

A Tale of Roses

by Memory

How does it feel to be missed?

Part 1

Chapter 1 of 2

How does it feel to be missed?

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All my gratitude to my fantastic previewer and beta, **Duj**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.

Dedication: To **Tearsofphoenix**, an excellent teacher, a captivating author and, above all, a dearest friend.

And to **Severus Snape**: I am honoured to share a birth year with the bravest man Harry Potter ever knew, and to have the opportunity to give him a happier end than canon allowed him.

The old woman trudged through the corridors, smiling absent-mindedly at the unknown faces that she encountered. They returned her smile with perplexity. She didn't fit in that place of youth. Her soft curls were veined by large stripes of white, and her wrinkled face looked more and more drained at every step. After a few minutes, she slowed and stopped, as if her legs had refused to carry her.

The younger woman, who was walking arm in arm with her, stopped as well and turned.

"Are you feeling well, Mum?" she asked.

The old woman nodded with a bit of impatience.

"I told you it would have been better to go directly to St. Mungo's. We could have come here later. I still don't understand what was so urgent," her daughter protested.

The old woman grimaced. "When we get old, we cannot spend our days trying to avoid the unavoidable. I have no more time to waste, Rosie."

"Oh, Mum!" Rosie sighed. "You know what the Medi wizards told you. You should rest. You should take care of yourself."

"That's what I'm doing today, dear." The old brown eyes held a hint of amusement. "And I think I know better than them what may help me."

"Why don't you tell me, then? Why Hogwarts and why today? It's been years since you were here! Since Jane graduated, I think..."

"And what a sweet memory." The old woman smiled. "But Rosie, you must understand that I have other memories in my life..."

She paused and then remained silent. How could she tell her daughter that the memories that drew her were even more compelling than her youngest granddaughter's celebration?

"Please leave me alone in the garden for a while," she said instead. "You can go and say hello to your friends. Take your time. I'll promise I'll sit quietly and wait for you."

Her daughter sighed, then shook her head. She bent to kiss her mother on her cheek and, after a last concerned glance, silently left.

The garden lay open in all its splendour, and the bench was exactly where she remembered it. A few steps lower, the White Stone, inalterable in its glowing pallor, shone in the mild sun. The quietness of the place enveloped her in its soothing embrace, and memories began to flow, while she savoured them one by one.

Now she could see it all again. There was the place that had welcomed her in her passage from world to world. Down in the fields, the chimney pot over Hagrid's hut was emitting white puffs of smoke. Hagrid wasn't there, of course. He had quietly passed away seven years earlier, but he had lived there till the last, too old and too weary to roam the forest, but still laughing his gigantic laugh. And his eyes had filled with tears each time she had come to visit him.

Near the hut, there was the pumpkin field in which Buckbeak had waited to be executed; up on the hill, there was the place where she had slapped Malfoy, and down in the valley she could see the Forbidden Forest, where they had met centaurs and unicorns and Thestrals. And even a werewolf.

Behind her was the castle and the impressive portals she had crossed coming and going so many times with Harry now a grandfather of nine and a retired Auror and with his best friend, the boy who had become so special to her...

Ron.

For the thousandth time in those last five years, the thought of her lost husband brought an ache to her chest, and her heart jolted. She clenched her fists to resist the sudden acute pain and made herself take calm, measured breaths. She didn't want to be forced to leave the castle before time, not on the day that she had finally convinced her daughter to make that little deviation for which she had begged yes, begged!

Slowly, the pain subsided. Her head bent while her thoughts returned again to their usual pattern. Memories formed and twirled in sequence... Ron telling Harry that nobody would want to have such an insufferable know-it-all as a friend... a Troll in the bathroom, and Ron managing *Wingardium Leviosa* for the first time... Ron wounded in the Shrieking Shack, lying in that dusty bed, and the strange hollow sensation his sweaty face had produced in her heart...

An immense wave of tenderness rose to choke her. She took a deep intake of breath. Those memories were too sweet, and she could no longer restrain the tears. Staring blindly at the Stone, she extracted memory after memory until she found herself in "that" place again. And as usual, confusion tightened her heart. She had come there to remember, and she didn't expect that her memories would bring only comfort. The illusion of being young again while she was instead on the verge of leaving life and her dear ones forever was excruciating enough.

But that unresolved question remained, prickling as it had subtly prickled for all those years. She had never confided to Ron how insistent that recurrent memory had been. Ron, bless him, was absolutely untouched by many of the anguishes that still tortured her. So, she had let them go, trying to forget them for the sake of their marriage.

But now, in front of that stone, the doubt re-emerged and hit hard. Could they have done something for...him? Why had they let him die? Of course, they hadn't understood who he really was. It had been a difficult situation. They were only children, and one of them so burdened! Taking sides with that dying man as she had done so many times previously would have seemed a betrayal.

She felt so confused... so terribly confused and guilty...

Immersed in her thoughts, she didn't notice the shadow elongating on the bench.

"Is this place taken?" a low male voice asked behind her. Surprised, she didn't answer immediately. Wiping her cheek with a quick gesture, she blinked back her tears.

"May I sit here?" The unfamiliar voice repeated patiently.

She nodded uncertainly, still trying to steady her voice, annoyed at the intrusion, and already preparing to leave the place and that untimely companion.

The man took the few steps that brought him in front of the bench and sat with an evident effort. She shot him a quick glance. He looked much younger than she, but not young, dressed in dark hooded robes that obscured his face and form. Only his grey hair and his long aristocratic fingers were visible.

"May I ask if you are a regular visitor?" he inquired after a few moments.

She winced. A talk was the last thing she wanted; her daughter couldn't arrive too soon.

"I used to be," she said repressively. But he wasn't deterred.

"Then perhaps you know what this white monument is about," he continued. "There's nothing written on it."

She felt shocked. How could a Hogwarts' visitor, surely a member of the wizarding world, possibly not know what the White Stone represented?

