

# CONVERSATIONS WITH 26 WORKS

1988 – 2008

*A Festschrift for Alan Rickman*

*By*

J. G. Spanne

*Motto:*

Seeking not beauty of sound,  
But music that is what it is  
For reasons of its own.

*Pu Song-ling (1640-1715)*  
Preface to *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*  
(transl. John Minford)

*Dedication:*

...To thee I send this written embassy,  
To witness duty, not to show my wit:  
Duty so great, which wit so poor as mine  
may make seem bare, in wanting words to show it...

*Shakespeare: Sonnet XXVI*

*With due apologies for the "thou".*

*The Bard was on more familiar terms with the recipient of his verses.*



*PRELUDE I The Barchester Chronicles*

Music is a sin,  
his God is the only truth:  
pride before the fall.

Music is a sin,  
his God is the only truth:  
pride before the fall.



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"A classic for every day"

*Le point du jour a nos bosquets  
rend toute leur parure.  
Flor est plus belle a son retour,  
l'oiseau reprend doux chant d'amour  
...  
...*



*PRELUDE II The Return of the Native*

A CLASSIC FOR EVERY DAY



Photos: Ingrid Holmberg, Natural England; text from "The Return of the Native" by T. Hardy

*PRELUDE III Mephisto*

## NOT A MEMORY

A white mask on the black cover of a theatre programme from 1986... bought second-hand some twenty years later. A copy of a copy of a photograph, bought second-hand from another fan. In 1986 life was somewhere else. And yet the painted black eyebrow in the whitened face brings up an intact chain of memories: Rickman – Höfgen – Gründgens – Mephisto...

Why does a book fascinate a sixteen-year-old? Stories and time periods strike strange chords when we are learning to navigate life, to make sense of ethics and the balance between ideals and pragmatism. To someone whose Czech family had experienced the events of 1918, 1938, 1948, and who was herself still dealing with the impact of 1968, the issue of individual responsibility under a totalitarian regime was much more than a vaguely interesting academic exercise.

True classics go through many readings in a lifetime. We read them for the plot, the action, the romance, the historical insights, the sensuous pleasure of language, the consolation of philosophy.

Reading “Mephisto” was, at first, personal: the childish pleasure of knowing Barbara’s stirred and spiced soft-boiled eggs from my own breakfast table, the hot-eared pleasurable confusion of reading about strange sexual practices only partly comprehended, the relief of recognising my own shame in Hendrik’s mortification at being asked to be silent when marvelling at the beauty of his own voice.

(Years later, the soft-boiled eggs dialogue was unwittingly replayed in my own relationship: the beginning of an end, not really about eggs at all, just as it must have happened to the actual Erika Mann.)

An artist’s responsibility, his options and choices, were a very tangible issue. My birth-father’s bizarrely failed choices around 1950, and having to live with them. My surrogate father being forced to retire as the managing director of a theatre during the Czechoslovak “normalisation” of 1970.

And the fortunate failure of misplaced “solidarity” in September 1968...

A young Soviet conductor, Yuri Temirkanov, was to guest the Malmoe Symphony orchestra. Its Swedish members declared their solidarity with their Czechoslovak colleagues, and planned to boycott him.

“Nonsense,” said my Czech mother, “we don’t know for a fact that he’s a swine,” and asked him to dinner at our home, effectively ending the boycott plans. He turned up, a 30 years young, dashing handsome, painfully shy Circassian, fumbling for some landmarks among the puzzling contradictions of Western Wonderland. He found a pile of recent “Der Spiegel” issues in a corner, recognised names and pictures, started asking questions, ate his dinner with absent-minded politeness, but his real hunger was for information. He spent half the night leafing through the magazines, our family explaining as best we could in halting Russian and basic German. And he kept coming back, his country was denying him information, refusing him the truth, he had found a source in piles of German political magazines in a private home in Sweden, and he was determined to make the most of it, not to settle for what his regime was willing to give him, not to let his career happen at the price that Höfgen had paid.

Fast forward to 2007. An exchange student from the Czech Republic listens to my memories of 1968, of the innocent-sounding but silently terrifying “normalisation” in the early 1970s.

“How fascinating,” she says, “meeting someone who has lived history.”

“What the ...” I think. And I stop. She is right. It was history, we were living it. So, can you tell? How do you know? When a historical moment happens, are you aware of it?

Yes, we knew. The Prague Spring of 1968 was more than just a hippie happening, more than bored middle-class brats throwing rocks and feeling titillatingly subversive. No paving stones flew in Prague, but everything else moved. Even a thirteen-year-old mind sensed it, the immense thrill of not being forced to join the First of May manifestation, of being allowed to ask questions about the processes of the 1950s openly in citizenship class, of political caricatures being created and getting praised during art lessons. Someone chucked a blackboard eraser at the portrait of the deposed President, it fell down behind a bookcase and we laughed – with a tinge of the old fear, and something almost solemn telling us that this was a symbolic act.

Yet a thirteen-year-old is expected to be clueless. Not so Höfgen/Gründgens.

He was an adult, made all the appropriate noises and went through the motions of political awareness.

Who was he cheating? Himself, as much as anyone else.

In this globalised, digital age, one might easily dismiss a 70-year-old story about a German actor as obsolete, irrelevant nonsense. But today, once again, “who is not with us is against us”. A shadow falls across the glittering computer and television screens, the shadow deepens, and its name is Hendrik Höfgen.

Only... today’s stars do not just reflect the light of political dignitaries: they shine in their own right. They make up integral parts of a Franchise owned by a Multinational Company, rich hence powerful enough not only to rob child audiences of long anticipated stories, but to dictate legislation or to treat heads of state with disdain.

Today’s Höfgens have a direct impact on audiences. If a blockbuster star were to point a finger at an enemy of the state, he could raise an army, politically indifferent, ready to join the witch hunt because “their” star says so. Until then, his fans put their feet up and open another can of lifestyle-flavoured carbonated sugar solution. – But, in this age of instantaneous, chaotic communication, when a star chooses his own way, that of independence, creativity and critical thinking, thousands of people are encouraged and inspired.

No technology can replace the human actor and his singular, tremendous ability: to embody issues and ideas, allowing the spectator to sense them in her own nerves and muscles.

Imagining it embodied takes comprehension of the Höfgen mind beyond an intellectual exercise, into the domain of gut feeling. My Höfgen is personified by one who could have given Gründgens the actor a run for his money, but who also possesses all the integrity that was lacking in Gründgens the man.

1986 is a distant past, the non-experience just spilled milk, but the pages of Klaus Mann’s “Mephisto” come alive again.

Not a memory: the key to a new perspective.

*1988 Die Hard*

## PROFESSIONALS

“No comment!!!”

Get it? No fucking comment.

You’d like my personal impression of Hans Gruber? Yeah, I bet.

You’d love that. You’ve got his body laid out on a slab.

And you ask me, his hostage, to hand you his soul on a silver platter.

Sure.

Don’t get me wrong, Gruber was a crook. Had it coming, all he got.

But what if...

... he’d gotten away?

With all that gorgeous Nakatomi loot. Spent a few years in Liechtenstein, lying low, investing smart, building up his business.

I might meet one of his monkey suit boys at a negotiation table someplace, totally legit. You’re rich enough, you’re legit. No awkward questions.

I’m sure he’d even have become a philanthropist, donating to charities, financing a malaria program in Africa, sponsoring an orchestra in Bolivia to keep the under-privileged kids off the streets.

Gruber wasn’t stupid. Got to hand it to the Krauts, they’re thorough. Those urban guerrilla types back in the 60s taught him all about capital, profit, how money makes the world go ‘round. And then he got even smarter and got out. Into business for himself, the grand theft and robbery business, but what the hell, it’s all about maximizing profit.

What he did took brains and guts.

What we do – the con game, with legal trimmings, but it’s still the con game, marketing, “creating a need”, training the poor suckers like Pavlov’s dogs to want all that shit they don’t need and to buy it with borrowed money they can’t really afford to spend... It’s all in a day’s work. And nobody tries to blow up our headquarters or take pot shots at us from helicopters. You’re good at the con game, you get an obscene bonus and a gold watch.

What do you want from me?

You fuckers scared my children, harassed my help and almost had all of us killed, for what? For a story.

And now you want me to tell you what made Hans Gruber tick.

You’d never have the guts to print it.

There but for sheer dumb luck go I.

Hans Gruber? Holly Gennero? Business was our business.

I got a gold watch, and he got dead.

That’s the way it works.

1989 *The January Man*

## ANTI-ENTROPY

Patterns.

That's what I do: I search for patterns.

On the wall, in the data, in the mind.

Art, programming, crime detection: what's the difference?

It's all about patterns.

Patterns.

A big part of what makes us human.

Look at pictures, disjointed, random...

Leave your mind to it.

And get a connection, a story, a meaning.

It's all about patterns.

Patterns.

Relieve the tedium of the wall.

Connect the disconnected into a melody.

Pretty? No – life-saving.

The only meaning there is.

Finding a sense in the chaos.

It's all about patterns.

*1990 Truly Madly Deeply*

## JAMIE'S BOURRÉE



*See inside of back cover for video documentation.*

Music: J.S. Bach, Bourrée I&II from Cello suite nr. 3 in C major, BWV1009  
Alexander Rudin, ed. Naxos, rec. 2000

Sources: Feuillet, R-A: Sarabande pour une femme (Recueil de dances, 1700/09)  
Feuillet, R.-A. & Pécour G.L.: Les contrefaiseurs (1-er recueil de danses de bal, 1703)  
Feuillet, R.-A. & Pécour G.L.: La bourée d'Achile (Recueil de dances, 1709)  
Waite, Philippa (lessons and course handouts ca. 1991-93)

*All faults, mistakes and inaccuracies in the choreography and notation  
are, of course, my own.*

*1991 Closet Land*

## PRISONER

It was all for nothing.

Soon they will take me down to the cellar, to the long room with the tiled floor and the sound-proofed booths at one end. The men from the unit that does not exist will use me for target practice.

They have shown me photographs of my brother – what was left of him after the experiment.

So it was all for nothing.

They wanted a confession, not a dead body.

They needed a criminal, not a martyr.

Afterwards I located one of the people mentioned in her file. Their group has been warned and told about her death. It has an immense symbolic potential for their cause.

Why I took the job, all those years ago?

Simple. They had my brother. They told me that someone with his type of cerebral palsy would come in handy for their experiments.

And they needed me.

I am... I was a scientist, a cognitive neuropsychologist. One of the world's top names in my field. They needed my expertise – I can handle this work very... efficiently. And in my official capacity I make a good poster name into the bargain.

They let me publish papers, lecture, go to conferences, always with a “secretary” on my coat tails, but still. It was my work, my hobby, my passion. Taking on their job meant that I could go on working with what really mattered. My brother was in a state-controlled institution, getting good care as long as I... behaved myself.

This last one was important.

This one important time my expertise failed me.

I had always believed women to be pragmatic. Heroism, clinging to your honour, to a higher principle, to your cause, is fine if you do not have children to think of.

Women are primed by evolution to take care of offspring, at almost all cost.

The first step is to stay alive, so a woman will think twice before playing the hero.

Not this one.

It was like trying to carve a statue out of water – sentient water.

She went through all the usual stages: confusion, indignation, anger, fear, humiliation...

She suffered, oh, yes, she did suffer. Confronted with pain, with her past, with her innermost fears, with her shame, with desires that she would not admit even to herself...

I did a good job, applying all my knowledge and skill.

And she... escaped. Into nothingness. Into water.

Dissolved, running through my fingers, making me feel thirsty, parched even.

So I made certain that her comrades were notified... and then I waited.

I hear steps in the corridor outside, three pairs of booted feet.

Voices outside the door... a rattle of keys; a key slides into the lock...

... and turns.

1992 *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*

## A DELETED SCENE

*The Sheriff's bedchamber, 10.30 p.m.*

*The SHERIFF sets up chessmen on a board. A WENCH waits just inside the door.*

SHERIFF: Hurry up, take off your clothes and get into bed. What if someone comes in?  
I have a reputation to maintain.

WENCH *complies*

SHERIFF: If anyone ever finds out what really goes on in my bedchamber, you will not  
live to see another day. (*Hands her the board*)

WENCH: But, Your Grace, how would you know whether I was the one who told  
the tale?

SHERIFF (*pulling off his boots*): I have no way of knowing. I shall kill all you wenches,  
and let God sort it out Himself!

(*Takes off his trousers and gets into bed*)

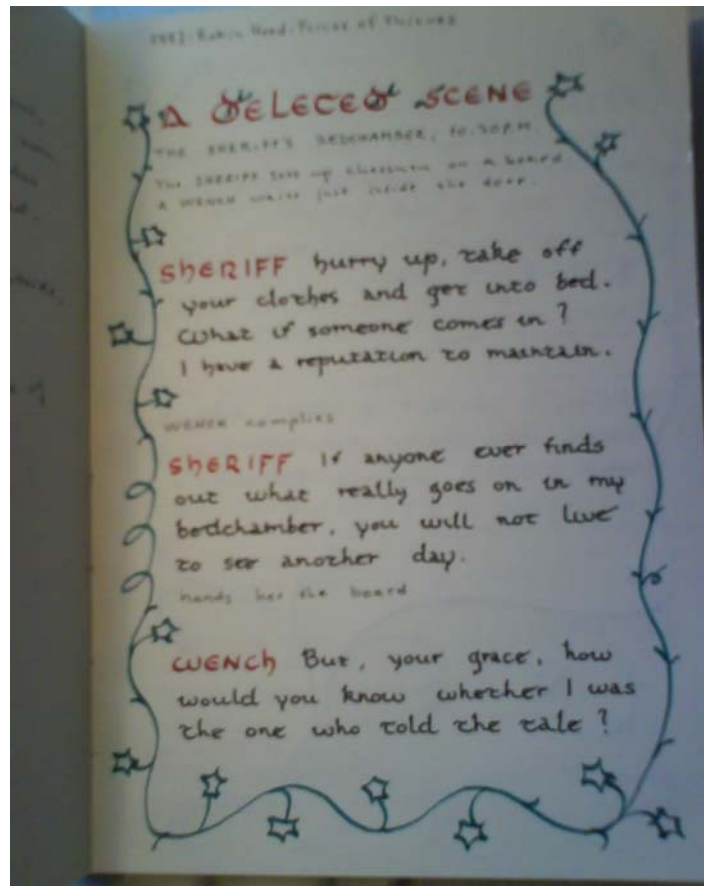
Go on, you're white.

WENCH *thinks for a moment, then opens with a Queen's Pawn*

SHERIFF: At last a wench who knows her chess. Gin rummy was getting awfully  
tedious.

*SHERIFF absorbed in the game, ignores the bare breasts next to him*

The Sheriff's deleted bedroom scene



Gleam of purest gold  
Through chinks in sombre surface:  
"Spices in the air!"



1993 *Close My Eyes*

*Sinclair may not be an expert in the kitchen, but he is very probably a hedonist at the table. This dish might capture his interest.*

*One of the first dishes I remember from my childhood and as much a favourite of mine today as it was 48 years ago. It was invented by my great-grandmother, maintained by my grandmother, developed by my mother. Restored and "Italicised" by me.*

*To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time the recipe has been written down.*

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## MANZO AI FUNGHI PORCINI

*Serves two or three.*

### Ingredients:

300 g beef for casserole – 30 g dried ceps (porcini) or 250 g fresh – 20 whole corns of black pepper – 1 medium/large bay leaf – 5-7 whole corns of all-spice – 1 small/medium clove of garlic

– 1/2 tbsp butter – 1 tbsp rapeseed oil (or olive if preferred) – beef stock or hot water and bouillon cube – about 5 tbsp sour cream – about 1 tbsp cream – 1 level tbsp flour – salt – white pepper – soy sauce

### Instructions:

1. Pre-soak the dried ceps in 1 cup of water for at least one hour *or*  
Clean the fresh mushrooms
2. Prepare the spices:
  - a) let the pepper, all-spice and bay leaf steep in 1/2 cup of hot water to make an infusion *or*
  - b) tie or stitch the pepper, all-spice and bay leaf in a piece of cheesecloth
3. Drain the pre-soaked mushrooms, reserving the soaking liquid, and strain the liquid through a fine sieve.
4. Chop the mushrooms finely.
5. Cut the meat into strips.
6. Heat the butter and oil in a sauteuse or a low saucepan. Brown the meat.
7. Add the mushrooms, stir briefly, then stir in the crushed garlic.  
Add some ground white pepper.
8. Add the reserved soaking liquid, the spice infusion or bag, stock or water + bouillon cube, to cover the meat and mushrooms.
9. Lower the heat and leave to braise under lid for at least 1/2 hour or until the meat is tender. Stir from time to time and check level of liquid, adding some stock or hot water if needed.
10. Mix the flour with some of the sour cream. Add to the casserole, stirring well.  
Simmer until thickened. Add more sour cream and/or ordinary cream to taste and to adjust thickness. Season with salt and ground white pepper, and a little soy sauce if needed.
11. Serve with pasta, preferably tagliatelle or fettuccine, preferably fresh whole grain.

