

“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 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, coddled and comforted the various Weasleys that had come along as much as any of their blood relations. Hermione had become more and more distant with each addition. She had only held Alice the once, and then, it was almost under duress.

“She’s just excusing herself in case something gets broken later. That can’t be Alice, can it? Have you been taking her by Hogwarts so Neville can put fertilizer on her? Last time I saw her, she was that big,” Viktor said, holding his hands apart.

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

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

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

“I suppose so,” Viktor murmured noncommittally.

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

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

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

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

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

“You manage what’s important and let the rest go. Just like being married,” Viktor murmured, taking a long finger and tenderly tucking a stray 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. All that's left after the incantation is separating out the doses and putting the rosehips in her dose, and the dried mandrake in his. I'm going to put the maximum amount of rosehips in there. Anyway, we thought that as two more of their oldest and closest friends, you two would probably want to be in on it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It lasts at least a week, according to the source I have. I think that's really all we

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

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

"Harry! Surely not!" Ginny exclaimed.

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

"Whatever did you think!?" Ginny pressed.

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

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

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

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

“Oh... oh... we shouldn’t be making light of it,” Harry said, gasping for breath.

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

“Oh, alright. I’m in,” Harry said, wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes.

“Me too,” Ron added.

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

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

“Mmmm... how long do you think we have?”

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

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

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

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

Hermione poured some juice into the front glass, 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. 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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"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?" 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.

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.

"Well, all of you get in here, dinner's ready," Hannah called from the doorway.

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

"I suppose so. Plenty of time yet, before we would know for sure. Viktor needs to be more careful though. I know he's dedicated to practicing hard, but no point in him killing himself before he and Hermione become parents," Ginny said with a yawn. "He's lucky he didn't really get heatstroke, if the practice facility was as hot as it was everywhere I went today. This heat makes me want to curl up and lie somewhere cool, too."

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“Are you alright?” Viktor mumbled as she slid back into bed beside him.

“Of course I am. Why?” Hermione asked in return, tucking into the curve of his body.

“Well, that’s the third time I count you being out of bed. Tonight. Starting to worry you were sick.”

“Four, actually. All that lemonade at Harry and Hannah’s. Ow. Shift down a bit, would you? Further away from my chest,” she pleaded when he wrapped his arms around her and gave her a squeeze.

“Sorry. I forgot what week it was. Sore?” he asked.

“Tender. Would you like pancakes for breakfast?” she asked on a whim.

“Bit early to be talking pancakes, isn’t it? It’s four in the morning.”

“Still. I want pancakes in the morning. It’s been ages since we had pancakes,” Hermione murmured.

“Got no objection at all to pancakes, at a decent hour,” Viktor murmured, settling back down to sleep.

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“Going to France with me?” Viktor asked, giving Hermione a peck on the cheek.

“I think so. Don’t see any reason why not,” she replied with a shrug, setting a huge platter of pancakes down on the table, between the two coffee cups and glasses.

“I’m not quite up to eating that many,” Viktor said with a little smirk.

“The rest are mine. I’m starved,” Hermione added, sitting down across from him.

“You usually don’t eat over two,” Viktor asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m usually not this hungry, either,” Hermione protested.

“So what are you planning on doing while I’m stuck at the stadium?”

“Thought I might go to the museum. Do you still have to go to the autograph session?” she asked tentatively.

Viktor made a face. “Yes. Don’t remind me,” he added, wrinkling his nose.

“Oh, come on. You’re always happy you went after it’s over. All those sweet, earnest fanboys of all ages who, like Ron, can quote every piece of trivia ever associated with you, and all those cute little nippers who can barely get their pieces of parchment or their autograph books up on the table and have to pronounce it ‘Kwum’ make it worth it, don’t they?” she teased, tapping him on the forearm.

“Key phrase being ‘after it’s over’. Drives me batty just thinking about it. Dreading it. It’s not the signing, it’s the having to think up something to talk about with all these people. At least the ones with questions provide some of the conversation. Especially when I’m pretty pitiful with the language. I ought to call up Fleur and make her go with me, in case anyone speaks much French,” Viktor complained, stabbing another forkful of pancakes.

“It’s France. They all speak quite a lot of French, I think,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“You know what I meant. Speaks much French in my direction and expects me to answer in like manner. I’m sure Fleur cringes every time I speak it around her. As would anyone else who actually knows the language. They’re all just too polite to correct me. Or think it’s too big a job for one person,” Viktor observed, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Just do like always. Speak English, attempt it in the local language if you have to, and when all else fails, plead being a clueless foreigner and ask them how their Bulgarian is. Or their Russian. It’s not like you don’t know other languages. So I need to pack for three days, then? We are staying at a hotel, right? I mean, we’re not both Apparating back and forth for three days of this, are we?” she asked, stabbing her fork into another pancake.

“Hotel. I mean, if you stayed here, maybe I would have come home one night, but if you’re going, I see no reason to come back. So, I should just get enough groceries to last us a few days, then? You want anything else while I’m out?” Viktor asked, finishing and laying his fork on the plate.

“No. I think I’ll just work on my article and see if I can’t get it done. Due in four days. Actually... ice cream?” she asked, finishing the cutting of her third pancake and putting a bite between her teeth.

“Ice cream? Any particular request? And I thought we still had some left,” Viktor

said, getting up to carry his dishes to the sink.

“We did until I ate it the other night. Leave your dishes. I’ll get them when I get mine. After I’m done writing. And I would love some chocolate chip cookie dough. Ice cream, that is,” she amended.

“Anything besides ice cream?” he asked, raising an eyebrow when she added a fourth pancake to her plate.

“No, I think that will do. I don’t want a bunch of things in the icebox that we have to worry about spoiling while we’re gone,” she said with a shake of her head. “You didn’t want any more pancakes?”

“Not really. Three is about my limit with pancakes. They lay kind of heavy...” Viktor said, trailing off, studying her.

“What?” she asked curiously.

“Nothing. Be back in a little while,” he said, giving her a peck on the lips, then walking out the back door to Apparate to Hogsmeade.

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Well, at least that article is done, Hermione thought to herself as she stretched and ambled back into the kitchen. She shifted a few of the dishes in the sink, setting Viktor’s nearly empty coffee cup further over on the counter. The sharp, bitter smell of cold coffee wafted up, and her stomach did an uncomfortable wobble, then lurched. She had to swallow hard to keep from gagging. A wave of heat passed over her, leaving a fine sheen of sweat on her forehead, which flashed hot, then strangely cool when damp. Hermione leaned against the edge of the sink for a moment, then crossed the room and sank into a chair. *Probably overdid it at breakfast*, she thought. *Forget the dishes. I’m going to lie down. I don’t feel well, I’m tired, and I think I’m getting heartburn*, she added to herself, rubbing the hollow below her chest where a mild burn had started up. *You should have left those last two pancakes off, no matter if you were hungry*, she chided herself, before rising and going back to bed. To her surprise, she had no trouble drifting off. She slept heavily, and didn’t even wake when Viktor returned. He had already done the dishes and started fixing dinner by the time she woke in the early afternoon.

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Hermione splashed cold water on her face, then rinsed her mouth out, to get rid of the horrible acid taste. She almost laughed when her stomach gave an insistent, empty growl despite the fact that she had just retched over the sink in

the bath. She had half a mind to tell Viktor she wasn't going after all, but she didn't want his mind on her while he was in France for three days, and really, it only seemed like a mild virus. Probably had picked it up when she was at the Weasleys, last. Some of the grandchildren had been confined to bed, lately, with something similar. Molly had been tending to a couple of them the day she had been there. She could be sick in France just as well as she could be sick at home. She could rest while he was busy.

Her stomach gave another odd roll when she thought of him asking if she wanted oatmeal for breakfast. Normally, she loved oatmeal, but today the very thought of it had been enough to make her feel as though her stomach had dropped straight through the floor. She had barely managed to choke out an answer in the negative through the closed door of the bath and wait until he had gone back to the kitchen before throwing up. When the second, weaker wave of nausea passed, her stomach rumbled again. She put a hand to her tender belly and rubbed. Between the soreness from the vomiting, and the feeling of being completely stuffed when she did eat, too much in most sittings, she allowed, it was fairly tender to the touch, maybe even a little bloated. It wasn't helping that she had missed her cycle, either. Seemed like every mild illness or stress caused her to skip, though. Her breasts were a little tender, as well. It was like the week before her period stretched out into two, or almost three, by now. She toweled off her face and walked gingerly out to the breakfast table.

"You okay? You look awfully peaky..." Viktor said doubtfully.

"I'm alright. Just still feel a bit off. Probably a mild case of whatever the kids had the other week," she protested, hoping she didn't look too green. She had to eat something. First, her stomach was growling something fierce, and second, she usually felt better once she got something in her stomach. It seemed the nausea was worse when she got out of bed with her stomach completely empty. Some early mornings, she had detoured from the trip to the loo to eat a few crackers in the kitchen, before lying back down. Those mornings, it had been possible to get up without heading straight for the sink. She had managed just fine the last few mornings. Only a little uncomfortable, queasy rolling and some hot, sweaty flashes until she ate, no actual retching. Thankfully, Viktor had made breakfast every morning for the last week, without asking. He obviously knew she didn't feel well, but she had tried to keep the fact that she was vomiting so much from him.

"You don't have to go, you know," Viktor said, brushing her hair back and setting a plate in front of her. She picked tentatively at the eggs, took an experimental bite, found her stomach didn't rebel when she swallowed, then started to fix her toast.

"I want to. Last match before the off-season. Even if it isn't a Cup year, it should

be a good match. Besides, it's France. We always have a good time in France," she reasoned.

"You just want to go back to the Louvre," he teased, sitting down across from her.

"Guilty," she said with a soft smile, spreading some jam over the butter on her toast. "When do you have to be at the bookstore?"

"Early this afternoon. And it's only for three hours. Four, probably, if they let everyone in line by then through. Are you just going to browse the books? Then dinner?" Viktor asked, watching her eat a few out of the pile of grapes on the edge of her plate.

"Think I will. Did you get reservations?" she asked, scooping up a little of the cottage cheese with her spoon.

"They're willing to let us in this evening, if they're not particularly busy. But I bet they're a lot less busy if you slip the host something," he said with a laugh. "We still on for sightseeing after practice, if you're up to it?"

"Sure," she said, nodding as she dug into her eggs with a little more enthusiasm, "is Katya still coming?"

"Last I heard from Zograf, yes. She still wants to go down to the Eiffel Tower and the Arc d'Triumph," he replied, gathering up his empty glass to take it to the sink.

"Fine by me," she shrugged, finishing off her toast.

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"Have you taken a second job and just not told me?" Viktor teased, as he slipped under the covers and curled up against Hermione.

"Second job? What on earth are you talking about?" she asked, puzzled.

"Well, I figure you must be doing something to work up that kind of appetite. You ate more than I did at the restaurant, and usually you have to get up pretty early in the morning to accomplish that. Like the day before," he chided gently.

"So, I was hungry. And if it makes you feel any better, I ate entirely too much. Good food is my weakness," she lamented, slipping a hand between them and cupping her overly full belly.

"Doesn't really make me feel better, but eating makes you feel better, doesn't it?"



Still queasy sometimes?" he asked, planting a kiss on her forehead.

"Not so bad these last few days, really. Especially if I try to keep something in my stomach. Today, I was mostly just plain hungry. But then, I always starve when I'm coming off of being sick."

"So I gathered at lunch. And dinner. I mean, from that big stack of pancakes you made the other morning, for a minute there, I thought we were expecting someone," he murmured, rubbing her shoulder.

She jerked a little in surprise as the word registered. "Beg pardon?" Hermione said, lifting her head from the pillow to look him in the eye.

"I said, I thought we were expecting... some... one... Are you thinking...?" he trailed off.

"I... it's probably not that..." she protested, shaking her head vigorously.

"Well, it's either that, or you've got an ulcer. Eating makes you feel better, right? I mean, a week and more is a little much for a virus, isn't it? You started feeling off almost two weeks ago. Worse in the mornings. You haven't had your... no? Either way, you really should see someone... I'm sure Zograf and Katya would understand. They know you haven't felt well lately. We could ditch sightseeing and get a walk-in appointment somewhere," he offered.

She tucked her head against his shoulder once more, whispering, "We'll probably just be disappointed."

Viktor hugged her to him a little tighter. "We'll try not to get our hopes up. Then, if you are, it's just a pleasant surprise, hmm?" *When did we start being afraid to even say the words 'baby' and 'pregnant'?* he wondered to himself.

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"So, we'll do the sightseeing together some other time, okay?" Viktor summed up in a rush.

"Of course. Tell Hermione we hope she feels better, soon," Katya responded, nodding.

"Explains why you were so worthless today. Mind elsewhere," Zograf teased. "Might want to change out of uniform before you take her to medivizard, too. So sorry she does not feel well," he added earnestly.

"Thank you," he called over his shoulder as he rushed back to the locker room to

collect his equipment bag. He should just have enough time to Apparate back to the hotel, find out where she had gotten the appointment, and make it there. *Provided I don't Splinch myself in my haste to get out of this darned practice facility*, he thought to himself.

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"Oui, Madame?" the receptionist inquired, looking a touch bored.

"Hello... I called earlier about an appointment... a walk-in?" Hermione said hesitantly, wondering if the receptionist was the same one she had spoken to on the phone. The hotel manager had been kind enough to suggest a bank of medical offices nearby.

"Oui, Madame? Name?" the receptionist asked, flicking her wand at a quill before her, which rose up and poised over a clipboard.

"Err.. Granger," Hermione replied, eyeing the quill. It scribbled in the name Granger next to the empty appointment slot, and checked her off as present, which meant she should be called back in a few minutes.

"Tourest, Madame?" the receptionist asked, looking at her curiously.

"You could say that," she said, nodding, then set off for the empty chair next to the one in which Viktor had settled. She was a little relieved that the waiting room was relatively deserted, only a couple of older witches, proper looking French matrons, who seemed to be determinedly ignoring them, for the most part, perched over in the corner, studying their magazines. It was still fairly early in the morning, so there didn't seem to be a lot of backlog, as of yet.

She couldn't help thinking it was preferable to those times when they had sat in other strange waiting rooms, with other married couples. It was always so obvious what they were there for. Men didn't typically set foot in those offices unless it was for a possible pregnancy. Or worse, they sometimes shared waiting rooms with couples who had obviously already had their condition confirmed, with those looks... serene and content and stroking bulges of varying sizes. Or worst of all, the ones who looked panicked, like they had no idea what to do with the news, or like they were dreading having their suspicions confirmed. Those were the worst. Because they always made her feel it was a pity they couldn't trade situations. "Sickle for your thoughts," Viktor murmured, giving her arm a little nudge with his elbow on the shared armrest.

"Just thinking it was lucky that it was pretty deserted in here, today. I didn't have much trouble getting a slot," she answered, then drifted back off into her thoughts, staring straight ahead. Viktor ducked his head and went back to the

absorbing business of determinedly and methodically mangling the scrap of parchment on which she had written the address of the office. In a few minutes, she found herself absently rubbing a palm over her navel, a ball of cold dread forming in the pit of her abdomen. She looked up to find that one of the women across from them had lowered her magazine, and was studying the both of them frankly, a soft, kindly smile creeping across her face. Seeing she had caught Hermione's eye, she broadened the smile, gave an amused nod toward Viktor, a pointed look at Hermione's middle, and gave an exaggerated pantomime of rocking a baby in her arms, followed by a questioning look.

Hermione gave her a sheepish grin, and a shrug, as she felt the embarrassed flush creep up her neck and into her cheeks. Just then, another woman stepped out of the back, almost certainly this woman's sister, judging from the resemblance, and they spoke to one another in musical but quiet French as they gathered up to go. The witch who had been looking at her gave Hermione one more encouraging smile and a friendly little wave before departing.

"What was that all about?" Viktor asked curiously, catching the last exchange.

"She seems pretty dead certain we're... you know," Hermione whispered. "Actually, I think she just thought you were kind of cute, there, killing that poor, defenseless piece of parchment," Hermione added. He folded up the remains and stuffed them in his pocket, coloring slightly.

"Madame Granger," the receptionist called, "follow me, s'il vous plait." They were led down a hallway, into an exam room. "Ze Mediwizard will be wiz you shortly," the receptionist murmured, shutting the door behind her. They sat in silence, but they both knew they were bracing themselves not to react too badly, not to feel too disappointed, if it wasn't the news they were looking for. It seemed a small eternity before a bustling little wizard barely as tall as Hermione, with sparkling eyes, red cheeks, and an enormously bushy black handlebar mustache stepped in, smiling so broadly that you could barely tell that his eyes were, in fact, a bright blue.

"Bonjour! I am Jean Paul Alouette. Madame Granger, what seems to be ze problem, if in fact zere ees a problem?" he asked good-naturedly.

"I... I just need a test run," Hermione stammered, wetting her lips with her tongue.

"Ahh. And may I inquire, what sort of test?" he asked in return, casting curious looks at Viktor and Hermione in turn.

"I... I... think I might be... expecting..." she said nervously, opting for not saying it quite so bluntly. Not saying the word out loud. Not saying it, because that meant

you hoped it was true, when you said it. Words could hurt, she had found. Like the word 'negative'.

"Expec... Ah! I see! Ze pregnancy test! May I also inquire if congratulations would be in order if ze results were positive?" Alouette probed.

She winced a little inwardly when he used the word. "Most definitely," Hermione replied earnestly.

"Well, zen, if Madame will just lie back on ze exam table?" Alouette asked. "You 'ave a regular care provider at 'ome?"

"Yes," Hermione answered, lying back on the padded table, looking up at Viktor, who was standing beside her. Ginny generally saw to her, at least when it wasn't for this. Ginny had done the tests in the beginning, the first few times. Before it got so painful and embarrassing that she started picking strange offices elsewhere, anywhere else, to be disappointed in. The way both of them traveled, it afforded her a wide selection. Somehow it hurt less when they didn't look at you with pity in their eyes after telling you the results. Somehow it hurt less if no one else in the room hoped with you. Better to just let your hopes live and die alone. All the better to fool yourself and tell yourself it didn't matter, anyway. It was one reason she had stopped telling Viktor to come with her. Harder to lie to yourself that way. When there's someone else in the room that knows the truth.

"Zen no need for me to do anyzing but ze test... you can make ze appointment for your care, if necessary, with your mediwitch or mediwizard when you return 'ome," he said, lifting his wand like a conductor's baton. Hermione found herself clutching for Viktor's hand, suddenly nervous and shaky. He folded her hand between both of his, giving it a comforting squeeze, something to focus on. Alouette pointed the tip of his wand in the vague vicinity of her navel, and said in a steady voice, "Zink ze 'appy thoughts, zen... *Provera Graviditas.*" It didn't register at first that the wand had actually blazed forth in a bright blue light, she hadn't just imagined it. She didn't even realize that tears were running down her cheeks until Alouette had already dated the pregnancy at four to five weeks from conception, offered his hearty congratulations, and invited them to stay in the exam room until they had 'collected themselves' and felt like leaving. Hermione hardly thought that clinging to one another and sobbing for a solid five minutes qualified as 'collecting themselves', but somehow, it seemed an appropriate reaction.

"Well," Viktor said at last in a strangled voice, "thank goodness we didn't get our hopes up, or I would hate to see what kind of messes we would have turned into!" The laughter lasted almost as long as the crying had.

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“You okay?” Viktor asked, coming out of the hotel bath with one towel around his hips, scrubbing at his hair with another.

“You ever going to stop asking me that every five minutes?” Hermione said with an indulgent smile.

“Will when you answer me,” he countered.

“I’m fine. Just don’t mention oysters, apparently,” she said with a shudder.

“You realize Katya and Anton now believe we’re both certifiably insane?”

“I can’t help it. The thought of eating oysters for dinner apparently did not agree with me. It was either run off or throw up on their shoes. Did you make excuses?” she asked.

“Told them that I thought after a seventeen hour match, I didn’t really feel like going out, and apparently, you still weren’t feeling too spectacular. I think they understood. That, or they thought I was bonkers because I ran off after you like the house might be on fire,” he replied, perching on the chair arm. “Did you order anything?”

“It’s over there,” Hermione said, gesturing to the room service cart. “Tandoori chicken alright?” she asked.

“So... oysters are a no go, but Tandoori chicken...?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow at her.

“The baby apparently doesn’t really care for oysters at the moment, don’t talk about them...” Hermione said, shaking her head. “I didn’t go running the minute that showed up, so I presume I’m safe. Oysters kind of give me the willies even when I’m not sick. Some Muggle said it was a brave man who first ate an oyster. I mean, they look like... like a sneeze. Personally, I think he must have been desperate.”

Viktor looked at her thoughtfully. “What did you just say?”

“I said, he must have been desperate.”

“Not that.”

“Some Muggle...?”

“First thing,” he said, sly smile spreading over his face.

“The baby doesn’t really care for oysters...?”

“Say it again,” he prompted, with a broad grin.

“The baby...”

“Lord, that sounds beautiful coming out of your mouth,” Viktor murmured, kissing her on the lips.

“Chicken’s getting cold. Going to eat in the towel?” she asked when he pulled back.

“Half the fun of room service, isn’t it? Saves a lot of time later. Is dessert something we can have in bed?” he asked.

“If you can handle a spoon. Chocolate mousse.”

“Let’s eat, then,” he said, getting up and walking across the room, but halfway across, he paused and looked back. “Say it one more time.”

“Baby. Madman. I’m having a baby with a madman,” she muttered with a good-natured shake of her head before following him.

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Hermione sucked in her breath when he put his mouth to her, trailing kisses down her front, gently caressing her breasts with his fingers while he kissed the soft curve of her belly. He raised back up and whispered in her ear, “I still can’t believe it... our baby is in there.”

“Be easy enough to believe in a few more weeks. When I start expanding. I’m pregnant. After all this time, I’m pregnant...” she whispered back, trying not to cry again.

“You’re beautiful, that’s what you are...” Viktor said, propping back over her, covering her mouth with his. He made love to her gingerly, cautious and slow, and afterward, they lay in a comfortable tangle, talking. And for a change, they said the things they had avoided for so long, and they treasured the words in their mouths. Hermione almost hated the idea that the next day, they would be going home.

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Hermione had been hoping that the morning sickness would fade after making it

back from France, but in the nearly three weeks since, it had actually gotten worse. And to top it all off, she was exhausted most of the time. “I was hoping I wouldn’t have this problem... my mother said she never got morning sick at all,” she lamented. On the other hand, one of the small payoffs of the last week had been the subtle bulge she had developed, something tangible that spoke of what was inside. But not so terribly obvious that they had to tell anyone just yet. Right now, she wanted to treasure it, just the two of them knowing.

“Ginger ale and crackers?” Viktor asked, ambling back in from the kitchen with a small saucer and a glass. “Maybe I should start bringing you something before you even try to get up?” he ventured, perching on the edge of the bed.

She took a small sip of the ginger ale. “Doesn’t seem to matter, lately. I wake up, I need to vomit, something in my stomach or not. Sometimes I throw up and need to eat at the same time. Isn’t that completely crazy? This morning I was hanging over the sink, still wondering what I could have for breakfast. Seems like all I do lately is eat and throw up. Oh, and take naps, let’s not forget taking naps,” she complained.

