

Confidences

by dolefully desired

Already facing a stressful job and an overbearing fiancé, Healer Hermione Granger adds another responsibility to her list.

One

Chapter 1 of 8

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"But... Where are they going to send him?" she spluttered, resisting the overwhelming urge to bury her fingers in her unruly hair and yank at it in frustration. After twelve hours on her feet, recently promoted Healer Hermione Granger, soon to be Mrs. Hermione Weasley, was officially at the end of her frayed rope.

"Dunno," the clueless aide mumbled, haphazardly dropping a rotted cardboard box onto the slim bedside table. Contained within its damp, collapsing confines were the few remains of the patient's life, and they were, she noted, scarcely in better shape than the box itself.

Hermione stared, dumbstruck. She'd recognized approximately three hours ago that it was time to clock out and head home for the day, but the continued distress of patient after patient tugged at her heartstrings. She knew from experience that her small flat would become unbearably stifling if she gave up early, and she'd be able to concentrate on nothing but the pain of the people she had left behind. Wandering through the corridors of St. Mungo's almost daily, she often wondered if she would ever be capable of truly convincing herself that it was impossible for her to cure each and every one of them.

Snape, however, had always eluded her. Even when immobilized by heavy linens and the insurmountable force of his own illness, he still proved to be stubborn and immovable to a fault. A man who had been comatose for going on three years hardly inspired hope in even the most determined of professionals, and because she had never caught more than a glimpse of him during her rounds, Hermione was unfamiliar with his case beyond the most basic of information. She therefore found herself unsure how to respond to the aide's shocking pronouncement.

"You mean... But *where*?"

The young aide...just out of Hogwarts, a surly young man with a demeanor to rival the professor himself...narrowed his eyes in her direction. His lank brown hair flopped unpleasantly before his eyes. "I *really don't know*, ma'am. All I know is now that Healer Cuthbert's died, no one else is willing to take care of him. His due date expired two years ago."

The aide began systematically waving his wand, replacing the thin, bare hospital gown covering Snape's body with his own moth-eaten clothing, extricated from the vile box. Suddenly furious, watching him attend to her former instructor with such blatant lack of concern, Hermione snatched his wand from his hand. She disliked pulling rank before the Healers' aides, but his put-upon attitude irritated her.

"Then *go find out for me*," she hissed, rather disconcerted by her own reaction. Opening his mouth briefly as though he wanted to retort, he finally took note of her

advanced state of anger. Glowering, he opened his palm and accepted the wand, stalking off to seek the information that had undoubtedly died along with Snape's former Healer.

Sighing, rubbing gingerly at her temples, Hermione reverted the spells just performed, covering Snape's emaciated body once again in the standard hospital garb. Hesitantly she picked up the clothes in which he'd arrived at St. Mungo's nearly three years ago; the fabric was as battered and bloodied as his body had likely been.

Irate that no one had thought to wash his belongings, she marched down the hall and shoved them belligerently into the nearest disposal receptacle. Before the day's end they would be incinerated as they should have been upon his admittance three years prior. With renewed determination she returned to his small, dark room, finding herself once again at a loss for further action.

No one had the vaguest idea precisely what potion Voldemort and his cronies had force-fed the unfortunate Potions master before heaping his unconscious body at the periphery of the Forbidden Forest. Undoubtedly the strain of the years had finally caught up with him, and his Occlumency skills had finally lagged in the wake of the Death Eaters' invasion and Albus Dumbledore's death. He'd probably let slip before his master the crucial memories pertaining to his true allegiance; as Dumbledore's Pensive had irrefutably established, he was a servant of the Order to the very end.

It was ironic, she thought wryly, that after spending the entire summer following their sixth year searching for the traitor along with the mysterious Horcruxes, he had been hand-delivered to the Order by the very parties with whom they believed him to be conspiring...and if his near-demise was any indication, the Death Eaters had discovered to whom he'd ultimately been loyal.

What a way to go, she thought, sickened by the sight of such an intelligent man lying helplessly before her. Especially, she reflected heavily, because he hadn't actually *gone* yet. The blessed respite of death eluded him. Instead, an unidentifiable and utterly incurable potion had sapped him of his life force and, presumably, his magic, leaving him perpetually on the brink of death. His chest rose and fell with excruciating slowness, admitting only the barest amount of oxygen necessary to keep him alive. The long, greasy black hair had been shaved to allow the Healers better access to examine him, and it had been maintained at that startlingly short length over the years. It only seemed to accentuate the dangerously sunken cheekbones and deathly pallor of his skin.

The aide had not returned, and Hermione privately doubted that he would do so. The vast majority of St. Mungo's staff had never cared to resuscitate the professor, let alone cure him. They clung stubbornly to the belief that he deserved his impending death simply for the atrocity of having become involved with the Death Eaters in the first place. His redemptive actions throughout the interim years bought him no credit in their eyes.

With no living blood relatives to oversee his affairs and estate, Severus Snape had become the concern of the government, and the Ministry had no desire to dirty their hands further with even the mention of his name. He was a pathetic and distasteful reminder that murkiness and relative interpretation existed in the Ministry's well-honed, merciless policies. Had he miraculously woken, he would likely have been thrown in Azkaban for the sheer temerity of being who he was. After a year's time the Ministry renounced all responsibility for abandoned patients such as Snape, and it was only through the persistence and generosity of the late Healer who had attended to him that he had been permitted...at times outside the legal boundaries of administrative policy...to remain in the Wizarding hospital.

A steady clap-clapping in the hallway signaled the end of her ruminations. To Hermione's astonishment, the young aide's face suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Healer Granger?" He addressed her neutrally, respectfully. It seemed he'd regained his manners, at least.

"Yes?" she asked rather tersely, oddly embarrassed to have been caught reminiscing over her old Potions professor's comatose form. She immediately plunged her hand back into the box of his few belongings, cringing at the sight of what appeared to be the tiny forms of housefly larvae lined up neatly along the bottom. She shifted around objects, nervously seeking anything of interest.

"Administration says they're sending him to the Malfoy house."

Hermione's head shot up instinctively.

"Malfoy?" she repeated dubiously. "Narcissa Malfoy?" The loathsome wife lived on, even if her husband and only son had been brought down in the heat of battle. As far as Hermione was concerned, Narcissa Malfoy was a continued and pestilent bane to the Wizarding community's existence. Shielded by her wealth and the inconclusive nature of the evidence presented against her after Voldemort's death, she remained wholly unrepentant, refusing to enter into society now that the Mudbloods' presence had been vindicated and well established.

"Don't see who else it'd be. They just said the Malfoy house."

Hermione, eternally suspicious, began to wonder just what interest Narcissa Malfoy had in Severus Snape. To the best of her knowledge, Lucius Malfoy's widow had not even set foot in St. Mungo's to identify the tattered body of her own son. Snape had spent the past three years languishing in unconsciousness without so much as a peep from her, and now she was emerging from the woodwork to play benefactress? Doubtful.

"How did she convince them to give her custody?" Hermione wondered aloud.

The aide shrugged apathetically. "All I know is you have to petition for custody if you're not a blood relative. I guess it's a good thing she did, though. If she hadn't..."