"This stone honours the memory of Albus Dumbledore, one of the greatest wizards who ever lived. You surely remember that, sixty years ago, he defeated the evil wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort," she told him.

"Sixty years is a long gap to fill," he apologised. "But I have always thought that it was Harry Potter who defeated Lord Voldemort."

"Of course he did!" she said. "But without Dumbledore's help, Harry Potter would have had little chance of surviving."

"How fascinating. I had heard that Potter wasn't alone. He had two companions who shared his adventures and risks." He hesitated and added, "I'm sorry for bothering you with my questions, but I left England many years ago, almost at the beginning of my adult life, and, now that I'm back, I'm trying to gather as many memories as I can."

She softened a bit. A difficult task, trying to recollect the facts of a life he hadn't lived. Her reservations fell.

"Yes," she said, "Harry Potter had two particularly close friends. But there were many who cared for him and helped."

She paused, and faces and voices filled her mind once more, sweet heartbreaking memories. Her eyes sparkled with tears.

"I suppose that, without his friends' help, he wouldn't have succeeded," she added, awakening from her painful trance with an effort.

"So he had many friends," the man mused. "I suppose he also had many enemies..."

"Yes." She lowered her head, and spoke haltingly, trying to control her emotions. It was too important. "Many. And very dangerous. But at the end, a few of them helped him. And one even proved to be his guardian."

"How can an enemy become a guardian?" the stranger asked disbelievingly.

She closed her eyes, reliving that miserable night. The corridor, the fear, the silence, the unexpected sound of a body thudding to the ground, then his figure out of the room, his commanding voice and his black robes billowing behind him while he hurried to the stairs, to the Astronomy Tower... Her voice went hoarse.

"He was a spy. Always playing a double role. So we didn't believe him completely. Ever." Absorbed in reminiscence, she forgot to exclude herself from the tale. "Then he killed Dumbledore. It was Dumbledore's idea, but nobody knew that. So he was marked as a murderer, but he kept working for the good side." A pause, and again that excruciating remorse. "Until the Dark Lord killed him."

"You seem sorry for him."

"We didn't do anything to help him." Her hands clasped and unclasped in her lap. "I still see his face in my dreams. I still ask myself what could have changed if we had tried to help him. Perhaps he would have survived."

"You seem to miss him."

"I did for many years," she confessed. "I wish I could talk to him and explain. And forgive and be forgiven. "

"A kind, though useless, feeling, so many years later," the stranger agreed, and put back his hood. "However, it's nice to know I was missed, Miss Granger."

For a moment, her heart thudded so violently that she thought it would escape from her ribs like a bird from a cage. She placed a hand to soothe the pain that was growing dangerously in her chest.

"You..." she whispered, her eyes fluttering with the effort of controlling her heartbeats and that immense, overwhelming sensation.

"You..." she repeated, and her face brightened suddenly with the joy of those who unexpectedly meet a friend in a far time and place.

"How can this be possible?" Her head was spinning as she cautiously said what she had never expected to say again. "Professor Snape?"

"Years haven't changed your manners, Miss Granger, though you must know very well that I am no longer a professor. But I see there has been a change in your status, too. How should I address you now?" He glanced at her gold ring, the only ornament on her hand.

She was too lost in her joy to hear him.

"This is the answer to my prayers," she murmured with trembling lips. Then, her heart sent a powerful signal, and this time she couldn't conceal her sudden pallor. She closed her eyes and leaned back on the bench, unable to resist the pain.

He frowned in alarm. "Are you feeling well?"

She felt his hand around her wrist, and his long fingers search for her pulse *NO. Not now.* She struggled to react.

"I'm well..." she panted, and he arched an eyebrow. "I will be in a minute," she corrected herself, as her lips tugged upwards *Oh well*, she thought with ferocious desperation, *this time her heart would have to get on with it by itself* But he took out a little flask and offered it.

"Here," he said, holding it to her lips. "Drink this."

She gulped the bitter liquid down, shivering in disgust but not even thinking to refuse. Slowly she relaxed, feeling the comforting warmth of his fingers on her pulse. She opened her eyes and smiled, a mischievous smile of youth.

He scowled back and asked gruffly, "Is there anybody here with you?"

Her smile deepened at that sign of concern. "Yes, my daughter. But don't worry, I'm well now."

He shot her a sceptical glance. "You don't look too healthy."

"Oh," she replied vaguely, "who isn't at this age? Work, family and children give so many worries..."

"So, I was right in assuming you changed your status?" he asked, seeming truly interested, and she smiled again.

"You were always right in your assumptions."

He snorted. "Weasley, I suppose."

She sighed. "So predictable, was I?"

"And how is he?"

Her smile fell away. "He is no longer with us." She lowered her head to hide the tears. In spite of his many defects, Ron's absence was even more painful in that so very special moment. "Five years ago."

"I'm sorry," he said mechanically. "Children?"

"Two," she replied, and he stared blankly at the garden as if he had run out of questions. But she had many.

"Tell me about you," she urged him. "How could you survive that bite? And what have you been doing all these years? Really, I still can't believe it! Does anyone else know about you?"

"You have kept that irritating habit, Madam Weasley," he replied, and a spark lit his eyes. "You speak too much."

They stared at each other. It was her turn to scowl now. He shrugged and surrendered.

"However, it's a simple story. My saviour was Dumbledore, though he never really cared for me. Or for anyone, I believe, despite your flamboyant description of him. His repeated comments about Nagini I presume you remember the name of Voldemort's pet serpent inspired me to brew an antidote against her venom and dose myself whenever I was summoned. So, that day in the Shrieking Shack, I was prepared. But I hadn't calculated the added, immense power of the Dark Lord's magic. The dose wasn't enough, and I entered a coma. I thought it was the end. Then I woke up in the night. Alone, forgotten and broken. But alive."

Mortified, she looked away, but he didn't seem to notice. His voice sounded remote as he relived lost memories.

"I left the Shack and went to a secret place where I used to store money and robes in case of need. I had a mission to fulfil keeping an eye on Potter and it wasn't completed. And I also wanted my revenge, if he failed. But he won, so I left. Forever."

