

Of All the Cruise Ships in All the World

by linlawless

Surprises (and romance?) abound for all who embark on a singles cruise to Tuscany.
Written for the lovely Dreamy_Dragon in the 2012 SSHG exchange

Part 1

Chapter 1 of 2

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Author Note: Many thanks, as always, to my fabulous alpha-beta team: karelia and TeaOli. Also, without the assistance of my Brit-picker extraordinaire, Proulxes, many, many Americanisms would still be cluttering up this story. And without additional beta assistance from Clairvoyant (not to mention access to her LJ full of pictures and narrative), I couldn't possibly have written any sort of story about a Mediterranean cruise. As an inveterate tinkerer, I can only hope I didn't add any new mistakes after they all worked their magic to take all the old ones out. Finally, thanks to Dreamy Dragon for coming up with such a fun prompt. As usual, I wasn't entirely faithful to it, but I hope you enjoy it anyway.

Warnings: mildly explicit sexual contact; hints of past and future slash/threesome

Original Prompt: 2. Hermione's friends give her a gift certificate for a romantic singles cruise. Severus is on board as well. (Did he get a gift too? Or was he tricked into thinking he was going somewhere else?). Unfortunately, the wizards/witches organising the event don't have clue what they're doing. With Severus' easy-going personality and Hermione's even temper how could anything possibly go wrong...?

Part 1

"What's this?" Hermione asked suspiciously, staring at the parchment envelope Harry had just placed in her hand.

"Your birthday pressie, of course!" Ron answered, sounding delighted and thereby increasing Hermione's suspicion.

"Why?"

"Why what?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Why are you giving me a birthday present? My birthday is a month away yet."

"Just open it, Hermione," Ginny said. "You'll understand then why we had to give it to you early."

Feeling decidedly nervous, Hermione opened the envelope slowly. She pulled out a pamphlet and some tickets.

Ignoring the tickets for the moment, she read the pamphlet cover aloud. "Carnival Wizard Cruise Lines Presents: Danziger Lovejoy on the Utility of Arithmancy Equations for the Development of Potions and Charms. Learn the latest in wizarding science while cruising the Mediterranean... Are you serious?" She heard the excitement starting to rise in her own voice and tried to tamp it down; this seemed an unusually perfect gift for her generally obtuse...and single-minded...friends to give her.

"Don't you like it, Hermione?" Ron asked. "Luna thought you'd be thrilled...said this Lovejoy fellow is some sort of celebrity in academic circles..."

"He is!" Hermione said when Ron's voice trailed off uncertainly. "I was just surprised, that's all...I wasn't expecting a birthday gift at all a month early, and if I had been, I suppose I'd have expected you'd still be trying to marry me off." Seeing their slightly anxious expressions, she added, "Well, you have to admit you've been rather single-minded about it...Hermione, how about speed dating? What about Arithmatically Yours? Don't Muggles have some sort of dating club on that interweb thing?" she mimicked.

Ginny said, "Well, we thought for your birthday, we'd stop all that and give you something we knew you'd enjoy. And Seamus's American cousin is going, so we arranged for you up to share a cabin with her, so that way you're not travelling completely on your own... Although it wouldn't kill you to get a little sun and have a few laughs with a nice wizard or two while you're learning something only *you* would care about. Anyway," she added, apparently to prevent Hermione's instinctive protest, "the cruise leaves three days before your birthday, and we thought you'd need time to pack and such, so we're giving the tickets to you now."

Realising her friends had made a serious effort to get her something she would enjoy, Hermione smiled genuinely and let go of her suspicions. "Thank you all very much. This is a wonderful birthday present."

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Severus grumbled for the umpteenth time as they stepped aboard the ship. Nevertheless, he pulled out the photo identification he had obtained at check-in with the help of a mild Confundus Charm to prevent any difficulties related to a lack of Muggle identification. Handing it to the crew person at the end of the boarding ramp, who seemed to be helping people determine where their cabins were, Severus glared at Lucius while "Sven", who was from Norway if the badge on his chest could be trusted, slid the card through some sort of Muggle device.

"It's not my fault you insisted on that bet," Lucius replied neutrally, handing his own card to the same man. "I've merely ensured that we have a proper opportunity to decide the wager."

"Gentlemen, your suites are on the Verandah Deck. Lifts are to your left." He gestured vaguely before turning to greet the next guests. "Your identification cards will function as both cabin keys and charge cards. Enjoy your cruise!"

Severus glared at Lucius as they headed in the direction the man had indicated. "You tricked me!"

"Really, Severus, you're being ridiculous. Who was it who said, 'I'll bet if we went where no one knew my past, I'd have more luck'? Here we are, and no one knows our pasts. Ergo, you should have more luck." Lucius might *sound* exasperated, Severus noted, but his expression was downright smug.

"I was drunk! Which was your fault, I might add."

"I didn't pinch your nostrils and pour it down your throat."

Severus allowed his own expression to show what he thought of that argument, but he didn't say anything more about their drinking session three weeks past. "You didn't have to say you'd take the bet," he muttered irritably instead. "I was speaking *hypothetically*."

"I've been trying for months to get you to socialise more. This is the perfect opportunity. Just think of all the lovely Muggle women we'll be meeting...none of whom will know anything about your history."

"I'm still the same sarcastic, greasy-haired, skinny old man I've always been."

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus. You haven't always been old. And you needn't always be skinny or greasy-haired. I've brought along a new shampoo for you that will take care of your hair problems, and *no one* need be skinny on a cruise."

"I notice you don't say I needn't be sarcastic."

"Women will love your dry wit."

"And how do you know so much about Muggle cruises, anyway? Been slumming?"

"Not as such, no. Kingsley and Narcissa took a Muggle cruise for their honeymoon; they thoroughly enjoyed it, if their pictures are any indication."

Shaking his head, Severus said, "I still think it's unnatural the way you've become bosom friends with your ex-wife and her new husband."

"Life's too short to hold grudges, my friend."

"Since when?"

"Since I'm thoroughly enjoying my bachelor lifestyle these days. Do you have any idea how many delightful young witches have eagerly jumped into my bed over the last three years?"

"You're a man-whore, Lucius."

"Well, be that as it may, you could be just as successful as I am if you'd stop hiding yourself away."

"I'm not hiding myself away," Severus muttered, hating the mild note of petulance he heard in his own tone.

He suspected Lucius might be suppressing an eye roll as he replied, "Of course you are. Your past is no worse than mine, you know; you'd do just fine if you'd put a bit of effort into it. Women love a bit of mystery, a tragic past, a bad boy. You have all that in spades, my friend."

"You forget the two all-important things you have that I don't: good looks and heaps of money."

"Pah. You're distinguished looking, and your new business is thriving."

"I really shouldn't be taking a holiday just yet." He couldn't help worrying that the business, which had grown faster than anyone had expected, might fall to pieces while he was gone. For the first time in his life, something seemed to be going well; how was he supposed to trust that to continue if he didn't keep a close eye on things?

"The business will survive a few days without you," Lucius assured him. "Longbottom can manage things. If I didn't think so, we wouldn't be here."

"As long as he sticks to his plants and doesn't take it into his head to brew anything," Severus grumbled.

"You stocked enough potions to last six months. Look around you! Have you ever seen such beautiful scenery?" Glancing around, Severus realised that Lucius was not speaking of the crystal chandeliers and sconces they were continually passing as they made their way to their suites. Rather, his gaze was fixed on two bikini-clad women who had just exited a cabin down the corridor and turned the opposite direction. "Take a rest before dinner, Severus. Or go to the dance lessons they're having this

afternoon so you'll be ready for the dance tonight. Try to remind yourself we're here to have fun. Nothing will prevent that except your own attitude, you know."

Hermione sat in her cabin, fuming. She should have known her so-called friends were up to something! She had been so excited at the prospect of hearing Danziger Lovejoy speak that she hadn't wondered about her friends' sudden lack of concern about her love life...which they had been obsessed with ever since Ron and Luna had started dating six months after she and Ron had broken up.

Now she knew why...they *hadn't* stopped meddling in her love life...they had merely changed tactics. She was stranded on a *Muggle*...not wizarding...cruise ship. And worse, it wasn't an educational sort of cruise at all! It was a *singles* cruise!

Did they not realise what singles cruises were like?

No, of course they didn't, Hermione assured herself. They wouldn't have purposely sent her off to a 'meat market' if they had known. Surely they wouldn't... They wanted her to get married, not have a random holiday fling.

Why couldn't they understand that if not for their interference (well intentioned as it undoubtedly was), she could be perfectly content by herself? Not everyone was meant to be married, and she had accepted that she was not destined to be part of a couple.

She was half tempted to just get off the ship now and go hide out somewhere...she'd be able to focus on her research without interruption since her friends wouldn't expect to see her.

She discarded the idea regretfully as quickly as it had come. The tickets were, after all, paid for, and who knew if she'd even manage to find someplace appropriate to spend the next five days...with access to the necessary research materials, yet far enough that her friends wouldn't stumble over her...anyway?

At least it was a short cruise. They would spend a single day at sea; then the bulk of the time was to be spent in Tuscany before the cruise ended in Rome. She could visit some of the Florentine libraries...

Sighing, she set about unpacking in her tiny cabin. At least in here, she could use her wand...

Even as she had the thought...and fortunately, before she had actually pulled the wand from her suitcase...the door burst open. A strawberry-blonde-haired woman, who appeared to be in her early twenties, dashed in. "Hello! You must be my cabin-mate. Helen or Henrietta or something, Seamus said, wasn't it? I'm Delilah...people usually call me 'Dee' or sometimes 'Lilah'. You probably know I'm from the US, right? Most recently Seattle, but I've lived all over. Navy brat, you know. How about you?" Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but wasn't given the chance. "I hope you don't mind having the upper bunk. I'm afraid of heights...fell off a bunk bed when I was five and never quite got over it, Mom says. I'm so excited! And I'm glad you're normal! I was worried about sharing with a stranger, even if you *do* know Seamus...he's always seemed a little odd to me...but..."

Hermione stopped listening, wondering how the woman could possibly know if she was normal or not, given Hermione hadn't even managed a single word yet. And Seamus's cousin was apparently a Muggle, so she would have to be careful about using magic...not a very relaxing prospect! And Dee, or Lilah...why didn't she just pick *one* name like everyone else did?...was still speaking... "Anyway, I just stopped by to grab my hat and more sunscreen." The woman went into the bathroom, talking all the while. Was she even pausing to breathe? Dee's voice floated out from the bathroom with the slightest hint of an echo. "I don't want to get sunburned before we even leave Barcelona, right? Is this your first cruise? 'Cause I hope you brought enough sunscreen. The water reflects the sun and you'll burn really fast if you didn't. But don't worry...you can use some of mine. I brought four bottles. You don't want to purchase it on-board...they really gouge you for things like that." Returning from the bathroom, she dropped the sunscreen on the bureau, then went to the closet and grabbed a pale pink floppy hat with a large silk rose from the shelf. Settling it on her head, Dee said, "You're really quiet, aren't you? Well, I guess you must be jet-lagged. I got here three days ago, so I'm over all that already. Been exploring the town and lazing on the beach. Anyway, I guess I'll see you later. Wanna meet for dinner? I'm doing the second seating." She paused at last, giving Hermione an enquiring look before returning her attention to the mirror, where she adjusted the angle of the hat minutely as she waited for an actual response.

"Er... Sure, that sounds nice." Hermione didn't know anyone else aboard, and at least this way, she wouldn't have to think of any conversational gambits.

"Great! And there's a mixer, a get-to-know-you dance thing afterwards, so maybe we'll meet someone there. I plan to have a delicious vacation fling with someone handsome and rich."

