

The Tower Affair

by Rose of the West

A wizard has been murdered. A special investigator is hired to find and apprehend the guilty party.

The Scene of the Crime

Chapter 1 of 12

A wizard has been murdered. A special investigator is hired to find and apprehend the guilty party.

Disclaimer: Except for an OC, the characters in this story and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling.

Minister Scrimgeour looked one last time at the view from the Astronomy Tower as the morning sun rose higher. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement had finished collecting their evidence and were clearing up their various potions and powders. Kingsley Shacklebolt stood near, waiting for instructions.

"As I was saying, Shacklebolt, various powers have already asked for an independent investigator. They want someone who hasn't been close to the Ministry or the school. I just don't know about *her*..."

"She's the best you will find, if you can get her, Minister."

"Wasn't she a friend of yours at Hogwarts?"

"You may recall that she was accepted into the Auror program, but family business took her away from the Wizarding world for a while. She's trained with the Americans. It's all in the dossier."

"I need this in good hands."

"See if she will come for an interview, if she's not busy. Gringotts and several other banks have her on retainer, and they use her all over the world."

"Very well."

The Minister of Magic considered the woman sitting across from him. She wore slender, dark gray robes over a longish pencil skirt in maroon and a paler gray turtleneck. Her calf-leather boots bespoke of money. They were just worn enough, but not shabby. The lines of her face were angled, but not sharp. Grey-green eyes rested atop an aristocratic nose and a soft mouth. All of this was surrounded by a cloud of honey-blond hair. All in all, the woman looked very much like a magazine advertisement for society clothing. However, she exuded a calm confidence in the conversation about capturing the Wizarding world's second most wanted criminal.

"Ms. Stanton, are you sure you can find and apprehend him?"

A confident smile was on her face. "Minister Scrimgeour, I always get my man."

"He's a highly skilled wizard."

"He's a highly skilled wizard whose contacts will keep him close to home. I'm a highly skilled witch, Minister. You've seen my references and that's why you contacted me. However, if you're having second thoughts, I have a cottage reserved in Martha's Vineyard this month and we need not waste each other's time." She placed her hands on the armrests of her chair as if to get up.

"Oh, no!" The Minister looked harried, and his hair ruffled up more than usual as he waved her back into her seat. "No, we want you to take this job."

"Splendid. Did you understand my terms?"

"Yes, the deposit will be sent to your Gringotts account this afternoon with the balance to be paid as soon as you have completed the job."

"Thank you. Were you able to find me a team that is not comprised of idiots?"

The Minister harrumphed. "I'll have you know that our Aurors are among the best and brightest of their classes."

"I'll manage, then." Katherine Stanton stood and shook the Minister's hand before walking from his office.

The Minister watched her go, thinking to himself that she was different from any investigator he knew during his own days in Magical Law Enforcement. He couldn't be too choosy, however. With Dumbledore dead, the Ministry was clamoring for anything that would find the murderer. This woman dressed and behaved with the easy insouciance of the purest of pure-blood society witches. At her prices, perhaps she could be one. Minister Scrimgeour had set up this meeting with the intention of lowering her terms, but her easy confidence in her own ability defeated him utterly.

Katherine went to the office that was being set up for her and met her staff: a petite Metamorphmagus, a somewhat shabby-looking college-professor type, and a rather beefy-looking military sort of young man. She sighed inwardly and noted that they all did the same. It was not quite an auspicious beginning.

She smiled though and transfigured a standard government-issue folding chair into a leather easy chair, into which she slouched. She encouraged the others to sit as well. She learned the Metamorphmagus was named Tonks and liked a chair similar to her own. The college professor was named Lupin, and he wasn't actually an Auror. He preferred a wing-back. Proudfoot simply sat in the government chair. Katherine made a mental note to find out whether it was because he was bad in Transfiguration or whether he simply preferred to keep things strictly by the book.

"What do we know about this wizard? Who were his parents? Where is his family home? Where does he spend most of his time?"

Of the people sitting in front of Katherine, one had been a classmate of their suspect while at Hogwarts, and the other two were former students. None had been in his House. They had a great many opinions and ideas, but very little concrete information. "Never mind," she said. "Perhaps we'll find more as we go. Tomorrow we will search his home and the next day his rooms at Hogwarts."

"Begging your pardon, but both places have already been searched by MLE," said Tonks.

"Not by me," she replied.

They started early in the morning with the house. As they walked up the street, Katherine said, "By now his warning spells have told him that we're coming."

"Are you sure?" asked Proudfoot.

"In his situation, I would have set them between those two hedgerows." She pointed just behind their current position.

"Are you sure we want him aware of us?" Lupin had reasons for not wanting an unexpected engagement.

Katherine smiled mischievously. "Why not? Perhaps we'll discover if he's an early riser or not."

They knocked on the door and received no answer. Using a sticking spell to fix the search warrant on the door, they then opened it with a simple *Alahomora*.

"It's almost too easy," said Lupin.

"He's certainly very clever. There's probably more to this," agreed Katherine.

As stated by Tonks, there was very little in the house. They looked through all the bedrooms, common rooms and even found staircases to a cellar and attic without luck. Katherine found a few items that would help round out his family history in her mind and directed that they be taken to the office. She noted the lack of dust and decided that someone had been here recently and at least freshened the place up if they didn't actually stay here.

The mirror in the entranceway interested Katherine greatly. It was three feet wide and spanned the entire height of the wall. Walking toward the kitchen and then looking in the library, she found that things didn't quite add up. She walked right up to the mirror and looked at it, under the guise of freshening her lipstick. She nodded to herself and leaned up, pressing her lips to the mirror just before they left the house.

Severus Snape listened for the sound of his alarm spells as they passed back through them and allowed himself to relax. He had just finished dressing and was about to fix himself some breakfast when they had sounded the first time. With just a minute to straighten up his bed and bath rooms, he had barely managed to get into his hiding place before the door had opened. Then he had watched through the two-way mirror as they had searched his house.

He was amazed by the woman who stood in front of his mirror as he stood, arms folded, on the other side. She wore a black turtleneck and knee-length black leather skirt as well as dragon-skin boots under her robe. She held her wand comfortably, as though it were a natural extension of her hand. He watched breathlessly as she applied her lipstick and then ran the tip of her tongue over her lips before applying her lips to the mirror. If he put his face to the mirror, the smudge of her lipstick would be in just the right place to meet his own mouth.

With a surge of exhilaration and smidgen of fear, he realized that she knew he was there. There was not much worry that he could fight his way out with the other three, but she was an unknown quantity. He wondered what it would be like to take her on. The kiss was the last thing she did as she went out the door, unless one counted the gesture that could almost be interpreted as a wave goodbye.

When he decided, finally, that it was safe to leave his hiding place, Snape finally had his breakfast and morning coffee. He pondered the woman. He would have to see if the Malfoys still had any sources at Ministry. He wanted to know more about her. For some reason, she had him boxed in, but decided to let him go this time. She might be a worthy opponent.

A/N: This has been beta read by Trickie Woo. Yes, the characters are a touch OOC and will be more so as the story progresses. This story was inspired by a movie made in the late '90's that is a remake of a movie of the same name in the '60's. House Points to the reviewer who correctly guesses the movie.

The Evidence

Chapter 2 of 12

Katherine looks through the information she has linking the suspect, the crime, and the victim.

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"He was there and you let him go? WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, KATIE ASHER?"

Few people ever saw Kingsley Shacklebolt angry or upset in any way, but Katherine Stanton was getting a good dose of it right now. Proudfoot and Tonks could hardly contain their giggling in the hallway. Remus took out a scrap of parchment and wrote "Katie Asher/Katherine Stanton" on it. Kingsley had been assigned to keeping the lines of communication open between the Minister and the special investigator. At the moment he was communicating rather loudly.

"He's not going anywhere," Katherine answered calmly. "He knows as well as you do that there's not a shred of evidence except the word of one witness who hates the man already. And do you mind using my professional name, please?"

Kingsley's voice lowered but somehow got angrier. "Are you saying Harry Potter is a liar and that you don't think he did it?"

Katherine smiled like a large cat toying with its prey. "Oh, he did it. He did it, and right now he's smugly sitting in his own kitchen, eating a tomato sandwich and planning how he will get away with it. He was the only one on that tower who could and would do it so cleanly." She leaned over Kingsley's desk. "I would prefer to capture him in such a way that we can actually convict him, however. Style won't convince the Wizengamot."

"That's why we will use *Priori Incantatem* on his wand."

"He's managed to clear this past month's worth of spells from it long before now, if he even used his own wand that night."

"That would take some complicated magic."

"For a wizard who took O's in how many N.E.W.T.s, and who has increased his knowledge and skill a hundredfold since then?"

Shacklebolt sat down, hard. "Did you get any sleep last night or did you just read our records on him?" He thought for a moment. "Do you think he will get away?"

"I think that there's much more to the story than we know. I would like to speak to the witness, but I understand he's unavailable?"

Shacklebolt nodded. "Until the end of July. Poppy is keeping a close eye on him, and then it's his family home. If we try to move him before then, he'll be exposed. Every Death Eater in Wizarding Britain knows who and where he is and is under orders to capture him if possible, including those here at Ministry."

"If that's the timetable, then that is what I will have to work from. In the meanwhile I can study the boy's statements, study the crime scene, and learn all I can about the enigmatic Severus Snape."

Katherine spent a long morning on the top of the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts School. She examined the statements and walked through each person's position and steps as though she were choreographing a dance. She spent an hour near the wall around the school property going over the duel between Snape and Potter in the same way.

She suddenly stopped and looked at Tonks, who was holding a folder filled with various parchments. "Why didn't Snape just kill Potter? Doesn't He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named just want the boy dead?"

Tonks looked back over Harry's statement. "Snape said that Potter needed to be killed by You-Know-Who, himself."

"So why didn't Snape kidnap the boy at that point and deliver him to... He-Who...oh, this is so tedious.*him*? Snape had Potter, wandless, injured, at his mercy. They were feet from a place where they could Apparate. Hagrid was dealing with the fire at his cottage, and there was just Potter against a half dozen Death Eaters. They could easily have used a binding charm and taken him. It's curious."

After lunch the team returned to the Ministry and started to assemble their notes. The papers and personal effects from Snape's office and living quarters at Hogwarts had been boxed and taken to the Ministry. Proudfoot and Tonks were called away on Auror work while Lupin sorted through the information they had gathered and re-gathered.

"Not a very happy childhood," she mused. "Perhaps some domestic abuse..."

Remus poised his hand to reach for any of several folders. "Where did you see that?"

"His house is better kept than when his parents were alive. The places where the walls have been plastered over and repainted are clear to see if you know where to look."

"And you know where to look?"

Katherine simply gave Remus a vacant stare before speaking again. "His mother was magical but his dad was a Muggle. That doesn't always work out. Even when both try very hard they end up living separate lives. His mum was from a well established purest-of-the-pure-blood family, she was in Slytherin House, she was the whole thing, and then married a Muggle. For all we know, his dad simply showed up on the scene and married her. I wish we had more background on that."

"So when he got to Hogwarts, he took after his mother's side of the family. That makes sense."

"But, if his dad's a Muggle, why buy into the whole pure-blood superiority thing? He must have hated his father and he must have had good reason. Which brings me back to the abuse."

"I see."

"At the same time, there isn't a single book or publication of pure-blood propaganda in his house or rooms at Hogwarts, not even *Nature's Nobility*, out of hundreds of books MLE catalogued. All Death Eaters, even the illiterate ones, have at least that. One of these files shows Snape punished students for using the word 'Mudblood,' too. His loyalties are quite odd. I'm missing a major piece of this puzzle, somehow."

Katherine sat back and thought, her hand tapping her mouth as she tried to put it together.

"What do we know about the relationship between Dumbledore and Snape?"

Remus looked at Katherine carefully. He had found her files under both names and read them shamelessly. Katherine (Katie) Asher had been a Hogwarts student two years behind him. Her mother was magical, a relative of the Longbottoms, and her father was a Muggle. She sorted to Hufflepuff and received good enough grades to be accepted into the Auror program but otherwise did not stand out in any way. There was a note in the file signed by Rufus Scrimgeour to indicate that she was accepted as a trainee with the Auror program. The next page showed a copy of a marriage certificate to a Cyrus Stanton, Muggle. Several pages appeared to have been tampered with and then there was a note that the husband and father were both deceased, on the same date, at a Muggle hospital.

From there, the file on Katherine Stanton showed that she moved to the United States and trained with their Auror program. Several notes signed by Kingsley showed that she had received commendations in the USA. As American Aurors often did, she trained with several government agencies while there. After completing her training, she spent several years working with the Americans. Afterwards she started working privately as something between an investigator and a bounty hunter. It was hard to tell from the file where Katherine's loyalties might lie, but based upon the source of most of the information, it seemed she would probably be loyal to Kingsley.

Remus returned to the question at hand. "Very little," he answered. "I think Snape spent time in the Headmaster's office when we were students, although not as much as my friends, James and Sirius. Our foursome could be fairly destructive in our way." He smiled in fond remembrance.

"I see in the school records many indications that Snape was not your friend." Katherine raised an eyebrow as she looked at Lupin. It was a demand that he explain.

"James Potter and Sirius Black took an instant dislike to Severus Snape, and he to them, the very first time we all rode the Hogwarts Express. When you add the House rivalries... well, we were never going to be friends with him."

"What about you, Remus?"

He sighed. "In another time or place, I would like to think that Severus and I could have patched over our youthful stupidities and become collegial. We did work together for one year... but my being friends with James destroyed any possibility of friendship, at least for Severus."

"So you have a bias?"

"It gets more complicated than that. I expect you've read my records, too?" Katherine nodded while holding his gaze evenly, indicating that nothing she read had bothered her. "So you would understand that my situation was eased by having Wolfsbane Potion prepared by a top Potions master. He prepared the potion and covered my classes at the time of the full moon. By doing both, he made my year as Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor possible. Dumbledore didn't give him a choice, and Severus did it. I'm in Severus's debt."

"So any bias you have...?"

"That bias would be based upon the fact that he murdered the man who mentored so many of us," Remus said with a flash of anger on his usually calm face. Then he relaxed. "Yet Dumbledore said, time and again, that he trusted Snape... The two spent hours together in that tower office, discussing who knows what. Before the murder, I would have said the one person who knew anywhere near as much about the plans of the resistance to You-Know-Who as Dumbledore would be Snape."

She kept thinking. "From Dumbledore's notes in these records, it seems as though he tried to replace some of what Snape didn't get from his father. There's at least some mentoring involved. It does seem rather odd that Dumbledore would give so much of himself to a man who would end up killing him. If he knew Snape was planning to kill him, why would Snape have been kept on staff? It was not like Dumbledore to be completely fooled like that. And if Snape knew so many of Dumbledore's thoughts and plans, why haven't the Death Eaters acted more decisively with all of that knowledge? There's no way to sort this out."

"So what's the next step?"

"I've received an odd invitation for an event scheduled at the same time as the funeral. Dumbledore was my headmaster, too, and I wish I could pay my respects. However, I believe it's in the best interests of the case if I attend this other event."

A/N: This has been beta read by Trickle Woo.

The First Interview

Chapter 3 of 12

Katherine has her first conversation with the suspect.

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The next morning, Katherine reopened an envelope containing an invitation to a Quidditch Match sponsored by the Malfoy family. The back of the card contained a personal note: *Dear Ms. Stanton, it would honor me to have you attend as my personal guest. The Portkey will activate at 9am. SS.* As an opportunity to better understand her prey, this event was not to be missed.

She had been startled to see the object he'd enclosed as the Portkey. Looking at it, she had a recollection of her fourth year at Hogwarts.

She was hurrying from an afternoon Potions class back to her common room when she accidentally slammed into a sixth-year student, causing her bag to spill everywhere. The sixth-year helped her pick her books and quills up and sneeringly sent her on her way. When she arrived at the Hufflepuff common room and started working on her homework, she discovered that the badger key chain she used as a zipper pull was gone.