### Serving suggestions:

– Double-tomato salad: mix sliced fresh tomatoes and marinated sun-dried tomatoes in strips. Add fresh basil leaves.

*(As Sinclair has probably forgotten more than I am ever likely to know about Italian red wine, I defer to his expertise.)*

1994 *Mesmer*

## THE BALLADE OF FRANZ ANTON MESMER IN PARIS

The marquise tastes a dainty macaroon:  
“Is he a lunatic, at whom to jeer,  
like Bergerac, who travelled to the moon,  
or are his powers true as they appear?”  
To much delight of every gazetteer  
they wonder, speculate and want to know,  
if Mesmer makes of science his career,  
or merely gives the audience a show.

The courtiers view me from their silk cocoon,  
their idle judgement vague and cavalier.  
My work is not a playful rigadoun:  
the scientific strictures are severe;  
the stringent system, whereto I adhere,  
demands the doubts that hold me in their throes.  
This much I claim: my methods are sincere,  
not just to give the audience a show.

They call me handsome: ladies sigh and swoon,  
forget the beaus who thrilled them all last year.  
At my house flocking every afternoon,  
they revel in its sombre atmosphere,  
and long to enter in my powers' sphere.  
As if on stage, into my part I grow,  
put on my cloak, my mystical veneer,  
prepared to give the audience a show.

### ENVOI

Oh, prince or beggar, lend me now your ear:  
my honest efforts I on you bestow,  
be it to heal, to soothe your pain and fear,  
or work to give the audience a show.

1995 I. *An Awfully Big Adventure*

SEA MAN

A wave returns

– rising rolling surging crashing –  
to soar up the tiers of the steep rising coast

– rushing rolling skipping dancing –  
to play with the foam and the surf and the sand

– stroking rolling lapping caressing –  
to smooth the rough edges of rocks on the shore

– stumbling rolling tumbling sinking –  
to die in the murky deep below the pier

A wave no more

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*Because having to choose would have been a cruel and unusual punishment:*

1995 II. *Sense and Sensibility*

Gleam of purest gold  
Through chinks in sombre surface:  
“Spices in the air!”

1996 *Rasputin*

## WHAT THE DOCTOR DID NOT SAY

I should like to drink with you, Rasputin,  
search for the *veritas in vino*  
or rather seek *pravdu vo vodke*  
– our spirits being so much more potent,  
there should be so much more truth in them –  
drink until dawn.

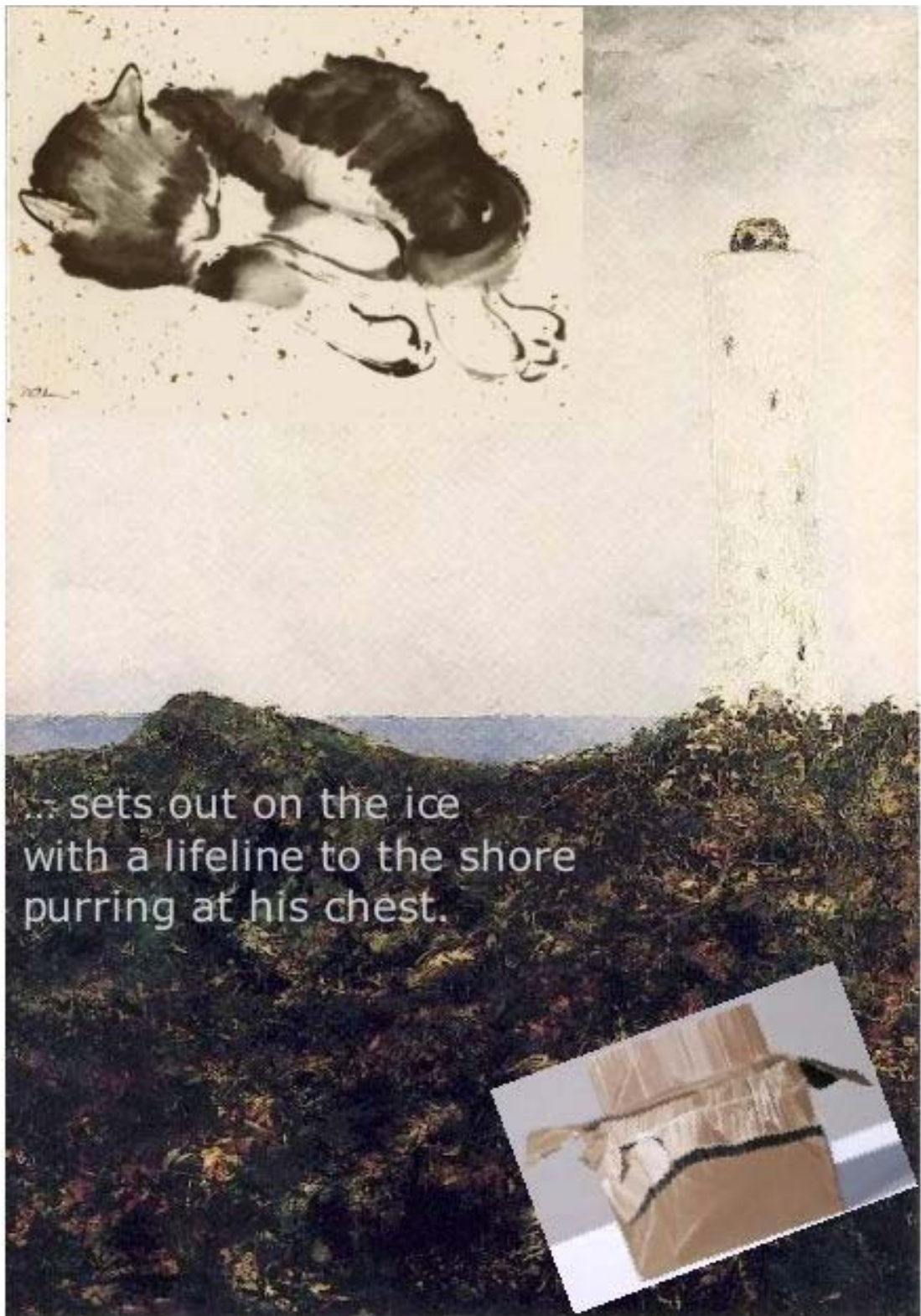
I should like to drink with you, monk.  
In the dissected bodies I find no feelings,  
no memories, no souls.  
You know there is no piece of flesh that is the soul,  
no little bits that are feelings, memories, lacks...  
You know, as well as I do,  
that those are what the flesh does  
– the brain, the heart, the limbs –  
they live,  
sense, feel, remember  
and make up the soul.

I should like to drink with you, sorcerer.  
But the world is a stage  
– as they knew centuries ago –  
and it pays to stay in character.  
Sufferers, ashamed of believing in you,  
come to me...  
I have no more to offer and  
they turn to you...  
Both of us painfully limited,  
pathetically human.

I should like to drink with you, Grigori Yefimovich,  
until the cock crows,  
reminding us that it is time  
to put our masks back on.

Yes. I should like to drink with you.

1997 *The Winter Guest*



Collage using art by Chen Dehong, August Strindberg and anonymous Internet source

*1998 Dark Harbor*

Passionate embrace,  
knowing what his hands have done:  
what may happen next?

1999 *Dogma*

## PARADOX

Who...  
... shaves the barber?  
... teaches the teacher?  
... gives the masseuse a back rub?

You have heard the wails of the Temple Wall.

Your voice has consoled the Son of Man.

You handed the Prophet a pair of scissors  
when the cat fell asleep  
on his sleeve.

You have listened  
– again, again and again –  
to Ganesha's tale of his murderous father,  
and with his drunken trunk about your shoulders  
followed the bright-eyed shrew  
leading the way  
to his abode.

Your suit has salty spots  
where merciful Guan Yin  
poured out her troubled soul.

Anatomically  
impaired,  
empathically  
unchallenged,

your tears... who will dry them,

Metatron?

*2000 Play*

Dusty, ashen voice.  
Illusion of connection.  
Break the jar? What for?

2001 *Blow Dry*

## PASTORAL DITTY<sup>2</sup>

*Sandra's song*

There's a tub on the hill  
where the cows come to drink.  
When your mind has a thirst,  
you can sit there and think.

In the summer the cows  
stroll around it and graze;  
in the spring you go there  
when your thoughts are a maze.

When the cows are not there  
to make use of their trough,  
then the tub is your boat,  
in the grass you cast off.

Well, your boat isn't green,  
– once it used to be white –  
but that's fine, you're no Owl  
and complaints aren't polite.

Someone may join you there  
and you ask him to stay,  
not a sailor by far,  
but a friend anyway.

He is not Pussycat  
and you don't want his ring,  
but you hear a new song  
that he's learning to sing.

There's a tub on the hill  
that's a trough or a boat,  
keeps the cows safe from thirst,  
your mind safely afloat.

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<sup>2</sup> Inspired by an Internet discussion what the tub was doing there in the first place (A/N)

2002 *The Harry Potter series*

*Dealing with personal loss is precisely that, personal.*

*A children's fantasy hero evokes big, basic emotions and offers enough clear space for me to project my fears and needs, to ask the necessary questions and to test possible answers. Better than any religion or academic philosophy, he helps me cope with an actual recent loss, with other people's sorrow, with the very distinct threat of an even greater loss that may strike any day.*

*Small children play at funerals with dead snails or a bird found in the yard. Even a so-called adult can profit from a game of make-believe. Severus may not be King Lear or Raskolnikov – but he has excellent healing magic.*

*So attend kindly to a tale of three women who mourn and learn.*

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## BURNING

Pain.

Searing, burning, freezing.

Two needles of red-hot ice were buried deep in the side of her neck, plunging deeper, the freezing, burning sensation spreading through her neck, shoulders, the base of her skull.

She sensed a wordless, desperate plea for help. As a well-trained, experienced mediwitch, she could become aware of a patient's distress even in her sleep. Knowing that she was feeling another's agony, she pushed herself to wake up, to break the rapport, but her strength failed her. She recognised the mental touch.

Severus. Mortally wounded. Aware of being effectively dead.

The huge snake hissed in her face, its fangs dripping with its victim's blood. The venom was spreading, spreading at a terrifying speed through the wounded man's blood stream, striking at his nerves, burning, searing, freezing, paralysing.

The magical sphere containing the snake released the victim, and the stricken man fell to the floor. She felt the jarring impact of his head against the boards. He was short of breath, running out of air, chest muscles struggling, straining, burning.

She felt her own lungs constrict, and forced herself to deepen her breathing. The man's body responded, drank in the oxygen avidly. His brain, able to sense once again, took in the searing, freezing pain now impacting his entire body, paralysing his extremities, dragging him beyond screams, beyond pleas.

Something was urgent. It had to do with memories.

Deep inside her, in the pit of her stomach as she pictured it, another fire glowed, burned, searing her with a sensation of her own. An amber gem, a mental artefact created many years ago to encapsulate a precious personal memory.<sup>1</sup> They had woven the spell together, in mental rapport, generating a deep, secret connection, hidden, quiescent, like a rock on the bottom of a deep, dark pool. Now it was dormant no more.

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<sup>1</sup> "Internship" [http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/internship\\_b.htm](http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/internship_b.htm)

The memory tied her to a man in agony, whose image of the amber gem was consumed by flames.

She screamed.

She managed to twist around onto her side, buried her face in the pillow, and screamed until her throat was raw. The fire felt as if it was burning a hole straight through her torso, chest to back. She saw the amber gem burn: yellow, red, white flames.

The flames receded slowly, and with them the searing pain.

Her own amber artefact was still in place, singed, blackened, but whole. It rested in a pile of grey-white ashes, the remains of its identical copy in another's mind.

The rapport strengthened its hold on her awareness, and once again she focused on the increasingly heavy effort of breathing, for herself and for the snake's victim.

There was someone in the room with the man – two presences, one anonymous, incidental, the other one a young boy, black hair, green eyes, a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. Severus' urgency had something to do with him, all the terminal shreds of his attention tunnelling onto the boy, single-mindedly needing to give, to hand over, to pass on... something. She joined her focus to his, felt Severus' mind desperately cling to her supporting mental energy, gathering for one final effort. His raw, brutal pull at her mind told her that he was not himself anymore, just one all-consuming last urgency, one single must, before the very end.

Wordlessly she gave her unreserved permission, all her energy short of bare survival completely at his disposal.

A splitting headache struck her, and with it a sensation of something, many, many, many somethings, being ripped out, long, sharp, cutting, searing strands being pulled out of her extremities, her chest, her groin, her stomach, pulling, pulling, cutting, searing, burning, gathering in the base of her skull, crowding and jamming her sinuses, struggling for urgent, brutal exit through her eyes, her ears, her mouth. She rolled out of bed and threw herself at the bathroom door, barely making it to the toilet before she vomited.

She lay on her knees, her hands clutching the rim of the toilet bowl. Her stomach heaved, constricted, spasmed, again, again, again, her throat burning with the passage of bitter gall and with the raw animal sounds issuing from it, searing it.

Then it was over, only sweat and tears dripping from her face into the foul stinking mess in front of her.

She managed to raise her arm and flush the toilet, but she grabbed the rim again and remained on her knees, panting for breath, tears streaming down her face. After a short while, still clinging to the toilet, she struggled to her feet. She grabbed for the wash basin, turned on the cold water faucet and lowered her face under the stream of water. She rinsed her mouth, swallowed a little of the water and staggered back to the bed. There was a numb ache in her entire body, the base of her skull as if crushed in a vice, her lower belly pierced by two blunt, searing hot daggers, a lump of frozen lead in her empty stomach, cold sweat soaking her night shirt.

She collapsed onto her knees only a step from the bed. She dragged herself onward and, still on her knees, draped her upper body over the edge of the mattress.

Sensing yet another yank at her mind, a desperate plea for air, she forced herself to inhale, to give breath to three final words: "Look... at... me...!"

She saw a pair of eyes, large and spectacularly green, no longer under a shock of black hair, but framed by a dark, dusky red, in an oval face, a woman's face. The pain that she

was feeling belonged to her alone – Severus was past suffering. Her eyes burst into tears again, her chest burning and constricted with the mind-shattering, overwhelming sensation of his love, affection, devotion, dedication, single-mindedly focusing on the green-eyed woman. Then the shared awareness lifted her on a wave of the dying man's relief, calm and contentment...

Everything went black. She thought that she was losing consciousness, but she remained aware. Aware of the blackness that enfolded her, of the piercing noise that she knew was tinnitus in her own ears, of the smell of autumn leaves, so powerful as to be nauseating, of the taste of bitter, dry ashes on her tongue, of the feeling of sinking down into thick, black tar that prevented all movement. There was no escape.

She was alone.

All that penetrated the blackness and isolation was a glimmer of light from a gem deep in the core of her mind. It chafed, cut and hurt like a grain of sand in an oyster shell. With a keening noise that she was unaware of ensuing from her throat, the woman crawled onto the bed and lay enclosed in her inner darkness, under the bright rays of sun streaming through the windows of her bedroom.

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Catrin woke up to a numb headache, a stiff neck, muscles that felt as if she had been shifting rocks. Strange – there had been a potentially nasty night-time emergency at the clinic, causing her to catch up on her sleep during the day, but nothing to warrant this degree of mental hangover. Her stomach was acid and sore, her lower belly twisted in a cramp, her sticky eyelids opened only reluctantly. She stretched with a groan and thought something vague about a terrible nightmare.

Then she noticed the spots and the smell of sweat on her night shirt. The sun showed that she had not been asleep very long. No. Not just a nightmare. A dream would have been bad enough, but it was true.  
Severus. Dead, gone forever.

The icy leaden lump in the acid pit of her stomach shifted as she rolled onto her side, lowered her legs off the bed and pushed herself to a sitting position like a convalescent. She waited for her head to stop spinning. Then she got to her feet and staggered into the bathroom, barely upright, hugging her midriff. She used the toilet, and had to grab the wash basin for support to get up. She turned on the faucet, stuck her face under the stream of cold water, sloshed it over her short-cropped hair with her hands, lapped and swallowed it like an animal.