"Oh. All right," Hermione said, as the woman seemed to expect some sort of response. How did one respond to that sort of declaration, anyway?

"Anyway, I'm heading out to the pool for a while. Come find me when you're settled. Oh, we're going to have such fun!" Dee bubbled. Before departing the cabin in a flurry, she grabbed a startled, slightly uncomfortable Hermione into a quick hug. "See you later!"

When the door closed behind the American whirlwind, Hermione realised the woman hadn't even given her a chance to correct her about her name. Yes, this cruise was clearly going to be rather less restful than one might have hoped.

Unpacking her suitcase by hand, Hermione wished she had Apparated away when she had the chance.

"Are you ready for dinner?" Lucius asked some hours later as Severus answered his knock. "Our scheduled seating is in half an hour, and I want to scope out the best view."

"The best view?" Severus asked, sure that he wouldn't like the answer.

"Of the dining room entrance, of course. We have to take the opportunity to see who's on board. It's a shame we couldn't go to both seatings, really. What if the most beautiful women went to the earlier one?"

Severus barely managed to restrain an eye roll. "I'm sure the younger women will all be at the later seating." He was, of course, just making that up, but he didn't want Lucius to start pouting this early in the trip. A pouting Lucius was rather wearing on the nerves, and all else equal, Severus would rather not Avada his oldest friend. "Didn't you say something about events designed for people to meet one another? Like the dance thing tonight?" Not that Severus intended to actually go to many such events, but Lucius, predictably, perked up at that.

"Right! I must recall we'll have plenty of opportunities to meet all the ladies on board, starting with the dance. You *do* remember your ballroom dancing lessons, don't you?" He paused, so Severus nodded. He remembered enough, he was reasonably certain. "Now, hurry up and let's go!"

Severus, missing his robes and feeling rather naked dressed only in black linen trousers and a black linen shirt said, "All right, all right. I'm ready."

Lucius looked him up and down and frowned. "You're not wearing *that*, are you?"

Looking down, Severus asked, "What's wrong with this?"

"It's *black*, that's what."

"Of course it's black. I like black."

"You cannot wear black all the time, Severus."

"I don't see why not."

"Because people will think you're strange."

"People will think I'm strange regardless, so I may as well wear what I like."

"Look, I'm not suggesting you wear one of those Hawaiian print monstrosities, but at least add a little colour, man. And can't you tie your hair back or something? Women will be wary of you if they can't see your face."

"Women will be wary of me regardless, I'm quite sure. At least, the intelligent ones will. And you know I can't abide stupid women."

Lucius picked up his wand, and before Severus could react, his trousers had become dove grey and his shirt dark green. "There, Slytherin colours shouldn't be too uncomfortable for you." Another flick of the wrist and Severus's hair was tied back neatly with a leather strap. "All right, we're ready."

Severus's hand twitched just a little as he glared at his oldest friend. "You're lucky the war's been over a while, Lucius. Time was, I'd have Avada'ed you reflexively the second your wand turned my direction."

"Pah," Lucius said, smirking as he unknowingly echoed Severus's thoughts. "I'm your oldest, dearest friend. I suppose I'd better leave the wand here and pick it up after the dance. Don't want to absentmindedly use it, do I? Oblivates are so tiresome."

This time, Severus didn't bother suppressing his eye roll. He *did*, however, resist the temptation to retrieve his own wand and restore his clothes to their original colour as he followed his friend out the door.

After a long shower and a lie-down, Hermione felt a bit better about her situation. At least she was no longer considering hunting down her erstwhile friends and hexing them. Dee had returned to the cabin to change for dinner, which turned out to be a very good thing, as the dining room was big enough that Hermione would have been uncomfortable entering alone.

As they waited for the hostess to seat them, the lovely scents of freshly baked bread wafted toward them from a wait stand along the left side of the room, and Hermione realised suddenly that she was famished. Thankfully, the other woman's chatter seemed to have slowed somewhat...perhaps it was just a nervous habit?...though it had certainly not stopped completely. At least Hermione had had a chance to introduce herself properly, and their conversation on the way to the main dining room had been a bit less one-sided than the one in their cabin.

The hostess led them to a table full of young women, and Dee immediately struck up conversations with several of them. Soon, they were all laughing and talking like old friends. Although Hermione was the quietest of the group, she didn't feel excluded because Dee seemed to be making a point of pulling her into the conversation on a regular basis.

As they placed their dinner orders, a low voice from a nearby table sent a shiver up Hermione's spine. She couldn't hear the words, but the voice itself...

She wanted to turn around and look, just to be certain...her old Potions professor was surely busy back in that shop he had opened with Neville last year. But the man, whoever he was, was directly behind her, so she couldn't look without drawing a lot of attention to herself.

Forcing her attention back to her dinner and the conversation flowing around her, Hermione dismissed the incident from her mind.

Dinner had gone relatively smoothly, Severus thought. Lucius had been at his most charming, and the people they had sat with seemed pleasant enough. One of the women, an attractive blonde in her thirties called Liesl, had seemed to be flirting with Severus. She had even said she hoped he would ask her to dance later. Perhaps Lucius had been right to drag him on this cruise...maybe this would be a better holiday than he had expected.

Lucius, for his part, seemed to have snared the attention of a lovely brunette, so he wasn't pouting (which was, after all, the only aspect of Lucius's amorous adventures that Severus really cared about).

As they approached the large ballroom, they were instructed to draw a slip of paper from a large bin to the left of the entrance. It appeared that all the men were drawing from that bin, while the women drew slips of paper from a similar bin on the right. "These are your assigned numbers for this evening," a perky crew member..."Amelia", whose badge said she was from the US...told them, smiling brightly. "Keep an eye on the large screen over the band; when it's time to change partners, the numbers will be randomly shuffled by our computer and the screen will tell you where to go to meet your new partner. It's our very first time with this particular activity, so I hope you enjoy it."

Severus suddenly had a bad feeling about this...it seemed that with several hundred people in the ballroom, every time a partner change was called, chaos would surely ensue... and especially if this wasn't an activity that the staff was accustomed to directing. Still, he obtained the pair of squares that had number 133 on them from the table just inside the doorway and allowed Lucius to pin one on his back as he pinned the other on his front. Then he helped Lucius...really, how on earth did the man end up with number 007? Of course, given his man-whore behaviour of the last few years, James Bond was not a bad comparison. Realising that someone or other was likely to comment, he whispered to Lucius a quick description of the fictional superspy so that the other man's ignorance of all things Muggle wouldn't cause comment.

He was proved right in his logistical concerns within the first ten minutes. The screen showed that he was to dance with whoever had number 322. By the time he found the woman, who was nearly as tall as he was and who spoke very little English, the opening waltz was half over. And why on earth they were waltzing when practically everyone present was younger than his own forty-nine years was quite beyond him.

Still, a glare from Lucius, who had been assigned to dance with number 404 (a petite redhead), ensured that he gamely attempted to lead the woman through the remainder of the waltz. He was glad Lucius had insisted they leave their wands in his cabin, for surely he would have hexed the fifth or sixth hapless young man who collided with him...

At length, the waltz ended, and naturally, the pairings were shuffled. Shouldn't some rudimentary lessons in dance have been *required*...not just *offered*...before people were asked to perform a samba? And how did they expect people to feel comfortable doing all these complex...and sometimes *close*...dances with complete strangers?

He finally found number 212, a shy, mousy young woman who appeared to be hiding behind a large plant...almost large enough to be called a tree...in the corner. Lucius danced past three times with a buxom blonde who couldn't have been more than twenty before Severus finally coaxed his partner out from behind the tree. Of course, what he really wanted to do was leave, but he supposed it wasn't worth the lecture he would get later from Lucius if he left a mere two dances into the evening.

Several more dances followed without major incident...a cha-cha, a rumba, a tango, not that anyone was really *doing* those dances. People mostly seemed to be just moving in rather random directions around the dance floor in close or (more frequently) not-so-close time with the music. Severus could only assume that the dance lessons offered earlier hadn't been quite as effective as the cruise organisers might have hoped.

Still, the experience wasn't *that* awful...the women were mostly friendly enough and reasonably attractive, after all. But then a jitterbug was announced. Severus felt quite justified in persuading his newly assigned partner to sit out that dance...there was no possibility that people who had little to no idea how to do it properly could toss their partners around in such a way without someone being injured, and Severus was quite determined not to be that unfortunate person. Sure enough, near the end of that particular dance, he noted several people with distinct limps being helped off the floor. Severus wondered idly if the cruise line would reconsider offering this activity in the future...

Eventually, the band took a break, and everyone headed to the refreshment tables for some punch and biscuits. Severus was just trying to decide how much of a lecture he

would be forced to endure if he left when Lucius materialised to his left. "Isn't this delightful, Severus? I've met several lovely young ladies, including Lilah." He gestured toward the young woman at his side. "Lilah, this is Severus, my long-time friend and sometime business partner."

"Pleased to meet you, Severus. Isn't this fun? It's such a great way to meet people, don't you think? Is 'Severus' a common name in England? I've never heard it before." Severus opened his mouth to respond, but she continued blithely, "You *are* from England, too, aren't you? Lucius was telling me all about how he decided to take this cruise because English women don't seem to appreciate him like they should. But I bet you do great with the women, don't you? You're so dramatic looking." Thankfully, the band began to play again, signalling the end of their little break. Otherwise, Severus wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't have resurrected his childhood accidental magic to silence the chatterbox.

Unfortunately, though the previous dances had been either classic ballroom or Latin dances, which Severus had at least passing familiarity with, there seemed to be a new theme for this next interlude: square dancing. Severus knew nothing about square dancing, though apparently it wasn't necessary that he should; someone in the band had started calling out rapid-fire instructions. At least the screen seemed to be showing video of people 'promenading' their partners and 'do sa do-ing' their corners.

Severus was not entirely pleased to discover that Lilah was in his group for the first set. At least Lucius was elsewhere, so he couldn't glare when Severus refused to smile. Severus was so focused on keeping up with the commands of the caller that he barely registered any of Lilah's non-stop chatter, nor did he register anything about any of the other dancers in his group. How anyone was supposed to get to know anyone else while trying to keep up with all these complicated instructions...how he was even supposed to know who were the 'heads' and who were the 'sides'...Severus had not the slightest idea.

Eventually, the square dance ended, and Severus hoped briefly for a return to the jitterbug. At least a major crash would be less complex than all these intricate instructions.

He was doomed to disappointment. A new set of squares was formed, and he was forced to search for number 464. At least for this part of the evening, people were being given time to find where they were supposed to be before the dance started. When he finally found his partner, spotting the number on her back just below a bushy cascade of brown curls, he tapped her shoulder and started to introduce himself.

"Hello, I believe we're partnered..." She turned to face him, and as recognition hit, he was momentarily shocked speechless. Recovering his wits a bit, he blurted, "*Granger?! What are you doing here?*"

She seemed equally stunned, gaping up at him with wide eyes and open mouth. Then she snapped her jaw shut and glared at him as if he had offended her mortally. *What else is new?* At last, she said, "I could ask the same of you, I believe. This hardly seems your sort of milieu."

The music started before he could respond. As they were promenading, he whispered irritably, "If you must know, Lucius forced me to come. What's your excuse? Looking for a holiday shag, are we?" He couldn't stop himself sneering, though he was aware his remark was uncalled for and probably unforgivably rude.

Her response matched his in tone, though her words weren't nearly as rude. "If *you* must know, my alleged friends *tricked* me into coming as a thirtieth birthday present. Happy?"

"Deliriously so, I assure you."

The dance separated them again. Severus couldn't believe his bad luck. How had he wound up stuck on a boat with one of the most irritating people he had ever known? And on her thirtieth birthday, no less? She was bound to be even more annoying than usual if she was hearing her biological clock or some such nonsense.

