

My Favorite Wand Waver

by Rose of the West

After *The Tower Affair*, Severus Snape survived the war and married quickly thereafter. He takes on a trio of apprentices as she takes a long-term case. How do two people, long single, create a life together?

In So Many Words

Chapter 1 of 25

After *The Tower Affair*, Severus Snape survived the war and married quickly thereafter. He takes on a trio of apprentices as she takes a long-term case. How do two people, long single, create a life together?

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

It was a swell affair although there were many things the wedding was not.

The bride was not fresh and dewy, nor was she in the first blush of womanhood. She was not youthful, and while she glowed with what the groom considered pure loveliness, she was not exactly beautiful. Neither was the groom particularly handsome. He was tall, dark, and definitely masculine, but by accident of genetics and habit, his features gave the impression that he was slightly sinister. The bride had considered since the day they met that she had never known a more attractive man. Such is the eyesight of lovers.

There were not hundreds of guests from the social register, nor scores, nor even a dozen. The guests, if they could be called such, were a half dozen British Aurors and Magical Law Enforcement personnel whose job it was to protect the Minister of Magic. In past years, two had worked with the bride. One had slept with the groom. The other four had never met either member of the couple previous to this occasion.

There was not a stunning wardrobe constructed through months of tailoring and fittings. The groom wore his third best tuxedo. His first best was lying in a pile of rubble, having inexplicably been the target of an over-eager member of Dumbledore's Army during the Battle of Hogwarts. His second best was on a hanger in a closet at the country home of a friend, unless it had since become "evidence" taken during a Ministry raid. In that case it would now be somewhere in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic. The bride wore off-the-rack dress robes purchased as general evening wear; they had been selected by the wife of one of the groom's friends.

Although an army of florists and caterers was not employed, the food and scenery of the event could not have been better. The hotel where the bride had been staying previous to the event was the best on the island. The island breezes and plants created a delightful setting. If it was late in the season and most tourists were leaving for cooler climates, that only improved things by reducing the crowds. Yet somehow the scenery was unimportant.

The bride and groom couldn't take their eyes from each other. They barely acknowledged the presence of others in the room, and even when taking their vows and being bound together, they only paid as much attention to the wizard officiating as was absolutely necessary. They gave no attention at all to his retinue. When the ceremony was over, they stood together and received the congratulations of their small wedding party with an absentminded grace.

After the rites were completed, the party moved into the hotel's general dining room and shared a quick dinner. Toasts were given, and everyone at the table drank to the newlywed couple. The Minister left soon after dinner, since he had a tight schedule and a society to reconstruct. His security detail left with him.

The bride and groom didn't seem to notice. Once left alone, they danced only with each other until the hotel band started to pack up for the night. Then they looked at each

other and nodded. They slipped out a side door, onto a patio, and then into the hotel's garden. A popping sound like the beginning of fireworks was briefly heard. The keyboardist went to the doors to see if he could see or hear anything, but there was nothing. The bass player said to the drummer, "That was the best wedding I was ever hired to play."

The affair had been swell; the marriage would now begin.

The morning sun rose and lit everything in its path. As it crossed the Mediterranean Sea, that included a very small island and villa. Peeking through a window, the sunlight shone upon the floor of a bedroom, glancing on a jacket, a shimmering robe of champagne-colored silk, shoes, and finally a tuxedo shirt and pants. A bow tie was hanging half off a chair, and shirt studs were scattered throughout the room. Moving into the very heart of the room, the sun discovered underclothes that were swirled and mixed together under the edge of a bed.

Finally chancing to illuminate the surface of the bed itself, the sun shone in the eyes of two tired but very happy people. Newly wed, they were clasped almost as close as humanly possible. The new husband leaned over his wife and smiled gently as she brushed his hair from his face. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather go someplace else, somewhere more interesting?"

She shook her head. "What place could be better than the very bed where we taught each other what lovemaking really is? And could any place be more interesting than our own island, all to ourselves?"

"You're sure, then?"

"Maybe later we can travel a little, but for now this is all I want... unless you would rather something else?"

He shook his head as he leaned down to trace circles in the perspiration on her belly. "No, you're right. This is perfect."

A worried expression crossed her face. "Are you sure we haven't rushed into this?"

"Were you considering better offers?"

"No... it's just that it's so soon after the war, we've hardly gotten to know each other, and there's the children thing."

He blew on her stomach, making her shiver, and started tracing again. "We may not have seen each other very many times, yet I know we belong together. I knew by the time I gave you the diamonds...that you have around your neck this minute, my dear...that you fit into my life. As to it being so soon after the war, that was only because we each had a different role to play. I very nearly insisted on taking you to a registry office instead of returning to Hogwarts after the Easter Holiday we shared. If there had been no need to protect you from the secrets I was keeping, you would have become my wife weeks ago."

"You really want me so much?"

"Madam, I want you any way I can get you." He kissed her navel and was rewarded by an answering thrum as she moaned lightly.

"I told you before that it doesn't matter to me whether we have children. That's not completely true. Part of me would delight in seeing a little girl, just like you, running around this island. It's not important to me, however. I would be just as happy if my father's bloodline never saw another generation. For your own peace of mind, you will go to St. Mungo's and be thoroughly checked." He felt her stiffen under his hands. "No, my dear, you will not put it off forever. The Muggles did what they could for your injuries, but I suspect there are things they missed, and I don't want something like that to suddenly have an adverse affect upon you." He spoke quietly but intently.

She raised up on her elbows and looked down at him. "Severus..." There was an odd catch in her voice that made him look away from his artwork. She smiled and shrugged. "We've never just said it out in so many words. I don't think I've ever said it in my life. I'll give in and say it. Severus, I I..."

"I love you, Katherine."

"--love you," she finished, looking ruefully at him. "Did you have to do that?"

"Was I supposed to let you beat me?" He smiled wickedly.

"What will we say when anyone asks who said it first?"

"I don't see that it's anyone's affair but our own."

"But, Severus..."

His attention was distracted by her new position. His gaze, and then his hands, moved up her body. "Less talking is necessary, Mrs. Snape, much less talking, if you see what I mean."

"Oh, yes, I see...ah..." Her voice broke off in breathy gasps as his lips claimed hers. She sank back to the bed as his hands explored what he had seen. Regaining some composure, Katherine shifted around and embarked upon her own discoveries. The sun continued on its path as the two in the bedroom kissed and caressed. After a while, they were clasped every bit as close as humanly possible.

Later, Severus tickled Katherine until she opened a baleful eye and looked at him. "I'm exhausted, Severus. I don't think I have any strength left. If I try to move, I'll dribble through the mattress and then what? Surely our marriage is consummated."

"Ah, my dear wife, we need to consummate a great deal more," he answered. "We've only done the bedroom and the bath, so far. There's the rest of the house and then the grounds."

She gingerly sat up. "I suppose you have piqued my interest, but you will have to do something about my peaked physical state."

He got off the bed, kicking one of his shirt studs and walking over to his wardrobe. He found his dressing gown. "As my lady demands," he said. "I'll see what Josephine has in the kitchen." He turned and looked at her, laying against the pillows on the bed. Her eyes had the look that he couldn't leave, belying her claims of exhaustion.

He walked back toward the bed until his bare foot stepped upon another of the studs. "Blast!" he said. He hopped around until he realized there were others somewhere on the floor and stopped. Summoning his wand, he rounded them all up and sent them to the top of a chest of drawers. He looked up and saw his wife beckoning him to the bed.

"Why not just call her, my love?" she asked.

They did, and several minutes later a tray of pastries, fruit, and juices was on the bed. After eating for several minutes, they moved the tray to a bedside table. Refreshed, they looked at each other questioningly. "Now, let me see that foot," Katherine said. She moved down to the foot of the bed.

"This wouldn't have happened if you had let me unbutton like a normal person," he said. Severus put both feet in her lap and watched, wondering what she would do.

She started rubbing. "Tell me you didn't enjoy it, either last night or at New Years," she said with a knowing smile. He looked at her helplessly.

Katherine Summoned a bottle she had discovered on her previous visit to the island. When she uncorked it, the scent of orange blossoms permeated the room. She

poured a little of the olive-oil based lotion into her hands. She rubbed the soles of both feet, gently caressing the spot that had stepped on the wayward stud. He groaned as she rubbed and massaged his feet until they were warm and relaxed. She lifted the wronged foot and kissed the sore spot, then kissed the other foot, continuing to rub his ankles. He sighed gratefully and relaxed into the pillows, closing his eyes.

Katherine was not one to let an opportunity go to waste, especially with her victim lying vulnerable. She rubbed a little above the ankles, and getting only contented sighs and groans in response, made her way up her husband's legs, crawling toward the head of the bed. She arrived at someplace a bit more interesting before Severus realized what she was doing.

"Katherine!" Severus squawked, brought to full awareness. He stared down at her, and she smiled back before lowering her lips. "Katherine?" She didn't respond to his voice, as her mouth was busy. He could only clutch at the bed sheet with his long fingers. When he felt he could take no more, he growled out "Katherine..." as he reached for her shoulders and flipped her over.

"Didn't you want...?" she asked.

"Right now I would rather see our shared pleasure in your eyes and to hold you to me, heart to heart." She sighed as he did that very thing. "Not to mention," he added, "I can't let you have so much advantage over me. We will share it, if you don't mind." She laughed and then gasped as he pressed his advantage home.

They had nothing urgent to attend and spent a full month honeymooning. Severus was not forced to participate in the initial round of reconstruction at Hogwarts or elsewhere, and Katherine rejected all inquiries.

After making full use of their island, they finished their month by stopping at touristy ports of call along the Mediterranean coast. It can be argued that they didn't see much at any of the cities in which they stopped, but they enjoyed their time in each one and created a list for future explorations.

At last the calendar showed mid-June approaching, and the Snapes decided to return to England. Katherine's London flat was sold, and a roomy penthouse flat was purchased in the same city. It must be admitted that a few spats were involved in the establishment of a common living space, just as for any pair of newlyweds. Small discussions about the exact shade of green used in the dining room can quickly get out of hand when passions are high.

They were interrupted by an owl from Mr. Ollivander, of all people. The short missive came one morning as they were lingering over toast and paint samples. *My dear Mrs. Snape*, it began. *I believe, from what I read, that your holly and unicorn hair wand is doing quite well for you. I wonder if I could interest you in helping me regain some stolen items? Yours &ct, Ollivander.*

"Do you mind being called 'Mrs. Snape' by the wizarding community?" asked Severus.

"Of course not," Katherine answered. "My maiden name was that of a man who beat my mother and took an occasional switch to me, and then sold me for beer. My previous married name sounded more sophisticated, but likewise was given to me by an oaf who killed my child. I have great hopes for Mrs. Snape."

He reached over to caress her cheek. "I shall do everything in my power to see those hopes realized, my dear."

She took his hand in hers and kissed it. For a few minutes they simply looked into each other's eyes. The note fluttered in a breeze from the open window, drawing her attention back.

"The real question is whether I should do it," the wife said.

"Yes, of course you should," Severus answered. "Perhaps it's time for us to look at daily employment. I've been pondering that storefront down the street. I'm thinking of setting up to properly research several potions."

"You never said anything..."

"I hated to end our honeymoon. I've been meaning to say something for a few days, though. I was asked to take on some assistants who will be taking the special N.E.W.T.s that are being offered this winter."

"Anyone I know?"

"Just a troublesome know-it-all or two. Nothing I can't handle." There was something evasive in his tone, which made her stare at him in curiosity. He quickly re-directed the conversation. "Run along and owl Mr. Ollivander that you can go this afternoon. I'll make an appointment to look over those premises. Then we'll meet back here, and we can start right back into this argument about the merits of julep green versus shamrock."

"You're awfully quick to agree to this. Are you sure?"

"Of course. We'll be better off for an hour or two apart. Perhaps one of us will have a changed perspective about the color."

Thank you to beta reader Trickie Woo.

Holly and Unicorn Hair

Chapter 2 of 25

Katherine starts her new case while Severus sets up shop.

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

"So, Mr. Ollivander, your stock of wands has been stolen?" Katherine looked around the shop. The windows had been replaced, and most of the broken boxes and other rubbish were cleaned away. There was still more work to do before the wand shop would be back to normal.

"Not all of them, my dear, and there are a few unfinished ones that I can complete before the new shopping season starts. I've been told that you are just the person to handle this sort of task."

Katherine smiled. "I appreciate the confidence you have in me, Mr. Ollivander."

"You were highly recommended by Signore Bacchetto," he replied.

"I located his missing shop clerk, not his stock of wands, sir. How am I to know whether the wands I find are indeed yours?"

"Ah, my dear, that is the question. It's a bit of wand lore that most people don't notice, but surely you understand? I happen to have a wand that is almost an exact match to yours: Holly, unicorn hair, and just a half inch shorter. Why don't you try it?"

It felt a bit off in her hand, but she was able to stack a pile of boxes that had been swept into a corner of the room. "I see. It's not just different; it doesn't work quite right," she said.

"It's even from the same unicorn and tree. You will recall my saying on the day I sold your wand to you that the wand chooses the wizard or witch. That one does not recognize you, but you are skilled enough to make any wand do what you need done. You see that it takes more of your effort and will never be quite what you are expecting. I imagine you've had some success with your husband's wand?"

She nodded, blushing at the thought of a certain incident during their honeymoon. *She and Severus were quite thoroughly caught up in a moment of passion when a sudden squall sent cold raindrops through an open window across the room. Katherine reached with her hand and closed the window with the first wand she touched. The magic went in both directions, closing the window with a bang and sending a jolt through her body that intensified the passion her husband evoked. Her body felt electrified for several indescribable seconds and then she went limp, quivering with the aftereffects of their lovemaking.*

She was reluctant to move for quite a while, until Severus nudged her with his nose. "Is something the matter?"

"I don't know what happened," she answered, finally remembering to breathe. "All I did was close the window and suddenly it was as if I were in both our bodies at once."

He gently pried her fingers open. "Perhaps it had to do with the fact that you used my wand?"

Her forehead puckered as she looked and saw the wand in her hand was ebony, not holly. "Why would your wand let me use it?"

"They change allegiance when their owner is soundly beaten. Perhaps it knows you have mastered me?"

"Then my wand should work beautifully for you, as well," she said with a satisfied smile.

After they had dressed again, they spent several enjoyable hours discovering the extent to which their wands worked for each other.

Katherine's attention returned to the shop as Mr. Ollivander continued. "Ebony and dragon heartstring are completely wrong for you. You shouldn't be able to so much as light that wand with the differences in your temperament. Yet the marriage bond has an effect, and the wand will recognize the true consort of its owner. In contrast, you will find that wizards or witches using stolen wands appear to struggle or seem surprised at the effort required. Now, my dear, I want you to look at the very end of the wand in your hand."

Katherine looked at it and discovered a round letter O. She looked up at her host. "Your trademark?"

"Almost," he answered. "I'll take that one back. Now look at your own wand."

Katherine pulled out her wand and looked at the trademark. Superimposed on the O was a strangely shaped E. She rolled it between her fingers. "I see," she said. "It's O-W for Ollivander Wands."

"Just so," he answered. "I tap each box as I sell the wand within, and the W appears. The wood is charmed as I prepare it to make the wand only take my trademark. Although a wand may work for someone in my shop, the ones that are stolen will just have the O and will not work quite right. If you know what to look for, it's fairly easy to spot wands that are not in the hands of the owners they are destined for." He pulled out a ledger. "Now, I can tell you about each of the wands that have been taken, and that will help you find some of them. There is one in particular that should be found..."

Katherine had to admit she was intrigued. Most of the wands were probably in the hands of black market dealers. She already had an idea or two of how to find them. The particular wand Ollivander mentioned was frightening, but any person who successfully wielded it would not stay hidden for long. Severus was right. Just taking a couple of hours to resume business was good for her. She walked into their flat with a bounce in her step and continued down the hall, thinking of ways she would greet her husband when he got in.

She stopped short at the doorway of the dining room. While she was gone, it had been painted shamrock green. The nerve, when he knew that she wanted julep! Katherine's shoulders stiffened as her hands formed fists.

"You're angry." Katherine whirled around and saw that her husband had come behind her. As she glared at him, she pulled her twisted lower lip between her teeth.

"How could you do this? I had plans..."

"Your plans were lovely, but your color just wasn't right. You'll see, this will be better."

"How did you manage to get this done so soon?" Her teeth were still clenched.

"Ah, a quick owl did the trick, and I didn't have as far to travel on my appointment."

"So now I'm supposed to capitulate? Just let you put one over on me?"

"That's a bit rich, coming from the witch who used feminine wiles to get her way on the bathroom fixtures."

"You said you loved them, after all!"

"That was after you showed me how well the bathtub works when you sit on my lap and how mesmerizing you are with the shower jets streaming over you. And you're going to love this color, after all."

"Severus..."

"I've waited all day to dine with you, my dear." He backed her to the table, planting hot kisses on her lips and neck as he did. When she was leaning against the table with her hands caught behind her, he knelt before her. He reached under her robe and unfastened her skirt. After he slid it and her boyshorts down, she learned the menu he had planned. He wouldn't get around her that way, she determined, as she leaned toward him, prepared to meet him equally in this activity, if winning were not an option.

A couple of heady hours later, Katherine was under the table with her chin on her husband's chest, watching the light from the setting sun strike the walls. There was a fascinating glow that mixed with the green of the walls as the daylight faded, the wall sconces came alight, and the reds and purples of the sunset came through the windows.

"The more brilliant shade is better," she admitted. "The other would look washed out and perhaps would even clash with the outdoor light."

"If we go through this for every room, I'm going to be completely used up," he said.

She smiled like a cat and traced the line of his chin with a fingernail. "You could always just agree with everything I want."

"That would hardly be sporting."

They discussed their appointments later in the evening. Katherine described the wands that Ollivander was looking for to her husband. She wanted his advice. "Do you think I should try to find that one first? I thought rather to see if bunches of them were in the hands of black market sellers. I cannot imagine that they're getting very good trade on them if they don't work as well, but they're probably trying. I don't think they have had them very long either, actually. From what I could learn at the other shops in the area, Ollivander's was boarded up by the Ministry right after Mr. Ollivander was abducted, and then someone smashed into the store about four months ago."

"How bad will it be if the right wizard finds that wand?"

"Horrible, but it will be impossible to find, otherwise. I really need to just happen upon it."

"Then you already have your answer. You have to watch for that one wizard to find it before he realizes his full power with it."

"I know, but I can't help feeling that there must be some way for me to look for and find it and avoid the trouble."

"The trouble can be laid at other doors. Don't take the guilt onto yourself. How do you plan to locate black market sellers?"

"That's the easiest part. Uncle Sonny will know."

"Your Uncle Sonny, the one in the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's?"

"Um-hm. Somehow he knows where to find the people who have things."

"Your Uncle Sonny has those sorts of connections? Really?"

"He always has had a rather, shall we say, flexible conscience. Because of that, he gathered quite a few interesting business contacts over the years. He has maintained a fair number of them even though he is in the hospital. Do you want to come with me tomorrow and meet him?"

He sighed. "I would very much like to meet your Uncle Sonny, but I have an appointment with all of my assistants."

"All?" She looked at him curiously. "Just how many of them are there?"

"Three. They each need to take the Potions N.E.W.T. to continue their chosen professions, and they didn't get a chance to work in that subject last year."

"You can't mean..."

"Yes, somehow your dear friend, the Minister, has talked me into taking on the Golden Trio. I thought if I ignored it long enough or pretended it wasn't happening I could avoid it, but to no avail."

"Doesn't Kingsley realize how you feel about them?"

"My feelings have never counted, and apparently young Potter has decided that I'm to be a sort of surrogate dad since I was so fond of his mother. The word is that he's eager to be my friend now. So tomorrow will be spent meeting with the dunderheads, assessing what we need for the Potions lab, and heading over to the apothecary to obtain it all."

"My poor darling, is there anything I can do to make it better?"

"I was hoping you would ask that..."

Katherine Snape had a good day, although there was some tension at the start. She went early to visit her relative at the hospital and was scolded for half an hour because she hadn't been to see him in months. She was then scolded for twenty minutes because she hadn't informed him, personally, of her marriage. There was an additional ten minutes of heated discussion over the question of whether she would ever see a Healer concerning her health and whether the injuries that caused her infertility could be reversed.

When Katherine was finally able to get a word in edgewise, Uncle Sonny listened attentively to the story of the lost wands. He was interested in the situation and offered several suggestions of places she might wish to search. He mentioned knowing what a certain group of wands might be used for, and gave his young relative some suggestions for how to look into that possibility.

They finished the visit by discussing whether enough time had passed to ask the Ministry to re-open Uncle Sonny's case. Katherine felt that it was finally the correct political climate to ask for a review. He had clearly acted in her defense and that of her mother. He was hardly a friend of the Death Eaters. She suggested talking to Kingsley Shacklebolt about it, herself. Sonny preferred to wait just a bit longer. He had caused the death of two Muggles, vile as the two men were, and for him it had been worth the cost to see her succeed in her career. With a sigh, Katherine acquiesced and hugged her elder relative tightly, kissing his cheek and thanking him for his help with her case.

One of Uncle Sonny's suggestions was a wizard known for standing on a certain corner of Knockturn Alley. Katherine decided to try her luck that afternoon. After hiding across the street and watching the man in action for a while, she saw him attempt to sell a wand. She quickly apprehended him and discovered that the wand in question was from Ollivander's. She also relieved him of four others. He seemed a bit too eager to give her what he thought she wanted and get away at that point, so she took him to the Ministry to allow them to question him further. They found two more wands as they searched him and allowed Katherine to take all seven to Mr. Ollivander.

Katherine walked quickly down Diagon Alley, pleased to have such immediate success in her search. Mr. Ollivander should be quite pleased to have this bundle of wands back. Hopefully it wouldn't raise his expectations unrealistically. She would need to point out how very lucky she had been to find these so quickly. Just after she passed Flourish and Blotts, a hand reached out and grabbed her arm. Before she knew it, she was folded into a firm embrace and a passionate kiss.

When Katherine was released to catch her breath, she found that she was looking over her husband's shoulder into the shocked eyes of a boy who could only be a Weasley. She barely had the time to register what was happening because her husband kissed her again. This time she returned the kiss with fervor. They became aware that they were causing a small scene and once again separated. Katherine saw a brown-haired girl this time, but her husband's eyes captured hers.

"You can't know how I needed that," Severus said.

"Happy to oblige," his wife answered with a breathless laugh.

"What are you doing?"

"I have a quick errand with Ollivander and then I shall be done for the day. You?"

"We are finishing our errands at the Apothecary, the Cauldron Emporium, and Flourish and Blotts. I have to spend a bit more time at the lab," he said with a groan, "and then I should be free for the evening."

"Shall I see you soon, then?"

"One can only hope."

They pulled apart and went their separate ways. Katherine couldn't make out what the girl with her husband said, but heard her husband reply, "If I wanted it to be your business, Miss Granger, I would already have made it so."

She hurried on to her destination. Mr. Ollivander was delighted with such quick progress, and as Katherine had foreseen, he needed some convincing to realize that finding the others would not go so quickly. There were over a hundred other wands to find, and some would be very complicated. He was nevertheless grateful and happy to pay Katherine's fee for the returned items. She proceeded to Madam Malkin's with a sense of a job well done.

Severus Snape's day was a bit more difficult all the way through. The property he would use for his Potions lab was not quite what he wanted, but it would not be difficult to retro-fit the space, and it was sufficient for the first few potions he planned to make. He spent half an hour signing the documents for taking over the shop before his assistants were scheduled to arrive.

The three arrived together just after the agent left. They had grown significantly since the last time their professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts had seen them. Weasley was now as tall as Snape was, while Potter had reached his father's height, which was a bit shorter than his friend, and Granger was a sort of average height for a woman. Their faces were a bit more weathered than before, and he would need to remember that while they were his students, they had earned the accolades they received. They deserved a modicum of respect, and the teacher-student relationship would need to be on a different basis than in the past.

If the three assistants looked at their professor and likewise recognized his heroism during the recent troubles, they didn't give any indication. If they realized the need to treat him with the respect they had previously withheld, they didn't show it. At the minimum, they did not go out of their way to be deliberately insulting. The new poise and maturity they carried improved matters that much, at least.

Snape internally sighed and placed the potion book he carried on a counter, summoning the three to stand around him and read the potion he intended to start with. The stance of these former students told much. One of the boys stood where he could see the professor's face, watching him carefully and paying close attention. The other boy stood with his arms folded. He was here simply because he must be and would not stay a minute longer than required. The girl stood as close to Snape as possible and smiled every time she caught his eye.

She interrupted constantly in an obvious effort to get his attention. She averred, correctly, that the recipe he planned to make that afternoon was not a potion. He pointed out that the same steps to preparing the mixture he planned were common to many potions and that it would be fairly forgiving in the case of mistake, compared to the next potion. Her objection being overruled, they moved on to the next point of conversation.

They discussed a plan for making both potions, making a shopping list in the process. The students were a bit rusty at thinking in terms of what must be done while brewing, but they were not as bad as their teacher had feared. Insofar as Snape's worst fears were not realized, the morning was a success. They went to Diagon Alley and split up, each assistant taking a portion of the list. Snape went into Flourish and Blotts to place an order with the personal shopper and spend a quiet hour in the coffee shop.

Granger and Weasley had just returned, arguing loudly, when Snape saw his wife walking down the cobbled street. He slipped out of the store and past the students, snatching at his wife's arm and turning her into his kiss. She resisted. Perhaps she didn't realize it was him, so he let her up for air. She saw that it was him and softened in his arms as he kissed her again. She melted against him, arching her body to fit his. His hand slid down to the small of her back and pressed her close as he became aroused. He was pondering which of the nearby alleys he could tuck her into when a loud clearing of throats alerted him to the fact that they had attracted too much attention to quietly do what he considered. He let his wife go, but necessarily stood close to her for another moment or two.

She had a glow of success about her, and she was headed to Ollivander's. Potter was back, and they shouldn't tarry on public streets. The sooner they got back to business, the sooner they could get back to... He would consider the possibilities in the intervening hours. They said their farewells and with a look and a motion of his hand, he indicated to his assistants that it was time to continue on their way.

"Was that witch your wife?" asked Hermione, suspiciously.

"If I wanted it to be your business, Miss Granger, I would have already made it so," he declared.

The rest of the afternoon went rather quickly and easily. They seasoned the cauldrons and on the side mixed their first recipe. They chopped additional ingredients to go with the concoction that would be added the next day. Finally, they discussed the plan for the actual potion they would brew at their next meeting. The assistants were given an essay to write about the potion and then finally, blessedly, they left.

Severus set all the cauldrons to cool. The mixtures they made were poured into gallon jugs, and the other ingredients were stored away in impermeable containers. Finally, he locked up and hurried home. If he were not mistaken, he had seen his wife walk past with a Madam Malkin's bag an hour earlier. It was always a pleasure to see what she gotten herself into, just so that he could remove it from her.

A/N: As was the case in The Tower Affair, you will probably notice these characters are a bit OOC. Thank you very much to beta reader Trickie Woo.

Pimm's Punch

Chapter 3 of 25

The Snapes attend the annual Malfoy Quidditch Invitational.

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

The next morning, Katherine Snape dressed as carefully as she had done a year before on the occasion when she and her husband first spoke face to face. The weather promised to be fair, so she dressed up more this time. She wore soft beige robes over a floral frock. She fastened her hair back in a style that was feminine and carried a floppy hat trimmed with fresh gardenias. On her feet she wore soft leather flats. Her husband, dressed in sporty robes over loose trousers and a sport shirt, looked her over for a long minute.

"You look good enough to eat," he finally said.

"You look rather marvelous, yourself," she observed. "Is the punch already there?"

"Fern and Wilbur took the bottled mixtures and fruit over at first light. Even now, I wager Lucius is into his second or third cup."

"So early? You must be joking."

"What do you wager?" His lips curled into a ruthless smile.

"I couldn't say. What is it worth?"

"How about if you're right, we'll get that coffee table you want for the drawing room, and if I'm right..." He put a hand on her shoulder and whispered into her ear.

Katherine's eyes grew wide, and her mouth went into the shape of an O. "We'll use the stronger broom, right, and cushioning charms?"

"I have something better than a broom. You will be well cushioned." His hand slid down her back and paused over her behind.

"Have you ever done such a thing before?" she asked curiously.

He put his other hand under her chin and kissed her, carefully so as not to smudge her makeup. "I've been waiting for the right witch."

"Is it safe?" She looked a bit worried.

"Probably not entirely so," he admitted, "but I won't let you fall."

She stepped back and considered.

"Come on, where's your sense of adventure?"

She thought for a moment and decided she was intrigued... and it was possible that she would win the bet. Finally, she put her hand out. "Done," she said. He took her hand and shook before sliding it within the crook of his arm. He then held out a cigarette lighter that would serve as their Portkey that day.

Narcissa greeted them this year. "Severus and Katherine, how wonderful to see you." She came up to them and air kissed their cheeks. "Severus, do see if you can do something about Lucius. I can't keep him away from the punch today, and there's a great lot of it, but it's not bottomless. Katherine, why don't I introduce you around?"

Severus felt a pang at the panicked look his wife gave him, but dared not disobey his hostess. He went in search of his host, who was indeed enjoying the Pimm's punch that year. He was holding the cup out to be refilled, but Snape deftly took it and handed it to a passing house-elf.

"Severus! Marriage agrees with you. The punch is better than ever."

"Indeed?"

"I've had three cups already. It's much better today than last year. What's different?"

"I can't think of anything that's different, Lucius, unless it's my staff."

"You had assistants this year?"

"Yes, I was asked, by a special request of the Minister himself, to take on a particular threesome. I had them prepare the ingredients yesterday."

Malfoy turned gray. "You mean..."

"Yes, indeed."

"Potter, Weasley, and Granger?" At Snape's amused nod, Lucius turned to a spot behind a tent and threw up into a bush.

Severus cast a cleaning charm and handed his host a Stringmint before putting an arm around him and guiding him toward the tents, where the teams were changing.

"You might have warned me, Snape." Lucius summoned an elf. After taking off his soiled robe, he gave it to the elf and asked for a substitute.

Trying to change the subject, the guest asked, "How did you stay out of Azkaban?"

The host grunted. "I didn't, entirely. I was kept there for several weeks, and was looking at several years when the boy-who-lived-to-think-he-needs-to-save-everyone begged the Wizengamot to have pity on my family because Narcissa saved the boy's backside. They let me off with time served. Now I'm obligated to the whelp and his Gryffindor sense of fair play. And you tricked me into drinking something his hands have touched. Really, Severus, it's not right."

Severus crossed his arms and smiled sardonically at his host. "Just how many cups did you have?"

"Two, three... Actually, I think it was four."

"Delightful!"

Malfoy was distracted by the return of the elf. "What, that I'll never be able to drink the stuff again?"

"No, that I win a bet with my wife."

"Just what did you win?" The new robe was fastened, and the wizards made their way back outside.

"Ah, that would be telling."

"Go on then, enjoy the spoils of my discomfort. Your wife appears to be alone in the stands."

Severus made his way up and sat in his designated seat, next to a dispirited Katherine. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, I'm fine." She had managed to crush her hat.

"You don't seem to be enjoying yourself."

"It's fine, really."

"Something isn't right."

"I remembered why I never come to these things unless I'm working. It's no big deal, but despite the fact that Narcissa is a perfect hostess, I'm not exactly accepted in this society. Between being a half-blood and the hired help to many of these families, let alone the fact that I removed an eligible bachelor from the ranks... I'll never be one of them. I've practiced my speech, I've learned how to walk and dress, what to talk about, what to leave unsaid, I know that I look and sound the part; but somehow I'll always be Katie Asher from a dockside neighborhood."

"I see. Well, you're married to Severus Snape, born and raised in a dingy mill town."

"I don't think that matters to them. You're so frightfully eligible."

"After betraying the Dark Lord? I suspect that most of these women would hide their daughters from me, now, between that and my pedigree."

She glanced at him with a small smile. "I love everything about Severus Snape," she said quietly.

He picked up her hand and kissed it. "I love everything about Katherine Snape. Shall we leave?"

"Shouldn't we stay to watch the game, and to bid on the auction?"

"Do you have a son I don't know about who's playing today, or a daughter looking for a husband?"

She laughed. "Of course not."

"Then I can think of a much more fulfilling game for us to engage in. We also need to prepare for you to pay your debt of honor."

"Lucius had that much of the punch by the time we arrived?"

"Four cups."

"Are you sure that's what you want?"

He looked at her and pictured her as she would be later that night. "Oh, yes."

"Take it off." It was delivered sternly, without much facial expression.

"But, Severus..."

"Take it off."

"I'll freeze to death."

He looked at the piece of lace in question and then into her rebellious eyes. One of his eyebrows raised as a mocking grin spread across his face. Her look conceded the foolishness of her position yet still persisted. "I can guarantee it won't make a difference," he said.

"But, Severus..."

"I won't have my favorite lingerie landing in some unknown back yard. Take it off now."

"I..." She looked into his eyes and sighed. "Do you suppose you could help me with the hooks?"

That unfolded his arms and softened his pose a bit. He summoned her with the smallest movement of one of his fingers, and she walked over to him. She lowered her robe so that it hung from her elbows and turned, allowing him access to the hooks running up her back. He worked his way down quickly and then let the garment drop where it fell. He ran his hands around her waist and slid his hands up her torso. He caressed her flesh with his fingertips as he leaned forward to kiss her ear.

"You think to seduce me and somehow avoid paying our bet, but it won't work," he said. He ran his hands the rest of the way up to her shoulders and then settled her robe back on properly. He leaned his body into hers. She turned in his arms and he looked into her eyes. "Don't be frightened, darling. I'm dressed just as you are. I've placed several protective charms and planned it to be as safe as possible. If there's the slightest problem, we'll stop." She flashed him a smile of trust that almost caused him to cancel his plans after all.

He Apparated them to the same field from which they started flying the last time. This time, he placed what appeared to be a square of coarse wool on the ground and tapped it. It grew into a Persian carpet, four feet wide and six feet long. The carpet rose and hovered at a good height to clamber on. Severus handed Katherine onto the carpet and helped her sit before seating himself behind her, his legs straddling hers.

"You Slytherins don't follow *any* rules, do you?" Katherine asked.

"The Ministry has cause to turn its glance the other way at times."

"My uncle isn't the only one with a flexible conscience." He could hear the amusement in her voice. His answer was to reach a groping hand between the fastenings of her robe.

He took off, and they flew for a while until it seemed the only thing that existed was the moon and them. He cast a charm that would keep the carpet flying straight and at the same altitude until he took control of it again. His hands came up around his wife in a way that signaled to her that it was time.

Ever so gently, he helped her to shift her position so that she was lying on her back. The carpet cradled her, while the bursts of passing air were invigorating. Then he gently settled himself over her. Their robes were quickly unfastened and then they were moving... through the air and with each other, feeling the air rush past as their passion left them breathless. Katherine could feel the breeze rushing through her hair and the top of her head that extended beyond the edge of the carpet. As her husband's attentions brought her greater and greater passion, she understood why he wanted to do this.

The only time the carpet even wobbled was when she reached around her husband to pull him closer as she dissolved into the moonlight, eliciting a strong response from him. He took his time, savoring every movement and moment, but eventually he couldn't stop himself from shouting his pleasure as his body found release. For a moment they simply looked at each other and then kissed and clung together. When they were done, he held her close to his heart as he flew the carpet back to their starting place.

As soon as they were back on land, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. These kisses were emotional but somehow took them back from the passion they had just shared to a more normal state. The moon set before he released her from his embrace. "Thank you," was all he said before Apparating them into their bedroom.

They had just turned out the light when she chuckled into the darkness. "You're never boring, Severus; I'll give you that."

"Is there a problem?"

"I just hope I can keep up."

"I couldn't even imagine a woman who could be to me what you are, Katherine. So far you have met me on every level."

"Even several hundred feet in the air?"

This time he chuckled. "Especially then."

A/N: Thank you to Trickie Woo for her careful beta reading.

Cherry and Unicorn Hair

Chapter 4 of 25

A former student presents an odd gift.

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

"Are you sure you can't come with me, darling?"

The summer had moved through July. The Snapes adjusted to married life and to their jobs. Severus's assistants made headway on the Potions work they had missed during their non-existent seventh year, and he made a little profit in the process. Katherine found several more black market vendors of Ollivander's wands and returned the merchandise to its proper proprietor. His gratitude added to the family vault at Gringotts as well.

On this particular day, Katherine was going to visit Uncle Sonny. For some reason, whenever she went, Severus had something else to do. There was either a visit to the Ministry that could not be put off or potions ingredients that only he could harvest for his own use and must be done at that exact phase of the moon.

He sat up and placed his cup into its saucer with a definitive clank. "I'm sorry, my love, but Potter's potion is at a ticklish point, and if I'm not there, Granger and Weasley will snog while the Calming Draught they're supposed to make boils over. I promise...I'll come sometime."

She stood and walked over to kiss him. "I hope so. At this point, he's starting to think you're scared of him. I can't imagine how that could be. After all, you handled the Tedious One and all of his manifestations so brilliantly."

He chose to change the subject. "What else are you doing today?"

"It's a rather ticklish point, but I'm planning to go to one of Uncle Sonny's old hangouts. There are rumors that a wizard out there has acquired an odd assortment of items he's reselling for cut rates. I believe he's going to be giving them away before I'm done with him."

"Do be careful. I'm used to seeing your face over my breakfast coffee, you know." He made her kiss him again before letting her go on her way.

Katherine never made it to the coastal town that day. When she arrived at the hospital, she found her uncle speaking with an older woman who wore green robes. Her hat appeared to have...good heavens it really was a vulture looking down from it.

"Here she is now," Uncle Sonny was saying. "Katherine, come meet Augusta Longbottom."

"How do you do, Mrs. Longbottom?" said Katherine, holding out her hand.

"Quite well, Mrs. Snape," answered the older witch, "and I don't have to ask to learn how you are. You've made quite a name for yourself."

"I hope it's a good one," Katherine answered.

