, but it pulls left. It sights funny. I think it's not quite plumb, but it's hard to tell because it's so much bigger and longer than any other model I've ever been on," Viktor said, holding it up against his shoulder and sighting down the handle. "See? It doesn't balance quite right, either," he added, setting it to hovering, then touching it with a finger, which caused it to wobble unsteadily. "They need to increase the weight in the back, somehow. It's thick, but it's so light I think you tend to oversteer with your dominant hand and that's what causes the pulling to the left. If I put my right hand somewhere other than the handle, it didn't do it as badly. And the wood's too hard. It needs to be more flexible, a bit more give. I think they need to trim the shaft a bit. I'm supposed to return it with my recommendations in a day or two."

"See, now, I didn't notice that at all. I thought it rode pretty well," Hermione said, looking at the broom. "I had a good time, anyway."

"Well, there has to be something in the world you don't know absolutely everything about. Suppose it's brooms and flying. Do you still get a complimentary production model if they end up releasing it? Could I borrow it sometime?" Ron said hopefully.

"Sure. Why not? I would give you this one to try right now if it were allowed or I got to keep this one. Keep you busy putting it through its paces. So, you two are going to ride for a whole hour?" Viktor asked again, grabbing the broom out of the air.

"Errr... yeah," Harry said.

"Right! An hour," Viktor said, raising his eyebrows at Hermione. "Any broom polish in the equipment shed? I should probably clean this up before sending it back."

"And I need to go fetch something from my room. Meet you later," Hermione said, scooting off back toward the castle.

"Sure. There's all kinds of polish in there," Harry said.

"Good!" Viktor said, one corner of his mouth curling up slightly, as though he were suppressing a smile. "Off to polish the broomstick, then. Enjoy your hour of flying!" he called over his shoulder.

"Damn. Now that's some appreciation for a fine, high performance broomstick. I

mean, that is a man who knows how to handle his equipment,” Ron observed.

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Hermione looked down at Viktor, seated on the end of the bench in front of her. “Well... that certainly gives new meaning to looking for the Golden Snitch,” Hermione said, rubbing her chin, considering the life-sized, colorful rendering, which was currently fluttering its small wings much like the genuine article. Beneath and behind, a small Bulgarian flag rippled in a non-existent breeze. “When did you get the tattoo? I understand I might have been a tad distracted this summer, but surely I wasn’t completely blind, was I?”

“A couple of weeks after you went home. Result of a drunken celebration, I’m afraid. We all very stupidly agreed that if the Bulgarian team won the Invitational, for which we got rather healthy bonuses, I might add, we would all get one. Not necessarily a Snitch, mind you. All the Chasers got Quaffles, and the Beaters got Bludgers, and Zograf went with the goal hoops. Anything seems like a good idea at the time if you’ve been at enough vodka,” Viktor said, blushing slightly. “And you know how that is. No one wants to be the one who points out that we were all idiots to agree to it in the first place and suggest we be sensible and call the whole thing off. Less painful to get the tattoo.”

“Oh. Did everyone get it in such... ahhh... an intimate spot?” Hermione asked.

“Ivanova got hers on her ankle, if you’re worried I’ve been looking at anything within a mile of her bum,” Viktor said, grinning. “No, the agreement didn’t specify where. Just somewhere on your person and at least one other member of the team had to verify you got it. Not all that hard when you share locker room showers. You just move the towel slightly on the way in or out. Volkov went with his bicep. I wanted it somewhere a little more... discreet. What? You hate it?”

“No! No, actually, I rather like it. It’s just that the last thing I expected to find when I took your boxers off was a tattoo on your right hip. Especially when it wasn’t there the last time I looked,” Hermione explained, putting her hands on her own hips. She had already stripped down to nothing but the red silk nightie that she had been carrying around in the gift bag.

“It’s not always,” Viktor blurted out.

“Not always what?” Hermione asked, puzzled.

“Not always on my right hip. That’s the bloody thing about wizard tattoos. If you get one of something that moves... well, it does. And I’m not just talking about the fluttering. It migrates a bit from time to time. Not for long, but sometimes it shows up elsewhere for an hour or two. Nothing big. I mean, it’s never gone

above my waist... but let me tell you, there's nothing quite so disturbing as finding something that was tattooed on your right hip on your left when you wake up. Or on your bum, all of a sudden. The tattoo bloke had a weird sense of humor, I think," Viktor said. "Once, it ended up smack dab in the middle, right below my navel."

