

Terces Is Secret Spelled Backwards

By [Sara Kraft <skfolk@gmail.com>](mailto:skfolk@gmail.com)

Rated: G

Submitted: February 2023

Summary: She didn't really need the excuse that this research was "for a story" to justify the fact that she was going through his computer files. It was for a story. It was. Or had been. Or could be. A Kerth Prompt Challenge Story.

Story Size: 1,583 words (9Kb as text)

Author's Note: Well, I just finished a novel-length story yesterday. So, of course, during my well-deserved break from writing, I decided to catch up on the L&C Fanfic MBs and...then there was an ill-fated (fateful??) click on the Kerth Challenge thread, and here we are. But at least it was short!

Many thanks to KathyB for the title and summary as well as a quick tidying job!

This is in response to 2022 Kerth Challenge #6: Missing File

<https://www.lcficmbs.com/ubb/ubbthreads.php/topics/291071/weekly-kerth-challenge-6-missing-file#Post291071>

Prompt: "During the investigation, a journalist comes upon a very interesting file on a suspect's computer."

She didn't really need the excuse that this research was "for a story" to justify the fact that she was going through his computer files. It was for a story. It was. Or had been. Or could be. The idea had been collecting dust for well over a year now, and to be honest, she'd kind of given up on the idea that it was a story worth pursuing.

Well, recent events had changed that. There were new clues. Clues that had sent her here, in the middle of the night, to the suspect's computer.

Okay, so it was a complete stretch that he was the suspect. In any case, he wasn't exactly the suspect, but he *did* have knowledge of the suspect...well, the man in question, anyway. Suspect was also a...well, suspect term. To-may-to, to-mah-to. She was a professional writer, and she could stretch and mold the semantics however she darn well needed to.

But enough of that. Back to investigating.

Some of his files were to be expected — copies of new hire paperwork, tax documents, and the like. He really

should have a better password with such sensitive information on his computer. He should know better that passwords are supposed to be hard to guess.

Documents, digital copies, of what he'd given to his boss. Not likely to be anything of interest there, unless he'd thought to obfuscate the true nature of the files by altering the file names...

Nah. From what she knew of him, he didn't seem the type to do that. But she filed that thought in the back of her head in case the rest of her search proved fruitless.

Ooh! A picture file. Called "High Score." This could be good. She felt her heart start racing, excited for the potential money shot, as she clicked to open the file.

She fumed silently. Literally a "print screen" image of his high score in Free Cell. Was this guy serious? He was *that* proud of it? Did he print it and take it home to hang on his fridge, too? Maybe she should send an anonymous note to his boss that he was playing computer games on company time.

She grumbled and closed the file and continued making her way through the rest of the files. Strange as this guy was, at least his fastidious filing system made for a quick and methodical search.

Wait a minute. A "Miscellaneous" folder? No one had a miscellaneous folder. There was no point. If you're going to organize your files, put them in the folders they go in; you don't make a folder for miscellany.

But maybe...maybe that was subterfuge? Well, it was only in her best interest to explore ALL the folders anyway.

Okay, that was strange. It did look to be a bunch of miscellaneous files, all with very strange, seemingly nonsensical file names. But for one. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the file named "terces". It was too easy...wasn't it? She held her breath and clicked.

I don't know why I'm writing this here or now, and it's a bit of a risk even keeping it on my computer, but I feel like it's relatively secure — relative being the key term here.

Think again, buddy. This wasn't at all hard to get to.

I'm tired, weary from keeping this secret. Secrets this big are...well, they come with a lot of responsibility. Way more than I'd fully realized or thought about at the time...I came to be in possession of this secret. It's a burden. But it's fine, really. It's a burden I'm happy to bear, especially given what it means to...him.

Her breath quickened. This was it. This was the motherlode! She knew it...she'd known that he just had to know, but this was confirmation that she'd been right. Sure, it was all speculative in nature, not even circumstantial evidence. But surely he wouldn't just...spell anything out. It had been a secret this long; even as

careless and cavalier as he was being about leaving this file practically out in the open, he'd still clearly done a good job being discreet. When was this file created, anyway?

She backed out so she could look at the creation date within the file system. Oh, wow. This was just a few weeks ago. So it was only recently that he'd come to find keeping this secret burdensome. And maybe that was why the recent clues had made her continue her investigation in the first place. Back to reading.

But having this secret, keeping this secret...it comes with some sacrifices. Consequences, even. Most of the sacrifices I don't mind. Time, for one. The benefit far outweighs the cost there. More than anyone can truly understand, even the...other few people who know the secret. They see the benefit, applaud it, support it...but I get to experience it first hand.

Wait, what? Other people knew? Her heart clenched. She wasn't sure if she was furious or hurt. Likely both. Definitely both. And what did he mean that he got to experience it first hand? Had he...does he...were they...? She shook her head, unable to even let herself go down any of those paths.

Lying is the thing that hits me the hardest. But it's a sacrifice I need to make, with consequences that are unavoidable. Though...it's becoming more and more clear lately — as much as it terrifies me to think about — that I need to share this burden with someone else. They say it lightens the load. And...the hope I have about it lives strong in my heart, right alongside the fear that the consequences that have played out already are irreversible. I hope I'm wrong.

Her heart was racing now, her mind racing keeping pace as it tried to piece things together. Was it even his secret, his burden to share, though? Had he gotten permission? Surely, he'd gotten permission...

The...other people who know tell me it's my heart that is preventing me from sharing this secret, that I'm too afraid to risk it. And it's true. It's my heart. But it's also the fact that telling this someone else would — without consent — make them just as responsible for this secret. The burden. The sacrifices. The unavoidable consequences. Is that fair?

It was her...right? Had to be her. The only other person he was remotely this close with was...him. So...he had to be talking about her. Did she want this secret? Did...he want her to have this secret. Shouldn't the secret come from...him?

But the...other people...they're right. It's mostly about my heart. I'm terrified to share this secret. And...it's because there's more than one secret. Though, really, it's probably not that much of a secret. Despite my flawless

track record with the main secret, I've never been good at keeping this one.

I love her. And I'm afraid that she'll never forgive me.

For the lying. The deception. For handing her a burden she didn't ask for.

Two burdens, actually, though that second one she's already got now. I can't take it back twice.

Oh, God. No, no he couldn't take it back twice. She hadn't wanted him to take it back the first time. And now... But what did this all have to do with...him? Did they...had they...talked about her? Fought over her or something?

And why wouldn't she forgive him? If all his lying and lame excuses, all his disappearances had been for the greater good, to protect...his secret, then how could she not forgive him? And why hadn't they let her in on the secret sooner?

She was trustworthy. She'd shown time and again that she could be trusted with even the most sensitive information about...him. Heck, she hadn't even told her partner and best friend because she'd just assumed he hadn't known these things. Or that he already knew and they just had some unspoken agreement not to talk about them.

So, he was going to tell her. Or wanted to. And...he was going to tell her instead of...him. Because for some reason, she wasn't allowed to get it straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. Something about it all was tangled up with his heart somehow...

You're the best at reading between the lines. I hope you'll find me when you've finished reading this. Even if it's late, please come over. I know it's late; you wouldn't sneak in at any other time. Still come over anyway. I know I don't need to tell you how to find me.

I'll be around.

THE END