The discarded smelly night shirt lay on the floor. She just kicked it towards the wall, rubbed her face and hair with a rough towel and ran the barely damp cloth over her chest. Then she pulled on a fresh night shirt and, not bothering to stop by her bedside table and put on her glasses, stepped out into the corridor.

Faint, deep, plaintive notes, like a psalm over a dying dinosaur... Catrin followed the sound. Alice was at home, practising. Alice. Her friend, her wife, the other half of her self. And the only person left in the world truly close to her.

The one, single, only one, now.

Catrin stood outside the door of Alice's study, leaning her forehead against the smooth wood, listening to the disjointed, plaintive, deep tones of the bassoon. Incidental music

for “Richard III”, she thought incongruously. Bassoon, bass clarinet, cello, double bass, percussion. The bassoon part exposed and revealing, full of treacherous technical traps. Quietly, without knocking, she pressed the handle and opened the door. She slipped inside, closed the door just as quietly, and leaned against it. Her eyes dry, her face stiff, she bent her knees and slid down to a sitting position. She sat, hugging one knee, her back against the door, staring ahead, letting the disjointed tones of the bare bassoon part penetrate her senses, flood her mind.

Alice sat on a backless stool, facing away from the door, completely focused on her instrument and on the sheet music on the stand in front of her. She was wearing a blue and white striped t-shirt, the stripes – fuzzy to Catrin’s myopic eyes – making her deep, meticulously controlled breathing even more distinctly visible. There was very little silver in the thick, copper-coloured braid that hung down the exact middle of her back, all the way down to her tail bone and ended in a simple piece of dark blue elastic. Catrin could only discern the ends of the long, reddish brown wooden tube that Alice was holding diagonally in front of her. The smooth play of the well-oiled silver-alloy levers and hinges whispered a distinct counterpoint to the tones of the instrument. Catrin imagined the familiar, slender, powerful hands, long fingers running, slapping, caressing, subduing the precisely worked silver keys to do the musician’s exact bidding. She pictured the curved silver mouthpiece, ending in a double reed, between Alice’s strong, flexible lips that regulated and balanced the stream of air in exquisite detail, turning it into music by strictly physical means that only appeared magical.

A ray of sunshine reflecting off a metal object caught Catrin’s eye, and she moved her head to look at Alice’s desk. The shiny metal was the foot-long, precisely turned and polished brass contraption used to plane the raw material into suitable thickness for bassoon reeds. There was an oblong white plastic bin on the window sill, and Catrin knew that it held about ten slender stumps of the bamboo-like material, soaking in water before it could be cut, planed, bent, tied and scraped into reed mouthpieces. Other implements of reed making were laid out on the desk top: slim tubes of brass and cork; spools of resilient, dark red silk thread; a watch-like instrument for measuring thicknesses down to fractions of a millimetre; shiny, meticulously clean scissors, knives and scalpels that always reminded Catrin of her own surgical instruments.

Alice was a powerful witch by birth and training, and yet she had chosen a profession where she had no use for magic. Or rather, it had chosen her, music having a magic of its own, compelling those struck by the talent to a life-long servitude, a never-ending quest for a clearer pitch, a more expressive tone, a smoother technique, a better-controlled timing. With age one learned to ask the proper questions, but the body grew more and more reluctant to provide the responses. Music’s devoted servants, constantly striving to develop their individuality and to discipline it, becoming part of a greater whole, a collective anthill of a hundred minds and bodies joining together to impact their listeners in ways that no-one, no science or magic, had yet managed to explain. Now Catrin was the sole receiver of that impact, the single strand of the deep, plaintive bassoon part caressing, probing, unsettling, soothing... Her eyes still dry, Catrin raised her face, leaned her head against the door, and, staring at the blue sky outside the window, waited for the musical sequence to end.

Alice released the reed, took a deep breath, unhooked the bassoon from the strap around her neck and placed it on its stand on the floor next to her desk. She pulled the reed loose from the silver tube, pushed a small lever in the leather and velvet case that lay

open on her desk, and slipped the double reed onto the raised empty holder in the case. Closing the case, she turned around on the stool, and noticed Catrin.

"Aren't you asleep?" she asked. "You've been working all night."

"Yes," Catrin said vaguely. "No."

Long legs in dark green warm-up pants appeared in Catrin's field of vision. She saw a hand, took hold of it and let it pull her to her feet.

"What's wrong?" Alice asked gently, her fingers running through the other woman's inch-short dark, grey-shot hair.

"Severus. Severus is dead."

"How do you know? Did you have an owl?"

"I was there," Catrin murmured flatly. "In rapport."

Alice pulled her into her arms, held her close, ran her hands along Catrin's back in long, smooth, gentle strokes.

"What can I do for you?" she said. "What do you need?"

Catrin stepped back a fraction, looked into her wife's startlingly blue eyes, then looked away.

"I don't know," she said numbly. "I don't know. I don't know. Sorry, Alice, I'm so sorry, I don't know. I don't know."

She felt as if she were screaming, keening, at an unbearable pitch, but to Alice the words were barely audible. She kissed both of her wife's hands in turn and gathered her into her arms again.

"I'm here," she murmured into the grey streak behind Catrin's ear. "Hold on to me."

After a short while, Alice took hold of Catrin's shoulders and looked into her eyes.

"Can you find Gsaa?" she asked. "I think she needs to run."

"You're right," mumbled the older woman.

She crumbled into a crouch. The air about her shimmered, and a snow leopard rose to all fours, shook its round, furry head, yawned, and stretched its long, flexible spine, front paws straight along the floor, the magnificent tail curving towards the ceiling.

Next to it, a fox-like creature with dark red fur, black ears, cream belly and a ringed tail, blinked its black button eyes and sniffed the air.

The door opened. The red panda and the snow leopard trotted out into the corridor and set off towards the stairs. They raced down, the panda in a flurry of legs, the big cat in a few huge bounds, disdaining the last half flight and leaping over the stone banister into the hall. At its muted "mmrrrrroooooarr" the back door opened and released the two animals into the park surrounding the old white building.

They would be back later, in human form, to deal with human sorrow.

But not yet.

Now there was running, jumping, chasing, sniffing scents, playing tag, rolling in dead oak leaves, and falling asleep in a tangled heap of pale grey and auburn fur.

--- --- ---

Thanks to the animagus romps in the park, Catrin was able to get some sleep, but for several days she did not trust herself to treat patients. Cancelling most of her out-patient appointments, she left the clinic routine in the care of her two assistants, and asked them not to call her except in a genuine emergency. Stephen, Catrin's senior apprentice, requested time off from work to care for an ill relative. On the next day he appeared at Catrin's and Alice's door, ready to help take care of his mentor. Alice gave him a talking-to, forced payment on him, and accepted his help with gratitude.

The depression was at its worst in the morning. Listless and filled with a numb ache, Catrin struggled out of bed, seeing no point in the exercise. She had authorised Alice and Stephen to use mild force to get her to shower, dress and take some nourishment. She was picking at a bowl of yoghurt with muesli and fruit when the tawny owl appeared at the kitchen window.

Alice let the bird in, served it a piece of liverwurst and untied the letter from its leg. Catrin opened it and read:

*Dear Healer Achrya,*

*I deeply regret to inform you that Professor Severus Snape, potions master at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has given his life in battle against the Dark Lord Voldemort.*

*Professor Snape listed you as his next of kin. I urgently need to consult you as to his funeral arrangements and his last will and testament. Kindly use the enclosed portkey to visit me at Hogwarts any time after 3 p.m. on the day you receive this message.*

*Should you be unable to meet the appointment, please suggest some alternative times by returning owl.*

*The stressful aftermath of the dramatic events that we have just lived through forces me to this bluntness and insistence, for which I apologise.*

*Sincere condolences and kind regards,*

*Minerva McGonagall*

*Acting Headmistress*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

Catrin handed the parchment to Alice to read. She put down her spoon, and turned the silk-wrapped portkey in her fingers. Then she looked listlessly at her wife.

“I’ll be there. Please send her a note.”

Alice gave her a brief hug, kissed the top of her head, and picked up a quill to send a message with the returning bird.

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The elderly witch’s piercing blue eyes had a tired watery gleam to them.

“Healer Achrya,” she said with a brief bow.

Catrin returned the greeting. “Professor McGonagall. I should have liked to make your acquaintance under happier circumstances.”

“As should I,” said the professor. “I’m rather puzzled with you being named as next of kin. Professor Snape had no living relatives that anyone knew of, and he never mentioned you to any of us at Hogwarts.”

She motioned Catrin to a tall upholstered chair by the fireplace and took a seat in a similar chair herself.

“We were not related by blood,” Catrin explained. “We met many years ago, at the Greylock Institute of Wizardry. The few years overseas at graduate school were not just a boost in academic excellence. They were Severus’ respite before the next battle, before

being called on to protect Harry Potter. I believe that Headmaster Dumbledore intended for Severus to keep that section of his life apart from the rest.”<sup>2</sup>

The older witch nodded with a glance at the portrait of a grey-bearded bespectacled wizard on the wall.

“You might call us surrogate siblings,” Catrin went on. “We became quite close friends at Greylock, but then the realities of life kept us apart.”<sup>3</sup> We co-authored some scientific papers. Aside from that we got together perhaps once or twice a year, picked up instantly where we’d left off, just like family in a good way.”

Catrin felt her voice close to cracking. She broke off and stared into the fire, blinking hard. Then she turned her head and her eyes met McGonagall’s scrutiny.

The Headmistress picked up a blue glass vial from a small table by her elbow.

“Then you won’t mind submitting to a test,” she stated, rather than asked.

“What is it?”

“Something that Professor Snape left together with his will. You should add at least three drops of your blood to the vial, wait one minute and drink the contents.”

“Will you permit me to examine a sample of the potion first?” Catrin asked. “Under the circumstances, I need to be careful as well.”

“I would expect nothing else, if you are what you claim to be.”

The older witch removed a used teacup from its clean white saucer, poured a few drops of the potion into the saucer and handed it to the healer.

Catrin tilted the saucer and watched the viscous, opaque orange liquid leave a thick shiny trace on the white china. Then she smelled the potion, dipped a finger in it, rubbed it between a finger and a thumb, smelled it again with a slight, wry smile. She picked up another drop on her finger, tasted it, and blinked back tears again as her throat constricted in a sudden, physically painful attack of nostalgia.

“I have absolutely no objection,” she said quietly. “Shall I draw my own blood, or would you prefer to do it yourself?”

“It’s closer to your area of expertise,” McGonagall said, “and I rather think I’d notice if you tried to cheat.”

Catrin looked around, and her eyes stopped on the professor’s black hat atop a knot of grey hair.

“I’ll borrow one of your hat pins, if I may.”

The headmistress reached up and withdrew one of the ornaments. It was over five inches long and looked viciously sharp. Catrin cleaned it with a brief wandless charm. Then she squeezed the tip of her left middle finger with the thumb, and calmly, almost casually, jabbed it with the needle. When she withdrew the point, a large dark red drop appeared on her fingertip. Shifting the needle between her fingers, she motioned for the vial.

“Count along with me, please,” she said.

McGonagall’s eyes followed her every move as she squeezed her fingertip once again and clearly, distinctly, let five drops of her blood drip into the potion. They waited. Shortly there was a slight hissing sound, and a small white cloud rose from the vial.

“Is this what you were expecting?” Catrin asked.

The headmistress nodded. “There should be a scent resembling cinnamon,” she added.

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<sup>2</sup> “Feathers” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/feathers.htm>

<sup>3</sup> “Wand work” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/wandwork.htm>, “Sutures” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/sutures.htm>

Catrin sensed a whiff of it as she handed the vial to the other woman who sniffed at it, nodded and returned the vial to the healer. The contents were translucent now, and no longer viscous.

Catrin raised the vial with an ironic tilt of her eyebrow.

“To absent friends,” she said and tipped the contents of the vial into her mouth.

The two women sat in silence, Catrin looking into the flames on the hearth in light meditation, the headmistress watching her in a scrutiny that grew less critical with each moment when no adverse effects of the potion manifested themselves.

Finally Catrin broke the silence.

“Severus’ potions were quite efficient. If I was to crumble in a groaning heap, clawing at my throat, with my mouth dripping foam, I rather believe it would have happened by now.”

“And?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt better. Not since I sensed Severus die, anyway.”

“You sensed it?!”

“He called my mind into rapport when he was murdered,” Catrin said dryly, taking refuge in clinical detachment.

“Yet you tell me that you were not related by blood?”

“Not in the least. I’m almost purely Slavic. One of my great-grandmothers was Tibetan – that accounts for the ‘almost’.”

“And... you were not... lovers?”

“I have a wife. Sorry if it shocks or offends you. One of Severus’ pet names for me was ‘you twisted dyke’.”<sup>4</sup>

McGonagall chuckled, checked herself and glanced at Catrin.

“It’s all right to laugh,” said the healer. “It was all in good fun.”

“Now you shock me. Severus Snape, joking?”

“Well... his life over here didn’t offer that many opportunities for humour.”

The headmistress could only nod in assent.

“So, how come you could maintain mental touch over such a distance?”

“I’m a strong and well-trained legilimens. We were evenly matched and found pleasure in mind magic. At Greylock I introduced Severus to mutual rapport – it seems that no-one else had trusted him enough to train him in the method.<sup>5</sup> So I assume that, when he was desperate for energy from somewhere – someone – in his final moments, he reached out to me by instinct. It was quite brutal.”

Their eyes met again, and the headmistress was the first one to look away.

“Now that you have me... hm... verified,” Catrin changed the subject, “I believe there are issues we need to discuss?”

“Yes. By the way, I’m Minerva.”

“Catrin.”

The two women shook hands.

“Before we get down to business,” the headmistress suggested, “perhaps you would like to... say good-bye.”

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Catrin had never seen Severus’ study at Hogwarts. Now she understood how it might feel frightening to students, but to herself the dungeon chamber was simply a protected oasis of peace and quiet, a place for focused work and silent memories.

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<sup>4</sup> “Raven’s long week-end” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/longweekend.htm>

<sup>5</sup> “Wand work” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/wandwork.htm>

One of the four stone walls was covered with shelves containing all sorts of glass and metal implements of potions making: bottles, beakers, tubes, retorts, mortars, cauldrons... together with a closet of standard ingredients that did not require special storage.

Another wall, floor to ceiling, corner to corner, held a reference library. The black stain had worn off the centres of the steps of the stepladder in front of it, so that the pale bare wood shone through.

Opposite the entrance and the rack of protective equipment – smocks, aprons, gloves, goggles – there was a desk by the fourth wall, and two high-backed chairs with a small table between them.

The centre of the room was dominated by a massive work bench, about waist high, over eight feet long by four wide. The black marble top had been cleared of all implements to accommodate the still figure of a tall man. About three feet from the bench, a little to the side of the figure's head, was a stand with a simple, unadorned stone basin filled with water. On a metal tripod in the middle of the basin, a short, thick, white candle burned with a steady flame.

Severus Snape's body resembled a wax effigy, the face somewhat more tinged with yellow than in his lifetime. The black hair, falling away from the sharply etched profile, held glints of silver easily mistaken for a trick of the light. A black shirt was buttoned loosely about his throat that was swollen from the effects of the snake venom. A brocade cover in Slytherin dark green and silver draped the abdomen and the legs. The body's left hand, also somewhat swollen, covered the right at waist level, with Severus' dark, worn wand wedged between the hands and the body.

Catrin swallowed the lump in her throat and looked, long, thoroughly, purposefully observing and taking in the reality of her friend's death. She touched the black hair in a semblance of a caress, touched the cold forehead with her lips, felt the stiff, cold, waxy cheek and ran the backs of her curled fingers over it in an old, familiar gesture. The body's hands had the same cold feel of wax-covered wood. The real wood of the wand felt somehow more alive. Catrin touched it with her fingertips and a last hint of a familiar presence tingled through her hand. Her throat constricted again. As she swallowed through the obstacle, tears broke free from her eyes and ran, unchecked, across her cheeks, into the corners of her mouth, down her chin.

She turned to stare into the flame of the candle and at its reflection in the water in the basin. She had no idea how long she stood there, her two feet planted firmly on the stone floor, tears streaming down her face.