"Actually, it's pretty sexy, wherever it is. But not so sexy as to make us take complete leave of our senses. So, we've drunk our 'punch'..." Hermione said, ticking off a count on a finger.

"Contraceptive Potion, check," Viktor agreed.

"Now, Contraceptive Charms both ways. *Nonconcupio!*" Hermione said, pointing her wand at herself.

"Check. *Nongravid!*" Viktor countered, pointing his wand at himself, then turning it on her and adding "*Nonconcupias!*".

"And a *Nongravidas* to grow on. Map's tacked to the door. Wards... And just to make absolutely sure we don't get any darling little surprises before we want them, condoms. Because, Heaven knows we get enough surprises around Hogwarts without us mucking up the birth control," Hermione observed, reaching into the bag and fishing out a small packet, opening it with her teeth.

"Preach it. Amen to that," Viktor said, leaning back slightly, putting his weight on his palms while she rolled the condom into place.

"And the cowboy hat, too. But just because I think it's cute on you," she said, snatching the Stetson out of the bag and settling it on his head. Then she hiked her nightie up slightly in preparation for straddling his legs and settling over his lap.

"What was it you figured the likelihood of all this failing was?" he asked, putting his hands on her hips and steadying her, still leaning back.

"Approximately one in fifty million, assuming normal conditions and parameters, and that's just with the condom. And assuming that the statistics I found on condom manufacture are reasonably up to date," Hermione said, lowering herself slowly. "And... oh! A little more careful how you're wielding that Beater's club, if you please," she cautioned, adjusting her position.

"Sorry. And?" Viktor prompted, bracing her around the waist with his left arm and cupping her breast through the thin fabric with his right hand.

"And assuming you fit the condom properly every time, the odds probably go up



about another million,” she sighed.

“Fascinating,” Viktor murmured, pulling the straps from her shoulders, kissing them, then her neck.

“And if you factor in the generally historically low birthrates of wizards and witches, even those who don’t use birth control of any kind, you could probably tack on another couple of million,” Hermione added, as he pulled the nightie below her breasts and gently suckled her nipples. “The failure rate of wizards and witches who both use birth control, multiple forms, even, must be nigh on incalculable. Or in layman’s terms, my eggs might as well be stored in Gringott’s, unless we are total failures as wizard and witch. And I think not.”

“Mmmmm... I love it when you talk nerdy to me,” Viktor said, nuzzling her neck.

“Well, lay back, cowboy, and I’ll explain Arithmantic Quadratic theory,” Hermione said, pushing him down onto the bench. “In detail.”

“Promises, promises.”

“I will,” Hermione protested, “provided you prove to be plumb and don’t pull slightly to the left.”

“You’ve ridden this particular model before. You should be very familiar with how it rides,” Viktor said, caressing her hips.

“Indeed. And I remember it riding a damn sight better than that thing the Russian company sent,” Hermione said. “Not that I didn’t enjoy riding the broom, but I really wanted to *ride the broom*, if you catch my meaning,” she elaborated, running her hands over his chest before leaning over to kiss his full mouth.

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Hermione burrowed closer into Viktor’s chest, tucking her head into his shoulder, their breathing returning to normal, both of them half drowsing in the close heat of the equipment shed. Hermione hardly noticed the steadily increasing low-pitched whine at first.

“Laino,” Viktor swore under his breath. “Get up,” he added, shaking her shoulder gently. “We’re going to fly an hour... An hour, Merlin’s left testicle... that was forty-five minutes, if that.”

“Lazy boys. They must be flying to the equipment shed instead of walking, judging from how fast that ward is picking up,” Hermione said, disentangling herself and standing up, straightening the shoulder straps and hurriedly slipping

her discarded knickers back on.

“Whatever they’re doing, you’re not going to have time to get out unless you go like that,” Viktor said, pulling his short robe over his head and hurriedly fastening his trousers while looking at the tacked up map. “Locker,” he said, snatching the map off the door and tossing it into the bag.

“But I don’t want to get in the locker,” Hermione said plaintively.

Viktor began tugging his boots on. “You have a better idea? I didn’t want to dunk myself in the bathtub or hide out under the desk, particularly, either, but where do you think we are? Bulgaria? Who’s the most logical person to be in here? I’ve got no good story to explain the nightie. They might be naive, but they’re not stupid.”