"You'll need to be as old as I am to know for sure," Augusta answered.

"Gussy has a bit of a thing I thought you could help with," interjected Uncle Sonny.

Mrs. Longbottom waved her hand. "Actually, it's something my grandson is working on. Sonny here thinks you can help my Neville."

Katherine smiled. "I'll do my best."

"There he is now." Katherine looked up into the eyes of a confident young man and shook his hand. With his other hand, he held a package, which he opened as he described what he wanted to do. She looked with awe at the contents and, after a few minutes conversation, agreed to go to Diagon Alley with him.

"I hear you have a young admirer," said Severus as Fern was clearing up the pudding that night.

"No such luck." Katherine could never decide whether the candles on the table lent a glow to his eyes or whether his eyes somehow kindled the flames of the candles. He was so different from the first night they dined together. For a moment on that occasion, it had seemed there was no light in his face at all, let alone his eyes.

"I'm sure it was true," he persisted. "I heard all about it at the apothecary and at Gringott's."

"Whatever can you be going on about?" She tried her most winning smile.

He stood and walked around to her side of the table. He slid her chair out and leaned down to whisper into her ear.

"I was told by no fewer than five people that you were seen with Neville Longbottom. Are you going to tell me what that was all about?" His fingers were on her shoulders, working at the neckline of her robes.

"I can't think," she answered. "It all runs together when you do...*that*."

"I'll stop, then," he said. He moved around to where he could look her in the face. "What am I supposed to think?"

It echoed oddly in her head and her face went white. She licked her lips and looked him in the eye. "It was a favor for Uncle Sonny and Augusta Longbottom, Severus. The boy was working on some project, and they wanted me to help." There was a pleading tone in her voice as she finished. She couldn't hold his gaze and looked down. She

saw her husband's hands clench in a way she'd only seen once before.

Severus was struggling with a memory of his own. "Katherine, please look at me." She tilted her eyes toward him but kept her face lowered. "Which of them was it?" She looked the rest of the way up at the gentler tone in his voice. Her mouth opened and shut as she looked at him in confusion. "Darling, I can see in your eyes that I reminded you of your father or Cyrus. One of them was jealous as well as everything else."

"Dad was too drunk to notice if Mum took ten lovers, not that she would." She gasped at what she had said and covered her mouth with her hand. He didn't need Legilimency to understand how her first husband had handled his suspicions.

"My poor darling..." He lifted her to her feet and walked her to their bedroom. They sat on the bed, and he held her in his arms. "If I could bring him back to life, I would use every Unforgivable there is as well as some spells of my own on him."

"You know I would never..."

"Of course not. Your loyal Hufflepuff soul is incapable of something like that. You were even faithful to him, weren't you?"

She nodded against his chest.

"Besides, if I truly suspected you, I would be a Slytherin about it and find the proof before saying anything to you."

She looked up in some surprise.

He snorted and kissed her. "Neville Longbottom, indeed."

"He did make me wish..." She blushed and stopped talking.

He became very still. "Don't tell me you actually entertained thoughts of..."

"Oh, no! Not that, Severus!" She shrugged. "He made me think of my poor little Sonny, who would be sixteen, now."

"All you need to do is go to St. Mungo's. The Healers there will tell you whether it's possible."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"It's my one last hope. If they say it's impossible, then I won't have that hope any more."

"But perhaps it's something they can fix easily. You don't want that?"

"I would love that, but the risk of losing that last hope is too great."

He hid his sigh and caressed her hair from her face. "You can't wait forever. There's no telling what those Muggle doctors did to you."

She shrugged again and he continued gently touching her until she relaxed in his arms.

Severus came home with a headache one day the next week to an odd sound from the drawing room. It was loud and somewhat musical but seemed to involve a certain amount of stops and starts and cursing. He arrived in the room to see his wife seated at a baby grand piano. He looked over her shoulder to see Mozart on the music rack.

"Are you serious?" He managed to slide it in between a stop and a start when there was no cursing.

She looked up in sheepish delight. "Yes. I always wanted one. I could never afford it, and then when I could, there was no room."

"Do you play?"

"Not really. This is actually one of my better pieces. When we have parties, we'll hire someone," she added quickly.

"Well, all right then. It doesn't seem to interfere with our carefully negotiated scheme for this room, so I guess it's acceptable." He turned to wander down the hall as his wife regarded him carefully, her head twisted to the side.

"Severus?" she asked softly.

He came back with a sigh. "Yes, Katherine, what can I do for you?"

"What is it?"

"What is what?"

She stood and walked toward him. "You're not yourself right now. Something's wrong or has happened. Are you feeling all right?" She reached her hand to touch his face.

He pulled away from her and turned around back down the hall, muttering grumpily.

Her head snapped around. "*Whose* birthday did you say it was?" He had disappeared through the bedroom door. She followed him. "Severus, whose birthday is it? Should we celebrate it?"

He came stomping out of the bathroom. "Oh, yes, let's celebrate the start of a life I ended four hundred and three days ago. What a delight!" He winced at the pain his own hollering caused. He pulled a dressing gown out of his wardrobe and stomped back into the bathroom.

She wasn't sure how to handle this. Usually her affairs ended long before anyone expressed these sorts of feelings. Severus had been so good about caring for her during vulnerable moments. Surely she could do the same for him. Katherine felt for her wand and squared her shoulders. She took a deep breath and followed him. "It's *Dumbledore's* birthday, today?"

He yanked his outerwear off and sighed in exasperation. "Yes, my dear, it's Dumbledore's birthday," he said sarcastically. He saw her face and turned away in bitterness, only to come face to face with the vanity mirror. "I don't want your sympathy. I certainly don't want your pity."

"What about my love?" she asked quietly.

He looked at her reflection, his mouth working without sound. They stood that way for several minutes. His mind worked frantically, trying to decipher what she was offering and how he could accept it. She simply waited, moving slowly toward him until she was able to grasp his arm.

She had no idea what to do. There was no spell or defensive technique that fit the circumstance. Taking a wild guess, she gently pulled him back toward the bedroom. "If

it's your pain, it's my pain too, Severus. I can't experience it or change it, but there must be some way I can help you to bear it."

"I can't."

"Suppose we just rest together." She sat against a pile of pillows at the headboard and made him follow her. "Suppose we just relax like this." She pulled his head into her arms. "I'll rub your shoulders for you. Maybe it will help. Maybe you can tell me about it."

"You can't make this go away." It came from his lips petulantly.

She continued as if she hadn't heard him. "Or maybe we'll just stay like this until it's not today any longer, and we can leave it alone until next year." She dropped a kiss on the top of his head, and suddenly, some fierce instinct rose up within her. She would do anything to comfort this man and to protect him from the memories that tormented him. She was surprised by the strength of this feeling. From where it was tucked within her sleeve, she could feel her wand tremble with her emotion. She hugged him tightly.

They stayed like that for quite a while. At first he fumed, but she wouldn't let him go. Once the words started coming, he couldn't stop them.

"I tried, you know. I read for hours, night after night, looking for just the right potion or charm. I sought Healing texts from other schools of thought, other traditions of magic and Healing, but there was nothing of use. The old manipulator sat serenely through it all, simply giving me directions of ways to help him and the boy, both at the time and afterwards. The Dark Lord kept at me with his demands, too."

"Were you expected to win the entire war, just by yourself? From both sides?"

"It was always that way, since I took the prophecy as I knew it to the Dark Lord, and he decided it was about Lily's son. I've been working hard on both sides, looking for the edge and giving it to one master, to his delight. All the time I knew I would have to go to my other master and find a way to get a leg up on *that* for him. Round and round, endlessly."

"It's over now."

"Why did it have to be by *my* hand, with *my* wand on the tower that night?"

"I don't know, my love."

"Do you think he forgives me?"

"I'm sure he does, since he wanted you to do it. Can you forgive him for that?"

"I don't know." He fell quiet again. After a while, his breath became hot and sticky through her blouse. "Katherine?"

He looked into her face, and she could see his hunger and need. He had never been this vulnerable with her before. She wasn't sure if she knew the right way to do what he was asking for, but she knew she had to try.

Placing one hand on each side of his face, she kissed him, trying to be as gentle with him as he had been with her just the other night. He groaned and nestled more snugly into the comfort of her body. Emboldened by this success, Katherine carefully caressed her husband and covered him with soft kisses. His need for her intensified, and he kissed her with greater demand. She gently undressed him and then quickly undressed herself. Soon she was holding him and listening as he rasped out incoherent words and phrases that grew to a roar. Then all was still.

Severus rolled to his side and looked at his wife. He brushed his hair from his face and looked at her. "That wasn't all it might have been for you." He traced with his knuckles along her hairline.

She smiled and shook her head. "It wasn't important just now."

"It's important to me. I promised myself, before we married, that I would not leave you wanting. I don't want to be like the others..."

She put a finger on his lips. "The others are a distant memory for me, just as I hope your others are for you?" His answer was to kiss her finger. "This one time, you weren't in charge. It was about what you needed."

He rolled over atop of her, perched on his hands and knees. "Is it still about what I need?" he asked, leaning in to kiss her.

"Yes." She smiled up at him, wondering what he was thinking.

He scooped her up and rolled over so that she was on top. "I need to do this some more until we get it right."

"You're in charge now," she said, looping her arms around his neck.

The next morning, Severus was sipping his coffee and reading his paper when he looked up to see his wife standing expectantly at the door of the dining room. She had a soft smile in her eyes, and she was wearing those clothes he could never look at without remembering the first time he had helped her out of them. She ruined the effect by glancing toward the hallway.

"Well?" he growled. "If you have a plan, you had best be about it. The dunderheads will be downstairs within the hour."

"Actually, there's a dun...that is, a former student of yours right here, hoping you will see him."

He smiled sardonically, an impish streak taking hold of him. "Don't tell me. Longbottom has developed a serious crush on you and wishes to duel me for your hand."

"*Severus!*" Katherine's eyes grew wide as she hissed his name.

"If you are that set on him, my dear, just tell me," he chuckled. "He became quite skilled at defense last year. Perhaps he could get lucky today. You're all in black, which could be my color, unless you have something lacy and red on underneath."

She covered her eyes with her hand. "Oh, you're going to regret this."

"Something cool and green in satin?" He became more serious. "Well, be about it, whatever it is."

She sighed and beckoned into the hallway and was quickly joined in the dining room by the object of his misplaced amusement.

"Longbottom!"

The boy was red in the face, but nevertheless met his eye. "Er, yes, sir."

Snape recovered his composure first and looked up to be met by the raised eyebrow of his wife.

"I take it you're not here to fight over my wife."

The boy was quick to answer. "Oh, no, sir. Never!"

He tilted his head, considering the younger wizard. "What's wrong with my wife? Isn't she pretty enough?"

The boy swallowed carefully. "Yes, sir, very pretty."

"Ah, so you do admire her."

"Of course, sir." At Snape's raised eyebrow, Neville hastened to add, "I mean, not that way, sir!"

His voice became silky as he started to enjoy himself. "Then how *do* you admire my wife, Longbottom?"

"Besides that she's pretty, she fought with us during the battle, sir, and she's friendly and... Well, she married you, sir. Everyone admires her for that."

That was a bit of a surprise. It made him quiet long enough for Katherine to break into the conversation. "Really, Severus, you needn't discuss me as if I were chattel," she drawled. "Even for a wizard that's quite passé. Suppose you let Neville show you what he brought. Give him the box, Neville."

He was speechless as he stared down at the contents of the opened box. "For me?" he said.

"I just felt that I should share it with you, sir," answered Neville. "Mrs. Snape helped me with sizes and everything."

Severus reached his hand out, and suddenly, Katherine was beside him to hold it. He swallowed hard. "You can't imagine," he started. He cleared his throat. "You can't imagine what it was like to be called to his side, time after time, to stare into his eyes and into the eyes of the one creature he loved, if love is the correct word. You can't imagine what it was like to see the two together and to watch the things they did." He clenched his wife's hand within his own and kissed it. "You can't imagine what it was like to hear that both were dead, and one by your hand, Longbottom. This is..."

"You're welcome, Professor."

He looked at his wife. "This is what you were doing last week."

She smiled. "Guilty."

His look turned rueful. "The things I said, what I implied..."

She shook her head. "It's done with, and perhaps we needed to say those things in the long run." He looked into her eyes as she smiled up to him. After a minute he smiled back and pulled her close.

The younger wizard took quietly his leave as the two elders appeared lost in silent communication.

Thank you to beta reader Trickie Woo.

An Acquisitive Core

Chapter 5 of 25

Katherine encounters a wand that seems made for one specific use and an Auror who once wanted her man.

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

The Weasley boy was in a sour mood. He didn't speak when Severus entered the lab and kept his head down. It was a sign of a coming bad day that the surliness of Ron was preferable to the bubbly effusiveness of the girl or the thoughtful glances of the other boy. To top it off he was late, and that put him on a bad footing.

At thinking of feet, he wiggled his toes inside his new boots. His tardiness was due to the snake-skin boots he was wearing. Who would have thought that Longbottom would share Nagini's skin in such a way? He supposed that once one got over the mental barrier to imagining Neville as the killer of the snake, anything was within the realm of belief. He couldn't directly blame his former student for his tardiness, anyway. The boy had left over an hour before. It was Katherine, he mused, who was to blame. She was the one who insisted on kneeling at his feet and changing his usual boots for these boots, and then when she was down there, she started doing things that soon had them both on the floor under the table.

He cleared his throat and his mind. It wouldn't do to think about what happened next. The students wouldn't see the effect of his thoughts through his robes, of course, but his pants were starting to feel snug. He would have to see about extra cushioning under the carpet in the dining room. It was quickly becoming his second favorite room in the flat. It was hard on Katherine, though. She would never admit it, but the injuries she had received all those years ago had not healed properly and occasionally pained her. Perhaps she wasn't even aware of it, but he saw her hold her hip and breathe deeply after he helped her up that morning.

That brought him back to the present situation. He had the witch and two wizards working with him brewing three different pain-killing potions. They varied in strength and mechanism. He had given the most difficult one to the surly boy, wondering how he would react. Ron had complained the loudest about slicing the fruit and vegetables for the Pimm's Punch at the beginning of their collaboration, but he had also done the best job, making even slices that were nearly paper thin. Molly Weasley had done so much of her motherly duty in training the boy, no doubt setting the lad to peeling and slicing fruits and vegetables from early childhood. The potion he was making required just that sort of slicing of one of the roots involved.

The Granger girl was given the easiest for once and didn't seem up to it. She kept trying to find reasons to ask questions and come to his side. He fielded the questions, for which she had known the answer since she was a know-it-all first year. He stepped over to Potter's cauldron, which was bubbling nicely, and a delicate odor informed him it was just right. He continued on to Weasley's work bench.

"Oy! What's on your feet?" The young wizard's freckles stood out on a very white face as he looked at the boots.

"Do you like them?" The boy was moving around the counter to get away.

"Is that snake skin? It looks like the skin of Voldemort's snake." The boy was stopped in his attempt to get away by the wall.

"Points to Gryffindor. It is precisely Nagini's skin, Weasley. Your classmate presented these boots to me this morning. He said that although he had killed the snake, he thought it would be fit."

As they spoke, Granger and Potter came to look. All three suddenly started talking about their last views of the snake. The very last was when its head had gone flying from its body, separated by the sword of Gryffindor. They were warming to their second-to-last view of the snake when Snape cleared his throat. "Interesting as you might have found that episode, I assure you, I would prefer not to relive it." Cheeks reddened, they quieted down and each went back to a partially finished potion.

Katherine walked quietly through the Potions shop. Something had caught her eye and made her want to find out what it was. She edged forward and caught a glimpse of a maroon hood at the end of an aisle of enhancement potions. She slid her way closer. She found a rather grubby looking woman holding several wands and trying each in turn, muttering a charm and pointing the wands at a glass case at the end of the aisle. Finally, a stubby oak wand seemed to do the trick, and as Katherine looked on, several gold watches disappeared from the case and reappeared in the dirty hand of the witch. She reached for her wand.

"Hold it right there!"

Katherine looked up and saw that an Auror was standing on the other side of the maroon-robed witch. "Silvia!"

Silvia said the standard binding spells and looked up. "Hello, Katherine, what brings you here?"

"Freelance work. I believe if we look, we will find that handful of wands belongs to Ollivander."

Silvia took the wands and watches and looked at them. "How can you tell?"

Katherine showed her that they only had a portion of the trademark on them. "This small oak wand seems to be pretty handy for some walks of life. I'll have to ask what's in it."

She accompanied the Auror to the Ministry and helped fill out the reports necessary to begin the process of charging the shoplifting witch. Silvia Greenlee was an Auror she had worked with in the past when breaking up a major crime ring in Dover. She had also been part of Kingsley's security detail when he came to officiate the Snapes' wedding.

They filled out the paperwork and moved on to small talk. Silvia looked down at the table and adjusted the quills lined up there. "So how's married life? Are you... and Severus... happy?"

Katherine almost let a gasp escape. The other witch was a little too casual. She looked her over and for the first time noticed just how pretty the other witch was. She had perfect dark hair and a creamy complexion. She was that petite size that men loved to snuggle at their side, and her sweater stretched in all the places men loved, too. What was curious about Sylvia's comment was the way she used Severus's first name. Witches usually referred to him by his last name, unless they had a special relationship with him.

"We're enjoying it greatly," Katherine said while letting a dreamy smile cross her face.

"I can't imagine being married to him and not being happy."

It was an awkward comment. Katherine couldn't answer. She recalled her wedding and remembered that Silvia had been looking oddly at them much of the time.

"So, how did you catch him? Did you manage to get knocked up? He's pretty careful to avoid that."

Katherine winced. "No, no children yet. We just found that we had a lot in common."

"I didn't think he had anything in common with any woman."

"I guess you thought wrong." Katherine's smile got a bit fixed on her face as she searched her mind for a new topic of conversation. "So how is working for the Ministry now under the new regime?"

This proved fruitful. Silvia had a lot of opinions about the Ministry as well as its past, present, and future. When they filed the reports, Katherine received permission to take all the stolen wands but one back to Ollivander. She left as quickly as she could.

"Why would you put niffler fur of all things in a wand?" Now that she knew what was in the core of the oak wand, Katherine almost wished she didn't.

"There are valid situations for its use..." the old man said in a subdued voice. Then his demeanor became eager. "How did it work?"

Katherine was starting to realize that Ollivander's interest in furthering his craft overrode the interests of society at some points. She shook her head. "All too well."

"And they wouldn't let you return it to me?"

"No, the Department of Mysteries is going to look it over."

"Well, thank you for your assistance again, my dear. Thanks to you, I've been able to sell a wand to all the first years who have come to my shop so far."

"I'm glad to help," answered Katherine. The old wizard patted her hand and she left.

She walked home slowly, troubled in mind. How *did* she manage to catch Severus's attention and heart? She knew she was pretty enough, but not in the league with so many other women, some of whom he must have dated. Did the things they had in common override that sort of thing?

When she got to the apartment, she half-heartedly wondered what surprises he might have in store for her. Would he have painted the hallway in stripes of Slytherin green and black? Her heart skipped a beat as she wondered what he would do in an effort to make her amenable to it. There was nothing new in the hallway, so she went to the sitting room and stopped short.

He watched as the three who worked for him finished their potions and cleared their workspaces. It seemed they would be done in good time this evening. The air shifted in the room. "Severus, you amazing man!" He barely realized it was his wife talking before she was in his arms, kissing him for all she was worth. Not being of a mood to deny himself, especially when something was so lavishly handed to him, he returned the kisses in kind.

He cleared his throat when she let him up for air. "My assistants will think that working for me comes with a floor show."

"It's probably nothing they haven't done." She smiled into his eyes.

He winced. "That's a mental picture I didn't need. To what do I owe the honor?"

"As if you don't know. You got my coffee table, even though you won the bet."

"Ah, yes. Well, I was hoping you would be inclined to show some gratitude." He lowered his mouth to her ear and whispered. "I was hoping we could repeat that earlier adventure. Since the time of year is changing and it will be cold soon, I thought maybe we could take advantage of this evening's mild weather?"

Katherine's response was an affirmative-sounding sigh. "You didn't have to bargain for it. I would have agreed in any case."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Hours later, they shivered under a warm eiderdown and asked Fern to bring them hot tea. They had been thoroughly enjoying the warm evening when a cold front sent a burst of frigid air under their robes at an inopportune moment. They looked at each other and laughed.

"I guess we won't try that until next spring," laughed Katherine.

"It depends upon whether I can find a better warming charm. You didn't seem so cold when I did this." Severus dove under the covers and quickly elicited a shrieking laugh from his wife. They warmed each other up by the time Fern brought the tea.

"You know," said Katherine after equilibrium was re-established, "this whole marriage thing is very pleasant. It's a good thing to be able to come home to you after the sort of day I've had."

Severus leaned back to look at her. "What sort of day was it?"

"I ran into Sylvia Greenlee today." She looked to see how he would react.

All the disquiet she had felt that afternoon vanished when he gagged. "That is one cold... er... witch."

She wasn't exactly expecting that. "How so?"

"Hmpf." He drifted off in a memory. "About ten years ago she seduced me in a night I wish could be Obliviated from my mind. It was a rather clumsy attempt to infiltrate the Death Eaters, such as we were during the years when the Dark Lord was dormant. She thought she would get ahead in the Auror Corps that way. I've never had such a coldly calculated experience in my life. I saw what she was trying to do and left her unresponsive behind on a chair at Florean Fortescue's. She created a scene by telling me I was the last man on earth she would want to be seen with. I believe it made the back page of *Wizarding World Inquirer*."

"Oh! I remember that!" He looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "Well, every witch ends up standing in the check out line at an apothecary shop once in a while." Katherine mulled it over. "But why would she ask me how I 'caught' you and make it sound as though she wished she had become Mrs. Severus Snape if she could have figured out how to do it? She suggested that I had trapped you by getting pregnant."

He sighed. "I think she found out that I have a certain amount of wealth. Some friend of a friend kindly informed her about what she had so publicly given up. A month and a half later, she tried to seduce me again. She had taken some fertility potion. It was absurdly easy to probe her thoughts and see that she just wanted to make use of the laws on community property. She didn't want to have children, she just wanted the money it would get her."

"So she wasn't jealous over you, just your money?" Katherine laughed and then sighed. She would give all her money to have her husband's child. She stretched and winced. There was an odd catch in the small of her back.

"Here, let me rub that." Severus loved that particular spot. More importantly, he wanted to see if he could notice any injury there. Perhaps there was a medicated massage oil he could develop. He heard her sigh and tried to think of some pretext for getting her to St. Mungo's. If she didn't relent soon, he would have to offer to visit her uncle.

"I must be stiff from the cold," she mused.

"I didn't get all stiff," he answered.

"Well, not *entirely*," she answered slyly. "And you were doing so much of the work it must have kept you warm."

A/N: Thank you, Trickie Woo, for beta reading.

Dinner Party

Chapter 6 of 25

The honor of your presence is requested...

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

Potion-making, although quite exact in its requirements, could be a soothing art. One mixed the items as directed, and the potion would behave as described. As Snape watched his assistants mixing their brews, he reflected that few things in life were so easy.

Just the day before there had been another bitter argument. There was a certain document that made Severus proud but just a little self-conscious. He wanted to hide it on the back of the door in his study, but she hung it in a place of prominence in their drawing room. He tried to remove it from the wall, but she threatened to hang it over their bed. Katherine ended the discussion by sitting under the piano and removing her clothes. "If you look at it from down here, it's quite lovely," she said.

Severus was across the room in an instant, and the next hour was spent in a different sort of conversation entirely. Finally he looked up at his framed, newly issued Order of Merlin award. He sighed, admitting, "I suppose it looks proper there."

"Sir?" He came back to the present room with his students and attended to the question Granger was asking. "It appears to be a fairly strong pain medication, sir, but the proportions are for a woman. Is it for your wife?"

"Do you feel it's appropriate to delve into my personal affairs?"

"Not exactly, sir, but if we knew about it, we might be able to make suggestions..." She thought better of what she was saying and broke it off.

Snape sighed and covered his eyes with his hand. He didn't know if Katherine realized that her injuries were hurting her. From what he could tell, based on the training he had received, the bones had not healed properly. When she got up some mornings, she put her hands on her hips and winced. He feared that, enjoyable as it was, their love life was not improving matters. His thought was to sneak a few drops of this potion into her coffee in the morning. Another perspective on the potion might be good, and in any case, quizzing the student on the potion would be good for her test preparations.

"What are your thoughts?"

"Well, from the formulation, I would guess that you're making it for a woman with some sort of injuries. Is there some reason the Healers at St. Mungo's can't help?"

"Let's say that option is valid but will remain unused for the time being."

"And you would prefer not to use opiates?"

Snape shuddered. "At this point that would be the worst option."

"Then I haven't learned anything else yet that might improve it. Why doesn't she go to the Healers?"

"That's nothing I care to discuss, Miss Granger." He turned and saw Potter looking at him from across the room. The questioning glances were driving him batty. If the boy would only make up his mind to say what he was thinking and be done with it, the world would be a better place.

At the moment, the latent hostility from Weasley was to be preferred. He, at least, concentrated on his work so as to be finished as quickly as possible with as little interaction as possible. He had never worked this well as a student. This whole experience was giving Snape ideas on how to improve Potions instruction at Hogwarts. There was a teaching journal that might publish a letter on the subject of encouraging mild hostility as a means of encouraging students to work quickly and well. Perhaps if he published some initial findings in a letter, then maybe Minerva would allow a study that could be published as a full paper in the same journal.

He looked up and saw Katherine standing in the doorway. She was staring at Granger, who was still standing too close. There was an odd look in his wife's eye. Severus walked over to Katherine and took her hand. "What brings you here?"

She looked apologetic. "Oh, I'm not getting anywhere on my case today, and I thought I would look in before going upstairs and making plans." She looked around. "You've done quite a bit with the place, here. You should be proud."

He stepped close enough to drop a lingering kiss on her lips. "I'm close to a stopping point for the day. I'll be upstairs in just a few minutes, myself."

"I guess I'll see you soon, then." Her eyes were full of promises as she left.

"We're nowhere close to a stopping point for the day," said Hermione.

"Do you always listen in to other people's conversations?" She took a step back. "For your information, you are not near a stopping point, but I am."

"You're just going to leave us?"

"You've passed the point with this potion where you could get into serious trouble. If there's an issue, send your Patronus." He gave them some last instructions for the day and then left.

Granger looked exasperated, Potter looked bereft, and Weasley looked pleased as Snape left the room. He didn't really notice. His thoughts were on the witch upstairs. It would be undignified to run, he told himself, but he couldn't help hurrying to the elevators.

He found his wife in her study. She sat at her desk, quill in hand, making lists. She looked up and smiled. "Uncle Sonny says willow and veela hair wands are popular in a certain trade. I've been keeping an eye on certain addresses of Knockturn Alley, but no dice. I think I'm going to have to try Rue des Sorcières Jolies."

"In Paris?" He half leaned, half sat on the edge of her desk. "How does a nice witch like you know of such places?"

She wrinkled her nose. "All in a day's work, of course. Want to come with me?" she asked before running her tongue along her upper lip.

He chuckled in a way designed to make a chill go through her. "I don't need a trip to France for that," he said. He leaned down and used his finger to trace the path of her tongue.

"No?"

"No."

"I don't suppose you would be interested in a practical demonstration?" She pushed her hair back from a face that was turning ever-so-slightly pink.

"I thought I was the Legilimens in this family, yet you seem to know exactly what I'm feeling," he said as he tugged her out of the office and toward their bedroom.

Some time later, Katherine was admiring her husband's feet. They weren't particularly attractive. They were simply long and skinny feet that had walked a great deal in thirty-eight years. As part of the entire package that was her husband, she found them to be highly captivating. She also happened to know that feet could be useful when extracting information.

"Hermione Granger is an attractive young witch," Katherine said, introducing her subject directly but casually.

"I suppose," Severus answered. Upon having a fingernail run along the arch of his foot, he amended his answer. "Yes, she's a lovely and accomplished young woman."

He was rewarded by more comfortable massaging motions. "She stands quite close to you."

"A lot of them do that." This earned a toe being pushed a little too far toward his shin.

"Indeed?"

He sighed and sat up. "If you want to know, just ask." He didn't get the response he desired and grabbed a foot that was near his own hand. "Katherine!" She turned and looked warily at him. His wand was in his other hand. She put his foot next to its mate and sat up.

"All right then, how have you kept a proper distance from your students?"

He blushed. "When I was just starting to teach, they were so pretty and smelled so good, and they stood so close... Some would come to office hours and practically sit on my lap..."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. He sighed. "Filius warned me early on. He told me to watch every hand that ever touched my desk, my books, my quills, everything. He was right. Several girls thought that they wanted to entrap me. They used every charm and potion they could find. Combined, the results might have been disastrous. I quickly learned to be cold and unapproachable, hard and strict."

He watched her sit up and pull her knees to her chest as he continued. "They wanted to use me."

"Really?"

He sighed. "For some reason, the Slytherins thought it was a mark of honor to have sex with a Death Eater. They never saw the proof of my affiliation, but it was assumed within a certain set. Perhaps some were disappointed in their fathers and thought I would be better suited for the job but in a horribly confused way. Then there were the other girls. By the third year I realized that all the ones who were most obvious about it had Muggle fathers. They were looking to me to fill in for their non-magical parent. I could never..."

"I should think not." Katherine looked more thoughtful than angry.

"The...companions...I've had were nearer to my own age."

"So what about Hermione Granger?"

"Two Muggle parents. She's looking for some sort of magical parentage, and her crush is misplaced."

"I see."

"I suppose," he mused, "since she has two Muggle parents, she might be looking for a mother figure, too. Do you suppose she wants..."

"Severus!" Katherine snatched a pillow and threw it at his head.

"Then there's Potter," he continued. "Two magical parents but raised by the worst of Muggles. Maybe he has a crush on one or both of us, too."

"Eeew!" Katherine reached for another pillow and then turned serious. "Perhaps we should invite them to tea?"

"You can't be serious."

"It's something to consider. It might be a way to address the whole thing and direct it in a positive manner."

"You must be joking."

"It's never a bad idea to develop a network. In my line of business, it's often the very thing that proves invaluable."

"Do you think so?"

"Did you ever have crushes like that as a student?"

"There was only one person I ever wanted."

"Oh." It was surprising how painful the pang that went right through her felt. She would have to stop feeling so betrayed whenever the subject of Lily Evans came up. "So you never looked to the professors as parent figures?"

"I suppose Albus prided himself in fulfilling that role. He could never be like a real parent, though. There was always an agenda. What about you? Professor Morgan, maybe?"

"All the girls went crazy for him. He wasn't for me, though."

"Are you sure?" His voice was teasing.

She nodded. "I was just so grateful to be away from home that I kept my head down. I hardly ever interacted with anybody. Plus, I did have Uncle Sonny. He looked after me."

Katherine cleared her throat at breakfast the next morning. Severus looked around his paper expectantly. "I'll be going to Hogsmeade today. There is a shady character who, I expect, will have some of the wands. One of Uncle Sonny's 'friends' saw him at the Hog's Head the other day."

"Do you know his name?"

"Caractacus Fletcher."

"Any relation to Mundungus?"

"Cousin, I believe."

"Hm..." He went back behind the paper. "You could find yourself getting a bit hurt. Too much running, perhaps something physical will happen. You might want something like this." He pulled a small vial out from a pocket of his robe. "I thought you might test it for me. Two drops in your tea or coffee, and it should alleviate certain types of aches and pains."

His wife looked at where he sat with narrowed eyes. The whole thing was a bit too casual. She pulled out her wand, and suddenly he jumped back from the table as she blasted a hole through the paper. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"What do you think *you're* doing?" she replied. "I think you learned how to meddle from your mentor."

"Take it back." His face went red with anger.

"You take it back," she shripped, sliding the vial across the table.

Suddenly they were staring at each other's wands, speechless.

Severus looked from his wife to his wand and then placed it on the table. "Katherine."

She dropped her wand on the table and took a step back, as if frightened. "Severus?" Then she winced and reached for her hip.

"It *is* getting worse, isn't it?"

"It's nothing I can't handle. I'm in a physical line of work."

"It's not nothing."

"Or it's because I'm getting older." She was grasping at straws and they both knew it.

"You're barely thirty-six, Katherine. It's from the injuries you received from Cyrus. Why won't you go to St. Mungo's?"

"Because if I do, they may tell me there's nothing they can do."

"They can do something for the pain from your accident."

"No, not that. They may tell me that there's nothing they can do about the..." She said the word almost inaudibly, "infertility."

"Would that be so awful?" He took a couple of steps toward her.

"As long as there's a hope, I want to keep that hope."

He stepped closer and pulled her into his arms. "I know, darling, but do you know how illogical that sounds?"

Her answer was a quiet, "Yes."

"You will go to St. Mungo's, Katherine. You can't avoid it forever."

She looked up, pleading. "Not yet."

He sighed. "Not yet, but soon. In the meanwhile, two drops of the potion, no alcohol." He kissed her. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Katherine said. "I overreacted. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry I tried to be sneaky about it. Take care of yourself. Dung Fletcher is a wily creature. His cousin is likely to be just the same."

The honor of your presence

is requested

on October 17th

for Cocktails and Hors d'oeuvres

at six o'clock in the evening

Dinner immediately following

Severus and Katherine Snape

The three piece combo was warming up in the sitting room as the host and hostess finished dressing. She looked up from the vanity to put on mascara and saw his reflection, leaning against the doorway. She had to stop and stare at him. He was resplendent in his new tuxedo. The school had sent Severus his best one after they cleared away the rubble that covered it, but it was in such a state that giving it to a house-elf wouldn't free him. The Ministry claimed not to know where the other one was. Katherine had laughingly dragged him to a tailor over the summer and now enjoyed the fruits of a long afternoon by appreciating the view.

"If you're going to undress me with your eyes, you might do us both a favor and undress me in fact."

"Mmm-nnn," she answered, shaking her head. "This is our apology to our friends for not having the wedding they all wanted. If we mess up this party, they'll make us have another one."

"You're probably right." He looked over to where her dress robes were hanging. "Does Madam need any help?"

She put her face close to the mirror and applied her mascara. "I'll be fine... if I can just get... this last bit... done," she said. She sealed it up and looked at her face critically. "What do you think?"

"I think you should get that dress on before I take this suit off," he said. She was going to laugh but saw his eyes and swallowed hard instead. In a flash, she disappeared under champagne-colored crepe, and then her head reappeared. She presented her back to her husband, who zipped her up ruefully.

"It was much more fun to take this off."

"Which is why you'll be given the opportunity again, but in several hours."

"Master!" Bonaparte and Josephine had come from the island villa to help at the party and quickly saw to the needs of the guests. They would be handling most of the party in the sitting room while Fern and Wilbur would reign supreme in the kitchen. Duties in the dining room would be shared.

"What is it?" Severus answered with his lips at the nape of his wife's neck.

"Guests are arriving."

They went out into the sitting room and saw the Minister of Magic and his guards. "Katherine! I thought I'd bring you a house-warming gift."

"Oh, Kingsley, you know we didn't want..." Her voice drifted off as she saw a wizard handing a cloak to Josephine. Pushing her way through several Aurors, she tackled the man with a hug. "I can't believe it!" she said. "How did this happen?"

Kingsley turned and smiled. "A special session of the Wizengamot this afternoon. Then he insisted on spending the next several hours at Madam Malkin's. I knew you wouldn't mind if we came a bit early.

"Of course not! Severus," Katherine said as she brought the wizard forward by the hand, "I would like you to meet Uncle Sonny."

Severus's face was a blank as he extended his hand. "Mr. Andolini, it's a pleasure."

"Mr. Snape, I'm a great fan of yours. I've had my doubts about little Katie, here," he began.

"Uncle Sonny!"

"But I haven't seen her so bright and cheerful since she was a student at Hogwarts."

"I assure you, sir, I'm a great fan of your work, too," answered Katherine's husband. "I'm quite grateful that there was someone to look after her interests so many years ago."

"Yes, so everyone is happy. I knew you'd be great friends. Uncle Sonny, where are you staying?" Katherine looked at the older man expectantly.

"I'll be moving to my house in the country, but my release was a bit unexpected today. While I wait for it to be prepared, I'm staying at the Plaza on Diagon Alley."

"Nonsense!" said Katherine. "You'll stay here. We have heaps of space. Tell him, Severus."

Severus looked to their guest. "You're certainly welcome to stay here if it suits your plans."

Salvatore looked from one to the other. "How can I say no?"

The door opened, and the Malfoys arrived along with the Nott and Greengrass families. Right behind them came the Golden Trio, and then in a rush several other guests from the Ministry.

At some point after dinner, the host of the party went to his study to have a quiet moment alone. He looked up to see the one guest he had hoped to avoid, just a little longer. It wasn't to be. "Mr. Andolini, what may I do for you?"

"I was just hoping to have a little talk with the wizard who has finally captured little Katie's heart."

"As she has firmly captured mine," was the answer. "But please, let's be comfortable." He indicated a pair of leather chairs positioned near a table. After they sat, he broached the difficult subject. "I apologize for the way I handled our courtship and marriage. I know there are rules governing such things..."

His guest stopped him with a wave of his hand and a laugh. "Please don't concern yourself on that count, Mr. Snape. Much as I would like to think otherwise, Katie is no shrinking violet. There's no pretending that she's a fragile flower who needs her menfolk to protect her." At this point, a pair of very intent brown eyes were fixed upon Severus.

"That would be true, except she very much needs protection because there are ways in which she is quite fragile."

"Ah! So you understand the issue. I've been told that you're one of the smartest to come through Hogwarts in a century."

"I don't believe I need to be smart in order to know how to protect my wife."

The gentlemen smiled in agreement.

"Severus?" Katherine's head appeared around the door. "Oh! Hello, Uncle Sonny! Whatever are you two doing in here?"

"Would you believe discussing our marriage?" asked her husband.

"Knowing Uncle Sonny, I do. So how many sheep and cows are changing hands?" She came in, kissed them each on a cheek, and laughed. "The Malfoys are getting ready to leave, and we should be there to bid them farewell. I think Lucius has something he wanted to tell you."

