

Rare, Dangerous, and Unusual

by tonksinger

He went into the bookstore looking for a good read, but found a bushy-haired ex-student. She opened the bookstore looking to heal her broken heart, but her old teacher reopens the wounds. And when Flourish and Blotts gets a new owner, business in Diagon Alley is about to get nasty.

In Which Severus Meets Someone Unexpected and Gets a New Book

Chapter 1 of 12

He went into the bookstore looking for a good read, but found a bushy-haired ex-student. She opened the bookstore looking to heal her broken heart, but her old teacher reopens the wounds. And when Flourish and Blotts gets a new owner, business in Diagon Alley is about to get nasty.

Severus had left his abode with every intention of buying a new book or five to add to his extensive collection.

The sign on the door of Flourish and Blotts had been made with every intention of this not happening.

Dear Valued Patrons,

We regret to inform you that Johannes Flourish, the owner of Flourish and Blotts, died last week. The store will be closed until its new owner is determined and put into place. We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused you and hope you will be patient with us during this difficult time.

Sincerely,

The Management

He glared at it, arms crossed over his lean chest. New reading material was essential at the beginning of the summer holidays; as he was no longer occupied as a spy or a Death Eater, there was very little for Severus to do at his home, and he had spent the past several days experiencing acute boredom. Now some old man had died, and Severus was prevented from purchasing a few volumes to occupy his mind. After enduring a life as hard as his had been, was it too much to ask of the universe that he be permitted to buy a book or two?

"Oh, no!" said a high, melodramatic voice by his elbow. He glanced down to see a short, dumpy witch in robes that resembled the uglier patterns on armchairs, who was wringing her plump hands as she gazed dolefully at the sign.

"He was such a *dear* man! I *do* hope he didn't suffer. Isn't it *dreadful*?" she asked, turning to look at Severus with tears in her eyes, clearly expecting a sympathetic answer.

"Yes," he said shortly. "I find it grievous that they closed the shop for such a ridiculous reason." With that, he turned and strode off down Diagon Alley, smirking at the gasp of shock that followed him.

As he passed the familiar shops, he gave each a cursory glance, wondering if there was anything inside that he currently had occasion to purchase. *He... No need to go to the apothecary, nor the writing shop, and Satan will purchase a winter cloak before I set foot in that establishment of the Weasleys.* He paused for a moment in front of the joke shop, observing the crowds of teenagers inside; as he watched, a girl took a bite of a sweet being sampled and promptly screamed as her hair fell out en masse. It grew back within a few seconds, though, which ended the entertainment as far as he was concerned. Severus had to admit a grudging respect for the Weasley twins' abilities; he had the opportunity to examine one of their Love Potions during the last year, and it was very skillfully made. Had those two been placed in Slytherin, their talents for deviousness and tricks would no doubt have been used completely unscrupulously on the other houses.

The rest of the street proved less amusing; few people were around that day to make fools of themselves, and he hadn't seen a student he could terrorize. Severus was just about to turn down the path to Knockturn Alley when something caught his eye.

Right at the junction between the two lanes was a tiny store Severus had never seen, occupying what looked like a former storage shed next to Quality Quidditch Supplies. A new-looking sign hung from it, proclaiming it to be *Words, Words, Words Rare, Dangerous, and Unusual Books*. There were no windows, only a narrow door with a bell on it, which jingled as Severus entered.

His immediate impression was of a room built of bookshelves, furnished with books, and possibly decorated with them as well. The entire store seemed to be made of rows of leather bindings; even the cramped counter on his right sported a selection of tomes behind a glass pane. Surprisingly, for a place so small and dingy-looking on the outside, it was clean and well-lit, with nary a mote of dust to tickle his sensitive nostrils into a sneeze. A quick look down one of the narrow aisles showed that the store was somewhat longer than it was wide. There appeared to be no one around, which was perfectly acceptable to Severus, and so he began to peruse the shelves. He rapidly came to the conclusion that whoever ran the place knew what they were doing there were books here that were too dangerous for the Restricted Section, as well as ones so rare as to be almost legendary.

He suppressed a smile. Flourish and Blotts, indeed.

Light, rapid footsteps disturbed him as he inspected a copy of *Bludd Magick: Kurses and Potiones*, a volume he had heard of but never actually located.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, sir; I was helping someone in the back when you came in. Can I assist you?" The voice was female, slightly bossy, and very familiar. It was a voice that was generally preceded by a hand shooting into the air so hard its owner levitated. It promised an overabundance of information for whatever fool asked it a simple question, and it had been a thorn in his side for seven years of his life.

A little voice in his mind said, *Of course Granger would work at a bookstore*

"Yes, you can assist me," he said coolly, lowering the book to meet a pair of surprised brown eyes. "You can continue helping someone else."

Granger's jaw had dropped slightly when she saw him, but she snapped it shut fairly quickly. "Professor Snape. What a ... surprise," was all she managed to get out; the lack of an adjective before "surprise" was not lost on him.

"Is it really so shocking that an intellectual wizard such as myself should frequent bookshops?" he sneered, returning his gaze to the book in front of him. For such an intelligent girl, she really could be remarkably idiotic at times; he wondered if she still believed him to be ignorant of her second-year theft of his potions supplies. "I find it no surprise to find you working in one."

"Actually, I own it, Professor. I opened in April."

"Why? Publicity residuals not paying the rent?" *April...* Something about Granger and April was ringing a bell in his mind, and he took a moment to look at her while he racked his brain. She looked about the same as she had when she graduated a year ago; hair still a wild mess, although she had put on a bit of weight, which made her look a bit more womanly than she had last time he had seen her.

Woman... wife? Ah, I remember. Oh, dear.. He smirked nastily, watching her fidget slightly under his gaze; she always fidgeted when nervous. "I believe I shall purchase this volume. How much is it?"

She blinked as the suddenness of his statement threw her off again, but she blurted out, "Fifteen Galleons."

"Very well." He followed her through narrow passages between bookshelves until they reached the front of the store. Following her had its benefits she was wearing Muggle jeans, which provided a nice display of her curvy backside. He was not above taking the opportunity to admire it; he was a man who gave due appreciation to well-made things, whether they be artistic or physiological.

She took his money and slid the book inside a brown paper bag, which she sealed with a basic Security charm. He provided the thumbprint she asked for; it keyed the spell to him, so in the unlikely event anyone stole something of his and lived to tell of it, they would not be able to access the book.

"Thank you," he said, which resulted in his startling her for the third time in ten minutes. "Your bookshop is a very interesting place, and I shall possibly return. Good day, Mrs. Weas--whoops. My mistake," he said, taking a moment to smirk at the stricken look on her face before he put the final nail in the coffin. "It's still Miss Granger, isn't it?"

At the sight of tears welling in her brown eyes, he decided it was a job well done and swept out the door

* * *

That bastard!

Hermione slumped down on the counter, her head in her arms, trying to hold back the sobs that were creeping up on her.

"It's still Miss Granger..." Of course the entire wizarding world had heard about the fiasco--how could they not? Two members of the famous trio, engaged to be married... The *Prophet* had covered nothing but that for months beforehand, carrying articles about everything from what dress she was wearing to whether the children would have red hair or brown. The entire Order, most of the Hogwarts staff, and about a third of the Ministry had been at the well, it couldn't really be called a wedding. Weddings generally required two people. Not one sobbing bride staring at the letter brought to her by an intended brother-in-law.

Hermione had read the letter Bill handed to her while the entire audience had watched. It had been short and ineloquent, but got the point across.

Dear Mione (how she hated that stupid nickname),

I love you. I really do. But I can't spend the rest of my life with a wife who makes me feel like an idiot all the time. It just doesn't work for me. We'd be miserable together. I'm sorry.

Love,

Ron

The change the letter had wrought in the Weasley family had been incredible. Molly had turned on her instantly, saying that if she had been more understanding and less pushy, she wouldn't have driven Ron away. Percy had sanctimoniously said it was all for the best, and that maybe she wasn't cut out for marriage. Fred and George had offered to track down Ron and turn him into a slug, while Ginny had just stared at her coldly and tugged Harry out the door before he could talk to her.

The worst part was that Ron had been right. In the year and a half they had gone out, she had been constantly driven mad by his tactless comments and crude manners, while he had complained that she "insulted his manhood" by correcting him all the time. Even so, they had always made up their fights (generally with sex), and she had been sure it would work out. These were thoughts she had dwelled much upon in the alcohol-laden week after the wedding, before she sternly told herself to buck up. She had promptly opened the shop, talked to the friends who still liked her, and had tried to ignore that fact that she cried herself to sleep four nights a week.

She had actually been doing very well until bloody Snape had shown up and brought it all crashing back on her. A surge of anger momentarily overrode her sadness and she straightened up, glaring at the door. How dare he just swoop in here and insult her? She was no longer some little student, too afraid of losing House points to talk back to him. No, now she was a woman... with a much-publicized failed marriage who was more vulnerable than a blind frog in a minefield. In Snape's eyes, a sitting duck.

"Excuse me Miss? I'm ready."

Hermione hastily wiped her tears away to look at the small, watery-eyed man who was clutching a book. Automatically, she rang him up and sent him out the door, taking a moment to turn the sign to "Closed" before retreating to a closet-sized room near the back of the store.

There were bookshelves here too, but the titles they held differed considerably from the ones in the rest of the store. No books about spells, potions, hexes, curses, or jinxes; just books about people. This was her room of Muggle books, which she sold to the few wizards interested in them; they varied from Muggle-borns who didn't feel like going to the Muggle world to get a novel to wizards who reminded her strongly of Arthur Weasley, and the occasional Ministry spy who had to work in the Muggle world and needed a basic knowledge of the literature.

Of course, Hermione sampled her wares liberally; it was her calorie-free alternative to downing a pint of Ben & Jerry's when she was unhappy.

I need something feminist... Down with bloody men After a minute of searching, she found what she needed and sank onto an armchair with *The Awakening*.

But even as she read, her mind whirled with thoughts of her former teacher. He had said he might return; knowing him, he would, if only so he could insult her some more. And with Flourish and Blotts being closed, he had nowhere else to purchase books. She could turn him away, but she needed money, and he had plenty from what she had heard.

All right, she thought, turning a page, I'll let him come back and buy what he wants, but I'm not going to let him walk all over me. He just caught me off-guard this time. Next time, I'll have my wand out, and if he says anything about Ron, I will goddamn geld him!

A slight smile tugged at her lips. She almost hoped Snape did come back.

Misdeed and Retribution

Chapter 2 of 12

After leaving Hermione with tears in her eyes, Severus decides that his access to her books is in jeopardy, so he returns to her bookstore to apologize. But "I'm sorry" isn't quite enough to mollify Miss Granger - she wants her pound of flesh.

Chapter 2: Misdeed and Retribution

The amber liquid in the shot glass refracted the firelight nicely, producing an alcohol-hued halo that warmed the sallow skin of his hand; Severus considered it as he mused over the events of the day.

He actually hadn't expected her to break down like that when he brought up her failed relationship with the Weasley boy; a glare, perhaps, or maybe even an attempted slap, but certainly not a gush of tears. He remembered months at Hogwarts during which she had been teased, insulted, and even sent hate mail, but she had always stuck her nose in the air and ignored everything, a paragon of Gryffindor self-confidence. He had heard her called "Mudblood" half a dozen times and she hadn't even blinked.

Had Weasley abandoning her really brought Granger so low as to burst into tears at any jibe? He found it hard to believe that anyone would mourn that little sod being out of their life, especially an intelligent and not-unattractive witch such as she.

Well, apparently he had miscalculated the depth of her anguish. But witches were fickle creatures; a standard, meaningless apology would probably mollify her, at least to the extent that she would not ban him from her very interesting bookstore. He would go by tomorrow and make amends.

Satisfied with this solution, Severus picked up the book he had purchased and began to read about the differences between arterial and capillary blood in potions-making.

* * *

It had been a terminally slow day at the store, which gave Hermione plenty of time to brood over her life. She leaned on the counter, staring at the shelves of books in front of her, while her mind whirled like a top.

She remembered when she had first told Ron about wanting to open the bookstore; he had protested, saying that his pay as an Auror would be enough for them and the children, once there were children.

"You don't have to make money, Hermione. That's my job. You'll take care of the kids. And me." It had taken him so long to understand that she didn't just want to make money; she wanted something to *do* besides take care of whatever children might appear. It had escalated into another one of their loud, heated arguments, and they hadn't talked for several days.

That had been three weeks before the wedding. Why couldn't he have said something then? Why not tell her quietly, in private, instead of humiliating her in front of everyone she cared about?

Because he's Ron, said the same little voice that kept reminding her that he had been right about them *He was at dinner stuffing his face when tact was handed out at the front door.*

The bell on the door jangled, which allowed her to break off from that uncomfortably accurate train of thought and direct her attention to the person entering.

It was Snape, striding inside as though he owned the place, his boots thudding imperiously on the wood floor. He glanced around briefly before his black eyes located her

at the counter and he stalked over to her. Determined not to show any signs of intimidation, Hermione crossed her arms, planted her feet, and stared up at him, wishing heartily that either he were shorter or she were taller. Still, he paused for a moment before he spoke.

"Miss Granger, I believe I may have said something rude to you yesterday. I apologize. It had been a long day and you were... convenient." With that, he turned and made his way over to the shelves opposite the counter and began to peruse them.

Hermione stood there, dumbstruck at his minimal apology. It was shocking enough to hear Snape apologize for insulting someone (though she was willing to bet he had done it to ensure continued access to her shop or something equally selfish), but the fact that he believed such a bland apology would get him forgiveness was astounding. He had targeted her love life, her heartbreak, the spot where she was most vulnerable; he had done it out of pure maliciousness, and he had enjoyed seeing her break down. And he thought "I'm sorry" was going to make up for that?

Before she fully realized what she was doing, Hermione had her wand in her hand, crossed the short distance to where Snape was standing, and had wrenched him around by a shoulder. Making the most of his temporary surprise, she jammed the point of her wand into his lean chest, pressing him up against the bookshelf. She glared up at him, meeting his narrowed black eyes.

"*I apologize?*" she snarled, "You said the exact thing you *knew* would tear me apart and then smirked at my hurt! You did it just to be mean; exactly what you did to me and everyone else at school! And you did it because I was 'convenient' and you were having a bad day!" She was shaking from anger, and she heard the shrillness in her voice; Ron always said she could crack glass with her voice when she was mad.

"Graduating from Hogwarts does not exempt you from my personality, Miss Granger," he hissed back, his eyes boring into hers. "Besides, it has been two months since the wedding; I assumed you had moved on." Slowly, he began to edge down the shelf, towards the back of the store. She followed him, wand still firmly ensconced in his pectorals, sidling along down the Potions aisle until they hit a wall. Distantly, she realized what he was doing—if someone came in, it would look very odd for the owner of a store to have a patron at wandpoint—but she didn't see why he should give a damn at the moment. This, of course, did nothing to improve her mood. She continued her ranting when they had stopped.

"Like hell you did! You wanted to hurt me because that's what gets you off, isn't it: hurting other people!"

She was so engrossed with being furious at him that she didn't see his arm moving until it was too late. Like lightning, he grabbed her wand hand and forced it away from himself, ducking and twisting around her until she was between him and the bookshelf. His wand had appeared in his hand; the long piece of ebony was pointed straight at her. She was now well and truly trapped, pressed up against a bookshelf by a no doubt irate and very dangerous wizard.

God damn my big mouth! Hermione thought, as she looked up into flashing black eyes.

* * *

"Then I suggest you make yourself more difficult to hurt, Miss Granger," Severus said calmly, gazing down at her intently for a moment before releasing her and stepping back as far as the narrow aisle would allow. He doubted she would try throwing hexes inside the store; too many of the books in there were sensitive to magic, but it did not hurt to be cautious with irate witches.

"You should know by now that the only deterrent to someone who wishes to upset you is not to get upset," he continued blithely. The girl's pert little mouth dropped open in outrage, and her eyebrows were practically meeting in the center of her forehead, but she seemed to be more in control of herself than she had been a minute ago.

"Not get upset," she repeated flatly, staring at him. "Right. Not get upset when someone uses my broken heart as a punching bag."

He snorted and leaned back against the shelf, still keeping his wand trained on her. *Bloody Gryffindor histrionics.* "However ill-used you may feel yourself to be, Miss Granger, I assure you that you know nothing of heartbreak. You feel betrayed and insecure at your abandonment. May I suggest, however, that if young Mr. Weasley cited your intelligence as his reason for leaving, then perhaps it was he who felt himself unworthy of you?"

She opened her mouth, probably to say something about how he knew nothing of how she felt, then stopped, biting her lower lip in thought. With any luck, the hint would get her prodigious mind out of whatever angst-ridden rut it had been in and he would not be subject to more outbreaks of emotion. Severus watched her as she processed what he said, and he could not help but notice how enticingly disheveled she looked: flushed and breathing hard, with her thick hair in disarray and her eyes focused on him intently.

It was quite a sexual visual.

She broke the rather awkward silence that had descended while she pondered his statement.

"I... I never thought of it like that." She hesitated, swallowed and continued. "Everyone acted like I had driven him away, and I didn't think I had, but I didn't see any other reason for him to have left." The tip of her wand slowly lowered with each word, until she held it at her side; Severus copied her action, as he didn't want her to feel threatened at the moment, magical books or no.

"But... But how do you know that, Professor?" she asked, meeting his eyes with her own. "How do you know it wasn't my fault?"

"Because I understand people better than you do," he replied simply. As her mouth opened, doubtless to pose some query about his statement, he quickly continued.

"Miss Granger, you are very intelligent—don't deny it," he added, as she opened her mouth again to demur, "I am simply stating a fact. People of average intelligence—such as your ex-fiancé—are often afraid of people who are extremely intelligent. There are exceptions, of course. If a person is personable and easy to like, such as Albus, then intelligence becomes a social boon. However, Miss Granger, people such as you and I are not... easy to like. You in particular are very forceful with your knowledge—in laymen's terms, a know-it-all."

"Are you trying to make me feel better, Professor?" she interrupted dryly. "Because you're not doing a very good job of it."

"Do not mistake my explanation for an attempt at comfort," he snapped, jerking a hand in irritation. Surely the girl knew him better than to think he was trying to make her feel better?

"Right. I forgot who I was talking to. Please, continue with your analysis of my love life."

He gave her another glare to keep her silent, and then continued. "As I was saying, Weasley, who is thicker than a brick sandwich, feared your intelligence and so he left you. He, and those like him, will never understand you, or people like you. The fact that he has been raised to think the husband rules the household was probably a factor, as well." Explanation completed, Severus crossed his arms and waited to see what would happen. Hopefully, he hadn't just turned on the tap to her tear ducts.

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It was so logical, so cold, so Slytherin.

So *true*.

Hermione fought the urge to put her face in her hands and cry. She didn't want to cry in front of Snape for the second time in two days, especially after he had just dissected her problems with Ron (or rather, Ron's problems with her) so accurately.

"Isn't it irritating when other people are right?"

She glared at Snape, who arched a sardonic eyebrow at her and smirked before continuing.

"Now, Miss Granger, unless you are planning some sort of meltdown, in which case I shall vacate immediately, I came in here looking for something to read."

Oh, no, you don't. You don't get off that easily, she thought. While the frank analysis, though uncomfortable, was appreciated, Hermione wanted a real, honest, sincere apology from Snape before she would so much as sell him a bookmark. She was determined to extract her pound of flesh somehow.

"I'd like an apology. A *real* one."

He stared at her, and she saw a muscle in his cheek twitch. She was pushing her luck, she knew, but her stubbornness overrode her common sense.

"Very well. I'm... *sorry*. Happy now?" he growled, reluctance ringing in every syllable.

Well, it wasn't poetry, but it would have to do. "What kind of book did you have in mind?" Mentally, she ran through her current inventory of rare Potions and Dark Arts books; there were a few very interesting and very expensive ones that he might like.

