

Last 'first day of school' done, then, Viktor thought to himself, tossing his Potions book onto the bed in his dorm room. It felt odd to be back at school after all the fuss surrounding the World Cup, and frankly, he wished people would finally let it drop. The black eyes had faded completely by now, but his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose were still slightly sore. Maybe he wouldn't have to put up with so much staring, pointing and whispering and fuss in a few weeks. By Halloween, he would be at Hogwarts, with the rest of the candidates for the Triwizard Tournament, and with any luck at all, most of the students there wouldn't be much interested in him and leave him alone. If he were extra lucky, he wouldn't be picked to compete and could just keep his head down and mind his own business.

He stretched a little and looked over toward the corner, where the wicker basket sat. There was a sizable stack of letters there, fan mail. He still couldn't fathom why anyone would be that interested in writing him when they didn't really know him from Adam, but he usually tried to keep up with them, and even to send a quick note back occasionally. He picked them up and flipped through them, glancing at the handwriting. Oddly, one was a large yellow envelope, rather than a roll of parchment, so he put that one aside and flicked a long, tapered finger under the flap.

He drew the piece of parchment from inside the envelope. It was pink, lightly perfumed with vanilla, and covered in a frilly, fancy hand.

Dear Viktor,

I was at the World Cup final, and I thought you were ever so brave going after the Snitch like that, after taking a Bludger in the face. And you were absolutely wonderful on your broom. Aidan Lynch didn't stand a chance! I've never written a fan letter like this before, but I think you're quite adorable. Do you have a girlfriend? Owl me.

Parma Pinkenbaum

Might as well send a nice, polite thank you note, at least. That one wasn't nearly as shrill and fawning as some of the letters he had gotten. He shrugged and started to tuck the letter back into the envelope, when he realized there was something else tucked inside. He turned the envelope up over his bed, and the contents tumbled out. It looked to be a small scrap of material. *Probably a handkerchief or scarf,* he thought, going to answer the knock at the door.

"Look, can I borrow your Potions notes, I missed that bit about asphodel and whatever-rot," Poliakoff prattled as he came through the door without being invited in. "Ah, got your usual fan mail, I see. So, is this your Potions notebook? I'll just... what on earth?" he said, holding up the scrap of material and stretching

it out between his hands. "Why, Viktor, you sly dog, you, holding out on me?"

"What?" Viktor replied.

"Well, I mean, you've obviously had a girl in here, and she forgot her knickers," Poliakoff gloated, showing him the scrap of material, which when held up, were obviously a pair of white cotton knickers with pink polka dots.

Viktor could feel his cheeks burn red. "Did not."

"Didn't forget them? Does she keep an extra pair here then? Gave them to you for a keepsake?" Poliakoff pressed.

"No girl," he insisted, shaking his head. His face felt like it was on fire.

"Riiiiight... no girl. I suppose these panties just Apparated their way in here, did they? Oh, have it your way. No girl, wink, wink, I won't tell anyone, don't worry," Poliakoff babbled, laying a finger next to his nose, "It's always the quiet ones," he added, pressing the wisp of material into Viktor's hand. "Thanks for the notes! Don't hurt yourself with that girl you don't have!" Poliakoff called over his shoulder. Viktor gave an involuntary shudder and tossed the panties into his trunk. He would have to get rid of them sometime, but he certainly wasn't going to get expelled the first day of seventh year for being caught with a girl's knickers in his rubbish bin. What would possess a girl to mail you her knickers, for heaven sake? Maybe he wouldn't send a note in response to *that* one after all.

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*Maybe I should go flying after every Runes class, it might make it more tolerable. Couldn't make it worse,* Viktor thought, coming back in and propping his broom beside the door. *Bad enough having to sit through a lecture. Twice as bad having to sit through a lecture with six girls pointing and giggling at you like idiots the whole while you're trying to concentrate.* He dreaded coming in tonight, since he had already seen at least four envelopes in the basket, in addition to the usual rolls of parchment. After that first envelope, and a few scattered ones since then, he hated opening anything that might hold any surprises. Tentatively, he lifted the flap on the first manila envelope. Nothing in there but a piece of parchment, thank goodness, from a kid. That one definitely ranked a return note. After all, he *had* asked nicely for an autograph.

Pursing his lips, he looked at the other three envelopes, stacked on his bed. *The small red one next, he thought,* tearing along the top. He unfolded the parchment, and to his great surprise, something fell out. *Oh, not again,* he thought, picking up the red cotton knickers carefully between thumb and forefinger, touching them as little as possible. *Where does one get such a thing*

*as red cotton knickers with the Bulgarian flag on them?*

Dearest Viktor,

Loved you in the World Cup... maybe we could get together sometime?

Melinda Puddleworth

*Not writing back to this one. Where would one even go to shop for unmentionables with flags on them, of all things? And why would you send them to someone you've never met in any case?* Sighing, he went on to the next manila envelope. *Well, at least those didn't have a flag on them. Maybe they put the ones with the flags next to these, the red ones with the Golden Snitch on the front, wherever they sold such a thing.* After reading half the accompanying note, he decided maybe it was best to just discard that one, since it coyly invited him to play "catch the Snitch" and just got worse from there. Not that he hadn't heard far worse language in some locker rooms, but still, it wasn't the sort of slang you expected to read in a letter from a stranger. Although he had to admit that some of it was a pretty clever play on words, given that there was only a letter's difference between the two words in English... still, it didn't bear repeating in polite company. Or even impolite company. Or company at all. Perhaps it didn't bear repeating when you were alone, either. Maybe he had better burn that one, soon as he stopped fanning his face with it. *Is it that hot in here, or am I just that embarrassed? Poliakoff would have a field day if he ever found that one in my room...*

*Hmmm, no two alike,* Viktor thought as he shook the black French knickers trimmed in lace out of the last envelope. No need to bother reading the note, the perfume was choking him as it was. He heaved a sigh and shuffled them off to his trunk, throwing them in the corner under some of his books, with all the others he had accumulated over the last couple of weeks. At this rate, he would have to buy a second trunk before leaving for Hogwarts. He'd burn them all if he didn't think the smoke would draw the caretaker, Pritkin.

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"You almost packed?" Poliakoff chirped from the doorway, just barging in and not bothering to knock.

"Ever knock?" Viktor huffed, slamming down his trunk lid.

"Oh, sorry. I figured if you had a girl in here you would have locked the door."

"Told you. No girl."