Looking at that very key chain in her hand right now, she wondered how much of an accident it had been to bump into Severus Snape that day and why he would save something so inconsequential for so many years. Perhaps he purposely gathered little trophies from other students. She wondered where he was keeping them and what else she might find there. That he remembered her was equally startling. She hadn't been so careful of her looks at Hogwarts, and her name had not been Stanton at the time.

Katherine was careful of her looks as she dressed for the day. She wore khaki slacks and a sheer blouse under the robe she normally wore to sporting events. Given the likelihood of rain, she wore her oldest boots. She fastened her hair into a soft ponytail and kept her makeup understated. Choosing to be seen as Americanized, she wore enormous sunglasses and a baseball cap to keep stray rays of the sun out of her face.

Promptly at 9 a.m., the Portkey dropped her practically into the arms of the event host, Lucius Malfoy, recently broken out of Azkaban Prison. He smiled and they both chuckled at the awkwardness of the situation. "You must be Severus's guest, Ms. Stanton?"

"That would be me," she said.

"I am Lucius Malfoy. Allow me to welcome you to our little gathering. Severus has asked me to make sure you find your seat. He's changing with the other players."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Malfoy, and that's quite kind of you."

As her host adroitly walked her through the crowd and to the stands erected on the field, he mentioned the charities for which the game was raising money, introduced her to some other guests, and wondered if the weather would hold out for an hour or two. "Severus will be at the far goal today, playing keeper. As his students will tell you, nothing gets past him."

"Not much gets past me, either, Mr. Malfoy," murmured Katherine, smiling.

He understood what she meant and smiled slyly. His voice became a bit smoother and even dangerous. "Perhaps we should see how well you play the game, then, Ms. Stanton. Shall we set you up as a potential reliever?"

A frisson of tension developed between them.

Katherine threw her head back and laughed. "La! Mr. Malfoy, I don't know how long it's been since I've ridden." She looked up and down at his gaunt figure. "A broom, that is. I'd surely ruin any chances your charities have of collecting money. No, lead me to my seat and let me watch. I'm sure that's the best place for me."

He smiled as well. "Here we are, then, Ms. Stanton. Enjoy the game." He stood next to her a minute too long, looking at her as though to take her measure, and then returned to some other guests.

The game involved members of the best-known Wizard families in England. As part of maintaining her business, Katherine made herself familiar with those families. Whenever she was hired to locate an uncle who had embezzled a family trust fund, she could more quickly get to work by knowing the members of that family. She scanned the pitch as the players flew onto it and saw quite a few whom she knew were eligible bachelors. The sides had been selected the previous evening, giving neither side a chance to practice beforehand and only limited time to discuss strategy. Looking around the stands, Katherine saw several families that she was aware had young unmarried daughters. One of the purposes of this game became clear.

As Lucius had told her, Severus took the goal at the far end of the pitch. His team wore dark green to differentiate themselves from the silver-gray color of the other team. She recognized the referee as a Hufflepuff who had been prefect during her first year. He was a little balder, but very much the same, now.

The green team had better Chasers than Beaters and their Seeker, a timid young man Katherine recognized as a cousin of the Malfoy family, seemed doomed. The gray team was better at Chaser and Beater, but could not get past the green Keeper. Snape kept the Quaffle out of the goals, but the rest of the game seemed to go badly for the green team. Eventually, a Bludger hit the Malfoy cousin, who fell to the ground and had to be removed from the game.

After a short consultation, it was announced that Snape would play Seeker for the green team and that a recent Hogwarts graduate named Montague would take over as Keeper. A collective groan was heard from the stands. Katherine soon learned why. The game balls were re-released, and play continued with the Quaffle and Bludgers. Snape flew slowly past the stands until he made out Katherine and then returned his attention to the game. The gray team scored twice in the space of five minutes, but before the Quaffle could be released again, Snape captured the Snitch and the game was over. The total length of the game was less than an hour. As the spectators made their way to the pavilion where lunch would be served and a silent auction was being held, Katherine could hear grumbling about show-offs who ruined a day's fun.

Katherine stood near the edges of the crowd, sipping a cocktail and watching the interplay of the people. It did not surprise her that there were several people wanted by the Ministry, standing and talking animatedly with Ministry staff members. She was in a world that transcended Magical Law, and she had been hired to apprehend only one of those wizards. Lucius Malfoy came back up to her.

"Ms. Stanton, we cannot have you standing by yourself. I have a reputation to uphold as a good host."

Katherine lowered her face and smiled softly, pretending to blush. "Oh, Mr. Malfoy, I'm so sorry! I was simply enjoying being here and waiting for a turn to look over the auctions."

"You must have noticed by now that you need to push your way in. Don't be shy. Can I get you another..." He looked at her drink. "My dear, what *is* in your glass?"

She held up the remains of her Sea Breeze. "Vodka, cranberry, grapefruit, twist of lime..."

"Ms. Stanton, has anyone ever told you that you drink like a Yankee?"

She chuckled and he looked past her. "Severus! Come get your guest a cup of your punch!" As Severus moved toward them, Lucius leaned down and said, "Watch yourself, my dear, half the women in this tent will be setting fire to you with their eyes, or wishing they knew a spell for it. Rumor has it that Severus is loaded, and now that the Dark Lord favors him, he's the catch of the year, even if he's only a Half-blood. If I had a daughter, I'd try to catch him for her, and I have half a mind to divorce Narcissa and sell her to him."

"Now, Lucius, you know better than to trust to rumors. I'm just a humble schoolteacher."

Katherine smiled up at him, "Why, Professor Snape, just gossip tells me there's far more to you than *that*."

Snape looked at Katherine and smirked at her. "That's exactly my point, Ms. Stanton. You shouldn't believe nasty rumors. They can get a person into trouble."

"Come now, professor. You know that every rumor has a nugget of truth. It's my job to find that nugget and properly interpret it."

Lucius laughed loudly. "I can see that you are both in capable hands with each other. I will bid you adieu, Ms. Stanton. Until the next time." He left them together and moved off to some other guests. As he passed his wife, he gave her hand a surreptitious squeeze that indicated a genuine affection between the two.

"You left my home in rather a mess." Katherine's attention was drawn back to the wizard beside her.

"Did I? I thought we had cleaned up rather well after ourselves."

"Yes, well, there is the matter of a smudge on my mirror."

She smiled at that. "I'm so sorry. Was the bill to clean it expensive?"

His smirk deepened. "Somehow I think it will be quite costly to someone."

Her smile became more serious. "Yes, well, I'm here to collect on a bill. Someone must pay for what happened at the top of a certain tower... a week ago?"

His smirk stiffened, and he looked seriously at her as well. "Not here, Ms. Stanton. Today we are raising money for one of Narcissa's charities. It's children at St. Mungo's, I believe. Come, bid on something. The silent auction will be ending, soon."

An hour later the party was breaking up and Severus was walking Katherine to an Apparation point. She had bid on several auctions and lost most of her lots, but had managed to beat out several hopeful heiresses on one item. As they walked, she pocketed a box containing the Snitch that Snape had just caught at the game that day.

"You know, there was one item I almost expected to see at the auction today..." she mused.

"What would that be?" he asked.

"Dumbledore's wand."

He stopped walking and grabbed her wrist, spinning her around to look at him. A rage that she sensed had been just below the surface all along emerged. "Witch, you go too far."

She looked right into his eyes, serious herself, and shook her head slightly. "On the contrary, Professor. I intend to go much farther with you."

With this Parthian shaft, she spun out of his grasp and into the ether.

Thanks go to Trickle Woo for beta reading, and to the staff of TPP for their kind assistance.

The Second Interview

Chapter 4 of 12

Katherine visits Hogwarts for a quiet dinner.

Disclaimer: Except for an OC, the characters here and the world in which they live are the creation and property of JK Rowling.

Katherine was invited to dinner at Hogwarts a couple of weeks before classes started. She arrived at the school gates as directed and was shown in by Filch and Mrs. Norris. She was directed to the Quidditch Pitch and looked in distress at her high-heeled shoes.

There was nothing to do but transfigure the shoes into more serviceable boots. Katherine then strolled in relative comfort along the drive to where the path down to the stands began. As she approached she saw two wizards flying up, around, and back and forth. They almost collided and then returned to the ground. At this point, Katherine was close enough to hear voices.

"Double or nothing, Lucius!"

"You owe me five thousand on that one, Severus..."

"It's a beautiful evening, Lucius, what else is there to do?"

Malfoy caught sight of Katherine. "Perhaps entertain your dinner guest?"

"It won't take but a minute or two. Draco, release the Snitch."

Snape was up in the air as the Snitch was released, with Malfoy cursing and streaking up after him. They chased and circled each other until suddenly the Snitch was right in front of Katherine. It swirled around her until it flew straight into the middle of the pitch. The men, following close behind the small ball, flew near her and back into the pitch after it. Finally, the Snitch swerved again. Snape saw the change; Malfoy did not. The two wizards returned to the ground and put the Snitch away. They walked with Draco toward Katherine, arguing good-naturedly all the while.

"Ten thousand Galleons. I'll have them sent to you tomorrow," Malfoy didn't look as upset as another man might.

"Actually, we can call it even if you would permit me to make a small raid on your wine cellar."

"Oh, come now, Severus. I know you've been lusting after that particular vintage, but still..."

"One case is worth precisely ten thousand Galleons. You can send the first bottle along tonight."

Malfoy nodded and lowered his voice, thinking Katherine wouldn't hear. "Only if you promise to tell me how you fare with the witch..."

Snape laughed, and Malfoy took it as agreement. The men reached Katherine and greeted her. Snape offered his arm and led her to the castle as the Malfoys made their way to the gates. Katherine was led to the Great Hall and seated at a single table placed in the middle of the room.

"Aren't the other staff members eating tonight?" Katherine asked.

"Those who are currently in residence prefer their rooms to my presence."

They started their soup and discussed Quidditch until the main course was served. A Malfoy house-elf appeared, holding a bottle of elf-made wine. Snape smiled and summoned him closer. The elf opened the bottle and presented it before Disapparating.

"This is the ten thousand galleon wine?" asked Katherine.

"Along with the rest of the case," her host answered.

"And I'm expected to..." Katherine twisted her lips as she let the rest of the sentence hang there.

"Not if you don't wish to do so."

"It's a delicious wine."

"Feel free to let that influence your decision."

Katherine laughed. "What makes this wine so valuable?"

Severus described the Mediterranean vineyard where the grapes were grown and bottled. This particular mixture of that year's vintage was considered particularly good. From there they discussed potions and how Severus had made his way up the ranks of respected Potions Masters.

"Now you," said Severus over coffee. "How did you become so well paid for what you do?"

"I'm very good at my job," Katherine answered. "Isn't that how you became so well paid?"

"Touché. It just seems odd that the wife of a Muggle barkeeper would train with Aurors in the United States."

"You are quite well informed. Do you have a file on me?"

"I doubt it's as thick as the one you have on me. Was that wizard you spent so much time with last year in Tuscany really related to the Rothschild family?"

Katherine smiled. "That's the rumor."

"Do you always get your wizard?"

"Or witch, as has occasionally been the case."

"Do you think you will get me?" Severus looked at her with smoldering eyes.

"Oh, yes," Katherine murmured, returning his gaze.

"The Ministry has exonerated me, you know." Snape folded his arms.

"Have they? Did you explain what you did and why and that made it all better?"

He looked at her evenly. His eyes were open but might as well have been shut for all that Katherine could see in them. If the eyes are the windows to the soul, Katherine had serious doubts about the soul of Severus Snape.

She watched him while she traced the top of her wine glass. "Will you explain it to *me*?"

The slightest flicker of his eye indicated that he heard her as he continued to stare.

The remains of dinner disappeared.

His arms unfolded and as he waved his hand, a game board appeared. "I had thought to share a game of Wizard's chess."

Still looking into his face, Katherine nodded. "I accept."

"I prefer black." Life returned to the obsidian eyes of Severus and dared Katherine to make a comment.

She accepted the dare. "Of course; I'm sure your life is complicated enough. If you're usually black, you should be black. I wouldn't want you to forget which side you're on."

His lips twitched without comment as she used the standard opening. "I see neither of us feels particularly original this evening?" he said.

She pursed her own lips to keep from smiling and didn't answer. The players exchanged pawns and then a knight for a bishop. Their faces became concentrated as the game began in earnest. Katherine leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. The slit in the side of her robe fell open, exposing a leg up to the lacy top of her stocking. Severus held his mouth shut by resting his chin on one hand as the other caressed a rook.

More pieces found their way to the edges of the board as the game progressed. Severus started tapping his mouth with a finger as he pondered his queen. Katherine couldn't take her eyes from his lips and absently ran her tongue over her own. As Severus captured her queen, she couldn't take her eyes from his hand and nearly missed the opportunity to capture his queen.

Soon there were no more than a handful of pieces left on the board. Katherine looked down to see her pieces shaking their fists in annoyance. "Why, it's a stalemate!" She looked at the jeweled watch on her wrist. "I really must go."

Her host rose and moved to hold her chair. "You may use the Floo."

"And have you hear where I go? I don't think so."

"Then allow me to accompany you to the gate."

Katherine smiled. "If you insist."

He offered her his arm, and they went out of the castle and into the night. "You have an attractive lifestyle," she observed.

"I have my small pleasures."

"What happens when you have to give it all up?"

He smirked. "That will be as soon as the rest of the staff and students arrive."

"Stalemate, indeed." They reached the gate.

Katherine was about to slip through when a hand circled her wrist and pulled her around. She looked up. There was no stalemate in his kiss. He conquered her mouth with his own until she went weak at the knees. She refused to give in to the temptation to slide her hands up his shoulders and around his neck. Instead, she kissed back with the same fervor he used on her. After a long moment, he lifted his face from hers and let go of her arm.

"Until the next time, then." Katherine found herself on the other side of the gate, watching as he turned on his heel and walked swiftly back up the drive.

"He sounds so...urbane." Tonks set out the tea tray her mother sent in. Katherine had been granted entry to Ted and Andromeda Tonks's house on Kingsley's say-so. It was one of the places Katherine and Kingsley had worked out to exchange information. Tonks would not be able to do much active work for a time, but she could help relay information and figure things out.

"Oh, he is," Katherine agreed. "He's the perfect example of a cultured gentleman."

"That's not how I remember him from potions class. Then he was a real hard..."

"I get the picture. A man in the circle of his friends and peers, however, is not going to behave in the same way as he does with students."

"So he's Mister Society Wizard?"

"Not exactly. I think he's playing along with them, because it suits him to fit in with them. Yet there are moments when I know I'm hitting a nerve. I'm just not sure what exactly I'm hitting. I still don't know whose side he's on, and I know I'm missing something major in his background."

"It sounds like he's hitting a nerve, too."

Katherine leaned over the tea tray to hide her face. "My nerves have been gone for a very long time. Do you want me to freshen your cup?"

"I'd better not, with the baby and all."

"How is that going?"

Tonks leaned back and sighed. She had not been pregnant for long, but it was taking its toll. "Who knew a person the size of a grape could be so exhausting? I just wish Remus..."

"I'm sure he'll be fine after he's had time to think about it. There's an awful lot going on right now, but he'll accept that this might be the best time, after all. At least he's not like..." Katherine waved off the thought she had.

"Like who?"

"No one... another husband I once knew about."

"So did you find out anything new?"

Katherine shook her head. "He favors certain chess strategies? Honestly, I'm not sure. He kept me in the Great Hall."

"That's something."

"Yes. I suppose he didn't want me to rifle through his things, but I've already done that, so what could that matter? Why would he keep me out of the Headmaster's office?"

A new voice entered the conversation from the doorway. "The portraits."

Tonks jumped up with a new energy. "Remus!"