"Something..." One long hand gestured slowly through the air, and Hermione noticed that it was very strong-looking, for all its thinness--as was he. A sudden recollection of him pressing her up against the bookshelf came to her, and she mentally shook it away, especially the feeling of his warmth and the muscles shifting under his robes...

"Something I haven't read and most likely would not have thought I would want to read. Something unusual," he finished, crossing his arms and looking at her with challenge in his black eyes.

Unusual... Unusual as compared to what? she wondered. Hermione had a feeling that he didn't necessarily want something that was simply rare or dangerous he wanted something truly new to him. A thought occurred to her and she considered it carefully. It was risky, no doubt about it, but it definitely met the qualifications, and if what she had heard of his history was right, he probably wouldn't have explored these sorts of books. No Death Eater who tried to hide his Muggle heritage would have picked up Muggle literature.

Coming upon a decision, she gestured for him to follow her and led him along the back wall of books, past the five narrow aisles that made up most of her store, to the little room made out of a converted broom closet. She entered, but he stopped at the doorway.

With a small grunt, she pushed the armchair out of the way so she could bend down to examine the D's. Quickly she ran a practiced finger along the spines, mentally reading off the familiar names. *De Lint, Dickens... Dostoyevsky!* Smiling to herself, she pulled the red hardback book off the shelf and turned back to Snape, who was leaning against the doorframe and watching the proceedings with great interest. A flush spread across her cheeks as she realized that her arse had been in the air for about twenty seconds.

"Here." Hermione handed the book to him. He took it solemnly and looked at the gold lettering stamped on the cover.

"Crime and Punishment?" he said, looking back at her with that eyebrow raised again. Hermione wondered if sexual withdrawal combined with emotional upheaval was messing with her mind. It shouldn't be possible for a man with greasy hair, a big nose, and a nasty personality to be sexier by raising an eyebrow, but he managed it somehow.

They made their way to the counter, and she rang him up in silence. He paused on his way out the door, though, and she braced herself for some new sally.

"Miss Granger, you may find this nearly as rude as what I said yesterday, but rest assured I say it with your welfare in mind." His silky voice sounded sincere, though Hermione wasn't about to put an enormous amount of faith in 'sounded'.

"I recommend you--what is the colloquialism?--'go and get laid.' It will help. Trust me." And with that, he turned and exited the shop, leaving Hermione staring at the door and wondering if it was she or Snape who had gone mad.

A Little Light Reading

Chapter 3 of 12

With Snape's parting suggestion ringing in her ears, Hermione does a little reading and tries putting her research to practice. But a wide smile can hide a lot of sharp teeth, as she finds out....

"Go and get laid..."

Hermione raked her hands through her hair, which she regretted when they snagged on tangles and stung her scalp. It was amazing how he could tell her to go and sleep with someone in the same tone as he would tell her to go and buy some milk. As if it were easy to go and find someone to sleep with, especially as she had never done such a thing before. Not that she was discrediting his advice entirely; now that she thought of it, sex would probably help a bit as far as getting some physical satisfaction went, and it might even help her move on emotionally, but she simply wasn't sure how to go about doing it. Dating simply hadn't been a major part of her life; there had been Viktor and then Ron; just two boys who had asked her out, no seduction efforts required.

Well, not exactly, but she decided that the incident with Cormac McLaggen was to be relegated to the "embarrassing mistakes" section of her memory and didn't really count. In any case, the sorts of men-related skills that other girls seemed to acquire during their teenage years were not in Hermione's prodigious resume.

Two months ago, she could have Flooed Ginny and asked her about what to wear and say and other such things, but that was clearly out of the question now.

She sighed. Fretting wasn't going to improve the situation, whereas reading might provide comfort, if not actual assistance.

Wait... assistance... I know! Hermione whirled and plunged down the second aisle from the right, heading for a small, specialized section near the back, which was so potentially dangerous that she had to keep it strongly warded. Quickly, she muttered the countercharms which allowed her to pass through and saw the slight shimmer that signaled the wards splitting and opening to let her in. Stepping inside, she sealed it behind her--she did not want a customer seeing her in here as they browsed--and turned to regard the two shelves of books before her.

The Ancientte ande Moste Potente Kama Sutra; Potions for the Heart and Associated Organs; A Treatise on Bondage and Related Spells... This was the love and sex section, but it went far past any similar sections in stores like Flourish and Blotts. The watered-down, vaguely amusing versions of the Kama Sutra that were sold to the general public looked like children's picture books next to the one she had; it was not only very old, but it was written by Indian wizards. The positions in it were physically impossible without the use of the spells that went with them; some of them were actually dangerous for the participants, as well as anyone within a ten-meter radius. There were love potions that surpassed Amortentia the way Ferraris surpassed Volvos, which had to be sealed in steel vials and stored under two feet of enchanted ice water to prevent nearby persons from being affected. In the darker books, there were pain/pleasure spells, as well as various objects of a similar nature; there was even one spell, in the *Erotinomicon*, that literally caused the victim to climax again and again, without any physical stimulation, until their bodies gave out and died.

It was a long shot that she would find anything helpful to her quandary, but it was as good a place to start as any. Hermione selected a few likely-looking tomes and settled down on the floor to read.

It was several hours later when the bell on the door jingled, alerting her to a customer. Hastily, Hermione replaced the books (one of which was still moaning from being touched) and slid out of the warded area, knowing that it would automatically seal itself up behind her. Hopefully, her face wasn't too flushed being magical, all the pictures in the books moved, and she definitely felt a need to change her knickers after reading them for a while.

"Hello!" she said brightly as she rounded the corner of the aisle. "How may I help you?"

The man leaning on the counter turned to her and gave her a warm, toothy smile, taking off his fedora as he did so. Hermione was surprised at how dapper he was; her customers tended to be swathed in yards of black robes or wearing mismatched Muggle clothing. Stylishly cut business robes such as he wore were very rare.

A long arm was extended towards her as she approached. Hermione took the hand attached to it and was treated to a limp, dry handshake as he introduced himself.

"Hello, I'm Tiburos Flourish, the new owner of Flourish and Blotts. You must be Hermione Granger."

"Yes, I am, and it's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Flourish. Are you--er--the late Mr. Flourish's son?" she inquired politely, looking up at him as she disengaged her hand.

"Actually, I'm his nephew, but I was the only living relative who wanted the shop, and I intend to carry on as though he had been my father. Speaking of carrying on," he continued, waving away her attempt at condolences with a long hand, "I was wondering if you would like to come and have a drink with me tonight. I want to discuss the future of bookselling in Diagon Alley with you."

Hermione blinked, taken aback at the unexpected invitation. "Oh... Well, that's very kind of you, Mr. Flourish, but--," she began. Snape's parting words to her rose unbidden in her mind. "But... Yes."

"Didn't quite catch that, Miss Granger."

"Yes, Mr. Flourish, I would like to have a drink with you tonight." After all, he wasn't bad looking, and he seemed nice enough. If she slept with him, it probably wouldn't be too bad, and if she didn't, the evening would not be a total waste. Besides, Hermione had just spent a few hours researching for a situation much like this one, and she was not one to let information go unused.

He smiled widely and replaced his hat on his head. "Lovely," he said. "Can you meet me at the Three Broomsticks at seven?" At her nod, he smiled even wider and exited, leaving Hermione trying to figure out what she had to wear.

There was little business that afternoon. Hermione puttered about the store, arranging books, taking stock, and checking her finances as she considered the happenings of the past day and a half. She smiled when she pictured Ron's expression if he knew that she was taking Snape's advice on sex; no doubt he would have got her installed in St. Mungo's had she suggested such a thing.

At five-thirty, Hermione locked up the store, taking care to set the protective wards on it, and Apparated to her London flat to change. Apparition was the best way to get there; having selected a home based on price, Hermione had ended up in one of the more dicey neighborhoods. The flat itself was fine, a small studio with a kitchen and loo, plus a crate that she had Transfigured into a bathtub, but she did not relish the idea of walking there.

After hanging her purse on a hook and taking off her shoes, Hermione opened her wardrobe and regarded its meager contents with her hands on her hips. Running a small bookshop did not exactly rake in the Galleons, and in any case, clothing had never been high on her purchasing priority list. There were casual Muggle clothes, plain and dress robes, and a few Muggle dresses, which, from what she knew, were a bit out of style. Quite frankly, even if she'd had an entire Selfridge's to choose from, Hermione felt her predicament would not have changed much--she still wasn't sure what was appropriate for that night. The way Flourish had said it, this was about business, and she didn't want him to think she was trying to seduce him, but she was in search of sex. True, the sex didn't have to happen tonight, but he was good-looking, and she remembered there were no rings on his hands. His very long, delicate hands. Rather like Snape's, come to think of it, though without the strength and roughness that came from years of working with them. Even when Snape had been horrid to her and her friends, she had always thought he had beautiful hands...

Hermione shook her head sharply, trying to clear out the images of Snape's hands that had appeared, and returned her focus to clothes. At last, she decided that business came first, and so she picked out a set of dark blue robes: nicer than her black ones, but not unusually so. Her jeans and shirt were dumped in the laundry basket as she stripped; she debated for a minute before swapping her plain cotton bra and knickers for black lace. No sense being unprepared. With a comb and Sleakeazey's, she wrestled her hair into a not-completely-hedge-like ponytail.

Her preparations finished, Hermione fixed herself a light dinner--she wasn't sure if food was included in "have a drink with me"--and buried her nose in the first book that came to hand--*Sense and Sensibility*, as it turned out. When her clock chimed seven, she marked her place, grabbed her purse, and Disapparated, hoping all the while for a bit of good luck.

* * *

Severus had never particularly liked his name as a youth, even when it wasn't being converted to Snivellus, but at least he wasn't christened Rodion Raskolnikov. It sounded like a skin disease, one that itched.

The book Granger had sold to him was fascinating in spite of the protagonist's name, and Severus was starting to realize what might have prompted that young woman to choose it for him. He understood feeling as though the world was full of idiots who were nothing more than a waste of space, and he knew all too well what remorse for killing a person could do. It occurred to him that Granger might have sympathy for such feelings; a person as intelligent as she must have felt frustrated with the shortcomings of others, especially the idiots she'd associated with. As for the other matter, well... she had killed Greyback and Macnair at the final battle. Killing two people at age eighteen was affecting, even if they were despicable men who would have raped, tortured and eventually killed her without the slightest twinge of remorse.

Remorse. Was that what she was trying to tell him with this novel? That his actions, from dooming the Potters to tormenting Granger, would come back to him in some way? Severus took a sip of mulled mead as he considered that thought, but he eventually dismissed it. She knew why he had protected the-Boy-Who-Lived-to-Drive-Him-Mad for so long, so presumably she was aware that remorse had kept him going for almost twenty years.

Half a pint of mead later, Severus was scanning the Three Broomsticks for a waitress to refill his glass when the woman who had been occupying his thoughts entered the pub with a man. Apparently she had taken his half-serious suggestion to heart, for the man was fairly good-looking and well dressed. Severus watched from his half-hidden corner table as they sat down and ordered drinks. Though he couldn't hear what she was saying, Granger was talking animatedly to the man, her hands gesturing in what looked like a mime of wandwork. The man looked a bit glazed behind his mask of attentiveness; Severus could have told him that the only way to deal with the know-it-all was to head her off before she got too much momentum up.

Using *Crime and Punishment* as a cover for his gaze, Severus watched the pair. Drinks had arrived, which shut her up long enough to give the man an opportunity to

speak. He was leaning forward with his arms propped on the table, fingers laced together. In between sentences, he flashed a wide grin that reminded Severus of a shark.

As he watched and the man talked, a change came over Granger. No longer was she exuberant and animated; she was sitting abnormally straight, and from what he could see, her arms were now crossed over her chest. Once or twice her bushy ponytail bounced as she shook her head vehemently at something the man said. If this was a date, then Severus was fairly certain that it was not going well. He saw it in the man as well; the wide grin was fading, to be replaced by an iron-jawed look of determination. Was Granger refusing his advances, perhaps?

"*Excuse me?*" Shrill and angry, Granger's voice suddenly cut through the general hubbub of the Three Broomsticks, making the rest of the patrons go quiet and turn to look towards her.

"Miss Granger, please, calm down," said the man hastily, glancing at the now-attentive patrons with chagrin.

"Calm down? You invite me to come and talk about business with you and then pull out this self-serving bollocks, and you want me to *calm down*?" Chair legs scraped across the floor as the young woman stood, her fists clenched at her sides. Severus gave up all pretenses of reading and leaned forward to watch the show. Schadenfreude was such fun.

"It was a business proposition, Miss Granger, and one I'm sure you'll find to be reasonable once you've thought it over," said the man as he reached--very slowly--for his fedora, which was on the table next to him. Behind the bar, Severus noticed that Rosmerta had surreptitiously drawn her wand and was eyeing the couple, probably trying to gauge whether intervention would be needed to avoid injuries. The ability to judge such things was one of the few skills shared by bartenders and teachers.

It was quiet enough in the pub for Severus to hear her snort of disdain. "I have better things to think about, Mr. Flourish. Please leave." She didn't move as Flourish stood and placed his hat on his head, but Severus saw her stiffen as he dropped a few Sickles on the table. His quiet, "My treat, Miss Granger. Good night," hung in the silence as he made his way to the door and left.

Satisfied that the entertainment was over, Severus went back to his book and his mead. Whatever Granger had been hoping to get out of that man, or him from her, it clearly hadn't been successful. If her recent behavior was anything to go by, she would likely go back to her precious bookstore, or simply to some secluded nook, and cry about being let down and betrayed. There would probably be reading involved.

With that idea in mind, it was surprising when the woman in question dropped into the empty chair across from him about twenty minutes later and slammed a half-full glass of firewhisky on the table, startling him.

"This," she said, giving him a fierce, albeit not quite focused, glare, "is *allyour* responsibili-lil-ity, Severush Snape."

Firewhisky in the Jar

Chapter 4 of 12

After her failed "date," a drunk Hermione confronts Severus about his role in the events of her day and lets a very interesting piece of information slip.

"Yes, Miss Granger, I would love a bit of company. Do sit down," he said coldly, marking his place in the book and setting it down on the table with a touch more force than necessary. She didn't seem to notice the sarcasm and rested her arms on the table, leaning forward to stare at him.

"Your reshponsibility," she repeated, after taking another gulp of her drink and using the near-empty glass to gesture at him. A drop of firewhisky flew from the glass and landed on his hand; growing more irritated by the second, he brushed it away and glared at her.

"Kindly explain to me how your date's crassness is my doing," he snapped.

Her bushy hair waved as she shook her head. "Not how he acted," she answered. "But you tol' me to go and get lead... lean... go an' fuck someone, and so I ..." She trailed off for a moment, staring at him, and then continued. "*You* told me, Snape."

"Miss Granger, did it not occur to you that I was not entirely serious when I said that?"

From the way her brown eyes went wide, it had not occurred to her. "But... you said... were giving me a vice... advice."

Of course. How could he have expected Hermione Granger not to take a teacher, albeit a former one, seriously? He remembered her at school; if a teacher had told her to jump off the Astronomy Tower to better understand a concept, she would have asked what the best time for it was. Good little Hermione Granger, who always did what her teachers told her to do. The know-it-all Gryffindor princess who would take what any competent teacher said as sagacious wisdom. Naturally, she had decided he was being serious and that having sex as soon as possible would be the first step to solving her emotional issues. She had probably consulted a book as to how to proceed, found the first man to come across her path and focused her not-inconsiderable mind on the task. It simply had not worked out the way she had intended, and now it appeared that Severus was to pay for his error.

"I expected you to use your usual good judgment in regards to what I said," he replied coolly. "Clearly, that was beyond you."

The insufferable woman was now staring disconsolately into her glass, twirling it between her hands; its base scraped the table in a way that set his teeth on edge.

"I wasn't completely stupid about it, y' know" she murmured, more to the glass than to Severus, and there was a slight thickness in her voice that made him clench his teeth. The very last thing he needed was a bawling Granger.

"I mean," she continued, now looking up at him with what he prayed were not tears in her eyes, "I didn't really eccep--espe--think that he would sleep with me. But he seemed nice. I didn't think he'd do this. Why's it always the ones that seem nice that aren't?"

Deciding that the question was rhetorical, Severus opted to remain silent, though he certainly had some opinions on the matter, none of them flattering to her. Answering would no doubt produce more emotional questions that he was not particularly qualified to answer. Unfortunately, his silence had not dissuaded her; she, however, made an attempt to compose herself before continuing.

"But, sir, I had a thought. It's logical. It works." Although she clearly meant the words to be reassuring, Severus grew more uneasy with her statements. Logic did not mix well with alcohol, in his experience, and tended to lead to "sensible" ideas that caused enormous amounts of trouble come morning. Severus, as a rule, did not drink to

excess; he had spent a good portion of his life as a spy, and an inebriated spy had the life expectancy of a mewling kitten amongst a pack of werewolves. However, he was well acquainted with the actions of others who did indulge themselves, and as many of them had been Death Eaters, the resulting memories occasionally had him waking in a cold sweat.

"I am breathless with anticipation," he said in a tone so dry that it put the Sahara Desert to shame.

Her chest heaved in an interesting way as she took an exaggeratedly deep breath before she spoke. "You should shleep--sleep--with me."

"What?"

"But it works, Prosefor. See," she said, adopting a tone of explanation, "you're a greasy git, right? But, I already know you're a git. It's not a surprise; I don't have to worry about you turning out to be a git when you don't seem like one. And it was your idea, so you should be prepared to test your idea. And I don't mind the thought of sleeping with you, really." She was staring at him rather intensely now, with more than a hint of lust in her eyes. Was it the alcohol, the sex withdrawal, or genuine attraction that was making her look like that--lips a little parted and eyes hot? Severus decided that, while it was probably the alcohol, the option that it might be something else was certainly an interesting one. Just how desperate was Miss Granger?

"Miss Granger, did it ever occur to you that I wouldn't want to sleep with you? Of course not," he hissed, sneering at her shocked face. "How could the greasy dungeons bat resist the lure of any piece of female flesh when freely offered? Clearly, any man who looks like I do must be desperate for sex."

"That is not what I meant--,"

"It's what you implied, Miss Granger!"

Whatever reaction she had expected, it clearly wasn't this. Her mouth opened and closed a few times before she managed, "It was still your idea!"

"As I said, Miss Granger, I was not serious when I told you to go and have sex," he snapped, now feeling very irritated, but not quite enough to warrant leaving. The idea of having any kind of leverage to use against her was too tempting to pass up. And what she said next made a small part of him crow victoriously.

"Fine. I unner--I get it, sir." She leaned across the table a bit, looking at him with all the earnestness of someone who is not in complete control of their faculties, and continued. "But I meant it when I said I wouldn't mind having sex with you. Not at all. Wouldn't mind a bit, really."

Oh, Merlin. This was beyond the alcohol--this was real attraction. He wasn't sure why, or how, or when, but Severus was as good at reading people as he was at reading books, and he knew what attraction looked like. No doubt three firewhiskies were crucial in buoying her feelings up to the surface and out of her mouth, but they were no less honest for all that.

Now, of course, the question was whether to take advantage of the situation. Despite his belittling of Granger's love life, Severus had not been incredibly busy in that area himself, at least recently. It was rather hard to look at this young woman practically panting at his feet and refuse a night of meaningless sex (the only kind Severus had). But he also had something of a taboo about sleeping with drunken women; such liaisons never ended well. Either the woman vomited at some point, fell asleep, or awoke in the morning with no recollection of the night before to find herself in bed with a rather ugly man. Defending himself from an irate, hung-over witch was not the way he preferred to spend his mornings. If, and that was a considerable if, he did decide to take her, he wanted her in full control of her senses; otherwise, he reasoned, she would not be able to fully appreciate the experience, which would be an insult to his talents.

"I am not in the habit of taking bushy-haired know-it-alls to my bed simply because of a drunken idea of theirs," he said sharply, standing up and gathering his belongings. It struck him, right before he started for the door, that perhaps she might require a touch more encouragement. As he moved around the table, he stopped next to Granger and leaned down to murmur in her ear.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Granger, I don't sleep with women as drunk as yourself. It is so irritating when they slur as they are screaming my name." He watched with interest as her cheeks flushed a pretty pink color and her lips parted just a little more before he took his leave of her.

