

The Janus Rose

by richardgloucester

Pomona Sprout has a melancholy duty to perform. This was my submission to the lj community Severus_Shots as part of the brief fic showcase celebrating Severus' birthdays in each decade of his life. My thanks to Machshefa and Ariadne for beta reading. Usual disclaimers.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Pomona pushed back from the staff table, sure that nobody had noticed her lack of appetite. Conversation was lively, centring on the ongoing rebuilding work, and whether they should take the opportunity to study and reproduce even improve on some of the castle's more recondite mysteries. As it was mainly a question of how to combine Charms, Arithmancy and Transfiguration, and Bathsheba was saying that the ancient runic inscriptions that had been uncovered really ought to be fully understood before they attempted anything at all, nobody sought the opinion of the Herbology professor, and she volunteered none, opting instead to leave quietly. She had a duty to perform.

Midnight would see the beginning of what should have been Severus Snape's thirty-ninth birthday.

As she stood in her bathroom, meticulously cleaning the dirt from under her fingernails, she recalled vividly the first time she had noticed him.

It was the first lesson of the new school year, September 1971. First-year Slytherins and Ravenclaws not a combination she ever enjoyed. The Slytherins believed themselves too good for anything taught by a Hufflepuff, and the Ravenclaws much preferred to take a purely theoretical approach to any subject. To Pomona's mind, the best way to learn both humility and theory was elbow-deep in compost, but she was never quite sure she got the message across to the students.

She generally liked to start with something entertaining, just to ease them in, and this year she had chosen Cage Bindweed. Ten minutes of theory got the Ravenclaws involved origins in community-building and ancient rituals of husbandry and then she told them to roll their sleeves up and start potting up the trays of seedlings.

"It's only dirt, you great ponce," she heard a flat northern voice exclaim. "It'll wash off dead easy."

Pomona examined the boy who had spoken: short, scrawny, with a pinched face and sharp black eyes. Ah, yes, the one who had looked so longingly at Gryffindor table before squaring himself and marching off to join the Slytherins.

"One point off Slytherin for name-calling in class," she said, and received a glare. "And five points to Slytherin for having the right attitude."

"Thanks, Miss," he said, looking happier, then defensive again when some of the Ravenclaws tittered.

"You're most welcome, Mr Snape," she replied, and added kindly, "but we use 'Professor' here, rather than 'Miss'."

"Yes, Mi... Professor." He bent his flushed face, hiding in his hair while his fingers delicately eased the seedlings into place.

They finished the lesson by placing the pots round the foot of a tall bamboo structure, adding some of the special fertiliser, and repeating the brief incantation she taught them. Some of the children cheered when the plants shot up, winding round the poles to form a neat cage covered in pink flowers. Severus watched, but he seemed more interested in the fertiliser, which he lifted to his nose, raising his eyebrows in surprise at the odour.

Pomona remembered how intrigued she had been by his reaction. She should have known then, she thought, that he would be a genius at Potions. She shook out her best black skirt then stepped into it and drew it up over her shift, eyeing the choice of bodices she had laid out on her bed. The black was fine but too funereal. The red just wouldn't do. He hadn't liked purple, she knew. She picked up the one she had already known she would wear – green brocade, its swirling design resolving into leaves and flowers if one looked closely. It laced up easily. The stress of the past two years or so had pared a few pounds off her. Every cloud... Now for jewellery.

A month after he arrived at Hogwarts, Severus had received a package from his mother. His companions at breakfast lost interest once they had peered into the box, but he had permitted himself a rare smile. Then, to everyone's surprise, he marched up to the teachers' platform and placed the parcel directly into Pomona's hands.

"Can you look after this, please, Miss – er Professor?" he asked. "Till I can find a place for it, like."

She examined the plant.

"It's a form of jasmine, isn't it, Mr Snape?"

He jerked his head down, like a sparrow after crumbs.

"Mam sent it – it's a cutting off the one at home. Can you look after it?" he repeated anxiously.

"Certainly I will," she said, wondering why a mother would send such a strange gift to a schoolboy.

