

The P-Word

by Paisley Snail

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

One

Chapter 1 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, JunoMagic. This story was written as a gift for Natasnape for the 2010 SSHG Exchange. These are the original prompts:

1/ There is a magical disease with a long incubation period and/or it is actually pleasant in the beginning. So, by the time the Healers notice there is a disease, the majority of the magical population is infected. The disease doesn't kill, but it changes lives. Who is infected and how do they live? It is up to the author if the story finds a cure or the wizarding folk learn to cope. Extra points if neither SS nor HG are Healers.

3/ Priapism hits the wizarding population. The Ministry, in all its wisdom, deals with the situation by assigning coupling orders to affected wizards and witches. These might be permanent or one-time events.

Fuck, yes.

Draco didn't know what the house-elves had been putting in his orange juice for the last few days, but quite frankly, he didn't give a Hippogriff's arse so long as they allowed him to keep delivering the goods.

Though he had never seen himself as much of an Arithmancer, Draco had taken to, uh, *timing* himself during his bi-weekly dates with Astoria. To further his research, he later added *sessions* with Candy.

The results of his experiment?

There was no longer even a shadow of doubt in the younger Malfoy's mind that someone up in the sky was looking after him. With each day, no, with each encounter, he would add a few minutes to his staying power. It was getting to the stage where he sometimes felt like there was no end in sight. He could literally go for hours. It was bloody fantastic!

Handsome, rich, and an absolute demon in bed, the only thing Draco grumbled about in his semi-charmed life was that very recently, the girls had not always seemed quite as inspired by his skills as they should be. Shrugging it off, Draco decided that Candy had probably just had a few too many that day while Astoria was now confirmed in his eyes as a spoilt weakling.

Maybe I need to widen my horizons a little more. I'm just too much of a man for them both...

When Harry started clumsily fondling her breast for the third time that night, Ginny wondered what in Merlin's name had got into him lately. She knew that they'd just

decided to try for a baby, but this enthusiasm seemed to be above and beyond the call of duty. Even more odd, she simply couldn't understand where Harry was finding the stamina. Once or twice every few days was usually enough to turn the Boy Who Lived into the Man Who Slept.

Ordinarily, Ginny would not be complaining. She liked a good romp between the sheets as much as the next woman disgustingly in love with her man, but this was getting ridiculous! She had to be on a broom at nine o'clock in the morning, for Circe's sake!

Slapping Harry's hand away, Ginny turned on him and hissed, 'Hands off, Mr Potter, or you'll be sleeping on the couch for the next week. I need to rest properly every night until the final on Saturday. It's my last season with the Harpies, remember?'

'Sorry, love,' Harry mumbled sleepily, obediently removing his hands from his wife's person. 'Don't know what's got into me lately.'

Taking a closer look at her husband, Ginny noticed that he looked as tired as she felt. Sighing, she gave him a light kiss on the forehead before closing her eyes and willing herself back into slumber.

Things had been busy at the Ministry lately, as some of the less serious war criminals were being released from Azkaban soon. It certainly wouldn't be the first time that Harry's anxieties had manifested into a need to show and receive physical affection...

When his morning erection came back again, despite two apparently successful attempts to make it go away, Severus sighed heavily. Leaning against the wall of his shower stall, he looked the picture of abject misery, eyes closed as he tried to work through his confusion and irritation.

Attuned closely enough to his body's normal rhythm to know that this was neither a gift from the Gods, nor a reaction to stress and overwork, Severus quickly did some mental calculations and decided upon a plan of attack that would not unduly affect his plans for the next week or so. The potions for export to the States could not wait, nor could the rush order of several elixirs for St Mungo's stores. He would deal with whatever this was only after he was on top of his business affairs.

It hardly seems life threatening...

Doing a mental inventory of the ingredients he had on hand, Severus scowled when he realised that he would also have to suffer through yet another trip out into Knockturn Alley for more. That made it twice this week! Bargaining with the hag who owned the shop always took a lot out of him physically. She liked to jump around and try to rake him with her disease-infested nails whenever he threatened to collect the ingredients himself if she wouldn't lower her prices. It took excellent reflexes and complete concentration to avoid losing a limb and thus make the threats empty by default. If she didn't truly have top quality products at slightly-less-than-ridiculous prices, he honestly wouldn't bother with her.

Damned hag, I probably got whatever this is from being within a two-metre radius of her...

Going into business after twenty years in education had not always been smooth flying. As it was, though Severus had managed to strike a fairly comfortable balance between research and more mundane production, he did not have a significant amount of spare time. In this case, he would not create a serious backlog of orders out of conscience. Day by day, St Mungo's ran more quickly through their top-quality, high-concentration painkillers and muscle-relaxants. So far, they'd been mum on the reason why, but Severus knew that whatever situation they were hiding in there would eventually explode in their faces.

Things like that always did.

A few weeks after he had first noticed his odd symptoms, now suppressed with one of the strongest impotency potions known to wizardkind, Severus found himself preparing to leave his home on yet another unexpected and inconvenient outing, this time to St Mungo's itself.

Though the short note sent by one of the Healers (signature too messy to read) had not been specific, it almost *exuded* a general impression of chaos and disorder which only served to add to Severus' feeling of unease about the whole situation. Though he had managed to brew all the potions asked for, he knew that unless St Mungo's planned to knock out the entire magical population of Britain at once, they could not possibly need more for at least another few months.

Eager to assure himself that he was supplying a well-known hospital, not a drug lord's den, Severus was actually only moderately irritated at the 'invitation' he had received to deliver the goods himself this time. It did not really matter that the reason given for this change in their arrangement lack of able-bodied hospital personnel seemed absolutely ludicrous in light of the fact that St Mungo's had more employees than the two largest Ministry departments combined.

Shrinking his rather large box of potions so that it would fit easily in the palm of his hand, Severus Flooed to St Mungo's with the clear intention of doing some quiet snooping to find out what the problem was. However, on arriving at the waiting room, the scene that confronted him was one of total chaos.

It now seemed completely believable that St Mungo's had absolutely not one spare pair of hands to pick up a delivery of potions.

The tumult that assaulted Severus' ears automatically sent his mind back to darker times. It had been a long time indeed since he had seen a Cruciatus torture, yet here it was in front of him, or something close to it. Just like the old days. No blood, no vomit, no urine. Just writhing bodies, shouts of sharp pain and moans of bone-deep agony. For a split second, Severus wondered why he was bringing potions. Only years of rigid self-control stopped him from dropping the delicate parcel and whipping out his wand.

When will these idiots learn? The best way to counter the Cruciatus is to incapacitate the caster!

Fortunately for the occupants of the waiting room, Severus was still anchored in the present firmly enough to note that something was wrong about the picture in front of him. Frantic looking female Healers tried to be everywhere at once, their unflattering lime-green robes actually acquiring some very impressive billow as they flitted from patient to patient, handing out what Severus immediately recognised as his own potions. However, there were also other bottles by other makers, with marks that took Severus a while to recognise.

Bridges, Anderson, the usual culprits. Slughorn? That old rat bastard charges a mint for his brews. Gerard Touvenot! Do they regularly employ every Potions master from here to Paris?

Severus' building anger over why he hadn't come here and demanded an explanation for the huge order two weeks ago was abruptly cut off by a strange realisation. The absolute bedlam didn't end with the tired-looking, over-worked Healers. Adding to the noise, crowd and general chaos were inordinate numbers of tearful, panicked wives, mothers, sisters and other lady companions. The atmosphere of the whole room positively reeked of the sort of frantic edge that only combined female hysteria could produce.

'Will he be all right, Healer?'

'How long will the potion last? Can we brew it at home?'

'I would have brought him in sooner, but I just didn't think it was something to worry about. Teenage wizards, you know?'

Through the chatter and the confusion, only one thought rang clear through Severus' mind.

He.

Him.

Wizards.

Every last one of the patients was male.

Thinking that it might be best to make himself scarce as soon as possible, perhaps isolate himself on some unnamed island in the Pacific somewhere, Severus' indecision as to whether he could just leave the potions on the desk of the presently-absent Welcomewitch, or shove them into the hands of a Healer was taken care of when one of said Healers started tugging on his sleeve to get his attention.

'You're here with more potions, Professor?'

Severus tried hard to repress a rather malevolent glare and failed. Yes, it was likely that half the people in this room were his ex-students, but he was no longer a teacher, and war hero or not, he was certainly not proud of some of his actions towards the end of his Hogwarts career.

'Obviously,' he bit out, promptly placing the shrunk potions in her outstretched hand. The black-haired girl wasn't even looking at him, he saw, but was busy firing questions at a man seated close by.

'So how long has it been painful? Have you tried to relieve the pain yourself?'

Not caring to hear the man's whimpered responses, Severus sharply tapped the Healer on the shoulder. He wasn't about to leave before she had affixed her magical signature to the standard receipt he had prepared.

'If you please,' he snapped, not at all politely.

Hurriedly fumbling her wand out of her belt, Healer Chang glared at her ex-professor and moodily jabbed it at the roll of parchment before looking at him in a more appraising way.

'Have *you* had any trouble with your penis lately, sir?'

Insulted and taken aback by the unexpected and unceremonious reference to his bits, which he would never deign to discuss with any woman, medical professional or not, Severus turned on his heel and Apparated home without another word to the impertinent Miss Chang.

Or is she now Mrs Davies?

Storming around his house, muttering about the indignity of being asked such a personal question by a young, relatively attractive Healer, it took a few moments for Severus to fully realise the quandary he was in.

Well. If St Mungo's is treating bloody-whatever-this-is with pain-relievers and muscle-relaxants, I can bloody well brew my own right here, and I won't set foot out of doors again until I hear that one of their idiotic researchers has hit on a cure. It will probably be weeks.

Damn them all to hell!

Two

Chapter 2 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: With thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

St Mungo's Cover-Up!

Mystery illness strikes down hundreds...

Inside information on what you weren't told and why!

The P-epidemic and you: the diagnosis and what to expect...

Public Service Announcement: DO NOT PANIC. IF YOU ARE IN PAIN, VISIT ST MUNGO'S.

'... thousands of men hospitalised... too few beds... Minister forced to act...'

Hermione found herself at a loss as she sat down to a proper brunch for the first time in almost two weeks. Her reward for working for every waking moment of her life? Slightly under-cooked scrambled eggs and burnt toast. *Lovely*. Breakfast aside, she just couldn't decide whether she would most enjoy continuing where she had left off in her latest novel, or whether it might amuse her to scan the newspaper headlines. Presumably, some things might have happened *outside* St Mungo's at some point during the last few weeks.

Picking up the *Prophet* purely because she did not have to get out of her seat to do so, Hermione blinked a few times when she realised that she had unknowingly chosen this morning's edition. It wasn't the paper itself that surprised her. Although the date was a bit of a shock, more to the point was the fact that instead of the usual hysteria and spew she expected about the outbreak of *Virus Tumescens Terribilis Magicus*, affectionately known as the 'P-virus', she was greeted by something very different, yet oddly the same.

Ministry Announces New, Revolutionary Policy

to Deal With the P-virus

The Prophet is pleased to announce that as a result of your letters and our petitioning on our readers' behalf, the Ministry has finally answered the pleas of Wizarding Britain with a new policy designed to minimise the amount of patients in St Mungo's and consolidate family values in magical families in one fell swoop.

Under the new Relationship Health Act 2004, passed in the Wizengamot last night, all married men, men in de facto relationships of two years or longer and/or in any other case where a carer* is willing to assist in a man's recovery under section 54(2)(b), will be discharged to their homes immediately. Recipes will be provided for basic pain potions and unguents, though it is strongly suggested that such remedies only be made by someone with at least an O.W.L. in Potions.

This latest piece of legislation has come on the heels of groundbreaking French research. Parisian Healers conducting both surveys and short clinical trials suggest that the best remedy to the problem is 'tender, frequent love-making and other forms of intimate favours.'

In his address to the nation last night, the Minister looked tired and in pain as he implored the wives of England to 'please look after' their husbands. Here at the Prophet, we received inside information that the Minister did arrive at the office this morning looking markedly better than he did last night. It seems that as in other endeavours, the Minister and his family plan to lead by example.

All women have been urged to look inside their hearts and see if they can't give up just a little of their time to help any unattached men in desperate need. A list of confirmed bachelors has already been put up in the Ministry Atrium. Copies of the list are also available by owl post. Please visit the Department of Magical Health or St Mungo's if you are interested in becoming a carer.

The Minister's address in full, p. 3

More detailed analysis of the French research, p. 4

Other related articles pp. 5-6

*'carer' is defined by the Act to mean: any person over seventeen years of age willing to take responsibility for the afflicted party, including but not limited to: the preparation and administration of medication, provision of nourishment, general assistance in going about his daily business, and such other assistance with alleviating the symptoms of the P-virus as is morally right and proportionate to the level of intimacy between the relevant man and woman. Preference will be given to wives, de-facto spouses, mistresses, any other woman who can provide evidence of an existing relationship of no less than three months duration, or the first able-bodied female petitioner with a clean bill of health from St Mungo's Hospital, in that order.

Hermione's breakfast went stone cold as she read this article once, then again to check that it was not a figment of her apparently very healthy imagination.

They cannot be serious...

She wasn't sure whether to be more disgusted on the behalf of England's womenfolk, or concerned about the very real risk that some of those men would end up at the mercy of any old harpy who wanted a ride.

Turning half-heartedly back to her breakfast, Hermione sifted back through her memories of the last month or two, trying to piece together how such a simple virus had turned into the most serious magical epidemic since the first outbreak of Dragonpox.

Having only just completed her mandatory four years of training and two years of supervised practice when the epidemic broke out, Hermione had thought the most difficult task she would face this summer would be deciding whether she wanted to work permanently in Spell Damage or Potion Poisoning. At that time, the hospital-wide memo informing staff that there was a new magical virus and telling them to watch for early symptoms had been a running joke.

'Priapism?'

'We should just send them home to enjoy it...'

'Who on earth called it the "P-virus"?'

'Don't take the piss, mate. It's the performance problem affecting privates!'

Like most other Healers, Hermione had giggled a little with her co-workers about the memo. They had all assumed that the people in Magical Bugs would deal with the new illness. That was their speciality...

Unfortunately, from about the time that the first male Healers had started showing symptoms, everything had quickly spiralled downhill into the proverbial shitstorm that had been her life for the past fortnight. St Mungo's administration had left only a skeleton staff in the other wards, and re-rostered everyone capable of walking around and uncapping a vial of *Paineeze XXX* to Magical Bugs or the waiting room while the researchers down in the basement had been told to leave whatever it was they had been doing and get to work on a cure.

A cure hadn't been forthcoming, and when it was discovered that the virus was non-fatal, the researchers had mostly been glad to move back to their other projects, leaving their fellow Healers to deal with the sudden deluge of patients armed with nothing better than age-old painkillers and muscle relaxants. They might as well have been placebos for all the good they had done.

Worse, due to the instructions for a press release getting lost amongst the extra order forms and other paperwork associated with a huge increase in both inpatients and clinic visits, the public hadn't been informed of the virus until they had come to the hospital with a screaming man or boy in tow, only to see another few hundred similar cases in the wards or waiting rooms. The only positive thing about the royal (and aptly labelled) cock-up by the Public Relations Department was that it had made little difference in the long run. The incubation period of the virus was relatively long. Anywhere from a month to six weeks. Adding this to the fact that most men hadn't actually complained about their symptoms until they were in the third and final phase of the illness, the result had been that by the time St Mungo's had realised what they had been dealing with, it had been far too late to preach prevention. To cut a long story short, Hermione and all the other female Healers had been averaging a day off per fortnight for the last six weeks, with no end in sight.

Looking around her messy flat, Hermione felt depressed when she realised that she had forgotten what to do with free time. Recently, more serious cases had been presenting themselves, leaving even less time for gallivanting. Home remedies and other desperate attempts to find relief had led to some seriously alarming conditions. One man had actually tried to hex his own bits off...

All the wards were literally cracking under the strain of the straightforward cases, let alone the special ones. Throwing the new Ministry policy into the mix, St Mungo's was going to be an even scarier madhouse for the next few days.

Hermione sighed.

She should probably head straight back to the hospital in the afternoon.

When she arrived at the hospital at around two o'clock in the afternoon, Hermione's former supervisor wasn't surprised to see her.

'They need more hands down in Magical Bugs, as usual. But be prepared for pen pushing wherever you go today,' Healer Payne stated tiredly, not bothering to look up

from the stack of discharge forms she was signing.

'So we're really just throwing people out? Do we turn them away at the door, too?' Hermione asked moodily. The more time she had to think about this Ministry policy, the more insane it seemed.

Mary Payne looked up at Hermione through almost bruised-looking eyes.

'What the Ministry is asking women to do is barbaric and inexcusable, Hermione, but it doesn't change the fact that we can't do any more for those men here. As for turning people away, we must free the beds for people who truly need our help. A boy with a bad bite from a home-grown Venus mouse-trap mutation came in this morning, and he almost lost the hand because Healer Pye is still on leave and the Healer-In-Charge of Poisonous Bites at the time was unable to be found. Turns out she was busy brewing in her office. We're short of *Paineeze* XXX again.'

'But the law is totally mad! We may as well be condoning the rape of both men and women!'

Healer Payne closed her eyes as she reiterated flatly, 'Well, we can't keep them here. Tired Healers make mistakes.' Opening her eyes again, she pinned Hermione with her gaze as she continued, 'We also cannot dispute the results obtained by our sisters in France. Sex helps, and that cannot occur here.'

Still thoroughly disgusted, but knowing that further arguments were pointless, Hermione tried a different tack.

'What about those without family or friends to take care of them?'

'They will remain,' the older woman replied, 'but we have been given strict directions to clear eighty percent of the beds taken up by P-virus patients before the end of the week.' She met Hermione's eyes and gave her a look loaded with meaning.

She doesn't even really want to keep those men...

'And the special cases?'

A deep sigh. 'Normal protocol. As soon as they are out of danger, those with carers will be sent home.'

Knowing that there was nothing else worth saying, Hermione turned to trudge back downstairs when the doors of office suddenly burst open, and a panting trainee blurted out, 'Healer Payne! You're needed immediately in room seventeen. A man has been brought in with an extreme case of the P-virus. He's barely breathing!'

As far as Hermione knew, room seventeen, one of the private suites reserved for only the most seriously injured, was currently inhabited by a man who had rubbed a Liquid Ice Potion all over his member in the hope that it would 'freeze the pain'. She made a mental note to check up on the fate of that man before turning to the task at hand.

'Come,' Healer Payne ordered briskly, flicking her hand in Hermione's direction. Proving that she still deserved her reputation as one of the most respected Healers in Britain, the sprightly old witch was out of her chair in a moment, hurrying out of the office as if she hadn't all but lived at St Mungo's for the last month or so.

Since they were in the Plant and Potion Poisoning wards on the third floor, Healer Payne's first question as they moved towards room seventeen was standard.

'What potions has the patient ingested?'

'That's the problem, Ma'am,' replied the trainee. 'He seems to have withdrawn into himself and gone half-crazed from the pain. Won't speak a word.'

'How do we even know he took a potion?' Hermione queried sharply. This sounded more like a case that should have gone to Spell Damage first. Most wizards and witches were wand-happy. They only turned to potions when spells wouldn't work.