Katherine sipped her tea and looked out a window as the two took a moment to greet each other. The exhaustion Tonks was feeling must have been partially due to not knowing where her husband was, because suddenly her hair turned pink and her face took on a healthier tone. Lupin looked embarrassed but happy to be with his wife. They held each other for a few minutes, and then Lupin and Tonks sat down.

"He doesn't want you talking to the portraits."

"What are you talking about?"

Remus looked at Katherine. "I take it you were never sent to the Headmaster's office? As I mentioned, we Marauders spent more than our share of time there. The office has the portraits of all the former Headmasters, and they must assist the current Headmaster in his duties. They retain whatever personality they had at the time of their deaths. There must be some reason why Snape doesn't want you talking to them. Dumbledore is in there, too, now."

"If they're supposed to assist him, why would he worry?"

"Perhaps there's some disagreement among them concerning you. He could be working with us or against us, and either way, perhaps he worried the portraits would tip you off."

A/N: Thanks to Trickie Woo for beta reading! Thanks also to The Petulant Poetess Admins for their vigilant help!

Further Developments

Chapter 5 of 12

The summer progresses and Katherine's case takes a U-turn.

Disclaimer: Except for an OC, the characters here and the world they live in are the creation and property of JK Rowling.

A/N: There is definite egg on my face, here. This is actually chapter four and the previous chapter is five. They will be switched around as soon as I can do so. If anyone is wondering how Katherine's job was affected by the changes at the Ministry, here is the answer.

Minister Scrimgeour was in a terrible mood. The case against Snape was going nowhere. He had finally given the order that it didn't matter whether there was sufficient evidence to convict Snape; they would arrest him and deal with the evidence later. A shamefaced Dawlish and Proudfoot came back from Snape's home and reported that he was not there. What's more, the house was dusty enough to indicate that it had been empty for at least two weeks.

Two nights after the botched arrest attempt, Harry Potter was moved, without Ministry knowledge, in a fiasco that resulted in the death of one the best Aurors that Scrimgeour had ever known. The boy arrived at his destination safely, but it was quite costly if just measured in the life of Alastor Moody. The Minister would have to meet with Potter as soon as he could, even over Arthur Weasley's dead body if need be. The release of Dumbledore's will from probate would be a good pretext. In the meanwhile, there must be a way to figure out what all of the whispers in the hallways meant. The Minister had been getting odd looks from Yaxley, lately.

Several evenings later, Katherine was out of the office, walking through the school grounds. Half of her staff were attending a wedding. It would give her a chance to look things over in a light more like that on the night of the murder and without extraneous comments. Minerva McGonagall came running up the Astronomy tower staircase when the word came: the Ministry had fallen to the Death Eaters, and Scrimgeour, for better or for worse, had been killed. Katherine patted the professor's arm and put

away her notebook. It was time to go back to her London flat to see what reception she would receive.

Kingsley was in a doorway of the dark alley where she Apparated.

"What's the news?" she asked quietly.

"I'm out. They know I'm in the Order. I've watched your doorway. They fastened a scroll to your door but left. I haven't seen any magical people at all around here since. I think that means you're still in."

"Do you remember my old address?"

He thought for a moment. "Yes."

"You can stay there if it's safe, although you'll fit in better if you look like a stevedore. I'll try to meet you there this weekend."

"Right. Watch your back until then."

"You stay safe, yourself."

The note from the Ministry was an order to come for a meeting with Pius Thicknesse and Gawain Robards. Having experience in such matters, Katherine arrived a full hour early. When she was shown into the meeting room, she found that Dolores Umbridge was also there.

"Ms. Stanton, the Ministry would like to keep you here, as long as we are clear about your duties." It was clear the statement was supposed to be from Thicknesse, but Umbridge did the talking.

"In my discussions with the previous Minister, it was clear that I am to find and apprehend the person responsible for Dumbledore's death. Is that still the case?"

"Very good. Yes. What leads do you have?" Umbridge was leaning over the table they sat around, looking eager.

"At the moment, our leads indicating that the person responsible is Severus Snape have dried up. I had hoped to speak with Harry Potter..."

"He's quite the person of interest, isn't he? In fact, based on information that has come through *my* office, we suspect that he was the person to have done the deed and has cast suspicion on a well-respected teacher to try to get out of it."

"That's definitely a theory of the case." Katherine was glad she had years of experience in controlling herself. In the back of her mind, her eyes were rolling just about out of their sockets.

"In fact, Minister Thicknesse is going to strengthen the Ministry. We're going to capture more of these undesirable hooligans that have made things so unstable in order to bring some peace to Magical England."

Katherine wondered who was defining the term *undesirable hooligan*. "A worthy goal, to be sure."

"So we understand each other!" Dolores almost squealed with delight. "Minister, I told you that Ms. Stanton is just the person to help us locate Undesirable Number One." She held up a poster of Harry Potter.

Katherine nodded her head. "I'll do all in my power to complete the task for which I was hired, Minister." She held out her hand and Umbridge gave her a clammy, soft shake, Robards shook firmly, and the Minister shook as if he didn't know what he was doing.

Katherine Stanton, in a previous life, had lived with her husband in an upstairs flat in a coastal port city. It was in a dirty section of town where very little magic had ever been known, and it was doubtful the Ministry currently had a record of it unless one perused the records very deeply indeed. When Cyrus had died, Katherine had kept the flat as a useful place to hide when necessary. It was to this place that she had sent Kingsley.

When she first arrived, they simply hugged each other, clinging together as refugees from the madness that had destroyed their world. Then they silently had coffee and breakfast together. After a while, Kingsley told Katherine of the night the fighting had broken out at the Ministry.

"It was very strange. I was guarding the Minister when Yaxley came to his office. Suddenly Thicknesse was there, saying the oddest things. They murdered poor Rufus before I could get my wand out. While they searched through his office, I ran down to the MLE office, where I quickly incinerated a drawer full of files I didn't want them to get. Then I fought all the way to the fireplaces and Flooed to King's Cross and from there Apparated around until I was sure I had lost them. Then I waited by your flat until you came."

Katherine described the changes at work. "The Ministry is silent these days. No one speaks unless discussing a specific work issue and then barely above a whisper. There's a trace on the Tedious One's name so that anyone who says it will be tracked down by some group of thugs turned policemen. Thicknesse is clearly under Imperius Curse and our dear friend Dolores is running just about everything at will. She's looking for Potter, and I don't think she intends to protect him."

"She has always looked for a reason to incarcerate him."

"I get the feeling she would like to incinerate him."

"How are you proceeding with your case?"

"Umbridge is having the *Prophet* publish a series of articles implicating Harry Potter in the Murder..." Katherine held up her hand to still Kingsley's spluttered comment. "And I think this will fit into our activities. If, as we think, it's possible that Snape is still, *somehow*, working for Dumbledore, we need to keep attention off of him. The few whispers I've heard say that he's going to be named Headmaster of the school next week."

Kingsley leaned back and let out a big sigh. "What is in our good list for him, again?"

"He didn't kill or kidnap Harry when he had the chance, he's always been closer to Dumbledore than almost anyone else, and he's half Muggle."

"The bad list contains?"

"His mother believed in pure-blood supremacy, he belonged to Slytherin, his Muggle father was an abusive SOB, and he killed Dumbledore, which has put him high among the Tedious One's followers."

"Murder would tend to eliminate him as one of Dumbledore's friends..."

"I know I'm missing something. An event, a relative, a friend... Do you have any idea what it could be?"

"I have sweet F.A. on that one, love."

"Oh, great. I suggested you *look* like a stevedore. You don't have to *sound* like one."

Kingsley chuckled and they made plans for meeting again and ways they could contact each other if they had news. Katherine's flat would be a good safehouse, but they didn't want to overuse it and attract attention. It was also unclear at what point someone at the Ministry would uncover the long-archived files that her married address was listed within.

"Watch yourself, girl," Kingsley directed as they parted.

"What are you talking about?" asked Katherine.

"You have a softer look in your eye when we discuss Snape. I can tell you want him to be on the right side. Don't fall for him."

"Don't worry. Getting him to fall for me is part of how I do my job."

"How far do you get them to fall, and what do you have to do to get them there?"

"I don't particularly care for the insinuation, Kingsley."

"I'm just worried. Don't get yourself into anything you can't get out of."

"I know what I'm doing."

A/N: this story is beta read by Trickie Woo.

Cherchez la Femme

Chapter 6 of 12

If it's not because of money, it's because of a woman.

Disclaimer: Except for an OC, the characters here and the world they live in are the creation and property of JK Rowling.

Halloween was chilly but clear that year. Katherine Apparated to a small town and inspected what was left of the small house she found there. Trick-or-treaters were walking up and down the streets, ringing doorbells and knocking on doors. Katherine, in her work robe and hat, was hardly noticeable under the circumstances. She smiled at a stray happy memory of her own childhood and then sighed.

She found the house. She assumed it was the right place, since half of it was caved in. It was originally a nondescript cottage, the sort of house that in some places would be called a "starter home." The couple who had last lived here were just starting out, for all that they also ended their lives here. If there were only some way of finding out for sure...

"What are you doing here?" a voice asked her with hostility. She turned to see Severus Snape.

This was not Severus Snape as she had known him on two previous occasions. This man was angry or upset and more than a little drunk. He stood away from her, legs spread to keep his balance and arms folded. He was trying to sneer down his nose at her, but she was too close to his own height. He tipped his head back slightly, only to realize it was compromising his balance in his current state. He folded his arms tighter and glowered. Katherine couldn't fail to notice that his wand was firmly grasped in his wand hand.

"Good evening, Headmaster. I'm here at the behest of the Head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission."

He grimaced with further annoyance. "Why on earth would Dolores send you here?"

"It's part of my job in tracking down Undesirable Number One. At least twice a week they send me someplace that they hear he might have gone."

"They expected him to be here?" The rage was fading from his face as they spoke. Soon all that would be left was a bland annoyance.

"Tonight is the anniversary of his parents' death and this, I assume," she waved at the ruined house, "would be the site of their death."

As she spoke and waved her hands, she must have tripped the mechanism that caused the notice board to appear. She read it silently.

"Yes, this was their home." She looked back around and he was still standing there, exactly as before, staring impassively. "So, what brings you to Godric's Hollow?"

He took a step toward her and pointed his wand at her. She slipped her own wand out of her sleeve. "How dare you ask me that question?" There was rage and... anguish... in his face.

"Never mind. I didn't realize it would be considered impolite." Katherine looked down to put her wand back. She looked at him again, fascinated.

"It's none of your business." He stood with his arms folded again, glaring at her. She had never seen him looking so stiff or unyielding.

"I was going to ask you where your broom is tonight, but after your charming repartee, I think I know."

"Impertinence."

She looked away to stifle a giggle. There was a crack in the air, and when Katherine looked up she was alone. Her supposed quarry was not at his parent's ruined house, so she continued on through town. The young families were headed home, leaving the teens and young adults to pursue their revelries. She had heard that the graveyard was right near the church and scanned the town for a bell tower. She sighted it and walked toward it. Katherine went through the gate and looked through the various gravestones.

She passed various Peverells and Bagshots and even saw a couple of Dumbledores. She didn't stop until she came to the double grave of James and Lily Potter. Their son was no where to be seen in the cemetery, but she drew closer to the graves and leaned down, anyway.

Someone had placed a basket of flowers on the side indicated as Lily's grave. Nearby was an empty Ogden's Old Firewhisky bottle. Katherine stood and looked around the area, again. An idea came to her, and she wondered.

Katherine finished her surveillance of Godric's Hollow and went back to the Ministry. After sneaking into the archive room, she dug through several boxes destined for a new filing room called "Pretenders." No one had bothered to alphabetize, having simply yanked the folders from the drawers in which they belonged. She finally found a file labeled "Lily Potter (nee Evans)."

She was not surprised to discover that Lily Evans was at Hogwarts during precisely the same years as Severus Snape. She looked through the class records and found that her N.E.W.T.s classes were almost identical to those she recalled had been taken by Snape. What surprised her, when she read the file more carefully, was learning that Lily Evans had grown up in the same mill town as Severus Snape.

There were two photographs attached to the file. The first was of a charming pre-teen with dark, reddish hair and lively green eyes. It must have been taken when she was a first-year at Hogwarts. The second photograph was taken at the time of her Apparition License and showed a strikingly beautiful girl just on the edge of womanhood. With a deep sigh, Katherine realized the young woman in the picture did not live another five years after it was taken.

It was already late at night when Katherine had returned to the Ministry. After the things she learned tonight, she would not be able to sleep. There was too much to figure out. After reviewing the file on Lily Evans, she sat in her office well into the morning, going over the files and her thoughts.

Katherine couldn't tell Kingsley what she had discovered except in the most round-about way. It was a difficult matter. They met in the woods near the Quidditch Pitch where the World Cup had been held a few years earlier. After their meeting, Kingsley would join some other resistance workers in broadcasting a new wireless show.

"I think he's on our side and has been almost all along."

"You *think*?" asked Kingsley. "Are you sure that it's not that you *want* him to be on our side and now you're readjusting the facts? I've never had a chance to watch you work a case so closely before, but I have to say that you seem to be losing your objectivity."

"I'm basing my assessment on facts, thank you," Katherine snapped. "If you had seen him the same way I did the last time..." She let that go, since she had not mentioned meeting Snape at Godric's Hollow to anyone.

"I heard about your dinner with him. It sounds like he knows how to captivate his audience. I never heard... Did he show you his etchings?"

"I'm sure it was in my report that I was only in the Great Hall and not taken anywhere else in the castle. Remus thinks there might be some disagreement he's having with the portraits."

"I know about the hypothesis involving the portraits. That's not what I meant."

"Let's skip over what you meant, although he was a perfect gentleman and I assure you I behaved like a lady. It's not an issue. At any rate, I came across something else, perhaps the missing item."

"So you're sure you have some great evidence? Let's hear it."

Katherine looked embarrassed. "I can't tell you."

"Why the Bludger not?"

"A variety of reasons: I might be wrong... it's not my secret... or the fact that if irrefutable proof of his loyalty came out, he could be in danger, and if he is captured or killed, it could ruin everything... the usual issues."

"So Snape tells you his little story and you fall all over it?"

"No, that's just it. He, er, let something slip at a moment he may not have realized. I noticed and I followed a trail."

"Why should I believe you instead of thinking it's just because you're falling for him?"

Katherine looked up with a rueful grin. "Because if I'm right, then whether or not I'm falling for him probably doesn't matter."

"So is he a friend or foe?"

"I think he's a friend. Have you seen how he has been handling discipline at Hogwarts?"

"What do you mean?"

"There have been complaints at the Ministry about his insistence on keeping discipline consistent with the way it was done during Dumbledore's time. Some of those working with him would like to see darker practices used on the students. The Carrows use Unforgivables anyway, but whenever he intercepts a detention or other punishment, he changes it to something else."

"So we want him exactly where he is?"

"For the students' sake, and also for the possibility that he's still the best-placed spy that the resistance has against the Tedious One."

"You had better not be wrong about this."

"Believe me, I know what's at stake. The first time I fail to satisfy the terms of a contract, my reputation will be completely ruined. I don't know if the Goblins will be content with simply ending our contract or if they will hunt me down, too. Plus, I'll have to return the deposit on my services that the Ministry has paid me."

"I know as well as you do that you can afford to lose it. You are certainly wealthy enough to live very well for the rest of your life without any further cases."

Katherine looked up with a wistful smile. "Yes, I'm wealthy enough, but what would I *do* in all that time?"

A/N: Thanks to those who have been giving this a look. Feel free to tell me what you think. Thank you to Trickie Woo, who beta reads tirelessly.

The Next Encounter

Chapter 7 of 12

Katherine picks up some information at the bank.

Disclaimer: Except for an OC, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling.

The remainder of the year was spent looking for Harry Potter in all the places that informants thought he might be. The Ministry expected her to follow up every lead within England and many in Scotland. Usually there was no trace of Potter wherever Katherine went to look for him. Occasionally she did stumble upon a place he had been, but he and his friends left a very cold trail. Dolores Umbridge railed weekly about Katherine's lack of success, but never went so far as to fire Katherine.