“I know. I’ve been here, remember? You might talk to Ginny, she may be able to give you something for the nausea,” but she shook her head vigorously.

“I’m just not ready to let anyone else in on it, for a little while yet. Not even Ginny.”

“Well, do tell,” Viktor said with a laugh.

“Tell what?” she asked, starting her second cracker.

“What were you thinking of having for breakfast, while you were in there heaving? So I’ll know what to fix.”

“I would absolutely kill for some bacon and fried eggs. Maybe some toast. And blueberry muffins?” she added almost sheepishly.

“No need to kill, unless you’re talking about the pig. Sure, I could swing that,” he said, pecking her on the cheek and getting up off the bed. As he looked in the icebox for the eggs, he couldn’t help but laugh softly and shake his head. Thrilled as he was about how well things had gone, so far, the extremes had been a bit shocking. One minute she was fine, like her usual self, only, if possible, happier than usual. The next, she was sacked out on the sofa, in a chair or in the bed, even, sleeping like the dead. Then, she might be draped over the sink at the mere thought or mention of a particular something to eat, and then turn right around and eat a plate that even he couldn’t manage to put away on a good day.

No mood swings to speak of, unless you counted the way she had started jumping his bones with even less warning than usual when she felt well. It rather reminded him of when they had first gotten married, and it was something close to hazardous for the two of them to even be near each other and a bed. Or an unused room. Or a closet. Or for that matter, a floor. Seemed like all they had to do then was get within ten feet of each other and the next thing they both knew, they were going at it. Not that things had been anything like boring since then, but he hadn't expected her being quite so... enthusiastic... these days. He laughed harder when he remembered what Vulchanov had replied when he inquired after Natasha soon after they had started sharing the news that they were expecting their second a few years ago. "Just like the first time. She's heaving, hungry, and horny, and sometimes all three at once," he had said. Thankfully, it shouldn't be too much longer before the heaving, at least, let up.

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Hermione shifted uncomfortably in the seat across from Ginny. She surreptitiously ran a thumb beneath the elastic band of her skirt, pulling it away from her and pushing it down slightly. It was already biting into her belly in a most uncomfortable way. In fact, most of her clothes had proven uncomfortably snug the last few days, despite the fact that, according to the scale, she hadn't gained much weight, yet. Initially, she had even lost a few pounds in the wake of all that morning sickness. Morning sickness that hadn't been content to just present itself in the mornings. Thank goodness that was becoming a rarer event, now. Heartburn seemed to be taking over as the discomfort of choice. When home, she had taken to wearing mostly loose, long robes. At little more than eight weeks, her tummy had popped out at what seemed an almost alarming rate, pushing beyond the limits of the majority of her regular clothes. The first three things she had pulled out of the closet had shown no hope of buttoning over her burgeoning belly. Even some of her closer-fitting robes pulled uncomfortably over her midsection now. She was developing a fair little mound between her hipbones, and her waist was thickening by now. Trying to suck it in was a laughable prospect. She chalked it up to the ravenous appetite she had when she wasn't nauseated.

She was a mite relieved that they were planning to tell Ginny, Neville, Ron, Susan, Harry and Hannah at dinner tonight. They had already shared the news with Viktor's parents that morning, and they had been equal parts delighted and surprised. The fussing that Petar, and especially Ekaterina, had done over Hermione had been an unexpected pleasure. Not that Viktor didn't take wonderful care of her and commiserate well, but having another woman who had been through it sympathizing with her and answering her questions, it had been almost as good as having her own mother back with her. There had been a few unexpected pangs of sadness over the last few weeks when she had wondered



about something, then lamented the fact that she couldn't ask the woman who had carried her, if it was normal. Books didn't hold a candle to a living, breathing mother in this instance. Even if it was someone else's mother. Between Molly and Ekaterina, she had plenty of mother figures since losing her own parents during the war, but it still wasn't quite the same. Arthur and Molly had, of course, taken the "what's two more?" attitude, treating Hermione and Viktor as just another couple extending their own brood. Ekaterina and Petar had been as warm and welcoming as she ever could have hoped, opening their arms to her as their daughter as much as the woman their son had decided to marry. Hermione had even been a bit surprised at how eagerly they had accepted her, foreign as she was on both counts, being British and a Muggle-born to boot.

She hated that she hadn't told Molly yet, but it would have to wait until they got tonight's dinner out of the way, else the news would travel like it had been broadcast on the wireless. And frankly, she was being a touch selfish in thinking it was her and Viktor's news to share, not Molly's, thank you very much. But the idea of being able to publicly graduate to looser maternity clothes seemed pretty attractive right about now. She tugged her loose, flowing blouse back down over her abdomen, hoping that between it and her outer robe, her new bulk wasn't that obvious. Not much she could do about hiding the new bounty up top, but then, she had always been a little full of figure, complaining about how she always overflowed the cups of her bra in the week leading up to her cycle. Maybe no one really noticed, much.

*I've got to be imagining it, Ginny told herself, studying Hermione over the menu. I'm talking myself into it. She's not heavier. Her chest is not bigger. She would have said something by now, if she were. Viktor would have said something. It didn't take. It couldn't have. You don't stay quiet about something happening that you've wanted for going on two decades, do you?* Hermione's eyes suddenly met Ginny's over the top of their menus. "What?" she asked, looking self-conscious.

"Just wondering what you were thinking of getting," Ginny said.

*I could eat half a roast, Hermione thought, but it would probably snap the waist of this skirt like a rubber band.* Better to eat a little lighter, so she and her skirt wouldn't both be groaning by the time lunch finished. It seemed like she couldn't rein in her appetite, these days. "Just a bowl of tomato soup, I think, and some tea," Hermione said, and before she knew it, she had added, "and maybe a grilled cheese." After giving her order to the waitress, Ginny seconded the order, and Hermione slipped a hand beneath the bottom of her blouse again, this time to scratch the crawling itch that snaked across her expanding front.

"I still wish you two would let us throw an anniversary party for you," Ginny said.

“Don’t start that, again. Save that for the twentieth. This one’s only eighteen,” Hermione protested.

“Listen to you! Only eighteen! Compared to the rest of us, you two have been married longer than... than... well, a blinking long time. I mean, you two were already working on your second decade together when the rest of us got married,” Ginny argued.

“So, what you’re saying is that both of us seem older than dirt,” Hermione said with a short laugh.

“No. What I’m saying is, the two of you have been an official unit for a darned impressive length of time. And I wish you would let us celebrate that.”

“We are. With the six of you. Tonight. Then, we’re going to have a nice, romantic dinner together on our actual anniversary, and anything else that happens after that is none of your business.”

“Eighteen years, Hermione!”

“I’m fully aware of how long I’ve been married. I was there when it happened. People don’t often get married almost straight out of school quite the way they used to. We were just lucky, Ginny. We found each other young. And it’s not every man who can already afford to build a house at twenty-three, pay for a wedding, take on a wife and still have money left over for the bills. If we both hadn’t been in such a good spot financially, I’m sure we would have waited longer to set up house together, too. You shouldn’t be nearly so impressed,” she admonished.

“I can’t help it. You two impress me.”

“We shouldn’t. You know we can be nasty, too. Can argue like a couple of banshees.”

“Actually, that’s what impresses me. Neville and I can’t argue for beans. We just beat around the bush for weeks and never get around to fighting it out until we absolutely have to. You two just forge right on in when you feel like fighting and get it over with in five minutes. You scare all the locals in the process, but you forget about it like that. It was the funniest and the scariest thing I’ve ever seen when you darned near gave the wedding planner a heart attack, when you two didn’t agree on the reception. I mean, I thought she was going to faint when you called him a pigheaded Bulgarian and he called you a *kuchka* right back. She didn’t know any Bulgarian, but she sure figured out from the way he said it that it wasn’t what you could call a term of affection.”

“Never a problem with the two of us. Never had much of a problem expressing our opinions, Viktor and I. Get Neville a Bulgarian temper. That ought to do it,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“I hope you weren’t planning on having grilled cheese, tonight,” Ginny teased.

“Oh, no. Dinner tonight is chicken and linguine. Meet with your approval?” Hermione asked.

“Sounds great. Beginning to wish I had just ordered the soup.”

*Half wish I had, too, Hermione thought, shifting her waistband down another notch, and the new, fuller arc of her stomach forced the elastic to fold over. I’ll be lucky if my belly isn’t poking clear out between my blouse and my skirt when I get out of this chair.*

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“Come on, I had to be imagining it, today,” Ginny argued. They had all met up at Ron’s, and to pass the time before they had to leave, she had asked if anyone else thought Hermione showed any evidence of being pregnant.

“I’m telling you, she looked a little plumper to me, the other day,” Ron protested. “Either she is, or she’s going all pudgy around the middle.”

“Ronald Arthur Weasley,” Susan sighed, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

“I saw what I saw. She was wearing those looser robes, but when she walked, and it blew back against her, you could tell. Harry will back me up, won’t you, Harry?” Ron insisted.

“It did look like maybe she was a bit... rounder. But like Ginny said, maybe it was a bit of wishful thinking. I mean, we’ve all been watching her, waiting for some sign. And even if she has put on weight, that’s no guarantee it’s baby-related. I can’t imagine them keeping it a secret this long, if she were,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Course they might,” Neville interjected. “Lots of couples won’t even tell until they’ve hit the three month mark. Think it’s unlucky.”

“Unlucky? Hermione and Viktor superstitious? Hardly likely,” Ginny said.

“Not so unlikely. Let’s say you’ve wanted to be pregnant as long as she has. What’s your first thought going to be when you do end up that way? ‘What if something goes wrong?’ I think it would absolutely kill the two of them if she got

pregnant and lost it. I bet they wouldn't tell until they were pretty sure everything was... set. Until they were sure it's going to take. They wouldn't want to have to go back and tell everyone they lost a baby. Besides, they tend to keep things between them, good or bad. They didn't tell a soul outside of their parents that they had set a wedding date until they were almost ready to send out invitations. And that includes the wedding party," Neville pointed out.

"Well, if she is, they'll tell us when they're ready. And if not, that will become apparent enough in time, too. So, let's just go before we're terribly late," Ginny reasoned. She still couldn't help but think that they might be wishing to see something so badly that they were convincing themselves it was there.

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"You look fantastic," Viktor assured her, but she tugged at the empire waist of her robes, which hung just below her more ample chest.

"It doesn't look too much like maternity clothes?" Hermione asked.

"It's not touching your belly, it's got a high waist, and you owned it long before you got pregnant. They've all seen you in it before. Unless you plan on grabbing the skirt and pulling it tight over your middle, I think you can fake not being in a maternal sort of way for part of an evening. Besides, we're telling them tonight, anyway. What's the big deal if they spot it on their own?" Viktor said, cupping his palm over the new curve in her figure and rubbing over it.

"Is it so awful to want it to be something of a surprise when we tell them? And please, stop touching me," she said, sounding exasperated.

"Ouch. I wasn't expecting that for a few more months," he said in a light voice.

"You know what I meant. Stop rubbing my belly, at least until we tell them. I mean, you might as well follow me around with a big arrow pointing to my torso with flashing lights that spell out 'baby on board', if you do that."

"There's an idea."

"Don't even think about it!"

"Well, how are we going to tell them, then, if you're so smart?" he teased.

"Wing an announcement after dinner. Maybe before dessert. I don't know. It will come to us,"

"I hope by 'It will come to us' you mean 'It will come to me', because I'm no good

at this, remember? I'm terrible at announcements."

"Bleh. You just say that," she protested, patting his hand, "and I need to go check on the dessert and see if it's frozen, yet," she added. The full skirt of her robes made it not quite so obvious that she had put on weight below the waist, but there wasn't really any hiding that she was fuller than usual above the waist.

It still surprised him sometimes, when he realized how evident it was, above and below, when she wore certain things. *Grant you, Mama tends to notice every little thing, but she noticed she had put on weight even under that loose blouse this morning. Of course, that was without the outer robe, but still, Mama never would have commented on it if it hadn't been pretty evident, even if she always thinks Hermione could stand to put on some weight.* In fact, that had been the only thing she had ever said about Hermione that could be taken as even slightly negative, that she could stand some more meat on her bones, lovely as she was. It had been a very real worry to him, how his parents were going to react to her, since he had always figured they expected him to marry someone who was a pure-blood and Bulgarian. Or at the very least, Slavic. He had expected at least a weak, token protest that she wasn't even one of the two. Just went to show you that even your parents could surprise you sometimes. *But then, Mama thinks everyone could stand some more meat on their bones. And feeds them accordingly.* He shook his head and wandered after her, out to the kitchen.

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Maybe... maybe her face is fuller. She looks beautiful, in any case, pink-cheeked and glowing with good health, but then, for all I know, it's like our wedding and they've had another shag just before we got here, Ginny thought, stifling a laugh and taking a sip of her coffee. And maybe her chest is bigger, but then, empire waists tend to emphasize that, and she doesn't usually wear them, so maybe it's just that and the scoop neck together. I swear, I think I felt something when I hugged her at the door. I wish she would get up and fetch the dessert, already, maybe her skirt would blow back a little, and I could tell for sure.

I'm half tempted to drop my fork accidentally on purpose, stick my head under the table, and see if I can tell, Neville thought to himself, casting a glance at Ginny, who seemed to be giving Hermione similar close scrutiny.

Harry, however, was watching Viktor more than Hermione. *Just my imagination, or does he keep... looking at her, like they're both waiting for the right time to say something?* Hannah caught his eye and gave him a significant look and a subtle nod. *Evidently, she agrees with me.*

Okay, I give. She looks like she's pregnant to me. It's the face. The face is always a dead giveaway, Susan thought to herself. She half hated to admit it,

since Ron had been so smug about it the other day. *But, if he had to be annoyingly smug about being right about something, at least it was something wonderful for the two of them.*

Ha. I win. If she isn't pregnant, I'll eat my hat. If I had a hat, Ron mused.

Hermione looked up at Viktor. "Would you go get the dessert?" she asked softly, and as he got up, she found her hand wandering to her middle, which was camouflaged under the drape of the tablecloth. Good thing it was, because sitting, it rose up rather prominently under the folds of fabric. No getting out of it now. If they went and sat in the living room, nowhere to hide. Surely they would spot it like Ekaterina had, even under this loose skirt. Viktor sat back down, picked up the hand resting on top of the table, gave it a little squeeze, and added an encouraging nod.

When she hesitated a bit too long, Viktor looked around at the rest. "I suppose by now, you might have gathered we've got something to tell the rest of you. We just seem to be having a little trouble deciding how to put it," he prodded.

"We got some news in France," Hermione said, swallowing hard and staring at her empty plate. "I went to the mediwizard while we were there," she said softly.

She looked so solemn that Ginny felt her chest clutch in fear. She and Neville both looked at one another, wide eyed. *Maybe it's not a baby,* Ginny thought in alarm. *Maybe there's something wrong. Something really wrong...*

Hermione's face suddenly crumpled, and Ginny was already up off of her chair by the time she let out the first ragged sob. She almost missed it when Hermione buried her face in her hands and sobbed, "I'm finally pregnant!" before dissolving into tears in earnest.

They all froze where they were, wide eyed looks of horror and surprise all around. Viktor wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulder and pulled her into him, laying his cheek against the crown of her head and rubbing her shoulder in a comforting gesture. "For those of you who might have missed it, it was actually *good* news. We're expecting a baby," he said softly.

"Oh! Sweetheart! You just scared the living daylights out of all of us! Congratulations!" Ginny said, recovering and coming the rest of the way around the table, standing next to Hermione, rubbing her back. The rest of the evening had the raucous, good natured feeling of shared celebration. Or at least it did once they had all offered their congratulations and finally got Hermione to stop crying.

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“You could go ahead and start dessert. You don’t have to wait for me,” Hermione said with a shake of her head, cutting the rest of her steak and baked potato. “I’m hungry,” Hermione said, a touch defensive.

Viktor laughed softly. “I didn’t say a word. If you’re hungry, eat. Simple as that. You’re feeding someone else, too, now. You don’t have to justify every mouthful to me. Dessert’s not going anywhere. I’ll wait,” he told her, propping his chin and watching her.

“But, I’ve eaten more than you have,” she protested, putting her empty plate aside and scooting the dessert plate in front of her.

“So? You’ve eaten more than I have. Shall we alert the Prophet?” he teased.

“I know it’s getting to be a tired line, but I’m just so hungry all the time. Shows, doesn’t it?” she asked ruefully.

“Some women put it on early and level off sooner. Now’s no time to be going on a diet. At least now you don’t see your food twice. You should eat and enjoy it,” he said soothingly.

Hermione laughed, “Like mother, like son. You sound like Ekaterina. Of course, it’s easy for you to say, you all have the metabolisms of hummingbirds. She could feed you and Petar from now until Kingdom Come and maybe put five pounds on the two of you. And she’s a little slip of a thing, too. She’s not used to actually being able to fatten anyone up.”

“Pardon me and my inherited fast metabolism,” Viktor deadpanned.

“I mean, I think the first thing your mother said to me in English was ‘eat something’.”

“I believe her precise words were...” Viktor thought a moment, then dropped into his mother’s thicker accent, “Eat! Got to eat something more than that. You vay too skinny, girl. Much too skinny.’ I could have died of embarrassment right there.”

“Oh, you embarrass easily. It was cute. Your mother likes people, she feeds them. I felt rather flattered that she darned near foundered me while I was there. I think I gained five pounds just off the aroma coming out of her kitchen. Pity you’re not going to make my first appointment with Ginny,” she added.

“I wish I could get out of it...” Viktor said, raising his hands in a helpless gesture.

"It's alright. I understand. All she's going to do is measure my belly and tell me how fat I'm getting, probably. It will be the next appointment before we can listen to the heartbeat. Besides, you're going to be home for an entire year and more by the time your next season starts, so I think one morning being stuck doing a signing is more than adequate tradeoff for being able to exercise your parental leave on short notice," she reasoned.

"They could at least have had the good grace not to schedule the signing the day after our anniversary. And don't say you're getting fat. You're growing a whole other person in there, show off that belly of yours with some pride," he chided.

"Salesgirl's jaw almost fell off at Madam Malkin's when I told her I was just nine or ten weeks. She even said most women don't come in until they're more like sixteen weeks," Hermione argued. "Much less come in nearly bursting out of their trousers like I did. I had to put a rubber band between the button and the buttonhole and leave the zipper down. I thought I would die of embarrassment when she lifted my blouse to measure me and my bulge is practically hanging out of my trousers."

"Well, I didn't marry 'most women' now, did I? It was money well spent, in any case. You look great in that," he told her, getting up to put his dessert plate in the sink, and it was true. She had bought several loose, flowing tunic tops in bright jewel colors and satiny fabric that could be gathered and cinched just below the bust, and gradually loosened to accommodate an ever-growing pregnant abdomen, some drawstring trousers, and some longer robes with empire waists. All of them did a wonderful job of showing off her fuller figure while letting her be more comfortable. She was wearing the bright blue and a pair of flowing black trousers for their anniversary dinner. She planned to get in a few trips for Muggle style maternity clothes as well before she got much bigger.

Viktor felt the warm, firm curve of Hermione's belly pressing up against the small of his back as she embraced him from behind. "Be a shame if we got out of practice at what put my belly clean out of my trousers," she murmured.

"That... is completely unfair," he muttered, clutching the edge of the sink.

"What's unfair?"

"You ambushing me. You do that again, I won't be able to sign my own name tomorrow."

"Funny. I thought all I could damage was your ability to walk."

"You keep this up, my signature's going to be pretty shaky, too," he said, turning around.



“Responsible thing to do would be to get the dishes started, first,” she said, smiling.

“Dishes will still be there and just as dirty tomorrow,” he protested, sweeping her up and heading for the hallway to the bedroom.

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Viktor undressed her almost reverently, loosening the tie around the waist of her tunic, slipping his hands beneath the hem, cradling the soft curve of her body, slipping between her bra and skin, massaging her gently, then helping her slide the fabric over her head, the straps of the bra down her arms.

He moved over her, kissing her mouth, and occasionally, the flat, almost concave, plane of his belly brushed against the new fullness of her own as they worked to meet one another in an urgent rhythm. He fondled and kissed her fuller, more sensitive breasts, caressed her body while they panted together, then kissed his way down the swell of her tummy.

“What’s so funny? Ticklish all of a sudden?” he asked when she giggled. He skimmed his fingers around her sides, making her squirm and squeal in earnest.

“Stop that! No, it made me laugh when I remembered what Ginny said the other day,” Hermione said.

Viktor rested his cheek on the mound of her stomach and she twined her fingers in his hair. “And what did Ginny say that was so incredibly funny that it makes you laugh in bed?”

“She told me to tell you that the twins were never going to forgive you for getting me pregnant at such an inopportune time. Seems they were getting pretty favorable odds on possibly betting you were going to get voted MVP again.”

“We’ll be sure to clear our breeding plans with Fred and George from now on, then,” he said, patting her middle.

She skimmed her own hand down her front. Sighing, she said, “My belly’s already so round. Don’t you think my belly’s kind of big for just nine weeks?”

“That’s a loaded question if ever I heard one, and I’m not touching it with a ten foot pole,” Viktor protested.

“Seriously. I won’t take it as an insult or you calling me fat. I just... well, I don’t recall anyone else being this big this soon. My mother didn’t have to wear

maternity clothes until she was at least three months gone, closer to four,” Hermione replied.

“Maybe a little bigger than average. But like I said, some women gain really fast at the beginning, but then don’t gain much in the middle. It’s all relative. Natasha, you remember what hers was like the first time? She put it on like gangbusters during the first four months, then hardly gained another ounce until she was seven months. Ask Molly. She’d know if anyone would. Or call Mama. We didn’t usually discuss how fast she popped out when she was expecting me, so I can’t really help you there. I haven’t exactly had a lot of experience at being pregnant either.”

“Maybe I’ll swing by Ottery St. Catchpole, then, before I go to Hogsmeade,” Hermione murmured, smoothing her fingers through Viktor’s dark hair. “I haven’t seen Molly for a while.”

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He left not long after daylight, since it was supposed to be an all-day event. “Don’t overdo it, today. Floo to the Burrow and Ginny’s. Love you,” Viktor said, kissing her temple.

“Love you, too. Have a good signing. See you tonight,” Hermione mumbled, burrowing back into the pillow after he had gone. Still tired, she slept another hour or so, then got up, ate breakfast, and dressed. Grabbing up a handful of Floo powder, she tossed it into the fireplace and stated clearly, “The Burrow”, before setting off on the dizzying whirl past fireplace after fireplace. By the time she stepped out onto the hearth at The Burrow, she was glad that the easily-triggered nausea was something of a thing of the past. A couple of weeks prior, she would have been thoroughly ill upon arriving. True, Apparating was more draining on you, but she would never prefer the Floo to Apparating. But, she was taking it easy for the sake of the baby, she reminded herself. And being on a broom was not an option, at least not with her flying. She still deferred that task to Viktor.

“Hermione! Oh, let me take a look at you, dear,” Molly admonished, holding her at arm’s length, studying her. “You’re the absolute picture of health, and you’re already showing,” Molly exclaimed, running a hand over the swelling beneath Hermione’s top. “Sit, sit down, and rest. Look at you,” she said, guiding Hermione to a chair at the kitchen table.

“I’m fine, really. Actually, I was kind of hoping you could talk shop with me, so to speak. I’ve kind of wondered about something...” Hermione began uncertainly.