Finally she was able to look at the dead man's pale countenance again, take a deep, focusing breath and wipe her own face with a handkerchief. She coughed, spoke a phrase that ended in a croak, sighed and coughed again, found her voice. She had not spoken Tibetan in a long time and the first lines of the ancient ritual felt clumsy. Soon she fell into the old, familiar rhythm, and the prayer went on smoothly. She was not a believer, not a religious person at all, but the good intentions and wishes of the bardo prayer for the peaceful passing of the soul, together with the physical feel of the burry murmurous vocal drone like a cat's purring, brought a calm, consolation and strength beyond faith, beyond intellect, beyond conscious thought.

The prayer ended, she took another deep breath and scooped up some water from the basin beneath the candle. She let the water trickle from her fingers onto her head, repeated the gesture, and again a third time.

Catrin stood straight, quiet, collected; she bowed to the still body of Severus Snape, her friend, and left the room.

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“Who is Renata Santelli?” asked the headmistress, handing Catrin a parchment across her desk. “There’s a very strange codicil in Severus’ will, relating to someone by that name.”

Catrin scanned through the paragraphs.

Severus had left Renata his house in Spinner’s End to dispose of as she wished, and one third of his rather substantial balance at Gringott’s, on two conditions:

1) that she enrol in an academic programme of her choice, magical or not, starting with the academic term immediately following his death;

2) that she make a serious attempt at a personal relationship within a year of his death.

Otherwise, his bequest to her would revert to the scholarship trust that the remainder of his money was funding, leaving Renata with only a few keepsakes of affective value.

“Renata was Severus’ lover,” Catrin said bluntly. “He’s telling her to get on with her life.”<sup>6</sup>

“His lover?! Where does that leave his devotion to Lily Evans?”

“The memory of Lily was what kept him alive. Protecting her son was his redemption. It was the only true meaning of his life. But being physically faithful to Lily’s memory would have helped no-one, only disturbed him. Renata... Renata gave him balance. She was his safety valve, the outlet for his good side.”

“I thought you were that,” Minerva frowned.

“I was his big sister. I was the sparring partner who wouldn’t break, who could match him spell for spell and patch him up when his experiments misfired. He did the same for me.<sup>7</sup> We knew and trusted each other implicitly. He needed that, but it made me a poor vehicle for romance and feminine mystique.”

“Surely Severus had no need for... that?”

“How do you know? For that matter, how should he know, without ever even allowing himself the thought?”

“So, with Renata...?”

“He had his one opportunity to be Prince Charming, to woo and win a beautiful woman. He could do the most extravagant magic just to make her smile. She’s a young, uncomplicated, romantic American. They met in Spinner’s End about a year ago. She gave him back the sense of wonder that wasn’t there when magic was just an instrument, a weapon. She made him stronger and braver for what he had to do... here.”

“Perhaps, but... do you know if there was some sort of understanding? Did he make any promises?”

“Renata is no blushing virgin. She was stranded in Spinner’s End, across the street from Severus’ house, after the wreck of a trans-Atlantic marriage. It’s the only housing she can afford on her wages from the book shop she works in. She may be feminine and romantic, but she wasn’t expecting Severus to make an honest woman of her and keep her as his homemaker.”

“That wasn’t really what I was asking.”

“I know they had exuberant daydreams... but Severus never promised her a ‘happily ever after’. Possibly a trip to Italy when – if – things calmed down. Basically, to be totally honest... I think he knew.”

“He knew what?”

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<sup>6</sup> “The hawk owl” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/hawkowl.htm>

<sup>7</sup> “Sutures” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/sutures.htm>

“That he wouldn’t get through this alive. After the war his task would be over, so nothing else really mattered.”

“Yes... probably,” Minerva said, mainly to herself. Then, to Catrin:

“Do you know where to find this Ms. Santelli?”

“Yes. And we can’t just send her an owl. Where can I apparate from?”

“You’ll have to walk to the gates. I’m sorry – security reasons. It’s never been possible to apparate to or from Hogwarts. It would be best if you could bring Renata back here, by portkey. It goes to the corridor outside Severus’ rooms, and it works any time you touch it bare-handed and say ‘Princeps’.”

The portkey was an actual key, large and heavy, made of brass. Catrin slipped it back into its silk pouch and took her leave.

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The woman who was closing the book shop told Catrin that Renata had left early – it had been her day to open the shop. Catrin turned the corner into an alley and apparated to Spinner’s End. She barely glanced at Severus’ house, dark and more lonely-looking than ever. There would be time for nostalgia later.

The lights were on in the small house across the street. Catrin braced herself and rang the doorbell.

Renata opened the door, looking tired and cheerless.

“Catrin!” she drew her inside. “Do you know anything about Severus? I’m so worried!”

“Yes, I’ve come about Severus,” Catrin steered the younger woman into the living room.

“I’m afraid I have bad news.”

“He’s hurt again? At your clinic? <sup>8</sup> Or has he been taken prisoner?”

Both of them sat down on the couch. Catrin looked away briefly, then she looked straight at Renata.

“Renata, there’s no nice way to say this. I’m terribly sorry. Severus is dead.”

Renata sat perfectly still for a moment, looking at nothing. Then she flew up and launched herself at Catrin.

“No! No, he is not, you disgusting lying jealous pervert! It’s not true!”

Catrin sat still, only shielding her head from the blows that Renata’s hands dealt her. Renata slapped her arms, her shoulders, her back, again and again. After a while she stepped back, but went on screaming:

“Go away, you’re lying, go away and leave us alone, go back to your pervert wife!!!”

She was about to run out of the room when Catrin stood up, grabbed her by the shoulders and made her turn away from the door. Renata looked into her eyes and said with deceptive calm:

“He’ll come back soon. The war will be over, he’ll come home and we’ll go to Venice. He promised. We’ll go to Venice. He promised. He promised.”

“I’m sorry, Renata,” Catrin said quietly. “Severus won’t be able to keep that promise.”

She put an arm around the other woman’s shoulders and led her back to the couch. They sat down, Renata sobbing loudly, like a child.

Catrin beckoned with her fingers in a wordless spell, and a glass of water came floating through the air from the kitchen. Catrin put it in Renata’s hand and directed it to her mouth.

“Drink. It’s only water.”

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<sup>8</sup> “The hawk owl” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/hawkowl.htm>

“The snow leopard wand” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/leopardwand.htm>

Renata twisted her head to the side.

"You don't want it," Catrin went on, "but you need it. Drink. You must."

Renata gulped down some water, sobbing into the glass.

Catrin helped her to hold the glass away from her mouth, her other arm stroking the young woman's back, slowly, gently. Renata's breathing calmed a little and Catrin helped her to some more water.

"The war is over," Catrin explained. "We are alive and not slaves or prisoners, to a great extent thanks to Severus. He didn't personally kill the Dark Lord, but his effort made the victory possible. He helped to save the wizarding world from slavery, and the non-wizarding world from being wiped out."

She was aware that Renata neither listened nor cared, but she knew that the sound of a friendly voice would help the young woman to connect to reality again.

Unconcerned about smudging her makeup, Renata wiped her face with both hands and asked through tears and sobs: "How did it happen?"

"A snake. Voldemort set a venomous snake on him."

"Was it painful, do you know?"

"For a while, probably. Then the poison numbed his senses. And Severus had an important message to pass on to someone on our side, so he focused on that effort. You know how strong he could be when it really mattered."

"But not strong enough!!!"

"No, not strong enough to survive. If it helps, I don't think it's fair either."

They sat in silence, Catrin's arm still around Renata's shoulders. Renata put down the glass, grabbed Catrin's other hand and clung to it.

"Where is he?" Renata asked.

"In his study at Hogwarts. Would you like to say good-bye?"

"Yes. No! ... I don't know. Do I have to?"

"The choice is yours. You should, though."

"Why?! I think you're cruel. Why can't I remember... keep the memory... "

"Because you wouldn't get to keep the good memories in peace. After a while you'd start speculating... imagining things... having nightmares. If you can't find the strength to face reality, your imagination will fabricate monsters."

"Is that something out of your books about the mind?"

"Yes, that, too. But it's from real life as well."

"Oh... You see, I've never... seen anyone..."

"A dead person?"

Renata nodded. Catrin pulled her a little closer.

"You'll be all right. There's nothing messy. I'll stay with you as long as you like."

"Thank you," Renata said in a small voice. And a little louder: "Can we go now?"

"Of course. You may want to bring some things, to spend a few nights at Hogwarts."

"Why?"

"I don't think you should be alone, and it's better for you to be around people who knew Severus. Then, the headmistress wants to see you about the funeral arrangements and about Severus' will. And, you probably don't feel like it now, but you should stay for the funeral, for your own sake. Don't worry. It won't be a big official affair. Severus expressly forbade that."

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The portkey dropped them in the dungeon corridor outside the metal-studded door to the Potion Master's quarters. Catrin lifted the wards and opened the door. Renata hesitated, but when she saw only a small hallway filled floor to ceiling with books, she followed Catrin inside.

"So this is where..." Renata said haltingly.

"Where Severus lived and worked, yes," Catrin filled in. "Would you like to see the other rooms, before we go into the study?"

"No. Maybe later. Some day. Could I just see him now, and then get some rest?"

"Of course. We'll go inside in a moment. Just so you know what to expect: the body is laid out on Severus' work bench in the centre of the room. His eyes are closed and he looks quite calm. There is no disfiguration, only the neck and one hand are swollen a little from the poison. It's all right to touch him – there's no residue of the poison, and the preserving spell on the body is harmless."

Renata nodded slowly. Without looking at Catrin, she asked:

"What does it feel like?"

"The body? Hard and smooth, like wax or thick, supple leather on wood. Cold, but dry, not clammy at all."

Again, Renata nodded, and looked at the three doors as if trying to guess which one to use. Catrin motioned towards the middle one: "This way," she said.

Renata passed through the doorway slowly, straight-backed, wide-eyed. Catrin followed a few steps behind, ready to give whatever assistance she could, if needed.

Renata stopped about three feet from the work bench, looked at the body, and back at Catrin. She was pale and her hands trembled a little, but she seemed quite collected.

"Would you like to be alone?" Catrin asked.

Once more Renata nodded without a sound.

"I'll be waiting for you just outside," Catrin said calmly. "Take the time you need. You have no obligation to stay long, but there's no hurry. And it's all right to cry, or to be angry and scream. There's a silencing spell on the room, so no-one will know."

Catrin withdrew and closed the door gently. She looked at some of the bookshelves in the hall, took down a small, ancient-looking tome, blew the dust from its top and opened it.

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"What is it Hogwarts does to people?" Minerva asked.

She had met Renata briefly, just long enough for an introduction and a bare mention of the funeral and the will. They would talk more when Renata was rested. Catrin settled Renata in the room they would share near the Headmaster's office, gave her a sleeping potion, set a healer's monitoring spell on her and re-joined Minerva.

"What do you mean?"

"Renata speaks of Severus with such love, affection and respect, and you do the same. Both of you only knew him outside the school. At Hogwarts he was harassed and ridiculed before making his fateful choice. After that, he was feared and loathed. Some colleagues had a grudging respect for him, but there was never any affection."

"Not even from Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"Yes, in a way. But Albus couldn't afford to concern himself too much with individuals. He saw the means to an end. A good and crucially important end, but his strategic thinking prevented him from being completely, unreservedly open and affectionate with anyone."

“Renata and I were privileged. We got to see something of the Severus who might have been.”

“If it hadn’t been for Hogwarts.”

“No, no. If you’ll allow me to speculate, from what he told me about his childhood, if not at Hogwarts, he’d have been harassed somewhere else, and probably joined the Dark to get back at his tormentors. Without Hogwarts he wouldn’t have been able to develop his gifts, cultivate his love of knowledge, learn whatever it was that drove him to make the right choice after Lily’s death, and continue making the right choices again and again with his unbelievable persistence and courage. Don’t doubt or demean Hogwarts. Learn from Severus’ fate. Let Hogwarts improve still more by it.”

“Help me, then,” Minerva said. “Come here and teach. Re-building the school will mean a lot of hard work. We need someone with your optimistic outlook.”

“No – I can’t leave my clinic, and I won’t leave my wife, for that long. I’ll help out in your infirmary while I’m here. I’ll come back as often as I’m able to leave my patients. And later, if you have any fifth- or sixth-years seriously interested in healing, I’ll be happy to organise something for them at my place.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

It was Minerva who, suddenly, changed the subject.

“We’ll have time to discuss Severus’ will in detail later, but there is one bequest that you have to claim now.”

“Bequest? I need or want nothing. Well... perhaps some keepsake. I’ll leave the choice to you.”

“Severus has left you his personal library, including his research notes and his collection of ancient alchemy books.”

“Oh... I’m very grateful. I know that he had some real treasures. But it’s going to take time; we’ll have to go through the collection together, so I don’t remove anything belonging to Hogwarts, or anything that the school needs.”

“There will be time for that. One object won’t wait, though. You have to claim it before the funeral, otherwise the wards that Severus set will destroy it when the funeral rites begin.”

Catrin stared into the fire for a long moment. Then she looked at Minerva and said tonelessly: “What is it?”

“Over there,” the headmistress pointed to a sideboard by the wall.

The dark object was rendered still more indistinct by the shadows that enfolded it.

Catrin stood up and took a few steps in its direction.

It was Severus’ old oaken potions chest.<sup>9</sup>

Suddenly she was back at Greylock, at the time of their post-graduate studies, the dark gleam of the polished wood, its smooth texture and the spicy, tangy, clean smell of the contents assaulting her senses, everything coming back, odd experiments, failures, successes, Severus’ eyes clouded with worry at her injury, or flashing with joy when they accomplished a new spell together... Memories overwhelmed her, head spinning, knees buckling, eyes smarting, throat constricting, she groped for support and found Minerva’s hand to clutch at.

“I can’t,” she mumbled. “Not yet. If I open it, I’ll fall apart. I’m sorry. It’s impossible.”

Supporting her, slowly, step by minute step, Minerva led her to the sideboard.

“You don’t want it to disintegrate and disappear for ever,” she insisted.

“No, but I can’t touch it yet,” Catrin said. “I must have more time.”

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<sup>9</sup> “Sutures” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/sutures.htm>

“You don’t have to touch it,” Minerva said firmly, “but you must acknowledge the wards and add your own to them. Take out your wand!”

Mechanically, Catrin complied.

They were standing in front of the chest. Catrin supported herself on the sideboard with her left hand, and forced herself to look at the chest. Minerva’s arm was around her back when her knees threatened to give once more. She took a ragged but deep breath, another one, focusing as though for a major magical task.

“Reach out to the wards, now!” Minerva ordered.

Catrin’s wand rose and approached the chest close to the lock.

The feel of Severus’ mental signature made her groan in pain. Then she forced herself deeper into focus, accepting the familiar mind touch that she would never sense again, tracing the firm, secure wards without unravelling them, joining her signature to his across time, the energies interlacing smoothly as always, the pleasure of the flow piercing and wringing her with the pain of the loss.

The combined wards flashed in completion and Catrin’s vision went black.

She recovered her senses in the tall upholstered chair, with Minerva holding a cup of tea to her lips. The tea was not too strong and had no milk or sugar in it, and Catrin gulped it down gratefully.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I made a total ass of myself. Falling apart like a twelve-year-old.”

“It’s all right,” said Minerva, “it’s known as feelings. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

She re-filled Catrin’s tea cup and handed it to her.

“Yes,” Catrin replied sheepishly. “That’s what I’d say to anyone else.”

“But...?”

“I’m a healer. Control mania goes with the territory.”

“It would. Well, you saved the chest, anyway.”

“I’d have hated to lose it. Thank you for the push, and for picking up the pieces.”

“Don’t mention it. Only... I still can’t get my mind around someone caring for Severus this much.”

“I never had any siblings. He was the best brother I could have wished for.”

“Are you up to talking about the funeral?” Minerva asked after Catrin’s third cup of tea.

“Yes, yes. We have to. Did Severus leave any instructions?”

“Severus found a very old ritual, almost completely silent, and adapted it himself.”

“Which one?” Catrin asked.

“The Fire of the Four Winds. But he re-configured it for one single officiator.”

“Did he appoint one?”

“No,” the headmistress answered quietly. “I think that he just didn’t believe...”

“... that there would be four willing Guardians?”

“Exactly.”

“Do we prove him wrong?”

“Well, you and me, that makes two. For the North and the West, I think.”

“Renata, for the South.”

“Isn’t she a Muggle?”

“No. Her powers may not be very strong. They are completely raw and deeply suppressed – she’s always been taught that magic doesn’t exist. But, given her potential for mind work, I frankly don’t believe she’s a Muggle.”

“Ever use a wand?”