Severus had time to doff his jacket and remove his shoes before Katherine came into their bedroom that night. He pondered Katherine's uncle. In some ways it would have been better if he had demanded a bride price for her. Keeping Katherine out of danger was difficult enough, and protecting her from things that pained her was even more so. As determined as she was to not be protected in either way, the best he could hope for was to be on hand when she needed someone to help her recover.

"Have you any idea how magnificent you are?"

He turned and saw her standing in the doorway. "I would take you to get your eyes checked, but I worry that with sight correction you would run from me in fear."

She moved into the room and the door clicked shut. "No one is running anywhere."

"Do I have anything to fear?" At the shake of her head, he walked toward her. "I believe some undressing is due to commence."

"Oh?" Her face was full of invitations and desires.

"Oh, yes."

"Yes, indeed," she responded as the zipper ran down her back.

A/N: Thank you to Trickie Woo for beta reading.

Adjusted Relationships

Chapter 7 of 25

Severus and Katherine get used to having a third person in the household.

Disclaimer: Except for some OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Katherine arrived in the dining room the next morning to see her husband and uncle deep in conversation. Their heads were close together as though in conspiracy, and they looked up in embarrassment as she walked into the room. Katherine made it a point to look them each in the eye. Severus returned her gaze evenly, with a question of his own in his eye, while Uncle Sonny busied himself with his corn flakes.

"And what are you two dears stirring up?"

"What makes you think anything is being stirred up?" asked her husband.

She laughed in return.

Uncle Sonny very carefully spooned the last of his cereal into his mouth and then just as carefully set the spoon on the place mat. "I don't see, girl, why I should be ashamed of looking after your interests. The fact of the matter is that your husband and I are discussing how to get you to St. Mungo's for a checkup."

Katherine walked over to her usual place at the table, sat down, and unrolled her napkin. She proceeded to fill her tea cup and prepare it to her taste, looking by turn, at each of the wizards watching her. As she took the first few sips, her breakfast appeared before her, and she buttered her toast. After she took a bite, she looked up at her

husband and uncle and said, "What?"

Severus just snorted while Sonny replied, "Why won't you go?"

"Severus understands the whole thing. He doesn't agree with it, but he understands. What you have to realize, Uncle Sonny, is that it's none of your business."

"Perhaps not, but I do feel a certain interest in seeing that your poor mother gets some grandchildren."

Katherine put her fork down and stared at her plate. "That is unfair, Uncle Sonny. I did what I could. I was actually carrying her grandchild when it all happened, you know."

"Now, girlie, you know I don't mean to bring all that up. Your husband tells me that he thinks there's a good chance that the Muggle doctors didn't get it right and that the Healers can help you. I want you to take that chance... for me?"

She looked at her husband, who sat silent but very interested. She knew that certain aspects of the discussion were less important than others to him. His face was encouraging. His interest was in getting her properly healed. There was no pressure from him on the other issue. Anything else was a delightful bonus, as far as he was concerned.

She sighed. "I'll do it."

Uncle Sonny knocked on the table. "Good girl."

"It will have to wait until after the Paris trip, though. That will involve an overnight."

"Any sort of agreement is better than nothing, my dear." Sonny stood. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to see the contractors about my house, and I may have other associates to check in with. Katherine, at what time should I be home for dinner?"

"Dinner is at seven tonight. It's nothing fancy." She held his hand, and then he left.

Severus watched his wife over the newspaper. "That was quite a show you put on. Will you be writing the hospital today?"

"You know I can't do that until I know when I'm going to Paris. My contact said it could be a couple of weeks."

"Yes, I know. So it's a couple of weeks before you contact the hospital and perhaps a month after that... Your uncle is looking for a Christmas present. I suppose it could be just about possible, depending upon the extent of the procedures they do."

She looked up at her husband in shock. "Are *you* ready... so soon?"

"I am happy to accommodate your schedule on this. You know that."

"I know you've been good about letting me take this at my own pace, but that was just to see if I could get pregnant. Are you really ready for the rest of it?"

"Once the decision is made that we want children, why would we wait?"

She smiled. "I guess it's not as though we need to save our money to afford it." She thought for a moment. "Speaking of uncomfortable subjects, I spoke with young Mr. Potter last night... Oh, *there's* the blank stare I fell in love with a year ago!" *Turnabout is fair play*, Katherine thought to herself with a feline smile.

"And?" It came out shorter than he might have intended.

"I think I understand the looks he's been giving you. He learned a great deal about his father from his father's friends and more than he wanted to know about him from your memories. He wants to know more about his mother."

"I'm not sure I'm the best person..."

"Come now, Severus. You're probably the only person living who really knew her. That impossible sister of hers has forgotten everything except that she considered Lily a freak. Dumbledore dropped the boy into a magical void for eleven years and then expected him to re-assimilate without much comment whatsoever. The boy has performed brilliantly, but now he's a bit lost. You're one of the people who can help him fill the gaps."

"I'll think about it."

"There we go. That's one non-committal promise from each of us. Quite a good day's work, don't you think?"

"You're incorrigible."

"And you're still magnificent."

He couldn't help blushing as he tried not to choke on his coffee. "What is Mrs. Magnificent doing today? Looking for wands in Piccadilly, by chance?"

"Nothing so grand. I'll be working with the elves on getting the flat back in order and then finding some way to reward them for their hard work yesterday. Hopefully I'll find something that they don't consider insulting or doesn't make them burst into tears. You might pop into the kitchen and tell Josephine and Bonaparte goodbye. They'll be going back to the island today."

"I'll do that." He set his cup and paper down and stood. "I should get downstairs. I need to see to those dunderheads."

"Don't you have something to do first?" she asked.

"Now that you mention it," he smiled. He took the few steps toward her and then leaned down to her upturned face. "Delicious."

"There's more where it came from, of course."

"I'm counting on that."

"I'm sorry, I just don't think I can do it with Uncle Sonny in the flat."

He laid back and riffled a hand through his hair, sighing loudly. "Are you out of your pretty little mind?"

"Didn't you see the way he looked at us when he commented about us being newlyweds? He *knows*."

"Of course your uncle knows. If you were him, what would you expect?"

"It's just too strange. He still thinks of me as a little girl."

"He knows you're all grown up."

"Yes, that's true." She smiled at him.

"Katherine..." He reached over to run his hand through her hair and nuzzled her neck.

She giggled and pulled away. "I just can't. What if we make noise?"

"This is senseless." He rolled over and sat up on his side of the bed, reaching for a pair of shorts and his robe.

"You're not leaving?"

"What's the point of staying?" He closed the bedroom door, and Katherine could hear him padding down the hallway to his office.

Severus found a book of charms that he had been thumbing through and sat down with it. He had been looking for something in particular and poring over the fine print of this book might be the solution. It didn't solve his more immediate problem, however, and he found that he had to stand up again.

He tried pacing the floor of his study without any luck. He kept thinking of the way she had looked during breakfast when she smiled over the way her uncle had gotten that promise out of her. That led him to thinking about her health, which was a more promising train of thought. The latest pain medication was doing the trick, and she didn't seem to be getting any worse. Perhaps not spending lazy mornings on the floor of the dining room, due to the likelihood of a relative happening upon them, would be good for her, too. He stopped walking. That was a poor choice of memories to draw upon.

He sat again and reopened the book. There were many useful charms here. He found one to make house-elves happy. Katherine could have used that this morning, by all reports. She had told him that the elves had all cried at being presented with their choice of the pillowcases at the apartment. All four had selected one in cotton sateen with dark green and silver monograms. Then they had cried at being separated when Bonaparte and Josephine had to leave. Katherine had to promise both that they would be returning to the island again and that the four would be reunited again. As a permanent arrangement, the Snapes were not sure it would work for all four to be in the same place. Each of the female elves was quite territorial about her kitchen.

He started to pace again. The more they tried to fit into Wizarding England, the less they actually did. As he had predicted, they were not comfortable in the world that was emerging. There really wasn't a place for a double spy. Old friends treated him kindly, but the message behind their eyes was always questioning and assessing his motives. Katherine, likewise, found that pureblood society was withdrawing from her as it stepped back to lick its wounds and consider its position in the emerging world. If it weren't for his campaign to get her to St. Mungo's, he would start pressing her to take a long-term vacation.

At the thought of Katherine's injuries, he looked again at some calculations he had made that day. This newest potion was sure to do something of interest. It would take several days to complete, but fortunately some of the ingredients were best harvested at this time of year and moon phase. A couple of sips might solve certain problems.

The room was becoming over warm. He stood at the sliding door to his balcony and brought the charms book with him. As he scanned the pages, he finally came upon a spell that caught his interest. He looked out the door and back at the charm, reading it carefully again. It appeared that he was looking at the solution to both a question he had tried to solve for a few weeks and the problem at hand.

Katherine tossed and turned, wishing she hadn't been so squeamish. It wasn't that she didn't want to make love, she just needed a different sort of foreplay to get her into the mood. She needed something to take her mind off her uncle. Was this normal married life? It seemed as though just a month before, once the bedroom door closed only Severus existed for her. Just in the past couple of weeks it seemed as though other things had started crowding in. She sighed and stared at the ceiling.

If only they could go back to the island. They had invited only their friends to the party, but even then there were a few awkward moments. Severus had been right in saying they wouldn't really fit in. They had felt the need to come back to England, though, and now were embroiled in life here. It would take a couple more successes for Katherine to feel that she had gotten enough of the wands to truly be helpful to Mr. Ollivander, and now Severus had those three students, or assistants, or *whatever* they might be called.

There was no way she could sleep. She was too keyed up. If only Severus had recognized that she needed a little wooing tonight! On the other side of the coin, hadn't she insulted him a bit by being distracted? Maybe she should woo him. She sat up and felt around for her peignoir set and put it on. Then she Summoned her hairbrush and ran it through her hair quickly.

She blinked her eyes at the glow in the middle of the room. A silvery panther hopped onto the foot of the bed. She backed away as it stared at her for a minute. Surely it couldn't hurt her, and it could only have one source.

"Come." It was his voice, as she expected.

If it was a riddle, it wasn't a complicated one. She congratulated herself on already being prepared and stood. The Patronus was at the door in a single bound. It waited for her to open it. She followed it down the hall and into a room filled with candlelight. The panther dissipated, but she wasn't really watching it anymore. She just looked at her husband.

He made a sound low in his throat. "You're very pretty."

"I was thinking of coming to find you, but you sent for me, first."

He gestured to the balcony. "Will you join me?"

She wrapped the thin gown around herself as securely as she could. "If you like."

They stepped out and Katherine discovered that it was actually quite comfortable.

"Wow! This is marvelous."

"I've been looking for Warming Charms for a while. I think this is the one. Care to test it with me?"

"My pleasure." She smiled at him.

"If it goes as I hope, it will be mine, too," he murmured.

Katherine heard "Stairway to the Stars" on the wireless as her husband pulled her into his arms. Before she realized what was happening, they were dancing. He held her closer and closer as the music played until they were swaying in time to the music rather than dancing. She lifted her face to find that his lips were waiting for hers.

The music was forgotten as strong feelings, never quite quenched, were quickly kindled. Severus guided his wife to a large and well-cushioned chaise lounge on the balcony. There he started to guide her robe over her shoulders.

"Won't someone see us?"

"On the twelfth floor, with no other tall buildings nearby? They would need a telescope and a great deal of luck."

She smiled at that thought and shrugged out of both the robe and her gown. He likewise disrobed and she smiled again. Reaching out, she caught his hand and kissed it before sliding it back around her waist. She stepped closer as her hands reached to caress his chest, working their way up to his neck. She trailed kisses where her hands had been until he slid his hand under her chin and tipped her face up to his and kissed her.

The Warming Charm on the balcony continued in full force as the two lowered onto the oversized lounge chair. It provided a warm atmosphere as the air directly around the chair reached a white hot intensity. The charm softly caressed them as they started to cool a few minutes later, keeping them comfortable. All the pair on the lounge chair noticed were the soft touches and comments that they made in the aura of their contentment. When the touches and comments became once again bold and determined, the charm accepted the heat from their bodies and held it around them without allowing them to become overly warm.

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

Willow and Veela Hair

Chapter 8 of 25

"...Halloween isn't just the night I lost the love I *had* always wished for, anymore."

Disclaimer: Except for some OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Katherine felt rather proud of herself for shedding her embarrassment about being intimate with her husband while her uncle lived in their house. It took a full week and a half, but eventually she could face him over the coffee pot in the morning without blushing. Uncle Sonny found the situation amusing and took advantage of the opportunity to needle her about it in small ways. Severus smirked and chortled into his coffee and neither helped nor hindered the shift in the family relationship.

Then, just as it was starting to feel as though Uncle Sonny were part of their household, he was gone. Severus came upstairs one evening to see Katherine sitting on a blanket in front of the sitting room fire, dinner spread around her. His blood quickened as he came toward her and sat down.

"Where is your uncle?" he asked.

"He got an owl this afternoon, packed up his things, and left. He said one of his associates found something he was looking for, and he was going to get it. His house is ready, and he wants to be truly out on his own." *And I want you and your husband to enjoy your time together* he had said. *With luck there will be someone else to disturb you by this time next year.*

"You will still see him."

"He did say he would stay in touch." Katherine handed Severus a wine glass.

"You'll see him far more than when he was at the hospital, I'm sure."

Katherine put her own wine glass down. "That's well and good, darling, but I have some staying in touch of my own planned for this evening."

"You seem to have planned quite a bit." Severus looked around and realized that she had made the room quite comfortable. He realized his robe was unfastened and that there weren't many buttons left to unfasten on his shirt.

Katherine finished undressing him and reached for a bottle of massage oil. "I believe I've planned everything. Lie down, Professor."

"I may have to do some planning of my own, you know."

"Will you?"

"Yes, at some point...ah, Katherine..." His last coherent thought was that he would need to unfasten her robe... eventually...

Katherine sat unusually straight over her breakfast the next morning. Her husband admired the way she didn't slump over as she often would after the little sleep they had gotten the night before. Then he made his way around the table and saw her face. He pulled a vial out of his pocket and put two drops into her tea.

"Did you run out?"

She looked up, ashamed. "No, I had stopped using it and forgot about it. I guess I'm not used to so much of what we did last night."

"Not on the floor of the sitting room, at least." He smiled down to her. "I should have brought you to our bedroom sooner."

"It was all worth it." She smiled smugly into her cup as she drank it down. After a minute or two she stretched and adjusted to a more comfortable posture. "Mmmm, that's better. I shouldn't have forgotten this potion. Shall we have another go? We haven't done anything in this room in a while."

"Tempting as that is, I'd like to give you a chance to properly recover. I also need to get downstairs. My new potion should be finished in a day or two, and I think this morning will be important."

"How are you doing in your conversations with Harry?"

He groaned. "Always with the difficult questions. I've told him a few things, answered some of his questions..." He trailed off in a funny way, so Katherine looked up at him. "I gave him that picture I had. It was from a letter his mother had written to someone else."

"I thought that picture was important to you."

"It served its purpose. Now I have something real that warms more than my thoughts at night."

Potion or no, the looks they were exchanging started to get heated. They took their time, eating slowly and smiling at each other until a pair of owls flew at the dining room window. Severus stood to let them in. There was one for each of them.

Severus looked at the one he received. "It's from Lucius. The common uncle he mentioned to me at the party has taken another turn for the worse."

"Oh dear. Will you visit him?"

"I'm not sure to what end. He was kind to Lucius, but he never acknowledged me as part of his family. What is your news?"

"It's from my Paris contact. I need to go today. I should be back tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow is the thirty-first." A flicker of something crossed his face, but Katherine didn't notice since she was reading the note a second time for the details.

"Yes, it is." Katherine stood and walked over to her husband, giving him a kiss. "I guess I should gather my things and go. The sooner I go, the sooner I'll be back. Thank you for the potion. I'll be much better with it."

He stood then and pulled her close. "Be careful, Katherine, and come home to me as soon as you can."

"I'll do that," she kissed him one last time and smiled to him before she slipped down the hallway.

Katherine arrived back home forty-eight hours later. She slipped rather stiffly through the front door and found her husband in the sitting room. There was a bottle of Ogden's Old sitting on the table in front of him.

"Ah, the lady of the house graces us with her presence."

"I'm sorry I was delayed. I sent word..."

"I got your owl. I was expecting *you*."

Katherine's face was very white. "I'm sorry. I just needed a few extra hours to finish..."

His face was tortured. "I needed you, it was the anniversary... the worst day... ever."

Lily's death. Katherine found it hard to breathe and tears stung her eyes. "How very foolish of me. I should have realized." It came out as a whisper.

He didn't look up.

"Let me go change out of this outfit. I'll come back, and you can tell me all about it."

"If you can spare the time."

"Of course I can. I'm sorry, it was thoughtless of me."

"You women are all the same. You all leave me."

"I did come back. I'll always come back." She got into the hallway and pressed her hand against the wall. "You had the paper done?"

"As you can see. I went with my choice since you weren't here to disagree with me."

"It looks beautiful. Are these snakes?"

There was no answer as she made her way to the bedroom. She was feeling sick and lightheaded. If she could only sit down, she would be fine. She would change into something comfortable, take a couple of drops of Severus's potion, and then she would mourn his loss with him.

"Master, wake up. Mistress is needing you."

He lifted his head from the back of the couch and stared at the house-elf. "You have it backwards. Master is needing Mistress. Where is she, now?" He took the potion the elf handed him.

"Mistress is on floor of bedroom. Fern tries to help her and Mistress cannot move. Come Master, help Mistress."

He stumbled up and found that his legs would stay under him. He made his way down the hall. He found where she had stopped to admire the new paper. There was a smear of blood. "Katherine?" His steps picked up speed until he got to her side.

Katherine must have fallen while trying to sit on the edge of the bed. She had laid out some yoga pants and a dressing gown. A long-sleeved tee shirt had fallen on the floor under her. Her face was very white.

"What happened to you? What was it that delayed you?" He gently lifted her to the bed. Her eyes opened, and he got the impression of an ambush, of a Stunning Hex that dropped her on her bottom and caused her to skid across a room, tumbling through rubble. There was a mediwitch who tried to repair the damage and asked her to stay, but Katherine insisted on getting home to her husband.

"Oh, my love, what did they do to you?" He undressed her carefully. It was clear to him that the same bones as before were broken. What disturbed him most was the purplish-black stain all across her left side. Several new bones were broken, and it appeared other damage might have been done as well. He checked her pulse. She would never make it to St. Mungo's.

There was his new potion. It should be able to help her. There were also a couple of drops left of the most precious potion Severus had ever owned. Before doing anything else, he gave her two doses of Blood-Replenishing Potion. He Apparated downstairs and got a vial of the new potion. He took the vial of the other potion out of his inner pocket and carefully opened it. Obtaining one of the two or three precious drops with a hand that shook more than he would ever admit later, he mixed it into the new potion. As it blended, the potion turned gold and emitted a soft hum. He knew that this mixture would work if anything could.

He rushed back upstairs and held the potion to her lips. At first she would only take a couple of drops on the back of her tongue, but as it started to take effect, she was able to take the whole dose. It appeared to be working, but there would be many painful hours before she would be better. Severus carefully wrapped his wife in the sheet and kissed her forehead. He got a chair and sat next to her. He held her hand to his lips and watched her throughout the day.

He was watching her as she opened her eyes. "Don't try to talk if it hurts."

"Water?"

He held a cup with a straw for her, and she sipped it eagerly, her eyes showing gratitude.

"How long?"

"You got home three and a half hours ago. It's just noon now. The potion I gave you will take at least until late tonight before we know how you are."

"So sorry... Lily."

"Don't think about it."

"Love you."

"I love you, too." He gave her another dose of Blood-Replenishing Potion and then allowed her to slip back into sleep.

She woke again, several hours later.

"It feels like Skele-gro."

He gave her some more water. "It works like Skele-gro, but not just on bones. It's supposed to be repairing your other organs, too."

"That explains why it's not entirely that splintery feeling. Some of my insides feel all twitchy."

"Do you mind if I look?"

"I never have, before."

His heart skipped a beat, but he kept a more professional demeanor while he pulled the sheet back and looked at the bruising. It had faded to reds and yellows. He said some simple diagnostic spells he knew and considered the results.

"It looks like the internal bleeding is under control. I need you to take a little more of the Blood-Replenishing Potion."

She went to sleep again.

When she woke the next time, Uncle Sonny was sitting in the chair. Severus was sleeping at the very edge of the bed. Katherine realized she was wearing a nightgown and that it was dark outside. Uncle Sonny saw that she was awake and raised his eyebrows in a silent question.

"I was ambushed. Someone knew where to go and what time to be there."

"I'll find out who. We will make that person pay."

"Let the Ministry have them."

"After doing this to you? They will answer to me. Let the Ministry have what's left."

She didn't say anything.

"Oh! I was supposed to offer you some water or even some juice."

"I think a little juice would be good."

A house-elf was summoned. He held the glass so that she could sip it and told her about the past day as she did. "Mistress is looking better. She comes home and sleeps on the floor. Mistress is white, so white. Master is being grumpy, then Master is sad and worried. Wilbur and Fern tells Master to rest, but he worries. Master Sonny comes and watches Mistress."

Katherine sipped her drink slowly. She wanted to savor the taste of it, but she also wanted the full story from Wilbur. There wasn't much, and she was quickly finished. "Thank you. I believe I owe the two of you a great deal." The elf went pink as he left the room.

She looked over toward her husband. He looked so peaceful. She didn't want to interrupt his rest, but she wanted his touch.

"You're supposed to go back to sleep." Her uncle patted her hand, and suddenly Katherine remembered she was exhausted.

"Yes, I think I will. Thank you, Uncle Sonny. I love you."

"I love you, too, child."

She found she could move her arm and slid it across the bed so that her fingers barely touched those of her husband. He shifted in his sleep and moved his own hand, covering hers.

When she awoke the next time, she found that her face was pressed against her husband's chest. He lay close to her, now. When she stirred, his arms tightened protectively around her.

"I love you," she whispered, snaking her own arms around him.

He was awake at once. "How are you feeling?"

"It's all just a dull ache, now. I do have to take care of one thing, though."

"Hmm, do you want to try to walk, or should we use the other arrangements?"

"I think I can walk."

He helped her get up and walked with her to the bathroom. After she managed to handle the necessities, her husband helped her back to the bed. "I'd like you to eat a little, but I would like to look you over, first."

His hands moved to the hem of her nightgown, and their eyes met. Katherine's breathing became shaky. To distract her he asked, "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

"They were waiting for me. I had to fight my way in and then back out. It was when I was coming back out that I saw... I think it's the ash wand that I'm looking for. I've never been hit with a Stunner like that. I don't think it worked at full force, either. It doesn't belong to the person who used it."

Severus pulled her nightgown over her head and gently maneuvered her onto her stomach. He started rubbing a healing potion into her back. "Did you see who it was?"

"No, they had hoods over their faces. Somehow I think it's personal. I don't think it had to do with the wands."

"Are you going back for them?"

"I have them."

"You managed to get the wands in the midst of all that?"

"I was attacked after I had gotten them, and there was no way I wanted to go back to that, so..."

"So you kept the wands at all costs. How did you get away?"

"I used a Reductor Curse. Whoever it was saw what I was doing and Disapparated."

He reached the small of her back and couldn't resist a kiss. "What did you do, next?"

"My contact brought me to a mediwitch who did what she could. She wanted me to stay, but I had already changed the Portkey once and I wanted to get back home to you." Her voice became husky. "I'm so sorry I missed the other night, Severus. I should have remembered from last year and dropped everything to get home and be here with you."

"I spent the evening with Potter."

"What?"

"We talked about Lily, and Lily's husband. We went to Godric's Hollow so we could visit their graves, and then I took him to the place where Lily and Petunia grew up. It wasn't as bad as I once feared such a meeting would be, but I couldn't shake the feeling that you had set me up, planning for your trip to go longer." He rolled her onto her right side, and their eyes met again.

"I had no idea of doing something like that. I wouldn't force such a meeting on you."

"I realize that now. It doesn't matter, anymore, anyway. Halloween isn't just the night I lost the love I *had* always wished for, anymore." Very gently, he started working the potion into the area that had been so bruised.

"What do you mean?"

"It's still the night Lily was lost to me forever, although she was gone from me long before. More importantly, it's the night I very nearly lost the love I *have*. As bad as it was seventeen years ago, and I wanted to die then, the last two days have been worse." He stopped the rubbing, his hand on her left hip, and he kissed her lips. "I love you in ways I never dreamed possible when I was younger," he whispered into her forehead. "If I lost that, there would be nothing for me."

"Oh..." She pressed herself close to him. He made her feel safe and loved. She found that she was very, very aware of him. "Severus?" Katherine put a hand on her husband's shoulder. "How am I?"

"Hmm? His hand was trailing around her back.

"I want to make love with you."

"You can't."

"After the way you've cared for me? I feel so close to you right now. Isn't there some way?"

"Lie still." He said some diagnostic spells. "You're just about healed, but I fear hurting you."

"There must be some way." She was picking at his shirt.

He put his hands over hers and gently pushed her back down. "If you really want this, we need to do it my way." He started working his own buttons and spoke to her as he undressed. "We're going to be very slow and gentle, and if you feel any severe pressure or intensity, you will tell me, and somehow, I will stop."

"I do believe you just told me not to have an orgasm."

"Be serious, Katherine."

"Yes, I understand, within reason."

He sighed, but started to kiss her. She returned the kiss, and her hands started moving along his torso. He stopped her and murmured, "Don't touch me in such a way that I will lose control, please." She made a sound and he shushed her. "I'm serious. If you won't let me be careful, we will stop."

"Don't stop, I'll be good. Oh, I ache." He stopped and held her away from him. "For your touch, I mean. Please don't stop. I ache for your touch and to feel you."

"Let me do it." He shifted her to her right side again and moved behind her. Katherine's only task was to clasp her husband's hands and abandon herself to his lovemaking. She buried her face in the pillow and held on for dear life as her body started shuddering with the passion they shared. A moment later he was bucking against her, releasing his fluids within her.

He held her a little longer and she said, "I would never have dreamed that such a man existed who could be so gentle and care for me so tenderly." She moved and let him guide her back into the nest he had made of her pillows. "I want to have your baby, Severus Snape. I want to see you as a father, caring for our child the way you have cared for me today."

"Are you sure?"

She ran a hand over his face. "I'll send that note of inquiry to St. Mungo's tomorrow. Unless you think I should go sooner..."

He looked chagrined. "Actually it's probably better not to go so soon. The, uh, *treatment* I gave you is not something that has been approved or is even anything that could be made available again in the same form. In any case, there is a particular Healer I think you should see. It may take a while to get in with her."

She smiled. "As you wish."

He re-wrapped her in the sheet and kissed her forehead. "Now I should see about that meal I wanted you to have..."

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

Holiday Cheer

The Malfoys hosted a dinner party to begin the Christmas party season.

The Malfoys hosted a dinner party to begin the Christmas party season. It would be a similar group of people as the summer's Quidditch match. Katherine decided to wear a dark green satin sheath. Severus's diamonds and the rings he gave her were her only adornment. At the last minute, she decided to wear long gloves over her hands and forearms, and the rings were covered.

Severus was seized as soon as they passed into the drawing room. Katherine smiled as he was taken from her by various wizards who were all captains of industry and the Ministry. Her smile became a bit stiff as she noticed that one or two of the men circling him were bringing forward daughters who had recently come of age. Didn't those fools know he was married?

Severus didn't think Katherine could get more beautiful to him, but he watched her tonight. Her loveliness and complete self-possession drew his every thought. Yet, he couldn't escape some role he seemed to have stepped into. There was some reason that these wizards wanted him to meet their daughters; perhaps he could learn what it was. He forced himself to kiss the gloved hands within his own and to make insipid conversations with the children in front of him who had been his students. When he looked up again, Narcissa was shepherding Katherine away. Surely he would get a chance to speak to his wife at dinner.

He should have realized that it was not to be. Narcissa had placed him close to her end of the table and Katherine near Lucius. He realized that they were each in places of honor, but he would have preferred less honor and more time with his own wife. He hoped he was making the appropriate small talk since he couldn't stop looking up at the other end of the table. She glanced at him from time to time as she spoke with her host.

Severus watched closely as she answered the questions of her dinner partners, first on one hand and then the other. Her eyes looked old and tired, as they had the night she told him of her forced first marriage. Her smile was bright though, and the men around her never noticed how very unhappy she was. Finally Narcissa stood to lead the ladies out. *Thank all good things for that.* This evening would soon end.

Katherine sat quietly in the drawing room. Sometimes these gatherings were a bit uncomfortable. The families who had used her services tended to view her as the hired help, especially the women. There was such a matron standing in the corner and dominating the general conversation. Katherine shut her eyes for just a moment. Suddenly she felt unbelievably weary. Perhaps Severus would want to go home, soon. Maybe he could explain what was going on with the Weatherfields and Morrells and others.

Someone sat beside her. When she opened her eyes, Katherine beheld Audrey Weatherfield. She was a lovely Squib, just on the brink of womanhood. She was ripe and beautiful in a way Katherine had never achieved. This girl might have been an embarrassment to her family, but she was pampered and loved from birth and had never known any of the harsh realities that seasoned Katherine's life from her earliest memories. Her youthful beauty had not been flawed by any serious hardship.

"Hello," the girl said, "you have a sympathetic face. That wizard...Severus Snape...do you know him?"

A strange sensation came over Katherine as she answered. "Yes, I know him, a bit."

"I thought you must. My parents wanted him to meet me, but he hasn't stopped looking at you all night. I wonder, do you know about him? Do you think he would be kind to a woman who's not magical?"

Katherine couldn't answer. It didn't matter because the girl kept talking.

"I hear he has a wife, but she can't have children. They haven't been married long, and my mum says that maybe he'll divorce her and marry me, and then all of his money will come to our family. Do you think that's likely? I wonder what his wife is like. Have you met her?" This time Audrey looked up at Katherine with searching green eyes.

Katherine twisted her wedding rings under the glove as she sought to reclaim her senses. She was spared the necessity of answering by a horrified gasp from the other side of the room. The men had joined the ladies, and Audrey's mother was rushing over to extract her daughter from the uncomfortable scene she had inadvertently caused. Severus was walking toward Katherine when Lucius tugged his sleeve.

The dancing was starting in the ballroom, and Severus was expected to lead off with his hostess. It was an honor for him, and indirectly, for Katherine herself. Nevertheless, it was hard to maintain the social smile she kept in public. She turned to discover her host holding his hand to her. "It would be my honor," he said. She allowed him to lead her into the ball room where she curtsied as he bowed and pulled her into a waltz.

"Well, Katherine, I know Severus isn't interested, but it appears Uncle Thad is going to leave us soon."

"Severus has told me, in your hearing, that Thaddeus Prince has never once acknowledged him. I'm not sure it's important news to him, really."

His eyes crinkled at the edges. "Ah, but it is important. My dear uncle controls a great deal of money. He's named me his sole heir."

Katherine smiled. "I'm sure the pain of your loss will be aggravated then, by the new responsibilities you will bear?"

He laughed loudly enough that some other couples dancing turned to them. "I will miss Uncle Thad and his interesting commentary on our society. He could always be trusted to turn any conversation to the effects on those with pure blood. I won't deny, however, that I look forward to the new responsibilities. The Ministry salvaged its pride by taking a large chunk of our family fortune, and this will neatly replace that pound of flesh."

"I don't know whether to offer you my sympathy or congratulations," said Katherine quietly. She caught a glimpse of her husband and craned her neck to see him better. Her host couldn't help noticing.

"You know, Katherine, after six months, you're not supposed to be quite so much in love with your husband anymore," said Lucius, who smirked. "It might be considered rude to avoid looking at your dancing partner."

She turned her head back to him and smiled. "Really, Lucius? How long have you been married?" she responded. "My husband's dancing partner keeps looking over here, and I don't think she's interested in me."

A gleam came to his eye as he spun her around in order to get a look at his own spouse. A genuine smile crossed his face for an instant before he laughed at himself. "Touché."

The music changed and Lucius pretended to pull Katherine closer. "Ah, isn't this the song you danced to at New Year's with Severus? It caused quite a scene. Will you dance again with me?"

"You're just being polite, Lucius. Surely you want to finish dancing with your guests so that you can get to your wife," she answered conspiratorially. The look in his face did not disagree.

"Yes, you really should look after your duties as host, Lucius. I'm afraid this dance is taken, isn't it, Katherine?" She looked up to see her husband at her side.

She gratefully moved from one wizard to the other with a brief word of thanks to her host. Her husband didn't speak but merely looked into her face. Suddenly she felt a new energy and straightened her spine. They both smiled as he twirled her and pulled her close. They danced a little more, and he gently lowered her in a dip. Their eyes never parted. The tango became a fox trot and then a mambo and more waltzes. They never left each other's arms for the rest of the night, even though several wizards tried to break in. They stayed as long as necessary at the party to satisfy convention. Pleading weariness, they then made their apologies to Narcissa and Lucius, leaving early.

It was a mild night for early December, and they decided to Apparate several blocks from their flat and walk. They stood across a park from their building and tried to pick out the balcony of Severus's study. They stopped short of having a row over which one it was by laughing at themselves.

"I guess it proves your point," she admitted. "There's no way anyone would see us or know it was us up there."

"Shall we test that Warming Charm again?"

"I think that sounds marvelous," she answered.

They had just gotten across the road when the crackle of magic shot past them. Severus pushed Katherine into a doorway, only to find that she was trying to push him into the same doorway. Both had their wands out and looked at each other and then into the street.

"Did you see where it came from?" he asked.

"I believe over by that tree," she answered.

"*Homenum revelio!*" he cast as she tried a Binding Spell. The Shield Charm that returned reverberated almost to where they were standing.

They saw a single shadowy figure by the tree. It was either a short wizard or a witch. The last spell that came at them was lethal, but they both ducked it. An instant later the shadowy figure was gone. The crack of Disapparition hung in the air. Severus and Katherine looked at each other again.

"Let's get you upstairs," he said as she was saying, "We should investigate."

She started again. "How do you know that person was after me? Maybe it was just a mugging. Maybe it was an ex-Death Eater looking for you."

"After what happened in Paris? We're not going to risk that another one is somewhere around." He took a firm grip of her arm and turned.

In their sitting room, he took her cloak and handed both hers and his to Wilbur. "It would appear it was aimed at you."

She sat down. "Well, then, let's consider what was aimed at you tonight."

He handed her a glass of brandy and sat across from her. "What are you going on about?"

"It was hard to miss," she said, watching him carefully, "that there were a couple of papas there trying to get you to notice their daughters. Whatever did you say to them?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, I'm sure I was charming. I impressed the girls who were former students by reciting their O.W.L. marks in Potions to them and their fathers."

"*Quelle* romantic for their introduction to Severus Snape, Hero and Order of Merlin, First Class!"

"Indeed. In every case I told them that I believe my wife and I looked forward to the acquaintance of them and their future husbands."

Katherine stood and walked around the coffee table. "I knew you were a marvelous man." She slid one of her gloves off and dropped it to the table.

He reached a hand up and pulled her down into the chair with him so that she was half in his lap. "That was a ghastly evening, wasn't it? Narcissa would be horrified if she knew what her guests were attempting to do. If Lucius found out, he would call the dunderheads into his study to be disciplined like school children on the proper social graces. Lastly, someone tried to murder my wife on the way home."

"That last one was just a Body Bind, I think," she said.

"But the way it was cast..." He thought a minute as he watched her tug at the fingers of the other glove. "Didn't you say the wand used against you in Paris might be the one you're looking for? Whatever was used just now was stronger than it should have been."

"You're just trying to scare me."

"Good, because I'm rather scared."

She went back to the dinner party. "What do you suppose those wizards were about? They behaved as though you had the freedom to marry anyone you please, as though you weren't already married. There was one little girl who actually mentioned you divorcing me."

"It's not going to happen," he answered. "If there was the remotest possibility that I would want to divorce you, your uncle and the Minister of Magic between them would make sure I was unable to marry anyone after that."

"My uncle would do no such thing! How can you suggest that?"

"Oh, no?" Severus smiled indulgently. "What about one of his 'associates?' The whole thing does concern me, in light of the fact that someone has tried to kill you twice now. I would tend to suspect those families first."

"We don't know the person downstairs was after me."

"If it was the same wand, the evidence would be fairly strong."

She couldn't argue against that, although she wanted to. She opted to change the subject. "Well, then, all the more reason to finish up our business here and get out of England."

"You will get no argument from me." He took both of their glasses and placed them on the table.

She smiled and got up, holding his hand and leading the way to the bedroom. Later, when they were dozing off and she was lying on her side, his arm around her, she had time to think about it. Severus was such a catch that a few families would naturally turn to him the hopes of snaring his fortune and increasingly good name. Most of them had seen losses due to the war, after all. They were probably desperate. She knew she had nothing to fear from that corner. The more she thought of it, the more she assumed that what happened on the way home was simply an attempt at a mugging. When the wizard or witch realized the targets were magical, they had left quickly enough. She snuggled into her husband's body and went to sleep.

The Last Cache

Chapter 10 of 25

"One more major find, Severus, if I can just find another cache of them, I'll give up on the last half dozen and figure I'll find them when I stumble across them."

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Except for the Malfoys' party, Severus kept Katherine quiet and at home for as long as he could after her injuries in Paris. He distracted her by getting her to finish the decorating. They got as far as the second guest room before she finally revolted. What initially started as a discussion about which colors to use in the paper devolved quickly into an argument about her wanting to go back to work.

"One more major find, Severus. If I can just find another cache of them, I'll give up on the last half dozen and figure I'll find them when I stumble across them."

"It's too dangerous."

"I've been doing this for over fifteen years. I think I can handle the danger."

"Has anyone actively tried to kill you before?"

She stopped and looked at him for a minute. "No... But we don't know for sure someone is trying to kill me, now."

"The evidence is almost irrefutable."

She couldn't deny it, yet she refused to admit it.

"Severus, I have to get out of here. I have to feel useful."