“Oh, I’ve been through it all, from the morning sickness to the swollen ankles, dear, what did you want to know?” Molly said, sitting down in the chair next to

her.

“This might sound silly, but I’ve kind of been worried about how much I’m eating. And consequently, gaining. I seem to be going up like a balloon,” Hermione said ruefully, giving her middle a pat.

“Dear, everyone’s different. For that matter, every baby is different. Why, with Bill, I never had a speck of morning sickness and I ate everything in sight because everyone told me I was eating for two and kept telling me to get off my feet. The mediwizard used to scold me about how much weight I had gained at every appointment. Now, with Percy, on the other hand, for about three weeks, the very mention of food turned my stomach before noon. I lost weight before the third month. Charlie, not so bad on either count. The twins, though, it was evident something was different with the two of them almost from the get-go. For a start, they made the morning sickness I had with Percy look like child’s play. And I swear my belly stuck out a mile with the two of them, practically overnight. To top it all off, I was positively ravenous when I wasn’t hanging over the sink, being sick. I got simply enormous with those two. But then, I got simply enormous with Ron, too. Not nearly as fast, though. Ginny, well, she was quiet even then. I barely showed when I was six months gone. People kept asking me if I was sure I was pregnant. Speaking of which, don’t you have an appointment with her today?”

“Sure do. Viktor got stuck doing a signing, since he’s not going to be around this coming season, so he won’t make it until next time. I can’t stay too much longer,” Hermione protested.

“Nonsense. You have time for a nice, hot cup of tea, at least,” Molly said, jumping up to get the kettle.

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“I was talking to Molly this morning...” Hermione began, while Ginny pressed her hand against the bulge of her belly.

“Uh oh. And she let you go? Did she let you get a word in edgewise, or just bombard you with five thousand pregnancy and baby tips? Or worse, questions?” Ginny asked lightly.

“She was fine, Ginny. Actually, something she said got me thinking... Ginny, don’t you think I’m a bit... round... for just nine or ten weeks?” Hermione asked curiously.

Nine from conception, more like. And barely that, Ginny thought, calculating back to when she and Neville had stayed. “Mum didn’t go and tell you that you

were too big, now did she?”

“No! It’s just... what she said about being so hungry, and her belly getting bigger faster with Fred and George... it sounded awfully familiar...” Hermione said.

“Oh. Well. You do measure big for the gestational age... you mean, you suspect you might be carrying twins?” Ginny prodded. *At least Hermione brought it up, not me. How do you delicately tell one of your best friends that she’s already put on too much weight with the baby she’s been dying to have for almost two decades?*

“It might explain why the morning sickness was so severe. And why I’ve been so starved. And why I needed maternity clothes so soon. I’ve read that older mothers have a better chance of having twins, too,” Hermione argued.

“Older? You’re thirty-six.”

“I am older for a Muggle. Not terribly old, but most Muggles start their families before then.”

“Well, I suppose it could be. No harm in trying to find out, anyway. Have you talked to Viktor about this?” Ginny asked, folding Hermione’s top further back.

“No. I mean, he would probably think I’m being silly. Or obsessing over how big I’m getting. Besides, I can’t see getting both of us all riled up over what might be nothing,” Hermione said with a shake of her head, pinning her top out of Ginny’s way with her hand.

“Riled up?”

“Excited. You know. I mean, can you imagine? Two at once? What would we do with two at once? One’s a big enough task, but doubling your family at first go, it’s kind of a scary prospect,” Hermione added, raising her head up from the exam table for a moment. She couldn’t possibly see what Ginny was doing past the gathered bulk of her blouse, so she lay back.

“Mmm. Suppose so. *Enumera Graviditas.*” The clatter when Ginny dropped her wand on the floor made Hermione look. “Sorry. *Finite Incantatem.* One more time...” Ginny said nervously, licking her lips. *I can’t have seen what I saw...* “*Enumera Graviditas.* Oh... my... Well... you’re not carrying twins...” Ginny added in a thin voice.

“See? I told you I was probably being silly...”

“Three.”

“Three? Three what?”

“Three babies. Hermione... you’re carrying triplets,” Ginny said, paling and sinking into the chair beside the exam table.

“Three? You mean... I’m having three babies at once?” Hermione asked, sitting bolt upright. Ginny nodded numbly. “How am I going to tell Viktor? Three? We’re going to go from nothing for seventeen years to being completely outnumbered in one fell swoop? How...?” she trailed off and fell back.

“I’m afraid I might be able to answer that. We put too much in. Too much of the rosehips. Hermione, we were only trying to help...” Ginny began, and the whole story ran so long, she had to rush the rest of her appointments for the day.

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Hermione sat at the kitchen table, drumming her fingers restlessly. She jumped when the soft pop of Viktor’s arrival sounded just inside the back door. She still hadn’t figured out how to broach the subject in the first place, and couldn’t quite decide whether or not she should be angry with Ginny and the rest, or simply grateful. “Hey, how are you?” he asked, giving her a peck on the cheek before getting a glass of water.

“Fine,” she replied, in a not too convincing tone.

“How did your appointment go?” he prompted, sitting in the chair next to her.

“Fine. Viktor...” she began helplessly, then floundered.

“Not to be rude, but you look tired. Everything alright? You didn’t push too hard today, did you?” he asked, covering one of her hands on the table with his free one.

“There’s no easy way to tell you this. I found out something at the appointment...”

“Something wrong?” he asked, looking alarmed.

“Not exactly. Just... unexpected. Viktor... I’m pregnant with triplets,” she blurted out.

He sat completely still for a moment, until a loud crack and the gush of water broke the silence. Viktor yanked his hand back, the pieces of glass falling to the table with a soft tinkle, a thin line of blood running down the inside of his left palm

where he had sliced it against the edge of the shard when the glass had cracked under the pressure. “Sh-,” he muttered half a profanity under his breath. Hermione did an *Accio* on the tea towel and wrapped it around his hand. “Did you just say what I thought you said?” Viktor asked after a moment. “We’re having three? At once?” She nodded slowly. “How did that happen? I mean, obviously, I know *how* it happened, but... How on earth do we manage to go that long with nothing and then end up having three at once!?”

“We had a little help,” Hermione said, pressing her lips together. Then she proceeded to tell Viktor what Ginny had told her earlier.

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“She thinks the rosehips were a bit much. So, I probably released more than one egg when I ovulated. Two, at least, she thinks. More likely, three. It’s not all that uncommon in Muggle fertility treatments, either,” she said softly.

“Three,” Viktor repeated.

“Three.”

“From two to five.”

“Two to five,” Hermione echoed, “Are you going to need seeing to? Was it a very deep cut?”

“No, it’s already quit bleeding. Speaking of needing seeing to, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“The human body was not designed to carry litters, Hermione.”

“Three is not a litter,” she said defensively.

“If not, it’s getting pretty close. That’s going to be tough on you. And the babies. What did she tell you?” he asked, knitting his brows together.

“You’ll laugh. For right now, to try to take it easy, and eat as much as possible. Seems it’s important to put as much weight on early as you can. The babies will come early, so they need a good head start. Later on, it gets so crowded in there, eating enough is hard. It seems I got off lucky with the morning sickness, after all. Most women pregnant with multiples have terrible morning sickness. At some point, I’ll almost certainly have to go on bed rest. Ginny might need to schedule a Cesarean. Depends on how crowded it gets in there and how long we can keep them in there. Obviously, the longer, the better. She wants to aim

for twenty-eight weeks at least. Thirty or more would be even better. But that's harder to do," Hermione said in a soft voice.

"So... not only are we expecting two *more* than we planned for, they're going to come earlier than we planned. Good thing we opted for the big house. Goodbye, spare rooms, I guess."

"We wanted a big family..."

"I was kind of hoping we might be able to spread them out, a little, at least. I mean, how are we going to handle three babies at once?" Viktor breathed.

"I'll quote a very wise man. You manage what's important and let the rest go. Just like being married," she said with a smile.

"No fair throwing my own words back at me," Viktor said with a shake of his head.

"You're the one who said peace and quiet was overrated. Don't suppose we'll be getting much of that for a while, either," Hermione mused, smoothing her top down in the front and intertwining her fingers in her lap.

"Guess not. How's our sanity?"

"I'm willing to bet we're both every bit as loopy as when we married each other. No danger of losing what you don't have," Hermione said with a laugh. "Don't suppose we could go out for dinner? I haven't fixed anything. I've just sat here, being stunned."

"Suppose we could. Hungry?" Viktor asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Absolutely. At least now I have an excuse. I'm eating for four."

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"What about this one? It's more narrow, isn't it?" Viktor asked, kneeling beside the darker wooden cradle, inside the shop in Diagon Alley. "Would make for a little more room," he allowed, inspecting it.

"I don't know," Hermione replied from the rocking chair across the store.

"Need a pair of Omnioculars?" he teased. "Or a boost?" he added, coming over.

"I can get up just fine," she said indignantly, shoving up from the rocking chair. However, she swayed a little on her feet, putting a hand to her forehead, and

Viktor steadied her elbow.

“Whoa. Remember, you’re circulating the blood for four, too. Don’t go fainting on me in public,” he warned. “Okay?”

After a moment, she nodded. “So is it alright as long as I faint in private, then?”

“Don’t want you fainting anywhere. Complete ban on fainting,” he replied lightly.

“Has it got enough room, though? I mean, we want to go straight from these to actual beds, right?” she asked, as they walked over.

He squatted next to it again. “Not so big as one of those cribs, but I still think there’s plenty of room for a toddler, even. They have two. Want to see if they can complete the set?” Viktor asked, standing.

“Sure. Why not?” she answered, draping a hand across her front. Even in the last couple of weeks, it had expanded visibly. At a newly minted twelve weeks, the roundness made it quite obvious what the cause of the expansion was. Viktor rang the assistance bell, and the saleswoman popped over almost immediately.

“May I help you?” she asked pleasantly.

“We were just wondering if you could possibly order one more of these,” Viktor asked, laying a finger on the railing of the cradle they had been discussing.

“You mean instead of the ones we have on the floor?” she asked, plainly puzzled.

“No. In addition to. If we took it, well, then, we’d like three that match. You’ve got two on the floor. Can you order another just like them?” he explained.

“Certainly. Would you like to go ahead and purchase them today? We could have them shipped when the third comes in,” the saleswoman said brightly.

Viktor gave a questioning look to Hermione. She thought a moment and nodded. “Sure. We’ll take that model, then,” Viktor told the saleswoman.

“And what residences would you like each shipped to?” she countered in a perky voice.

Viktor narrowed his eyes. “Just ship them all to the one address,” he muttered, and she bustled off with her clipboard.



“Down, boy,” Hermione said with a bemused smile.

“Well, it irks me,” Viktor bit off, “people assuming that you’ve got more than one house.”

“Considering we just bought three cradles, maybe not such a crazy assumption,” Hermione said evenly.

“Still,” Viktor snorted indignantly.

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“Of course, it’s one of his pet peeves, so it irked him to no end when she assumed we had more than one house,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“Why does it bother him?” Ginny asked, sipping her tea.

“I think men just tend to be more sensitive about money. I mean, you remember how defensive Ron, Fred and George all were about not having much money to spare growing up. You were never that defensive. I think Viktor’s just as defensive about having it. You would think someone had insulted his grandmother if they so much as ask if we keep a summer house. He hates being thought of as a helpless, pampered rich boy. The only reason we bought the one, fairly sizable house when we got married, is because we planned on filling it up with a family,” Hermione explained, shaking her head. “Oh, and when he sees the paper, he’ll be in a right snit, I suppose,” she added.

“Why? I haven’t seen it, today. What was in it?” Ginny prodded, shifting on the sofa cushion.

“Vratsa wasn’t supposed to announce the reason for the leave, or for that matter, the fact that he’s taking a leave, until right before the season starts. And I don’t suppose they have. I imagine our little shopping excursion to Diagon Alley might be the reason for that,” Hermione said, reaching for the paper on the side table and folding it back. She pointed to the top of the gossip column.

“Krums Definitely Infanticipating. This columnist has it on good authority from reliable witnesses that Viktor Krum will likely be exercising a year of leave from Quidditch this season, and with good reason. It seems that after eighteen long years of marriage without the pitter patter of little feet, Hermione Krum, nee Granger, is obviously in a delicate condition, and the two are preparing to welcome a little stranger. Not only were they spotted looking at the necessary equipment for a nursery, but once Mrs. Krum removed her cloak after coming into the shops, out of the rain, it was quite evident that she’s already quite visibly ‘apron up’. Expect recruiting visits from a dozen Quidditch teams before she

gets much fuller in the belly. Judging from appearances, they've managed to keep the impending happy event quiet for some months. But they can't keep the fact that she's *enceinte* a secret any longer. Congratulations to them, from Rita Skeeter and all her adoring readers," Ginny read, hardly able to suppress her laughter. "Is she still at it? I never read that bit of the paper. I thought she retired."

"Just from full length articles. Still does a gossip column and those awful 'tell-all books'. Although she doesn't invent as many wild tales as she used to. She's actually pretty accurate, most times," Hermione said ruefully.

"So you figure this will rile Viktor? Which bit?" Ginny asked.

"Oh, the whole thing. It will peeve him that she did it at all. And Vratsa rather prides itself on keeping the season lineup a secret until the last minute. They don't let it leak about the new prospects, and they don't tell who isn't going to be there for the year, either. Not until the last minute. Not that they were going to wait much longer, but still... They way she's all syrupy and eats you up to your face and then stabs you when your back is turned, it gives me the creeps. All that simpering congratulations. He pretty much hates her guts anyway and makes no secret of it, and she still insists on all that air-kissing and 'darling' business whenever she sees us. Well, Harry, too. And all those coy little euphemisms! I'm surprised she skipped 'eating for two', 'egg in the nest', and 'one in the oven'. Or that she didn't say I was 'in a family way'," Hermione added. "And never mind that the poor kids might take after me and be rotten on brooms."

Ginny laughed again and patted the swell of Hermione's middle. "She doesn't know you're in an 'entire family at once' sort of way, at least. Viktor's got plenty of other reporters he could be ticked off about. And do you mean to tell me that you're not still angry at her?"

"Won't be long before everyone that looks at me knows that I've got to be carrying more than one. I look more like I'm leaving my fifth month, instead of entering my fourth. And Viktor and Rita, I think he's more ticked off on my behalf, still, over that 'scarlet woman' article, and it still bothers him that she wrote about Harry that way. I kind of feel sorry for her by now," Hermione allowed.

"Sorry? And she's written as bad or worse about Viktor," Ginny said, knitting her brows together.

"Ah, but he thinks it was particularly low what she did with me and Harry. We were underage at the time. He wasn't. I think they prepped him to expect it once he turned seventeen, people printing nasty things about you. And most of

the articles about him, they were honest mistakes, bad reports, misunderstandings, misquotes. Most other journalists have the good grace to apologize when they get the facts wrong. Rita is fairly unapologetic.”

“I see,” Ginny said. In a few minutes, Viktor came in, with the groceries. He set them to putting themselves away, and walked into the living room.

“Hello, there, Fairy Godmother,” Viktor teased.

“Fairy Godmother... I rather like the sound of that.” Ginny said with a laugh.

“I thought it sounded better than Meddlesome Shrew,” he said lightly.

“I’ll remember that,” Ginny warned. “Just for that, I’ll let her break your hand in the delivery room.”

“I wouldn’t touch that paper if I were you. Put you in a bad mood,” Hermione said when he reached for the section Ginny had discarded on the coffee table.

“And why is it going to put me in a bad mood?” Viktor asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Your favorite journalist is at it again,” Hermione replied with a shrug.

“What did she write now?” Viktor muttered.

“Nothing that isn’t true, really. Hope you already told everyone you wanted to,” Hermione said, sighing.

“Well, at least the rotten woman didn’t make anything up, I guess. Not exactly high praise, but still, I guess it is for her,” Viktor said, frown pulling down at the corners of his mouth.

“Might I offer something that will probably at least give you a grin?” Ginny offered.

“Shoot. If you can cheer me up in the wake of even a mention of Rita Skeeter, you’re more than welcome to do so,” Viktor replied, flopping into the chair and tossing the paper back onto the table. Ginny cleared her throat, murmured a short incantation, and pressed her wand tip to Hermione’s middle. A loud, quick beating, overlapping almost like the sound of hoofbeats, filled the room. A slow, soft smile crept across Viktor’s face. “I thought you weren’t going to listen for the heartbeats until we came back in for the next office visit.”

“Oh, one of the benefits of being an honorary Auntie. I get to come over and play with Hermione’s middle whenever I want. I don’t have to wait until you two

come into the office,” Ginny said with a sly grin.

Hermione stroked her fingers down the slope of her belly, around the wand tip. “It’s so... fast. Like hummingbirds. I didn’t expect it to be that fast,” she said in a wondering voice.

Ginny withdrew her wand. “Babies have much more rapid heartbeats than adults. I wasn’t sure you could hear it yet. Sometimes it takes another week or so.”

“And loud. Or are you just doing that? Jacking the volume up?” Viktor asked.

“You would be surprised just how noisy it gets in there. Everybody thinks it’s such a nice, peaceful place, the womb. But it’s really loud in there. Heartbeats are nothing. Although, with three, it *is* kind of a racket,” Ginny allowed.

“Why do I get the feeling we had better get used to racket?” Hermione said with a short laugh.

“Say it with me... peace and quiet are overrated,” Viktor said ruefully.

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“Do you think we should?” Hermione asked, as Viktor slid into bed beside her. She was already tucked in, hands interlaced on the mound of her stomach, which pushed the sheets up in a heap.

“Did I miss part of this conversation?” Viktor asked curiously. “Start it without me?”

“I was just thinking about what Ginny asked us today. If we wanted to know whether it’s a boy or a girl,” Hermione explained.

“Don’t you mean all boys, all girls, a boy and two girls, or a girl and two boys? We’ve got more than the usual two options, all together, you know,” Viktor asked with raised eyebrows.

“True. You know what I meant. On the one hand, I can’t wait to find out, but on the other, I love a good surprise,” Hermione said with a shake of her head.

“Personally, I’m on the surprise side, myself. Gives us a lot more wiggle room on coming up with potential names. We can start with a bigger list, because, more than likely, we’ll be using more of them. I mean, chances are, there’s more than one gender covered. We certainly each ought to get a favorite in there,” Viktor said lightly.

“Don’t want to know at all?” she asked.

“Sure. Some part of me does. But I can’t help thinking I’ll be a bit disappointed. No surprise at the end.”

“True. I agree. And it’s not like we’re planning much of anything around the genders. We just need an appropriate pool of names. Six of them on the short list, right?”

“Right,” he answered, slipping an arm beneath the covers and over her belly. One of the babies made a light, fluttering movement near her navel and she gasped. “Something wrong?” Viktor asked, looking at her with concern.

“I felt one! I felt a baby move!” she said excitedly, hugging his arm to her torso with both of hers.

“Good! Be a while before I can feel it, I think... Hermione, is your nose bleeding?” he asked, sitting up.

She put a couple of fingers to her upper lip, and they came away spotted with blood. She could feel a thin trickle from one nostril. “Ginny told me I might get nosebleeds,” Hermione murmured, as Viktor slipped out of bed to fetch her a handkerchief.

She spent a good thirty minutes with one palm pressed to the handkerchief, the other pressed to the spot where she had felt the first quickening, hoping for another detectable wriggle, but all three little ones curled quietly inside, instead. When she commented on it, Viktor chided, “Probably have the good sense to be asleep by now, like we should be.” She finally nestled down into the curve of his arm and dozed within five minutes.

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Viktor felt an odd little flickering jab, almost like a bubble popping, it was so brief, beneath his hand. “Right there?” he asked, voice tinged with disbelief, rubbing his fingers over the spot. Hermione nodded wordlessly. “Well, I’ll be. I felt it, then.”

He hadn’t expected to feel one of them so soon. She had been feeling quick, small movements, like the fluttering of tiny wings, for several days, but he figured it would be a few more weeks before he could feel that definite contact on the other side of the skin. Still, they had spent a lot of time with their hands planted on her continually thickening torso, hoping to catch one of them out. To catch one of those miniscule hands or feet brushing beneath his hand. They were

already fairly active and lively at times. “Ginny said the reason you don’t feel it a lot usually is because they have so much room. No brushing against the inside walls early on. These three don’t have that luxury. They’re pretty crowded, already.”

Another delicate tap into his palm from inside, this one harder than the first, and he laughed, “Knocking, apparently.” Her belly had swollen at a shocking rate, to say the least, making her look more like she was heading into the last trimester, rather than barely into the second. She had taken more and more to spending much of her time sitting, with her feet up, to help relieve the swollen ankles. And she had developed a curious numbness in one leg that came and went at odd intervals, from the pressure one of the nerves was under, with the sudden weight of the babies. She very nearly felt as though her center of gravity shifted day to day. “So... get enough to eat?”

“Too much. It’s awful, but I’m starving and feeling like I’m about to burst at the same time. I feel almost like a kettle drum. I... oh!” she started and put her left hand to her distended belly. “That was a really hard kick for someone weighing half a pound,” she breathed.

“Now, what were you going to say? Before the footballer so rudely interrupted,” Viktor prodded.

“I haven’t the foggiest notion. Nothing important,” Hermione murmured, shifting a little in her chair, smoothing her somewhat rumpled top back down. In the last few weeks, it seemed she tied the waist looser on an almost daily basis. In fact, she wasn’t sure she was going to be able to avoid loosening the waist right now, to give her bloated stomach a bit more room. *The bigger I get, the more scattered my head gets*, she chided, studying herself, the swollen fingers resting on the crest of her abdomen.

Viktor’s eyes fell on her fingers, as well, noting the way her wedding ring looked so tight, the fingers obviously swollen. He knew it was to be expected under the circumstances, but he kept a mental chart, day after day, wondering how tight it should be before he worried about it in earnest. “Tired? Want to go have a bit of a lie down?”

“I’m not a toddler. You don’t have to order me to rest, or trick me into resting enough,” she snapped, a touch irritable, then was instantly ashamed. *He’s got black circles worse than mine, trying to do everything around here plus get the nursery supplies and getting the nursery ready and being just as worried as I am, if not more... not to mention putting up with the fat, cranky pregnant lady that might snap his head off any minute...*

“I wasn’t so much ordering as inviting. Think I’m going to,” Viktor said lightly,

ignoring her tone. "Coming with me, or want anything before I go?" he asked, squatting beside her chair.

She sighed and said, "I can't believe it's October, already. There will be snow, soon, and by then, I'll probably be on bed rest... okay, let's go lie down." He stood and slid a hand beneath her elbow, cupping and supporting it. Not only did she need some help shifting herself from some of the furniture, already, she had found that she got completely wooly in the head when she stood too quickly and her blood pressure dropped momentarily as her heart tried to keep up with the demands of four bodies. More than once in the last couple of weeks, Hermione had been forced to clutch the arms of the chair she had just shoved herself out of while the room righted itself in her vision after swirling crazily and dimming for a second. *Won't have that problem much longer*, she thought to herself, *because, soon, I won't even be able to get up that fast from a chair with arms...*

"It will be Yule before you turn around twice," Viktor agreed. "Frankly, I'm kind of glad they won't be big enough for any of that until next year. I've done enough purchasing and shopping to last me a year these last few weeks, with baby equipment alone. I shudder to think about doing gift shopping." He supported her elbow and grasped her upper arm firmly as she rose, saying, "Take it easy, just stand there for a bit. Bed's not going anywhere. Neither is the kitchen floor, if you pass out."

