

# Roses

*by bound\_by\_passion*

A moment of reflection for Severus.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters. They belong to JKR. I make no money.

A/N: If I've done this right, you may end up crying.

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"It's not your fault, you know," she said, the words tumbling from her mouth.

"I know," he replied, his response almost automatic.

Hermione's quilt was the colour of roses. The pale pink ones with the heady scent. Severus tried to remember if he'd ever seen roses like that, and he couldn't come up with an answer. Not when faced with the pale expanse of Hermione's quilt, laid out before him like a vast desert, the soft cotton and silk becoming another barrier between them. He probably had, at some time or other, but he could only remember the red ones he'd given her for her birthday, and the white ones they'd slept on during their wedding night. He could still feel the softness of the petals on his back and how they'd fluttered to the floor. His hands had sprinkled them across her torso when she slept, and he had watched as her skin seemed to weep petals. Soft on soft. Beauty on beauty. Everything about her had been magic that night. She was his. The gold ring on her finger set with roses.

She drew the quilt up. The cold got to her these days, no matter how much they turned up the heating. And Severus wasn't sure whether the wetness on his cheeks was due to tears or perspiration. He seemed to cry so much now.

"I love you," she said, "But that's not why I wanted you to come. No one forgets the best thing that happened to them."

Severus took her hand in his. He could feel the bones in her fingers, covered with little more than skin. She was like a living skeleton, so fragile he feared she would snap. It was unsettling.

"The best thing?"

"Don't go fishing for compliments," she said, wagging her finger, a smile stretching her chapped lips. Even a weak Hermione was a strong Hermione. "You know perfectly well what you mean to me."

"It's nice to feel valued." His tone had less of a bite about it than she remembered, his waspish nature lost somewhere in his despair.

"Then you ought to be thankful that I adore you. There's more value in that than in anything else."

"I brought what you asked me to."

Severus reached into his pocket, pulling out a long gold chain. He rested it on top of the bed, the fine links almost lost amidst the thick fluffiness of the quilt. Hermione picked it up, running it between her fingers, testing its weight. He watched as she grasped the ring that lay on the nightstand, the one with the red petals, and threaded it onto the chain.

Her fingers were too thin for it now.

"Do you know why I wanted you to bring this?" she said, dangling it from her hand like a pendulum, the simple harmonic motion almost calming in its repetitiveness.

"Why did you want me to bring the chain, Hermione?"

"I wanted to remember feeling beautiful," she said simply. "We were so beautiful that day. And this ring reminds me of that, that once I could turn heads. You were beautiful too, you know. Wearing your robes, wearing that smile you used to save just for me. Why don't you smile anymore?"

Severus could taste the saltiness of his tears on his own lips. "I can't."

"Of course you can. You haven't lost your facial muscles. They're still there, under the surface." Her smile waned. "I used to make you laugh. Now you only cry."

"It's not your fault," he said, repeating her earlier words.

"I never said it was. No-one wants to get sick. And no-one wants to die."

"You are not going to die, Hermione," he said, trying to make the words sound ridiculous, but failing after the first few syllables. The catch in his voice had taken away any chance of reassurance. Because he couldn't deny reality. Hermione was going to die. And there was nothing he could do to help. He'd taught her, laughed with her, married her, and even loved her. But he couldn't save her. Not from this war. Not when it really counted.

All the people he'd killed, long ago, before he'd found the light. Perhaps it was karma. A sort of penance for his own sins. He should have been more attentive. Then maybe he would have noticed the sickness take hold, see the disease that gnawed away at her before it became too late.

"I always thought I'd die beautiful. In my sleep somewhere, with the sunlight on my face." Her voice held not sadness, but more of a sense of disappointment. As though she were a child denied chocolate at bed time.

Severus grasped her hand tighter, feeling her warmth seep through his fingers. Something in the back of his mind told him to remember the sensation, for all too soon she'd be cold. To remember something for all those nights he'd spend alone, with little more than a book for company.

"You're still beautiful," he whispered, the words seeming to get stuck in his throat, as though prevented from escaping by the lump that had taken up residence there.

"No, Severus. I'm not. But thank you for lying to me."

He could see the cracks in her lips when she smiled. The dark shadows under her eyes that told of nights spent alone and sleepless. She was so thin now, nothing more than skin and bone and bushy hair, that he felt afraid she'd snap if he tried to hug her. Shatter if he kissed her anywhere other than her hand, with its long milky fingernails.

"I'm not lying. You'll always be beautiful."

Her smile dimmed, her brown gaze cast upon the blanket rather than his face. "Take a look at me. Tell me what you see, because, when I look in the mirror, I don't feel like it's me staring back."

He looked and saw.

"Hermione," he said honestly, "I still see you there. Peeking out at me from under all that hair of yours. I can still see the light in your eyes, the fire in your soul. You're still you. Still the woman I married." He brought a hand up to cup her cheek, his thumb falling into the hollow there. "When I look at you, all I see is beauty. Beauty and brilliance."

"Well, I always have been a know-it-all. It would seem such a pity for me to lose that ever *so*endearing quality now," she said, deflecting the weight of his words with humour.