“I don’t know. Do you have any spare ones she could try?”

“A few. In fact... What would you say about rowan and dragon scale?”

“A bit incongruous. But then, so is Renata. It could work.”

“Here,” Minerva opened a drawer and handed Catrin a dark purple silk pouch. Catrin opened it and slid out a slim, neat, honey-coloured wand.  
“Talk to Renata,” Minerva said. “Have her try it. And I’ll see about a Guardian of the East.”  
“Who might that be?”  
“Think about it. We three women and how we related to Severus. There’s one blatantly missing.”  
“Lily, who is dead.”  
“Her son is alive, thanks to Severus.”  
“Yes... Severus found peace, at the very end, when he saw Lily in Harry Potter’s eyes.”  
“Oh... you were there. I’d almost forgotten. I’m sorry.”  
Catrin waved off the apology, not trusting herself to speak for a moment. The older woman went on:  
“I’ll speak to Harry. He used to hate Severus, but a lot of things have changed. I think he’ll want to stand in his mother’s place.”

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Renata staggered out of the Headmaster’s office with tears in her eyes. She fumbled for the door handle and stumbled into the guest room that she and Catrin were sharing. She threw herself face down onto her bed and cried, cried, as if she would never stop, the tears rising from the very core of her being, gathering in her throat, pouring out of her eyes, on and on. The pillow muffled her sobs, and she beat and beat and beat the mattress with her fist, a wordless scream accompanying each blow. Then she went on sobbing, less loudly, almost normal breaths intermingling with the sobs. She felt a hand on her shoulder.  
“That’s right,” a low voice said. “Let go. You’re safe here.”  
The hand left her shoulder, stroked her hair a few times, went on stroking her back. The voice went on murmuring reassurance, soothing, supporting her as she slowly calmed down.

She rolled over onto her side and looked up at Catrin, who was sitting on the edge of the mattress.  
“I want Severus. I don’t want his money, or his house. I want Severus to come back.”  
“Of course you do. You don’t stop loving someone just because he is dead.”  
“It hurts. Why did he do that to me?”  
“Dying? He’d have preferred to live, and find some joy with you after the war. But first and foremost Vodemort had to be defeated, regardless of the personal cost. Many people have lost their loved ones in the war.”  
“No, I don’t mean that. I mean the will.”  
“Severus knew what it was like, living for and through the memory of someone. He didn’t want that for you. The war is over and you have no atonement to make, the way Severus had. His will gives you the greatest gift he could imagine: a life of your own. The possibility to develop your potential, to find your true self and to make your own choices.”  
“Without him. And he wants me to find a lover. That’s cruel!”  
“Why don’t you try to leave that aside for now.”  
“That’s easy for you to say!”  
“Is it?”  
“Oh... I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking...”  
“It’s all right. You’ve a right to be in pain.”  
“So what should I do? How do you manage?”

"I'm not impervious to sorrow. And I manage... one day at a time. I find an occupation. Sometimes – just staying alive is work enough. Taking in food. Keeping clean. Getting dressed."

"You look so composed, so efficient."

"I fell apart completely in Minerva's office last night. It happens. You go to pieces, and put yourself back together. If you're lucky, someone is there to help you."

Renata whimpered and passed a hand over her eyes.

"My head... I'm dizzy."

"That's normal. You've been crying a lot. Turn around so I can reach your head and stretch out on your back."

Catrin pulled up a chair to the foot end of the bed where Renata's head rested. She cradled the young woman's head in her hands and felt for the small, tense muscles at the base of the skull.

"Focus on your breathing," murmured the healer. "Feel how the air fills your body cavity, how it streams in and out."

How long it lasted, the gentle murmur, the soft manipulation that let her neck and shoulders relax, Renata neither knew nor cared. After a while she felt pleasantly heavy, not sleepy, but rested, ready to open her eyes and to start moving again.

"Good," said the healer. "Roll over on your side and sit up. Take your time."

Renata complied.

"Have you ever tried using a wand?" Catrin asked.

"Don't," Renata cried out. "Please, don't!"

"What's wrong?"

"You know what's wrong, you're just being cruel again!"

"I want you to tell me. Say it aloud. Give your troubles a name."

"Why?!"

"You have a great potential for mind magic. You've had no training, but there are simple ways of using your powers to deal with your pain. This is one. I know you can do it. – So, have you ever tried using a wand?"

"I won't talk about it. It's too painful. It was... it reminds me... it was with Severus!"

"Very good. Don't talk about when and how. Just tell me what happened. What you did, and what the wand did."

Renata took a deep, shuddering breath.

"I just waved the wand... and there were sparks... My fingers tingled a bit. And then I... I pointed it... at the fireplace. I said... I said... 'Fire'... and the wood just... it started burning... just like that. I pointed it... and said 'Fire' and it was on fire."

Renata spoke haltingly, through more tears and sobs, but she did not stop until her short tale was finished.

"All right. Let's try something," Catrin said, walking over to the desk and picking up a long purple silk pouch from it.

Renata, curious, forgot her discomfort. She rose from the bed and came closer.

"Here," Catrin handed the object to her. "There's a wand inside. Take it out."

Renata hesitated. There was a trace of fear in her glance at the healer.

"No, it isn't that one," Catrin explained. "It's a new wand."

Renata drew out the piece of honey-coloured wood, and Catrin took the pouch from her hand.

"Feel the contact between your fingers and the wood," she instructed. "Sense if there's something you want to do. If the wand suggests a movement to you."

Quiet, wide-eyed, Renata raised the wand and moved it in a smooth, fluid wave.

Purple and silver sparks trailed from the tip.

She repeated the gesture, varied it a little, tried again.

Every time a scattering of tiny fireworks appeared in response.

“Well, well,” smiled Catrin. “It would seem that you have a wand of your own.”

Renata nodded, her own smile the only comment necessary.

Then, suddenly, she sobered.

“What if I can’t afford it? I don’t... I’ve no magical money at all!”

“It’s a gift. Minerva kept it as a spare, and meeting you made her suggest that you try it. Obviously she was right. It’s a rather unusual combination, rowan wood with a core of dragon scale.”

Renata studied the wand closely, caressing the smooth golden wood with her fingers.

“Thank you...”

“On one condition,” Catrin added sharply.

“What?” Renata’s eyes locked with Catrin’s.

“That you work with it. Study some magic every day. You have to explore your powers, learn to use and control them.”

“Will you teach me?”

“To begin with, yes. Later, Minerva will set up a proper curriculum for you, and work out the practical details. You will be a student at Hogwarts, but, of course, under different conditions than the children.”

“That would be...”

“Your academic commitment, yes. The first article of Severus’ codicil. But don’t worry too much about that. You need to learn those things in any case, and it will give you something to do. At best, it will keep your mind off the pain.”

Renata stood musing for a moment. Catrin interrupted her.

“Let’s get started, shall we? Here’s a book of basic spells that Hogwarts’ students learn in their first year. You should be able to progress faster; a grown-up mind has recourse to certain shortcuts.”

Renata did prove to be a fast learner.

Catrin demonstrated several simple spells to her. Renata understood the principles almost instantly; her control of the wand and its power improved dramatically in the first few attempts.

“Excellent,” Catrin said. “You can read on in the book, but don’t experiment on your own just yet. And get some more practice on your first spells. I expect you to be fluent at them tomorrow, so you have something to show Minerva.”

She gave Renata a brief hug and left for her stint at the Hogwarts infirmary.

Renata sat, looking at nothing, holding the wand loosely between her fingers. Then her eyes focused and she raised the wand. Once more, sparks were trailing from its tip. Renata smiled to herself and turned her attention to the book of spells.

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On the day of the funeral, Catrin was frankly impressed with Renata’s poise.

It was the young woman’s first public encounter with the wizarding world, the first time she wore a witch’s robes in earnest, her first real task to be accomplished with the aid of a wand.

As funerals go, it was probably like nothing she had ever experienced. Still, she was focused, outwardly calm, taking her cues from her surroundings like a professional actor. There was comfort to be found in the conventional occupation provided by a funeral,

and Renata obviously had the strength and intelligence to use even an unaccustomed ritual to that purpose.

Following Severus Snape's instructions, there were no seated rows of conventional mourners going through the motions of a formal ritual, or listening to official speeches; no black-clad, sandwich-chomping, gossip-mongering crowd; no obligation to put on a show of sorrow that one did not feel. Whoever wanted to would have the opportunity to pay his or her respects. Later, the body would be ignited with magical fire in private, by the four volunteer Guardians.

The long but simple, informal farewells took place in the Potion Master's study. At dawn, the four Guardians opened the iron-studded doors to the chambers and assumed their places by the body. They would take turns during the day, two of them always present at the dead man's side. A portrait of Headmaster Dumbledore, moved here for the day, appeared to be supervising the proceedings from the wall opposite the entrance.

Teachers, older students, other staff, even house elves and castle ghosts, all sorts of people and beings, some of them involved in the re-building of Hogwarts, some having arrived specifically for the occasion, passed by and paid their respects in varying ways.

Flowers, small stones, magical tokens were placed next to the body. Some spoke incantations; some drew magical symbols or wrote down words of power on pieces of parchment. Some stood in silent meditation; a few cried openly.

Every mourner stopped to speak with the Guardians. Some simply to shake hands and utter a vague phrase of condolences, others to share a memory of Professor Snape, some even to speak of their feeling of guilt over having neglected and distrusted him for many years.

The school was closed, so the students had no obligation to take part in the funeral of a teacher who had been universally disliked – but one short, chubby Ravenclaw second-year had insisted on joining her much older brother for the day. She came in, shivering with dungeon cold and her own apprehension, facing death for the first time in her life, grateful for Renata's sympathetic arm around her shoulders.

That way she gathered enough courage to approach the still figure on the black marble bier and to whisper: "Thank you, Professor. I finally got it right."

She slipped a small crystal vial containing a clear blue liquid onto the surface by the dead man's head, and even touched the cloth of the black shirt with her fingertips.

Then she turned to Renata and pulled out a small book from a pocket of her robes.

"This is the Professor's. I'd like to return it. He wasn't sure if a young dunderhead like me could make sense of it, but it was really helpful."

She made a small gesture towards the crystal vial.

Renata took the book and pulled the girl closer. With her other hand she held out the book to Catrin, with a questioning look.

Catrin examined it. 'Intermediate plant extraction techniques'. Heavy going for a second-year. A magical seal showed it to be part of Severus' personal collection.

Catrin beckoned the girl to her in a corner by the bookshelf.

"Hello," she said to the young student. "My name is Catrin Achrya and I'm a healer. Professor Snape and I did some research together."

The girl's eyes lit up. "I'm Helen Grey, and I'm going to be a healer. Or a potions master. Or perhaps both."

“Well, then, you’re going to need this book. Would you like to keep it? The professor has left it to me in his will.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. It’s yours. I’m sure it’s valuable.”

“I have the impression that you appreciated Professor Snape’s classes.”

“Yes. He was very demanding and not always fair. Most people mocked and hated him, but he knew so very much. And now it’s all gone, all lost. It’s so sad.”

“Oh, but it isn’t gone. The professor left lots of notes, so it’s up to us to develop his ideas, now that we have the peace to do it. I’m certainly going to continue his research, and I hope you will as well.”

“Me?!”

“Of course. You have a lot to learn, but at this pace you’ll be inventing new potions of your own in just a few years. Go on, keep the book. If you like, we’ll do some special work on healing potions when the school re-opens.”

“Are you going to be a professor here?”

“Not all the time. I’ll give some lectures and help out in the infirmary a few days a month.”

“And teach me more about potions!”

“If you don’t neglect your other subjects.”

And, in a mock threatening tone, Catrin added: “Don’t look too pleased. Some people call me Severus Snape’s sister!”

There were tears in the girl’s eyes at the mention of the professor’s name, but she smiled through them and said: “That’s good. I’ll learn a lot, then!”

“We shall find out, Ms. Grey,” said Catrin, still with mock sternness, returning the book to her.

“Thank you, Healer Achrya. Thank you very much.”

The student turned to cast a final look at the figure on the work bench; then she left the room, hugging the small book to her chest.

Sunset was approaching. Dinner time ended the last trickle of mourners.

Catrin was feeling light-headed from fasting and drinking nothing but water since the previous sunset. Fasting was not compulsory – in fact, the lack of nourishment might weaken a less powerful witch or wizard to the point of inability to perform the evening’s ritual. But Catrin was strong, and refraining from the consolation that food would offer, exposing herself unprotected to the raw emotion, was her own private tribute to the memory of her exceptional friend.

Headmistress McGonagall and Harry Potter had an obligation to appear at dinner, to keep up the spirits of all those involved in the re-building of Hogwarts. Renata and Catrin were alone with Severus’ remains, arranging and tidying the tokens of tribute on and around the body. Catrin withdrew to the bathroom, as much for a physical need as to give Renata a few moments on her own. When she returned, she glanced about the room.

“We’re almost ready,” she said, “we just need to move the water basin to the foot end.”

“It looks very heavy,” Renata remarked. “I suppose we’ll have to wait for the others.”

“Not really,” said Catrin. “No need for anyone to break their backs. You’re a witch, remember? You can do it on your own.”

“I don’t think so, not me, not yet!”

“You’ve already moved lots of things with your powers: books, cauldrons, even chairs. This contraption is just a bit heavier, and you have to be careful about balance, because it’s filled with water. But nothing will explode if you spill some on the floor. Give it a try.”

With a doubtful look at Catrin, Renata took out her wand and pointed it at the basin.

Catrin corrected the angle of her wand, the better to balance the heavy stone block, and Renata spoke the incantation. The basin on its stone stand rose a few inches from the floor and slowly, smoothly, moved towards the foot end of the bier. There it settled in the exact centre. Even the flame of the candle had barely fluttered. Renata lowered her wand, let out a deep breath, and her face lit up in a moment of genuine joy.

The door opened, and the remaining two Guardians came in.

No-one was wearing black. Harry and Minerva had chosen the deep scarlet of formal Gryffindor robes. Renata had felt the need for an outward sign of affinity in dark Slytherin green that complemented the cover on the dead man's lower body. Catrin wore blue, a late evening blue of the sky above the Roof of the World, a place that Severus never got to see in spite of his fascination with its magical powers and healing plants.<sup>10</sup>

They took their assigned places at the four points of the compass.

Minerva McGonagall raised her head to look at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore.

"We are the voluntary Guardians of the memory of Severus Snape," Minerva intoned.

"As the four winds gather to herald the end of a season and the beginning of a new one, so are we gathered to honour his memory and carry it into the world. Thus we declare ourselves with our names."

"To the East, Harry Potter, standing for Lily Evans, my mother."

He finished the sentence and took a step closer to the bier. The youngest of the Guardians, the black-haired, green-eyed boy represented a woman Severus had met in his childhood, one who determined his fate for the rest of his life – even, and still more, after her own death.

"To the South, Renata Santelli."

Her voice faltered a little, but she stepped forward without hesitation. A young woman from another continent, almost from a different world, had offered unexpected solace, a respite from the war, and given Severus back a sense of joy and wonder at his powers.

"To the West, Catrin Achrya."

A companion of mutual trust, she had been Severus' match in intellect and magic, one who saw him without disguise, outside the confines of the war, understanding his true potential, anchoring him to what he might have been.

"To the North, Minerva McGonagall."

She was the last one to step forward, an older colleague and fellow warrior, one who should have been closer to death than Severus, if the circumstances had been normal.

A golden glow surrounded the portrait of Albus Dumbledore when the four Guardians assumed their places. The glow had been spreading as they declared themselves and its protective hemisphere enclosed the scene when Minerva spoke the next sentence:

"We are gathered here to consign Severus' mortal remains to the cleansing and healing element of fire. With his body gone forever, he will live on through the memories represented in our minds, our speech and our actions."

The next part of the ritual was silent, as each Guardian evoked a happy memory of Severus. Catrin shot a sympathetic glance at Harry – this would be quite a challenge for

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<sup>10</sup> "Wand work" <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/wandwork.htm>

him. But, in a quick, smooth flash of rapport, she caught an image of a silvery doe Patronus by a frozen lake surrounded by trees. She nodded slightly and focused on her own memory.

Their first mental touch. The cringing mind of a young man tormented by guilt, mortally afraid of what his power might do to another, slowly letting go... unfolding... reaching out... trusting her to be sturdy and solid, finally trusting himself to be gentle.<sup>11</sup> Her eyes fogged for a moment. She rested in the memory, purposefully experiencing the pain of it, before laying it aside in her mind, drawing a deep focusing breath, and readying her wand.