He turned and didn't quite succeed in concealing the defiant gesture he made at the group of Gryffindor boys who were watching him.

The very same group who chased him into hiding amongst the greenhouses a few days later, catcalling and shouting names.

Pomona had sent them packing, minus a few points, and gone in search of Severus. She didn't find him, but the next day he came to reclaim his plant from her.

It wasn't until very late on January the eighth that she found out where he had taken it.

She had spent a satisfactory few hours in the library tracking down an ancient herbal and was returning to her quarters via the entrance hall, when she became aware of a small figure tugging silently at the doors. "Mr Snape!" she exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing out of bed, and attempting to leave the castle, at that!"

He jumped, but, "Miss! I've got to get out," he pleaded. "I've *got* to!"

"You have *got* to be in bed, young man!"

"But *please* Miss!" he begged desperately. "I've *got* to – I really have!"

He was not an appealing child, but his eyes, round with anxiety, and the open avowal of need in a boy who would normally walk around on a broken leg rather than ask for help, caught at her soft heart.

"Very well, Mr Snape, but against my better judgement. And I will accompany you wherever it is you are so set on going, and then see you back to your dormitory in good order."

He sagged with relief, and then, so great was his urgency, seized her hand and dragged her at a trot towards the greenhouses. They slipped between the two last, pushing heedlessly through old nettles and other frost-crisp weeds until they came to a thicket of stunted saplings up against a high wall. She didn't understand – but then he dropped to his knees and began to weasel his way between the trunks. Back then, she'd been a lot slimmer, but even so it was difficult to follow the boy, and he did not wait for her. Behind the trees was a gap in the old stonework, small enough to squeeze her uncomfortably, and by the time she was through she was grumbling. But when she stood and looked around her, all thoughts of vexation fell away.

He had found a garden. It looked as though nobody had set foot in it for centuries. Most of it was a tangle of high weeds, brambles, a few birch trees, a jumble of frost and shadows in the moonlight. The far end, though, near the foot of a particularly high, featureless and forbidding section of the castle, was host to two ancient yew trees that had spread and drooped to make a dark bower. She couldn't see the boy, but he had pushed a path through the undergrowth, so she followed it until she came to a small area, roughly cleared, where she found him kneeling over the little jasmine plant, which he had begun to train against the wall. Although it was barely more than a cutting, it was starred with many white flowers.

Snape took a penknife out of his pocket, opened it, and with barely more than a wince, stabbed himself in the thumb. She watched, astonished and slightly appalled, as he used the same blade to gouge a hole at the plant's root, and then let three drops of blood fall into the earth. He covered them and sat back, beaming. Such a brilliant smile he had had as a boy, she remembered, though even then rarely seen.

"Thanks, Miss!" he said.

She recovered her voice.

"What was that all about, Mr Snape?" she demanded. "It looks very much as though I have just been a witness to blood magic – and if so, you are meddling with something very dangerous indeed!"

He took the thumb he had been sucking out of his mouth and got up, alarmed at her censure.

"It's all right, Miss – er, Professor! It's like... a family tradition, nothing bad or nowt. I promise!"

"You had better explain to me precisely what this tradition may be, and right now, so I can decide whether I must take you to Professor Dumbledore." Most of the blood magic she had read about formed part of the darkest rituals known to wizard kind.

"But, Miss... Okay." He took a deep breath. "It's something Mam's family does – something they allus does, with every new baby. Every month has a plant, right, that represents something about the time of year..." He looked at her, anxious that she should follow, and seeing her nod, carried on. "So every baby gets given a plant, depending on the month it's born. On the day the baby's born, the plant's given three drops of its blood, and then again every birthday. Mam's is hawthorn, for May. Mine's this one, this jasmine. This is a cutting off the one at home, cos I'm not at home for birthdays no more."

"And what exactly does this ritual achieve?" she was suspicious.

"Nothing much," he shrugged.

"Then why do it?"

"Well, it sort of shows how a person's doing, like. That's all."

"Are you sure that is all?"

"Oh, yes, Miss." He looked so earnest she nearly laughed.