“Oh, very well,” Hermione said, quickly gathering up the bag and some of the former contents, sprinting for one of the lockers. “Get me out of here quick!” she cautioned before he slammed the door. She gave the inside of the door a frantic peck.

“What?” he said, opening the door again.

“Hat!” Hermione hissed, pointing to the discarded Stetson on the bench. Viktor promptly deposited it on her head and slammed the door again.

“So, anyway, George tells Mum- Oh, hullo. Finished getting the broomstick polished?” Ron asked.

“Just finished not long ago,” Viktor said, running his fingers through his damp hair.

“I don’t know how you two stood it. It’s bleedin’ hot out there. No wonder you’re still sweaty. And it’s like an oven in here, too. Why didn’t you just take the polish to your room and do it there?” Ron asked.

“Didn’t think of that. Besides, I miss being in school equipment sheds, handling equipment. These days someone else handles my equipment more than I do. Nostalgic and all. But that is a capital suggestion. Here,” Viktor said, snatching up one of the tins of polish and a cloth from the shelf and shoving it into Ron’s hand. “You should do just that. Take that back to your dorms and give your broomsticks a good polishing. You should keep your equipment in good working order.”

“But-” Harry began.

“Look, do you two want your equipment to fail at a crucial moment? I mean, the last thing a man needs is for his equipment to give out on him just when he needs it the most,” Viktor insisted.

“Well, no...” Harry said.

“Then do proper maintenance! Proper maintenance! Get back to your rooms and get rubbing. Don’t argue!” Viktor insisted, whirling them around by the shoulders and giving them a solid nudge toward the door.

Harry and Ron stumbled outside, the door shutting firmly behind them. “You know, Ron, I’m starting to get a sneaking suspicion...” Harry stage whispered.

“Me, too,” Ron whispered back, tucking the polish under his arm and starting back toward the castle.

“Viktor’s spent too much time around Mad-Eye Moody,” Harry said.

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Ron said.

Inside the shed Viktor yanked open the locker door. Hermione staggered out, gasping. “Good grief, it’s hot in there,” she said, collapsing against him.

“Got rid of them as soon as I could,” he said, hefting her over his shoulder and playfully spanking her bottom. “Now get dressed,” he admonished, putting her back down. “I need to remove my fail-safe device. It’s still properly fitted on my equipment.”

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“Anybody got any idea where Viktor and Hermione are? They didn’t come back in for dinner. I haven’t seen her all evening and I wanted her to take a look at what I’ve got so far,” Ron said, lifting his parchment from the desk and giving it the once over.

“I’ve seen them about a bit through the afternoon. Saw them nip into the Transfiguration classroom when I went down to see McGonagall about my idea for my NEWT project for next year,” Ginny answered somewhat absently, flipping the page in her book.

“The Transfiguration classroom? Why would they be going in there?” Harry asked, perking up.

“Probably thought she left something in there yesterday,” Ginny answered hastily.

“And I stood guard outside while they went in one of the greenhouses late this afternoon and took a look at some biological specimens,” Neville said with a grin.

“So they did go look at your NEWT project?” Ron asked.

“NEWT...? Oh, sure, I imagine they looked at it. In passing, anyway. Spent long enough in there to take a good gander. Told them they had better drink some water, they were so sweaty when they came out, or they would drop from dehydration,” Neville said, exchanging a look with Ginny. “So, did she think your idea would meet the requirements?”

“She’s going to think it over,” Ginny replied.

“Errr... Harry? You want to go do some research with me?” Ron pleaded.

“Do I have... oh, okay,” Harry assented, heaving himself from the chair and following Ron through the portrait hole.

“Ginny gave me an idea. I need sources, right?” Ron said.

“Right. You’re still only about halfway there. And Charlie’s return owl might not get here in time,” Harry said.

“So, why not visit the one place that can give you whatever you want? The Room of Requirement?” Ron asked.

“Brilliant!” Harry said excitedly, widening his eyes.

“Let’s go, then!” Ron enthused, heading off in that direction.

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“You got your sources, I don’t know what you’re complaining about,” Harry said, giving the Fat Lady the password. “Crumpet.”