They had reached room seventeen.

'I think you'll understand when you see who the patient is,' the trainee stammered, standing respectfully by the door while the qualified Healers entered first.

It was a scene Hermione would never forget.

On the bed, curled up in foetal position, hands clutching tightly at his family jewels, lay none other than Potions master Severus Snape.

The man's face was a mask of agony. His breath was coming shallowly, and a quick diagnosis spell revealed that his pulse was dangerously rapid. As Healer Payne muttered more complex diagnosis spells in a vain attempt to get some idea of what Snape had ingested, Hermione tried a different approach. Gently placing a hand on his shoulder, she asked, 'Can you hear me, Professor?'

Voices.

Minerva?

Movement.

Pain.

Merlin's fucking grandmother's tits, the *pain*.

More miserable than he had ever been in his entire, very much pain-filled life, Severus struggled to stay conscious despite the overwhelming pull towards black oblivion. It was imperative that he keep a vague record of who was around him and, more importantly, what they were doing to him. He knew that there was no way in hell that the Healers would be able to identify the cocktail of potions he had taken over the past few days using external testing, and though he was already in unimaginable pain, he feared the consequences of certain other potions being poured down his throat.

He also needed to keep a tight lid on the pain. Knowing that there was nothing he could do to make it better, Severus had long ago resolved to shut down every stray thought, embrace the agony and *hold on*. It was taking every ounce of his legendary control not to scream and flail like those men he had seen so many weeks ago. But that served no purpose and wasted energy.

He was better than that.

Better, perhaps, but that didn't mean he had anything other than maybe one last reserve of strength and control to ~~stop~~ *stop* them from doing something. Communication was just asking far too much.

Pain.

Voices.

From far away, 'Professor...

you...

... hear me?"

Stupid.

Sudden, unexpected contact.

One feeble jerk later, and Severus was staring into a pair of concerned-looking brown eyes. While trying to pick out all the different shades of brown in them, everything from amber to dark chocolate, he could almost forget the pain. Well, not forget it, that would be impossible, but he could try.

Pretty.

'If you can't tell me, can you show me?'

Yes.

Looking into the eyes rather than at them, whoever this was made it easy; her eyes almost seemed to draw him in. Rapidly unloading some of the mental stress of the last few days (or was it weeks?) was a relief, but the connection was not long enough for even a significant improvement, and Severus ruthlessly slammed his control back in place as soon as he found himself ejected from the other mind.

He didn't even care that his ears vaguely picked up a whimper coming from his own throat.

Hurts.

Then, not a moment too soon, it finally came.

... *darkness...*

Since she was by no means convinced that the ex-professor could hear her, Hermione was not expecting to be immediately assaulted by a positively nauseating ocean of pain and suffering.

Just before she forcibly broke off the connection, she felt more than heard the faintest of whimpers, a weak cry for help. Trying very hard not to be completely shaken by what she had just been exposed to, Hermione took a deep breath or two before quickly relaying her information to Healer Payne.

'He's been taking potions. Ones I don't recognise, so we had better not give him any more. Shall I perform the *Mortis Similis*?'

How can he be so quiet? How can one mind carry so much strain without breaking?

As soon as Healer Payne nodded, Hermione wasted no time in using a complex charm to put the man into a magically-induced, death-like coma.

Best that he not even be semi-conscious while they ran tests and tried to put his system back to rights...

Three

Chapter 3 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

'Mrs Parkinson, is it?

No, I don't care if you know that he likes his tea with milk and one sugar. I cannot release him into your care.

Why not? Because he's...he's my husband. We were, er, married in a private ceremony shortly after the war.

Yes, yes, very romantic. I do love him very much, and he is a wonderful husband, but I must ask you to keep it a secret as a favour to him. You, who know him so well, should know that he prefers privacy. Can you do that for us?

Oh, of course I'll contact you for dinner when he's better! I'll, I mean, we'll be moving house soon...oh, you'll give me your address instead? Thank you, I'll be in touch.'

'You owe me, Severus Snape.'

Noise.

All at once, just as if someone turned on the wireless.

Strange noises, they were, too.

Who the bloody hell owns a dog near Spinner's End?

Opening his eyes and blinking to clear his focus, Severus panicked for a moment when after several moments, he still couldn't see a thing. However as his brain caught up and brought back his last few memories, he relaxed at little.

Funny, I don't remember St Mungo's ever being this dark before...

Doing a very cautious inspection of his general state of health, Severus was surprised to find that aside from the throbbing in his nether regions, he seemed to be in very

good shape. A bit stiff, but that was to be expected. He suppressed a twinge of irritation at his still-aching crotch. The pain was back to manageable levels, but it still wasn't exactly a walk in the park.

If they haven't done their job yet, what business do they have to be waking me up in the middle of the night?

It was then that he realised that he wasn't the only person in the bed.

Freezing, rather than jumping up in alarm, Severus didn't dare breathe as he slowly turned his head to inspect the other person more closely.

Definitely a woman, but from the back, could be anyone. Impossible to say what colour that hair is, and pulled back like that, difficult to see texture and length...

A look past the woman into the room proved beyond doubt that he was no longer in St Mungo's. The bed they were on was right against the wall, making it absolutely impossible for Severus to get out without climbing over his mystery bedfellow. The room was cluttered without even having much furniture. Severus could only make out a wardrobe and bedside table in addition to the double bed he was currently on. If it wasn't for the window on the wall nearest the foot of the bed and the doors he could vaguely see in the darkness, he would have assumed that he was in some sort of prison.

But why the bloody fuck would the Healers send me to sleep in someone else's home, not even counting the fact that I've somehow ended up in bed with them?

It was time to act.

First, Severus slowly and carefully pulled the sheet off and laid it carefully back down on the bed, trying his hardest not to wake the other person before he was able to move freely.

Subdue the unknown, steal her wand, and get out!

Speaking of moving freely, the removal of the blanket immediately alerted Severus to the fact that he was rather inappropriately attired for the escape plan that he had been formulating. Vaguely similar to the hospital gown he had been expecting, Severus found himself clad in what was very probably an enlarged t-shirt.

If she's dressed me in her own clothing, it will be worth murdering my generous host before escaping this prison...

It was with these fairly uncharitable feelings foremost in his mind that Severus pounced on his host, rolling her onto her back and straddling her while he secured her arms above her head.

At least, that's what he intended to do.

Unfortunately, what Severus didn't realise was that he had actually been asleep for over a week. As a result, some of his muscles didn't respond quite as quickly as he had intended. Lying sprawled over the woman with a strong grip on *one* of her wrists was not ideal, but since she was probably a bit winded by his weight, overall not a totally ineffective manoeuvre. Fumbling with his left hand for the wand on the bedside table, Severus swore when it dropped to the floor with an audible clatter. However, he soon realised that all his precautions probably weren't necessary when his host patted him on the cheek with her free hand and mumbled sleepily, 'Not now, I'm tired.'

Totally unable to comprehend how deep a sleeper she must be to assume that his attack was anything other than what it was, Severus decided to forget the wand for now and change tactics.

Slapping her lightly on the face, then a little harder when there was no response, he ordered, 'Wake up.'

At once, there was a response as the woman opened her eyes and took in a gasping breath, 'Sir!'

That single syllable caused Severus to leap off the bed and away from her even quicker than he had attacked her before, reflexively covering his bits with his hands. He was glad that the darkness hid his blush. He knew that voice and wished a thousand times within a fraction of a second that it was anyone, anyone but her. Trust *her* to see him in all his embarrassment and misery.

Slytherin knows, I feel like some sort of awful pervert...

'What the bloody hell is going on, Miss Granger?' he snapped, discomfort shortening his ever-unpredictable temper.

Gods, what did I do to end up with her? I'll sue St Mungo's. No. I'll track down who is responsible for this and hex them until their own mother wouldn't recognise them. That will definitely be more satisfying...

Squinting to get a better look at her, Severus could vaguely make out the girl hanging over the side of her bed, obviously trying to find the wand he had knocked onto the floor. Why she didn't just get off the bed, he wasn't sure, but after a few moments of her fruitless groping, he stalked back to the bed, grabbed the damn thing and gave it to her.

A split second later, when she muttered '*Lumos*' with the wand pointing squarely in his face, Severus wondered why the bloody hell he had done *that*. He really must be sick. Probably delirious.

What happened to grabbing the wand and running?

'You should get back into bed, Professor,' she said sleepily, lowering the wand as she saw him twitch slightly at the wandlight in his face. 'You weren't meant to wake up until tomorrow morning.'

'I am *not* a professor,' grated Severus, forgetting all about his painful erection as he crossed his arms across his chest defiantly. They had a few things to straighten out before he was leaving this place.

'Fine. Mr Snape,' she agreed, rolling back into bed and pulling the sheet back over her body in a surprisingly fluid movement.

That doesn't sound right either. Why is she attempting to placate me? Isn't she bothered at all by this situation?

'What makes you think I am getting back into bed with *you*?' he retorted, angry now that she wouldn't even talk about why he was here.

'Do whatever you want to.' She waved her wand at one of the doors; it swung open with such force, Severus was surprised that it didn't damage the wall. 'Wake me after the sun has fully risen.'

Just a second after her head had hit the pillow, and she began to drift off back to the happy place where she was not sharing a very small flat with Severus Snape for the foreseeable future, Hermione was jerked back to her unhappy reality by one of the wards going off.

Specifically, the ward the Ministry had put up only the day before to keep the grumpy bastard inside her flat.

Knowing that it wasn't really urgent, because she had his wand, and she doubted that he had the strength to break down her door, Hermione nevertheless resigned herself

to getting up and explaining what had happened over the last few days before returning to her much-needed rest.

It had been a very trying week, and she was not in a good mood.

After splashing some cold water on her face, Hermione stumbled out into to her all-purpose kitchenette-living room-study and was immediately confronted with an amusing parody of 'irritated Potions master'.

He was standing in the same attitude he had often adopted in the classroom, with his arms folded across his chest and legs planted firmly apart, glaring at her as if she had just blown up her potion in his face. However, this picture of superiority was completely ruined by the fact that instead of his usual crisp black robes, the professor was dressed in an old t-shirt of her father's with a big, yellow smiley face on the front that said 'Smile!'.

That parts of his anatomy were dotting the 'i' did nothing to help his case. Fixing her gaze squarely at the height of his chest not because she wasn't curious, but because she felt it was rude to stare Hermione had to collect her wits quickly when Severus interrupted her wayward thoughts.

'You live in a shoebox.'

Amusement gone, Hermione grit her teeth and tersely replied, 'It was all I could afford as a student, and not that it's any of your business, but my lease ends in a few weeks.'

'Why have you warded me in?'

Irritated with the way that he was interrogating her, but keen to get this confrontation over with, Hermione leaned against her table and took a deep breath.

'What is the last thing you remember before you woke up here?'

'St Mungo's,' Severus bit out. 'A Healer put me to sleep.'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes, that was last Wednesday. We then ran tests on you to determine how much of what potion you had left in your body.' It was now her turn to glare at him. 'The impotence potion was of your own creation?'

'Obviously,' he grumbled. 'The ordinary ones stopped working weeks ago.'

Wrong answer.

'There is no such thing as an ordinary impotence potion,' she hissed. All the feelings she had buried while trying to help this man suddenly came rushing back in the face of his terrible attitude and awful manners. 'You could have made yourself sterile. Or, for all you know, it could have turned black and fallen off. We didn't use impotence potions to treat the P-virus precisely because of all those nasty side effects. Magic does have some rules, you know, and suppressing certain natural reactions is never a good idea.'

'And how exactly would it have affected you if any of those things had happened? I knew '

'I would have been the one trying to re-attach it!'

In hindsight, that may have been a tad over-emotional, but Hermione was simply in no condition whatsoever to deal with this sort of unreasonableness. Heedless of the way he was staring disdainfully at her, she added, 'Now, would you like to know what happened? I'm beginning to think that I should have let Melinda Parkinson take you home, after all.'

At the mention of Melinda Parkinson, Severus immediately dropped the superior stance and at once seemed to realise that he was standing in front of Hermione Granger wearing nothing but a gimmicky t-shirt and sporting a rather noticeable hard-on.

With as much dignity as he could muster with his hands cupping his balls and no pants on, he hissed, 'Kindly keep your voice down, Miss Granger. Your neighbours are likely still sleeping. Now tell me where to find a pair of trousers.'

'Minerva packed you a bag when she found you more or less unconscious at your home,' Hermione replied, sitting down and massaging the bridge of her nose. If this headache got any worse she'd have to scrounge around the flat for some pain relief potion of her own. She felt like she was coming down with something. No doubt the hours and energy she had been putting in St Mungo's were finally catching up with her. 'The bag is in the bedroom. You'll find your wand in there, too.'

Five minutes later, he walked back into the living room in a pair of black trousers and a plain white shirt.

Looking him up and down, Hermione realised she had forgotten to give him basic instructions about what and what not to put on. 'I hope you didn't put any underwear on, sir. Don't restrict yourself any more than necessary in that area. How are you feeling down there, by the way?'

It seemed that being clothed hadn't improved his outlook. 'Fine, Madam Healer,' he snapped. 'Now, start at the beginning and tell me everything.'

Hermione took a deep breath and reviewed the mental pact she had made with herself to stay calm and professional, no matter the provocation.

He's no different from any other patient.

Except that he still treats me as if I were eleven.

He's a right bastard.

And one of the most brilliant wizards I've ever met.

Now massaging her temples, Hermione tried to put together a succinct, yet coherent version of the last few days that hopefully wouldn't alarm him. Just because he'd shown almost no regard for his health thus far didn't mean she was willing to wager on what his reaction would be to her news.

'So you took the impotency potions for a while '

'Three weeks.'

'Yes, for three weeks, and then they stopped working, and you ended up in St Mungo's '

'You said Minerva found me. How did she know to look?'

Hermione glowered at his constant interruptions.

Bloody control freak. Can't even resist adding to someone else's narration...

'You were meant to have tea with Minerva on the Tuesday. When it seemed you had decided against gracing her with your presence, she decided to visit you instead. Since you were found rocking on your bed, totally unable to answer her queries about your health, she Floo'ed St Mungo's immediately.'

Glaring at the man just to check that he wasn't about to treat her to his unwanted two Knuts again, Hermione was a bit concerned to see that his face was beginning to look a bit pinched. Not that it changed much really, just a bit of extra tightness around his mouth and eyes.

'Has the pain got any worse?'

'It has,' he answered shortly, 'so hurry up with your bedtime story, Granger.'

Grating her teeth, Hermione continued, 'While you were asleep, we ran tests and determined that you are immune to known painkillers and muscle relaxants, which, I assume,' she added, staring straight into his eyes, 'is because of frequent use during the war and not some sort of addiction. But the main problem stems from the use of impotency potions. They did suppress the virus for a time, but that has only made things worse.'

'How so?'

Here Hermione hesitated, unsure exactly how to word this.

'Well, given that you are saturated with potions to the point where the only way to completely flush it out of you would be to replace your blood, our tests results were not very precise. They showed that in your case, you definitely have the P-virus, but it isn't progressing in quite the same way as it is in our other patients. The impotence potions will have to be processed by your body in the normal way.'

She relaxed a bit when he nodded calmly. 'The virus somehow modified itself to its host.'

Surprised by his knowledge of what was essentially Muggle medicine, since magical strains were generally stronger, but also found it harder to adapt, she added, 'Yes, it mutated. Actually, we've been quarantined inside this flat. I can't get out either.'

He took that fairly well, actually. His nostrils flared, and he gave her a look that quite clearly said, 'I do not approve', but otherwise made no comment.

'And Melinda Parkinson?'

'Who is she, by the way? Any relation to Pansy?'

'Cousin's wife. And she's my stalker. I'm surprised you didn't realise.'

'Oh, I thought so. But innocent until proven guilty, you know?'

'This is of vital importance, Miss Granger. I need to know whether to contact my lawyer.'

'She turned up at the hospital with a formal petition to take you to her home. If she hadn't tried to lick your face when she thought I wasn't looking, I might even have approved it.'

At that revelation, the light bulb hanging above the table promptly smashed and showered them with a tinkle of glass shards.

Hermione was just glad that he hadn't popped a blood vessel instead.

Four

Chapter 4 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: With thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

On hearing that the alternative to being stuck in this tiny excuse for an flat with the ever-irritating Hermione Granger was Melinda Parkinson, Severus almost felt something crack from the pressure inside.

Her tongue? My face!

As glass dust and possibly a few larger splinters fell on the table between him and Hermione, Severus forced his embarrassment and anger to the back of his mind and decided to rethink his tactics.

'So, how did you deter Mrs Parkinson?' he asked, forcing his voice to calm politeness.

'I told her that I was your wife.'

'That is a very poor joke.'

'I'm not joking. She believed me. It might be to your benefit to keep it up if you ever run into her at the shops.'

Severus gaped at her incredulously, but said nothing.

I suppose it's better than the alternative...

'Thank me anytime.'

He didn't want to do that, but he was willing to let the matter drop.

'I have been too busy lately to read the newspapers and information leaflets that somehow found my Unplottable house. What is this so-called P-virus?'

'P is for penis..., ' she began only to be abruptly cut off.

'As difficult as it might be for you, Miss Granger, please refrain from repeating commonsense basics and only tell me what I actually need to know.'

Assuming that he was embarrassed by the subject matter because of their past relationship, Hermione gave him what she must have thought was a soothing smile. 'Please treat me as you would any other Healer, Mr Snape,' she said coolly in her best medical-professional voice. 'I will not divulge the contents of our conversation to any other sentient being.'

'Use your head, girl!' he spat. 'This is obviously the sort of problem I would rather not discuss at all.' As an afterthought, he added, 'And I am treating you *exactly* as I would treat any other Healer.'

Hermione stared. 'So, what are you saying? Would you prefer me to pretend that we're friends?'

Friends?

He snorted.

How amusing.

'Just spare me that hideously artificial Healer voice and your grossly over-simplified explanations, Miss Granger.'

She seemed annoyed. 'I might be more inclined to stop calling you "Professor" if you would stop referring to me as "Miss Granger". "Hermione" is fine if "Healer" isn't to your taste.'

It is not.

'Fine.'

'And what should I call you?'

"Severus", then,' he growled, unwilling to veer any further off topic while his groin ached ever more insistently. All he really felt like doing was curling up on the bed again to wallow in his pain and misery. Only years of self-discipline and pride kept him upright and determined to function normally in front of her.

'The pain is milder now, though still present. Am I recovering?'

She chewed her lip and rested her face on one hand as she weighed her response. 'We're not sure. The ferocity with which the virus attacked your system last week most likely signalled the onset of the last phase of the illness the painful part. Of course, that is assuming that the mutated strain is only more severe and will run the same course as the original virus.'

Trying not to whimper at the idea that 'painful part' was yet to come, Severus forced himself to ask the last question.

'How long will this phase last?'

'In the other patients? Two or three weeks,' Hermione replied. She made a sort of half-movement to reach out to him, but then obviously thought better of it. Instead, she settled on allowing great pity to stare out at him through wide, brown eyes.

Those eyes!