"I'm alright," she said softly, after a moment or two on her feet. "Don't feel like we have to have the house decorated this year. It's not as though I'm likely to be up and about and able to see any of it."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Viktor said, following after her, but not letting go of her arm. "Besides, that's what makes Yule fun. It's no fun when you don't have any little ones to buy for. It's that charming, unrestrained, wild-eyed greed, I think."

Hermione laughed and asked, "So, what does Alice want, now that she's able to answer that query? I know Molly's probably got the grandchildren at least one present apiece already."

"Oh, Alice is going to go easy on us. She just wants a stuffed kitty. Too bad poor old Crookshanks passed on so long ago, he would have qualified after any meal in later years," Viktor teased.

"It was the only pleasure the poor old thing had left. He was so stiff and old he couldn't even get on the furniture by then. And admit it, by the time we got married you were just as soft over him as I was," Hermione said, sitting on the edge of the bed and scooting into it. Shifting her bulk in bed was getting to be a chore, even now. She couldn't imagine what a few more weeks would mean.

“Never said I wasn’t. The little rotter actually liked me from the beginning, better than Ron and Harry, anyway. Not as crazy as he was over you, but I had to like him, the bandy legged, yowling, shedding, ill-tempered menace. I actually missed having ginger hair everywhere for a while,” Viktor replied, shaking his head, then getting into bed on the opposite side once she had settled. *Tree could fit in the corner in here, and not be too much in the way, move that extra table and lamp, and I can let the rest of the house pretty much go*, he thought with an inward sigh, curling up beside her and caressing the bulge between them. For a change, he drifted off to sleep well before she did.

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“Got fleas?” Viktor mumbled into the mass of her hair from behind, as she reached to scratch the crawling itch that spread across the dome of her growing stomach once more. The thin morning light was already filtering through the drapes, but they had stayed put in bed.

“No. It itches,” she sighed.

“Lotion help any?” he asked, raising up.

“Usually does,” she answered, grabbing the covers and preparing to fling them back.

“No, stay there. It’s just over here on the bedside table. Let me get it,” he said. Hermione felt the mattress shift, then his right hand on her side. He stroked the curve down to and over her navel, which by now was nearly completely inside out because of the pressure behind it. His fingers gathered up the folds of his old nightshirt, which she had been wearing to sleep in, lately, tugging it up above her stomach. Then he shifted the covers down below her hip, exposing her belly to the cool morning air. He smoothed some lotion onto her tummy, massaging it into her skin.

“You don’t have to do that,” Hermione murmured.

“Well, no, no one’s holding a wand to my head or anything. Occur to you I might want to?” he asked, slipping his hand beneath the waistband of her knickers, fingers playing over her abdomen, then up, beneath the nightshirt, cupping her. He leaned over her and nuzzled her neck just below her ear.

“Doing that takes more planning and effort than an assault on France,” Hermione said regretfully, putting her hand over his. “Sure you’re that interested, to go through all that propping and bracing with pillows and awkward maneuvering?”



“Well, luckily, my scheduled assault on France has been postponed indefinitely, due to the weather. And it won’t be long until Ginny probably puts a stop to us doing this altogether, mind. It’s up to you, I guess. If you don’t feel like it, that’s fine... I’ll just lie back here and think impure thoughts about the mother of my children,” he said, laughing, as right on cue, one of the babies gave a particularly hard kick beneath his forearm. “Besides, I would much rather assault you than France any day. France is not nearly so good in bed.”

“You can’t possibly think I’m attractive like this. I look like I’ve swallowed a watermelon. My hair’s sticking up every which way, I’m in one of your old nightshirts, which, frankly, isn’t going to even go around me that much longer, you can practically hear my stomach getting bigger by the minute, and my face is blotchy. My ankles and feet are swollen, at least I think they are, I haven’t gotten a good look at them for a while. But I guess they are, because my fingers are so fat my rings won’t even come off.”

“Oh, and that’s the first thing a guy looks for. ‘Wow, check her out, she’s kind of cute... but, darn it, her feet are too big and she’s got fat fingers!’ And if it’s your hair you’re worried about, make you feel better?” he teased, scrubbing his fingers through his hair, making it stand out in all directions, leaning over so she could see.

She burst out laughing in spite of herself. “Come on, you’ve got to be desperate.”

“Funny, I thought you were pretty darned sexy, myself. You’re the most attractive woman I ever married, certainly.”

“Viktor!”

“In all seriousness, I think you’re gorgeous.”

“Engorged, you meant.”

“Don’t badmouth our babies like that. Listen to me. You are not fat nor are you unattractive, at least to me, and that should be all that matters, because we’ve been married to one another eighteen years, and I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t relish the thought of having to date again. Your body’s just changing because it’s doing a job, nothing more, nothing less. It’s not as though your belly’s getting bigger because you’ve been hitting the bonbons too hard, not that I would mind that, either, because I didn’t marry you for your robe measurements. Or your hair. Or your teeth. Or what size your feet were. I married you because I loved the person you were, and big belly or no big belly, you’re still that person. Maybe even a little improved. Look, you’re pregnant, you’ve got a pregnant tummy, and I had a small hand in that. We created three

whole new lives together. Unfortunately, you got the short end of the stick after that, but I think your belly is absolutely beautiful. Even if you were driving me mad scratching at it this morning,” he said with a grin, leaning over to plant a kiss on her exposed middle.

“Viktor Nikolai Krum, if you meant even a tenth of that...” she began softly.

“I meant all of it, or I wouldn’t have bothered saying it, and you know it, Hermione Granger Krum,” he countered. He had once teased her about her lack of a middle name by saying her parents must have squandered all their creativity while settling on her unusual first name and had none left over.

“True. You’re honest. Completely insane, but honest. Hand me the pillow, then,” she said, sitting up heavily on the edge of the bed and pulling the nightshirt over her head, bare except for her knickers. She shivered a little when he put his lips between her bare shoulder blades instead, kissing his way down her spine to the small of her back, then back up to the nape of her neck as he held her hair out of the way. He ran his hands up and down her sides, stroking the fuller, softer curves of her figure, her swollen sides. A few minutes later, she was back on her side, nude, one pillow braced beneath her stomach, another propping her bent knees and lower legs apart. It was the most comfortable, if still somewhat awkward, position they had discovered in recent weeks. Working something out with her enlarged stomach between them was almost impossible now, unless she propped her hips up with a pillow, and even then, it was no easy task.

As he tucked his chin over her shoulder, nestling his cheek next to hers, she reached up and stroked his face. He entered her, and they settled into a slow, gentle rhythm, moving with one another as he embraced her from behind. *I’ve never felt more fulfilled*, she thought, feeling the early morning wriggling inside her womb, and his hand over it, tickling, nudging movement inside, the heat of his hand on the outside, soft, strong palm and long, tapered fingers, at odds with the nearly lifelong calluses that formed at the base of his fingers, despite the gloves, where he gripped his broom handle. *Or maybe that should be full and filled.*

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“Pick a color already, love, or they’ll be off at Hogwarts before we get the nursery painted. I can’t keep putting Ginny and Neville off and stuffing more nursery furniture in the extra bedrooms indefinitely. Ron and Harry already were good enough to help me haul all the old junk out of there to get it ready,” Viktor said, leaning closer to the sofa where Hermione was stretched out with the sample book.

“Hey! Some of that was stuff we kept on purpose, like our Yule Ball robes, thank you very much,” she said defensively.

“Yeah, and it was surrounded by a lot of junk we should have chucked a decade ago, or at least chucked into the attic, rather than chucking it in there. Hazard of having an extra bedroom you never use, I tell you. It becomes the ‘see no evil’ room. It’s where you toss everything you don’t know what to do with.”

“Who can concentrate on paint when it’s the last day you’ve got as a free woman?” she complained.

“You’re just going on bed rest, not to Azkaban. You can still come out here on the sofa if you like. Anywhere you can get horizontal. Just no frolicking in the back garden.”

“Like I could frolic. Glaciers move faster than I do, right now. Continents could be formed while I try to get up from bed unassisted.”

“What’s the big hurry? Got a pressing appointment somewhere?” Viktor asked.

“I feel like a bloody continent,” Hermione grouched. “Light blue,” she added, pointing.

“Now, are you saying light blue because you’re tired of fooling with it and that’s where your finger is, or do you really want light blue?” he probed.

“Bit of both,” she sighed.

“Well, I doubt they’ll be traumatized for life based on what color we do the nursery, anyhow, despite what Ron thinks,” Viktor soothed.

“Ron wants us to put damned bunnies in it, or something cutesy. I hate cutesy.”

“Language! Stop assaulting their poor little virgin ears, or we’ll have kids that curse like sailors,” he joked, cupping his hands on either side of her belly.

“Besides, Ron’s not helping paint, and when he has one of his own, he can put all the bunnies he wants in the nursery. I’ve declared our nursery a bunny-free zone. Or I’ll sic you on him.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that the thought of spending at least eight more weeks in a mostly horizontal position is not improving my mood,” she said apologetically.

“I understand.”

“Really?” she asked, closing the sample book.

“Well, no, not really, but for the sake of argument, or more like, avoiding one, we’ll say I do. Peeves me to have to stay in bed even a few days. I can’t imagine doing it for over two months. You have my sympathies, anyway. I can’t believe they’re already that big,” he said, holding his hands roughly seven inches apart.

“I gave them a good head start, I guess, eating that much. Ginny said a lot of twins aren’t even that big at this stage. Only three pounds of it are babies, though. And would you mind terribly getting me some pyjamas that I can wear while Harry and Hannah are here tomorrow and you’re out for the paint, anyway? The nightshirt is about to split at the seams.”

“Done,” he agreed, kissing her temple.

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Hermione’s voice rang out from the other bedroom, “Viktor!”

“Back in a minute,” he told Ginny and Neville with a sigh, and he trudged toward the doorway after putting the paintbrush down on the dropcloth.

“Think this will be like those other ‘minutes’ and stretch into fifteen?” Neville whispered, giving Ginny a nudge with his elbow.

“Shhh! She can’t help it. She’s on bed rest, she’s uncomfortable, she’s lonely, she’s bored, she can’t get up by herself in under five minutes, and he’s usually the only other person in the house. Imagine lying in there all the time, just staring at the ceiling or the walls, knowing all the getting ready is going on elsewhere. You’d yell for help with every little thing, too. And she’s probably driving him batty,” Ginny allowed.

“He gets out a bit when some of us come over,” Neville protested. “Or his parents.”

“Sure, usually to run errands. I’m not sure how much ‘getting away’ it is when you’re still picking up nursery paint and maternity pyjamas while you’re out. And you know he doesn’t leave while his parents are here. It would be rude. And they don’t exactly get to see each other a ton as it is. I’m sure he wants to visit with them when they are here. We girls should come over here some Saturday and you boys should take him with you somewhere.”

“And where would we take him?” Neville asked, refilling his paint brush and setting it to work with a flick of his wand.

"I don't know. The Three Broomsticks for a Butterbeer. A restaurant. A Quidditch match. Just somewhere, where, for an hour or so, his mind's not on his bedridden pregnant wife, nurseries and three babies coming Heaven knows when. Think about it a week or so. You'll come up with something."

"Only way that's happening is if we get him so drunk he passes out for an hour," Neville muttered, "because he's Mr. Responsibility. Hermione just upgraded from Ms. Responsibility to the Mrs. when she married him."

A few minutes passed before Viktor walked back in, "She just needed another pillow from the linen closet. They're on the top shelf in the back," he said apologetically.

"So, what are you doing next Saturday?" Neville queried.

"Probably finishing moving the furniture in here, maybe get our Christmas shopping started if I can get someone to stay. I know it's only the first week of November, but I'm not expecting to have much free time come December, either," he said, wearily.

"How about Ginny and maybe Hannah and Susan come over, and the rest of us, we'll do something?" Neville ventured.

"Define 'something'," Viktor prodded tentatively.

"Maybe a Quidditch match and eating at The Three Broomsticks? Ron's got Cannons tickets, Puddlemere's playing them, I bet he could get a couple more. Not much of a match, likely, but it's a chance to get out for an afternoon," Neville said.

"Maybe. By the way, anyone who reminds her of her mother while here, I'm punching them right in the nose," Viktor said softly.

"Huh?" Ginny asked.

"The other night, we put some of our loose photos in albums. It was something to do together that she could do from the couch. Found a picture of her mother and father and it was waterworks for an hour. No more," Viktor said, spreading his hands in a helpless gesture. "But then, it seems like anything sad, sentimental, or nostalgic, she loses it. I asked her yesterday where I should put the box she put our Yule Ball robes in, and she cried for thirty minutes about how we didn't get a picture that night. I'm half tempted to owl Colin Creevey and see if he's got something. But I'm afraid that would set her off, too."

"It's the raging hormones. And being stuck in bed, or at least in the house, all

the time isn't helping. It's stressful," Ginny said defensively.

"I never said it wasn't. I'd probably be ten times worse. I about drove her over the edge when I was stuck in with my busted leg that time. Another week and she probably would have stabbed me to put us both out of our misery. But at least I didn't burst into tears when I couldn't decide what I wanted for breakfast. It's just hard to know what to say and what to avoid. And what I should make her still do for herself. Her magic's already weakening enough that you notice. It's why she didn't get her own pillow. Closet was too far away to *Accio*. That usually doesn't happen until a lot later," Viktor said, as Neville tipped the last bit from the open can into the paint pan. "I'll go get the other bucket of paint."

"Viktor!"

"Right after I go see what that's all about," he added, in response to Hermione's voice.

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"You know, this is a lot less fun when you've got an insider pointing out all the inadequacies of the home team," Ron complained.

"Why? Going to get their arses kicked whether I point out that the Cannons Seeker couldn't find his with two free hands, a map, and a flashlight, or not. Must be Unplottable," Viktor said blithely. "I've met him a few times. He's a nice enough bloke, but he's got no business out there against her," he added, nodding his head at the Puddlemere Seeker.

"And the Chasers, well, they reek," Neville pointed out, "and that's coming from me, who barely knows one end of the broom from the other."

"Face it, Ron. Hermione could have outflown that lot a few months ago, and she'll barely even ride with Viktor," Harry said dejectedly.

"I'm not so sure she couldn't right now," Viktor protested. "I think you should have held out for the Pride of Portree tickets. Then, at least you could have watched them get their keisters kicked by an even higher quality team. The captains should just meet at midfield and get it over with."

"They could still come back," Ron argued.

"Five hundred and fifty point deficit, Ron. Give it up," Viktor sighed, leaning his head back and looking up at the sky. "Might as well leave now and go to dinner. If they come back, I will eat this chair I'm sitting in."

“No need. Puddlemere just caught the Snitch,” Harry announced. “Get on wi’ ye, Ron. Let’s go. Might as well go have a decent drink and a meal, at least.”

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“I didn’t know mention of Christmas trees was strictly forbidden, or I never would have mentioned that Harry already had ours up!” Hannah whispered to Susan.

“Oh, I think it was the mention of Christmas, period,” Susan said dismissively. “Or decorations. Or the letter ‘c’. Who knows? Who can tell? If she’s like this all the time, it’s a wonder she hasn’t driven Viktor up a tree.” They each gathered up two glasses of ice water from the kitchen counter and carried them back into the bedroom.

“And I won’t even get to go out in the first snow, much less go to The Burrow, or Petar and Ekaterina’s. And I forgot to even get him a bloody Christmas present while I could still go out and shop!” Hermione sobbed while Ginny patted her shoulder soothingly.

“Love, I think he might be a little more preoccupied this year with things other than what you got him for Christmas. Like the reason you’re cooped up in here. And you know Petar and Ekaterina will be just as happy to come here for Yule, under the circumstances, and...”

“But it’s not the same,” she wailed, burying her face in her hands.

“Come on, now what started this? You’ve known Viktor was going for a whole week. And he even asked if you didn’t want him to,” Ginny cajoled, grimacing and shrugging at Hannah and Susan. “It’s just today. They’ll probably be back by nightfall. Chudley would give up by then, if nothing else.”

“Th... th... that!” Hermione spluttered, pointing to the bedroom window, where a few stray flakes, like feathers, floated by in the cold air, wafted on the currents and stuck to the glass.

“Here, now, come on, it’s only a little snow. It will snow again. I know you might like to go out in it, but you just can’t this year. And he’s not even here right now, might’ve stopped by the time he gets back. Nothing we can do about it, anyway. Here, drink some water,” Ginny said, offering her a glass.

She sniffled for a few moments, clutching the glass and taking the occasional sip. “He wanted out of the house, and who can blame him?” she said at last, voice soft and forlorn.

“Honey, it was my suggestion. I thought he might be getting just as burnt out on

the same scenery all the time as you were. And I thought it might be nice if he could get out for a day where he didn't have to hurry back. It's not like he was begging to get away," Ginny explained.

"Probably is on the inside. I look like a beached whale, and he's probably bored out of his skull, stuck here with me. I scream or cry at every little thing, and I can't even get up in under five minutes without help. I want away from me," Hermione murmured. "He's even going to miss out on most of Christmas because of me."

"Dear, you had a little help in this department," Ginny said, "and you're not solely responsible for this belly, you know. I think said husband might even have had a small role." Hermione gave a feeble smile as Ginny laid a hand on the jutting curve beneath her pyjama top. *Insane, raging hormones*, Ginny thought to herself.

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"Does he look completely worn out to you, or is it just me?" Ron asked, nodding his head toward the bar where Neville and Viktor stood waiting for their drinks. The barman stifled a cough into his forearm as he filled several glasses.

"I assume you don't mean Nev. He won't admit it for anything, but Viktor's flat-out knackered. I'm sure he's about to climb a wall just from taking the season off. Add to that an ever-expanding Hermione who is now stuck in bed and hormonal beyond all reason, the man's a saint. Ginny said this would be a rough spot. She's prone to mood swings right now, and add to that being told you're going to have to stay in bed... Hermione's going to cry. He's basically trying to do everything, plus get things ready for the babies, and worrying over that. Miracle he's not turned to drink prior to us dragging him to a pub. Alright, seriously, he does look tired," Harry responded. "I gather he's having to walk on eggshells these last few days. Hermione cries about everything."

"And that's different from before how?" Ron said with a smirk.

"Well, I don't remember her choking up over quite so many things since she and Viktor got together. It's different because they can't get away from each other. You know they're both pretty independent. Kind of into going off and doing their own things. She doesn't expect him to sit at home all the time, he doesn't expect her to be at every match. He doesn't expect her to sit at home all the time, she doesn't expect him to go with her on every research trip. Being stuck together with no out at all and worried, to boot, that's got to be rough on both. He's got big black smudges under his eyes," Harry pointed out as the two of them returned from the bar.

“What I really want to know,” Ron said with a mischievous grin, “is how the two of you are managing to not engage in your favorite hobby?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but up until she went on bed rest, we weren’t ‘not engaging’, thank you very much,” Viktor said lightly.

“Now, how did that work? I mean, the logistics must be staggering....” Ron asked, open mouthed.

“Without getting into specifics, in latter weeks, it involved a lot of propping with pillows. Or do I need to explain how it all works and what goes where once you get your clothes off, even if the lady’s not in a family way, Ron?” Viktor said with a short laugh.

“He slept through that lecture,” Harry teased. “So, did today ease the pain of being away or just make you more anxious to get back to Quidditch next season?”

Viktor dropped his eyes to the table. “I’m quitting.” Ron choked on his drink and wheezed while Harry pounded him on the back.

“Beg pardon? Sounded like you said you were quitting...” Neville began.

“I did. I’ll go back for the preseason all-star match, but not the season. Not a word, though, because I’ve not told Hermione,” Viktor added.

“Why not?” Harry asked.

“Are you kidding? I can’t discuss oatmeal with her these days without risking setting her on another crying jag. I think ‘I’ve decided to retire’ might be a bit more tetchy than ‘We don’t really have any oatmeal to speak of at the moment, just brown sugar, and you hate brown sugar’,” Viktor said with a shake of his head.

“Why?” Ron wheezed at last.

“Why retire? Besides the fact that I’m suddenly going to have three kids? You want to be the one to break it to Hermione that I expect her to sit home with them while I go tripping off to matches everywhere, when we don’t really need the money and there are other things I could do if I get bored? Like help out with three little ones. Good luck. Let me know where you wish to be buried.”

“Other parents play... some with three kids...” Ron protested weakly.

“Not three infants. I mean, it might be different if we had, say, a seven-year-old

and a three-year-old and we were just adding one more. But three *babies* at once? Traveling with them would be darned near impossible, it's not fair to ask Hermione to take on all the work when I'm gone, and that's not even taking into account my own reasons," Viktor said, cocking an eyebrow and taking a sip of his drink.

"And those would be? Just curious," Neville prompted.

"Well, I thought about it. I've played more than half my life. That's a good, long career by any standard. I've played sick, hurt, in the rain, in the freezing cold, in the blazing heat, and everything in between. I almost lost my leg that time I broke it, and I've even been lucky enough to make quite a bit of money at what I loved doing, anyway. So, why was I busting my arse on that broom and risking breaking my neck for about two decades if I can't go home and enjoy my family, now that I've got the chance? It's not as though they repossess the broom when I retire. I can still fly. I just won't be doing it in front of so many people. I'll just worry about pleasing four other people for a change. And three of them can't give me any backtalk, for a while, either. Funny, I always thought leaving would hurt. But it doesn't so much when you're leaving it for something. Or, maybe I should say, someone."

"Won't you regret it?" Harry asked, leaning across the table.

"Sure I will. But not a tenth as much as I'm going to regret it if I turn around in a few years and wonder where the time went. I've watched players who needed the money sit in what a lot of people consider to be some of the finest places to visit in the world, and spend the whole time there wishing they were home with someone incapable of getting their shoes on the right feet and cereal in their hair. One baby a decade ago would have been different. One baby *now* would be different. This... I've come to the conclusion that there's nothing worse than having to miss your children, and I don't have to. So, I'll just retire. I'm an old boy for a Seeker, anyway."

"Isn't she driving you even the tiniest bit mad? I mean, all those hormones and asking for things all day and crying at the drop of a hat?" Ron asked tentatively.

"Not the tiniest bit. Just plain mad. Completely bonkers, sometimes. I'll just get started doing something and she'll want something else. Or need to get up. Or think of something else I might not have already gotten that I've already told her I've gotten three times. I've threatened to post a list. Or she'll want to discuss names. Or can't sleep. Or decide she needs to have kippers and wafers at three in the morning. When we never buy kippers over once a decade. And it can't be the square wafers, it has to be the round ones. Or that lunch simply must be pastrami on wheat toast, not white bread, not French bread, not rye, it has to be wheat. And not the regular wheat, either, but the whole grain split top stuff that

comes in the thick slices. Or when she starts bawling because of some perceived slight, or some perceived criticism, or because the food tray no longer clears her stomach and has to be put on the bed beside her instead, or because I've not been in the room in four hours, or because I'm in the room too much and smothering her and making her nervous, or because we don't have any oatmeal in a flavor she bleeding likes! I've walked on eggshells for over a week, and Heaven help me, I've wanted to strangle her a few times, but I keep reminding myself that no matter how annoying it gets, it can't be half what she's going through. And she can't be driving me half as batty as I drove her when I was laid up with my leg. Because, I'll admit it, I'm a rotten patient. Forty times worse than she is. She gets all the worry I do, and I admit, there have been nights that I stared at the ceiling for two hours and wondered how the hell we are going to do this. And she can't get away from it, not even for ten minutes," Viktor pointed out.