Lucius was going to pay for this, he vowed. As he had the thought, Granger's urgent whisper drew his attention. "Wait, did you say *Lucius* forced you? Do you mean to tell me that *Lucius Malfoy* is on a Muggle cruise?!"

"I don't mean to tell you anything at all." Though, he mused as he do-sa-do'ed his corner, the fireworks when Lucius and Granger learnt of each other's presence should be entertaining. She had never got past his previous views relating to Muggle-born witches such as herself, and Lucius, for his part, had been irritated that he hadn't managed to charm her into trusting his reformation after the war.

Severus just found her irritating on principle. She was, after all, one-third of the most troublesome trio to roam the halls of Hogwarts during his long tenure there. He studiously ignored the fact that she was unfailingly polite, even friendly, toward him whenever they chanced to meet these days, and that he usually enjoyed the spirited discussions she drew him into at such affairs.

The important thing was this was supposed to be a holiday where no one knew him, and she, by her very presence, was ruining it.

Hermione somehow managed to get through the rest of the dance without embarrassing herself. Of all the cruises in all the world, he had to walk onto hers, she thought, giggling inwardly at her mental nod to her mother's favourite movie. Her humour thus restored, she ignored his scowls and glowers as they finished the dance and then moved along to find their next partners. She managed to enjoy the rest of the evening, for the most part, despite the obvious stupidity of planning this sort of complicated activity with this many people...most of whom knew less than nothing about dancing.

When the evening ended, she met Dee at a pre-arranged spot near the ballroom door. She was surprised to see that her cabin-mate seemed to have already met someone...and even more surprised to discover that someone was Lucius Malfoy. His eyes widened in surprise when he recognised her. "Miss Granger, I did not expect to see you here," he said neutrally by way of greeting.

"Nor I you, Mr Malfoy," Hermione replied, eyeing him askance. "Though I was partnered with Mr Snape earlier for a dance, so I've had a bit of time to get used to the idea."

"Who's Mr Snape?" Dee asked. "And why so formal? This is a cruise! You should call each other Lucius and Hermione, especially if you already know each other. It would be weird, otherwise."

Malfoy looked about as happy with that suggestion as Hermione felt, so she decided to go along with Dee's suggestion. "All right, Lucius it is." She savoured his annoyed expression for a moment before adding cheerfully, "Well, I'm off to bed. Are you coming, Dee?"

"Oh, no, not yet!" Dee protested. "Lucius and I were going up on deck to look at the stars. You should come. His friend Severus will come, too."

"His friend Severus will come where?" asked a smooth voice from behind Hermione, startling her. Really, couldn't he ever glide just a little less silently rather than sneak up on people?

"Up on deck to look at the stars," Dee replied.

Hermione looked over her shoulder in time to catch some sort of wordless communication pass between Severus and Lucius. Eventually, Severus sighed and said, "Fine. If Miss Granger will go, I will, too."

"Oh, but..."

"*Please*, Hermione?" Hermione suddenly understood that Dee had enough sense not to go walking alone with someone she had just met, and the prospect of listening to her chatter away for hours in their cabin was enough to change her mind.

"All right, but just for a little while." She narrowed her eyes at Lucius, trying to send a message that she'd be keeping an eye on him and he'd better treat Dee properly. She

might not particularly like the girl, but she couldn't help feeling a little bit responsible.

As they strolled along the deck a short time later, Severus tried not to consider that he could have been strolling with Liesl instead. He might, in that case, have had some reasonable chance of a shag. Lucius and Lilah were some distance ahead of them, and it was amusing to watch Lucius work the girl; even though he couldn't hear what his friend was saying, her body language suggested his friend would have better success than he would tonight. *What else is new?* he wondered wryly. He could only be glad that Lucius had sprung for separate accommodations for them. He definitely didn't want to be forced out of his cabin...or worse, forced to listen to Lucius and a parade of women.

Granger...Hermione...interrupted his musings, asking abruptly, "Why did Lucius drag you onto a Muggle cruise? There *are* wizard cruise lines, you know. Wouldn't he have been more comfortable on one of those?"

Severus was grateful for the darkness as he felt his cheeks flush. "He felt it would be better to go where no one knows our histories."

"Oh." There was a pause and then, "Why is that better? He seems to be doing perfectly well enough with witches if the papers are to be believed."

"The papers should never be believed, Miss Granger..."

"Hermione."

"...You, of all people, should know that."

"So you're saying he's *not* some sort of man-whore?" Severus couldn't help it; he laughed aloud. "What's so funny?"

"If you must know, *Hermione*, I called him a man-whore to his face mere hours ago. So, no, I'm not saying he's not a man-whore." Sobering, he added, "I believe he tells himself he chose a Muggle cruise for my benefit, but I rather suspect he had gone through the entire population of British witches and hoped to widen his circle of romantic prospects."

Hermione seemed mildly affronted. "Not *all* British witches, I assure you, *Severus*."

Though it was odd to hear his given name on her lips, it was not unpleasant, Severus realised with some surprise. "Ah. I should have said, 'all the witches with whom he stood the slightest chance of succeeding.' I wasn't counting the ones who still hold a grudge."

If anything, Hermione looked more offended by his attempt to smooth things over. "I don't hold a grudge! I just don't like or trust him, and I don't think anyone can blame me for that! He let them *torture* me."

Severus, concerned that her voice might carry, said sharply, "Keep your voice down, if you please. I don't fancy having to Oblivate a bunch of Muggles on my holiday. And besides, intelligent as you're purported to be, I'd have thought you'd have realised by now that he was in no position to protect anyone by that time...not even his own family."

"We were in his *house!*" Fortunately, she had lowered her voice in volume, though not intensity.

"Yes, but he wasn't in charge by then. Merlin, woman, he didn't even have his *wand* anymore!"

"Still, he could have done... *something!*" She sounded slightly uncertain now, though she tried to sound emphatic, he thought.

"Not without risking the lives of people who mattered a good deal more to him than you did."

A long silence followed his words. Eventually, she said more calmly, "Even if that's true, it doesn't explain why he's still so..."

"So...?" Severus prompted after a moment.

"So... conceited, I guess. He still looks at me as though he's stepped in something rotten." This last was said so quietly that Severus had to strain to hear her.

He stopped walking and stared at her in surprise. "His opinion actually matters to you? Do you actually *like* him or something?"

"No, I don't *like* him. But he claims to have changed, yet still hates me because I'm not a pure-blood. And no one seems to see that but me."

"If it were a matter of you not being a pure-blood, how do you explain that I am his closest friend?"

"I don't know. History, maybe?"

"I can assure you, Hermione, he doesn't dislike you because you're not a pure-blood. He dislikes you because you dislike him."

"That's ridiculous. He disliked me on principle before he ever knew who I was."

"Yes, but *now* he dislikes you because you remind him, with your obvious disdain toward him, of things he'd rather forget."

The next morning, after a restless night, Hermione went with Dee to find some breakfast. The other girl...Hermione knew she was a woman, but she seemed so very *young*...chattered brightly as they made their way to the cafeteria, where a lovely selection of everything from kippers to miso soup was available to accommodate everyone in the international crowd. Apparently, 'Lu' had kissed her hand as he said good night and made plans to meet for breakfast, and Dee was thoroughly infatuated.

Hermione tried to tamp down her natural suspicion toward the man...he didn't seem the sort not to press for Dee to spend the night, so she couldn't help wondering what he was up to.

Pushing the thought from her mind, she greeted Lucius neutrally. He returned the greeting politely, then held Dee's chair as Hermione seated herself beside Severus and asked, "Did you sleep well?"

"Fine. You?"

"Not really. I was restless, so even after Dee finally sh... well, even after Dee fell asleep, I was awake for a while."

Severus smirked. "She does talk rather non-stop, doesn't she?" He gave an exaggerated shudder. "How do you stand it?"

"Practise, I suppose, though it's been a while." At his questioning look, she added, "I shared a dorm with Lavender and Parvati back in the day."

"Ah."

Whatever Severus might have added was forestalled when Dee interrupted. "Lu tells me there's a shuffleboard contest on the Lido deck this morning. We should enter!"

Hermione and Severus shared a glance, and Hermione realised they were in perfect accord even before Severus said smoothly, "Hermione and I were just saying how much we were both looking forward to reading by the pool. It's our only day at sea, after all. But you and *Lu* shouldn't let that stop you."

Lucius raised an eyebrow, but said only, "Don't worry, *Sev*, we weren't going to let your anti-social tendencies interfere with our fun."

Hermione, having decided in the wee hours to treat Lucius as though she had never met him before, smiled at the way the two wizards needed each other. It reminded her a bit of Harry and Ron...though those two were much brasher about it. She rather enjoyed the subtlety...for the first time, she could see between the two men the sort of friendship she understood, she decided.

Finishing her breakfast, she stood. "I'm off to get my book. I'll meet you at the large pool in half an hour, all right, Severus?"

"Fine," Severus replied.

When Severus found Hermione by the pool, she had her hair tucked up inside a floppy hat and her eyes hidden behind a large pair of sunglasses. Taking advantage of the fact that his own eyes were likewise covered by dark glasses, he allowed his gaze to examine her surprisingly fit body. From a purely male perspective, he discovered he quite approved of her blue swimsuit, though he also realised that, as her former professor, he probably shouldn't be ogling her like this.

But really, the suit exposed more of her to his perusal than he ever would have imagined in their prior acquaintance, and he couldn't reasonably be expected not to enjoy the view.

Seating himself in the beach chair beside hers, he felt he ought to say something, but he didn't know what. He detested feeling awkward. He finally settled on, "Hello again."

She looked up from her book and smiled. He found his lips twitching instinctively in response as she said, "Hi, yourself." She studied him for a minute before adding, "What did you bring to read?"

He held up the book to show her before remembering he had charmed it to appear to be about Muggle chemistry. "The latest theoretical treatise on potion rod materials. This author seems to believe certain side effects can be eliminated or mitigated by using the newer alloys."

"Oh? You sound sceptical."

"I am." He paused, accustomed to people not really wanting him to elaborate on why he thought someone was an idiot. When she merely looked at him enquiringly, he continued, "Just because the newer alloys are new doesn't mean they're any better. It stands to reason that if they eliminate some side effects, they may create others."

"True, but perhaps the newer side effects will be more acceptable to the consumer."

Severus frowned. "Sometimes more acceptable in the short term becomes more problematic in the long run."

Hermione began nibbling on her lower lip as she considered that; Severus felt a distinctly non-academic interest begin to rise as he watched her. "Well, it's certainly true that one can't know long-term effects for sure until years later... But shouldn't we sometimes try new things if the indicators are that they might fix problems we already know we have?"

"I'm sure the women who took Thalidomide...and their children...might disagree with you." Hermione looked surprised. Severus glanced around and dropped his voice before asking, "What? It didn't occur to you that I might know about major issues with Muggle chemicals?"

Hermione's voice was equally soft as she replied, "Honestly? No, it didn't. You always seem so quintessentially *wizard* to me." Severus was just trying to decide if he had been insulted when she added, "And I mean that as a compliment, so don't look like that, please."

Feeling awkward at the unaccustomed praise, Severus muttered, "Thank you, I suppose."

"You're welcome, I suppose," Hermione replied, but her tone was light. "Perhaps I could borrow that when you're finished with it?"

Severus generally didn't lend his books out, having got too many back in unusable condition, but since she was probably the least likely of any person he knew to abuse books, he said, "All right."

She smiled. "Great!" She picked up her book.

Severus was surprised to find himself loath to end their conversation. He blurted, "What about you? What are you reading?"