"Come downstairs and brew with me, then."

It was difficult. Katherine tried to sit in a quiet corner and read, but she couldn't help trying to do things to help, and Severus gave her a simple Calming Draught to work on. The boys didn't seem to notice, but the looks from Granger were difficult to take.

Severus enjoyed having his wife in the lab with him. It was a dream come true to see her bent over a cauldron. He imagined the coming evening when the students left. They would clean the work spaces and then clear off his desk. Finally he could do what he never let himself imagine doing with a student. He had difficulty keeping a straight face as he looked over the work being done, but he managed it.

Katherine wouldn't let the other matter rest. As he brought her some ingredients, she said, "I know Mundungus Fletcher has the wands I'm looking for."

"It's too dangerous. Wait until I go with you."

"I don't think we'll catch him by surprise if he has time to find out I'm looking for him."

He chuckled and stepped away. Potter's potion needed a special sort of stirring, and he wanted to watch him do it. The young wizard did a better than adequate job, and the Potions master's attention strayed back to his wife. He couldn't help returning to her side in order to stand behind her and help her chop a root in preparation for grinding.

"I could pop over to Hogsmeade and be back within an hour. No one knows I'm going and they won't be looking for me."

His lips were close to her ear as he assisted with the mortar and pestle. First they put the chopped root into the mortar. Then he held her hands in his as they worked the pestle back and forth, grinding and crushing the chopped root. "Watch as the juices are released, my love." His lips touched her earlobe. "I can go with you in a day or two, and then I'll know how safe you are."

Katherine felt her insides turning to jelly. "Oh, Severus, you're distracting me."

He stepped away, sure that his plans for the afternoon were set. Twenty minutes later, the Calming Draught was ready for bottling. Severus pronounced the potion perfect and helped Katherine fill the vials set out for the finished product. Their fingers touched often as they worked. All too soon the task was done.

The Snapes went upstairs for lunch, discussing Katherine's plan to go to Hogsmeade as they ate. "I cannot allow you to go into danger without me," he said. It was a point to which he kept returning.

"Do you realize how odd that sounds? I've been in danger plenty of times before. If I wasn't being hunted, at least I was in danger once I got to the situation. The battle six months ago wasn't exactly a school picnic, you know."

"It's different, now."

"I don't see that."

He snorted. "You wouldn't."

"One hour. I can go and come back in one hour."

He decided to change the subject. "How are you feeling this week?"

"Very well, actually."

"I would have judged that you're still overtired." He had noticed that whenever she sat down in the late afternoon, she fell asleep.

"Well, I am a bit tired, but that's just from being injured so badly before. I hardly notice even my usual aches and pains these days, and I'm sure my energy is coming back."

"How can I let you go anywhere when you aren't at your best?" He smirked, assessing that he had won the battle.

After lunch, Katherine sat in a quiet corner, again, wishing she even had an elementary potion to make. No, that wasn't exactly true. Katherine wanted to track down Mundungus Fletcher and the remaining wands. Then she wanted to come home and finish the flat's decorating, and then she wanted to take her husband some place where all they needed to do was be together. Maybe then they could dispel the worries that crept in when she least expected it.

Weasley's potion was the first finished on this day and as Snape helped him bottle it, the elder wizard quipped. "Now you have the remainder of the afternoon to spend as you wish. If you like, you may even accompany my wife to Hogsmeade..." He tried to bite his tongue on that last line, but it was too late. Katherine had heard him.

"Done!" she said as she quickly walked toward the red-haired wizard.

Severus looked at her with lowered brows. "I really don't want you to go."

"You just said I could."

"I did no such thing."

"I suppose it's all in how it's interpreted. You said you didn't want me to go alone, and now you've arranged for an experienced dueler to come with me. I'll be fine and we can contact you if there's the slightest trouble."

"Katherine, this is not what I intended. I would really rather that you not go."

She came close enough to kiss his cheek and slipped away before he could reach to hold her. "It will be fine, Severus. Have a little faith in my abilities."

She took Ron's arm and shepherded him out the door.

Katherine stood on High Street and took a deep breath, smiling into the breeze. "I've been cooped up far too long, Mr. Weasley. This is much better."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm just playing a hunch, but I think we should start at the Three Broomsticks. There might be someone who has seen him lately."

Katherine and Ron went into the inn and found a seat. Katherine handed Ron some Galleons and asked him to get her a cup of tea and something for himself. He did as she said and turned to go back to the table, but was jostled by someone who was leaving. When he reached the table, she smiled at her mostly empty cup of tea.

"He'll be at the Hog's Head in about half an hour."

Ron looked around. "How do you know?"

"He has an appointment with the gentleman who bumped into you."

"You knew that guy?"

"'Know' is such a precise word. I'm not sure it's appropriate for the situation."

"Where was he?"

"As it happened, he was in the booth that backs up to my seat."

"Oh." Ron sipped his butterbeer.

"Supposing we think of a way to catch our friend by surprise in the Hog's Head?"

"Isn't 'friend' a precise word?"

Katherine laughed. "Wasn't he a member of your Order? Wouldn't that make him a friend?"

"He was. He knows me and will likely try to get away. His last meeting with Harry was a bit uncomfortable for us all."

"Then it's a good thing there are two of us. Do you have any ideas?"

"Me?" Ron sipped his butterbeer and shrugged. "You want Hermione or Harry for that."

"I don't believe that," she responded. "I understand you were the unofficial chess champion at Hogwarts your first year. I suspect you can be quite good at planning strategy."

"Who would have told you that?" he asked.

"Who, indeed?" she said with a smile. "We need to keep it quick and simple."

There was only one person who could have told her, practically speaking. His mind couldn't absorb it so he stared at his bottle. Suddenly he nodded his head. "I might have a thought or two."

They peeked into the Hog's Head and saw Mundungus Fletcher sitting at a table in the middle of the inn, just where Katherine had been told he would be. He was facing away from the door and too busy speaking to someone to notice them. They walked up quietly and Ron put his bottle down heavily on the table. "What do you suppose this is worth?"

Fletcher saw who it was and stood up to Disapparate, but discovered Katherine's wand at his neck on the other side. "Not so quickly, Mr. Fletcher. I would like to relieve you of some items that belong to Mr. Ollivander." She smiled and her voice was like butter.

"Oh, 'o course, 'o course," he answered, a little too quickly. "I 'eard you was lookin' for 'em." He pulled four wands out of an inside pocket and handed them to her, a little too quickly for her taste.

She frowned sadly and shook her head. "What do you take me for? Some kind of chump? *Accio* wands!" Mundungus looked like an odd porcupine for a moment as wands flew from various apertures in his robes. Ron kept a hold on Fletcher as Katherine started going through the wands in her hands.

An hour and a half after leaving the lab, the two arrived back, smiling happily. "It worked out well, and I have all but a handful of the remaining wands. I'm going to pop over to Ollivander, and then I'll Floo home." She didn't really notice the cold look her husband gave her as she kissed his cheek. Then again, she didn't know how she had ruined his plans for the afternoon.

The potions were just about finished, so he rushed Potter and Granger through clean up and was waiting in the sitting room upstairs when Katherine arrived back home for the day. He hid the fact that he was waiting behind a new potions text that had recently been published.

"Back again, I see," he said, pretending to be bored.

"I'm done. I told Mr. Ollivander that I would keep an eye out for the last few wands, but that I'm essentially done."

"I'm sure you're going to enjoy the time off."

"I did it for us, so we can finish up here and do something else... together."

"For us? You didn't consider my concerns nor what I want in the least. You did it to suit yourself."

"I..." Suddenly, she wasn't sure. "You said young Mr. Weasley could accompany me."

"Surely you knew I was being facetious? Most people have ignored my preferences for my whole life, of course. I'm used to it."

He almost relented when he saw how that hit her. She sat down and looked at her hands in her lap. He continued to stare at the page of his book. She glanced at him, but he was ignoring her. Stifling a sigh, she looked for something to distract herself.

"Where are the wallpaper samples for the second guest room?" Katherine asked, looking at the table where she had left them.

"Aren't those the ones?" asked Severus, indicating some papers that were on the end table without looking up from his book.

"No, these are green and blue. I had gold ones."

"And you thought you left them there?" She looked carefully at him with narrowed eyes. He was trying hard not to smirk.

She sighed. "I know you didn't like the colors I picked, but couldn't you have left them where I put them?"

He was determinedly reading his book. She sighed again and took out her wand. "*Accio* wallpaper samples!" Instantly an old and heavy Potions book fell off of the shelf and half a dozen pieces of paper flew toward Katherine.

Severus stood up with a curse. He picked up the book. "That's broken the binding! Why did you do that?"

She took a step back toward the door and looked at him in dismay. "I'm sorry I broke your book. Did you honestly think I would forget about my samples if you hid them there? Are you that angry about my going to Hogsmeade? Is winning this argument so important to you?"

He angrily turned his back on her and took the book to a table. He looked at it for several minutes. After a minute or two his demeanor changed. "It's easily fixed. Don't worry," he said without looking up. He took out his own wand and tapped the book. "See? Good as new..."

When he looked around, she wasn't there. "Katherine?" He walked through the flat and finally found her in her study. She was kneeling on the couch. Her feet were bare and her hair had been pulled into a quick ponytail. Her face was pressed against the window. She looked like the love-starved waif she had once been. "There you are."

She spoke quietly although she didn't move. "You're right about the color. By candlelight it's a rich gold, but when daylight comes through the windows it's brassy and tacky. I'll look at your choices again."

He walked into the room and sat next to her. "What are you looking at?"

She nodded toward the park. "That family down there, they're so beautiful."

He peered out the window. "You can't see what they look like from up here."

"It doesn't matter what they actually look like. It's what they *are* like. See how the parents keep coming back to touch each other, and how the kids are helping to gather their things together? I wish we could be like that."

"You really want that baby."

"I think the appointment card came from St Mungo's today." She waved at a stack of unopened mail on her desk. "That's not it, though. Severus," she said as she looked at him with sorrow in her wide eyes. "I can't fight you any more."

"We don't fight."

"What would you call it, then? We quarrel about everything and all I can think about is winning the argument or putting something over on you. Usually it's good-natured, but sometimes it hurts so much..." She looked back out the window.

He sensed that she had more to say. "Katherine?"

"I've been having nightmares. It's always after we have one of these quarrels, now. Sometimes it's my parents arguing until he starts hitting her." She shuddered and put her face on her knees. "Sometimes it's one of the few times I stood up to Cyrus and what happened afterwards."

He looked concerned and reached to touch her. "I know you've been having nightmares and that they have been getting worse." His hand found her knee. He fingered her hair.

"I don't like to bring it up. It seems so pathetic, and I don't want you to see me that way."

"You know I love you, Katherine. It doesn't matter how I see you."

"Doesn't it? Isn't that what we're based on? I don't think I can keep fighting with you, yet I'm not sure if I can stop. If I do I stop, maybe you won't see me as a worthy

adversary any more." She bit her lower lip to keep her chin from trembling. "Maybe these elegant quarrels we've been having are just a more sophisticated form of what our parents did."

A cloud passed over his face. "Do you really think that?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I just worry about it. Sometimes our love seems like a burst of strong magic that could destroy anything bad in its path, but at other times, it seems delicate and fragile. I haven't a clue how care for it or protect it. Can you show me?"

"My dear," he said, holding his arms open to her. She moved into his embrace and he kissed her gently. "I don't know, either. I do know that you're clever, strong, capable, and so very brave."

"I don't feel brave at all, today. I feel like an enormous crybaby, lately. I expected it to be easier than this. We love each other so there shouldn't be any problems, should there? Sometimes I wake up with the thought that maybe we shouldn't be together after all. Then I think I would rather cut off my wand hand."

He kissed her eyes and tasted the tears that were gathering. "After the nightmares?" She nodded.

"Katherine, don't you love me?"

"How can you ask?" she cried. "I can't imagine not loving you. I'm just so worried..."

"Hush, my love." He kissed her into silence. "I'm sorry. We'll stop the quarreling and unkind remarks. We'll work together more. Would you like that?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry too. Nothing happened, but I should have taken your wishes into consideration this afternoon and waited. I just wanted to be done with this job."

"Now what?"

"I want to go away. I'm tired of trying to fit in, here. I know you have your students..."

"The N.E.W.T.s are in another week. We can plan to leave after then."

"Is it that easy?"

"You're not the only one tired of the society here."

She sighed and relaxed into his arms. He touched her delicately and gently. She responded with soft caresses and tender kisses. Time stood still and the world disappeared as he slid his fingers through her hair and used his other hand to mold her body to his own. Her own arms slid under his robe and her hands ran up and down his back.

When their bodies joined it was almost a surprise to both of them that something so ethereal could be so physical. Their love for each other was leading them and they followed, still moving gently and carefully. Their movements slowed and then ceased. They shifted position slightly for comfort's sake and slid an afghan, that usually adorned the back of the couch, over themselves. Their whispered comments and endearments quieted as Katherine fell asleep. Severus watched her until sleep claimed him as well.

"Master."

Severus roused himself from his nap and looked into the eyes of the house-elf. "What is it, Wilbur?" he asked quietly as he cuddled his wife closer and kissed her forehead.

"It's Messy-hair Loudmouth, Master. She insists on talking to you."

"What time is it?"

"It's five in the afternoon. I thought you could explain the theory behind my potion to me and then I could leave by dinner time." Hermione had followed the elf to the study door.

"Ummm..." Hermione's voice roused Katherine.

"Katherine," Severus said gently as he Summoned his pants, "we have company."

She came to full awareness and knew a moment of fear until she realized the afghan still covered them. "What is she doing here?" she mouthed to her husband.

He answered her aloud. "It would appear that what she is doing is gaping. If you see anything of interest, Miss Granger, kindly remember that it's spoken for. Katherine and I are both taken."

Hermione had already turned beet red and whirled around on the spot. Her former professor chuckled at her discomfiture. "Miss Granger, you may as well go to the sitting room. I'll be with you in a moment." He likewise dismissed the elf and turned back to his wife.

As they dressed, he watched her. Her movements were fluid, with very little stiffness. Except for the exhaustion that continued to overcome her as it had that afternoon, she seemed completely recovered from the events of several weeks before. He remembered the guest in the sitting room and left his wife to check her mail.

When the former Potions master and Headmaster of Hogwarts reached the sitting room, his former student had her head buried in her notebook. The only thing showing was a very pink ear. "Well, Miss Granger, if one is going to stick her nose into people's private studies, one is going to find things she might better avoid. It cannot be undone. I don't suppose you're going to show me the difficulty you have, now?"

"Um... I think I figured it out while I was waiting but I didn't want to be rude and leave I really must be going thanks." Hermione was out the door in one breath.

"The poor thing's been thoroughly embarrassed," observed Katherine from the hallway door.

"Yes, I suppose. I doubt she'll follow house-elves around private residences again. It's one of the filthy habits she picked up from her two closest friends." He walked toward Katherine and pulled her into his arms. "Did you mean what you said, before? About going to St. Mungo's?"

Katherine extracted an arm just enough to show him the scroll in her hand. "I have an appointment this week."

"And until then?"

"I will stay close to you."

"That's where you belong."

A/N: Thank you, Trickie Woo, for looking this over!

St. Mungo's

Chapter 11 of 25

Severus smiled. Katherine saw an expression of great satisfaction cross his face. "Thank you," he told the Healer.

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Katherine fastened her earrings and looked at her reflection. "Do you think I look right for this?"

Severus came up behind her. "If not, I can think of a great many things for which you look perfect." He kissed her bare neck and pulled her to her feet. "I love you in blue."

"Is there a color you don't love me in?" she asked, just to be sure.

"Not that I can think of," he responded obligingly. "If I find one, I'll remove it from your wardrobe."

"Are you sure I look all right? I feel like I must have lost weight." She turned to look at different angles and pulled at the fabric. It did hang a little differently than it had on another occasion early in the summer.

"You were so sick a few weeks ago, what do you expect?"

"Is that it, do you suppose?"

He tugged on her hand to get her moving toward the hallway. "I'm sure of it. Never mind. It's just Lucius and Narcissa tonight. You have nothing to worry about."

Katherine shook her head. He didn't understand, and she didn't know how to explain it. "You men, you just don't realize how it is."

Dinner with the Malfoys was more relaxed than Katherine expected, and there was a surprise at the end of it. Lucius waited until after dessert was cleared away and looked from his hostess to his host. "Severus, I was hoping that I could hire your wife to take on a job."

Katherine shook her head. "I'm really not sure..."

He held up a hand. "I don't think it will take that long. Please hear me out."

Katherine looked at Severus. He shrugged, so she nodded.

"Severus is well aware that our Uncle Thaddeus Prince died a couple of weeks ago. I was named his only heir, and the will went through probate fairly smoothly. The problem is that the major portion of his assets never made it to our Gringotts vault. Will you find out what happened to it? The goblins aren't talking to me."

"Some families have legacies that are entailed to particular lines or connections," Katherine observed.

"Yes, that's true. Therefore, the question I have for you is whether you can track down any other potential heirs."

"You don't know of any?"

Her guest looked a little embarrassed. "He was so emphatic about me being his only heir that I confess I didn't pay much attention."

Katherine looked at her husband. He shrugged and nodded. "Well, it does sound as though this should go very quickly, and that I can do most if not all of it at the ministry." Lucius smiled until she continued with a wicked grin of her own. "Now all that remains is to haggle over my fee and expenses."

Katherine lay very still, wincing a bit as the Healer worked. Severus sat by her side and held her hand through the entire exam. It seemed endless, but there was much to consider. The Healer's look of concentration at one point became one of amusement. She stepped back and nodded to Severus that he could help Katherine sit up.

The Healer started talking. "It would seem that there's nothing to worry about..." Her assistant suddenly put his head in the door.

"There's someone who says they must speak to you immediately."

The Healer smiled and went outside. Katherine and Severus sat quietly as they listened to muffled voices outside the door. The voices were never loud but at one point it was clear there was a heated argument going on. Then one of the voices sounded resigned. Finally, a third voice was heard and the Healer came in, followed by a wizard Severus recognized.

"Geoff! It's good to see you again." He turned and looked at his wife. "Geoff is the staff Apothecary."

Geoff wasn't as effusive in his greeting, although he shook hands warmly. The serious look in his eyes seemed to convey a message that Severus instantly started assessing. The Healer was a bit subdued, although she still smiled.

"Where were we?" she asked. "Having finished my exam, I'm prepared to state unequivocally that you will be perfectly able to have children as soon as a minor correction is made. Geoffrey, here, has prepared the potion that will do the trick."

There was something in the Healer's eye that Severus did not trust, and his colleague was definitely trying to tell him something. He decided to change the pace of things. "Katherine has been exhausted with worry over this. Would you mind if we had her sleep for a couple of hours, first?"

The Healer looked nervous but then nodded. "Of course. A couple of hours won't matter one way or the other, I think. At any rate, if she's better rested, the results with the potion will be more favorable."

"Excellent," responded Severus. He put his hand into his pocket, dropping a vial that Geoff had slipped him while shaking hands. He then made a great show of looking through his pockets before finding another vial. "I have a Calming Draught right here. It's perfect for what we need."

Katherine was a bit surprised by a look in her husband's eye, but she trusted him, so she took the vial from him, noting that it was from the batch they had made together a few days before. Her husband nodded and she swallowed it. She was already quite tired, and it allowed her to drop off, but not before noticing that her husband brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her forehead.

Severus slipped out of the room and found Uncle Sonny. "I need to do something at home right this minute. Can you sit with her for a couple of hours?"

The older wizard noted the way Severus looked up and down the hallway and spoke quietly, hardly moving his lips. He nodded. "I'll be here for as long as she needs me."

"That's one concern handled, then. Don't let them give her anything until I get back."

Sonny looked up, suddenly tense. "I'll take care of it."

They shook hands and clapped each other on the back. Severus made great strides down the hallway then, his robe billowing in a way that was familiar to the former students who happened to be watching. He went to a spot where he could Disapparate and immediately went to his laboratory.

He found Granger, Potter, and Weasley studying together and blessed his luck. There had been a little awkwardness since Granger's last visit at the flat, but that was forgotten at this time. "All right, you lot, I have one last assignment for you, and it needs to be done perfectly and within two hours."

He pulled out the vial that his friend Geoffrey had given him. "I need to know the components of this. Then we need a formula for an antidote and a dummy potion, both of which must be brewed within the next hour and forty-five minutes."

Granger looked aghast. "We can't possibly..."

"I swear to you that if you do this thing I will go back and change every Potions grade you ever received at Hogwarts to E, or O if it's already E."

Hermione quickly decided she was up to the task. The three together bent over a joint cauldron and began. There was much whispering and discussion, but at the end of ten minutes Weasley said, "We have the component list, sir."

Potter was finishing the antidote recipe while Granger was puzzling over the dummy potion. They watched as Snape's long finger traced down the list. As he got to the bottom three ingredients, he stopped for a minute, his other hand passing over his eyes momentarily. "I should have noticed...it's not quite what I expected," he said quietly. He asked more loudly, "Have you got the proposals for the other potions?"

They had finished them by this point and he likewise ran his finger down those. Hermione commented. "The antidote would have to be given almost immediately after the original potion to have the proper effect."

"Yes, that's why the dummy potion would be better." He looked it over and mused. "It's almost perfect, except you need something to give it the same color without changing the properties..."

"Oh, I didn't think about that." Hermione blushed.

"I have every confidence that you would have, given a few more minutes." Her blush this time was accompanied by a smile.

He thought for a few minutes. "There's a variety of blueberry juice that added right at the end should mimic the shade of blue... WILBUR!" he shouted. "Carry on, all three of you," he said as he turned to give the house-elf directions on obtaining what was needed that was not already in his stores.

Then he stood before a window and paced as they brewed, coming over to watch their progress at intervals. To the three who worked he seemed absent minded and worried, two attributes they never expected to see with him. His intensity gave them the impetus to work harder, and they used the efficiency he had trained in them during the past several months. One hour and forty minutes after he first arrived, Severus Snape watched his young assistants as they bottled their brews.

"Thank you," he said, fervently. "The potions look and smell perfect. I can't tell you what this means to Katherine. Later, I may tell you what this means to me. Thank you." He called Fern down to bring tea to the three who would continue to study and left with a pop and a swirl of his robe.

"What was that all about?" asked Harry.

"Something about that list of ingredients," answered Ron. "He said he had every confidence in you, Hermione. Did you hear that? It's as if he was admitting that he knows you're as smart as we know you are."

She smiled. "Thank you, I think."

"But what was it about the ingredients that made him smile and then look like he was going to throw up? What was he so excited about?"

Hermione looked at Harry oddly. "Didn't you look them up?"

Harry looked down at his feet. "Well, since you suggested the counter-ingredients, it didn't seem necessary..."

She sighed and shook her head, then went on. "Any one of those last three ingredients could be used to cause a miscarriage. Together they would be practically lethal to the mother, too."

The two young men thought for a minute and then both groaned. "That's not a mental picture I wanted," said Harry.

Severus returned to Katherine's room and found her uncle sitting next to her. She was still sleeping, but Sonny was frowning. "They're circling for some reason, but I chased them away."

"Let them circle, now."

"Do you have good news?"

"The best, but there is much to discuss. Will you come to dinner a few nights from now?"

"Certainly."

Severus smiled as he sat next to his wife and took her hand. "Katherine!"

She woke from a dreamless sleep and smiled to see his face so close to hers. "Is time to take that potion, now?"

"Are you ready?"

She sat up immediately. "It's all I need, right?"

"Let me get Geoff. Sonny," he said to the older wizard. "I'm not sure you want to be in the room for the next part."

"All right, then. I'll just wait until you come back, shall I?"

"Yes, that's fine."

Severus found his friend in the Potions lab. "I can't tell you how grateful I am that you brewed the potion that will help Katherine," he said, clapping his hand into his friend's

and slipping a vial with the dummy potion into it.

"I'm glad to be of help," answered Geoff, sliding his hand into his pocket. "Are you sure that she's ready for this?"

"Absolutely," was the answer. "She has worried and fretted over it to the extent that if we put it off any more it could well be the end of her."

"Ah, well, then, let's not keep her waiting."

They went up to Katherine's room and Geoff gave her the potion vial while the Healer's assistant watched. Katherine looked at her husband and he nodded. She took the potion and then winced at the flavor of it. Severus took her hand and advised her to relax. As she did, her uncle came and said goodbye.

"I have some things to attend to. I'll come to see you in a day or two, my dear."

"All right. Good bye, Uncle Sonny. Thank you for being here." He patted her shoulder and left.

Katherine had nothing to do but watch her husband. "So what is my condition and what does the potion do?"

He had no idea who might be listening to their conversation. He thought for a moment, while looking at her tenderly. "From what the Healer is saying and what I noticed when you returned from Paris, I think there must have been a blockage. Today's potion is supposed to clear things up."

"So now it should be easy to get pregnant?"

"Absurdly so, I believe."

She smiled at him. "Why do I suspect there's more to this than you're telling?"

"Well, there is a part I haven't told you yet. You should feel fairly uncomfortable in a few minutes but when that eases, they'll let us go home."

"Fairly" was an inadequate word to describe the feeling that came a while later. Katherine couldn't believe the cramps that went throughout her belly.

"Is this right?" she asked during a moment when it wasn't so bad..

"Yes, it's doing just what it should," he answered. He moved to the bed to hold her close.

She snuggled up to him. "That's better."

An assistant was waiting when the Healer walked by. "She's had hard cramping for half an hour or so."

"That sounds right. I should do an exam to make sure."

The Healer looked Katherine over and smiled, relief showing on her face. "It's working just as it should be. If you feel up to it, you may go home. You might see some bleeding over the next couple of days, but the potion is working the way it should be. You must avoid physical intimacy until I tell you it's all right. I'll go sign the paperwork so you can go home."

Severus smiled. Katherine saw an expression of great satisfaction cross his face. "Thank you," he told the Healer.

A/N: Thank you to Trickie Woo for beta reading this story!

Full Disclosure

Chapter 12 of 25

"...Something happened and you started acting like a spy. I need to know what was going on..."

This XML file does not appear to have any style information associated with it. The document tree is shown below.

AccessDenied
Access Denied
JFCVKWPXJPTYJ636
cJlpO3vCyK4+1qA30EqWFgZ/PQJIKQDCM79dVslf+5Bwh6CeC4oNUIKDhmVswN+vDtEJhnJXxfY=

A Muggle Solution

Chapter 13 of 25

What could Katherine learn from a box purchased at the chemist's shop?

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

As predicted, Uncle Sonny was very happy. He was also concerned. Severus explained the reasons he worried and to Katherine's annoyance, her uncle sided with her husband. She was admonished from taking risks, even after she pointed out, repeatedly, that she was trained to take reasonable risks and use those risks to her benefit. The two men in her family just looked at her as if she were speaking another language. She pointed out that she had been living and working around the world without getting killed, and Severus waved his hand. He pointed out that everything was different now while Uncle Sonny nodded. It was hard to be upset with two men who so overwhelmingly wanted to protect her, but it was also annoying to have her movements curtailed in this way.

She was expected to stay within the confines of their flat until they left for Venice. There was plenty to do, overseeing the last bit of papering and packing for their trip. The plan was to possibly continue on to their island if they completed the job for Lucius. There was a great deal to do around the flat, fixing things up and explaining how to manage it to the house-elves. It was important work that needed to be done, and Katherine hated it.

She smelled the cool air and looked carefully around her as she made her way to the chemist's shop. Packing for a delightful trip was not the delightful part. Plus, she was anxious. Having thought of a way to calm her nerves, she was eager to make use of it. Now the greatest danger lay not in those who would do her harm, but in one who wanted her to stay within their safe flat.

She walked carefully past certain stores and alleyways as she went, feeling a certain relief as she got past them. She got to the chemist's shop and made her selections. The check out clerk raised his eyebrows at her, but the look she gave him in exchange did not allow for comment.

Once outside again, Katherine breathed a sigh of relief and hurried on her way. Her goal in sight, she was not as careful as she should have been. She was not careful to check one of the alleys she passed and as she did, a hand reached out and pulled her into the darkened space.

Granger was bubbly, Weasley was morose, and Potter watched worriedly between them. It had started early in the morning and continued as the lunch hour approached. Snape pinched his nose between his eyes and finally said, "I realize that you're all teenagers, but is there a particularly good reason for this bit of drama?"

The three looked between themselves, looked at him, and shrugged.

He continued, "I'm not sure I see the point of this study session if you're not going to concentrate."

Ron stood and went to the window, still morose. Hermione blushed and turned away. Harry opened his mouth. "It's like this..." He shut his mouth quickly when Hermione quickly turned back and shook her head. Ron looked over from his window and shrugged.

Severus looked at them all in turn. Weasley was facing the outside again, Granger was turned away and blushing, trying hard not to smile. Potter was the weak link in this case, and an easy one at that. It had always been fairly simple to get the boy to let out more than he intended.

"I see. Well, if you are unable to study, I'll bid you adieu. My wife and I were planning to travel soon and I'm sure she could use my assistance on the plans..."

"It's your wife's fault," said Ron. "She put ideas in Hermione's head."

"No, she didn't," answered the girl. "I was already planning to visit Viktor. You're just looking at it all wrong."

"Is there a right way to look at it?"

"I'm just taking some time to sort myself out. I don't need to jump into anything."

"Who's asking you to jump into anything?"

"Aren't you?"

"No! I thought you wanted..."

"Well, I don't!"

"How was I supposed to know?"

"You might have asked."

"You might have told me."

"You seem to be jumping to Bulgaria fast enough..."

Her wand came out. "That's not fair!"

Severus and Harry looked between the two. One was annoyed while the other was embarrassed. As he glanced toward Ron and the window during one part of the exchange, Severus noticed a shadow walk past. Moving toward the window, he watched the shadow as it furtively glided down the street.

He turned and removed Granger's wand from her hand, while Summoning Weasley's from his sleeve. "If you don't mind, I'm going to leave this scintillating discussion. It seems I have something to look after." He handed the wands to Potter, hoping that the-boy-who-saved-everything was also the-boy-who-could-referee-between-his-friends.

Once outside, he spotted his wife and followed as she went to the chemist's shop. He stepped into an alleyway and waited. She came back after a few minutes, carrying a paper bag. She had an odd look in her eye and wasn't watching around her as well as she might. It was all too easy to reach her sleeve and tug her into the alleyway with him.

Katherine knew instantly that it was her husband. She squirmed to pull back but his arms were like iron, pinning her against him. Her cheek was held against a wall of rage, and she realized that there was nothing she could do or say at the moment. She stood still and waited while the anger and fear drained from his body and his hold on her softened but did not relax. Finally, he trusted himself to speak.

"Have you any idea what went through my mind when I saw you walk past?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I know you're capable. I know you can get to the chemist's shop and back with little trouble. I know that you can blast a hole through anyone who would hurt you. What I don't know is what I will ever do if they get lucky and blast you first. Katherine, it's not just you, anymore. Please think about me."

She had been defiant, but now she was chagrined. "I'm sorry. I just had to...and I was very careful."

"Until this last minute, you mean." He sighed. "Well, why don't we see what was so important that you had to get it without me." He plucked the bag from her reluctant fingers and looked inside to find three smallish boxes. "Know Now?" "First Friend?" "TBD?" Katherine, what do you need these ridiculous kits for?"

"We don't know for sure," she answered, blushing hard and turning to look anywhere but his face. "I was packing and taking care of things, but I've been fretting all day."

What if it's true? What if it's not true? Then I remembered that the Muggles have these kits and then I couldn't wait another minute to find out."

"And thus ends my career as referee between Granger and Weasley as they play out yet another of their arguments." She was relieved to see him smirk at her. "Very well. Is it any use to beg you not to do something like this again?" She shook her head, causing him to sigh. "I shouldn't think so, although I do hope you would take better care in the future." He hugged her tightly, but gently, now. "Supposing you Apparate straight upstairs and find out what these kits will tell you. I'll send the trio out on a long lunch and join you in a few minutes. She smiled at him and he kissed her before holding her tightly again. "I wish you could know what went through my mind when I saw you."

"I'm sorry for causing you distress. I'm so tired of waiting and having to stay safe. You can't imagine what it's like."

"Well, now I'll be waiting for something else. Get on with it." He released her and she Disapparated.

When he returned to the Potions lab, Granger and Weasley were sitting on chairs close together and speaking in soft tones to each other.

"I had no idea," she was saying.

"I thought you knew everything," he muttered.

"It's not the sort of thing I could read in a book."

"Well, then, how was I supposed to know?"

"I guess I should have told you, but I wasn't sure."

"But now we both know."

"Will you come with me to Bulgaria?"

Potter was a little apart from them, looking through a Defense Against the Dark Arts book. He stood up, relieved, when he saw Snape enter the room.

"You certainly seem happy to see me, Potter."

The younger wizard sat down again, discomfited. He gave his friends a sidelong glare which went unnoticed by the objects of that look. "I was hoping to get back to studying."

"I'm sure, and I would be surprised if Granger wasn't at least as eager. Circumstances prevent me from continuing right now, unfortunately... for you. Why don't we take a long lunch and come back at, say, one-thirty?" He turned his back before they could disagree and hastened up to the flat he shared with his wife.

He was unprepared for the sight that greeted him in their bedroom. There were no signs of packing, just little plastic test kits on every flat surface of the room. Some were shaped like flat squares while others were like little wands. Some had two lines showing through little windows while others had plus signs. One wand-shaped one had nothing showing in its window. He pressed the button on the wand and read the word that flashed on the little window. He couldn't help feeling surprised and excited, despite the fact that he had already been as sure as he could.

He tried to get control over himself. It appeared that she had been quite busy that morning and must have gone to the chemist's shop several times before he caught her at it. He found that he was unable to summon the proper demeanor with which to confront a wife who had been so reckless. Somehow the message on all the little tests overrode his worry and fear. "Katherine?" he said, sure that she was in the bathroom.

"I'll be right out."

He took out his wand and went to work. When Katherine came out of the bathroom, holding another flat one and two more little wands, she found that her bedroom had been enchanted. Where there had been little tests lying on the dressers and nightstands there were now candles. Severus stood near where he had pulled the drapes.

"Let's see those," he said, walking toward her.

"All positive," she said. He looked with her and as soon as she set them on a bookshelf they became tea lights. "It's like a fairyland in here," she said. "I know I should have waited, and I know that one or two would have been sufficient, but once I started..."

His fingertip was over her lips and she quieted. "This is much better. Did you use every brand they had?"

She nodded.

"All positive?"

She nodded again.

"Do you finally believe it, then?"

She kissed his finger and moved her mouth away from it. "It's not that I didn't believe you, before. I just... I don't know how to explain it."

"Don't try. Somehow it's more real to me, now, too." He held her close, all the better to unfasten her robe. "Have you ever used one of those things before?"

"Once."

His fingers stopped working. "And?"

Her hands moved over his robes, opening the fastenings as she went. "Of course it was negative. It was a huge relief. The man was a complete jackass. It turned out that he had given me a potion to cause certain symptoms, hoping I would marry him before having it confirmed."

He slid her robe over her shoulders. "And the time that you were?" He felt her shiver as he slid his hands around her waist and started tugging her blouse from her skirt.

"They didn't, um... make... oh that's nice... There weren't home tests, then."

He met no resistance as he brought her to the bed. Indeed, she turned the tables upon him, pressing him to his back and moving her lips over his body. After a very enjoyable time, he pulled himself to his side next to her. He looked into her eyes.

"That was a bit different. What got into you?"

"Do you have to ask?" she smiled. "Perhaps I felt as though I should thank the part of you that has given so much to me." She knelt up and looked at him. "Suddenly I feel powerful, and capable, and free."

"How about hungry?"

She thought for a minute and her stomach growled. "I suppose I can eat."

He laughed as he leaned up and wrapped a sheet around them both. "We'll call Fern, then."

When he returned to the laboratory, Snape had the same predatory air that they had long known from him. They saw from a look in his eye that their own affairs must stop immediately. Harry was relieved until he was the first victim. The teacher started asking questions on every subject, circling, pouncing, and drilling when they erred until they thought they would become dizzy.

His questions were clear except when they obscured some point that they would have to figure out. He watched them think, raising an eyebrow from time to time as they surprised him with their knowledge or lack of it. The methods were playful and the students knew they were being toyed with. They didn't know how to make it stop. The wizard they had known as professor pushed and prodded for the entire afternoon, until the world outside the window was dark. Severus noticed the time and nodded to each of the three. "Very good progress. I suspect you know what to study, now?" When Hermione nodded, he said. "Excellent. Until tomorrow, then."

He swept from the room, leaving Ron to ask, "What was that?"

Hermione's face was full of delight. "That was the best study session I've ever had. It was amazing, the way he led us through the material, showing us exactly how it all fit together. I've never seen it that way."

Harry was surprised to find that he was sweating from the exertion of the previous several hours. "I wonder whatever got into him."

Ron nodded. "It must have been some lunch. Do you suppose..."

Glasses flew as hands moved to rub tired green eyes. "Ron, I said I couldn't take that mental picture!"

Upstairs, Severus was kissing his wife awake. "I'm almost surprised to find you here," he said.

"Didn't you tell me to stay right here? I'm the picture of obedience."

He snorted. "More like the picture of exhaustion, I suspect."

"Perhaps you wore me out at lunch."

"If I had known that's the right way to keep you safe, I would have worn you out like this before." He quickly removed robe, boots, and trousers. He sat on the bed and pulled his wife close.

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

Crossing the Continent

Chapter 14 of 25

The means of transportation was glamorous; the company, not so much.

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

As Katherine Snape was handed up onto the step of the train at Victoria Station, she had the sense that she was stepping into a different world. It wasn't just the elegant rail carriage she was boarding. It was the feeling of freedom. Once on this train she would be away from London and the troubles that kept her trapped in her apartment. On the Continent she would be able to come and go as she pleased.

Katherine's husband followed his wife's cloaked figure onto the train with a sense of relief. He hated seeing her so sad when he had to leave her at home, and he wearied of the worries he felt about her. They would need to find out about the danger that threatened them, but for now they would simply enjoy a time away from that.