Hermione nodded, her gaze straying to the small, innocuous blue bottle on the bedside table. A solution of Invigorating Draft and Blood-Replenishing Potion was all that could possibly keep Snape alive, and without St. Mungo's to provide such highly concentrated and controlled dosages, he would have been dead within the day.

She felt a slight panic beginning to settle into her chest. If Narcissa Malfoy was the sole party to have petitioned for custody of Snape, he would have no chance. She would tire of him sooner or later; she probably considered it a halfhearted attempt to do right by her late husband's friend and comrade. Hermione was rather surprised that she didn't consider him a traitor to Malfoy's cause, however.

Hermione glanced at the potion again, gnawing at her lower lip in consternation. Perhaps she did. Perhaps Narcissa Malfoy intended to subject Severus Snape to a far more miserable demise than he would otherwise experience. Denying his body its daily medicine was akin to pulling the plug of a Muggle life-support system, which would certainly have been his fate had no one applied to care for him.

The aide watched, baffled, as she began to pace back and forth before the hospital bed, debating internally. She had no idea why Narcissa Malfoy's possible motives weighed so heavily upon her conscience, but she couldn't abide the thought of turning Snape over into that horrible woman's talons. He'd never been pleasant to her, but in retrospect, there was no denying that he'd served Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix unwaveringly and wholeheartedly. If there remained any probability whatsoever that he could recover, however grim his prognosis, he deserved better treatment.

Having reached her decision, Hermione forcefully quashed her lingering worries and turned to the aide. "Find him better clothes," she barked, checking that her hair was firmly contained within its clip. "Find a better box and pack his things, and put in two months' worth of the potion in individual medium vials. I'll be back shortly."

Though Severus Snape would likely never know it, he passed an additional night in his tiny, dusty room on the third floor while Hermione lay motionlessly in her bed, staring intently at the ceiling. Six hours prior she had signed and turned in the official documents petitioning the Ministry of Magic for custody of Snape's comatose body. She had, of course, neglected to mention Narcissa Malfoy's petition as the impetus; she'd simply stated that she, as a certified Healer, was fully qualified to attend to him for the duration of his survival and could offer a level of expertise equal to that of the hospital's care.

Probably better attention, when it came down to it. Healer Cuthbert, bless him, had been on the decline himself for some time before his abrupt death the week prior. His intentions had been warm-hearted...he'd refused to let any patient be abandoned by the hospital, regardless their background...but she, being younger and more capable,

could offer Snape more comfort.

She sighed restlessly, kicking off the covers and cursing the infernal July heat. She'd never been able to sleep well on balmy nights...something about the warmth crawling across her skin kept her perpetually on edge...and she couldn't seem to put a stop to her brain's persistent worrying. If she arrived at work the following morning to find that the Ministry had sided with Narcissa Malfoy, there was nothing else to be done.

Peeling off the oversized T-shirt in which she'd been clad, Hermione murmured a quick spell to open the window above her bed to its fullest. The lightest suggestion of a breeze began to stroke across her body, eliciting a moan of relief. She stretched, resolutely ignoring the sweat beading in her thick, unmanageable mane of hair, and resumed staring balefully at the ceiling.

Ron would be furious, of course; he'd never consent to Snape's presence in her...soon to be their...home, even if he was physically incapable of tyrannizing anyone. Ron had been increasingly quick to anger over the past few months. She'd been having an unusually frequent number of volatile moments herself, of course, but that was to be expected with the strain of planning a wedding. She was just now a full year out of her Healer training and finally able to focus on her career, and Ron was putting constant and almost brutal pressure on her to choose a date.

It was only during the solace of long, sleepless nights that Hermione allowed herself the opportunity to indulge in doubting herself and her decisions. She loved Ron...she acknowledged that, and she had for years...so she couldn't understand the more and more frequent bouts of hesitation and fear insinuating themselves into her thoughts. Engagements were hellish...the inescapable effects of a sinister poison that she couldn't seem to cure.

It had become drastically worse since Harry and Ginny had married two months ago. Ron was positively overbearing at times, demanding to know why she was so ambivalent in setting the date for their own ceremony. For her part, Hermione stuck by her defense time and again...she was under an abnormally high amount of pressure at work due to her recent promotion to the Potion and Plant Poisoning floor, and while she *did* still want to marry Ron, the timing simply wasn't right to bring the occasion to fruition.

The trouble was that she'd long been doubting the validity of her desires.

Pummeling her pillow in a fit of ill nature, she muttered to herself, "No more dwelling on Ron." She genuinely believed she wanted to marry him, she kept repeating to herself, but the part of her that hesitated did so quite vehemently. Trying to envision the two of them walking down the aisle always precipitated a pounding headache. What could she possibly do to control her hair? Would her parents approve of a Wizarding ceremony? Should she even wear a white dress, given that she and Ron had already consummated their relationship many times...and if so, would it clash terribly with her teeth, which had been suffering lately from the dramatic increase in the amount of coffee she consumed?

Stray thoughts about her teeth brought to mind another man's face. Stifling a chuckle, Hermione squirmed against the sticky sheets, recalling vividly the malicious sneer on Snape's face when he'd cast his worst aspersion on her.

Hindsight being augmented by the maturity of adulthood, she realized now that he probably hadn't meant it in a derogatory way. As an adolescent she'd been unable to see past the pettiness of his words, but now, looking back on her reaction, his words bordered on amusing. If he'd truly desired to hurt her, he would have done so by insulting her school performance...in that particular instance, by belittling her own inability to fix her predicament with magic. Instead he'd made an offhand remark about her appearance, and she was positive he'd never taken more than a cursory notice of what she looked like. What did he care about her teeth?

He certainly had no right to care, given the state of his own, she thought rather gleefully.

That gave her a sudden and clever idea. If she did gain custody of him...and she was definitely loath to imagine what might transpire if she did not...she would be responsible for his care and hygiene as well as his personal affairs, and it would be prudent to begin amassing a list of chores that needed to be completed. She would have to determine whether or not Healer Cuthbert had been caring properly for his teeth and skin and subjecting his muscles to regular stimulation to prevent atrophy.

She would also have to find something more suitable for him to wear, she mused, casting a hasty *Lumos* and stumbling into her study. The small second bedroom had become home to her book collection and desk when she'd moved in. Rifling through the drawers, past scrawled notes and articles dating back months, she snatched up a Muggle notepad. Smiling, satisfied, she located a ballpoint pen.

Five minutes later, heartened by a glass of ice water, she sprawled out uncomfortably on her living room floor to write, unwilling to sit on her sofa for fear that she'd end up permanently adhered to it.

Two

Chapter 2 of 8

Already facing a stressful job and an overbearing fiancé, Healer Hermione Granger adds another responsibility to her list.

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The clattering of her house keys landing on her desk made Hermione cringe in pain. Whereas at midnight compiling a list of her responsibilities to Snape had seemed a bright idea, she'd spent four hours lying in a cramped stupor on her living room floor. Denied adequate sleep, her spine shrieking its complaints with every step, she was anticipating a rather miserable day.

Thankfully, the Healer who usually worked the night shift before her, Helen, had been kind enough to leave her a large mug of coffee, spelled to remain at the perfect temperature. Closing her eyes and sighing deeply, Hermione sipped at the miracle cure and removed her coat, stumbling slightly. Extreme fatigue had left her feeling drugged and somewhat disconnected from her body.

