

sandalwood

by bellarossi

A tale of unexpected discoveries, exotic places and intoxicating scents.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Originally written for **portugal_faro** at **hpcon_envy**, who gave me this prompt: "a small fic for ss/hg , subject THE PERFECT DAY and include the word terminus if possible. I have often wonder what they would think would be a perfect day."

Hugs and kisses to my wonderful and ever-supportive beta, **Katie**, and an extra special thanks to **writermerrin** who took a lot of time and effort to go through commas and other things with me. Thanks also to **portugal_faro** for the wonderfully inspiring prompt; I don't think this would have ever happened without it!

Sandalwood

She's in the middle of buying a handful of *dom rodrigoes* when he bumps into her.

He doesn't turn around, doesn't acknowledge her, doesn't stop to apologise. Instead, he simply carries on his leisurely way. The only proof that he was there at all is the soft, sensual scent of sandalwood that lingers on her arm.

For the briefest fraction of a second, she thinks nothing of it. After all, she is in a crowded marketplace in Lagos, Portugal, with barely any breathing space, let alone the space to move without jostling someone...or being jostled. The chorus of yelling, bartering, 'Who will buy my fresh fish?', 'Are you crazy? My wife makes better *bacalhau*!' and loud chatting and laughing means she can hardly hear herself think. There is such a symphony of scents, from the strong aroma of the fish to the tantalising whiff of port; the temptation of fresh seafood sizzling on an open grill; thick, fragrant olive oil, pungent onions and ripe, juicy tomatoes; it is the olfactory equivalent of an entire orchestra of people playing to their own tune.

And yet, above all this, she can smell the sandalwood, the absolute essence of *santalum album* where he had brushed against her, so clear that he might as well be standing next to her and not already a metre away. But it isn't just sandalwood; in a matter of this one precious second in which she is still caught, she can smell the smallest hint of patchouli, a swirl of cloves, a whisper of peppermint.

She knows only one person, one man who smells like this, and he has been missing for five years.

'One euro, sixty-five cents, miss,' the snack vendor says, but she isn't listening; she turns quickly, and her eyes fix on the slowly-retreating figure of a man who looks like he bathed in black ink before leaving his house. He stands out even from the back, as he is the only person crazy enough to wear that oppressive colour in Portugal's equally oppressive summer heat. In a sea of dark-haired, olive-skinned Mediterraneans in various states of undress, his black dress shirt, rolled up at the elbows to reveal pale, pale skin, and his black trousers stand out like pink and purple polka dots.

She shakes her head, gives a short laugh that comes out more like a disbelieving puff of breath, and is about to turn back to give the snack seller exact change when she sees him take a right turn. The first thing her eye catches is not the aristocratic nose or even the sharp angles of his pale face, but the streak of faded ink on his left

forearm; it flashes by so quickly she thinks she imagined it. Then she notices his face, and she thrusts a two euro coin into the vendor's rough, chapped hands, takes her small, warm paper packet of freshly-baked Portuguese pastry and decides to follow him.

She makes her way around, winding between Portuguese men, women and children, accidentally walking into photos taken by Japanese tourists, dodging the pointing fingers of several Americans loudly exclaiming how 'awesome' everything is, finding comfort in the odd English accent every now and then, being mistaken for Portuguese herself. She follows some steps behind him; his legs are much longer than hers, his step worth two of hers. Besides, she isn't sure he wants to see her...isn't sure he even recognised her when he'd bumped into her. She doesn't tend to believe in coincidences, but this man was...is...a private man, so she follows at a distance, keeps him in her line of sight, thinks about the fact that she's clearly out of her mind.

Idly, she wonders what exactly is wrong with her. She is not an impulsive girl; she doesn't make decisions on the fly. Perhaps the overload of senses...sight, smell, sound, taste, feel...has addled her brain. This is the only reason she can justify why she is following the back of a man who looks undeniably like Severus Snape.

Severus Snape, her Potions master.

Severus Snape, the man who had never, ever had a kind word for her.

Severus Snape, the man who had murdered Albus Dumbledore because he asked him to.

Severus Snape, who had sacrificed his life to help the son of a man he hated.

Severus Snape, the man who had disappeared without a trace.

She is so caught up in her thoughts that when she looks up he is gone.

She swears under her breath, looks left, then right, then left again. But all she can see is ~~people~~, everyone but the right person.

Then she stops, and there it is again: that strong scent of sandalwood that is so inextricably mixed with those other scents that they cannot be separated, and she thinks of it as if she's saying it in one breath.

Sandalwoodpatchouliclovespeppermint.

Sandalwoodandpatchouliandclovesandpeppermint.

But mostly it is sandalwood, sandalwood, sandalwood.