Glancing back at him, she flushed. "Well, I thought I had brought along Danziger Lovejoy's latest, but my so-called friends seem to have decided I shouldn't be allowed to read anything interesting." She sounded resigned, rather than annoyed. He wondered how often her friends did this sort of thing to her.

She held up the book for him to see the title. "*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd?*" Severus read aloud. "Agatha Christie?"

Hermione laughed. "I'm trying to count myself fortunate that it's not Stephenie Meyer or Jackie Collins." She made a face. "At least they seem to have had the good sense to realise I don't read romance novels...or whatever sort of trash those are supposed to be. They put a selection of Agatha Christie, along with some P.G. Wodehouse, D.H. Lawrence, and Graham Greene into my bag. I suspect they asked my mum...they can't possibly have had any idea these books existed. The only thing I can't work out is why they would have included *Lord of the Flies*..." She paused, considering, then seemed to shake the question away as she smiled at Severus. "Anyway, this one's pretty good so far. You're welcome to read it when I'm done."

Severus started to refuse, but thought better of it. "Perhaps I will." Changing the subject, he asked, "I hope you're wearing sunscreen?" He ignored the whisper in his mind that suggested he might actually hope...just slightly...that she *wasn't* wearing sunscreen and therefore would need help putting it on her back.

She grinned. "I take a daily sunscreen potion. But don't tell the Muggles...they'll be jealous. You?"

"Considering it's my company that markets that particular potion, I do the same."

She grinned. "Nice to know you have faith in your own product."

"Indeed."

They shared one more smile before settling down to read for a while. A companionable silence prevailed, punctuated occasionally by bursts of laughter from the pool. Periodically, they chatted for a few minutes about something or other that Severus found particularly interesting in his book. All in all, there were far less pleasant ways to spend a morning, Severus thought.

When lunchtime came, it seemed natural to purchase sandwiches and fruit from the cafeteria to enjoy together poolside. In fact, Hermione mused, she was rather

pleasantly surprised by how very comfortable she was relaxing with Severus and her book. It was as close to a perfect day off as she could imagine.

The relative peace was shattered when Dee and Lucius appeared, laughing boisterously about their performance in the shuffleboard tournament. "There you are, Hermione! You should have seen us...we won by a mile! Lu was great, even though he swears he's never played before." She seated herself on the edge of Hermione's beach lounge as she spoke.

Hermione forced herself not to ask Lucius how he had managed to cheat, but she didn't miss the look Severus sent toward Lucius that suggested he wondered the same thing. Lucius maintained an expression of angelic innocence, which confirmed for Hermione that her suspicions were well founded.

"Anyway," Dee said, "there's a trivia contest later this afternoon. Lu thinks we should form a team and enter...you know, the four of us."

"Oh...", Hermione said, trying to decide how best to point out the problem with that plan. She couldn't exactly say that Lucius would hardly be an asset in a Muggle trivia contest. She settled on, "I'm rather enjoying my book. I think I'd prefer to just stay here." She looked to Severus, expecting him to agree...surely he had no interest in trivia contests? ...but he didn't notice, as he and Lucius were doing that weird Vulcan mind meld thing they always seemed to do.

Dee didn't seem to notice; she addressed Hermione without even glancing at Severus. "Oh, but if you don't enter, too, we'll have to find other teammates...the rules require teams of four, you know, two couples per team...and Lu says Sev is really smart, and I can tell you are, too, Hermione, so *please*?! It'll be fun! And besides, we just sign up now; the contest isn't till after dinner. We could just go sign up and then you can come back and read for the rest of the afternoon," she finished.

Hermione couldn't think how to respond, but Severus had no such qualms. "I *might* consider agreeing to do it, Delilah, if you take an earnest oath that you will ~~never~~, call me 'Sev' again."

Delilah frowned. "Really? You hate it that much? It's just a silly nickname, and 'Severus' is so formal. Especially for a cruise."

"Nevertheless," Severus said. "I detest that nickname. If you want me to agree to put aside my book, you will agree not to use it."

"Fine," Dee said on a slight pout, but then she brightened. "Let's go! Sign-ups are in the Grand Ballroom."

As they headed toward the ballroom, Hermione asked under her breath, "Why on earth did you agree to this fiasco? Lucius knows *nothing* about Muggle trivia!"

"Several reasons. One: he'll find some way to cheat, so we're sure to win; two: I'd rather just give in than listen to your cabin-mate wheedle and whine about it; three: I really do detest that nickname, so if there's any small chance of never hearing it again, it's worth it; four: between us, you and I and perhaps even Dee will perform adequately. And five...and I cannot stress this one enough...Lucius pouting is a sight you never want to see. Trust me."

Hermione couldn't help giggling. "You're afraid Lucius will pout?"

"No. I *know* Lucius will pout...which will lead to cajoling, which will lead to whining, which will lead to arguing. And I can safely assure you that by the time we get to arguing, hexing will be the inevitable outcome. As I believe I've already mentioned, I don't fancy having to perform mass Memory Charms; I'm sure you won't be surprised when I add that I also have no desire to wind up in Azkaban or St Mungo's. So as you can surely see, it's by far the better course to simply go along with a ridiculous trivia contest."

Hermione sighed. "I suppose. But he can't cheat. That's not fair."

"He won't be obvious about it."

"He can't cheat! Tell him not to cheat!"

"All right. I'll tell him..." But Severus sounded sceptical that it would have any impact on Lucius's behaviour.

As it happened, the problem in the trivia contest wasn't Lucius's penchant for cheating, Severus decided later. Rather, it was Hermione's rather extreme tendency toward competitiveness.

Things started off well enough; the first category was literature. Between Hermione and himself, they managed to score a number of points answering questions about Muggle literature from such authors as John Updike, C.S. Lewis, Pearl Buck, and Upton Sinclair.

The next topic was television, and fortunately, Delilah seemed to know an awful lot about that. If she thought it odd that none of her teammates knew anything about it, she didn't comment. *Probably assumes it's because we're English.* Severus, for his part, couldn't imagine wanting to watch dramas about terrorists or homicides or serial killers. And he couldn't even fathom how anyone could turn war or cancer into comedy.

Even Lucius turned out to be a contributing member of the team when the topic turned to political history; he was able to answer readily which wars were motivated by what political considerations as well as who had won and how. Upon further consideration, Severus supposed he shouldn't have been surprised. Lucius had always been inordinately interested in power, whatever form it took.

Amongst the four of them, they also managed to do well in such varied categories as genetics, fashion, and music (both classical and modern). In fact, until the final round, at least one of the four of them had a working knowledge of every single topic that came up. Severus even had to admit...if only to himself...that it was rather a lot of fun advancing through the rounds until they only had one more round to win in order to be crowned trivia champions of the ship.

Unfortunately, when the final topic was announced, Severus realised that it was the one topic they almost certainly could not win. Delilah didn't strike Severus as the sort to be interested in sport of any kind. If Hermione's disdain for Quidditch were any indication, she wouldn't be much help. Lucius's pool of knowledge was likely limited to Quidditch, Crup racing, and other wizarding pastimes. As for Severus himself, unless the questions were limited to English football in the 1960s and 70s, he wouldn't be much help, either.

Hermione's consternation quickly became apparent.

"Do something!" she hissed under her breath, nudging him with her elbow when the other team correctly identified the last English winner of a Wimbledon singles title as Virginia Wade. Severus assumed they must be tennis enthusiasts; how did Hermione expect anyone to compete with people who possessed such obscure knowledge?

"What would you have me do?" he answered *sotto voce*. "Call a time out? Do you expect me to learn the entire history of world sports in two minutes?"

"You must know *something* about it!"

"Why? Because I'm male?"

"Well... yes."

Severus's male side registered how attractive she was with that militant sparkle in her eye and the pink tinge in her cheeks. "I don't. However, if you're so determined to win, I could always tell Lucius you no longer care if he cheats."

Hermione snapped her mouth shut with an audible click, sent him a fulminating glare, and gamely hit the buzzer to answer the next question herself. "Bobby Fisher."

"Correct." *Well, at least we'll have a few points, then. Who knew chess was considered a sport?*

Severus managed to answer one other question ("What English football team won eight league titles, three European cups, three FA cups, and four League cups between 1972 and 1985?"). That was not, however, enough to overcome their opponents' knowledge of winter and summer Olympics, American professional football and baseball, college basketball, and professional golf.

When all was said and done, they lost the final round by an embarrassing score of eleven to two.

Hermione grumbled, "Of all the categories, why did it have to be that one?"

Severus smirked. "Look at it this way: if that category had come up sooner, we never would have made it to the final round."

"You're right, but really, eleven to two is so humiliating."

"Why?" Lucius asked. Severus was rather surprised that Lucius was taking the loss in stride, but he seemed more amused than anything. "We knew more than anyone on all but one topic...and in the scheme of things, sport is not the worst thing to be a bit ignorant of."

Hermione's countenance lightened a bit at that observation. "True. We *did* know rather a lot about the important issues, didn't we?"

"Indeed," Lucius said, smiling back and offering Hermione his arm. "Now, shall we all adjourn to the bar for some drinks and stargazing?" To Severus's surprise, Hermione placed her hand at Lucius's elbow without hesitation, her smile widening.

All agreed that drinks on deck made an excellent plan. Delilah was, naturally, effusive in her enthusiasm, but Severus had no trouble tuning her out for once, occupied as he was with his own thoughts even as he offered the chatterbox his arm. It was only polite, after all.

It was good to see Hermione and Lucius bury the hatchet at last. Especially since Severus was discovering, to his very great surprise, that he actually *liked* the woman...that she had many attractive qualities he had never allowed himself to recognise. And it would certainly be very awkward for Severus to pursue any sort of friendship with Hermione if she and Lucius maintained their old animosity. Severus had spent enough time in his life caught between warring individuals. He had no desire to do so again, not even on a small scale.

So all in all, he was *happy* that she and Lucius were laughing and chatting amicably as they took chairs on the deck.

Wasn't he?

Hermione was surprised to find that, having decided to let the past go (at least for this holiday), she found Lucius to be good company. Her original reasons for putting the past aside had been centred primarily around her long-standing desire to get to know Severus better. She had always thought him intelligent, brilliant even, and since the war, whenever she had seen him at Ministry functions, she had tried to engage him in conversation. Each time, when she finally got him to relax and talk to her, she found him acerbically witty and, in his own inimical way, sarcastically charming. She had, over the years, considered and discarded numerous ideas for furthering their acquaintance. But she had never managed to find an excuse to see him more frequently that was both workable and *not* pathetically adolescent.

She had quickly realised after their discussion last night that this cruise was a golden opportunity; another one so ready-made for furthering her acquaintance with the intriguing man was unlikely to come her way. And considering how longstanding his friendship with Lucius had been, her inability to behave in a friendly manner toward Lucius would likely have been an insurmountable obstacle to any hopes she might have in Severus's regard.

So as she strolled the deck on Lucius's arm, she pushed aside any lingering misgivings and simply allowed herself to be charmed. He said, "I find myself in need of some advice, Hermione. Perhaps you would be willing to assist?"

"What sort of advice?"

"I am interested in expanding my exposure to Muggle literature, and I wondered if you could recommend some books?"

"Oh, all right. What sorts of stories do you like?"

"Anything, really, so long as it's well written."

"I have a number of books along with me. Perhaps you would care to borrow one or two?"

"That would be perfect. Thank you." He led her to a pair of deck chairs and gestured for her to sit. She glanced back at Severus and Dee and saw that they, too, had found chairs nearby, though not so close that conversation amongst all four would be comfortable. She felt a small stab of jealousy as she watched Severus smile slightly at something Dee said.