Her decision to petition for custody of Severus Snape's body suddenly seemed like a poor choice indeed. She'd managed to complete a very impressive list of issues and chores to be finished for his benefit, but going up against Narcissa Malfoy was simply begging for trouble. She had no reason to fear physical retaliation...the Death Eaters had been rounded up and thrown in Azkaban with no hope for pardons, and the woman herself never put a well-clad toe outside the boundaries of her property...but Hermione wouldn't have put it past her to seek her revenge via alternative routes.

She was flipping through the many charts awaiting her attention when a soft knock sounded from the hallway, and a large, shaggy head popped around the corner of her

office door.

"Yes?" She looked up to find Neville Longbottom's shy, round face smiling at her.

"Neville!" She rose hastily to her feet and swore softly when the coffee mug swayed precipitously on the desk. "Hello! I haven't seen you in awhile! Come in." She motioned for him to take a seat in the chair before her desk, but he shook his head regretfully.

"Sorry, I can't. Gotta get back to the greenhouses." She nodded understandingly. Neville was one of St. Mungo's top Herbologists...an amazing accomplishment for someone so young; his aptitude for his subject paralleled her own for the art of Healing...and was responsible for a large number of the ingredients used to create the thousands of potions used by the Healers every month. Though he was a frequent visitor to the third floor, Hermione rarely had occasion to speak with him.

"Okay," she said in a disappointed tone. "But don't forget...you promised to have lunch with me one of these days."

He grinned. "Well, since it's Friday, you're out of luck for this week, I'm afraid. But maybe next week...?"

"Don't get my hopes up," she teased, gulping down another refreshing mouthful of coffee. "Was there something you needed?"

"I was just down talking to Susan, and she asked me to tell you to stop by. Apparently some papers you turned in yesterday afternoon have been processed."

Hermione's grip on the coffee mug tightened dangerously. A small portion of her was still truly too terrified at the prospect of spending an indeterminate amount of time caring for Snape to wish for good news.

"Did she say anything else?"

"No, just that she wants you to stop by...and you'd better do it sometime this morning, because she's threatening to quit before lunch and never come back."

Relaxing somewhat, Hermione thanked Neville and bade him a cheerful goodbye. She could always count on Susan to drag her out of any funk or self-pity, and thus a visit seemed an especially good idea at the moment. She pulled on her Healer's robes, reduced and pocketed the first charts that required attending, and quickly made her way to the administrative offices.

Susan Bones, despite her reputation for shyness at Hogwarts, had gained a certain notoriety since landing the highly coveted position of First Assistant to the Director of Administration at the hospital. While others found her professional demeanor off-putting at times, Hermione simply adored her. She was fantastically well suited to her job and had succeeded in bringing a simpler, more polished approach to overseeing the goings-on of the hospital.

Miraculously Susan prevailed over the immense stress and the expectations placed upon her, retaining the valued Hufflepuff quality of being an excellent listener and an ideal confidante. Hermione had spoken to her more frequently during the past few months. The two conferred about the less pleasant aspects of their jobs and relationships, and Susan, to Hermione's constant relief, was one of the few who did not flinch when she confessed to her mounting uncertainty regarding her engagement to Ron.

Hermione paused outside the office door, knocking lightly. Susan's head was bent intently over a towering pile of forms, and she was scribbling furiously. As her friendship with Ginny...her only truly close female friend throughout her school years...had, sadly, become rather distant and detached over the past few years, Hermione was grateful to have a kindred soul...and another woman, nonetheless...located just a few floors away.

Susan's head shot up, her face pinched with irritation that immediately diminished when she took note of her visitor's identity. "Hermione! Come in, come in. Sit down." She began shuffling papers madly, and Hermione watched with dizzy fascination. How the prodigious First Assistant managed to maintain her sanity while organizing so many projects simultaneously never ceased to amaze her. Even during her school years, multitasking and making spur-of-the-moment decisions had never been Hermione's forte. Susan seemed to revel in it on a daily basis.

"What's all that?" Hermione happily accepted Susan's offer of tea and a biscuit, chewing thoughtfully. "Did they ever buy you that self-indexing file cabinet you were asking for?"

Susan snorted. "No, of course not. We can't manage such a frivolous expense, you know? They can afford to buy a whole shipment of rare and exotic plants for the Thickey Ward, but they can't buy me a simple file cabinet." She blushed suddenly, hanging her head. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I shouldn't have said that. That was rude. Neville would probably hex me."

"Probably," Hermione agreed mildly, "but we both know you'd win."

"Only because you'd cover my back." Susan shook her head in amusement and looked up, tired eyes meeting Hermione's gaze. "How are you, Hermione? Wedding still bothering you?"

Hermione groaned. "Let's not talk about it." All morning she'd been beset by images of Ron's enraged face when he confronted her about petitioning to care for Snape without first consulting him. "How are you?"

"Bloody tired. I worked on a report for *seven hours* after work yesterday, and His Highness didn't so much as thank me." Susan shot her a conspiratorial smile, and Hermione returned it with a commiserative grimace.

"He still can't get off his high horse and acknowledge that you exist?" She'd grown to dislike the Director somewhat by extension, having seen how poorly he treated his young protégé, who continued to impress and outshine when faced with every obstacle set before her.

"No, but I'll get over it. I'm sure he's under a great deal of stress himself."

Hermione resisted the urge to bark an amazed laugh. She could never have been so tolerant and understanding when put in Susan's position; it was one of the other girl's most admired qualities.

"So what did you want to see me about?" She sought desperately to remain composed, but below the level of the desk, blessedly outside of Susan's view, her foot was bouncing impatiently. Internally she was still divided as to whether or not she wanted her petition to take precedence over Narcissa Malfoy's. "Neville stopped by my office. He said to talk to you before you quit."

"I wish." Susan blew a stray hair out of her face and muttered a quick spell to refasten the long plait of hair at her back. "Well, I got a memo this morning saying that you petitioned to take care of Snape now that they're getting rid of him?"

"Abandoning is more like," Hermione returned rather too icily for her own liking. She flinched. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to snap at you."

"No, I agree with you completely. It's horrible that they'd even consider letting him... Well, you know." Susan's voice regained its businesslike evenness as she whisked a file out from the teetering mountain before her. "Anyway, apparently there was another petition put in a few days ago."

"Oh?" Hermione asked, striving for nonchalance. Susan rolled her eyes and giggled.

"Don't play coy with me. I was the one who had to answer to that kid you sent down yesterday."

Hermione stubbornly said nothing.

"Hey, I don't blame you," Susan assured her, searching around until she had unearthed a suitable quill and a pot of black ink. "I wouldn't want to see him turned over to Narcissa Malfoy either. That woman gives vampires and trolls a good name." She handed the quill over to a confused Hermione. "Which is why I'm happy to tell you that they've agreed you're the best candidate."

"Really?" Hermione replied breathlessly, allowing a sigh of relief to escape her. "Thank God. I couldn't stand to think of what she..."

Susan nodded understandingly. "It's a sure sign that times have changed when a Hufflepuff and a Gryffindor are desperate to protect Snape," she remarked with a chuckle, and Hermione laughed as well. "Here. Just sign on the bottom here...and here"...she flipped briskly through the papers, indicating the relevant locations..."and you're all set to take him back with you at the end of the workday."

