

Beneath the Cedars

by lady_rhian

Hermione visits a Spanish monastery intending to do some research. She finds something else instead. Written for Juniperus for the latest SSHG Gift Exchange.
Award: OWL Awards 2009: Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 2nd Class.

I

Chapter 1 of 2

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A/N: This was written for Juniperus for the latest round of the SSHG Gift Exchange. I utilised her five-senses prompt but was also inspired by her request for *dark night of the soul*. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, lady_karelia and sshg316. A special thanks to Camillo for Brit-picking. Thanks also to talesofsnape for the lovely, lovely story banner.



Oh night, thou was my guide

oh night more loving than the rising sun

Oh night that joined the lover

to the beloved one

transforming each of them into the other

The wind billowed and moaned, its near-biblical keen a stark contrast to the sunlight that spiraled out over the landscape. Hermione Granger breathed in deeply at the sight and continued to climb the steps that wound up the rockface, each step as determined as the last, though perhaps she moved more slowly than she had in her twenties.

She was in the south of Spain and had arrived in Mistégova only half an hour previously. The town was nestled at sea level between the Mediterranean and the rockface cliffs. These stretched out to wrap around the town and then border the sea itself, their embrace wide and jagged.

It was certainly stunning. There were no vistas like this in England, or perhaps England just lacked the warm, salty breeze of the Mediterranean, even though the breeze was currently a gust. The North Sea, Irish Sea, Atlantic, English Channel cold bodies of water, all.

The August sun was hot even early in the morning, and it bathed Hermione in its glow as she walked. The cliff should have broken the heavy gusts, given its position, but instead, the wind wound about the crags with her, whipping her shawl about her shoulders and attempting to undo the already messy bun at the nape of her neck.

A test, perhaps, Hermione thought as she climbed the steps. After all, it was to be her final sojourn into the vaults of a monastic library. A contented smile spread across her face. *El Monasterio de San Juan* the Monastery of St. John, or St. John's Monastery was the last monastery on her list, but it would surely prove one of the most fascinating visits, even if it didn't fall entirely within the remit of her research.

Hugo was with his father this summer, preparing to enter his final year at Hogwarts. It freed Hermione up to embark on a trip she'd long desired to take a journey through Europe's abbeys, through its convents and its monasteries, to the knowledge that dwelt within. The libraries held volumes on religious mysticism unparalleled in both quantity and number.

Hermione had first become interested in religious mysticism while on a consulting assignment for the Department of Mysteries. On leaving Hogwarts, she had worked as an Unspeakable; her phenomenally high marks and war hero status virtually ensuring that she would be offered any position she desired. However, the intensity of the job and the effort expended to maintain her lustre had wearied her over the years. Maintaining a family whilst carrying the weight of the wizarding world's secrets and the eventual divorce had frayed any remaining nerves that remained. She had left the Ministry and gone to Hogwarts. She had taught Arithmancy for six years following Vector's retirement and had left after Hugo's second year. She had once again been hired by the Ministry to consult for the Department of Mysteries at her own discretion: she could finally choose her assignments.

One of her assignments had led her to stumble upon a connection between medieval religious mysticism and magic. It was Hermione's opinion that some of the mystics had in fact been wizards. Last summer, Hugo had been with her, so she had been limited in her research. This summer, he was with his father and stepmother, allowing Hermione to explore the continent at her leisure, reading original mystic texts, speaking with monks, and basking in the peaceful solitude. She had limited her research to monasteries, as they tended to host better libraries; the convents and priories had been cheated, in Hermione's opinion. She'd visited Italy, France, and Germany, and now, finally, she was in Spain.

This particular monastery didn't hold overt links between Christian mystics and magic, but it did hold a bevy of treasure: original writings and centuries-old texts of the great Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross.

Her breaths were shallow as she neared the top of the cliff; she was forty-five, after all. She knew that the monastery sat on top of the cliff, overlooking the sea, and that it purportedly held some of the most beautiful gardens in southern Spain, but she had not expected to see *green*.

Suddenly, a sensation came over her, indescribable, something in her recognising

Magic.

She had lived mostly with Muggles all summer... she did not think that she would be able to feel the magical energy so acutely, even after three months apart. She breathed in deeply and tried to right herself. The dizziness was fleeing; she attempted to regain her composure, yet...

She felt a concentration of her entire being on whatever was at the top of the cliff, and it was not entirely magical... whatever it was, was magic, but it was not entirely that. It wasn't a religious compulsion, either... it was visceral. Her senses felt alive. Sharp. Heightened.

Why?

The feeling intensified once more and then went, washed away in some sort of cosmic wave.

That had never happened to her before.

She breathed deeply and climbed a few more steps and, reaching the top, took in the sight of the lush landscape, the medieval buildings in the near distance, the arched entrance with the monastery's name etched into the stone, and

Severus Snape.

She thought her heart would stop beating.

It didn't.

She clutched her shawl tight about her. So, he was... he was...

"Hermione," he said, his voice washing over her skin, the sound far too heady.

"Severus," she said calmly, staring at him head on.

He was leaning against the arch, replete in black trousers and a crisp white shirt with sleeves rucked up to his elbows naturally. His hair was pulled back in a queue and was streaked with silver, by the look of it. Well, he would be in his sixties, wouldn't he? She wasn't exactly youthful, herself. It had been she did the maths in her head twenty-seven years since the Final Battle.

Ten years since she'd seen him last.

How time flies, Hermione thought.

"Well, this is a surprise," she managed at last. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," he said casually, walking towards her, his gait elegant. "I was simply admiring the view."

She smiled, ignoring her pounding heart. "I am pursuing independent research this summer, and I wrote the Abbot several months ago about the possibility of spending a few days in the archives."

"Not just the library?" Severus asked. A smile spread across his face. "Ah, you desire to see the writings of *San Juan de la Cruz*"

"You speak Spanish?" she asked, surprised at his easy accent.

"Fluently," he said, and she snorted.

"Of course you do," she said. "And yet I ask again, why are you here?"

"I live here," he said.

Her jaw dropped. "You live here? In a Spanish monastery?"

"During summertime, yes."