"You've not exactly been out living the whirlwind life away from it, either," Neville argued.

"Ah, but I can still sleep on my stomach. And I didn't have to worry about seeing my breakfast twice. Or when I was going to outgrow my clothes. And I can still get out of bed by myself, and take a bath without assistance, and I don't have anyone shoving all my internal organs out of place and playing xylophone on my ribcage at all hours. I'm not confined largely to two rooms in the house and two positions, I am not starving beyond all reason, I am not having leg cramps and heartburn, etcetera, etcetera. I can do all the complaining I like, but I'm still not pregnant. I would be a lot worse," Viktor allowed. He glanced out the tavern window, then looked stricken. "Please tell me it's not snowing..."

"It's snowing. Why's it matter if it's snowing?" Neville asked.

"Damn! I need to see Fred and George before I go back home, then. Thanks for the invite, even if Ginny probably made you do it. Drinks are on me," Viktor said, jumping up and throwing some money on the table. He threw on his cloak on the way to the door.

"What was that all about?" Harry asked Ron.

"Oh, Fred and George were supposed to be putting something together for him. Seems he and Hermione have this thing about going out together in the first snow every year. I think he proposed to her during the first snow that year. They happened to be out in it when he asked. She seemed to think it was a big deal that she wasn't going to be able to go out in it, like they usually do. I think Gred and Forge were supposed to be coming up with a way to bring the snow to her," Ron explained. "Saint, I tell you," he added, looking toward the door and shaking his head.

“Only fair. The girls were saying the same about Hermione when he was laid up with the leg,” Harry observed.

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“Where in the heck have you been?” Ginny asked sharply when Viktor walked through the kitchen door.

“Isn’t that supposed to be my wife’s line? To see your brothers, if you must know,” Viktor replied. “And I’ve never heard you sound more like Molly.”

“Well, the rest were back an hour and a half ago,” Ginny said in a truculent voice.

“Well, your brothers were supposed to have this done yesterday. Although I figured they had a few more days leeway, before it got so cold. What’s got you so edgy?” he asked, sitting at the kitchen table. “No, wait. Let me guess. Hermione cried on you.”

“How did you know?” Ginny responded, sounding less argumentative.

“It’s a pretty good bet this last week or so. You’re the one that told me to stay out as long as I wanted. Not so easy, is it? Dealing with that in there?” Viktor asked with an arched eyebrow.

“I didn’t know what to say. We were having a nice enough visit, Hannah mentioned Christmas, it snowed, and off she went. What’s so blinking important about the first snow?” Ginny asked, huffing.

“You don’t remember?” Viktor asked.

“Oh! Oh. Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot. I thought she was just being irrational about being confined to bed. Not that I would enjoy it, but...”

“You’d be barmy, too. Go on home. I got my day off. I enjoyed it very much. Thank you for browbeating your husband and friend and brother into getting me out of the house. I needed a break. But now, I’ll more than happily take my weepy, bedridden wife back off your hands,” Viktor said softly.

“I swear, the mood swings improve in a few weeks,” Ginny said, laying her hand on his.

“Can’t get much worse, can they?” Viktor replied with a shrug.

“Well, I’ll be off, then. She was asleep the last time I checked on her. What’s in

the box, anyway?" Ginny asked curiously.

"Something that might cheer her up. Or make her wail like a banshee. Possibly both, I'll let you know," Viktor said evasively. "Ask your brothers. Might become part of their product line."

"Be sure to let me know which it is," Ginny said, draping her cloak on her shoulders, then walking out the back door to Apparate to Hogsmeade for the final leg of the trip back to Hogwarts.

Sure enough, Hermione seemed sound asleep, and he sat on the edge of the bed gingerly, perching the box on the bedside table and bending to untie his boots. "Viktor?" Her voice still sounded thick and muffled, like it always did for hours when she had been crying. He could always tell when she had, even when she tried to hide it. The mattress shifted as she struggled to roll over from her left side to her back, propping in a sitting position against the pillows.

"Sorry I was later than I figured, but I—" he began, but stopped when she flung her arms around his neck from behind and hugged him, pulling him so tight against her that he could feel the press of her belly and a sharp little knee or foot against his back.

"I missed you."

"I missed you, too. But I was just watching Chudley, not off in Azerbaijan," he said softly, patting one of her hands. *Clingy, for a change.*

"It snowed," she said in a pitiful voice. One of the babies jostled hard between them, as though in sympathy.

"About that... I knew you couldn't go out, so I thought I would bring something in. Now, mind you, Fred and George came up with this, so I'm not sure I threatened them heartily enough that they didn't try to pull anything funny, but anyway... for what it's worth. It's why I was so late," he explained, turning and swinging his legs up onto the bed, handing her the small box from the table.

Hermione studied it curiously, holding it in her hands and settling back into the pillows. "What is it?"

"It's a prototype, so I would hold it at least an arm's length away when opening it," Viktor said with a laugh. "Actually, here, maybe I had better," he said, taking it from her and smoothing her disheveled pyjama top over her distended middle with his free hand. He held it out, pointed away, toward the middle of the room, and yanked the piece of twine holding the box closed. The top flaps flew open, and a puff of white flew out and dissipated, like a fog.

“Fog in a box?” Hermione asked with a bemused smile, trying to smooth her hair back from her face. Her hair was as disheveled as her pyjamas.

“Wait for it,” Viktor replied, settling back into the pillows on his side and putting his left arm around her shoulders. In a moment, the first fluffy, delicate snowflakes drifted down from the ceiling, formed out of thin air.

“Snow,” Hermione breathed. “How long does it last?”

“Best guess, fifteen or twenty minutes, so you had better enjoy it. They had trouble getting it to last beyond ten.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said gratefully, laying her bushy head on his chest and leaning against him, snuggling under his chin. Her swollen side pressed heavily against his ribcage and side, and he could catch a flutter or jab here and there, when the babies moved. Anyone looking at her now would guess her at least full term, probably, judging from the way her stomach filled out most of the oversized pyjama top.

It wasn't exactly how he had pictured things at twenty-three weeks when they had first found out they were expecting. Or how he had figured on spending the first snow of the winter, piled up in bed with snow falling from the ceiling with a half finished nursery next door, pieces of furniture tucked haphazardly into all the spare bedrooms waiting to be moved, absolutely positive he wasn't going back next season without even having discussed it with his wife. *But then*, Viktor thought to himself, smiling and resting his chin against the crown of Hermione's head, *what was it that Muggle poet said about the best laid plans? Things don't always go so neat and according to plan. Thank goodness.*

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“What are you doing?” Ginny asked, walking in the back door, surprised to catch Viktor sitting at the kitchen table, still in his dressing gown, nursing what looked to be a cup of tea. He looked like he hadn't slept at all.

“Preparing to die, I think,” he replied, his voice hoarse, thick and congested. “I woke up feeling like hell.”

“You haven't been near Hermione with that, have you?” Ginny asked in alarm.

“Not since I realized I had it, but I hardly think peeling myself out of bed at three in the morning counts as total isolation. Soon as I realized there was something wrong...” He covered his mouth and coughed for a while, losing his breath. “Got up,” he croaked.

“You’re not getting pneumonia, are you?”

“I don’t think so. Just the head cold from Hell. Got it from the barman at the Three Broomsticks, most likely. He was barking like crazy when we were there last week. Guess that knocks the fledgling idea of at least getting a Christmas tree in the head, then. If I’m lucky, I didn’t already give this to her,” he said, looking into his teacup. “I haven’t had one half this bad since arriving at Hogwarts the first time,” he added, propping his head heavily in his hand. “Screw decorating the house,” he muttered.

“Well, what are you going to do about Hermione? You can’t be near her with that cold. If she gets sick now, it’s not good news,” Ginny said.

“What are you doing today?” he asked, not lifting his head.

“I can’t. The office is packed with appointments, and there will probably be walk-ins on top of it,” Ginny said apologetically.

“Call my mother, then, I guess. I can catch her before she leaves for work. I’ve just been sitting here waiting for a decent hour to call. She’ll come,” he said with a sigh. He stood and shuffled off toward the living room, so Ginny cut down the hall to check on Hermione.

“Hey. How are you?” Ginny asked softly, when she saw that Hermione was awake.

“Okay. Viktor up? I haven’t heard him at all,” Hermione said.

“Well, he’s awake and mostly mobile, if that’s what you mean. I’m afraid he’s taken a bad cold. He’ll have to stay away from you for a while. He’s just calling Ekaterina to come by and look after you, today.” At Hermione’s stricken look, Ginny winced inwardly. *All my fault he was at The Three Broomsticks, he wouldn’t be sick if I hadn’t suggested it.* “But how are you? I’ve only got a few minutes to spare, then I have to go in to the office. Seems Viktor’s got a lot of company, sickness-wise.”

“Swollen. Fat. Kind of crampy and cramped in the middle. Just about what you would expect,” Hermione said in a dejected voice, cupping her hand to her round belly. Ginny noted that her fingers were quite swollen. “Had a few Braxton Hicks.”

“Painful?” Ginny prodded.

“Not really. Just funny feeling. Like it tightens up, then relaxes. Bit like

menstrual cramps. Bad cold?”

“Bad enough he should be in bed. Any bed other than the one you’re occupying. Sorry. Better take your vitals and measure, then I’ve got to go,” Ginny said, laying a hand over Hermione’s. “Before I do that, need to take a look at your ankles, too. You’re still supposed to limit your upright time to thirty minute windows. Don’t want you getting too many Braxton Hicks,” Ginny added, pulling the covers away.

“Check and see that my feet still look more or less the same. Haven’t seen them in some time,” Hermione said ruefully.

“A little puffy, but that’s to be expected. And your feet are still on,” Ginny reported, massaging Hermione’s right ankle. She finished up the exam and said goodbye to Hermione, walking back toward the kitchen, where she could hear a flood of rapid Bulgarian being lobbed back and forth, the sentences overlapping, the words tumbling and rushing around and over one another.

“I don’t... I don’t want anything, Mama, I already had something. Just let me go to bed and leave me to die in peace while you see about Hermione. That’s enough,” Viktor said in English, at last, sounding flustered. “Really. That’s all I want,” he added gently. His voice cracked and faded a bit as he talked, cutting in and out.

“Then go to bed! Or do you think your mama knows nothing about haffing babies or tending the sick?” Ekaterina asked imperiously, arching her black eyebrows as though daring him to argue. Her English had improved in the years since Viktor and Hermione had married and Ginny had first made her acquaintance, but her accent was still thick. Ekaterina currently had that same stubborn set to her jaw that Viktor got when there was no changing his mind. Even Molly had commented on what an intimidating presence Ekaterina could have, and that was saying something. Molly Weasley was no slacker at taking up space and demanding your attention, either. Difference was, Ekaterina managed it without ever raising her voice. Hermione once swore that the entire Krum clan had mastered how to yell without upping the volume.

“No. But you don’t have to do anything else, Mama. That’s plenty. Don’t... don’t go feeling like you have to decorate, or anything. Look, we’re just going to let it go this year, okay?” he argued from across the kitchen.

“Fine. Bed,” Ekaterina ordered, flicking her small, white hand at him dismissively, as though shooing him off. Ginny might have thought it funny under better circumstances, the booming, overwhelming presence that such a tiny woman projected, the way she measured up against her son, the top of her head a good foot or more below his chin. Her jaw softened momentarily, and she added,

“Don’t worry. She will be fine,” with a sigh, sounding reassuring and looking almost as exasperated as Viktor had a moment earlier. She followed it up with a few words in Bulgarian, and a gentle smile. Then her chin took on that defiant edge again, and she set back to unloading food from a mass of bags on the counter.

“She’s okay, really. She checked out fine,” Ginny assured him when he plodded past her in the doorway.

“Bury me somewhere nice. I’m going to go croak or sleep for a week,” Viktor added.

“Rest up,” Ginny called after him. “Ekaterina,” she greeted. By the time she got away, Ekaterina had managed to load her down with a picnic basket full of food for breakfast and lunch and send her off with a pat on the cheek, wondering how she had ended up with it despite politely declining the offer. How such a quiet slip of a woman managed to make you feel like you had just experienced an irresistible force of nature after a minute or two alone with her, Ginny would never understand. Molly had always had something of the same effect on people, including her own offspring, sometimes, but Ekaterina managed the same outcome without being the brash, loud, sometimes bossy and hysterical, mother that Molly had been. Still was, sometimes. She lugged the basket out of the Floo and into the office, setting it on the receptionist’s desk. “Help yourself. It’s all Bulgarian, and I’ll wager I can’t pronounce half of it, but if Ekaterina Krum made it, you can eat it, no problem,” Ginny said, taking off her cloak and heading toward the exam rooms. “The rest of you leave something for me! Especially if there are any of those sort of sticky-bun looking things in there!”

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Hermione drowsed a little near lunchtime, the book she had been reading propped open on the crest of her bulging belly. Napping for short periods on her back, propped semi-upright against the pillows was still workable. Flat on her back was completely out of the question, by now. The weight of the babies was enough to make breathing difficult when lying down flat. The soft click of the bedroom door woke her, as Ekaterina carried in a lunch tray.

“You didn’t have to go to all this trouble,” Hermione said, when she saw the full plate, chicken, vegetables, and a small cup of tomato soup.

“No trouble,” Ekaterina protested, affectionately cupping a hand beneath Hermione’s chin, “you will see, soon enough.”

“I expect so,” Hermione assented, as Ekaterina settled into the chair beside the bed.

“How are you?” Ekaterina asked.

“Oh, you don’t want to hear my complaints about swollen ankles and swollen fingers. Or how big my belly’s getting or how much the babies kick me when I’m trying to sleep,” Hermione replied.

“Not vot I asked. I asked how *you* vere,” Ekaterina said, raising a dark eyebrow and looking at her significantly.

Hermione squirmed a little under her gaze, then sighed. “Nervous and restless, mostly. A little scared. Funny, I thought I would be so ready by now. We wanted it so long... Maybe it’s because I know they’re going to come earlier, or because there are three at once,” she explained, taking a bite of chicken.

“Never ready. Years not long enough,” Ekaterina answered.

“Who am I kidding? A lot scared. Petrified. Were you scared?” Hermione asked, not looking up from her plate, a little ashamed for admitting it.

“So afraid,” Ekaterina said evenly. Hermione looked up in surprise.

“Really?” She couldn’t imagine Ekaterina being afraid of anything, least of all having a baby. She seemed so infinitely capable of handling anything.

“He vos complete surprise. Never even suspect, until the Healer tells me,” Ekaterina said, as though that explained that.

“You didn’t think you were pregnant when you went?” Hermione asked, disbelieving.

“Never sick, just no blood. Think nothing of it. Go to Healer for something for a headache, only I find out I haff somebody in my belly, instead. Gave me a bigger headache,” Ekaterina said with a smile and a small shake of her head. “Go home and cry for two hours, then stare at and rub my middle another hour. Try to convince myself there is a baby growing inside me. Young and scared,” she added with a shrug.

“Nineteen?” Hermione asked, doing the math. Ekaterina had been only a couple of weeks past her twentieth birthday when Viktor had been born. Little more than seventeen when she and Petar had married.

“Nineteen.”

“A few years might have made a difference, hmm?”

Ekaterina smiled and shook her head. "Ten years, fifteen years, no difference. Just older and scared."

"What were you scared of?"

"Everything. Carrying life inside my body. Not just life, but a whole other person. Not enough money. Not enough room. My body changing as this baby grows inside. Vot Petar think about it. How maybe he vood not like this at all, haffing a baby and me getting bigger. Maybe he vood not loff me any more with a big belly. Getting the baby out. Vot kind of mother I vos going to be. How tiny and easy to break babies are. Vot vos I not scared of? I am a little ashamed, now, but that first day, I vished he vood go away, not be real. I vished the Healer vos wrong. Could not bring myself to tell Petar for a veek. Kept hoping it had been a dream."

"What changed? I mean... how did you finally tell him?" Hermione amended.

"Finally realize vishing it away not going to vork. Finally, I get up the courage to tell Petar, and he never say a vord. Just kneel down in front of me, put his arms around me, and kiss my stomach. Later, ve talk about it, and I feel better."

"You weren't scared any more?"

"No. Still just as scared. Just haff someone else to be scared vith. Someone else who haff no idea vot he is doing, or how ve are going to afford a house, or how he is going to feel about it. Time vent on, my belly started to grow, our parents help us get together the money for a house, we buy it ven I vos almost four months. He kicked me for the first time the night ve moved. I get bigger and bigger, and this baby kicks me more and more and harder and harder all the time. Vos so big I could barely move by the time I had him. My magic vent. For a vwhile, things vere stronger, then they leave. Could not even *Accio* a towel. Petar took good care of me, even then, when he is already vorking so hard to try to save up some money," Ekaterina explained, putting a hand below her ribcage.

"But you're so tiny! You can't have gotten that big," Hermione said with a shake of her head.

"Must find some pictures, then. Had a belly like a balloon. So round. Almost as big as vith three. He veighed ten pounds." Ekaterina gestured with her hands, pantomiming a big, heavy belly.

"Ten pounds? Ouch." Hermione said, putting a hand to her side in sympathy.

"Not so bad," Ekaterina protested with a laugh. "Vos a relief from all that kicking. But I miss it, too, for a vwhile. Haffing a baby is like getting company in your own

skin. Never alone for nine whole months.”

“What was it like? Giving birth, I mean,” Hermione asked curiously.

“Backache all the evening before. Go to bed early, wake up at two in the morning, everything hurts, aches and cramps, so I wake up Petar and he calls the Healer. He stayed with me. Mostly, everything just ache and tighten up every few minutes, then there vos this pressure down low that make you vant to push. By seven, they tell me to push, I push hard five times, Viktor vos born. I did not listen to all these vomen who vant to tell you how awful it vos for them, like it is some kind of contest who had it vorst, so I think it vos better because I vos not so scared. I did not expect it to be so horrible, so it vos not so horrible. He vos so long, with these big feet and hands. Funny that vone of the things I worry about most is him being so tiny and crying all the time, and turns out he vos not so tiny and he hardly ever cried. They put this sturdy, heavy baby with all this black hair and vide, dark eyes in my arms, everything vos okay.”

“You weren’t afraid any more.”

“No. Still afraid, I just knew I could handle it by then. I had never been anyone’s mother before, but he had never been anyone’s son, either. And there had to be something of the two of us in there. So maybe he vood at least be familiar. And he vos, when he vos not completely baffling. Serious, quiet and stubborn right from the beginning. Could hold a complete standoff at age three, but then, so could Petar and I. Ve made him stubborn in the first place, so not fair to be angry at him for it, for haffing a mind of his own and not being afraid to make it up and hold to it. For being his own person and not being just like the two of us. Ve fought the battles that vere vorth fighting, the rest ve agreed to disagree. And I don’t think he turned out too badly for it. Sometimes, it turned out to be better he get his own vay. Disciplined himself as much as ve did. Might be a very good thing he vos not afraid to make his mind up for himself, later, or ve might not be haffing this conversation. And if you think he is not just as nervous, or scared, about this as you are, then ve did too good a job teaching him not to complain too much,” Ekaterina added, raising her eyebrows and looking at Hermione for a long, silent moment. “If you need anything else, and I am not just talking about the lunch tray, let me know,” she said, laying a hand on the piled up bedcovers over Hermione’s new figure. “I need to go check on your husband.”

“Ekaterina!” Hermione called when she reached the doorway. “I... I’ve been dying to ask this ever since I met you. Why... why did you and Petar accept me in the beginning? I mean, you two seem to have made it pretty clear to Viktor that you expected him to bring home a Bulgarian girl, or at least one who wasn’t the first known witch in her family. Viktor even said as much before I met you. That he wasn’t sure how the two of you were going to react. Viktor doesn’t tend to jump to conclusions...”

“He did not. Ve did expect a Bulgarian girl. Or a pure-blood. Or maybe at most, a Russian girl. I nearly had a fit when he writes and tells me he is in loff vith this British Muggle-born, even though the only contact they haff had for more than a year vos letters. I hated the idea at first, figure you vere just some passing fancy. As soon as he goes back to Britain and the two of you vere together much, the novelty vood veer off. Only I kept my mouth shut, and you vere not. By the time he talked about bringing you home to meet us, and started making real plans to, I realize something. If my son vos that in loff vith you, you had to be vorth it. He does not make foolish choices, not when they are important. Ve raised him not to make foolish choices. Vot is more important than who you share your life vith? Who you give your heart to? And all the talking in the vorld vood not change his mind, even if ve wanted to. By the time I met you, I had reread all those letters he wrote about you. Saw you through his eyes. When you come visit, I realize you loff him just as much as he did you. And vot mother could object to a girl who loffs her son just as much as she does? Vot father could, either? Cannot ask for more than that. And expectations do not always vork out. I expected he vos going to be a girl for the first six months. Buns in the kitchen, if you vant them, later,” she tacked on, closing the door softly behind her.

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Viktor sprawled face down, burrowed into the pillow on the bed in the far guest bedroom. “You might vant to eat something,” Ekaterina said, shaking Viktor by the shoulder, “or are you going to die on an empty stomach?”

“Whichever’s faster,” Viktor mumbled into the pillow.

“Alright, out vith it. How many nights haff you not slept?”

“Hmmm?” he asked, not moving.

“Do not play ignorant vith me. How many nights? You get this sick only when you are already vorn down.”

“Since the beginning, or just this past couple of weeks?” he countered.

“Your pick. Sit up and eat this soup before it gets cold. Chicken, too, if you vant.”

“I’ll pass on the chicken. Don’t really want the soup, no offense, but I’ll eat it. Otherwise I’ll get no peace, will I?” he asked, sitting up.

“Getting no peace now, are you? And you vill not until you answer me.”

“How did you know?”

“I helped make you. Cannot fool me. Hermione vood notice, too, if she vere not so busy being vorried herself.”

“I’m not really hungry,” Viktor protested, stirring the soup with his spoon.

“Now I know you are sick.”

“I lost count after four nights. Several,” he admitted.

“Vot is it? Cannot be money. Or retiring. Your mind is made up. I think you ought to tell her and get it over vith,” Ekaterina said evenly. “Not so likely to cry now.”

“Now how’d you figure that out? I haven’t said one, single, solitary word to you about not going back!” Viktor asked, open mouthed.

“Haff not said a vord about it to her, either. How blind do you think I am? Not a note, on either of those scouting reports Vratsa sent. You always make notes. And common sense. How are the two of you to manage vith three babies?”

“Yeah, that’s a very good question. How *are* the two of us going to manage with three babies? I keep asking myself that very thing,” Viktor said with a sigh.

“You just manage. Like vith one. And unless you lock down the Floo, I think your Papa and I might be persuaded to visit a bit and maybe even rock one or two. Did I ever mention you scared me to death?”

“What? You mean some of the things I did?”

“No, just you. Just being. Being this whole other person ve had to deal vith. And the things you did. Ve vere both scared to death, your papa and me.”