"Five o'clock?" Hermione confirmed, already excited to get him moved out of his hot, stifling surroundings and into more comfortable quarters. "Right at five?"

"If they'll let you escape," Susan replied with a teasing smile. "In all seriousness, though, are you sure you want to do this? You're agreeing to be responsible for his welfare for an entire year. After that you can return him to the hospital until someone else petitions for him or... Well, you know." Hermione *knew* all too well, and the thought bit painfully at her heart. "But as it is, you're committing to one full year."

Hermione nodded shortly. "I realize that. I'm more than willing." She signed the documents with a flourish, an immediate golden glow confirming her signature and transmitting the verification to several locations within the labyrinth of hospital forms and papers.

"Okay, then that's it." Susan gave her a mock handshake. "Enjoy your new professor. He's probably a much better house guest when he's quiet."

Hermione snickered. "Well, we'll see," she agreed, sobering the moment she exited Susan's office. It was all well and good for them to make light of the situation in order to dispel the tension surrounding his condition, but she genuinely had no idea what to anticipate once she'd brought him back to her flat.

As it turned out, she shouldn't have spared the brainpower required to fret so early in the day; the attending Healer, barraged by one hapless case of accidental poisoning after another, refused to let her leave until nearly eight o'clock that evening.

After bolting down a measly share of the cafeteria's grainy and unidentifiable supper offering, Hermione saw to the last few patients on her list, finding that several required extensive treatment and briefing until they were released. She was veritably dragging her body down the hallway by the time she returned to her office, where her superior sat primly in the chair before the desk, looking weary.

"Good evening, Healer Granger," the woman greeted her in a crisp tone. She was a fair bit shorter than and smaller than Hermione, but intimidating nonetheless. Healer Vickers was a legend in her own right, touted as a promising candidate for the next available opening in the Wizengamot, and Hermione felt a distinct and unshakable sense of inadequacy when confronted with her presence.

"Good evening, ma'am. I was wondering if I could ask a favor..."

"You need assistance moving Severus Snape's body." Her piercing gray eyes studied Hermione with keen interest. "I anticipated that you would. Your good deed has rather made the rounds today."

"Oh." Hermione's throat felt tight. "I hadn't realized..."

"Well, don't concern yourself with it. I think it's wonderful that you're going above and beyond your responsibilities here to care for someone in need." Hermione was somewhat blindsided by the thought that any of the hospital staff had had differing views on the circumstances, but she chose not to broach the fact. Instead she silently and obediently followed Healer Vickers to Snape's room, where the older woman began to describe the process by which they would transport him.

"There is a Ministry vehicle waiting outside," she explained brusquely, sparing a moment to shrewdly inspect the patient's condition. Snape's face was as sunken and inexpressive as ever, his bones disturbingly prominent. "I will help you to levitate him down to the ground floor. It will take our combined concentration to maintain him steadily and keep from bruising him."

Together the women achieved a feat Hermione would have otherwise considered impossible. It took them nearly thirty minutes to maneuver their way through the hallways and down to the ground floor, the confluence of their powers forming an eerie, luminescent shroud around his body as they progressed with agonizing slowness. With every step Hermione's breath hitched, and she feared that they would topple him too far in one direction or the other. In his emaciated and fragile condition, a fall of even several feet would have resulted in grievous injury.

Fortunately, they alighted before the black, nondescript Ministry vehicle without incident. The interior of the car had been magically enlarged and equipped with a well-cushioned bed on which Snape's body fit comfortably. Feeling touched by her superior's efforts to help her, Hermione thanked the older Healer warmly before clambering into the vehicle and giving the driver her address.

The man was kind enough to help her perform a similar operation in order to manage the staircase leading to her second-story flat. While he provided the raw concentration necessary to keep Snape's body afloat, Hermione directed her energy toward stabilizing and cushioning him, preventing any sudden jarring movements from causing further trauma to his system. Once within, they managed to settle him with minimal trouble into Hermione's guest bed. She thanked the Ministry driver, tipped him generously, and was left standing in the foyer of her small flat, the slam of the door echoing in her ears. The complete silence of her surroundings felt troublesome and wrong when there was another person present.

She wandered into the kitchen to fetch towels and a basin of warm water and commenced with the most basic of medical care...a thorough bodily examination and wash. Once she had stripped his upper body of the hospital gown, she stifled a gasp, dismayed by the overwhelming number of scars crossing his body. The combined skills of the best Healers in Wizarding Britain hadn't been sufficient to erase the history of torture and beatings he'd endured at the hands of his master.

Gingerly lifting one skinny arm and then the other, Hermione bathed his body in warm water; it was difficult not to dwell on the outrageous prominence of his ribs and wrists, the spare skin accentuating the disparity between his frame, certainly not small for his height, and his dangerously low weight. She vowed to discover a way to fortify his daily potion schedule with something more nutritious. When she'd finished with his chest and shoulders, she began to carefully examine his scalp, noting a fine array of scars located there as well.

She washed his face with utmost caution, fearing that the frail, parched skin already stretched to papery thinness over his cheekbones would tear at the lightest touch. Layer after layer of grime dissolved and sluiced off his face, and Hermione found herself becoming increasingly irate at his treatment. She couldn't blame Healer Cuthbert...the old man had been hard-pressed to maintain his own health for the most part...but someone else ought to have offered to assist him in providing regular care. Someone else ought to have noticed Snape's condition and intervened. She felt tremendously guilty that she herself hadn't managed to do so.

When she'd finished washing his face, she ran a gentle, inquisitive finger along his jaw line and the bridge of his nose, seeking for any signs of past fracture. Finding nothing, she made a quick sweep with her wand to test the bone density; it alerted her to a past fracture of his nose. It was clear it had been broken at least once, but the injury and healing had likely occurred many years ago, during his adolescence or young adulthood.

The bones of his jaw seemed sound, as did his shoulders and arms. A murmured spell and a low, methodical pass of her wand over every inch of his torso revealed in sickly glowing red the concentrated areas where the poison had settled in, continually corroding his muscles and organs. It had formed a massive systemic infection that seemed to have infiltrated every pore of his body.

Distressed, Hermione turned back toward the bed-table. Without further research she could do nothing to combat the poison, but her many salves could quickly heal the

sores and abrasions that had formed over his bed-ridden body. As she turned her wand passed inadvertently over his face, the color analysis projected by the spell shifting to a dull but noticeable blue.

Intrigued, Hermione moved it upward. The farther from the lower portion of his body her wand progressed, the more noticeable the blue glow became, culminating in a brilliant cerulean at the crown of his head. Baffled, her heart racing, she resorted to pushing aside what little hair remained on his head, repeating the spell once, twice, thrice.

It was unmistakable...the wand was informing her that his head, at least, was in perfect health.

"That can't be possible." She dropped her wand into her lap and sat back on her haunches, staring at his face. The thin lips were slackened, his pallor ghostly white with sickly yellow undertones. Beneath crinkled, parched lids, his eyes displayed no movement. Even his ears seemed to have been leached of skin tone...not that he'd had much to begin with, as any Hogwarts student could have attested.