'You were the one who put me to sleep,' he said, his tone making it almost an accusation, unable to believe that those were the eyes that had pulled him back from the brink of insanity.

'Yes, and I am your Healer. Why do you think we've been holed up in here together?' she snapped, angry and disappointed in herself for feeling too under the weather to do her job properly. She just couldn't think straight.

I must be some sort of masochist. Why am I still seeking this impossible man's approval after so many years?

Hermione's preoccupation with her own problems kept her from noticing Severus' more careful assessment of her now that he was aware of just how relevant she was to his future comfort. Accustomed as he was to being various shades of pale, it hadn't immediately occurred to Severus that Hermione Granger did usually walk around with a healthy flush in her cheeks. Right now, she looked like an overcooked vegetable, almost grey-tinged.

With his characteristic tact, he enquired, 'Since your health will probably affect mine if we are to be confined in such close quarters, I am interested in knowing why you look like an Inferius this morning.'

Shivering slightly despite the warm summer breeze blowing in through the window, Hermione sat up straighter and replied fiercely, 'I think I have a cold, which I'd intended to sleep off until you woke much later in the day. Now, if you have nothing to add, I might go back to bed.'

Deciding that a cold was the absolute last thing he needed right now, Severus was more than happy to let her disappear and fester in as small a space as possible.

Since he was almost convinced that there was nothing she could do for him, even should the pain grow worse, he would see what he could do with these living quarters while she slept...

After using the very cramped bathroom to perform his morning ablutions, Severus surveyed the cluttered living room with a strong sense of disgust.

He'd expected Granger to be cleaner.

Oh, it wasn't really dirty, nothing even close to the sort of filth he often encountered in the Slytherin boys' dorms, but it came nowhere near his own exacting standards of hygiene and orderliness.

Starting with the kitchen, Severus was most alarmed to see that there was no food to be had. A mouldy loaf of bread and yoghurt past the expiry date could not rightfully be considered edible. Nor could the dirty cauldron sitting in the sink bring forth any emotion other than sheer horror.

Potions in her cooking space! And she insists that we're living here for how many weeks together?

Although he had never really been worried about his long-term health, the state of Hermione Granger's kitchen forced Severus to grapple with the tenuous nature of his own mortality. He just couldn't shake the thought that he might have survived the war and carved a niche out for himself in the new world order only to starve to death in Hermione Granger's flat.

While he considered possible methods of obtaining food, Severus started subtly testing the wards on the flat, careful not to do any spell that might wake the girl.

Hermione, he thought, rolling the name around his mind and even testing it on his tongue as he tried to merge his memory of her as a student with the present incarnation sleeping in the next room. He had known that she was a Healer, of course. Barely a week went by without some mention in the social pages of the *Prophet* about what the

Golden Trio were doing with their lives. Not that he eagerly kept up with such things, but he felt it prudent to know what was said about whom. His own name even merited a mention occasionally.

Eventually deciding that he could break through the wards if he really wanted to, even though it would probably take a couple of days due to the sheer amount of layers to be dismantled, Severus was still pondering breakfast options when he walked up to Hermione's bookshelf.

Bookshelves.

In this tiny flat, he could only admire the fact that she had still devoted the whole wall next to the door and the space under and around the living room window to her books.

In terms of size, it was an impressive collection for someone so young, and there were not a few titles that he had always meant to read, yet somehow never got around to. Her taste, he noticed, was very diverse. Everything from Muggle bestsellers to thick tomes filled with dry, magical theory graced her shelves, all meticulously arranged by subject, then author.

At least I'll be well entertained...

As he picked up a book on Animagus transformation, and vaguely wondered whether it was even legal for the Ministry to confine two unmarried citizens together for an unspecified period of time with no means of support or sustenance, Severus flipped open the cover only to see familiar writing staring back at him.

Minerva.

The answer to all his troubles. If she cared enough about him to hunt him down and send a bag packed full of clothing with him to St Mungo's, she could bloody well ensure that he didn't starve to death, too.

The problem was how to contact her. Looking around the flat, Severus saw no fireplace, and no owl. He had never really considered it before, but though this was clearly a witch's home, it must be a Muggle building. There was even a telephone connected on the wall above the kitchen bench top.

Deciding that a Patronus was his only option, Severus kept his message brief and to the point. It was best that way; there was simply no point mincing words with Minerva. Sickness or not, she was probably still a little bit put out that he had missed tea with her the other week.

Only a few minutes after Severus had sent the message, while he was deciding which of the chairs looked easiest to turn into a sofa, Minerva's reply arrived in the flat with a loud *crack!*

'Scampy is here to serve the family of Snape!' beamed the young elf, wearing a spotless Hogwarts tea towel.

Severus had always liked elves. So much so that he didn't bother to correct the elf's assumption that he and Hermione were a married couple. However, that Hermione had been spreading the same rumour, albeit for a good cause, did make him somewhat suspicious. He made a mental note to remain alert to the possibility that this was part of a much larger, more personal conspiracy.

However, feeling relieved that Minerva had provided such an appropriate and useful solution to the problem, Severus lost no time in detailing the sort of things that he would need. Food, waste disposal and laundry. Yes, laundry. Contrary to popular belief, Hermione's so-called S.P.E.W campaign back in the day had been totally ineffectual. Only the headmaster could free a Hogwarts elf. The irony of it all was that her little stunt had only proven that the elves did have some standards and organisation after all. The boycott of Gryffindor Tower had actually been thought worthy of a mention in the next edition of *Hogwarts: A History* and other works, as a significant development in the 'Right to Clean' movement.

Unsure how Hermione currently felt about house-elf enslavement, Severus toyed with the idea of actually asking her what she wanted done, but then thought better of it.

This flat is tiny. I cannot possibly live in this squalor for any longer than it takes to clean up.

If he had been forced to guess without seeing the place, Severus would probably have said that Hermione had, at worst, a bit of clutter. Nothing at all like the mess that covered her entire living room. Books, newspapers, quills, and parchments were stacked randomly on the floor along with assorted items of clothing, shoes, bags, and other paraphernalia slung over what few items of furniture she had. Strangely enough, the cleanest part of the room was the kitchenette.

Cauldron-in-the-sink aside, it didn't look like it had ever been used.

In what would become the first of many attempts to ignore the ache in his pants by spurring himself to action, Severus decided to ignore the room for now and promptly directed several strong spells at the kitchen bench top.

He hadn't eaten for a week.

Around three hours and an edible, if not perfect, chicken broth later, Severus began to wish that he had cooked a steak.

Though he could have asked Scampy to cook the soup, Severus knew that it would have taken the elf just as long to do it from scratch, and the elf was better employed as it was magically disinfecting the bathroom. Though Severus had used the tiny cupboard-like shower earlier out of sheer desperation, in doing so, he had seen several fungi that he didn't particularly care to harvest. In any case, soup making was more or less similar to potion making, requiring less actual thought than other methods of cooking. All in all, Severus was quite proud of his efforts.

Remembering that Hermione had gone to bed looking paler than a Malfoy, Severus decided that it would be prudent to check whether or not she was still breathing. After all, with the two of them warded in together, he would almost certainly be found responsible if she were to die.

Wondering how best to wake her, Severus was tempted to simply slam the door open and save himself the trouble of saying anything. Old habits died hard; he had opened his classes at Hogwarts in the same manner. Deciding against that on the basis that the door's slam-capabilities were as yet unknown to him, Severus was still undecided as he stood over her and watched her sleep.

Only a very few seconds was enough to tell him that something was quite wrong.

Hermione was curled up tightly in a ball, shivering, despite the warm air and the fact that she was covered by a sheet. Her face had regained some colour, but her flushed cheeks alarmed him, especially when combined with a quick pulse.

Though Severus hadn't thought anything of putting his fingers gently to Hermione's exposed wrist to check her pulse, he had some quite serious reservations about putting his rather cold hand on the back of her neck or her forehead to get an idea of her temperature. He certainly would not appreciate anybody doing that to him, and he was a bit wary of her possible reaction.

She doesn't really seem the sort to hex first and ask questions later. That's also assuming her reflexes are even that good...

Deciding to take the chance, given that even if she did hex him, Severus was confident that he could dodge it, he gently put his hand on her forehead only to yank it away almost as soon as he did.

Her skin was burning to the touch.

Fuck.

When an 'Accio Pepperup' yielded no results, Severus scalded his tongue with the too-hot broth and sent Scampy running for cover as he snapped out orders for a cauldron and certain other ingredients from his storeroom at Spinner's End. As soon as the elf had left, Severus looked around the messy living room once more with a disdainful sniff.

Hermione Granger was already turning out to be absolutely pants at healing. She didn't even have a proper potions preparation space.

Five

Chapter 5 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: With thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

Judging by the golden glow streaming in through her window, it was well into the afternoon when Hermione awoke from her second slumber. Prying open her eyes with what felt like entirely too much effort, she shivered. Her skin felt like it had been pulled tight; it was dry and almost tingly. Rising from her bed to heed the call of nature, she was halfway across her room, completely adrift with no bedposts to hold onto, when her head suddenly swam, and her vision went black.

Abruptly half-sitting down, half-falling onto on the floor as she waited for the dizziness to pass, Hermione was most surprised to hear quick steps into her room. Turning towards her door, she felt more than saw Severus start to pick her up off the ground.

'I'm fine,' she croaked, glaring up at him. Who had told him that she needed help? She was a qualified Healer, and completely in control, thank you very much.

He snorted in answer, putting a supporting arm around her to escort her to the bathroom. As he brought her all the way in and deposited her on the loo, she even began to wonder if he planned to wipe up after her too when he asked condescendingly, 'I trust that you are conscious enough to use the lavatory unaided?'

In what she would later claim was a fever-fuelled haze of fury, Hermione stood and pulled her pants down, looking him in the eye the whole time she did so, daring him to goad her further.

She was impressed by his balls.

Figuratively.

Through the sort of swimmy, woozy feeling in her mind, Hermione admitted to herself that if bathing and changing him over the last few days was any indication, she actually didn't mind what she had seen there physically either. He held her gaze squarely, eyebrow raised, until she sat back down, and the first tinkling noises were heard hitting the porcelain. At that time, he abruptly seemed to recover himself, exiting the bathroom far more quickly than Hermione would have believed possible. She was not even mid-stream when the door slammed shut.

Giggling hysterically, Hermione didn't care that her walls were paper-thin, and even the neighbours could likely hear her.

Were those pink stains on his cheeks a blush?

Since she had every intention of returning to bed as soon as she had checked on her 'patient', Hermione made absolutely no effort to tidy her appearance before dragging herself from the bathroom to the living room. For a moment, she was sure that she had walked through a magical door into another person's house.

But... but all her things were still there...

It took Hermione a few minutes to sort through her mental fog and realise that her room had been tidied. Obviously, to within an inch of its life. Old, yellowing newspapers were sitting in piles near the door, all her books were sitting in the correct places on the shelves, and pots and knives were washing themselves in the kitchen sink. However, what shocked and bothered her most was her table. Her multi-purpose desk, dining table, and bench top had been raised several inches and converted into a *work table*, complete with unidentifiable ingredient stains on the surface and a steaming cauldron.

He's been brewing?

Hermione tried to calm the rising panic and hysteria she felt at the sudden rearrangement of her things. There had been important research and other as-yet-unanswered personal correspondence among the dross. She hoped that he hadn't thrown anything out.

Deep breaths. Potions masters brew. It's just what they do. I could hardly expect him to sit around all day and twiddle this thumbs...

Turning towards the man himself, Hermione decided that she didn't even know whether she wanted to rip into him for moving all her things without permission, or kiss him for doing what she had put off for years. What eventually came out of her mouth was something different again.

'How is your pain now?'

'Irrelevant, in light of the fact that I have a Healer who couldn't help me even if she wanted to,' Severus replied in a maddeningly calm voice, seeming to be totally absorbed in inspecting his cauldron of whatever.

Stung by his harsh rebuke, Hermione looked down, blinking back hot, feverish tears. She was failing him as a medical professional. He would have been better off left with a total novice.

When a cool hand took her wrist gently and wrapped her fingers around a mug handle, Hermione still didn't look up to face him, but focused on her cup instead.

Smoking, black liquid swirled within the confines of the mug as if trying to sneak up out of the mouth and escape. It was as flexible and potent as the viruses it sought to kill.

Hermione felt more tears come to her eyes as she stared dumbly at the freshly made Pepperup Potion. He had cleaned her flat and made her medicine. Her mother had never even done that. Well, given that her mother wasn't magical, Hermione knew that this was an unfair comparison, but it was nevertheless true.

'That potion should be ingested while it is still warm,' he prompted her shortly, once more putting his hand on hers and guiding the mug to her lips as if she were three years old.

Totally floored by his kindness, Hermione swallowed her tears with the peppery mixture, downing it in a few large gulps. As she felt her body warm up and steam start to gently rise from her ears, Hermione finally found the courage to look at Severus and smile her gratitude.

'I only meant that you were incapacitated, not that you are inherently incapable,' he stated bluntly, as if in reply to an earlier query.

When she raised an eyebrow at him in question, he shifted uncomfortably and began to pack away his potions kit as he continued, 'And I didn't mean to invade your privacy earlier.'

That one seemed to refer to the bathroom.

Now that her head had cleared a little, Hermione was embarrassed enough at her own audacity without needing the reminder.

'Let's not speak of it.'

His single nod of acquiescence seemed very emphatic.

'You should return to bed unless you would like some chicken broth?'

Mother of Merlin, he even cooked?

A moment's consultation with her stomach quickly decided Hermione's course of action. She was already feeling much better, but thought it might be pushing it to ingest anything else just at the present moment. It would be better to just let the Pepperup do its job uninterrupted.

As she walked to the sink, taking care to rinse out her mug before filling it with tap water, she said, 'No thanks, I'll just have some water and go back to sleep, I think.'

For some reason, watching her brought a frown to his face, but he offered no objection as he continued to pack away his things.

'Until the morning, then.'

It wasn't until Hermione was lying in bed, right about to drift back off to sleep that she remembered that there was only one bed in her flat and almost no space in the living room for any sort of bed or sofa.

I suppose he'll Transfigure the table...

Still a little sick, miserable and desperate for comfort, she felt like such a fool for even daring to entertain the slightest hope that he would join her later.

Cursing his own weakness, Severus wondered what had possessed him when he gave her not only an explanation for his misinterpreted words but also an apology of sorts for helping her. All in some sort of pointless attempt to make her *feel* better.

Hermione's tears had not escaped the notice of her former teacher, and he was surprised by just how protective, and responsible, her vulnerability caused him to feel. Illness had certainly dulled her mind. She had been as easy to read as a book when she had thanked him for the small kindness. What had struck him was the extent of that gratitude.

You would think that she was starved as a child and forced to eat Flobberworms...

Gods, and it wasn't only her vulnerability that threw him off balance. In his opinion, young women should not have the right to waltz (or stumble, as the case may be) around their flats with nothing on but skimpy Muggle clothing and no foundation garments. He had been so shocked when she started taking them off in his presence that it had taken every single bit of his self-control not to look down at what she had so readily revealed.

He was only human.

Most disturbing of all was that the mere thought of Hermione Granger, with the delicate hands and nice legs, disrobing in front of him, made his already painful erection just that tiny bit *more* painful.

With a grunt of general irritation, Severus decided that despite the lack of beds, and the presumption that since he had woken up there, he could return, he couldn't possibly survive the night in close proximity with young, innocent Hermione Granger.

Thoroughly disgusted with himself, he looked dubiously at the table and wished that he had Minerva's skill at Transfiguration.

It was going to be a hard night.

Six

Chapter 6 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: With thanks to my beta, JunoMagic. Another huge thanks to all the lovely people who have reviewed. I really appreciate the feedback.

Feeling more refreshed than she had in months, Hermione stretched in her bed and contemplated what she might do with her day. If yesterday was any indication providing his pain didn't get any worse Severus was best left to his own devices. Perhaps she could direct him to her wardrobe. That hadn't been cleaned out since she

had moved in either...

Wait. Where is he?

Jumping out of bed a little more slowly than the day before, in an attempt to avoid another embarrassing episode in the middle of her bedroom floor, Hermione went straight to the living room with a keen desire to see exactly how good Severus' Transfiguration skills were. He might be a brilliant potions maker and duellist, but Hermione privately doubted that he had kept up with complex Transfiguration work as the years went by. Like everything else in life, practice made perfect when it came to magic. Most wizards and witches didn't bother with things that didn't relate to everyday life once leaving school, and Transfiguring a table into any sort of bed worth sleeping on was best left to masters of the art.

Sure enough, Severus was sprawled uncomfortably on her table looking for all the world like some sort of road kill, so awkward was the positioning of his limbs. He had slept in his clothes from the day before, only covered by a rather thin-looking sheet, noticeably elevated in the groin area. Not that she was looking. In fact, Hermione had long become accustomed to such things. The Healers at St Mungo's often joked that rounds these days had become a 'tent inspection'.

However, what she was not prepared to see was that the table was, in fact, still a table. It didn't even look like he had bothered to lengthen it to accommodate for his height.

Didn't he even try?

Tiptoeing past him in the hope that he might sleep a bit longer, Hermione headed straight for the only appliance that she actually used in her kitchen: the coffee machine.

'Can I assume that the next cup is for me?'

Whirling around, expecting to see him right behind her, Hermione was surprised to see that Severus hadn't moved a muscle.

Surely it can't be good for him to sleep like that?

Hermione was still in such a spectacularly good mood from waking up snuffle-free, she didn't even mind that his manner of requesting a cup of coffee left much to be desired.

'Do you take milk or sugar?' she asked brightly, inhaling deeply in satisfaction as the smell of coffee began to waft gently through the flat.

'You are entirely too cheerful this morning, and neither,' came his terse reply. It was a statement of fact, not a rebuke, leaving Hermione in an even better mood. In the few moments she'd had to herself since becoming Severus Snape's carer, she had been most doubtful about how well she would fare with his infamous temper.

'You didn't have to sleep on the table,' she informed him, as she handed him a steaming mug of strong, black coffee. By this time, he was sitting rigidly upright on the tabletop, one hand in his lap as he scrutinised her with keen eyes.

'Yes, I did,' he said, glaring at her as if she had forced him to sleep on a hard table. 'You certainly look better this morning.'

'But you woke up in my bed. Wasn't it implied that I wouldn't mind you returning to it?' she asked, unwilling to let the subject drop.

'Has it not crossed your mind that I might not want to sleep in your bed? That I might feel more comfortable on my own?' he snapped, giving her one of his trademark glares.

'Oh.'

In all honesty, it hadn't occurred to Hermione that he would actually prefer somewhere ten different kinds of uncomfortable to sharing the bed with her.

Well, she thought wryly, I suppose it might have been a bit conceited to assume that he was thinking only of my comfort.

'Why didn't you at least Transfigure it into something a little more comfortable?' she heard herself ask, mentally kicking herself as soon as she'd said it. It wasn't important, and she hadn't even thanked him for the potion yet.

He sniffed. 'The hardness of the bed doesn't bother me.'

Hermione gave him a funny look at that statement, but let it pass.

Is he trying to tell me that he's uncomfortable in other areas?

'How is your penis this morning, Professor?'

A vein began to throb in Severus' temple.

'What did I say about that word?' he hissed.