She can smell it so strongly, like a wolf in a blizzard can smell the pine trees on the other side, like a shark can smell blood across the ocean. It's like a trail, as though this man is Hansel, leaving her a trail of breadcrumbs so she can find him again. So she follows the scent, for lack of a visual. It takes her straight for a while, then left, then left again, then right.

She catches sight of him turning a corner, a fleeting second of white and black, and smiles. Who would have thought the olfactory sense could have come in so handy?

This time, she keeps him in her sight, letting the sandalwood scent linger around her nose seductively. She idly wonders whether he is leading her somewhere on purpose, if he knows she is following him. He was a spy, after all; surely he would know if he was being trailed, especially by a former student with no pretence at espionage. She is sure that he can hear the slip of her woven flip-flops against the warm cobblestones, the rustle of her black shorts and the white t-shirt proclaiming 'Kiss me, I'm Irish!' Perhaps he can see from the corner of his eye her brown curls, her amber eyes, her face very slightly flushed from the sun and from excitement and anticipation as he turns corner after corner, leading her on a wild goose chase simply because he knows she's curious enough. Perhaps he can even *smell her*, though she isn't really sure what she smells like beneath her standard deodorant which smells like baby powder. Perhaps she smells of something wonderful and pure and sweet and fresh, like cinnamon and vanilla and honey and citronella.

She loses him again.

She swears out loud; then she realises she is in an empty alleyway as it echoes back to her. Before she can sniff him out again, a hand clamps over her mouth and she is yanked into the shadows of the alley with a muffled yelp.

She is staring at a wall, her back against a lean, muscled and obviously male body. The scent of sandalwood is overpowering.

'Following me, Granger?' he whispers in her ear.

He releases her, and she whips around so fast her hair lashes at his clothes. There isn't a shadow of a doubt about it; she is staring, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, at Severus Snape.

He is the same, and yet he is different. His face is pale, his nose is large, his lips are thin, his teeth are probably crooked, too. His hair is shorter, cleaner and silkier, but it's dark in the alleyway and she isn't sure. He is still thin, but she remembers the feel of the muscles against her back.

She is speechless. Then, out of shock, her brain prompts her to blurt, 'You're alive.'

(Later, when she thinks about it, she blames it on his scent, which is strong and yet subtle, but nevertheless intoxicating.)

He chuckles; it's a pleasant sound, deep and satisfying, and she can almost feel it in her abdomen. 'Clearly.'

'Professor... Professor Snape?'

He pauses. In the darkness, she isn't sure if her mind is playing tricks on her, but she seems to see a shadow pass over his eyes for the briefest moment. Then, he replies, 'Do not say that name. I am not your professor anymore. But yes. I am Severus Snape.'

She observes him closely, taking in each word one at a time. It's all too easy to believe that he is an imposter who is unnaturally good at Transfiguration or perhaps had some of Snape's hair and is using Polyjuice. So she asks, 'Which animal did I transform into in my second year?'

He nods, and the sides of his eyes seem to crinkle just a fraction. 'A cat, thanks to your botched efforts at Polyjuice Potion.'

She's so shocked that she actually swallows back a retort about how it was the hair, not the potion.

Maybe she's dreaming. Maybe this is all in her subconscious; maybe she isn't in Portugal at all, but back at home, in England, working at the Ministry. Perhaps she's had a late night, hasn't slept too well, forgot to take her morning coffee and has slipped off for a short nap.

Nevertheless, this doesn't explain why a missing man has turned up in Lagos, Portugal. And the scent of him is too real; she doesn't believe her subconscious ~~is~~ that good.

'What are you doing in Lagos?'

Pause.

'It's a long story,' he replies. 'Perhaps we should take this somewhere else.'

This prompts her to realise that she is standing barely a few centimetres away from a man she has thought, for all intents and purposes, to be dead after all these years and who nevertheless is very fit and smells rather good.

'Right,' she squeaks, hastily stepping away.

He walks away, as graceful as she remembers, leaving her standing there. As he is about to turn the corner, he pauses and looks over his shoulder back at her.

'Are you just going to stand there, or are you coming, Granger?' he asks her, raising his eyebrow. 'It isn't as though you don't know how to,' he adds slyly.

She blinks, gulps again, then follows meekly.

'Where are we going?' she asks.

He puts a finger to his lips and doesn't say a word.

She is brimming with questions (why are you here? why Lagos, Portugal? why didn't you come back? why do you call me 'Granger'? why won't you tell me where we're going? why, why, why?) that she's dying to ask. But she takes the hint and keeps her mouth shut...for now.