"Very well. But I shall keep an eye on things," she warned. "Don't worry I won't tell anyone as long as I remain convinced there is no dark magic involved. May I take a closer look at your plant?"

He stepped aside, and she knelt, unheeding of her skirts, on the ground. The flowers were delicate and gave a clear, sweet scent. She was intrigued to see one or two dark purple blooms, almost black, among the white.

"This is unusual," she said, gesturing.

"It's a Janus rose, Miss. Two colours, to represent the crossing from the old year to the new, Mam says."

She resolved to raid the library again as soon as possible, but now didn't seem to be the moment to interrogate the boy further. She'd invaded his privacy quite enough.

"So, you found this place when Potter and Black were chasing you?"

"Yeah you don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all. I've always liked the way Hogwarts goes out of its way to give some students what they need. It could be that this place is a gift to you, Mr Snape."

He looked startled, and even in the moonlight she could see his sudden fierce blush, but he drew himself up proudly.

"Show me what else you have found here," she invited.

"Well, I've not had time yet to do much but clear this space, Miss, but them yew trees are fine, don't you think?"

"Indeed I do. I wonder how old they are. Shall we see?"

He followed her curiously under the canopy of branches to the thick, gnarled trunks and then, at her encouragement, placed his hands on the bark.

"Now, not everybody can do this, Mr Snape, so don't be disappointed if you don't feel anything, but try to just... um... how to explain this?" she mused. "*Feel* your way into the tree sense it, if you can."

She put her own roughened palms against the tree and let herself breathe with it.

"Do you sense anything?"

"I... don't know, Miss. It feels, sort of... slow, and heavy, and sleepy, a bit."

"Very good, Mr Snape! In time, you will learn to interpret that impression. You will feel that these trees are well over a thousand years old." He gasped. "They may even have been here when the Founders started building. You have uncovered a hidden treasure."

He looked stunned. She patted the trees, and then his shoulder.

"And now to bed with you, boy. Show me the garden again if you want, but apart from that, I would hazard a guess that the castle wants it to be your secret for now."

Pomona hunted through her trinket box, becoming agitated when she couldn't find the little flower earrings Severus had given her, paid for from his first month's wages as a teacher. They had to be here somewhere! Ah, there. Just little enamel earrings, but they meant so much, especially now that he would never again see her wear them. Her fingers trembled, but she sternly pulled herself together. Now for the shoes nothing fancy, as she'd be outside, but something a little better than her usual boots.

Potions was his passion and his joy, so much so that Horace really couldn't decide whom to boast about more Snape or the Evans girl. He was even talking about putting the pair of them in for their OWL a year early, and speculating on the careers he might steer them towards, and how he might profit by them. But next to Potions was Herbology, for which Severus had a genuine aptitude, though he tended to regard the plants more in light of their usefulness in his other favourite subject than for their own beauty. Still, she thought, it made a pleasant change to meet someone who could admire a Venomous Tentacula, or a well-grown Stinking Elfbane. They had shared many an amused glance over the rest of the class's reactions, though other than that he remained distant, never capitalising on the connection they had forged. He did not take her back to the garden until the following January, when once more he needed to be let out of the castle.

It became a shared tradition, that once-yearly hour or so of communication, even of communion, in his garden. He widened the gap in the wall for her, showing her that she was welcome, and that he trusted her not to betray his secret. By his thirteenth birthday, she was well aware how great a privilege that trust was; by the end of his schooling, she knew it also for a responsibility.

As she pulled her cloak round her shoulders and pushed her favourite hat down over her greying curls, Pomona wondered how much time Severus had spent in his garden, for he rapidly brought it under control not that most people would have seen anything in it but a wilderness. He kept many of the plants that had already established themselves, clearing space around them for the ones he brought in. Even the Giant Hogweed was allowed to keep its place. Each year, there was something new for her to discuss with him. Belladonna, monkshood, foxgloves, lupins, lily-of-the-valley, lords-and-ladies, rhubarb... He told her what he had planted in each of the cleared spaces, for she only ever saw the garden in the depths of winter, and usually under snow, and they discussed the properties of each plant as they made the tour. It was the only time he ever seemed to open up that she could see, though she hoped there was someone else with whom he could share his ardent, enthusiastic soul, somebody other than one teacher, twenty years his senior, for an hour a year.