Her mind whirled, trying to fit this new puzzle piece into the box labelled Severus Snape. "... I didn't know," she said, feeling like a schoolgirl all over again.

"Most people don't," he said.

"How long have you been staying here during the summer?" she asked, shock giving way to interest.

"Twenty-five years," he said, hands in his pockets, his eyes surveying the landscape. "Turn around you really must admire the view."

She did so, and she breathed in sharply at the sight. The town looked so tiny, cradled as it was on such a narrow strip of land. The small buildings quickly gave way to a thin, sandy shore, and then there was only sea, relatively calm, brilliantly blue, reflecting as it did the cloudless, sunny sky above.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. "And you live here."

"I'm a lucky man," he remarked. "Come. I was sent to escort you in. You have a meeting with the Abbot."

"Yes," she said. "Father Juan?"

He nodded and offered her his arm. She took it, pretending to be unaffected by the feel of his skin against hers.

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They walked in silence, going under the arch and along the path that led to the monastery. She tried not to think of their last meeting. They came almost immediately upon the cloister, the inner courtyard, and walked along an open-air corridor. They were passed by several monks, and Severus nodded to them. Once they were past, Hermione let out a small chuckle of amusement.

"What is it?" Severus asked.

"I just realised... well, you must be quite at home with the apparel. The Benedictines wear all black."

"They are known as the 'black monks,'" Severus remarked.

Hermione gazed at the beautiful medieval buildings, made of stone, stoic in their ascetic grandeur.

The corridor ended, and they walked along a short path to a small house. "The Abbot's chambers," Severus said, although Hermione had guessed as much. "It's eight o'clock. They should be done with morning prayer by now." He knocked on the door, and it opened quickly, revealing a short man with dark skin and snow-white hair. "Ah, you must be Hermione Granger," the Abbot said before Hermione could greet him in Spanish. "Welcome, welcome, please, come in," he said.

"I'll wait here, if you don't mind," Severus said.

"Suit yourself," the Abbot said, and Hermione wanted to laugh at the no-nonsense exchange between the two men as she walked into the main room.

It was simple, of course, with a desk, several chairs, a fireplace, and bookshelves lining the walls.

"My mother was a librarian," he remarked, noting her examination of the books, and extended his hand. She shook it. "It is good to meet you."

"Thank you for having me, *Padre*," Hermione said, taking the seat he offered. "It is most gracious of you."

"It is our pleasure, I assure you."

She paused. "Do you have any questions for me, or...?"

He laughed heartily and shook his head. "Oh, no. It is just that I like to personally greet our visitors and make them feel welcome."

She smiled. "It is not hard to feel welcome in a monastery. I've visited several others this summer, and the experience has been..." She paused, and the Abbot smiled at her. "It's been one of the most peaceful and productive summers of my life."

The Abbot nodded. "I take it you have not met with many Abbots right away?"

She shook her head. "I often arrive during morning prayer and go to the library as soon as I can. I'm getting a late start today."

"A studious woman," he remarked. "Well, I shan't delay your research, then. Severus will show you the archives. They're beneath the library."

She smiled. "That sounds fascinating. My plans are the same as when I wrote you; I hope to spend today and tomorrow here."

"You are more than welcome to stay in the guest house. I know you said you would not require it, but the offer stands."

"Thank you," she said again. "I am staying at an inn in the town. I must tell you, *Padre*, this is the most beautiful place."

The Abbot smiled. "Yes. It was built in the fifteenth century, and we are very lucky that it has survived so long. Many monasteries haven't." He stood. "Do you require anything more, or are you ready to explore?"

She laughed. "You have a great sense of humor."

His eyes twinkled at her. "I'm one of those fun abbots," he said, and she laughed again as he opened the door for her.

"I hear her laughing. What awful jokes are you telling now, Juan?" Severus asked.

"None awful, all wonderful," the Abbot said. "Remember to eat lunch, now," he said and shut the door behind him.

"How did he...?" Hermione started as she and Severus walked back in the direction of the cloister.

"He knows academics. Not that many of them are allowed in the archives; the application process is rather long and the credentials must be... credentials. You'd be surprised at the individuals who will try to get into an abbey's archives," Severus remarked.

"Mine got through quickly," Hermione said, her mind racing.

"I put in a good word for you. Juan took his orders the first year I was here. He's known me a long time." Severus all but smirked at her.

"You put in a good word for me?" she asked, crossing her arms, pleased and offended at the same time.

"I saw no problem with it."

She huffed. "So I'm here because of you?"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, woman. You're here because the Abbot thinks your project is interesting what you've told him of it, anyway," Severus said lowly. "You are here now because I put in a good word for you. Had I not, we would be having this discussion in three months, or rather, we wouldn't, because I am only here during the summer."

She inhaled sharply. "Fine." She gazed at the cloister, splashed with brilliant rays of sunlight, and any negativity that had collected quickly dissipated.

"The Abbot seems young, in spite of his white hair," she remarked, and Severus visibly relaxed.

"Yes. He's younger than I am," he said mildly.

"You said he took orders the first summer you were here. He wasn't the Abbot that allowed you in, then?" Hermione asked, leaning against one of the stone benches.

Severus held her gaze before dropping his eyes. "That would be Father Tomas. He passed on several years ago."

"You cared for him?" Hermione asked softly. Severus didn't respond. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Father Tomas was a kind man, a good man. He knew what I was and what I came from," Severus said slowly. "He knew me when I was a boy. He was a young monk when he volunteered in our parish."

Hermione gaped at him. "Are you religious?"

"That is an excellent question," he responded. "I was, however, raised in the Catholic church, yes. My grandmother was religious. And the Abbot," he said, turning back to the topic at hand, "knew our family for what we were. He knew that my mother was a witch, and he guessed that I was a wizard, though he only told me upon our meeting as adults."

"How did he know?" Hermione asked, leaning to sit against the rail, completely fascinated.

"He was a Squib," Severus said with an amused grunt. "Apparently, my magic manifested itself in small ways during the church service. He noticed but didn't want to ask at the time. We met twenty-five years ago at an apothecary in Segovia. I was travelling the continent, and he was visiting his brother, a wizard, obviously, who resides in the Muggle part of the city." Severus paused and smiled down at her. "I apologise, you caught me lecturing."