"And where did you go?" she whispered.

"Away." He shrugged again, this time with immense bitterness. "I had nothing to live for. I spent days struggling against my emptiness, then I found a quiet place, a small country town in the North, where nobody knew me. I settled there and used my knowledge to prepare herbal remedies. Soon I had a circle of unsuspecting clients buying my potions to cure themselves, their cattle and their fields. Nobody asked after me or came looking for me. So, I stayed there and found my peace in helping the Muggles I had fought in my early years, until I became a Muggle again. It wasn't so difficult. After all, my father was a Muggle."

His eyes darkened with regret.

"But, as I said, sixty years is too long to stay in one place. They would have started to notice the many incongruities and strange facts about me. So I left that little heaven, and with my savings, I bought a small house, far from commercial routes and practically isolated. And there I live now, alone amongst the many other existences that surround me: animals and plants, peaceful creatures that do not accuse, do not command and do not hurt just for the pleasure of it, as humans do."

He hesitated. "And there... and there I cultivate roses. Beautiful roses. Their beauty is a comfort to my heart and a joy to my eyes." He paused, as if searching for words, and concluded sharply, "But the Dark Magic that is in me corrupts their nature. So, my roses are black."

He took a deep breath, as if awakening from a dream, and glared defiance at her. "Now, what about you?"

"My story is much shorter," she said. "I married Ron, as you guessed, and we had two children, a girl and a boy. I have five grandchildren, and my first great-grandchild is due within the next month."

"Your career?"

"In the Ministry. Ended twenty years ago."

"That's all? What about your ambitions, your plans of saving of the world? Or if not the world, at least the house elves?"

She could feel the sneer in his tone, but didn't care.

"That was sixty years ago, Professor. I am a wife, a mother and a grandmother. And that's enough trouble in my life."

She stared at the ground. How could she tell him that life had brought so many disappointments to at least two of the once famous child prodigies? Ron's work as an Auror had never got off the ground. Soon their differences of habits, wishes and interests had created quarrels and problems, and she had been forced to sacrifice her career to save his.

Their children had been a continual source of troubles. Rosie had found the man of her life while still at Hogwarts. The union had been celebrated immediately after her graduation, and had been blessed by three children in rapid succession. But then Rosie's husband had revealed an unpleasant penchant for beer and Firewhisky, and an alarming tendency to lose every job he got. Soon Hermione had felt obliged to take care of the new family, effectively becoming the mother of her grandchildren... and spending a great part of her time seeing to their education.

Hugo had been an erratic student, to her dismay. Then he had spent years searching for a job, always unsatisfied, always complaining, until he had found the girl of his dreams... and divorced three years later. Many other disagreeable events had followed, and finally he had settled down in his Uncle George's shop. The old man had never married so, at the end, he had practically adopted the nephew. Lately, Hugo had married a woman who had added two children to the family, but their grandmother didn't see them too much, as they spent the greater part of their time with George.

Her eyes saddened. No, life had been completely different from her dreams.

"Really, there is nothing more to say."

He intertwined his fingers. "I see. So, why did you come here today?"

"I was going to ask you the same question," she replied quietly. "You must admit that your reasons are surely much more interesting than mine."

He frowned. "In any case, please tell me."

She took a deep breath. "I've been thinking about Hogwarts for months. No, I must be sincere. I never stopped thinking about it."

"The days of our glory are hard to forget," he sneered.

"No!" she protested. "You don't understand. What happened here has been my pride and consolation in the darkest hours... and there have been so many of them," she admitted. "But what happened to you has been my constant remorse. I came here to find peace from my memories."

She blushed under his gaze. He straightened and spoke with a cold voice.

"You mean, you left me dying in the Shack, without even turning to check if I was breathing, and now you want to convince me that you have been sorry for sixty years? Do you expect me to believe it?"

"Yes! Yes, please!" she pleaded, raising her hands as in a prayer. "I have longed to talk with you, to justify myself, to ask for forgiveness..." Her hands slowly lowered to her lap, and clasped with a sudden movement. "But of course you weren't there to be asked."

She swallowed and tears twinkled again. "I'm sorry..." she whispered, while a large drop fell on her lap.

Whiner, she thought bitterly; she had always been ready to cry and time hadn't changed that. How would he react to that reminder of her weakness?

He was sitting rigidly. "Though they come a bit late, I accept your apologies, Madam Weasley," he said, staring at the garden. Incredulous, she turned to look at him.

"But do you trust me? Do you?" Anxiety vibrated in her voice along with tears.

He sighed, and a hint of a smile tweaked his lower lip.

"Should I?" he asked himself. "After all, you lied and tricked and meddled behind my back for years."

"Ah, Professor!" she replied, turning again for a moment into the schoolgirl she had been. "I've always regretted that. What if you had trusted us? What if we had trusted you? What if we had been able to work together? But in the end, you are still alive, and that's the only thing that counts. And looking so well!"

She watched him in wonder, finally realising the incongruity. "How old are you?"

"It should be easy for you to calculate my years," he replied with a bitter smile. "Next January, I'll be a centenarian."

"But you look so... so young!"

"It's the poison. Nagini was too closely linked with the Dark Lord: her power was his power, and a part of it now flows in my veins." His eyes grew sombre. "Her bite became my salvation and my curse. I'm filled with a malevolent power that I can't and I won't ever use, but that grants me a longer, slowed-down life, so that I can savour completely the weight I am carrying ..."

She gasped in horror, but his lips curled disdainfully. "I suppose this means I am linked to Potter as well. Ridiculous, isn't it? How is he?"

"Well," she began, "he married Ginny Weasley..."

"Another obvious choice," he sneered. "I imagine they have a litter of brats, then."

"Actually, only three," she said, a bit hurt by his tone, but preparing her revelation with a mischievous smile. "James, Lily..."

"How predictable!" Again he interrupted her with a nervous wave of his hand.

"And Albus Severus."