"Ooooooh, grown woman, then... not the Potions mistress!? She's been looking at you funny, mooning over you in class. Bet she would give you some one on one tutoring. I hear she likes Quidditch. A lot. Just adores it. Bet she wouldn't mind you showing her your 'broomstick'." Poliakoff said, wagging his eyebrows lecherously.

"No!" Viktor replied, lowering his eyebrows.

"Pity, she'd look nice in those knickers. Even better out of them. You're about the color of your robes, you know..."

"Shut up."

"Touchy, touchy. Must not be taking much, I don't see many of your things missing."

"Just the owl and some robes."

"None of your precious little books?" Poliakoff asked, waving a hand at the bookshelves.

"Don't fit."

"Then you're not reducing things down much. Need help packing?"

"No!"

"Well, fine, then, be that way. You're cranky when someone teases you about your adoring public, aren't you? Is it the librarian? I bet she's pretty when she takes her hair down..."

"Out!"

"Okay, fine, fine. See you at dinner."

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Well, on the bright side, at least his trunk was lighter and easier to get into his quarters on the ship. Piles and piles of scraps of cloth were a lot lighter than books, at any rate. They were to leave in the morning. Pity they would be under water most of the trip. If they weren't, he might risk tossing the darned things overboard in the middle of the night. He had gotten another dozen today. *What was it with females that made them want to ship crates of something you had absolutely no use for?*

It was getting hazardous to open his mail. He had gotten one the other day at the breakfast table by mistake because the envelope was marked "Personal". Thank goodness he had opened it below the table and taken a peek first. Pulling out a little satin pair of knickers packaged to look like a rose was not the way to reduce the amount of attention coming your way. *Stupid girls. Stupid boys for that matter, acting like how a girl looked in her knickers was important.* He shuddered to think what a stir that would have caused, having a pair of girl's knickers nearly land in your oatmeal while opening your mail. Poliakoff had tried to grab the envelope and take his own look, but Viktor had given him that glare that promised a punch in the nose if he didn't back off. Luckily Poliakoff had the good sense to know when to quit.

He would probably never hear the end of it from Poliakoff as it was. Just yesterday in class he had asked if it was the tavern mistress from the village who had left her knickers. *The tavern mistress! Not that Madam Alyssandra wasn't an attractive woman, but she was twice his age for Heaven's sake! And she would wear bigger knickers in any case. Not that it was a bad thing. She was just... curvier.* Viktor mentally kicked himself. *Get your mind off knickers. It's not like thinking about a lady's shoe size. I'm going for a swim in the lake. The nice, cold lake. And if I so much as think the word "knickers", I'm going to drown myself.*

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"Forgetting something?" Poliakoff asked, as they walked up the gangplank.

"No."

"Your big old wicker basket over there. Full of mail. The caretaker dropped it off and made me promise to give it to you. Saves the owls several trips forwarding them to you." With a deep sigh, Viktor trudged back down the gangplank and picked up the wicker basket by the handles. It felt heavier than his trunk had yesterday. With a grimace, he noted that only a few were simple rolls of parchment. What on earth was he going to do with them if he got more? He was out of room in the trunk. Maybe he could chuck some of them into the boiler along with the coal and wood. Although he doubted the little leather number that seemed to be made up exclusively of some cobbled together shoelaces would burn too well. He was getting a cold. Maybe he could use them as hankies. It's not like he had room in his trunk for too many handkerchiefs. Maybe he would just stick his head in the boiler. "Most people would kill to get the kind of mail you're getting. I know I would... my stars, did I actually see one corner of your mouth twitch like you almost smiled?" Viktor only snorted in reply. *If Poliakoff only knew the type of mail I get! His head would probably explode.* "Did those knickers belong to the girl who works in the bookshop? You spend a lot of time in there. You like the bookish ones? I wouldn't mind getting her down behind the shelves for a little research between the covers myself..."

"You ask me again, I'm going to knock you overboard. For the last time, no. And stop talking about Yuliya like that."

"Okay, okay. I will let the subject of whose pink polka dots you were poking around in drop. Leaving her behind, anyway. Probably. Unless it's one of the girls who are coming with us? Did you give her a pair of your knickers, too, to remember you by? You even wear knickers? I would have thought you would just go commando. Saves time if any of those giggling girls want to 'meet you in the cupboard' at a moment's notice." Viktor just rolled his dark eyes, and then glared at Poliakov. "Oh, come on, surely you've taken at least one of them up on it! Not even Kalya? I hear she can do some interesting gymnastics in tight spaces." Viktor just shook his head in exasperation as he walked on around the deck, leaving Poliakov standing by the rail. *This is going to be a long trip*, he thought to himself.

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*Good Lord. What good were knickers when they seemed to be missing the most vital bit? Or maybe it was 'bits'. Okay, maybe he could see mailing the thong off. That couldn't be comfortable to wear. Floss was not intended to be used anywhere below the waist. And the crotchless pair, well, he wasn't even going to bother thinking about why anyone would want to wear those. That was entirely too much information Too much information. And it wasn't like he had anyone he could ask and find out. Not without getting a black eye. Viktor sighed and shoved another handful into his laundry bag, then cinched it closed. Tight. The trunk was completely full, no amount of Reducing Charms was going to gain any more space in there, and the cupboard was just about bursting at the seams as well. He would just volunteer for stoking the boiler and at least get rid of some of them.*

Poliakov opened the door and stuck his head in. "Knock, knock. Why are you taking your laundry sack? It's only been two days, did you pack dirty robes?" Viktor gave a shrug. "Talk my ear off, why don't you? You want patrol, steering, or boiler this shift?"

"Boiler."

"Why on earth do you want to volunteer for the nastiest, hottest, hardest job there is? That's four times in the last two days, both shifts. Let Borodin shovel for once. He always volunteers for patrol and then naps. So, going to make Borodin be useful for once?" Viktor just shook his head. "Well, will you at least make him steer? Let me be on patrol for once." Viktor shrugged. "Come on, I can stop by and talk every once in a while. Maybe help you feed the boiler."

"If you want."

"You're welcome."

"Not necessary. Don't put yourself out for my sake," Viktor said airily.

"Just a boiler-feeding fool, aren't you? Pity it doesn't heat the ship better. Still, the fuel is stretching further than I remember on other trips. Don't you agree?"

"Maybe," Viktor answered noncommittally.