Her year-end audit of her personal Gringotts account took place on the morning of New Year's Eve. As one elderly goblin talked her through her assets management and tax loopholes, Katherine kept half an ear on the party that had already started in the next room. It seemed the goblins were celebrating the various ways in which they had tricked or fooled the witches and wizards for whom they worked.

"...The absolute best this year would be the day we got that sword." Laughter broke out. "Here, Snape thinks he's bringing us Gryffindor's sword, supposedly one of the finest pieces of goblin-craft ever... but anyone can tell at a glance that no goblin ever ever touched the thing he had until it was brought here... The sword we're protecting in one of the highest security vaults in London is a fake!" The laughter became riotous.

Another voice broke in. "Don't let the Lestranges know they have a fake in their vault, though. That Bellatrix..." The room became silent. Someone piped up, "As if any of us would tell..." The laughter started again, and they moved on to a Boggart that had moved into someone's vault, instantly taking the shape of making the vault look empty whenever the customer entered.

Katherine finished her audit, signed her paperwork, rolled up her own copy and thanked the goblin who helped her. She left Gringotts with a smile and walked to the owl post office. She had two messages to send.

Proudfoot,

Be a dear and find out for me where I might find Severus Snape this evening.

Thank you,

Katherine

xxxxx

K,

I have just heard a most curious story about our friend. He's either a fool or incredibly sly, and I know it's not the former. I'm going to try to get the story from the horse's mouth.

K

Having sent every student home, the Death Eaters threw a gala ball for pure-blood society at Hogwarts on New Years Eve. The Great Hall was filled with dress robes, elegant gowns, and pricey jewelry. Katherine walked straight through the masked dancers and tapped on the shoulder of one buxom witch in garnet red and a wealth of black hair who was dancing with a wizard in a fine robe worn over a tuxedo.

The couple turned to look at her. She had worn her hair down so that it floated in a cloud around her. Her gown was a silk sheath with a sheer beige overlay that had been sewn with hundreds of crystals and sequins. Snape smirked while Bellatrix glowered.

"I'm cutting in," Katherine said coolly to the two.

"How rude! By the way, this is a masquerade," said Bellatrix, looking pointedly at Katherine's bare face.

Katherine shrugged. "I'm actually crashing the party. Manners aren't at the top of my list this evening."

"The song is over, Bellatrix. We can continue our conversation at another time, if you like." Snape turned to Katherine and said, "Well then, shall we?"

Couples around them were squaring off to dance and they did the same. At first they followed the steps of the dance, stepping and spinning. Katherine looked up into Severus's eyes with the expression of a school girl on a crush. "It doesn't add up."

Severus twirled her and then pulled her close again. He looked deeply into her eyes. "Pray tell, what does not add up?"

Katherine danced around her partner and stepped close to his back. She whispered into his ear as she unfastened the white tie at his collar. "I heard a curious story today while at the bank... about something that's fake..."

He reached for her hand and twirled her out again, and she saw something harden around his eyes. Her instincts were right. He deliberately took the fake sword to Gringotts. He kept her away for several measures and finally brought her close again.

She smiled once more and demanded, "The real one?"

He considered his answer before speaking. "I believe its rightful owner obtained it through an act of valor and great need just this last week." He dipped her and lifted her back up. "Who else heard?"

"I was the only customer in the bank at the time."

He nodded, considering the possibilities.

She looked at him, pondering, and yet still smiling. "As I said, it doesn't add up."

The song continued and they continued dancing. Although he kept his hands where they belonged, Katherine recognized the change that showed Severus was exploring what he did touch. She didn't stop to wonder whether he realized what he was doing to her.

When he spun her around again, she spun back hard, her back to his chest, swaying and pressing against him. As they danced, she shimmied against him and noticed that he was feeling what she did. He took her hand and twirled her one last time, facing him. "Shouldn't we continue this dance with fewer spectators?"

Finding no argument in her eyes, he guided her to the door and then out into the entryway. They made their way to his office as quickly as possible and then stared at each other. He shed his outside robes and started working on the buttons of his coat, never taking an eye from her.

She shrugged and the dress fell to the floor. She was wearing nothing now but panties and a pair of dangerous-looking high-heeled sandals. He finished with the tuxedo coat and started working on his shirt. She stepped forward and pulled it apart, causing studs to fly in all directions, and then stepped into his space.

Their coupling started as a power struggle. Neither wanted to submit to the other and neither did. They kissed savagely and dropped to a couch where their first passion was spent. They moved from there to the stairway up toward the Headmaster's bedroom and finally the room itself. What began as a quick search for release continued through the night. At some point they realized, once again, that they were evenly matched. From there the struggle shifted from taking pleasure to sharing it.

Only once did they speak. Early in the evening, as they lay gasping for air and sizing each other up, Snape asked, "Have you taken any precautions..."

Katherine quickly said, "There won't be a child." He heard a trace of bitterness in her voice, but she was looking at him again with an expression he had already learned. He couldn't resist that look, and the bitterness was forgotten for the moment.

Katherine wandered through the Headmaster's bedroom the next morning. He had gallantly let her have the shower first. She finished and didn't require much time to dress, as her only option was the dress she had worn the night before and her winter cloak over the top of it. She was quickly finished, deciding that she would take the time to more thoroughly dress when she went home. She used the few minutes she had snooping around.

She found what she was looking for on his nightstand. It was only half of the picture. The other portion had been ripped away. A lovely young woman with reddish hair and green eyes was laughing up at the camera, her eyes straying occasionally toward whatever had been ripped away. The Lily Evans in this picture was not very much older than in the picture in her file, but she had experienced a great deal of trouble in the intervening three or four years. There was a new maturity in the face in the snapshot.

Katherine turned her head as her host walked into the room and waved a hand toward the picture. "She's very pretty. You must love her dearly."

A look of pain crossed his face. "She was never mine."

"In some ways, she was always yours and still is."

"That's nonsense."

"You fell in love with her years ago. You still love her, and you still mourn her when others have all but forgotten her."

"You already knew?"

She kept her tone of voice light. "I pieced a few things together." Katherine turned away from the nightstand while avoiding Severus's eyes. "I should be going."

"You're jealous."

"It's nothing to me." Katherine reached into her handbag, pulled out her sunglasses, and put them on. Only then did she look up into his face.

Snape folded his arms and looked at her. "Then why are you hiding behind those glasses?"

She shook her head and bit her lip.

"Never mind." He changed the subject. "Can I trust you?"

"I haven't told anyone what I suspected, and no one would believe it, anyway." She fished through her handbag and found her lipstick, which she applied as she looked into a mirror. "Now that I'm halfway human, I need to go home to properly prepare for the day." It took three tries to get the lipstick back into her handbag.

"Do you wish to use my fireplace?"

"I think the walk to the gate will do me good." Eluding his grasp, Katherine sped out of the bedroom and down through the Headmaster's office. The Headmaster could hardly follow her, as his only garment was the towel he had fastened around his middle upon leaving the bathroom.

After dressing more properly for the day, Katherine met Kingsley at the apartment in the port city.

"Nice dress," said Kingsley, tossing the *Daily Prophet* across the breakfast table at her.

"Thank you," responded Katherine with as much bravado as she could muster.

"So at what point did following a suspect into his quarters and spending the night with him become standard Auror procedure?"

"I'm not an Auror."

"You're falling for him."

"I'm n..." Katherine decided to change the subject slightly. "It's useless. He's in love with another woman, a woman with impeccable loyalties. No one could love her and be a true Death Eater."

"So why didn't he spend New Year's Eve in bed with her?"

"Let's just say she's not available to him."

"So he's in love with a woman he can't have. Who's to say he wouldn't turn to the Death Eaters, hoping they would help him get her?"

"It wouldn't work. Please just believe it. He's in love with her."

"Where does that leave you?"

"Now that I understand why he was loyal, it leaves me wondering why he would kill Dumbledore."

"I meant, where does that leave you since you're falling for him?"

"If I *were* falling for him, it would leave me very much out in the cold. It's a good thing I'm not. I'll be all right."

Neither Kingsley nor Katherine believed the last two statements.

A/N: Thank you to beta reader Trickie Woo.

Further Investigation

Chapter 8 of 12

Both Snape and Katherine discuss the case with friends. They meet again.

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Snape followed Katherine through his quarters, with his towel still around his waist, as she almost ran from his rooms. He sat heavily at his desk as the door to his office shut behind her. He sank his head into his hands and wondered what he would have done if he had caught her.

"Aren't you a bit underdressed for work, Headmaster?" asked the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black.

"Don't get your breeches in a twist," answered Armando Dippet. "Can't you see he's upset? This must have something to do with the lovely young thing we caught all too short a glimpse of last night and just now."

"She's not that young." Snape's voice was muffled by his desk where his forehead rested.

"But she *was* lovely," answered one of the portraits further away from the desk.

The head on the desk lifted slightly and sank back down again with a bang. "I thought you were supposed to help me. This is more like torture."

Several voices spoke up at once. "We didn't think you needed help last night."

"You seemed to have things rather...ah...well in hand."

"She wasn't complaining."

"You both seemed to be enjoying yourselves."

The banging on the desk started to develop a rhythm. "It doesn't have to do with *that*," the current Headmaster stated. He raised his head and looked around at the portrait directly behind his chair. "She knows about the sword."

Dumbledore had been enjoying the banter between Snape and the portraits, but now his face took on a more serious expression. "From what I know, she won't say anything without a clear reason."

"The Dark Lord feels she's harmless and that Dolores is controlling her. She is supposedly looking for Potter. I suspect, however, that some professional pride has her investigating me still. She wants to know what happened on the tower that night and why."

"Poor Severus, to be the focus of a pretty woman's attentions!"

Snape's eyebrows came together. "She figured out how I feel about Lily. What if she starts blabbing something to the wrong people? Albus, your carefully constructed plans could be destroyed."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take. Katherine is quite savvy. She will figure it out, but she's trustworthy. She won't say anything that could cause a problem."

"How well did you know her?"

"Well enough, I'd say."

Severus looked hard at the portrait and sighed. "You know far more than you're telling. How involved were you in whatever happened when her husband died? I found that all the records of that event had been modified. The only thing I believed was that you leaned pretty hard upon the US Department of Magical Investigation to get them to take her."

"I'll tell you just as much about her as I will tell her about you."

"Nothing, then."

"You've always been one of our brightest."

Dilys Derwent spoke up. "Perhaps you should find a way to show her how you feel."

"How *do* I feel, Dilys? On the strength of a handful of encounters and one night of...whatever that just was. Don't try to tell me it was love."

"Of course it wasn't love. I've seen more real affection between a pair of mating...well, it doesn't matter," she hastily added, seeing his ever-darkening face. "You feel *something* for her. That's what matters."

"It's not love. It's nothing like what I felt..." He stopped himself. "Nothing like what I *feel* for Lily."

"You're evenly matched, Severus, and she fascinates you. You should show her that."

"I'll think about it." Snape glowered up at the portraits and stood. "Now, if it's all the same to you, I believe I'll dress for the day?"

"Of course, Severus," answered Dumbledore brightly.

He stomped to his private rooms, knowing they would discuss him behind his back the instant the door closed.

After the holidays, Katherine spent her time tracking Harry Potter for the Ministry and secretly updating her files on Severus Snape. It was absurdly easy to figure out where

Potter had been. The Muggle news agencies had several stories about random thefts of food and clothing late at night. The Ministry never gave the Muggle press any credence, so Katherine spent her official time following up on leads that had been tortured out of Half-bloods or brought by wizards and witches hoping to curry favor. Katherine did her best to prevent the torture of some of those poor souls. Even when Katherine knew where Potter had been, it was easy enough to admit that there was no seeming pattern to where Potter and his friends would go.

She kept her distance from Hogwarts and its Headmaster. It was not clear to her exactly how she felt, but she knew that if she spent more time with him she would be in danger of having serious feelings. She had sent a curt reply to his note during the first week of the new year. He had invited her to private dinners at the school as well as a weekend away. On the afternoon that the new atrium of the Ministry was being dedicated, Katherine had to skirt the edges of the crowd to avoid Snape. The refusal she sent to his invitation to attend the Valentine's events at the school was no more than the word "regrets". There had been a few other communications since then, but she sent those back unopened.

The "Support Harry Potter" party thrown by Rubeus Hagrid on school grounds proved to be her undoing. After the fight that had ensued at the Gamekeeper's cottage, Katherine was sent to find out if Harry Potter himself had been at the party. She did this with bad grace, pointing out that it would be nearly impossible for Potter to be in Hogsmeade or on the grounds of Hogwarts with all of the Death Eaters and Dementors in the area, but Dolores Umbridge was adamant.

Katherine sighed in relief to see her old Potions Professor, Horace Slughorn, at the gate of the school. He accompanied her to the Gamekeeper's hut. "Welcome, welcome!"

"Thank you, Professor."

"Little Katie Asher. I should have realized that you would be so talented from your Potions grades. Do you care to become an after-the-fact member of the Slug Club?"

Katherine smiled and shook her head. "My work takes me all over. I'm not sure I could make it to the meetings."

"Quite all right, my dear."

Katherine walked up to the hut and started looking around. As far as she could tell, Potter had not been there in months. "So were you there the night of the murder?"

"I was downstairs and helped chase the Death Eaters away, but missed all of the action."

"I see."

"I couldn't believe it at first. Severus was one of my students, and one of my best ones at that. I like to think I'm a good judge of character."

"I'm sure a lot of people thought the same thing, including Dumbledore."

"Poor Albus. I think he was starting to go a little dotty. That year he wasn't at all what he had been previously, what with the cursed hand and all."

"Oh?" This was something new. "Dumbledore had a cursed hand?"

"It must have been cursed. That hand was all black and looked as though someone had burned it. It was his wand hand, too. Albus could do amazing things with a wand, and even injured he was capable, but there was no denying that whatever had happened had taken the edge off."

A new voice came from the doorway. "Thank you, Horace. I'll take over from here."

"As you wish, Severus." Slughorn gave his former pupil turned current boss a sidelong glance. Then he slid out of the cottage and walked quickly back to the school.

"Well?" demanded the Headmaster.

"Harry Potter has definitely been here, but not in months."

"Excellent. If your work here is done, you can spare me a few minutes in my office." The hand under her arm was not making a request.

"I...I don't think that's wise."

His chuckle slid over her like silk. "Where is your sense of adventure? You provoked me at every turn and now nothing for two months?" He tilted his head close to her ear. "Or is this a new way to provoke me?"

Before she could recollect her thoughts, he was leading her up the stairs. She noticed that the students were strangely quiet in the halls as they moved between classes. Snape led her to his office and then up into his bedroom. Katherine walked over to a window and looked toward the lake.

"I'm not sure..." she started.

He came up behind her and put his hands on the windowsill at either side, surrounding her with his robes. "You're wearing the same skirt you wore the first time I saw you," he murmured into her ear.

His breath on her neck did things to her. "It's one of my work outfits."

"It's working on me."

He was too close. She turned around, thinking to get away. He reached for her and kissed her. As before it was a dare, and Katherine matched his kiss with her own intensity as he pulled her toward his bed. They joined together with as much intent to test each other as to give or receive pleasure. Their passion exploded around them and left them sated yet still cautious as they looked across the bed from each other.

"You will stay for dinner." His tone of voice made it a command.

She shook her head. "I can't. Dolores will want me to report..."

Severus sat up, pulling up the sheet, and called for a house-elf. "Go to the Ministry and tell Mistress Umbridge that Mistress Stanton will not be at the Ministry for the rest of the day. She will file her report later."

"Yes, Master Headmaster."

The elf was gone with a crack, and Severus turned back around. "It took too long to get you here. I'm not letting you go so easily." He shifted on the bed, moving toward Katherine.

She met him in the middle.

Dinner had been eaten and they were dawdling over the coffee when she chanced asking. "What's this about Dumbledore having a cursed hand?"