He takes her on another little journey through the narrow streets of Lagos: through archways, past restaurants smelling of fresh bread, across a field, towards a cliff, down a dirt path, around some rocks and into a little beach tucked between two small cliffs. The strong sea breeze whips against them, throwing her unruly brown curls against her face as she tries vainly to shake it out. She can smell the ocean; its salty, clear, refreshing scent is strong, but not strong enough to overpower *his* scent.

He sits down on the sand, surprising her. Then again, everything about this day so far has surprised her. So she shrugs, takes a brief look around at the scenery, and joins him. She doesn't sit too close, though. Although he has broken many of her preconceptions of him, she is sure that he is a private man that enjoys his space.

So she keeps her distance, about half a metre or so. Close enough to hear him over the roaring wind, but far enough to respect his space.

She waits for about a minute, but when he still doesn't speak, she can't help herself. 'Why are you here?'

He doesn't speak for a while, to the point that she isn't sure he heard her. She's about to repeat her question when he opens his mouth and replies, 'I wanted to start a new life, away from everything.'

'In Portugal?'

He has Portuguese ancestors, he tells her, from his mother's side. Príncipe; Prince. When his grandfather had died, he'd left him with a villa in Lagos, where he had lived and breathed his last.

'I never thought I would live to see this place again,' he says, more to himself than to her, looking at the green-blue water as though it holds his answers. 'The last time I came here, I must have been six.'

She watches him as he speaks. Although his face is as unreadable as she can remember, his eyes are surprisingly expressive. There are little things, little details that make him a wholly different man to her (but nevertheless, still Severus Snape).

His black eyes, like dark pools of ink, are more alive than she can ever remember. The tension in his body seems to have left him; he is freer in his words, freer in his actions. He is guarded, but not as though he fears for his life, simply that he would like to retain what little privacy he has left to himself.

But the thing that surprises her the most, albeit pleasantly, is that he doesn't mind her questions. As far as she can tell, since she lacks Veritaserum and would never use Legilimency on anyone, never mind someone like Severus Snape, he seems to be telling the truth. She considers herself a decent judge of character, and although this man has no reason to answer her questions truthfully, she is certain that he does so anyway.

That feeling, when she realises it, is a pleasant one; it simmers in her chest and lightens her heart a little bit.

'So you don't think you'll ever come back, then?'

He looks at her as if she's suggested he should eat a Thestral with tartar sauce for lunch. 'Granger, my wand has been sitting beneath my bed for five years. People don't know who I am here. They don't know what I've done, who I was. Frankly, neither do I anymore. I am not that man; I never will be. I don't want to go back to a society that remembers me for someone I used to be, rather than the person I am now. My answer is no; it always will be. Do not ask it of me.'

'Oh.' Then, 'Is that why you call me Granger?' She licks her lips nervously, but doesn't notice the black eyes that watch the tongue flick out, across, in. 'Because you want to forget?'

He shakes his head ever so slightly. 'I don't want to remember. There's a difference.'

Silence.

'It's Hermione.'

He blinks. 'Pardon?'

She smiles, her affection unconcealed. 'Not Granger. Hermione. Her-my-oh-knee.'

The side of his lip twitches. 'Herm-own-ninny.'

She throws her head back and laughs.

& & &

Soon enough, their bellies start rumbling, so he takes her to a restaurant.

The maître d', a youngish man with hazel eyes, an easy smile and the faint scent of olive oil, greets him like an old friend, slapping him on the back as they converse freely in Portuguese. She isn't using her Comprehension Charm, but she observes the lack of tension in his muscles, the small smile at his lips and the gentle tone of his voice and realises she doesn't need to; his actions speak volumes.

She gives a small, satisfied smile, more for herself than anyone else.

The waiter sits them down, waves his hands expressively and flourishes the menu in front of her. She stares at it blankly. It's all in Portuguese, of course.

She looks up at him helplessly, attempting to silently convey that she is at his mercy and you had better pick something good, you bastard, or else. She assumes that he has understood, judging by the amused twitch of his lips as he points to the menu, roughly halfway down, and holds up two of his fingers, all the while conversing in Portuguese.

After taking the order, the maître d' bustles off in an olive oil-scented cloud, returning only to give them two glasses of Lagos' famous moscatel wine. After a moment's hesitation, she raises her glass to him and he clinks his against hers, and they drink deeply, eyes locked.

She wonders if he is performing Legilimency on her; she feels like his eyes are searing her soul.

The conversation is awkward at first, a little stilted and self-conscious as two people realise that they have been thrown together by fate but have stayed together out of choice. It is a strange feeling and not necessarily the easiest to accept; her nervousness makes her a bit too chatty, but he doesn't seem to mind too much. Once the dishes start arriving (*chouriço* sausage, bread and olive oil, a refill of the wine) the discussion flows freely, spanning between anything from holidays to friends to family to hopes and dreams. She finds herself telling him about how unhappy she is at the Ministry because she feels like, despite who she is and the fact that the war is over, she is still nothing but a Mudblood (*Mudblood, Mudblood, Mudblood*; he winces and tells her not to say it again) and seems to do nothing but brew coffee and run errands. He's a surprisingly good listener because he does exactly that. He doesn't interrupt (except for the Mudblood thing), doesn't offer an opinion and doesn't look pointedly at his watch.