Lucius drew her full attention back to him with his next comment. "It's a lovely evening, isn't it? It's been far too many years since I relaxed under the stars with a beautiful woman."

Hermione, feeling her cheeks grow warm, was grateful that there was only a quarter moon. She didn't quite know how to respond to a complimentary Lucius, and she grasped for something to say. "I've always loved looking at the stars, ever since I was a little girl. Some of my earliest memories involve stargazing with my parents. My dad used to point out different constellations, and he always said Mum was brighter than the brightest one."

"Sounds idyllic."

"It was, mostly."

A silence that somehow seemed pregnant followed. Hermione became aware of the sounds of the night around her: the crash of the waves against the ship; the murmur of other passengers' voices nearby; the hum of the ship's engines. After what seemed an eternity, Lucius spoke. "I feel as though I should apologise to you."

Surprised, Hermione asked, "For what?"

"For..." He paused, then began again. "For what you went through during the war. For what happened in my house. For... for the misguided beliefs I once held, and for the things I did and didn't do because of them." Another pause, an almost casual shrug, and an almost negligent wave of his hand. "For the entirety of my history with you, I suppose. And with Muggles in general."

Hermione could only stare at him.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have brought it up," Lucius said softly. "But it needed to be said, and I couldn't be sure I'd ever have another opportunity. If I were you, I wouldn't be particularly keen to see much of me. Besides," he added more briskly, "unless I miss my guess, *you* will soon be spending significantly more time with my dearest friend. I'm sure he'll be most grateful if we can find a way to get along."

Hermione smiled and relaxed. He sounded sincere, and even if he wasn't, holding on to grudges wouldn't solve anything. "I can't speak for Muggles in general, but for my part, I'm willing to forgive you. And not just because I hope you're right about Severus." She felt the flush on her cheeks deepen; *why* must her tongue get ahead of her

brain?

But Lucius only chuckled. "Oh, I'm right," he said. "I can feel his eyes boring holes into me even now."

Her eyes flew to Severus, and *hedid* seem to be glaring at Lucius. When his eyes shifted to meet hers, Hermione couldn't contain a delighted smile at the notion that he might be a little bit jealous of her spending time with Lucius. After a moment, Severus's features seemed to relax. He said something to Dee; then the pair stood and approached.

When he spoke, his voice flowed as smooth as silk over Hermione's entire body. "Lucius, my friend, I've just realised I need to discuss something with Hermione. Perhaps you'll excuse us?"

"Of course," Lucius said. He turned to Hermione, his smile just a tiny bit smug as his eyes clearly telegraphed his *I told you so*. "Hermione, perhaps you would be so good as to bring a book to breakfast for me?"

"Yes, sure," Hermione said, distracted by the intense way Severus seemed to be looking at her. "Good night, then."

"What did you want to discuss?" Hermione asked as soon as they were out of earshot of Lucius and Dee.

"The ship is making port tomorrow morning in Livorno. I wondered if you'd care to go ashore to visit Florence? We could get a Portkey and play tourist for the day: visit some of the *Palazzi*, the *Uffizi* Gallery, the *Duomo*..."

He wanted to spend the whole day together? Just the two of them? "Yes, I would love to!" Hermione exclaimed, unable to temper her delight. She barely managed to keep from hugging him.

He smiled then...not the tiny, almost-smile she would have expected, but a full, complete smile that even showed his teeth. They weren't as crooked or yellow as they used to be, she noted abstractedly...

"Good," he said. "Shall we meet at seven for an early breakfast? That way we'll have the whole day."

"Perfect." She paused, then frowned. "But I promised to bring Lucius a book at breakfast tomorrow. Will he be up that early?"

Severus chuckled. "Doubtful. If I walk you to your cabin now, you could give me the book. I'll ask a steward to deliver it to him at breakfast."

Smiling, Hermione agreed with alacrity, wondering whether she might be able to persuade Severus to kiss her once they were truly alone...

Part 2

Chapter 2 of 2

Severus and Hermione explore the delights of Tuscany and Rome. Is this love or just a holiday fling?

When they arrived at the cabin Hermione shared with Dee, Severus found himself wondering how she would react if he tried to kiss her. She certainly had seemed enthusiastic at the prospect of spending the day together. But maybe that was just because Florence itself was so appealing...

He was pulled from his thoughts when Hermione said, "Come in for a minute. No sense loitering in the hall, is there?" By the time he had complied, she had a suitcase full of books open on the bed. "Which of these do you think Lucius would enjoy?"

Without even looking, he said, "*Lord of the Flies*, of course."

Hermione looked surprised, then giggled...which, he was surprised to discover, seemed charming rather than annoying. "You don't think he'll take offence?"

"Not now that you seem to have decided to put the past behind you. You have, haven't you?"

"Well... yes." She resolutely ignored the small voice at the back of her mind that wondered whether it was really that easy. The first step to forgiving someone was simply deciding to do so, she had learnt. Once the decision was made, it eventually would happen. And really, it felt so much better to let go of all that anger. "But how did you know? He only just apologised when we were up on deck."

"You were too relaxed to be still holding tight to a grudge. You do realise your every thought and emotion is usually writ all over your face?"

"Yes, I know," Hermione said on a sigh. "Sometimes it's a real hindrance." She paused, looking at him consideringly. Very deliberately allowing a specific thought free rein in her mind, she asked, "What am I thinking now?"

He stared at her for a long moment, then surprise...almost disbelief...crossed his features. His usually smooth tones were husky when he asked, "Shall I... show you?"

At her wordless nod, he stepped closer, awkwardly placing his hands at her waist to draw her near as he bent his head.

When his lips finally met hers, Hermione let out her breath on a sigh and kissed him back, letting him lead, keeping it light and gentle at first. When his tongue sought entrance, she immediately granted it, enjoying the way the kiss seemed to radiate ever-increasing heat throughout her whole body, savouring the faint taste of the brandy he had enjoyed up on deck.

Time ceased to exist for Hermione as they exchanged kiss after kiss after kiss, each one a little more intense than the last. She could feel the restraint he was exercising in the way his hands gripped her waist and in the slight tremor that seemed to be coursing through his body...or was that hers?

Her arms had somehow found their way around his neck, and she pressed her body closer to his. She could feel his arousal against her belly, and a flood of heat shot to her groin in answer. As her own arousal grew, she forgot how to think... could only feel...

Her growing passion was interrupted by the mechanical hum of a key card deactivating the lock. Recognising it for what it was, Hermione tore herself from Severus's arms just as the door was flung open.

"Oh, good, you're still up. I wanted to ask you..." Dee said, but she stopped as her eyes landed on Severus. She looked from one to the other of them. "Er... am I interrupting something?"

Hermione was too busy trying to get her recalcitrant libido back in control to answer. After a moment, Severus cleared his throat and said, "I was just leaving. I shall see to it that Lucius gets this." Gesturing with the book, he added, "I'll see you in the morning, Hermione. Good night, Delilah."

Hermione suppressed a smile as he swept out of the room; she could almost visualise the black robes of the past billowing behind him.

Turning her attention to Dee, she found her voice at last. "What did you want to ask me?"

"Oh... er... Are you sure I didn't interrupt something?"

Forcing herself to smile at her cabin-mate, Hermione said, "It's fine. It's better we don't move too fast, anyway." Though part of her certainly wished they had not stopped quite so soon...or at all...she knew that in the long term, it would be a mistake to hasten things like that. She liked him too much to want to settle for a holiday fling, and she felt quite sure that if she wanted something more, slower was better.

She didn't have to like it, though.

"Anyway, I wondered if you think Lucius is gay?"

Hermione choked. "Gay?!" Forcing herself not to laugh aloud, Hermione asked carefully, "No, I'm pretty sure he's not. But what makes you ask?"

"Well, I've done everything but throw myself naked in his bed, and he's not getting the hint."

"Ah." Hermione tried to think what to say... After all, given Lucius's activities in the past few years, it did seem rather odd... "Maybe he's waiting for a more opportune time."

"How much more opportune can it get? The cruise *ends* in three days!"

"Well, Severus and I are going to Florence tomorrow, so you'll have him all to yourself all day to work on him."

"All right, I guess that'll help. But I really hope I'm not going to wind up without getting laid even once this whole cruise!"

Hermione had no idea how she ought to respond to that, so she changed the subject. "Do you need the bathroom before I have a shower?"

As he waited for Hermione to appear at breakfast, Severus tried not to give in to the thoughts chasing themselves around in his head. *What if things are awkward between us now? We're supposed to spend the whole day together! What if we can't think of anything to talk about? What if...*

His litany of worries was interrupted when Hermione said, "Good morning!" She looked fresh and bright in her yellow sundress, and he forgot to feel awkward for a moment when she smiled.

"Good morning," he replied with a small smile. Then the awkwardness returned. "Er... you look... that is... I... er... like your dress," he finally finished, cursing himself for sounding like a schoolboy. But she didn't seem to notice anything amiss.

"Thank you," she said, her smile growing as she seated herself and poured some tea from the pot he had requested. After her first sip, she asked, "Where shall we go first?"

"Well, we're scheduled to make port at eight, and I believe the Portkey office opens at eight-thirty. I imagine the churches will be open by the time we get to Florence, don't you think?"

"I would expect so. They'll probably have information for tourists at the Portkey office."

As they ate, Severus realised that the awkwardness came and went. He began to suspect it might be all in his head, as Hermione didn't seem too worried when silence fell.

They managed to finish breakfast and make their way ashore without any disasters occurring, and they found the Portkey office with a minimum of fuss by following a trail of coded runes that were hidden from Muggle eyes by an elaborate set of charms.

"What shall we see today?" Hermione asked, all business. Severus was appalled to discover he found her efficiency *cute*. It made him want to kiss her, just to distract her a little.

Really, if he didn't watch out, he'd find himself behaving like one of the adolescents he used to take points off of...

He forced his attention back to the matter at hand. "Well, the ship is in port for two full days, so perhaps the tourist areas today and more out-of-the-way places tomorrow?" He braced himself in case she didn't want to spend two days together.

But the idea didn't seem to faze her. Sounding almost hesitant...and looking as if she were bracing for a strong objection...she said, "I was really hoping to visit some of the libraries and bookshops in Florence while we're here."

"I'm shocked," Severus said dryly. "Given your well-known hatred of research...and, indeed, all things intellectual...I'm surprised you'd force yourself to do such a boring, depressing thing."

Hermione stared at him for several seconds before she burst out laughing, sounding thoroughly delighted with his attempt at humour. He smirked, pleased with himself for making her laugh so hard.

He was again tempted to kiss her.

At last she calmed enough to say, "Oh, Severus, I keep forgetting you aren't like my other friends. They'd have groaned and rolled their eyes at any hint that I wanted to spend a beautiful autumn day inside a musty old library. Well, except for Luna," she added with a quick grin.

He squelched another adolescent surge of delight...*she considers me her friend!*...and covered the grin that threatened to break through by giving her his sternest expression. "Please don't compare me with your other friends. I'd prefer not to lose my breakfast, if you don't mind."

She laughed again. He couldn't completely suppress his smile; her joy was infectious. She said, "All right, shall we visit Pisa and some of the more touristy things in Florence today? Then we can spend tomorrow in musty old libraries and bookshops, and perhaps find some of the more out-of-the-way places along the way."

"All right," Severus agreed. "Maybe we should rent brooms, too..." He trailed off at the look on her face. "No?"

"I hate flying," she said.

"Why?" he asked. "We could get a look at the countryside, and that would give us more flexibility about visiting places we might otherwise not even know about."

She sighed. "True..." Pausing, she seemed to debate with herself. Eventually, she said, "The truth is, I'm not very skilled at flying. I would be so focused on staying on the broom that I wouldn't see much of the countryside anyway. Unless..."