"Albus... Severus?" he mouthed disbelievingly, and her smile grew.

"Yes, Professor. So, you see, there is effectively a link."

"But... I can't believe it." He looked dumbstruck. And exposed.

"I think you have always underestimated Harry. He was not as thick and self-absorbed as you thought. He honoured his parents, of course, but he also chose the names of the two men who had shaped his destiny. His foster parents, if you like."

He almost choked. Recovering his composure, he snarled, "A despicable choice. Joining my name with that of the man who wanted to sacrifice both of us for a hypothetical greater good!"

She stiffened, but he stopped her reply with an ironic glance. "Don't try to justify him. You can't. Just tell me: what is Albus... Severus doing?"

"Oh, he is the same age as my Rosie, fifty-three now..." she said in melancholy. "Not a boy any more. Time goes by for our children, too." A shadow crossed her face, then her eyes twinkled again, as she savoured her impending revelations.

"He is a wonderful potioneer. He works in St. Mungo's, is married and has three children." She grinned. "And, last but not least, he was sorted into Slytherin."

He took a deep breath. His eyes sparkled, then darkened again.

"Does he know about me?" he asked.

"Of course!" It was her turn to be surprised. "Harry told him that he had been named after two Hogwarts Headmasters, and that one of them was a Slytherin and the bravest man he had ever known."

Snape closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against his fists. She added slowly, "Albus Severus has wonderful green eyes. Just like his father... and grandmother."

He jerked up his head. "You... you know?" he rasped.

"We all know," she declared firmly, and he turned his head away.

"Severus," eyes twinkling with tears, she dared call him by his name. "Your sacrifice was immense and Harry wanted to remember it. We all did."

A violent emotion contorted his features and he struggled to control it. Impulsively, she placed her hand on his hand and gently squeezed it. Then, tired but content, she leaned back against the bench and closed her eyes with a sigh.

"Finally I told you everything. I'm so glad..." she breathed.

"I... I am flabbergasted..." he muttered. "I came here to revisit bitter memories and persuade myself that I had made the right choice, because there were no reasons to hope. Now you tell me that I have been remembered, and remembered with love. If I'd ever known... I could have come back before."

"Why not now?" Eyes glowing, she sat straighter. "You don't need to publicise your arrival, of course. If you don't want to remain forever, at least come for a visit. I'm sure that Harry..."

"No," he replied with an effort. "Meeting him wouldn't be a good idea."

"Then what about me?" She was ready to suggest. "I'm so lonely these days... My grandchildren have all grown up, and my days are empty. Would you come to visit me? I imagine you still know how to Apparate. Do you have a wand? Otherwise I could help you find you a new one."

"I have a wand," he replied, his voice wavering. "But... would you really like to see me again?"

"What a silly question! Of course I would." She turned to look at him, tilting her head and smiling. "Aren't you one of my oldest friends?"

"If I were, I never noticed," he replied bitterly, and her smile vanished. She looked him straight in the eye. "In spite of what you may think, I always trusted you and did my best to convince the others that you were trustworthy..." Her voice went flat. "Until that dreadful night. I lost confidence then. Dumbledore's plan was too hard to understand, too incredible to believe."

He didn't answer and, for a horrible moment, she felt hopeless again. Then...

"I remember when you came to Hogwarts," he said with an unexpectedly soft tone. "You were an exemplary student, but you didn't fit in. Too impetuous for a Hufflepuff, too straight for a Slytherin, too practical for a Ravenclaw, too brilliant for a Gryffindor. You had every gift... except popularity."

He paused, unravelling his thoughts.

"So, I wasn't surprised when you attached yourself to Potter. It gave you another route to admiration, a chance to bask in his reflected glory. And why not, after all? It was a matter of mutual convenience. You needed appreciation, he needed your brain to survive his tasks."

Her brows furrowed, and she burst out, "But brain isn't what counts in friendship, Professor. It's much more important to care and to help each other. That's what friends do."

He bowed ironically. "Yes, that's what you did, and the most astonishing, whimsical things began to happen. I'm still not sure whose mind was behind them where Potter's responsibility ended and yours began." His eyes narrowed. "Because I'm sure that many times you were the inspiration behind the hand that acted."

She blushed and looked down. "I admit we were reckless. But I wish you could have trusted us the way I trusted you! So many things would have changed, so much pain would have been spared..."

This time it was his turn to look away. He cleared his throat.

"I confess that I was wrong about you. I understood too late, when I saw what you did for him, and how you remained at his side till the end. That... that was extraordinary. Even when your own life was in danger, you never abandoned him." His eyes flashed with sudden ferocity. "Does Potter know how lucky he has been?"

"Well, he had other friends," she replied, surprised at his passionate tone.

"No." He shook his head. "None like you. Not even Weasley. Phineas's portrait told me that he abandoned you in the tent after an argument."

She stared. How could he remember such remote events, and with such precision? How much time had he spent in reminiscence, far and forgotten in that village?

He returned her gaze and shifted uncomfortably. Then he closed his eyes and said haltingly, "If I had had a friend like you so many years ago, perhaps I wouldn't have..." His voice trailed off and choked, and he tightened his hands so forcefully that his knuckles whitened.

Her eyes softened. "There's still time. If you want, we can be friends now."

He watched her with sudden hope, then shook his head. "I... I don't think I could... I have spent a whole life alone..."

"I'm alone too," she murmured. "It would be nice to share my loneliness with somebody else."

His lips trembled, searching for words that he didn't know how to express. Then, with a graceful movement of his fingers, he conjured a flower, a beautiful black rose and, silently, offered it to her.

"For me?" she said in surprise, and lifted the splendid blossom to inhale its scent.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, and smiled. He smiled back, with a blush of pleasure.

Her heart twisted painfully in her chest.

Something cracked inside and the colour disappeared from her cheeks. She leaned back her head on the bench with a moan of pain. His eyes widened in alarm.

"You are not well!" He looked around for help, not daring to leave. "You need medical assistance..." And he fumbled to take out his little flask.