Merlin, how she hoped it all the more, now, for there would be no more conversations like that, ever. Her steps faltered a little as she left the shadow of the great doors, and she had to work to swallow the lump in her throat.

"Why only Muggle plants?" she had asked him as he turned thirteen. "And why only poisonous ones?" These days, she had to peer up at him, he had shot up so suddenly, though he still had about as much substance as a piece of twine.

He shrugged.

"Well, Miss " a habit he retained, though only with her " it's because they're really interesting in their uses. I really like how the poisonous compounds can be used in benign ways, and how they interact with the magical substances in potions. And I don't need to grow the magical ones, since you do that for the school." He shrugged again. "You can have the rhubarb, if you like, what I don't send to Mam I only want the leaves." He kept the blackberries from the rampant bramble patch, though, she recalled with a smile.

Last on the tour was always the Janus rose. It was a vigorous plant, and grew to cover the wall he had chosen for it. He gave it his offering of blood while Pomona watched silently, and then he allowed her to approach. The perfume was always subtle, filling the icy air but never cloying. The sprinkling of purple flowers among the white always fascinated her. Their perfume seemed different, somehow, but she could not quite distinguish it among the pale blooms and never asked to deface the plant by picking one. By the time he was fourteen, though, there were more dark petals to be seen, sometimes whole sprays, and she found their scent left a musky aftertaste in her throat. A strange plant, and stranger still to see it darken from one year to the next. In his fifth year, the white blooms seemed to be holding their own against the others, but only just. By his sixth year, the dark dominated. She did not care to approach the plant then, nor to give in to the urge to ask him why his shoulders were more hunched than usual and his eyes shadowed. She was aware that he was no longer speaking with Evans, and all the teachers had to be on the lookout if his path crossed that of Potter and Black between lessons, but somehow it seemed more than that as if a cloud of darkness was consuming him.

In his final year as a student, Severus, now a young man, waited with a bag in the shadows by the castle doors, shuffling nervously. They made the tour as usual, haunted by the scent of the jasmine while they talked over the planting, the uses, his experiments and discoveries, and he became quite animated, gesturing broadly to illustrate his ideas. Pomona laughed when he made an unguarded comment about Slughorn's intellectual laziness.

"That will never happen to you, I'm sure," she said, teasingly. "I can't imagine you all fat and complacent when you reach Horace's age."

He stopped, suddenly, in front of the Janus rose, which was now two-thirds purple.

"I can't imagine myself at his age at all," he said quietly.

He stabbed his thumb hard and ground it into the dirt at the base of the plant, holding it in position for a minute or two while he mastered himself. Then he rose and stalked off to where he had dropped his bag.

"I thought we might celebrate," he said. "I bribed the house-elves to get me this."

And he held up a bottle of cheap champagne and two glasses. They drank it beneath the yew trees, sitting on a rug he Transfigured from some old leaves, talking over the year's work ahead of him, his exam expectations, and her plans for the greenhouses that year. He did not seem to wish to discuss his future. As ever, she trod carefully around his privacy.

"Miss," he said, as they left, "may I ask you a favour?"

"You may always *ask*, Severus."

He gave a rare chuckle.

"Nobody would guess you were a Hufflepuff, Miss. What I wanted to ask was... Will you let me in next year, for the blooding, I mean? And stand witness? The rose at Mam's isn't mine any more, and I don't have anywhere to establish another. Not yet, anyway..." He stopped, not looking at her.

She touched his arm. The first time she ever touched him.

"Yes, Severus, next year and every year as long as you need me to or want me to my word on it."

And she had kept that promise, or nearly.

She was shocked to see the Janus rose nearly solid black the year after he left, and to see him haggard and withdrawn. He barely spoke but to utter his thanks, and did not take her on the usual tour.