"Unless...?" he prompted when she paused.

"Unless you'd be willing to manage the flying for both of us?"

Her expression was hopeful, and his inner adolescent perked up happily at the prospect of a day spent holding a pretty girl close. "You'd be comfortable with that?"

"I trust you." And it was decided.

They Portkeyed to Pisa first, simply because there wasn't much to see there...just the various sites at *Santa Maria Assunta*, the *Piazza dei Miracoli*, the baptistery, the *Campo Santo*, and of course, the famous leaning bell tower. They discovered that the *campanile* was actually shored up with an intricate series of spells and charms. Speaking with some of the local magical folk, they learned that the tower had been purposely set to leaning in an odd, yet successful, effort to attract business to their otherwise unremarkable little town.

Hermione couldn't immediately decide whether to be impressed or appalled by such an ingenious commercial ploy. In the end, as she said to Severus, "Well, I suppose the Muggles enjoy it, and it's not actually hurting anyone, so it's good that they came up with something so unique to draw tourists."

They spent a little while traipsing around the grounds, exploring the beautiful carvings and art work in the *Duomo*, and then looking around the walled cemetery. In the end, they agreed that while there wasn't much to see in Pisa, what was there was so beautiful that it had been well worth delaying their arrival in Florence by a few hours. Except for that very bizarre sculpture of the she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus... Hermione couldn't help thinking that was just weird. When she said as much to Severus, he replied, "I wonder what Lupin would have thought of his namesake's likeness." Despite the accompanying smirk, his comment seemed to Hermione to lack any lingering rancour toward his childhood nemesis, which pleased her more, perhaps, than was actually warranted.

When they had seen enough, they headed for wizarding Pisa, where they stopped briefly at a tiny café for fortifying coffee and pastries before Severus pulled out the broom they had rented. "Are you ready?" he asked, sounding amused. Hermione supposed her anxiety showed, despite her best efforts to conceal it.

Squaring her shoulders, she climbed aboard. When he settled behind her, Disillusioning them and then placing his hands on the broom in front of her, she felt herself relax. This felt much more secure than flying by herself.

As they flew over the beautiful Tuscan countryside, she eagerly looked at the vineyards, olive groves, gardens, and peach and fig orchards they passed. Severus set a pace that was comfortable for sightseeing, not too fast or too slow.

Spotting a small village with sheep dotting the hillside, Hermione asked, "Do you suppose they sell woollens there? Italy is famous for its textiles..."

Severus asked smoothly (*too smoothly?*), "Is there something in particular that you want?"

Feeling herself blush...what was that in his tone?...Hermione nevertheless answered, "Not really."

Severus pressed, "You must have something in mind. Don't you want something special?" Without giving her a chance to answer, he added, "You really must have something special."

"This entire cruise is something special. It's enough."

Severus didn't say anything more. However, he did land in a copse of trees near the village, saying, "Let's see what's here. Maybe you'll find something you like." Hermione couldn't help feeling impressed when he transfigured the broom into a two-person bicycle.

They hopped on and pedalled toward the village. As they approached, Hermione felt the Muggle-Repelling Charms that she hadn't detected from above. "It seems we could have landed in the village square," she commented.

"Yes, so it seems," Severus agreed. By tacit agreement, they hopped off the bike at the edge of the hamlet; Severus transfigured it back into its natural state, shrunk it, and put it in his pocket. Offering her his arm, he asked, "Shall we explore?"

They spent the remainder of the morning exploring the tiny wizarding community. The people were friendly, seemingly delighted to have visitors, and Hermione wound up making a number of purchases: a crocheted purple shawl, a silk scarf, a leather purse. Apparently, they were in the middle of farm country, and a number of cottage industries had sprung up in this tiny hamlet. By the time they were finished shopping, it was lunch time, and Hermione was famished. Severus asked an old woman if there was a restaurant or café nearby and was directed to a small cottage on the outskirts of the village.

They enjoyed a leisurely meal of fresh *Pappa al Pomodoro di Francesca* mushrooms with a fresh olive and cheese stuffing, and potato ravioli accompanied by locally produced Chianti before getting back on their broom and resuming their journey to Florence.

Arriving in Florence in early afternoon, they elected to begin their explorations by seeking out some of the city's tourist attractions. Fortunately, though many of the shops seemed to be closing for siesta, the major attractions remained open. At the *Accademia di Bella Arti*, Severus cast a mild Confundus Charm to allow them to gain entry quickly rather than waiting in a long line. Other than a mildly admonishing look, Hermione didn't comment.

The *David* was a sight to behold, Severus decided, trying not to feel insecure in the face of Hermione's raptures about such a perfect representation of manhood. Severus consoled himself with the thought that he would win the comparison in at least *one* area...

He almost said as much to Hermione, but decided that would be unnecessarily crass. Besides, he was a living, breathing person. Marble had to be cold to snuggle up to, no matter how warm it looked...

Severus didn't know how Muggles could stand the crowds. He tolerated them only by casting a very mild Muggle-Repelling Charm on himself and Hermione...just enough to give them a few feet of space, but not enough to draw attention. It was enough to allow him to enjoy the many master works in the gallery.

At the *Museo di San Marco* while they looked at the frescoes and explored the Cloisters, Severus fought the urge to take Hermione's hand.

As they headed toward the *Duomo*, stopping along the way to take in some of the glorious architecture in the *Piazza della Santissima Annunziata*, someone jostled Hermione, and she stumbled. Severus caught her arm to steady her, then took the opportunity to place her hand in the crook of his arm. "Can't have you injuring yourself, can we?" he murmured. She smiled and agreed.

At the *Duomo*, he kept possession of her hand as they walked around both outside and inside before exploring the Baptistry and its famous doors. When they reached the top of the *Campanile*, where they had climbed to take in some breathtaking views of Tuscany, Hermione exclaimed over how gorgeous it all was, and it was all Severus could do to keep from kissing her.

They were in public, after all.

Severus enjoyed their explorations far more than he had anticipated, primarily because Hermione was such a lively companion, he assured himself...not just because he liked touching her.

She had, of course, read about most of the places they visited, and Severus was content to let her direct them through the places she thought they should see.

In the late afternoon, they found their way, arm in arm, to the *Basilica di Santa Croce*. By the time they had finished exploring there, they were hungry. Someone recommended the *Ristorante Finisterrae* for dinner, where Severus found himself enjoying the intimacy of sharing another bottle of Chianti along with dishes like *Flan di Broccoli*, *Pizzoccheri alla Valtellinese*, and *Tegame*. They finished with *cannoli* and coffee.

Severus was amused to see Hermione stifling a yawn; she seemed to have worn herself out with their packed day. He said, "Come, my dear, I can see it's time for you to find your bed."

"I'm not tired," she said, but another yawn belied her assertion. Her smile was a bit sheepish. "I don't want to be tired," she amended. "It's been such a perfect day."

"It's been enjoyable," Severus agreed. "But tomorrow, we have libraries and bookshops to find, as well as the Uffizi. You want to be rested for that, don't you?"

"Yeeees," Hermione said, still sounding reluctant to see the day end. "But maybe..." she stopped, flushing a lovely shade of pink.

"Maybe...?" Severus prompted.

"Well, I just thought maybe a star-lit stroll to the *Ponte Vecchio* would be pretty before we turn in."

Severus was happy to oblige. They found their way to the bridge and enjoyed the view of the city lights reflecting off of the Arno River. Hermione sighed with pleasure, leaning in to Severus's side and resting her head against his shoulder, seemingly without conscious thought.

Deciding to seize the moment, he slid his arms around her waist, tugging gently until she faced him. Before she could say anything, he bent and touched his lips tentatively to hers. She immediately relaxed into him, her lips opening as she welcomed his kiss.

Encouraged by her response, he touched his tongue to hers, teasing with light caresses, letting his hands pull her tight against him. She raised herself on her toes, pressing herself even closer... and then she sighed and began to pull back. Before he could wonder if she was less interested than he had thought, she whispered, "We need privacy before we take this any further. Can we Apparate?"

Unable to hide his relieved smile, Severus murmured, "My cabin or yours?"

She grinned then. "Yours. Unless you're keen to see Delilah..."

"Point taken." Before she could say anything more, he Apparated them both to his cabin. As soon as they arrived, he kissed her again.

I should have done this ages ago, Hermione thought as she slid her hands inside Severus's linen shirt. *But how could I have known he'd be so...?* Words failed her as Severus pushed the strap of her sundress down her arm and followed his fingers with his lips, placing small kisses along the top of her shoulder.

Her mind raced as her head fell back of its own accord, giving him easier access to her neck. She had known he was intriguing and intelligent; why else would she have worked so hard to get him to talk to her whenever she had run into him? And of course, how could his silky voice fail to send shivers down any female's spine?

But this... *How could I have known he could make me feel like this?*

Her other strap fell, and he pushed her dress to her waist and stared. The moonlight, streaming in through the balcony door, let her see the desire in his eyes, and the intensity of his gaze sent a wave of heat through her entire body. Paradoxically, she shivered and ducked to kiss him as her hands rapidly unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it from his shoulders.

It was her turn to stare...how had she never suspected the male beauty he had been hiding underneath all his layers of black cloth? She pressed her lips to the centre of his chest. With a growl, he lifted her and then dropped her on the bed. He tugged at her dress, and when he couldn't remove it fast enough, he waved a hand and murmured, "*Divesto!*"

Hermione was momentarily impressed by the show of wandless magic, but that thought was immediately crowded out as his hands went to the fastening of his trousers. She leaned up on her elbows to watch as he unveiled an impressive erection. She smiled and said, "The *David* has nothing on you, Severus."

He smiled. "I'm glad you noticed." And then he joined her, pushing her back onto the bed, his lips feasting on her mouth, then moving lower until he could taste first one turgid nipple, then the other. "Sweeter than anything I've tasted all day," he whispered. Hermione saw his cheeks flush before he returned to his efforts at worshipping her body with his lips and tongue.

He was masterful in his attentions. He seemed attuned to her every sensation, and he used that understanding to drive her arousal higher than she had ever imagined it could go. By the time he finally entered her, she was incoherent with desire, and as he slid inside her, the feeling of completion, of fullness, was so intense that she moaned aloud. When he began to move, she lost all rational thought; she was drowning in sensation.

When at last her orgasm hit, it was more intense than anything she had ever felt in her entire life, and it seemed to go on and on and on. As it finally began to wane, she heard Severus's hoarse shout of completion, and then he collapsed on top of her as though boneless. It was several minutes before she realised she was stroking his back gently. She heard him mumble something into her hair, but couldn't make it out. "Hmmm?" she asked, unable to form an actual word.

He turned his head and spoke into her ear. "I'm crushing you. I should move."

"In a minute," Hermione managed to reply.

But he rolled to one side anyway, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her close as he dropped a kiss atop her head. Somehow, they got under the blankets, and Hermione heard Severus sigh sleepily. "G'night," she thought she heard him say.

Inwardly smiling at how typical it was of men that he fell asleep immediately, she whispered, "G'night."

She turned to snuggle, spoon-style, into his embrace...and who would have thought he'd be a cuddler? Just before she closed her own eyes, she caught sight of the clock. A few minutes after midnight. *Not a bad way to start my thirtieth birthday*, she thought irreverently. On that thought, she allowed herself to drift off to sleep.

Severus woke with a mouthful of hair and a morning hard-on. He shifted gingerly, hoping to make himself more comfortable without waking his companion, but then realised what a bad idea that was as his erection seemed to swell even more as it brushed against Hermione's bum. He debated what to do for a moment, wondering if she would regret their activities now that the bright light of day, rather than soft moonlight, was illuminating them.