"I didn't know you were apt to lecture." She smiled.

"Only on subjects I care about."

She took in this news slowly. He seemed more... frank... than he had been when she'd met him before. Or perhaps she had been too shocked at seeing him alive to notice. "So Father Tomas invited you to stay here?" she asked quickly.

"He invited me to visit, which quickly turned into habit."

"What did Father Tomas tell the monks about why you were here?" she asked.

He chuckled. "That I had been scarred in battle."

"And..." she prompted, waving her hands.

Severus paused, pensive. "I think they mostly assumed correctly that I had been a spy, and they left it at that. The monks are not gossips, thankfully."

Hermione snorted. "A spy for the Queen. How dashing."

"Or for the Spaniards. I do speak the language fluently."

"You spoke Spanish fluently when you came here?" she asked, surprised.

He paused. "Translation amulet," he said, and she let out a great honk of laughter that drew the attention of several monks walking across the cloister.

"Lord, woman, you have a loud laugh." He smiled at the monks and looked back at her, his eyes amused.

"And you need to show me where the library is," Hermione pointed out.

He nodded. "Of course." He gestured, and they began to walk across the grassy courtyard. "It's been a while," he said.

Is he honestly going to talk to me about...?

"Ten years," she said, her tone noncommittal.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

"You refused me," Hermione said. "No means no and all that."

"That doesn't mean there wasn't something there. I sent you several letters after," he said. "All went unanswered."

"It didn't make sense to answer them when you had already said you weren't interested in pursuing a relationship," she said, not meeting his eyes.

Severus hesitated. "You were only just divorced. It wouldn't have been proper."

"You made the decision for me?" She looked at him, challenging.

He gave her an admonishing look in return. "I repeat: you had just got divorced." He lowered his voice. "Wizarding Britain was reeling from the shock of it, and the media attempted to vilify the both of you, in spite of your repeatedly amicable statements towards the other and unified public appearances. And you think that seeing me would

have *helped* the situation?" he asked, his tone mild but still incredulous.

"I wanted you," she said softly.

"I know."

She looked away from him. "I may be older, but I'm still a woman, Severus. It's still nice to be... desired."

His intake of breath was audible. "You mustn't speak that way around me, Hermione," he said lowly.

"Have you taken vows of celibacy along with your brothers?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

He chuckled darkly. "You know I have not. They are not my brothers."

They walked in silence a while, admiring the curvature of the walls, of the columns. It was a few moments before he spoke.

"Tell me of your family. The children are with their father for the summer?" he asked.

"Hugo is with him in Germany, yes," she replied.

"Curious, that."

"What?" She looked up, surprised.

"That such a stay-at-home would move to the Continent."

She chuckled. "Love does interesting things to a person."

"He loved you," Severus stated, and Hermione looked at him, cross.

"Not like he loves her," she said matter-of-factly.

Severus looked at her unflinchingly. "Does that trouble you?" he asked, his voice softer than she would have thought possible.

Hermione sighed. "I'd be lying if I said that it didn't. Every woman wants to be wanted. Even bookworm academics."

"And do you want to be wanted specifically by him or just in general?" he asked, his lips quirking at the edges.

She laughed. "I just miss the feeling."

"Which feeling?"

She inhaled and didn't answer.

"And Rose? What is she doing?"

Hermione sighed, relieved for a change in topic. "She is apprenticed to an Arithmancer in Rome. She's a clever girl, my Rosie."

"And you are still consulting for the Department of Mysteries?" he asked.

"Yes. It's how I stumbled upon this... connection, between religious mysticism and magic. I've been visiting monasteries this summer; next summer, I plan to research Judaic mystic texts."

"What have you found in your work thus far, Hermione?" he asked.

She chose her words carefully. "There are some Christian mystics who I thought might have been witches or wizards or who might have had magical influences. It is... ironic, to say the least, that you said that Father Tomas was a Squib. But as I read more, I find the linguistic patterns that suggest elemental magic more in the transcriptions of the original documents than in the original documents themselves, when there are original documents, of course."

"And St. John of the Cross is someone you suspect of having had such influence?" Severus asked, clearly intrigued.

"No, actually. But he is considered one of the great Christian mystics, and many of his original writings are purportedly in good shape. I'd be a fool to not stop by for a look." She grinned up at him.

"The writings have been impressively kept," Severus said.

"You've seen them?"

"Of course," he responded. "I'd be a fool to have been here twenty-five summers without examining them."

She snorted. "True. As I was saying, though, I've found that the language tends to shift between the original text and the transcription. Part of the reason I don't believe in the Bible," she said and paused. "I probably shouldn't say that sort of thing in a monastery."

"Probably," Severus said dryly.

"But I digress. I wonder what I would have more difficulty believing," she continued, feeling more at liberty in his presence than she had felt in a long while, "that the mystics themselves were wizards who found a way to combine magic and religion or that the monks in the abbey were wizards leading an ascetic religious life. It seems a contradictory existence, either way," she concluded. "Considering the religious persecution all those centuries ago, I cannot imagine a witch or wizard turning to the persecutor for comfort."

Severus was silent.

"You don't agree with me," Hermione said.

"Is it so silly to think that wizards and witches may have passed through Abbey walls?" he asked.

"I don't know how anyone could do it," she said.

"Those seeking a safe place in which to lead a life of contemplation and good works would have found a welcome respite within such walls. Not to mention those fleeing a traditionally Muggle life," Severus said.

She was silent.

"Why do you come here, Severus?" she asked him, gripping his arm hard as she stumbled on an upturned stone.

He caught her against him and helped to right her before they continued.

"I have come to believe that there is something greater than ourselves," he said slowly.

"I do not share your sentiments," Hermione remarked dryly.

He chuckled, a warm sound that fluttered across her skin and made the hair on her neck stand up.

"You are a witch, are you not?" he asked.

"What would the monks do, were they to know who it is they host?" she asked, attempting playfulness.

"None has divined that knowledge yet, and it has been twenty-five years. I doubt the brothers will be expelling me from the premises."

