

# Tanz der Verfluchten

*by Amita*

Darkfic: the story gradually unfolds as a tragedy of the fatal-flaw variety. Title (Dance of the Cursed) is the one preferred by the beta reader, ladyinthecloak.

## Assignment

*Chapter 1 of 4*

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### Chapter 1: Assignment

"Okay, we're finished with the real property assessments," said Hannah.

"We hope," said Hermione.

"We have them totaled, divided into three sections: minimum, improved, and extensive, and subtotaled for each section," said Padma.

"They're ready for their graduated tax rate, based on perceived ability to pay," said Hannah.

"Tomorrow, we can start the miscellany of private property," said Hermione.

The three women groaned. They knew there would be petitions for reassessment of real property, but they had made a careful case for homeowners with a history of complaints and for homeowners whose property had increased in status. But private property was a jumble.

"Oh, look at the time," said Padma.

The three sent messages that they would soon be home with dinner. Padma and Hermione stopped at a take-out Indian restaurant where they purchased some curry bowls with rotis.

"Do you think we're stuck in this job?" asked Padma.

"I don't know," said Hermione. "The first two years we were doing it, it was exciting enough."

"It was total confusion," said Padma. "The five old men we replaced were plodding on until retirement. They didn't care about anything, and they couldn't explain anything."

"Hannah seems happy," said Hermione.

"It fits her," said Padma. "It's what you and I could get." She smiled. "Of course, they leave us alone because no one else wants the job, and we don't have to put up with any grouchy wizards."

*Ah, yes, a grouchy wizard,* thought Hermione.

Some time later, Hermione walked in her front door and cried out, "I'm home."

"About damn time," said her husband, walking into the kitchen. "I'd think you were running around, but I can't think of anyone who'd have you. Of course, you're giving it away for free, and there're all those desperate soldiers." He looked at the food on the table. "What's this?"

"I thought you liked Indian," she said.

He grunted, disappeared, and reappeared, dressed to go out. She just looked at him.

"I'm going home. Maybe they have some real food leftover," he said as he left.

She put the food away since she wasn't hungry anymore. She wondered if there would come a time when her husband's behavior no longer affected her appetite. She wondered if that would be a good thing. She slept in the guest bedroom with the door locked since if her husband came home later, she knew it would be better to avoid him. She lay awake thinking about soldiers and the stupid war in the Balkans. How had they slipped into that? It had begun with some ill-considered treaties with the German and French wizards as the Brit wizards tried to be some sort of power on the continent, and it had been precipitated by some blunders and aggression against the Middle Europeans. She fell asleep concluding it was a mess with no end in sight. She woke and left early the next morning without checking to see if her husband had returned.

When Hermione arrived at the office, it was empty. She let herself slip into daydreaming about some of the younger men who had just entered the Ministry. She fantasized about running into one of them in the hallway and spilling his tea. She would be most gracious in helping him clean up the mess, and she would generously treat him to another. She imagined him shyly and clumsily blurring out how much he admired her intelligence and pictured him blushing admitting how attractive he found her. She had arrived at the point where she was about to allow him an innocent snog, virtuously protesting that she was a married woman, not revealing how her body and soul ached for more, much more, when Hannah skipped in only a few minutes late, began preparing tea, and said, "Henry treated me to a special evening when I told him we'd completed the real property stuff." She delivered the tea, looking dreamy-eyed. "We went out to a dinner and a dance, but we hurried home for the real celebration."

"That sounds great," said Hermione.

They sipped their tea and waited for the full complement before beginning the work on personal property. They needed the moral support of a team to tackle it since it bothered their sense of fairness that all their projections relied on custom and old depreciation tables and it bothered their sense of completion that they could only make estimates of what there was and the revenue it would bring.

When Padma sauntered serenely in a half hour later, she was greeted with a chorus: "Hey there, you with the stars in your eyes."

Hannah grinned. "You need to tell Paul to hurry up."

"I'll tell him nothing of the sort," said a contented Padma.

The three were sipping their tea our smiling heroine busy thinking of suitable hexes for her companions' happy knickers her companions thinking our heroine should get her head out of hers and admit she had made a mistake when there was a knock on the door. An anxious young man entered and said, "I'm looking for Hermione."