After a moment, he decided that if she was going to be upset, trying to coax a repeat of last night wouldn't make things worse, but might actually put her in a good mood. With that in mind, he brushed her hair away from her shoulder and began planting small kisses on the soft skin he had just exposed. Soon, his efforts were rewarded with a

sigh and a shiver as she began to stir. "Mmmmmmm," she murmured sleepily, tilting her head slightly, which served to give him better access.

"Good morning," he replied between kisses. She stretched languidly, sliding against his skin in all sorts of interesting places, and turned to face him.

She captured his lips for a long, sweet kiss before answering. "Good morning. What time is it?"

He glanced over her shoulder at the clock. "Not quite seven."

"Good," she said. She kissed him again, and as they made love, he thought, *I could get used to this...*

After, when they were relaxing, the contented feeling that stole over him was sufficiently unusual to make him panic. "Happy birthday," he blurted, then could have kicked himself when she frowned.

"How do you know it's my birthday?"

"You said this was your birthday cruise."

"But I didn't say what day it was, just that that was why I was here."

"Delilah must have mentioned it, then."

She looked at him suspiciously. "I really, really hope you didn't mean to imply that this was a birthday shag."

Severus hadn't even thought such a thing, and he said so. "Why would I imply that? If anything, it was more a gift to me than you..." She looked slightly mollified as she flushed an endearingly awkward shade of pink, but Severus couldn't resist adding, "Although, if it really is your birthday, I suppose that technically..."

"Do *not* finish that thought, Severus Snape!" She got up, dragging the top sheet with her. "Unless, of course, you *don't* value your manly bits." She slammed into the bathroom, and he could hear her muttering for several seconds before the sound of running water drowned her out. He couldn't suppress a smirk. How had he never noticed how adorable she was when she was in a snit?

Climbing out of bed and stretching, he thought it a shame that the shower stall, while not as tiny as he might have expected, didn't really allow enough room for two to manoeuvre in the way he would like: it would be fun to try to coax her back into good humour... Realising he could solve that problem, he grabbed his wand and let himself into the room. He ignored her shrieks of outrage when he cast appropriate charms on the stall and stepped in with her. "Just doing my bit to conserve water," he said innocently. "Carry on."

She glared, but considering the suds in her hair, she had no choice, really. He waited until her eyes were closed and her head tilted back before stepping closer, murmuring, "You missed a spot, right here." Her eyes flew open as he swiped a thumb over her left nipple. He didn't try to mask his delight in the way it immediately stood at attention. "Hmmm... I don't think I got it." Ignoring her muttered warning, he leaned forward and took it into his mouth.

"Severus," she began, "we can't..."

"Shhhhh," he interrupted, letting his breath blow on her nipple. She didn't sound convinced anyway, did she? "I'm busy. You don't want me to miss any soap suds, do you? Oh, there's another one." He blew deliberately on her right nipple before sucking it into his mouth. She moaned, and he knew he had her.

Forty-five minutes later, Severus Apparated them back to an out of the way alley they had passed yesterday in Florence. The Uffizi Gallery and the *Librairie Francaise de Florence*, among other things, awaited.

They shared breakfast at the *Mercato di Sant'Amrogia*, and Hermione could only marvel at how relaxed and happy Severus seemed. The fourth or fifth time he said something outrageous, she finally realised that provoking an outburst from her...and then kissing her back into good humour...was his version of flirting. It was rather effective, too, she had to admit.

They visited the French Library first. Hermione was pleased that she remembered enough French to browse around without having to cast translation spells, and she could comfortably converse *en français* with the librarians without needing a translation amulet like the Italian one they had rented at the Portkey office yesterday. She spent an enjoyable two hours exploring the stacks...they had a wonderful collection of French literature.

She had to admit, though, if only to herself, that her favourite part of her time there was when Severus found her deep in the recesses of the library and spent ten minutes kissing her senseless.

After leaving the library, they strolled hand in hand as they made their way toward the *Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze*. As they walked, they sipped coffee Severus had purchased at a café they passed; Hermione found it sweet that he remembered how she liked it...no sugar and a healthy splash of milk...without needing her to remind him. Most of her friends still got it wrong after all these years. She couldn't count the number of times she had worked to avoid grimacing at the overly sweet concoctions they usually served her.

At the National Central Library, they caught a special exhibition on astral myths, with a number of fascinating manuscripts relating to Galilean astronomy. Severus seemed to like her enthusiasm for the ancient texts: he pulled her into a quiet corner, cast a Notice-Me-Not Charm, and kissed her senseless again.

Hermione found herself falling deeper and deeper into infatuation as the morning wore on. His sly sense of humour, his sharp intellect, and his mind-numbing kisses all combined to form Hermione's ideal man. She was very much afraid she would be irrevocably in love by the end of the day; she could only hope that he would be as enraptured as she was.

They had lunch at an out-of-the-way *taverna* that seemed to be full of locals rather than tourists. They split a Tuscan-style pizza and a bottle of Chianti, and by the time they finished, Hermione was ready for siesta. But Severus said, "No time for that. It's time for your birthday surprise."

"What birthday surprise?" When had he found time to arrange a birthday surprise?

He refused to say more, just kissed her quickly before leading her to a quiet alley and Apparating them both to another quiet alley. They seemed to be at a service entrance of some sort, and when Severus knocked, the door flew open as though someone were waiting for them. A slight, balding man spoke in rapid Italian. Fortunately, the translation amulet worked perfectly. "Severus, my friend! It has been too long! Come, come, we must hurry." He gestured them in and shut the door firmly behind them. He turned to Hermione. "You must be the friend Severus so wants to impress." He took her hand, bowing over it formally. Over his head, Hermione saw Severus's cheeks colour slightly, and she smiled reassuringly. "I am Giovanni Balducci, the curator of the collection here. Welcome to the *Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana*. And happy birthday! We have arranged a very special treat for you. This way."

Bemused, Hermione followed the little man up some stairs and down several long corridors. She was already impressed that Severus had managed access to the library, which was normally limited to scholars with specific, demonstrable need for the resources it contained. "Ah, here we are. Our current exhibition about the forms of books through history. Take your time; it is siesta and no one will disturb you. When you are finished here, I shall show you one of the crown jewels of our collection: one of the three Sinibaldi manuscripts that was ordered by Lorenzo de Medici for his daughters. We are trying to arrange to borrow the other two so that we can exhibit them side by side for the first time in centuries, but for now, we have only the one."

The next two hours flew by. The exhibition was fascinating; it covered centuries and included everything from pottery shards with writing on them and fragments of papyrus to different styles of books and manuscripts. Hermione became so engrossed in it that she forgot everything around her until Signore Balducci returned, ready to show them the Book of Hours of Lorenzo de Medici.

It was a stunning work of art. Hermione could have happily stared at it for hours, but alas, as siesta came to an end, Signore Balducci returned to lead them back the way they had come. He bid them farewell, reminding them to visit again when next they came to Florence.

When they were alone, Severus asked, "You were very quiet. Did you like it?"

She was surprised that he sounded unsure. "Do you really have to ask?" She couldn't restrain herself; she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him thoroughly until she felt him relax. She pulled back and said, "That was by far the best birthday gift anyone has ever given me. If you're not careful, I'm going to fall head over heels in love with you." She felt herself blush, wishing she could recall the rash words, but then she mentally shrugged. The words couldn't be unsaid, anyway.

His cheeks flushed, but he smiled and kissed her again. "Come. The Uffizi awaits."

"The Uffizi cannot possibly be as amazing as the *Biblioteca*. I'm still practically speechless."

Severus grinned slyly. "Well, not quite *speechless*."

She smacked him lightly on the arm. "Be nice."

"I'm never nice. I'm sometimes good, perhaps, but never nice."

Looking at him consideringly, she said, "I can think of a few times in the last couple of days when you've been *very* nice, indeed. But don't worry," she added when he glared, "I won't tell anyone."

They returned the Portkey and the translation amulets in time to re-board the ship shortly before its scheduled departure. Severus felt as exhausted as Hermione looked. They walked at an easy pace through the corridors toward her cabin.

Stopping outside her door, he felt the awkwardness that had all but disappeared while they explored Florence return with a vengeance. She must have felt it, too; her smile seemed a bit uncertain.

After a seemingly interminable silence, she said, "Do you want to come in?"

He tried to decipher what answer she wanted, but couldn't read her expression. "It's probably not wise. Your cabin-mate will likely be there." If he had had his way, they'd both be in *his* cabin by now. But she had asked him to walk her to her cabin, so here they were. He wondered whether their relationship, such as it was, would end when the ship docked in Rome tomorrow.

She said, "She won't be here if she managed to seduce Lucius." She paused, then asked abruptly, "He's not gay, is he?"

Severus was startled by the question. "What makes you ask that?"

"Dee asked me the other night. He hadn't taken her up on her offer, and she didn't think she'd been subtle."

Severus couldn't contain a snort. "Subtle? I don't think she knows the meaning of the word."

"She's not *that* bad," Hermione protested. Severus raised an eyebrow. "Well, all right, she's kind of... But she means well."

"All I can say is: better Lucius than me."

Hermione grinned. "Anyway, do you want to come in?"

Maybe she didn't want to end things, after all. "Why don't we go to my cabin instead?"

Her smile widened, and he thought he saw a touch of relief in her eyes. "I'd be happy to come to your cabin, but I need to get a few things. It was uncomfortable having to sneak back here this morning to clean my teeth."

The degree of relief he felt seemed out of proportion to the situation, Severus thought. He had assumed they were merely having a holiday fling, but it appeared he might have been subconsciously hoping for more. *Don't get ahead of yourself, Snape. The holiday isn't over; she could still be planning to end it tomorrow.*

Still, he had tonight. "I'll wait for you here."

She frowned. "You don't want to come in?"

"I'd rather not see Delilah, and I especially don't want to be *interrupted* by Delilah again."

Cheeks turning pink, she said, "Oh. Okay. I'll be quick."

Hermione hurried to gather some toiletries and a change of clothes. She didn't want to leave Severus hanging about in the corridor for very long. What if he got impatient and left?

She didn't care to examine too closely how much she had grown to like him. But really, how could she not? The two days she had spent with him in Florence had been wonderful. Nearly perfect, in fact. Even when he was purposely provoking her, she had fun with him.

But what if he just means to have a holiday shag? What if I'm growing to like him...maybe even love him...and he's just having fun for a few days?

Shoving the last of her toiletries into a small case and snapping it shut, she forced herself to push aside the doubts that were trying to ruin what might be her last night with Severus. Opening the door, she said brightly, "All set."

He looked at her closely for a moment, but to her relief, he didn't comment. "Let's go, then."

The silence as they walked felt awkward to Hermione, and she groped for something to say. "Do you think Lucius and Dee missed us today?"

"No, Lucius knew we were spending today together."

"Oh."

A moment later, she tried again. "Are you staying in Rome tomorrow night, or leaving for home straight away?"

"We're spending the day in Rome, then Portkeying to London tomorrow evening. You?"

"Same." After a pause, she added, "Perhaps we could explore a bit of Rome together."

"Perhaps," he said, sounding preoccupied.

Hermione gave up.

Why does she keep asking me about Lucius? Severus wondered. *Maybe she's getting bored with me. Maybe now that she's decided to forgive him, she wants to...*

They arrived at his cabin at last, interrupting his morose speculation. Opening the door, he gestured for her to precede him into the room. She stepped in just far enough to let him in behind her and stopped. He sought for a way to help both of them relax. "We could have some wine if you like," he offered.

"Great!" she said. "On the balcony, perhaps?"