Hermione repeated the spell again and gave a cry of alarm when the blue reappeared, its hue even more intense. "How is that possible?" she whispered, glancing down at her wand. Was she experiencing errors in the spell results due to her wand?

Though she knew it would be impossible to relegate her confusion to the background, Hermione forced herself to press on, removing the light traveling trousers he'd been clothed in, undoubtedly Healer Vickers' work. His lower body had wasted away to practically nothing, the knee caps and ankles as prominent as his cheekbones. She began to massage in a light warming lotion which, upon contact, would sink into the muscle tissue, providing nourishment and encouraging regrowth.

An hour later Hermione had healed all of the minor sores and abrasions and made considerable headway in treating the more severe. She'd found several improperly healed bones in his left leg and his right hip, which she'd promptly knitted together properly, afterward glancing briefly in the direction of his face. By all accounts he felt nothing...no pain, no response to external stimuli; his body's systems stood perpetually on the brink of imminent collapse, the poison having overtaken control.

His face remained completely nonreactive, but something she could not identify compelled her to massage an analgesic salve into the flesh of his right hip and left leg.

Three

Chapter 3 of 8

Already facing a stressful job and an overbearing fiancé, Healer Hermione Granger adds another responsibility to her list.

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Though Severus was powerless to respond to the girl's distressed murmuring, he was able to sense even the slightest shift in her behavior. Pain, heat, cold, pressure...such sensations escaped him, the nerves in the rest of his body having long since fallen under the insidious control of the poison.

His mind, however, remained honed; he could hear her speaking, and his body's traitorous refusal to respond to her ministrations made him furious. He could not muster sufficient control over his muscles to open his eyelids. He could not shift his head or arms, nor could he so much as twitch his lips. His swallowing and breathing were involuntary, as were the few bodily reactions that kept toxins other than the poison from overloading his system.

It was his own fault, of course, but he was enraged nonetheless. He was an unwilling prisoner of the potion, condemned to spend the remainder of his ignominious existence surrounded by stale hospital sheets and medical apparatus to empty his bladder and bowels. It was a hell more overwhelming than even he, at his masochistic best, had ever been capable of imagining.

His extremities were completely beyond his ability to sense. His brain, desperate to counteract the effects of the poison, had sequestered itself. He could think, too, of course. It would have pained the many skeptical Healers at St. Mungo's to find that after three years of pacing about his room, expounding at great length the hopelessness of his case and the certain failure of his mind to register the outside world, they had only succeeded in infuriating him. He could hear every word, and he had no choice but to endure lecture after lecture, one disheartening explanation after another.

It was ironic that after nearly two decades of diatribes about the potential for potions accidents to cause harm to others, his first abominable failure as a Potions master had hurt only himself.

For three years he'd longed for the potion to live up to its intent, destroying both his mind and body swiftly and systematically. Instead, his brain...the one organ he'd desired to have rendered useless from the very beginning...remained miraculously and inexplicably intact, currently providing him with the unbearable knowledge that he was in the home of Miss Hermione Granger.

Voldemort's torture tactics sudden seemed infinitely preferable.

To Hermione's astonishment, it took a full two days for Ron to get wind of what she'd done. She spent the entirety of Saturday alternately massaging and examining Snape's body, determined to improve its condition, and researching whether she could successfully blend a highly caloric nourishing potion with his usual regimen.

Consulting Horace Slughorn was ultimately her largest mistake. At three o'clock on Saturday, she surmised that despite hours of research, she would never be comfortable altering his medicinal schedule without first seeking the approval of a certified Potions master. As a Healer she knew that a nourishing potion would not adversely affect his body in its current condition. Frankly, she had doubts that it would make the slightest bit of difference...it was entirely possible that the poison he'd ingested would prevent any such recuperation.

She felt she absolutely had to try, however, and thus she contacted Professor McGonagall by Floo at five past three that afternoon.

"Hermione!" McGonagall exclaimed, surprised. "It's wonderful to see you, my dear. What can I do for you?"

"Actually, Headmistress, I was hoping I could speak with Professor Slughorn." She leaned slightly into the flames, the improved view illuminating the Headmistress' office and startled expression of McGonagall herself. "I've rather reached an impasse regarding one of my current patients, and I can't proceed until I've verified with a Potions master that..."

"Is this about Severus Snape?" the Headmistress interrupted sharply. Hermione drew back.

"Yes, ma'am, and I really need to verify with Professor Slughorn that..."

"Well, come through, girl, come through!" McGonagall commanded sternly, beckoning her forward with a short wave of her slim hand. "I can't very well Floo Horace until you've vacated my fireplace!"

With an obedient bounce, Hermione jumped through the fireplace and landed in the Headmistress' office, compulsively brushing the ash off her robes and looking around. The room, lined richly with tapestries and portraits, seemed far too lush for the prim and strict Transfiguration professor.

McGonagall, in the meantime, had snatched up a small handful of Floo powder and promptly Flooed the Potions professor, whose fleshy face appeared in the fireplace grill.

"Minerva!" he greeted her warmly in a booming voice. "What can I do for you? My, is that Miss Granger with you?"

"*Healer* Granger, Horace," McGonagall corrected him automatically, "and she is here in a professional capacity. She would like to ask you a question about one of her current patients."

"Sure, sure," Slughorn boomed, stepping through the Floo and into the room. He was as immense and eccentric as Hermione recalled, his enormous belly reaching out to greet her long before his hand managed to shoot out and shake hers. "Wonderful to see you, my dear, wonderful indeed! I understand you've just been promoted. Working directly below Edwina Vickers now, aren't you?"

"Yes, Professor," she replied, wringing her hands lightly. She'd anticipated the need to slog through a bit of small talk before he finally answered her questions, but she abhorred the thought of being away from Snape for long. He was due to have his daily potion at four o'clock, and she didn't want to chance the effects of administering it even a minute later.

"I had quite a few classes with Edwina myself when I was in school. Brilliant woman. You know, I believe you might also be acquainted with..."

"Horace, Healer Granger has a patient waiting," McGonagall intervened softly, a surprisingly neutral tone for the stiff Headmistress.

"Well, go ahead, my dear. What can I do for you?"

"Professor," she began slowly, "I'm currently overseeing a patient who has been in a coma for some time. He's on an infusion of Invigorating Draft and Blood Replenisher, and it's keeping him alive successfully, but it hasn't done much to restore hydration or muscle tone. I'm concerned that..."

Slughorn's bushy mustache twitched suddenly. "Are you talking about Severus Snape, then?" he exclaimed. "I suspected as much! I told you it was true, didn't I, Minerva?"

Hermione trailed off and turned inquiringly to McGonagall, whose lips were pursed in disapproval. Sensing that no explanation would be forthcoming, she turned back to the Potions professor, who was more than happy to indulge her.

"I have a good friend who brews potions for St. Mungo's who told me you'd petitioned to care for him," he explained, growing more vociferous as he went on. "What a splendid idea! I said, 'Why, if anyone can cure him, it will be that girl. Such a smart one. Best in her year!'"

Hermione sensed an oncoming blush spreading across her cheeks, but she wasn't sure if it was due to embarrassment or frustration. "Thank you, Professor. That was very kind of you. Yes, I've agreed to take care of Professor Snape. Whether or not a cure can be found, I'm afraid I can't say at this time."