"No..." she breathed. *Her time had come like a thief in the night, and there would be no more moments of joy, except these last precious instants!* It will be useless. My heart is injured, Severus. By Dolohov in our fifth year. Do you remember?" Her voice slurring, she struggled to explain. "In the Ministry, fighting over the prophecy... He hit me with a curse... we thought it was healed, but ... aging... it returned..." Her voice was barely audible now. "We had to pay a price for our glory, sooner or later... First Ron... Now it's my turn."

He watched her in panic. "Stay!" he implored.

"It would have been so nice..." she murmured. Her eyes closed, and her head sank onto his shoulder.

"No!" he cried, bending and enfolding her in a tight embrace while he summoned his forces and, for the first time, dared awaken the immense power locked inside his body. Waves of energy exploded, surrounding them in a circle of light. And, while he obstinately, desperately, called her spirit back from the depth in which it was sinking, an astonishing change took place. His hair whitened and his face creased, while his body altered and aged in a few terrible instants. He writhed in the pains of the transformation, but kept her tightly till the last powerful vibration. Then and only then panting and exhausted, he drew back and watched her through eyes unfocused by tears.

Her body had absorbed his power. Her cheeks were rosy and her breath was returning. He shivered at the sight of his hands, now wrinkled, stained, and veined with blue. Then he looked again at her. She was sleeping peacefully, lips slightly open in a smile. He lingered, brows furrowing with infinite tenderness.

A sound of voices startled him. He turned his head to the castle. With an effort, his now weakened eyes detected a small group of people coming out of the portals and speaking in merry confusion, as friends do when they meet after a while.

"See you soon, Rose!" A male voice exclaimed, muffled by distance, and other voices joined it, exchanging greetings and good wishes. He recognised the name and stiffened. Her daughter was coming.

A moment he hesitated, torn between doubt and desire. Then he lowered his head in resignation. There was no place for him in that world anymore. His eyes apologised to the woman resting so placidly on the bench. Though his heart raged and bled, he didn't want her to see him, not after that dreadful change.

"Sleep well, Hermione," he whispered with his new uneven voice, and bent to kiss her lightly on the forehead.

Part 2

Chapter 2 of 2

How does it feel to be missed?

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All my gratitude to my fantastic previewer and beta**Duj**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.

Dedication: To **Tearsofphoenix**, an excellent teacher, a captivating author and, above all, a dearest friend.

"Mum... Mum!" Rose gently shook her mother's shoulder. "MUM!"

Finally, the old woman opened her eyes and looked around hazily.

"Rose?" she quavered.

"Merlin's beard, Mum, you frightened me!" Rose's shock had been great and demanded compensation. "This is the last time I indulge your whim! See how tired you look! We are going to St. Mungo's immediately now, and I don't want to hear another word from you anymore!" she scolded her mother in a bizarre exchange of roles.

"Rose!" her mother replied sharply. "I'm perfectly well, don't you see? I was only..." She glanced around. "Oh dear, did I fall asleep? Where is Professor Snape?"

"Mum!" Rose sighed, convinced of her mother's mental confusion. "What are you saying? Professor Snape here? Let's go to St. Mungo's and see the Healer."

But Hermione was too worried to listen.

"Rose!" she demanded. "Didn't you meet a... a man, more or less your age, dressed in dark clothes?"

"A man?!" Rose replied, gathering the bag she had dropped on the grass in those first terrifying moments. "Mum, you were sleeping." She shook her head. "You've been dreaming."

"I was speaking with a man, I tell you," Hermione declared, but her confidence was shaken. Had she really met a man who had died sixty years ago? Was that possible? Or had her immense longing for consolation made her imagine it?

Saddened, disappointed, uncertain, she watched her daughter as if she could give her an answer.

"Mum!" Rose insisted, clearly running out of patience.

Hermione looked around in anguish. Nobody else was there. The garden was lonely and silent. Had it been only a dream? Her lower lip trembled.

"Let's go, Rosie," she murmured at last, fighting tears. Slowly, she got to her feet and put a hand in her sleeve, searching for glasses.

And there she felt it.

The rose.

The black blossom he had given her was in her fingers again, and she stared, stunned, at it.

"Mum?" Rose called, turning to see if she was coming. Swiftly returning the flower to her sleeve, the old woman began to walk, her pace becoming faster and steadier with every step.

The sun was low on the horizon as nature prepared for a wonderful sunset that would paint the sky in glorious shades of orange and red.

The house was just on the top of a hill: a pleasant little cottage, solidly built in stone to protect those living inside from the chilling cold of the Northern winters. But there was no need of such protection. Though there was snow on the peaks of the mountains, the little valley downwards was blooming in an eternal spring; the thick walls of the house were covered by ivy, and the chimney was merrily emitting white puffs of vapour, showing that something was boiling on the fire. There was a market garden on the left of the house, and a well on the right. Hens crossed the yard, guiding their rows of chicks with measured, rhythmical movements. A goat rubbed her small horns against a fence and, curled on a windowsill, a cat slept as soundly as only a cat can. Everything looked quiet and peaceful.

The old man was sitting on a bench, his white hair reflecting the light of the fading sun while he stared at his ordered little kingdom. His eyes affectionately watched the many little creatures wandering in the yard, and finally rested on the field of roses in front of him: the luxuriant, beautiful black roses, that were slowly but inexorably withering.

Since he had returned from his trip, their soft, velvety petals had gradually begun to detach and fall on the ground, whirling in a delicate dance of death. Thousands of brightly coloured butterflies flew over the flowers, trying to find nourishment and shelter in that tremulously swinging mass. The spectacle, that had once been breathtaking, now breathed desolation to the ambient air.

With a soft pop, the woman Apparated onto the pebbly road that led to the house. Slowly, she went up the little hill, her eyes fixed on the dark-clad figure curled on the bench. Though her face was old, her hair was brown and curling and her movements were fluid and easy. Silently, she went closer and closer, and not even the dog napping in the shadow of a great oak noticed her.