Catrin lifted her eyes and met Minerva's steady gaze. She looked around and saw four wands at the ready. Again she nodded to Harry, and together they folded down the dark green cloth, uncovering the long black shirt that shrouded the entire body. Catrin put down the heavy cover on a chair and stepped back into her place.

Four wands rose higher, waiting for Minerva's signal.

Catrin saw Renata's wand tremble and waver. The young woman was tense, her weight on one foot as if taking a step, neck and shoulders stiff.

"Renata," Catrin murmured, "breathe..."

The release of tension was tangible as Renata complied, took a deep breath and planted her feet firmly on the floor.

Minerva sought Albus' portrait with her eyes, found it and nodded.

Three silent spells and one whispered 'Incendio' released four cascades of magical fire over the still figure before them.

There was none of the mock-tortured twisting, flexing, blackening and crumbling of a body consumed by ordinary fire. The magical flames enveloped the body, shimmering blue as they met the black cloth and the sallow skin, and the form disintegrated, gradually, quietly, transformed into fine, pale grey ashes.

The four Guardians lowered their wands and, in silent meditation, watched the process take its course. Shortly the flames died down, the golden shimmer withdrew into the portrait and was gone. Only the ordinary light of Hogwarts' magical candles illuminated the four robed figures and the pile of ashes on the black marble-topped work bench before them.

Minerva drew the two young people to her, laid her arms about their shoulders and steered them towards the door. Renata resisted.

"What about Catrin?" she asked.

"I'm going to finish things here," Catrin explained. "as the designated next of kin."

"Can't I stay?"

"Go on with Minerva. I'll join you in a little while. It's just a bit of housekeeping."

She was alone. Standing in front of the collection of potion implements, she scanned the highest shelves and found what she had been looking for. She pulled the step-ladder closer, climbed up on it, and, her hands high above her head, lifted the fragile object down.

The urn was about the size of her head, rounded, somewhat oblong. It was made of fine, thin, translucent china, the outside glazed in a light but distinctive jade green. Catrin lifted the round lid. The inside was perfectly white and spotlessly clean.

Catrin picked up a small rook's feather broom from among the potion implements, tilted the urn and began sweeping the ashes from the work bench into it. She worked

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<sup>11</sup> "Wand work" <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/wandwork.htm>

mainly by hand, only aided by simple charms not to spill any of the ashes or to leave any residue on the marble top.

Then she closed the urn with a magical seal and swept it in the Slytherin green cover that had been removed from the body. She bowed to Albus Dumbledore's portrait and left the room, cradling the fragile green bundle in her arms.

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The portkey dropped Catrin on a grassy hillside overlooking a green valley. High above, on each side of it, like silent guardians, rose two rows of grey, rocky, snowy peaks. A rapid glacier stream ran along the centre of the valley. On its other side there was a group of large black woollen tents, the size of small cottages. Among the tents, a herd of black, white and piebald yaks was grazing, grunting contentedly.

Catrin drew a few deep breaths. She had been away too long, and was feeling the altitude. Slowly she made her way downhill to the stream. Before crossing it, she called out in Tibetan:

“Tie up your dog! It's me, Achrya!”

It was not just a polite, formal greeting. A massive, heavy-jowled black dog, wearing a viciously spiked collar lined with red wool, bounded towards the visitor, barking furiously.

A woman appeared in the entrance of the nearest tent. She called the dog and tied it on a crude rope leash attached to a pole in the ground. Her face barely shifted, but her eyes smiled at Catrin.

Inside the tent, Catrin studied the woman who had stood in her mother's place during her school days in Ladakh. Pema had changed little over the years: there were just a few more wrinkles in the golden skin of her face, and the long, black braid had a scattering of silver in it.

Pema filled two wooden bowls with butter tea and the two women sat down.

Catrin took a few small sips, savouring the tea, the old familiarity of the taste returning to her. Tibetan tea, nourishing when the altitude spoiled one's appetite for food, soothing and refreshing, with the tangy undertone of fresh yak butter.

Catrin emptied her bowl, and nodded her thanks for a refill.

She opened her pack and presented Pema with her gifts: several bricks of high quality tea. They chatted a little about the family and the herd; Pema showed her the year's rich harvest of worm plant. Catrin let a sigh escape her. The worm plant had fascinated Severus and been the focus of their joint research.<sup>12</sup> If only...

Catrin suppressed the nostalgic thought. The two women agreed on a price, and Catrin was pleased at the chance to renew her store of the rare medicinal herb.

Then Catrin took out a cloth bundle from her pack, unwrapped it and showed Pema the jade green urn. She explained her business.

“You can take the brown mare,” Pema told her. “She's in good shape and afraid of nothing. You know her. She will comfortably take you to the pass and back before nightfall.”

Catrin thanked her, finished the last of her tea, put away the urn in her pack and hefted the heavy, hard, iron-framed saddle in her arms. Pema returned to her work; Catrin went outside and called to the brown mare.

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<sup>12</sup> “Wand work” <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/wandwork.htm>

Breathing was getting harder as she approached the pass. The top of the pass was at some 16 000 feet, with another 300 to climb on foot before reaching her goal. The sturdy little brown mare, bred and raised in the mountains and not burdened with any load apart from her rider, had negotiated the stony path quickly and surely, breaking into a trot on stretches of even ground. Now even the horse was beginning to feel the altitude, its walk steady, but not as quick as before.

The pass was decorated with long rows of prayer flags, blue, white, red, green, yellow, the series repeating itself again and again, on strings suspended between pegs in the ground and the tops of several tall poles. The main path continued down into the next valley, but a barely discernible footpath led at an angle towards a jagged peak nearby. Close to the path, an old woman squatted next to a stone brazier, burning sweet-smelling juniper twigs and thin scraps of paper with prayers printed on them.

Catrin swung down from the saddle and led the horse to the old woman.

She paid her to look after the mare and to burn an offering while Catrin was completing her task up the hill. The offering was a sizeable piece of dried worm plant. If the old woman thought it strange to burn such a valuable item, she did not show it.

The going was slow and heavy. Catrin had to scramble up some parts of the steep path on all fours, and her lungs, unused any more to the thin air, were punishing her. Headache closed like an iron cap about the top of her head, she felt her heart hammer against her ribs, and nausea attacked her again and again. Every dozen steps she had to stop, straighten her back, and catch whatever was left of her breath. The wind was rising as she approached the jagged rocks, and the tears that it drove pouring from her eyes made her eyeglasses slip.

She staggered on, on and on... and at long last she could grab hold of the sharp, upright rock on top of the path. The rock stood like a parapet over a steep precipice on the other side. Deep, deep below, in a circle of rocky slopes, inaccessible to any wingless creature, lay a small, turquoise-coloured lake, almost perfectly round.

Catrin planted her two feet firmly on the rocky ground and drew some deep, steadying breaths. The air was thin, but she focused, relaxed, and her headache receded. She slipped the pack from her shoulders and removed the jade green urn. She raised it towards the deep sapphire blue sky, stood steady and poised for a long moment, and hurled the urn down the precipice in front of her.

It flew, spun, finally crashed down on a jutting outcrop of rock about fifty feet below. The fine china split into a few large, curved shards, landing on a narrow rock shelf. The sharp, clean wind took hold of the ashes, picked them up in a light grey cloud and let them disperse into nothingness over stones never touched by human hand.

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Ten months had passed since Severus' funeral. Catrin woke up at dawn one morning, feeling particularly relaxed and refreshed. She stretched luxuriantly, savouring the sense of leisure and freedom, with no work to do yet for a few hours. Alice would start preparing for rehearsal soon and Catrin knew better than getting between her wife and a work-day breakfast.

She snuggled down in bed and thought about the young couple that was using Catrin's and Alice's home as a base in their own house hunting. Renata's young man, Richard, was a wizard and actor with unruly black hair, piercing blue eyes and a wistful smile. Severus' will had been duly registered, allowing Renata to spend the proceeds from the sale of Spinner's End on a house of her own. It would be a home for her and Richard,

but also the site of the creative workshop for children that they were planning to open together.

Catrin was more than pleased with the development. Richard Lysander was spending the school year at Hogwarts, helping the pupils handle their traumatic memories and fantasies after the war. He let the older ones act out scenes from classical dramas dealing with war, death, personal loss, helping them to recognise their own feelings in the words of great poets. The younger children still needed to play games. Richard let them re-enact the Battle of Hogwarts as often as they liked. No-one wanted to be Voldemort, of course, but Richard never tired of playing the Dark Lord for them and letting them “kill” him over and over again. Luckily he was an accomplished tumbler, otherwise he would have ended up with broken ribs more than once. Catrin had come to his class to observe from a healer’s point of view, but soon she volunteered for the part of a Death-Eater minion of Voldemort’s. The children charged her or sneaked up on her, shouting or whispering all sorts of names and curses that they needed to get out of their system. From early on she saw and sensed how good Richard’s performing arts activities were for the pupils. Soon she realised that his presence had an even greater therapeutic impact on Renata. The rest, she understood, was history.

The previous evening Richard and Renata had returned quite tired after visiting half a dozen houses for sale and everyone had decided on an early night. Catrin supposed that they would call a house elf and have breakfast in bed before going off to see yet another estate agent.

Catrin got up, went to the window, opened the curtains and smiled at the sight of the first sun rays gilding the leaves of the oaks in the park surrounding the building that housed both her home and her clinic.

Somewhere deep in her mind she sensed another glint of gold, a glimmer of light in the mental image of a honey-coloured amber gem.<sup>13</sup> The image was embedded in pale grey, silvery ashes.

Catrin went to her dressing-room and rummaged in a corner. Covered with a swath of dark turquoise silk, there stood a firmly locked, metal-studded oaken chest, a little over a foot long, equally wide and high. She picked it up from the floor, carried it to her bedroom and put it down on the desk by the window. She could feel, rather than hear, the subdued rattle of glass vials secured in their holders inside the chest. She worked unhurriedly, but without hesitation.

She reached for her wand, but checked herself. Instead, she placed both her palms on the surface of the lid. She took a few focusing breaths and immersed herself in the magical wards securing the chest. For a moment she shivered at the touch of the magic that had set the original wards: an unmistakable mental signature she would never again sense in the real world. The absent friend who had been more than a sibling, the brother she had chosen of her own free will. Severus.

Catrin did not believe in meeting again on the “other side” of death, as she believed in no other side. Severus would live on in the freedom that they all enjoyed from Voldemort’s tyranny, as long as anyone recognised and recalled his crucial role in the war. Severus would live on in the future research that she and other potions masters would base on his theories and findings.

But, for Catrin herself, there was yet infinitely more. Severus’ sharp analytic judgement and caustic wit, tempered by an ample but little-known capacity for kindness, had

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<sup>13</sup> “Internship” [http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/internship\\_b.htm](http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/internship_b.htm)

become an integral part of her own world view, vivid and permanent enough not to need a mausoleum nor require her mind to turn into one.

Firmly, gently, carefully, she unravelled the wards. Then she turned the iron key in the lock and raised the deep lid, closing her eyes. She inhaled the scent that rose from the chest: a clean tang of wood, minerals and spices. It was the scent that had always clung to Severus' clothes and hair, but also one that reminded her of days much longer past. Mid-days in July in her childhood, in an old Central European town, when the air over the pavement was shimmering with heat, but the open entrance of an ancient cathedral exhaled a cooling breath of sandstone, incense, and aged, polished wooden pews, soothing, restful, refreshing.

She rested in the memory, relishing it, a gentle joy mingled with bittersweet nostalgia. Then she opened her eyes and looked inside the chest.

Two rows of small glass vials, colourless, blue, green and brown, as their contents required, stood in their holders, in two tiers, like the spectators of a miniature theatre show. They were labelled in Severus' even, clear handwriting, and shielded by appropriate preserving spells. A few specific painkillers, cold reliever, wound cleanser, dreamless sleep potion, contraceptives for either sex, some common jinx and poison antidotes, tincture of bezoar – the precious universal antidote – in its small brown vial.<sup>14</sup> Behind the front tier, underneath the top one, she discerned a small store of dry infusion preparations preserved in charm-imbued, tightly-woven linen bags. It was a complete set of potions and ingredients to meet most emergencies.

An open compartment held a flask of saline solution, a set of dosage cups and a satchel containing a few basic surgical instruments, again meticulously maintained and preserved with a cleanliness spell.

Under the satchel, Catrin noticed a piece of dark green silk ribbon that seemed to be wedged between the bottom and the side of the compartment. She pulled at it. The thin board forming the bottom of the compartment lifted easily. It was not a secret cache, but neither a completely obvious one.

It contained a pale piece of wood and a folded paper envelope.

The long, slim piece of wood might have been a small, crude wand, but it was not. It was a chopstick, the kind that comes with orders of take-away Chinese food. Rather handy for practicing wand movements without accidentally jinxing anything and Catrin smiled when she recalled, decades ago, Severus and herself doing just that.<sup>15</sup>

She savoured the memory for a moment; then she put down the chopstick and picked up the envelope. It was of the kind that sutures and needles are sealed in to keep them sterile. This one had been ripped open and the thin curved needle inside it had long ago ceased to be sterile. It had been used, and still had a short piece of suture thread attached to it.

Catrin's fingers went to her left eyebrow, to an old, thin, barely discernible scar bisecting it. That was where the suture had gone. The procedure had hurt – a brief application of a bag of frozen peas numbed the skin only slightly.<sup>16</sup> Strange, she reflected, the way we remember pain. We recall having been in pain, we remember the circumstances, but not the distinct quality of the sensation, not like we remember a specific sound or smell.

She had submitted to the four stitches without flinching, without complaint, her firm, steady encouragement boosting Severus' confidence and helping him to a new insight.

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<sup>14</sup> "Sutures" <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/sutures.htm>

<sup>15</sup> "Wand work" <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/wandwork.htm>

<sup>16</sup> "Sutures" <http://www.achrya.net/fanfic/sutures.htm>

Doing good did not necessarily entail being nice and pleasant, he understood. Only now, holding the thin curved scrap of metal and the stump of synthetic catgut between her fingers, did she fully realise how much her trust had meant to him. Her absolute, unreserved, unwavering trust, in and for himself, her certainty of what he might have been, and what he, for a short time many years ago, truly was.

She returned the needle into the envelope, and both envelope and chopstick into the hidden compartment. Then she examined all the vials in the chest once again, thoroughly, in her best professional mode. They were all well-filled, the contents safely preserved and in good condition.

She would make sure that they remained that way, well maintained and replenished, the working potions chest of an active healer. As she closed the lid, turned the key and made to restore the wards, she sensed a familiar presence in her mind, stronger than she had in a long time.

Her mental image of the old amber gem was glowing. The fine, pale grey ashes gathered into silvery strands, floated, undulated, enclosed the amber. Gradually they merged with it, strengthening its glow, until no more silver strands were visible. The honey-coloured gem shone with a warm, steady inner light. Still using no wand, directing the magic with her bare hands, Catrin reached for the wards on the potions chest and slowly, thoroughly, almost sensuously, restored them into place. They were firm, secure, Severus' solid mental signature interwoven with and refreshed by her own.

Catrin smiled with the satisfaction of a task well accomplished.

*(Adapted from earlier fan fiction versions, [www.achrya.net/fanfic](http://www.achrya.net/fanfic))*

*2003 Love Actually*

Consolation prize,  
memory of rumpled sheets...  
Monogamous man.

*2004 The Search for John Gissing (from 2001)*

## A CORNER OF THEIR HEARTS

I was fourteen when mum told me about the divorce. And I said: “Good riddance.” She looked as if she didn’t quite dare to feel relieved. “Aren’t you going to miss your father?” she asked. “Of course you’ll visit him a lot, spend half your holidays with him, but it won’t be the same.” “The same as what?” I said. “And what am I supposed to miss?”

I remember when I was in Primary. We were living in the old flat in Bayswater, three rooms, kitchen and bath, across the yard from a print shop. The telephone was in the bedroom. My father would come home from the office, lay down on the couch to read the paper and fall asleep. He snored and I had to be quiet not to wake him up. Mum woke him up when dinner was ready, we sat down to eat, he asked me about school, but his mind was on some deal or negotiations, and sometimes he’d even take out a folder from his brief case and read in it, and grunt “oh” and “yes” and “really” to me because he pretended to be listening. After dinner he always disappeared into the bedroom to make business phone calls.

Sometimes he said he was sorry. He’d rather spend more time with me, but he had to earn money.