The anxious young man led her down several halls, ushered her into a room where three people were sitting at a table, and left. The three wizards continued to be engrossed with the papers on the table. Hermione recognized the standard ploy and kept her annoyance and amusement to herself.

"Have a chair," said one of the wizards without looking up.

*Would they never tire of these games?* thought Hermione.

"Your record is impressive ... very impressive."

"We need stalwart souls, stalwart souls with a stout heart."

"England is in danger."

*And guess who put her there,* thought Hermione.

"We have a very special job for a very special someone."

"The hour is near; the need is great."

"This goes beyond the special; the need is for the extraordinary."

*I've got to keep a straight face,* thought Hermione.

"We have a new assignment for you."

"It was done with the most careful consideration. We searched for exactly the right person."

"We despaired of finding anyone, anyone at all, but then a miracle occurred."

"Your country needs you."

At this, just before their audience of one burst out laughing, the last speaker pulled a cord, and the anxious young man returned to lead Hermione into a private office where he handed her a sealed packet and vanished. Suitably primed by administrative motivation, she opened the envelope. As she began reading, she agonized over how to break the news to her husband that things had changed at work. The situation at home had progressed to the point where she hated to tell him anything about her job. Working with Hannah and Padma had become a refuge that she didn't want sullied with her married life. Near the end of the documents were the instructions to proceed to a remote area in the North where lodging had already been arranged.

She decided to go to the house and pack immediately in the hope her husband was not there. He wasn't. As instructed, she wrote a note saying she had been assigned to a school for intensive training in accounting and departed before he returned to accuse her of joining her friends in 'Whoresville.' She was certain the time away would inspire her to think of some relation-saving stratagem. She would apply her mind to it.

The train ride was pleasant enough, and she had a decent meal, but she arrived after dark and faced a ride through an unknown landscape on the broom she had been issued. She thought she was halfway there and was congratulating herself on not getting lost when the first spell knocked her sideways. The second sent her into a barrel roll. The third caused the broom to hit the ground with enough force that Hermione lost her grip and tumbled across the rocks and dirt. She came to her hands and knees and lost her decent meal. She found a depression behind some bushes where she waited what seemed ages while her heart pounded. At last, she carefully made a circle, but when she thought she had found the path to the village, there was a flash of bright lights and a flurry of curses.

Hermione fell unconscious to the ground.

*It was cold. Very cold. The sun was bright. Every blade of grass cast its shadow.*

# Partner

## Chapter 2 of 4

Out heroine meets her partner, and snarkiness ensues.

### Chapter 2: Partner

The band of kidnappers had searched Hermione and had discovered she had not completely shed her old identity. They had found a card with instructions on how to contact the tax assessment office in case of questions or complaints.

The leader of the gang was tired of the constant digs that he and his men lacked intelligence and initiative. Taking care to hide his face and location, he used the card. The message that Hermione was being held as a hostage was received by Padma.

Padma and Hannah had been given the notification that Hermione was temporarily reassigned for an advanced course in accounting. The extra workload had irritated Padma. The thought that Hermione was the one chosen had infuriated Padma. The suggestion that someone believed the over-achiever worth kidnapping instead of her sent Padma over the edge.

"Listen up, you redneck peckerwood. We will make your life a living hell. If you don't want to pay your fair share, that's okay with us because you're not going to pay your fair share or do anything else in this life. Your entire pathetic existence is about to come to a bureaucratic, scorched-earth halt. All your records are now lost, do you hear me, dickwad? They have dropped into the black hole of our filing system, and the only way you can keep out of prison or even establish that you exist is to replace them one by one. You're going to fill out forms until your hands drop off. No, wait, you're going to mark everything with your DNA loaded semen since you're such an ignorant asshole you probably can't even sign your own name. You'll mark so many forms that your member will drop off which will be a good thing. 'Cause you be messin' with assessin', and you be payin' usin' tax on your wife's pussy. By the time we're finished with your sorry ass, it'll be buried so deep the Bureau of Land Reclamation won't be able to find it. Your momma!"

"Who was that?" asked Hannah.

"Another crank call from some homeowners' association," said Padma.

"How'd it go, boss?" asked a thug.

"Tough group," he said.

Meanwhile, Hermione was feeling her way around a black hole of despair. It appeared to be eight feet by ten feet with a high ceiling and no source of light.