“One of them nicked me right between the eyes, Harry! I mean, I figured they would just be in there on a shelf, or maybe lying in a neat pile on the floor or something. I never expected them to come catapulting out the door at a high rate of speed and wallop me in the head!” Ron complained, rubbing at the knot on his forehead. “One of those is a five hundred page book! And I still say I saw a canopy bed and lit candles...”

“I don’t know how you would remember. You were out cold before you hit the ground and the door slammed shut right after the books came out. I thought I

was going to have to *Mobili* your *corpus* downstairs to Madam Pomfrey,” Harry said. “I imagine the candles were stars. Maybe you wanted the sources a little too much. Hermione always said you wanted your research material to fly off the shelves and land in your lap. Maybe she wasn’t too far off.”

“Ha. Ha. Why wouldn’t you look?” Ron said, sinking into his chair at the desk.

“And risk getting a concussion from a flying reference book? No, thanks,” Harry said, sinking into the stuffed armchair nearest him. “Besides, I was checking to see if you were still kicking or if you had been crushed under the weight of knowledge.”

“Well, I got all the sources I need. Now I just need to write it,” Ron said, doggedly flipping through one of the books.

After about twenty minutes of notes and scratching along on his parchment, the portrait hole swung open and Hermione stepped in. “Are you okay?” she asked anxiously.

“Yeah... I’m... huh? How did you know?” Ron asked, rubbing the lump on his forehead.

“Well, you can spot that goose egg a mile off. Err... what happened?” Hermione asked.

“Went to the Room of Requirement for some essay sources so Snape doesn’t kill me, and the books came flying out the door, clocked me in the melon, and the door slammed shut after them. And I could have sworn I saw a bed, of all th-” Ron said, but Hermione interrupted.

“Oh! How horrible! I’m sure it was a total accident! I mean h-... the room couldn’t see you, I suppose, so h-... err... it couldn’t possibly have aimed for your head on purpose! Besides, I keep telling you that you just want them to come running off the shelf and nip you on the bum. So be thankful they didn’t actually nip your bum,” Hermione said, folding her arms and sinking into one of the chairs, curling up tiredly.

“Riiiiight,” Ron said, eyeing her warily, going back to his essay. They all sat in silence for several minutes, Hermione leaning her head back against the chair, resting her eyes. “Would you look at what I have, Hermione?”

“Hmm? Sure, I’ll take a look. But I have to go, soon. Viktor and I are going to try to squeeze in a late dinner. He may even have to go before lunchtime tomorrow. Business. For the people. In the thing. Against... oh, you know how it goes,” Hermione said, waving her hand dismissively and taking the parchment, starting

to skim. "Lovely. You should probably get more from that *Magical, Mystical Potion Ingredients* book, though."

"I ... Oh! Harry! Did you see that layout in the Quidditch magazine on the new Finnish model? That was one fantastically huge piece of equipment. Biggest one I've ever seen. Bet it would be fun to ride," Ron blurted out.

"I sure did! Bigger than anything I've ever seen, either," Harry replied.

"Honestly! Size isn't everything. There's some artistry involved. You two should know that the size to enjoyment ratio is not necessarily strictly a smooth curve-" Hermione began, stopping when Ginny let out a strangled cough behind her book.

"By the way, what kind of broomstick does Viktor have?" Ron asked suddenly.

"All I know is it's long, hard, thick and fun to ride," Hermione said, stifling a yawn against the back of her hand. Ginny dissolved into a fresh coughing fit, and Neville patted her shoulders again.

"Sis, maybe you should get looked at for that," Ron said.

"No! I'm fine!" Ginny protested, managing to catch her breath for a moment.

"What *is* the name of that Finnish model of broomstick that the Finnish broom manufacturing company is introducing this month?" Neville asked, just a touch louder than necessary.

"Oh! *Broom!* Err... he didn't look it up. The Russian one, I mean," Hermione interjected.

"It's the Norse Intruder," Harry answered.

"Ohhh... I need to go lie down again," Ginny said, struggling out of the chair and wiping the tears from her cheeks. She climbed the stairs to the girl's dorm, still coughing.

"Well. Off for dinner. Don't wait up," Hermione insisted, getting up and heading for the portrait hole, handing Ron his parchment. "Get your essay done!"

"Yes, Mum!" Ron shot back.