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At least the cupboard was empty. Five days worth of shoveling them into the boiler when Poliakoff would leave him be had at least made a dent in them. Heaven only knew what he was going to do with the rest if they had to stay anywhere else besides the ship. The ship might be cold, it might be damp, it might even be leaky and musty, but at least he didn't have to open his trunk in front of anyone. Being at Hogwarts meant he would have to start speaking in English again. It had been a nice respite, being at Durmstrang, settling back into Russian and Bulgarian for the most part. He normally only spoke English when he had to, like with reporters. Under duress. The coaches practically had to hogtie him to get him to sit with any of them in the first place, much less actually speak to them. Who was he kidding? He only spoke, period, when he had to. Papa had always said that silence was no substitute for wisdom, but it was a fair imitation. And being quiet tended to keep you out of a lot of trouble. Besides, there were so many syllables in English that felt odd in your mouth when you were Slavic.

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"So anyway, Father was thinking of sending me to Durmstrang, because at least they have a pure-blood requirement. Keeps the trash out, doesn't it?" Malfoy added. His head was killing him, but he almost always caught a cold when they traveled for more than four days. It was nice enough here, he supposed, particularly the ceiling of the Hall. It was warm and rather pleasantly appointed inside, all except for the incessant prattling going on at the dinner table. Right now, he wanted to kick Karkaroff for insisting they sit with the, what was it? *Slytherins. This one here apparently never shut up about his favorite subject. Himself. Oh, a pause in the prattle. And apparently some sort of response was expected, because he seemed to be sitting there, waiting. Better play pleasant and politely puzzled foreigner. That usually fended them off.* If he said what he was really thinking...

"Vot?" Viktor said softly. It was barely audible even from the next chair.

"Keeps the ones who aren't good enough out, doesn't it? Not like here. They'll let anything in here. But in the end, Father and Mother decided they wouldn't like sending me so far away," Malfoy added with a wistful sigh.

*Funny, if I were them, I would have no problem sending him as far away as possible. Maybe via a boot in the backside. Would be kind of handy to have some of those knickers right about now. Might make a fine gag. Especially some of the ones that had arrived that morning. Nothing for it but to start filling up the cupboard again. Viktor spent the rest of the welcoming feast keeping a carefully crafted straight face while imagining Malfoy trussed up in various configurations of cotton, lace and polyamide. Might do for a way to get rid of the fool things. Or shoving them up his stuck up nose. There was certainly enough room in Malfoy's overgrown head. This was definitely going to be a long school year.*

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"Unbelievable! Dumbledore must think we're going to just sit here for this... two school champions, and one underage at that!" Karkaroff grumbled, as they walked back to the ship.

Oh, sod off, Viktor thought. Moody's right. If anyone has a right to complain, it's Potter, and no one heard a word out of him. I like him already. That other one... Cedric... he seemed peeved. And Fleur definitely got her knickers in a twist... oh no... that reminds me. A whole new pile of envelopes was already waiting for him. And all of them addressed in that beyond-neat hand that females everywhere seemed to possess. Viktor sighed in spite of himself.

"I know... I know... but you will do fine!" Karkaroff responded. If he had to deal with one more giggling female in the flesh, he was going to be tempted to pull the knickers she was wearing clear up over her head...

Honestly, signing an autograph in lipstick! Who ever heard such nonsense? He was going to have to make room under the bed. The cupboard was fast filling up again.

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*Stupid, giggling... how was he supposed to concentrate on looking anything up? It was bad enough that everything here was in English, and arranged differently, but those twittering girls were the last straw. Following him around and pointing. How were you supposed to find anything on dragons with all that moronic sniggering on the other side of the shelves? He left the book open in his hand, and skimmed a finger across the other spines that had been next to it. There should be one more here somewhere... something ... dangerous beasts... maybe? He balanced the book out to his side, leaning closer to the shelves.*



More giggling. He sighed and looked around. That girl with the Bulgarian scarf around her waist, leaning through a gap in the shelves, so high up that she had to be on one of the library ladders. She waved and pointed, giggling madly, and then disappeared back onto her side of the shelves. Following the line of her finger, he looked back at the open pages in his hand. *Well, at least she was original.* He had never seen a pair in bright blue mesh before, with little bows at the sides. *Those would leave nothing to the imagination. And at least there was no note to deal with. Whatever happened to girls having a little mystery, for crying out loud?*

He heaved a sigh, but then stiffened when he heard footsteps and a voice. Panicking, he slammed the book shut and hugged it to his chest, hoping against hope that none of the material was hanging out. "Over here, Harry, there should be some good ones over here," the bushy-haired girl called to Potter, dragging him into the aisle. Viktor slouched over the books, trying to be as small as possible, not an easy thing when you're that tall, sure he was blushing furiously. He was mortified to think that she had almost caught him standing in the middle of the aisle with a G-string balanced on an open book. He ducked his head as much as possible, trying to look intent on the titles, and prayed she wouldn't say anything to him. He couldn't possibly force his tongue to move after that. He was fairly sure he might have swallowed it. "Hello," she said idly as she swept by, but he could force himself to do nothing but nod in reply. *She looked familiar.* He was sure he had seen her somewhere other than Hogwarts before, but right now, he was simply worried about scurrying out the opposite end of the aisle and hurriedly secreting the scrap of material in his pocket, for the walk back to the ship.

"Done studying?" Poliakoff twittered, "So soon? And what do we have there?" he cried, snatching at the little blue string barely peeking out of Viktor's robe pocket and twirling them around a finger. "Woo, got one in every port, do we? Been on shore leave? Who is it this time? The one who keeps wearing the Bulgarian scarf?" Poliakoff asked eagerly. Viktor merely turned a deeper shade of crimson, snatched the knickers back and stalked back to his quarters.

*No point in even bothering to explain. Who would believe it anyway? Girls throwing unmentionables into your library books from shelves.*

"Researching the female form? Studying your anatomy?" Viktor slammed the door on Poliakoff's voice. He yanked on the cupboard door, and a small avalanche of knickers in a rainbow of colors and variety of fabrics buried his boots up to the ankles. *This was going to be a very long school year, indeed.*

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The World Cup... the Top Box maybe... that had to be where he had seen her!