There was a tap. Hermione stopped to listen.

"Miss Granger?"

It took her a while to respond. She hadn't been called that for several years. "Yes," she said.

"Step clear," said the voice.

Hermione moved along the wall away from the source of the voice. A pinpoint of light appeared. The voice asked if she was a safe distance away, and she replied that she was. A larger hole appeared.

"Just give me a bloody wand, and I'll do the rest," she said.

But the voice asked if she was at least three feet away, and when she huffed and replied that she was, a woman-sized hole appeared in the wall. She looked out to see the last face she wanted to see and the only person she could trust.

"Take this until we find yours," he said, handing her a wand at last. "Back me up," he added.

He burst through the door of the hideout.

*Get the bloody hell out of my line of fire,* she thought.

But, onetwothree, he had stunned the thugs.

She felt cheated. *Honestly!*

"Don't just stand there in plain sight gawking," he told her. "Get in here and look for your wand. And anything else you think looks informative."

She found her wand in a drawer with a notepad.

"Severus," she cried, holding up a piece of paper with her husband's name on it.

He shrugged. "It's obvious we've been betrayed, and that clot is the least of our problems."

She had to agree, but she still had to fight back the tears.

"Wipe the tears from your eyes and keep looking," he said. "The people that hired this group aren't going to trust them alone for long."

"Oh," she said. She had found her tax-assessment card on the table.

"Well, well, your husband betrays you, and then you spill the rest of the beans," said Severus. "You're a well-matched pair."

Hermione glared at him, but he just said, "I wonder if they contacted the department of assessment. That must have been fun. And stop your glaring and keep searching

this place. Try to repair some of the damage you've done."

They searched, but found nothing else.

"What am I doing here?" asked Hermione

"I'm asking the same thing," said Severus. "I asked for a foxy lady. I planned to dress her flash and parade her in front of the bad guys as bait. But that's no longer an option."

"I see," said Hermione.

"If you've stopped blubbering over hubby, we can go," said Severus. "Try to stay alert."

"Just a minute," he said as Hermione started out the door. "We can't do much, but we can do something." He waved his wand, and her hair became long, black, and straight. "Amazingly better," he said.

She was fuming as they stepped into the glare of the noonday sun.

They strolled casually into a neighborhood of small shops, through a coffee house, down an alley, and across a field into a copse of trees. Severus stopped and looked for any sign of pursuers.

"We may as well be comfortable," he said. "I can put a glamour on you, a contradiction if there ever was one, and we can travel unrecognized."

"Will you lay off?" said Hermione. "You don't want me here; I don't want to be here. You don't want to be around me; I don't want to be around you. I don't know what's going on; you don't have to tell me. And I'm going to be gone in about two seconds."

"Don't go back to your house," said Severus. "Your husband will betray you, and they will kill you."

"What? Why? Why would my husband want to kill me?"

"Not your husband, he doesn't care."

Someone else saying that her husband didn't care cracked years of self-deception. Hermione was sitting on the ground, pulling at the grass, and sobbing. How had she made so many wrong choices? How had she made such a mess of her life?

After a while, Severus was sitting beside her. "We should go."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Today, London to Cologne by train to get out of England. We'll risk resting for a day in Cologne. Then, we use our interail passes to get lost on the continent. We keep moving, never travelling in a straight line."

"If we should keep moving, why are we stopping in Cologne?" she asked.

"We're not used to this, and your capture has us more disoriented than we realize," he replied. "We feel energized now from the excitement, but when it wears off, we'll be exhausted and confused. That's more dangerous than stopping to rest."

"I can hold up quite well, thank you," she said. "And what's our destination? I can rest once we get there."

"Ultimately, Brasov, Romania – gateway to the Carpathian Mountains and Transylvania."

"Vampires," joked Hermione.

"Yes, vampires," said Severus seriously. "A week from now, you'll be dining on cornmeal and cabbage rolls and downing enough tuica to forget ten bad husbands. And provoking vampires."

*It was cold. Very cold. The sun was bright. Every blade of grass cast a sharp shadow. Wrapping the cloak tighter did no good since the cold inside was as sharp as the cold outside.*

## Journey

*Chapter 3 of 4*

A crucial chapter.

### Chapter 3: Journey

"You're from their world. Have you ever wondered why the non-wizards are not bothered by werewolves and vampires?"