'Penis?'

'Your obsession with male anatomy aside, I distinctly remember telling you not to call me "Professor",' he spat.

Potions wasn't the only thing Hermione had learnt in Severus Snape's classroom. His slight changes in facial expression were essential knowledge to every student who actually cared about their marks. No point putting him in a worse mood right before he collected the vials. That was just asking for an '*Evanesco*'.

Right now, Hermione was most intrigued by this latest look. Pink spots of either embarrassment or rage graced his cheeks. Though she wasn't sure which emotion it was, she was definitely exploring uncharted territory.

Since he had also banned her from acting as she was accustomed to doing with patients, Hermione had no choice but to be blunt about what they were going to have to do.

'You need to answer my question, Severus, and after you've had something to eat, I am going to need to inspect the afflicted organ. There is some information that should be recorded as the illness progresses.'

As expected, he balked. 'It hurts like bloody hell! What else do you need to know?'

'Length, girth, colouration...'

'No.'

'What?'

'*Pardon.* You are not going to impress your patients if your grasp of the English language is elementary at best. I was very clear. I will not allow you anywhere near my *afflicted organ*.' He looked absolutely horrified at the thought.

This she had seen before. If Hermione could collect all the time men had wasted in St Mungo's worrying about size, shape, and other such totally irrelevant things, she could take a holiday.

'You have nothing to be ashamed of, it's nothing I haven't seen before, and I assure you that the records will not be accessible to anyone else. It is merely a comparison with your own records to check for any abnormalities.'

Apparently the wrong thing to say.

'When?' he asked icily, his eyes boring into hers. 'When have you ever seen my genitalia?'

'When I gave you a sponge bath yesterday, but that wasn't what I meant. Realistically, I've probably seen more than you have...'

He cut her off again. By now, the pink spots on his cheeks had become decidedly red, and a vein was beginning to throb in his forehead. 'Your relative promiscuity is of no interest to me, and I do not appreciate your suggestion that I am some sort of peeping Tom. Why would you imagine I had seen many?'

It was Hermione's turn to get frustrated. 'Because you went to boarding school with a whole lot of other boys,' she said. 'Or did you just not open your eyes in the showers?'

'It would be none of your business if I did.'

Sick of their arguments going in pointless circles, Hermione was about ready to give up. She had one card left to play.

'But don't you want to know if there are abnormalities?'

'We keep coming back to this. What concern is it of yours if my reproductive health is compromised?'

'So you wouldn't care if you did become completely impotent after all this?'

Silence.

Sighing her wordless, 'I told you so,' Hermione was willing to compromise.

'We can do it before breakfast if you wish. Get it over and done with.'

One curt nod and a few buttons later, Severus Snape was once again lying prone on the kitchen table with his erection in full view.

And what a beautiful sight it was.

Hermione hadn't been lying or exaggerating earlier. She had seen so many penises over the last month or so, she was quite sure that the only other women who could even come close to matching her expertise were London's working ladies.

And Severus Snape had the most wonderful penis she had ever seen.

Neither too long nor too short, too thin or too wide, he was large without making her wince, and overall it managed to be highly aesthetically pleasing. At least, as aesthetically pleasing as a very odd sort of stick poking out of someone's body could be. It brought to mind Michelangelo's 'David', beautiful, detailed and proportionate, but all the better for being at attention; warmer, longer and attached to a man whose skin was real rather than marble-smooth.

With uncharacteristic eagerness and interest, Hermione cleansed her hands and got ready for her latest foray into fondling, groping, and this time, admiring.

That is to say, a completely professional medical evaluation of the affected body part...

Lie back and think of England, Severus thought wryly as he fought against all his body's instincts telling him to grab his trousers and bolt. It wasn't that he objected to women touching him, quite the contrary actually, but despite their unorthodox setting, Severus was beginning to regret that he hadn't insisted upon a formal Healer-patient relationship with *Hermione*. Courtesy of her openly admiring gaze and bright eyes, this was far too much like being on display at a zoo.

It's a moot point anyway. I am hardly in a position to owl her for my results and resolve never to see her again...

It started as a fairly casual, visual inspection as she scribbled things down on a piece of parchment.

So far, so good. Maybe this won't be completely humiliating after all.

The first touch of her soft, warm hand almost made Severus jump off the table.

Merlin!

'Relax,' she said huskily, her fingers never ceasing their movement.

Gods...she's even beginning to sound seductive in my mind...

For minute or two, it was almost relaxing. Severus allowed that the light touches were fairly pleasant. At least she was gentle. It actually took the edge off the pain for a little while, as he could focus on something else.

Unfortunately, focusing solely on the touches turned out to be a terrible idea. After a slow build up of more innocent touches, a certain caress when she oh so slowly trailed her fingers up and around as she moved them to a new position caused something to snap in Severus' mind, a sort of numb roaring inside urging him to jerk hard into her hand.

Struggling not to whimper, he wished fervently to whatever deity was listening that he would be spared. He would take dull, directionless pain any day.

This was far, far worse.

Trying desperately to think of dead kittens, or the time he had caught a glimpse of Albus' third nipple, had failed five minutes ago. However, just when he thought that this couldn't get any worse, Severus felt a warm breath down *there* and felt himself twitch just as a low moan somehow erupted from between his tightly pursed lips.

What the bloody fuck is she doing?!

Jumping up and off the table in a belated attempt to hide his totally inappropriate reaction to her ministrations, and almost kicking her head in the process, Severus put as much space as he could between them before rounding on Hermione.

'What was that?' he snarled.

She blinked a few times, looking a bit dazed before she answered, 'I was simply taking a closer look at the line of your perineal raphe.'

'My what?' he snapped.

She visibly gathered herself together and repeated in what Severus thought was her worst know-it-all voice, 'Your perineal raphe. The line that runs up from your anus...'

'Stop.' Severus cut her off before she could get any further. 'I do not want, or need, to know.'

She huffed in irritation. 'I was almost finished. How will we compare tomorrow's results if the tests are not completed today?'

'There will be no tests tomorrow. I refuse to be *manhandled* in such a manner again. If you just bloody well did your job the way you were supposed to, none of this would have happened!'

'I hurt you?' She actually looked seriously concerned. The know-it-all tone was gone, replaced by those fucking *haunting* brown eyes just begging for absolution.

'No,' he replied shortly, unable to meet her eyes as he began to feel slightly guilty.

Damn her for looking so bloody innocent! And damn me nine times to Hades for enjoying it!

'What was wrong, then?'

Severus glanced at her incredulously.

'You can't bloody well guess?' He felt totally justified in his sourness as he watched her eyes open wide and her cheeks burn.

A moment later, the know-it-all made her return. 'That isn't a bad thing, you know,' she started, turning away from him to search through the fridge that had been empty until the previous afternoon. 'Why don't you go and have a shower? We can discuss your treatment options further over breakfast.'

Feeling thoroughly disgusted with both himself, and her, for how that had turned out, Severus swept out of the room without a word, banging the bathroom door behind him.

Merlin save me, he enjoyed it too...

As she heard the bathroom door slam, Hermione stopped hiding in the fridge and felt her knees give way as she slid slowly down to the floor and closed her eyes.

How did it happen?

She'd known she was playing with fire the moment her fingers had touched him and he had sort of twitched.

So responsive!

Though she had by no means indulged her own freaks of fancy during his examination, Hermione's heart had been racing as she tried her hardest not to spook him or be at all rough.

With his eyes closed, he looked peaceful, yet Hermione could feel the tension in his body winding ever tighter as she methodically ticked off the boxes of a thorough evaluation of his penis.

Peering closer at what looked like the most perfectly straight perineal raphe she had ever seen, Hermione had been completely surprised when he had suddenly leapt off the table and only just avoided being hit in the face with *it* as he struggled to get as far away from her as possible.

Now she just wanted to sink through the floor in mortification at what had just inadvertently occurred.

My kitchen table will never be the same again...

She had pleased him.

During a medical examination.

She, Hermione Granger, had just laid hands on Severus Snape's dangly bits, and he had actually liked it.

With the call to the wives of England running through her head, suddenly Hermione felt far more interested than she had before in that French research.

Maybe there is something to it after all...

Trying manfully to distract herself from such inappropriate thoughts about a patient, Hermione looked dubiously at her wand and wondered what she could produce for 'breakfast'.

Perhaps it would be best to go for something safe, like toast.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: With thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

In unspoken agreement to not mention the events of the morning, Hermione and Severus both pretended that they hadn't seen each other before he emerged from the

bathroom to partake of her burnt toast and jam. Not wanting to crowd him, Hermione made no objection to Severus taking one of her books to read, though actually, she would have much preferred to talk to him.

It had occurred to her, somewhere between making her second cup of coffee and burning the toast, that for as long as this quarantine lasted, she had one of Wizarding Britain's finest minds at her disposal. Difficult and surly as he might be, Hermione was excited at the thought that so long as he wasn't too sick, she might actually be able to have the conversation she'd been dying to have about Russian Potions master Nikolai Vasilyev's latest articles about magical mass production in *Ars Alchemica*. That, and all the other conversations for which she ordinarily didn't have the time, or a suitable partner.

In truth, Hermione had not spoken to, or even really seen anyone outside St Mungo's for a few months. Of course, she kept up a few correspondences and made sure to meet with Harry, Ginny and Ron whenever possible, but they were all so caught up in their own lives, Harry and Ginny as newlyweds, Ron with George and the shop, and she with the busy life of a trainee Healer that such small pockets of free time were few and far between. She hadn't even been on a date this year. Going through the men at the hospital had never been her style, and there just wasn't any time to go out and meet new people.

Of course, there were people at work who could more than meet Hermione in their own fields of expertise, but the hospital was often like its own little world. Whenever she managed to meet with friends for lunch, they would invariably talk over the latest hospital gossip. The few times that they did discuss the latest advances in healing, they never had enough time to really go into detail.

The result of all this was that while Severus buried his nose in a book about Amazonian tribal magics, Hermione forced herself to be patient by meticulously going through the information she had been given on the French research into the P-virus. As she did so, she often peeked up over her paper to see if he looked at all amenable to being drawn into conversation.

When he made to pick the book straight back up after lunch and settle in for the afternoon, Hermione decided that she could stand the silence no longer. Just as he was reaching for the piece of parchment he had been using as a bookmark, she blurted out, 'Would you say the pain moves in waves or more sudden spikes?'

'Is that the question you've been dying to ask me for the last three hours?' he asked, raising an eyebrow at her in maddening superiority, smirk in place.

Hermione blushed at being so obvious in her earlier observations, but nevertheless grabbed the gift of his attention with both hands. Without examining the feelings too deeply, she was nevertheless aware of a strong desire for his approval at the edges of her conscience, warring with an urge not to feel like a nuisance.

I don't need his approval. I'm an adult now, for Merlin's sake!

But it would be nice to have it.

Even though he had given her permission to call him 'Severus' the day before, it still didn't sit well. Resolving to get to know 'Severus' before their enforced time together was over, Hermione decided that, yes, she did mean to pursue that topic.

'Not exactly,' but I wouldn't mind talking to you if you can tear yourself from the Amazonians for a little while. I've been familiarising myself with the latest research into your condition.'

He smoothly put his book down and gave her his attention.

'There is constant, dull, aching pain,' he answered slowly, 'and every now and then, it builds up into a wave of a somewhat sharper pain, then subsides again.'

Hermione nodded slowly. That more or less fit what she had been reading. Having somewhat more interest in Muggle medicine than some of her peers, she had also done some reading on priapism in the Muggle world near the beginning of the P-virus outbreak. All the symptoms of this magical virus more or less matched the Muggle theories which stated that raised levels of a certain biochemical, adenosine, were responsible for the condition.

But, and there was a very big 'but' after that, magical diseases by their nature always worked somewhat differently to their more straightforward Muggle counterparts. That was one of the reasons she had never chosen Magical Bugs as a speciality. Mixing Muggle medicine in that field was almost certain to lead to failure. Magic simply didn't work on the same rules as the scientific world of bacteria, cells and antibodies. As frustrating as it was for Hermione, even the most basic knowledge of Muggle medicine was more likely to be more misleading than helpful in that field of study.

The French research, which really did identify sex as possibly the best course of 'treatment' for this disease, was one such huge point of divergence. Although she knew that Severus was a half-blood, Hermione wondered whether he might know a bit more about it than she did. He had, after all, spent much longer living in the Wizarding world than she had, and he was a Slytherin. Steadfastly holding onto old traditions and thoughts was occasionally useful.

'How much do you know about sex magic?'

To her relief, he neither smirked nor balked, but looked thoughtful as he replied, 'More than you, I imagine. I haven't seen any books on the subject in your collection, and your comments yesterday about impotence potions would suggest that you know little of that particular branch of magic.'

Though the words themselves were not particularly flattering, Hermione couldn't argue with his deductions. She also couldn't see what possible relation impotence potions had to the particular topic she wanted to discuss, and she told him so.

His voice took on a lecturing tone as he replied, 'I trust you are familiar with the idea that love can constitute a magic of its own?' He barely paused for her nod before continuing. 'Sex magic operates on similarly abstract principles, and of course the two often overlap. The fundamental idea is that something in the exchange, both physical and psychological, necessarily involved in ordinary intercourse can create not only life but also other benefits. Unquantifiable and imprecise, but nevertheless present.'

Hermione soaked up the information before interrupting with, 'But what about rape and other such situations where the emotional or psychological is altered or negated? Surely that would lead to different results?'

She almost felt him tense, and the air crackled with a sort of energy.

'And why would you imagine I am an expert on such a topic?' His voice was deadly quiet.

Hermione sensed that she was treading on very thin ice. She didn't want to know what made him so touchy on this particular subject; she didn't even want to hazard a guess.

Screwing up her courage, she let her own mental shields drop a fraction and looked him squarely in the eye as she replied, 'I wish to rely on your expertise of the Dark Arts, Professor.' This time, she put emphasis on the title. As much as she might wish to appear as a knowledgeable professional, she did still look up to him as an intellectual authority figure.

Apparently, he was satisfied with her reply. He started again, though she noticed that he didn't directly answer her question.

'You alluded yesterday to the less desirable side effects of suppressing natural desires and reactions. However, stimulating and suppressing sexual urges are linked. In fact, the active ingredients in fertility and impotence potions are similar, but combined with different ingredients, the compounds formed produce opposite results. In ancient times, manipulation of any of the natural cycles was quite heavily frowned upon. Modern improvements and social standards are such that this only remains true for certain suppressants. Namely, impotence potions and even female contraception in some circles.'

Here, he frowned, as if deliberating whether to continue.

'Of course,' he added more slowly, 'sex magic does have an identifiably darker side, but that is true of all branches of magic, is it not?'

Hermione could not refute that last remark. She was still halfway through digesting the information when she blurted out, 'So what does all this mean in relation to the potions you were using?'

He shrugged. The slightest shift of his shoulders.

'It means that it is more than likely that I overdosed a little on the impotence potion, causing the, shall we say *episode* that caused me to be taken to St Mungo's. It also means that contrary to what you might have been told about the limits of magical medicine in this area, when properly brewed and used judiciously, those potions are not harmful.'

Raising her eyebrow at his comment on the 'judicious' use of impotence potions, Hermione was inwardly seething with irritation that he hadn't shared this information earlier. Actually, it may have been more correct to say that her anger was in not being aware of it herself. It irritated her that she hadn't even realised that she had been buying into a social norm rather than proven science. Moments like this depressed her; she felt unnecessary. Nothing she had done so far could honestly be considered helping.

When all this is over, I will petition the St Mungo's Board for much more thorough instruction in sex magic for all Healers!

She had only just finished that thought when his first real attack started.

'Excuse me,' Severus heard himself mutter stiffly. So concerned was he on getting out of her view, he knocked over his chair on the way to barricade himself in the bathroom. It was inexplicable, but it seemed of utmost importance not to appear weak in front of her. He didn't want her to see that he was in pain.

Blood pounding in his ears, he slumped to the floor as he struggled to clear his mind and regain control, but already distracted, the sudden onslaught of blinding pain crept through all his defences as wave after wave of agony racked his body.

It's all that bloody girl's fault. Asking me about bloody rape rituals then turning those cursed trusting eyes on me. Little wonder I'm confused!

Sure enough, a mere second or two later, the 'bloody girl' was hammering on the bathroom door, squalling for him to come out.

'Go away,' he called, thoroughly embarrassed that it came out sounding more like a moan.

'Stop being ridiculous, Severus. I need to see it. This is the most sensitive stage of the virus. The stage where things can go wrong.'

Arguing was good. It focused his mind in a way that dwelling on Hermione Granger's inexplicable propensity to be friendly never could.

'You can't give me anything anyway,' he retorted. 'Resistant to pain potions, remember?'

'I never got time to explain them to you, but there are a few Muggle remedies we can try, as well as that French research.'

'You will not get your hands, or any other part of your body anywhere near my person,' he snarled, the morning's humiliation still fresh.

'I wasn't suggesting that as our first course of action,' she replied. 'Now get out before I blast down the door to get in to you.'

Damn her, she sounded amused.

'You wouldn't.' He immediately felt like hexing himself.

Never dare a Gryffindor! Now she'll have to do it just to prove me wrong.

As it turned out, he was actually right when he assumed that she wouldn't break down the door. Always one for slightly more finesse than her peers, Hermione's next action was to noiselessly Vanish the whole thing, hinges and all, after which she waltzed right in and crouched down next to him.

'I'm not paying for that door to be replaced,' he muttered, closing his eyes so that he wouldn't have to watch her reach for his pants. He shouldn't have worried. She seemed to be trying, and failing, to get him on his feet.

'Where do you want me to go?'

'The bed,' she replied. 'You'll be more comfortable there.'

'More comfortable for what?' he asked, suspicious of her as yet unnamed alternative Muggle remedy.

'Oh, I'm just going to drain some of the blood down there,' she said airily, grip on his arm tightening even as she said it.

Jerking out of her ineffectually strong grip, Severus immediately put as much distance between them as he could without turning around to check where the door to the living room actually was.

'You have got to be joking.'

The determined look on her face said that, no, she wasn't.

'There must be another way.'

'I thought you said you didn't want my hands or body anywhere near your person?'

'I'll do it myself.'

She shook her head.

'You know that won't work. Just let me do this once. If it doesn't cause a marked improvement, you can do it your way next time.'

Edging towards him all the while she was talking, Hermione took a gentle grip on his arm and steered him back to the bed.

'Lie down and try to relax.'

Muttering profanities under his breath about bossy witches interfering where they weren't wanted, Severus grudgingly did as she asked, more than a little worried about what this procedure would entail.

As he tried his hardest to block out all errant thoughts and retreat to the blank space inside his head, he was totally unprepared for a very sharp prick on his, well, prick.

So violent was his reaction, Hermione almost dropped whatever it was she was doing as he sat up and grabbed her arm.

'What the bloody hell are you doing?' he hissed, eyes slowly and inexorably being drawn downwards to whatever it was that she had done.

He felt nauseous.

No.

He felt absolutely, wretchedly, disgustingly sick at the sight that greeted him.

A bloody huge needle was poking into it, and she had just started to draw blood out. Gritting his teeth and ignoring it for a moment, Severus turned his most intimidating glare on his errant ex-student.