"You seem friendly with them," Hermione said.

"Monks are not all solemn creatures, you know," Severus said to her as they strode down an open air corridor. "Brother Andre plays a particularly riotous game of chess."

"Who else are you close to?" she asked, intrigued.

"I'd be hard pressed to say I'm close to anyone save the former Abbot, but there are a few monks I am... friendly with."

"And what do you do to earn your keep?" she asked with a bit of smile and cheek.

He chuckled. "I rent my rooms."

"Aside from that."

He was silent, as if gathering his words together. "The brothers here are most welcoming. They do not ask me for anything in return for the joy of my company," he said, arching an eyebrow, and Hermione laughed. "I do help with some chores, though, tending the gardens and such."

"I didn't know you had green fingers."

"I don't," he said, "but it is relaxing, and help is always appreciated."

She squeezed his arm as he led her around a corner. "I love to garden, as well, though I tend to flowers, not vegetables."

"There are beautiful gardens. I'll show them to you later," he said. "What do you like best about gardening?"

"The feel of the earth beneath my hands, I think. It's dirty. Reminds me that it takes soil and sunlight for things to grow," Hermione said matter-of-factly.

"Now who's the philosopher?" he murmured.

"Oh, shut it," she said, teasing, and he laughed at her.

"We are sensate creatures," he offered.

"Indeed."

They walked along the stone path, passing the doors on one side, the pillars on the other, sun streaking down into the collective whole, piercing with its brightness.

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At long last, after passing through several dank, narrow corridors, they reached the library.

Hermione was immediately overcome by the smell of dust, candle wax, and that indescribable, musty smell of antiquated books, a smell so exquisite it should be bottled up as a perfume for the academic. She inhaled, the smell heady, as she took in the library. The room was circular, beautiful in its symmetry; tables and chairs populated the center, and the rows of shelves shot out from that point like rays of sunshine. Warm colors dominated the room, the rich tones of mahogany and maroon streaking across the prospect from one side to another. Warmth pervaded the skeletal frames of the bookshelves, full as they were with meaty tomes. There was a large fireplace, and the stone floor...

"...keeps it cool in the summer," Severus was saying.

"It's beautiful. Welcoming," Hermione said. "Unlike so many libraries I've visited."

"The manuscripts you seek are below in the vault."

"But there are other books of use here?" Hermione said, more to remind herself than to ask.

"Of course," he responded.

"The library is remarkably... rich... for the Benedictines," she said.

"There was a benefactor a century or so ago who sought to renovate the space. And it is used by scholars," Severus said.

"It is simply luxurious," Hermione intoned.

"Considering that everything else is almost Spartan, it wouldn't take much to be considered luxurious," Severus said wryly.

She chuckled. "True."

They walked down the stairs to the main floor and settled their things at one of the tables.

"Would you like to go in the archives?" Severus asked.

Hermione grinned. "You think I cannot stand the suspense?"

"I'm doubtful."

"I can," she said, her eyes dancing. "I like to acquaint myself with the library first." She rubbed her hands together. "Besides, I don't see any monks around. I presume one serves as the archivist?"

Severus nodded. "Yes, but I can go in as much as I like."

She stared at him. "They let you in the archives?"

He chuckled. "Of course."

"You are allowed to handle those... precious materials as much as you like?" she said, standing aghast.

"Well, not often," he said. "My work is potions, remember."

She snorted. "Well, you are a private man."

He lifted an eyebrow in question.

"Forgive me," she said with a slight smile. "I just can't quite see you sitting in a room with manuscripts while a monk watches your every move. It is fitting, really, that they would let you in alone."

His lip quirked upwards in what Hermione thought was almost a smile. "Indeed."

She looked about the room and smiled. "I think I'll get to know the library first."

He chuckled and leaned against a table, watching as she walked up and down the aisles.

After a few moments, as she was rounding a turn, she noticed an engraving on the side of one of the shelves. She squinted her eyes at it and, standing back, noted that each shelf was engraved with a quote.

"Severus?" she asked.

"Ah, the engravings," he said, coming to stand next to her.

"They're in Spanish. Translate, please."

"These are all quotes from St. Benedict, the founder of the Benedictines, and various popes... this one is from St. John of the Cross." Severus gestured around the library as he spoke. "It translates, 'If a man wishes to be sure of the road he treads on, he must close his eyes and walk in the dark.'"

"Wise," Hermione said.

"Or foolish."

She looked up at him and cocked an eyebrow. "You don't mean that."

He snorted. "We aren't going to have a theological debate now, are we?"

"No," she said. She traced her hand across the engraving. "Is it a reference to his poem?"

"*Dark Night of the Soul*?" Severus asked.

"That is his most famous poem," Hermione said, leaning against one of the shelves.

"One of the oldest written copies is in the archives," Severus said lowly, leaning against the shelf, standing barely a foot away from her.

"You want to show me the archives badly, don't you?" Hermione asked, smiling.

"I haven't been there all summer," he admitted.

"Then a few hours more won't hurt you," she said and turned to walk down another row.

An hour or so later, they were seated across from each other at one of the tables taking notes on their reading, having each amassed a pile of books.

"What do you know of St. John of the Cross, Hermione?" Severus asked.

"A bit," she replied.

"Surely you read a biography or two before you came," he remarked dryly, and she laughed.

"Is this an oral exam, Professor?" she asked.

"I never gave oral exams," he said.

She brought the pencil's eraser up to her lips and traced it along the lines of her mouth, thinking. "St. John of the Cross," she mused. "He lived during the sixteenth century and was Spanish, of course. A Carmelite friar and priest... he founded the Discalced Carmelite order with St. Teresa of Ávila. He was one of the great Spanish mystics, most remembered for his literary contributions, largely the poems *Dark Night of the Soul* and the *Spiritual Canticle*. Much of his work dealt with the progression of a soul's growth... if you believe in such things."

"A succinct answer," Severus said.

She stared at him. "What exactly were you looking for? He was a rebel and was imprisoned for his efforts to reform life within his order. I hit all the high points."

"Have you read any of his work?" Severus asked again, still taking notes.

"Not yet," she admitted.