What was wrong with what we had? The flat was big enough, close to everything we needed, and the print shop only made noise in the daytime, so it only bothered me when I had the flu and had to stay home from school. Besides, mum worked and earned money. Quite a lot, really, designing sets for the National Theatre. Later I understood. She earned more than he did. So he had to get ahead in business, make more money, buy us a house and what-not. He took us on cultural holidays in Toscana and on the Loire. I’d have been happy with a camping trip in Wales.

He actually has the nerve to complain. He has two ex-wives and three children, he says, each with a corner of their hearts that he isn’t allowed to visit. That’s what he says to people when he wants to look human. Just sappy enough to make them sorry for him, keeping a stiff upper lip, how brave. So what about his own heart? I’d have settled for a proper slot on his schedule.

He’s always had ambition to educate me, so sometimes he’d get theatre tickets, mostly for free, he knows loads of people in the business, and ask me to be ready at six-forty-five if the show was at seven-thirty. I loved it. I loved the theatre and going out with my father. I asked mum to help me pick nice clothes, I washed my hair, made myself as pretty as I knew how and was ready from six. Time would pass, and pass, and pass, and at seven-fifteen my father would burst in, drop his briefcase and grab my hand, we’d gallop to catch the Tube and then rush from the station to the theatre. In the best case we got to sneak in after the overture or the first scene. Too often we missed the first act. – He’s never been late for a business appointment.

So what’s the point snivelling about our hearts?

I so wanted to be what he wanted. When I was little, he sometimes talked mock-French to me for a joke. It sounded really funny. And sometimes he said things, verses, in real French. I didn't understand and I felt ashamed. For some reason I was embarrassed, there he was saying things I didn't understand, and I felt as if it was my fault, and perhaps he'd notice me more if I was fluent in French.

Of course I took French in grammar school. By then we had serious money and one summer my parents sent me to a language school on the Riviera. I'd rather have gone to Bretagne, the school in Nice was full of party animal types, but father said that Nice was better for getting to know the right people. I don't know. After about a week I discovered that I really knew quite a lot of French, so I spent the rest of the month enjoying it and learning more. There's physical pleasure in speaking a foreign language fluently. And you can write in French perhaps more intricately than in any other language.

I wrote my father a letter, three pages, all in French. I thought it was elegant and sophisticated, using *passé simple* and *subjunctif* and the whole nine yards, and... nothing. Nothing, no reply. Not while I was in Nice, not after I'd returned home. He simply didn't react. I found it embarrassing to ask him straight out, but I dropped hints. And more hints. He didn't notice, or understand, or pretended not to.

I figured it out later. He had spouted French verses at me, always the same ones. Bits and pieces of Molière and Corneille. And that was all he knew. His fluent French was just a sham. And after my letter he couldn't show off anymore.

Oh yes, there have been good times. My father didn't always have his priorities straight, but he tried to do all those things dads are supposed to do with their children. We went on hikes some weekends, he taught me that there was a knack to walking far without getting too tired, he let me feel proud and strong when I was thirsty or tired and didn't whine. He lost his way once when I was about eleven, we walked and walked, did something like twenty miles in one day, and then my father boasted about it to his business friends. But later his work demanded even more of his time and we stopped going on hikes.

And when I was a child, perhaps seven or eight, I was afraid of water and couldn't learn to swim. There was no way I'd put my face under water, I was terrified. So, just before the summer hols, my father bought me a diver's mask. We had two weeks of incredible weather and he spent most of it in the water with me, for hours on end. We looked at water plants, searched for fish, played splashing and diving games, and in the end I didn't need the mask anymore. I was ready to take a swimming test at the end of that summer. Swimming was fun. A few years later I beat my father at 200 yards breast stroke in open water – the only competition I've ever known him to enjoy losing.<sup>1</sup>

I found out from mum that he'd once wanted to be an actor. I was puzzled – my father, the ultimate business executive, wanting to be an actor? But it makes sense. That's why he's so good at networking, negotiations, presentations: he has focus, he knows how to read people and play off them. He met mum in student theatre. He was playing Richard II, she was designing the costumes. Then he chose money and the School of Economics, and she took theatre design at RADA. She's always taken the job seriously – the training, the commitment. She chose a good dance school and voice teacher for me after an infamous shouting match when my father wanted to put me in a posh performing arts "academy" with the right people's daughters.

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<sup>1</sup> Written before reading "Creditors". From life. (A/N)

Years after the divorce, he still tries to interfere. He heard that I wanted to join RADA, so he said he'd talk to some people he knows on the board! Another shouting match with mum stopped him and he went off in a huff. Said he wouldn't finance my studies, if I didn't enter the School of Economics instead. He's willing to pay the tuition, living expenses, pocket money and all, if I go to some fancy business school in France or Switzerland.

Well, sorry, father. I won't study how to get rich, not even how to get famous. I've tried performing and I know what I want to do in the theatre.  
My RADA course starts in September: technical and stage management.

There is such a thing as student loans, you know.

*2005 Snow Cake (released 2006)*

## BECOMING

Past fifty, you are what you are.  
What is there to prove?  
You cannot become  
                                an acrobat  
  an astronaut  
  or Spiderman.

Except for one thing,  
never finished,  
never polished,  
never quite wrapped up...

No matter what you were, and where, and how,  
you can, may and must move on:

From a blow to a handshake.  
From gossip to your own truth.  
From guilty tears to liberating laughter.

Feed the dog,  
take out the garbage,  
climb on the trampoline  
always to go on becoming  
a decent human being:

just like a mouthful of snow.

2006 *Perfume*

## LE TEMPS DE LA RAISON

A sensible wig  
A waistcoat properly laced  
Guardians of Reason  
In the daytime.

At night  
Laid aside  
They release  
The inner ghosts.

No-one to help  
To guard  
To defend  
A man alone.

2007 *Nobel Son*

*Originally written for Sheena Ashby's 2008 Severus' birthday challenge:  
a meeting of two AR film characters*

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## THE MORNING AFTER THE NIGHT BEFORE

Eli Michaelson rolled over onto his back with a groan and almost fell off the couch. "Couch?" he thought. "What the fuck... Where's my bed?"

Then he remembered.

Extended family. Never again.

And certainly not for New Year's Eve.

Last night's hosts had been some distant relatives of Sarah's, the party had featured decent drink, passable food and an indecent number of thoroughly non-passable under-age cousins, nephews, nieces, what-not.

The last thing he remembered was having wandered off with a pint-sized snifter in his hand and a friendly-looking bottle of vintage Christian Drouin Calvados under his arm. He found a bean bag chair in what looked like some young nephews' play room, poured a half-inch of calvados in the bottom of the huge glass and picked up the top book from the pile on the floor next to him. "Harry Potter"... Well, he'd always been partial to adventure and fantasy novels. He was deepening his acquaintance with Monsieur Drouin and reading about some absurd but useful-sounding potions textbook, when he fell asleep.

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Eli heard a door open and close, quiet but determined steps, a faint rustle of clothes.

Then a low voice said:

"Who are you, how did you come here, and why should I not blast you into Oblivion?"

Oh... obviously not his nephew's play room anymore. Eli tipped his head back and rolled his eyes in order to look at the speaker. He saw a tall man, about his own age and build, but with bluish black hair inexpertly chopped off at collar length, wearing some sort of black academic robes. The man's right hand was pointing a dark, slender piece of wood at Eli. A what... a wizard's wand???

The fingers of his left hand moved in a simple, fluid pattern, and a book slipped out of its row on a shelf, flew through the air and settled in the man's hand.

"Right. This is what I came for," he noted. He took a few steps towards the couch, lowered the wand and looked down.

"Now, about you," he said.

Under his black gaze Eli felt like a preparation under a microscope.

"Professor Snape," he murmured.

"Yes," the potions master said, not batting an eye. "You have me at a disadvantage."

The statement sounded matter-of-fact, but Eli sensed that the position was not a propitious one. He squirmed.

"Eli Michaelson," he croaked.

The attempt at speech made him cough and he squirmed again.

“Don’t piss on my furniture,” Snape noticed his discomfort. He pointed with his chin: “Toilet and bath is through there, straight ahead.”

Snape stepped back to give Eli space to move and watched impassively, with his arms folded across his chest, as Eli rolled up from the couch and staggered towards the door. It led into a dark, narrow hallway that might have other doors leading out of it, but only the one straight ahead interested Eli.

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His bladder appeased and his dehydration relieved from the cold water tap in the bathroom, Eli was able to take in more of his surroundings. The hallway seemed smaller than it was, because it was literally wallpapered with bookshelves. There were books everywhere, floor to ceiling, even over the four doors that opened from the small room. If he could only see... Eli groped for a light switch and found none.

Oh, yes. This was supposed to be a magical place.

Let’s see... magic...

Feeling infinitely silly, he murmured under his breath:

“Fiat lux.”

And there was light.

And he was in a treasure cave.

As far as Eli could tell, the small room was crowded with tomes from the times before alchemy and chemistry went their separate ways. His head was spinning, not just from the after-effects of alcohol, and he felt an urge to fall to his knees. He pulled out a handkerchief, rubbed his palms and reached out a shaking hand at random. Judging by its spine, the book might be a couple of hundred years old. Eli tipped it gently, pulled it out from its row and opened it.

His Latin was no-where near good enough, but he recognised the alchemical symbols and he did know a few things about valuable old books. He found the frontispiece: the author was a certain “Stephanus Princeps”. Stephen Prince. The Prince family.

The Half-Blood Prince. Right.

Eli deciphered the Roman numerals. MDLXXVIII. 1578.

He stared at the volume in his hand, hardly daring to breathe.

“Now what?” said a voice behind him.

Snape was looking at him from the living-room door.

“This is...” stammered Eli. “I can’t believe it. You see... I’m a chemist.”

Nothing.

“A Nobel Laureate in chemistry,” Eli added.

“Hm.” Snape observed him through narrowed eyes. Then he said:

“Put that back for now and come in here.”

In the living room, Snape pointed to a high-backed chair by the fireplace.

“Sit,” he said.

Dazed in equal parts by the hangover and the experience of obviously being inside a children’s book, Eli complied.

Snape stepped closer, raising his wand, its tip ablaze with white light. Eli flinched, but Snape’s strong fingers held his chin steady.

“Don’t squirm,” said the potions master.

He turned Eli’s face this way and that, the wand almost – but not quite – touching Eli’s skin in a few places. Eli’s hands clutched the arms of the chair; Snape’s lips curved derisively when he noticed the grip. He made no comment, just pulled down each of

Eli's lower eyelids in turn and concluded his examination. Then he turned towards a work bench against one of the walls. There were some subdued clinks of glass and a few splashes of liquid.

"Stomach trouble?" Snape asked Eli over his shoulder.

"Well... Not really. Only what could be expected."

Snape swooped about to face him.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" he growled. "You're a scientist. Be precise."

He crossed the room in four strides, opened Eli's jacket and placed a hand on top of his shirt over his lower ribs. Eli tried to twist away.

"Don't be ridiculous," murmured the potions master. "Just keep still and breathe."

Eli closed his eyes and made an effort to comply.

He could feel a purposeful, impersonal touch probing just below the edge of his ribs. Then there were a few more steps, the familiar sound of a cut-glass stopper being pulled out and replaced in the neck of a glass bottle, and of a glass rod stirring a liquid in a heat-resistant glass beaker.

The steps returned and something was placed on the small table next to Eli's chair.

"Drink this," Snape's voice said.

Eli opened his eyes. There was a tall crystal goblet on the table, containing a pale blue liquid. Small bubbles rose in the liquid, like in a glass of San Pellegrino water. It looked quite appealing.

Eli reached for the goblet – and checked himself. Enough was enough. Whether this man was an over-age living role player, or a schizophrenic mental patient, Eli was not about to gulp down some unidentified... stuff.

Snape looked down at him.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," he shook his head.

"What?" said Eli.

"My language?" said Snape. "You know me from children's books. Bowdlerised."

"And as for the hangover cure," he went on, nodding at the goblet, "I've no reason to poison you. You obviously know who I am. Then you should be aware that I could have killed you in any of seventeen different more-or-less painful ways the moment I found you snoring in my living-room. However..."

He went to the work bench, and returned carrying another identical goblet and the original beaker of the blue liquid.

"Let's do this the established literary way."

He sat down in another tall armchair at an angle to Eli's, dumped the contents of the first goblet back into the beaker and stirred the liquid with the glass rod. Holding the rod in place with a practiced grip of his index finger, he poured out two exactly equal doses in the two goblets, sat back in his chair and nodded to Eli.

"Choose one," he said.

Eli reached for one of the goblets, his original one or not, he had no idea, and moved it closer to his place.

Snape picked up the remaining goblet, raised it in an ironic toast and emptied it in three smooth swallows.

"You won't enjoy the taste," he said dryly. "But it will cure your hangover."

The potions master stared into the flames in the fireplace while Eli gulped down his dose. The taste was sour and bitter, but the cool, effervescent liquid felt good going down and Eli's stomach began settling almost immediately.

After a short moment his shoulders and neck relaxed, he was feeling more alert than he had in a long time, and even the ache in his head was receding.

“Ah...” he sighed with relief. “I wish something like this could work in real... in my universe.”

“Undoubtedly,” the other man sneered.

“No, I don’t mean just the hangover cure.”

“So? What exactly do you mean?”

“Administering medication perorally and having it work this fast. By the way, do your cures interact with what people eat and drink? Do certain ordinary foodstuffs render them ineffective?”

“No, not generally.”

“How do you do it?”

“There’s nothing to do,” explained the potions master. “It’s all built into the genre conventions. Instantly efficient cures and poisons, slowed down or neutralised only if the narrative demands it. Plus, in our particular case, Ms. Rowling has no clue whatsoever about physiology.”

“Oh...”

“Are those problems in your chemistry?” inquired Snape.

“In pharmacology, really, but the two are in part closely related. You see, sometimes we find chemical substances that could make very efficient medicines, but they get broken down by the digestive system, or they work very slowly when taken through the mouth.”

“Not very practical. What other options do you have?”

“Well, there’s... rectal formulation,” said Eli, praying fervently to whatever Power was listening that Snape would understand. Fortunately, he did.

“Yes,” he nodded slowly. “The problems would be similar, with the active substance being absorbed through the intestine.”

Eli, feeling encouraged and increasingly on his own turf, continued:

“And, for faster effect, there are injections. Introducing the substance directly into a muscle, or straight into the blood stream, by means of a hollow needle.”

“Not a lay man’s method, obviously,” the potions master sounded intrigued and interested. “Apart from mastering the actual technique, what major problems do you encounter there?”

“Well, mainly, the carrier,” Eli began.

“Something to dissolve the active substance in, that’s right,” Snape caught on. “It would have to have particular properties... being non-toxic when injected, of course.”

“Yes. And not breaking down the active substance.”

By then, Snape was fascinated.

“Are you thinking of any particular type of drug? Anything you’re working on just now?”

“Yes, in fact,” said Eli, no longer caring if he was talking to an impostor or to a figment of his imagination. “There’s a new and very promising COX-2 inhibitor. It could be the solution to the cardiac toxicity problem, but it doesn’t work with any of the known carriers.”

Snape interrupted him: “A COX... what?”

“A potentially very efficient pain-killer. You see, there are two types of prostaglandins...”

Eli launched into full lecture mode, with Snape looking increasingly doubtful.

After a while, the potions master waved his hand.

“Wait, wait, wait, I don’t understand a thing. You might as well be speaking Eskimo.”

“Oh... I’m sorry,” Eli said. “I got carried away. For a while I was hoping... Sorry. It’s ridiculous.”

“Not necessarily,” Snape replied, once more scrutinising him with jet-black eyes.

“It’s a matter of finding compatible models for that particular piece of reality. I could see for myself, if you’re up to it.”

"You could... what?!"

"It's just as difficult for me to explain as those prostaglandins are for you. Look here, I haven't harmed you yet, so I'm probably not about to."

"All right. So?"

"Imagine that you're explaining that COX-2 thing to a talented first-year student."

"And?"

"Sit back, focus on what you're saying and keep talking. That's all."

Eli had a creepy feeling again, but the day's Alice-in-Wonderland mindset prevailed. He leaned back in his chair, collected his thoughts and began a high-school level lecture on his subject.

Snape watched him closely. After a brief moment he raised his wand slightly, unobtrusively, and murmured: "Legilimens."

Eli's eyes met his and there was a deeper intake of breath as Eli began his next sentence. Apart from that, the potions master was just intently listening to the chemistry professor's lecture.

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"A fascinating problem," said the potions master.

Eli looked at him questioningly.