'What is this?'

'I told you,' she defended stubbornly, 'I am attempting to drain some of the blood out. We could be finished by now if you hadn't stopped me.'

'Couldn't you have used some sort of freezing charm?' he queried scathingly. 'Not even a salve to make it a bit numb before sticking me in my privates with a bloody fucking needle the size of my arm? Did it never occur to you that I might need some sort of warning before you attempted such a thing? Use your brains, Miss Granger. You've been trying to convince me you have them for the last ten years at least.'

Intending to be spiteful and hurtful, Severus was rewarded for his troubles when Hermione frowned more deeply and replied, 'Please remove your hand from my arm. The sooner this is finished, the better.'

Severus had other ideas.

'Remove your hand from the needle, Granger.'

As they glared at each other, Severus ever so slowly started to draw her hand (and the accompanying needle) away and out.

Although she realised what he was doing, Hermione didn't fight him, but her glare intensified, and Severus saw real fury in her eyes.

'I am *trying* to help you.'

'Your help is not welcome,' Severus hissed through very tightly clenched teeth as the needle finally pulled free.

Somehow managing to look both hurt and furious, Hermione gave him one more look before flouncing out into the living room and slamming the door behind her.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Severus curled up on the bed to ride the pain out and be miserable.

He wished he'd thought to bring that book on the Amazonians with him.

Eight

Chapter 8 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: As usual, massive thank you to my beta, JunoMagic. Thank you also to all the people who take the time to review. I really appreciate it.

Idiot man! I knew what I was doing! He could have done himself a serious injury!

Ten minutes after she had slammed the door on Severus, Hermione was still fuming.

A freezing charm? Does he want to urinate into a bag for the rest of his life?

In hindsight, it might have been a better idea to tell him what she was doing at some point before she actually did it, but there really hadn't been time. At least that's what Hermione told herself. No mention of the fact that she might have foreseen the difficulties and tried to negate them by forcing him into acquiescence...

Apparently, it hadn't worked.

She stopped her internal rant when she spied his book on the table. The one that he had stopped reading to answer her questions. Feeling sick to her stomach when she realised exactly what she had just done, Hermione sat down heavily and pawed through the book with swimming eyes.

I did a medical procedure on a patient without prior consent. I assumed what would be best and just went ahead.

I deserve to be suspended.

Dismissed.

I'll speak to Healer Payne as soon as I'm allowed out...

Even as she castigated herself for allowing his ridiculous wish to be treated other than as a patient override six years of training and a lifetime of sound judgment, a small part of Hermione's mind pleaded with her to cease the self-loathing.

I only wanted to help...

It broke her heart to see that absolutely no one seemed to care about Severus Snape's well-being. Not even Severus cared.

He should take better care of himself.

This was a clear, unassailable truth in her mind. It was important to her that he not only be physically well, but hopefully also as whole as reasonably possible.

I will help him. I must.

Suitably sobered by her reflection, but with a firm resolve to be totally above reproach for what time he remained in her care, Hermione picked up the book and marched straight back into the bedroom.

If there was nothing she could do for him medically, she would be damned before she didn't try to at least comfort him a little in his distress.

Ten minutes after Hermione had left the bedroom, Severus was still curled up in pain, his traitorous mind wondering if he really should have just endured and at least seen if that method had any positive results.

He visualised the needle again.

Or not.

Desperate for a distraction, he concentrated on listening to the sounds Hermione was making in the next room. It wasn't particularly difficult. The walls of this place might as well have been paper.

Sniffles.

Sweet Merlin! He hadn't been *that* scathing.

Or had he?

Severus honestly didn't know. He couldn't even recall the last time that he had been confined in closer quarters with another person for any significant stretch of time. Bigger that, it had been an age since he had let anyone close enough to even have a chance at getting to know him. The only people he actually talked to on a semi-regular basis either ignored the snide comments, or snapped right back.

Here, with her, he was in deep, choppy water and had no idea which direction looked the most promising for finding land.

Still listening to her, Severus was more than relieved when the sounds quieted. They made him uncomfortable, hardly better than the pain.

When he heard her footsteps approach and saw the door swing open, Severus trained his eyes on her, still puzzled over the cause of the tears. She looked almost as determined as she had before, but there was something softer there now.

Penitence and humility.

She's sorry? For what?

As he looked deep into her eyes, Severus was entirely unnerved by the lack of information he could glean as to what was bothering her. Just a general sense that she was pleading with him for forgiveness, for absolution. It seemed not only out of character for her, but most disconcerting for him.

He didn't like this feeling.

Not at all.

She wasn't beholden to him.

No one was.

Still absorbed in his own pain and confusion, Severus didn't object when she intimated a desire to read to him. Whatever made her feel better. He much preferred her eyes smiling and kind to ashamed and sad. If he actually quite liked the way she read, smoothly, but with just enough inflection to make it interesting, he didn't say so.

He knew that he was being weak, but while he was in this state, he would take whatever comfort he could get.

As the pain slowly abated throughout the long day, both Severus and Hermione were too exhausted to even think about preparing any sort of meal when dinnertime arrived.

As Hermione fretted and muttered to herself about how to order takeaway while they were being quarantined, Severus fortunately remembered an alternative.

'Scampy!'

Hermione's eyes goggled when the cheerful house-elf materialised in her bedroom, but had the wit to keep silent as Severus quite politely asked him to get them some sandwiches and pumpkin juice.

As soon as the elf disappeared, presumably for the Hogwarts kitchens, Hermione let fly the questions Severus had fully expected from the beginning.

'Is Scampy your elf?'

'No. Why would my elf be wearing a Hogwarts tea towel?'

'On loan, then?'

'Clearly.'

'May I speak to him when he comes back?'

'If you wish.'

Overall, not even half as bad as what he had expected.

Not wanting to show his concern about her possible motives for wanting to speak with the elf, Severus immediately started on the sandwiches when they arrived, but kept a sharp ear on Hermione's dialogue with Scampy.

'So, how long have you been working at Hogwarts?'

'Scampy was born at Hogwarts during the time of Dumblydore, Mistress.'

'Call me Hermione.'

'Yes, Mistress Hermione.'

That obviously wasn't what she meant, but she didn't press the point.

'Do you enjoy your work? Is it very quiet at the moment with the students gone?'

'Oh, no, Mistress. Us elves is busy cleaning the castle with the little ones gone. Much better clean than when humans be there.' The elf considered something for a moment before adding, 'Scampy likes it at Hogwarts, Mistress Hermione, but I sometimes wishes that there were littler childs.'

Hermione seemed surprised.

'Do you mean babies?'

The elf nodded.

'Hogwarts children is already too old to need us elves care much. We cleans, but older elves tell Scampy that littler childs is even more better work. Watches them grow big and strong.'

To Severus' amusement, Hermione seemed quite appalled by this picture of domestic happiness. She hastily changed the subject.

'And will you be cleaning here while Mr Snape is staying with me?'

Scampy beamed. 'Of course, Mistress Hermione. Headmistress McGonagall tells Scampy to take good care of the Master Severus and Mistress Hermione.'

Nodding at the elf, Hermione just added tiredly, 'Just don't throw out anything of mine, please.'

Scampy bowed so low, his nose almost hit the floor.

'Scampy is pleased to serve the Master and Mistress' family.'

After the had elf disappeared to complete his tasks, Hermione rounded on Severus again.

'Why does he assume that we're married?'

With a full stomach and only a slightly uncomfortable throb in his nether regions, Severus was in a fairly talkative mood.

'Likely because that is the way Minerva presented the situation to him, and none of us have seen fit to contradict her. Do us all a favour and don't even bother trying.'

'Why not?' she demanded. He didn't like the expression on her face. She really was far kinder on the eyes when she wasn't being shrewish.

'Didn't you hear him rattle on about family, home and "little childs"? Severus asked, exasperated. 'You just try telling him that we are living under the same roof unmarried and watch our food supply dwindle until we yield and tie the knot out of sheer desperation. There is more behind wizarding conservatism than a few stuffy old men, you know.'

From the way she opened and closed her mouth a few times, she hadn't known.

As he watched the sun set, Severus began to feel like he should get out of the bed and prepare for another night on the table. However, when he mentioned it to Hermione, she changed the subject, engaging him in a rather heated discussion about whether tribal magics were compatible with, or totally contradictory to, European theory. It was just so much more comfortable on the bed, and Hermione hadn't even once suggested that he wasn't welcome to share.

After a natural conclusion to their conversation (like all things, people tend to prefer what they were brought up with), Severus ruined the comfortable silence by saying, 'I'm sorry about what I said this morning.' It was an attempt, albeit belated, to make sure that he wasn't the cause of the tears.

She looked confused.

'About your intelligence. You have always been quite a bright witch.'

The breathtaking smile he got in reward for that brought him peace.

When she decided to lie down, still facing him, Severus cautiously followed suit a few moments later.

She wouldn't have blocked my escape route if she really didn't want me to stay.

From this point, their conversation turned to more personal things.

'So, other than Healing, what have you been doing since the war?'

'Disgustingly little, actually. The work and study I do at St Mungo's takes up all my energy and time.'

'Understandable. I would have expected you to put your all into whatever field you chose. Why Healing?'

'Isn't it obvious?'

'Humour me.'

Hermione sighed. She had thought long and hard about this question. It was, after all, one of the big ones, almost certain to come up in interviews. But a practised, rehearsed answer wouldn't be appropriate. Not when he was actually talking *to* her. 'You didn't see the end, did you? No, of course you didn't,' she mused.

He didn't interrupt, but gave her the time and space she needed to give voice to her thoughts. Eventually, she rolled on her back and spoke to the ceiling. Severus wasn't offended. In the same situation, he wouldn't want her looking into his eyes and reading his emotions, either.

'You didn't see them all. Lying on the floor of the Great Hall. All the dead on one side with everyone who was still alive up near the Head table. The St Mungo's Healers weren't there until later, but, well, to me it looked like they did miracles when they arrived. Even after six years at Hogwarts, I couldn't believe how quickly some people were up and walking. It was just amazing that so many of the terrible spells used that day could be remedied by the hard work and patience of the Healers and by the innovations and research of those who came before them. I wanted to be part of that.'

Severus had no response to offer. Not moving a muscle, he let her words turn into a respectful silence as they both reflected on those she hadn't mentioned.

Those that the Healers hadn't been able to save.

After a moment, Severus was glad when Hermione took her turn to ask him a question. The war was behind them now, and he didn't particularly want to dig up all his old demons. Here, with her, just wasn't the time or place.

'By all accounts, your business is thriving. Until recently, every second vial I opened at St Mungo's was one of yours.'

After acknowledging her praise, Severus deftly turned the conversation back to Hermione's current work and future plans. As he mulled over her responses, he was struck by how much she had changed in the years since she had been his student. The enthusiasm for learning was still there, but tempered by better knowledge of herself and the needs of others. Their conversation was rather easy and free. It helped that Severus knew many of her contemporaries, both at St Mungo's and otherwise.

When Hermione's voice grew hoarse, he decided that it was only fair to share a little bit of himself too. Not much about his childhood, that was too depressing. Just small snippets of his life at Hogwarts as a student. The Marauder-free version.

After he finished one tale about a Hufflepuff boy who somehow managed to turn Minerva's favourite biscuit tin into a tartan fish, Severus realised that for the first time in years, he actually hadn't needed to do something to occupy his hands at any point during the day. And yet, awful pain and suffering aside, it had been a welcome change away from his own thoughts. She had even challenged him a little sometimes with her firm opinions and thoughtful questions.

At some point during the evening, they had both decided that it would be better to sit up; Hermione in particular often used hand movements to punctuate her thoughts. However, at the conclusion of Severus' story, they both lay back down and rolled onto their backs in a sort of mutual understanding. While Hermione closed her eyes to welcome sleep, Severus lay wide awake, mulling over the other problem he'd been toying with on and off all day.

After a few more moments of silence, not knowing whether she was awake or not, he finally spoke up.

'I never raped anyone,' he whispered, 'but I have seen it done.'

She was awake, but only just. Rolling over so that she was facing him again, she patted him clumsily on the arm before settling far closer to him than he thought appropriate.

'I know,' she murmured sleepily.

Though she couldn't possibly know, Severus understood that she was giving him her understanding. Unwilling to disturb her by attempting to get out of the bed, Severus finally forced himself to relax and closed his eyes, too. Worrying about their proximity was senseless; he knew that he could trust himself not to push the boundaries. If she was going to be under the sheet, he would be on top of it.

His last thought as he drifted off to sleep was that he was glad that he had told her.

It was important for her to know.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: With thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

It was still dark when Hermione awoke to the sound of a sort of whine. Struggling to clear her mind, it occurred to her that her pillow wasn't usually so warm. It also didn't *move*.

Severus.

Immediately alert, Hermione sat up quickly and looked down at him in concern, forgetting for a moment that she had probably used the man's stomach as a pillow for half the night.

Even in the dim, pre-dawn light, she could see that his face was tight and pinched. In fact, he didn't look too far from the state that had caused him to be brought to St Mungo's in the first place.

Oh, Merlin's balls!

There was only one solution.

Since she couldn't very well jump him without his consent, Hermione realised that there would have to be some preparatory discussion before any decision could be made.

'You know what we should do, don't you?' she asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

I cannot believe I am suggesting this...

Apparently Severus wasn't in as bad a state as she had thought. Sitting up and crossing his arms, his, 'I don't want to have sex with you,' was so emphatic, Hermione would have been offended in a different situation.

However, she wasn't going to be deterred from helping without a better answer than that. What red-blooded, circumstantially desperate man said 'no' to freely offered sex? It would have to at least be against his morals, if not some sort of magical vow he had made to someone in the past.

'It will help, you know,' she implored.

This is almost fun despite the seriousness of his situation, she realised. Seducing Severus Snape...it's almost worthy of the title of a new romance novel!

'Are you insane?' he queried. The eyebrow he was in the process of raising faltered as a wince passed over his face.

'No, I'm really offering, and you're making it hard to help,' she told him more gently, resting a hand on his knee. It had the opposite effect to the one she intended.

Jerking away from her, he almost yelped, 'Hard to help? You just propositioned me out of the blue, witch! How do you expect me to react?'

She tried yet another angle, the snooty know-it-all. 'I expected, no, *I expect* you to accept my offer graciously, in the spirit it was given. You might even be grateful.'

Silence.

Well, maybe gratitude is a stretch too far...

Another attempt. 'We're both adults, Severus. I knew what I was doing when I offered to be your Healer and carer.'

'You wanted to have sex with me?'

Hermione was running out of patience. 'Look, Severus, this is really very simple. I am willing if you are, and I really can't see an alternative. I'd rather not see you doubled over in pain for the rest of the day. And besides, it's bloody dangerous!'

'You are completely mad.'

Hermione snapped. 'What is it that you want? Would you prefer for both of us to get drunk and pretend it's a one night stand? I'd personally rather not waste that time, but tell me what I need to do to get you to agree, and it will be done!'

'Really?' He actually had the audacity to smirk at her little outburst before the smirk turned into a grimace as another tremor of pain racked his body. The pain seemed to decide for him. Laying back on the sheets, he intoned, 'Do your worst.'

Trying not to roll her eyes at his martyr-like expression, Hermione asked, 'So, you will sleep with me?' Given their past interaction, a watertight clarification seemed like a good idea.

Her caution proved well-founded. 'Will you stop bloody well saying "sleep" as if it's all so bloody innocent when we both know that you mean something else? If you are really going to do this, get on with it!'

Too relieved at his acquiescence to bother being affronted by his very unflattering way of communicating it, Hermione sighed with relief. Amazement at her own bravery made her recklessly confident.

'How do you want to do this?' she asked cheekily, not really expecting him to reply.

'Merlin, woman, you're the one who's supposed to have all the answers. You decide.'

That shouldn't have made her more excited.

It really shouldn't.

Deciding that she would examine her motivations for pushing him so hard later (after all, it was his business if he wanted to suffer in silence), Hermione turned her mind to exactly how she was going to do this.

I can't just grab him by the balls and go down on him!?

Or... I could, but that just seems so sudden?!

She bit her lip and frowned at her difficult patient in consternation.

Just what was she supposed to do?

With his eyes tightly closed as he focused inwards to keep the pain at bay, Severus couldn't see Hermione's confused expression. After a few moments, when she was still sitting on him, but no move of any kind had been made to get proceedings under way, Severus opened his eyes and glared at his 'Healer'.

'Well, what are you waiting for?'

She shifted off him a bit, to the side. 'I... I'm going to touch you now.'

Biting back the acidic, 'You do that,' on the tip of his tongue, Severus closed his eyes and bit the inside of his cheek to stifle a moan as her deft fingers unbuttoned his trousers and she gently took him in hand.

Gentle wasn't going to cut it, however, so Severus reached down himself, putting his own hand over hers to guide her.

There, a bit tighter, faster...

'Um, Severus?'

Will the daft bint never stop talking?

'What now?'

'Nothing really, it's just that you are, er, ready...'

And she isn't...

Groaning a little as he removed her hand, Severus propped himself up on his elbows and raised an eyebrow at her.

'Well?'

'Well, what?' Hermione was confused.

'What can I, or can't I do? What are the "rules" of this treatment, so to speak?'

He could see her blush even through the darkness.

'I don't really mind.'

He idly ran one hand up her side to her breast and felt her lean into his touch. Letting his instincts guide him, he pulled her closer so that he could see her face properly.

'Really?' His voice was soft, enticingly so.

'It's supposed to be real, an honest magical exchange,' she started, and he was pleased to note that she was slightly breathless.

'You coming willingly to me is enough for the exchange,' Severus countered. 'But what do you want, Hermione?'

Severus was totally unprepared for her to gently touch her lips to his.

So... soft...

He wasn't complaining.

Though he was still painfully hard, now that his body sensed a possible outlet, the agony suddenly seemed much more bearable.

Allowing Hermione to set the pace and deepen the kiss, Severus started a small exploration of his own, beginning with his hands on her hips, slowing moving upwards.

As she moved from his lips to his neck, Severus almost lost control. Shifting her so that he was top, he relished the sensation of her body pressed against his, feeling his desire spike the moment he did so.

... soon...

He knew that he had to give her some time, but only within limits. Thanking his lucky stars that it was still dark, he didn't bother to hide the lust in his eyes. The fact that he was about to have sex with Hermione Granger was completely bizarre, and it was just wrong that it was proving to be so bloody enjoyable. There was no need for her to see that.

Deciding that she was rather too clothed for the relief he needed, Severus was quick to assist Hermione in wriggling out of her knickers and shorts, also taking the opportunity to kick off his own trousers. Sliding one hand down to check how much longer he was going to have to wait, he was surprised to find her not only ready, but the way she squirmed when he touched her only made him keener to get on with it.

She seemed to feel the same way. She showed her appreciation by pulling Severus into what he would later remember as one of the best kisses of his life. It didn't matter that their teeth hit each other with a *click*, or that she had put her hands in his admittedly slightly unclean hair.

He felt as if she wanted him, and it was brilliant.

As she started to move her hips a little and make lovely gasping noises, Severus forced her to look at him one more time.

'Are you sure?' he growled, cursing himself even as he said it.

Don't let her get away, you fool!