The girl who seemed to have enough hair for two and was almost always buried behind a book every time he came down here. Her... and Potter, and that tallish red-headed boy... and that blathering idiot Malfoy, too. If he heard one more story about "Father this..." and "Father that" and "Mother says" and "Mother did" and how rich "Mother and Father" were, he was promptly going to stuff his pointy blonde head in the fireplace. Just the thought of having to sit anywhere near him tomorrow made his head hurt and the corners of his mouth pull down something fierce. Three times tomorrow. Stupid seating arrangements. Did anyone at the Slytherin table ever have a pleasant meal? And the Beauxbatons lot just seemed to want to complain about everything, the "heavy" food, the "cold" castle, the "annoying" ghosts, even the cutlery didn't meet with their approval. Fleur especially. He would like to see how she would cope after about five minutes in real cold. Real full of herself, that one. He might like to dunk her face first in the bouillabaisse if he were forced to sit with her. Not that Karkaroff would let him sit with Ravenclaw.

He didn't know *their* head of house, and that would mean, gasp, socializing with the "enemy". Might let something slip. *Like any of them yet had the slightest idea what those yowling eggs meant, anyway. The lot from Hufflepuff and Gryffindor seemed alright. Couldn't sit with Hufflepuff, Diggory was part of that house. Not that there seemed to be anything wrong with Diggory.* In fact, Viktor rather liked Diggory. He seemed rather pleasantly astonished all the time, he was polite enough and seemed like a good competitor, win or lose. Gryffindor, well he was half tempted to just go over there and flop down right between Potter and that bushy-haired girl... *Malfoy kept calling her "Granger"... just to get under the grey-eyed little git's skin, if for no other reason. Him and his stupid Mudblood nonsense. She apparently kicked his rear in every class, didn't she?* He liked a girl who could hold her own. *Anyone who annoyed Malfoy that intensely must not be all bad. She must really best him, given how much he complained about her. Not that it was a big surprise, considering how much she read.*

Actually, he probably wouldn't mind sitting next to her even if it didn't irk Malfoy. *She would probably have something to say that didn't involve mad giggling and lobbing her lingerie at you. Oh... heavens! She was looking at me and here I was glaring at her like I was trying to burn a hole in the cover of the book she was reading!* He ducked his head to his own book, but not before he noticed her shooting her own withering glare at the giggling gaggle of girls passing by his table. They immediately clammed up. He liked her already... even if he had no idea what her first name was. Maybe he would suck it up someday soon and say hello. *But sometime when she wasn't with Potter.* And sometime when he wasn't carrying a pocketful of little frilly tap pants. Scarf girl must have told her friends what she had done. "It worked! He looked at me!" It was fairly pelting panties back in the reference section today... Heaven help him if Poliakoff decided to frisk him again.

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*Get up... get up... get up...get...up. There is never going to be another chance like this. Those fool girls giggled their way out of here ten minutes ago, when they got tired of waiting for you to head to the stacks. The librarian is putting things away, and she is sitting there all by herself. Potter isn't with her. Move your bloomin' knick... arse. Move your arse. There is no one else in the whole library, and no one's tossed anything at you, and you're not packing some idiot female's unmentionables around in your pocket. Get up now. What's the worst she can do? Say 'no'? No, giggle and lob lingerie, he thought with a sigh. Okay, don't think about underwear. She's not interested in throwing any underwear at you. Or sneaking up and tucking it in your pocket right in the middle of the hall, I hope, he thought, shuddering and thinking about the previous afternoon when some girl had done just that. Poliakov had nearly choked on his apple, and then dissolved into a fit of loud, whooping laughs that no amount of glaring silenced for a good twenty minutes. Viktor had just managed to get the G-string tucked down into his pocket before everyone out in the hall had started staring at them, because Poliakov had been making so much noise. Then he had hiccupped for another ten. He had half a mind to stop walking with Poliakov anywhere public. At least he hadn't announced it at the top of his lungs, though.*

Viktor stood and slowly slid his chair under the table, almost not daring to breathe. He crept over behind her chair, stood there a moment weighing his options, watching her read, so engrossed in her book that she didn't even look up. He inched to the side of her chair after taking a quick, last look around. "Pardon... May I sit?" *Oh, bloomer... blooming brilliant, Viktor! Not a taken chair in the whole library but hers, and I ask if I can sit? Damn! Why didn't I just ask to cozy up in her lap! Hello, there, you wouldn't be about to toss any knickers at me, would you? Got a brain in your head? Evidently I don't. Carry on a sensible conversation? Wish I could. Might as well go back to the room and string myself up now. Got plenty of material to make a rope...or just open the cupboard. Probably be killed in the avalanche. Crushed under a ton of lace...*

She started slightly and dropped her book down onto the table, as though she had just noticed him standing there. "Sorry?"

"Ahh... vood you mind if I sat for a moment, joined you?" *An improvement. Not much of one, but an improvement all the same.*

She looked around the library as though looking around for someone else he might be talking to, then back to him. "You're welcome to sit," she said at last, still looking puzzled. He slid the chair back quietly and sat in it, perched nervously on the edge as though ready to bolt.

"You... you haff read... all that already?" he asked, tapping the bundle of pages

she had trapped under her left thumb, against her fingers.

"Oh! Um... this bit?" she asked, flapping it back and forth. "More like skimmed, really. Not much on what I'm interested in ..." she trailed off.

"It has a much better section on Advanced Charms. Further back. Seventh year level," he offered in a low voice, so low she almost had to lean forward to hear.

"Does it? You've read it?" He gave a barely perceptible, shy nod.

"Not as good as Truskin's book, the first part," he confided with short shake of his head. "Not nearly as good on Transfiguration."

"Oh... that sounds interesting... I'd like to see that..." she said earnestly.

"In Russian," Viktor said, and he knew his cheeks had colored slightly, as though he had said something embarrassing. "Something special you are interested in? I could translate..." he offered.

"Would you? Oh, that would be wonderful. I think I've read almost everything here in the library, sometimes, but nothing by a Russian author. Unless you count War and Peace, and that's a Muggle book, so properly, I think I should say I've never read anything written by a Russian wizard. Advanced Transfigurations, I suppose, if it's not too much trouble... Wait, you know Russian? How silly of me! Of course, you would! Most Bulgarians know Russian, don't they? I mean, the two countries border one another if you count the Black Sea ... Pity I don't know any, it always sounded like an interesting language. Unless you count 'da' and 'nyet' and 'vodka', but those don't count, because everyone knows those. Best I can do in the foreign language department is some terribly awkward schoolgirl French. Sorry, I'm prattling on and on and not letting you get a word in edgewise. I'm being rude. Where are my manners?" Hermione said when he slowly arched a prominent, dark eyebrow. The corners of his mouth twitched subtly, and he gave her a soft smile.

