

# The Unexpected Patient

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Just another normal day for Healer Granger ... or is it? Written for 2013 SSHG Promptfest.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Hermione slid the tight dragon skin gloves from her hands, first the left and then the right. Pushing up the dark metal shield of her welding helmet, she inhaled the wafts of smoke floating through the surrounding air. A bead of perspiration glided from her crown down to her chin as the cool air of the examination room reached her face.

"Well, Mr. Treadwell, it appears that Sonia here is quite healthy. However, it should be noted that her lack of cooperation did hamper my attempts at a full examination," Hermione announced, still eyeing the fire crab cautiously as it lay prone on the examination table.

Mr. Treadwell's eyes practically gleamed as he took in his prized pet, adoringly following the tiny wisps of white smoke rising from her jeweled shell. For her part, the tortoise-like animal slowly stuck her head out from her glittering encasement, giving Hermione her first complete view of the creature's leathery face. Sonia's expression seemed to indicate that she was more than a little irritated, as demonstrated to Hermione earlier when red hot flames had shot from the creature's hind quarters.

"Brilliant," Mr. Treadwell muttered, still unable to tear his eyes away as Sonia wiggled her legs experimentally, her jaw moving like a cow chewing its cud.

Noticing his obvious stare, Hermione cleared her throat. "I would like to remind you, Mr. Treadwell, that any efforts to... exploit Sonia may result in some... rather regrettable injuries." She had hoped her head to toe fireproof outfit might have signaled that, but figured a reminder wouldn't go amiss.

"Yes, yes, Healer," Mr. Treadwell grumbled dismissively, reaching one of his hands into a coat pocket. Producing a weathered piece of paper, he waved it in her direction, saying, "I have my license and everything. Took the care test and the oath, promised my first-born child, all of that. Everything is on the up-and-up."

Raising an eyebrow, Hermione nodded in acknowledgement, replying, "Okay, okay. Just had to check though, didn't I? More than a few people would love to get their hands on this lovely lady." The 'lovely lady' seemed unmoved save for an occasional slow-motion blink.

Dismissing the pair, Sonia safely secured in her fireproof carrier ("heavy as lead," her owner grunted), Hermione moved into the lobby of her magi-veterinarian practice. The morning had been luxuriously slow thus far, and Hermione had yet to be scratched, bitten, or slimed. So truly, what was to happen next really should have been no surprise.

Approaching the reception, Hermione found Bridget with one quill clenched between her teeth and another caught in her tall blond bouffant.

"Seven across is 'acromantula'," Hermione offered as she picked up the forgotten clipboard beside Bridget.

"Healer Granger!" the young blond exclaimed, crushing the quill between her teeth. Spitting out the pieces, she turned to glare sullenly at her employer. "It's not fair for you

to just come around and guess while I'm concentrating on the puzzle."

"Fwooper? Please say it isn't Mrs. Billings again," Hermione moaned, ignoring Bridget's small tantrum. "I swear I should just have the animal confiscated. She's starting to show up at least once a week now."

"Hmm," Bridget hummed with disinterest, her focus now on nine down. "Haven't a clue what her problem is. That Fwooper has perfect pitch."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione reached for the drawer beside her, fishing out a pair of noise-canceling ear muffs to fasten to her head before entering Exam Room 2. Still fiddling with the strap of the ear muff, her clipboard tucked under her left armpit, she bumped the door open with her hip.

"I've taught you the proper silencing charms quite a few times, Mrs. Billings," she admonished without looking up. "Perhaps you might consider..."

*CRACK.*

The sound of a wooden clipboard belly-flopping on the linoleum floor echoed through the examination room. Hermione was overly conscious of it lying useless at her feet, a mental diversion of sorts, as she stared into the eyes of an unexpected guest. Because unless Mrs. Billings had undergone extensive plastic surgery, Hermione found herself face to face with a dead man.

Even given the precarious and surprising nature of her profession, she found herself completely gob smacked by this turn of events. Perhaps that was why she couldn't even close her mouth as Severus Snape lounged before her in an examination room chair, somehow managing to appear as if *she* were wasting his time. That look made her feel as if she had shrunk in her healer's robes and was once again eleven years old and overwhelmed.

"Wh... wh.... Mrs. Billings?"

Oops, she had tried to speak too soon. It was as if she were recovering from a stroke; words felt strange in her mouth and full thoughts seem to hide somewhere just beyond reach. Yes, she was truly and properly gobsmacked.

"I took care of her." Snape didn't appear transparent in the slightest, confirming in her mind that a man she had thought dead and buried for five years now was indeed there in the flesh and clad in his trademark black. Snape raised an eyebrow.