"Do you know what a dark night of the soul is?" he prompted.

"I'm sure you'll tell me," she said sweetly.

Silence.

"Well, it doesn't sound good. From the little I've read, it is something akin to separation from God," Hermione said after a long moment.

"St. John called it a time when the soul perceives itself to be so unclean and miserable that it seems as if God had set Himself against it," Severus said.

Silence.

"As I said, it sounds depressing," Hermione said. "We'll see it in the archives later?"

He snorted.

Just then, a monk who had come into the library left in a hurry, nearly knocking over a chair as he rose from his table.

Severus chuckled. "He's late. Well, rather, he'll be right on time."

"For what?" Hermione asked.

"*Lectio*. Reflection," Severus said. "In chapel. It's a short period."

She sighed. "I can't imagine living on such a schedule, having to obey those who master the schedule."

"The monks' life is not as rigid as it may seem, but it is certainly ordered. Speaking as one who has lived that way under much worse masters, the life lived here sometimes seems damned near idyllic."

"You are in a monastery, yet you have no master," she said slowly, contemplating. "It's almost oxymoronic."

"Life's ironies are delicious, Hermione. Learn to savor them. It is impossible to correct them," he said without looking up.

Her stomach growled. "Speaking of savoring I'm starving," she said. "Is it lunch already?"

He glanced up at the clock. "It will be soon, but we are not eating in the refectory," he said as he stood and helped her to her feet. "Lunch is a time of solitude. Meals are eaten in silence."

"And you like that?"

"Yes."

"A relief from Hogwarts, then?" She grinned at him.

"You have no idea," he said dryly.

"So where will you be taking me?" she asked.

"The Mistégova market. Come on."

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II

Chapter 2 of 2

We find what we need when we least expect it. Written for Juniperus for the latest SSHG Gift Exchange. Award: OWL Awards 2009: Nineteen Years Later, Order of Merlin 2nd Class.

They walked side-by-side back through the monastery, and she then followed him down the winding steps of the cliff.

She took the opportunity to reacquaint herself with his features, reveling in the cover that the busy market provided. His features were angular, too sharp to be handsome, but his Roman nose was strong, which Hermione found appealing in a visceral way. His black hair had slight silver streaks running through it, which gave him an air of distinction, and his eyes well, his eyes could rip the soul out of a person, or a confession, and Hermione didn't quite know which she thought to be worse. Severus would have made quite the priest in another life, save the requisite celibacy and disavowal of skepticism. Could priests be skeptical about the church? An interesting question.

In short order, they reached the market, rife with activity, bustling and hot, full of color and rich odors competing for dominance. She walked behind him as they wove through the streets and avoided the more pushy vendors, their hands touching as they retained contact, and she took in the back side of him. He was still lean and muscled, or so it appeared, but Severus Snape was a take-me-or-leave-me sort of person, so Hermione thought it fair in assuming that his body was still strong.

Not that she should be noticing such things.

He was a colleague... more or less. He still worked in Potions, after all; that was what he had been presenting on ten years ago at that blasted conference in Berlin. Moreover, he was a brilliant man, highly respected on the Continent, and yes, there had been that incident right after the divorce where she could have sworn he was going to kiss her. Yes, there was that.

He had been right to not tell her he was here; she would have gone mad with the suspense.

The years had been decent to her, decent being the equilibrium between generous and cruel. Nature often punished the bodies of those who bore life, after all. She was plump around the edges and had laughter lines on her face, but her hair hadn't yet gone grey and probably wouldn't for another ten or fifteen years, if her mother's genetics were an indication. She had a modicum of youth left in her, and she had to remember, she was young next to Severus. Young enough to have been his student, old enough to have joined the ranks of those who had taught at Hogwarts. There were equalities between them but far more inequalities existed, with her coming out the lesser, in her opinion. To Hermione's mind, his sacrifice during the war rendered him sacrosanct.

She was startled from her thoughts when Severus pulled his hand from the tentative grasp they had held. She watched as he approached a nearby vendor selling fruit. He examined the selection with quick scrutiny before turning back to his companion. "Do you like peaches, Hermione?"

"Yes," she said noncommittally, gazing out over the market. Not a moment later, she felt a ball of weight transfer from his fingers to hers.

She looked down. In her hand, Hermione held the most delectable looking peach she'd ever encountered. She bit into it, the ripeness of it washing her senses *ifresca*.

"This is delicious," she said, juice trickling out of the sides of her mouth.

Severus chuckled and wiped the juice away with his thumb. He sucked it off and bit into his own peach without looking at her. Hermione was grateful for the occupation of chewing; she would otherwise be slackjawed, a most unattractive state. Did he realise...? He had to.

Then again, he'd been with monks for three months and every summer before that. He lived a quiet life. That would render him either oblivious or hyper-sensitive.

Hermione couldn't decide which she would prefer more.

They ate their peaches in silence, standing still amidst the bustle of noon-time activity, and when they were finished, Severus started walking forward.

"What are we doing?" Hermione asked, hurrying to catch up to him.

"We are going to have lunch," he said, pausing as she reached his side.

"Can't we eat lunch here in the market?"

He shook his head. "You will have a proper lunch," he told her as they came upon an avenue replete with sun-washed buildings, wide pavements and outdoor tables where diners sat comfortably, sipping wine or beer.

He led her to a door. "*La Caf  Rosa*," he said as he held the door open for her. "My favourite."

They walked in, and Hermione was at once awash in the terracotta walls and sticky, smoky atmosphere enhanced by noisy chatter. Severus led her to a small table wedged in the back corner, and he took the seat that surveyed the room. Hermione pretended to not notice.

They settled in their seats quickly. Hermione took a menu; he didn't.

"Severus!" a throaty female voice sounded behind Hermione. She looked up to glance and saw a petite, dark haired, big bosomed woman leaning in towards Severus.

"Isabel," he said with more warmth than Hermione would have expected, although it occurred to her that cleavage probably assisted customer friendliness.

"*Qu  quieres hoy?*" the woman asked Severus.

Hermione turned her attention back to her menu.

He started to speak in rapid Spanish, and Hermione looked up. "Are we ordering?" she asked.