Her first thoughts were that it was denial, but if there were enough incidents, then it couldn't be denied. She next considered that either the non-wizards weren't as vulnerable or they didn't live in close proximity as wizards did or some combination of the two. But, finally, she didn't know. She looked at him and shook her head no.

"Retaliation," he said.

She reflected for a moment. "Okay, we stir up the monsters, they attack the humans, the humans retaliate, and the wizards of Central Europe are too embroiled with a war against the vampires and werewolves to be a threat to England."

*I'm disguised as the perfect tourist, she thought as the escargots à la Bourguignonne arrived.*

"Can we afford this?" she asked.

"We're on a bloated war budget. Wait 'til you see our battle brooms complete with code words."

"Code words for battle brooms?" she asked.

"If things get dire, say, 'Tchaikovsky,' and a 105mm howitzer pops out."

There was a pause before she said, "That rings a bell," and was able to return to her lunch with a peaceful mind, proud that she had not hexed a snail up his nose.

"We could have rented a car. It would be more flexible. We wouldn't have to fight the crowds at the rail stations," she said. "Aren't you tired of cities? Wouldn't you prefer a country inn?"

"Didn't take you long to get spoiled. Besides, who wants to drive thousands of weary miles?"

"I can handle it," she said.

"And what's so romantic about country inns?"

"You said it, not me," she replied.

"How, exactly, are we supposed to rouse the vampires and werewolves against the general population? And don't give me that 105 howitzer bullshit."

"Surely, you've guessed."

"That's terrible. Think of the innocent lives." She paused. "Oh, no, it's worse than that, isn't it? We'll have to provoke both sides."

"It calls for daring and cunning," he said, "and some people think we're not capable enough."

"Not capable!" She paused again. "Let me think about this."

*They may have sent the right girl,* he thought.

"We'll have to check the references. Where's the best library?"

"Okay, I know how non-wizards kill vampires and werewolves, and I know how to fake a vampire or a werewolf killing a human, but I don't know if I can bring myself to do either one."

"Things are more desperate now than during our civil war," he said.

"More desperate than facing a Dark Lord?" she asked.

"He may have been one of the most powerful wizards ever, but people followed him out of fear, envy, and hate. It was never a cohesive, effective group."

Can't we decide not to do this?" she asked.

"If we don't carry out the mission, the people who sent us will conclude that we are going to betray them, and they will send a team of assassins after us."

"Can't we join the other side for protection?" she asked.

"We're dealing in treachery. The other side won't trust us, and they will kill us."

"Isn't the other side trying to do the right thing?" she asked.

"That makes them more dangerous," said Severus. "They're not going to make a long speech justifying their actions that gives us a chance to escape. They'll immediately do the right thing and eliminate us."

Hermione wondered how it was that she was an agent provocateur instead of being someone trying to stop a bloody war between humans and vampires. She wondered how close she had come to being on the other side and how much of morality was a justification for the accident of being on one side or the other.

"I'm not very sexy," she said.

He sighed. "Okay, what did I do wrong?"

"You didn't do anything wrong," she said.

"I thought you liked it."

"I loved it," she said.

"I thought you had a good time."

"I had a great time," she said. "It was wonderful."

"Then you're sexy," he said.

"I don't get very excited, and I know I don't make much noise," she said.

"It's a deep and personal experience for you," he said. "At least, I hope it is."

She nodded. "Yes," she said.

"I couldn't ask for anything better," he said as he put his hand on top of hers.

"It's magical here," she said.

"Perhaps you just like breathtaking mountain scenery," he replied.

"No, I mean ordinary life has a magical quality about it."

"Well, you'll have to be satisfied with that while we're here. We can't leave any trace of magic as we go about our work."

"Ah, yes, our work," she said. "Do you think they will let us back into normal society after this?"

"You rejoined normal society after the civil war," he said.

"That was different," she replied.

"It might have been different for you because you were young and there seemed to be only one right choice. Now, you're older and confused."

"Okay, we've located two girls with leukemia, two with incurable tuberculosis, and one with a broken heart. Is that a big enough batch? And why do we have to arrange their deaths within one week of each other?"

"It'll be easier for us to ignore our consciences for a short period of time. We may crack under the stress anyway," he said. "Besides, it will have more impact. The human mind responds to large deviations."