Severus laughed. He couldn't help it. But the sound, as rare as it was, was tinged with a certain amount of bitterness. She was dying, and she was the one cheering him up.

"See. I knew you still had it in you." She dropped the ring and chain onto the bedspread, her eyes alight. "You should laugh more often. It makes your face softer. And perhaps you'd scare the children less."

"Children are meant to be scared. Especially if they're sat in my classroom," he said, using his lecture voice. "If I so much as smiled, I suspect half of them would die of shock. And we can't have that. Just think of all the lawsuits."

Hermione chuckled. "True. Though I think Minerva would certainly appreciate it. From what I hear, Headmistress duties are exceedingly boring. The paperwork might spice things up a little."

"She misses you, you know. All of the staff do."

He picked up the chain from the bed and leant over, fastening it around her neck.

"They do come and visit. And fill the place up with junk. Minerva brought me that large box of short-bread. Filius brought that puzzle. And Neville did bring me that lovely plant. Though I'm not quite sure I want it anywhere near my bed when I'm sleeping."

She was right. Severus wouldn't want it near his bed either. The thing looked vicious.

"But I do wish you'd come more often and save me from their woefully boring anecdotes."

"Hermione--"

"I know, I know, they're just trying to be friendly and supportive. But just because I'm dying doesn't mean I suddenly have a great interest in the school's tax returns for the next quarter or Hagrid's new batch of pumpkins."

Severus felt a little guilty. He should come more often. In fact, he should be here all the time, not spending his days teaching dunderheaded students how not to cause an explosion.

"I asked the mediwitches if you could come back home."

She grinned, her weary eyes sparkling with mischief. "I heard. You and Minerva and the others, all yelling at the poor mediwitches, telling them that I should be allowed to go to my own bloody house. You curse like a fishwife when you put your mind to it, Severus Snape. I was impressed."

"Everyone else was cursing. So what if I turned the air a little bluer?" He grasped her hand again, afraid to let go in case she slipped away. "I didn't want to feel left out."

"I wasn't too sure about a few, though. Was that last one even possible?" She laughed as he bent down and pressed a kiss to her hand in ridiculously debonair fashion. "It's okay, really. I'm fine here. I've got my books, and I managed to steal the Wireless remote, which took some doing, since that battleaxe of a matron has eyes sharper than a hawk's. And as long as I've got you, then it doesn't matter."

"You'll always have me."

"Then I'll be okay," she said. "Dead or alive, I'll be okay."

"Don't," he warned.

"You have to face it sometime, love. You can't hide away behind your cauldron forever." Her hand gave his a faint squeeze. "I've accepted it. And you must too, or you'll never be happy. I'm probably not going to see July and definitely not August. I only get to see you once a day and my friends twice a week. There so much out there that I just don't have the time or the energy to see. You have to do it for me; you have to be my eyes and ears."

"Is that your final wish, Hermione?"

He was crying again.

"No. I want you to be happy."

"How selfish of you."

Hermione smiled. "Everyone has to go sometime. It's just that your time is a little later on than mine."

"You have the oddest mind. Always willing to see the best in any situation."

His thumb lightly stroked the soft flesh of her hand, afraid to use too much force in case he damaged her.

"Not always," she muttered.

No not always. But she did when it counted. When he needed it to count.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"That we should break free from here."

"Oh, and go where?"

"To France. Or Italy. Or a million other places I've never been," she said. "And that, when we get there, we should go and sit on some lovely spot of grass and have a picnic."

"I don't do picnics, Hermione."

"Alright then, how about coffee in a shop somewhere?" She smiled as he nodded, carefully avoiding looking at the tears that fell onto her quilt with the movement. "And we'll drink all sorts of things that I've never tried before."

"Like lemonade?"

She never drank lemonade. She claimed that bubbly things did not agree with her, or her nose.

She giggled. "Just like lemonade. And we'll watch the sunset before heading off into the horizon on some new adventure."

"Anything else I should know, so that I can plan ahead?"

"Nope." She shook her head. "That's about all of it."

Her face went sombre, her dark eyes shining with unshed tears. Severus had never seen her cry. Not in all the time she'd been kept here. No, she'd held in the tears until he'd left, crying them to into her pillow at night when the ward was silent.

But she was crying now. His poor Hermione, with her crystal tears.

"I wish we could have done that, Severus," she said. "I miss all those things we didn't do."

He missed them too. Just like he missed her, even though she was still alive, still breathing.

"We had us, though," she said, leaning back against the pillows, her eyes closing. "Without you I'd be gone already."

He smoothed a hand over her cheek, brushing away the curls and the tears. It didn't take long for her to fall asleep, the drugs and the stress making her drowsy. He slid his hand down to her neck, holding it there until he was sure he could still feel a pulse, however weak. A ritual to make sure she was still alive, that she wasn't going to slip away before he had the chance to say goodbye. For he was so afraid that the next time he kissed her, touched her, her skin would be cold. That when he shook her, there would be no response, no answer when he said her name--

Severus sat beside her in silence, grieving for the woman he loved.

*Fin.*