"I've come here enough to know what's good," he said. "Do you like fish?"

"Yes" she said.

"Salad, dark chocolate?"

"Yes," she said, and he turned to Isabel and spoke in rapid, unintelligible phrases that nevertheless sounded like a warm rain in the summer.

At that moment, Isabel cocked her head coyly towards Severus, who smirked, and she then turned on her heel and walked away. Severus turned back to Hermione, his expression daring her to challenge him.

Hermione cocked an eyebrow.

"Isabel is the owner's niece," he said.

"And does she flirt so scandalously with all her customers?" she asked wryly.

"Only with harmless old men," he said.

"You're not old," Hermione exclaimed, indignant as Isabel returned with two water glasses. She quickly strode away.

"To you, no. To our peers, no," he said casually, quietly. "To them, I am sixty-five a scarce ten or fifteen years away from death."

Hermione inhaled sharply and looked down at the table.

"What is it?" he asked immediately.

She gestured helplessly with her hands. "My father is almost eighty. He's been very ill recently." She paused. "I apologise; it's not very good table conversation."

"I am sorry to hear it," he said.

"So," she said, leaning forward, desirous of a change in conversation, "what do you do during the other three seasons?"

He chuckled and leaned back in his seat. "Potions, research, consulting the same as when we last met." He paused. "Did you think I abstained from work during the summer?"

"You do potions work in a monastery?" she asked, shocked.

He shrugged. "Some. I don't do as much work at the monastery; my summers are my time away."

"You're still on a professor's schedule," she remarked dryly, sipping her water.

He smirked. "You could say that."

Isabel approached the table and set their salad plates down.

"*Gracias*," Severus said.

"Thank you," Hermione said. Isabel smiled at her and walked away.

Hermione's eyes widened at the size of the salad. "So we have salad, a meal, *and* dessert?"

"It's too hot for soup," Severus said.

"You eat soup with all this?" she asked, incredulous.

"Yes, and be grateful that they know me too well to attempt to offer a second course."

"Isn't this a café?" she asked.

"It's a café in a small town in southern *Spain*," Severus emphasised. "Lunch is the most important meal of the day here. As a consequence, it's also the largest."

"Do the monks eat like this?" Hermione asked, and Severus shot her a glance that told her they did not.

"So what are you researching right now?" Hermione asked, probing for conversation.

"A personal project. I'm attempting to develop potions that can be used to preserve books as an alternative to the standard charm work," he said. "It is far easier to quantify preservation in terms of chemical formulas as opposed to the ability and power of the wizard or witch casting the spell."

Hermione's face lit up, and so he expounded.

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They ate and talked of Severus' research, and Isabel brought their main course, and they ate and talked of Rose and Hugo.

"Rose is thrilled with her apprenticeship. She eats, sleeps, and breathes Arithmancy day in and day out," Hermione said. "I can't believe that I used to have that kind of passion for something. That sort of focus is exhausting."

"Or exhilarating," Severus said.

She chuckled. "I suppose you have that sort of passion for your potions."

He raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"What do you want to do with the rest of your life?" Hermione asked, her tone a bit cheeky.

Severus snorted. "That's a question you ask a seventh-year."

She narrowed her eyes at him, though she smiled. "Do you want to stay here?"

"Ideally, I would, but in reality, that is impossible. But do I want to continue to live quietly, in solace? Yes."

"I think it a nice life, if a lonely one."

"I make my bed every day, Hermione. I do, no one else, therefore I am more than content to sleep in it."

Her breath caught at that, and just then Isabel brought large hunks of dark chocolate on dessert plates with small cups of steaming hot coffee. They thanked her and turned to their desserts, the prior conversation temporarily laid to rest.

"Won't you eat some?" Severus asked, raising a piece of chocolate to his lips.

"The fish was divine, and this looks oh, I am *so full!*" she exclaimed with a slight laugh. She sipped her coffee. "The coffee's good."

"So is the chocolate. You must try it," Severus said. He reached across the table and broke off a small piece of lush dark chocolate and waved it under her nose.

Hermione inhaled its layered bittersweet scent an aphrodisiac in itself and when she opened her mouth to protest, he popped it into her mouth, her lips closing around one finger before he withdrew it. She closed her eyes at the taste that had burst in her mouth and that crested over her taste buds in a wave.

She opened her eyes to find him staring at her, his eyes intense, breath withheld as if awaiting her reaction.

She swallowed hard.

"Good?" he asked, his voice husky.

"Very," she answered, her tone far too breathy for her liking. She sipped some coffee in an attempt to restore her senses.

"Hermione" Severus started, and just at that moment, Isabel returned to the table.

"*La cuenta*," Isabel said, handing the piece of paper to Severus. "*Espero que tengas un buen día!*"

"*Y tú también, gracias*," Severus said, pulling out his wallet and throwing a few bills on the table.

"Let me" Hermione started, and he held up a hand. "Thank you," she said, dipping her head in gratitude.

"You're welcome." They rose from their chairs and started to wade their way to the door of *La Café Rosa*.

They walked onto the brilliantly lit street and remained silent the rest of the way, his fingers light on her lower back as he guided her through the town and up the cliff once more.

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As they approached the monastery, Hermione heard a low rumble, something she soon realized was song, or rather chanting the sound of dozens of voices coming from the church.

"What is that?" she asked Severus.

"Choir practice," Severus said. "They're in the sanctuary. Would you like to see?"

"Very much," Hermione responded.

Severus led her through the intricately woven corridors in the church that finally led to the sanctuary, and the richness of the visual image of stained glass windows and vaulted ceilings and medieval masonry nearly overwhelmed the intonation of the monks.

Nearly.

The sound swelled and wafted high in the sanctuary, the deep voices reverent in their haunting timbre, but there was something more; the chants stirred something in the air, a near tangible feeling that gave Hermione chills. It was the sound that invited rapturous attention and which commanded solemnity, demanding acknowledgment of something divine, even if it was the divine within.

Hermione put a hand over her heart and stood still. She felt Severus' nose brush against her cheek as he leaned in and murmured "Mesmerising, yes?"