* * *

Something had clearly gone wrong at some point. Snape was supposed to have left with her on his arm. Or in his arms. But that hadn't happened.

Hermione tried to wrap her mind around what had happened during that brief conversation. She had joined him, informed him that everything was his fault, and suggested her perfectly logical solution to her problems. That was the plan, as she had planned it while she had a few drinks. What had gone wrong?

Oh, right. He fused... defused... said no And then he had gone and said something incredibly sexy about women screaming his name that made Hermione wet her knickers. And then he had left.

It really should have worked. He was a logical man; surely he could see the sense in what she was saying? It made sense. Men who seemed nice at first either dumped you at the altar or told you to shut down your business and take a position at their newer, bigger bookshop. Thus, men who were always mean would at least not let you down quite as badly. She knew for a fact that Snape was mean, and she didn't have to go through the whole introduction process with him, so asking him to sleep with her was perfectly reasonable. And somewhere around firewhisky number three, Snape had become very attractive.

Apparently, he did not reciprocate her feelings. And who could blame him? Who would want a bushy-haired know-it-all in their bed? Hermione felt tears start to sting her eyes, and she decided it was time to leave before she turned into the most pathetic drunk the Three Broomsticks had ever seem.

Carefully, she stood up and made her way uneasily outside, only tripping over one chair in the process. It was a warm summer night, and she breathed in the fresh air gratefully. Focusing hard on her apartment, she spun around and Disapparated, praying that all of her would arrive at her flat.

Upon arrival, she spent a minute collecting herself and fighting the nausea that accompanied intoxicated Apparition; fortunately, all her limbs seemed to be present. She managed to make it to the couch before her legs gave out on her completely. Hermione decided to remain there for the time being, or at least until walking seemed like a safe option.

Option... that was what Flourish had called the ultimatum he'd given her, carefully couched *Ha! Couch-ed!* she thought) in polite language and smiles. His new and improved version of Flourish and Blotts would open in approximately two weeks, and he would appreciate it very much if she were to close her shop and take a position in his administration. "After all," he'd said, "we would both benefit. You would get a more secure and better-paying position, and neither of us would have to deal with competition." He'd carefully insinuated that, if she did not agree with his idea, business for her in Diagon Alley would get extremely difficult, due of course to the fact that anyone looking for a book would go first to his store and she would simply be overlooked. The new Flourish and Blotts wouldn't *dream* of doing anything to discourage people from going to her store, of course. Life would simply be easier if she saw the wisdom in his offer and went along with it.

Her response had been a resounding "no." Flourish had slunk out, but she was certain that he would be returning, either to restate his offer or deliver more direct threats.

And now here she was, flopped on her couch, brooding. Alone.

It really should have worked! she thought fiercely. Men were supposed to be constantly looking for free, willing pussy, and someone who looked like Snape couldn't get that much of it. Mind, Snape had looked very appealing back in the Three Broomsticks, and subsequent images of him in her mind's eye had continued to be so. She remembered being trapped between him and the bookcase earlier that day: that lean, hard body pressed against her own, those black eyes looking down at her, his long fingers wrapped around her wrist... That silky voice whispering, "It is so irritating when they slur as they are screaming my name," into her ear, the breath from his words making her skin tingle and sending jolts straight to her groin.

Her currently wet, hot and throbbing groin.

Well, if she couldn't have the real thing...

Quickly, she moved her hand up to the buttons on her robes and began fumbling at them with fingers made unsteady by alcohol and arousal. She gasped when her arms brushed against her hardened nipples; the resulting sensations prompted her to undo the remaining buttons at top speed. Her robes flew across the room once that was done, landing in a heap somewhere by the door. After a moment's thought, she decided she wasn't up to undoing the hook-and-eye fastener on her bra, so she simply tugged the straps down her arms and peeled the lace off her breasts. Once her breasts were free, she raised her hands to them, kneading and rubbing until she moaned. Her eyes drifted shut, and she pictured Snape kneeling in front of her, smirking smugly as she writhed beneath his hands.

Normally, Hermione took her time with this activity, but right then she was in desperate need of a satisfying climax, and so she slid one hand down her stomach and into her soaking knickers. As she spread her legs, a whiff of her own musky scent drifted up to her nose, the scent of her own arousal heightening her need. Another moan escaped her when her fingers found her nub and she began to circle it, her hips bucking in response. In her mind it was Snape's long fingers that were expertly pleasuring her, rubbing and circling in her wet folds. She slid two fingers inside of herself and began to thrust them back and forth while her thumb continued to rub her clit and her other hand toyed with her nipple with ever-increasing fervor.

"Professor!" she half-moaned, half-shouted as her inner walls convulsed around her fingers and her back arched in orgasm, waves of pleasure flowing through her. As she slumped back on the couch, panting and sated, covered in sweat, Hermione allowed her self to wonder if Snape had meant what he said about bushy-haired know-it-alls, or if that only applied when said know-it-alls were drunk. She hoped it was the latter.

Dawn of Men

Chapter 5 of 12

Confrontations the previous night lead to more confrontations the next morning. At least poor Hermione's sober this time.

Being something of a night person, Severus did not like getting up in the mornings. In fact, it was a task which caused him a good deal of difficulty, especially during the halcyon days of summer when he had very little incentive to do so. Left to its own devices, his sleep schedule would have him abed until noon and up until four in the morning.

However, Severus was a man of considerable self-discipline, as well as one averse to wasting time, and so when the sun's rays seared holes through his eyelids, he levered himself off the mattress with a groan. He blinked for a minute, focusing on the east-facing window in his bedroom wall and then threw off the sheets and slid out of bed.

Thirty minutes and one hot shower later, Severus was seated at his small kitchen table, drinking a large mug of coffee while, more out of habit than anything, he scanned the *Daily Prophet*. News was sparse in the new, post-Dark Lord era (though he certainly wasn't complaining), and as a result the paper was slightly less interesting than, say, a Muggle phone book. The front page was comprised of a nasty article by Ms. Skeeter about how tacky Ginevra Weasley-soon-to-be-Potter's wedding dress was, along with a piece about the reopening of Flourish and Blotts. Severus sneered at the oily smile on the face of the new owner and tossed the paper aside. Well, he had other reading material; the book Granger had given him the day before was shortly in his hand, and he read until his coffee was finished.

Severus reflected over that interesting day as he buttoned up the black shirt he had selected. Contrary to what most of his students believed, he did not dress like a bat as a matter of course; those billowing robes were mainly to intimidate his students. In the heat of summer, he had decided that Muggle garb was much more comfortable.

A memory of a round, denim-clad bum appeared in his mind--apparently Miss Granger agreed with him about Muggle clothing, though she had been wearing robes at the pub last night; very well-fitting robes they had been, too. Had she not been falling down drunk, Severus would almost have been tempted to take her home and fuck her until she couldn't answer a single question about *Advanced Potions-Making*. However, she had been very upset by the actions of her "date" and so may not have been the best candidate for meaningless sex with an ex-professor.

Her date... Merlin! Suddenly remembering something, Severus Summoned the paper. He stared at the front page for a full minute before he started to laugh.

* * *

Black hair, lank from sweat, was hanging around his face as he pounded into her. Hermione was still gasping from her first orgasm and felt a second one coming on with each deep thrust; her hands raked his back, sliding over his slick skin.

"Gods, Hermione..." he groaned before he dropped his head to lick and suckle her nipples, alternating between them, and she moaned in response. The pounding did not abate for a moment; indeed, her head was now hitting the headboard repeatedly, and it was beginning to hurt quite a bit.

"Severus, wait," she gasped, trying to still his movements so she could move away from the end of the bed, but he would not stop, and now her head hurt worse than ever. In addition, their activity must have been straining the bedsprings, for Hermione heard a dim squeaking noise, although it didn't seem to quite match the tempo of his thrusts. It was getting louder, too, and as she cried out both from her orgasm and the pain in her head, it rose to a crescendo--

Hermione awoke as her alarm clock screeched in her ear. Her head was throbbing and felt as though one of the Weasley twins had placed Exploding Bonbons in it.

Of course, it wasn't the only place that was throbbing after that dream. Groaning at the pain in her head and the odd turns her sex drive had taken, Hermione slowly crawled out of bed. On her bedside table lay her wand; she groped for it and performed a silent Summoning Charm, mentally blessing Snape for drilling silent spellcasting into them sixth year. A small vial of Hangover Remedy zoomed into her hand from its place in the bathroom cupboard; she gulped it down happily and sighed as her headache receded.

She automatically went through her morning ritual of shower, coffee, breakfast, clothes, leave, except that she added "wank off" during the shower bit. Hopefully, this newfound sexual overdrive regarding Snape would subside soon. Either that, or be consummated.

A tapping at her window halfway through breakfast proved to be the owl from the *Daily Prophet*. With a Knut and a crust off her toast, it was gone and she had her paper. She wasn't entirely sure why she still got the Prophet; after all the bollocks from it during the Second War, it seemed pointless to keep reading it. Of course, when the

alternative was reading about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, it didn't look so bad.

Well, normally it didn't look bad. When Hermione unrolled the paper to find Tiburos Flourish grinning up at her like some kind of bad dream, the credibility definitely took a dive. His face was quickly reduced to a pile of ash, along with the rest of the paper, leaving Hermione feeling a bit better, but not entirely satisfied.

Her mood did not improve as she Apparated to Diagon Alley and undid the complex wards that protected her shop. It was necessary to keep strong wards on a store full of valuable and volatile books--a third of the wards were protecting people from the books, rather than the other way around. Mad-Eye Moody himself had tested them and said only a trained Auror could get through them, which was quite a compliment coming from him.

The morning passed uneventfully. The Muggle Studies teacher from Hogwarts showed up, and Hermione happily allowed her to peruse the collection of Muggle Literature for two hours; she walked away with a huge stack of books in her arms. A thin, sweaty man, who addressed every word he spoke to her breasts, asked to see the Sex section. She was reluctant to sell him something really rare or dangerous, as she had the feeling he was either trying to get a date or was simply looking for something to wank off to, and she was relieved when he bought one her simpler, safer books. The thought of that man using some of the more powerful Ensnaring Charms on the unsuspecting female populace made Hermione shiver.

She was just arguing with a wizened little man about the merits of ancient Egyptian curses as opposed to Druidic ones when Mr. Flourish walked in the door. So shocked was she at his nerve that she completely forgot what she was talking about and the little old man began pointing out all the flaws in her arguments with glee. Cutting him off as politely as she could, she rang up the book he was buying and ushered him out the door.

When she turned on Flourish with her hands--one clutching her wand--on her hips, he was looking around the shop with a sort of condescending interest.

"You have a fascinating collection of books here, Miss Granger," he said, looking down his long nose at the titles on a shelf.

"I find it very hard to believe that you care about my inventory, Mr. Flourish," she replied coldly, "given that you're so eager to have me abandon it."

He turned a look of surprise on her, eyes wide with insincere shock. "Abandon, Miss Granger? No, no, I never said that. I said to sell them off and make as much money as you can, followed by a steady, well-paying job in my administration. You wouldn't be working the floor, I assure you."

She had to admit that he had a point. He could see clearly how many customers she got each day; no doubt he was savvy enough to figure out that she was just making ends meet. The practical, logical side of her saw a secure job with Flourish and Blotts and panted with desire. The rest of her, however, objected quite strongly to his attitude and his business dealings.

"What I said last night is still true, Mr. Flourish," she said. "However, as you seem to have difficulty understanding it, let me repeat it: *No*."

It seemed that she crossed some limit of patience that he had, for suddenly he left off looking over the shelves and focused his entire attention on her, even taking a few steps in her direction. Unfortunately for him, she had been menaced by Snape the previous day; Flourish didn't hold a candle to Snape's glare. They locked eyes for a full minute; his were cold, blue, and annoyed.

He looked away first, holding his hands up in an unconvincing gesture of disappointment. "I'd hoped that you would accept my generous offer after you had a night to think it over, but apparently you're not reasonable enough to see it."

Hermione's wand arm moved before she even realized how angry she was. The sight of his eyes immediately locking on to the tip of her wand was quite satisfying, especially as it made him slightly cross-eyed. "The fact that I don't want to give up the store I worked hard to open so I can work for someone I don't like seems *unreasonable* to you?" she railed, hearing her voice get shriller with each word. "Well, then, Mr. Flourish, perhaps this will seem more *reasonable*!" As swiftly as she could, she shoved past him, yanked the door open and trained her wand on him again.

"Leave before I hex you!"

He must have been fighting hard to keep that look of calm on his face, but she noticed that he had gone rather pale. "I am sorry that we could not come to a mutually satisfactory agreement, Miss Granger. Consider yourself my competition." With that, he stalked out, keeping one wary eye on her wand as he did so.

Once Flourish was far enough down the street, Hermione sagged against the doorframe, pinching the bridge of her nose with her free hand. She really didn't need this on top of everything else. Those parting words of his made her nervous: he had already proved to be rather unscrupulous in his business dealings--exactly how did he deal with "competition"? The pattern of wood grains on the other side of the door frame burned itself into her eyes as she stared at it, considering any likely actions Flourish would take and what she could do to be ready for them.

Hm... It's unlikely that he'll try anything overt, at least to start with--more likely, he'll disparage me and try to take away my customers. What could he do, though, to get my clientele to abandon me? He doesn't carry what I do--if they need a rare book, they'll come to me whatever he says.

"Miss Grang--,"

"*What the--!*" she half-shrieked, whirling and bringing her wand up so fast that she almost poked Snape--for he had appeared magically by her side--in the eye. Black hair swung away from his face as he jerked backwards to avoid the length of wood, hastily shoving her wrist downwards so the wand pointed to his side. They remained in that pose as they both tried to calm down a bit; Hermione felt adrenaline rushing through her veins and she knew without a doubt that her face was flushed, both from anger and close proximity with the man she had been fantasizing about.

"--*Fuck!*" she cried, completing her surprised ejaculation. "Do you *want* to get your greasy head blasted off?"

"Do you enjoy allowing people to creep up on you while you're staring at doorframes?" he shot back, releasing her wrist with ill humor and taking a step backwards. "Peace has made you soft, Miss Granger."

"Who are you, Mad-Eye?" she snapped, brushing her hair out of her face so she could glare at him properly.

He crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at her, the inevitable sardonic eyebrow arched for maximum effect. The movement of his arms drew her eyes to his torso for a moment where she was surprised to see that he was wearing a Muggle shirt; black trousers over his usual boots met her eye as she glanced further down. She had never seen him in anything but robes before; Muggle clothes, she decided, were much more flattering on his lean frame--robes just swallowed him up.

"Does my outfit pass muster? I realize it's not Madam Malkin's finest, but I tried." The acid in his voice could have etched glass. Hermione quickly looked back up at his face, trying to think of something to say that didn't involve the words "very fit."

"I'm sorry, Professor. I spent all those years thinking that you wore those robes because you weren't secure enough to actually wear dresses, so this is something of a surprise--," she said, feeling the corners of her lips twitch at the look of shocked outrage on his face. "I'm *joking*," she added hastily, seeing thunderclouds forming on his brow. It appeared that Snape was one of those men who simply could not stand any jibes at his sexuality, however patently absurd they might be, and she was disinclined to get him really angry. Flourish as an enemy she could handle, but Snape was another story.

The anger seemed to subside a bit; at least, he no longer looked borderline homicidal. "My sense of humor extends only so far, Miss Granger."

"You *have* a sense of humor?"

"It is clearly superior to your sense of your surroundings," he retorted. "Now," he continued, cutting off the beginnings of her retort, "let us take this conversation indoors. There may be subsequent parts that we don't want all of Diagon Alley to hear." With that, he strode past Hermione into the shop. She stayed outside for a moment, reluctant to obey his orders like a student, but she decided there was little use yelling at him from outside, and in the shop, at least, she would be on her territory.

* * *

Severus had started perusing the shelves as soon as he entered, finding a patch of books that he had not previously inspected. It was a minute before he heard Miss Granger follow him; he had a feeling she had been outside debating whether coming inside was tantamount to obeying him. He surreptitiously glanced at her and smothered a snort at what he saw: shoulders back, steps firm and decided, stiff posture... She was trying to impress upon him that this was her store and he should not forget it.

Territorial Gryffindors, he thought. The display of power was unnecessary; Severus had no intention of forgetting whose shop he was in nor what that shop contained. He had no wish to discover the hard way whether she had read all of the books in her store.

"Well," came the usual crisp voice, as she seated herself on the stool behind the counter, "what was it that you didn't want the world to hear?" She rested her arms on the countertop, leaning forward and looking very curious under that thatch of hair.

Abandoning his pretense of looking at the books, Severus strode over to the counter and casually leaned his knuckles on it, forcing her to draw back a little, before he spoke. "So, I gather that your attempt to liaise with the young Mr. Flourish did not go well?"

The look on her face could not have been more entertaining had he told her that Gryffindor House had been discontinued.

"Liaise?" she asked, a quavering note in her voice. "I did not try to liaise with that... man."

"That is not what you told me last night."

The stool hit the floor about half a second before he found her face two inches from his own. Brown eyes bored into him with power of a hundred wands. But her voice, when she spoke, was dangerously quiet, albeit a bit shrill.

"Many parts of last night were a mistake, Professor. The situation has changed considerably since then. So if you will excuse me," she continued blithely, stepping back from him and turning to a stack of books, "I am shortly to be under siege by a major bookstore. I have things to prepare." With that, she turned and marched off down the aisle to the room where she kept her Muggle books.

Well, that was interesting. Had he really misread her drunken advances so much as to believe she might be attracted to him? Or was she simply so angry that it smothered her sex drive? Remembering how she had looked him up and down when he had surprised her earlier, Severus smirked. No, the desire was still there--she simply had other things on her mind.

And he had to admit to himself, as he made his way down the street, that she was much more attractive when not drunk or on the verge of tears. He almost felt sorry for her the next day when he opened the Daily Prophet and it read, "*Eccentric or Evil-centric: Hermione Granger's 'interesting' little bookshop*"

Openings

Chapter 6 of 12

The Battle of the Bookshops is on! Take no prisoners, have no scruples!

Hermione's first thought upon opening the *Daily Prophet* was how nice Rita Skeeter would look pinned to a corkboard and displayed under glass; whether she was human or beetle wasn't particularly important.

It took quite a bit of willpower and logical thinking for Hermione not to Apparate to the Daily Prophet's offices and slap the malicious journalist across her overly made-up face. She knew it wouldn't do any good; Skeeter was very well ingrained at the *Prophet*, especially after the war. Taking a deep breath, Hermione began to read the article.

Eccentric or Evil-centric: Hermione Granger's 'interesting' little bookshop.

Heartbreak can drive a woman to desperate actions, writes Rita Skeeter. Hermione Granger, said to be the brains behind Harry Potter's success, was left at the altar by Ronald Weasley in April and chose to cope by opening a bookshop. But Harry and Ron might not approve of the contents of the bookshop, because they seem to go against everything the trio fought for. Miss Granger has opened a bookshop containing, almost exclusively, books about the Dark Arts.

"Words, Words, Words," as the shop is called, is located at the junction of Diagon and Knockturn Alleys. Its ramshackle appearance belies the evils contained within it. The description alone would set off alarms in most upstanding wizards--"rare, dangerous, and unusual books."

The Prophet has an exclusive look inside the shop. Tiburos Flourish, the new owner of Flourish and Blotts, says he was inside the shop on business. "It was dingy and cluttered--books up to the ceiling. Most of them were about the Dark Arts." Mr. Flourish tells us that he was attempting to make an honest business deal with Miss Granger, but was forcefully repelled and threatened by the angry witch.

We can only hope that this member of the famous trio of evil-fighters has not turned to evil after being spurned by her fiancée.