“You two were nineteen when you found out you were expecting me. I’m twice that age. I’m old enough to be the parent of someone the age you were when you had me.”

“Don’t know everything at forty any more than you do at twenty, not vhen it comes to being a parent.”

“That’s encouraging.”

“Point is, you make mistakes, you learn, you grow. And the children do, too. I trust you vith my grandbabies,” Ekaterina said, kissing his temple. “And that

should be enough," she added, getting up and leaving. "And you might want to let your wife know you worry. Then maybe she will not feel so bad for doing the same thing."

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"Gin, explain to me again why we're responsible for finding Viktor and Hermione a Christmas tree," Neville prompted.

"Viktor's got the head cold to end all head colds. I stopped back by before coming home. He's miserable. And that's just the cold. Add to that the guilt about making Ekaterina take care of both of them, worrying over Hermione, and feeling bad about not even getting a tree, he's twice as miserable. And Hermione's miserable because he's miserable, because at least if they were miserable before, they could be miserable in the same bed. Now they can't even do that. Least we can do is see if we can't procure them a tree. We've got connections in that department, remember?" Ginny explained.

"We do?" Neville asked.

"One very large groundskeeper who can wag a tree single handed. Hagrid's been asking after her every few days since he found out she and Viktor were expecting, and he keeps saying he wants to go visit Hermione now that she's laid up. What better time than when he goes to take her a Christmas tree?" Ginny replied. "Tomorrow's Saturday. He's got to get a few more trees for the Great Hall, what's one more? Going to come with me to shamelessly beg him to get one more and set aside part of his afternoon?" Ginny pleaded, wrapping her arms around Neville's neck.

"It's freezing out there!" he protested. "And there's snow practically up to your eyeballs!"

"It's only knee high. Who put him in the line of fire of a germy bartender?" Ginny chided.

"I'll get my cloak," Neville sighed.

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"Viktor?" Ekaterina called from the doorway.

"No more soup. Really, I'm good, soup-wise," Viktor mumbled, not turning.

"Not about soup. It is about a tree," Ekaterina replied.

"I *told* you already, we don't *need* a tree. You've done enough," he protested, sounding tired.

"I haff nothing to do vith it. I just open the door. *They* vant to know vhere to put it," she countered, pointing to Hagrid, Ginny and Neville, who were standing in very cramped fashion in the hall and the doorway.

"Surprise! Hope you don't mind. We brought you a tree. Without calling first. Which is probably a major breach of etiquette, but much better as surprises go. Hermione's bedroom? Then, we'll leave you to be ill in peace," Ginny said.

"I think that might be best. Move the corner table," Viktor replied softly.

"Right, then! Hagrid, two doors back that way, in the corner, I guess," Ginny ordered, pointing back up the hall.

"Ginny?" Viktor said.

"What?"

"Thank you."

"Least an honorary Auntie can do," she said, backing out the door.

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"It's absolutely wonderful, I can't believe you three did this. Silly, but I missed having a tree," Hermione said, as Neville steadied the tree topper and stepped down off the wooden chair he had been standing on. "Thank you for going and getting it, Hagrid."

"No trouble. Been meanin' ter stop by, but I figured yeh had enough ter keep yeh busy," he replied.

"Not really. Since I went on bed rest and Viktor got put into isolation, I've not exactly been running over with company. Ekaterina's busy enough, and everyone else is busy getting ready for Yule, I suppose..." Hermione trailed off. "Even before that, Viktor wouldn't much more than let me shift anything heavier than a pair of knitting needles, so I didn't help out with much, as far as the nursery goes."

"Busy knittin' baby booties?" Hagrid asked with a low chuckle.

"Between me and Molly, they should have enough afghans, booties, caps, mittens and bonnets to last a lifetime. I knitted up a storm while I could still do it



by wand. Now my fingers are too fat and clumsy to do it the Muggle way, I expect. And I'm out of practice," Hermione said with a heavy sigh, wiggling her swollen fingers.

"So what've yeh been doin' in the meantime?"

"Written a few articles. Read some books. Eaten. Gestated. Eaten some more. Gained a good forty-five pounds so far, if you can call it good. I don't know what I'm going to do if I gain the recommended sixty. Worried myself sick, and probably driven Viktor crazy to boot," Hermione said lightly.

"Doubt it. Got one more thing ter give ter yeh. Actually, three o' the same thing. Yule an' baby gift in one. Back in a minute," Hagrid said, getting up and disappearing for several minutes.

"What is it?" Hermione asked curiously, looking at Neville and Ginny.

"Haven't the foggiest. He pulled three big somethings all the way over here on a sled, covered. Looked a right Father Christmas, what with the tree and the snow, and a sled. Couldn't come by Floo, of course, not with that load. He and Olympe wouldn't tell us a thing, except that it was something for the babies, and by extension, the two of you. I got an inkling it was something he made. Don't worry, it's not a pet, so you can probably let it in the house," Neville said. "I think," he added uncertainly.

"Or a baby blanket," Ginny added with a laugh.

"Well, thank Heaven for small favors, then," Hermione replied earnestly.

Hagrid came back with a form covered in canvas, and set it in the floor, pulling off the canvas. "Yeh use it like this when they're jus' wee little things, an' yeh don' want ter worry 'bout 'em fallin' off. Then when they get bigger, yeh add the saddle, here," Hagrid said, laying his hand on a sizeable, hand carved rocking unicorn. "See, the bucket seat is fer when they're jus' small. Then this bit fits down in there, and turns it into a regular ridin' rocker," Hagrid added, demonstrating. "One fer each."

"Oh, Hagrid," Hermione breathed, covering her mouth with her hand, "it's beautiful! It's absolutely beautiful! You made it yourself?"

"Did," Hagrid said modestly.

"Oh, it's wonderful," Hermione said, sniffing, and she knelt upright on the bed and threw her arms around Hagrid's shaggy neck, "thank you so much!" She hugged him fiercely, as tightly and closely as her and Hagrid's amply round

figures allowed, and Ginny was quite sure she spotted a very red blush behind the thick, black beard.

“Oh, it’s not much,” Hagrid protested. “Got ter bring the other two in,” he prodded, but he didn’t budge, just patted Hermione’s back gently with a huge hand. “Not worth squallin’ over, fer sure,” he said awkwardly as she continued to wet his beard. “Were Olympe’s idea, she designed ‘em. I jus’ carved ‘em,” he said after another moment. “Ooh! Got one that’s trainin’ ter be a Beater, seems like!” he added, rubbing his hand over her side as they parted.

Hermione pulled away and clutched her stomach. “All three of them are. Or Bludgers, more like. They just take turns beating me up,” she said, sniffing. “Thank you, Hagrid, they’re lovely, thoughtful gifts. You must have put a lot of work in on them.”

“Well, Olympe thought the unicorns were a better choice fer the nippers than dragons,” Hagrid said, as though he disagreed, but was trying to stay diplomatic.

“And be sure to thank Olympe for me, too,” Hermione added with a smile, sitting back down on the bed.

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“Need anything else before I go?” Ekaterina asked.

“I think you’ve done enough damage. I can’t see the back of the icebox anymore. Or for that matter, the middle or much of the front,” Viktor said, biting his lip. “I told her. She seemed relieved, more than anything. Took it better than I figured.”

“You will be busy enough when you retire. You will take it better than you figure,” Ekaterina said dismissively. “Talk about anything else?”

“Nerves. Getting cases of them and losing them,” Viktor replied, studying his teacup.

“Ne razbiram. Not the last bit,” Ekaterina said, cocking her head.

“Kind of a play on words in English. You can get a case of the nerves or lose your nerve. Either one’s being nervous,” he explained.

“Did I ever tell you about when you vere born?” Ekaterina asked abruptly, sitting beside him at the kitchen table.

“Once or twice,” Viktor said with a short laugh.

“I vos so tired. Carrying you around just pulled all the life out of me by then. So big and so heavy. And all that kicking you did. All the time. Always kicking me. The night before you vere born, I had a backache. All evening I lie on the sofa in the den and look out the vindow, the little I can see over my big belly, and vonder vot you vill be like. Next morning, when the Healer is there and just as I start to think maybe this vill never be over, they tell me to push, and soon enough, out you come. The Healer put this long, sturdy baby vith these big, dark eyes in my arms, and you just look at me, barely blink at all. Never cry, either. Ve spent hours, checking over and over that you vere okay, counting fingers and toes and inspecting you. I vorry even more because you never really cry until that night, just sleep or look up at me like you are trying to figure me out. I realize something that first day,” Ekaterina said.

“And what was that?”

“That you vere probably never going to be just vot I expect. And that I never could haff imagined loffing anyone so much. I vos so scared for a minute that I vould disappoint you. But then, I realize, you vill disappoint me some, too, so it should be even. I did not expect you to disappoint, and it vos a rare thing. Did I tell you that, enough? That I loffed you? And that you vere a good son? Still are?” she asked.

“I think you made it pretty clear,” Viktor said, nodding.

“Then, I got the most important thing right. All the rest, not so important. You are all sure to make some mistakes. Don’t vorry about anything but making sure they know how much you care about them. I doubt they vill care about much else when they grow up. You did not,” Ekaterina said with a soft smile, kissing his temple, then rising to leave.

“Mama?”

“Yes?”

“One more thing. What on earth was Hermione referring to when she said I didn’t always meet your expectations? Did I do something...?” Viktor asked hesitantly.

Ekaterina laughed and answered, “Nothing you could help. I simply thought you vere going to be a girl up until I got so big and you kicked so hard that you could be nothing but all boy.”

“Why did you think that?”

“No reason. I think it vos a desperate attempt to convince myself I would understand you. I vos a little girl once, maybe I would understand a girl. But you vere just as big a mystery to your papa as you vere to me, so I guess it does not matter. I would not haff traded you for a dozen girls, in any case, even if it vere so. But I would not be too upset if at least one of my grandbabies happens to be a girl, either,” she said, arranging her cloak.

“I’ll see what we can do. You’ve got a pretty good shot at it. Odds are in your favor, more than usual, there,” Viktor allowed.

“Of course, I would not be too upset if they vere all boys, either. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I think you already took care of everything. Mama, seriously, no big baskets of food at Yule. Simple. Don’t knock yourself out. And don’t go buying out all the stores in Hogsmeade before you go back home.”

“No promises,” Ekaterina cautioned, stepping out the back door. Viktor finished his tea, and stepped to the sink to put the empty cup with the rest of the dishes. The front doorbell sounded, and he walked to the living room, and opened the door.

“Delivery, sir,” the young wizard at the door piped up, holding out his clipboard. “Just need to see the order ticket, if you have it handy, to confirm I’ve got the right house. And get you to sign for the delivery.”

“Of?” Viktor asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh! Three cradles. I think they made a misprint back at the loading dock, frankly. I mean, who orders *three* cradles?” he said, laughing nervously.

“I did,” Viktor said flatly.

“Oh. Right. Well. I’ll just lay the clipboard down, here, and get Ned to go unload them while you get the ticket, then? If you can’t find it, I have to Floo the store and confirm the address.”

“That’s fine.”

By the time he returned with the ticket, the other wizard, presumably Ned, had the first cradle in front of the door. “Who orders three cradles, then, Chester?”

“Here,” Viktor said, ignoring the comment and handing Chester the ticket.

“Exactly, darling, I had to ask myself the same thing. Who orders three cradles

and has them all shipped to one address?” a smooth, smug voice said behind him. Viktor turned on his heel and nearly ran smack into Rita Skeeter.

“Who let you in?” Viktor demanded.

“Let myself in, darling. Door was open. Thanks to, Chester and Ned, was it? They were good enough to let me ride along. I was hitching, don’t you know. You shouldn’t leave your front door standing open while people are moving new acquisitions in, if you don’t want company wandering in,” she said airily, settling herself on the sofa.

“Strays, you mean. Don’t get comfortable. And don’t make me have to burn a perfectly good sofa after you leave. You can leave the same way you got here, front door with Chester and Ned. No offense,” he added, signing the delivery form. “Down the hall, second door on the left, anywhere inside the door.”

“No problem,” Ned said cheerily, and he and Chester headed down the hall.

“I heard a teeny rumorlet that makes me think you two aren’t sharing everything with Auntie Rita,” Rita said sweetly.

“Well, I can clear up any confusion on that point for you right now. We’re not. Now, beat it,” Viktor said through gritted teeth.

“Now, sweetie, is that any way to talk to me?” Rita asked, batting her eyelashes and inspecting her long, manicured nails.

“No. But you wouldn’t understand me if I curse you out in Bulgarian, so that’s rather a waste of breath. And I can’t do you justice in English. I’d have to invent new profanity,” Viktor said, crossing his arms.

“All done,” Chester called from the door. “Ned put the third one in there, so... we’ll be going,” he added, looking at the two of them curiously, leaning into the room.

“Take her with you,” Viktor called after him.

“No, Chester, doll, I’ll make my own way back. Tah,” Rita said, waving. Chester smiled and shut the door.

“Out.”

“Not until I get some answers. Now, I can only think of three plausible explanations for you two ordering three cradles, and two are newsworthy,” Rita said eagerly, pulling out a piece of parchment and a quill.

“Out!”

“One, maybe you’re getting one for home, one for the grandparents, and one for the Arthur Weasley house. Or one for the Potters and Ron Weasley’s. But that one’s boring and it doesn’t make much sense. You would have had them delivered separately. So I discard that one right now,” Rita said, shaking her head.

“You can either get out of my house, or I will throw you out. Literally!”

“Two, possibly you finally broke down and bought another house, and that would need to go into the column. But not likely either, unless you got two. And you would probably break out in a rash if you bought two whole houses you didn’t *need*, right, sweetie? So, I’ll rethink that one and toss it, I think,” Rita added, gesturing with her quill. “That one only makes sense if it’s part of ‘nesting’, or you’re being impractical about the deliveries, and you don’t seem the type to lose his head and go showing off for infants, nor to be impractical. Which leaves me with the most logical explanation.”

“Whatever it is, I’m not going to answer you, anyway, so all you have is a theory. Get your manicured behind off my sofa!”

“So, I decided I needed to go back and talk to that sales clerk again. Make sure I had my facts straight. And sure enough, three matching cradles. Insisted they match. Which wouldn’t matter unless you were putting them in the same room, most likely. People seemed to think she was pretty far along when they saw her in the shops, but I haven’t seen a birth announcement. There’s only one thing that explains that part away, too,” Rita said coyly.

“Would you get yourself out of our house, or do I need to call the-?” Viktor asked in an exasperated voice, but he was interrupted.

“Viktor? Who on earth are you talking t... oh. You.” came Hermione’s voice from the door. She had changed into a fresh pair of pyjamas, and her hair, which was still damp from the morning shower, had been pulled back into a ponytail. By now, even the oversized pyjamas were nearly filled out, and she was finding walking fairly difficult at nearly twenty-seven weeks. The weight of the babies made every movement slow and careful. Hermione walked over and stood by Viktor, putting her hands to the small of her back. “How did she get in?” she asked at last.

“Drafted in behind the furniture delivery. Cradles are here,” Viktor muttered, rubbing her back with his hand.

“Why, ducky, aren’t you just the picture of the little mother! Or perhaps I should say the not so little mother, hmm? Rita’s readers were starting to think I had made the new arrival up, since there hasn’t been a birth announcement yet. But, looking at you, either you really have been pregnant about thirteen months or there’s a very good reason for those three cradles. Come on, now, spill it, when are they due? You can’t possibly keep a secret in there, too, or you’re sure to explode,” Rita gushed.

“Right! That does it! Bad enough you come in here like you’re welcome, but then you go and insult my wife,” Viktor complained, turning and heading for the kitchen.

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

“To get a butcher knife! I hear stabbing people is very satisfying!”

“Honestly! Come back here, it’s not worth ruining the carpet,” Hermione sighed, sinking into one of the armchairs. Viktor stalked over and perched on the arm of the chair. “None of your business when they, if in fact, there is a ‘they’, are due,” Hermione protested.

“Oh, come on! You’re so big you can barely walk. You’re going to have triplets, aren’t you?” Rita asked eagerly, leaning forward toward them.

“How do you know that’s the only shipment of cradles we have coming? That might not be the only nursery we’re working on. Going to look mighty foolish if you gush about how we’re expecting triplets and a few more cradles show up. We’ll call someone else and let them know, so they can get the scoop on you. And Rita’s going to have egg all over her face, hmm?” Hermione countered calmly, rubbing her side. “What’s to say we’re not having five or six?”

“I’ll just stick around and see, then,” Rita said firmly.

“You will not! I’ll charge you with trespassing before I let you sit on my sofa another hour,” Viktor said, narrowing his eyes. “Print whatever you want, but be advised it might not be true. Or the whole truth. Risk looking like you don’t know what you’re talking about,” he added with a shrug.

“Call them, then. That’s even better. ‘Rita Skeeter bodily thrown out of Krum household when she offers congratulations for triplets in person’. Sell a lot of papers,” she said smugly.

“And what if you don’t remember this conversation later?” Viktor asked.

“Viktor...” Hermione said.

“Are you threatening me with a Memory Charm? Taken care of. Told a colleague about the details. So if I come back with no memory of having been here, he’s to remind me of my theory. And I run with it,” Rita countered.

“Viktor...” Hermione repeated, sounding more urgent.

“You make me want to Oblivate the entire staff,” Viktor muttered darkly.

“Viktor, sweetheart,” Hermione said, tugging at the sleeve of his robe. “I think we had better leave the argument for later, darling,” she added, clutching at her stomach with her free hand and panting.

“Labor pains? You need to go to St. Mungo’s?” Viktor asked, squatting in front of her chair.

“Frankly, I don’t think there’s going to be time. I think they’re coming right now... maybe you had better call...” Hermione said, gritting her teeth and crying out in pain.

“Now, see what you’ve caused?” Viktor told Rita.

“Well,” Rita said, going white as a sheet as she watched Hermione double over and writhe, jumping up off the sofa and running for the front door, “good luck, then, dearies. I’ll... I’ll think about it, and ... and... I’ll just be going! Call me with the names!”

After the door had clicked shut, Viktor raised an eyebrow and asked, “You *are* faking, aren’t you?”

Hermione raised her head. “I thought the ‘sweetheart’ and the ‘darling’ would clue you in. I knew she wouldn’t stick around if there’s a hint of any mess coming. Or anything unpleasant,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“She’ll still print it,” Viktor said with a rueful smile. “At least the triplets part.”

“So? At least we didn’t give her the satisfaction of telling her anything,” Hermione responded. “Got her out of the house without her quizzing us on what we were going to name them and insisting on a tour of the nursery, didn’t it?”

“True. You deserve an award for that acting job.”

“I’ll settle for a bowl of ice cream and a glass of milk. That’s what I came out here for in the first place. And I didn’t have to act too hard. I’m having Braxton Hicks to beat the band. And my back feels like it’s about to snap. No, it’s okay.

Don't go get it. I'll come to the kitchen. It might take me half of my allotted thirty minutes, but I need to move a little."

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"So, do tell why it sounds like the fifth battalion is in our kitchen," Hermione said, sitting up in bed.

Viktor sat up beside her. "I don't know, but I've got a sneaking suspicion. Mama does not *do* simple." He swung his legs off the bed and grabbed his dressing gown, throwing it on over his pyjama bottoms. When he opened the door, the voices from the kitchen grew louder. Viktor stood in the door of the kitchen and leaned against the jamb.

"Morning," Ekaterina called from in front of the stove.

"You call this simple? I have seen less food at gala dinners," Viktor said with a bemused smile.

"I only did half. Molly did the rest," Ekaterina said with a shrug.

"No trouble, dear. You two stay in bed as long as you like and pay the rest of us no mind," Molly said, taking her head out of the icebox. "There'll still be breakfast whenever you want it."

"How on earth did you coordinate this?" Viktor asked.

"Oh, little ones opened their presents at the Burrow, and after that, we decided it would be just as simple to bring Yule to you two. Speaking of which, Alice, what do you say for the kitty?" Molly prompted the little girl, who was sitting in a booster seat at the table, finishing a sausage.

"You're most welcome," Viktor said, in response to her shy, mumbled thanks, as he swung her up out of the booster seat.

"Might not want to do that. She's had pancakes and she's covered in syrup," Ginny cautioned.

"I can handle being sticky. Better go tell Hermione who's making all the racket," Viktor said, settling Alice in the crook of his arm and heading for the hall.

"He still looks kind of tired and peaky," Ginny said with a shake of her head.

"Better get used to being tired and peaky, hadn't they both?" Ron replied, gathering up a couple of empty plates. "Last Yule they'll be able to sleep in past

dawn, most likely.”

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“We’re infested with redheads,” Viktor said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Hi, Alice. Hello, sweetheart. What do you mean, infested?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, the entire extended Weasley clan’s having breakfast here, along with my parents and Harry and Hannah, although they pretty much fall into the first category by default. They brought Christmas at the Burrow here, so to speak. All we’re missing is the Burrow, really,” Viktor said, waving his wand at Alice and cleaning the syrup from her hands and face.

“And who do we have to thank for that?” Hermione asked.

“Got an inkling the two women who did the cooking might have been the ringleaders,” Viktor said with a smile.

“Oh, so it’s not all redheads, then. There were a few black heads involved,” Hermione murmured, gathering Alice’s hair back from her face.

“A couple or three,” Viktor assented.

“I didn’t get you a thing for Christmas. I forgot until I was on bed rest and it was too late,” Hermione confessed.

“Good, then. We’re even. Because I didn’t have a chance, either. I thought about getting you a mother’s ring, but I didn’t know what birthstone to get. Could be January, could be February. I was going to go back and look again a week or so ago, but it’s hard to shop from bed. So we’ll call it a wash. I think we got our presents a few months ago, anyway. Don’t you?”

“I think so. Couldn’t get a ring on my finger right now, anyway,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“Hey, thanks for the book!” Jeremy called from the open doorway.

“Well, that’s what you asked for, isn’t it?” Viktor replied, waving him onto the bed. Jeremy clambered up onto the foot of the bed and unceremoniously flopped down between them.

“Yeah. Wow, you’ve got really big,” Jeremy said, wide-eyed. “Way bigger than Aunt Cassie was when Alice was still in her tummy.”

“Funny, I was just about to say the same thing about you, that you had got really big,” Hermione teased.

“Jeremy! You don’t say things like that!” Fred scolded from the hallway. “Sorry, I’ll take them both off your hands, if you want,” he sighed, coming into the room.

“Now, Fred, don’t scold the boy for pointing out the blatantly obvious. I have got really big. Aunt Cassie just had one in there, though. I’m packing three. Want to feel the babies?” she asked. “Here, put your hands right there. They’re kicking up a storm.”

After a moment, Fred pulled him up off the bed and set him on the floor with a playful swat. “Now quit harassing the two of them and go play with your cousin Peter. So, I hear we’re only going to see you in a uniform one more time,” Fred said, sitting on the foot of the bed. Alice scooted off Viktor’s lap and into the spot Jeremy had vacated.

“Afraid so. Have to find yourself somebody else to bet on,” Viktor replied.

“More is the pity. But I expect you’ll have your hands more than full. Imagine what three the same age could do to a house,” Fred said, laughing.

“Just about what the two of you did to the Burrow, I imagine,” Viktor countered.