"I understand what you're looking for," Snape went on. "I'd be happy to spend some time working on it. Take my mind off... other things. I may need more data from you shortly."

"You mean... We'd meet again?"

"It could be arranged."

Eli only nodded.

Snape left his chair briefly and returned with the old alchemy book that Eli had been admiring in the hall. The potions master paused to think for a moment.

"January 9<sup>th</sup>?"

"In a bit over a week, yes. What about it?"

"Would it suit you?"

"To come back? I suppose so, yes. But how? Where are we, anyway?"

"This is Hogwarts. If you know me, you know the place. Leave the 'how' to me."

"Why January 9<sup>th</sup>?"

Snape hesitated for a moment. Then he said:

"My birthday. Very few people know it. I don't celebrate per se, I see no reason for celebration, but I do take some time off."

He located a page in the book, counted the lines and busied himself with his wand.

Then he shut the book and handed it to Eli.

"On January 9<sup>th</sup>, any time after noon, open the book on page 60 and read line 19."

Eli looked at the book, then at Snape.

"Aloud?"

"That is not compulsory," was the reply.

Eli put the book in a pocket of his crumpled suit jacket.

The potions master picked up something from the floor in front of the couch. It was Eli's calvados snifter.

"This artefact should take you back home, if I'm not completely mistaken."

He handed the glass to Eli, who took it from him and had no time to say or do anything before...

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... he felt a thud and noticed that he was lying on the floor of a room not his own, next to a bean bag chair, with a Harry Potter novel for a pillow.

He opened his eyes and prepared to groan, when he realised that he had nothing to groan about. Judging by the level of the calvados in the bottle on the floor in front of him, he should be in considerable distress, but he was not. There was no soreness, dizziness, nausea, no acid stomach, no headache, even his mouth felt reasonably fresh.

A little dismayed at having slept in his jacket and possibly ruined one of the few suits that he felt really comfortable in, Eli Michaelson rolled over and rose to his knees, ready to get up. His right jacket pocket felt strangely heavy, so he reached inside it. There was a small book there, one that looked very old. He stood up and went to the window to look at the book in the murky daylight.

It was a book on alchemy, including certain findings that eventually contributed to the development of modern-day chemistry. The year of publication was printed in it, in Roman numerals: MDLXXVIII.

The author's name was Stephanus Princeps.

2008 *Sweeney Todd (from 2007)*

## JOHANNA

I loved her above all things, yet she betrayed me.<sup>1</sup>

She was such a sweet child. Always smiling, never fussing, fascinated with every little thing – bright flowers, shiny trinkets, stars shimmering in the sky over the balcony of my house, the birds twittering in the trees in the park across the street.

Was I in love with her mother? In lust, certainly. She was exquisite: the porcelain skin, the spun-gold hair, the lightness and grace of her movements. And what, after all, does 'love' mean? I had so much more to offer Lucy and her daughter than that... barber. My social position. The comfort and security that wealth can provide. They say that you cannot buy happiness. That claim is just a sop to keep the poor quiet. And of course some have to be poor. It is the natural order of things. It is the universal law.

Yes, the law. Order. Regulation. Regularity. Stability. The bulwark between mankind and chaos. Law and order distinguishes us from animals. Science, language, religion, they all have their laws. Among men, the laws of the realm must be enforced, and that is my profession, my duty and one of my passions. And consider other laws, those of human nature. Men have, by nature, physical needs, drives, passions of the flesh. Not so decent women – it is a man's duty and privilege to awaken desire and passion in a woman and to slake it to the couple's mutual satisfaction.

I did what I could to awaken desire in Lucy: I dressed my best, employed a skilful barber – not that husband of hers, of course – and sent her flowers every single day. Day after day I would appear beneath her window and pay my respects with the utmost grace and courtesy. Women are susceptible to male persistence: it moves them to see unfaltering devotion caused by them, directed at them.

But Lucy... Lucy would not even grace me with a smile through her window. Sometimes she would appear, with Johanna on her arm, smiling at the child and pointing out items in the bustle of the street below, but as soon as she saw me, a cloud suddenly crossed in front of the sun. Her smile vanished, she would remove the child as though protecting it from an evil eye, and draw the curtains without even a second glance out of the window.

I was well aware of the obstacle. It was that barber, with his fragile boyish figure, his big damp bullock's eyes, well versed in spouting flattering fluff at customers, and doubtlessly using the same method on his wife. As long as he was there, moving her to tenderness and pity, I would always be the coarse brute intruder.

It was at that point that my very efficient beadle heard from one of his informers that some of the barber's preparations came from illicit sources. Prompt action was called for, so as not to give his accomplices time to escape. The barber was duly tried and convicted as one of the instigators of a major smuggling ring, not rating the extreme penalty, but

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<sup>1</sup> Written by my grandfather on the back of a photograph of his daughter, my mother. (A/N)

enough to get him transported for life to a place where he would pose no further threat to civilised society.

My road to Lucy's heart and body lay open – but what first step should I take? I could not offer charity – her pride would drive her to spit in my face. Somehow, that pride had to be broken. By vanquishing her body I was certain to convince her of the inevitable and through acceptance of her fate her heart would adapt eventually. Women are weak, but they possess a natural resilience, particularly as mothers, feeling an instinctive responsibility for the well-being of their offspring.

Be it as it may, my stratagem failed. Lucy visited one of my masqued balls and let herself be induced to a physical encounter, but then...

My duties called me away to the country for a time. When I returned, my people had lost track of Lucy. It was said that she had taken poison, survived with a ravaged body and a deranged mind and been removed to Bedlam. A neighbour was seeing to the little girl's simplest needs, but some permanent arrangement had to be made. Johanna could, of course, not be returned to her mother; in fact, letting her believe that she was an orphan would be best for her in the long run.

At my request, the beadle took me to see Johanna in the drab room where her parents had lived. She lay in her cot, smiling, cooing and babbling little bits of nonsense, and I could not help smiling back. After all, even many a hardened criminal will be moved by the sight of a helpless child: it is a law of Nature that humans should care for human offspring. She reached out to me with her chubby arms and said something that sounded like "papa". I had, obviously, no likeness with her father, other than being a male figure with a friendly appearance, but children's minds are vague and malleable. It gave me a warm, pleasant sensation, like responding to the simple, unreserved affection of a dog.

My decision was instantaneous. After all, it was my failed plan for Johanna's mother that had placed the innocent child in this position. And the thought of forming the mind of a child, this child, Lucy's child, of instructing her in what was right and proper, of instilling in her the beauty of knowledge and the knowledge of beauty, and above all, of watching the promise of her own beauty turn into reality, was infinitely appealing. So both the law of men and the law of Nature demanded that I take my responsibility and provide for Johanna. I took her away on the spot, brought her to my home and made her my ward.

That the cook took to her instantly did not surprise me. She would spoil the child rotten if left to her devices. The young impressionable scullery maid was so besotted with Johanna as to fantasize about marriage and a child of her own. The way she made cow's eyes at the groom became intolerable and I was compelled to dismiss her.

The biggest surprise was provided by Mrs. Hodgkins, my housekeeper. The strict, dour, bony woman appeared ten years younger when she busied herself with the child and I became convinced that she would guide Johanna as appropriate in all the feminine aspects of life.

Johanna grew quickly. Soon she was learning to walk, to speak, joining words together to make short sentences and only a little later asking everyone what this, that or the other printed word "said". She was only a little over four years old when she could keep me company in my study in the evenings, deciphering simple stories while I was learning about the mores and customs of other nations. She even took to imitating my

personal habits: my eyes misted slightly the day she appeared holding a smooth piece of wood between her lips, declaring it to be her “pipe” and insisted on joining me in front of the fireplace – me, smoking tobacco and drinking a glass of sherry and Johanna, play-puffing on her piece of wood and sipping from a glass of cold tea.

Johanna was not only a pleasant, sweet-tempered child. She had focus, patience, determination, taking whatever interested her very seriously. Early on she became fascinated with birds. Hers was not a mere girlish interest in pretty feathers and sweet song. An accomplished reader at the age of eight, she found books on natural history in my library and learned all she could about birds, British and exotic, their appearance, behaviour and habitats. Had she been a boy, she might have become a natural historian and gone to foreign lands to discover new bird species. As things were, she kept birds in cages in her room and created beautiful bird images on her embroidery frame.

I spared no expense to have Johanna instructed in everything that a young lady needed to know. Mrs. Hodgkins taught her household skills and the personal aspects of life, but Johanna also learned painting and music from accomplished teachers, under my own supervision. She enjoyed singing and was making good progress on the pianoforte. My mother had always wanted to play the zither, but had never had an opportunity to learn, and Johanna was agreeable when I suggested that she take up the instrument. We visited the instrument maker occasionally: Johanna was particularly attracted to large zithers with a dark auburn finish. But her piano teacher advised us to wait, time passed and somehow Johanna never got around to taking up the instrument until... it was too late for everything.

Throughout her childhood, I never needed to censure Johanna very strictly. Only once was I obliged to strike her. On that occasion she complained of feeling depressed and, upon being questioned, replied that she was a princess, held prisoner in a dank dungeon by a terrible dragon. Her description of the mythical reptile fitted my appearance and clothing exactly, so I had to punish her with a slap to the face for her fanciful claim that I was an oppressive jailor to her. All the restrictions that I imposed were only for her good, for her protection, and motivated solely by my affection for her.

Most of the time, Johanna was a well-behaved, malleable child. Her keen intelligence allowed me to instruct her thoroughly in the rule systems that Providence has given man to distinguish him from the beasts.

Regularity is everywhere, from the heavenly spheres to the minute creations of skilful and patient human mechanics. I showed all this to my ward. I had long wanted to buy a telescope. While it seemed a frivolous thing to do for a grown man, in Johanna’s education I found a valid motive. She was eager to study the stars, learning the constellations and their positions at various times of the year and the paths of the planets across the sky. – Watch making had long been a hobby of mine. Patiently and cheerfully, Johanna kept me company for hours when I took apart, cleaned, repaired and re-assembled complex systems of tiny cogwheels and powerful, finely regulated coil-springs and chains. When no-one claimed a battered old long case clock confiscated from a convicted criminal, I had it brought home and gave it to Johanna. The mechanism was large enough for her unskilled fingers; she needed very little help in disassembling it and pored over it, searching for broken parts, while I was toying with the diminutive wheels of an antique verge watch. I shall never forget her radiant smile when she made several cogwheels fall into place, turned them and understood how movement was transmitted from one to another.

As long as Johanna remained a child, teaching her was almost like teaching a son. But she was growing up, turning into a young woman. Sometimes I felt a pang of regret at the waste of her keen intellect on a future of social life, marriage and procreation. Such is, however, the natural order of things.

I did my best to protect my ward from the sordid aspects of human existence. The closer she came to womanhood, the more important did it become to shelter her from undesirable contacts. I chose suitable company for her among my friends' daughters and, naturally, she never went on visits unless accompanied by either myself or my trusty beadle. At home she had free run of the entire house, with the exception of the ballroom and my private library adjoining it. She only entered the ballroom for her own dance lessons, in the company of her dancing master and myself. As for my private library – I see no need to elaborate.

Yes, my masqued balls continued, unchanged in style. I do not see them as immoral: in fact, I render society a service by hosting them. A rule-bound society needs a release of the kind provided by the Catholics' unbridled Carnival antics. Mocking and reversing rules within strict limits helps people to follow those rules willingly under normal circumstances. And I myself, like all men, have physical needs set down by Nature. Not to satisfy those needs would be to rebel against Providence and to court madness. Even proper society ladies, of the class that participate in my revels, harbour the desire to submit to a man capable of awakening and satisfying their physical urges. My feasts were meant to provide a select company with a safe, comfortable outlet for all those needs best not mentioned aloud. My young, innocent ward was, of course, completely unaware of what went on in the ballroom and was perfectly content with considering the place out of bounds.

Years went by. Johanna grew up into a beautiful young woman, with sapphire eyes, hair of pale spun gold and a figure as slender as a willow twig. One day I saw a scruffy young sailor stare at her window from across the street – and I remembered another young man, many years ago, in a similar posture. I very well recalled my sentiments when I stood across the street from Lucy's house, hoping for a glimpse of her, possibly some day a smile, through the window. I saw the lust in the sailor's eyes, a force that might threaten my Johanna.

I invited him inside, confused and frightened him out of his wits, had the beadle throw him out summarily and none too gently, giving him a taste of the consequences should he attempt to approach Johanna again.

There is an old tale of a husband jealous of some young men who flirt with his wife. As he decides to move to another town, away from them, a friend asks him if he has remembered to bring fire for their new hearth. He laughs, saying that there will surely be fire available in the other town – and the friend reminds him that, as surely as there will be fire, there will be young men. So, I understood, there would be in Johanna's life.

Slowly I realised that there was only one way I could protect Johanna and grant her an appropriate social and legal position, while shielding her from the unseemly attention of crude young males.

Yes, she was young, but not much younger than many of my colleagues' wives.

I offered myself to her. The reluctance that she showed could to some degree be ascribed to my somewhat neglected personal appearance – and that, as the beadle pointed out, was easily corrected.

There was another point, though, on which I myself was not completely sanguine. All of my lovers had been experienced; introducing an innocent young woman to the pleasures of married life would be an altogether different matter. I was just debating with myself whether I might confide in one of the ladies in my social circles, who had young daughters, and ask her advice, when...

I found Johanna in her room one night, packing her essential belongings in a bag. Somehow she had managed to communicate with that upstart young sailor and deluded herself into thinking that she wanted to elope with him.

In fact, he intended to steal her – he would steal my Johanna!

Yes, I hurt her when I said that I saw no lady in that room. I fully intended to; I could certainly never hurt her as much as her treacherous project hurt me.

I decided instantaneously that she would have to be removed to a place where she could contemplate her perfidy and ingratitude. I know what the institution is like and the thought of Johanna's suffering makes my heart bleed. It is, however, necessary, for her own good. She must be made to understand, admit her crime and regret it. When she has had time to contemplate her transgression, she will comprehend and feel contrite.

She will return to me and I shall forgive her.

Of course I shall forgive her – the sweet, lovely, innocent child.

My Johanna.



## A DEBTOR'S SONNET

Husbands and wives disparaged, lovers scorned,  
Teachers and friends dismissed unrecognised  
See true affection into farce deformed,  
In guise of debt and credit bastardised.

Unlike destructive passion's searing probe  
Catalysts aid and yet remain unspent.  
Thus offer you to thousands 'round the globe  
A catalyst of thought and sentiment.

So that we may shed light in corners dark  
Your precious platinum to us you loan:<sup>1</sup>  
Your lavish gift brings forth a lively spark  
Igniting flames far brighter than our own.

These clumsy lines my heartfelt thanks express:  
No creditor – a grantor of largesse!

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<sup>1</sup> In chemical engineering, platinum is a common catalyst for combustion reactions (A/N)



## CONTENTS

<i>PROLOGUE</i> ... of the lack I have	1
<i>PRELUDE I The Barchester Chronicles</i>	2
<i>PRELUDE II The Return of the Native</i>	3
<i>PRELUDE III Mephisto</i> Not a memory	4
1988 <i>Die Hard</i> Professionals	6
1989 <i>The January Man</i> Anti-entropy	7
1990 <i>Truly Madly Deeply</i> Jamie's bourrée	8
1991 <i>Closet Land</i> Prisoner	9
1992 <i>Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves</i> A deleted scene	10
1993 <i>Close My Eyes</i> Manzo ai funghi porcini	11
1994 <i>Mesmer</i> The ballade of Franz Anton Mesmer in Paris	12
1995 <i>I. An Awfully Big Adventure</i> Sea man	13
1995 <i>II. Sense and Sensibility</i>	13
1996 <i>Rasputin</i> What the doctor did not say	14
1997 <i>The Winter Guest</i>	15
1998 <i>Dark Harbor</i>	16
1999 <i>Dogma</i> Paradox	17
2000 <i>Play</i>	18
2001 <i>Blow Dry</i> Pastoral ditty	19
2002 <i>The Harry Potter series</i> Burning	20
2003 <i>Love Actually</i>	47
2004 <i>The Search for John Gissing (from 2001)</i> A corner of their hearts	48
2005 <i>Snow Cake (released 2006)</i> Becoming	51
2006 <i>Perfume</i> Le temps de la raison	52
2007 <i>Nobel Son</i> The morning after the night before	53
2008 <i>Sweeney Todd (from 2007)</i> Johanna	59
<i>ENTR'ACTE – Creditors</i> A debtor's sonnet	65