Damn her! Hermione thought, glaring at the beaming picture of Skeeter that topped the article. It wasn't so much the content of the piece that incensed her; it was that it was written so carefully as to be invulnerable. While it was clearly slanted and biased to make her look as bad as possible, it wasn't actually libelous--most of it was true, and the parts that weren't could not be proven as such. Selling material related to the Dark Arts wasn't illegal in any way, but now she was going to be under some very intense scrutiny by the wizarding community.

Hermione wondered if she should go ahead and cancel the mail or if she should wait until the first letter accusing her of aiding Voldemort all along appeared.

Matters did not improve over the two weeks leading up to the grand reopening of Flourish and Blotts. Two more articles by Rita Skeeter appeared in the *Prophet*; one was an interview with Flourish about his hopes for the future of business in Diagon Alley. The other was an opinion piece on whether selling items related to the Dark Arts was

tantamount to performing them yourself--and, of course, the illustrious Ms. Skeeter declared it to be so. *It's funny*, Hermione thought sourly as she flung yet another newspaper into the rubbish bin, *she never mentions any of the stores in Knockturn Alley that sell the cursed items and poisons that my books just describe*

It didn't help that large signs promoting the opening party for Flourish and Blotts now dotted Diagon Alley. Bright and colorful, they all featured pictures of attractive wizard families holding books and waving; the slogan for the store, "*Real pages for real wizards*," was emblazoned across the tops. Several prominent wizard authors were attending, as well a "secret guest," the identity of whom she heard discussed excitedly in the street.

And to pour bubotuber pus on the wound, the letters started arriving. Hermione, more out of curiosity than anything, read some of them (though she made sure to ascertain that there were no nasty curses inside before she opened them). "*You horrible little bitch! I always knew there was something fishy about you, and now you're supplying Dark wizards with spellbooks!*" read one. Another kindly offered counseling for her broken heart while gently reprimanding her for dealing with her grief by walking the line between good and evil. The last one she read informed her that she didn't "deserve someone as wonderful as Ron Weasley" and should essentially find a deep, dank hole to crawl into and die.

After that, she stopped reading them.

It wasn't all bad news. A number of her customers assured her that they would continue to patronize her shop, as no other store in the area sold what she did. One kindly man in his forties, who was what Hermione secretly called a "wizard nerd," told her to keep her chin up and not worry about what other people thought of her. Clichéd though it was, it did make her feel better.

Snape dropped by on occasion, to peruse the books or discuss (argue about) whatever he was reading. While he offered no words of comfort or concern, his presence was reassuring to her; it suggested that he was on her side, for whatever reason, and that was infinitely better than the alternative.

On the day of the Grand Opening, Hermione woke up, stared at the ceiling for a while, and then decided not to go in that day. *I'm plenty good at depressing myself without forcing myself to endure that*. She would go in the next day, or perhaps the day after; hopefully the hubbub would have died down a little and she could run her store in relative peace. Such decisions were one of the many advantages of owning and running a business on your own.

* * *

So much for Gryffindor courage and tenacity, Severus thought, crossing his arms as he studied the "Closed" sign hanging on the door of Words, Words, Words. He paid no attention to the people streaming past him to get to Flourish and Blotts; he didn't really have to, as they were mysteriously giving him a wide berth.

He was a little disappointed in the young woman, to be honest. All through the past two weeks, she had been showing the usual stubborn pluckiness in the face of what must have been considerable stress (though, as he had pointed out to her a number of times, it was nothing to some of the things he had gone through), and he had been wondering what exactly she would be like on the actual day of the Grand Opening. Severus had hoped that she would at least show up with her back stiff and her nose in the air, if only so he could see how much jibing it would take to crack that veneer. Apparently, he was to be denied that modest entertainment. A replacement pastime would have to be concocted.

Keep your enemies close, he thought as he made his way down to Flourish and Blotts, keeping to the edge of the alley where the crowd was thinner and then pushing through the throng once he was parallel to the shop. Once he was inside the shop, he discovered that there were very few people perusing the shelves--the crowd seemed to be focused entirely around the stage set up outside the shop, where a popular author was reading from one of her books.

There were large signs hung from the ceiling at seemingly random intervals throughout the shop; finding the one that read "Potions," Severus headed for the shelves underneath it. It was an easy store to navigate; the shelves were fairly low, with plenty of room between them. Bright globes of magical fire dotted the walls, burning clear and steady to perfectly illuminate the large store. He passed several smiling salespeople, who all took one look at him and ducked down the nearest aisle, smiles noticeably dimmer. Hogwarts alumni often had that reaction to him.

The Potions selection was predictably pedestrian, containing everything the average witch or wizard would need to make most basic household potions, including a few books on love and sex potions; however, none of them was nearly as interesting as the ones Miss Granger stocked. Severus was about to turn and have a good smirk at what would pass for their Dark Arts section when a surprised voice accosted him.

"Snape?"

Severus snapped around to gaze down the aisle where the voice had come from. He found himself staring at a rather shocked Ronald Weasley and a well-built brunette hanging on his arm.

"Congratulations, Mr. Weasley," he replied coolly, wasting no time in taking control of the situation, "you have remembered my name after a whole year of not being my student. Do you feel accomplished now?"

A tinge of red that echoed his hair crept into the young man's cheeks at Severus' jibe, but he was wise enough not to attempt to match wits with his former Potions Master.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Snape, that's all. Grand Openings don't seem like your kind of party." Much to Severus' surprise, Weasley was now looking a little thoughtful; it was not an expression he was used to seeing on that face. "Especially not this one."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Well," Weasley said, shifting his weight a little and crossing his arms, "I've heard you've been spending a lot of time in Hermione's store. It's bit weird, then, you being in this place."

"Contact me when you wish to make your point, Mr. Weasley." Severus turned, beginning to walk away, knowing that if Weasley wanted to say something to him, this would elicit a statement. He was right.

"It's just... Hermione can't win. Not against this Flourish bloke, at any rate; he's got a lot of influence and power. She should just give in, for once in her life."

It was amazing how much Severus wanted to plaster Weasley all over the bookshelves for that sentence. He forced himself to keep his hand off his wand and replied without looking at the young man, "Forgive me for not being entirely convinced that you care about Miss Granger's well-being, given recent events." With that, he took his leave of the store and, afterwards, of Diagon Alley.

Once he had Apparated into Spinner's End, Severus stood and stared at the peeling plaster of the wall, trying to determine whether or not he cared about Miss Granger's well-being. Why should he? She was annoying as all hell at times; her sheer tenacity in their literary debates had caused him to forfeit a few of them, as she would simply not concede her points, however erroneous he would prove them to be. There was a certain close-mindedness to her that often allowed him to win arguments and solve problems that her by-the-rules mentality prevented. Even her reason for starting such an interesting shop fell into her way of thinking--it was a logical niche to fill, not some radical statement or outrageous idea that had occurred to her; apparently, she had considered several different themes for a shop before deciding on rare and dangerous books. She was still a know-it-all, though the trait was not as conspicuous as it had been when she was his student.

On the other hand, she was an attractive young woman whom he knew lusted after him, however well she tried to hide it.

The streets were not exactly teeming with women who fit that description.

It was reasonable, then, for him to at least have a passing interest in her well-being.

It was with that idea in mind that he Apparated to Diagon Alley two days later to see if she was back yet. Fewer people occupied the narrow alley than had during the Grand Opening, and he was glad of the respite from the press of humanity. The bright banners that had previously advertised the naissance of the store had been changed to read "Now Open!" in flashing letters, with moving arrows pointing the way. Unfortunately, the sickeningly picturesque wizard families that waved from them had not been altered in the slightest.

Suppressing the urge to light the banners ablaze, Severus strode down to Words, Words, Words. To his satisfaction, the modest sign on the front of the door had been changed to read "open." He quickly turned the knob and pushed the door forward, saying, "Miss Granger, I must say that the book you sold me on vampires was--."

The sight of toppled bookshelves and scattered tomes was what stopped him midsentence. Running square into the back of Miss Granger as she stood like a statue just inside the doorway, surveying the devastation, was what stopped him from moving forward.

He glanced down at her. She was standing stiffly, arms wrapped around her midsection one on top of the other, with her wand dangling from the fingers of her right hand. Slowly, he shifted his position until her face came into view; her brown eyes were huge above dark circles, and those plump lips were parted in shock. It was a second before she focused on his face, and he thought he saw the faintest glimmer of relief in them before she spoke.

"Well, Professor, I think I had better start cleaning up. Excuse me." Turning from him, she picked her way across the floor, pausing every now and then to pile up a few books, until she reached the first abused bookshelf, which had fallen into the shelves that lined the walls. Most of the books on the side nearest the wall were now heaped on the floor, and the tops of both shelves were splintered and cracked.

She paused for a moment, her back to him, considering the scene before her. Then she turned back to him, her free hand coming up to run through her bushy hair. "I may have to hire some big, strong wizards to get the shelves back in order. I don't dare risk using magic around all these books..." Her voice trailed off as Severus stared back at her silently, and he saw a faint wobbling of her lower lip. Very slowly, she walked back to him via the path she had cleared on the floor, pocketing her wand as she did so.

But she didn't stop in front of him to continue whatever it was she had been saying. No, she walked straight into him and seized his shoulders, pressing her face into his chest; every muscle in his body went rigid, but she didn't let go. After another moment, Severus felt her shake as she began to cry very quietly into his shirt.

Severus wasn't quite sure what to do. Generally, if someone were crying in his vicinity, he was the cause rather than the cure. Feeling awkward, he hesitantly brought his arms forward to wrap them around her quaking body, though he wasn't confident enough to venture any sort of vocal attempt at comfort.

"What the fuck did I do to him?" she mumbled into his chest, her voice thick and less crisp than usual. He could feel the wetness from her tears soaking through his shirt, but he decided not to mention it, given the circumstances.

They stood there for a few minutes, as Severus was too nervous to try to break away, and the tears showed no signs of cessation. Finally, she pulled back a little, far enough to look up at him with red, swollen eyes, though she still kept a hold on his shoulders. "I mean," she said, still choked "it's not as though I'm a major competitor or anything. We don't even sell the same types of books...." She held his gaze for a second before a fresh wave of tears returned her face to his pectorals.

Now, the situation was certainly very serious and Severus was not sure of what exactly he was expected to do, but the fact remained that a rather curvy woman was currently pressed flush against his body and was, frankly, vibrating a bit. One part of him, at least, knew precisely how to respond to *that* situation, and he found he had no control over it. Gritting his teeth, he tried to extricate himself quickly, but he knew he was too late when Miss Granger's sobs paused and she went rather still. Fully prepared for her to recoil in disgust and anger, Severus prepared to make some apology as he moved backward, but his words died in his throat as one of her hands slid down from his shoulder and stopped at his chest, and her other hand gripped his shoulder more tightly.

"Professor," she began, slowly beginning to move her hand in gentle circles, "I don't know what you'll think of me for this, but... I need someone to not hate me for a night. And after all," she continued, looking up him again with a slightly more cheerful expression, "it was your suggestion."

He stared at her, trying to get his mind off the sensation of her hand on his chest. "Miss Granger, I--,"

"Hermione, if you please, Professor."

"Hermione, then. I don't know if it is really the wisest action to take at the moment." He was stalling, he knew he was stalling, but he needed a minute to fully evaluate the situation and respond adequately.

"It doesn't have to go beyond tonight, Professor. Tomorrow we can go back to being... whatever it is that we are. But please, I need this. You knew that two weeks ago, when you told me to go and get laid. Well, now everything is even worse than it was, so your advice holds truer now. And you're convenient."

"Use my words against me, will you?" he murmured, looking down at her. There was no reason to say no. He had no objections to having sex with her, she clearly had none for him, and tomorrow... would be tomorrow. And he was damned if he was going to go home and wank off like some simply teenager when there was a much more pleasant alternative rubbing her hand over his chest.

"Very well, Hermione, I am inclined to acquiesce to your request, with one caveat."

"What is it?"

"That we use your place of residence, as mine is not exactly in good order for these sorts of activities."

She nodded, finally releasing his shoulder and wiping her eyes. A handkerchief appeared out of one pocket, and he waited while she blew her nose and tucked the cloth away before she looked back at him.

"Shall we go now, or would you like to do this tonight?" she asked, as coolly as if she had been asking whether mandrake should be sliced widthwise or lengthwise.

Severus shrugged as nonchalantly as he could and replied, "If you feel that no further progress can be made here, then by all means let us proceed to your home."

Bushy hair shook as she nodded and glanced around the shop. "I'm in no condition to deal with this now. Let's go." With a wave of her hand, she indicated that he should precede her outside. Once they were both in the alley, he watched as she locked the door securely and spent at least two minutes warding the shop, though he did not miss the grim look on her face. He could not blame her--obviously, her wards had been little help the night before. Silently, he added a ward of his own design, one that he was quite sure would hold up against anyone but a wizard of comparable power. Finished, he looked at her to find a hand extended towards him. Hesitantly, he took it and felt the familiar pressure of Apparation as they vanished from Diagon Alley.

As She Likes It

Hermione's got Severus at her flat, so the hard part's over, right? Right?

What am I doing? Why did I just proposition Snape? And why did he agree? As she stood next to said man, having just arrived in her flat, those three questions raced around Hermione's head. She couldn't even look at him; she was so embarrassed by her recent actions.

A soft cough reminded her that she was still holding onto his hand. She dropped it and glanced around the flat for something to do. Now that he was actually in her flat, her libido seemed to have vanished, to be replaced by nerves and a desperate need to stall. There had to be some little chore that she could use to buy herself time that would seem like a logical thing to do given the circumstances. Remembering suddenly that her bedroom was something of a pigsty, as she had been living in it for several days, she decided a quick tidy-up would do the trick.

"Er... sit down, sir, I just have to... I'll be right back." Waving a vague hand towards the couch, Hermione fled to her bedroom and closed the door. A few waves of her wand and the remnants of her in-bed meals vanished; in a similar fashion, she straightened the bedclothes and cleared the floor of a few pieces of laundry. It didn't take nearly long enough to clean everything up, however, and she found herself standing in her bedroom wringing her hands in distress.

Come on, you pathetic girl, you've been masturbating to visions of him for the past few weeks; now he's here and willing, so stop being a prude! she told herself, staring at her clean floor. Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves and steady herself, Hermione opened the door and returned to the living room, fully prepared to be collected and mature about what they were about to do.

"I'm sorry about that, Professor. Would you like...?"

Snape was seated on the couch, one leg crossed over the other, dangling her favorite lace bra from one finger. He looked up when she spoke, an amused smirk playing around his thin lips.

"I must say, Hermione, that keeping lingerie between the couch cushions is an interesting seduction tactic. Are there matching knickers under the coffee table, perhaps?"

She felt the blush creeping up her face as he considered her with that damned raised eyebrow. As a matter of fact, she had been looking for that bra for some time; she had a feeling it had been there since that eventful night at the Three Broomsticks.

"I was under the impression that you wished to have sex with me today. Standing over there and turning red does nothing to further that venture."

He was baiting her into making the first move; clearly, he would sit on that couch until she came over to him or asked him to come to her. But precipitating sex was not something Hermione was good at; she had assumed that once they arrived at her flat, it would just sort of happen naturally. She had figured, of course, without the capriciousness of her potential bedmate--or her own nerves.

"I am not a patient man, Miss Granger. I have no wish to stay here and waste my time while you gape and try to remember why you asked me here. I am doing you a favor, not the other way around." His tone was reverting to its usual cold acridness, and she knew from his sudden formality that she had to do something fast. Before she even consciously decided to do so, Hermione had stripped off her shirt and dropped it on the floor. Fighting the urge to cover herself, she stared at Snape, watching for his reaction.

"I'm ready when you are, Professor," she said, hoping it didn't sound too forced. She really wasn't much good at this; she simply hadn't had any need for skills of seduction, not with Ron's libido and lack of subtlety. Possessing a vagina was generally all a woman had to do to get him interested.

Snape did look a bit more interested that he had a few moments before, but he remained on the couch. Sighing inwardly, Hermione bent down to untie the laces of her trainers, hoping that he wouldn't force her to continue her improvised stripping for much longer; it was a miracle she had remembered to take her shoes off *before* her trousers. A faint inhalation came from his direction when she bent down, and she had to smile--even a man as controlled as Snape could be affected by a woman bending over while topless, it seemed. She took a little longer than was necessary to remove her shoes and socks. When she straightened back up, it was clear from the shape of his trouser front that she had his attention once more. He still hadn't moved, though. All he did was watch her intently, as though asking for proof of her desire for him before he would so much as unbutton his shirt.

You want proof, Professor? she thought. *Fine.* Reaching into the back pocket of her jeans, she extracted her wand and, keeping it concealed behind her back, she vanished her jeans. His eyes flicked downward for the smallest instant, and she saw his lips twitch; cool air hit her knickers, and she realized that, during the past few minutes, her juices had soaked the cloth through. Apparently, the striptease had worked both ways.

* * *

It had taken all of his considerable self-control for Severus to remain on the couch while she took off her clothes. The second her shirt came off and revealed her full, soft breasts, he had been riveted to her every move. But he had been determined, from the moment he sat on the couch and watched her flee to her bedroom, to extract a show of desire from her, to remind her who was doing the asking in this circumstance. It wasn't that he didn't desire her in return--far from it--but Severus had had too many bad experiences not to want some proof *quid pro quo*.

And watching her strip had been an extremely enjoyable experience; now she stood in her knickers, looking vulnerable and defiant. He took the time to study her body intensely, partly because it was worth studying and partly because it made her patently uncomfortable; she shifted her weight and clasped her hands in front of her pelvis, drawing his eyes down to her damp knickers for a moment before he resumed inspection of her. She had been a bit chubby as a child, he remembered, and traces of that could still be seen in her thick thighs and plump hips; it followed that her breasts would be full, and so they were. By no means was her waist perfectly tiny, but it was slim enough to give her a pleasing hourglass shape. All in all, he decided, she wasn't the least attractive woman he had ever slept with, but neither was she the stunner that say, Bellatrix had been.

All right. My turn. Standing up, he began to unbutton his cuffs as he walked towards her, keeping his eyes upon hers the entire time. He stopped in front of her, forcing her to look up at him as he finished the buttons on his shirt and slid out of it, dropping it on top of hers. Bare to the waist, he stood and waited to see what she would do next.

There was a very long and rather awkward pause. Apparently, she had been waiting to see what *he* would do next.

"Er... shall we go to the bedroom, then, Professor?" she ventured, indicating the door she had vanished through earlier.

"Now there's a clever idea," he replied, watching her flush at his sarcasm. Still, she turned and led him the few steps to the door, giving him a perfect opportunity to admire her plump arse. He didn't bother to shut the door behind them.

"I assume you have Silencing Spells on the flat?" he asked, eyeing the small bedroom and guessing at how thin the walls probably were. She had turned back to him and simply nodded in response. There was another pause, which made Severus reconsider his decision to let her make all the first moves. But whatever sense of embarrassment or awkwardness that had held the woman in check seemed to have evaporated upon crossing the threshold to her bedroom, for she suddenly reached up and pulled him down into a very passionate kiss.

He was only too ready to kiss her back, slipping his tongue into her mouth and deepening the kiss as he pulled her body flush against his. The sudden, warm, pressure of her abdomen against his groin made him groan into her mouth, and he required more of her. By sliding one hand down her back (never letting up on the kiss in the process), Severus found and unhooked her bra; she moved her arms to allow him to remove it. Hard nipples pressed into his torso, backed by full breasts, and now it was

her turn to moan, as he slid a hand between their bodies so he could tweak and knead.

They finally broke apart, panting. He kicked off his shoes in record time and yanked off his belt and trousers soon after. She watched him, eyes hungry, one hand coming up to toy with her own nipple; he felt a surge of desire when he saw that. One hand grabbed his wrist as she tugged him towards the bed; he resisted, grabbing his wand from where it had fallen and pointing at the single bed. "*Engorgio!*"

The bed went from single to double to queen sized in a few seconds; he stopped it when it filled half the room wall to wall. She was upon it in a trice, and he followed, sliding on top of her and in between her spread legs.