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"Aw, come on, Harry, we haven't slipped off to Hagrid's and cut it close on

coming back in time for curfew in forever. Live a little!" Ron pleaded, looking around the deserted Common Room. "You know you want to. It's just late evening. Not even really night, yet."

"Fine. Don't need a cloak, do I?," Harry said standing up.

"Nah. Plenty warm. Sweaty, even," Ron said.

The two of them hurried down the stairs and outside, dashing across the lawn at a fast clip, their way lit by the bright, harvest moon. "Hagrid's pumpkins are coming along nicely, aren't they?" Harry said, pointing out the towering squash in Hagrid's back garden.

"Yeah, they're... You hear that, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Sounds like... rustling. Something in the patch... let's go see," Harry said, pulling out his wand.

"Right behind you, Harry," Ron said, drawing his wand, as well. They followed the sound, sometimes partially snatched away in the wind, threading their way between pumpkins and vines. By the time they could hear it clearly, they could also see the source of the sound clearly. A couple among the vines, covered in a cloak, the female's face just visible over his shoulder.

"OH! Oh... I-o-g-y. Zoology. It's a little like Care of Magical Creatures. Just without the magical creatures part," the female, who, by now, was obviously Hermione, finished lamely.

"Right behind me, aren't they?" Viktor muttered under his breath. Hermione nodded subtly. "Shiba," he said a little louder, repositioning to sit beside her, but still keeping the cloak over them.

"Errrm... what exactly are you two doing out here?" Hermione queried.

"Going to see Hagrid. You two want to come?" Ron asked pleasantly.

"Desperately," Viktor muttered under his breath so only Hermione could hear.

"No, thank you. We were just... we have something we would like to do before he has to go, and you two are *interrupting*," Hermione said, an edge of irritation to her voice.

"Well, I don't know what could possibly be better than going to visit Hagrid-" Harry began.



“Obviously not,” Viktor interjected, prompting a gentle elbow in the side from Hermione.

“Look, I love Hagrid as much as you two do, and in fact, we went to see him before we ended up out here,” Hermione sighed. “Listen... tomorrow, two o’clock. Room of Requirement. We need to have a serious talk, and how. I know Hogwarts leaves some big gaps in the practical curriculum, but honestly! Didn’t you ever watch television, Harry? Did the two of you ever read a book? Have the big talk with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley?”

“What are you on about?” Ron said. “Talk about what?”

“I’ll explain it tomorrow. Now, could you two run along?” Hermione asked.

“Before I’m tempted to transfigure you into a small patch of slimy mold?” Viktor elaborated.

“I’m afraid I second that,” Hermione said. “Oh, and by the way. I would appreciate it if you didn’t mention running into us to Hagrid. At all. Or it will be absolutely all over the school. And I could do without that.”

“Okay. Mum’s the word,” Ron agreed, turning and heading out of the patch.

“Absolutely. Won’t breathe a word,” Harry said, waving and following after Ron.

“You’re not having *that* conversation, are you?” Viktor asked.

“Well, I *have* to, don’t I? I mean, they’re hopeless! Have no clue! You would think Ron, being a Weasley, would at least have some idea that people have sex! I mean, he has six siblings! You would think he would have a passing familiarity with what caused it! This is exactly why I think Hogwarts needs to institute a Sex Education program. I know wizards as a rule are very traditional and conservative, but studies prove that it’s beneficial! Teenage wizards and witches have hormones, for crying out loud! Better they know how to control them, or at least wield them responsibly! It’s a wonder fifty percent of the student body aren’t in a premarital family way, at this rate! They don’t even bother teaching about tab A going into slot B, much less anything about birth control. The statistics prove that if you arm people with the knowledge-”

“Just shut up and kiss me.”

“Mmmmmph!”

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"I'm glad he got to visit, but I can't say I'm all that sorry to see him go, either. I mean, I like him, but for some reason, Hermione's a mite tetchy when he's around," Ron said, watching out the window as Viktor and Hermione said their goodbyes on the front lawn. "Maybe she'll be available as a friend for a change."

"For a homework resource, you mean. Snape like your essay?" Harry asked.

"He was impressed that I got the length right, I think. He said it 'remains to be seen if I got anything of worth out of my sources', but I think I did. Besides the knot on the noggin," Ron said ruefully, rubbing his tender forehead.

"Are they ever going to come up for air?" Harry observed.