Lost in meditation, the old man turned his head just a moment before she reached him. His eyes widened in amazement, then warmed with pleasure. For a long moment, neither said a word, each savouring their intense emotion.

"It took me a whole month to find you," she said.

He nodded gravely. "I imagine you used the rose."

"Yes." She put a hand in her sleeve and took out the black blossom he had given her. It was still soft and radiant, and its petals exhaled a subtle bittersweet scent. She lowered her palm to show it to him.

"It was the only clue I had. But I had to try so many times! I think I have Apparated into more than two dozen rose nurseries, in every part of England. Once I even landed in a botanical garden."

Her eyes twinkled. "The gardener wasn't very happy about my sudden appearance but, as I am an absent-minded old lady, he accepted my apologies. After that, I was much luckier. The next attempt brought me to a village, a nice little place... though the people there were extremely reserved. It was hard to find somebody willing to talk. Even harder, somebody willing to answer. But you know me: I have always been stubborn."

Her smile grew mischievous. "Incidentally, John Harrison and his wife send you their best wishes."

"John... Harrison?" he asked, brows rising in astonishment.

"Yes, the farmer whose baby you saved with one of your potions. Little Jimmy Harrison is thirty-six now, a rather tall man with a handsome smile. His parents are grandparents and remember you with great affection: they were eager to tell me wonders about your remedies as soon as I said that I was an old friend of yours... but alas, they couldn't tell me anything else, except that you had left more than twenty years ago. It took me an extra effort of imagination to guess where to try next, but, as you see, it was worthwhile."

He tilted his head and considered her. "Are you real?"

"Of course I am. Let me show you. Is this place taken?" She indicated the bench. "May I sit there?"

His eyes lit. "These... these are the first questions I asked you that day in Hogwarts."

"You are correct, sir, and your memory is excellent as always," she replied with a little bow, pleased to see that he had treasured even the most insignificant details of their

meeting. But he hadn't answered the questions, so she added jokingly, "Do you think that this bench will stand an added weight?"

"I suppose the best way to know is to try it," he suggested.

She smiled, but tears were dangerously near. He had aged so frighteningly since their previous encounter! She sat near him and silence fell again while she furtively studied him. His hands crumpled the fabric of his robes, and a curtain of white hair sheltered his face and his feelings.

"Why did you leave that day, Professor?" she asked.

"Why should I have remained?" he retorted.

"You saved my life. Why didn't you wait to be thanked?"

"There was no need of thanks," he said.

She took a deep breath.

"Well," she said merrily, "as *thank you* is only a part of what I intended to say, if you don't accept my thanks, I will have to leave immediately."

He stiffened and looked helplessly around.

"In that case, your thanks are accepted," he muttered, shooting her a glance of reluctant appreciation. She smiled to herself. Her hook had been too tempting for him to decline.

Reassured, she continued, "Again, please tell me: why did you leave?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't stay. Perhaps you haven't noticed, or perhaps you are too polite to remark, but I have changed."

"After all your years away, nobody would have recognised you. Even less noticed a difference," she said. "However, I don't see any change in you, except in the colour of your hair." Her gaze lingered on his figure. "White suits you. It gives you a much more luminous air." She smiled, hoping she had told her lie convincingly.

He looked her over. "You look beautiful," he said.

She hadn't expected that. "My heart has recovered," she agreed. Her new-found wellness had exacted a terrible price from him, and a fresh remorse had joined her old ones... Which was probably the reason she felt compelled to keep talking.

"The Medi wizards at St. Mungo's were utterly astonished by my improvement, and so was my family. They wanted me to stay in the hospital for further investigation. But I left as quickly as I could. You understand, I couldn't waste my time in experiments, and I didn't want to explain about you." She paused. "There has been an unfortunate development: my daughter told them that I had fallen asleep before the White Stone." Her voice was wry. "I'm afraid that they are going to credit my recovery to a newly manifested healing power."

"Another miracle of Albus the Venerable," he agreed, but there was no resentment in his voice, only a weary acceptance and a hint of relief.

She whirled on him. "But this is so unfair, Professor!" she protested. "YOU were my real saviour! It has been terrible, hearing all that nonsense and not feeling allowed to reveal the truth!"

"Thank Merlin you didn't!" he retorted. "Fame is the last thing I want. Do you think it could improve my life? Do you think a belated glory could repay me for all I have lost?"

She bent her head. There was nothing she could reply. She had arrived brimming with good intentions, but now the momentum threatened to abandon her. Her words had awakened hurtful memories, and she had played an active part in so many of them. What answer could she give to his bitterness?

Her eyes silently questioned the mountains, the fields and the sky; slowly their remote serenity filled her heart.

"I can understand your feelings," she murmured. "It's so beautiful here."

He nodded, his austere face finally opening in something similar to a smile.

Comforted, she tried again.

"Please, show me your roses."

They strolled amongst the fading flowers, each step awakening bright clouds of butterflies that flew frantically away to alight immediately after. She contemplated the ravages with a lump in her throat.

"What happened?" she asked, though she already knew the answer.

"My roses are dying," he said, crossing his arms. "As you have surely understood, there is no more power in me to nourish them."

She felt an immense remorse. Not only had he shortened his life for her, but also sacrificed his most precious possessions.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"I'm not," he replied. Then, while she looked at him in confusion, he added sharply, "Do you think I value my roses more than your life?"

"But these flowers were a part of your soul," her voice trembled and, embarrassed, she bent to stroke a reclining blossom, blinking the tears away.

"My roses must die, as all earthly creatures do," he murmured. "But, someday, new roses will grow in their place. And perhaps I will live to see them bloom again..."

He stopped, and she understood his unexpressed feelings. He had been living for years in the illusion of a sort of immortality. Now his sudden unpredicted transformation had reversed his options and presented him with the unknown pains of an aging body and the fear of approaching death.

The prospect was even more terrifying in that little corner of paradise, where magic had tamed nature, making the valley flourish in an eternal spring. The implications of that last consideration suddenly struck her, and she turned to look at him.