"Tell me what you like," he breathed, looking down into her face. "How you like to be touched," he continued, as a slight frown had appeared on her forehead. "How you like to be fucked." Normally, he would take the time to experiment and work out for himself what she liked, but his need was simply too urgent for that time-consuming task.

"Well," she said, sounding both aroused and hesitant, "I like my nipples pinched a bit and then rubbed in circles--*oh!*" She finished her sentence in a gasp as one of his hands followed her instructions. He watched her face as he did the same to her other breast; her eyelids fluttered and she moaned.

Lowering his head, he murmured into her ear, "And?" taking the opportunity to run his tongue up and down her jawline and then nibble on her earlobe.

"If you... if you could just take them in your mouth and..." she trailed off, and he could see a blush spreading over her cheeks. While this woman was no shy virgin, there was still a bit of prudish innocence remaining in her, though how long it would last with him around there was no telling. With unusual obedience, he slid down her body and took one rock-hard nipple into his mouth and sucked gently, swirling his tongue around the hard peak. Immediately, her hips bucked against his, and he felt the damp cloth of her knickers rub against his abs. He switched between her breasts for a minute, enjoying her taste and texture, until he heard her moan:

"Fingers... clit... now, please!"

He wasted no time in removing her knickers (and his pants) and sliding his hand up to her slit; he smirked to himself as he discovered her patch of soaked curls. Slowly, he pushed a finger between her netherlips and circled her clit, rubbing it in the same way he had rubbed her nipples, and was rewarded with a moan. He worked one finger, then two, into her wet depths, moving them in and out as his thumb worked her clit. The sheets crinkled as she grabbed at them, her hands clawing as she gasped in pleasure.

The noises she made when he replaced his thumb with his tongue were amazing. Teasing, tickling circles around her clit elicited gasps, but long, slow licks from her entrance to her nub received loud cries. He continued pumping his fingers in and out of her, occasionally removing them to make room for his tongue. Her fingers were twined in his hair, and when she came against his mouth he felt a sting as a few hairs were tugged out.

"Please... Professor, Severus, whatever the hell I should call you, please fuck me!"

"As you wish," he said, quickly moving back up and positioning himself at her entrance. He intended to tease her for a minute by rubbing his tip against her opening, but she raised her hips, pushing against him, and he slid in, groaning at how wet she was. Pulling back, he buried himself in her again, careful to start off slowly and keep control of himself. Apparently, 'slow' wasn't what she was interested in, because she suddenly grabbed his shoulders and flipped him over so she was on top. Straddling his hips, she impaled herself on his cock; he heard her juices squelch as she came down on his loins.

She rode him hard, sliding up and down his shaft, her hands braced against his chest. Normally, he preferred the dominant position, but he was inclined to let her have her way; it was wonderful to watch her as she moved up and down, breasts bouncing, head thrown back in pleasure. He felt the familiar tightening in his balls as ecstasy overcame him. Not wanting to come before she did, he grabbed her waist with one hand and used the other to rub her clit while she continued to ride him.

"Oh, God! Severus! *Severus!*"

She came hard a moment before he roared his own completion, feeling her walls quaking around him as he emptied himself into her. Boneless from pleasure, she slid off of him and collapsed on the bed beside him, one arm draped over his chest, the other cushioning her head. The two of them lay there for a while, heartbeats slowing and breaths steadying. As they regained their senses, what had been a comfortable post-coital silence became an awkward one; Hermione sat up first, looking as uncomfortable as she had before they had entered the bedroom.

"I--thank you, Professor." She ran a hand through her hair, which now more than ever resembled a lion's mane, before sliding down to the foot of the bed and dropping to the floor. Severus sighed and sat up too, just in time to see her bend down to retrieve some item of clothing from the floor. The view that offered was enough to silence him for a moment, but he found his voice soon enough.

"I believe you were calling me 'Severus' a minute ago," he said. "I see no reason to change that--unless there is some *other* reason you like calling me 'Professor?'" It took her a moment to understand his meaning, though the salacious tone he had used probably helped; she spun to face him, blushing furiously when he raised an eyebrow at her and smirked knowingly.

"You wouldn't be the first to have that inclination," he continued.

Still bright pink, she said, "I...er--would you like something to drink or eat? I'm a bit hungry, after..." Trailing off, she looked at the floor, before donning her knickers and bra and exiting with a surprising turn of speed.

* * *

I just fucked Snape, I just fucked Snape... What on earth do I do now?

Hermione stood in the kitchen, staring at the door of the refrigerator as she jerked on her jeans and shirt. Part of her was happy, of course; she had, after all, just had sex (and rather good sex, at that) with a man she had been fantasizing about for weeks. But another part of her, the sensible, logical part, was simultaneously berating her for being so improper and reminding her that her shop had been destroyed that morning. The past hour could have been spent arranging for repairs to be made, filing a report with the Ministry, and working on tracking down the culprits--*not* having sex with her former Potions master.

The happy, libidinous part of her told the other part to bugger off.

A noise from behind her interrupted her brooding; she turned to find Snape--*Severus*--standing there, buttoning up his shirt. "I take it you don't do this often," he stated.

"Do what?" she said, not sure what he was referring to. Shagging former teachers? Being awkward about it?

"Have impetuous, impersonal sex."

"Never before."

"I see," he replied, in an even and maddeningly inscrutable tone. "Well, do you think you will need me to 'not hate you' again, or shall I leave?"

It was clear that impersonal sex was easy for *him*. "I'm fine, thank you," Hermione said, trying to keep the slight hurt out of her voice. She shouldn't have expected that he would be any other way about it, but she thought there might have been at least a façade of emotion afterwards. *You wanted Snape, you got him. All of him* she told herself sternly. The mean, nasty bits were part of that, and in other circumstances, she was more fond of his sarcasm; it was just more enjoyable when not leveled at her.

"Very well." He turned to go, but paused, looking back at her over his shoulder. She tried to suppress a burst of hope that he might have changed his mind about staying, or at least about showing some sort of emotion.

"There is a spell I know of that could help you. It is called the Retribo Poss Poenic, and you will find it in *Magick Juidicio*, by Lawrence Turpin, which you should have in your shop if you are anywhere near as good as I believe you to be." Without another word, he spun on the spot and vanished, accompanied by the *crack!* of Apparation.

Hermione stared at the spot Snape had just occupied, not sure if she should be amazed that he complimented her shop or offended that he hadn't said a "good-bye" of any sort. The book title sounded familiar, though the spell did not; she thought she had seen it pass into her inventory at some point, though she couldn't remember if someone had bought it. In order to find out, she would have to clear the shop up and hope that her records were intact--it would be just her luck for the vandals to have destroyed them. That, of course, brought up the problem of how to get her shop sorted out.

Sighing, Hermione made her way back to the small sitting-room, pulled quill and parchment from a box on the coffee table and began to plan. Twenty minutes later, after considering and dismissing magic, Muggle movers, the Weasley twins and Hagrid, she hit upon a solution. It would take some careful logistics, but it was certainly possible and would probably be more efficient than any of her other ideas. Feeling a smile start to tug at her lips, she grabbed fresh parchment and began to write a letter to one of the few people to stand by her during the Ron fiasco--Minerva McGonagall, current Headmistress of Hogwarts.

A Working Relationship

Chapter 8 of 12

After their one-afternoon-stand, Severus returns to the bookshop to see how Hermione is, and she cuts a deal with the sneaky man.

Rosmerta's cool, nutty ale was just the thing to drink while reflecting on an interesting afternoon, and the Three Broomsticks was in the middle of its afternoon lull, providing Severus with the perfect place to sit and go over the events of the past hour. Propping his elbows on the bar and steeping his fingers, he stared at the wall and thought.

It had not been the most awkward afternoon of sex Severus had ever had, but it was probably a close third. The back and forth play of seduction had been most enjoyable, as had the following exploration of her body, but the girl had been so damn hesitant about the whole thing that it was rather tainted in his mind. She had wanted him--of that he was certain--but it was still unnerving, the way she had behaved; she had all but fled from the bedroom when they were done.

Well, if Severus Snape knew anything, it was when he was no longer wanted; it was something he had ample practice in perceiving. Either her lust had been satisfied to the point where she no longer desired him, or she was trying to figure out how to handle the aftermath of their activities, but his presence had no longer been required or wanted at that flat. He had completed the task set for him--not that it had been a tedious task, by any means--and had therefore been set free to do as he wished.

It had been rather generous of him, Severus thought as he sipped his ale, to actually tell her the spell, book, and author; he was not given to acts of altruistic aid, though the very satisfying orgasm he had minutes before probably had something to do with it. The spell he had given her would work perfectly for her needs. Both of them knew that Flourish had instigated the ransacking of her shop; however, more substantial proof would be needed if legal action were to be taken, and the spell was created to provide such evidence.

A grace period of a few days was what she needed to deal with her feelings about the afternoon's activities, he was sure, as well as locate the book in the disaster area that her shop currently was. He decided to return to her shop on Wednesday; if he was lucky, something else would have upset her enough that she would require some more "comforting." Knocking back the rest of his ale, Severus slid off the barstool and made his way outside so he could Apparate home.

Stepping out into the warm summer afternoon, Severus noticed that the shop across from the Three Broomsticks, the small Hogsmeade bookshop, was boarded up and bore a sign: "Under new ownership--Flourish and Blotts coming soon!" Apparently, Flourish was expanding the family business. He spent a moment speculating about whether the previous owners had given up their business willingly and considered it unlikely. Well, he thought as he spun around and vanished, he couldn't help every small bookstore in the wizarding world; besides, few of them would come with the perks that Words, Words, Words had thus far provided.

After two days spent at home, polishing off the last of his purchases (one book about undetectable poisons and a play called *As You Like It*, which he was enjoying more than he would admit), Severus decided to go and see whether Hermione had managed to find the spell and whether she was planning on using it. When he arrived in Diagon Alley, he made his way to her shop and was pleased to find the sign read "Open." The bell on the door jangled in its usual irritating manner when he entered, but no Hermione appeared from between the shelves to greet a new customer, nor was she behind the front desk. The store had been rehabilitated: the shelves were once again upright and arranged in narrow aisles, and no books littered the floor; in fact, the only evidence that the store had been ransacked were the splinters and gouges in the wood of the bookcases, along with a few marks in the floor. It was a remarkable job, which made him wonder exactly how she had managed it, since he knew she wouldn't use magic around the books and Muggle labor would have taken longer.

The answer came around the corner of one of the aisles a second later, bat-like ears perked in greeting. Severus had been acquainted with the Malfoy's house-elf for quite some time, so it was no surprise when it whirled around and vanished back into the aisle. He smirked; Dobby had always been leery of him, as he was not known to be fond of house-elves, though he did not go out of his way to abuse them the way the Malfoys did. Once, when the creature was being particularly irritating, he had mentioned that house-elf ears were an ingredient in a very difficult potion that he had wanted to experiment with for some time; stupid as the elf was, it had got the hint and made itself scarce. Still, the little creature had its uses, as was elucidated by the restored bookstore: elf magic was different enough from wizard magic that it would have been safe to use it around the books.

Hermione appeared a moment later, coming around the same aisle with Dobby trailing behind her like the world's most pathetic--and ugliest--puppy. She looked rather harried.

"Mistress Hermione told Dobby to tell her if Professor Snape sir came in, and here he is, Miss!" Dobby babbled, clearly ecstatic at having completed a task set for him.

Hermione blushed slightly and said, "Yes, thank you, Dobby. You can go back to Hogwarts now, if you like; you've done a very good job." It sounded as though she'd been trying to persuade the little creature to leave for some time; there was a hint of desperation in her tone.

"But Dobby doesn't want to go back, miss, as Miss Hermione is paying Dobby so handsomely for not so very much work. What can Dobby do, miss?" The elf's green eyes bulged out of his face as he stared pleadingly up at her, clutching the rim of its lumpy knit hat in anticipation.

"Well," she said, biting her lip in thought for a moment, "you could go back to Hogwarts and get me a bit of lunch, if you like. Not too much!" she added hastily as the elf nodded happily and vanished with a sound like a whip. She stared at the spot he had been for a second before saying, half to herself, "Whatever makes him happy, I suppose... I do hope he doesn't bring back a whole turkey." Shaking her head, she turned to Severus, and he saw the kind expression she had used for the elf abruptly

morph into one of irritation; somewhere in her seven years at Hogwarts, she had picked up Minerva's ability to turn her lips into a straightedge.

"I found the book," she stated. "And the spell."

"Don't thank me; I'll blush," he replied. There was something very odd about her expression and tone; he detected no gratitude in either, but rather, a great deal of hostility.

His quip earned him a narrow-eyed look and an about-face that would have made the most maniacal drill instructor proud. Practically stamping on the floor, Hermione went around the desk and retrieved a book--*Magick Judicio*, if he remembered the cover correctly--from underneath it. The offending tome was placed upon the table and opened to a marked page, all in terminal silence; she considered it for a moment, studying the page intently before looking back up at him with a blank expression. Too blank.

"I thought you didn't hate me, Severus. I thought you might even like me a little bit, enough to acquiesce to sleeping with me, anyway. I thought you enjoyed my little shop and didn't want it shut down." Her voice was as placid and bland as her expression, which set off every warning bell in his head. Severus gave a cautious nod, not quite sure what she was playing at.

"Then why," she said, the blandness rapidly diminishing into anger, "*why* did you recommend a spell to me that could get me five years in Azkaban?"

Ah. "You should have learned not to take my advice anymore."

"This spell is Dark Magic, and yet you recommend it to me as easily as I would recommend shampoo to you!"

"You must concede that it would work for your situation, though," he pointed out, crossing his arms and choosing to ignore the shampoo remark--or, rather, storing it away in his memory if he ever needed an example of her being rude to him. Such anecdotes could be useful, especially with anyone inclined to feel guilty. "Besides, as the targets of the spell would be people who knew of or participated in the ransacking of your shop, I wouldn't think that you would care too much for their well-being."

"Their well-being? People get Splinched with this spell!" Clearly, his suggestion was not being taken well. The now-familiar shrillness in her voice was beginning to make itself known as she rebuked him; when a strand of hair fell into her face, she brushed it away so forcefully that she nearly slapped herself across the forehead.

Well, if she didn't want his help, he didn't have to stand around and be yelled at. "I merely recommended it, Miss Granger; if you don't want to use it, fine." He turned to go and was halfway to the door when her next words stopped him.

"Help me alter it, then, Severus. It can work the way I need it to, but it has to be changed first and I'm... not good at altering spells, particularly ones of this nature."

This was an interesting turn of events. He considered it for a moment, staring at the wall of books in front of him, making her wait for a reply. It had cost her to admit to being unskilled at something involving magic, he could tell, but evidently her needs had overturned her pride. His own pride told him not to go back and help her; she had already shown him what she thought of his ideas. On the other hand, having her so deeply in his debt could prove extremely useful, if he played his cards right; when he further considered the possibilities *that* implied, he decided to give her what she wanted.

"Well? Will you or won't you?" Apparently, her patience only extended so far; the bossiness in her voice was back.

Severus turned back to her, smirking, and replied, "I was merely waiting to see if the world was going to come crashing down about my ears after hearing *you* confess to inability in any subject." The familiar blush of rage colored her cheeks, and he hastily spoke again before she could begin some new tirade. "What is to be my compensation for this task?"

"Er... I don't have much money," she started, nervously running a hand through her bushy hair while her teeth restarted their chewing of her lip, which was starting to look a bit swollen from the constant mastication.

"The house-elf said you were paying it 'handsomely'."

"That's 'him,' not 'it,' and 'handsomely' for Dobby means five galleons and three pairs of mismatched socks. I trust you'll want something different."

Nodding, he moved forward, studying the young woman's reactions as he neared; her nervous idiosyncrasies intensified a bit, with the addition of her being remarkably interested in the wood of the desk. Was it possible, he wondered, that she still lusted after him? If she did, it could be a marvelous ace-in-the-hole for him, a means of influence that could be most rewarding. Perhaps an experiment was needed to test this theory.

"No, you're quite right. You can pay me in something far more precious than money," he murmured, modulating his tone to be as smooth and silky as possible; he saw her inhalations increase in rapidity, and he continued. "Something more unique, more personal, that I feel I can only get from you." He was only a foot away from her now, and she looked up, a light of hope in her eyes that made the wicked side of him dance with glee.

"Yes?" she breathed. "What is it?"

Leaning closer until he was practically nose to nose with her, close enough to feel her breath on his face, he said, "Books."

* * *

It could not be possible. Hermione stared back at Snape, trying to find some hint of a joke in those black eyes, but they were as unreadable as ever. How could he say what he had just said in those tones that dripped seduction, while he leaned in like he was about to kiss her, and then tell her he meant books?

She had thought that one round of sex with her former Potions master would satisfy her lust for him, but instead it had intensified; the one, rather brief experience had piqued her curiosity. Irritation at his behavior had overwhelmed her desire for a day, but when he came striding back into her store, she felt her knees go a bit weak, although she was proud of herself for concealing it with anger at his spell suggestion. Of course, that had only worked until he started talking about "compensation," at which point the wet heat between her legs reasserted itself. *Admit it, girl--you wanted him to mean something besides books.*

Realizing that she was probably gaping at him like a Weasley staring at a Veela, Hermione pulled her gaze away from his eyes and back down to her desk as she stammered, "B-books, Severus? In what way should I pay you in books?"

Blessedly, he turned away from her, waving a hand to take in the small store. "I was thinking along the lines of a book or two per day of my assisting you."

Now, she might be addled with lust, but Hermione Granger was not about to let the Head of Slytherin House make an open-ended deal like that. Putting her hands on her hips, she gave him the same reprimanding look she had used on the boys when they tried to beg off of homework. "And how many obstacles would you invent to lengthen your term of employment, Severus? How much of the tapestry would you unravel each night?"

His eyes glittered, whether in disappointment or insult she couldn't tell; if it was the latter, she wouldn't have much time to convince him to stay. She continued, thinking fast. "I'll give you unlimited access to my store, but I will keep track of anything you take home and you must return it once we're done." She already had a means of tracking her wares once they left the store, so it would be easy enough to make sure nothing got left at... wherever he lived.

The man considered that for a moment and then nodded in apparent satisfaction. "Done." A long arm was extended towards her, and she reached out to shake the long-fingered hand; his grip was firm without being overpowering, and she could feel the calluses that spoke of hard work on his palm and fingers. Trying to ignore the new heat that spread through her at his touch, Hermione dropped his hand and ran hers through her hair, smiling a little nervously.

"Would you like to start now?" she asked. "Dobby will be back with food soon, and he'll bring enough for five people, so if you want lunch..." Hermione shrugged a little, hoping to indicate that she didn't care one way or the other if he stayed or not; it was a bit late to start pretending not to fancy him, but hopefully she could salvage what was left of her dignity. Snape jerked his head in curt assent; Hermione found herself smiling broadly at that and decided to give dignity up as a lost cause. Beckoning for him to follow, she scooped up the book and slipped down the aisle to her little side room, where she quickly rearranged the armchairs and side table into a configuration suited for working, not relaxing, with the chairs facing each other across the table. A careful spell made the small table taller and a bit bigger; the finished product wasn't ideal, but it would do to be going on with.

"I can see that my legs are going to be constantly cramped for the foreseeable future." She turned to find Severus in the doorway, looking at the chairs-and-table set up with disgusted resignation.

"You'll have a chance to stretch them every time I need something off a top shelf," she countered, smiling sweetly at his indignant glare before squeezing around the table to sink into her favorite armchair and look expectantly back at him. With the smallest of put-upon sighs, he mimicked her, though she couldn't help noticing, with a bit of rancor, that he had a much easier time of it than she had; he slid between the two pieces of furniture almost without touching them. *Bloody thin bastard*, she thought, hiding her annoyance by opening the book and studying the appropriate page.

Once he had settled into the chair and arranged his legs under the table (she told herself that his ankles rubbing against hers was simply a result of their close confines and not in any way a seduction tactic), Severus steepled his fingers and regarded her over the tips. "I'm ready when you are," he said, raising his eyebrows just enough that they hinted at a suggestive remark.