Ever the pragmatist, Hermione didn't waste any more time talking but instead tackled him so that he ended up lying on the bed. Slowly, she lowered herself onto him, eyelids fluttering shut in ecstasy as she stilled for a moment before pushing up and repeating the process all over again.

Merlin, yes...

Severus was entirely incapable of coherent thought from the moment he felt himself slide inside her. His control frayed, he barely moved, just rocking slightly to let her take what she could until he lost it completely.

Running his hands underneath her top to cup her breasts, he vaguely wondered why he hadn't encouraged her to strip completely, but the thought was lost as she made the most wonderful sort of moan.

Wanting to give her more, but knowing that it wouldn't happen today, Severus let the pressure build before suddenly grabbing her hips to hold her still. Then, with a few faster jerks, he ended their impromptu liaison.

Over almost before it began...

Expecting her to roll off him in disappointment or even disgust once she realised what she'd just done and with whom, Severus went completely still as Hermione moved, almost expecting a ringing slap. To his bewilderment, however, she only shifted sideways a little, one leg still lying over his as she buried her face in his neck.

'Wake me again when it's really morning.'

Still swimming in a balmy sea of blissful thoughts, not least because his penis was now well and truly soft for the first time in recent memory, Severus didn't question her.

There were worse things than falling asleep with a lovely, mostly unclothed young woman half-draped over his body.

Mmm... warm...

Tucked into Severus' side, Hermione prayed that he wouldn't push her away. Contrary to the impression he might have of her now, after that totally unprofessional display of wanton desire, it had been ages since she'd last shared her bed with a man. Though Severus certainly wasn't the devoted man of her dreams who promised to love her forever, she wanted to hold onto this feeling of safe contentment for as long as humanly possible.

Now, lying here with him, she could pretend for a night that she wasn't alone.

Ten

Chapter 10 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: With thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

On waking to the harsh glare of mid-morning sunshine, Hermione took a brief moment to wonder if her dreams had suddenly become a lot more explicit, or if she really had had sex with Severus Snape in the wee hours of the morning.

No clothes on below waist, overall feeling of stickiness...

So, it had happened.

Now, in broad daylight, Hermione felt disgusted at the thoughts that she'd harboured before going to sleep next to him a few hours before.

Merlin! I'm no better than that Parkinson woman! Totally deluding myself like some sort of desperate old maid! My professional career is just about to start, I have friends that I'm sure would be here if I weren't being quarantined, and one day, maybe I will find a man who appreciates me. This is a medical treatment, not a steamy affair or fling. The best I can hope to get out of this is a useful penfriend!

Deciding that a shower was not only desirable, but also absolutely necessary to clear her mind and get her traitorous emotions back on track, Hermione unstuck herself from Severus and quickly made her way to the bathroom without a second glance.

She missed seeing the way a head turned and a single black eye opened to watch her very nice bottom as she made her way across the room.

Severus waited until Hermione was out of the bathroom and making breakfast before he so much as moved an inch. Taking stock of his physical condition, he was pleased to find that he was only at half-mast this morning. Almost no pain at all.

However, any joy he might have derived from his new pain-free state was completely incompatible with the self-disgust Severus felt when he considered his actions during the night. The morning sunshine had brought more than one thing into clearer focus, and Severus couldn't justify his weakness. No pain was so terrible that he had to prey on a young woman's vulnerability and desire to help. He felt like he had tricked her into sex.

It didn't matter that it had been her idea. Severus knew how the world would view what had happened the previous night. For once, he was even inclined to agree with general opinion. As the more experienced, responsible party, he should have nipped the idea of such a ridiculous 'treatment' in the bud. That would have been that. He certainly shouldn't have encouraged her to greater heights of passion and *enjoyed* it.

She's my Healer. Not my 'friend'. Gads, I even sound dubious about it in my mind...

Keen to rid himself of her scent, *dispose of the evidence* the more cynical part of his mind corrected, Severus dragged himself to the shower. As he scrubbed every inch of himself clean, he did his best to put it behind him.

It doesn't matter. It won't happen again.

Fifteen minutes later, Severus walked out into the kitchen to see yet another Hermione-cooking-disaster.

Apparently the girl who burns toast also explodes eggs...

Flicking his wand to clean up the mess, Severus took the frypan away from the very frustrated-looking young woman and enquired mildly, 'I take it you never joined the Magical Cookery Club during your time at Hogwarts?'

'Clearly.' Hermione smiled at Severus, moving away from the stove to watch as he magically cleaned the pan and prepared to start their breakfast afresh.

Severus' tone was guarded when he continued, 'I was surprised when you told me that you'd chosen to specialise in both Spell Damage and Potion Poisoning. Although your performance in my class was always acceptable, I rather thought you naturally favoured Charms.' He was truly curious, hoping that she would take the compliment for what it was.

She sighed in agreement as she put a couple of pieces of bread into a Muggle toaster. 'Yes, Charms came more easily to me from the beginning, but I always enjoyed the challenge that Potions presented, both then and now,' she admitted.

That was not easy for Severus to understand. He had always excelled at Potions and Defence, and concentrated heavily on them as a result. The other subjects had always been more or less just things to wade through. Transfiguration in particular had been a real struggle. While his pride had demanded that his marks be better than average, he hadn't hesitated to dismiss the details of the area from his mind the moment he left his N.E.W.T. examination room.

'Yet cooking and other household spells are mostly Charm work,' he added blandly, wondering if she would bite.

The look on her face as she brought the toast to him (barely browned this time) was pensive.

'My Charms haven't been good for a while now,' she confessed. 'I don't know why, but though I still mastered the complex Charms needed for healing quicker than the other trainees, they often aren't as powerful as I think they should be.' She didn't meet his eyes as she added, 'That may be why you woke up earlier than I expected.'

Dismissing her misplaced guilt, since he was less than eager to address his own recent failings, Severus honed in on the details which interested him. He had noticed that Hermione rarely used her wand around the house. Unlike for Muggles, who had an excuse, magical cleaning was hardly more than lifting a finger. Knowing that Hermione wasn't a particularly lazy person by nature, Severus had begun to harbour a growing suspicion about the lack of care around her home. If he was right, he would curse the incompetent dunderheads she associated with until they learnt to open their eyes and pay attention. St Mungo's standards had slipped if her superiors couldn't recognise a basic problem when they saw one.

'And easier Charms, ones you shouldn't have to think about, they don't really work at all?'

Hermione nodded, eyes wide as she realised that he was actually going somewhere with the questions. This was something she had meant to address for a long time. It was just that she could never find the time, and it was hardly debilitating. It only really happened around the kitchen and with other things that she could usually do using a Muggle method.

'Molly Weasley actually taught me to cook the summer we stayed with her before what would have been my seventh year, but I've never been able to get as good results since. When I started exploding things with simple charms to slice vegetables, I gave up on it altogether.'

'Excuse me for a moment.' Severus swept out of the living room, breakfast half-eaten, hoping that Minerva had the foresight to send his favourite pair of dragon hide boots. Or just the right one. That would work just as well.

It should still be there. I can't recall taking it out...

Returning a few moments later, Severus held out an unfamiliar wand to her and said, 'Try a basic charm with this.'

Ensuring that she took it directly from his hand, he watched with great satisfaction as Hermione took the wand and fumbled with it for a moment.

Did she just feel a jolt of magic?

Pointing the new wand at the eggs, she must have commanded them non-verbally to crack themselves neatly onto the frypan. While Hermione closed her eyes and grimaced as she waited for some sort of aftershock, Severus watched with great satisfaction as the three eggs split themselves and gently slid into the pan. She didn't even break the yolks.

'Better?' he enquired smugly.

'How did you know this would work?' Hermione demanded, her eyes narrowing as she struggled to make sense of the information before her.

'I guessed.' He let her gnash her teeth with frustration for a moment before continuing, 'I believe that sometime between Molly Weasley teaching you to cook and the present day, you must have outgrown your wand.'

She shook her head impatiently. 'That much is obvious now, Severus. I want to know where you got this from, and how you knew that ~~this~~ wand would be a better fit.'

This was the part he was more reluctant to talk about, but he supposed that if he wanted her to consider keeping it, he had to tell her a little bit.

'That was my wand during my time at Hogwarts. Birch, twelve inches with a unicorn hair core. Certain... life choices caused me to outgrow it almost immediately upon leaving school.' A quick glance in her direction showed nothing but open interest. No judgment or censure. He relaxed a little more and continued, 'As for why it works so well for you, I gave it to you with the intent that you keep it.'

When she made to protest, Severus cut her off.

'The wand chooses the witch. That one I only ever kept as a spare for emergencies,' he said, tone brooking no argument.

Stupid thing hasn't worked properly for almost thirty years now...

'Then take my wand,' she said, offering him her old wand.

Severus wasn't sure whether to be amused or irritated.

Gryffindors...

'That really isn't necessary,' he began, but was cut off by Hermione getting up to more or less brandish the wand in his face.

'If you wish me to take your wand with good grace, the least you could do is take mine in return, for whatever emergencies you might face.' The look in her eye was fierce and determined.

And a bit of a turn on.

'As you wish.'

Severus' sudden acceptance surprised even him. He could have argued that she should keep it to be her spare, that he could easily get another, Merlin, he could have merely told her to go to Ollivander's next time she was Diagon Alley, but something inside him was selfish. It wasn't really magical, or unbreakable by any means, but the act of consciously surrendering your wand to another was steeped in symbolism and intimacy. The birch wand had been a part of him for several years, and now it would be a part of her. Just as her wand would be part of him.

Get over it, old man. It's hardly taking advantage of her if she's forcing you to take the bloody stick!

The truth of the matter was that Severus Snape would never have considered giving his wand to just anyone. Originally fetching it just for testing, Severus had decided that giving her a wand was a good way to repay her for the pains she was taking to preserve his health and welfare.

Nothing more than quid pro quo...

He certainly hadn't expected to get her wand in return, but once offered, it was difficult to resist owning that very small part of her, too. He didn't particularly care that his acceptance came close to ruining his earlier resolution to be aloof. As mortifying as the thought might be, he actually *liked* the version of Hermione Granger he'd been getting to know the day before, and he knew how to value that which was precious.

It wasn't that he had no friends; he had managed to patch things up with Minerva, Filius and assorted others after the war, but Severus knew that he would never be as open with them as he might be with Hermione. There was simply something in the way that she generously kept giving to him that was irresistible, and he was clearly finding it difficult not to repay her in kind.

Not that he planned to tell her that.

'If you have no other pressing matter of business, I suggest you spend some time today putting that wand through its paces.'

'Just one more!'

'You said that thirty minutes ago!'

Hermione knew that Severus would yield with just a bit more cajoling on her part. After the first two times that she'd worn him down, he seemed more or less resigned to his fate, reserving only the right to whinge and complain as much as he saw fit.

Perhaps it is time for a break. Ten hours is a long time by anyone's standards...

After running every diagnostic and other revealing spell that she could think of on him, Hermione probably had a more comprehensive knowledge of Severus Snape's physical and magical condition than even he did.

I wonder if I can talk him into letting me re-break and mend that crooked left index finger?

It was of vital importance that she cast this last spell on him. Throughout the day, in between more involving or obvious spells, Hermione had been surreptitiously checking up on Severus' pain levels. The particular spell she was using worked on a sort of echo system. Since she hadn't yet been literally blown away by the backlash, Hermione considered it both safe and appropriate to continue with the testing.

Knowing his temper, Hermione was also determined to satiate her fascination with this man as well as she could while he was being so unusually cooperative. Now that she was well again, she quite enjoyed the challenge his contrariness presented. That said, the opportunity to interact with Severus Snape in a mood to humour her was something that Galleons couldn't buy.

The new wand, his wand, had also proven itself to be perfect. Although she relished no longer having to fight a one-woman war with her wand every time she wanted to perform complex magic, Hermione felt a strange mixture of elation and suspicion when she considered the wand in her hand.

She knew enough of the Wizarding world and wand lore to know that a wand was a very personal item, even if it no longer worked very well for its master. Despite the very frightening realisation that the only thing between success and explosion for several years had been her will power, Hermione had nevertheless only given her old wand to Severus because her sense of honour demanded it and because she trusted him absolutely not to defile it in any way.

Well, perhaps 'defile' was too strong a word. It was difficult to describe, but Hermione felt responsible for the actions of that wand out in the world, even if it was no longer 'hers'. That Severus might possibly think the same thing about his own wand humbled her.

She would endeavour to be worthy of compliment.

Casting her spell, Hermione felt like she had been punched in the gut as the echo sent her crashing down onto the floor.

Even as she struggled to take deep breaths to ease the pain, Hermione gave Severus her most withering glare.

'Why didn't you just tell me that it got bad so quickly?'

Unfortunately for Severus, Hermione had taken his advice on using her wand very much to heart. Not even wanting to take a proper break for lunch or dinner, she had ignored his protests, using her rediscovered Charms skills to prepare and cook very simple meals.

Now, as she lay sprawled on the floor, no doubt as a result of the Pain-Indicator Charm she had just placed on him, Severus found himself at the end of his tether. He was tired of being told what to do when. The pain wasn't even as bad as it had been the day before.

The sex did help, but I'll be fine on my own now!

Getting out of the uncomfortable wooden chair he had been confined in for much of the day, he loomed over her, glaring back for all he was worth. 'And what would telling you have achieved? More prodding and poking?'

In response, she quickly scrambled to her feet, arms akimbo as she prepared to defend herself.

But it was going so well!

'In case you'd forgotten, Mr Snape, I am your Healer and Ministry-appointed carer! All this *prodding and poking* was absolutely necessary, and, if you weren't arguing with me right now, we could be much closer to alleviating your pain.'

He sneered. 'We will do no such thing. As your patient, I reserve the right to refuse your treatment. ~~Healer.~~'

Only Severus Snape could make her hard-earned title sound like the grossest insult. 'Oh, stop being so absolutely childish, Severus. Now get into the bedroom and get out of your pants before I force you to.'

She dares to threaten me at the point of my old wand?

'I am not in the mood for jokes,' he stated flatly.

'What makes you think that I'm joking? We've done it once already,' she snapped.

'You seem very eager to "do it" with me again, Miss Granger. So selfless. Tell me, did you take bets at the hospital? I'd certainly never have picked you as the sort of woman to harbour a schoolgirl fantasy about shagging one of your professors.'

It was one step too far. He knew that as soon as the blistering accusation left his mouth that it had no foundation, but in his rage, he savoured the words, letting them fly with more than his customary vitriol. He was still angry and proud enough to know that he wouldn't take them back.

All colour drained from her face immediately, and she swayed a little on the spot as if reeling from a physical blow.

Hit the mark, did I?

Even through the increase of anger he felt upon his suspicion being confirmed, Severus was unwillingly impressed when Hermione gathered the courage and composure to say coldly, 'I've been made responsible for your health.' With a wave of her wand, a bottle of Firewhisky soared out from underneath the kitchen sink. 'I am going into the bedroom. Drink yourself stupid if you want to, but if you decide that you don't hate yourself enough to suffer a night in blinding pain, I will do my best to relieve you.'

With that, she stalked out of the room and slammed the bedroom door, head held high.

The moment the door slammed shut behind her, Hermione used the last of her strength to construct silencing wards before she collapsed into a puddle in the middle of her bed.

Allowing tears to flow unchecked down her cheeks as she replayed his cruel words over and over in her mind again, she still had the capacity through the pain to consider the *whys* of their present predicament.

Just why did she care so much?

He was out of order.

Oh, stop it, you were practically gagging for it.

It hasn't been that long!

Then why did you tell him to get into the bedroom and strip?

It's treatment.

But would you have treated any other patient the same way?

The answer in Hermione's mind was crystal clear and frighteningly wrong.

No.

Severus Snape was the only man she knew who could be surly, kind, maddening and brilliant, all at the same time. He had nice skin and a perfect penis. Suddenly, the *whys* no longer mattered.

I care for him. I care for Severus bloody Snape. The man, not the patient, but I'm still his Healer, and I know that he wouldn't give two withered Shrivellfigs for me. Oh, but remember? We've slept together, because the Ministry is completely irresponsible...

Even she could see the irony in all of this.

It would have been funnier if it didn't hurt so much.

Hermione hadn't been involved in a real, emotional blowup since she'd dated Ron in the immediate aftermath of the war. Totally incompatible, their spats had been frequent and just as loud, but Ron had never possessed anything even close to Severus' eloquence.

Whoever said words couldn't hurt was a charlatan who deserved to be hung by the balls and quartered.

Curling up tighter, Hermione tried, and failed, to keep her tears in check.

It really shouldn't surprise her that he'd thrown her attempts to help back in her face. Despite the attractive good things that drew her to him, Severus Snape was also a potty-mouthed, bad-mannered, sometimes greasy, annoying, spiteful bastard.

It really is as simple as that.

Such thoughts were poor comfort. With every fibre of her being, Hermione prayed that he would not walk through the door and take her up on her brazen offer.

Not tonight.

She had neither the courage, nor the heart to go through with it.

Eyeing the bottle, Severus wanted nothing better than to hurl it against the nearest wall. Unfortunately, he was still calm enough to care that the walls here would probably crumple rather feebly under any sort of assault.

Drinking didn't even cross his mind as a possibility.

Control... control is the key.

Biting the inside of his mouth in an attempt to distract himself from his other pain, Severus focused in on his feelings of rage and inadequacy.

She thinks that she knows everything, that she can fix everything...

The longer he dwelt on it, the more convinced Severus became that he had been weak in accepting her help in the first place. He should never have had sexual intercourse with Hermione Granger. It was even worse that he had let it occur on her terms. She was a woman, and women always used sex to lay claims on men. He should have known that it would never be the professional medical treatment that she claimed it would be.

It's sex, for Merlin's sake!

However, even as the rational part of his mind acknowledged his fault in this whole mess, the larger part of Severus' fury was still directed at Hermione.

I am not a 'problem', and even if I were, I wouldn't be her problem!

He felt used, and the worst part of the whole thing was that he couldn't understand why.

From what he knew, Hermione Granger was a darling of Wizarding society. One of the heroes of the war, she had friends, family and the job that she'd always wanted. She was just so bloody *promising*, with her whole life ahead of her. From knowing her as a child, Severus would never have picked Hermione to become the sort of sadistic, cruel woman who manipulated a man for her own ends. She had always seemed so sickeningly wholesome.

For some reason, that realisation only served to make him angrier.

Severus stewed, contemplating everything from revenge to pretending that it never happened before eventually settling on a very calculated withdrawal from this situation as a whole. She couldn't have any power over him if he consciously made himself unavailable to her. From this moment on, they would share no interaction outside that absolutely necessarily as flatmates. Once he was free of this place, Severus wouldn't look back.

The first resolution he made was that he needed to find a way to take care of his little ~~problem~~ by himself. Knowing that it wouldn't be nearly as effective as sex, or even as good as if her hand was doing the work, Severus nevertheless decided to take a shower and try to relieve himself. If he could get a decent night's sleep, he would be in far better shape to face the days ahead.

Since he couldn't Apparate inside the flat, Severus tiptoed through Hermione's bedroom, noticing with disgust that she was sleeping soundly, not even stirring at his entrance.

I don't suppose my words meant anything to her. What a waste of breath.