"I don't know, but if they hold each other any closer, they'll be behind one another," Ron said. "She better hurry up, or she's going to be late for her own talk. Come on, Harry, let's wait for her outside the Room of Requirement. They'll either pass out or burst a blood vessel and have to give it up, soon."

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"So... err... as you can see from the flipcharts, here, and those books, there... Hogwarts leaves a little something to be desired on the ahhh... practical side of the curriculum. Any questions?" Hermione said, putting her wand back at her side. Harry and Ron sat, mouths slack, gaping at her. "No?"

"Just one... You said this had something to do with this weekend... and needing to make an apology... Not that this wasn't... errr... very informative," Harry said, blushing madly, "but what does it have to do with the two of us?"

"Well... I haven't exactly been honest this weekend. Or this past summer, either. I need to explain why I was riding the broom, so much, so to speak. You see, I used a lot of innuendo and doublespeak, thinking you two were like most teenage boys, and your mind was permanently camped out somewhere below your waist. Problem is, Harry, the Dursleys haven't exactly been the best parents, now, have they? And you've been distracted, what with the shadow of Voldemort hanging over you your entire school career, and nearly snuffing it on a regular basis. Perfectly understandable if you're a bit behind in the boy-girl department, especially after the Cho Chang incident. And Ron, though Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are wonderful parents, they seem to have neglected giving you the most basic education on where babies come from. Which is odd, because they should be pretty familiar with the whole process," Hermione said.

"I know where babies come from!" Ron said indignantly.

"And what about how to prevent them from coming?" Hermione pressed.

"I beg your pardon? You... err... well... you don't... do... And I still don't see what this has to do with this weekend," Ron said.

"Oh! Poor naive boys... What do you think Viktor and I were doing most of the weekend?" Hermione said, pinching the bridge of her nose and shaking her head.

"Talking?" Harry ventured.

"Well, yes, around you two, but I mean, when we were alone. Together. With no one else around," Hermione said. When Ron and Harry just blinked at her, she sighed. She snatched up the book from Ron's hand, flipping the pages. "We talked some, too, but mostly, we were doing something else. Something *else*. Good grief. The penny hasn't dropped, yet, has it? Okay, when you found us in the library, we had just been doing, err... page twenty-eight, there. And a spot of thirty-two on the side. And something a bit like figure A, there."

"You were what!?" Ron said.

"Common Room. Page ninety-three. Figures A, B, C, and one that isn't listed. And when you walked in on me in the bath, well, he was there, too," Hermione said. "We had just gotten finished with page one hundred and three. And were about to move on to page... three hundred."

Harry and Ron both stared wide-eyed as she pointed out each page.

"Where else?" Harry squeaked.

"Transfiguration classroom, bit of fooling around in the broom closet, the equipment shed, position on page one hundred and fifty, plus props, a bit of messing about under the bleachers, some groping on the broom-" Hermione counted off.

"That's just not right. Fooling around on a broom," Ron said. "That's sacred."

"Oh, nonsense! The pumpkin patch last night, and the greenhouse. We did something in there that isn't in any of those books. Oh! And the Room of Requirement. By the way, Viktor wanted me to tender a sincere apology. He forgot you had grown several more inches since he saw you last, so you're almost as tall as he is. He was planning to fling the books *over* your head, not at it. He was terribly sorry when he found out he had clocked you, but he *was* levitating them out completely blind. We were beside the door. And he wanted to apologize for getting a tad stroppy with you in the pumpkin patch, as well. Not that you noticed. Anyway, I feel I shouldn't have put off confiding in the two of

you so long. If I trusted Neville and Ginny-”

“They know!?” Ron screeched.

“Well, of course they do. They’re both very observant. It’s not as though I could hide it from them. And besides, sometimes a girl wants to talk to another female about these things, you know,” Hermione said.

“Hey! Neville’s supposed to have taken Ginny for rides on the broom... I wonder-” Ron said, drawing his eyebrows together, before Harry interrupted.

“But... but... why? I mean, you’re... you’re so sensible,” Harry said.