He clapped her comfortingly on the shoulder. "I have faith that you'll figure it out, my dear girl. After all, if your friend Harry can survive the Killing Curse, there's nothing out there can't be overcome, eh?"

Having never considered Snape's predicament from this perspective, Hermione felt oddly heartened. "I certainly hope so, Professor. In any case, I was wondering if you could suggest a nourishment potion that wouldn't react adversely with the other two. I'm positive that if administered by itself, any number of potions wouldn't cause any shock to his tissues, but I didn't want to overlook the possibility that the mixture may cause him harm."

Nodding thoughtfully, Slughorn stroked at his mustache, belly heaving as he sighed in thought. "Well, I think I may have just the thing for you," he said suddenly, shaking a finger in emphasis. "Not the strongest of potions, mind, but then it certainly won't counteract the Invigorating Draft or Blood Replenisher. I'll fetch it for you, shall I?"

"Yes, sir," she exclaimed, immediately reverting to student mode. "I would appreciate that very much."

Slughorn disappeared back through the fireplace, leaving Hermione to chat idly with McGonagall. She seemed pleased that Hermione had agreed to look after Snape and care for him, but like every Healer who'd given his or her opinion on the matter, she openly expressed doubt that anything could ultimately be done to save him.

"It's such a terrible pity," she concluded at precisely the moment Slughorn reappeared through the Floo. "He was such a brilliant man. That poison sounds diabolical enough to have been his own invention."

Hermione nodded absently, herself convinced that if anyone else were afflicted by the poison, Snape would have been one of the few Potions masters capable of discovering the antidote. She could make an amateur attempt, of course, but as a Healer, her ability to brew advanced potions was only moderately more developed than any other Hogwarts graduate.

Slughorn presented her with an enormous jar of what he explained was an especially light nourishing potion generally used to improve the growth rate of prematurely delivered babies. Intrigued, Hermione peered at the liquid, a light rose in color.

"And it doesn't contain anything that will counteract the other two?" she repeated for what felt like the seventeen thousandth time, unwilling to take the chance of putting his life in further jeopardy.

"Not at all," Slughorn assured her, patting at his stomach in satisfaction. "It won't work quickly, of course, not on a body of his size, but with any luck, you'll see some improvement in a couple weeks."

Hermione was almost tempted...almost...to hug her former teacher. She wished both Slughorn and McGonagall a good day and returned to her flat, anxious to examine the potion herself before administering it to Snape in half an hour's time.

Ron, as she later found out, had heard from Harry, who'd heard from Remus Lupin, who had been reinstated as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, about Hermione's kind actions toward her former teacher. At six o'clock on Sunday evening, Hermione was reclining in one of her threadbare living room chairs, poring over a variety of potions texts she'd borrowed from St. Mungo's medical library. She was exuberantly researching potions known to result in coma or coma-like symptoms, determined to prove Slughorn's faith in her had not been in vain, when Ron burst through her fireplace.

"Hello," she began, halting when she noted the look of apoplectic rage on his face. Ron leaned over, shoving his nose practically into contact with hers.

"*What* were you *thinking*?" he shouted, and she pushed back against the uncomfortable chair, seeking to avoid the spit flying from his mouth.

"Ron, calm *down*," she sighed, absently marking the page in her text and setting it aside. "Do you want a cup of tea? Sit down, at least."

Ron apparently would consent to do no such thing. He began to pace in front of her, and Hermione wondered just how insensitive it would be to inform him that he was grossly overreacting to the presence of a man who was no longer cognizant of the fact that he existed.

"How could you bring *him* here?" he cried, glowering in the direction of the guest bedroom. "Where is he? In there? Lupin overheard Slughorn telling everyone about what you're doing. Where *is* he?"

"In the guest room," she snapped. "Where else?"

"I don't want to live in the same place as him, Hermione." He looked down at her, his expression still thunderous. His ochre jumper and flaming red hair lent him a fiery appearance that only served to make his ranting seem all the more unnecessary and absurd.

"I wouldn't call his current state of existence living," she replied dryly. "He won't infringe on your life. I can promise you that."

Calming somewhat, Ron ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. I just... How do you think it looks to other people when the girl I'm going to marry starts taking care of *Snape*? He killed Dumbledore!"

"Our entire world is aware of that fact, Ron. They're also aware that Dumbledore himself established that there were extenuating circumstances." She rose to her feet, suddenly too worn down to want him around. She wished he would leave immediately, dragging his juvenile grudges with him. "When are you going to let that go? Harry's got over it."

"Harry had the pleasure of killing V...*Him*," Ron shot back irrelevantly.

"And that's supposed to excuse the fact that you can't get over some childish dislike you had for him in school?" He followed her into the kitchen where she poured herself a glass of milk. "Besides which, you said it yourself: Harry killed Voldemort, and it was *Voldemort* who was ultimately responsible for all the deaths we've suffered. Not *Snape*," she added firmly, taking a sip.

Ron remained silent, his lanky form leaning against her counter.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked solicitously. He shook his head, shaggy red hair flapping with the movement.

"I've got to get back home. I promised Mum I'd be there for supper."

She nodded, staring at the scuffed surface of her refrigerator. It had been nearly a month since he'd stayed over, always opting instead to return to The Burrow to be with his family. She couldn't blame him, really...the stress of arguing over the wedding plans had put a damper on any desires either of them had...but it hurt nevertheless.

As he turned to leave, Hermione concluded miserably that she was actually relieved to see the back of him. She would have spent a miserable fifteen minutes going through the motions even if he *had* wanted her that evening.

"Ron," she began haltingly, and he turned to regard her again. "Are you... Are you having any... second thoughts about the wedding?"

His features grew stony again. "No," he said with a steely undertone. "Are you? Is that why you're always so distant lately?"

The suspicion in his eyes cut deeply, and she found herself once again dissembling to keep from having to admit to him the truth, much as it pained her. "No, it's just that it's been ridiculously busy at work. Summer holidays and all that."

Confusion and disbelief flashed in his gaze, and she wished, not for the first time, that she could escape the memory of all the times those icy blue eyes had pinned her in one lie or another. "I'm sorry," she added in an afterthought. "I was just worried."

"There's something you're not telling me, Hermione." He crossed his arms in front of his chest defensively, but his features, at least, had softened a bit. "I'm not trying to bully you, you know. I just... I get so frustrated with you sometimes."

"I know."

"You spend all your time at work, and on the few occasions when you're not at work, you're holed up in here working on something ~~else~~," he barreled on, ignoring the fact that she'd already acknowledged his irritation. "My family are starting to wonder what kind of marriage this is going to be, with you always hiding out here. It wouldn't kill you to come to dinner and see Mum and Dad once in awhile."

She felt guilty tears pricking at her eyes. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'll try to make time for that." She realized she was still clutching at the glass of milk and put it quickly onto the counter. "What about next weekend? Everyone usually gets together for Sunday supper, right?"

His white-knuckled grip on his arms relaxed, and both of them fell to his sides once again. "Yes," he replied. "And Harry and Ginny will be there next week. Will you show up?"