*Oh, right. My turn to say something.*

Brain still spinning, Hermione decided to retrieve her clipboard (which was a surprisingly effective safety blanket) instead, nearly squatting in an effort to keep her eyes on what must be an incredible illusion or maybe even a delusion.

Standing, she worked her suddenly dry mouth in another attempt to form a coherent thought.

"Took care of?" *There we go, Hermione, managed a full question that time. Well, sort of.*

Pointedly ignoring her question, as he so often had in his past capacity as a professor, Severus replied, "Close the door, Ms. Granger."

Hermione's first impulse was to do the opposite. A dead man shows up in your examination room and asks you to enclose you both inside, alone. The sensible thing to do the only thing to do would be to run screaming. Possibly alert your useless receptionist before fleeing the premises. Possibly.

Luckily for Snape, even after years of the quiet life, Hermione was still essentially Hermione.

She chose to close the door.

Of course, her efforts were not exactly received graciously.

"I see I have startled you," Snape said silkily, carefully eyeing her up and down as she remained terribly close to the door. "Shall I give you some time to collect yourself? Perhaps a moment to dismiss your other inane questions?"

*Did he rise from the dead just to insult me in my own practice?*

Hermione suddenly stood a little straighter, indignation generally giving her that extra boost of confidence when even logic failed her. "I fail to see how asking about the health of a loyal patient is inane."

Snape snorted dismissively. "I Silenced the fwooper and sent the pair on their way," he replied nonchalantly.

"You what?" Hermione exclaimed. "So they saw you?"

"The woman was half mad anyway. I doubt she'll remember anything that occurred before her ears stopped ringing. A most annoying creature." Snape's nostrils flared in disgust, and Hermione wondered briefly whether he was referring to Mrs. Billings or her pet. Seated straight-backed in the flimsy plastic chair, Snape seemed reasonably relaxed, or in the face of her own discomfort, as comfortable as she had ever seen him.

"So does anyone know then... that you're... here?" She carefully worded the question to avoid the words 'alive,' 'hiding,' and 'zombie,' fearing any of the three might receive another sharp rebuke.

"I have maintained a low profile, yes, but there are a chosen few who are aware of my existence," he answered tiredly.

"Oh." It came out as a squeak, a confused sound emitted as she grappled with feeling both honored and nauseated at being let in on such a secret.

"Would you care to know why I'm here? It's quite urgent and I don't have all day."

It took Hermione's deepest reserves of patience not to reach for her wand. Well, that, and the reasonable assumption that any attempts to attack would probably be useless. He had, after all, been wandering around anonymously for some time now.

"Yes, of course," she finally managed, trying to infuse some pleasantness into her tone.

Snape reached into his dark wizard's robes and, for her part, Hermione reached for her wand. For use during the examination, of course. Thankfully, she didn't drop it, as she once again found herself in shock.

What Snape gently placed on the metal examination table could only be described as a ball of fluff, an overgrown pink cotton ball with a pointed pink mouth and sapphire blue eyes barely poking out. The ever intimidating Severus Snape, the professor of nightmares, the war's tragic hero, was the owner of a bubblegum pink pygmy puff.

If closing the door seemed like a trick, this seemed like the most elaborate of practical jokes. She looked up at her former professor, wondering again if he were truly real. Maybe this was just a strange stress dream. Would the Snape dressed as Neville's gran show up next?

Hermione was drawn from her thoughts at the soft sound of purring. The pygmy puff's bright blue eyes were clenched closed in pleasure as his apparent owner stroked his fluffy fur.

"This is your pygmy puff?" Hermione asked, realizing the answer was obvious despite her inability to reconcile it with what she thought she knew.

Snape simply glared at her, which implied to Hermione that yes, it was his pet, and no, he would not defend himself.

Approaching the patient, she asked, "Right, so what seems to be wrong with... Sorry, what is its name?"

Snape removed his hand from the creature and mumbled.

"Sorry, I didn't catch that," Hermione apologized, leaning closer as she reached the pair. "What was it?"

"His name is Pinky," Snape responded through gritted teeth.

"I see." She bit the inside of her cheeks to keep from giggling. Threading her fingers through the animal's thick fluff, she couldn't help saying aloud, "Pinky the Pink Pygmy Puff."

"It wasn't my choice," Snape grumbled.

"If you say so..." It was so difficult to keep the victory out of her voice. It was nice to finally have something to hold over her fearsome professor.

"The animal has been sluggish," Snape cut in impatiently.