She shivered against him and could only nod in agreement. She then felt the warmth of his fingers as he slid his arm under hers and walked out of the chapel.

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They were soon resituated in the library, seated across from each other, poring over their chosen texts.

"Did you attend church as a child?" Severus asked after a long while.

"No. Does it show?" she replied wryly, lifting an eyebrow.

He snorted.

"My parents don't believe in religion," she offered, returning to her text.

"In religion or in God?"

She looked up at him, exasperated. "Are you trying to be difficult? Because if you are, you're succeeding nicely."

He chuckled. "Just trying to ascertain your background is all."

She met his stare head on. "Why are you curious?"

"I like to play with a full deck," he responded.

"And how you deal with me depends on my religious upbringing or lack thereof?" she asked.

"It's only a question, Hermione," he said gently.

"A rather imprudent one to ask, don't you think?"

He sighed. "It's only a question. You've been staring at that page for a good five minutes without moving. I wondered where your mind was, that's all."

She softened. "It's nothing."

They sat silently for a few more moments.

"What was your upbringing, if you don't mind my asking?" she asked.

He looked up and stared at her. "Very well." He paused. "My father was a religious man, though his actions hardly spoke of goodness or godliness," he said wryly. "Religion did my family no use; it simply spared my mother a beating on Sundays."

"It pushed you away?" she asked quietly, pushing the shock away.

"The hypocrisy did, yes, as did the seeming incompatibility of the spiritual and the magical."

"And do you still maintain so strict a delineation?"

A smile twitched at his lips. "Clearly not. I come here and remember what I loved about church as a boy."

"Which was?" she prompted, fascinated.

"The solitude, the inherent peace. The choirs, the reverence. The Benedictine monks who volunteered were always kind to me, and they helped instill in me a love for learning."

"The Dark Arts..." she started.

"I've always sought a complete understanding of how the world works."

"And?"

"And I learned to fight fire with fire. My father was an abusive man, a harsh man, and we stopped attending the church in town before I was ten. Also, it made my mother uncomfortable, and she was already a skittish woman, and my father did not like how her 'poor' behavior reflected on him. He attended Mass completely hung over most of the time."

"Why on earth would he attend at all?"

"Surely you've heard of Catholic guilt, Hermione."

She snorted.

He went on, "My father's mother was Italian, and she was the truly religious one in the family. My father reportedly inherited his father's temper."

"What happened to your parents?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"My father died of liver failure when I was sixteen, and my mother followed soon after."

"Heartache?"

"Suicide."

"Christ." The words escaped her breath, and a nearby monk glanced over his shoulder.

Severus laughed heartily.

"And yet you have found peace."

"I would not go so far as to say that. Everyone carries their past with them... but here..." He looked around. "It's a place where I can let the past go and simply be in the present. I think it is the most restful place on the planet."

"You would stay here your whole life, wouldn't you?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," he said, a sad note coloring his tone.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching a hand across towards him.

He shrugged. "I cherish my time here. I know the day will come when I will not be able to walk these halls every summer. Already, it has been jested that I look no older than when I first arrived."

"I I hadn't thought of that," she said.

"I hadn't, either," he said wryly. "Then again, I never expected to stay so long."

"Would that I could find a place like that," she said, tracing a page with her fingertip.

"Britain is not that for you?" he asked.

"Libraries," she said, smiling up at him. "Libraries. There are few other places where I feel at one with my surroundings. My home feels that way when Rose and Hugo are there."

"So you need books and loved ones to make a place for yourself?" he asked.

She chuckled, a sound which dinned throughout the still library. She covered her mouth so as to avoid laughing. "Yes, I suppose so," she said, recovering. "Why do I feel like such a schoolgirl in here?"

"Does it remind you of Hogwarts' library?" Severus asked.

"No, why?"

He didn't respond.

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They spent the rest of the afternoon in the library, companionably silent, devouring their chosen texts, and when Hermione came upon the original Latin, Severus leaned into her and ran his finger along the page, translating, his voice a heady sound in her ear, the warmth of his body both a comfort and a temptation.

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Around six o'clock, eyes ready to cross, Severus and Hermione rose from their seats, placed the books back in their proper place, closed the archives, and left the library.

"Are you hungry?" Severus asked.

"I find that I have very little appetite these days. Lunch filled me up," she responded.

"Would you care for a drink, then?" he asked with a slight smirk.

She gaped at him. "Alcohol? In a monastery?"

He shrugged. "I don't see why not," he said as they strode down a corridor in what Hermione presumed was the direction of his suite.

After several moments, they stood in front of a heavy door. Severus murmured what Hermione realized was a password, and just as he was about to open the door, she put her hand on his forearm.

"What is this engraving?" she asked, tracing her finger along the light wooden etch on the door. It looked like a person...

"That is St. Serenus the Gardener," Severus said, leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets.

"And what is he the patron saint of?" she asked.

"Bachelors and the falsely accused," he said with no trace of sarcasm.

She looked at him, gobsmacked. "You're serious?"

"Father Tomas had a wicked sense of humour," Severus said, clearly fighting the urge to laugh.

Hermione laughed loudly enough for them both, and Severus opened the door and invited her in.

His suite was small but sufficiently sized. She initially walked into the sitting room, and Severus quickly gestured in the direction of the bedroom, the bathroom, and the kitchenette that the first Abbot had been gracious enough to install for him. The sitting room was by far the largest room, but it had Spartan furnishings two small tables, two chairs that faced each other on opposite sides of the room, several full bookshelves (naturally), and surprisingly a small bar.

"I like it," Hermione said pleasantly, a broad smile on her face.

"You're kind. It's small and chilled." Severus gestured for her to take a seat.

"It's a nice reprieve from the heat outside," she said. "And it seems sufficient enough to meet your needs."

"Indeed," he said. "Can I interest you in a gin and tonic?" he asked, moving to the bar.

"Make it a vodka and tonic and we have a deal," Hermione said with a smile, glancing around the Spartan room, dark as a dungeon even in mid-afternoon.

He grinned and mixed their drinks at his small bar.

"I'm still surprised they let you have alcohol here," Hermione said, crossing and uncrossing her legs.