As she thinks these things, she follows each clause with '...unlike Ron.' She finds herself comparing the two men constantly, even though she doesn't want to. But Ron never listened like he listens; Ron never cared about the same things she did; Ron was never the one for her. Everything about him is 'unlike Ron', both the good and the bad. But mostly the good.

He opens up to her, too, in his own secretive way, confessing how much he loves Lagos; how he despised teaching and how he never even wanted the Dark Arts position anyway, it was just a rumour that ended up working in his favour in the end. As he says this, he grimaces, and she wonders if he would give up every favour in the world to have Albus back instead.

By the time the mysterious main dish arrives...*bacalhau com broa*, a delicious dish of roasted cod, with special bread found only in Portugal, and olive oil...he's telling her about how much he despised himself as he said those two words on the tower that night, all those years ago. How much he wishes he could have turned the wand around and pointed it at himself. How despicable he thought himself, how shocked he was that he could even live with himself.

As he says these things, she notices the little changes in his demeanour; the tightening of his lips, the furrowing of his brows, the shadow in his eyes. But she doesn't interrupt him, partly because she feels he needs to say it and partly because she wants to hear it, even if it hurts.

And then there's a tear running down her cheek, one single track of salt, but before she can blink it away, his long, pale, calloused finger wipes it in one graceful motion.

She stares and stares and stares, for a moment, for a minute, for eternity.

Then she kisses him.

There's a pause, a little tiny uncertain breath, but he closes the gap, his thin lips gently pressing against hers. She opens her lips, reaches in to explore; he ~~evetastes~~ like sandalwood, spicy and intoxicating, and she can't get enough. He kisses like an expert, running his tongue along her lips and slowly, tantalisingly, teasingly exploring every corner, every crevice of her mouth. He is graceful, not in the least bit sloppy, and there's an inherent sensuality in every movement, every tiny sound that comes out of him. And then there are hands, grasping her hair, encircling his neck, closer, closer, deeper, more, *more*...

'*Senhor?*' says the maître d' in a distinct tone of amusement, and they spring apart like magnets of the same charge. She breathes heavily, a blush staining her cheeks, as he glares at the waiter and growls at him to give them the bill. The maître d' clears away their empty plates, giving him a significant (and highly amused) look before he turns and walks away. She swears she can see his shoulders shaking.

She sneaks a look at him and is surprised to see him watching her with a fire that burns fiercely in his jet-black eyes. The attraction between them is so strong, so electric, so tangible. It surprises her, considering she has been with him for a scant few hours....

Her eyes wander to the window, where, to her surprise, the sun has already begun to set; she checks her watch: it's already eight thirty.

Seven hours. Seven hours ago, she'd thought Severus Snape no longer existed. Seven hours ago, she had been a clueless tourist wandering the streets. Now she felt as though she knew them intimately, as though it breathed with her every inhalation and had become a part of her essence. Seven hours ago, she had caught a whiff of the scent of sandalwood, without any idea what it would ultimately bring her.

Seven hours ago, she'd had no idea she would kiss Severus Snape.

Now, she had done it once...and very much wanted to do it again.

She looks back at him again. He has paid the bill (sneaky of him, paying it while she isn't looking, but then ~~he's~~ a sneaky Slytherin) and is ready to leave.

He holds his hand out to her.

She takes it without hesitation.

And as they lie on the sand beneath the stars, still holding hands, she files this day away in her memories as 'a perfect day'. Because she can't recall another time when she has felt so at peace.

Even as she thinks it, though, she feels there is one last thing to be resolved. So she can't help but to blurt out the question that has burning within her all day.

'Severus?' she whispers, their eyes locked.

'Mm?' he replies, reaching out with one of his pale, calloused hands, and twirling a curl between his long, elegant fingers.

'What do I smell like?'

He chuckles deeply; she can't think of a sound she likes more. He rolls over in the sand to embrace her, still laughing so she can feel the deep vibrations against her chest. He takes a deep breath, smelling her hair.

'Like honey...' he kisses her forehead, 'and apples,' behind her ear, 'and coconut,' her neck, 'and vanilla,' he lingers over her lips, 'and Hermione.'

She smiles against his lips as he kisses her deeply.

'And I? What do I smell like?' he asks huskily, whispering into her ear.

She smiles a little secretive smile. 'Like sandalwood.'

FIN.