“Oh, honestly, Harry! Do you think you’re the only one who needs a distraction? A way to blow off some steam? Something important to you that you can still have a bit of fun with? You two have Quidditch. I’ve got Viktor. We were sensible enough to wait until I was of age, at least, and until we were certain we were in this for the long haul. We didn’t just go leaping on one another because we were there... we wanted to make sure there was some deeper feeling than ‘I need a shag’ before we went and did anything of a horizontal nature. Besides, the sexual tension was getting to be unbearable. Don’t get me wrong. Viktor was always the perfect gentleman. Until I visited in Bulgaria and asked him not to be...” Hermione said.

“But.. but... you must have broken about a million school rules!” Harry said.

“I did when we made Polyjuice Potion, too, didn’t I? Besides, I didn’t break a single one with this. Viktor’s not a student, nor is he a teacher, so he’s not prohibited from doing any of the things we did in any of the places we did. The Hogwarts rules say nothing about what students can do with guests at the castle. How’s that for a loophole you could herd an Erumpent through?” Hermione said, crossing her arms.

“So, all that talk about broomsticks, and riding the broom, and talking... and looking at biological specimens...?” Harry said, trailing off and looking a little green.

“Pretty much covered on pages eighty through one hundred and fifty. See other chapters for more detail,” Hermione answered.

“But you could end up pregnant! An unwed, pregnant teenage witch! And if you have a baby before you get married, Mum would have kittens!” Ron insisted.

“Honestly, Ron! Don’t you think we took precautions? Potion, charms both ways, and Muggle condoms, page two hundred, so there is no way I’m going to end up

pregnant before I want to!" Hermione argued, putting her hands on her hips, looking as though she would brook no more argument. "I didn't lose my head simply because I've got hormones. We discussed this... really discussed this... seriously, in depth, and weighed all the possible risks. And figured out how we could counter them, as much as is possible. Really, Ron. It's sweet you two worry, but we're as safe as we can be."

"That's nice. Excuse me, I think I have to go thrash Neville..." Ron said, getting out of the comfy armchair the Room of Requirement had provided and heading for the door.

"And I need to... errr... polish a broom," Harry mumbled, blushing as he ducked his head and followed Ron.

Ron turned at the doorway, hand on the knob. "Safe? One hundred percent safe?" he asked Hermione.

"Well, nothing is one hundred percent safe, Ron. But the odds of us having an accident are astronomical. Astronomical plus ten, actually."

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"If one more bloody person asks me if I'm smuggling a Bludger under my robes, I will be forced to poke them in the eye with my wand," Hermione complained, sinking heavily into a chair in the Great Hall.

"Surely not," Viktor murmured.

"It's funny about the first forty times you hear it, but it's starting to get really old. And problem is, it's mostly Ron that keeps saying it. Three times out of four," Hermione huffed, sitting well back from the table and lacing her fingers over the rounded swell of her stomach. "And I'm melting. It's no picnic being pregnant in this heat."

"Sorry, would you like to go home? We could beg off. We have a golden excuse. Tell them we need to go, and wave that belly of yours at them. No one argues with a pregnant woman who says she has to leave, even if she is the matron of honor. I could go tell Neville and Ginny we're leaving their wedding reception early. I think they would live. They only have about four hundred other guests to keep them occupied. About forty percent of them other Weasleys. I don't think they would miss the two of us all that much," Viktor said, raising an eyebrow at her.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm being a cranky pain in the neck. But if the matron of honor had known that she was going to be quite this matronly by the time this

ceremony rolled around, she might have declined,” Hermione said with a sigh. “I had to have these robes refitted four times, and they’re still just about to split at the seams in spots.”

“They are not. And when you agreed to do this ten months ago, you didn’t know that you were going to have a passenger going down the aisle with you. Blame it all on the little stranger that didn’t exist, then,” Viktor said mildly, resting his hand over hers.

“Trust me, the stranger is not so little. If I had been thinking more clearly, we would have timed this so the baby would come in the fall instead of late summer. October or November, ideally. Not only would I not have been dealing with this scorching heat and ninety percent humidity when I’m eight months gone, but there are studies that show babies born in the fall thrive better. Physically and academically. Mind you, it’s also easier to conceive in the fall, according to the *Wizard Medical Journal*, and less chance of magical ability being suppressed in children delivered in summer. Besides, a maternal age of twenty-six fell right in the optimum range for primiparas, and a paternal age of-”

“Hermione?”

“What?”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Viktor asked softly, raising an eyebrow.

Hermione considered him a moment. “Meet you in the Quidditch shed in fifteen minutes.”