She nodded immediately, ignoring the alarm bells sounding in the back of her mind. Showing up at The Burrow after several months' absence would be tantamount to a torture session at the hands of the most sadistic of Death Eaters. Molly Weasley would flay her alive for having virtually ignored her son all these weeks.

"Good. You promise?"

"I'll be there," she insisted, rather too vehemently. Ron's eyes flashed again, but he simply nodded.

"All right. I'll see you next week."

He approached her slowly, hesitantly, and they shared a brief and wholly unemotional peck on the lips. The awkwardness strung between them caused Hermione's eyes to water further. She was immensely relieved when he finally disappeared through the door.

After seeing him out, she turned on her heel and immediately headed for the guest bedroom, desperately endeavoring to take her mind off their painful conversation. By the time she was bent over Snape, nervously examining his coloring for any signs of improvement, her eyes had welled to overflowing. One small sniff sent a thick tear streaming down her face, and it promptly plopped onto Snape's nose.

She swore softly and reached for a tissue. "I'm sorry," she murmured immediately, wiping the drop of moisture from his nose. "I shouldn't be looking after you in this condition. Stupid of me."

The utter silence emanating from his wasted frame somehow comforted her.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she continued in a lost tone, hunkered down beside the bed. She continued to trail on as she ran her fingers lightly and skillfully over his legs and arms, feeling the condition of the muscle beneath the skin. "I should be focusing on you, and I'm sitting here crying about myself."

Two years previously her ornery half-Kneazle, Crookshanks, had passed on, and Hermione had missed him sorely since that time. She'd never been ashamed to admit

openly to others that she was one of those people who consulted her cat during times of confusion and melancholy, but having an actual person before her was more emboldening yet.

"I can't marry him when everything between us feels so off." She pulled out her wand and cast a diagnostic spell over his chest, the results just as depressing as the previous day's. "It was great before, when everything was casual. He didn't expect an 'I love you' and a renewed commitment every time we saw one another."

She set his right arm back on the bed, running her fingertip over the sunken curve of his bicep. Looking at Snape's body, she felt an odd combination of confusion and interest. She'd never known what he looked like underneath the voluminous black robes he'd worn at Hogwarts, and thus she had no means of knowing what was normal for him. She wanted terribly to restore some vitality and muscle to his form, to provide some hope that perhaps he would awaken from his extended unconsciousness. If he did so suddenly, it would likely require months of grueling physical therapy and chemical supplementation for his body to regain its strength and ability to move smoothly.

A smile quirking at her lips, she turned her attention to his legs. The sores had healed on the white skin, and only a light dusting of black hair remained on the stringy muscle. She massaged at his right calf gently, remembering how silently he'd stalked about Hogwarts. Undoubtedly his enormous boots had helped in that venture, but he'd possessed a particular grace that was entirely and inimitably his own...and oddly appealing, at that.

"You can't give up yet, you know," she whispered, moving on to his left calf. "I think we can get your muscles back into shape, but something has got to be done about your organs." She cringed, recalling the bloody red of the diagnostic spell. "I don't know how to cure that," she concluded, helplessness flushing over her. Determined not to cry any more in front of her old Potions teacher...unresponsive though he may have been...Hermione retired to her bathroom to draw herself a hot bath.

Four

Chapter 4 of 8

Already facing a stressful job and an overbearing fiancé, Healer Hermione Granger adds another responsibility to her list.

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Upon arriving to work the following morning, Hermione sent a hasty message to Susan requesting that the two meet for lunch. She needed the advice of someone who would listen carefully without making rash judgments, and as far as she was concerned, Susan was precisely the woman to turn to.

When noon rolled around she hurried up to the tearoom, discovering that Susan had already found them a table and made herself comfortable. Hermione slid into the chair opposite her with such excitement that she nearly toppled over.

Susan coughed slightly on her drink. "What's the matter with you?" she asked.

Glancing around, wondering whether she was being absurdly paranoid, Hermione folded her hands before her and took a deep breath. "I need your advice," she began, "but before I tell you what happened, you have to promise me that you won't deem me crazy for what I'm thinking of doing."

Susan looked perplexed. "Okay," she agreed slowly. "What?"

"Friday night I gave Snape a full physical exam...trying to figure out if there were any injuries Cuthbert missed and all that. Well, I found a few and healed them, but then I discovered something really bizarre."

One red eyebrow quirked upward. "This isn't something that's going to make me lose my appetite, is it?" Susan demanded in a half-teasing tone.

Genuinely confused, Hermione cocked her head. "Pardon?"

"Snape. I don't want to hear anything... personal about Snape."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I didn't come here to gossip with you. This is serious...I think he may be conscious of what's going on around him."

Susan's spoon clattered to the tabletop, causing the other patrons to swivel and stare momentarily. "Are you sure?" she whispered. "How do you know?"

"I performed a basic diagnostic spell that projects a color spectrum. Depending on the color and intensity projected, it indicates the health of the tissues. According to the spell...and I did it at least five times...his head is healthy, but the rest of his body is very nearly dead."

Susan sat back in her chair, crossing her arms thoughtfully. "You're going to have to humor me and start from the beginning," she admitted, sipping at her tea. "I don't understand how it's possible that he's still alive at *all*."

Mentally quashing her anxieties, Hermione took a quick glance at the nearest clock. They had forty-five minutes remaining, plenty of time for her to bring Susan up to speed. She would have to reveal the full extent of the situation before chancing to ask for her assistance in what promised to be a wholly illicit and rather foolish plot.

"All right," she began. "No one's been able to determine much about the poison he ingested, but here's what we've got so far: sometime during the summer after our sixth year, he was force-fed a very volatile and so far unidentified poison, one that appears to operate by leaching magical force from his body. If it had been fed to a Muggle, it probably wouldn't have made an ounce of difference...but our magic is integrated into our bodies, so it began to rapidly kill him.

"As far as we can tell, either something went wrong in the process of executing the potion's original intention, or its original intention was to render the victim comatose. When they first brought him in, it was assumed that he'd been dosed with the Draught of Living Death, but he never responded to any of the typical treatments."

"So it *looks* like he's taken it, but his body isn't coming out of it when you administer the antidote?" Susan surmised.

"Correct. I haven't administered it to him personally, but I read in his file that they've tried dozens of times before. They even had the hospital's top Potions master studying him for awhile, trying to determine what alterations might have been made in order to cause the potion to counteract the antidote. No one knows exactly what's wrong with him.

"My understanding is that it's been assumed all along the potion is working very slowly, and he'll eventually die from it. Again, since we don't know precisely what it is and what its intended effects are, we can't say for certain as to whether it will ever kill him or if this is the desired end result."

"How is he staying alive then?" Susan asked, still confused. "If his body is all but shut down, how is he managing to survive?"

"Just barely," Hermione admitted, her throat clenching at the recollection of his wasted, colorless face. "He's on a mixture of Invigoration Draught to provide the bare minimum of calories and nutrients necessary to keep his body alive, but he's basically wasted away to nothing. They've been giving him a Blood Replenishing Potion after they discovered that the poison appears to degrade the blood over time, and it seems to have helped with his condition, but only minimally."

"I spoke with Slughorn on Saturday, and he gave me a potion that should increase the caloric value of the entire mixture," she finished with a sigh, leaning back against her own chair. Her stomach rumbled, but she knew she would be unable to concentrate on any food. "I'm hoping it will put some muscle back on him."