"Not rude... vonderful...haff not... really talked... to anyone... since arriving," he protested. He seemed, more than anything, relieved about something. He glanced at the table momentarily, at her pile of books and journals and parchments, and then shyly raised his gaze back up to hers. "May I ask... something?" For some reason, she suddenly seemed ashamed of the untidily scattered pile in front of her. She made a halfhearted attempt to shuffle them into a neater stack.

"I suppose..." she answered guardedly, seemingly a little unsure.

"Vould... vould you like to go to the Yule Ball?" he asked, voice low. "Vith me?"

he tacked on hastily. His dark brows were drawn together, and he looked a little anxious.

She couldn't seem to answer at first. The nearest thing to words she could produce was a garbled "Errr... aahhh..." She blushed herself when she saw the pinkish flush in his cheeks go a much darker red. No doubt about his being embarrassed now, he could feel his cheeks burning. He suddenly broke off his gaze and stared at the table.

"I apologize. It vos presumptuous of me..." he almost whispered.

"Yes. I mean, no! I mean... oh, I don't know what I mean!" Hermione burst out, sounding flustered. "Let me start over. Sorry, the question kind of surprised me," she said sheepishly. She cleared her throat. "I would very much like to go to the Yule Ball. With you," she added, ducking her head a little to catch his eye.

"I would be honored. Excuse me now, I need to go, or I will be late. Curfew," he said apologetically.

"Wait... did you drop this?" she asked as he stood. She leaned over beside her chair and retrieved something off the floor. He cringed when she held up her hand and a scrap of white material and a bit of lace were all that could be seen between her fingers. She was looking at her hand curiously. His mouth went completely dry and his heart felt as though it had leapt straight up into his throat as he fished for an explanation. *Had they started just Apparating the darned things into his pockets? Could you even do that? Where on earth would you even learn something like that? Sure, I'll go up to the librarian tomorrow and ask if she can help me research how one would make panties do tricks! Or, how about asking if they've got anything on Panty-Repelling Charms? Could he blame it on the laundry? Static? Fake a coronary? Just go ahead and have a coronary?* "Oh, how stupid of me! Of course you didn't, it's my handkerchief. Sorry," she said with a smile.

"You will be here tomorrow, Miss Granger? I will bring the translation?" he asked tentatively.

"Oh, sure. I'll be here in the afternoon again. There's just a Quidditch practice, and I'm not much interested in watching that... no offense..." she trailed off, and he gave her a little shake of his head, as though denying he was offended. "I don't mean I don't like Quidditch, I thought the World Cup final was fantastic... but I don't need to see just a school practice... so I thought I would get some reading done. I never saw... well, let's just say my Quidditch background is pretty thin. That's more Harry and Ron's department."

*Thin? Ah, yes. Mal-twit kept making a production of pointing out that she was a*

*Muggle-born. So? And I don't need to go see a school practice, either...* "You were there?" he asked, and he suddenly felt very self-conscious about how he had gone to the box just as muddy, bloody and bruised as he had been on the field. *Why didn't I let them clean me up? Odd, I never even thought about freshening up before going to a box before...*

She nodded enthusiastically, setting her hair bobbing around her shoulders. "Right in the Top Box. Ron's father... he's the redhead you see with Harry and me sometimes... got tickets and I was invited. It was very exciting. I thought it was very brave, the way you still caught the Snitch even though you were hurt. You looked a terrible mess afterwards. It looked like it hurt, I mean," she said plainly. There was none of the false, batting eyelashes, fawning manner most other girls would put on. And the smile was genuine, unforced and not self-conscious at all. *They are not beaver teeth*, Viktor thought to himself. *If he says it again, I'll show Malfoy beaver teeth...*

"My job," he said matter-of-factly, with a modest shrug.

"You weren't planning on going to the practice, were you? I don't want to keep you from going if..." she asked, looking slightly alarmed.

"No. See enough Quidditch," he replied, taking a glance at the clock. He could spare another minute or so, if he walked fast, but not much more. *Much more than that, and even sprinting wouldn't do.*

"Suppose you do. See you tomorrow, then? I'll probably come at the same time as today."

"Okay. Goodnight, Miss Granger."

"And you can call me by my first name. You don't have to call me Miss Granger, you know."

*I don't know it*, he thought in panic, but his eyes fell on the cover of one of the journals in front of her. In a neat hand, it was labeled 'Property of Hermione Granger' with black ink. He studied it a moment over her shoulder. "Goodnight, Herr-mee-yohn," he said hesitantly, the syllables slightly awkward and stilted, before hurrying off.

"Goodnight," she called after him.

"Just made it in before curfew, library rat," Poliakov said in singsong fashion from his doorway. "What were you doing in there this late? All the pretty girls would have given up a while ago."

"Research," Viktor answered, hand on his doorknob.

"Did you look under the letter 'G' for G-string? Or 'B' for bikini?" Poliakoff snickered.

"Goodnight," Viktor said firmly, ignoring him. He bumped his door with his hip. *Maybe the damp is making it stick.* He bumped harder and the door gave way. He could hear an avalanche of paper and spotted a mound of envelopes on the floor through the opening.

"Oh, by the way, lover boy, mail call. They should just send an Erumpent to deliver yours," Poliakoff laughed. Viktor simply lifted his foot, strode over the pile in the doorway and shut the door solidly behind him, heaving a sigh. Soon after, he heard Poliakoff's door shut as well. *It's the unused cargo hold next. No more room in here... I wonder how deep the lake is?* He resisted the urge to point his wand at the lot and cast Incendio.

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"Oh! There you are! I was beginning to wonder if you were coming at all!" she announced when he walked into the library. He cast a glance at the girls over by the stacks, who were giving evil looks to Hermione as he sat down. One of them was the girl with the scarf. *Does she recruit more people each time she comes?* he thought with a sigh as he counted eight this time. As soon as Hermione turned her attention back to her books, he shot the lot of them a glower that sent them scurrying off back to the other side of the shelves, still pointing and whispering.

"Late start," he said apologetically, voice low, even for the library. Technically, it was true. He had rather lost track of time down in the cargo hold. "This is the chapter... some vords haff no exact translation... I made notes on those," he offered, unrolling the piece of parchment he had been carrying and laying a finger next to some notes in the margins.