“Only if you’re lucky. Next few years won’t be dull, in any case. Even if they’re regular little saints, like I’m sure the two of you were. Want me to take this little monkey off your hands?” Fred asked, pointing to Alice.

“No, it’s okay. Leave her. I could use the company. I’ve been kind of thin on company the last few weeks,” Hermione said. “It’s been too quiet around here.”

“Babies?” Alice asked curiously, laying her head against the curve of Hermione’s huge belly and looking up at her.

“Soon enough, munchkin. Soon enough. But let’s hope the babies stay put in there a few weeks longer, okay?” Hermione said, stroking Alice’s hair.

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“Recovered from Yule, yet?” Ginny asked, poking her head in the bedroom door.

“Slept an age afterwards, but it was worth it. Thank Molly again, for me, will you?” Hermione responded.

“So... how are you?” Ginny prompted, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“My pelvis feels like I’m carrying a cannonball in it. There’s so much pressure all the time,” Hermione sighed.

“Think about the poor runt on the bottom. Not quite three pounds and two bigger babies on top. Speaking of which, we need to talk. I’d like to get you as close to your due date as I can, but I don’t see you carrying them past six weeks before what your due date would be with one or two. If February second comes and they’re not out, I think we’ll need to take them. You won’t be physically able to be pregnant any longer, at that point, I’ll wager. I’d be surprised if something doesn’t change that makes me do it in January, in fact. I know you’re already taking it easy, but be even easier on yourself these next four or five weeks. We’ve been lucky so far and your blood pressure has stayed steady. But I don’t want to push our luck. If you start showing signs of eclampsia, I’m admitting you to St. Mungo’s,” Ginny warned.

“But what about the smallest one? You said you wanted them four pounds, at least,” Hermione asked anxiously.

“Could still happen. Especially if you go as long as possible. But I can’t ignore the other two or what kind of shape you’re in for the sake of putting an ounce or two on the runt. Come on, those are my honorary munchkins, too. You know I want them to get a good head start. I’ll do what I can. But no promises. No good staying pregnant if you can’t breathe anymore and they don’t have any room to grow. Better the runt gets out and gets some room to stretch, if things start going south,” Ginny said. “I need to check your cervix. I’ll help you into the stirrups.”

“Have to help me into everything, these days. I made the discovery last night that I can’t even get into bed anymore without help,” Hermione complained.

“Happy New Year, honey. Welcome to being enormously pregnant,” Ginny said lightly.

“Right. I’m going to give Viktor a hernia before the babies get here, if I don’t just drive him completely mad first. Bad enough when he had to help me out of chairs and out of the bath. Out of bed was at least optional if I wasn’t in a big hurry. Took me a while, but I could finally struggle out. Sad when you can’t even fall *into* bed properly anymore. Don’t know about out. Maybe I can’t get out anymore, either. I’m up fifty-one pounds. I don’t think I’ll be able to breathe if I hit the recommended sixty. I outweigh Viktor by now,” Hermione said, as Ginny worked beneath the sheet.

“Nothing going on down there. Not dilated. Which is exactly what we want. Once you start dilating, it probably won’t stop. And outweighing Viktor is not exactly all that impressive. Now, outeating him is another story,” Ginny said with a laugh.

“Got both covered. And Viktor weighs more than you think. I’m not telling you what I weigh,” Hermione said with a shake of her head.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about gaining too much with triplets. You would have to eat all day and night to do that. Want some external company the rest of the day? Office is shut down for the holidays, and I told Fleur I would watch Etienne. Want some baby practice? I could bring him over here. I warn you, though. The little rascal’s a rounder. He’s learned how to play ‘fetch’. And he wants you to fetch all the toys he tosses. We’re all trying to teach him that if he throws it and it’s not a ball, he doesn’t get it back right away, but sometimes he cuts a real shine for a few minutes. What do you say?” Ginny asked.

“I’d love it if you brought him over. I had barely seen him until Yule. I had no idea he had gotten that big. Viktor will probably be busy the rest of the day trying to get the last of the furniture into the nursery. Sure, why not? After all, you’re the one who has to do the fetching. He would be four before I got back with anything.”

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“Not much of a New Year’s Eve, is it?” Hermione asked, groaning a little as she shifted in bed.

“I was just thinking it might be the best one I can remember. Except for the aching and general discomfort on your part, and the fact that neither one of us is getting any sleep anymore, of course. Still hurting?” Viktor asked, rubbing her lower back.

“Something terrible,” Hermione lamented, rubbing her belly harder.

“If you’re hurting that badly, maybe we should call Ginny. Or go ahead and take you to the hospital.”

“It’s just aching from the load I’m hauling. Not contractions. They’ll just tell me I might as well be pregnant with an Erumpent, get used to it, go home, take a bath, change positions, blah, blah, blah. Better put my feet up, hadn’t I? My ankles are swollen. At least I think they’re swollen. I wouldn’t know. Haven’t seen them in weeks,” Hermione said, rolling over onto her back.

“Miss them?” Viktor asked, moving to the foot of the bed and kneeling between her spread legs, waiting for her to get situated against the pillows behind her head and shoulders.

“Kind of forgotten what they were like, to tell the truth,” she sighed.

“They’re not that swollen, see?” Viktor said, lifting one and propping it on his shoulder.

“Stop that! It used to be a lot more fun to have my ankles up around your ears! Now, there’s just no point. That’s what got me in this mess to start with.”

“My point is, they’re not that bad. Not considering. Here, hand me the pillows,” he said, holding his hand out for them and propping her lower legs. “Happy New Year,” he added with a grin, leaning over and kissing her navel through her pyjama top before lying back down.

“I’ve got heartburn like you wouldn’t believe. I don’t think what Ginny left is helping. And someone’s jammed up under my ribcage.”

“Give your mother a break already. Shove over in there!”

“We’ve lost it completely.”

“Never had it in the first place, whatever it is. Soon as it strikes midnight, I’m going to sleep, with or without you. You can wake me if you want anything, like to be taken to hospital or to be rescued from that mountain of eiderdown. I’m about to pass out. I’d hold you as we welcome the new year in, but I can’t get within a mile for all the pillows.”

“Stop making me laugh. It hurts.”

“Stop keeping me from falling asleep, then. Everything hurts nowadays, doesn’t it?”

“Just about.”

“Feel like you’re about to explode?” he asked, pulling her top up and rubbing her bare belly. The waistband of the bottom was pulled well below the curve of her engorged tummy. It had been for weeks.

“That would be a pretty fair assessment. Imagine hauling around a water balloon the size of a beach ball in your pelvis. That kicks. Constantly,” Hermione said glumly, laying her hands on top of his.

“I wish I could do something, but about all I can do is tell you I’m sorry you’re so miserable. Not much, but there you are. You have my utmost sympathy.”

“And that’s wearing kind of thin along with your patience, isn’t it?” Hermione said with a smile.

“Guilty. I’m leaving you if you don’t let me alone for thirty minutes and let me get some rest.”

“You can leave me, but only if you take the kids with you.”

“Damned loopholes.”

“It’s two after. Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year. Now can I go to sleep?”

“I’m sorry, but I have to visit the loo, first. I know it’s only been an hour, but I can’t help it.”

“I never said you could. I was ten times this annoying with the leg, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, you were. You still owe me. You were fairly helpless and *really* ill-tempered. It was like living with a sleep-deprived, wounded bear with a toothache and a bad attitude. And no comments on how I’m lumbering around like a bear, now.”

“Wasn’t going to say a word. Now, isn’t this more fun than attending some stupid, boring cocktail party?”

“I told you to stop making me laugh.”

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“You’ve got a call,” the receptionist said, poking his head into the exam room after knocking.

“I’ll take it when I’m done,” Ginny replied absently.

“Relative of a patient.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that I won’t be able to talk to them for a few minutes,” Ginny said.

“I don’t think he’ll hold the connection that long,” Tyler said, shaking his head.

“Or better yet, take a message, Tyler, and I’ll call them back,” Ginny said, feeling a tad exasperated.

“He *really* wants to talk to you,” Tyler said, raising his eyebrows.

"I've got to finish setting Mrs. Mundy's arm," Ginny said, smiling encouragingly at the woman perched nervously on the exam table.

"Actually, I think you had better take it. Like, *now*. Sounded urgent," Tyler insisted.

"Really, I can't. I'm in the middle of wrapping her arm. Then I've got to heal the bone. Going to be a while, Tyler. Ten minutes, at least. Take a message," Ginny repeated. "Sorry about that, Mrs. Mundy," she said apologetically.

"Got your message," Tyler said, stepping back in.

"Not now, Tyler. I'm with another *patient*," Ginny said patiently, trying to hold back the urge to strangle him for interrupting over and over. "You can give it to me later, when I'm done with Mrs. Mundy."

"Alright, but it was Viktor fucking Krum and he said for me to tell you that if you couldn't be at his house in less than two minutes, he was just taking his wife straight to the hospital without you," Tyler said, shrugging and turning on his heel.

"What!? Oh... I'm sorry, Mrs. Mundy...didn't mean to drop your arm... Why? Did he say *why* he was taking her to the hospital?" Ginny asked urgently.

"Oh, so now you're interested? Basically, he said it was his inexpert opinion that she was developing a bad case of pre-eclampsia. I gather she had abruptly turned off rather poorly this morning, with swelling, vomiting, sharp abdominal pain, seeing spots and the like. Described a textbook case, if you ask me, but you didn't. Said he would like for you to accompany them to the hospital and admit her, if you were available, but if not, to tell you he was going to call for emergency transport as soon as he ended the call here because he didn't feel comfortable moving her by himself in the condition she was in, and you could meet them there whenever you get the chance. Sounds like her blood pressure is sky high to me, but you're the mediwitch," Tyler said.

"Hermione... Tyler, get someone else to come in and see to Mrs. Mundy!" Ginny said, jumping up and sprinting for the outer office. She just had time to grab a handful of Floo powder and breathlessly squeak out "Viktor Krum Residence!" before leaping in. She managed to beat the emergency transport team from St. Mungo's by thirty seconds.

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"It just happened so fast. I mean, two hours before, she was fine... As fine as

she has been, lately. She's been miserable since before New Year, as far as getting comfortable is concerned... but... I... I didn't think anything of it when her hands and ankles swelled that badly. She had been up right before that and they always seem to be worse in the morning. When the vomiting started, she thought she had just eaten too fast, and she's had heartburn almost constantly the last few days, anyway. But when it kept on... I called. I figured maybe if you went along, they would admit her faster. I..." Viktor trailed off helplessly and cradled his forehead in his hand, propping his elbow on his thigh.

Ginny sat beside him in the hall and rubbed his shoulder soothingly. "Well, it can hit really fast. Especially with multiples. You did the right thing. I wish you had told Tyler it was a medical emergency. He tells me every call is 'urgent', even if it's just someone wanting to know if I want an office subscription to Witch Weekly. Once, he pulled me off a patient who needed a tenacious Jarvey pulled off his finger, for an 'urgent' call that turned out to be Neville wanting to remind me to pick up some seeds he had ordered. I mean, this poor guy is about to lose a finger and is taking a string of mumbled insults to boot, but I go to take this big, urgent call from my husband that scared me half to death and turned out to be a message he would have been glad to leave with Tyler, if Tyler would have just written it down instead of insisting I wasn't busy. But you didn't know that. Important thing is, she's admitted and stable, and we can keep a closer watch on her in here. And she's reached the thirty week mark, give or take a few days. If we have to, we can do a Cesarean whenever necessary. Even if the runt is a bit undersized. Now, why don't you go home and get some rest? You're just as worn out as she is, if not worse. You two haven't been resting any for weeks. Every time I've been over there for the last few days, you have been conked out or on the verge of conking out, even during the day. Harry and Ron have caught you two at it, too. Mum came over two days ago and couldn't even rouse the both of you in the hour or two she was there. Said Hermione was passed out in bed and you were passed out on the sofa. She cooked soup in your kitchen, left it in the icebox with a note, did the dishes, and neither of you budged the whole time she was there. She could have packed the house off around you. And you two hate sleeping during the day. Nights are not meant to be a series of twenty minute naps. Viktor?"

"I am not going home," Viktor said softly but firmly.

"You might as well. You're knackered. All we're going to do is monitor her and try to get her blood pressure down. I'm going to stay with her, and the nurses will help me get her up if we need to. I'll call if..."

"I am not going home when my wife is in the hospital," he repeated.

"I'll stay overnight. I just called Neville to bring me an overnight bag. Harry and Ron are going to come by after work. She won't be by her-"

“Would you go home if Neville were in here?” Viktor asked sharply.

“No, I don’t suppose I would,” Ginny said.

“Then don’t ask me to go home like there’s nothing wrong, when it is essentially my entire family in there,” Viktor snapped.

“I’ll see if I can catch Neville and get him to swing by and grab your hospital bags, too. And I’ll speak to them about keeping the other bed open as long as possible. You don’t want to try to sleep on a hospital cot, trust me. I’ve tried it. They’ve got lumps on top of lumps. You walk funny for a week. Those chairs aren’t too hot, either. There’s a reason interns sneak into the unused rooms to get some sleep on long shifts. I’ll be right back. You can go on in. I think they’re done getting her settled,” Ginny said, heading for the nurse’s station.

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“I’ll walk out with you, if Ron and Harry are going to stay here a few minutes longer,” Ginny said, pulling the hospital room door closed and stepping out into the hall.

“Holy... I don’t know which one of them needs to be in the hospital the worst, frankly. Has he slept in the entire three days she’s been in here?” Neville asked in a low voice.

“Not much that I’ve seen. Just when he’s so exhausted he can’t sit up anymore. Half the time he does sleep, he just puts his head on the edge of her bed and sleeps in the chair. Petar and Ekaterina even came by yesterday and tried to get him to see reason about going home for at least an hour or two, and he stood them both down over it. He sleeps when she does, and that’s not much. I don’t think he can lie down and go to sleep at all, if he’s not here. He went home about five minutes to get some clean clothes, and that’s it. He’s not left that room otherwise,” Ginny said, as they walked toward the lobby. “I’m scheduling her for January the 26th. She’s already starting to dilate, but she’s holding steady at two centimeters. That date would be the thirty-one week mark. That’s not pushing things too far, I hope. Her blood pressure’s come down, but not enough that I feel comfortable releasing her. It still spikes a lot. It’s not helping that he’s scared to death about her and the babies, and she’s scared to death about the babies and worried about him. The other day, she’s being dosed up on potion, and having Braxton Hicks and muscle cramps, we’re monitoring her blood pressure and the heartbeats, and she’s asking if I think Viktor’s alright. I’m ashamed to say I outright lied and said I thought he was fine, just tired. He looks like if you pinched him just right, he would fly into a million pieces, he’s wound so tight.”

“And what about you?” Neville asked.

“Oh, I’m worried about the babies, too. I think they’ll all be alright. They should be around four pounds apiece, even the runt, and knock wood their lungs are strong enough for them not to need any help breathing,” Ginny said, pausing at the door to the street.

“I meant more how you were holding up. You sleeping any?” Neville asked with a grin.

“I sleep like a log. Hazard of having done an internship here. You can sleep through anything, just about. Goodnight. I’ll call if anything changes,” Ginny said, giving him a peck on the lips.

“Better. They’ll all hound me for news back at Hogwarts. Always do, no matter how late I get back. Minerva comes by every night before she retires to ask after ‘Miss Granger, Mr. Krum, and their impending, happy events’, as she usually refers to them. She always calls Hermione ‘Miss Granger’, even though she’s been Mrs. Krum nearly two decades and hasn’t been a student in longer than that. Hagrid and Olympe will be hanging about conveniently on the lawn near the front door, no matter how late it is. I think he and Filius have a pool going on how many of each, if you want to know the truth. Sybil, of course, is saying she saw this coming all along, and surprisingly enough, she’s sure they’re all going to be healthy and fine, instead of her usual gloom and doom. Oh, and Firenze passed on a word of congratulations about the ‘new foals’. Believe it or not, even Snape muttered a good wish to pass along when he caught me alone in the hallway, even though he says he thinks it’s silly for everyone to ‘go all mushy in the head just because the Krums finally decided to breed their own litter of insufferable know-it-alls’ as he puts it. And the Headmaster, he asks at least twice a day if I’m an honorary uncle, yet. Of course, they all remember Hermione fondly, even Snape, although he’d sooner die than admit it. He even admits to a grudging admiration of Viktor these days. Must be going all mellow as he ages. And the other ones who were members of the Order, or know anything about it, they’re fond of Viktor, too. So, lots of finger-crossing on their parts for the five of them. Most of the staff is quite excited about the prospect that some of them might one day get to see triplets attend Hogwarts. That would be a first. Although, if they turn out to be anything like my brothers-in-law, maybe a few of them will wish they hadn’t seen it,” Neville said with a low chuckle.

“The twins are a unique case, I think. Or for Viktor and Hermione’s sake, I hope they are. Otherwise, they won’t survive the first year, much less survive long enough for any of them to make it to Hogwarts. Any of them. Careful on the Underground,” she added.

“I will be. I’ll let them know back at Hogwarts that our expectant couple is still

tiredly and nervously expecting, then,” he said, kissing her goodbye.

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Hermione reached out hesitantly and twined her fingers in the dark hair. She could just see the back of his head, where it rested on the edge of her bed, as he slumped over from the chair beside it. The long stay in the hospital had begun to tell on both of them. “Viktor?”

“Hmmm?”

“Sorry, I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No. I was awake.”

“Liar. Sorry, but I need to move down. I feel like a freight train is trying to move through my pelvis. I can’t sit up any longer.”

“Well, I guess you won’t have to worry about that after tomorrow morning,” he said, bracing her under her tented knees and around her shoulders as he helped her scoot down off the pillows that had her propped upright. “They’ll be out by this time tomorrow, won’t they?”

“Viktor... something’s wrong. That didn’t help,” she said softly, after a moment.

“What do you mean?”

“It still feels just as bad as it did when I was sitting up,” Hermione said, stroking the enormous bulge of her belly.

“Give it a minute to let up after you move,” Viktor said, wearily raking his hair back off of his forehead.

“It’s not pain. It’s pressure. It feels like ... bearing down. Worse than usual. Maybe my water’s leaking. Or I’m bleeding. Check for me.”

“Bed’s dry as a bone,” Viktor said, taking his hand back from beneath the sheet. “Want me to look and make sure nothing else is going on?”

“I think you had better,” Hermione said, and he folded the sheet down to her ankles and lifted her hospital gown.

“Looks like the runt’s gone and gotten impatient. Isn’t going to wait for the operating room tomorrow or for that matter, for your water to break. I’ll call a nurse,” Viktor said calmly.

“What? Are you sure?” Hermione asked in alarm.

“I could reach and touch the head with my middle finger if I wanted. You evidently dilated the rest of the way. Don’t know about the other two, but the one on the bottom’s had enough. Promise me something,” he added.

“What?”

“Don’t panic. Because, if you do, I’m going to fall apart in short order.”

“I was just about to tell you the same thing.”

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“Are you sure it’s dead? I swear I think I saw whatever is in this sandwich move,” Ginny said to the mediwizard across from her.

“You just said to bring you a sandwich, not to club it to death first. Suit yourself, you know how hospital food is,” he said with a shrug. “Why are you hanging out here so much lately, anyway? I know you’ve still got admitting privileges and some of your patients opt for the hospital, but I haven’t seen you here this many days running since you were a fresh-faced intern, Gin. Got a baby boom going on out in Hogsmeade or something?”

“I was never a fresh-faced intern, Lucas. I was a sleep-deprived one, just like you were. Got a patient and a friend here. Well, one of each, really. Or one who’s both. You remember Hermione Granger, my friend from Hogwarts, right?” she asked, taking a tentative sniff of the sandwich.

“Sure, the one with the wild hair? Married Viktor Krum, didn’t she?” Lucas asked, perking up.

“That’s her. She used to come visit me here sometimes, when we were both interns. They’re expecting,” Ginny said, nibbling at the edge of the bread.

“I remember reading that. That’s usually a pretty straightforward couple of days stay, and the attendant usually gets to go home. What’s wrong?” Lucas responded.

“She’s expecting a little more than most. She’s pregnant with triplets. And she’s developed complications. Got her scheduled to deliver by Cesarean tomorrow. I feel a bit out of practice. Don’t get nearly as many baby deliveries as I used to when I worked the maternity beat here exclusively, especially if you don’t count relatives,” Ginny said, shaking her head and making a face. She laid the

sandwich back on the wrapper.

“Triplets! So Rita Skeeter *wasn't* hitting the bottle when she wrote that?”

“Afraid not. Well, not really. I mean, I’m pleased for them, they want these children desperately, and I just hope everything turns out alright.”

“Quite the compliment that they trust you to take care of her,” Lucas said, obviously impressed.

“Why?”

“Well, you just said they want these kids desperately, and they could have had any specialist they wanted, in or out of the country, couldn’t they? With the kind of money he makes.”

“Suppose so. But they’re not like that. They don’t act like they have to have the best in everything just because of who they are. Or how much they’re worth.”

“Ginny Longbottom, please report to the Maternity Ward. Ginny Longbottom to the Maternity Ward,” came the voice over the loudspeaker.

“That your triplets, then?” Lucas asked as she stood.

“I hope not. Could be Angelina Ringwold, I suppose. I told the office to let my patients know I was already here, that they could come here and have me paged if they were going to be delivered in hospital.”

“Well, good luck in any case. Can I have your sandwich?”

“Eat it! All you hospital denizens must have cast iron stomachs!” she called over her shoulder as she hurried from the cafeteria.

“Yeah! Not like you soft office practitioners!” he yelled after her.

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“Your runt needs some schooling in patience and manners. Didn’t wait for the bag of waters to break nor the operating room. Halfway down the birth canal without bothering to call ahead,” the nurse at the station informed Ginny, as she stepped off the elevator.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Ginny muttered, breaking into a jog for the middle of the hall. “Any bleeding?”

“Not really. From what I gather, if the father hadn’t bothered to look, they wouldn’t have had a clue the baby was coming until it was practically falling out. He came and got Vance. She’s in there with them.”

“Call my husband, Winifred. Let him know what’s going on. Hey, there, kiddo, didn’t you have any warning pains?” she asked Hermione, as she pushed the door open.

“Who could tell?” she panted, while Nurse Vance rearranged the sheet draped across Hermione’s knees. “I thought they were just the usual aches.”

“Left the amniotic sac intact. It still hasn’t broken, even though the head’s completely in the birth canal. Figured you would want to break it yourself,” Nurse Vance said, scooting back on the wheeled chair she was perched on. “There you go, Doc. Your call from here on out, but I don’t think we’ve got time to get organized and waltz down to a separate delivery room. Want me to put the call out for a couple more delivery nurses and incubators? Gonna be a tight squeeze in here, though,” she added, looking around.

“Round up the incubators and one more delivery nurse. We’ll just do it here. And try not to elbow one another. Guess the runt got tired of being on the bottom, eh?” Ginny said, sitting on the chair and pulling herself closer to the end of the bed, between Hermione’s legs. “Going to sit you up a bit straighter,” Ginny added, tapping the bed with her wand. “Viktor, she’s probably not going to be able to push too hard on her own seeing as her abdominal muscles are so strained just from holding everything in, so you’ll probably have to help. Here, give me your right hand. Just put it there, on top of her belly, and when I tell her to push, press down steady and easy. Normally, I’d have a nurse do it, but we’ll practically be in each other’s pockets as it is. But, first, let’s try it with just Hermione. I want you to bear down, nice and steady, as much as you can, for just the count of three. One... two... three... good. Alright, they’re here with the equipment, leave the other two incubators out in the hall until we need them, so we can breathe... So, let’s see what we can do about the impatient little rascal. Next time you feel your belly tighten up, I want you to let me know, alright? Got the natal unit on standby just in case? Right, then, guess you two are about to be-”

“It’s happening,” Hermione interrupted, clutching at Viktor’s left hand.