"If you like." He got the glasses and opened a bottle of Chianti he had purchased in Florence. Unfortunately, Lucius was on the balcony next door and had already engaged her in conversation by the time Severus joined her. "... took me to the *Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana*, and we saw the de Medici Book of Hours. It was amazing!"

"I'm glad you enjoyed your day," Lucius replied.

"Here's your wine," Severus said.

Hermione frowned, probably because his tone was a bit less gracious than would have been ideal, but she thanked him and took a sip. "Is Dee with you?" she asked Lucius.

"Alas, she threw me over for someone younger and more fun," Lucius replied.

"You don't seem very unhappy about it," Hermione observed.

"She was too... young, I suppose." He waved a hand. "I hate to say it, but all that energy and chatter became a bit wearing after a while. I must be getting old."

Severus almost rolled his eyes as Hermione protested, "You're not old! You're in your prime! You're probably just ready for something more than a holiday fling."

What was Lucius up to? He apparently wanted sympathy...which, to Severus's chagrin, Hermione seemed only too happy to provide...but to what end?

Severus soon found himself growing irritated with his oldest friend. As petty as it probably was, he wanted Hermione all to himself, in case this really was his last night with her. But she seemed perfectly content to chat with Lucius...

Abruptly, he stood and said, "I'm going to have a shower." He swept out of the room without giving them a chance to comment, wishing for some robes to add to the drama of his exit.

Hermione stared after Severus, her mouth agape. At last, she asked Lucius, "What's the matter with him?"

Lucius shrugged. "Who knows? He complains about me pouting, but he's worse, I think."

"Do you think I should go after him?"

"No. He'd only bite your head off, and then you'd waste the entire night arguing." He shrugged again. "Or avoiding each other."

"Yeah, but he'll probably be more upset if I don't at least try."

"Trust me; I've known Severus very well for a very long time. He needs at least a few minutes to realise he's overreacting, and then a few more to get past the embarrassment he'll feel when he does realise."

Hermione digested that. Something in his tone suggested... something. "How well *do* you know Severus?"

"As well as anyone," he said, leaving Hermione no less mystified. "But enough about that. Let's talk about you. Are you planning to spend any time in Rome? Or do you have to return immediately?"

"My Portkey is tomorrow evening, so I'll have the day." Glancing at the bathroom, where she could hear the water running, she added, "I was hoping... Well, maybe he'll be in a better mood tomorrow."

"If he's not, I am at your service. Or perhaps the three of us could explore Rome together? I can probably arrange entry to a few of the more interesting and less accessible places."

"The Vatican library, perhaps?"

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "The Church likes a sizable donation as much as anyone."

"That would be terrific," Hermione mused aloud, then shook herself. "But only if Severus agrees. I don't want to upset him unnecessarily." She glanced at the bathroom again, wondering how long she should wait to go after him.

Lucius sighed theatrically. "I can see I'm not going to keep your attention this evening. Depending on your intentions, you could probably go after him now. But not if you're planning to waste time talking." He paused. "And if I might offer a piece of advice?"

Hermione, trying to gauge his intentions, realised she didn't know him well enough to judge. She nodded cautiously. Lucius said, "Start as you mean to continue. Don't tiptoe around his temper, *especially* if you want a long-term relationship with him. He won't mean to, but he'll take advantage, and he'll lose respect for you if you let him."

Hermione considered that for several seconds. "I'll keep it in mind. And on that note, I'll bid you good night."

"All right. I'll see you both tomorrow at breakfast, then?"

"I imagine so." She went inside, closing the balcony door behind her. She stripped as she headed for the bathroom, figuring her nakedness might distract Severus from whatever had him in a snit.

Taking a breath, she opened the door and asked, "Is there room for me?"

Seeming startled, he turned to glare at her. "Where's your new best friend?"

She considered her response carefully. At last, she said, "I would have said the only candidate on this ship for the position of my new best friend is here, taking a shower... but perhaps you'd prefer I find someone else instead?"

His whole body seemed to relax. "No. I just thought... Never mind." Taking her hand, he pulled her into the shower and kissed her gently.

Pulling back to look him in the eye, Hermione said seriously, "He's *your* friend, Severus. I'm growing to like him, now that I'm giving him a chance, but I like you more. And I'm hoping..." She stopped, a little afraid to continue.

"Hoping...?"

Why not ask? she decided. He might say no, but at least then she wouldn't have to wonder. Mustering her courage, she said, "I'm hoping we can continue to see each other, to get to know each other, when we're back home."

"You want us to... court each other?" he asked, sounding cautious and perhaps a bit hopeful.

"Yes. If you want to."

"Yes," he said simply, and then he kissed her.

In the morning, Hermione returned to her cabin to pack. Severus tried to convince her to help him pack and then let him come and help her pack, but she pointed out cheekily, "And just how much packing do you think we'd actually accomplish, the two of us together in rooms with beds?"

He had to admit she had a point, so he kissed her once more...very thoroughly...and sent her on her way.

As he packed, he thought about how much things had changed in a mere five days. He had come here reluctantly, annoyed with Lucius for forcing him, sure he would have a miserable time. Now, after possibly...probably...the best five days of his entire life, he was relaxed, happier than he had ever been, in a fledgling relationship with an intriguing, intelligent, sexy, and (he must admit) bossy witch.

For once in his life, things were looking up.

He was startled from his reverie by a knock at the door. "Yes?" he called.

"I'm not shouting at you from the corridor, Severus," came the rather petulant reply.

Opening the door, he asked, "What do you want, Lucius? Hermione's not here. She went to pack."

"Obviously, I'm looking for you. I knocked at *your* door, not hers."

"Hmmmph." As soon as the door closed, Severus pulled out his wand and resumed packing.

Lucius ignored that. "So, do you want to thank me now or wait until we get home?"

"Thank you for what?" Severus asked, caught off guard.

"For dragging you along on this holiday, of course."

"Oh. Thank you."

"You could try to sound gracious about it, you know."

"I suppose you want me to admit you were right, too?"

"No, that's all right. We both know that; no need to say it. Now, if you're finished packing, it's breakfast time."

"Hermione!" Dee exclaimed. "There you are! I was beginning to wonder if you had missed the ship!"

"Er... no. I was with Severus."

"That's what I figured. Anyway, I can't believe we're about to make port! These five days just *flew!*"

"Did you have fun?"

"Yeah, I met a fabulous Italian man... Luigi," she said on a sigh, then shook her head. "Had a blast. Shame I wasted so much time on Lucius, though. Are you *sure* he's not gay?"

Hermione shook her head. "He says he's getting old. I think he's just getting sick of meaningless flings. No offence."

Dee just laughed. "Well, it all worked out in the end. Are you going to keep seeing Sev?"

Unable to contain her delight, Hermione grinned as she said, "Yes."

"Good for you," Dee said. "Listen, I've gotta run. I'm meeting some of the girls for breakfast. It's been fun. Maybe I'll see you the next time I visit Seamus." She hugged Hermione briefly. At the door, she turned and said, "You know, if I were you, I wouldn't settle for just one of them. I bet you could have both if you tried...Lu was always more interested in you than me, the way he's been watching you this whole trip. And he and Sev are so close, I have to figure they've probably played around, you know? You've seen that creepy, psychic mind-reading thing they do, right? Where they talk without actually saying anything out loud? There's gotta be history there..."

"Anyway, I bet you'd all be very happy as a threesome."

Before Hermione could even *process* that outrageous statement...never mind think of a response...Dee was gone.

At breakfast, Hermione was quiet. Severus found himself working hard to pull her from whatever thoughts had her preoccupied, but with little success. Lucius wasn't having much luck, either. Other than a series of thoughtful looks that seemed to alternate between them, and a few perfunctory answers when questions were directed at her, Hermione seemed lost in thought.

Severus eventually decided not to worry about it. After Hermione's reassurances of the night before, he thought she might think he was too insecure if he refused to let Lucius spend the day with them, so he reluctantly agreed to explore Rome and Vatican City with both Hermione and Lucius.

As the day wore on, Hermione seemed to snap out of whatever had been bothering her. She still occasionally looked thoughtful as she laughed and chattered and took in

the sights with him and Lucius, but for the most part, she seemed to enjoy the day. And after reminding himself several times that Lucius was an inveterate flirt, and that Hermione had assured him she was *his*, he gradually grew more comfortable with the way the pair of them seemed to be enjoying each other's company.

Severus decided not to worry about whatever she was thinking about. She clearly hadn't changed her mind about spending time with him...she frequently touched him, taking his hand or arm, giving him quick hugs and an occasional kiss. So whatever was on her mind didn't make him feel any need to press her to share it.

The day flew by, and soon enough, the three of them shared a bottle of Chianti as they enjoyed an early dinner. It was nice, Severus decided, having his best friend getting on so well with his new lover.

Now that Dee had planted the idea, Hermione couldn't get it out of her mind. She found herself wondering if Severus and Lucius had ever been more than friends, and if they were still. She wondered how Severus would react if she asked him.

If they were, she wondered if they might someday be amenable to the possibility Dee had entrenched so firmly in her mind...

Probably best to let all that wait a while, she decided eventually. If his behaviour last night were any indication, Severus still harboured some insecurities about his appeal, especially as compared with Lucius. She'd see how things played out. If ever the time seemed right, she would ask him about his relationship with Lucius, and depending on his answer and her own inclinations, she would ask him about the possibility of a triad relationship.

Or not. If the time never seemed right, or if Severus never seemed ready, or if she herself lost interest in the idea, she was sure she could be happy with their budding relationship the way it was. For now, she would enjoy her new friendship with Lucius and her new more-than-friendship, maybe-even-love with Severus.

As they arrived at the Portkey office, Severus asked, "Are your friends meeting you in London, Hermione?"

"I don't think so," she replied, frowning. They followed the signs to the London Portkey as she explained, "They're probably afraid I'm still angry with them for tricking me into this cruise in the first place. They won't want to risk being hexed until they're sure I've had time to calm down." Grinning suddenly, she said, "I've just had the most delicious idea."

"Oh?" Severus asked.

"Do share," Lucius added as he and Severus gripped the battered *Saturday Night Fever: The Original Movie Soundtrack* LP.

Looping an arm through each of theirs and touching a fingertip to John Travolta's raised hand, she asked slyly, "What say I throw myself a belated birthday party and introduce all my friends to my new lover..." She paused to give Severus a lingering kiss before continuing, "...and his very unsuitable friend?" She punctuated that with a smile and a quick squeeze of Lucius's arm.

The Portkey activated, leaving only a trace of their delighted laughter to echo through the office as they were transported home.

La fine

Author's Notes:

As far as I can tell after spending an inordinate amount of time looking at major cruise lines' websites, most cruises of the Mediterranean are at least a week long, and most make several ports for one day each; however, that didn't work as well for my purposes, so I took author's license with the itinerary.

The three de Medici [Books of Hours](#) are being displayed together in Florence this fall, but in 2009, they were each being held in the collections of the museums/libraries that own them. See [this article](#) (or [this one](#)) for more information.

Resources used in this fic (in addition to Clairvoyant and her livejournal) include the following:

[At Home in Tuscany](#)

German Language Wikipedia: [the Laurentian Library](#) (as translated by Google Translate)

English Language Wikipedia: [Tuscany](#), [Piazza dei Miracoli](#), [Uffizi](#)

[Florence On Line](#)

[Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana](#)

[Tuscany Tonight](#)

[Trip Addiction](#)

[Tuscan Recipes](#)

[Finisterrae Firenze](#)

[Trip Advisor](#)

[Livorno Now](#)

[The Independent](#)

[Librairie Française de Florence](#)

I think that's all of the sources whose information made it into this fic, but it's possible I lost track over the course of writing. If so, I apologise; the oversight was unintentional.

Now, who wants to meet me in Tuscany next September? ;)