He frowned and then brought out a slim box. "This made me think of you."

"Surely you knew about that hand? Do you know how it happened or what it meant?"

His only answer was to look at her evenly with that empty stare. He nodded toward the box.

With a sigh Katherine opened it to see a diamond-studded chain and then lost her breath. "It's beautiful."

His look turned teasing. "You're not going to tell me you can't accept it or some such drivel, are you?"

She shook her head and smiled thoughtfully as she traced the necklace with her fingertip. "I couldn't be so mundane, not with you." She looked up at him. "So how do you manage ten thousand Galleon bets and jewelry of a similar cost on a teacher's salary?"

He smiled enigmatically. "I was wondering when you would ask that. I suppose you observed that there's a piece of my record that's been obscured?"

"The Potions master under whom you apprenticed." He watched her think for a moment. Lucius Malfoy had mentioned that Snape was wealthy, and now Severus was tying that fact to his master... "Nicolas Flamel?"

"Bright girl."

"If you had access to the Philosopher's Stone, you must have also made..."

He stood and walked around the table. "Let's see that necklace on you."

She knew she had gotten as close to the truth as he would let her... for now... and put her hand to her throat. "Oh, no... it wouldn't look right with this sweater."

"Then we'll have to get rid of the sweater."

A while later they were lying on the bed, again apart, but only by an arm's reach. Katherine touched the jewelry around her neck. "Why?"

He reached over to straighten it. "You've proven that I can trust you."

"It wasn't a matter of..."

"I know that," he quickly said. "Your companionship gives me a great deal right now. You can't imagine how lonely it gets."

Katherine's face looked pensive. "I think I can understand better than someone else would. I don't have a side in this war, not the way everyone else has. When it's over, that will be it, though, won't it? We'll go our separate ways. You will go back to mourning your losses, and I'll go on to...to whatever might come along." She tried to say it lightly and smile, and kept all but a trace of melancholy from her voice. "As Cole Porter would say, 'It was great fun, but it was just one of those things.'"

"What if I was whatever came along?"

She looked at him without speaking.

"I needed you to see that picture. I needed to see what feelings you have for me. I needed to know that it wasn't just about your investigation." He sat up and then moved closer to her on the bed. "Katherine, come away with me. Whatever the outcome, let's escape it together." She sat up and backed away. "I don't want to go back to what I was before I met you." He moved closer to her and she moved farther back. "We are compatible in so many ways." He moved closer yet, and she couldn't go any farther back. She was at the edge of the bed and somehow couldn't leave it. "We have similar half-blood backgrounds. We both grew up in the working class Muggle world."

He was close enough to touch her, but could tell she was frightened. "Let's go away together. We can have marriage and children..." He saw her wince and changed his tack. "Or we don't have to do that. Just be with me. I think you are the only one who could understand."

Her eyes were squeezed tightly shut. He edged ever so slightly closer. "I don't know," she finally said quietly.

"You don't know what?" His whisper was almost a caress.

"Can I trust you?"

"Haven't I trusted you?" His hand cupped the side of her face, the tenderest gesture that had yet passed between them. He looked into her eyes and saw wariness and a great deal of pain hidden far beneath. He had his own mind arranged in a similar manner, and realized they were alike in ways he didn't know, but wanted to find out. A bitter look was now around the edges of her face and he let it go.

"Never mind," he said, trying for a light tone and achieving a sarcastic one. "Perhaps it's not as I thought. I won't keep you if you don't want to be here."

Her response was a look that made him close the distance between them.

Katherine was in the habit of meeting with Kingsley every few days. For her it was a way of touching base with reality. Spending time working for Dolores Umbridge defied the limits of Katherine's imagination, and she needed time to relax away from the delusions of the other witch. For Kingsley, it was a way of obtaining information that he could use at the best time and place.

"Whatever did you decide about that cryptic note you sent me? Is he a fool?"

"Of course not. As I guessed, he was incredibly sly. He's pulled a scam that has the Goblins laughing at him. He gets the last laugh because they can never admit what they know. I simply overheard it while at my year-end audit at Gringotts."

Kingsley thought for a moment, piecing the bits of information together. "Interesting. So tell me about this scam. Does it involve an object and do you know where that object may now be?"

"I have it from the horse's mouth that any object that might be involved is in the hands of the person to whom it rightfully belongs."

"That's hard proof to refute, if it's true."

"It only makes the tower incident more confusing. By the way, if you get the chance to ask around, I've heard that Dumbledore had a cursed hand and that Snape apprenticed under Nicolas Flamel. What do you know about either thing?"

"Everyone saw that Dumbledore had a blackened hand. I never heard much speculation about it. He acted as if it were nothing at all. As for Flamel... It's believable, but I don't recall ever hearing about it. I'll ask around."

"Where does this end, Lucius? I give her some jewelry, I coax her to take a few days with me in an undisclosed location...no, Lucius, I'm not telling you where...and then what?"

"Why don't you marry her?"

"Because I don't intend to marry anyone. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because, dear friend, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say. The girl interests you to the point of distraction. Even when she was supposed to turn you in to the Ministry, you risked her doing that to meet her at the fund raiser last summer. You invited her to dinner, but not to the New Year's gala. When she crashed the party, it took you about five minutes to whisk her away to your rooms, leaving the rest of us to only imagine what you did with her. You did acquire carnal knowledge of the girl, didn't you?"

"Lucius, dear, don't be so crude. Severus, what do you think of this robe?"

Narcissa held up a shapeless black dress robe that would cover everything from chin to ankle and wrist.

"That's not what I had in mind, Narcissa. Please remember that we will be in a tropical location...no, Lucius, I'm not telling you where. I don't see why I should marry a woman just because I enjoyed her company on a hand's count of occasions."

"Then marry her because you can't stop thinking about her and she's the only woman who's driven you to such lengths since I've known you." Lucius looked at the robe appraisingly. "I guess Severus doesn't have as developed a fantasy life as we do, my dear. If you wanted to get that for yourself, I would love to charm it from your lovely frame tonight and then..." He whispered something into his wife's ear that made her blush.

"Lucius!" she said before whispering something into his ear. He stepped closer and said something unintelligible that made her giggle.

"Are you two here to help me or arrange your own romantic life? How do you carry that out with your distinguished house guests, anyway?"

"Our one house guest has business that takes him to the Continent these days." Narcissa looked up. "I'm sorry, Severus, dear. Really, I think the things we've already selected should be adequate for what you describe. The only thing I would add is this." She held up elegant champagne-colored dress robes that would be form-fitting but not snug. He sucked in his breath. Narcissa continued, "I know it's not necessary for the sort of thing you have described, but one never knows what events may come up, do they?"

"No, they don't. It's all perfect, Narcissa, thank you."

Lucius spoke up again. "You do feel something for her, don't you? Do you enjoy her company?"

Severus thought a minute as Lucius watched his wife step into the dressing room. "I've never encountered a woman who meets me so evenly in every way before."

"In *every* way?"

Snape sighed. "Yes, if you must know, we're evenly matched everywhere, including the bedroom. I can't wait to see her again, yet I worry that when I do, she may finally best me at something."

Lucius looked over Severus's purchases at Madam Malkin's and let out a low whistle. "She's not at all like the girls one buys off with dinner, is she?"

"Not to me," answered Severus.

"Clearly, you should consider something longer term than what you have currently in the works. By the way, old friend," said Lucius, "you know the Dark Lord is not oblivious to her existence. As long as Dolores keeps her in control and as long as the witch keeps you happy and on task, he is willing to have her on hand. For her own sake, however, you had better not let her get in the way of your real job."

"I get the message."

A/N: That is indeed a direct quote from Cole Porter's song "Just One of those Things."

Thanks as always to Trickie Woo, who beta reads.

Sacked

Chapter 9 of 12

Katherine terminates her contract with the Ministry.

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Dolores Umbridge smiled in satisfaction. She so enjoyed an opportunity to put other witches in their place, and this witch, while potentially useful, was a thorn in Dolores's side. She was attractive and intelligent, and had made Dolores look bad before. Just within the past two weeks the witch had proven herself to be a tramp. There was no doubt in her mind what had been going on the evening the house-elf had been sent. When the witch finally came the next morning with her completed report, Dolores had commented upon her possible activities. The witch had merely smiled, stating that the Headmaster had issues he wanted to discuss the previous evening. Dolores could guess what the issues were, but she would not act against the Headmaster... yet.

Snape could hardly intervene today. The Ministry had succeeded in Dolores's chief goal where the witch had not. The terms of the contract were clear and the witch would go. This was a moment to cherish and draw out. Therefore she set the appointment for the afternoon and gloated all morning. When the hour finally came, she smiled broadly and worked her way into a meeting room.

Katherine Stanton was already sitting in the room, as Dolores had hoped, but everything else was awry. Instead of looking bedraggled and distressed, the witch was as carefully put together as ever. Instead of a tearful frown, a grim smile flashed across her face. Worst of all, the air of desperation that Dolores had hoped to see was missing. That annoying confidence hung in the air as if it were visible.

"Ah, Dolores," said Katherine, rising as the other witch entered the room and sat down. "Thank you for postponing this meeting. It enabled me to tie everything up."

Dolores needed to reassert herself as the one in control. "The purpose of this meeting..."

"Yes, it's time to end our relationship, since Harry Potter was apprehended."

"You didn't..."

"...actually capture him, did I?" Katherine's smile showed self-depreciation. "Potter apprehended himself with that trace you used. Much more effective, I think, than sending investigators to the places people thought he might have been. Did you think of that trace yourself? It was quite elegant."

"You're..."

Katherine opened the folder in front of her and showed Dolores the parchments inside. "This is my final report detailing my activities and results or lack thereof..."

"We paid you."

"Yes, and this is a receipt from Gringotts, showing that the deposit plus a fair rate of interest has been returned to the Ministry account. I took care of that this morning."

"You didn't do what you were hired to do."

Katherine smiled. "No, I didn't. There's a first time for everything, of course. It's a shame that I didn't know I'd be done here so quickly. I let go of the cottage I usually rent on Sanibel this time of year. Well, there are places on the Continent that will be lovely just now. Thank you for an interesting time, Dolores. I'll be off." Katherine rose from her chair and walked from the room, leaving Umbridge sitting at the table with a confused expression on her face.

Dolores finally had a chance to say the words she had been gloating over all day. "You're fired." Her voice echoed unsatisfactorily in the empty room.

Katherine took the Ministry Floo to her flat and then sealed it off. She quickly walked through every room, checking her protective spells and looking for curses of any kind. Finding nothing of concern, she returned to her living room and flopped on the couch.

For the first time, she had failed to fulfill her client's wishes. She didn't mind that so much. She had no intention of turning Harry Potter over to the Ministry even if she had found him and hoped that he would find a way to escape now. She didn't have a real stake in the war going on around her, but couldn't imagine what her life would be like if the Tedious One actually achieved the full power he sought. She had hoped to keep being unable to find Harry until the TO was finally put to rest for good. After that she could solve the mystery surrounding Severus Snape and the murder of Albus Dumbledore. Then she would have been able to complete the job with her reputation intact.

She did wish she fully understood what had happened on the Astronomy Tower on that night. She knew Severus was a Death Eater. No woman who had seen him as she had could doubt it. Of Snape's loyalty to Dumbledore and what he stood for she had no doubt, either. What she had suspected after reading Lily Potter's file was proven by the look in his face when they had discussed her. What was it like to be the object of such passion?

Katherine sighed at herself. She wasn't like the other woman. She couldn't expect to be the inspiration of such feelings. Men would hire her to find other men, and some would enjoy her body. Some might even provide her some enjoyment, but then they would go on to other women. She shook herself. This train of thought was never productive. She really needed to finish the case, for her own peace of mind. She would then be able to go back to her life and the careful control she kept.

The way Snape had stopped Horace Slughorn from talking about the cursed hand might be important. Was Dumbledore suffering from a curse? Snape must have had a supply of the Elixir of Life, if Flamel let him use the Philosopher's stone to make as much gold as he was rumored to have stashed away. Why wouldn't he use it to help Dumbledore, somehow? Finally, if he were going to kill Dumbledore, why do it so publicly?

Snape and Katherine had been public about their affair, too. Pictures of them going up the staircase at Hogwarts together were on the front page of the *Prophet* the next morning. Was that important? Did she care about it as much as she cared about the picture he kept on his nightstand? Katherine shook herself again. She needed to find a way to keep every thought about that maddening wizard on the matter of the tower and the murder. She really needed to work through the case and to decide what to do next.

Failing did put a crimp in her career plans. This morning she had not only returned the Ministry's deposit but also this year's retainer from Gringotts. When word of that got around in certain circles, she would receive fewer and fewer requests. As she had told Kingsley, she had plenty of money to retire at any time she pleased. She simply didn't know what to do with the time she would then have. The rest of her life loomed ominously.

Whatever the outcome, let's escape it together, he had said. Unbidden, a picture came into her mind of a cottage and a tall, dark-haired wizard. They worked in a garden together and watched the sun set over a distant hill. Then they went inside to clean up. Katherine's face became very pink as she imagined helping the wizard clean up and what it would be like to experience his hands running soapy water along her body, too. The witch and wizard in her imagination got very clean and ate a late dinner before returning to their bedroom. If she tried very hard, she could imagine that the witch in her daydream had a rounded tummy.

Katherine shook her head and went to the bathroom to wash her face. There was no use in wishing for what could never happen. He spoke of a future that might not even exist. She had an appointment with Kingsley this evening. It would require a great deal of Apparition to many places. Dolores no doubt had her under surveillance, so Katherine would need to move around and shake her followers before finally getting to the meeting place.

"Thank you for sticking it out as long as you did." Kingsley handed Katherine a large glass of wine before taking a glass of his own.

"I'm not sure it was enough."

"If it was all we can get, that will have to be enough. Katherine, you got information for us that was invaluable. For example, if we had not known about the trace..."

"But it's all going so badly, and now Potter's been captured..."

"Actually, I have it from a good source that Potter and his two friends got away, along with some others who were being held at Malfoy Manor."

Katherine leaned forward and slapped Kingsley on the knee. "Why didn't you tell me that to begin with?"

"I thought you might know. When did you last see..."

"Him? A couple of weeks ago, I guess."

"I'm surprised. Rita Skeeter suggests that you're a frequent guest in the Headmaster's rooms."

"Just twice, and I don't want to push it..." They were both quiet for a moment.

Katherine took a big gulp from her glass. "He gave me expensive jewelry."

"The be-mine-forever kind?"

"No," Katherine said as her face grew thoughtful. "More the it's-been-nice-but-don't-make-assumptions kind, or perhaps the I-want-to-keep-seeing-more-of-you kind. I don't know which it was. He spoke about a future, but in a time and place where we may all be killed, that's meaningless."

"The other woman must be out of the picture."

Katherine snorted and smiled ironically. "She's still very much in the picture. I'm sure that I am just a diversion. I think it's been good for both of us..." She sighed. "I look

forward to finally figuring out exactly what happened on that tower and why."

"You need to watch yourself."

Katherine took another sip of her wine and changed the subject. "Have you learned anything new about Dumbledore having a cursed hand?"

"Why do you care if you're not working the case anymore?"

"I'm no longer under contract, but I will finish the case. What have you heard?"

Kingsley sighed. "I'm getting next to nowhere. I've discussed it with some Hogwarts contacts who tell me that it was obvious that there was something wrong, but whenever his hand particularly pained him, the Headmaster would go to Snape every single time. Dumbledore wouldn't even admit that there was a curse in his hand to most people. He acted as if it were some minor problem."

"Curious."

"As you continue to say, none of it adds up."

"I'm getting closer, and it's probably staring us all right in the face. Is there anything interesting to be found through the Flamel connection?"

"Not much. Most of my contacts were either surprised to hear of that apprenticeship or got that look on their faces as if they knew something, but had been Obliviated. We definitely know that if he had any quantity of the Elixir of Life, he wasn't sharing."