“Actually, the entire natal unit’s sort of put themselves on standby in the hall. They told us to just wheel them straight out and they would take them to the nursery as they get here. Not every day we get triplets. They’d be in here staring over your shoulder if they thought they could fit,” Nurse Vance said.

“Well, good, then. Come on, Hermione. Give this little one some help, and I’ll see

if I can't get the bag-" Ginny began, but she was interrupted by a gush of fluid hitting the floor. "So much for me having to rupture the bag of waters, then. Give me a towel, this one's very impatient. It's impersonating someone being shot out of a cannon. Just a little more... there, now." Ginny scrubbed with the towel for a moment, and absolute silence fell in the room. "Come on... come on, sweetie. I know you've been all cramped up in there on the bottom for seven months, baby... take a-" but she was cut short by a loud, lusty howl from the towel. She laughed and said, "That's it, honey. Let us have it!"

"Is the baby okay?" Viktor asked anxiously, biting his lip.

"She's a little small and mad as a drenched Cornish Pixie, but listen to her squall!" Ginny replied, holding her up.

"She?" Hermione prodded.

"She! Runt's a girl! Here, put her in the incubator and let the natal bunch at her, or they'll storm the door," Ginny told the nurse. "Now, let's see if we can't get more organized before the next one lands in my lap. Ice chips, more towels, clean the floor, and for Heaven's sake, bring me some scrubs!"

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"Nnnnnnnnggghhh... h... h... how far apart are they now?" Hermione moaned, clinging to Viktor's arm.

"About a minute. They've picked up again," Viktor said, mopping her sweaty forehead with a damp cloth. He rubbed her bare, straining belly gently, below the hospital gown bunched beneath her chest. The muscles tensed and knotted with each contraction, hardening and taking her breath.

"You're doing fine, Hermione. Uh oh. Got a breech, here. Feet first. I'm going to pull while you push, okay? This one ought to be small enough to deliver breech without too much trouble. Okay, Mum, give me a nice, solid push, and we'll work with you... good, that's it. Bear down," Ginny encouraged, tugging at the baby's heels steadily once they got within reach.

"How... how do women who have bigger babies *do* this?" Hermione asked, gritting her teeth.

"Funny, I've had a lot of women carrying pretty big babies come into the office these last few weeks and ask me how you carry three babies at once. I guess the answer to both is 'you just do'. Hope you two have at least one boy's name picked out," Ginny said as a quiet, mewling cry came from the bundle in her arms. "Incubator."



“He’s not crying very loud,” Hermione said, going pale.

“He’s pinking up just fine, and that’s what’s important. You’ll be trying to get him to stop crying soon enough. Come on, now. Save your strength. Lie back and relax until the next one gets here. I’ll walk with him to the nursery if you two can do without me a minute. Might even give Neville an update. He’s probably hanging about at the end of the hall,” Ginny said, placing the bundle inside the open incubator.

“I’m fine,” Hermione whispered, leaning back tiredly.

“Go on,” Viktor said, nodding as Ginny wheeled the incubator toward the door.

“This one’s a boy, so definitely not all identical,” Ginny told the mediwizard outside the door. “How’s the first one? They’re asking.”

“Small, but spunky. Couple of ounces short of four pounds. And evidently she doesn’t like being alone. She’s howled to beat the band and thrown her arms and legs around like a champion most of the hour and a half she’s been in the preemie nursery. She acts royally peeved that we put her out by herself. Or maybe it’s all the strange people staring and poking at her that she doesn’t like. Might put them all in one bassinet, if it seems to help. Some twins just aren’t happy apart. Could be the same for them. Although, he seems quieter. Want me to take this little fella?” he asked, tapping at the incubator.

“Did I hear ‘he’ and ‘she’?” Neville asked. He had walked up from the benches at the end of the hall, where Harry and Ron and their wives also sat.

“Sure, take him. One of each, so far. The deliveries themselves have been pretty quick, since they’re so small, but she started off pretty worn out. First one nearly fell out without any warning. If Viktor hadn’t checked, I don’t think Hermione would have noticed she was having the first one until it was practically on the bed. I think the runt was eager to get off the bottom of the pile. She came out like she was being shot out of a cannon. Boy there decided to come out feet first, so I had to pull him. I think both amniotic sacs broke at the same time with these last two. That was a lot of water. Two babies down, one more to-” Ginny said, but was cut short by Hermione’s shriek of pain from inside the room.

Nurse Vance stuck her head into the hall. “Think you had better get back in here. Got another breech that’s insisting on coming out bottom first. All folded up. Won’t budge either way. Tried manipulating it back and turning it, but I had no luck. I think a foot’s caught out here, that’s why it won’t go back.”

“Call Viktor’s parents. I don’t think any of us thought to do it. They don’t even

know the babies are coming early,” Ginny tacked on hastily as she followed the nurse back in.

“Good luck!” Neville shouted at the closed door.

Ginny thought the next few minutes couldn't have moved by any slower. And the baby couldn't have moved any less. No matter how much she strained, Hermione couldn't move the baby on her own, even with assistance pushing. “I can't do this anymore!” Hermione sobbed, as Viktor put his arm behind her shoulders and braced her up again.

“Come on, you can do this. After this one, it's all over,” he told her, grasping her hand.

“This one managed to back out in the most awkward position I've ever seen, knees are pinned almost up to the chest. I don't like doing this, but if it hasn't moved in five minutes of pushing, it needs some help. Relax all you can and try to breathe, don't tense up and hold your breath. *Mobilus Forceps!*” Ginny pulled at the baby, and finally, after an agonizing minute, one foot popped free, and she hastily pulled the baby out by the heel. Again, complete silence in the room, as the two nurses hovered over her, with the incubator lid open. The small face was worryingly ashen, and the silence seemed to go on forever. “If they aren't outside the door, page them,” she ordered when it went on a beat too long, jumping up, pausing for a second to seal her lips over the tiny mouth and nose, and blow a puff of air. She massaged the little chest as she ran for the door. “Girl!” she shouted back at them as she pushed it open, and she just caught Hermione's first wrenching sob before it swung shut behind her.

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“Gin? Is it okay if we all come in this far?” Neville whispered from the nursery door.

“Sure,” she said distractedly, waving them in, not taking her eyes off the glass in the door between the general nursery and the preemie nursery. “Poor man. He just lost it. Went in there, saw the two of them, and completely lost it. But after what he's been through, who can blame him?”

“How are the runt and the boy?” Harry asked softly.

“In there squalling their heads off right along with him. Good lungs. Funny thing is, if he talks, they hear his voice and clam right up. Runt squalled the whole time she was down here until he came in and said something. They recognize it,” Ginny murmured.

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The thought hadn't even entered his mind. Not even the possibility of this happening. You bore up under everything, thought you would break, and then you bore up a bit more, because somebody else needed you. He had been fine until he had been shown in here and the nurse had walked out. And then it had hit him. Like a ton of bricks. The events of the day. The entire seven months. The years of waiting, hoping and agonizing disappointment. Most of their marriage by now. Looking at the two little flailing bodies dwarfed by blankets and stocking caps that were a size too big, the crying that sounded like it was a size too big as well, and the third incubator sitting there, empty, it had suddenly been all he could do not to just curl up in the corner and lose all control. So he simply lost it standing up, leaning on the edges of the incubators, over them. They cried and he cried with them for a while. Who knew crying could ever sound so beautiful?

He had no idea how long he had stood there, before there was just nothing left. "Shhh... it's okay... it's okay," he said, as much to himself as to them, laying a hand on each narrow chest, and he could feel their hearts pounding like hummingbirds beneath his fingers. It still stunned him just how big his hand looked in comparison. At the sound of his voice, they quieted and blinked, stirring and squirming contentedly beneath his touch.

"You're good at that getting them to stop crying, want to volunteer around here?" the preemie nurse said, as she pushed through the swinging door. She was an older, plump witch who had an air of "seen it all" about her.

"Who gets me to stop, though?" Viktor asked in a strangled voice, wiping at his cheek with a sleeve.

"Oh, we've had daddies fall apart worse than that with a lot less reason," the nurse laughed. "You're allowed to pick them up, you know. They're just smaller than average, they won't break. We even let you take them home, eventually. Here, why don't you start with this one, since I'm already carting her around?" she offered, holding out the loosely wrapped bundle with one leg awkwardly splinted and sticking up out of the blanket. "Here, just make sure you get beneath the splint and support it, her Aunt Ginny was kind of rough on her when she yanked her out. Broke her little leg. I'm sure that's good and sore. She'll probably have the splint off and be none the worse for wear by the time you take her home, though," she added, transferring the baby to Viktor's arm.

"She's okay otherwise?" Viktor asked, staring at his daughter, who was silently taking in the lights in the ceiling with wide eyes, as though still shocked to be in a place so big and bright after months in a space so crowded and dark.

“Fine. Just gave us a good scare before we got her started breathing. They’re all pretty tough. Don’t be afraid to handle them. Babies need handling. Especially preemies. You’ve got another arm and a lap there. If you sit, I’ll let you have a go at all three of them at once. It will be another thirty minutes at least before they wheel your wife down, most likely.” She pulled a chair closer to the incubators and waited for him to sit before scooping up the other girl and wrapping her tightly in the blanket. The nurse settled her in the crook of Viktor’s other arm and then snugly wrapped the boy, nestling him into Viktor’s lap, head toward his knees. The baby boy wriggled, nudging against Viktor’s stomach with his feet. “And just think, your wife put up with months of that from all three of them,” she said with another hearty laugh.

“Oh, she put up with worse than that,” Viktor protested.

“Hey, there. Thanks, Luella,” Ginny greeted the nurse as she headed for the door. “The others would come in, but technically, it’s only supposed to be family and personnel in here, and Luella would have my head if I try to bring that many in first thing. Bet we can get them to bend the rules by tomorrow, though. Novelty and all. Thought I would wait until you had at least gotten to meet all of them, properly. They all got rushed off so fast. So, how is having your hands full and more? Going to be okay there, Papa?” she asked, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m not sure,” Viktor replied, shaking his head.

“Oh, surely you will. Hermione couldn’t have done this without you. More ways than one. Your parents are on their way. They were going to stop by your house first. Bring you two some things. Neville finally tracked them down. Seriously, are you okay, now?”

“I... I just... let’s say twenty years or so caught up with me all at once,” Viktor said softly. The second girl waved her splinted leg and wailed angrily, balling up her fists.

“Ohhhh, sweetheart, I know... mean old Aunt Ginny got too rough. But you got yourself in that position all by yourself,” Ginny soothed, tickling her cheek.

“Viktor... can I ask a question? And you don’t have to answer. I’m just curious. When Alice was born, I left and took the hall that went by the nursery. And you were standing outside the window. Hours after you left the room. I didn’t say anything, because I didn’t know what to say, then. What were you... doing?”

Viktor raised his eyes from the babies and looked across the room at nothing in particular. “You can’t imagine how important having a baby was to us. Even right after we got married, we talked about it. We planned to put it off for a while, but that didn’t stop us talking about it. But you take it for granted that when you want them, they just come. First three or four years we were married, we played pretty

fast and loose with the birth control, because if we had an ‘accident’, it didn’t matter much. It’s not as though having one baby before we planned it was going to blow our budget or completely derail one of our careers. We only wanted a few years with just us to worry about, for a change. No worrying about bigger things or too far into the future, just now and us. No saving the world as we know it. Just doing a good job at what we liked doing and pleasing ourselves. Had a few near misses here and there over the years, but we weren’t too broken up over it. Assumed it just wasn’t time, it would happen when it happened. It was nice to dream about the possibility, in any case. She missed easy and we jumped to conclusions. Then we forgot the birth control altogether. Figured it would be a couple of years, or three, at best, and we would have a baby before we had spent our first decade together. Not too shabby, considering our ages. And before we knew it, we had been married eleven years,” he said, pausing and pressing his lips together for a moment before continuing.

“Lots of false alarms, but no real thing. And it started to hurt when they said no. It started to hurt when other people shared their good news with us. It started to hurt when other couples talked about morning sickness, growing bellies, and babies. It made us wonder what we did wrong. So we tackled it like we did every other problem. We read every book and article we could get our hands on, and tried every harebrained idea and method we came across, and still nothing but a false whiff of hope every few months and nothing but heartbreak in the end. We inquired about adoption, but with me not being born in the Muggle world, going to a Muggle orphanage was out of the question, never mind that adopting a Muggle child would be sentencing yourself to outliving your child. And adopting a child in the magical world, well, you know how rare that is. Wizard families tend to step in and take care of their own. But we thought maybe if we adopted and relaxed about the whole thing, possibly, it would happen. After a while, she stopped telling me when she went to the office to find out. Don’t think I didn’t know. I probably knew when she was due better than she did. And I knew when it didn’t come. She shopped offices on research trips and away game trips. She never went to the same one twice, if she could help it.” He cleared his throat and sat silent for a space.

“And with every month, it hurt worse. It got to be like a funeral every month. A death. It got to be something I couldn’t help. I would stop by and look at the nursery every time I was here. And wonder. Wonder when it would stop passing us by month after month, year after year. More and more people I worked with dropping out for parental leave and more and more new Weasleys under our feet, and Heaven help me, in a way, we hated you all for it. And we dreaded when the six of you started having children and we ran out of people to avoid. I finally talked her into going to a specialist. Only, she backed out on me at the last minute and told me to cancel the appointment. And for the first time, I did something without telling her. I went. I... ah... I’ve known for over five years now that it was Hermione. That whatever was wrong, it was in her body. They told me

there was no reason I shouldn't be able to become a father," Viktor said, swallowing hard.

"Why didn't you say anything? You could have said something..." Ginny said, openmouthed.

"Because she wasn't ready to hear it. Same reason you wanted to do the Potion without telling us. It hurts to hope. But not nearly as bad as it does to be told there's no reason to hope. And because there was only one thing more important to me than becoming a father."

"And what was that?" Ginny prompted, squatting beside the chair.

He turned and looked her in the eye. "Being a good husband."

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"Say it again," Hermione prompted.

"Nikolai Luben Krum. Kind of a mouthful for someone that small," Viktor said experimentally, leaning closer.

"He would grow into it. Luben. I like that. Especially the meanings, together. I hadn't really thought about it before, but Petar and Ekaterina gave you two names with almost the same meaning. Nikolai is 'victorious', right?" Hermione asked, hefting the little boy in her hands.

"Roughly. Depends on who you ask, like most names," Viktor replied, shifting the baby in his arm a bit so he could hold the splint with one hand, the bottle with the other.

"So technically, you're 'victor victorious'? At least your parents were consistent. And a testament to the power of positive reinforcement, I suppose. Nikolai Luben. Luben, derived from lub, for love. 'Victorious love'. 'Victory derived from love', I think I would sign off on that. You okay with that name?" Hermione asked, looking at Viktor.

"I think I could live with it. So long as you don't tell the poor child we named him after me. Could we possibly look more uncreative?" Viktor said with a soft smile.

"But we did name him after you. And it's not like we just recycled your name and stuck 'Junior' on the end. I love your middle name. So, Nikolai Luben Krum," Hermione said, situating the drowsing baby in the crook of her left arm, between them, "welcome to our family. We're your Mama and Papa," she murmured.

Viktor raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You don’t want to be called Mummy, or something more British?”

“Just seems natural. You call Ekaterina and Petar Mama and Papa. I refer to them as your mama and papa. I’ve even called them my mama by marriage and my papa by marriage once or twice. We’re willing to name them some very un-British names, why not take very un-British titles?” Hermione said with a shrug.

“That mean you’ve got two girl names up your sleeve and ready to go, then?” Viktor asked.

“Not all put together. Which one were you sort of partial to, again?” Hermione asked, rubbing the runt’s tummy with her free hand as she kicked on her lap.

“Tereza. It has a nice ‘oomph’ to it. It’s got some heft without being too long. Last thing we want is a bunch of long names. Run out of breath calling everyone for dinner.”

“Tereza. Makes her sound like an empress. Tereza. Tereza Ludmila.”

“Mama’s going to kill us both.”

“I like your mother’s middle name,” Hermione protested.

“She doesn’t. Thinks it’s too frilly. But I think that’s just because she hated being called ‘Mila’ by an uncle who insisted Ekaterina was too long. Ludmila. Favor of the people. Tereza Ludmila Krum. Fair enough. Well, now what about you? Got to come up with something suitably epic-sounding for you, don’t we? Wounded in the course of getting here and all. Look, I swear we won’t leave you until last on everything. It’s just that you haven’t been quite so demanding of the attention like Miss Lungs, over there. Grant you, you and your brother squashed her all that time. Now then,” Viktor said, wiping the milk from the pursed mouth and holding her up so he could look into her face, “who are you supposed to be?”

“Only one name left on our short list that fits. Are you thinking what I’m thinking? Suitably regal, isn’t it?” Hermione asked after a moment.

“Yuliya. But what are we going to use for a middle name? Can’t go shortchanging her by not giving her one,” Viktor argued.

“What have you got that’s sort of soft, short and sweet?” Hermione asked, tucking a fingertip into Nikolai’s hand. “The sweetest flowers in all the world. A baby’s hands,” she murmured.

“Where did that come from?” Viktor asked.

“Oh, I read it in one of the baby books. Famous quotes about babies. I thought it was beautiful.”

“That’s it. Lala. Means ’tulip’. Yulia Lala Krum. Now, all of them suitably named?”

“I think so. Unless we lost count. I see one thing, right now.”

“What’s that?” Viktor asked, shushing Tereza, who had begun to fuss.

“You really shouldn’t have more babies at a time than you have arms,” Hermione said.

“Oh, that’s what laps are for. And grandparents. Remember what Ginny said. You just do. We only have to do this one day at a time. Just like being married. Think, when these are nineteen months old, we’ll have been married twenty years. That’s a lot of days.”

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“Twenty years. Seem like that long to you?” Viktor asked, lifting Yulia under the arms with his left arm and putting her astride his left thigh, opposite Tereza.

“No, it doesn’t,” Hermione answered.

“Nooo,” Nikolai echoed solemnly from her lap.

“Thank you, my little mynah bird,” Hermione said, planting a kiss on the crown of his dark head.

“Bird. Mine bird,” he repeated.

“Me either. Seems like last week I was standing by the library stacks, trying to think of what to say to you to get you to go to the Yule Ball with me.”

“I think you managed to stutter the right thing. I was so busy wondering why Viktor Krum was even talking to me that I didn’t pay much attention to what you were actually saying, until you asked if I would do you the honor of being your partner for the Yule Ball. That got my attention,” she said, spooning up some of the mashed potatoes from her plate and feeding Nikolai.

“The letters were better. I didn’t have to stand there and agonize over every syllable and wonder how firmly I was putting my foot in my mouth while you looked at me. Year apart did us good. Gave me time to practice my English, if



nothing else,” Viktor allowed, feeding a few green beans to Yuliya and Tereza. Tereza had Hermione’s features, while Nikolai and Yuliya had the sharp cheekbones and slightly solemn, thoughtful frown that Viktor wore most of the time, though he could always coax a smile out of them. They all had thick, dark, slightly wavy hair. And Hermione sometimes thought the tip of Nikolai’s nose already showed signs of tucking under slightly, like his father’s.

“You were charming enough at the Yule Ball. You were just kind of shy and quiet. But you’re right. The letters were better. I prefer you face to face, now, though.”

“You ball?” Yuliya asked curiously, leaning her head back.

“Yule Ball. Back ages and ages ago, before you were even thought of, and your Mama looked a right fairy princess, if I do say so myself. And I just did,” Viktor said lightly, leaning over to kiss her nose, which made her laugh.

“Back before these three wrecked my figure, and I could pull that off,” Hermione said with a laugh.

Viktor leaned back in the chair and studied her for a moment. “Still looks awfully good from where I’m sitting. I would still take you to a ball. Or a cupboard. Either one, if you’re willing.”

“Please! Not in front of the children!” Hermione said in mock horror. “Might dance with you later. And possibly sneak off and not dance if we can find someone to entertain the moppets here for a little while.”

“There are about as many people here at this anniversary party as there were at our wedding. Surely we can find a handful we trust with our offspring for twenty minutes. And I think it’s good they know I’m crazy about their mother.”

“You’re assuming we can peel the little monkeys off of us for twenty minutes. Tough enough to do that at home,” Hermione said with an indulgent smile, as Tereza leaned and put out her arms, silently begging to be taken.

“Mama,” Tereza whined plaintively, when it took Hermione a moment to reach out and take her.

“Excuse me, but... aren’t you Viktor Krum?” the young witch from the waiting staff asked, as she collected dishes from the table.

“I used to be,” Viktor answered offhandedly, resettling Yuliya in his lap.

“What do you mean ‘used to be’?” she asked, obviously confused.

“Get called ‘Papa’ a lot more often, these days.”

“All these yours? They’re adorable. And very well behaved for being so small.”

“Thank you.”

“I just wanted to let you know that I saw you play your first World Cup. It’s still probably the most impressive game I’ve ever seen a Seeker play. I would ask for your autograph, but I got it then. My mum took me. I was six,” she gushed.

“Thank you. That makes me feel really old,” Viktor said with a laugh, as Hermione elbowed him.

“Well, you were only twelve years older than I was, if that makes you feel better. And you were very nice to me. You even knelt down and talked to me for a minute or two. I was so impressed, all I could do was gawp at you with big eyes and my mouth hanging open.”

“I used to get that a lot. Actually, I get that a lot now, but usually only when I’m doing the voices for storybooks at bedtime. Or if I say something in Bulgarian that they haven’t heard before.”

“What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Oh, it’s our anniversary party. They’re celebrating the fact that we’ve managed to be married twenty years without her killing me. This is my wife, Hermione. And our children, Yuliya, Nikolai, and Tereza, respectively,” he said, laying a hand on each small, dark head as he spoke their names.

“Well, they’re beautiful children. I had better get back to work. It was nice to meet you and actually be able to form words, this time,” she said, going back to gathering up the dishes from another table.

“Sok, Papa. Molia,” Nikolai pleaded, putting his arms out.

“Here, I’ll trade you. That one wants juice. And he did say ‘please’. I’ll take him. Speaking of storybooks, I’ve got to say something to Minerva about the storybooks she sent, and I see she’s up there at the refreshment table. I’ll kill two birds, before I forget,” Viktor said, standing up, swapping Yuliya onto Hermione’s lap and gathering Nikolai up to sit in the crook of his arm.

“Juice, Papa. Pleeeeeease,” Nikolai insisted.

“Za da te razbera. Heard you the first time. We’re going to get juice,” Viktor said, shoving his chair back under the table.

“Me too,” Tereza said.

“Oh, alright. Come on, fickle girl. Hermione, just do one thing, while I’m gone,” Viktor said, hefting Tereza up in the other arm.

“What’s that?”

“Guard my drink. For at least five more years or so, guard my drink.”