Pomona walked briskly down to the greenhouses. There was no snow yet, but the air was frigid and the grass heavily rimed with frost. She had always loved the sound it made, crunching under her boots, leaving a lace of ice crystals on the hem of her cloak and skirt, and she always when alone played with her smoky dragon's breath in the air, using her wand to shunt the vapour into flower shapes and vines for the bare second before it dispersed. She couldn't remember if she had ever showed Severus the trick she doubted it, but if she hadn't, then it was a pity. Underneath all the seriousness, which became so dour with the passing of time, he'd had a strong sense of humour and even of whimsy. She laughed aloud suddenly like the time he'd bewitched Sybill's tea leaves to spell out "YOU ARE ALL REALLY DOOMED THIS TIME" at breakfast the day after she'd thrown him out of Divination classes for an excess of cynicism. No-one had been found to take the blame, but Pomona had seen his eyes sparkle with mirth while Dumbledore tried to reassure a gibbering Trelawney that it was entirely too direct to be a real prophecy. He could be an unholy terror in Herbology, too, when the mood took him.

She strode on, reminiscing.

He was only twenty-one the year he started teaching the year before Voldemort fell. He was... He was... Grim. His face was like a stone wall. The eyes that had shone with enthusiasm, or interest, or mirth when he was eleven were merely black. The mobile mouth was a compressed line. Young as he was, he had no trouble keeping his classes in check. He held everyone at a distance. But there was something different about the way he looked at Dumbledore. For a long time, Pomona couldn't place what the expression was, until the day Dumbledore told Severus to do something he didn't want to do, that he knew Severus didn't want to do, a thing any of the other teachers, or even Filch, could have done, and Severus glanced at Dumbledore with fear in his eyes. Yes, that was it fear. And Dumbledore was using it to crush the boy.

The world found out why at the trial in December of the following year. But she had long ranged herself mentally at Severus' side, for she had seen the Janus rose the year that Voldemort fell and the white was starting to return.

Severus was a mess that year worse than she had ever seen. A large part of her had wanted to shout that he deserved to be in such a state, that he was a Death Eater, that he wasn't fit for civilised company, but a promise was a promise, and when she saw his rose, she knew that he was trying to claw himself back out of the abyss, and knew too that a hand extended in friendship might be the one thing he needed. If the hand was callused, dirty, and twenty years older than him too bad. That year, the year that would see the death of all his hopes, she dared to hug him. He stood stiffly in her arms, but he rested his chin on the top of her head for a long moment before turning away.

Pomona reached the greenhouses. She walked past them slowly, checking that the doors were secured and the windows closed, except where the cold-weather plants could enjoy the natural atmosphere and she could let the refrigeration spells lapse for a few weeks. She was delaying, she knew. She wanted to think of Severus alive. She didn't want to see the Janus rose become mere jasmine, cease to be *his* flower. But she had made a promise. She faltered. A promise that she had broken when keeping it mattered most.

The gap between the last two greenhouses was, as ever, overgrown. Severus had gone to great lengths never to leave any traces of his passage. She was not so skilled. But she'd right everything just as he had always had to do after her yearly visit. The air was eerily still and crisp snow was coming. The stars glittered in the narrow strip of sky she could see above her. The only sound, as she suddenly stopped, unable for a moment to go on, was her uneven breath. She had to master it. She had to. Severus had never liked it when people cried. She put her hands on her ample hips and raised her chin, biting her lower lip while she willed the tears away.

He taught, and disciplined, with ferocity. Nobody liked to see it, but for some reason, Dumbledore protected Severus as much as he seemed to crush him, and he permitted the unfairness to go unremarked. It shamed Pomona, somehow, to see Severus use words that had been used to cut and belittle him as an ugly, brilliant child, to cut and belittle the children he now taught, but it was as though, should he permit himself one moment of empathy, he would shatter. He was so brittle. He threw himself into everything, teaching, research, even patrolling the corridors, with reckless intensity, as if to attack were the only way he knew of defending himself. From what, she did not know until much, much later. But she tried her best to be a calm place for him. She didn't react to his sarcasm with more than a roll of the eyes, and he came to stop using it on her; she listened as wisely as she knew how when he felt inclined to talk about his work; she bent over backwards to grow whatever he wanted. Gradually, they became something like friends. And gradually, the Janus rose resumed, spottily, some of its white.