Together the Snapes looked through the carriage for their places and glanced at each other like school children on a holiday. A steward beckoned them to a pair of seats and took their cloaks. They sat and placed their order for brunch, barely noticing as the train slipped out of the station.

"I've never looked so forward to a train journey since my first time on the Hogwarts Express," said Katherine.

"I can't remember being so excited about a trip myself," Severus replied.

The champagne arrived and they toasted each other. Katherine had barely tasted hers when Severus snatched the glass from her hand. "You can't drink that."

She looked at him, affronted, and then giggled. "No, I don't suppose I should."

He put an arm around her. "What am I to do with you?"

"I can think of a great many things," she said helpfully.

"How many of them can we do in a parlor car of a train?" he asked.

"Hm, I see the difficulty," she responded.

Their brunch came. Severus exchanged Katherine's champagne flute for a juice glass and they ate well. Pastries and fruit disappeared until Katherine waved off the waiter. "I can't take any more," she said. She went in search of the Ladies' and came back a few minutes later.

"That was exhausting," she informed her husband.

"How so?"

"Once I got there, I met a woman who was an honorable, or the daughter of one, or some such thing. She proceeded to explain everything about the trip, including the part that goes over the channel. She told me I'm far too frail to be a good sailor."

"I think you'll be fine and if you aren't, I have a potion," said her husband.

"You're too good for me."

"I hope I'm good enough."

They spent several hours reading the Muggle papers and laughing at the odd pictures and stories. Severus read the financial items in the same tone of voice he used to teach Potions, and Katherine pretended to swoon. After a foray to the gift shop, she returned with a European copy of *USA Today* and proceeded to read stories from the United States using the broadest American accent she could muster, which was difficult due to her giggles.

"I can't account for your behavior," Severus said.

"I can't either," she answered. "This is the happiest I've ever been in my life, I think. I'm just delighted to be here with you, without a care in the world."

He leaned toward her and kissed her then, to the dismay of the honorable or daughter of one, who happened past at that moment. Neither Severus nor Katherine noticed, however. They were too interested in each other to consider the aghast faces that passed by their seats.

It was soon time to cross the English Channel, and after getting settled, Severus pulled his wife close and told her to sleep. She didn't argue long because dinner would be late in the evening.

They stepped onto the rail car in France and entered a different era. They arrived in their cabin and were encouraged to dress for dinner. Katherine was starting to find some of her dress robes to be a bit snug, but had a few for the trip with an empire waistline. The golden robe she wore tonight was snug above the waistline, but the appreciative look in her husband's eyes convinced her that it wasn't uncomfortable. He wore a tuxedo, and she cast some appreciative looks of her own. Their steward directed them to the bar car, where they were shown to a table.

A familiar voice greeted them. "Look who's here!"

Katherine turned and saw her uncle at the next table. She looked in dismay at her husband as Sonny directed the waiter to change them to a table for four. If Katherine was dismayed at first, she was completely floored to see who accompanied him.

"Why, Silvia, I never imagined I would see you, here..." Katherine didn't know what to say. Her only hint to Severus's thoughts were in the stiffness of his lips as he pressed them just over her ear after seating her.

The other witch was at her most charming. "It was the craziest thing. I ran into Sonny at Diagon Alley, and we stopped to have coffee together. I mentioned that I had always longed to take this particular trip, and he asked if I was available this week. I have at least a week due me from the Ministry... so here I am."

"Here we are," said Uncle Sonny, who seemed more smitten than Katherine could imagine. Really, he was acting like an old fool in her opinion. Severus noticed her annoyance and squeezed her hand under the table. He raised an eyebrow and looked at the other pair. Katherine relaxed.

Not much was said during dinner. The meal was prepared by well-trained chefs, but Katherine didn't get as much of it as she would have liked. She took one sip of the wine, but after her husband shook his head at her, she set the glass aside and favored her water. Her shellfish disappeared before she had a chance to eat it, and certain portions of the cheese course were apparently off limits, as well. She was starting to look forward to spending time in their cabin, but she needed to talk privately to Uncle Sonny, first.

When she quietly indicated her intentions to Severus, he replied. "That's fine. I'll just head to our room."

Once alone, Katherine rounded on her uncle. "What are you doing with that woman?"

"Isn't she adorable?" he responded. "We've started keeping time together."

"She's just after your money."

"Don't worry, I've got it locked up tight for your children."

"That's not my concern."

"Isn't it?" He took her elbow and led her into the train corridor.

"Uncle Sonny!" she hissed. "You just got out of the hospital. I hate to see you tied up in a miserable situation, again."

"Don't you worry about me," he replied while patting her hand. "I'm just fine."

They stepped from one car to another and then into a corridor. A different conversation was then audible to them.

"Here we are."

"No, I want to go to my cabin. Please hurry."

"This is my cabin. It's much faster."

There was the sound of a door opening and a thud. Katherine and her uncle came around a corner and then to Katherine and Severus's cabin. The door was open, and lying on the floor was Severus. Silvia was straddling him.

"*You effing slag...*" Katherine's wand was out in an instant. Her Stinging Hex had the force of knocking the other witch into the closet door.

"Katherine!" said Severus. He reached his arms to Silvia.

It had to be either a jinx or a potion. Katherine decided to cast a spell and ask later. A Sleeping Charm hit her husband, and he fell back down on the floor. His jacket was askew and his tie was untied, but he was otherwise in one piece. She rounded on the diminutive Auror. "What did you think you were doing?"

"Really, Katherine, he wanted me to come into your cabin with him. He was most persuasive. Who am I to argue? I thought that perhaps he would like a change."

A sound came from low in Katherine's throat as sparks flew from the tip of her wand. She lifted her arm and pondered various spells. Uncle Sonny chuckled as he grasped Silvia's hand firmly.

"I think you had better get to your cabin, dear. I'll help Katherine get her husband into his bunk."

Sonny watched appreciatively as the witch walked down the corridor. He then chuckled some more as his niece gave him an ear full of invective. She couldn't understand how he and the other witch could be on this particular train and she blamed him. It seemed this trip, on which she had counted for over a week, was ruined.

She didn't spare her husband, either, but muttered her annoyance to him for somehow falling into the other witch's designs. For once he didn't argue, being unconscious. They put him on the lower bunk and removed his shoes and jacket. That left him in his shirt and trousers. Katherine pulled the coverlet over him and took his wand. There

was no telling what spell or potion her husband was under, and she wouldn't let him leave the room until she was sure that it was no longer in effect.

Uncle Sonny pulled her into a hug, which she didn't return. "Never mind, dear. It's not so bad. You'll see." He then went out the door and down the corridor in the same direction as Silvia.

She shut the door, locked it, and sealed it magically. Then she looked at her husband and sighed. Finally, she got some pajamas out of her suitcase and prepared for bed. Tears stung her eyes as she creamed her face. She had looked forward to this trip to get her away from London and the troubles that plagued her there, but it seemed that one disagreeable part of London had followed her, at least on the train. Hopefully they would part ways at Santa Lucia Station. She kissed Severus's forehead somewhat ruefully and climbed into the top bunk. This day had started so well, but if it had to end annoyingly, at least it was over, thank the Fates.

Severus spent dinner hoping his wife wouldn't blow up at the other witch. He watched her simmering below the surface, but there was little he could do. As it was, he had difficulty keeping an eye on her plate for foods that posed potential dangers. Frustrated as his over-protectiveness made her, he knew she would be devastated if one of those minor dangers proved truly hazardous in the long run.

He sighed in relief when the end of the meal was in sight. He had lost track of his own meal, but that didn't matter. Silvia handed his glass to him, and he took a drink of the wine. It tasted a bit cloying, but finished sweeter than he remembered. It must be a different variety for the current course. The next glass was delicious. He smiled and looked at the two Katherines. The one on his right was golden, but the green one across from him was interesting in new and different ways.

The golden Katherine asked if he minded that she stay behind and speak with her uncle for a minute or two. That was fine. He needed to be with the green Katherine with the dark hair. That Katherine smiled secretly as she led him to the next train car.

They made their way to his room and she would have taken him further along the corridor, but he wanted to stop. She tugged the sleeve of his jacket, and suddenly he wasn't so sure. They argued as he fumbled with his key, and she tugged again. He pulled back as the door opened, and they fell into the room. The green Katherine fell on top of him, which was somehow all wrong. Yet he wanted her to stay right where she was.

Suddenly, the golden Katherine was there, yelling, while the other smirked from across the room. There was something wrong about this situation, but he couldn't tell what it was. He had never seen anything as entrancing as the golden witch, who glowed with anger for some reason. Yet he couldn't stop being attracted to the green one, and he put his hands out, reaching for her. She smirked in response. Then a wand was pointed at him.

He woke with a raging headache. He swore and reached for his wand but couldn't find it. It was a small space, yet comfortable enough. The rocking sensation reminded him that he was on the train. He got up and made his way to the bathroom. When he re-crossed the room, he saw the sleeping face of Katherine. He got close enough to see that her face was damp with tears.

It came back to him, then. What had Silvia put into that wine, and what would have happened if Katherine had been a bit slower to get to their room? He brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her eyelids. She opened her eyes and looked at him suspiciously.

"I thought we were going to use this bunk to store our suitcases."

She smiled and sat up. He put his hands at her waist to slide her down. He pulled her close and kissed her, holding her tight. The lower bunk was initially a tight fit for them both, but they made the most of it. With the flick of a wand, there was plenty of space for two people who were determined to be as close together as possible.

As they ate their breakfast the next morning, they discussed what to do about the interlopers who had joined them on their trip. Based upon his memories of the wine, he realized that Silvia must have slipped him a potion. He mentioned it to Katherine and was unsurprised to discover she had come to a similar conclusion.

"You spent so much time watching what I ate that she had plenty of opportunity to slip something into your glass. Was it Amortentia, you think?"

"Amortentia wouldn't have worked with you right there. This one made me see you both as Katherine. It made me desire the Katherine who gave me the potion."

"Are you sure it's out of your system?"

"Who was the Katherine with me in the bunk last night?"

She smiled and sipped her orange juice.

"That's what I thought." He smirked. "I'm quite sure."

"I can't imagine why Uncle Sonny would take up with such a money-chasing tramp. Do you think he's *that* lonely?" Katherine thought for a minute. "I know he's just recently gotten out of the hospital..."

"It's hard to say, but he doesn't strike me as the sort to have let being in the hospital keep him from having companionship if he wanted it."

"Severus!" Her face was surprised horror.

He smirked. "You brought it up, my dear. If he could run his organization from the fourth floor of St. Mungo's, he could probably do pretty much whatever he chose there. Because he's so astute, I'm sure that whatever is happening, he is not being taken in by that woman. Did you notice that you were just far enough behind us that Silvia had a chance to put her plan into action, but not long enough to actually carry it out? We now have certain information we would not have had, otherwise."

Katherine thought about it, but was too miffed to admit it might be the case. "Whatever scheme either or both of them are playing at, I'm not going to participate today."

They decided to stay in their cabin until the steward chased them out to switch it from a bedroom to a sitting room. They went to the boutique car and found gifts for Severus's student assistants. They bought cuff links for the young wizards and a silk scarf for Hermione.

"Do you suppose Fern and Wilbur would like these table linens?" asked Katherine, looking at the gilt monogramming.

"Make sure you get enough for Bonaparte and Josephine."

"Oh, yes."

"There's one more thing..." Severus placed a teddy bear dressed like a cabin steward with their purchases. Katherine looked at him and smiled. Her eyesight became blurry as she looked through her purse for her credit card.

They made their purchases and hid for the rest of the journey in their cabin. As soon as the train reached Venice, they disembarked and ignored the waves of Katherine's uncle. They made their way to a small, old-fashioned hotel near the local magical bureau, and hoped that they had seen the last of anyone they knew.

A/N: Thank you to Trickie Woo for beta reading!

Venice

Chapter 15 of 25

"...I want to take care of Lucius's case and then get out of this stupid town as soon as possible. I want as much distance between myself and that—that person as I can get."

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

Just thinking about it in the elevator of the hotel made her mad again. Katherine's handbag flew across their guest room as soon as the door was opened. It was followed by a verbal expression Severus wasn't sure he wanted to know in English.

"Do you need a moment?"

She pulled out her wand and reassembled her bag while tilting her head back and forth. Her husband could hear her whispering under her breath. "So happy to have run into you on the train, she says... I *really* hope we see you around Venice, she says..." She whipped around and fixed him with a sea-green stare. "Why does she annoy me so much?"

A lifetime of practicing Occlumency was called to the fore now. "I couldn't say."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Couldn't?" She looked him up and down as though he was a reluctant witness. "Won't, I think."

He allowed his smirk to show. "Are you going to break me down now, to get the answers you're looking for?"

That brought a smile to her lips and her posture relaxed. She tilted her head to the side and looked at him again, tapping her wand on her hip as though pondering options for a difficult round of questioning. "Oh, no, Mr. Snape. You *are* going to give me *everything*... but I expect it will take some time. I have other matters to attend for now."

"Are we going to the Healer this afternoon or the Ministry office?"

"Ministry, definitely. I want to take care of Lucius's case and then get out of this stupid town as soon as possible. I want as much distance between myself and that...that *person* as I can get."

"And then you plan to... question me?"

She stepped close and traced the mid-line of his robes with her fingernail. "Oh, Professor, there are things I plan to get from you, and you won't be holding *anything* back."

He swallowed hard. "Do you always get this way when someone makes you mad?"

"Every time some bitch tries to steal my husband."

"Every time?"

"Choose your future conquests carefully."

"You've been my only conquest for a very long while, and there won't be any in the future." He pulled her close and kissed her in a way that reminded her he was a man and she was very glad to be a woman.

They spent over an hour in the Magical Bureau archive, looking through records for Barry Prince. After a while they discovered the entry indicating that he had moved to Venice and his address. They continued looking until they found another, more recent entry.

"It says he died in a dragon-pox epidemic six years ago," said Katherine. She was reading through a ledger of tax records.

"Do you have the month?" asked Severus.

Katherine looked again. "June."

He was standing in front of a shelf of coroner's reports. He slid out the volume indicated by the date she gave him and paged through it. "Yes, it's here. A nephew, Omar Malfoy of Monte Carlo, claimed his body. It says he's buried on San Michelle..."

"There's a graveyard there." Katherine looked at her watch. "It would be better to wait until the crowds thinned before we went, though."

They left the Ministry Bureau with thanks to the attendants and walked out of the alley that contained it. Severus thought two of the wizards they passed looked familiar. Katherine started to speak and then was quiet. She started again. "That Healer I know is just around the corner."

"You are anxious to have it confirmed? You wouldn't rather take a leisurely stroll around the city?"

Her uncertain look was quickly replaced by a confident one. "I'm merely making the best use of our time. As I said, I want to get this all taken care of so that we can get..."

He nodded his head. "Yes, yes, so we can get out of this town and put some distance between yourself and that woman. Let's move along, then."

The Healer thought the pair was incredibly romantic and sweet. The *signora* was so elegant, so professional, but she was so eager to learn about *herbambino*. The *signore* was as sophisticated as she was, but so full of concern for her. It was a pleasure to examine her and reassure them about all of their worries. He sent them on their way with a light heart. Over his dinner that evening, he looked at his own *bella donna* and smiled as he described them.

Severus and Katherine walked slowly from the Healer's office to a place where they could catch a launch to the island of San Michelle.

"It's real," she said. "I'm really pregnant and I'm really going to have a baby." Her hand that wasn't within Severus's kept coming back to pat her tummy.

"*Our* baby," he responded.

"It's not too soon, is it? You didn't get much chance to say whether or not you really wanted this."

He stopped her to face him. "I'd never thought of children except as a nuisance until those days you first came to my island. Since then I've become rather fond of the idea of a gangly-legged, sandy-haired girl running around our beach."

"It's a daughter then?"

"There's no other possibility."

She looked at him, teasingly. "You do know that there *is* another possibility."

"Not for us."

Something caught her eye, and she pulled him into a doorway and kissed him hard. "Why don't we have something to eat?"

While they were eating, she signaled the waiter. He went away and a few minutes later brought plates to two men sitting on the patio. The waiter pointed to Katherine, and she waved to the men.

"Did you just buy them dinner?" asked Severus.

"They were standing outside the Ministry office when we came out, and I've seen them several times since we went to the Healer. Surely you noticed?"

"I had, but did you want them to know we saw them?"

"I think it's better if whoever it is knows we're aware of them."

"If you say so." He concentrated on her plate, which he reflected would be a new habit from now on. Several items needed to be removed from it.

"Why do you insist on vanishing my food?" she asked. "I wanted to eat that."

"You know there are some things you just shouldn't eat, now."

"But I wanted that."

"Katherine, how would you feel if that cheese or seafood made you sick and hurt the baby?"

She looked at him, opening and closing her mouth. Her lips got thinner and thinner as she tried to find a reason for him to give the food back. She couldn't think of one, which was worse. It meant admitting he was a better parent than she was just then.

She sat back in her chair as she slurped her pasta in defiance. "All right, you win. I won't risk poisoning our child."

"Daughter."

"*Fine*. I won't poison our daughter."

"Very good." He sounded exactly like a teacher congratulating a slow student who had finally figured out an important point.

"Watch it." She looked at him from far under her eyebrows. "You'll get yours, Professor."

"That's what I expect." This was said caressingly. "I believe it's time for us to move on, if you wish to go to the graveyard tonight."

She sulked a bit as they made their way to the launches, but found that she needed to hold on to his arm as they traveled by water to the island. For some reason, the movement through the water made her slightly dizzy. She went back through her mind to see if she should be worried about the meal she had just eaten and was able recall that her husband had eliminated all suspect items from her plate.

She was grateful to reach land again, and they started looking slowly and methodically through the rows of graves. They worked their way through many of the city's well known residents and finally reached the portion containing magical folk. There were a surprising number of names that were familiar. Based on the information at hand, it appeared that Venice was a spot frequently chosen to retire. Katherine drew up in surprise at one gravestone marked *Andolini*.

"I wonder if these people are related to Uncle Sonny."

"I'm sure you'll get a chance to ask him," said her husband.

"Ugh, don't remind me."

They continued on and found a *Malfoy-Prince* headstone. Looking carefully, they saw it was Lucius's kinsman, giving the same dates of birth and death Katherine had found in the Ministry in London and here in Venice.

"I guess that's that, then," she mused. "I suppose we could go to Monte Carlo just to confirm with the Malfoy cousin."

"Hotel de Paris?"

"Never!" She shuddered. "We'll stay at the Ambassador. They called me a horrible thing at the Paris last time I was there."

"Let's go and correct their error, then."

She looked at him and opened her mouth to reply, but saw something move across the way and tackled her husband, knocking him to the ground. He saw the streak of blue light pass over them and rolled so that she was underneath him. A nearby monument cracked and burst into flame. Some sort of argument broke out at the spot from which the spell came, but they were unable to hear what was said.

"I'm trained as an Auror, you know," she said, "and I'm getting a little annoyed by your over-protectiveness."

He didn't move. She became angry. "Severus... get... off." She pushed hard and won her freedom, but he moved his wand, and she was rendered motionless.

"Listen well, my dear," he hissed into her ear. He ignored her glaring eyes. "After this baby is born, you may again live as recklessly as you please. Go ahead and do things that will kill you if you must. I don't know what it will do to me, but I will recover. However, while she is inside you, you will protect our daughter, even if that means protecting yourself. I can't stand the thought of you losing another child. Can you?"

He looked into her eyes then and saw that his point had been made. More noises came from the other section of the cemetery. He looked around the stone they had hidden behind and saw that whoever had cast a spell in their direction was involved in an altercation with someone else.

"*Finite Incantatem*."

"I didn't think..." A single tear ran down her face. "Of course...you're right. I'm just so used to going it alone... doing everything for myself... by myself..."

"There's no harm done right now," he said. He held her close again but gently now. "What was that spell?"

"Honestly? I could have sworn I heard an Itching Jinx."

"That monument did more than break out in hives. It must be that wand, again."

"I think so... at least, I hope there's only the one."

"Why would Ollivander ever make a core out of that material?"

She shook her head, "He said something about testing his art at its limits. I have to say that I think he's a little mad."

There was a sound of triumph and a cracking noise. Severus looked around the headstone in time to see the second figure Disapparate. "I think we're safe now, but I think we need to leave Venice immediately. Do you mind?"

She smiled brightly. "I believe I would be delighted to leave this town. Have you arranged accommodations on another train?"

Severus smiled. "It was going to be a surprise."

"I can be just as surprised now as whenever you were going to spring it on me."

"Just a moment, then." He held his wand protectively as he raised to a crouching position and then stood. His eyes never stopped watching the mists as he leaned his body down and helped her up. Once she was standing, he pulled her close and Disapparated.

They arrived at a quay. Severus shouted, "Ahoy the ship!"

Katherine turned and gaped. "Is that what I think it is?"

"What do you think it is?"

The name on the prow gave no question. "It's the *Star Flower*."

"You know it, then?"

She gasped. "Only as much as any Magical person knows this very famous yacht."

"You're about to know it a little better."

Lucius's head became visible. "Ah, Severus! We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

"Bit of trouble on San Michelle."

"So you don't have your luggage? Shall I send a house-elf for it?"

"Better not. We need to get out of here as quickly as possible."

"They can take care of it while I speak with the captain and the Harbor Master."

Severus handed over their room key. "There are only two bags."

"Narcissa had them prepare your usual stateroom."

"Then that's where we'll be."

"Very good. Oh, where are we headed?"

"Monte Carlo. I'll explain later."

"I hope it's for business. Monte Carlo is always a very expensive place for me to take Narcissa."

Katherine found herself steered onto the boat and into a passageway as the two wizards talked with no chance for her to comment. Severus stopped in front of a door, said a password, and opened it.

She coughed and gasped. "Why did we take the train when this was an option?"

"It wasn't. Lucius had other business to attend. He arranged to meet us here and take us wherever we wanted to go after you found the answer to his question."

"We're no closer to solving the riddle, but we know it's not here, at least."

Severus guided her into the shower. "I'll chat with our host and come back. I keep a few things here. You should be able to find a dressing gown in the wardrobe."

"You have your own room and keep 'a few things' here?"

"I'm a close friend of the family, my love." He kissed her and went back to the door. "I'll be right back."

Lucius was discussing their departure with the Harbor Master. Severus decided to slip into the galley and request a late meal for his room. The house-elves smiled and nodded. When he arrived back on deck, the Harbor Master was walking back down the dock and Lucius was rolling a sheaf of papers.

"Any problem?" asked Severus.

"None, certainly nothing like you must have experienced. Is it my imagination, or was your wife's back covered with dirt and grass as though she had taken up rolling around on the ground?"

"If you ask her, do so with a wand in your hand. She's pretty upset."

"What happened?"

"We were conducting the research you requested in the cemetery when someone cast a deadly spell at us."

"I didn't think my case would be so dangerous."

"I believe it's something else. By my count, this is the fourth time someone has tried to kill her since our marriage. When combined with the adjustments to her lifestyle, she's feeling a bit irritable."

"Lifestyle changes?" Lucius quirked an eyebrow. "What have you done to the witch?"

Severus accepted a shallow firewhisky from an elf. "Nothing you haven't done with yours."

"Marriage to you is so much of a lifestyle change?"

Severus shook his head. "It will come to you." He swallowed the rest of his drink and set the glass on a tray. "I need to get back down to Katherine. It's been a long day."

He found her in the bed, wrapped in the sheets. "I hope you don't mind. The house-elves took my clothes to clean them, and although our baggage is here, I thought I would just skip that step."

He smiled and leaned down to kiss her. "They will be bringing you a tray in a few minutes. I'll slip into the shower in the meantime."

Katherine watched him and then felt the boat start moving. She sighed with relief. For the first time in a while, she felt safe. What Severus had said about the baby resonated with her. She would do what had to be done and then move to the island and wrap up in soft blankets if that's what it took to have a healthy baby. She refused to lose another one.

"Mistress is hungry?" A house-elf had popped into the cabin and set a tray on the table nearest the bed.

"Starving, thank you," she responded. She looked at the tray, suddenly uncertain in the face of her new resolution. "Are these foods all right if... I mean, is anything here a danger for..." She wasn't sure what words would be best to explain to the elf and didn't know why the elf would know the answer.

"Mistress is asking about the tiny master or mistress inside her?"

"Yes," said Katherine a little shyly.

"House-elves know Mistress is breeding. We make only foods good for tiny witches and wizards on tray."

"Thank you," said Katherine, who wasted no time filling a plate. "This is just what I wanted."

Severus came out of the shower, then, wearing the dressing gown and looking cleaner. "What are you eating?"

"They told me everything was all right for the baby," said Katherine defensively.

"I trust them and you."

"There's an omelet here, and tea. Hurry if you want any."

"I'm sure they'll bring more."

"Not if we're otherwise occupied." Her eyes twinkled up at him. "I still intend to collect everything you have to offer."

A/N: I realize it's been a while since I updated. Real life and rabid plot bunnies for other projects got in my way. Hopefully the next few chapters will be more regular.

Thanks as always to Trickie Woo for beta reading!

Monte Carlo

Chapter 16 of 25

"I see you've put on weight."

Katherine turned and saw a former acquaintance and, she hated to admit it, lover. "Hello, Charles."

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

"Ugh... Make it stop."

Severus woke a little and snuggled closer to his wife. She struggled against him and pushed away. "Make it... ugh... stop."

He didn't move. Katherine rolled over and struggled more, eventually pushing him off the bed. "I said... Make it *STOP!*"

She got up and made her way to the bathroom. Severus could hear her throwing up. He followed her and held her hair back from her face. "What can I do?"

"Make it stop... Ohhhh..."

"Make what stop?"

"All this up-and-down and side-to-side."

Severus suddenly understood. "We can't avoid it, dear. I didn't realize you got seasick."

"I never have, before."

"It must be the baby."

A new spasm hit her stomach, and she was unable to talk until it was over. "Would it be possible to take the baby out, just for a few minutes until my tummy settles down?"

"You know it doesn't work that way. You were feeling fine last night."

"That's not the right answer," she said, turning back to the toilet.

Finally, she thought she was done and leaned back against the bathtub. Severus handed her a damp washcloth, and she wiped off her face. He summoned a house-elf and requested some toast and weak tea. Then, he pulled his cleaned-up wife into his arms, holding her loosely.

"I don't know," she moaned. "I feel like I could eat..."

"Let's try it," he answered. "It's almost morning and your stomach may be too empty. If you like the toast, we can try something else, too."

He helped her back into the bed. She felt a little better after eating the toast and nearly like herself after a more substantial breakfast. Her husband held her in his arms, and somehow the steadiness of his heartbeat overrode the motion of the boat. She fell into an uneasy sleep. Severus made sure she had small snacks from time to time for the rest of the short trip. However, Katherine was grateful to arrive in Monte Carlo and went straight to their suite at the hotel. She sent a note by Owl and then got right into the thankfully motionless bed to rest for a long while.

Severus slipped away and went to an Apothecary shop he knew about. He found some ready-made potions and purchased supplies for another. It took some trial and error, but eventually he found a mix that perked his wife up enough to continue her work.

They arranged that she would go to the Casino before he did. He would hang back to assess whether they were still being followed, and he would join her later. They had done some shopping after Katherine felt better, and she had a gown that she thought would set the proper tone for her investigation.

The men who had followed them in Venice were not seen. Katherine wished she knew more about those men. Did they work for the person who had tried to hex them or the other person in the altercation on the island? Were they unrelated to either, indicating a new danger?

She caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror in the lobby of the hotel as she left. The bodice of her gown was covered with tiny dark-amethyst-colored beads. Its deep neckline made sure that anyone looking at her would first notice the enhancements that pregnancy had brought to her figure. The many gathers of sheer fabric in her skirt were designed to hide her thickening waistline. The skirt's gathers also hid the slit that went to the middle of her left thigh. The diamonds Severus had given her a year before were around her neck. Katherine nodded at herself, watching as the cloud of her hair settled back into place, and continued on her way.

She wandered close to the Backgammon tables, where her appointment would come to meet her. She kept her face toward the door but glanced around at the rest of the room from time to time. Nevertheless, she jumped when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

"I see you've put on weight."

Katherine turned and saw a former acquaintance and, she hated to admit it, lover. "Hello, Charles."

"That's the best you can do for your Bonnie Prince?"

"It was a long time ago, and I confess I'm bewildered by your opening line."

"You're even more beautiful than when I last saw you, and I thought nothing would equal you then." He came closer and whispered into her ear. "Your breasts are magnificent. I can't wait to take you to my rooms."

"Please don't talk like that, Charles. There's nothing to wait for. It's been over a long time."

"It never ended for me. I'm ready to begin again."

She looked up at him, a little sadly. "I'm sorry. It never quite began for me the first time."

"Ah, then let's pretend we are beginning now." He looked around the room and signaled for a waiter to bring champagne. "Would you look at that?" he asked. He pointed at a new arrival. "Are those snake-skin boots? Why would anyone match those with evening wear?"

"If you knew the snake, you wouldn't ask. Farewell, Charles." Katherine walked over to her husband and slid a hand up the lapel of his jacket. He leaned over and kissed her. He meant to just softly brush his lips over hers, but she put something extra into it. The kiss was soft and welcoming at first but soon became a compulsion. Neither could break it off. Neither wanted to.

"Ahem."

They separated and Katherine gave a look between apology and annoyance. Sighing, she half turned and said, "Baron Charles von Ulm, may I present Professor Severus Snape?"

Charles clicked his heels as he shook hands. "Any friend of Katherine's, of course... Snape? The famous Potions master? Is one of your potions responsible for Katherine's delightful new curves?"

Severus looked to his wife, who shrugged and raised an eyebrow. He smirked and said, "In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Am I to understand that you are now her lover? I warn you; I shall be a relentless rival for her affections."

Severus looked at Katherine appraisingly. The look she gave back to him supplied all he needed to know. "I have no fears of that battle."

"Ah, but you should fear me. I fully intend that she will be mine again."

Katherine looked toward her husband, so that the other man could not see her, with a plea in her eyes. Severus raised an eyebrow and smirked. He kissed her hand and calmly said, "We know what road is paved with good intentions, don't we?"

A newcomer arrived at the Casino. His hair was dark but his features were unmistakable. This was the person Katherine had come to meet. She turned first to her husband and then to the Baron. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have an overwhelming desire to play tonight." She slipped away and sat at one of the game boards. As the two men watched, she was joined by the man who had just arrived.

"How did you meet?" asked Charles.

Severus took a drink of the champagne he had been handed. "She was hired to investigate me. The attraction was immediate and overpowering. You?"

The other man's face took on a wistful look. "She was hired to locate my cousin, and I traveled with her. I wanted her from the first, but she made me wait until it was all over. When she finally became mine, I vowed to keep her forever."

Snape couldn't resist the chance to jab at the other man. "Yet it ended between you."

"Yes. We were here in Monte Carlo. She was staying at the Hotel de Paris, but she wouldn't let me stay with her. We went everywhere together, and I planned to make a permanent arrangement of it. She's not pureblood, but she knows how to behave in any situation. I gave her a parure of diamonds and pearls that had been in my family for

generations. We spent the most incredible night of my life together. I'd never been with a woman who made me feel that way. The next night we went to an Embassy ball. She was stunning, regal in some sort of pink and silver gown and those diamonds and pearls. The concierge even thought she looked like a noblewoman and called her 'Baroness.'

Severus gasped into his champagne glass.

Charles looked at him. "Am I boring you?"

"Oh, no, this is fascinating."

"There's not much more. I had kept back the ring that went with the jewelry set. I was going to give it to her that very night. She told me she had a headache and left the ball early. I never saw her again until this night."

"That was the last you heard of her?"

"I saw the jewels. She had donated them to be auctioned for a hospital in Norway. Of course I bought them back. I intend to make sure she keeps them the next time."

"Are they worth a great deal?"

"They named a children's wing for her."

"I see." Severus looked over at Katherine, who was coolly rolling her dice and looked as though she was exchanging mere pleasantries over the game board. Her loyalties were never in doubt, but it was interesting to learn that she could turn down so much money when she didn't love the man in question. She was wealthy, but not as rich as that.

"Tell me," started Charles, breaking into his thoughts. "That fishing lure around her neck. Do you know where that came from?"

Severus looked at the diamonds and remembered how she had looked wearing them in his bed at Hogwarts. "It was a gift from her husband, not long before they married."

"I understood that Cyrus Stanton was essentially destitute."

"She's had another husband." Severus wasn't sure why Katherine did not mention their marriage to this man. Given all the questions surrounding them, he was sure she had her reasons.

Suddenly Katherine stood from her table and handed chips and galleons over to her opponent. She spoke loudly enough for Severus to hear. "I'm sorry, but I can't double again. This game has become too rich for me."

When she returned to the other men, she smiled up at Severus and said, "I'm exhausted, can we get to bed?"

Charles was quick to respond. "You are positively peaked. Your face is completely white. Shall I walk you to your suite?"

Pink flared on Katherine's face as she shook her head. "You're kind, Charles, but no. Severus will look after me." She stood within the shelter of his body, a sign the other wizard could not help but notice.

"Katherine." She looked at the wizard she had once spent so much time with. She saw the hurt expression in his face and smiled kindly. "I'm ready to start where we left off," he said. "I never stopped loving you."

"Oh, Charles," she said, touching the side of his face with her hand. "I'm so sorry. I never could feel that way for you. Please forget me." She looked up at Severus and placed her other hand trustingly on his arm. He guided her to the coat check and helped her into her cloak. She sagged against him as they made their way to the hotel.

She could barely wait for him to open the door to their suite. She brushed past him and moved quickly toward the bathroom. He shut the door and locked it, then set aside their outer garments and followed her. She was sitting on the floor, the skirt of her dress pooled around her except for the slit that showed her leg from the lacy top of her stockings to the foot that was half out of a sandal. Her hand was over her forehead.

She saw him standing in the doorway. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I hoped he would be out of town."

"How long ago did you know him?"

"Three years."

"Did you care for him?"

"Not really. I told you before, and it's true, that I've never known love. I thought being with Charles was just in fun, but I was terribly naïve. All sorts of people had developed expectations, and when I realized what they were, I had to leave."

"And we come to your being called 'Baroness' at the Paris."

"He mentioned *that*?" Her face flamed with remembered humiliation.

He nodded.

"Yes," she whispered. "I suddenly realized that what was just a convenient situation for me had become important to him. I couldn't breathe, and I had to go."

"Why didn't you keep the jewels he gave you?"

"I would have, but I discovered their true value. It wouldn't have been right."

"Why didn't you give them back directly?"

"I couldn't face him. If he had become sad, I would have felt obligated to do something... I might have married him out of pity. So I donated them to that charity, knowing he would be contacted and would buy the jewels back."

Severus knelt down and dabbed at her face with a washcloth. "I'm getting better at this, I think."

"You don't mind? I'm disgusting."

"You're beautiful. Tomorrow, I'm going to locate some ingredients to make a different potion specifically for you, and you'll be somewhat better after that."

She looked up balefully. He leaned down and lifted her to her feet. "Why didn't you want him to know we're married?"

"I don't know. It's a feeling I have. It was a little odd that he almost seemed to know I would be there tonight. I was a bit surprised that he didn't mention our marriage. We haven't been seeking publicity, but it *was* in the *Daily Prophet*. Yet he was acting as though he believed that he and I could continue from where we left off. I don't know

what to make of it, and I get very protective of information under those sort of circumstances."

He digested it before changing the subject. "What do you think of the idea of coming to bed?"

"Hmmm... I don't know why, but now that I've been sick, I feel as though I can do anything. Let me brush my teeth, first."

Severus stood behind her as she brushed her teeth, rubbing her shoulders and whispering lewd comments into her ears. Katherine made faces in the mirror at him. As she finished rinsing off her toothbrush, he unzipped the back of her gown, letting it fall to the floor. He half carried her to the bed and made good on his comments. She thought that she did very little, but she was still breathless after the passion they shared.

He ordered her a small meal that would settle her stomach and watched her eat it. "How was your game with Omar Malfoy?"

"He's quite a fascinating gentleman. He was able to tell me some surprising things although nothing really helps me."

"Such as?"

"He said you should have inherited everything instead of Thaddeus Prince, but since your father is a Muggle, you were ineligible. He was very impressed to see you in person, by the way, and interested in all the wrong ways. What with all the admirers we've stumbled across of yours, I was extremely put out."

He chuckled. "We've each run across a former lover on this trip. I would consider it even." His face got more serious. "Omar's information doesn't help you?"

"I'm not sure. It doesn't explain where the money is, now, although I suppose it does give a clue about where the money goes."

"We're well out of it. It's bad enough that someone is trying to kill you without worrying about the money, too."

"You have no proof that someone wants to hurt me."

"We're not going round on that again." He frowned at her, and she looked sheepish. "Where to, next?"

"I'll have to go back to London and check through some other documents at the Ministry."

"Can it wait until after Christmas? I'd like to spend the holiday at the island."

"That suits me." They both went to sleep dreaming of palm trees and relaxing afternoons on their own beach.

The Golden Circle

Chapter 17 of 25

"Well, if we're to properly prepare for Christmas, perhaps we had best start?"

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

It was with some trepidation that Lucius Malfoy watched his wife disappear down l'avenue des Beaux-Arts in Monte Carlo with Katherine Snape. "This is going to be an expensive day, my friend," he said.

"Let them have their fun, Lucius. Soon enough Katherine will be someplace safe..."

"Don't tell me. You're taking her to your favorite 'undisclosed location.'"

"Exactly. Soon Katherine will have to stay in one place, and even though it's a paradise, she will get tired of it."

Lucius looked down the row of shops. "Well, if we're to properly prepare for Christmas, perhaps we had best start?"

They looked in the windows of several shops, and stopped at one that appeared to passers-by to be filled with advertisements for a resort. The resort looked interesting, yet it had clearly been in business a generation or two earlier. The bathing costumes covered more than some Muggle street wear of the current fashion, and the posters were crumbling around the edges. Severus, however, saw something that caught his eye. "Let's go in," he said.