They discussed the passages from the book for some time, and an hour seemed gone in an instant. Those giggling menaces had only stuck their heads around the corner once or twice, to give pointed, jealous looks. "You must spend a lot of time reading. I admit, I figured you would prefer to spend more time on a broom than in a library. But I guess if you're picked champion, you need to study. I'm sure you understand the importance of being prepared. I can't seem to get Harry to see that. More interested in ignoring it until the night before and then panicking and trying to cram three months of studying into a single night," she said, shaking her head and making a *tsk* noise under her breath. "You like Hogwarts?"

"Very... different. But a good kind of different. And you cannot always fly. Can

always read," he said softly. "And... I did not always come in here just to study," Viktor found himself saying.

"I expect you come in to get away from all those mad girls in your fanclub? Doesn't seem to have done much good. They drive me mad every time Harry and I come here to study. You too?" she asked, tilting her head back toward the shelves. He colored and nodded slightly.

"And because of you," he blurted out.

"Me?" she asked uncertainly.

"You... seemed nice. Not ... giggling... and staring... and pointing like them. Different. The way you were always reading... I thought maybe..." he trailed off, taking his eyes off of her face and looking bashfully at the tabletop again.

"Different?" she prodded.

"A good kind of different," Viktor said, raising his gaze back up to hers. "I thought maybe you would carry on a real conversation. Half a brain in your head. And I was right. I tried to get up the courage to ask... about the ball... a long time," he murmured.

"Viktor... maybe you don't know... and I would hate to get you in trouble... I know Durmstrang has different rules. I'm... I'm Muggle-born," she said. When he didn't respond, just looked at her unblinking, she added. "My parents are Muggles." Still no response. "My parents aren't wizards. I'm not a pure-blood."

"Is that all?" he asked. She nodded slowly. "I already know. Malfoy kindly made that clear," Viktor said, the familiar scowl settling back on his face.

"And it doesn't matter? I mean, you still want to go to the Yule Ball with me?" she asked.

"Does not matter to me," he said bluntly.

"I suppose we had better make plans on where to meet, then. Just in case we forget to do it between now and the ball. How would the entryway be? Wonder if Harry's found someone yet? It's only a few days, really. No matter. Entryway?"

The scowl deepened a little, but then faded. "Fine. Time?" They had already settled on a time and he was excusing himself and gathering his books when the pack of girls passed by, positively shooting daggers at Hermione. He noticed something falling in their wake, but decided to ignore it and get out before he managed to put his foot in his mouth. He could hardly believe his luck that he

had made it this long.

"One of them dropped a hanky," she muttered, fishing around behind his chair. Before she came up from leaning behind him, she dropped the scrap of pink material on the table. He felt slightly faint when he realized it was definitely not a hanky. "Well, honestly!" she snapped suddenly, causing him to jump. "Why would someone be carrying those around! Really!"

"Laundry? Static?" he offered, looking stricken and turning an interesting shade of crimson. His cheeks nearly matched his robes.

"Surely. It's the only explanation... sorry, I must be embarrassing you to death. I'll take them back to the laundry when I take my clothes," she said in a rush, snatching them off the table and sticking them in her pocket.

"Only explanation," he agreed hurriedly, looking positively sick.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you... Good thing we didn't really see which girl dropped them. She'd be positively mortified, I think, realizing she's been walking around with some of her unmentionables stuck to her clothes. Or someone's unmentionables. I'll include a note, just to save her imagining we both know..."

"Thoughtful. Flying practice," he stammered, and hurried toward the door.

"See you in the library sometime between now and then?" she called.

He seemed to gather himself up a bit better by the time he reached the door. He turned, nodded vigorously, and offered a "Good afternoon, Herrmeeyohn." The name flowed more easily, today.

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Viktor took the cap off the first bottle of butterbeer and sat it on the table. *So far, so good. She seems like she's having a good time, at least, even if I do keep botching her name. I should have made sure of the pronunciation earlier... practiced... Now where would they have put the rubbish bin?*

"Looking for the rubbish bin?" a brusque, Scottish voice on the other side of the table asked. He nodded at McGonagall, who was standing a few feet down, monitoring one of the refreshment tables, and filling her own plate. "Try looking under the table. Likely got shoved too far back." He leaned back a bit, and spotted what just might be the corner of it beneath the tablecloth. Viktor knelt and ducked his head under the tablecloth, catching the rim of the bin with a curled finger and dragging it closer to the front.

Beneath the tablecloth, he could see a pair of feet in dress shoes, a female. He waited an extra second, and let out a sigh of relief when she backed off and walked back toward the crowd. *What was I going to do? Just stay under here if she didn't move off instead of just standing there beside me? Probably just getting a drink*, he chided himself.

He sat the bin on the floor and raised himself up. *Is nothing sacred? Now what am I going to do? I've got no pockets in these dress robes... and my cloak's on the chair... and... and...* He stared at the frilly little tap pants draped around the neck of the bottle he had just opened.

"They should be swapping the punchbowl soon, if you want fresh punch!" McGonagall called to Headmaster Dumbledore. Viktor grabbed the blue knickers and tossed them right into the punchbowl. They were soon at the bottom of the crystal bowl, soaked and obscured in the dark punch. He hardly noticed that McGonagall was directly across from him until she spoke. "Are you quite alright, Krum? You look positively green... err, ill," she said, studying him with an arched, thin eyebrow.

"Fine," he forced out, "I am fine"

"You're not feeling off? You look awfully peaky," she insisted, "I'm sure Madame Pomfrey would be glad to have a look at you."

"Not necessary, thank you, Professor. Probably overheated and need a drink." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the punchbowl disappear, and a fresh one appear in its place. He heaved an inward sigh of relief. *The last thing I need is for McGonagall to fish something like that out of the punch.* After she moved off, he surreptitiously slipped the butterbeer bottle into the rubbish bin and got two fresh ones. He left the rubbish bin at the end of the table. There was no way he was going to leave these two unguarded...