"How did you manage to keep this place secret?"

He looked embarrassed.

"As I told you, this is a very isolated location; probably the best term would be 'forgotten'."

She crossed her arms with a frown. Being a mother and a grandmother had its advantages: she could easily recognise a lie. "Forgotten or not, I can't believe that you have

lived here for more than twenty years without anyone stumbling on you. Call it coincidence, luck or misfortune, but there is always a chance to encounter people in the limited space our island offers."

He turned away his head, biting his lower lip.

"The place was Unplottable... till a month ago," he admitted.

For a moment, she was baffled. "And then you removed the spell? Why?"

He didn't answer and, watching his sheepish expression, she suddenly understood.

"You mean you wanted somebody to come?"

"Not somebody," he said quietly. "Just you."

An immense joy filled her heart at those words. Then she shook her head, frustrated and sorry for the time they'd wasted, a time that was running shorter each day for both of them.

"I could have come before, if only you had let me know. Why did you play hide and seek with me? Why did you force me to wander and search for a whole month?" she reproached him.

He clenched his hands.

"I warn you: you are not going to like my answer."

"Why not? It can't be worse than a refusal!"

"No," he agreed. "Not a refusal. But... friendship is a word so far in the past for me that it has practically lost its meaning. Memories are all I've got... and memories ache and stab! Still, I need them to persuade myself that once I was alive." His tone hardened, as if he was forcing himself to go on. "I left you that day, because I needed to know if what you had told me was true."

Her eyes darkened. "So, I was right. You didn't trust me."

"You don't understand. I left a passage open for you, but I had already resigned myself to not seeing you again."

Though she knew how deeply wounded he had been, she felt offended. Her offer had been somehow disbelieved, and disillusion bit cruelly her heart.

"I suppose you hate me for what I've done to you," she mused, and bitterness tinged her voice.

"That is complete nonsense," he snapped.

"It's the truth. I've shortened your life!"

"No, you've only shortened my sentence," he corrected her, crossing his arms.

The night had spread silent wings while they talked, and a fresh breeze had begun to blow. The moon was shining in the sky, indifferent in its pale beauty. Dark shadows were clouded by dark thoughts; neither spoke. She felt the tears prickle again. Why had she reacted so harshly? It was as if they had returned to the skirmishes of her schooldays. She shivered in the darkness, and he saw.

"You are cold, and it's late," he commented with the inexpressive tone he used to hide his feelings. "We'd better continue our conversation in the house." He glanced at the moon and impulsively added, "Perhaps you would like to share dinner with me? I'm not a great cook, but some food would warm you before you go."

Wrong-footed, she nodded without even knowing why. They went back to the house in silence, while she searched frantically for words that could correct, explain... apologise.

When they reached the yard, he excused himself and stopped to gather the goat and the hens and lock them in their shelters. She didn't try to help, and he didn't ask for assistance; the animals followed his commands obediently, and she admired the many ingenious devices he had installed to make up for his increasing lack of strength and agility. He seemed to enjoy manual work, and she noticed that he never used magic if he could avoid it.

The house was heartbreakingly ordered, austere in its simplicity, minimal yet pleasant. He watched her look, his stance stiff and anxious, as if fearing her judgement. Then she smiled and he breathed again.

"Long time since I had a guest", he said. "Hope I've not been too hasty in my offer. I'm afraid you'll find my meal a bit light. I can offer you only soup, cheese and vegetables. I renounced meat when I moved here. The animals you have seen are my friends, not my food."

"Don't worry," she answered, ready to make amends and to rebuild their relationship. "I'll be happy with what you've prepared. I too have changed my tastes with years."

He went to the fireplace to check the simmering cauldron. She followed him with her eyes.

"That's our soup," he said and, understanding her unexpressed question, he added, "I brew potions only for my plants these days, and not in the house. My lab is in the cellar."

They had entered the kitchen and, roused by the sound of his voice, the black cat jumped down from the seat where it had been resting. After a few moments of hesitation at the sight of an unknown visitor, it went to rub its furry head against its master's robes. Then it raised curious eyes at the woman and meowed insistently. She tilted her head in amusement, while the cat arched its back against her legs, waiting to be stroked. She couldn't resist anymore. Shaking her head in defeat, she crouched to take it in her arms. The happy sound of purring filled the air.

She glanced at the man she had, for years, yearned to meet again. He was smiling, the very first open smile since she had arrived, and the room seemed brighter.

She watched him prepare dinner. His fingers selected and chopped the different vegetables with precise graceful movements, and a wave of memories filled her mind. For a moment, she was twelve again, sitting in a cold classroom with a bunch of frightened students as he taught them the correct way to cut Asphodel roots. The vision was so vivid in its details that she shivered. He turned to look.

"Do you still feel cold?" he asked, arching an eyebrow. "I will add wood to the fire."

"No," she reassured him. "But I don't like to just sit and watch you work. Let me at least set the table."

"You don't know where the dishes are," he pointed out.

Her smile widened. "I have run a house for more than fifty years. I suppose I can deal with this kind of problem... Furthermore, I know you."

He frowned at that sibylline pronouncement, then nodded assent. She opened the cupboards. Everything was as precise as she'd imagined, the dishes stacked near the glasses, and the cutlery meticulously divided in the drawers. There was no tablecloth though, and when she asked him, he apologised, explaining that he liked the look and feel of wood under his hands.

She gave him a sympathetic look, and began to place the different pieces on the table, doing her best to create a nice composition. The black cat had followed her, tail up, and it had even tried to climb on the table, evidently curious to see what she was doing. Impertinent creature! She lifted it off and put it on the floor, scolding it with the soft amused tone she used on her grandchildren.

When the dishes were set, she searched again, this time looking for decorations, the finishing touch to celebrate that special dinner. At last, she found some scented candles on a shelf. Perfect! She placed three of them in the candle holder and lit them. Their tremulous light cast soft, undefined shadows on the walls, creating a nice atmosphere, and she smiled.