He stopped in front of a table of jeweled keys. A quiet witch stopped at the table and watched as he looked at one in particular. "Many wizards choose them for their beauty," she said. He nodded a bit abruptly, and she started again. "Some wizards choose them for the symbolism."

Lucius stood at the display case and looked at a magnificent key that was heavily jeweled and enameled. Its bow looked like a rose window from a cathedral. "I believe I'll have that one."

The witch didn't miss a beat in turning from a potential customer to a probable one. "Very well, sir. Shall I have it boxed for you?"

"Yes, I believe so... or rather," he continued as something else caught his eye. "I'll look at these first." He stopped at a display of Fabergé eggs. One in particular seemed to amuse him.

"Very well sir," said the sales clerk. She returned to Severus and noted that he was still looking at one of the keys. "Are you looking for a gift for someone in particular?"

"My wife."

"Some wizards choose them for their charm." She opened the back of the display case and tapped the key with her wand. A swirl of magic became visible.

"I believe I'd like a closer look at that," Severus said.

Katherine looked at herself in a mirror. "I've never worried much about this before."

"You'll say that a lot as a mother, about a variety of subjects."

"Who knew they made black lace maternity bras?"

Narcissa laughed. "For the right money you can get one in leopard print, too." She fished around with the hangers in her hand to show Katherine.

Katherine shook her head. "I don't believe that's necessary." She went behind the curtain and changed back into her own clothes. "Of course, I've only rarely found these necessary to begin with." She held up the ones she had decided to purchase and looked at them ruefully.

They paid for their purchases, Narcissa having selected one or two items for herself, and walked to the next shop. Narcissa patted the other witch's arm. "I never expected to see Severus so happy," she said.

"I never expected to be so happy, myself," Katherine answered. "It's like a fairytale dream come true."

Narcissa stopped walking. "You really love him, don't you?" she asked a little sternly.

Katherine saw the look in her eye. "Am I supposed to prove something now?"

"No..." Narcissa shook her head. "Not exactly, but if anyone were to hurt him, some other people and I would be extremely upset. He's not had the most fortunate of lives."

Katherine looked at her feet and then at the other witch. "There's not much I can offer you by way of reassurance. I've had some colossally bad romances in my life, myself. With Severus, though, it's all been so very easy, even when we've had spats. I can't imagine..." She shook her head and laughed at herself for tearing up. "These damn pregnancy hormones," she whispered as she wiped an eye. Then she cleared her throat and continued. "I don't even remember what my life was like before I knew him, I just know that if he ever leaves me or is taken from me, I'll simply die."

Narcissa smiled kindly and with a little embarrassment over having induced such an emotional display. "I just wanted to make sure," she said. She turned to a storefront a little way down. "This lovely boutique usually has some adorable frocks for expectant mothers."

"I hope we have time for some Christmas shopping, too. We've already been to three shops for maternity clothes, and I need to find something for Severus."

"No worries. You need to be properly outfitted, and we Malfoys always say that if a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing to excess."

The *Star Flower* was moored in a little cove along the coastline between France and Italy. In past times, this spot was used by pirates and smugglers. Once a small army had landed here to ambush its enemy. Now it was just a scenic picnic area by day. On this star-filled night, it served the purposes of a wizard who wanted to remain unseen.

"I don't understand why you need to be so secretive, Severus," said Lucius Malfoy. I'm sure we could sail you right into your destination."

"Maybe I don't want anyone to know my destination," was the reply. He put the square of wool that was his carpet onto the deck and tapped it.

Lucius put his hand over his heart. "I'm insulted!"

"Lucius, I love you like a brother, but I'm not going to risk my wife's safety over the chance that someone will see your boat or overhear an innocent conversation."

"Your wife is quite able with a wand."

"She's also distracted lately and not feeling her best. Speaking of which, there's even more to worry about." He slapped the other wizard's shoulder. "Perhaps we're getting off here because Katherine can't stand the motion of the boat." Severus watched as his wife came up to the deck, looking gray but happy. After she and Narcissa exchanged hugs and air kisses, he helped her onto the carpet and wrapped an extra robe around her.

His host nodded. "I don't understand it, myself. I've never seen a witch so seasick, and no one has ever been sick on my yacht, before."

Narcissa smiled and spoke to Katherine. "It's been long enough that it will probably fade in a few more weeks."

Katherine nodded hopefully.

Lucius looked confused. "I've never heard of anyone's seasickness fading, my pet."

Narcissa lovingly cuffed the back of his head. "Lucius, pay attention. She's not seasick."

He looked at his wife. "That's what I don't understand. What has happened to her? Did you do something, Snape. Did she get bad fish in Venice?"

Katherine snorted at that. "As if anyone would let me eat..."

Severus settled himself on the carpet behind his wife. "All set?" he said quietly. She nodded, and with a low command the carpet lifted in the air. He leaned down to shake hands with first his hostess and then his host. After that, the carpet continued its ascent.

They barely heard Narcissa say, "Really, Lucius, is it so long you don't remember? Maybe we should remind ourselves."

Severus chuckled and pulled his wife close. "Are you warm enough?"

Katherine chuckled back. "At least." She unfastened the second robe and stretched a little. "It feels good to have the wind in my face and hair. By the way," she said as she turned her head and shoulders to face him, "do you know how to get there?"

He feigned a look of insult. "Why, madam, do I detect disbelief in my navigational abilities?" He was going to continue, but they heard a popping noise behind them.

They both looked around and saw bright red fireworks in the sky. Among the roman candles there were letters. Katherine spelled them out. "C, O, N, another C...no...it's G, R, another R or maybe A? T, U, L, oh, I guess it's A, T, I, O, N, is that an S?"

Severus laughed out loud. "Lucius must have finally figured it out."

Within an hour they reached Corsica, and moments after that they were standing on the portico of their villa. Josephine promised a good meal and soft sheets. Bonaparte quietly told his master of the arrangements they had made for the Christmas Holiday. Soft breezes blew over Katherine and she suddenly felt relaxed and comfortable.

Severus sent her upstairs to shower and relax. When she came out, he had a quick meal laid out for her, on a table next to the bed, which was turned down invitingly. He kissed her nose and slipped into the shower, himself. Katherine just meant to sit on the edge of the bed and wait for him, but when he came back, she was sound asleep and snoring slightly. He smiled and kissed her nose again as he pulled the sheet over her.

"Really, Severus, I don't think you should be quite so absorbed by her. You will set up unrealistic expectations for the future," Lucius Malfoy whispered behind the cover of his menu.

He was watching as Severus advised his wife on the foods to best avoid from the dining room of the hotel. Katherine overheard Lucius and looked at her husband to see how he would respond. Lucius's own wife also heard and suddenly became quite interested in this conversation.

Severus smirked. "So you're saying that I shouldn't...just for example, mind you...run through the halls of St. Mungos demanding that every Healer come to the side of my wife, when she's experiencing false labor?"

"You promised you would forget that," Lucius mumbled.

"I assure you, I haven't," said Narcissa sweetly. "You kept swooping me off to the hospital every time I burped, which was all too often in the last weeks," she added in an undertone to Katherine, who was learning to nod and ignore maternity stories.

"Speaking of Draco, how is my former student these days?"

Lucius smiled indulgently. "He was happy enough to open our gifts and sit at our dinner table, but then he was happy enough to return to the Greengrass home for the rest of the holidays. If we didn't have the Star Flower, we would be lonely empty-nesters."

Severus snorted. "He was happy enough to get away from his fawning parents, you mean."

"Just wait your turn," was the grumpy response. "You'll spend all your life spoiling that child. Then it will grow up and leave you, and you'll wonder why you were so attentive."

Severus smiled at his wife as she fingered the jeweled key hanging just where her new cleavage started. "I assure you, Lucius, we are as attentive as the situation warrants, no more, no less."

Narcissa caught a glimpse of Katherine's idle action and said, "That's a lovely pendant! See what Lucius gave me for Christmas!" She showed that she was wearing a similar necklace, but where the bow of Katherine's was jeweled around the perimeter of the flower pattern, Narcissa's was entirely jeweled and enameled.

"That's gorgeous," agreed Katherine.

"That's just the start of it," was the reply. "When I opened my gifts, there was a Fabergé egg with a dragon clasp. When you pat the back of the dragon, the egg opens to a satin lining and this necklace."

Suddenly Severus must have drunk his wine incorrectly, because he started sputtering and coughing. During his fit, Katherine couldn't be sure, but she thought she heard something very much like "excessive."

He recovered surprisingly quickly and murmured to his wife, "I think you'll want to forgo the clams. There have been warnings in this area."

She quickly put up her hand. "I'm passing on all seafood for a while."

"Oh, I forgot." Josephine had known a preparation technique for preparing foods so they would be safe for Katherine to eat. Unfortunately, no food is immune from overindulgence, and Katherine had spent a bitter morning suffering the wages of her overeating. Her eyes narrowed as she realized her husband was having fun at her expense.

"Attentive, my..."

"So Katherine," asked Narcissa. "Was there a special box or anything with your key?"

"Nothing so grand as a Faberge egg, of course," she answered. "Just an ordinary Tiffany's box," she said with a twinkle in her eye. She wasn't yet wealthy or jaded enough to think anything regarding Tiffany's ordinary.

"That was it?"

"Well, it came with a series of protective charms that the sales clerk put on it. The pendant surrounds me...us...with special protection." Her hand went, almost unconsciously, over her tummy as she spoke.

Lucius looked at Severus, who he knew had put additional charms on the necklace when they were on the yacht. He wondered why those charms weren't mentioned. Severus caught his eye and just barely nodded in the direction of the waiter, who was paying altogether too much attention to the conversation. Lucius understood the point, then, and made a show out of straightening his silverware.

"Perhaps we should go ahead and order, and let this good lad get along with his employment."

That was the Snape's cue to restart a discussion concerning a certain cheese sauce and whether it would be heated to a temperature that would eliminate risk from a specific pathogen. Lucius placed his and Narcissa's order while the deliberations were ongoing and finally suggested, "Really, Katherine, why not have a different sauce?"

"Are you questioning my ability to take care of my wife?" Severus asked.

"No, I just thought it might have less trouble..."

"So now we're trouble-makers?"

"Forget I asked."

Katherine suddenly ordered the vinaigrette sauce, and the waiter escaped with his life. The bass player of the same music group that had played the night of the Snape's wedding arrived at Severus's elbow. He smiled and whispered effusively as Severus whispered back.

Narcissa returned to the question of Christmas presents. "Did you see that Lucius is wearing the ring I got him?"

"It's quite striking," said Katherine, her eyes drawn to the jewel-studded circle of platinum around his finger.

"I still don't understand why you would pay so much for shirt studs. The onyx was quite impressive and looks quite good with his attire, but a charm to have them gather themselves up seems a bit ridiculous."

"I believe my wife was thinking of my feet," said Severus. He reached for his wife's hand and squeezed it.

"She said that as she purchased them, but really Severus, I don't get the connection."

Katherine met her husband's eyes. They smiled a private smile as they recalled the practical demonstration of those self-gathering studs several days before. Katherine's eyes twinkled with a promise to test them again that very night.

"Ah," said Severus, "I believe that's our song." The bass player had signaled to their table as the keyboardist started "Stairway to the Stars." The Snapes stood and went to the dance floor, where they stayed for most of the evening, to the band's delight. They celebrated with the other guests of the hotel until the New Year was counted down. Afterwards, the Malfoys and Snapes separated with a promise to have dinner together again soon.

From the Desk Of...

Chapter 18 of 25

She went on to open another letter. When she saw it, she went cold.

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Severus and Katherine Snape

wish you and yours

a

Joyous Holiday Season

My dear Katherine,

Thank you so very much for your holiday remembrance. I was highly gratified to learn that my favorite cognac is still available. My happiness pales in the delight of discovering that you knew and remembered after all these years that it was my favorite. I can't tell you how pleasing it is to know that someone cares so much about me.

I know that we did not part amicably at the station in Venice, and I am glad to discover that you haven't let it color our relationship. I'm sorry that I can't explain what happened on the train, nor what I did after that. I was able to obtain an item that had been eluding me for some weeks, and therefore the trip was a success even if it lacked something in companionship. It's an amusing story, and I hope that I shall have a chance to explain it all to you eventually.

I will say that my young friend was everything you accused her of being. She was inordinately interested in your husband, although my money was quite fascinating to her as well. I lost track of her only hours after I lost track of you. I would advise caution in your future dealings with that witch. There's something about her that's not quite balanced.

I hope you don't mind that I've taken the liberty of purchasing a few trinkets for the baby. Your London house-elves will no doubt know what to do with them.

All my love,

Sonny

Dear Professor and Mrs. Snape,

I have attached copies of all our N.E.W.T.s grades. Harry, Ron, and I cannot thank you enough for helping us study, especially in the branches of Potions and History (the boys, of course).

Thank you also for the gifts you sent. It was most kind of you to think of us on your travels. The Venetian glass stirring rods are particularly useful as well as beautiful. I'm going to keep mine someplace safe and only use it when making potions that specifically demand a glass stirring rod.

I hope you don't mind, Mr. Andolini came and asked us up to your apartment. He showed us a nursery that he has outfitted. I've also attached some pictures of it. He said that he's going to have it painted and purchase linens as soon as you tell him whether it's a boy or a girl.

Thank you again for all the help for our test preparation. It was most valuable.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Dear Miss Granger,

Congratulations to you and your two friends on such high scores. I confess that I couldn't wait to hear from you and pestered the board until Edgewater sent me a note to tell me you had no grades below Exceeds Expectations. Nevertheless, I'm gratified to see so many Outstandings among the three of you.

You may tell Potter that they specifically designed the Defense practical with him in mind. If a wizard always reaches for "Expelliarmus," that wizard may indeed find himself dropped on his behind a few times. When everyone knows that's the spell he's going to start with, they can plan accordingly. Savior of the Wizarding world aside, he needed to demonstrate the full range of his ability. I'm glad they made him work for his O, yet I'm not surprised he achieved one.

Katherine is looking over my shoulder and insisting that I tell you if you see her Uncle Sonny, to please tell him he must stop all his work. However, you may tell Mr. Andolini from me that this child is to be a girl. If he wishes to engage in such sentimental pursuits, shades of pink are the correct colors.

Enjoy your vacation. I look forward to hearing great things as you prepare for your careers.

Sincerely,

Severus Snape

Dear Uncle Sonny,

You ought to be ashamed of yourself, chasing after a woman so... so... I don't know the word, but she doesn't deserve anyone as wonderful as you are. I cannot imagine

you needed to stoop to that level in order to have companionship, and Severus has now convinced me that you must have been doing something else, so I'll drop it. For now.

The crab cakes and other delicacies you had sent from various countries were delicious, although you'll have to apologize to Josephine the next time you see her. I had to spend a full afternoon explaining that it had nothing to do with her kitchen and that we were sure she could cook just as well as the chefs who made the contents of the box you sent. She was mollified when Severus made her perform whatever magic she has to ensure the safety of the food, but she was still miffed with me.

We have received pictures of the things you sent to our apartment. I am telling you in no uncertain terms to stop adding things to the nursery. I only showed you that the room existed so that you would know that we had plans for children. If you cannot stop, I shall have to instruct the elves to bar you from entering. This child is going to be frightfully spoiled if you and some other people I won't mention lavish so many things upon her even before birth.

You didn't ask, but we spent several days in Monte Carlo. The Malfoys took us in their yacht, and we stayed at The Ambassador once we arrived. I ran into Charles again. I was quite surprised to meet him; he was less so. Have you been in contact with him? I have the distinct impression that someone has.

This story you have promised me sounds a bit off. I hope you haven't been engaging in anything illegal again. I like having you free. It's almost like having family again. Take care of yourself until I'm back in London and I can keep an eye on you.

Love,

Katherine

Kingsley,

Don't pretend to be interested in my health unless you plan to take the situation with Sylvia Greenlee seriously. The woman put a potion in my husband's wine, intending to do something non-consensual with him. She's not a great potions maker and might very well have injured him.

If that's not grounds for investigation, I don't know what is. I understand that you have a great many things to look after these days, but the witch is a public menace. She should be investigated.

Katherine

My dear Katie,

All of my activities are legal in the countries in which I have engaged in them. Beyond that statement, I will not comment on what they are. I've gotten along for sixty-eight years without you mothering me. You needn't start now.

Also, if I wish to spoil a child I plan to view as my grandchild, that's my business. Nothing I do will hurt the child. You have really become fussy in your condition, haven't you? The nursery at your apartment is a delight to the eye. Young Corinne (I hope you will name her after your mother) will not be spoiled but will know every luxury I can bestow upon her.

Lastly, no, I haven't spoken to that puffed up young fop since you brought him to meet me a few years ago. I haven't sought him out or been otherwise interested in his existence. Somehow, I knew you would never be serious about him. The man you married is clearly your equal and then some in a few ways. I don't see a need to worry about the others.

Love,

Sonny

Dear Narcissa,

I never properly thanked you for the days and nights we spent as your guests on the Star Flower. Your yacht is everything a ship should be, and it's my trouble entirely if I was unable to enjoy it to its fullest extent.

We've greatly enjoyed our time with you this winter. I've never seen Severus so relaxed or enjoy himself more than when he can goad Lucius. He walks about the house these days, repeating some of his better comments and laughing to himself.

I think it's a prelude to becoming tired of the one spot. We love it here and pondered staying out of Wizarding society entirely, but I guess we need the stimulation of others too much. He, of course, can leave. He's feeling fine and he's quick to point out that so far no one has tried to kill him. On the other hand, they have poisoned him as a means to seduce him, but he doesn't consider that a problem.

I, on the other hand, am completely unable to leave. I'm a little tired of our house, too, but I can't seem to string together more than two good hours at a time before I feel weak and ill. I don't remember this from before. Severus says it means the pregnancy is healthy. I think comments like that mean he's saying anything to keep me quiet these days.

I hope you're enjoying your cruise around the sea. It sounds quite romantic. I'm sure it's a welcome change from your activities a year ago.

Ugh, I'm starting to feel ill again, so I'd better sign off.

All my love,

Katherine

Dear Katherine,

You poor dear, to be so sick!

I'm sorry to hear that your sickness is so bad, lately. I've heard it gets better at the end of the third month. At least it did for me with Draco. I'm sure Lucius doesn't mind your waiting until you feel a bit better before you go to London to get the whole inheritance thing cleared up.

I've noticed that our wizards have been going at it hammer and tongs lately, too. I've never seen Lucius envy Severus for anything, but recently he asked me what I thought of having another baby. I might just do it. Of course, it makes it that much more important that we find out where the inheritance has gone. If we decide to add heirs to our family, he wants to maximize the sum of what they will inherit.

I'm so glad that you enjoyed your time on our little boat. I can assure you that when you are feeling better, you will discover many things about it that you haven't seen yet. We would be delighted to have you and Severus as our guests again, so I hope it will happen soon.

I have to go now. I hope you're having as good a time as possible. Your own little island sounds simply delicious.

Love to all,

Narcissa

Dear Katherine,

Of course I take the situation seriously. I fully intend to investigate Sylvia. I cannot do so at this time, however. She has taken an extended leave of absence.

I look forward to seeing you again. We can discuss this thoroughly when you are next in London.

Sincerely,

Kingsley

Katherine smiled over the letter she got from Narcissa and fumed over Kingsley's response to her note. She went on to open another letter. When she saw it, she went cold. Suddenly she ran to the bathroom with a moan. Her husband put his head in the door and saw the horrified look on her face.

"What is it?"

"Look at that last letter on my desk," she moaned as another wave of nausea hit her.

Severus stepped over to the desk, scanned the note, and swore.

My Dear Mrs. Snape,

I wish to thank you for handling my case to its full completion. I had suspected that some of the wands would never be found or would be damaged, but they have all come back or been paid for.

Yesterday, I received payment, from an anonymous purchaser, for the Ash and Banshee-hair wand. Since it was the last outstanding item, I have forwarded both your percentage of its value and the additional fee for completing the entire task to your Gringotts account.

Thank you for taking on this job for me. I am delighted with the results and will unreservedly recommend you to all of my friends and acquaintances.

Yours &c,

Ollivander

A/N: There will be more action in the next chapters, as Katherine starts to feel a bit more like herself. Thank you for reading, and thanks to beta reader Trickie Wool!

The Ministry Archives

Chapter 19 of 25

So far all I've learned is that it always goes to a magical male heir, but the pattern is crazy.

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

A smartly dressed witch presented herself at the front desk of the Ministry of Magic during the first week of February. Her hair and eyes shone, and her curves had become lush. Pregnancy had given her a her look of beauty with a sense of contentment that emanated from her. Most of the men who looked at her took a second glance.

As it happened, it was also a day that a certain famous trio were meeting with the Minister. The distracted clerk behind the counter glanced at the note Katherine Snape showed to him and waved her toward the records archive. Katherine thought to herself with a huff that she needn't have worked so hard to look presentable. Flip flops and any old robe would have done.

Late in the afternoon, the witch's husband found her, hard at work. What had been a shine in her hair had become stringy greasiness, and her robe had been tossed over the back of a chair during a hot flash. Her face was a bit blotchy where she had blotted at sweat, and exhaustion had made the corners of her eyes look red and watery. She bent over a work table and scribbled notes furiously, which was probably the cause of the black stain on her right forefinger.

"You need a rest." He sat across from her and shifted a stack of scrolls so that he could see her.

"I can't figure it out," she answered.

"How far have you gotten?"

Suddenly chilly, she shivered and reached for her robe. Pulling it around herself like a blanket, she shook her head. "I'm not sure I get on at all."

He stood and walked around the table. "You're just tired. Why don't I take you home and tomorrow you can come back and make a fresh start?"

She stood up. "If you think so. I've been looking at the records of so many wills that I can't think straight."

"Wills?"

"I decided to work my way back through *Gringotts Annual Report* until I can find the first instance of this legacy."

"How far back did you get?"

"Seventeen ninety-six. So far all I've learned is that it always goes to a magical male heir, but the pattern is crazy. It crosses family trees and occasionally jumps to a line

that I wouldn't have thought was even connected. The heir never actually inherits the legacy, either. They are given ten percent of the principal one year after the death of the previous legatee, and then ninety percent of the interest until their own death."

"Who controls the principal?"

"It's invested in blue chip stocks and bonds by the goblins, who get five percent of the interest every year without fail. The actual principal has a vault of its own, somewhere near the very center of the Gringotts stronghold."

"Just how much money are we talking about?"

"It covers half the Gringotts operating expenses each year. What they make from the rest of us is mostly profit to them."

Severus whistled. "That's a pile of money."

He put an arm around Katherine's waist to support her as they walked to the lift. "Yes," she said. "It's quite a bit of money." She looked at him carefully. "What brings you here to find me?"

"I received an owl from your uncle. He wants to know how you're doing." Katherine groaned, and he smirked. "Don't carry on so. He won't be home from Italy for a few weeks yet. You have time to prepare to interrogate him."

"Hmm..." She stood a little straighter. "He promised me a story. I should have some questions ready so that I can direct things if he gets off topic."

Severus chuckled in a way that went down her spine, and Katherine felt new energy. "I suppose I can come back tomorrow and trace it a bit further."

"That's my girl."

Katherine looked across the coffee table Severus had purchased for her and assessed how the Malfoys were taking her information.

"So there's no telling exactly where the money will go?" Lucius frowned.

"I wouldn't say that," she answered. "I found the first instance of the bequest, along with a copy of the will, made out by an Elijah Prince, that was probated in 1654."

"How did he hide the money from Cromwell?"

"That's just it. The Prince Legacy, as it was known in the nineteenth century, is an entity of its own. Since the money did not belong to a person, and because of some magic that Elijah and the goblins worked out, the Lord Protector couldn't touch it."

Lucius chuckled. "I'll take a Slytherin over a Roundhead any day."

Katherine smiled. "This particular Prince was a Hufflepuff, as it happens. Sometimes what's wanted is the persistence of a badger." She went back to her notes. "At any rate, the legacy was established by a charm mixed with an Unbreakable Vow. It appears that Elijah was hoping to skip over one of his children in an effort to get the money to a favorite grandchild."

"The exact wording of the charm and legacy are unclear, but it appears the money must go to the straightest line male descendant who is more than half magical blood. He himself married a Muggle-born witch, whom he loved dearly, but his oldest two sons were disappointments in his opinion. One of the two redeemed himself enough to marry a pure-blood witch, so the oldest son of that match inherited the legacy."

"Amazing," breathed Narcissa.

"Yes," answered Katherine. "From that grandson it went to his son, but then crossed to the great-grandchild of one of Elijah's daughters. It's jumped around the family tree for the past three and a half centuries, now."

"So who has it now?" asked Lucius.

"No one has received it at the moment. It will be bestowed a year after the death of the last heir, the accrued interest simply rolling into the principal."

"So it *will* come to me."

Katherine looked at Severus and bit her lip, not wanting to fudge the answer. "I think it's most likely, since I think you're the purest-blood descendant in the most direct line. However, I would like your permission to work on this a bit longer. As I traced the legacy back in time, I discovered it went into some family trees I never would have guessed were connected." Katherine wouldn't mention it to the Malfoys, but she wasn't sure she understood the grins the goblins gave her when she went to confirm her notes. Severus agreed that until she had all of the facts, she shouldn't get Lucius's hopes up or down.

Narcissa leaned forward. "How much longer will it take?"

"A few more weeks, perhaps two months. It may also involve more travel."

Lucius smirked at his host. "Naturally."

Severus looked him evenly in the eye. "Most of the work can be done here at the Ministry, but to fill in some branches of the tree, she will need to go abroad."

"I can't say I'm thrilled to be financing your extended vacation, Snape," said Lucius.

Severus growled and started to speak, but his wife patted his hand. "Truly, we needn't bother, after all," said Katherine, who was becoming uncomfortable after sitting for the duration of the discussion. "You will either receive the money or you won't. It's only until next November."

The Malfoys looked at each other. "Circumstances make it such that we ought to find out as soon as possible," said Narcissa. "Lucius will need to make certain decisions..."

"I see," said Katherine. "I'll get right on it, then."

A few weeks later, Severus Snape again made his way to the Ministry archives. Katherine's head and arms were sprawled onto the table. She was asleep, and he was tempted to leave her that way, but she couldn't be comfortable in that position.

"Madam..." He tapped her on the shoulder and quickly leaped back as in one fluid motion she jumped up and pulled her wand out. She saw it was him and relaxed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have fallen asleep."

"How much more is there?"

"It's done. Everything that I need to do here, that is." She pointed to a pile of parchments on the table.

Severus took them and rolled them up. "Let's take them home, then." He slid the papers into his pocket and put an arm around his wife.

"I'm positive that Lucius is the heir," she said. "There are just a couple of branches left. One of the sisters in the first generation moved to France, and there's a small branch that went to Italy."

"He'll be gratified that you saw it through."

"Yes," she said, "it's done. I just can't get over the sense that something else is going on with it, though. I think there's something looking me in the face, but I can't, for the life of me, figure it out. It would be so much easier if the goblins would tell me how it works, but they just smile mysteriously and disregard my questions. It's almost as bad as working with centaurs."

He chuckled and kissed the side of her head. As he did, something caught his eye, and he quickly pulled her behind a bookcase as a flash of light went past and hit the clock just above the door. Springs flew everywhere as the clock shattered. The archivist on duty slipped from behind the desk and ran out the door.

"What was that?" Katherine said. Her wand was back in her hand and her alert position belied the lassitude with which she had allowed her husband to guide her seconds earlier.

"Simple Reductor Curse, I think. The clock wasn't anything special, just Ministry standard."

"So it was an ordinary wand."

They looked at each other for a long minute.

"That much we can be grateful for, then."

There wasn't much time for gratitude, as another Reductor Curse was cast at their book case. Katherine pulled Severus out of the way as an entire shelf full of books and files fell to the floor. "Did you see who it was?" he asked.

"No, but we're between whoever it is and the door," she answered.

A blasting curse came next, turning the shelf itself into a pile of rubble. Severus pushed Katherine down the row of shelves. "Take cover, will you?"

"We need to catch this person. I'm tired of hiding!"

"I need you to be safe." He breathed a sigh of relief as she lightly dropped to hands and knees and crawled down the row of book cases. He kept an eye out for whoever it was, only to realize his wife was crawling along the row of book cases ahead of him.

"Will you stop that?" he said. His wand swung around and the book case at the end turned on one side like a gate, closing off her passage.

Katherine looked up with narrow eyes and made her way back down the path she was on. When she reached the wall, she scooted down along it as far as she could go and saw a cloaked figure making its way up the main aisle of the archive room. "Gotcha," she breathed as she sent a silent Body-bind across the way.

The figure turned and parried the curse, then cast something of her own. Katherine ducked around the flash of light that made the paint on the wall behind her ripple and cast a tripping jinx. Her opponent cast a shield charm but had to stretch her arm to do it, causing her hood to fall back from her face.

"Silvia!"

"He should be mine, Katherine! Severus and all the money should be mine!" She cast a spell of ugly brown intensity and smiled when Katherine's shield charm didn't stop it. "Your reactions aren't what they once were. Marriage must not agree with you." Katherine avoided the curse by sliding behind a bookcase and tried an *Incarcerus*.

"You know that since I'm an Auror that won't work on me," said Silvia. "I was willing to just borrow him long enough to get what I wanted. After I got the money you could have had him back. Now I see that you will have to go." She cast the brown spell again, and Katherine ducked and ran through the bookcases.

"*Flagrate!*" came from the other side of Katherine. She peeked around and saw her husband. "Stay down, will you?" hissed Severus. She looked up and saw a snake of fire extend from his wand as he walked toward Silvia. She cast spell after spell in his direction, but they all burst into nothingness as the snake hit them. Severus walked down the row of book cases. He passed Katherine and continued on his path toward the other witch. Soon the fiery snake would be touching her.

Silvia smiled. "I'll take care of you yet," she said. "We'll be together, soon, Severus." Then she turned and was gone.

Katherine made her way to a standing position. She saw the way her husband looked at her and didn't move otherwise. He peered down along the wall and then made his way back to where she stood. "What possessed you to engage her?"

"I want this over, Severus. I didn't realize..." She shook her head sadly. "She was right. My reactions aren't as quick."

"We'll talk about this at home." There was a banging sound from the direction of the main door into the archive. He looked toward the center aisle. "If we can get home. Is it too much to ask that you stay behind me?" After a rather dispirited shake of her head he said, "Let's go then."

He led her along the row of book cases as they made their way to the center aisle. He peered around the bookshelf and then stepped into the aisle.

A well known voice asked, "Where's Katherine?"

"Down here, Sonny."

Severus stepped all the way into the aisle, bringing Katherine out, too. Walking toward her from the door was her uncle and a couple of wizards who looked like they ate whole livestock for dinner. "Katie!" said Sonny as he saw his niece. "I was at home, taking care of some business with my friends here, when another of my friends..." he looked over to where the archivist had returned to his desk "...visited and said you might be having some trouble. We thought we'd drop by to see if you needed some help."

Katherine swallowed hard. "We're fine, no thanks to me. I seem to be pretty useless these days."

"Not in the least." He pulled her into a hug and kissed her cheeks. "You're busy doing other things. Take care of that great-niece of mine. Did you see who it was?"

"Silvia Greenlee," said Katherine as she extracted herself from his embrace.

"That's what I suspected," he said. "I learned a few things during our travels together, but not enough."

"What did you learn?" asked Severus.

"It appears that she might be responsible for the other attacks." He held up his hand. "She would talk about how smart or talented such a witch must have been...without being told it was a witch, mind you...and then when I would ask a question, she would just smile and change the subject."

"Do you have other reasons for thinking it was her?" asked Severus. "You must have had a reason to travel with her to begin with."

Sonny grinned. "I'm going to smile and change the subject. Let's get you kids home."

A/N: Thank you to Trickie Woo for beta reading.

A Family Discussion

Chapter 20 of 25

"I promise you that I've said all that's important to your investigation. If I keep any secrets, it's for my own very good reasons, and I'm not going to be dictated to by a boy like you."

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Severus stepped all the way into the aisle, bringing Katherine out, too. Walking toward her from the door were her uncle and a couple of wizards who looked like they ate whole livestock for dinner.

"Katie!" said Sonny as he saw his niece. "I was taking care of some business with my friends, here, when another of my friends..." he looked over to where the archivist had returned to his desk "...came by and said you might be having some trouble. We thought we'd drop by to see if you needed some help."

Katherine swallowed hard. "We're fine, no thanks to me. I seem to be pretty useless these days."

"Not in the least." He pulled her into a hug and kissed her cheeks. "You're busy doing other things. Take care of that great-niece of mine. Did you see who it was?"

"Silvia Greenlee," said Katherine as she extracted herself from his embrace.

"That's what I suspected," he said. "I learned a few things during our travels together, but not enough."

"What did you learn?" asked Severus.

"It appears that she might be responsible for the other attacks." He held up his hand. "She would talk about how smart or talented such a witch must have been...without being told it was a witch, mind you...and then when I would ask a question, she would just smile and change the subject."

"Do you have other reasons for thinking it was her?" asked Severus. "You must have had a reason to travel with her to begin with."

Sonny grinned. "I'm going to smile and change the subject. Let's get you kids home."

Sonny was no more forthcoming when they reached the Snape's apartment than he had been at the Ministry. Severus sat a dispirited Katherine on their living-room couch and directed her uncle to a nearby chair. He had questions that he wanted answered.

"You wanted us to get home, Sonny, and now we're home and safe. Now tell us, what interested you in Sylvia?"

Katherine's uncle looked at his fingernails and then back at the Snapes. "I don't care to discuss anything else on this topic."

They looked at each other and then back at him again. "Uncle Sonny, that's a dangerous witch out there, and it seems she wants to hurt me and especially the baby."

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I've told you all I can. What little I could tell you is of dubious use in solving your case, and you could be in danger from that as well."

"Why don't you tell us and let us decide?" When the other wizard only stared back in response, Severus stood up. "Do you mean to tell us, after all we've done for you, you're not going to help us understand what that witch has been doing? How can we anticipate what she will do next?"

Sonny sat back in his seat and looked up calmly. "I promise you that I've said all that's important to your investigation. If I keep any secrets, it's for my own very good reasons, and I'm not going to be dictated to by a boy like you."

Severus's face turned red. "A boy, am I? Well, sir, at least I'm trying to take care of my family, to protect my wife and daughter..." He was stopped when the beefier wizard stood and met him face to face.

"I'll have you know that the secrets I keep are exactly to protect your wife, and her mother. Should I tell you everything, she would be in even greater danger! And you will NOT. TELL ME. HOW TO MANAGE. MY AFFAIRS!"

"Stop, please." Katherine said it so quietly that they both looked over at her. "Severus?" She motioned him over. She reached for his hand and put it over her tummy. She had just reached a stage when others would wonder if she was merely gaining weight or pregnant, but Severus was able to tell what disturbed her. The muscles under his hand were rock-hard.

He took a deep breath and let it out to calm himself. "It's probably nothing. How often are you noticing it?"

"Three times in the last twenty minutes."

Her uncle was forgotten in the need to take action. Severus helped Katherine up and into their bedroom, where he made her comfortable in their bed. Then he turned and saw her uncle.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper. I know you wouldn't do anything to harm Katherine or the baby."

"You're distraught. It's how I killed two men and ended up imprisoned at St. Mungo's."

Severus ran his hand through his hair and sighed. "She needs to see a Healer."

"I can think of a Healer whom you should probably speak with. Shall I bring her here?"

Understanding dawned in Severus's eyes. "Yes, I think that's a good idea."

If Sonny wouldn't talk, he at least would bring someone else they could question.

When Sonny returned with the Healer a half-hour later, Katherine was dozing and the contractions had ceased. The two wizards decided to start with a conversation in the sitting room. Severus frowned when he looked at the witch he once considered to be his friend. "You tried to kill my wife."

"If you only knew..." She wrung her hands.

"Why don't you explain to me why someone I considered a friend would take steps to kill my wife and our child."

"They threatened me, and promised me..."

"Who? Who threatened you, and who promised you?" Sonny Andolini's voice was barely above a whisper, but the witch answered immediately with wide eyes.

"Gustav Weatherfield." Snape raised an eyebrow and she continued. "He threatened to make certain facts about my accreditation known, and then he promised that after his daughter was married to you and pregnant..." She looked up and blushed. "He said the family wouldn't mind if I became your mistress, Severus."

Sonny chuckled hollowly. "You weren't to have any say in the matter, I see, Severus."

Severus looked pained. "Just exactly what was supposed to happen?"

"If the aborting potion didn't kill your wife," she swallowed hard, "I was supposed to give her a potion on her next visit that would damage her completely. The counselors would see to it that at the very least she would release you from your marriage."

"Yet suicide would not be an undesired outcome." Sonny was furious.

"We have need of a Healer, but under the circumstances, I cannot let you touch my wife."

The witch looked up uncertainly. "I'm sorry, Severus, I would never hurt you...I care for you..."

"Don't."

She stopped and looked from one wizard to the other. Their faces both looked murderous. Severus finally shook his head and spoke to Sonny. "There is no way I'm going to let this woman near my pregnant wife."

The older wizard nodded in agreement. "It's simply not appropriate."

The witch suddenly allowed her eagerness to show. "Has Mr. Weatherfield succeeded, then? Is Audrey expecting your child? Am I here for..."

Snape looked nauseated. "Don't embarrass yourself."

Sonny looked at the Healer, assessing something. "I believe I can make use of this healer, Severus, but you will need to find another medical professional."

Severus looked into the other wizard's eyes searchingly and then smiled. "That's an interesting proposition."

"Katherine has made a great deal of money out of similar arrangements and mentioned in passing that she thought such an introduction would have merit."

"What about Gustav?"

Sonny's smile became an evil smirk. "One way or another, he and I will come to a satisfactory conclusion. I'll deal with his old bat of a mother if need be, as well."

"You know Agnes?"

"Unfortunately. We had dealings when she was still managing the family's affairs. It will be a pleasure to even a few scores."

The Healer watched the discussion with wide eyes. "What are you going to do with me?" she whispered.

Severus slipped out the door as Sonny explained. "... If you do everything as I ask, we'll finish with Obliviation and you won't remember a thing."