"Hermione, this day should have taught you that I can do *anything* here."

"Even entertain female guests privately?" she quipped, accepting the drink he offered her. Their fingers brushed as the glass passed from his hand to hers.

"I have taken no orders," he said simply, seating himself in the chair across from her.

"You just enjoy the lifestyle when you please?"

"After the life I've lived, I revel in that freedom."

"Of course," she said, contrite and feeling a bit shamed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "How is your vodka and tonic?"

"Excellent, thank you." Her gaze flickered to the sliver-like window, but there was something beside it, something mounted on the wall...

"The poem *Invictus*," Severus offered, following the direction of her gaze.

The letters were white, and the stone they were etched on... "Is that ebony wood?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. Do you know the poem?" Severus asked.

"I'm not familiar with it, no."

"*Invictus*, by William Ernest Henley," Severus said, the timbre of his voice a bit deeper than usual, more professor-like in tone, and Hermione realized that he was going to recite the poem to her.

"Out of the night that covers me,

Black as the Pit from pole to pole,

I thank whatever gods may be

For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance

I have not winced nor cried aloud.

Under the bludgeonings of chance

My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears

Looms but the horror of the shade,

And yet the menace of the years

Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,

How charged with punishments the scroll,

I am the master of my fate;

I am the captain of my soul."

He said nothing more, and Hermione was speechless.

"That poem is..." She searched for the words.

"Fitting?" he asked, a sarcastic tilt to his tone.

"Stunning. Beautiful. And yes, fitting." She looked at him warmly. "Where did you find it?"

He sighed. "It was a Christmas gift."

"From who?" A smile twitched at her lips.

"Minerva," he said softly.

"You're still in contact with her?" Hermione asked.

"Mm," he said, and Hermione understood that the subject was closed. She looked again at the poem and the window that ran parallel to it. The sun was beginning to set.

"Shall we take a walk in the garden?" Severus asked.

"Won't we disturb...?"

"The monks are at Vespers, and they will be in the refectory after. It's at the other end of the monastery," he said, taking his gin and tonic in hand as they both rose from their chairs. He held the door open and then placed his fingers ever so gently at the small of her back, guiding her down the corridors and outdoor pathways before reaching the other end of the Abbey the gardens.

She inhaled sharply at the sight. Weeping willows flagged the entrances to the different pathways, and Severus led her to a specific path. He lifted a hand, and the long leaves of the willow parted in a perfect arch.

She smiled up at him. "You still use magic here."

"Only in the little things."

"Haven't you ever heard that God is in the details?"

"You said you didn't believe in a higher power," he said, amused.

She chuckled and took the arm he offered.

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They walked along a gently worn path; it was narrow, and Hermione noticed that it intersected with other paths as they walked further into the garden. And what a garden it

was. Many of the flowers were nearing their last month of season, but they were still bursting with color and fragrance, crowding the path as they leapt from their confines. The flowerbeds were lush and well tended; there was a seeming order to the wild arrangements. Hermione had never been in so dense a garden. She and Severus walked side-by-side, his hand on the small of her back. He pointed out flowers she did not know with his other hand - Gibraltar Candytuft and Spanish Bayonet, Andalusia Thyme and Sawfly Orchids. There were tall, ornamental grasses and violet larkspur and various irises and violets interspersed in the arrangements. And the smell was as lush as the sight of the flowers.

They came at last to the garden's center. Hermione was surprised to see that the center was bereft of flowers or landscaping; there was merely a small grove of cedar trees.

"Come," Severus said, and he walked ahead of her and sat under one of the trees before lying on his back and looking up at the sky.

"We're going to stargaze?" she asked, surprised.

"When the sky darkens, yes," he said, folding his hands over his chest.

"Do you do this often?" she asked, walking towards him. She kneeled to the ground and lay down beside him, hoping that nothing would creak.

"Not nearly enough," he said.

She chuckled. "I haven't done this since I was a child. Or perhaps since my children were young."

He was silent, so she sighed and folded her hands over her chest and stared up at the sky.

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It was nice, this silent companionship, she thought. The still peace between them was soothing.

She snorted. As if Severus Snape had ever been a soothing man.

"Is something funny?" he asked mildly.

She shook her head. "I'm just thinking about this... how soothing it is."

He snorted. "I'm soothing?"

"My thoughts exactly," she said, chuckling.

Darkness was slowly falling now. The moon was visible in the sky, though they could still see the colorful streaks of sunset.

"A dark night of the soul," Hermione heard herself murmur. "Spiritual darkness." She cleared her throat.

Severus sat up and looked down at her. "And do you think that you can have a different sort of 'dark night of the soul?'"

She sat up, as well. "How would it not be spiritual?" she asked, confused.

"A separation from one's self."

She inhaled sharply. "Being separated..."

"Feeling a disconnection between your actions and your very being," he said lowly. "Sacrificing your integrity for the sake of duty or some other nonsense."

"The monks are rubbing off on you," she said kindly.

"Contemplation and meditation nourish the spirit, and considering that there were decades where I didn't think I had a soul, that is saying something."

She scooted a bit closer to him. "You are an amazing man, Severus."

"I am more broken than most men."

She took his chin between her thumb and forefinger and tilted his face to look in her eyes.

"I am a woman, then, and believe me when I say that this day has been one of the best days of my life."

He looked up and met her eyes.

She brought her hand to his and turned it so that it lay palm up on the soft, dense ground, and she stroked his hand once before he withdrew it.

"I'm sorry..." she started, turning away.

"I am not made of stone," he said huskily, and he cupped her face with his hands.

He kissed her then, a question of the flesh, and her flesh responded with a resounding yes. She felt it deep as she ran a hand down his back, as he ran a hand through her hair, and as darkness engulfed the sky, he laid her down on her back against the soft earth and kissed her again.

She looked up at the sky and beheld the stars.

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Within my pounding heart

which kept itself entirely for him

He fell into his sleep

beneath the cedars all my love I gave...

I lost myself to him

and laid my face upon my lover's breast

And care and grief grew dim

as in the morning's mist became the light

St. John of the Cross

"Dark Night of the Soul"