"Not even with his tedious boss?"

"No."

"Curious."

"How so? If he has no Elixir of Life, he can't give it to You-know-who."

"Suppose this. Let's say Dumbledore *has* been cursed. He's been cursed so badly that his hand turns black. A curse of that sort will try to make its way all through Dumbledore's body, but Snape manages to control it back into the hand. He must have trained in Healing as well as Potions to accomplish that, by the way, but more importantly, what does he use to keep Dumbledore alive?"

"The Elixir of Life."

"Bang on. But suppose the curse is so evil and awful that the Elixir doesn't work...or better yet...perhaps there's only so much of the Elixir in existence. They squeeze as much time as they can get from every drop, but eventually they run out and they haven't found a cure for the curse. Now what?"

Kingsley finished her thought. "They plan a huge, lavish death scene, or take advantage of some event so that everyone will be convinced Snape was working for You-know-who all along. It's brilliant."

Katherine sighed. "It's a working hypothesis. Somehow I'll have to figure out how to prove it. He would have to be one incredible Occlumens to have had that potion on hand without telling the Tedious One."

"No one has ever known what he's thinking. That's why it's so easy to believe he killed Dumbledore with evil intent."

"Hmm..." said Katherine. A cloud passed over her face.

"If you want to know what he thinks about you, you should ask him."

She shook her head. "I'm probably better off not knowing. What else is going on these days?"

They finished their discussion and, after encouraging each other to be safe, went their separate ways.

Katherine had a take out meal in a bag swinging from her wrist as she returned to her flat. A tall shadow separated from the side of the building and walked toward her. She dropped the bag and pulled out her wand while looking for cover.

"It's me."

She didn't know whether to laugh or start casting spells. Was he here as a Death Eater or as whatever they were to each other? "How did you find my flat?"

"I received an unsigned note. I believe it was from a friend of yours. Where have you been this evening?"

"Oh, I did what anyone does when they've been sacked. I went to have a drink with a friend."

"I've been told by one of *my* friends that it's a long time since you've ridden. Would you care to go for a spin with me?" He pulled a broom out from under his cloak. It was a bit bigger and sturdier-looking than those used for Quidditch play.

Katherine hesitated. "Come on," he said. "It will be fun."

They Apparated to an empty field. Severus held the broom and mounted it before settling Katherine on it in front of him. As she climbed astride, the slit in her skirt opened, allowing one leg to be bare from the top of her boot to her mid thigh. Severus murmured an appreciative comment about it and Katherine giggled. They took off and headed into the night.

Katherine closed her eyes and breathed in the clear air. Severus held the broomstick in front of her and simply went straight for a long time, until it seemed as though they had left their world and its troubles far away. His arms were necessarily around her, and his breath was in her ear. Unbidden, the thoughts and longings of the afternoon started to play within Katherine's mind.

Then he started to do dips and turns on the broom, making Katherine squeal with the joy of it. They were miles away from anywhere she knew, and she didn't remember anything so simple or so much fun. As a student at Hogwarts, she had learned to ride and had done well enough, but once she'd learned to Apparate, she'd never ridden again. This was different than she remembered. This was pleasure.

Severus reached for her hands and held them on the broomstick under his. Suddenly she could feel the air currents and how he guided the broom into them or along them. She could feel herself floating along the wind and being carried by it. His hands gently slid up her arms to her elbows and then around her waist and all at once she realized she was in control. She squealed again, nearly losing altitude, but grasped more firmly and steadied the broom. Slowly at first, she tried doing some dips and turns of her own and quickly found herself enjoying the power of riding a broom in a way she had never before understood.

They landed on a coastline not long before dawn. Severus had Katherine hold the broom while he lit the end of his wand to look for something on the ground. "I've never really enjoyed it before," Katherine said. "Thank you. If I had been taught to ride like that, I never would have gotten off."

"There are some things I never really enjoyed before meeting you, either," Severus responded. "Ah, here's something!" He picked up an empty bottle, tapped it with his wand and said, "*Portus*."

Reaching for Katherine's hand, Severus held it to the bottle along with his own and counted down. "Three... two... one..."

They landed on a Mediterranean beach, not long before sunrise. Katherine looked around and up the hill, recognizing a house she saw. "We're on Corsica?"

"You're well traveled," he replied.

"There was this witch who worked for a wand maker in Genoa..."

"So you were here on business before. This is most definitely for pleasure."

"Why are we here? Don't you need to be back at the school, and are you allowed to create unauthorized Portkeys?"

"Ah. It turns out that the Headmaster at Hogwarts has certain authorizations that others do not. I am allowed a few Portkeys, supposedly in the round of my duties. I consider it within the round of my duties to obey my master, who had a good day up until the moment Potter was lost. He told me I might have a couple of days off, until the students get back from the Easter Holiday. Who am I to argue with the Dark Lord?"

He stood behind her and pointed alongside her head into the sea. "My island is visible from this beach, on Corsica." As he spoke, she looked past his hand to where it was pointing and suddenly saw an island with a small villa on it. He tightened his other arm around her waist, and a moment later they were standing on the portico of the villa.

Small voices greeted them.

"Master is coming here! He has brought a pretty witch with him."

"Would Master and Mistress be needing a meal?"

Katherine smiled at the two house-elves standing in the doorway who tried to bustle Severus into the house. Severus guided Katherine through the doorway ahead of him and smiled at the elves.

"Bonaparte and Josephine, this is Mistress Katherine. She and I will be bathing and changing before having a light breakfast." He handed them the broom and their cloaks before resting his hand on the small of Katherine's back. He guided her through a dining room and hallway, and then up a staircase. "Their previous owner enjoyed the proximity to the big island, and as you see, he went with a theme when the elves came along." He showed Katherine a wardrobe and opened it. "You should find pretty much whatever you need here." Then he showed her to the bathroom.

He left her then, and she took a long enough shower that her daydream from the previous afternoon came to mind. She rinsed off quickly at that point and wrapped in a soft towel. She looked through the closet and found a peasant skirt and blouse that seemed appropriate for the occasion. Peeking in a drawer, she discovered that whoever had done the shopping had indeed thought of everything. She dressed quickly and left her hair soft around her face. She went back downstairs and made her way to the dining room, where the table was set for breakfast. She passed through some open French doors and stood on another porch, watching the surf. Her host came and stood next to her.

She sighed appreciatively. "This is amazing. You must get whatever you want when you bring them here."

He looked out in the distance and shrugged. "I've never brought anyone here." He turned to eye her critically. "You look just as I imagined. I shall have to wait to see if that includes everything."

Katherine drew back. "Did you personally purchase everything?"

He leered at her. "I had some help."

They sat and filled their plates. "When did you acquire this island?" Katherine asked.

"Right after the Dark Lord fell. I had already finished my training with Nicolas, and all that gold was burning the proverbial hole in my pocket. I needed someplace to grieve, after..." He fell silent.

Katherine took a deep breath. She might as well hear about it sooner than later. "Tell me about her."

He sat back and fingered his tea cup. "When you are raised by magical parents, you always know magic exists. For the Muggle-born, it's not like that. For Lily, it was this delicious secret. It caused great friction with her sister. Petunia was not ugly or anything, but she would never be as beautiful as Lily. Petunia was good at school and capable in many ways, but she wasn't magical like Lily. I was walking through a park one day and I saw the two of them there. Petunia was calling Lily a freak, but instead of being offended, Lily wasn't even paying attention, and Petunia got more and more angry with her. I hid behind some bushes and watched Lily as she waved at some flowers and they waved along with her motions.

"It seemed like I waited forever to introduce myself, but I've thought ever since then that it was too soon. Maybe it never would have mattered. At any rate, I told her about magic being real, and until we got on the Hogwarts Express, I was her guide and confidante in all things magical. Then we were put in separate houses, and I let my House and family decide where my choices would lead me. Over the years we argued and I pushed her, trying to get her to fall in love with me as I loved her, while she was only interested in keeping me from the Death Eaters. Neither of us got our wish. I helped to kill her by telling the Dark Lord of the prophecy about him, and she died."

Katherine had stopped eating and simply looked at him sympathetically. He sipped his tea and set the cup back down. "I saw you tracing the outlines on the walls and floors of my parents' house. You know my childhood wasn't very happy. I've learned to take some joy in life since then, but at that time, Lily was the only bright spot of my life."

He reached across the table and Katherine offered her hand. He clasped it in both of his and stared down for a few minutes. "Why didn't you take me in that first time, when you knew I was in my house?"

"There wasn't enough evidence. If I had known you had a whole island to yourself and that you were the only Secret-Keeper, I might have made a different choice right then."

"That's not the only reason." He looked into her eyes. She knew he was an expert Legilimens, and she had previous experience with Legilimency, but she never knew it could be so gentle, so feather-soft. As he looked at her, she could feel herself *wanting* to give him all of her secrets, things that no one should see. She fought with herself over it, and finally he found something that made him withdraw.

"Your childhood was no better than mine, and seeing my house touched something within you," he observed. "I had suspected, but you hide it so well."

"As do you," she returned before shrugging. "Who wants to be known as the investigator with the tragic past?"

They ate for a few minutes until he pushed his plate away. "Do you think a person can find love a second time? Sometimes, lately, I think I can let go of my love for Lily. Do you think such a thing is possible?"

Katherine didn't know how to answer. She stared at the table and answered him quietly. "I'm the last person you should ask. I don't think I've ever known love."

"You were married."

Katherine swallowed hard. "I take that back. I loved my mother."

He looked at her a long minute. Then he stood and came around the table. "It's been a long couple of days. We should get some rest."

When they arrived in the bedroom, however, thoughts of sleep left them. There were still signs of sadness in Severus's eyes and sympathy in Katherine's. There was no competition this time, only comfort. Although they later slept with most of the bed between them, as they lay their hands moved until they were touching.

Katherine woke that afternoon to the sounds of sea waves breaking on some nearby beach. As she lay, trying to decide whether to wake or roll over and go back to sleep, she noticed the smell of tea and pastries. Something was tickling her face, too. She opened her eyes to see Severus, tracing the edge of her face with a bright yellow flower. He was wearing a silk dressing gown and smiling down at her. A tea tray was on the bed beside him.

Katherine sat up and pulled the sheet up under her arms. "Either I'm under-dressed or you're over-dressed."

"I'm dressed properly for tea," he replied. Then he gave her a wicked grin and traced the top of the sheet with the flower. "You are properly dressed for what's becoming my favorite dessert." His smile became more serious. He put down the flower and held a piece of buttered scone to her lips. "However, I thought you might like to explore the island a little. I asked the house-elves to put together a late dinner."

"Mm, if you're going to feed me like this, I'm yours to command."

"Why don't I quite believe that?"

"Well, in terms of this afternoon's activities."

They spent the early evening walking around the island. Katherine admired everything about the flower gardens, the fruit trees, and the small beach. Severus spoke as if none of it mattered to him, but she could see the pride and love that existed between him and his small domain. He was quite respectful of his house-elves and although he groused when they nagged that it was dinner time, Katherine could easily see that he really enjoyed the loving attention they gave to him.

After dinner they played a round of chess. They played silently and ruthlessly and again ended in a stalemate. Severus let out a sigh of relief.

"What?" Katherine asked.

"Nothing," he responded. "I'm glad that we're so evenly matched." With that he took her hand and led her to the bedroom.

A/N: Thank you, as always, to beta reader Trickie Woo.

Cross-Examination

Chapter 10 of 12

Katherine answers some questions, herself.

Disclaimer: Except for an OC, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling.

Warning: Includes discussion about abuse and not completely consensual sex. It's fairly mild, but it's there.

The next morning they lay on the beach under a giant umbrella, enjoying an occasional swim and the nearness of each other. A stray thought bit at Katherine, and she traced a finger along Severus's arm.

"There have been more men than I would like to admit to."

"I know."

"I don't know how I fell into it. There was Cyrus, of course, but then there were others. First there was the dueling instructor at the academy. He called me a 'frigid bitch,' but I just didn't know what I was doing. I don't think he understood. Then there was my first partner when I worked for Magical Investigation in the US. It kind of went from there. Occasionally it helped a case, although it was never the man I was investigating, before."

Impatience crossed his face as he drew away from her. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I just wanted you to know... No one has ever touched me as deeply as you have."

He smiled and pulled her close, nudging his hips against hers. "Really?"

She chuckled. "I didn't mean like that! Although, since you mention it, your abilities, and...oh yes...your equipment, are divine." She looked at him seriously. "I meant that I have strong feelings for you. It's a bit of a problem."

"How so?" He leaned up and looked down at her.

"Well, when things are finally back to normal, a time will come when I will probably have to turn you in to the authorities. I don't know how I'm going to do it."

"Then don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't turn me in."

"I can't see a way to avoid it. If you could only explain what happened to me... please?"

"There's no explanation." He pulled her into his arms. "Here, there's nothing but us. When things are back to normal, no matter who wins, come back to my island, Katherine. Come be with me.

"You know I've been a Death Eater, and I've done everything that entails. There have been quite a few women for me, too. I have taken care that none have suffered because of me. That has included making sure there were no children."

"What about the night..."

"Ah, New Years Eve was the one exception. I was surprised by you. I didn't expect you to crash the ball, nor to come so quickly to my bed. It was the only time in my life that I've ever been fully caught up in the moment." He played with the tie to her bikini bottom. "You are different for me, too. I can trust you; I don't think I could even have trusted Lily with the things you know. You're the only one I ever even imagined bringing here, and you fit. Come back when the rest of it is all over. Neither of us will truly belong in either world, regardless of who wins. Let's just drop everything and come here."

Indecision was fluttering across her face, and he realized it was the best he would get just then. He smiled and leaned in to kiss her. Their bathing suits seemed to melt away as they suddenly couldn't get close enough. Their time together was getting short, and they desperately wanted to make as much of it as possible.

Katherine looked up at a saner moment and realized that the sun was in a far different position. "It's a good thing your Hogwarts robes are so concealing," she laughed. "Otherwise you would have some explaining to do about the odd tan you seem to have back here." She stroked his legs.

Severus rolled around, pulling Katherine on top of him. "We'll just have to get you the matching tan." Madness seized them again, and they stayed under the umbrella until Bonaparte summoned them to dinner.

Their time together was passing from a search for advantage into an expression of affection. Later that evening, they sat on the balcony adjoining the bedroom in a large lounge chair. They watched the moon while idly caressing each other and making light conversation.

"Why did you keep the badger key chain?" Katherine asked.

"You don't ask why I took it."

"All right then, why did you take it?"

"I took it on a dare from Rosier. He told me to see if I could get something small from you without your noticing."

"So why did you keep it?"

He looked a bit caught out. "Well, once I had succeeded in doing that, I tripped or bumped several other students and took trinkets. Then one day Dumbledore noticed and took me to his office. He told me that the Dark Lord, even before he was a student, would do things to people and then take small trophies. I found ways to give them all back except yours. Yours is the one that proves I could do it, you see. Now I've given yours back to you as well."

Katherine looked at him and pondered what she had just learned. He chose, while a student, not to do something that would make him like the Tedious One, and yet he'd still become one of that man's followers. "You're such an enigma."

"If I keep you guessing, does that mean you will continue to come see me?" He was gratified to see her blush. "So how did the coltish Katie Asher become the self-confident Katherine Stanton?" Severus asked teasingly.

Katherine pulled away and sat up straight. "Do you really want to know?"

"You know everything about me, now."

"I'm not sure that's true." She looked at him and sighed. "All right. The first time I knew my father hated magic, I was five years old. Dad was yelling at Mum because she used a spell instead of starch on his shirts and he could always tell the difference. I wanted him to stop yelling at her, so I took my dolly out into the living room and made it dance. I had just discovered that I could do it that day. Dad called me an evil monster and hit Mum with the back of his hand. He didn't know until then that I was magical, too. He told her it was her fault for producing me."

Snake's hands tightened into fists. He knew this story all too well.