The Snapes' guests had left when Severus returned, this time with Poppy Pomfrey. He wasn't concerned since he knew what Sonny had planned. Poppy looked around the hallway and into the various rooms with interest. "Your home is lovely, Severus! I never would have imagined it."

He laughed sardonically. "I'll show you all the way around after you reassure me that Katherine is fine."

Severus led her to the bedroom where Katherine was napping. She lay on her side where her husband had put her, and the shape of her body was obvious from that angle, especially to the medical professional. "But she's pregnant!" said Poppy. "Congratulations, Papa!"

Severus turned red. "She's been having contractions. I think they were simply Braxton-Hicks contractions, but we need to know for sure."

Poppy smiled and took over the room. "It looks like you've done the right things, by having her lie down on her side and drink fluids. Let's take a look to make sure nothing has been happening underneath, shall we?"

Twenty minutes after Severus took the medi-witch to examine Katherine, they came back out into the sitting room. The house-elves were summoned, and Fern took Poppy on a tour of the flat. Sonny had returned and looked up expectantly. Severus reassured him. "She's perfectly fine. It's that false labor they talk about."

Sonny smiled too. "My little project is going as I envisioned it."

"Where will it happen?"

"At the Ministry. Gustav has an office there, and it's easy enough to bring the girl to visit her father and then arrange for the other party to come to the office on some pretext."

"And the delivery system for the necessary potions?"

"Nothing will be easier for my people."

Severus shook his head in amazement. Sonny's organization was not in actuality very large, but it had a broad scope. There was no doubt in his mind that the entire caper would progress exactly as designed. There was a single pang of conscience at the thought of the truly innocent lives that would be changed. On second thought, the innocent would most likely find the change an improvement and the guilty would suffer all the more. Snape smiled. "I'll have the elixirs prepared within the week."

Several hours later, the Snapes were lying together in their bedroom. He lay behind his wife and caressed the bump of her belly. "Our baby is perfect, Poppy says."

Katherine snuggled into his arms. "Then she matches her father."

"Hm, we'll be a perfect family."

"She could tell for sure?" Katherine turned and half sat up.

"She wouldn't lie to me." He started massaging where his hands were positioned.

"So everything is perfectly fine?"

He smiled, knowing what she was after. "Yes, we can carry on as normal."

"Really?"

His hand found the hem of her short night gown and started rubbing her leg. "Absolutely."

Severus wouldn't let his wife out of the house after the archive incident. With Silvia Greenlee still at large and no way to prevent Gustav Weatherfield from plotting further damage, Severus wasn't sure how well he could protect her. At the same time, he also worried that any stress might cause more contractions, and that further contractions might be all too real.

That didn't prevent their friends from coming to visit, for tea or dessert and coffee after dinner. The Malfoys visited during the following week. They were delighted by the news that Katherine could find no other potential heir. Lucius felt magnanimous and encouraged the Snapes to finish the investigations in France and Italy. "Let's make sure we've run the table," he said. "As it happens, we have more than one heir of our own to consider." He looked at his wife, who smiled at the Snapes.

"Congratulations," said Katherine. Narcissa smiled and whispered her thanks while Severus shook his friend's hand.

"Everything is going exactly as we could wish," said Lucius.

Katherine didn't want to upset anything, but there was a nagging question at the back of her mind. She smiled and laughed along with the conversation while the Malfoys were visiting. Severus sent her to bed as he checked the security of the apartment. When her husband came to their room and started to undress, she put words to her question.

"Has anyone attacked either of the Malfoys?"

Severus Banished his shirt studs to a dresser drawer. "No, I don't believe so."

"What about their son...Draco...isn't that his name?"

"No, Draco hasn't been the target of attack either."

"It doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't make sense?"

"What has anyone got to gain by attacking us?"

He looked at her.

"I mean, I guess I see the point of getting me out of the way to be with you. As Lucius said the first time I met him, you're a marvelous catch and any witch would want you."

He smiled. "I am, aren't I?"

"But then why does Gustav Weatherfield want me out of the way? What do you have to offer him? If all he wants is a suitable match for his daughter, I could give him half a dozen choices."

"Yes, you've named them all to me. It's interesting that three are all in the same family."

"Four, actually, but only one really makes sense, given their personalities."

"Your uncle says you're quite good at that. It sounds quite lucrative."

"I only collect after the first child is born. Occasionally, a family is angry with the gender and doesn't pay."

Severus lifted the sheet and slid next to his wife. "You should do that, then. Send Gustav a letter."

"I sent one to Agnes, right after the party at the Malfoys."

"Gustav's mother?"

"Yes. She sent me a Howler in response, telling me to mind my own business."

"Ah, I recall that now."

"I thought you might."

"Well, I'm inclined to let your uncle continue his plan, then."

Katherine sat up. "What is he going to do?"

Severus ran a hand through her hair and then down her torso as he spoke. "I'm not entirely sure, and when I suggested that he not be ruthless, he responded that no one has seen ruthless yet."

"We can't just let him be lawless!"

"Is it possible to actually stop him?"

She pondered the question as her husband rubbed the bump of her tummy. Suddenly she gasped and rubbed at the side, herself. He was instantly concerned.

"What is it? Is it another contraction?"

She shook her head, and the look in her eyes was indescribable as she concentrated. She rubbed and prodded and then laid her hand flat. Then she looked at him, an open invitation in her eyes.

"*Legilimens*," he whispered. His hand joined hers.

As he sifted through her emotions, he felt it: It was like the gentle strumming of a stringed instrument, or perhaps the flash of a fish as it swam close and then away again. "It's her," she whispered. He pulled away from her mind and discovered that he could still feel the motions under his hand. When he looked at his wife, he saw that her eyes were suspiciously bright and a shy smile was on her face.

They sat like that for several minutes, until the child went back to sleep. "I love you," whispered Katherine.

"I love you too," he answered. He had stopped rubbing Katherine's belly when they felt the child move, but now there was an urge to resume gentle rubbing and caresses. Before long the two were clasped together tightly, managing to work around the person who would soon be an important part of both their lives.

The Malfoys saw the Snapes off lavishly at Victoria Station. Several photographers were there, as was a reporter from the *Daily Prophet*. If leaving England was an event, the Snapes were going in grand style. Lucius was particularly garrulous on this occasion, and all eyes followed him and his wife as though charmed that way... not that it was beyond possibility that Severus and Lucius had cast an interesting spell or two.

He made a big deal out of handing the Snapes' bags to the conductor, and pointed out the private car to the reporter. Then he took a photographer on board to show just how luxurious the Malfoys' private car was. As he did so, Narcissa preened for the other photographer, posing with Katherine and Severus as though they were at a Ministry function.

Perhaps those watching could be forgiven if they didn't actually see the Snapes get on the train. They did get on the train, but immediately stepped off on the opposite side and Disapparated. From there they went to Katherine's old apartment in the port city where she had grown up.

A/N: I promised myself I would never let a story go more than a week between updates. I'm so sorry! I just couldn't figure out how this one started. Chapter 21 is ready to post soon, and Chapter 22 is at least started. Please forgive me!

Thanks as always to Trickie Woo, who betaed this in a flash.

Not as Described by Tour Books

Chapter 21 of 25

There was just time to throw their clothes on and grab their bags. The last sound they heard as the Portkey activated was a banging on the door of the apartment. A moment later they were standing under a bridge in Paris.

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

Instead of traveling to Paris, the Snapes Apparated to a port city where Katherine still owned a flat. Severus was quite impressed by just how dodgy the neighborhood was and yet how comfortably Katherine had arranged everything. As they waited for the *Evening Prophet*, Severus looked through the apartment, occasionally chuckling to himself.

"What's so amusing?" she asked suspiciously.

"I finally get to go through your things. It took a house-elf several minutes to re-sort my underthings, you know."

"That was Tonks." She smiled sadly. "She had so much fun that morning."

"I should have known," he replied, "although it was fun to imagine you wrist deep in my delicates all last winter."

"Poor baby," she drawled. She moved close to him and slid a knowing hand someplace that caught his attention. "I can explore your delicates now, if you like."

"That's a promising offer," he said, "but I see two owls coming." He nodded to the window over the dining area.

The owls brought the evening paper and a note. They were not disappointed by the paper. "Look," said Severus, holding it up. A headline said *Private Malfoy Car Detaches from Train, Falls From Bridge*. There were several pictures of the two of them with Lucius and Narcissa, there was one of them getting on the train, and finally there was one of the Malfoys waving as the train left the station.

There were also pictures of the train car after it fell from the bridge. It was twisted, and in the rubble Katherine could make out her cosmetics bag. She shuddered. Then she saw Severus's suitcase and shuddered again.

"But, Severus, whoever did that tried to kill you, too."

"Actually not," he answered, showing her the note he had received.

Dear Professor,

You were right. It happened as soon as I went to the dining car. I admit I'm rather proud of my subsequent performance.

D

"Who's D?" she asked.

"Draco. He was on board, wearing one of my robes and using Polyjuice."

She was shocked. "But he might have..."

"He was perfectly safe. There was a Portkey in case of an incident that he couldn't escape."

"Did his mother approve of this?" Her voice was a whispered shriek.

"I'm pretty sure she will now," he answered. Seeing that he was about to be scolded, he pointed to the story and the pictures of what looked like Severus, speaking to authorities in Calais. "Let's read about it."

The Malfoy family railroad car mysteriously rolled off the train between London and Calais this afternoon. The car was being borrowed by their good friends, Professor and Mrs. Snape, who were traveling to France and Italy. The accident happened shortly after Professor Snape had left his wife napping on the car.

Professor Snape was visibly distraught after the accident and promised retribution if the tragedy was the result of foul play. "My dear Katherine will be avenged," he was heard to vow...

"That's sweet. He's barely met me," she said. "What happens next?"

"I'm leaving him and his father to decide what to do next. There might be inquiries at the Ministry and that sort of thing."

Katherine had stopped listening and refolded the paper. A different story had attracted her attention.

Friends of the Weatherfield family will no doubt congratulate them on the marriage of their daughter Audrey to Percival Weasley. The nuptials were celebrated just this morning after an engagement of just three days. Both families have indicated that the pair simply fell madly in love.

However, this reporter has learned several things about this rapid courtship that don't add up. Audrey, known to be a Squib, had recently been reported to be a possible bride for a leading citizen whose wife has become quite accident-prone. It has been whispered into my ear that three days ago Audrey had visited her father at the Ministry, only to be left to wait for several hours in a conference room. When Gustav finally found her, she and Mr. Weasley were in a most compromising position.

Witnesses say that Gustav maintains that potions must have been involved. However, the pair seemed quite taken with each other and begged to be married. Since the damage appeared to have been done, a wedding was hastily put together...

"Do you know anything about this?" Katherine asked her husband.

"I believe I shall invoke my right against self-incrimination."

"Severus..."

"I had nothing to do with bringing them together at the Ministry."

"I take that to mean that you knew it would happen... and by any chance, is this related to the afternoon you spent in your potions laboratory last week?"

He folded his arms. "Didn't you suggest that the pair be introduced? Do you think they really needed any potions?"

"Not for a normal-length courtship, but this one was sped along..."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"I should have known better than to introduce you to Uncle Sonny. Two Slytherins together will of course engage in male bonding by carrying out some scheme."

"Hm," he said, closing the subject. "I have a question or two of my own. Suppose you explain the significance of that?" He pointed at a small table in her hallway.

"Oh," she said with a blush. "I stayed here right before that last battle, you know, and I had gathered a few things. It was good to have items around to remind me of you."

"You couldn't remember me without those items?"

"Of course I could, but it was good to have things to hold and look at."

He smiled indulgently. "So what are all these pieces of memorabilia?"

She touched each one reverently. "Well, this is the lipstick I wore on the day we searched your house."

"My favorite color ever since. I recognize the keychain, but what about the cork?"

"It's from the bottle of wine we shared that night at Hogwarts."

"Ah, I recall. How did you come by that picture of me?" It was a snapshot of an eleven-year-old boy who looked half-frightened and half-fierce.

"It's your Hogwarts entrance photo. I filched it from your file at the Ministry."

"I never saw this issue of the *Prophet*." It showed them working their way up the grand staircase at Hogwarts, clasped together as closely as clothed people could be. When he picked up the newspaper, he found something underneath it. "I believe I recognize this shirt stud. I had Filch tear the Headmaster's quarters apart, looking for it."

"Any one of the portraits should have been able to tell you where to look."

"They were working against me when it came to you." He smirked. "I can guess where the Snitch box came from, but what is the value of the glass bottle?"

"You transformed it into the Portkey that carried us to Corsica."

"I wonder if I should be disturbed, that you created almost a shrine. I suppose it's typical of a Hufflepuff, if she's in fifth year."

"I needed it during that last month. I was so worried about you, and I missed you so much."

He kissed her, and they made their way to the bedroom. "Please tell me that's not the bed you used with your first husband."

She shook her head. "The entire flat has been redone years ago. That bed was Transfigured."

"Indeed?"

She pointed out a window. "Do you see that tree in the courtyard?"

He looked to see an elm tree that was thriving. "That's good work."

She shrugged casually. "The hard part was getting it through the window at three in the morning."

"So is the current bed a transfigured tree?"

"Why don't we find out?" she asked, moving her hips toward his and being stopped by the bump in between.

He chuckled and started to undress her as they sat upon the bed.

A while later, they were lying together and softly kissing. Severus was idly touching his wife's tummy, occasionally prodding and hoping for more motion from the baby. Katherine giggled and poked him back, and they both laughed.

Suddenly, a bull-shaped Patronus appeared before them. "They know about your apartment. Use the Portkey now."

Severus was out of the bed before Sonny's voice faded. He found Katherine's clothes and tossed them to her. "We have perhaps 30 seconds. Dress quickly."

There was just time to throw their clothes on and grab their bags. The last sound they heard as the Portkey activated was a banging on the door of the apartment. A moment later they were standing under a bridge in Paris.

"How did they do that?"

"Do what?"

"How did they find out about my apartment? It was in my records, but only in the ones buried in the Ministry archives."

"Have you met Gustav's new son-in-law?"

"Would Percy Weasley have put us in danger like that?"

"It's likely he wasn't told why he was looking. Have you ever met him? Once he realizes he has someone to impress, he will do anything that person wants. He's the consummate sycophant."

She conceded the point, because a new one occurred to her. "All right, that's how they found us, but why were they looking? How did they know we *both* got off the train?"

He thought for a moment. "The steward...they will have questioned the steward, who would have told them he never saw you on board the train."

"How did we miss that?"

"Lucius paid him off; obviously someone else paid him more."

They looked at each other in concern. Suddenly even Paris didn't seem particularly safe. They looked out from under the shadow of their bridge at a world that was suddenly frightening. There was only one place safe enough for them, now. They couldn't go to the island just yet, there was too much else to do, first.

They stood and waited. Within half an hour the twilight changed to full dark, and they decided they could risk walking on the streets. The Snapes walked up to the street level and went down an alleyway. There was a small establishment where Katherine had often spent a night or two in the past. The concierge greeted her and handed her a key to a fifth-floor room and a note.

The Snapes looked at each other. They took the stairs to the second floor and read the note in a broom closet.

Katherine,

I must see you. Please don't tell me there's no chance for us any more. Please meet me at that delightful cafe where we shared so many lunches.

Charles.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"You know him. Isn't it a little odd that he would send a note here, as if he expected you to come to Paris?"

"I don't want to believe that he's behind this."

"I don't think he is."

"Make up your mind, Severus!" Katherine was tired and worried

"This is dated before the rail accident. He didn't know about that. He's not behind this, Katherine, but he *is* involved. Someone told him you would be in France and asked him where you would stay."

"He's the back up plan, you mean." At her husband's nod, she added, "We can't stay here, then." She said it sadly, but she knew it was true.

"No, we can't. How about the Ritz?"

She looked up at him through her lashes. "Who's paying?"

He made a show of sighing. "I'll pay, Mrs. Snape, but you'll have to make it worth my while."

"We're in the wrong neighborhood for *that* sort of arrangement."

He chuckled as she thought. "We had reservations at the Ritz. Narcissa told everyone about them. Let's go to the George Cinq, instead."

"You just like the spa there better."

"It *is* better, and more private as well."

"Will it be safe?"

"It's a bit off the beaten track for either of us, and although we've each used it, it's not where either of us usually goes."

He grasped her hand and Apparated to a quiet corner near the Avenue des Champs-Élysée. It was a short walk to the hotel. Twenty minutes later, Mr. and Mrs. Snape were being shown to a suite that looked on the city toward the river. Severus tipped the attendant and closed the door.

As soon as the young man's footsteps faded, the wizard pulled out his wand and went to work. He cast every protective spell he could remember, a process which took several minutes, and then realized that he would need to remove several of them so that Muggles could come to deliver the room service Katherine had ordered.

When the tray arrived from the kitchen, Severus reset his spells and finally relaxed enough to walk to the bedroom. Katherine lay across the bed, her robe and dress on the floor. It looked as though she had undressed to her slip and was suddenly overcome by weariness. He climbed onto the bed behind her and put an arm around her middle.

"Aren't you hungry?"

There was a sigh as she woke from her doze. "Mmphf, starving."

"The food is here."

"Could you eat it for me and then tell me about it? I'm too tired to chew, or swallow, or sit up, or really do anything."

"Well then, shall I join you?"

"That would be," there was a pause for a huge yawn, "lovely. You could rub my back."

"It's such a lovely back."

"Hmph. It's an overlarge back and you know it. You're sweet to play along, though."

After a short but vigorous rub, Severus roused his wife enough to take a bath. He sat beside her and fed her from the tray until she looked up at him and observed, "You've had an active day, too, you know." She pulled on his arm until he tipped into the fortunately enormous bath with her.

A/N: Thank you for reading and reviewing! I appreciate that you have kept with this. Thank you to Trickie Woo for beta reading!

April in Paris

Chapter 22 of 25

Katherine sits down at a cafe with an old flame.

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Charles arrived at the cafe indicated in his note at approximately eleven in the morning, local time. It was in the middle of Magical Paris between a book store and an emporium that appeared to sell wands. They weren't sure about the latter shop. The sign seemed to indicate them but the pictures in the windows were of scantily clad women with smiling men. Katherine remembered the book shop but did not recall the other. They hoped it would be unimportant.

Katherine and Severus knew when Charles arrived because they were watching the cafe. They also watched several of the buildings in the area and assessed the likelihood of anyone else watching the small restaurant. As they watched, Charles ordered two coffees and then made a great show of arranging them perfectly on the table, along with a small nosegay of daffodils and narcissus.

He placed an order and then stood and slowly turned, looking all around himself. "What's he doing?" asked Severus.

Katherine sighed, her one hope dashed. "If I had to guess, I'd say he's looking for a contact. His spot at the table faces the direction I usually arrive from, so I don't think he was looking for me."

The Snapes let him sit there for a while. Katherine wanted to go straight over and speak to him, but Severus wanted to be sure of her safety, first. "I don't want you to go down there. Let me do it."

"This is our chance to find out what's going on."

"I would rather get you onto our island and keep you there."

"For how long, Severus? When will it be safe to come back to civilization? Will it be before or after our daughter's Hogwarts letter arrives?"

"I don't like this."

"We have to do it, and the fact that there are people around the area shopping should keep anyone from shooting hexes all over the place."

"I'm not so sure."

She kissed him. "You know this is the best way to do things. I love you."

He pulled her close and kissed her some more. Finally, he could see no danger that would offset the potential value of the information his wife would obtain. He adjusted the key pendant hanging around her neck and whispered a charm as he tapped it with his wand. Then he kissed her and watched her walk away on a circuitous route that would take her behind the wizard she planned to meet.

He watched as she made her way to the meeting spot. It was a risk they had to take, and she was trained in defense. He had also done much to protect her, but somehow watching his whole life walk up to her former lover and whatever dangers were in the area was unnerving. He started making his way to a spot where he could still watch unseen yet closely enough that he could participate if any trouble started.

"Hello, Charles." The wizard jumped when he heard her voice and his table jiggled. He quickly stood and turned around.

"Katherine!" He would have taken her in his arms, but her hand was forcefully in his way, so he took it in his and bent to kiss it. "How are you, my darling? You left me in a lurch in Monte Carlo. I was left all alone to cry in my champagne. Imagine my surprise at hearing about the lovely Mrs. Snape who went up and down the Golden Circle with her friend, Mrs. Malfoy."

He was trying far too hard not to look at her middle as he spoke, so she made things easy for him by smoothing the front of her robe from just under her bosom to the middle of the bulge in her belly. There could be no doubt about her condition. "Surprise, Charles? That I went shopping with a friend? You must explain this riddle to me."

The witch sat down in such a way that her back was to a wall. She couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, but she kept looking. The street was full of the normal people, shopping, sightseeing, or stopping for a bite to eat. She barely could make out the shadow that was her husband as he moved into a spot that was just within wand range. Katherine wasn't sure whether to be nervous or relieved. She touched the key below her neck just to reassure herself.

"Have some coffee. I ordered your favorite." Charles sat as close to her as he could. "I was surprised that you were married, dear. I distinctly remember you saying once that you couldn't imagine getting married again, but if you did, I would be as good a choice as any."

"I did say that, didn't I?" At his nod, she shrugged. "I guess that goes to show how colossally wrong a person can be, Charles."

"You can always divorce him." He was tapping the table nervously. "Do drink your coffee."

She chuckled and shook her head. "No, Charles. This is the sort of marriage I always dreamed was beyond my grasp. There's no way I could leave him. I'd as soon cut off my wand arm."

"But you're the only one I can imagine being married to."

"Surely that's not so. There must be others who would love to be your baroness."

"Exactly. They all want to be a baroness. You enjoyed being with me."

"I wouldn't enjoy it now that I've met Severus. Not at all, Charles."

"I'm richer than he is."

"Been checking up on us, have you?"

"That island of his would fit inside my estate."

Katherine sat up at that. "How do you know about the island?"

"No one can find it; I know that much. There's a full description of everything except its location in your marriage records."

She took a breath and let it out. This was not the time to let him see that he had shaken her. "Where were you ever looking at my marriage records?" The smile on her face was a bit stiff, but he wasn't really paying attention.

"I went to the Ministry in London, where they're filed. I tried to see you, but everyone said you never went out." He fiddled with his napkin. "Actually, I was hoping it was made up, that you were pretending marriage for the sake of a job, but I stopped in at the cafe on Diagon Alley that has a reading room. Too many back issues of the *Prophet* show you two together for it to be a fake."

She shrugged and decided to let that part of the conversation die. She counted to sixty before saying, "I don't care about the money, Charles."

"Then what is it, Katherine?"

"We have similar backgrounds. We understand each other. Most of all, we simply have whatever it is that fate gives us when the right two people are together. I'm sorry, Charles."

"You can't blame a fellow for trying, can you? Why aren't you drinking your coffee?"

Katherine was going to pat his hand, but hers paused half way across the table. "Charles, surely you realize I'm pregnant. Caffeine is bad for babies, you know."

He looked stricken. "It's true? You really *are* pregnant?"

It was her first genuine smile of the conversation. "Yes, I am. I'm really married, and I'm really having my husband's baby."

He mumbled to himself. "I was so sure that it was just a lie they told me." Aloud he said, "You always told me you would never be able to have children."

"I couldn't," she said. "Then I came here to Paris, actually, and was badly injured. I went home and Severus made a potion that cured me. It healed those old injuries as well, and now I'm able to have children."

A church bell started tolling the hour. Charles looked worried. "Please, Katherine, you have to drink that coffee. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Something in his face made her determined to never drink that coffee, if she had to force it down *this* throat. That wasn't a bad idea. She slid her wand far enough into her hand to use it, but was unable to actually cast a spell due to the arrival of a third person.

A voice on her other side said, "Yes, Katherine, do drink the coffee. It will be so much easier, and far less painful and obvious than my other methods of dealing with you." Katherine turned slightly to see Silvia Greenlee walking toward them. The false Auror smiled and said, "Confound her, Charles, force her to take the potion!"

"It will be the last thing you do, sir." Katherine looked toward Silvia again to see that Severus was standing behind her. She smiled up at him and was able to grip her wand more firmly. He smiled back, but never took his eyes from their adversaries.

Silvia broke back into the conversation. "It doesn't matter about him, Severus," she said. "Once your wife takes the poison, both she and her brat will be dead. Then you and I will conceive the heir to the Prince Legacy. It will be a bit of a squeeze, but I'm sure a Healer can be convinced to bring the baby a few weeks early."

"Then what? Severus is only half-blood," said Katherine.

"His child with me will be more than half. The baby will inherit, but I will find a way to be in charge of the legacy. It shouldn't be too hard to dispose of a disagreeable Daddy, if necessary. That would just make a larger inheritance."

"So you would kill Severus, too?"

"I don't see the point in discussing it. Charles, kill her."

Charles followed the conversation with annoyance in his face. "The potion was supposed to only cause the baby..."

"The baby and the mother. The love charm I have in mind works best if there's no rival around to complicate things. Although love is perhaps overstating the ability of the charm. Once I cast it, Severus would be unable to stop thinking of me until the deed was done."

"You're sick." Charles stood up.

Silvia laughed. "You didn't mind when you thought it would get you what you wanted. Now that you learn that your precious Katherine is going to die, you suddenly get a conscience?" Her eyes went ice cold. "Kill her."

"I won't," he answered.

She sighed. "Why did I have to pick someone who's in love with you?" she asked Katherine. "There must have been some other way to get you into the open." She turned to Charles again. "Do as I say, Baron!"

"I won't. I was willing to convince her to run away with me, but this... This is..." He saw Silvia's wand swish through the air and moved in front of it. An instant later, he was lying on the pavement at Katherine's feet. The patio that had been crowded seconds before was suddenly filled with popping noises and then just as suddenly was silent and empty.

"Why do men have to make such long, boring speeches about how much they love other women?" This time she spoke to Severus, whose wand was out. He watched the witch carefully. He took a step toward his wife when the witch aimed her wand in that direction. She stepped closer to him and purred. "You can tell me anything you like once your wife is dead, Severus. You can whisper anything you like as you impregnate me, if you enjoy it. Anything to further the cause."

"It won't happen," he said, confidently. "I can't imagine that I would even be able to touch you."

"That wasn't the case on the train," she trilled. "If I could have had ten minutes before your wife had to come along..." She was reminded of what she was doing and suddenly whispered a curse and aimed it right at Katherine's breastbone.

The spell hit the key full on, and fireworks seemed to erupt as the spell backfired onto the witch who cast it. She fell to the ground but got up again. Severus took the opportunity to move next to his wife, who used his cover to once more scan the neighboring buildings for dangerous shadows.

Silvia hissed at them. "The protective spell wasn't supposed to stay once I said the counteracting curse! The sales clerk lied to me!"

Severus chuckled. "Did you honestly think I would leave it as purchased? Of course I placed some charms of my own upon it."

The witch smiled. "Then it should be fairly easy to find the counter-curse. As I recall, you had some favorite spells..." She lifted her wand.

"*Incarcerous!*" shouted a familiar voice from the edge of the cafe's patio.

Silvia ducked and ropes sailed past her, wrapping around a chair at the next table. The back of the chair was completely twisted by the force of the ropes pulling around it. She looked at the source of the spell and laughed. "I'm an Auror! That spell doesn't work on me!"

The wizard set his chin and raised his wand again. Katherine shook her head and reached for the other witch with her hands as Severus pushed his wife backwards. An instant later they were forced to the ground as Silvia cast a Revulsion Jinx and Disapparated.

"Uncle Sonny!" Katherine saw her relative standing near by.

"Do you think I would allow you to have all the fun?" He walked over to give her a big hug. "How's little Corinne?" he whispered.

"Perfect," she whispered back. "They wanted me to drink poison, but I wouldn't touch a drop of it."

"Good girl."

They waited for the *Gendarmerie Magique* as Uncle Sonny loudly ordered himself a glass of the house red. They sat at a nearby table and discussed nothing in particular.

"Has anything interesting been happening at home?" Katherine said, a little louder than necessary.

"Nothing except the oddest train accident. One car detached from the train and fell down a steep embankment."

"Great Helga!" said Katherine. "Was anyone hurt?"

"The authorities thought a woman might have been killed, but the attendant told the authorities that the witch who was supposed to be in the car had never actually been on it."

"Really?"

"She was seen to get on it, but the attendant never saw her; he only saw her husband. The accident occurred shortly after he went to the saloon car."

"So he wasn't hurt, either?"

"Where did he say his wife was?" asked Severus at the same time as Katherine's question.

"The husband insisted that the Ministry keep looking for his wife's body for a day, but then he disappeared. The owners of the train car are now pressuring the Aurors to uncover the truth of what happened, but let's face it, the Aurors are not what they once were." Sonny gave Severus a look.

Severus took his wife's hand. "Do you know, my dear, I have the oddest desire to learn more about this bizarre story. I think that I shall send a letter to some friends back home to see if they can fill me in."

She smiled and patted his hand. "Whatever you think best, dear."

The gendarmes came and took their statements, which perhaps didn't match the facts perfectly. However, in the absence of other witnesses to come forward, this did not raise any questions. They went back to their local Ministry office convinced that the charming witch had stopped to have coffee with an old friend. A rival stopped by and created a scene during which the unfortunate wizard was killed. Such a shame that people will get so agitated over their personal affairs. They took a detailed description of the other witch and thanked the trio who answered their questions.

Katherine tried to put words to the dozen or so questions she wanted to ask her uncle, but Severus took her arm and Apparated. He took her underneath a bridge and straightened her hair and robes. Then he straightened his own.

"We've just had a lovely walk through town, and now we're a bit tired. You're going to go to the spa for a salt-wrap or whatever it is you women do, and I'm going to lie down for a while near the pool. Then we're going to have tea in our room and after that we're going to have dinner somewhere elegant."

"A *salt-wrap*?"

"Isn't that what it's called?"

"You know very well that it is not," she said to him. "I probably won't get any sort of wrap. It would be bad for the baby." She warmed up to her subject. "Just manicure, pedicure, and perhaps a facial..."

He smiled as they went through the door of the hotel. "Are you sure?"

She realized that he had been teasing her so that she wouldn't try to discuss what had just happened while they were in public. "You've been particularly Slytherin in your methods, lately."

"All the better to keep an eye on things," he replied. His hand rested on the small of her back as she went to the concierge desk to make her spa appointments. Then he asked for advice on restaurants, and the staff later recalled that the Snape couple seemed to be enjoying their visit to the City of Light. They tipped well, too.

Katherine didn't get a chance to broach the subject until they were dressing for dinner. "Every time we figure something out, there are more questions."

"Such as?" He didn't really need to ask, but now he would let her get them all out.

"How did Uncle Sonny know where to be? How did Silvia get to know Charles? If the Weatherfields are the ones who engineered the train accident, how did Silvia and Charles get involved on this side of things? And why was Uncle Sonny's binding spell so strong?"

Severus considered the last point first. "In your experience, did you ever see a binding spell work that way?"

"Never."

"So the answer is obvious."

"But he wouldn't."

"Are you sure?"

"Well..."

"I believe he would do a great many things when you're involved, my dear."

"Perhaps. I guess we'll have to ask him the next time we see him."

"Don't fret over it. It might be weeks from now."

"Or at dinner."

He smiled at her. "Suppose we tackle the easy questions. Your relationship with Charles was no secret."

"No, I suppose Silvia probably knew about it."

"And since Silvia was high enough in the Auror ranks to be on security details, her connection to Gustav Weatherfield is easily seen."

"They must have been using each other. What would have happened if they managed to get both Silvia and Audrey pregnant?"

"Hm, we might have saved Audrey's life with that matchmaking."

"I know it's a good match, but I wish it could have gone at a normal pace."

"There's no use worrying about that, now."

"So why was Uncle Sonny so close?"

"My best guess is that he asked his friends to look after you... or to look for Silvia. Most likely he was having you both followed." He leaned behind her to zip her dress.

"There's one last question."

"What's that?"

"Why does everyone want to kill our baby? If she's half blood, wouldn't they be just as well off to pretend she doesn't exist and go straight to seducing you?"

He brought her his studs so she could thread them through his cuffs. "I've never understood the truly criminal mind, myself. Perhaps they just want fewer people around who could be executors of the legacy."

"I guess so."

"Well, suppose we forget all that for now and go have our marvelous evening on the town? Let's be the tourists we want people to think we are." He leaned up and looked over his appearance in the mirror. Satisfied, he turned to his wife and offered his hand. She smiled, and he helped her stand. Together they set the suite to rights and put their wands away before going out.

A/N: Thanks as always to Trickle Woo, and also to my kind readers and reviewers.

Ash and Banshee Hair

Chapter 23 of 25

Katherine looked at her plate. Suddenly she felt ill. She was used to being wary whenever she entered a situation, but her husband had made an art out of suspecting everyone and everything. A year ago she would have scoffed at such concerns, but at the moment his caution was warranted.

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

A/N: The violence in this chapter is a bit cartoonish in my mind, but I can see it being a bit disturbing for some. It is certainly more violent than what I usually write, so I

wanted to alert my readers.

Katherine sat at the breakfast table and pondered the next move. They couldn't go to the French Ministry. Silvia would be expecting them to do that. The same was true of the Italian Ministry. Somehow she knew what the branches of the family tree were, and she knew which pieces Katherine was missing. Clearly the Auror had availed herself of the Ministry Archives before Katherine had done so, and also clearly, the ex-Auror had the resources to watch the places the Snapes might look for information.

"How did she get those sorts of resources? I thought she was trying to marry rich; someone is involved who already has a fair amount of money."

"There is the Weatherfield family. We know Gustav is definitely involved, and your uncle seems to think his mother, Agnes, is trying to keep an old vendetta running."

"I don't understand what that old bat Agnes is trying to do. She can't expect to gain anything, herself, from the Prince Legacy."

"Some of the old families really want to see the future generations well cared for." Severus chose his next words carefully. "Then again, there seems to be a vendetta between Agnes and Sonny. He seems to think she would derive particular pleasure in hurting him through you."

"I can't believe anyone thinks I'm important. It's hardly happened in thirty-seven years that anyone has thought much about me one way or another. Meanwhile, how are we to get the missing branch of this family tree filled in?"

Severus watched her fret and finally set an object next to her plate. She picked it up. It was the cork from the bottle of Elf-made wine they had shared the night he invited her to Hogwarts. She didn't really look at the cork as she touched it. She just turned it in her fingers as she remembered the case she was working on at that time. Severus was reminding her that she had solved that case; she would solve this one too.

Then as the writing on the side of the cork came into focus, she realized what Severus was pointing out to her. The proprietor's name burned into the side of the cork was "Luc Malfoy." It was the last name she had on the French branch of the family tree. She gasped and looked him in the eye.

"You brilliant man." She got up and walked around the small table to kiss her husband. He met her part way, and the kiss they shared made them glad that the bed was just a few steps into the next room. Within hours they would take a rental car into the country with a picnic basket, like any couple hoping for a tour of the countryside. For the moment, however, they enjoyed a few moments of married bliss.

The basket of edibles was stowed carefully in the car that the concierge helped them obtain. Severus drove carefully out of town. They spent the morning driving through countryside and stopped along the way to have a picnic from the contents of their basket. An hour later, he parked at the remains of a church that was considered important to Muggle historians. The Snapes locked the car and then Severus held the cork out to his wife. He had made arrangements with the friend of a friend. As soon as she touched it, the Portkey activated and they were transported.

They found themselves in a room that looked very much like the atrium of a fine restaurant. That was, in fact, where they turned out to be. A fussy gentleman hurried up to them, spewed a mixture of what they assumed was English with what they knew was French, and showed them to a table overlooking the vineyard.

"Wow," said Katherine. "And Lucius owns most of this?"

"He loves the wine so much that he wanted to make sure he had a steady supply. It would seem that this is the missing French branch of the family, as well. When Luc had financial troubles, Lucius stepped in and made an arrangement that suited both quite well."

"I can understand why they came here." She sighed and shook her head in admiration of the view. "It sure is beautiful."

The waiter spoke much better English than the Maître 'd. "We have everyone start off with the classic red." He placed glasses on the table and Severus watched him carefully as he described the options for the various courses. He slid his hands over his wife's and held them on the table. The diners at the other tables oohed to themselves at how loving a husband he was.

The waiter took their orders and left. Severus quickly took his wand and vanished the contents of Katherine's glasses. "I was looking forward to that!" she hissed.

"I don't like the look of him, and if someone tried to poison you here, it would not be the first time, would it?"

"What am I to drink, then?" She couldn't help sounding waspish just then.

With an *Evanescio*, he cleaned her glass. Then he inspected it and sniffed it. Deciding it was clean, he said, "*Aguamenti!*" and filled it with clear, cold water. She sipped it gratefully.

"That's fine, but what about dinner? The cheese and bread we ate for lunch was a while ago, and not that filling."

"It is a problem," he said as the meal appeared at their places. "Perhaps it will help if you consider that someone wants to kill our child and you in the bargain."

Katherine looked at her plate. Suddenly she felt ill. She was used to being wary whenever she entered a situation, but her husband had made an art out of suspecting everyone and everything. A year ago she would have scoffed at such concerns, but at the moment his caution was warranted.

"Wait a minute," she said. "If this is the branch of the family tree that was missing, and if Lucius knew them all along, why couldn't he fill it in for us, himself?"

"Did he ever get a good look at the scroll on which you outlined the genealogy? He was also expecting you to go through official records. Even the records in this house would be more accurate than family lore."

The waiter returned in a fit of pique. "Madame does not like the chicken?" Katherine shrugged apologetically. "Well, then perhaps Madame would like a tour of the vineyard." The waiter took her arm and Disapparated.

Severus swore and stood to scan the arbors just below him. She was not close to the buildings, but there seemed to be a commotion in the distance. He closed his eyes and concentrated as he turned.

"...will *not* be quiet. There's no reason to hurt me whatsoever. Just let me go home, and we can pretend it never happened."

He heard his wife's voice and knew he had come near to the correct spot. He turned carefully and peered between some foliage. There she was; he had arrived exactly where he intended.