Why, you little...! It took every ounce of self-control Hermione possessed not to slap the smug look off his face when he said that; instead, she shifted in her seat and "accidentally" kicked him in the ankle, smirking when she saw him wince. It was a childish sort of revenge, but satisfying nonetheless. He glared at her, and she smiled sweetly before turning back to the book and ending their little sparring session.

"The Retriba Poss Poenic," she began, "works by tracking the magical signature of a wand and then using the bond between wand and owner--,"

"I am aware of how the spell functions, Hermione."

"Reviewing never hurt anyone," she snapped automatically, not bothering to look up at him. She was in what Ron had called "learn or die" mode and, as a result, her patience was thinner than Lavender Brown's gauze knickers.

"Do not speak to me as though I were one of your imbecilic little friends."

Exasperated, she jerked her head up to glare at him to find him glaring right back, arms crossed over his thin chest as he frowned across the table at her, black hair swinging forward to frame his black look. She had, however, been the subject of said glare numerous times, and she found its effect had weakened with repetition, so she simply replied:

"Then stop acting like a bored first-year who wants to go play Gobstones. This won't take long." From the stunned look on his face, she figured she had guaranteed his silence or his impending exeunt, so she went back to the book, hoping the lure of free books would keep him in the chair. When a lack of footsteps and some dramatic exiting line told her he was staying, she continued reading aloud.

"It uses the bond between wand and owner to bring the owner back to a location, specified by the spell's caster, by means of forced Apparition. Often, the victim of the spell will attempt to resist it, which results in Splinching. *That*," she said, leaning back in her chair to look at him again, "is what we must change in order for me to stay out of jail."

As she regarded him, waiting for an answer of some kind, Severus shifted in his chair, thoughtfully tracing his lips with a long finger before reaching out and seizing the book, dragging it across the small table and turning it around all in one movement. Silence prevailed as he studied the page intensely, and Hermione bit back the questions that sprang to her lips; she knew she hated it when people interrupted her reading. Instead she just watched him as he read. He was an intense and physical reader, with his hawkish nose only inches from the paper, his hair actually brushing the pages, and his finger still outlining his thin lips. He almost created a bubble of literary attention around him, and she found herself itching to pick up another book and dive into it with the same focus. She almost expected there to be a 'pop' of separation when he pulled away, which he did after several minutes so he could regard her once again.

"It will be difficult," he stated. "The incantation is very simple, which makes our job harder; there is very little material to work with, and the smallest alterations will have dramatic effects. We will have to experiment and test on ourselves--or, rather, on *you*, for I have no intention of risking myself for this--and it will take a copious amount of plain hard work." The eyebrow quirked up in a silent question.

Hermione had the answer. "Very well. Hard work and danger it is. But first," she said, hearing the familiar *crack* of Apparation in the main area of the shop, followed by the excited patter of small feet, "I think Dobby has our lunch."

It wasn't easy for her to sit and eat when there was a project to be started, especially when said project was vital to her continued employment, but Hermione also knew that her eating habits when she was engrossed in work were erratic at best and nonexistent at worst, so she forced herself to eat. It wasn't too hard; Dobby had chosen good foods for the season and weather. She and Severus worked their way through mixed-greens salad with cranberries and blue cheese, cold roast chicken, and bruschetta, with dark chocolate mouse topped with raspberries to finish it off. They ate in silence, as the table was small enough that they didn't have to ask for anything to be passed; only when Dobby had Vanished with the plates and cutlery did Hermione speak.

"I suppose I owe you thanks for agreeing to help me with this," she said, smiling a little.

"Yes, you do." He sat back with an expectant look on his face.

"Er... are you waiting for something?"

"You haven't thanked me yet."

"I just said I owed you thanks!"

"Yes, but you haven't given them to me yet."

"Ooh, you...! Fine. *Thank you*. Can we start now?"

"As I said before, I'm ready when you are."

If he says that once more, I will hex his bollocks off Hermione glared at her new partner as he settled back in his chair and smirked at her. She had a feeling that reworking the spell was going to be a long, difficult process, but it was certainly going to be interesting.

And, she thought, I now have Severus Snape on my side and helping me. Flourish, say your prayers. Smiling, she opened the book and started taking notes about the Retriba Poss Poenic.

Errors and Trial

Chapter 9 of 12

Severus and Hermione are frustratingly close to getting the altered spell to work. Maybe they just need a little persuasion from the right direction.

"So," Hermione said, tapping the parchment in front of her with her quill, "if we change the emphasis to the second syllable, it should change the meaning to 'suggestion' instead of 'command.'"

Glancing up from his own parchment, Severus met her inquiring gaze and nodded curtly in reply before reaching for his cup of coffee and taking a few sips. He noticed that her eyes followed the movement of his arm and hand and suppressed a smirk at the longing in her expression. He had discovered, while working with the woman, that she was inclined to become completely absorbed in her work, to the point that she forgot to take care of herself, while he had self-preservation written on his bones. Often, he would slip out for food or coffee without her even noticing, and he rarely returned with anything for her, unless her growling stomach had been irritating him. The last trip to acquire caffeine had been no different. His reasoning was that she needed to learn to take care of herself while working on projects, no matter how consuming or important they were; that, and it was rather entertaining to watch her envy him for something as simple as coffee.

Of course, watching her in general had its benefits. As they had moved their base of operations from the shop to her flat, she often opened her door for him dressed in Muggle sweatpants and tank tops, which seemed expressly designed to cling to and accentuate the wiggling of her curves. Furthermore, she spent much of the time leaning over the table directly in front of him, which provided a very acceptable change of scenery from blotted parchments and complicated books.

No, working closely and extensively with Hermione Granger had not been quite the arduous task he had imagined it. Not that it had been perfect, by any means, but he only wanted to strangle her once or twice a day, instead of the expected four or five times. She was bossy as all hell and as stubborn as he, and they both despised being wrong. His leaps of intuition often did not sit well with her logical and straightforward thought process, while he grated against her reluctance to try anything completely new.

At least they had finally reached this new variation of the spell without a riotous quarrel, which was more than could be said of the previous three. "Shall we try this once again?" he asked. At her nod, he stood and reached for the piece of parchment she held; she gave it to him, and he read the new incantation to himself as she prepared the sitting room for another test run by moving the furniture out of the way with her wand. This was the "crime" that they were using as the subject for their tests; the magical signature of her wand would be traced by the spell, and, if all went well, she would be gently, but firmly, guided back to the "scene of the crime" by the spell. Thus far, she had been Splinched twice and arrived naked once. He had to admire her tenacity in being the guinea pig for the tests, as being Splinched was an experience most wizards went far out of their ways to avoid, but she was determined to find a way to legally obtain proof of Flourish's guilt.

"All set," she said, and he looked up to see her heading for the door to her bedroom. He waited a minute after it closed to begin the incantation. Softly chanting the words, he moved around the room, drawing shimmering lines that connected each piece of furniture she had moved until a jagged loop had formed. With a deft flourish, he sealed the ends of the circle, stepped into a corner, and waited.

Nothing happened. No "pop" of Apparition. Not so much as a squeak. Sighing, he slid around the edges of the spell until he reached the door to her bedroom and opened it.

"Something went wrong..." he began upon entering, but stopped when he saw what the spell had done.

Hermione was floating a few inches off the floor and spinning around like a prima ballerina. Her hair was haloing around her head, flung out by centrifugal force, and from what he could see of her face each time it flashed by, she was not happy.

He snickered, and then burst into a full-out laugh.

"This...is not...funny!" she snarled, spitting each word at him as she spun around.

"Oh, really?" he replied, still laughing as she attempted to grab on to something to stop herself spinning; he evaded her clutches, but was too slow to dodge the fist that connected with his shoulder on her next rotation.

"Severus, get...your skinny...arse...back in that...room...and undo...the spell!"

With his shoulder aching, it was sorely tempting to simply return to the sitting room and wait for an apology before undoing the spell; upon further thought, an aching shoulder would be the least of his worries once Hermione was free, so he grudgingly waved his wand through the silver lines, severing the connection and ending the spell. A yelp and a muffled thump from the other room signaled Hermione's release from the spell's effects. Still chuckling a bit, Severus returned to find her on hands and knees on the floor, looking more than a little green and breathing hard.

"Well, at least some good has come of you not eating anything for two days," he said, leaning against the doorframe. "There's nothing to come up when this sort of thing happens."

"I haven't eaten," she panted, "for two days?" She did not look at him, keeping her gaze fixed firmly on the floor between her hands, though he thought he saw the now-familiar crease appear between her brows. The wild mess that her hair usually was had been intensified by the spinning; as a result, a good portion of it was defying gravity.

"I brought you a sandwich yesterday. That's all."

"Oh." Slowly, she pushed herself up until she was kneeling on the ground. Even this cautious movement must have set off a wave of nausea, for she swayed slightly and went pale, clutching one hand to her head. "Oooh. I think I'll stay here for a while."

Severus sighed. He was hungry, she probably could use something to eat, and they needed to debrief what had just happened, none of which would happen while she knelt on the floor and felt sorry for herself. In one stride, he had crossed the distance between them; swiftly, he bent, grasped her arms, and hauled her to her feet, ignoring her gasp of protest.

"Standing will normalize your circulation and help you recover faster," he improvised, wondering if it was true and whether or not she would know. True or not, the hastily-concocted explanation was not enough to appease her; she yanked out of his supportive grasp, thunderclouds forming on her brow, but he saw her wobble a bit right before she collapsed forward onto his chest, grabbing his upper arms to hold herself up.

Looking down into a mass of bushy brown hair, he smirked and said, "Now, where have I seen this before?"

"Sod off." He grinned at that. It was so delightfully easy to bait her about the one afternoon of sex they'd had. The pleasure he took from teasing her was increased by the

fact that he knew she still wanted him; each barb was a reminder that she had had him once and might never do so again. Not that he actually had any strong objections to another dalliance, but it hadn't taken him long to figure out that Hermione Granger in full research mode was not an easy thing to deal with. Any proposition on his part was likely to be responded to with a glare and some tart comment about priorities; that was, if she didn't simply ignore it as another jibe.

It was a long minute until Hermione got her legs working properly again, during which Severus tried not to enjoy having her pressed against him too much; blissfully, his body acquiesced to his wish. Still, he was relieved when she finally pushed herself off him and stood on her own. As she looked up at him, still a touch unsteady, he noticed the dark circles under her eyes, which contrasted ghoulishly with the unhealthy pallor of her skin. A surreptitious glance up and down her body showed that her sweatpants had a bit less to cling to than before.

Severus Snape would be the first person to say that he generally did not give a damn about the well-being of the rest of the human race. He had plenty of problems of his own without worrying about anyone else's. But right now, he could not help but react to how wan Hermione looked, though a good part of said reaction was disgust with her absurd Gryffindor tendencies to put everything before her own well-being. It was, however, her loss of weight that decided his course of action; if sleeping with her at any point was still a possibility, he wanted to ensure that she retained the plump curves he had so enjoyed running his eyes and hands over.

"Get dressed in clothes suitable for the public's eye and find some way to control the shrubbery on your head," he ordered her, pointing to the closet imperiously. "We are going to acquire some lunch while we discuss this latest test run."

Maybe her head wasn't on quite right after spinning around for several minutes. Maybe it was the commanding way he'd said it. Or maybe Hermione's subconscious realized her need for food and sunshine more than she knew because she found herself moving to obey Severus' orders as soon as he'd said them.

She dropped her shirt to the floor before she remembered he was still in the room.

Gazing into her closet, she decided there were two options: continue the undressing / dressing process without acknowledging him; or turn, half-naked, and ask him to leave.

His eyebrows shot up a notch when she spun around; though, to his credit, his eyes only flicked down to her chest for an instant before fixing on her face.

"Would you mind giving me a bit of privacy while I change?" she asked sweetly, propping her hands on her hips. He had been asking for this, really, with all his sly little innuendos and allusions to their afternoon together; if he made one more of his comments, she was inclined to take it as consent and just rip off his clothes and go for it.

With a slight sneer, he retreated; though she noticed he didn't shut the door. She could read the message there: *I'll do as you ask, but it's nothing I haven't seen before*. Sighing at the constant complexity that was Severus Snape, she quickly changed into jeans and robes, grabbing a hair tie and cramming her hair into a bun at the back of her head as she went back into the sitting room.

She found him Reducing their notes and slipping them into his pockets, presumably so they could discuss them over lunch. Opening her mouth to inquire as to where he wanted to eat, she was cut off before she even began.

"There is a very nice café in Muggle London that I am quite fond of. It's near the Leaky Cauldron, which will make the second part of our excursion easy."

"What second part? What else are we doing?" she asked, feeling the trepidation that accompanied any mysterious suggestions of Severus' start to creep up.

He turned, giving her a slightly disgusted look. "We're going by your shop so I can acquire some more of my payment for this enterprise."

"You've already taken out eight books!"

"And each one has drawn up more questions, which require more books in order to be answered. Might I add," he said, a warning note entering his smooth voice as he moved over to loom above her, "that you put no quantitative limits on our bargain." It was fairly clear from his tone and his scowl that any such limits would result in the end of the bargain.

"Fine," she snapped. "But we're splitting the check for lunch."

"Doesn't the employer generally pay for the employee?"

"Doesn't the gentleman generally pay for the lady?"

"As you have previously pointed out, I am a git, not a gentleman." Before she could respond to that, he had wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drawn her close to him, pressing her against his firm torso; she felt the familiar tug of Apparition as her flat vanished from sight.

The next sight that greeted her eyes was the brick-lined courtyard behind the Leaky Cauldron, which was a very popular Apparation point for wizards planning to go into Muggle London, as there was less risk of Apparating right on top of someone, as occasionally happened in Diagon Alley or other crowded areas. At the moment, though, it felt rather crowded; of course, to her, an open field would feel crowded if she was directly adjacent to Severus Snape, as she currently was. It took quite a bit of willpower to pull away from that lean, hard body, instead of snuggling closer to it and inhaling the masculine scent of him. Hermione knew better than to confront him about his actions; he would probably make some blithe, yet cutting, remark about how Side-Along Apparation worked better when the passenger was *beside* the Apparator. Instead, she simply followed him as he made his way through the dingy pub and into the bright street outside.

The café turned out to be a little Italian place a few blocks away from the Leaky Cauldron. It was small and lit mostly by sunlight that came through the large, open windows that faced onto a patio in the back. The tables and chair were a bit mismatched, though they all tended towards simple design and dark woods. Hermione was surprised when a waiter asked Severus if he wanted his usual table set for two; she had never pictured him as the type to frequent a Muggle restaurant often enough to merit a usual table. Regular or not, however, she could tell that some of the wait staff were less than thrilled to see him...a few dark looks and hasty retreats clued her in.

Once they were seated, with a glass of wine each and a basket of fresh bread between them, Hermione got straight down to business.

"What do you believe went wrong with the sp--test?" she said, realizing at the last minute that she was in a Muggle establishment and therefore should refrain from mentioning spells and magic in every sentence. From the way his lips twitched, he had noticed her near slip.

"I believe," he replied, selecting a slice of bread and plucking it from the basket with his long fingers, "that by changing the meaning of the last word to 'suggestion,' we did not, as we intended, suggest that the victim return to the scene of the crime. Rather," he continued, now buttering his bread and taking a neat bite, "the effect was a suggestion of Apparation." Sipping his wine, he cocked an eye at her over the bowl of the glass, clearly expecting her to fill in the rest. It was remarkable how he could be working for her, and yet he could put her on the spot exactly as he would have in the classroom (that is, as he would have if he had ever called on her in the classroom, which he never had).

"Oh. I see. There wasn't enough impetus for the Apparation to be completed, so it just got to the spinning around stage." Frustrated, she glared into her wine before taking a healthy gulp. It was a smooth red, and its rich taste made her feel a little better. She continued to toy with the glass as she thought out loud. "So... we need to remove Apparation from the words entirely... except that will probably cause multiple problems with the rest of the effects..." She fell silent as the waiter returned to take their orders; lost in thought, she didn't notice when Severus finished his own order. A cough brought her back to reality, and she glanced over at Severus, realizing that she hadn't bothered to look at the menu.

"She will have the lasagna, I think?" he prompted, raising an eyebrow to see if she had any objections. When she nodded acquiescence, a brief look of what might have been satisfaction passed over his face, though she couldn't for the life of her tell why her food choice would cause that. Again, she put the eccentricities of Severus Snape out of her mind and refocused on the spell they had to fix.

They spent the rest of the meal debating various ways to change the spell without either gaining new, unwanted effects or undoing the desired ones. By the time the espresso and chocolate torte had shown up, they were glaring at each other again, as Severus had just told Hermione that her most recent idea "would be about as effective as Lockhart's teaching," to which she had responded that Lockhart was charming enough not to have to control his class by terror. When it came time to pay, they both slammed their share of the bill down so hard that nearby customers jumped and then stormed out, leaving somewhat frightened stares in their wake.

Not a word was spoken during the walk to the Leaky Cauldron, nor did they say anything as Hermione tapped the correct order of bricks to open up the wall into Diagon Alley, and silence continued to reign in the brief walk to her shop. She undid the wards as quickly as possible and preceded Severus into the shop, though she chose to remain at the counter and fiddle with paperwork rather than accompany him as he searched for the books he wanted. It took him nearly forty minutes before he returned to the front, carrying a sizeable stack of books and looking a bit less angry and more thoughtful than he had before being set loose upon her wares. It occurred to her, looking at him, that being given free reign in a bookshop would have exactly the same effect on her.

"I was thinking about our earlier discussion," he said, setting the books down on the counter. He very intentionally didn't quite look her in the eyes as he spoke, and she wasn't sure if that was appealingly awkward or a little frightening; she hid her own confusion by recording the titles he had selected as he continued.

"While there were numerous problems with your last suggestion, I was... reconsidering it while I browsed, and I think it may have...potential to work. If we implement a few of my own ideas, of course."

Of course. He may have conceded a minor point to her, but there was no way Severus would ever admit to being entirely wrong. *You did hire him to advise you,* she reminded herself, *so it's no good being stubborn and not taking his advice.* "Very well," she replied. "Just give me a few minutes to put a few things in order here and we'll go back to my flat to experiment some more, okay?"

He nodded and exited, leaving her to calculate how much longer she could afford not to open the shop. It was a long, complicated equation that threatened to give her a headache.

Stepping back out into the warm summer afternoon, Severus wondered if he was getting too emotionally involved in the project; he must be mentally off somehow, if his recent admission to being wrong about something was anything to go by. It was true that her idea, at first consideration, was ridiculous, but his mind had been nagging at it all through their walk, and a few possibilities had emerged. This was not the first time such a thing had happened, but in the past he had always managed to take all the credit for any resulting success. He certainly had not told the idea's progenitor that he had reconsidered his original opinion.

And this time, he didn't even have the haze of a recent orgasm to excuse his action.

"Well. Professor Snape. Good afternoon."

Long practice had made Severus all but immune to being surprised by people sneaking up on him; even as the adrenaline raced through his veins, he kept a calm mien as he turned to find Tiburos Flourish standing a few feet in front of him. He recognized the moronic fedora that the man had worn to that eventful night in the Three Broomsticks all those weeks ago, though his robes were far more businesslike. He still had the same shark-like smile.

"I had heard a few rumors about your recent activities, but now I see that you really have chosen sides." There was a clear note of false sorrow in the last part of the sentence, as though Flourish were mourning a man who had chosen the weaker army right before a major war.

"I am assisting Miss Granger in some minor research," Severus replied evenly, surveying Flourish for any clue as to what he was up to. "I fail to see how that requires me to have 'chosen sides.'"

Flourish chuckled a little, a smooth, assuming noise that made Severus grit his teeth. "Minor research, all-out war, it's all the same, really. You're still working for her, not me, which is really a shame for you, as I'm sure I could pay you much more than she can." He crossed his arms, regarded Severus with his head cocked a little to one side, and dropped his voice as he continued. "Of course, I couldn't match the appeal of having her on her knees, sucking your cock every payday--."