"After that, I hid my magic as well as I could, but it was too late. My parents constantly quarreled over me. Father wanted me to be 'normal,' whatever that meant, and Mum wanted me to do what I wanted. You got a glimpse at breakfast yesterday. He used physical forms of persuasion and therefore generally got what he wanted.

"When my Hogwarts letter came, Mum had to sneak me out of the house to get my things. Uncle Sonny came and took us to Diagon Alley so we could shop. He was actually Mum's cousin, and he looked out for her whenever he could. I later learned that he provided the funds, too. On the day when I had to meet the Hogwarts Express, Uncle Sonny picked me up and saw me off. I never quite found out what my mother must have suffered after we left her there alone.

"I was accepted into the Auror program during my seventh year at Hogwarts. My mistake was in going home before I went to London."

"What did your father do?" He wasn't sure if he wanted to know.

"Mum didn't know about it, but Dad had promised me to the owner of a local tavern in exchange for having his bar bill erased. On the morning after I got home, I woke up to see my father holding a white dress and telling me to hurry. I spent about five minutes arguing, but he told me he'd kill Mum if I didn't do it." Katherine looked up with a white face. Severus could see lines drawn in it. "He was slowly killing her anyway, but I couldn't let it happen like that. Uncle Sonny had to be away, so he couldn't help right then. There was nothing I could do, so that day I became Mrs. Cyrus Stanton."

Severus reached to touch her, but Katherine slid away and curled up, pulling her knees to her chest and straightening her dressing down over them. "I wasn't quite eighteen yet. I had no idea...I had no experience before my wedding night. I had heard the girls at school talking and thought that it would somehow be special. Cyrus wasn't drunk and awful like my father. He was nice enough, even if at twenty-five he was a bit too old. That is, I thought he was nice enough. He took me to his apartment and ripped the dress off, and quickly discovered just how young and inexperienced I was.

"Cyrus, of course, thought that was wonderful. He promised Father he could have free drinks forever after that night." She shivered. "It hurt... Somehow I got used to it. I found a job as a clerk in a store and made a little money for myself. It didn't last long. Where my father turned to drink, Cyrus turned to the ponies... and anything else he could place a bet on. He took my earnings from me, and when I didn't immediately hand them over, he...well, I think you can guess what he did. He was excited when he first realized about my magic, but after I explained to him about Gamp's Law and he realized I couldn't just make him money, he was as bad as my father about it."

His hands clenched again as he sat beside her. Having asked for this story, he couldn't tell her to stop, now. "I don't know how it could possibly happen in such a hateful home, but I became pregnant." Katherine looked up. "Is it odd that I could be happy about carrying a child when I feared and hated the father so much? The baby was something for me to love. I had this foolish thought, that if I could have Cyrus's child he would stop the gambling... and the other things. I even thought maybe we could start to have a halfway decent marriage. Nothing really changed, though. Oh, he bragged to the boys at the bar about how manly he was, but that was it. And then..."

Katherine buried her face in her knees. She didn't speak for a minute, and when she did, Severus could barely hear her. "I was about five months along. I needed to pay

the midwife, so I went to her one night straight from work with my wages to give her a partial payment. Cyrus met me at the door of our flat. It was a walk-up. He was so angry that I didn't have any money with me that he hit me and slammed me against the wall. I fell down the stairs and woke up in a Muggle hospital.

"Mum and Uncle Sonny were there. They sat with me while the doctor told me about things like broken ribs. It took him a long time to get to the point, but the doctor finally told me that the baby had been lost and that it would take a miracle for me to get pregnant again."

Katherine looked up with a look like flint in her eyes. "Cyrus was with my father in the hallway and asked the doctor if the baby was a boy or girl. The doctor told him it was a boy. Cyrus swore and yelled that I was useless and he would kill me for letting his son die. Everyone could hear him. He slammed into my room with my father right behind him... and Uncle Sonny killed them. He simply lifted his wand and killed my husband and then my father with Unforgivable Curses.

"When I got better, it was arranged that I could train as an Auror after all, but I would have to go to the United States. It was around the time that You-know-who was killed, and Magical Law Enforcement was a bit dodgy right then. You no doubt know the rest from the files about me. That's how I went from being such a silly girl to what you see now."

As Katherine finished her narrative, she bowed her face toward her knees, again. For several minutes neither spoke. A shudder ran through her body. Severus stood and picked her up.

He carried her back into the bedroom and laid her on the bed. Katherine lay quietly as Severus massaged and caressed her. As he ran his hands over her skin, he located the various scars. He had always assumed that they had come from her training or her job, but now knew better. He knew how certain marks were made. As he found the scars, he whispered into them and and kissed them.

The tears started running down her face when he reached the few marks that gave evidence of her son. He finished and held her in his arms as the quiet weeping became open crying and then great shuddering sobs. He stroked her hair all the while, crooning comforting sounds to her.

"I don't know why I did that," she said when she finally regained control. "I never cried the whole time it was happening."

"What happened to your Uncle Sonny?"

"Kingsley tried to hush everything up, but he had to go to Azkaban. Since they were Muggles, it was an assumed attack on Muggles. Dumbledore managed to get him moved into the Janus Thickey ward at St. Mungo's as a criminally insane patient. It was another reason I had to go to across the ocean for my training... the supposed taint."

"Where's your mum?"

"She had been fading away for some time. It had been years since she had done any magic other than the very simplest of household spells, and she hardly used those anymore because Dad hated it so much. When Dad was killed, she started failing. It was as if, as if..." Katherine didn't know how to put it.

"As if she had only stayed alive out of a spiteful desire to outlast him."

Katherine looked up in surprise. "That's exactly it."

"That's how it was for my mother, too. She died shortly after my father."

"My mother died not long after all of that happened, right after I started training in New England. I never cried for her, either. I wasn't there and it seemed so unreal."

He held her some more. He thought she might go to sleep, but when he leaned down to kiss her forehead she raised her face to his and invited his kisses and more. The dynamic of their caresses somehow changed. Katherine abandoned herself to Severus, and while he enjoyed the power it gave him, he was awed by a need to give to her before he took for himself.

His kisses were filled with gentleness and sought to draw out her desires. He kissed her endlessly, making her feel adored. His caresses were light and careful, and when his lips followed his hands, she sighed with a new bliss that overcame her. She leaned up to touch him, and he let her explore his body. She wanted to know him and find his hurts. As he had done earlier, she kissed every scar that was found by her fingertips. She stroked his face and ran her fingers through his hair. He held his breath as she lightly traced the outline of his Dark Mark. Suddenly the moment came in which they could no longer wait.

Though they knew well the mechanics of the act, this experience was new to them, and every caress or motion became different from anything either had known before. Even as Katherine welcomed Severus into her body, she also took him into her heart. A new sort of ecstasy settled upon them as they finished, and for the first time they slept clasped together. Katherine was held securely in arms that understood her pain. Simply by encircling her, those arms seemed to pledge that they would prevent that sort of hurt from happening to her again.

After breakfast, they would travel back to England and go their separate ways again. Katherine looked across the table at the man reading a newspaper and wished they could stay on the island forever. Whatever happened in real life, the cottage in her daydream would forever afterwards be an island villa. She slid a small box across the table.

He looked around his paper. "What's this?" He opened it and found a Golden Snitch.

"It's the one from the Quidditch match last summer. It will open for you since you're the one who caught it. I was trying to think of anything in the world that would be appropriate to put inside, but I finally decided that you will probably have the best thing on hand. I've charmed it to fly from your pockets to somewhere near your hands if you are ever in great need."

He looked thoughtful. "I think I know exactly what to put in it. Thank you." She smiled in relief and he smiled back. "Why is this so important to you?"

"I decided... that is I think... I mean..." She took a deep breath and looked into his eyes. "I just hope that you will be given that chance to discover whether you can find love a second time."

He stood up and walked around the table. He took her hand and lifted her to stand next to him. "Katherine, if I find it, will I find you, too?"

She was barely breathing, but looked into his eyes without flinching. "If you want me."

He crushed her to him, more savagely than they had ever embraced. She didn't mind. "Why now?" he asked the universe. He kissed her, over and over, until the clock in the hallway chimed the hour he had set for departure.

He took her hand, and they went outside to Apparate back to a quiet part of the bigger island. They spoke of inconsequential things as they looked for a viable object to make a Portkey. He described his plans for the end of the school year while she described visiting her various flats and apartments to decide which to sell. At last they found something and within minutes were back on English soil. From there they Apparated, he to Hogwarts and she to the apartment where she had very nearly died so many years before.

The Headmaster returned to his office with mixed feelings. He was filled with a sort of hope for a future with the witch who had somehow displaced Lily in his life. He was also concerned that the future might not let them be together.

The previous Headmaster was quick to greet him. "Hello, Severus, how was your trip?" asked the portrait of Dumbledore.

"It was..." He couldn't finish it. The portraits all turned to look at him. "I think she told me everything. She finally trusts me." He looked back up at Dumbledore's portrait. "Was there really nothing that could be done for her injuries? I think they haunt her."

Dumbledore sighed. "She refused to go to St. Mungo's, Poppy was far too busy to look at her just then, and the other young wizard I knew who was skilled at many forms of Healing was grieving at an undisclosed location."

Severus had the grace to look embarrassed. "I needed it at that time, but I'm starting to think it was a colossal waste."

"Don't look at it that way. If you had met her then, you would not have loved her. She was a frightened child, and the angry young man you were would never have looked upon her as you do now."

Snape sighed. "That may be, but what choices since then might have been different? For the first time since Lily died, Albus, I want to live. I want to survive this war and build a future."

"You have the means, don't you?"

"I suppose." Snape's arm was tingling, which drew him into another train of thought. "I have to carefully reconstruct my thoughts, Albus. The witch broke through everything, and my mind is a mess. Some of our experiences, however, will be the sort of thing he's looking for, and much that she has told me is actually useful... I felt such rage toward her father and husband, that if they were not already dead I would search for them."

The Headmaster in the portrait regarded the man walking toward the private rooms. There was nothing he could do beyond offering a word of advice, and that was not wanted at the moment.

Kingsley Shacklebolt let himself into Katherine's apartment and was greeted by the business end of her wand. "Have you lost your mind?" he asked.

"What did I name my son?" she demanded.

"Salvatore, after your Uncle Sonny," he responded easily. "I'm going to assume that only you would know to ask that question and consider that you're not a trap. Why would you think to ask that question today of all days?"

Katherine went back to the couch and sat down. "I've succeeded with him. If the Ministry were working in its normal way, he would turn himself in and make a full confession. I'm sure of it."

Kingsley sat on a chair across from her. "You've gotten him to fall for you to the point that he would face the Dementor's kiss?"

"Yes, I think so," she answered.

"That's incredible, Katherine, but I have to say that's cold. I've done some hard-hearted things, but I don't think I could ever do what you did to accomplish that."

She smiled and looked a bit hopeless. "It doesn't matter."

"Because of the way things are now, you mean? We're going to win this war, you know, and then we will be in control of the Ministry again."

She shook her head. "It still doesn't matter."

He looked at her and saw the red rings around her eyes. "Why not?" he asked gently.

She looked up. "It doesn't matter because if he ever tries to turn himself in, I will give my life if necessary to prevent it."

Kingsley looked at her over folded hands for a slow beat. "It's like that?"

"Yes."

"How did this happen?"

"He knows everything about me, and he doesn't mind. He still wants me."

"How long ago did you see him?"

"I spent two days with him. He owns an entire island in the Mediterranean. We got back three days ago."

"And when you were gone you... just talked a lot?" Kingsley asked.

"Don't be daft," Katherine said with a knowing smile. "We did talk about a great many things, and suddenly I remembered what I was like all those years ago. I was such a foolish little girl, thinking it would all come out right somehow. I'll never be that little girl again, but somehow I'm not the woman I became after all of that, either. She's lost to me right now, too. I guess it's a good thing my reputation is smashed to bits. The thought of taking a case and all that might come with it sickens and frightens me."

"Did he tell you what happened?"

"No, but somehow I know I'm right about it, and I'm sure there's still a little of the Elixir of Life."

"How can you know that?"

"Because I obliquely told him that if he ever needs it, I hope he uses it, and he just as obliquely said he would."

"You know that if you two ever have kids, you will need to learn how to state things explicitly."

Katherine laughed as tears came from her eyes. "I guess it's just as well that we'll never have them."

Kingsley stood and crossed over to the couch so he could put an arm around her. "What have you done since you got back?"

She looked around. "Pretty much what I'm doing right now."

"Most women eat ice cream by the pint when going through this sort of thing."

"I don't have any ice cream, and I just want to be with him."

"You can't, right now. If things are as you say they are, he needs to be able to act alone."

"I know, I know. Kingsley, this isn't my fight, but I want to be there to help. How do I know if something important is happening?"

He dropped a coin into her hand. "Here, carry this."

She looked at it. "A Galleon?"

"It's not real money. Harry Potter's friend Hermione figured out how to charm these. Keep it in a pocket. When you feel it get warm, look at it. A place and perhaps a time will be listed on one side. That's where the action will be. In the meanwhile, I need to check in with some others. You should get dressed for work and do what you do best."

A/N: Thanks as always to Trickie Woo for beta reading.

Habeas Corpus

Chapter 11 of 12

Katherine finds a way to pass the time until the final battle.

Disclaimer: Except for an OC, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling.

Katherine did as Kingsley directed and went back to London. At her flat there, she showered, dressed and made herself up. She went to Diagon Alley and drank a cup of tea in a very quiet Leaky Cauldron as she read every society page from every periodical that was on hand. She compared notes with a social calendar she kept, and then she went to work.

When not actually on a job, Katherine spent a great deal of time mixing at society events. She was frequently seen at library openings and hospital wing dedications. She rubbed elbows and met those who were likely, in the future, to become her clients or targets. She heard endless dreams of young witches and listened to many sordid tales of conquest told by wizards old enough to know better.

It was to this world she returned, although her heart was not quite in it. Oddly enough, although the streets of Wizarding London were quiet and subdued, the high society doings were as active as ever. Indeed, in the late evenings, the parties were a bit more riotous than before. Someone made sure those who thought they were in charge were enjoying themselves. The Firewhisky and mead kept flowing, and the party goers acted as if there were not a care in the world.

With a soft smile and a quiet comment here and there, Katherine learned much about various families. When she visited with Kingsley Shacklebolt, Remus Lupin, or Tonks, she was able to pass along quite a bit of information about which families had certain loyalties and how various wizards and witches might behave in an all-out battle.

Her visits with Lupin and Tonks left her worn. Their little boy was everything a baby should be, and it took all of Katherine's willpower not to dwell upon what she had lost so many years before. It was hard not to be envious of the doting looks the married couple shared, as well. When Katherine gave her reports to them, she finished quickly and left before the thoughts had a chance to come to her. She couldn't see the small glances and touches without wishing for the touch of Severus's hand. For some reason, she kept daydreaming of the son she had lost, and he always had black hair and dark eyes within a too-pale face. As long as she could keep those thoughts to herself and the privacy of her apartment, she convinced herself that they were not a problem.

Nights were difficult. After the lights were out and Katherine curled into her bed, he came to her in her imagination. Asleep or awake, Severus was there as he had been so few times in reality, driving her to passion and demanding the same in return. In her waking moments, she forced herself to recall only the earliest times that they had shared each other's bodies. As long as she could concentrate upon the part of their relationship that was purely physical, she knew she would survive being apart from him.

Her dreams, however, took her to the island where she had learned in his arms what lovemaking truly was. She woke teary-eyed, aching for his touch and the feel of his body moving against hers. There was nothing to do but head for the shower and have a cup of strong coffee. Each morning she would prepare for the day and hope that something, *anything* that day would prove to be the catalyst for the change that had to come soon.

Katherine was not altogether worried or upset the afternoon she Apparated into Diagon Alley and found that a large crowd was standing in front of Gringotts. Perhaps this would be the day something happened. There were several goblins in front of closed doors, facing down witches and wizards who looked quite angry. Katherine worked her way toward the crowd and asked one witch on the edges what was happening.