She was enjoying her task so much that she didn't notice that he was watching her.

Dinner was over, but she was still waiting for something, a strange void aching in her chest.

"Everything was very good," she complimented him. "Being a great potioneer has definitely enhanced your cooking skills."

"Thank you. I'm glad you liked the dinner," he replied. Silence fell while they both lost themselves in their thoughts.

"What are you going to do tomorrow?" she asked at last.

He seemed relieved at her question. "Oh, plenty of things, though nothing special. The usual routine. I have my animals to feed and my plants to water. And then I have my roses." He hesitated. "Perhaps I will begin to root them out."

She stared at him incredulously. "You mean you will destroy them all?"

His lips twisted downwards. "Anything is better than watching them die day by day. If I clean the ground, I can plant new roses." He sighed. "Though I'm not really sure that they will grow."

"I suppose you'll be very busy, then," she tried again.

"Yes," he replied briefly, toying with a crumb. The cat jumped on her lap and she startled. For a moment, she thought to push it away, but it was too cute, so she smiled and gently rubbed its neck. Curling comfortably in the new nest it had found, it began to purr.

"He seems to like you," Snape said.

"The feeling is mutual," she replied, stroking the little animal absent-mindedly. "He reminds me of Crookshanks. Do you remember? The cat I had in school. But yours is much more handsome."

He nodded, but kept his head obstinately down. The silence became unbearable. There seemed to be nothing else to say. Swallowing hard, she put down the cat and got to her feet.

"I think I must leave now. Thank you for inviting me. The food was really delicious."

His lips curled down, but he rose and walked her to the door, although she could have Apparated away where she stood. They paused to bid good-bye.

"Thank you for visiting," he said, still avoiding her eyes. "I imagine your family is waiting."

"Actually," she said slowly, "nobody is waiting for me. As I told you, I live alone."

She waited, but he didn't reply. Slowly, she opened the door and turned to look at him, hoping for a word that could possibly...

"Farewell, Madam Weasley," he murmured, interrupting her thoughts and burning her last hopes. Her eyes prickled and her chest ached.

"Even now, you can't call me just Hermione?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I'm too old-fashioned," he replied with a little bow.

"Good bye, then, Professor." She felt the tears trickle down and, turning her head to hide them, she Disapparated with a soft pop.

He stayed still, staring at the empty yard for some long moments, uncaring of the cold breeze, unaware of the stars above his head. Then he went back in the house and sat at the table. He looked blankly at the walls for many minutes, then, with a sigh, he bent his head and rested it on his crossed arms. Slowly, the flames in the fireplace decreased. The cat meowed once, surprised at his master's stillness, then jumped again on a seat and nestled in it.

Silence filled the house.

She scrutinised her living room. What a contrast between the comfort, even the luxury of her furnishings, and the Spartan simplicity of his cottage! And now he was there alone and saddened and...

She forced herself not to think about him. He had refused her friendship. Stubborn, irritating, insufferable man! Surely she could find something better to do...

Yes, she decided, a book would be a much more suitable companion to spend her evening.

He sighed deeply. Then, noticing that the flames were dying, he dragged himself up to add more wood to the fire.

She threw the book on the table and sprang up from the armchair. What she wanted to do couldn't wait any longer.

His eyes lit up, then became immediately wary.

"Back again?" he asked, fixing his face in a sneer. But his eyes were desolate. "Forgotten something, I suppose?" he continued, but she was quicker.

"Yes," she said, before he could stop her. "I've forgotten to tell you something, so I've come back because I wanted to give another chance to the most stubborn, exasperating man I've ever known."

He inclined his head with a sarcastic smile.

"Such impetuosity! So Gryffindor," he tried again to tease her, and miserably failed.

"Don't try to evade the issue," she told him. "I came here to offer you my friendship, and I meant it. Now it's up to you to decide. If you say no, then I won't come to visit you again."

He remained silent, but his eyes were anguished. Then he lifted his arms in a gesture of helplessness.

"I cannot answer your question," he replied bitterly. "Don't you see? I have nothing left to offer."

"You have yourself. And that's enough for me." She watched him, and her voice softened. "Now tell me. Should I really go away?"

He didn't answer. She stared at him for a long moment, hoping with all her might. But he didn't say a word, so, saddened, she lowered her head and prepared to leave forever.

Then she heard a whisper.

"Hermione."

He had called her by her given name, and joy invaded her heart. She turned and watched him.

His lips trembled and she couldn't resist any longer. With two quick steps she went close to him and hugged him tenderly. How frail he seemed in the circle of her arms!

"Severus," she murmured, touching her cheek to his.

He was shaking.

"Would you like me to stay?" she asked.

"Please don't go," he pleaded, hiding his face in her curls.

Holding him tightly, she smiled fondly.

"I have already raised a rose of my own. Now I'll be happy to help you raise yours."

Inspiration for this story came from two wonderful pieces.

One is a poem, the other is a song. Below you can find them both.

La Felicità

(Happiness)

C'è un ape che se posa

There is a bee that alights

sopra un fiore de rosa,

on a rose flower,

lo succhia e se ne va.

savours it and flies away.

In fondo, la felicità

All in all, happiness

è una piccola cosa.

is made up of little things.

(Trilussa, Roman dialectal poet, 1871-1950)

Life is beautiful

(song from the Oscar-winner movie by Roberto Benigni)

Smile, without a reason why

Love, as if you were a child,

Smile, no matter what they tell you

Don't listen to a word they say

'Cause life is beautiful that way

Tears, a tidal wave of tears

Light, that slowly disappears

Wait, before you close the curtain

There is still another game to play
And life is beautiful that way
Here with his eyes forevermore
I will always be as close as you remember from before
Now that you're out there on your own
Remember what is real and what we dream is love alone
Keep the laughter in your eyes
Soon your long awaited prize
We'll forget about our sorrows
And think about a brighter day
'Cause life is beautiful that way
There's still another game to play
And life is beautiful that way.