When he came out of the bathroom fifteen minutes later, erection thankfully gone for the moment, Severus couldn't resist taking a closer look at Hermione in what he told himself was a sensible attempt to steel himself against any remaining desires to become the persuadable fool he had been earlier in the day.

A closer view, illuminated by moonlight, told a far different tale from the one that he had so carefully constructed in his mind since she had stormed out of the room.

Curled into a tight ball as if shielding herself from all outside harm, Severus could feel a magical disturbance in the air surrounding the young woman when he got within a metre of the bed. While it was probably nothing serious, Severus couldn't help but be wary of anything that caused the hairs on the back of his neck to rise in alarm.

Merlin, she looks a mess...

Cheeks still blotchy even in sleep, it did not take particularly keen eyesight to deduce that Hermione had gone to bed in tears and had likely succumbed to slumber only out of sheer exhaustion. It did not even look like a deep or restful sleep, given that every few seconds or so she would shift. One leg brought closer, head burrowing even further into the pillow as if it could make the bad dreams go away.

Gingerly stepping right up to the edge of the bed, Severus' mind fought every inch of the way as his hand automatically reached out towards her, and he gently laid it on her shoulder. Immediately, the air ceased to be so suffocating as the magical disturbance he had sensed disappeared. Just as the self-preserving part of Severus' mind was urging him to get out and barricade himself in the living room, the reason for the cessation of the uncontrolled magic became clear.

Hermione's eyes were open, and she was staring straight at him.

Time stood still as they each carefully assessed the other, neither one moving a muscle as they fought this silent battle of the wills.

Finally, Hermione sighed and grimaced before slowly rolling over so that her back was to Severus. A clear message was conveyed in every line of her stiffly held body ~~go~~ away. Severus felt stung.

I reach out in comfort, and she doesn't even have the grace to accept it!

Oh.

It occurred to Severus that she may just possibly have thought that he wanted *relief*. Recalling the unnecessary harshness of his accusations, and their lack of justification, Severus blanched, then grew irritated again at her passivity.

So why doesn't she just tell me to bugger off?

She couldn't possibly still be willing. No one was that altruistic.

Why has she been trying so hard?

Only this infuriatingly Gryffindor girl could make him feel emasculated and like the worst kind of insensitive bastard at the same time. And yet, perversely, he didn't want her to think that he was an awful person. Not when she was one of the only people to ever look hard enough to see through the mask in the first place. With that thought, it depressed him to realise that all the anger made some kind of awful sense.

Damn her. This wouldn't be so bloody difficult if I didn't want her just a little.

But she...?

No.

He knew that he had no right to want her and no hope even if he had. She could do so much better. However, being tired and a little overwhelmed by the mental and physical demands of his illness, Severus didn't think, but instead just guiltily crawled into bed next to her without any thought for how his action might be construed.

As he curled up behind Hermione and pulled her close, she stiffened even further for a moment. However, since she made no move to shrug him off or hex him, Severus knew that he had finally got something right. When he made no move to grope her, but just simply held her loosely as he settled himself for sleep, she too relaxed, resting against him as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Forgiven.

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: With thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

Severus awoke early the next morning and decided that it might be nice if he cooked breakfast for once. As he got out some eggs, butter and bread in preparation, he wondered how the dynamic between himself and Hermione might have changed after the events of the previous night.

He hesitated to call it a 'relationship'. Of any sort. Sharing a bed and having sex once certainly did not constitute a concrete bond even in the eyes of the most romantic, and they could not with real honesty be called friends. They just weren't really at ease in one another's company.

When Hermione decided to show her freshly scrubbed face ten minutes later, Severus could immediately sense that something had indeed changed. She was less bubbly than previously. That was understandable; it was even desirable.

He didn't think that he had carelessly revealed any of his inappropriate longings to be closer to Hermione over the last few days, but he really should be more guarded. For both their sakes.

Feeling in a much better mood now that he had determined his own course for the foreseeable future, Severus resisted the urge to hum a tune as he cooked. Even with Hermione as his only witness, it wouldn't do to ruin his image completely.

On Hermione's part, she was strongly resolved not to trust herself with Severus again so easily. She had seriously misjudged her ability to deal with him. Having been burnt once, until such time as she developed a much thicker skin, she would not expose herself again.

He seemed to share her desire to bury the hatchet. As a result of this new reserve, their breakfast conversation was largely limited to the most common daily chores and topics. It was almost like starting anew.

'I asked for the butter, not the jam.'

'But you'll need the jam too, won't you?'

'No doubt.'

After they had finished eating, Severus decided that he felt well enough to get back to doing a little bit of work.

'Do you mind if I appropriate your table today for potion making?'

As much distance as she wished to put between them emotionally, Hermione couldn't resist asking, 'May I be of any assistance?' It would be pleasant to use her hands again. It had been weeks since she had brewed anything, and the chance to do so with Severus Snape was too rare to pass up.

She didn't really expect him to say 'yes', and she was quite sure that he would not when he didn't answer her immediately. However, just as she was about to mutter something about reading instead, he nodded.

'It may not be as glamorous as you expect,' he warned. 'Due to my illness, and the rush orders I've been doing for St Mungo's, I have built up what we might quite accurately call a mountain of less urgent orders. It might take both of us several days working together to get through even half of it.'

Hermione wasn't really sure what to make of this friendly, relaxed Severus, but nevertheless resolved to enjoy it while she could.

'I'll take my chances,' she replied. 'Can I have a cut of the profits?'

He smirked.

'Of course. We'll start with the potions for Hogwarts. I do them free of charge.'

After Severus asked Scampy to fetch his order forms and the necessary ingredients, they set to work, both working on large batches of rather ordinary potions for the Hogwarts Hospital Wing. It turned out that Poppy needed to restock before September, but the current Potions master was on holiday with his family until right before the term commenced.

The benefit of making easy potions was that Severus and Hermione had time to indulge in light banter while they worked. They spent the day in mutual satisfaction, getting through without any interruption in the form of Severus' pain, though Hermione was careful to keep an eye on him for any signs of distress. He insisted that it was manageable, and she decided to take him at his word.

However, their tenuous *alliance* shifted again during the night when Hermione awoke to the sound of Severus whimpering in pain. True to her resolution, she did not offer him anything, but after what must have been almost five minutes of listening to him, she hadn't been able to resist rolling over and taking his hand. Seeing the panic and vulnerability in his eyes, she was rather quick to respond to his touch when he reached for her.

She didn't regret it.

The next day saw Hermione and Severus return naturally to 'the lab'. Always quick to bounce back, and floating a little on the wings of a rather satisfying shag, Hermione had all but forgotten the previous hurt. She was pleased to discover that a human Severus Snape was one that she didn't mind pestering, even about his most basic life choices.

'Why do you wear black all the time? Are you in mourning?'

'It's a little known fact that I'm actually quite colour-blind. Wearing black saves me from opening my wardrobe and putting on something horrendous every morning.'

'But you're a Potions master!'

'Being deaf didn't stop Beethoven.'

'Ah, point taken.'

As the days wore on, they began to assume a sort of pattern. During the day, Severus would make potions, often assisted by Hermione. As they worked, they talked about everything from Hermione's envy of Severus' platinum-plated cauldrons to why exactly Severus refused to eat unmelted cheese. The evenings were a different story. As night fell, they would both grow more introverted, usually choosing to read in comfortable silence. Though they never went to bed at the same time, they were both invariably naked and curled up together by morning.

However, even an unspoken agreement not to mention the words 'treatment', 'patient', 'Healer' or even 'sex' could not stop Hermione from verbally enquiring after Severus' health several times a day. On the morning of the fourth or fifth day, she decided to be creative about it.

'You will NOT name it!'

'But it makes more sense than asking how you are fifty times a day when I really only want to know about one part of you.'

'Liken it to a code,' he muttered tightly. 'If you ask about me, I will know that you're talking about it.'

'You know, "it" isn't a bad name. It really is more like a thing than a person.'

In an attempt to distract her, and save himself and Little Severus from the dubious honour of being named by Hermione Granger, Severus quickly changed the subject.

'You said that you live in this tiny space because you couldn't afford better as a student, yet I was under the impression that you were given some sort of lump sum when the war ended for services to the community or some such.'

She beamed. 'Been keeping up with my press clippings over the years? I'm flattered.'

Severus only rolled his eyes in response. At some point during the last few days, he had decided that he actually enjoyed her conversation. Though he had often accused her of being unoriginal as a student, given time to simply talk to her now, he found that she did actually have that brain he had been so reluctant to credit her with. It just often worked in ways dissimilar from his own mind.

She keeps life interesting, at any rate.

'Well to answer your question, yes, I have an Order of Merlin. I believe you have one, too?'

That wasn't the point.

'So, where is that money? You have a tiny living space, almost no furniture, and, from what I can see, inexpensive taste. Surely you could have made it go further.'

She gave him a mysterious smile. The type that he had recently learnt meant bad things, like today's Hermione-proclaimed 'no-black Tuesday'. Severus was currently wearing her father's old t-shirt again, though she had allowed him continue wearing one of his own pairs of trousers. She didn't want to send him into withdrawal.

'I invested it. Every last Knut is tied up in various Muggle and Wizarding business ventures whilst I live off the dividends and the very small amount they pay me as a trainee.'

How very Hermione...

Impressed that her finances seemed to be much better organised than his own, Severus wondered what her plans were for life after this little period in limbo.

'So, given that your lease expires in a month or so, where are you going to live?'

'Somewhere with a library and space for a real sofa. I really need one of those.'

Severus looked incredulous. Not that he didn't agree with the sentiments she expressed, but that was hardly the answer he'd been expecting. It wasn't an address.

'You don't actually know.'

She glared at him, which amused him no end. 'Well, I've hardly been in a position to go house hunting, have I? Do you think I should have somehow fit it in before or after the Wizarding world was hit by an unprecedented epidemic, or perhaps in my quarantine lunch breaks?'

Well, that was unnecessarily sarcastic. I must be rubbing off on her...

She wasn't finished.

'Where do you live, anyway? I still can't understand why we were quarantined in my flat. It clearly wasn't made for two people. I'm surprised we haven't killed each other yet.'

Thinking on the 'comfort' of Spinner's End as a whole, Severus was actually quite grateful that they weren't at his house. He had always meant to do the place up properly, both in terms of enlarging it and making it generally more comfortable, but he found that he could live there without complaints so long as his bedroom, lab and library were in good condition.

'Surely you have better self-control than that, my dear. You simply cannot go around killing those that irritate you. To answer your question, my house is Unplottable.'

'But where is it?'

'It is also under a Fidelius Charm.'

'Well, at least tell me something about it, then. I can hardly come knocking at your door on the basis of a simple description.'

As Severus started to talk about his rather modest dwelling in Manchester, he was cut off mid-sentence due to the sudden arrival of something that he hadn't encountered since he had woken up in this flat close to a week ago.

A letter.

As the purple, Ministry-sealed envelope appeared on the table with a puff of rather acrid, black smoke, all thoughts of calm camaraderie were forgotten as both Severus and Hermione lunged for it like two dehydrated travellers fighting over the last water bottle. With longer arms and no qualms about playing dirty, Severus naturally got to it first, only belatedly realising that it probably hadn't been necessary to elbow her in the process.

As he opened it and read, absently putting his free arm around Hermione to rub the shoulder he had probably bruised, she peered over his shoulder as best she could.

Quarantine Area 3B

London, England

Mr Severus Snape,

We are writing to inform you that an authorised St Mungo's Healer will be allowed through the wards of your residence at 0800 on Wednesday morning, the fourth of July to test you for the P-virus.

Should the results be negative, you will be free to go about your normal business.

Regards,

Eugene Anderson

Department of Public Health and Sanitation

Ministry of Magic

United Kingdom

As Severus struggled to absorb the information that he might be able to get back to his own lab very soon, he noticed that Hermione was uncharacteristically silent. He gave her a little shake.

'I'll be out of your hair soon enough, it seems.'

He supposed that he was a little bit glad that she didn't seem to want to celebrate this news, as such. She neither smiled, nor frowned, but looked at him with a serious expression and said, 'But you aren't quite better yet, are you? You had a smallish attack this morning.'

'I did.'

Examining his own feelings, now that he was faced with the actual prospect of leaving, Severus couldn't say that he was as happy as he had expected to be. Yes, he hated having to call Scampy every time he needed more potions ingredients, and it would be wonderful to use his own shower again, but over the past few days, he felt like he had tentatively started building something with Hermione, and he wasn't even nearly ready to let it go.

The feelings which had led him to give her his wand had increased tenfold. He was almost ready to admit to himself that he was fond of her, that he actually quite liked her fussing over him, and that he even enjoyed taking care of her. Given her unaccountable propensity to experiment when it came to food, Severus privately thought that even with the new wand, it would be a long time before she managed to feed herself satisfactorily. 'Edible' was usually the highest compliment he could give her creations.

Speaking of the wand, with their time now drawing to a close, Severus felt that there was something he should tell her. Spinning her so that she was facing him, he placed his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes as he explained, 'There's something I didn't tell you about that wand.'

'Why are you telling me now, Severus?' Her puzzled expression made him wince. Maybe she didn't really need to know.

'You see, I never told you the reason I grew out of it. The catalyst, as such.' Now that he had started, he wouldn't stop. 'You know that I became a Death Eater shortly after leaving school. You don't need to know the details, but after I used that wand at my initiation *test* as it were, it would no longer respond kindly to my hand. Do you understand?' Fixing his gaze at a point just to the left of her face on the wall, he couldn't, wouldn't let her read the truth in his eyes.

'You killed someone.' It wasn't a question.

'I didn't mean to,' he whispered. 'A *Crucio* for a few minutes would have been enough to prove my worth, but when Rowle saw her, I knew that she'd be better off dead.'

His gaze flicked to hers. Hard, empty eyes.

Courage...

'Though I would understand if you wished to purchase a new one, I would ask you to consider using the wand I gave you,' he stated formally, unsure how much more he could tell her without sounding like a complete fool.

She didn't say anything, but there was no disgust or judgment in her eyes, only concern and even understanding.

Those eyes...

'You're a Healer,' he stated simply. 'I didn't buy a new wand until I started teaching at Hogwarts.' He hoped that she would understand the significance of that. 'Birch for renewal. Give it the rebirth that I cannot.'

Can you see?

'Of course I will.' Her smile was genuine now, warming him even as a part of him longed to confine himself in solitude and brood about darker days. She must have sensed this, because she stepped in closer to him and put her arms around his waist, resting her head on his chest.

'We really aren't so different, you know. I may not have used Unforgiveables, but why do you think my wand stopped working for me after the war?'

Severus had no answer to give as he struggled to fight the very rapid arousal that had absolutely nothing to do with sickness and everything to do with the beautiful body, mind and soul in his arms.

She understands.

It was really just as well that words weren't really necessary. Lowering his lips to hers, he was more than happy when she responded with equal fervour and enthusiasm.

In direct contrast to their previous liaison, Hermione found herself effortlessly being swept into both the moment and the man as he gently caressed her lips with his, pressing against him as he deepened the kiss, sending her heart soaring and her pulse racing.

He does care...

She could come to no other conclusion regarding Severus' current actions. Always lying just beneath their interactions the last few days had been this unspoken something more. Now that she had time to enjoy him, Hermione noticed that he tasted sweet, but with a bitter edge. Though obviously the tastes were not at all similar, she would liken the overall experience to dark chocolate.

As she ran her hands up his chest, then further upwards around his neck and into his hair, Hermione gasped as she felt his hands creep lower, one slipping underneath her shirt while the other began to explore her bottom.

When they finally came up for air, staring deep into each other's eyes as they both read their mutual desire and affection in shades of black and brown, Hermione melted just that little bit more when she saw the sort of lip quirk that passed for a smile on Severus' face.

'Shall we take this somewhere more comfortable?'

Glad that he was taking the initiative this time, and knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt that this was what she wanted, Hermione agreed, pulling him down into another kiss before allowing him to lead her into the bedroom.

This time, there was no rush at all. Once they were in the middle of the room, Severus stopped, drawing back to start working at her buttons. This time, it was Hermione wearing the loose shirt to work in, and he made sure to tease her as he progressed, but gently smacked her hands away when she reached for his belt and trousers.

'All in good time, kitten.'

Though she usually despised nicknames, Hermione had to grin at that one. With her body singing under the effect of his ministrations, she honestly didn't mind being his anything.

When he'd finished with the shirt, Severus didn't immediately push it off her shoulders, but allowed her to pull off his t-shirt and throw it into a corner of the room. His skin was far softer than she remembered when she traced the lines of his chest with her fingers, Hermione pressed a kiss to it as she felt his nimble fingers fiddle with her bra. After a short struggle, that came free, and he gently peeled first the shirt, then the bra off her, eyes hungry as they raked up and down her body.

He definitely approves...

As he picked her up and carefully deposited her on the bed, things rapidly became much more heated as Hermione gasped, eyes fluttering shut as his mouth and tongue found one of her hardening nipples. Unbuttoning her own shorts, she made her first demand of him.

'More.'

She felt him chuckle as he moved back up from her chest to give her a sweeter kiss on the lips.

'More of what?' he asked before moving downwards again, this time stopping at her neck.

'Everything!' she groaned, wishing that she could just Vanish their remaining clothing. However, no sooner had she wished it than it came true. Apparently Severus was getting a mite impatient too.

Not that Hermione was complaining. Feeling him rubbing against her leg, she took him into her hand, marvelling at how it could be hard and soft at the same time. Everywhere their skin touched, she felt shivers of excitement, of desire.

So... alive...

Spreading her legs wider in anticipation for what she was beginning to think she really *needed*, Hermione slowly guided Severus into her, tears almost coming to her eyes when he finally filled her completely.

Perfect...

Smiling up at him, Hermione thought that she might explode with happiness and fulfilment when he almost smiled back before he gathered her up in his arms and kissed her fiercely as his hips slowly worked in a strong, steady rhythm.

As she felt the waves of pleasure building, Hermione never once broke eye contact with the man who had been her everything for the past few days. Whatever happened to them once they were allowed back into the big wide world, she knew that she would always treasure this moment when it had just been the two of them.

Just as his own climax sent her falling over the edge as her body closed tight around him, Hermione could have sworn that she actually felt a sort of fusing and mingling of their magics. She saw it in her mind's eye as a brilliant explosion of light.

Allowing herself to be swept away by the wave, Hermione thanked every deity she knew as she clung to Severus, unwilling to let him go.

If, as the fairytales went, she only had until midnight, there was absolutely no way she was going to let him go for even a second before then.

Sensing that she didn't want to let him go, and not at all upset about that, Severus rolled to the side and settled Hermione more comfortably in his arms. Looking at her face, alight with joy, her contentment only added to his own satisfaction. Whatever it was that they had just done, it was right. Giving her a light kiss on the cheek, they lay there in peace until Severus broke the silence with a question that had been niggling in the back of his mind for some time.

'Why did you have sex with me the first time? No one could have forced you to,' he asked quietly.

'I wasn't forced,' she said slowly, frowning a little, 'but I suppose I just didn't think of the possible consequences. I would have done anything I possibly could to help you, and it really did seem like the best course of action.' She turned her face into the pillow so that he couldn't see it. 'I didn't want you to think I was a bad Healer, or that I wasn't brave enough to do what was necessary.'