The rows of vines went on interminably. He would have to blast through them to get to her, but that would announce his presence. Instead, he would wait. She could be crafty when she needed to be, and her wand was still where she could get at it.

The waiter shook her arm. "You will be quiet." He spoke a spell and shook his wand. A puff of gray smoke came out.

"Not hardly. Am I supposed to make it easy for you? It's not like anyone's going to hear me." She twisted and struggled, but Severus thought she might be holding back.

"Quiet, now. I'm trying to concentrate." The oaf shook her again and Katherine shrieked at him. This time he managed to say the spell correctly and a stream of light went back toward the buildings. The wizard now trained his wand on Katherine's face and she became warily quiet.

There were four pops of Apparition and Severus saw three people come into view. A voice next to his own ear said, "How is she doing?"

He turned with his wand in his hand, a deadly curse of his own making on his lips, and found himself face-to-face with Sonny. "How did you know to come here?"

"I figured you would be here eventually, so I've been staying at the inn. It happens to have a view of this part of the estate. Do you recognize the others?"

Severus looked through the vines again and saw that Gustav Weatherfield was circling Katherine, along with Silvia. The third person was an older witch, who stood back and smiled. Severus had never seen her before. "Is that the infamous Agnes?"

Sonny peered out and swore. "Bloody hell, she *is* in this. I should have killed her years ago."

Katherine was still struggling and finally stamped on the instep of her captor, who let her go and howled. She turned to run, but Gustav caught her hair and pulled her close. Sonny swore and slid his wand between fronds of grape vine. He whispered a third-year Stinging Jinx at the man standing with his back to him. Gustav screamed when his arm was broken.

As Sonny pulled his hand back, Severus grabbed his arm and looked at the wand. "You have it."

"Of course I do. I wasn't going to let it go to just anyone."

Severus's mind started working through various events. "Have you had it all along? Were you the one who shot spells at us that night?" He thought of all the things that wand had done and became angry.

The older wizard's face turned dark. "Are you accusing me of that? I suppose you also think I would have hurt her, my own flesh and blood, and left her to die in Paris like that?"

"Of course not." Severus shook his head. "So you obtained it later..." He thought some more. "... at the cemetery in Venice!"

"Yes. Actually, one of my associates obtained it for me there."

"And then you sent payment for it to Ollivander?"

"I wanted to harness its full power."

"You realize that the core will cause any spell to develop deadly force."

"I just need to control it better. But what are we talking about? Katherine is in danger." He blasted a hole through the vines, which shriveled at their feet.

Katherine had likewise blasted a hole through some of the vines and was running away from the other four. Silvia followed. The waiter had done all he was paid to do and used the confusion to Disapparate. Gustav took several minutes to tie up his arm, but then followed along with Silvia. Agnes walked behind at a slower pace.

Unfortunately, Katherine didn't know her husband was so close and had gone in the other direction with the others following. As they chased her with spells, she blasted her way through the next row of vines and moved further in the other direction. As they got closer, she did the same thing again.

Silvia solved that by sending a stream of Fiendfyre to the row of vines beyond Katherine. She was forced back in their direction. Severus decided that hiding was unnecessary at this point and Apparated to the row where his wife was running. She swerved to avoid him, but when she realized it was him, she moved closer. The curses that had been following Katherine stopped abruptly.

"They want me alive," he said. Stay as close as you can." He ensured it by sliding an arm around her.

Silvia came closer and aimed her wand at Katherine's middle. "*Incarcerous!*" was shouted from a nearby vine. Ropes strangled a vine near Severus.

"Didn't I tell you that it won't work on me?"

"Not anymore," answered the other voice calmly. "The Ministry terminated your employment. *Incarcerous!*" Ropes extended from the wand to tie the witch tightly, but they did their job too well. Silvia screamed and struggled, as blood was drawn by the ropes encircling her arms and legs. They seemed to pull tighter and tighter as they enveloped her. When she realized what was happening, Katherine tried to sever some of them, using her wand to cut through the strands. There were too many of the ropes, and they worked too quickly. Silvia was soon strangled, and her body sank to the ground.

For a minute, only the fire could be heard. They could make out the sounds of many people yelling as they came down from the offices and restaurant to put the fire out. Katherine was suddenly tired and leaned into her husband. Neither took their eyes from their enemies.

Gustav came toward them, glowering and holding his arm. His mother glided up, seemingly unperturbed. "So this is Sonny's heir? I don't understand how you've had so much trouble, Gustav. She seems quite ordinary. It shouldn't take much of a curse." With a flick of her wrist, Agnes cast a spell at Katherine. It hit the jeweled key she was wearing. The rebound caused the elderly witch to fall to the ground, losing her grip on her wand as she did. With a shout of rage, Sonny blasted his way through the vines and stood over the witch.

"You won't do it again!" He stood over her with his wand held out. Any spell he uttered would end her life at this range.

"Uncle Sonny, you can't," said Katherine. Now that she could see it without inhibition, she recognized the wand in his hand.

"You have no idea what she's done," he answered.

"I did nothing, you fool. You did it all yourself," said the older witch.

"But you'll be put in Azkaban this time, unless they decide to send you to a French prison. Please think of little Corinne. She'll want to know you."

"She won't be safe with this madwoman in the world."

"She won't be safe anyway. We'll have to hide her until Lucius inherits the money and everyone forgets. We have the means to do that, but we don't have the means to replace you." There were sounds of Aurors Apparating to the scene. "Let the authorities have her, Uncle Sonny. You can't use that wand."

"She sounds like her mother, Sonny, just another foolish Hufflepuff. Or was she one of Dumbledore's precious Gryffindors?"

He pointed the wand at a spot where the fire was coming near. "*Aguamenti!*" A three-foot wall of water headed down the row of vines, toward the flames. "I just need to learn to control it better, Katherine."

"It was a mistake with Silvia, Uncle Sonny; this wouldn't be. Don't do it."

"She kept me from helping your mother, Katherine. She did everything she could to keep us apart, and after she succeeded in doing that, she pushed Corinne out of the Wizarding world. If I hadn't interceded, you wouldn't have gotten to Hogwarts."

"But I did get to Hogwarts, and now there's little Corinne. We can all be happy now."

He shook his head. "I'm sure she hounded your poor mother to her death, too, after you left and I was...away."

The Aurors were casually making their way to where Sonny stood over Agnes. Severus, however, didn't take his eyes from Gustav, who was watching everything very carefully. That wizard was a bit too casual. Suddenly he raised his wand and pointed it at Katherine. Severus raised his own wand, a spell of his own ready, but Sonny had been watching him too.

"Impedimenta!"

The wizard was blasted backwards into a bit of the fencing that held up the grape vines. As the others watched, he slumped down to the ground. His head came to rest at an impossible angle to the rest of him.

Katherine risked going to her uncle. "You can't use that wand any longer. You have wonderful control over it, but you have to see, it's beyond anyone. The core...it should never have been used."

"I chased across the Continent to get this wand."

"Silvia had it, didn't she? She was the one who kept trying to kill me. That was the real reason you spent so much time with her, wasn't it?"

"Oh, that's rich. Sonny chasing the wrong witch, *again*."

Severus aimed his wand at Agnes. "I have half a mind to kill you myself."

Sonny answered Katherine. "Yes. Silvia was using me to get close to you, but I was using her to get this wand. I was also keeping an eye on you, of course."

Katherine rolled her eyes. "It's evil, Uncle Sonny. You can't use that wand. No one can."

He sighed and watched the Aurors help Agnes to her feet. Another Auror was speaking with Severus as a third took the wand Katherine had caught after the other witch had lost it. Over in another section of the vineyard, other wizards and witches were monitoring the fire that was now under control.

He took the wand in his two hands and stared at it. He had worked hard to find this wand, which he had planned to use in exacting revenge upon various people. He looked at Katherine again. She smiled in a way that reminded him of her mother, and his heart turned over.

He took a breath and snapped the wand in half. As the banshee-hair core broke, a stream of black smoke rose into the air with an ear-piercing shriek. The sound died away, leaving two lifeless pieces of wood in his hands. The black ash on the ground blew away in the breeze and mingled with the smoke from the fire.

A/N: Once again, dear readers, thank you for your kind attention. Thanks especially to Trickie Woo, who's gone through this with me and discovered a major problem with an earlier draft of this chapter.

Gossip at Hogwarts

Chapter 24 of 25

...he watched her so carefully that she couldn't sigh or even stretch to better take a deep breath without him asking whether it was another pain. That, of course, was stifling to her, and she yelled at him to leave her alone. He would wander off in search of a magazine, but then he came back and made a show of reading while really watching her until she cleared her throat or shifted her weight. That would restart the cycle...

Disclaimer: The characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

Poppy Pomfrey returned to Hogsmeade after quite a journey. She took her bag to the Hospital Wing, unpacked some hard-to-obtain potions that were in it, and looked in her cabinet in satisfaction. Turning, she saw a cat watching her, its head tilted to one side.

"As you can see, it was a fruitful trip."

Minerva McGonagall regained her usual form and looked. She tapped one bottle. "Someone has time on his hands. We couldn't get him to make that very often even when he lived here year round."

"He always said it was just as easy for me to mix muscle relaxants, pain relievers and caffeine for the poor girls."

"But that's not as good as Moonease."

"No, but it's not like he would know the difference."

The two witches looked at each other and couldn't hold back a laugh at the idea of Professor Snape needing such a potion.

"Marriage must have mellowed him."

"You have to see it to believe it."

Minerva looked at the other potions Poppy had placed in the cabinet while Poppy stepped into her living quarters to put the rest of her things away. "When Hagrid saw you, he alerted me. The house-elves are laying out tea in my study. When you're ready, why don't you come up and tell me all about it?"

Poppy came back out, wearing comfortable robes. "Of course. It was half the reason I went. I can come with you now."

Minerva looked her over. "I think you must have picked up some color while you were gone. I would guess you saw the sun wherever you went."

"Oh, yes, there's quite a bit of sunshine in that place."

You were there when the Owl came (said Poppy to Minerva in the Headmistress's cozy study), so you know I wasn't given much option. The note all but demanded that I come to deliver the baby in exchange for certain Potions. As you saw, the Potions were delivered as promised. He's arranging for greater quantities of simpler ones to come to us from the little shop front he set up in London. It's not exactly a functional establishment, but he has some former students working there.

At the appointed time, I went to the Three Broomsticks and took out the Portkey. It was, of all things, an empty potion vial. When my senses returned, I was standing on an island in the sea somewhere. I was literally near a beach. I have no idea where I went, but it was a place with modern buildings. Those line things were strung up and down the streets, there were cars behind me on the roads, and motor boats on the water.

"Aha, just in time," said a voice behind me that I recognized. Only Severus Snape has that voice that goes down your back even if you don't really have a back anymore, you know. He led me to a secluded part of the beach and pointed out on the water. "Our villa is on an island just there," he said, and there it was. He picked up my bag and took my arm. Then he Apparated us both across the water and onto the island.

I don't know how to describe that island. There's a different sea view every way you look, of course, but there are two small groves, one of oranges and another of olives. There's a beach on the side facing away from the main island, and the house... I don't know how to describe the house.

There are rooms, just as you would find in any house, for cooking and washing up and sleeping, but there seems to be a room for just about anything a person could want. When you're in the mood to sit down with a good book, there's a room with a good library. Sometimes it's sunny and bright while at others there's a roaring fire in the fireplace and an excellent lamp. When you want to enjoy the breezes and rest, there's a porch that seems to always have exactly the right amount of sunshine and shade. I don't think there's a room of requirement, exactly. They're not quite like the Room of Requirement downstairs. I think those rooms are there all the time, but they adjust to suit the person within them, and you don't notice those rooms when you want something else.

When I arrived, poor Katherine Snape was having terrible pains. It was probably a good thing that Severus had been on the other island waiting for me, but they have four house-elves who fought over how best to soothe her. She had no idea what to do and just lay in her bed, suffering.

When I was able to report that the pains she was feeling were just false labor, she was very relieved but a little disappointed. She had gotten so hopeful that the child might be coming, but at the same time, she didn't cope with her pains at all. I got her up and walking. I had the elves bring her water and juices and before long she felt much better.

After a pleasant walk along the grounds, we got Katherine to take a restful nap. I spoke with Severus at length. "How long has this been going on?" I asked.

"For a few days," he said with a sigh. "We went to the Healer on the main island, but I started to worry that someone would get suspicious. Katherine needs to stay hidden."

Now I was close to the question we've been asking ourselves as we've read the *Prophet* together. "Why on Earth have you been running all over Europe, with a trail of destruction following you?" Well, Minerva, he launched into this long winded explanation about an inheritance that they weren't going to receive, but somehow everyone in the world thought they could get if they could only kill Katherine and the baby. I don't know what to think about any of that, but they believed it, and decided that if I could come to their island, they wouldn't need to worry about the other Healer.

I asked him, since he was trained in the Healing arts himself, why Severus hadn't thought to check for the changes that labor causes. He could have checked for himself whether it was true or false labor and whether she was progressing. At the same time, he should have known that liquids and walking are a good way to differentiate between true and false labor. I'm not sure I've ever seen that look of foolishness on his face.

"She doesn't like me to touch her there," he mumbled. "She doesn't want me anywhere near that part of her body these days."

I admit it was all I could do not to laugh.

Katherine woke after a couple of hours, but now she was completely nauseous. We were able to calm her stomach well enough to eat dinner, but she was clearly not comfortable. Poor Severus suffered right along with her. Is it evil of me to wish you could have seen him, Minerva? As little as we ever saw anyone or anything get the best of him, it was a little bit delicious to watch him twist in the wind.

We bundled her off to bed, and then sat down to gossip about everyone at the school. He did not know, for example, that Sibyll had finally admitted her strong attraction to Firenze. When I told him about that afternoon when she stumbled into staff meeting late and said, "I've always wanted to have my own pony," he roared with laughter. He remembered that Horace had that block in the office pool. I was surprised at how well and how fondly he remembered us all. I was quite embarrassed and ashamed for several minutes.

The next day started frantically. Katherine was feeling pains again. I felt horrible for her; it was clear to me now that she was in prodromal labor. When I checked again, I realized that there had been some very minor change overnight, but no serious progress. Every morning she felt miserable until I could get her up and around. Severus couldn't stop aching with every one of her pains.

Then when she finally felt better, he watched her so carefully that she couldn't sigh or even stretch to better take a deep breath without him asking whether it was another pain. That, of course, was stifling to her, and she yelled at him to leave her alone. He would wander off in search of a magazine, but then he came back and made a show of reading while really watching her until she cleared her throat or shifted her weight. That would restart the cycle and I finally had to stop it. I swore that I would let him know if the slightest thing happened, and then sent him to the room where he brewed his potions.

There came a day when Katherine felt quite well. I sensed this was the beginning of the end. They encourage mothers to rest at this point, but she wanted to go out to the beach and swim in the sea. Many women wouldn't be able to rest, anyway, since their minds are busy thinking of the things they want to do. Severus took her down, with a great amount of paraphernalia stuffed into an impossibly small beach bag. I would have followed, but the house-elves discouraged me, so I went to the library and read for a couple of hours.

At that point, I thought it was past time for lunch and set out to tell them so, house-elves or no house-elves. I got to the edge of the back garden before I saw them coming toward me, arm in arm and smiling secretly at each other. They advise against intimacy right before childbirth, but in this case I think it was good for both of them. Before that morning they were both exhausted. She was tired of being pregnant and took it out on him without intending it. He understood, and although he tried to handle it in his normal stoic way, it was very difficult for him.

Dinner was quite restful and pleasant. We laughed and talked over the meal. Afterward, we went out onto a patio where there was a fire pit. They played Wizard's Chess together with a special set that lit up enough for the players to see what was happening. I have to admit that listening to the sea and occasional mayhem on the chess board lulled me to sleep. I bid them good night and went up to bed.

I was shaken awake by one of the elves some time early in the morning. "Mistress Poppy comes now," he said. "Master says not to wakes Mistress, but Mistress needs you." I got up and dressed quickly. The elf pulled me by the hand while he carried my bag in his other hand. He pushed me into the bedroom, in which I arrived just in time to see the baby slide into Severus's hands.

They didn't know I was there, yet, and I felt a little bit like I was eavesdropping. Such a look passed between them that I couldn't describe it, Minerva. He held the child so that she could see it, and they were laughing and crying together. Suddenly Severus looked at the baby again and said, "Katherine, our daughter has non-standard equipment."

Katherine was the picture of serenity as she looked at her child and husband. "I believe they call that kind a son, my love."

They were laughing and crying again, until a new pain hit. Katherine's labor wasn't quiet over, and it was high time for me to take over. "You might have called me sooner," I said, trying to sound peevish but really quite relieved that it had gone so well.

"It wasn't that intense," he said. "By the time we were sure it was real, it was mostly over."

After the baby finally came, we thought the ordeal was over. It turned out that it had actually just started. He was very fussy at the beginning, crying for several hours right in the middle of the night. He refused to nurse at those times, and Katherine burst into tears, feeling rejected. When I reminded her how eagerly he had fed just a few hours earlier, she perked up. Then she worried again, wondering what the problem could be.

I explained about colic and Severus worked on several potions until we found one that seemed to work well. By the end of a week he was sleeping two to three hours a night. He had already grown into the next size of playsuits and looked like nothing so much as a grumpy little man. I had to laugh, but I couldn't explain why.

Picture this, if you will, Minerva. After the blotchy redness due to birth wore off, the baby's skin was very pale and just a little yellow. He had been born with a shock of dark black hair and by the end of the week he had black eyes that looked at everyone as though he were going to start firing questions any moment. He still had no name, a fact that seemed to trouble his parents much more than himself.

I spent one more week with the Snape family. As I was there, I saw Katherine take over more of the care of the child. She was surprisingly good at bathing and dressing him. She was a natural at feeding him. I caught Severus watching her do that from a doorway one afternoon. I must have caught him off guard, because he spoke rather openly to me.

"She's so beautiful," he said. "I never expected anything like this in my life."

I admit to being incredulous. "Come now, Severus, they said you were planning all along for Dumbledore's side to win."

"It wasn't for me," he answered. "I never dreamed I could have this, too, until I met her." Then he looked at me and nodded his head down the hallway. We made our way to a porch, where we sat and the house-elves brought lemonade.

"Fern and Wilbur are supposed to be at our apartment in London, but since we couldn't be there, they insisted on being here. They wanted to be here when the new baby came, and they all love each other, but nevertheless none of them thinks the others can properly look after my wife. Even less do they think I can take care of her." He sighed derisively and added, "After what we've been through in the past year, maybe they have a point."

"It can't be as bad as what happened with You-know-who."

"It's different, but it's just as terrible. There's so much to lose, now. Back then it was just myself, and I didn't expect any sort of happy ending. Both sides considered me expendable, eventually, and I half believed it."

It was a chance to ask the questions that had bothered us all for the last year. "Still, Severus, if you didn't think you had a happy future, why did you do it? Why didn't you work truly for Voldemort?"

"I believed even less in my chances as one of them. I doubted my survival in any event, and I threw my lot in with the side I thought would make... certain people happy."

I looked at him and understood so much more than I ever did before. If he never expected to survive, much less be happy, no wonder it infected his actions all along. How many times did we assume he simply didn't care about us, and how many of those times was he perhaps insulating himself from something of which he didn't believe he was a part? Was that distance an attempt to protect us?

I didn't have much chance to ponder the question at the time because he continued speaking. "I know the Death Eaters rather enjoyed themselves during that year at Hogwarts, but I was quite lonely. I did my best to keep the Carrows under control. I know you don't believe me, but it was difficult to prevent trouble while letting them think they were doing exactly as they pleased. Otherwise they would have complained and there would have been more like them. The idea of Greyback teaching at Hogwarts amused the Dark Lord..."

He actually shuddered at that thought, Minerva. Then he shook it off. "I don't think he would have done it. He knew how I felt about werewolves, and he may have suspected that it would have been a step too far even for me.

"How did we ever get into this topic of conversation? You know, Poppy, you made things go so much smoother during the days leading up to the baby's birth that I'm very grateful to you. Is there a particular potion you would like made?"

Since he'd already made all the others I wanted, I decided to test his largesse by requesting the Moonease potion. If I'd had a camera, I would have taken a picture of his face at that moment. "Why do you hate making it?" I had to ask.

"It's so bloody fiddly," he replied. "Once you have it under control, it pops out in a new and different way. The brewer has to be prepared to fix anything."

"Ah, but that's the nature of womanhood at such times," I replied. "Once we learn how to deal with the symptoms, some of them go away and others pop up."

"Nevertheless, I'm not inclined to make that one," he said.

"Which one?" a new voice said. I turned to see Katherine. She had put the child down and now wanted adult companionship.

"Poppy is asking for the Moon Ease potion." He said it with his arms folded, glowering as he would look at every staff meeting. You remember, don't you?

"Oh, what an excellent idea!" said Katherine. "I've been wondering if it would help with my afterpains."

I turned to look at her. "Are they severe?" Perhaps there was some new trouble that cropped up.

"Oh, no," she replied. "I just seem to get achy whenever I feed the baby, and then it lingers."

I thought about it. None of the ingredients were bad for a post partem mother or the baby, so I nodded, knowing it would help my case. "It could help."

Severus looked at both of us and then rolled his eyes. "I can't fight both of you, so I'll do it. You don't know what you're asking of me."

We smiled then, pleased that we had won this round. He stomped off, muttering that certain ingredients would be better if he harvested them from the island garden right now. Katherine and I looked at each other and laughed. Then we chatted about her Hogwarts classmates who were now parents of current students.

It only took a few days to prepare the potion, and by then, it was clear that things were going well. The baby was thriving, the mother was recovering well, and the father enjoyed his family. We made arrangements for me to leave. This time, the two elves who usually live in London took me back to the Snapes' flat. From London it was an easy trip back to Hogsmeade.

The only thing they never told me was the name they're giving their son. I know they had planned everything for a girl. Katherine whispered to me at one point that Severus had been adamant since before conception that any child would be a girl. They were going to name her Corinne, after Katherine's mother. Still, after seeing Severus with his son, it's hard to believe they hadn't planned for *any* boy's names...

A/N: Ack! It was missing an ending! My apologies! I'm going to blame this on my junior editor, who likes nothing more than to sit on top of the keyboard while poking keys. She's at the age when she's worse than a cat.

Thank you to Trickie Woo for beta reading, and to Becky for catching the problem!

Thank you

Finally, Brethren...

Chapter 25 of 25

"Finally, the bulk of the estate goes to the straightest line male descendant whose blood is more than fifty percent pure..."

Disclaimer: Except for OCs, the characters here and the world they inhabit are the creation and property of JK Rowling and her assigns.

A rather large crowd was seated at a conference table the following November. Severus could only surmise that it was the living descendants of the Prince family, who were in any way in line for the legacy. He was sure that he had no real standing in the room except perhaps as a family witness. Likewise, he found himself across the table from Sonny Andolini, whom he assumed was there in the same capacity.

Katherine and the baby had been summoned to this meeting as well, but Severus refused to take any chances with their safety. For whatever reasons she or the child had been targeted, he didn't want to take a chance that anyone was still out to murder either one of them. His love for Katherine grew stronger every day, and although he had never liked children, his own son was a completely different story. Instead of bringing the two of them, Severus brought duly notarized documents giving him power of attorney to act on their behalf during this meeting.

He was fairly certain that there would not be much behalf to act on. Katherine had all but proved that Lucius would inherit the entire legacy. The Malfoys were delighted to hear that, and all three sat down the table from Severus. He tried hard not to laugh at the way Lucius fawned over the pregnant Narcissa, demanding that one and all admire her beauty. It was all Severus could do not to observe that she looked rather like a misshapen kumquat. He instead admired the woman who could inspire such love in a man who usually looked only at surface beauty.

A rather fussy-looking solicitor finally came into the room, accompanied by an equally fussy goblin. The two looked at everyone seated at the table as though to intimidate them. Through greed or disinterest, however, no one was cowed. Severus watched the others at the table with curiosity. Who here had been involved in the attempts to kill his wife? Would he ever know?

He hoped it didn't matter. As soon as this meeting was over, his family would be free of the dangers threatening it, and he would be able to bring them back to London. It was not something he'd seen as desirable before, but walking a pushchair through a city park was now something he wanted to do. Children do change everything, he thought.

He realized that he was woolgathering as the meeting was starting. The solicitor cleared his throat, and the meeting began. He read through a sizable document as small bequests were given to various people around the table. It seemed that the charm governing the legacy had been broken enough to allow for small side inheritances along one branch or another of the family tree. The recipients obtained those bequests merely by being next in line along those branches.

"Finally, the bulk of the estate goes to the straightest line male descendant whose blood is more than fifty percent pure."

The air in the room changed as many people leaned in. One man leaned back, confident that he would receive it all, while another leaned back, confident he would get nothing. The latter looked around the table, wishing he could watch all of their faces as the announcement was made.

"The descendant who best fits those qualities is one Lu..."

"*Yes!*" came from Lucius down the table. Narcissa and Draco started to relax in relief after the worry of the past year.

"...as Severus Snape."

"*Damn!*" breathed out Lucius again. Everyone turned to Severus, who had concentrated so much upon watching the others that he hadn't quite understood what was just said.

The solicitor was thanking everyone for being there and the goblin was telling the beneficiaries to stay behind as the others left. Lucius stood next to Severus, who slowly rose to shake his hand. The blond-haired wizard smiled ruefully.

"No hard feelings."

"Pardon?"

"Your kid won the whole thing, Snape. Weren't you paying attention?"

"My son?"

Narcissa smiled. "Weren't you paying attention, Severus? Lucas inherited the legacy. Your son is very likely the richest wizard in England."

"He's not in England," answered Severus, reaching for the surest fact he could verify.

"He doesn't understand it yet," Lucius said to Narcissa. He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I've been meaning to thank you. When the vineyard burned, the price of the wine skyrocketed. I've made a tidy bit of money on it while the insurance is rebuilding the vineyard. It will be several years before that section can be made to bear again, but it will be better than ever."

Severus caught the eye of his wife's uncle, whose face seemed ashamed and yet proud. He realized that this was the person who could explain everything. Sonny caught Severus looking and moved toward the door. "Wait a minute!"

He grabbed the sleeve of the older wizard just as the goblin said, "A moment, Headmaster Snape?"

Sonny escaped, but Severus knew he would find him before long.

* * * * *

The train's passengers watched the older lady work her way through the car until she found a seat that suited her. Although her hair was gray and wore an old woman's clothes, she walked with an assurance that made her seem much younger. As she settled herself into her space, she realized she was carrying a ridiculously large handbag and frowned at it. It was as if she didn't know what to do with it.

After debarking from the train in a small southern Italian town, the older woman made her way to a cafe at the edge of an olive grove. She looked until she saw a gentleman of a similar age to her own sitting at a table right under some of the trees. He stood as she walked over and kissed her cheek before seating her.

"I was told you could answer all the questions."

Sonny shook his head. "Not while you look like Gussy." He looked Katherine up and down. "That witch was born to be old, I think. I believe she wore that same hat on the Hogwarts express back when we were fifth-years. Agnes sneered, but we ignored her. She hung around with us way too much, and we never really cared what she thought. Corrine giggled and whispered that it was just Gussy's way."

His eyes wandered somewhere behind Katherine as he traveled a long ago journey. "Even then, Longbottom couldn't take his eyes off of Gussy. Why not? I was the same way about..." Then he shook his head. "Suppose you tell me how the baby is doing." He looked at her fondly.

"I would have brought him, but Severus says he can't leave the island until everyone forgets about the inheritance."

She passed some pictures across the table and the wizard looked at them hungrily. He asked questions and she answered them, showing him the various small events in the baby's life and how different he already was from one picture to another.

"He grows so quickly. Already he's completely different than the tiny baby I held for those first few days." As she smiled, she seemed years younger.

After a while, she shivered, and if anyone could have seen her face or her hair under the hat, they would have seen a sandy-haired woman in her middle to late thirties. She took a long drink from her wineglass and then cleared her throat.

"Now, Uncle Sonny, Severus told me that you knew why the baby inherited the legacy. You know how it is that he's not a half-blood like his parents."

For the first time in her life, Katherine watched uncertainty pass over her uncle's face. "I'm not sure where to start the story, Katie. This, here, is the place where it all started for me." He waved his hand at the grove of trees. "That's the land my father, and his fathers before him worked. This is my family home. Some day, you will own my share in it."

"Oh!" She looked. "But then how were you and my mother cousins? How did you ever meet?"

He smiled. "Her father's sister was married to my mother's cousin. So we are distantly related, but that is not how we met. Papa met Mama on a trip to England and they fell in love at first sight. She came here to live with him, but it was too hot, she always said. So she traveled to England and stayed with family there during the summers. When I was at Hogwarts she came home to be with Papa."

He looked at her and smiled, a little strangely. Then he looked at the pictures again, fingering Katherine's face nearly as much as he touched the small face of Lucas. He sighed and continued. "When I met Corinne, I lost my heart. Yes, we were related, but what pure-bloods are not? Actually, we had fewer family connections than many did. After school ended, we planned to get married. We were sure we would be happier than many couples. We would have been, I think.

"I was talked into one last trip to visit my parents. While I was there, both fell ill and I had to stay and work. I don't know for sure why the letters we sent each other were never received, but I suspect that cow of an Agnes was involved. When I finally returned to England, Corinne was married to that Asher creep and pregnant with you."

Uncle Sonny stopped to take a drink of water. Katherine suddenly had a premonition that the next part of the story was the critical one. She didn't know whether she should stop him or beg him to hurry. She squeezed his hand where they were clasped on the table. He smiled and squeezed back.

"I never really understood why she married him, but it became clear. You were born a few weeks earlier than many people expected. As it happened, it was just about nine months from the time I left to come to Italy. Jack suspected but was never really sure."

"Until the day I did magic in front of him." Katherine winced at the memory of her mother staggering under the blow of her father's...not her father's, she realized with a twinge of pleasure...hand.

"I wanted to kill him then, but Corinne wouldn't let me. I worried so much about you both. I settled for visiting him when you were at school one morning. I was very convincing. He wasn't supposed to touch either of you again."

Katherine fingered the coffee cup now sitting in front of her. "He was actually good unless he'd been drinking, and he never touched me. When he got too drunk to control himself, he would spend the next half day weeping and begging mother..." She drifted off remembering. "He would beg her not to tell on him... to you?"

Tears were gleaming in his eyes. "She wouldn't leave him. Somehow she felt we deserved to be punished. I almost convinced her, right before you were forced into marriage with Cyrus, but again duty called me away when those I loved needed me."

Katherine turned her head. Suddenly she understood a great many things about her Uncle Sonny as well as her mother. Corinne Asher had her share of pride, and could be spiteful at times. Sonny would always follow what he called duty, and Corinne would never have accepted second place from the man she loved. Instead she allowed a man who was nothing to her to abuse her for the latter half of her life. She couldn't explain any of that to the man who was sitting at the table with her. He was perceptive. He probably understood some of it, anyway.

"So I'm not half-blood?"

Sonny shook his head. "Like it or not, you're a pure-blood witch."

Katherine nodded her head as she absorbed it all. Sonny wasn't quite done. "You're also in line for the Prince Legacy, yourself."

"What are you talking about?"

"I understand there was one piece of the family tree you didn't finish looking at."

"The Italian one," said Katherine with a gasp.

"It would have brought you here to this very vineyard. You and Severus are distantly related through my great-great-grandfather, who was the younger brother of his great-great-great-grandfather. Severus is a straighter line, but you are the next nearest. In fact, I believe the only reason you couldn't inherit was your gender."

"It always goes to a male. The Muggles followed male lines when the charms were laid out, so the Prince Legacy was set that way, too," said Katherine absently. "So little Lucas is more than half-blood."

"Yes, that's why he inherits."

"I wish you had told me this before."

"Corinne was adamant, but I've come to learn that Agnes Weatherfield manipulated things greatly. She certainly manipulated your mother. From what I've learned through my contacts over the years, it was Agnes who convinced your mother I wouldn't be returning from Italy. She told your mother that she was traveling here to marry me. She

maneuvered events with Jack Asher and Cyrus Stanton, too."

"She caused my marriage to Cyrus?" Katherine asked in disbelief.

"Money changed hands. I now know that it was she who paid off your father's bar bill and told Cyrus he could have you in the bargain. Your marriage was a way for her to punish me."

"How could a woman, a mother, do such things?" mused Katherine.

"I've realized recently that she believed that if she and I ever had a child, he would be the heir to the legacy. I believe now that her family knew or guessed how the Prince Legacy passed from one generation to the next. In fact, her pursuit of me started right before my parents got so sick, when Old Thaddeus inherited it. Much of what she has done has been in an effort to force me into marriage with her. When she realized that wouldn't work, she got married to Gustav's father. For some reason, he died shortly after I was incarcerated at the hospital. She came to me and practically raped me in my hospital bed, suggesting that if I would do as she wished, she would get me out of there. She was older, but I suppose not too old for a child."

"You refused."

"I wouldn't risk it in any case. There were whispers about how Gustav's father died. As soon as she left, I summoned some of my associates, who started making my inquiries for me. When I understood what I thought was everything, I started making my plans. Then you started working on this case and new facets of the situation came to light. You have gotten the greatest vengeance of all, one that hurts Agnes particularly." He pulled her hands to his lips. "You have made me proud and happy, my daughter."

Katherine smiled, and for a while they were both silent. They drank their wine and ate the bread and cheese before them. Suddenly Katherine sat up.

"I still don't understand about Silvia. She seemed to be working with the Weatherfields, but she couldn't have been if they wanted Audrey to have a baby with Severus."

"I believe if you were to look carefully, you would discover that Silvia is Agnes's niece. Her mother was pure-blood, but not a line Agnes wanted. Audrey's mother was in the correct family, but she was a Squib. In any case, they were both witches and not allowed to inherit. Their value lay in producing a boy with the right wizard. Severus was the only one of the straightest line, so Agnes concentrated on him."

"It's like something from the dark ages," Katherine said thoughtfully. "I don't understand all of this concentration on family trees and status. It seems like such a waste of time and effort."

"You sound like a proper blood traitor." He said it proudly.

"Have you explained all of this to Severus?"

"He helped me figure out the last bit about Silvia."

"He wouldn't tell me any of it. He said it was your place to explain it."

"He's right."

"If you feel that way, why did you wait until now?"

He shrugged and looked sad. "I wasn't sure it was my place. You seemed perfectly happy with me as your uncle."

"I could have used a proper father, especially after I got out of school."

"I don't expect you to forgive and forget, not so soon after learning about it all."

"I feel like I need to get to know you all over again, as though Uncle Sonny is somehow gone beyond the veil and a new person is here with me, now."

Katherine clasped his hands and looked at him. He looked so hopeful, and although he looked nothing like Lucas, she suddenly saw the exact facial expression Lucas made when he wanted her to feed him. It was strange and yet it seemed perfectly normal. She suddenly saw her way clear. "Will you meet with me once in a while and tell me about my family? Will you give me a chance to get to know you as my father?"

He looked relieved but then looked worried. "Will Severus let you off your island that often?"

"He knows better than to stifle me, and I think he knows how important this will be to me."

Sonny smiled broadly. "As often as you can manage it, then...I would like that very much."

* * * * *

Two years later

The sun moved lower and a breeze moved over the island. The woman walking along the beach with the tow-headed child near her stretched and took a deep breath, noting the change in the air. She heard a distant cracking sound and smiled. If she waited, the object of her affection would soon come to the beach.

She looked down at her son as he examined a bit of sea-shell on the sand. The shell was actually a small crab walking toward the water. The tot made squealing noises and followed, chattering up to his mother, who understood one word in five but nodded as though she were in Professor Flitwick's class.

An arm circled her waist. She jumped but then relaxed against the body of the man behind her. Turning, she reached around his neck and lifted herself on tiptoe to kiss him. "Did everything go well?"

"All of that infernal money is sitting and growing, if that's what you mean."

"How are the Malfoys?"

"Likely to be peasants soon, if they don't stop catering to every whim of the princess Narcissa gave birth to."

"Severus, I've had a letter from Narcissa. I know exactly how you behaved around that darling baby."

"Hmph. She's nothing compared to my son." He said it with such pride that Katherine smiled.

"How was the travel back? Are you hungry?"

"I only took a couple of hours getting here, and I'm not hungry in the least."

"Well, it's time for his nap soon. Then we can have a nice long talk."

He leaned down and tousled Lucas's hair. "How is my big boy?"

"Dad-dee!" The crab went its way without note as the boy's attention was diverted. He put his arms up in a demand to be lifted. Severus picked the boy up and held him up so that they could look eye to eye. "I think you've gotten much bigger this past week. Have you been taking good care of Mummy?"

The boy launched into a long description of his doings, or perhaps he was explaining something else. The parents understood some but not all of his words. Severus put a free arm around his wife's shoulders and the small family walked toward the house.

As they reached the small grove of orange trees, the child fell silent. Severus stopped and turned to look into his wife's face. "Most of the furor has died down, but I'm not convinced, yet. Therefore, I've figured out another means to protect our son."

She smiled. "I'm sure whatever you have in mind is a marvelous idea. How will we do it?"

"We'll give him heirs, plenty of heirs, until he can create his own."

Katherine giggled. "Are you sure?"

"Why not? If we just keep making more, surely even the most determined of criminals will decide to look elsewhere for a fortune."

"That's probably excessive." She giggled again. "It's funny you should mention that, though."

Severus suddenly had a thought and grasped her tightly by her shoulder. He fixed her with his gaze and said, "Katherine, if I were to take out my wand and say the charm that turned all of those test kits into candles..."

Her smile was shy to start and then knowing as she answered, "You would probably burn down that wing of the house."

finis

A/N: I'm not sure this is what anyone had in mind when the decision was made to continue this story. So much has happened in RL since the night I couldn't sleep and watched The Thomas Crown Affair on TV, that it has a completely different flavor than I started with. Through it all, many of you have continued to follow the story, which I appreciate greatly. Thank you so much for your kind attention.

As always, I couldn't do it without the help of beta reader Trickie Woo and the admins here at the archive. I'm grateful to all of them, as well.