"It's a run on the bank," the witch answered.

The wizard next to her chimed in. "Potter and his friends attacked it. They flew a dragon in and tore the place up. Everyone just wants their money back now. It belongs to us; we should be able to get it if it's there."

Katherine allowed her eyes to widen in agreement as she nodded. "Indeed we should." Secretly, she congratulated herself for having moved most of her money to a bank on the Continent several weeks earlier. She was prepared if it turned out that *he* really did want her... not that she would count on it, of course.

Katherine mentally shook herself. If she were to be of any use at all, she needed to concentrate better. "So Potter attacked Gringotts with a dragon?"

The witch shrugged. "That what everyone's saying. He stole everything out of the Lestrangle vault, destroyed several others, and then flew the dragon back out. Harry Potter must be able to do just about anything."

"Quite interesting," said Katherine. "Thank you very much, and good luck to you. I hope you get your money back."

"You and me both," said the witch before turning and joining into the chants aimed at the goblins.

All of the events Katherine had planned to attend that day were canceled. The witches and wizards who would be attending the afternoon tea and evening cocktail party were all within the growing crowd outside the bank. She went back to her apartment, changed into clothes she could wear to battle, and waited. She drank cups of coffee and put the fake Galleon on the coffee table in front of her.

The wait was interminable. Every time there was a sound from the street, Katherine jumped and picked up the Galleon. When it was nothing, she would sigh and put it down. She was starting to doze when it made a sort of vibrating hum. This was it. Kingsley had said he would let her know and now he had. Somewhere a battle was brewing. Katherine realized with a catch in her throat that Severus might already be in it, fighting, suffering, or dying. She checked those thoughts and reached for the coin.

Hog's Head, Hogsmeade.

It was time to go. Katherine made a final check over her preparations. She had her wand, she was properly dressed, and she had such healing potions and items as could be reasonably carried within her robes. She looked around her sitting room one last time and then left her flat, walking swiftly to a dark corner from which she could Disapparate.

When she got to the Hog's Head, she found herself within a group of witches and wizards climbing up onto a mantelpiece and walking through a tunnel. The others around her mentioned that this was a path into the school. Some were here to take revenge while others simply came for the adventure. Several were hoping to find their children and keep them safe.

They arrived in a strange room on the top floor of the castle. Kingsley and other Aurors were hustling everyone out the door and suggesting places they should go, based upon their skills as he knew them. He sent Katherine to the front lines.

A cool breeze came through a broken window, and suddenly Katherine's mind was clearer than it had been in weeks. She was here to fight, just as she had been trained to do so many years before, and as she had been required to do time and again since. She met a person wearing a black robe and Death Eater mask. Almost without thinking, she engaged this opponent in battle and succeeded in tying him or her up. She removed the mask and recognized a former class mate, whom she locked into a nearby closet.

From that point it became almost easy. She fought with anyone wearing a Death Eater mask, besting most and getting help in some cases to dispatch others. She fell easily into the old habits that had been trained into her. With a grim sort of contentment, she realized that this was the Katherine Stanton she knew herself to be.

She knew it wasn't quite the case. Although she was fighting the Death Eaters with her usual skill, she was also carefully not thinking about one person. She was carefully not thinking about how she wished she could leave this battle behind and escape with that person. She was also quite aware of a fear that the person would somehow be on the other end of her wand or pointing his own at her. As long as the Death Eater she faced was not him, it would be a minor distraction, but it was still a distraction.

During a lull in the action, she went to the Great Hall where she learned that Snape had left the school hours earlier. "Like the coward he is," someone said disparagingly. She turned to cast a jinx at the speaker and instead came face to face with the lifeless body of Tonks. Kingsley had levitated her and was moving her close to the body of her husband.

Too many thoughts pummeled Katherine at once. Tonks's cheerful "Wotcher" every morning... her positive glee upon discovering Snape's boxer shorts at Spinner's End... her impish delight in mismatching his socks in the same place... her steady love for her husband... Remus and his constant worry over the future... the joy of both in their infant son... The envy she had in their happiness only a month before evaporated instantly in dismay that it was over for them so soon. Someone was talking to Katherine, but it was just a buzz in her ears.

"Get back in the game, Katherine." Kingsley had finished his task and was shaking her now.

"I don't know if I can do this."

"None of us can do this, Katie, but we're the ones who are here. We *have* to do this, and we will."

"Yes." Katherine's gaze strayed around the room to the groups of people who were no doubt mourning their dead. She shook her head and looked at Kingsley. "Yes, of course. I'm sorry, Kingsley. I'll do the job, for as long as you need me."

Shacklebolt gave her a small smile and moved on to encouraging another group of his volunteers. The battle began again and Katherine made good on her promise. Where possible, she cast binding charms around the Death Eaters she fought; where necessary, she killed them. She struggled and fought as long as anyone pointed their wand in her direction. She was in the Great Hall and heard everything said between Harry Potter and Voldemort until both described her lover as dead.

Suddenly time stopped and she couldn't think or breathe. She looked around the room, not sure what she was looking for until she saw Kingsley give her a small nod. She slipped out the door as the final spells were shouted. She barely registered that Potter had somehow triumphed. *Where was Severus?* They had mentioned the Shrieking Shack, and she couldn't get there fast enough. Were the protective spells around Hogwarts still in working order? What could it hurt to try? She closed her eyes with great determination as she turned.

It worked. She found herself standing in front of the most haunted house in England. The front door was open. She forced herself to treat this as any investigation. She was alert as she looked through the hallway. She was aware of every sound and breath of air as she looked into the rooms. They were dingy and musty but empty.

The last room was just as empty, until Katherine saw the small pieces of metal in a corner and the pool of blood in the middle of the room. *Where was Severus?* This must be where Potter and his friends had left him. Suddenly she felt as though all of her own blood were draining down through her feet to join his on the floor. She became aware of the movement in the hallway far too slowly. She reminded herself to stay professional and turned just as the Stunner hit her.

A/N: Thank you all who have been reading and reviewing! Thank you especially to beta reader Trickie Woo.

Closing Arguments

Chapter 12 of 12

One last discussion

Disclaimer: Except for an OC, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling.

The woman sat on the beach every day for a week. Every day it was the same. She came as soon as it was light and left as it became dark. She always wore a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt. Her hair was in a ponytail, and she hid her face behind big sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat. She gently rebuffed the locals who tried to speak with her, but they were able to report that she had a British accent and held a funny little gold and silver ball in one of her hands. Occasional tears could be seen creeping below the edge of the glasses. Those who watched her from a beach-side bar conferred. They decided that she had suffered some tragic loss. Perhaps the ball belonged to her son or daughter who had recently died of a dreadful illness. They decided to leave her alone.

The man showed up after about a week. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt as well, but it was all in unrelieved black, as was the curtain of hair that covered much of his face. He scanned the beach until he saw the woman and then walked toward her. The watchers could tell that he was used to long strides, but the sand impeded his

normal gait. Even so, he managed to get to her quickly and with an impressive dignity.

The man reached into his pocket, making one of the watchers stand in an effort to prevent harm to the woman. They had no idea who she was or why she was there, but after a week she belonged to them. The watcher sat back down when they saw the man remove a handkerchief and hand it to her. She took it without looking at him, but then she did look at him. She stood and started beating at his chest with her fists. Snatches of her voice yelling could be heard on the breeze. The watchers all stood now, prepared to defend the woman. Some even took a step or two toward the pair, but the man had his arms around the woman and was kissing her. Slowly she relaxed and put her arms around him, clinging in a way the watchers all recognized. They knew they were fairly simple folk and prided themselves upon it. Perhaps because of that simplicity, they understood that this was a scene of great delicacy and that they should stay back.

"Where were you?" asked Katherine, once they were seated. "I went to the Shrieking Shack and all I found was that puddle of blood. Yaxley got the drop on me, and then I had to listen to him explain that since the Dark Lord wanted you dead, Yaxley was going to make sure you were dead. He would finish the job if necessary. I didn't know where you were, and then he gleefully told me your body must have been carried off by the werewolves. That's all I've been able to think about."

"Yaxley is in Azkaban, now."

"Where were you?"

He put his arm around her. "Would you like me to tell you everything?"

She pressed herself against his chest. "Perhaps that would be best."

"I've spoken with Kingsley. He told me how much you had figured out, my bright girl." He squeezed her close and kissed her again.

"To start with, you were absolutely right. Dumbledore was cursed. He was cursed in a big way. He put on a ring that we now know was a Horcrux."

"You're kidding. Whose soul was in it?"

"I kid you not. It was the Dark Lord's Horcrux, and he made six of them on purpose and a seventh without realizing it. It took two doses of the Elixir of Life to revive the Headmaster and everything I know about the Dark Arts and Healing to push the curse back down into that hand. Right then and there he asked me how long I could keep him alive. Given the amount of Elixir it had taken to revive him then and how much I had on hand, I estimated a year at the most. He had realized after a recent battle with Voldemort that the Dark Lord would want to kill him and even guessed that the Dark Lord would pick Draco Malfoy to fail at the deed before forcing me to do it.

"Dumbledore chose to defeat that gambit by forcing me to kill him himself. We argued long and hard over it for the entire school year. To Dumbledore it seemed an obvious choice, while I thought it was absolutely ghastly. We ran low on the Elixir before I could find a good alternative, and so I found myself at the top of the Astronomy Tower on the fateful night."

"So that's how it was."

"Yes, and then you entered my life. I couldn't understand you at all, yet I knew your drive and ambition, because they match something in me. The heavens know you've lived the worst parts of my life and my mother's life. We both know what we've each been through and we understand each other because of it. You have been a worthy adversary, my bright girl, and it was worse once your guesses started getting close to the truth. I lived in constant fear that you would tell the wrong person what you had discovered. Yet at the same time it was a joy to have someone so interested in me that she was asking the questions you asked. You were brighter still than I had thought and only gave one person hints."

"I told Kingsley early on that I wouldn't risk your safety if I could help it. For all I knew, all of Dumbledore's plans hinged on you remaining as you were for as long as possible."

"Yes... Well to come to the present, after that wretched snake bit me, who should show up but Potter and his friends. I'm not sure what the boy expected, but I gave him some of my memories. Dumbledore had told me that many of his private lessons with the boy involved looking into a Pensieve, and I could only hope he would find the opportunity to discover my darkest secrets an irresistible opportunity. Apparently he did, because he and his friends left me for dead and ran off."

"What memories did you give him?"

"The sorts of things you were able to figure out. I might have given him an eye opener of you in your bikini on my beach, or standing in my office as your dress was sliding down your body, but there were several reasons against it and time was short, so I decided not to share. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not."

"Well, to continue, those kids left and there I was, bleeding profusely, when I felt something tickle my hand. It was that Snitch you gave me. Somehow I opened it and retrieved this." He handed her a small vial with a few drops inside. "That's all that remains of the Elixir of Life I made using Flamel's Philosopher's Stone. It didn't cure me, but with that and some Blood-replenishing potion I was able to get to St. Mungo's. A friend was able to filch a bit of the potion used to cure Arthur Weasley when he was bitten by the same snake a few years ago. After a day or two of regaining my strength and waiting for the right moment, I went to beard the lion in his den."

"Kingsley?"

"Got it in one. Did you know he's been named Minister?" At Katherine's blank stare, he chuckled. "You've been a naughty girl, running off without telling anyone where you were going. Of course you are unaware of what has been happening. I went to see Minister Shackbolt, and we had quite the conversation."

"I started off by telling him that I was there to make a full statement. He replied that he was sorry to see me. I asked him why he would be sorry, and he responded that a certain investigator had sworn to die rather than let me turn myself in, and that if I were there it must mean that investigator was not in full health."

"I was a bit of a loss at that point, because I had not seen you since the day we were last here and told him so. That made him more worried yet, and it occurred to him that you might have been kidnapped or killed by an uncaptured Death Eater. I suspected that you might have come here and told him I thought you were safe. I contacted Bonaparte and Josephine, and they were able to discover what you've been doing all week and where you were staying. I must say it's sloppy work for an Auror to be as obvious as you have been, sitting on this beach all week."

Katherine roused herself at that. "I've been busy mourning your loss, and all you can say is how sloppy it was?"

"It's also quite sweet, although you might have hung around England long enough to make sure I was really gone. At any rate, once we ascertained that you were reasonably safe, Kingsley has had what's left of the Aurors questioning me night and day. We finished yesterday, and the Minister expects to be able to issue me a full pardon."

"That's wonderful news!"

"Indeed. All that is left now is for you to prepare for our wedding. Then we can honeymoon for as long as you like in just about any location you desire."

"Back up a minute. You want me to prepare for what?"

"Our wedding. Josephine is waiting in your hotel room, and all the arrangements are made."

"I can't marry you! I don't remember how to be a wife, it's so long since Cyrus died."

"Do you honestly think I would want you to be that sort of wife? Do you think I want to be that sort of husband?" He pulled away to look into her eyes, anger showing. "I could never treat you the way that man did. I love you the way I met you with your independence, boldness and cleverness."

"I'm not sure I can be that woman, either. Did you hear what I said? Yaxley got the drop on me. I've lost my edge, and I'm not sure if I'll ever get it back."

"I don't care about that, but let's make this easy. Can you be the woman who crashed the New Year's party and didn't allow me any sleep that night? Can you be the woman who shared her story with me and then let me make love to her as no woman ever did before? Can you be the woman whose heart was in her eyes when she told me without using so many words that she wanted me to survive this war?"

Katherine's heart was in her eyes again as she answered, "I am that woman."

"Katherine, nothing else matters. Neither of us really fit into the world that just ended, and we might not fit into the world that's beginning. If we're together I know at least one piece of my life will fit."

She buried her face in his shirt. "I can't give you children."

He snorted. "I've had hundreds of children pass through my life over the last twenty years. I don't need any more. I do think you should get checked at St. Mungo's, in case there's something that the Healers can do. If they can't help you and it's important to you, there are quite a few orphaned children who can use a good home. Don't let this stop us."

She finally took off the sun glasses and looked at him, almost convinced. "Did you have something better to do?" he asked sarcastically.

She looked out over the water. "My plan was to sit here and look at your island until I couldn't see it any more."

He laughed at her. "That isn't going to happen. I started the paperwork to deed it over to you the day I returned to Hogwarts. You may also recall enough of the theory behind the Fidelius charm to know that if I had died, you would have become the Secret-Keeper?"

"It seems a rather moot point in any case, but why would you give your island to me?"

"It was part of some other paperwork I began the same day. The full marriage license and contract only require your signature. I have a wizard here who will marry us tonight, but his schedule is pretty tight. He's quite eager to see for himself that you are safe, and I think there's also some excitement about officiating his first marriage. Let's not make him wait."

"He's here? With all the other things he probably has to attend to?"

"Just for a few hours. As I say, he has a tight schedule."

She sighed and smiled. "Well, the only problem I see now is that if I say yes, I'll be giving in to you."

He stood and pulled her up, laughing. "There are some who would say that I've already given in to you by asking."

"I don't recall hearing any of this discussed in a question format, actually." She flashed her knowing smile at him, and he knew he had succeeded.

"Fine, then," he pretended to growl. "Katherine, will you marry me?" He removed an object from his pocket and slid it onto her finger.

She never bothered to look at the ring. Instead, she reached up to kiss him. "Oh, yes, Severus, yes."

As far as the locals could tell, watching the couple leave the beach, the woman had accepted the man's ring. They sighed contentedly over the romance of it and filled in the other parts of the story to their hearts' content. Over time the details became more extravagant. Years later Severus and Katherine had dinner at a restaurant near the beach, where they were told the story and didn't recognize themselves. In essentials, the locals had the story correct. They saw a couple very much in love, and in that they were not wrong.

A/N: This ends the story. I've had some requests to go farther with it, so this pair may return. Thanks to all who have read this and reviewed. Thank you, especially, Trickle Woo, for beta reading.