Severus was taken aback by her frankness and vulnerability. Although he was familiar with the feeling of not measuring up in one way or another, he couldn't really understand how *she* could feel that way. Particularly, how she could feel that way in relation to him?

Stupid girl...

He wasn't worth it. However, though he might not completely understand her feelings, Severus knew how to honour and respect them. That too, he had learnt the hard way.

Gently cupping her cheek and turning her head so that they were looking into one another's eyes again, Severus moved slowly in until their lips were almost touching.

'Thank you.'

The kiss he gave her immediately afterwards was likewise fairly soft at first, but deepened as he tried to pour all his feelings into it.

His affection. His desire. His desperation.

Pulling her close with his other hand, Severus very forcefully blocked out the despair that threatened to creep into his headier feelings.

He knew that this would all come to an end tomorrow; if their lovemaking this night hadn't healed him, nothing would. Still, he'd be damned if he didn't make the most of this last night with her.

How I wish I could stay.

A/N: Thank you to all those who have read and reviewed. I really appreciate it. :)

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

A/N: With thanks to my beta, JunoMagic, and to all of you who have read and reviewed. I really appreciate it. We're at the second to last chapter, so almost there!

The last thing Healer Payne thought she would see when she Apparated into Hermione Granger's flat at eight o'clock on Wednesday morning was an empty flat.

At first, she assumed that they must not have received the memo. That was rendered exceedingly unlikely by the presence of said memo on the table. Being a sensible woman, not much given to jumping to unlikely conclusions, the Healer then realised with a fond smile that her charges (for that was how she considered them both) must still be sleeping. Unfamiliar with the flat as she was, Mary took her time wondering how best to go about waking its inhabitants. Although what she assumed was the bedroom door was open, waltzing in there with a cheery, 'Good morning!' was not an option. She had no idea what arrangement Hermione had set up for them both, and she wouldn't dream of invading their privacy in such a manner.

Eventually determining that a very loud noise would have to do, Healer Payne raised her wand and allowed it to emit a sound very much like a kettle's whistle. Perching herself gingerly on one of the stools underneath the workbench, she settled herself to wait for ten minutes before making any repeat attempt to rouse them.

When Hermione heard a noise that sounded an awful lot like the kettle she didn't own, she didn't immediately snap into full wakefulness, but just snuggled further into the warm body next to hers.

Go away, whatever you are...

In contrast, Severus knew that he wouldn't be able to settle again until he found out exactly what had caused the disturbance. Carefully disentangling Hermione from his person, stroking her hair when she stirred a little, he only bothered to grab his wand and pull on a pair of trousers before going to inspect what new surprise the kitchen had in store for him.

Senses still a bit sluggish from the little sleep he had managed to catch the previous night, he almost jumped out of his skin when he heard a woman say, 'Mr Snape, I presume?'

A friendly, motherly-sounding woman, but not a voice he could place.

Who?

As his brain caught up to speed, and he remembered that there was a Healer coming to conduct a test, Severus felt some very uncharitable feelings develop in his breast towards this woman who was going to send him away.

'Why are you here? I thought the last phase of illness took two weeks to run its course.'

Healer Payne only answered him with a small smile. Ignoring his rude question, she produced a vial of some clear potion. 'I'll need a drop of your blood in this, Mr Snape. From your finger will do.'

Grinding his teeth, Severus touched the tip of his wand to his finger with a very ugly expression on his face and dropped the blood into the vial roughly for all the world as if it had committed some heinous offence against him.

Watching the potion turn shimmery blue, Severus felt his stomach sink even before the Healer told him the result.

'Excellent news, Mr Snape. It seems that you are no longer infected by the P-virus. You may go home at your convenience.'

Before he could retort that it wasn't particularly convenient for him to go anywhere at the present time, Hermione emerged, clad in what looked like one of his shirts.

'Severus, what's happening?' she asked, still rubbing her face with her hands.

'Hello, Hermione!' Healer Payne cut in before Severus could answer. 'I've just given Mr Snape the all clear. As soon as he packs up his things, he is free to go home.'

'Mary!' Hermione visibly flinched in surprise, looking guiltily towards Severus. 'I forgot someone was coming.'

'Not to worry, my dear, no harm done. Best you come in this afternoon, though. There are all sorts of things we need to bring you up to speed with.'

'Yes, of course,' Hermione replied, staring at her kitchen sink as if it held all the answers. 'I look forward to it.'

The matronly Healer beamed. 'I'll be off, then. Enjoy your breakfast!'

With a small *pop!* she was gone.

Breakfast was an awkward affair. As Hermione offered to fry some bacon, Severus reluctantly muttered something about needing to pack up, leaving a sort of leaden feeling in Hermione's gut.

I can't believe it's over...

The moment they had both finished eating, Severus stood. Eyes shuttered, back ramrod straight, he stated clearly, 'I suppose I should be off, then.'

Hermione tried so hard to pretend that she was as unaffected by those words as he was.

What did you expect? That he'd just leave everything and decide to stay in your shoebox flat forever?

'I suppose so,' she answered numbly, half tempted to see what would happen if she broke down and begged him to stay.

She didn't know how or why, but over the last few days or so, Severus had become dearer to her than she would ever have believed possible. She had even thought that they had reached an understanding of sorts the previous night.

Evidently not.

What were these feelings anyway? Maybe it was just that he had seemed to take care of her and keep her company when no one else in the world seemed to care.

She grimaced bitterly.

Of course he took care of me. He is a decent person, and it isn't as if he was given a choice...

Wondering what he was waiting for, Hermione drew nearer and nearer to the edge of depression and a sort of despair. The gentlest breeze would send her headfirst into loneliness that she hadn't even realised was possible.

Severus, for his part, was crushed by her calm, apparently emotionless reply.

Clinging to the last of his pride, he now knew that he would never tell her how much the previous night had meant to him. It would be pointless to do so when she didn't feel the same way.

Ridiculous to expect anything else. It was only a few days, for Merlin's sake!

As he made his last resolution to leave, Severus realised that this truly would be goodbye.

He would never again seek out the company of Hermione Granger and would almost certainly take steps to ensure that he would not bump into her casually, either.

Yet for all that, he wished her well.

Walking over to her briskly, he didn't pause to look really at her. He knew that his own resolve and control was tenuous at best. He wouldn't make a fool of himself by begging to stay, nor did he trust himself not to whisk her away and never let her go. Instead, he bent to give her a gentle kiss on the forehead.

Goodbye, love.

Stepping away, he tried to hide the bitterness by flashing her the smallest of lip quirks. Turning on the spot, he Apparated away before she even had time to say goodbye.

Hermione wasn't sure what kept her upright as he approached her and was even more confused as to why she didn't just reach out for him and pull him down for one last kiss.

Barely registering the touch of his lips on her forehead, she struggled to say something, anything, but her usually quick mind couldn't think of anything appropriate. Not even a bad joke.

Suddenly left staring at the empty space where he'd fit in so comfortably over the last week or so, Hermione's resolve to be brave and graceful in rejection crumbled when she spied the cauldrons that he had left for Scampy to move later in the day.

Transfiguring one of the stools that they had been using back into the sort of uncomfortable wooden chair she had used before, Hermione fell back into it, boneless. It briefly crossed her mind that he hadn't even been gone a full minute before she put her head into her hands and started sobbing.

It didn't matter that they had never been in a real relationship. If this wasn't a break-up, she had no idea what was.

It was past lunchtime by the time Hermione finally forced herself back onto her feet with a new resolution.

She had work to do.

Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 13

Priapism, n. Pathology. continuous, usually nonsexual erection of the penis, esp. due to disease.

'... lack of ready-made contraceptives... irresponsible policy...'

Minister announces one-off bonus for all babies born within nine months of the Relationship Health Act!

The baby boom and you: tips and tricks in household economy...

Two women claiming to be carrying Malfoy heir left penniless! Draco cut off as Narcissa announces birth of second child in February.

A couple of weeks later...

Scanning the headlines for anything that wasn't about the thrice-cursed P-virus and the havoc it continued to wreak in wizarding society, Severus morosely picked at his toast and tea. He wondered when the hype would die down so that he could get on with his life properly.

Though he wasn't outwardly any surlier than he had been before his quarantine, Severus had noticed that he had become even more prone to fits of melancholy than formerly. Of course, he knew that he could live in relative contentment with nothing more than what he already had, but he couldn't entirely banish a niggling thought in the back of his mind that life could be so much better...

And it had been just within his grasp.

Severus had spent the first week after his separation from Hermione cursing his stupidity in not fighting for what he had now decided that he wanted. However, being a quick learner, he had quickly moved on from there to his current occupation: plotting how to recreate what he had so rashly broken. Owls somehow didn't reach her. He had stopped by her flat more than once only to find it empty and messy again. The welcomewitch at St Mungo's always said that 'Healer Granger' was busy, and since he was not particularly keen to comb every ward in search of her, Severus was forced abandon this strategy and think of another.

The problem was that nothing seemed quite good enough. He needed something that said 'I'm sorry' and 'You are mine' at the same time. On second thought, given that he had no idea how she really felt, maybe a little less of the 'Be mine', but just enough to ensure that she wouldn't be anyone else's. After discarding his more creative ideas, like going to Bulgaria to catch the latest strain of the P-virus in the hope that she might be available to look after him again, he found the direction that he needed one morning while skulking around Diagon Alley.

Deep in thought about whether he really needed more Ashwinder eggs, or whether he might be better off spending the money on a new whetstone for his favourite knife, Severus didn't see Melinda Parkinson approach him until she tapped him on the shoulder.

Whirling around, Severus cursed himself for such an unforgiveable lapse of attention in a public place. However, he relaxed a fraction when it became apparent that the woman no longer seemed to harbour any desire to throw herself into his arms. In fact, she had even stopped a decent distance away from him, standing tall as she looked down her nose at him. The relationship to Pansy had never been more obvious.

Before he could even tell her to get out of his airspace, she addressed him haughtily.

'Hello, Severus, it might interest you to know that I spoke to your wife today.'

My wife?! Ah. That rather elaborate lie Hermione fed the woman.

Putting a look of polite interest on his face, Severus stoically listened to Mrs Parkinson's approximation of Hermione's virtues.

'... she really is a wonderful woman. I went to get the results of my pregnancy test today. She was the one who suggested doing the blood sample rather than the wand scans. Apparently the wand scans aren't really safe on an embryo that might be younger than eight weeks. I'm glad she suggested an alternative. Wouldn't want little Parkinson here to get hurt,' she said, pausing to give her flat belly a rub.

'Congratulations,' Severus said tersely, fighting the urge to ask this woman if Hermione was well.

'When I tried to invite her to tea at the weekend, she mentioned that you'd both be out house hunting. I forgot to mention it at the time because of my excitement over the baby, but you must remember to tell her that some new cottages have just been constructed on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. If you two were to take one, I'm sure that I could persuade Mr Parkinson to buy another. Then our children could grow up together!'

House hunting. How could I forget?

As the strands of what would become a very cunning plan began to form in Severus' mind, he heard one last part of what Melinda was saying.

'... what do you think happened next? She was fine one minute, telling me that she would have a look if she had time, and then the next, she had fainted dead away!'

That was all Severus needed to hear. As soon as he had registered that Hermione was unwell, he Apparated straight to St Mungo's, leaving a very put out Melinda Parkinson standing in the middle of Diagon Alley talking to no one. When he arrived in the waiting room, he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, frightening the welcomewitch until she was a gibbering mess. He considered that a job well done. After all, he had made sure that she would still be coherent enough to tell him the room number.

Striding to Hermione's room as fast he could without breaking into a run, Severus was a bit breathless when he rounded the corner into the ward and immediately demanded to know more. The Healer in the room was the same motherly woman that he had met in Hermione's house.

'Well? What's wrong with her?'

'She overworked herself, fainted and hit her head awkwardly when she fell,' the Healer stated in a disapproving tone. 'What exactly does that mean to you, Mr Snape?'

Trying desperately to think of a plausible justification for his needing to be with Hermione at this time, Severus grasped the only lifeline he had. 'I think my wife's health concerns me very closely, *Mary*, so I would very much appreciate it if you would not take that tone with me,' he sneered.

Thank Merlin I remembered her name...

'Hermione has never mentioned a husband, and I've worked with her for several years.'

'Until-recently estranged husband,' Severus supplied, 'but I'm here now, so you'd do better to keep your questions to yourself.'

'Severus?'

Hermione was awake.

As she struggled to rise from her bed, Severus glared at Healer Payne, daring her to say anything, before he moved to Hermione's side and took her hand.

'Don't strain yourself, love.'

Lowering his voice, Severus asked Healer Payne slightly more politely, 'How much longer will she need to stay here?'

The Healer sniffed. 'Given that we have to check her for a few things and make sure that there has been no lasting damage to her skull, two days at least.'

Perfect.

After he gave Hermione a quick kiss on the cheek, Severus promised that he would be back for her in two days' time. That same day, Severus went straight to Hogwarts to beg Minerva's and Filius' help with the perfect gesture to win her back. He knew when to ask for help. There was no point even pretending that his Charms and Transfiguration work was up to task. He had to get this right the first time.

Freshly discharged, Hermione wouldn't hear of going home, but instead elected to work half a shift in the newly chaotic St Mungo's maternity ward. When her time had finished, she still didn't want to leave the hospital, but Healer Payne had been completely unyielding. Hermione had collapsed once due to exhaustion; it was time for her to take some time off.

Sometimes, she thought that Severus had come and visited her while she had been at St Mungo's as a patient, but her memories from that day were vague. Too many painkillers tended to play havoc on her system. It had probably just been some sort of dream.

Being busy had dulled the initial shock and pain of abruptly being cut off from Severus, but going home to an empty flat, especially one in which she had made so many wonderful memories only added to Hermione's keen desire to be anywhere else. At the same time, a sort of desire not to part with one of the last things she had to remember her time with Severus had made Hermione incredibly reluctant to decide on a new home. She hadn't really done much house hunting since going back to work and was beginning to think that she might well be obliged to take Molly and Arthur up on their kind offer of a place to stay until she found something.

However, when she Apparated home that evening, Hermione was shocked beyond belief to find it empty. All the books, furniture, even her paintings were gone. Fortunately, before she could so much as Floo Harry to get himself and his Aurors to her flat *now*, a Patronus that she didn't recognise soared into the room and spoke with Severus' voice.

'You weren't supposed to leave St Mungo's without me. You have two minutes to be sentimental before I'll be there to take you to our home.'

Though the message was hardly romantic, Hermione couldn't help but feel elated and start *to hope*. He was being bossy, high-handed, and she positively fumed at the thought that he hadn't even discussed the idea of living together with her before moving all her things. However, despite his fairly unconventional method of showing that he cared, Hermione knew that she was going to grasp his offer with both hands and never let it go.

Taking one last look around the apartment, butterflies in her stomach, Hermione whirled around in surprised glee when ~~pop~~ of Apparation sounded right by the door.

All her fears and doubts were pushed aside when she saw how uncertain he looked. There was none of his normal confidence about him; his clothes looked dirty and even a bit worn, not to mention the fact that he seemed to find his boots intensely interesting.

She decided that it didn't matter. He was here, and he had more or less said that he wanted to be with her. In a very dictatorial, yet roundabout way.

Taking the initiative she wished that she had taken a month ago, Hermione tried not to scare the poor man by flinging herself in his arms and crying. Deciding a less exciting route would be best, she simply walked up to him with a smile.

'Severus.'

That at least got him to look up at her. Seeing how tired he looked, Hermione immediately looked concerned and flung herself at him just like she told herself she wouldn't. Knowing that he would not appreciate the outburst, she kept a firm rein on the tears of happiness that pricked in the corner of her eyes, settling instead for a rather loud sniff.

She could feel the tension in his body drain away as she gripped him tightly. He was returning the embrace with equal fervour.

Eyes brighter than they had been in weeks, she teased, 'You look absolutely awful.'

Hermione felt more than heard him speak as he rested his chin on her hair and muttered, 'It took me a lot of time and effort to integrate your books into my library. I hope you'll be suitably grateful.'

'Maybe later. I'm still a bit shocked by how sudden this all is.'

He nodded.

Fair enough.

'But you aren't angry?' he enquired warily.

'Only a little.' Hermione qualified her statement by giving him a quick kiss. A kiss that turned into a much longer, more passionate one once Severus realised that she was not simply distracting him so that she could hex him unawares.

When they broke it, Hermione looked at Severus reproachfully.

Not what I was intending...

'Do I have my own room?' she asked, her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

'Do you want one?' he floundered, wondering whether he had completely misunderstood her, after all.

'No.' She smiled, leaning in so that her head was once more against his chest. 'I'd like to share everything with you.'

Excellent.

Just before Severus Apparated Hermione away, to show her every day for as long as she would let him how much he wanted that too, he hesitated for a moment. There had been something important that he had been meaning to ask...

'I was reading the *Prophet* this morning. You were on some sort of contraception when I was ill, weren't you?' he blurted out, wincing at his lack of subtlety.

'Of course I was!'

Severus sagged with relief. Not that a baby would have been the end of the world, but he really did want a chance to stabilise things with Hermione before messing it all up again.

'But I realised after my shift today that I forgot to factor in your idiocy with the impotence potions. If my theory is correct, there is a small chance that my efforts were pointless. I know Mary tested me just in case. Results come back in two days.'

Active ingredients similar to stamina potions, base very similar to fertility, combined result... hmm... but usually impotence potions would preclude any engagement in sexual intercourse...

It's untested.

Oh, bloody fuck...

Even as he cursed his own incompetence, a part of Severus' mind sat and purred contentedly, not really caring. After all, with Hermione in his arms, he felt much more sanguine about his ability to take whatever else life could throw at him.

He might even enjoy it.

Arriving two weeks before her due date, Rosalind Emily Snape holds the honour of being the youngest child to be eligible for the Ministry bonus, surprising her proud parents, Mr Severus and Mrs Hermione Snape, by entering the world a mere five minutes before midnight yesterday.

*Married secretly at the end of the war, Mr and Mrs Snape were both instrumental to ending the reign of You-Know-Who. Although the *Prophet* is unable to reproduce Mr Snape's exact words from when our reporter caught up with him yesterday, we can confirm that they did contain a warning to the effect that the family house-elf was under orders to incapacitate any would-be intruders into his family's privacy. Fellow 'Golden Trio' members, Messrs Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, were both seen entering St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries this morning, but they declined to comment.*

However, another close friend of the family, Mrs M. Parkinson told reporters, 'Of course, the Snapes expected a son, but I knew they would have a daughter. I have a two-month-old son, you see, and as soon as practicably possible, I will ask my husband to begin negotiations with Severus about a betrothal while they're still in their cradles.'

If Mrs Parkinson's hopes come to fruition, it sounds like young James Sirius Potter will have competition!

Best of luck to the happy parents and little Rosalind.

Have your say owl the Editor, p. 23.

THE END.

A/N: Thank you to all those who have read and reviewed here at TPP. I have enjoyed reading each and every one of your kind comments, and I hope you liked the ending. Of course, the final thanks must go to my beta, JunoMagic. Without her, this story would not be even nearly as good. Until next time Paisley.