"I've been watching, Severus."

"Yes."

"The four girls we've picked out with fatal diseases have someone who loves them, and they either know or don't know that their loved one has a limited time upon this earth, and at least two eligible wizards wish the heartbroken girl would notice them."

"And your point is?"

"The world doesn't need a love-potion; it needs a cure-for-love-potion."

"Would you take it if there were one?" he asked.

"Do vampires love each other?" she asked.

"Now that you mention it, our plan will go better if they do," he said. "I was counting on retaliation, but a vampire revenging a loved one will create more havoc."

"Then we should attack beautiful or handsome ones," she said. "If vampires have any trace of humanity left, that increases the chances that another is attracted to them."

"When this is over, will we be able to stay together, knowing what we've done?"

"I don't know."

*It was cold. Very cold. The sun was bright. Every blade of grass cast a sharp shadow. Wrapping the cloak tighter did no good; the cold inside was sharper than the cold outside. The trudge up the hill was over sharp and unforgiving rocks.*

# Failure

Chapter 4 of 4

Our pair in action.

## Chapter 4: Failure

Still, the hesitancy. But she was with him, her husband far away and forgotten. The face he had come to love so close, so inviting, looking melancholy and expectant. He let his fingers trace her noble lines from her cheekbones to her chin. She was letting him touch her. She was moving closer. He held her in a light embrace, wishing the moment could last forever.

She gave a sudden lurch. He was puzzled. Had he done something wrong? Her face contorted in a silent scream. His mind was blank as she sank to her knees, her fingers desperately clutching him. He refused to accept the obvious, that she was mortally wounded.

How could everything be taken away from them at this moment?

"Run. Run. Save yourself," she said. She crumpled to the ground, her fingers clawing at the grass. The pain was almost enough to kill her love, but not enough. She looked at him. She wanted him to be the last thing she saw.

He did not run. They had known he would not. He hovered over his dying lover, looking wildly around for the ambushers. Then the fatal darts pierced his body, and he howled with his agony and the knowledge that he would die without avenging her. He thought he caught a glimpse of them and staggered towards them. His legs gave way; he was on his knees. His last move was to throw himself toward his lady and clutch her hand with one final spasm.

"We were lucky," said Hermione.

"Yes," said Severus. "Who could hope to find a pair of clandestine vampire lovers?"

Both Hermione and Severus were glad the five human girls were alone when they arranged their deaths to appear to be by vampire and werewolf.

It was time to run and hide.

It was time for suicide. They had talked it over and decided that, while the opposition might kill them cleanly, it was likely to torture them and stake them out for the vampires. Thus, when the dark wizards burst into their bedroom in the wee hours of the morning, the intruders ran into rattling chains, stepped on ankle twisters and noise makers, and had their wand movements restricted by netting. Severus woke and cast a Disillusionment charm that stripped away their beliefs and had the dark wizards pondering the meaning of their lives. Their hesitation gave Hermione a chance to pull the cord that ignited the gunpowder under the bed.

Welcome, oblivion.

Oblivion welcomed them with a pain in the rear as the gunpowder rapidly propelled the bed upward. It gave them a splitting headache as the bed split the ceiling, followed by a twisted back when the bed fell back to the floor. Fuming from the fizzle of the gunpowder and cranky because of his headache, Severus dispatched the stunned dark

wizards and turned on Hermione. "You aimed too much of the gunpowder outward. You wanted to take our attackers with us. Always with you, the petty revenge."

"We'd be happily dead if you hadn't been cheap and skimped on the powder," she retorted.

"There was plenty of powder. It just didn't get through the thick plywood sheets you insisted we sleep on. Just because you can't abide a soft mattress."

"It's not a soft mattress; it's a sagging mattress," she said.

Fairly certain they would not go back to sleep, they hopped an early train to the next town where they had a breakfast of coffee with heavy cream and waffles with fruit as they recovered from their reversal.

Several evenings later, there was a knock on their door. Severus opened it cautiously while Hermione hid behind a couch, poised to attack.

"May we enter?"

"I think not," said Severus.

"That's wise, but not necessary. We come as friends. We admire your efforts even though they have been fruitless."

"I don't understand," said Severus, thinking the war between the humans, werewolves, and vampires had started in earnest.