Now she came to the barrier of saplings respectable trees, now, after twenty-eight years and a little thinning-out. Stunted, but taller than she was, and healthy. If you knew where to go, there was still a passage through them. She paused to pat the trunks fondly.

It was curious, but when the Potter child arrived at Hogwarts, and Severus had to confront old ghosts and resurgent terrors, the rose's blush of purple seemed to retreat more rapidly. Severus was savage and difficult, and the plant was never better than half-white, but there it was the evidence, as she thought of it, though she doubted anyone else would see it as such. He had the respect of the other staff members by now, and their trust, and could entertain them with his acid wit, but he never had their friendship. He was a lonely man. It was only with her, and only for that one night a year, that he would share his doubts about Quirrell's competence and trustworthiness, and about Dumbledore's wisdom in engaging him, or make her guffaw with his cruel impersonation of Lockhart, even as they shared their disquiet over the children's safety and argued over the preparation of the Mandrake potion.

The year that Remus Lupin came back, he was filled with rage. Pomona herself was angry with Dumbledore over that. Yes, they had needed a DADA teacher, and yes, Lupin was competent and approachable, yes, he was a gentleman as long as he took the potion, but Severus suffered from the re-opened wounds of his childhood. He wasn't the only one who remembered Lupin running with James Potter's pack, though, and Pomona let him know, by her solid presence at his side, and her quiet anger at Lupin and Dumbledore over that stupid Boggart prank, that he had an ally.

And he felt her friendship for what it was. That January, when he turned thirty-four, he brought champagne again a good one, this time and they sat beneath the yews within the circle of a warming charm, enjoying the jasmine-perfumed air and talking about anything and everything but school, and work, and the ties that kept him there. They finished the bottle, then stood, and Pomona risked a hug again. This time, he became pliant in her arms, reaching his own round her shoulders to draw her against his heart. They remained so for a long moment before she felt him withdraw, and she loosened her hold on his lean body, so different from her own. But he didn't step back. He put his fingers beneath her chin and raised her mouth to his. In her astonishment, she froze, but then his fingers moved to her hair, weaving through the untidy curls to caress her head and the nape of her neck, and she was lost. She didn't care why he was doing this he wanted to, and that was enough. He was in need, and she gave.

She answered Severus' need for affection unquestioningly; he asked silently and simply, and she gave. Nothing was said, but between them the bond of loyalty was strengthened through the darkening times when he held her while she grieved for Cedric Diggory; when young Potter threw himself recklessly and repeatedly into the path of death and Severus could do little but watch; through the renewal of Voldemort's power; until the year Severus betrayed them all, the year he served as Headmaster, the year Pomona broke her promise to him.

She pushed through into the garden, and as she straightened, a pale light against the castle wall caught her eye and a clear, delicate perfume enfolded her. She abandoned her plan of touring the dormant plants, neglected since Severus' death. She had to see the Janus rose she had to. Past a clump of birch and... there! She gasped and the tears fell freely. The wall, entirely covered now, was a mass of white.

She could barely breathe.

What had it been like, that dreadful year? She thought she knew, now. If she had seen it then, if she had not broken that promise, would she have noticed how he tried to protect the children? Would she have been able to persuade Minerva at the last moment that he was on their side? Would he have needed to flee the castle? Would he still be alive?

She fell to her knees.

"Severus," she said, and it came out as a wretched bark. "Oh, Severus. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right, Pomona," came his voice, softly, at her ear. "How could you possibly have known?"

"Severus?" It couldn't be! It *couldn't* be! Her hands rose to grasp at him, and he took them in his own. She was shaking. "Severus!"

"Yes, Pomona. I am real."

He smiled, then, and his eyes sparkled in the moonlight as they had when he was a small boy.

"I'm so sorry, so sorry!"

"Enough. Past is past. Come and watch my bleeding now."

"It's so white, Severus, so white!"

"I am free," he said simply.

He let his blood fall into the earth, then reached his hand into the blooms to pluck a spray. It was purple. He grinned as he handed it to her.

"There's champagne under the yew trees, if you're in the mood."

*