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Deep, evidently. Deep enough for a giant squid. That's how deep the lake is. He peered over the rail of the ship at the steely gray water. The wind was fairly brisk, but not so bad that he couldn't stand it. *Of course, none of the Hogwarts students would ever think of getting in the lake in January, but then, they had never been to Durmstrang. If you waited for the lake to warm up, you would swim about once a year...* Besides, he needed the practice... keeping up with the wand, trying the Transfiguration if he could, getting the lie of the lake, where some of the trouble spots might be, all that. And he couldn't help but be relieved that he had abandoned the notion of dumping them in the lake. *Imagine the commentary that would lead to... "Delacour's gone and gotten herself tangled up in a pair of French knickers, not looking good for her..."* He swung his arms a

little bit to loosen up before climbing up and diving in. He could see Hermione, Ron and Harry walking across the lawn. He would wave, but Karkaroff might see him... he didn't want to explain why he was being friendly in the vague direction of a competitor. *Too many questions.*

After an hour in the water, his skin was red in spots, white in others, but at least he felt better about where some things were in the lake. He swam over to the shallow end of the lake and stood, wading to shore, where he had tossed a couple of towels earlier, off the side of the ship. He folded one and placed it on the snow, sitting on it. Viktor picked up the second and scrubbed his hair, then his arms and legs, trying to get the circulation going. It almost seemed par for the course when he found the extra lump of material in the towel. He simply bundled it up inside the towel, wrapped the second around his narrow hips and went back to the ship. It wasn't until he had made it back into his room and shook the towel out over his floor that he realized this wasn't quite par for the course.

Well, at least these would be sort of useful for a change... if the pair of green silk boxers weren't about two sizes too big... I thought that sixth-year that always sits at the end of the table might be turned a bit funny. I used to see him ogling Malfoy. Guess he finally figured Malfoy hasn't got time for a boyfriend... too busy being in love with himself, Viktor thought, bringing up the ghost of a smile. *On the bright side, at least he doesn't giggle.* He tossed the silk boxers in with all the other lingerie that had arrived over the last week, into the cupboard. He would have to make another trek to the cargo hold soon.

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*So maybe the boxers didn't come courtesy of the sixth-year, after all,* Viktor thought, as he gathered up his things and left the dungeon classroom. *Yet another reason to hate Karkaroff, him being chummy with that insufferable greasy git. Even when he's being nice, he's creepy. Actually, when he's nice, he's creepier.* He stuck the folded piece of parchment that Snape had slipped back to him with a returned essay into a journal to keep the wind from catching it on the way back to the ship. At the top of the essay Snape had written "*Aparecium* on the note..."

He slammed the door, cast the Charm, and read

Dear Viktor,

There is absolutely no truth to the rumor that I am in league with "Lord Thingamabob". Anymore. Nope. None at all. Absolutely not. No way. I'm evil masquerading as good. Wait, scratch that, I meant good masquerading as evil. Or possibly I'm good masquerading as evil masquerading as good. Alright, forget the protest. The point of the matter is, whatever Potter tells you about me, don't believe it. That brat... I mean boy, and I got off on the wrong foot. And Granger doesn't know what she's talking about either. Or Weasel. I mean Weasley. Okay,

well, I used to know Ivan quite well back when we both freelanced a bit for Lord Thingamabob... but that doesn't mean squat at Hogwarts. We're all reformed, right? Been through the DEA (Death Eaters Anonymous) twelve step program and all that.

Point of the matter is, I've not killed anyone in years. Accidentally *or* on purpose. Even though I've wanted to strangle Potter on numerous occasions. Wonderful restraint on my part, I think. Would you like to come down to the dungeons for a drink sometime? I could introduce you to my, err, "Lord Thingamabob". Not the horrible, dread Dark Lord himself, of course. It's a... let's call it a pet name. No, no, can't possibly say that. Imagine the scandal. Something more neutral. Anyway, what I wouldn't give for a player like you on the Slytherin team for a year. Those Gryffin-dorks would have never gotten the House Quidditch Cup away from us. You're worth ten of Malfoy. Let's see him take a Bludger in the face and... well, you get the idea. Is the "edit" feature on this damned Quick Quotes Quill broken? Course not. Would it be wrong to sign it "Love" or "Yours"? No, no, too pushy. Better just sign it.

Severus

*That does it. Definitely playing the politely puzzled foreigner on that one. Not a word of English in Potions again. And if he so much as looks at me crooked, I'm going to hex his "Lord Thingamabob". What is it with these people and their cheap innuendo?*

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At least he had seen her several more times in the library lately, with no more embarrassing bits of clothing showing up anywhere that they shouldn't. And at least some of the fuss surrounding the second and third tasks had died down. *And at least... at least... at least, what? What do you do with your miserable self now? I mean, it was all well and good when Harry took the second task clue literally, and even... even, well, sporting of him to make sure that everyone made it back if he really believed they were in danger. The only decent thing you could do, really, if you took it literally. He deserved every point he got for it and then some. Reasonable to take it as just a song, since they told us about all the safety precautions. Reasonable to do the opposite. Reasonable mistake, given the history of the Tournament and the way things seem to go around here. It's a wonder to me that Hogwarts students don't drop like flies the way they do things, I mean, wrangling dragons seems to be a safer prospect than attending Hogwarts, but what do you say to someone after the third task? I can't rightly expect her to visit, now, can I? You can't very well go over and say, "Right then, not going to let a little thing like the Dark Lord being resurrected interfere with your vacation plans, now are you? Didn't know Cedric too well, did you? Can't be that broken up about him snuffing it, now can you? And Harry having to drag his*

body back, well, growing pains. Everyone does something like that. Oh, and about torturing him not twenty minutes before he died, that wasn't my fault... Not going to blame me for a tiny mistake like casting an Unforgivable, right?" Ugh. Get it over with. Apologize, grovel, throw yourself on her mercy, whatever. Maybe I'll get lucky and will have pegged her right...

He walked toward them. "Wonder how the Durmstrang students are getting back," said Ron. "D' you reckon they can steer that ship without Karkaroff?"

"Karkaroff did not steer," Viktor said. "He stayed in his cabin and let us do the work. Could I have a word?" he asked Hermione.

"Oh . . . yes ... all right," said Hermione, looking slightly flustered, and following Viktor through the crowd and out of sight.

"You'd better hurry up!" Ron called loudly after her. "The carriages'll be here in a minute!" He let Harry keep a watch for the carriages, however, and spent the next few minutes craning his neck over the crowd to try and see what Krum and Hermione might be up to.

"Obviously, I cannot expect you to want to visit, now... Not with all that has happened..." he said softly, looking her in the eye.

"I would love to... under other circumstances... With Voldemort back..." Hermione said hesitantly.

"With Voldemort back, everything changes," he finished for her, nodding. "I apologize for anything I may have done... that put you in an uncomfortable position..." he said abruptly, thinking of the teasing she had taken after the second task, and that regrettable cornering of Harry to ask about any possible relationship, and those glaring girls in the library.