He stopped abruptly, as people were wont to do when Severus pressed his wand into their windpipe with a snarl etched on his face. He had to give Flourish points for remaining cool when threatened; his leering smile barely slipped, and all he did was slowly uncross his arms and hold them up in surrender.

"It would behoove you," Severus hissed, fighting to keep from doing the man serious damage, "to turn around and walk away. Right now. And Mr. Flourish, rest assured that if I had not chosen sides before, I certainly have now." People were staring at the two of them, and especially at Severus, but small scuffles in Diagon Alley were not uncommon; as long as no magic was actually used, people tended not to interfere.

Flourish nodded, backing away slowly with his arms still raised, but even though his actions spoke of surrender, there was a triumph in his eyes right before he turned away that had Severus more than a little worried. Nobody had ever looked remotely triumphant when he was threatening them, so it made him wonder exactly why Flourish had chosen to confront him, and to say what he had said.

"All set!"

Hermione appeared beside him, looking a bit more cheerful than she had a few minutes ago and holding a few rolls of parchment. Her face fell when she looked up at him; no doubt he looked positively murderous.

"Er, Severus... Is--is everything all right?" she asked, a slight hitch in her voice.

"I think," he ground out, grabbing her arm and pulling her a bit closer, "that we should finish our experiments as quickly as possible." With that, he focused on her flat, spun around, and Disapparated, pulling her with him.

When they appeared in her sitting-room, he wasted no time in pulling out their notes and returning them to their original size. Muttering to himself, he grabbed a quill off the coffee table and sat down to being scribbling out a new variation. *She was right; if we change this word back to 'command' but remove the word for Apparation... and replace it with the word for 'travel.'* He stared at the paper. *This should work!* "Hermione, move the furniture again. I...we've figured this out." He thrust the paper at her, letting her scan it quickly and seeing the light of discovery appear in her eyes. Handing him back the sheet, she quickly sent some of the furniture twisting around the room before she all but ran to her bedroom and shut the door.

Quickly, Severus connected the pieces of affected furniture, drawing the silver lines with as much speed as he could safely manage. Carefully, he read through the incantation, enunciating each syllable with all the delicacy of a trained actor, while the words *this will work, this has to work* flew through his mind. When he finished the spell, his gaze flew to the bedroom door.

Seconds ticked by. Silence. He bit back the curse words that arose in his throat, not daring to risk the quality of the spell.

A faint scuffling noise made him even tenser, if that was possible. With agonizing slowness, the doorknob turned and the door was pushed open a bit, then pulled back, but then opened all the way. Hermione stumbled out, looking like a marionette trying to fight the strings of her puppet master as she was dragged towards the circle of silver light.

Severus didn't breathe until she had collapsed in the center, panting from trying to resist the spell. Her breathing was the only sound for a minute, until...

"*It worked!*" Severus had about half a second to cut the lines with his wand before she launched herself at him, wrapped her arms around his neck, and planted a very firm kiss on his lips. He couldn't help it; he went rigid.

"Oh..." she said, pulling back and unclasping her arms from his neck. "I...er...sorry about that. I was just a bit...excited." She bit her lip and tucked a strand of hair behind

her ear, bushing slightly.

"I'm not interested in your apologies," he snapped, still off-balance (physically and mentally) from her assault on his person.

"Yes, well, I understand," she babbled, "and I suppose we're done here, thank you for helping me and everything. You can keep the books for a few more days, if you like..."

"Thank you," he said, automatically, though not without a hint of sarcasm.

They stood there for a minute before Severus, desperate not to endure more awkward silence, nodded a goodbye and Disapparated to Spinner's End.

No, he wasn't interested in her apologies, not at all, and she was a fool if she thought he was.

What he was interested in, as he had realized when he pulled his wand on Flourish, was *her*.

Dirty Rita

Chapter 10 of 12

Who says the *Daily Prophet* tells lies?

Of the remarkably idiotic things Hermione had done in her life, she felt that this one ranked right up with Confunding Cormac McLaggen and marrying Ron. It was one thing to go to Severus for a bit of comforting, explained in a suitably logical and straightforward way, but it was another to pounce on him and kiss him soundly. No wonder he had fled; he was probably in shock.

And she might have lost a friend, partner, and potential lover. She groaned and allowed herself to stagger to the couch and collapse with her head in her hands. *Hermione Granger: Know-it-all, entrepreneur, and fuckup extraordinaire.*

Perhaps a carefully worded note of apology in the morning would mollify the prickly man--enough to keep her in his good graces, anyway, should she find herself in need again.

At least she had the spell. Now all she had to do was figure out a way to use it to implicate Flourish. That would require planning, and planning was a wonderful thing she could throw herself into at the moment, burying her emotions in charts and schedules and reams of notes. Almost feverishly, she jumped from the couch and grabbed quill, ink, and parchment, seating herself at the kitchen table with her arsenal.

Automatically, she unscrewed the cap to the ink bottle and unrolled a piece of parchment, using the salt and pepper shakers to keep it from rolling back up. Thusly prepared, she sat and stared at the wall, turning over her potential problems in her mind.

She already knew how she would implement the spell: during the cleanup of her shop, she had prevented Dobby from magically repairing scorch marks and sharp gouges on the shelves, as it was likely that they were made magically. Additionally, she could try to sift through her wards and find any residual magic from whoever had broken them.

Of course, there was the very real issue that Flourish was not a complete idiot; it was quite likely that he had hired someone to break into her shop, in which case the spell might deliver to her a very dangerous hired thug from whom evidence needed to be obtained.

And there was also the slim chance that it had been an independent agent who was not associated with Flourish at all, but was instead attacking what they saw as a purveyor of Dark materials. Possibly even an Auror, using his or her training to fulfill a personal vendetta. In which case, Flourish would be able to continue his war against her with relatively clean hands.

She listed each possible scenario on a separate piece of parchment and then began outlining the various courses of action she could take for each one. As she worked, she began to relax; this was one of the things that could relax her: just figuring out a problem, step by step, ensuring all possible loopholes were closed.

Hours later, she was starting to nod off, but she had three distinct plans outlined and so felt that she could go to bed. A huge yawn hit her as she was rolling up her parchment, and it occurred to her that she had not slept well for weeks...ever since she and Severus started experimenting with the spell. Maybe now she could get some rest, though her emotions had started roiling the moment she thought of the saturnine man.

A nice note in the morning. That should set things right, or at least, right enough Satisfied for the time being, she undressed, fell into bed, and fell asleep in record time.

It felt like he had just fallen asleep when the sun's light hit his face and woke Severus up, but he knew that wasn't true; looking at the clock, he determined that he had gone to sleep a whole three hours ago. He groaned, seriously considering the option of closing the blinds and staying in bed to catch up on sleep, which was in no way a tactic to avoid seeing Hermione. Absolutely not.

Slytherins can generally lie to everyone except themselves. Muttering about irritating women who lived to make his nights sleepless, Severus levered himself out of bed. He just stood there for a minute, staring blearily out the window as he rubbed grit out of his eyes. It wasn't much of a view: the peeling grey wall of the house next to Spinner's End, with scrubby weeds populating the narrow strip of land between the two buildings, bisected by a chain-link fence on the brink of collapsing into a rusty heap.

Home, sweet home. He sneered at the pathetic panorama and turned to make his way to the bathroom. If he ever brought Hermione here, he would be sure to close the blinds. And maybe plant some fast-growing hedges.

If. All things considered, it wasn't really much of an 'if'. She fancied him, he fancied her, so what was the problem?

He was the problem. Standing under the hot water in the shower, Severus leaned against the tiles and considered the situation. Despite having had a quite a few short-lived lovers, one-night-stands, and drunken escapades, Severus had never really had what one might call a romantic relationship. At school, there had been Lily; after school, there had been his work as a Death Eater, followed by years of teaching and spying, and now freedom. No woman had made him want anything other than sex, except for Lily. Quite frankly, he was damned sure that he would be a terrible... no, not "boyfriend;" he refused to use that puerile term... "romantic partner." That would do.

Hermione had been hurt once already; she didn't need him making her problems worse.

But at the same time, he thought as he reached for the soap, it wasn't as though she wasn't prepared to deal with him, surly attitude and all. She knew perfectly well what she would be getting into, and she was more than mature enough to decide for herself what was good for her.

There. Problem solved. He was willing to try, and if it went pear-shaped, she had been warned.

That thought buoyed him out of the shower, into a shirt and trousers, and into the kitchen, where two owls were tapping at the window. One of them, a tawny barn owl, was carrying the *Daily Prophet*; the other, a small brown one, held a small note clamped in its beak. With a flick of his wand, the window opened and they soared in. Severus took the note and paid for the paper, which he tossed to the table in favor of the former. Turning it over, he saw his name written in small, neat handwriting that he had come to know very well recently.

Carefully, he broke the seal on the envelope and pulled out the small piece of paper inside.

Severus,

I'm sorry if my actions yesterday alarmed or offended you. I got a little overexcited by our success. I'm sure you know my feelings for you; please know also that I realize they are not reciprocated. I will try to control myself in the future.

I also apologize for the article in this morning's paper. Should you wish to make some sort of statement denying it, I will understand completely. It was never my intention to make you a part of this stupid business war, and I understand your need for privacy, so whatever action you take in response to the article, you have my full support. Again, I offer my sincerest apologies.

Hermione

Article? Severus thought, placing the note down and reaching for the paper.

One glance at the front page had him dropping it to the table, Summoning shoes and socks, and Apparating to Diagon Alley as fast as possible.

He arrived down the street from her shop; fortunately, it was too early for the usual crowds to have gathered in the narrow alley, so he was able to get to the little shack very quickly. The worn sign on the door was turned to "Closed," but he was not easily dissuaded. Cautiously, he pulled out his wand and tested the wards on the shop: the security wards were up in full, and he swore. Turning from the store, he glanced up and down the street, but saw only a few goblins outside of Gringotts and a plump witch sweeping the doorstep of the Apothecary.

"Goddammit, witch, where are you?" he muttered. She might be in her flat, but he was reluctant to go there; he needed relatively neutral ground for this conversation. Snarling to himself, he slipped around the corner into Knockturn Alley, finding a spot against a wall that would allow him to watch the entrance to Words, Words, Words. He knew she would show up eventually; all it would take on his part was a little patience. Crossing his arms, he leaned against the wall and began the strenuous activity of waiting.

Still a little puffy-eyed and congested from her morning's crying, Hermione arrived at her shop devoutly hoping that no one would be around. Bad enough that the article had been run, but she wanted no confrontations with the public, no questions or insults or accusations. A quick look up and down the street proved fate to be on her side that morning. She reached into her pocket, pulling out her wand to dismantle the wards.

"Hermione--"

A Stinging Hex was flying towards the direction of the voice before she even recognized whom it belonged to. Shaking with startlement and anger, she lowered the length of wood and watched as Severus straightened up from his duck.

"When will you learn not to bloody startle me?" she said shrilly.

He waved her irritation away with a brusque move of his hand. "Hermione, I need...*want* to speak to you--"

She cut him off, turning back to the door and beginning to undo the wards, hoping that he wouldn't see the tears already starting to glisten in her eyes. "I'm sorry about the article, I really am. I understand how you must feel, and anything you wish to do in response is fine with me--"

"Hermione, will you kindly shut up for two seconds altogether?" He moved forward swiftly and grabbed her arm, pulling her around to face him, but she resolutely looked down. Two long fingers slid under her chin and pushed up, gently forcing her to raise her gaze to meet his.

"I do not give a flying fuck what Rita Skeeter says about you, me, or any combination thereof," he said softly, but with that peculiar intensity that he could infuse quiet words with.

She stared at him, hearing the words he spoke but not allowing herself to believe what it sounded like he was saying. His black eyes met hers, and there was a passionate honesty there that she had never seen before, and she was reminded that, behind the Slytherin tricks, the sarcasm, and the casual cruelty, there was an honorable core to Severus Snape, the same core that had brought him back to the side of good.

"Are you--?" she started, but they were interrupted by a nasal voice from behind them.

"So it's true, den? About you two?"

Hermione whirled around, yanking away from Severus, to find a pimply twenty-something girl standing behind her, holding a copy of the *Prophet* and pointing to the headline that read, *Severus Snape: Taking What Ronald Weasley Left Behind* There was a picture of Severus and Hermione standing outside her shop, talking.

Automatically, Hermione began babbling denials. "No, of course it isn't. Severus has just been helping me with some work; the picture is totally out of context, and besides, Rita Skeeter writes lies about everybody," but again she was silenced by Severus, who put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a warning squeeze.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," he murmured, and she turned back to look at him, as confused as she had ever been. He looked down at her for a moment, and something like amusement glimmered in his black eyes.

"I feel," he continued, "that as reasonably upstanding citizens, we have a moral obligation to ensure that what our newspaper publishes is the truth."

"But... but it's *not* true, Severus..."

"Then let's make it true."

And he pulled her close to him, raised a hand to cup her cheek, and kissed her with more fire and vigor than he had ever done so before. Dimly, she heard the girl gasp, but she was much too caught up in the fact that *he* had kissed *her*, not the other way around, and he was doing the most wonderful things with his tongue and lips. Hermione realized, a bit belatedly, that she wasn't helping her own cause, and she suddenly found herself wrapping her arms around him, tangling her fingers in his hair, and deepening the kiss as much as she could. Their tongues twined and rubbed, tasting and touching. She let out an involuntary whimper when he pulled away with a last nibble of her lower lip, though he remained ensconced in her arms.

"Does that answer your question, miss?" he said to the girl in his most deadly polite of tones.

"Er... yeah, I'll say it does."

"Good. You have three seconds to be somewhere else, or I will turn your nose inside out." There was a sound of scuffling feet, and he turned back to Hermione with a satisfied smirk.

"Shall we take this inside?" he asked, raking his eyes over her face, no doubt taking in the flush she could feel in her cheeks and the swollen plumpness of her lips. Hermione was about ready to melt into a puddle with bushy hair on top and, if the smirk was anything to go by, he was well aware of it. Breathlessly, she nodded and wrangled what was left of her functioning brain into pulling away from those strong, warm arms, and undoing the rest of the wards at top speed. Still a bit dazed, she opened the door and stepped inside, turning back to see him follow. He shut the door behind him and faced her again, brushing his hair out of his face with a long finger.

"I take it you have no objections, then?" he asked, as casually as if he had suggested a café for quick cup of coffee and not just kissed the living daylights out of her and declared them to be in a relationship to a total stranger.

Hermione chose not to give the obvious answer and instead said, "Severus, you knew all along how I felt; why didn't you say something sooner? Do something earlier? I mean, of course, I want this, you, but I'm confused."

"I did not realize my own desires until quite recently, I assure you." As she opened her mouth to ask him to elucidate, he held up a hand, silencing her. "Later, Hermione. I believe there is a spell that we have worked long and hard on that has yet to be utilized. I would very much like to see the fruits of our labor. And then," he continued, gliding forward to place one hand on her hip and the other on her cheek, "if it is successful, we can go back to your flat and... celebrate."

Only Snape's silky voice could make "celebrate" sound like "have a ten-hour orgy." Hermione gulped at the heat she saw in his black eyes, feeling her knickers get even wetter (they had been significantly dampened during the kissing session).

"S-sounds lovely. I'll just go and start the spell, shall I?" she managed. To her mingled disappointment and relief, he let her go without another word, and she moved away as quickly as her wobbly knees would allow. Only when she was around the corner of a bookshelf and out of sight did she slump against that wall and stare at the ceiling in a combination of lust, giddiness, and utter shock.

Repercussions

Chapter 11 of 12

The secret's out now, but Severus and Hermione have a few things to do before they can focus on themselves...

AN: We at tonksinger fanfic, inc. would like to thank you for your patience with the long wait between updates. We hope you will continue to do business with us.

Sincerely

tonksinger

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That had gone wonderfully. He would have to send Rita Skeeter a thank-you card. Should she drop dead from shock, it would be an unexpected bonus. Severus smirked and leaned back against the counter, waiting for Hermione to return so they could cast the spell, kill whomever it summoned, and then go to her flat and fuck her into the mattress.

He could tell that focusing on anything besides that last activity was going to be difficult; the growing heat and hardness in his pants agreed with him. Closing his eyes and gritting his teeth, he took several deep breaths and forced himself to think of Hagrid sunbathing nude. It didn't quite get him down all the way, but it took the edge off. At least, he no longer felt like his pants were two sizes too small.

He had to recall the image almost immediately when Hermione came around the corner still looking a little flushed and eminently kissable. She was carrying several sheets of parchment, on which he recognized both of their handwritings: obviously, the notes on the spell. Placing them on the counter, she moved to the door and began checking to make sure the wards would be compatible with the spell; the person, or persons, that the spell found had to be able to enter the store, or else they would just float outside and attract attention. While the thought of Flourish being repeatedly rammed into the door was an appealing one, it might cause comment by passers-by.

"All right," she said, returning to the center of the room and looking up at him; she blushed a little when she met his eyes. It was understandable, as he was making no effort to hide the lust he was feeling, and she was obviously flustered by his open desire. It certainly wasn't an objectionable effect to have on a lovely young woman, and he allowed himself a lingering gaze that took in her whole body. If he remembered their previous encounter correctly, her blush went down quite a ways...