Making sure to store that memory for another time, Hermione went back to her examination of the pygmy puff. Carefully sliding her hand underneath him, she felt around his underbelly and sides, checking for irregular bumps or broken bones.

"How old is he?" she asked, as she ran a gentle hand along his spine to check his vertebrae.

"Can you not tell from your examination?" Snape sounded skeptical of her abilities.

"What? Do you expect me to cut him open and count the rings?" Given the look she received in return, he most certainly did not.

"Okay, judging by the development of his legs, the color of his fur, his teeth... around 5 7 years old," she determined.

"That is correct," he confirmed, now hovering slightly as she moved her wand over the creature in a series of diagnostic spells. It was in the middle of this flurry of wand waving that a thought struck her.

"You've had Pinky since we were at Hogwarts." *The whole time he was in knee-deep in espionage, working for his two masters, he was coming home to a cuddly pink pygmy puff?*

Snape hesitated and then nodded. "Yes, I confiscated him from a student the year before I became headmaster. The blasted thing kept crawling around the lab during the lesson, reaching for fallen ingredients with its disgusting tongue."

"Oh yes, I've heard they'll eat anything," Hermione chimed in excitedly, recalling the text she had read about the animal. "I've actually heard that they enjoy using their long tongues to search the noses of sleeping wizards. May I ask, have you ever experienced..."

"I am not answering that!" Snape declared, cutting off her question.

"Fine, I wasn't *that* curious about the behavior," Hermione lied. "May I ask then, if you've had Pinky this entire time? Even with everything that happened during your term as headmaster and the Shrieking Shack? I assume there's also been some duck and cover in the years since."

"Yes," Snape replied simply. As he reached out to pet the fluff ball again, he continued, "I had intended to... let us say, experiment with the properties of the creature. It is, after all, genetically altered from the original species."

Hermione cringed at the thought. Though he hadn't spelled it out in so many words, clearly *he* might have had plans to cut Pinky open to count the rings, so to speak.

"However, he is compact and easy to travel with, and..." Snape hesitated. "He is an adequate companion."

Looking down at the pygmy puff, Hermione could see how Snape might have found comfort in the creature's soft expression. She imagined him returning to his quarters after a day of putting on a façade and pouring his soul out to this bright pink puff of a thing. The image was at once hilarious and heartbreaking.

"Well," she said, finally placing down her wand, "I can't seem to find anything specifically wrong with Pinky. There might be slight arthritis in some of his joints, perhaps a bit of a reduction in his vision, but honestly, for a pygmy puff, he's actually lived quite long. I suppose what I'm saying is..."

"He's old," Snape summed up. "Yes, I thought as much, but I figured I should get a second opinion."

Hermione watched as Snape scratched behind Pinky's barely visible ears, the image no longer amusing, but very nearly adorable. She thought of Mr. Treadwell's affection for his flammable friend and Mrs. Billings refusal to rein in her woooper's grating chorus.

"There's no telling how long he'll live. Maybe for quite a few years more," Hermione offered hopefully. "But I think the best course of action is to make him as comfortable as you can." Turning to one of her cabinets, she pulled out a vial of shimmering purple liquid. "I'm sure you're capable of brewing a simple muscle relaxer, but this will at least allow you to give him an immediate dose."

Appearing less surly than their initial encounter, Snape took the vial and placed it in the pocket of his robes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Hermione replied earnestly. Then she saw him aim his wand. "And now you're going to wipe my memory..." The statement came out as a long sigh as the realization hit her. She made no efforts to stop him, recognizing his need to maintain his privacy. She would have liked to keep that adorable image of him and his pygmy puff, though, if only to replace the one of him on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.

Snape pocketed his wand and gently picked up Pinky. "I can assume you'll be discreet about our encounter?" Snape asked, the pink pygmy puff resting on his right shoulder.

"Yes, of course," Hermione replied quickly, accepting his trust with a nod. "And please, feel free to stop by again. You know, to discuss Pinky's health. Or if you would like to just talk, in general." Not entirely sure of why she had added the last bit, she did know that seeing him with Pinky had changed her mind about the Severus Snape she thought she had known. Something about his care for the sweet little pygmy puff had somehow connected the two incredibly different images she had held of one complicated man. She couldn't help wondering what other sides there were to Severus Snape.

Acknowledging the invitation with a slight nod of his own, he began to spin in place, the whisper of his disappearance hardly audible.

Hermione remained staring at the spot where he had just stood.

creature cured, he has to come out of his post-war hiding and consult Dr Granger, who doesn't know whether to be more surprised that he's alive or that he actually dotes on a living being (as opposed to something pickled in a jar).

Thank you to the amazing designrl for her last minute edits and advice!