"You didn't do anything wrong. You can't help it people are idiots about things like that," Hermione said dismissively. "I would like to write... would you mind if I wrote?" she asked him, her voice tentative.

"I would love for you to write. Please do," he said, the relief evident in his voice. "I missed talking... things were so busy..."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't ignoring you on purpose, it was just that I was so worried about Harry and there were so many things going on and-" she said in a rush before he halted her with a raised hand.

"You are a good friend... of course you worried... with good reason. Please, write," he pleaded, trailing a fingertip lightly over the back of her hand. He was

pleased to note that she at least didn't move it away.

"Of course I will. I missed talking to you, too," she said with a soft smile.
"Carriages will be here soon, I had better get back. Or Ron will throw a terrible fit and be over here demanding to know what's going on, in his loudest voice. He's a bit of an idiot, sometimes, too," she muttered, and he had to press his lips together to keep from laughing.

Ron stared at Hermione when they rejoined him and Harry, but her face was quite impassive. *She's pretty good at that, too. The poker face. Best to get this over with.* He felt obligated to say something to Harry, no matter how uncomfortable it felt. *Lord knows the poor boy earned it.* He could already feel the scowl creeping back onto his face. "I liked Diggory," said Viktor abruptly to Harry. "He vos always polite to me. Always. Even though I vos from Durmstrang - with Karkaroff," he added, scowling.

"Have you got a new headmaster yet?" said Harry

Viktor shrugged. He held out his hand as Fleur had done earlier, shook Harry's hand, and then Ron's. Ron looked as though he was suffering some sort of painful internal struggle. *Probably can't figure out whether to smile because he's rid of me or punch me in the nose as a parting shot. They probably both hate me. Not that I blame them. Not much fun to be reminded of the third task, now, is it?*

Viktor dropped Ron's hand and had already started walking away when Ron burst out, "Can I have your autograph?" Hermione turned away, smiling at the horseless carriages that were now trundling toward them up the drive, as Viktor, looking surprised but gratified, signed a fragment of parchment for Ron. *Okay, maybe not quite hate, then. Kind of nice to have a bloke ask for a change. All that signing in lipstick and all that, I can do without that. And the mail calls,* Viktor thought with an inward sigh. As they walked off toward the carriages, Hermione turned and tossed him a quick wink.

"Alright, get on the ship before you float away," Poliakovoff muttered behind him. "You steer on the way back. The rest of us insist. No more feeding the boiler, or we mutiny," he said in good-natured Russian. "Move it, Captain," Poliakovoff added, making a big production of steering him away by the shoulder.

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"Still can't understand why it took an extra day to get back. We fed the boiler just the same," Poliakovoff said, shaking his head as they walked down the gangplank. "It's almost like we're heavier. Or didn't put the same amount of fuel in, but that's impossible..."

"Just one of those things," Viktor murmured, hauling his much lighter trunk toward the castle. All the Triwizard Tournament candidates were going to be taken outside the anti-Apparation perimeter and permitted to travel home that way. Their things would be sent after them, so no more ship travel after this. *The ship would stay at the dock, and they would service it, and... Boy, will they get a surprise, sometime...* Viktor thought to himself, a quiet smile creeping onto his face.

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"Professor Malatova?" came a tentative voice from the doorway of her office, "May I have a word?"

"Certainly," she said, looking up at the caretaker, Pritkin. He had been at Durmstrang as long as anyone could remember, and he had been as much help to her as she could hope, when she stepped in as interim headmistress. In fact, she considered him invaluable. His unflappable demeanor, his tireless work ethic, his skill with his hands, all of it had helped to set a lot of the school to rights in the months since Karkaroff had turned tail and fled. At least now she had some latitude in her decision-making, with him gone.

"Madam. I'm not quite sure how to broach the subject... I don't want you to think I'm being insolent or impertinent, but..." Pritkin trailed off, worrying at the hat he now held between his fingers. She'd never seen him anything like unnerved before.

"I'd never think you insolent, Pritkin. You've been nothing but a complete gentleman and more in all the years I've been here, and probably before. Now, what's the matter?"

"Well, Madam... you see, we had a problem with the ship this morning," he said.

"I'm sure you'll set it to rights in no time," she encouraged. He blinked a moment.

"Begging Madam's pardon, but the thing... sank..." he added awkwardly. She could tell he was itching to swear, but his good manners prevented it.

"Pritkin, I'm sure that makes things a bit harder, but I've no doubt you and your crew will have it in dry dock and repaired before it's needed. Err... was there something else?" she asked.

"Yes... Madam... the boys and myself, we've gotten the ship to dry dock already. Must have sunk in the night, it was sitting in the lake up to the deck this morning. But Professor Malatova, we found something a mite curious. I noticed the old girl was listing a bit for the last week. Slow leak, I tell myself, it will hold a few days,

the currents in the lake shift, it runs in, it runs out, she'll hold her own. But Madam, the leak was in the cargo hold, we found. Or, at least, we found after we cleared out the cargo hold..." he said, worrying at the hat even harder.

"Cleared it out? Pritkin, I thought the cargo holds were empty, because the students didn't have enough baggage to warrant using the cargo holds, did they?" she asked, confused.

"Madam, the cargo holds, they were all full. To the top. Madam... it must be a seventh-year prank, surely. I can think of no other explanation..."

"Cotton wool? Pudding? Balloons? What was it?"

"Something that soaked up the water and wouldn't let it back out, Madam. You see, they were made out of material, Madam, not like having crates down there..."

"Quilts? Blankets? Cloaks? School robes? Sponges? Pillows?"

"And they just kept pulling in more water until it got too heavy and dragged her right to the bottom," he said, almost as though he hadn't heard.

"For Heaven's sake, Pritkin! What was in the cargo hold?" she asked impatiently.

"A bunch of, well, tons of the things, Madam! And I've no idea where anyone would have gotten so many..."

"Pritkin?"

"Up to the portholes, practically, Madam, and that was with them shrunken down!"

"Pritkin! So many what!? What was nearly up to the portholes?"

"Look for yourself, Madam! We've got them on the East Lawns to dry!"

She had a queer feeling that she knew what she would find. Stunned, she walked to the window that looked out over the neatly manicured East Lawns and drew her blinds. There on the grass, color as far as they eye could see, scraps of material in varying colors, shapes, cuts, and degrees of sheerness. She fainted dead away when she recognized her own silky purple lace knickers flapping in the breeze, hung there on the tree outside her window. She just knew she should have opted for sending him the brassiere instead.