*Hagrid sunbathing! With oil! Rubbing it all over himself!*

This could well be the longest spell ever cast.

~~~~~

Hermione was finding it very difficult to focus on the spell with Severus looking at her like she was made of chocolate truffles; her knickers were absolutely soaked, and she wondered if her jeans weren't getting a bit damp as well. It was so easy to stare into his burning black eyes and just let herself drool (mentally, of course. At least, she hoped.)

Spell, Hermione! You have to cast the spell, you silly girl! Shaking her head at her folly, she forced her gaze away from his and turned to the bookcases, touching the scorch marks with her wand. The silvery lines began to flow from the tip as moved from shelf to shelf, chanting, until she had circled the area and enclosed it. She ended the spell.

It was quite possible that she and Severus both stopped breathing as they stared at the door, though her heart was hammering so loudly it might have drowned out his breaths.

Long seconds ticked by with no sound, no indication of a suspended body hitting the door. After about a minute, Hermione felt a thickening in her throat; her stomach clenched in dread that something had gone wrong, that their experiment had been a fluke, that maybe she had done something wrong--

Thump.

The hinges twitched. Ever so slowly, the doorknob revolved, and the sound of the latch sliding out of the jamb was pure music. Pain flared in Hermione's lip, and she tasted blood; her anxiety and bad habit were costing her, but she didn't care as the door swung open to reveal a very angry Tiburos Flourish, struggling against the invisible bonds that held him. A curious crowd had gathered around the shop, but she only got a brief glimpse of their faces before Severus strode forward, yanked Flourish completely into the shop and slammed the door shut.

It was far more shocking than it had any right to be. She realized that she hadn't actually expected Flourish to be the person the spell dragged in; it had always seemed more likely that some mercenary henchmen or corrupt Auror would appear at the other side of the door. Flourish was supposed to have under-the-table connections everywhere. He just didn't seem the type to get his hands dirty.

"You know," drawled Severus, as he turned away from the door and examined Flourish, "the sheer arrogance and idiocy of some wizards will never cease to amaze me."

"Shut up, you greasy bastard!"

"Language, Mr. Flourish."

"Don't give me orders, Snape!"

Flourish had floated to the center of the circle when Severus flung him inside, where he was currently suspended in midair, glaring at the other man with pure hatred. He had not so much as glanced at Hermione yet, and she found herself irritated by this small fact. Severus was not his problem, *she* was, and she was damned if she wouldn't be treated as such. Thus determined, she took two swift strides across the room, planting herself between the two wizards, wand pointing at Flourish.

"That will be enough from you, Mr. Flourish. Your guilt in the breaking into and vandalizing of my store has just been given evidence—"

"You think this is evidence, you little slut?"

Severus was next to her before she even opened her mouth to brush off the insult, his wand joining hers in its target. She looked up at him for a second and saw a snarl that she had seen once before: in the Shrieking Shack, third year, when Severus was menacing Sirius. His automatic protectiveness brought a rush of warmth to her, but she gently placed a hand on his arm and pushed it down.

"Thank you, Severus, but I can handle him." Black eyes glared down at her for a long second, and she was worried his stubbornness wouldn't allow him to submit to her. She needed to be the one in control right now, or Flourish would never gain any respect for her whatsoever. Finally he stepped back and lowered his wand, though he remained only a foot behind her, no doubt lurking in his most grandiose fashion. Hermione suppressed a relieved sigh. Severus Snape was not an easy wizard to deal with even when he was on your side.

"Sorry for the interruption, Mr. Flourish," she continued, looking back at the other wizard, whose handsome face was flushed an ugly red in fury. "As I was saying, we now have evidence that implicates you in the trashing of my shop. Please do not make us waste valuable Truth Serum to get a confession from you, as waste makes Severus a bit... tetchy." She let that idea sink in for a moment. Flourish's eyes flicked over her shoulder and widened slightly; she got the impression Severus had just done a wizard equivalent of checking the sliding pump on a shotgun. His gaze reverted to her rapidly when she started speaking again.

"Now," she said, when she was sure he was listening, "this is what you're going to do so we don't go to the Ministry and talk to my old friend Harry, who is now a full Auror and a *personal* friend of the Minister's..." Rapidly she outlined the plan, watching with savage glee as Flourish's face went white, then red as his look of outrage turned into full-fledged terror.

Just Desserts

Chapter 12 of 12

Punishments and rewards are meted out.

AN: Hi, everyone! Thanks for your patience with my slow updating. Here's the last chapter of RDU for you all—with extra lemons! Thanks to my beta, moonrevel, for her hard work and support.

Chapter 12: Just Desserts

"Do you really think he'll comply?" Severus asked, glancing down at Hermione as they watched Flourish skulking back to his bookstore. The slump of the man's back was nearly adolescent in its implied sullen rebellion, and Severus was not inclined to trust him. He had not survived as long as he had by trusting people, especially people whose pride had just been for a spin in the Granger Blender, set on Decimate.

*Speaking of going for a spin with Granger...*He edged a little closer to her as she stared down the street, pondering her answer.

She shrugged and flicked a wayward curl out of her eyes. "I think so; he knows I have enough information on him to reserve him a cell in Azkaban for a few years. What I'm making him do will humiliate the hell out of him and make his life quite difficult, but he's smart enough not to try to retaliate."

"A bit of a shame, that." Severus, of course, had a few quiet plans that would cause Flourish considerable damage, but he knew better than to tell Hermione about them. It would only make her angry with him, and, as he knew quite well, a witch who was angry did not react well when he stepped close behind her, wrapped his arms around her curvy waist and nibbled on her neck like *this*...

"Mmm." *That*, however, was the reaction of a happy witch, so he continued to lightly nip at the side of her neck, soothing the red teeth marks with his tongue. A few curly hairs found their way into his mouth; he paused in his work in order to spit them out. The repeated *thph* noises aroused Hermione from her sensuous stupor, for she quickly swept the rest of her hair to the other side of her neck, tilting her head as she did so to grant him easier access. Gently, he nibbled his way up an expanse of creamy skin until he hit earlobe, at which point gentle tugging with his teeth and lapping with his tongue elicited a sigh.

"Much as I am enjoying this, Hermione," he murmured, "I am no exhibitionist." At least, not at this stage in a relationship he wasn't. Time, if there were time, would reveal all, but in order for there to be time, he had to ensure that his odder proclivities didn't send the woman screaming down Diagon Alley. It was a lesson he'd learned fast. "Shall we remove to your flat?"

"Hmm?" Half-lidded brown eyes turned up to him, misty with indolent pleasure. It was very tempting to scratch her behind the ear to see if she would purr. "Oh. Yes. Let's." A few flicks of her wand and the door of the shop was shut, locked, and warded; he felt her clamp onto his arm a second before the familiar whirl of Apparition took over.

It felt like déjà vu. Severus was coming back to her flat to sleep with her. Surely such a delightful occurrence wouldn't happen twice. But memories of the past hour fought past the haze of lust that clouded her mind, and Hermione knew that Severus was in her flat again. This time, she decided, there would be no games.

The instant the world stopped spinning, she seized his lean face in her hands and pressed her lips to his, feeling a thrill go through her body as his searching tongue found hers almost immediately. Strong arms wrapped around her and pulled her as close as possible; his lean body was unyielding against her curves, but she didn't mind, as she was far too concerned with the way in which Severus was basically fucking her tongue with his mouth. Back and forth he moved, sliding his tongue along hers as he sucked gently. Hermione moaned into his mouth. A twitch around the corners of his lips told her he was trying not to smirk, a difficult thing to do while kissing.

Reaching around his slender form, she slid her hands down his back until she found his firm arse. A rough squeeze on each side got a surprised grunt out of him, followed by retaliation by imitation. One of his hands remained kneading her arse as the other one crept up her body to her left breast. Her nipples were so hard she was certain they were making themselves known even through her bra; when one received a light pinch that made her clit throb, her suspicion was confirmed.

She couldn't take it any more. If the bulge in his trousers that she could feel pressing against her abdomen was anything to go by, he wasn't far behind. Breaking away, she panted out, "Bedroom. Now," and began to tug him toward said room. The feral grin on his face as he followed her soaked her knickers. So it came as a bit of a surprise to her when he stopped dead as she opened the door and pulled him in, his eyebrows rising to meet his hairline.

"What is it?" Anxiously, she stopped and looked around, trying to find something that might have shocked him into halting. Closet, rug, dirty sock on rug, bed...

Ah. She had forgotten that she hadn't bothered to shrink the bed after their last liaison. It still filled the room from side to side.

"I'm glad you appreciated my handiwork," he quipped from behind her.

"Well, it's one less thing we have to do now." To get him back on track, she turned around and, in one swift movement, pulled her t-shirt over her head.

That got his attention. Severus's gaze focused on her breasts, followed quickly by kneading, caressing hands. The thin straps were gently pushed from her shoulders so he could tug the cups down, revealing her hard nipples. Pinches that had felt wonderful through the bra now made her knees quiver. Aching with need, she mustered enough brainpower to undo her jeans and shove her hand into her knickers, sighing with pleasure when her fingers found her clit and started moving in circles.

Severus's hands stilled on her breasts. A moment later, he whispered in her ear, "I don't suppose I could observe what you're doing down there..."

Hermione smiled. Stepping away from him, she reached behind her back and unsnapped her bra; it tumbled to the ground to join her shirt. Hooking her thumbs in the waistband of her jeans, she began to inch them down over her hips, smirking at the impatient looks he was sending her. This time the striptease was entirely on her terms, and it was incredibly entertaining to torment him just a little. Maybe she could even get Severus Snape to beg...

Removing her clothes had apparently sparked his inner copycat, for his long fingers were flying down his shirt, undoing buttons at a rapid pace. No sooner had the offending garment been shrugged to the floor than he was unzipping his fly and bending down to remove trousers and pants. When he stood back up, his reddened cock pointing at her made Hermione swallow hard. It was just like she remembered it, and the memories of what it had done to her came flooding back. Biting her lip, she reined in her galloping libido. *I want to make you squirm this time, Severus Snape. Just because I can.*

Sliding her trousers down to her ankles, Hermione stepped out of the pile of denim, wearing only her soaked knickers. Even without her clothes, she felt warm; her face must be flushed bright pink. It was a bit hard to maintain control as she carefully slid her hand back into her knickers and went to work on her clit.

"Do you want me to take my knickers off, Severus? Would you like to watch me touch myself as I look at you?"

"Yes," he groaned, taking his cock in hand and starting to slide his fist up and down its length.

"Really? I'm not sure I believe you. Convince me, Severus."

"I want to see your fingers playing in your pussy, Hermione. Please."

"Very good. Was that so hard?"

She was sitting on the edge of the bed in a moment, legs spread, knickers gone and fingers buried in her cunt up to the knuckle. He slowly moved towards her, stopping just close enough for him to run his free hand over her body, caressing and rubbing. Every touch added to her pleasure. She stared at him through half-lidded eyes, watching his pale hand move back and forth along his swollen cock.

"This is what I did after I left the bar that night, Severus," she panted, grinding her clit against the heel of her hand. "I came home... and I threw myself on the couch..."

Severus groaned.

"...and I rubbed my clit and fingered myself... until I came..."

"Merlin, Hermione, *let me fuck you!*"

Writhing with the pleasure she had brought herself, but wanting more, Hermione needed no further prompting. She flipped over to her hands and knees, presenting her wet cunt to him (and wriggling her arse just a little bit in the process). Tossing her hair to one side, she turned her head to look back at him. He looked as though Christmas had come early.

"Then fuck me, Severus."

Long hands seized her hips, sliding over her skin for a moment before grabbing hold. She moaned as the tip of his cock probed at the entrance to her pussy; with one pull at her hips and a thrust from him, he slid in.

Hermione gasped and bucked back against him as he began to fuck her hard. The position allowed him to go very deep with each thrust, his cock rubbing her g-spot in the most delicious way. She could hear the *slap* every time his hips connected with her buttocks. Moaning, she reached underneath her with one hand and began to rub her clit. She was so close, trembling on the edge of orgasm.

"Oh, gods, Hermione... come for me... I'm going to..." Faster he was thrusting now, fingers digging into her flesh as he pumped his cock in and out of her slick cunt. Suddenly, he slammed forward, holding fast to her hips, jerking slightly with every pulse of his cock. The throbbing inside her pussy was all she needed to push her over the edge; waves of pleasure, centered on her clit, flooded through her. Hermione shuddered and moaned as she came hard. She heard Severus gasp, probably from her pussy clenching around his cock, but he made no effort to pull out as she writhed beneath him.

Panting and sweating, Hermione allowed herself to collapse to the mattress, head pillowed on her outstretched arm; Severus's cock sliding out of her pussy one last time sent a few small aftershocks through her body. He joined her in a heap on the mattress a moment later, pale skin slightly shiny from sweat.

"That was..."

"Yes." Smiling, she reached over and took his hand in hers. "It was."

Severus woke up in an unfamiliar bed. The lumps in the mattress were completely wrong; in fact, he ascertained by shifting about for a second, they were absent. Also, the sheets were pale teal, a color he associated with Easter and old ladies and therefore would not use for his bed linen on pain of death.

Normally, these inconsistencies would have had him on his feet with wand in hand in about three seconds flat. However, the bush of hair that took up most of the other pillow, and the pretty face it was attached to, reminded him of the activities of the previous night. Gently, he reached over to brush a lock of hair out from under Hermione's nose. She shifted in her sleep and rubbed at her nose, apparently objecting to whatever tickling he had produced. A moment later and two brown eyes were peering groggily over at him.

"Severu-uuh...us?" she yawned, groping forward with one arm until she found his.

"Ouch!"

"Oh. So you are real, then."

"Of course I'm bloody real, you lunatic!" Severus rubbed at the red mark on his arm. The woman could pinch like a lobster.

"Sorry. Before coffee, real is a nebulous idea." Yawning again, she stretched languidly, arching her back until a few vertebrae popped. Severus, eyeing the pert nipples that had suddenly come into prominent view, decided he approved of stretching. Other parts of him agreed wholeheartedly.

Hermione squealed as he seized her around the waist and rolled her on top of him; a thorough kissing silenced her protests for a moment, though she glared at him for a moment when she got the opportunity. Sitting back and straddling him, she placed her hands on her naked hips, providing a perfect frame for the thatch of curls resting several agonizing inches in front of his cock.

With a mischievous smile, she slid off him and onto the floor, bouncing deliciously as she made for the wardrobe. After donning a black satin dressing gown that emphasized everything most clothing was designed to hide, and with a last glance over her shoulder that promised everything she had just denied him, she vanished out the door.

Severus practically heard his cock whimper in protest of this sudden abandonment. Sighing, he got up, located pants and trousers, and followed her.

He found her in the kitchen with a pot of coffee already percolating on the countertop. She was bent over the table, intently reading something, and the way the dressing gown draped over her curves sent another surge of blood to his cock. She looked up as he came in, and his last impression before he was engulfed in a hug was of an ear-to-ear grin and the *Prophet*.

"We got him, Severus! We got him and everything's going to be fine, he's already done most of what I asked him and...and...oh, just read the paper, it's wonderful!" she babbled excitedly into his chest, squeezing his ribs with every third word. He hadn't seen her this excited about something since she'd got a hundred and eight percent on one of his essays in fifth year.

"Let go of me, madwoman," he said, attempting to pry her arms from around his torso, "so I can read this wondrous article that has got you all worked up." She looked up at him, tightened her arms until he thought his ribs would crack, and then released him, moving to the side so he could see the table and what lay upon it.

Tiburos Flourish looked sulkily up at Severus from an enormous picture on the front page. Every now and then he would sniffle and rub his nose, reminding Severus of a Christmas when seven-year-old Draco had not received a toy broomstick that was the exact color of glaring orange he had desired. The large headline above him read: *No Happy Ending for Bookstore Heir*. He didn't need to check the author's name to know the exposé had been penned by Ms. Skeeter; her writing the article had been one of the stipulations of Hermione's ultimatum.

He scanned the article quickly, not wanting to subject himself to too much of Ms. Skeeter's melodramatic writing. It said everything Hermione had laid out: a heretofore unknown cousin of the senior Mr. Flourish had appeared, taken one look at what the current Flourish had done to the family business, and had walked the man out at wandpoint. She was in no position to run the business herself, as her unicorn ranch in Wales demanded an enormous amount of time, but she "would swallow every single enchanted halter in her stable before she allowed her cousin's business to be turned into a profit-mongering monster." After several interviews with the local talent (Severus grinned outright at this; it was brilliant), she had selected Hermione Granger, known for her "small-business idealism and maniacal love of books," to take over as manager. The store would be closed for restoration and, upon re-opening, would incorporate Ms. Granger's "eclectic bookstore". The mysterious cousin was unnamed and would be returning to her ranch within the week. All of this, of course, was written in the most acidic tone possible, but it read as being perfectly plausible, which came as little surprise; slanted and not-entirely-true journalism was a specialty of Ms. Skeeter's.

Oh, and Flourish had decided that his delicate constitution would benefit from an extended stay in a nice mansion in Majorca.

"Well?"

"Well what?" he replied, turning back to see Hermione nibbling her lower lip.

"Do you think it will work? Is it any good?"

"I could have done it better."

"Bastard." She was smiling, though. Stubborn and independent she might be, but some part of Hermione would always need approval of her work. Getting her to admit it would be suicide, but he was smart enough not to try, especially if he wanted more sex.

"Now, now, no name-calling. This bastard," he continued, stepping close to her, "actually thinks you deserve a reward for sending an odious bookseller to Majorca for the foreseeable future. And you of all people should know that my rewards are hard-earned, but well worth it."

"Really?" she said, trying to sound casual but unable to hide the huskiness of lust. "And what do I have to do to receive this reward?"

Bending down until his lips brushed her ear, he murmured, "Spread your legs."

Hermione bit her lower lip. Slowly, she slid her feet a few inches over the hardwood floor, causing her dressing gown to gap just a little; Severus caught a glimpse of creamy thigh.

Gently, he cupped her chin in his hand, tracing the delicate skin of her jaw with his thumb. Not taking his eyes from hers, he slipped his other hand into the empty space between the panels of her dressing gown. Her eyes drifted shut as he drew his fingers lightly up her inner thigh, and she gasped when he found the curls at the juncture. Smirking, he began to tease her, brushing his fingertips over the hairs, barely touching the wetness he felt seeping from between the lips of her pussy.

She whimpered and thrust her hips forward, trying to grind against his hand. "You said reward, not torment!"

"And so I did." With that, he plunged his first two fingers deep into her pussy and brought the heel of his hand to rub against her clit. She moaned, and he had to wrap his spare hand around her waist as her knees buckled. The sight of his arm disappearing into her silky garment set him on fire. It seemed so indecent to be pleasuring her without even undressing her. The light gown, with its opening in the front, seemed expressly designed to allow him easy access to her pussy. It gave him an idea for the rest of her reward.

Gently, he used the arm wrapped around her waist to steer Hermione over to the table, still twiddling her relentlessly. She seemed perfectly content to move anywhere as long as his fingers stayed in her pussy. He didn't want to take them out, especially when he could feel her juices dripping down them, but some slightly complex choreography was required for his plan to work.

"Hermione," he said, stilling his fingers for a moment. She whimpered and squirmed in protest, but then opened her eyes to gaze at him in sulky bemusement.

"Mmph?"

"Get up on the table and lay back."

"Mmkay."

Severus slid his fingers free of her pussy. As Hermione slid up onto the table top and lay back with her legs spread wantonly, he occupied himself by licking his fingers clean. She was quite a sight, lying on the table, panting slightly, with her hair creating a fuzzy brown halo around her head. The panels of her dressing gown had fallen so as to barely cover her pussy, which was exactly as Severus had hoped. He wanted to wait until his cock was buried inside her to open those panels and see her.

"Severus!"

"Patience." Grasping her hips he slid her forward until her plump arse was resting just on the edge of the table. Stepping between her legs, he undid his fly and released his aching cock.

She moaned from her gut as he plunged into her, and he wholeheartedly joined her. His cock was enveloped in warmth and wetness, and he began to thrust desperately. With one hand, he reached forward and tugged on a loose end of the silken tie that held her dressing gown together at her waist. It came undone, and he pushed the panels of the garment off her writhing body. It was like unveiling a work of art; now he could see, once again, her hard pink nipples and full, jiggling breasts; her soft curves, rippling slightly with each thrust; and, as his gaze travelled downwards, her wet pussy swallowing his cock up to his balls.

The sight very nearly made him come.

A brush of a finger against her clit made Hermione come. He felt, rather than saw, her stiffen, shudder, and buck. He lost himself inside her pussy, hips jerking with every spasm of pleasure. After the strength left his body via his cock and he was certain no more was forthcoming, Severus slumped into a nearby chair, wincing slightly as his now-sensitive penis clipped the edge of the table. Hermione seemed practically comatose.

For a while they lay in the kitchen, panting. Hermione moved first, heaving herself up onto her elbows before sliding off the table and padding over to Severus. Lazily, he reached out to wrap his arm around her waist, drawing her onto his lap. Spent though he was, he still took a moment to appreciate that she hadn't retied her dressing gown. Her nipples were just barely catching the fabric, preventing total exposure, but the sides of her breasts and her waist were shown clearly.

She leaned against him, draping her arm around the back of his neck. He felt his arms twitch slightly; cuddling was not in his nature, and a number of instincts were screaming for her to be pushed into a heap on the floor. But the rest of him decided that warm and soft were allowed to cuddle. Reciprocal cuddling was not required.

"You know, Severus," Hermione said, toying with a lock of his hair, "if you're not doing anything this summer, I could use an assistant in the store."

He raised an eyebrow. "Assistant?"

"Yes. You know, to get me coffee, take stock, shelve new shipments..."

Severus sat bolt upright, nearly dislodging her from his lap. "If you think, after all I have done for you, that I am going to be some bloody *grand boy*..."

"...and to acquire a sense of humor," she continued, glaring at him.

Damn post-orgasmic brain dysfunction! Settling a little, he shot her a look that promised trouble later and asked, "More of a partner, then, in administration and business?"

Hermione nodded, lips twitching slightly. "You'll be compensated, of course, in money and books. But only if you have nothing else to do, Severus." He appreciated that she made no assumptions that a relationship with her would be enough to guarantee his working for her.

"Oh, I already have something to *do*," he replied, smirking and sliding his hand down to squeeze her arse, "but I'll take the position in the store as well until Hogwarts starts up again. It should be more entertaining than sitting around doing nothing until September."

As she smiled and leaned in to kiss him, he decided that maybe it was fortunate that Flourish and Blotts had been closed those weeks ago.