"We're aware that some group, for reasons unknown, has been provoking both sides to start a war, and we're aware that you have been trying to prevent this."

"I see," said Severus.

"We even know that the provocateurs, may they rot in shit, tried to blow up you and your comrade who may as well come out from behind the couch but they were caught in their own evil stratagem while you managed to escape. Our congratulations to your daring and cunning."

"Thank you," said Severus, "but why have you come to us when we've obviously failed to prevent the war?"

"There may be some hope if not in stopping the war, then in keeping it from spreading everywhere."

"Won't all vampires, as part of a minority, join with their brethren?" asked Severus. An idea occurred to him, and he said, "Well, perhaps not."

"We are glad you are as intelligent as we hoped although that both makes it possible to work with you and risky to work with you."

The vampires dared not stand long in the open and promised to return. Severus thought the intrigue had become too complicated and wanted to leave. New Zealand sounded good. Hermione quipped that he could join the other sheep. He replied that he had a thicker skin than that and her intemperate opinion didn't faze him. She couldn't live with the shame of a job left incomplete, and she would not be happy until all the vampires were involved in the conflict and the countryside ran with blood. Thus it was that three nights later, the two were approaching a small, but imposing castle. Both patted their concealed wands. Revealing their true nature would expose them as agent provocateurs and undo all their work. The honor guard of two vampires at the drawbridge almost managed to conceal their leering and hungry looks at the human damsel.

"Severus, I'm scared," she whispered.

*Oh, great, he thought. Just what I need: someone who can't think straight out of fear.*

They were led across the courtyard and up the stairs to the throne room where the Duke and Duchess of the fief presided. They bowed to the royal couple, and the Duchess addressed the assembly. "So these are the peacekeepers. We need peace. Others have undermined their efforts elsewhere, but perhaps if we cooperate, we can secure an untroubled domain where all can prosper. There has been a tacit accord with our human neighbors, and under it, our small duchy has been regaining its strength."

"We shouldn't stand by while our fellows are being hunted," interrupted the Duke.

"As if they've ever lifted a finger to help us," said the Duchess. "They prospered while we were being chased back into this remote castle. Now, it's our turn."

"I'm aware of that," said the Duke, "but we should make a nominal effort so we don't appear to be traitors."

"Tell them we are fully occupied in securing our own borders," said the Duchess. "Tell them we are preserving a haven." She stood. "And let them rot in hell as they would us!"

"Don't you want to help your fellow vampires?" blurted out Hermione.

The royal couple paused for thought.

"Why would you favor the vampires over your own kind?" asked the Duke.

"Why are you trying to draw us into the war instead of seeking peace?" asked the Duchess.

"We should come back at a better time," said Severus, placing his hand on Hermione's shoulder and backing out of the chamber. "You obviously have much to discuss among yourselves."

"When you have decided on your best policy, you know where to find us," he said as he and Hermione backed out of the chamber door.

"We've got to get out of here and out of the country," he told Hermione.

Quicker than thought, they departed that scene.

But quicker than that, the vampires were seen.

As quick as they could, they flew down the stair.

But when they arrived, the vampires were there.

Across the drawbridge, they believed themselves free.

But the vampires appeared, mean as could be.

Severus called out her wand she should use.

To keep her cover, she had to refuse.

Hermione made a final dash. The vampires were on her; they had her arms and legs; their teeth were in her.

"Kill me, Severus!"

True as love, a green lance of light connected her heart to the tip of his wand.

The creatures snarled over the bushy-haired lump of dead meat, no longer of interest to them. Severus snarled. The creatures, now in a dead lump, were no longer of interest to him neither was his life. He charged back across the drawbridge. The vampires trying to raise it were the next to be sent to his zone of indifference. His zone of indifference widened in inverse proportion to the tight and unbelievably beautiful lances of light. The door to the tower blown off its hinges along with his cover story formed a gross counterpoint as did the bodies littering the stairway to the throne room. Before he had finished, the royal couple were positively indecorous.

He walked out of the castle into the dawn of his world of indifference.

*It was cold. Very cold. The sun was bright. Every blade of grass cast its sharp shadow. Wrapping the cloak tighter did no good; the cold inside was sharper than the cold outside. The trudge up the hill was over sharp and uncaring rocks. Under a bright and uncaring sky, he placed a flower on her grave.*

END