"Why are you so concerned about whether or not he's strong if it's not likely he'll wake up?" Susan bit into her sandwich, chewing pensively. "Or are you certain now that there *is* a way to wake him up, if that spell indicates that his head's healthy?"

Hermione bit her lip. "That's just it...there's no known spell that can actually measure brain activity. If I could prove that there's a sufficient amount of brain activity, then there's the possibility...however slim...that he will naturally recover from it. Perhaps there's nothing we *can* do, other than wait."

"But you don't know how to measure this?"

Susan seemed to flinch slightly and lean backward when confronted with what Hermione suspected was probably a rather manic gleam in her eyes. After two years of reasonably close acquaintance with the Hufflepuff, Hermione had reached the conclusion that she was profoundly unhappy to even consider breaking any rules.

Hermione, fortunately, was a seasoned expert. Seven years of schooling with Harry and Ron had taught her that perhaps some rules were meant to be bent.

"There is a way," she began, feeling the grin spread across her features. Susan put down the remainder of her sandwich and wiped at her lips with her napkin.

"I don't think I'm going to like this."

Interspersing bouts of potions research with her chores for the remainder of the workday, Hermione succeeded in determining that no one, as far as the hospital's library was concerned, had ever successfully altered the properties of the Draught of Living Death. There were methods to improve and expedite its creation, of course...Harry's damnable Potions book in sixth year had proven that.

Still she couldn't fight back the inkling that they were overlooking something. After all, if Snape...the Half-Blood Prince himself...could modify the execution of the brewing steps while a student at Hogwarts, there really was no conceivable restriction on his brilliance as a potion maker. They had no way of speculating whether he had or hadn't managed to make some kind of modification to the Draught. Perhaps, when it came down to it, McGonagall was correct: the ingenuity of the potion itself ought to be their first and only necessary indication as to the identity of its brewer.

And if that was the case, she stood no chance whatsoever. Hermione was an excellent potion brewer, and she excelled in the comprehension of any kind of magical theory, but she knew her limitations; she could not possibly unravel anything Severus Snape had created.

At ten past six she slipped past Healer Vickers' office, desperately wanting to escape for the day. She'd dealt with the last of her patients and had managed to do a bit of detective work in addition. Jogging lightly through the hallways, she made her way to the ground floor and ducked past the Welcome Witch, hurrying through a large wooden door marked STAFF ONLY.

When she'd first arrived at the hospital to begin her apprenticeship, Hermione had been given the token tour, walking alongside her fellow students through the various areas of the hospital. She had wondered then, as she still did now, whether potion makers in all companies and disciplines were always relegated to the cold, dank basement areas. St. Mungo's Potions masters, an elite and highly unsocial group of witches and wizards, seemed to prefer to exist in this manner, however.

According to several dusty files pertaining to Snape's initial examination and diagnosis, the Potions master who had been assigned to make a determination about the poison he'd ingested had worked closely with Cuthbert over the course of Snape's first six months in the hospital. Hermione could still vividly recall the overwhelming sense of hopelessness and melancholy that had set in during her seventh year. At Hogwarts discussions were centered around those students who had lost family members and close friends; at The Burrow, they'd been given the gruesome details of Snape's condition.

Hermione still felt that she had been the only one truly concerned about his welfare. Harry and Ron, while their desires certainly were not malevolent, felt no anxiety on their former teacher's behalf. The Weasleys on the whole did not concern themselves with his progress...or lack thereof...and before long, Tonks had taken to consulting with a friend at the hospital and sending Hermione short missives every few weeks, knowing how she worried about him.

It surprised her that no one had ever considered it odd that his continual decline had left her wracked with worry. Molly Weasley had been the one to spark her interest in his case as they shopped for their school books a week before seventh year began. She'd found Hermione grabbing the textbook for N.E.W.T.-level Potions and had released something akin to a sigh.

"It's such a shame about Professor Snape," she remarked, shaking her head slowly. Hermione had noticed out of the corner of her eye that the older woman gave a short nod in the direction of the uppermost shelf, which was covered in a thick layer of grime and contained books so dirty their titles were rendered illegible.

"Such a brilliant man." Mrs. Weasley had then wandered off to rejoin her children, and Hermione had grabbed the nearest step stool and taken a look for herself.

Her recollection of the small, leather-bound book containing Snape's earliest work was brought to an abrupt halt when she found herself standing before the Potions masters' break room, staring resolutely at the door. Shaking her head firmly, Hermione lifted her hand and rapped four times.

A short, skinny man with squirrely eyes opened the door, peering at her with a look of blatant irritation. "What?" he barked, nearly upsetting her balance.

"Hello. I'm sorry to interrupt you. My name is Hermione Granger; I'm a Healer on the third floor."

"Is this about that last batch of Deflating Draught? I told them three hours ago I'd brew another."

"No, no," she assured him hastily, lifting the yellowed file of parchment in her hand. "I was actually hoping to speak with...ah...an Albert Brauer. Several years ago he helped to treat a patient of mine."

"He's in the last lab. Fifth door on the left."

The scrawny man slammed the door in her face, leaving Hermione feeling disoriented and more than a little annoyed. Making her way to the end of the hall, she knocked again, praying that Brauer turned out to be a great deal better-tempered than his colleague.

Upon hearing a thick German accent shout out, "Enter," she opened the door tentatively and stepped inside. It was a clean, well-kept room, its lighting much better than the laboratory rooms at Hogwarts. A graying man in his early seventies was attending to a bubbling cauldron in the corner.

"Hello," she began again, anticipating an equally hostile reaction. Potions masters were not renowned for their conversational skills regardless their place of employment. "My name is Hermione Granger. I'm a Healer on the third floor..."

"Well, come in, Healer Granger." The man waved a hand beckoning her forward, not turning his back or removing his attention from the potion before him. A moment later he murmured a stasis charm and pocketed his wand, turning to meet her. He seemed pleasant enough, she decided: tall, slim, with a very dignified air and an intelligent curve to his brow. He proffered his hand and she shook it, wondering if he was Muggle-born.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, and she held up the file.

"I understand that you offered your expertise when a patient of mine was first admitted to the hospital three years ago, a Severus Snape."

Brauer's hairy eyebrows raised. "Yes, I did. Unfortunate man."

"Is there anything you can tell me about the initial examination performed on Mr. Snape? I understand the poison he'd been dosed with was impossible to identify, but is there anything you recall about the Healer who was put in charge, Amory Cuthbert?"

He frowned. "Well, that was a few years ago now, and my memory's not what it used to be, miss. Can you be more specific? What in particular would I recall?"

Hermione decided to dispense with the strict professionalism and be honest with him. "Well, I'm having difficulty charting Mr. Snape's health history. In particular, I need to know if a diagnostic spell was ever performed that assesses tissue health. It causes a glow of color...an aura, if you will...to surround the body."

Brauer suddenly nodded forcefully. "Yes, yes. I remember that, all right...passed a wand over his body, and he started glowing thick, deep red. So red it was almost black." His eyes seemed to fog over momentarily as he became immersed in his memories. "I've never seen a man who looked more ill. They were convinced he would die that night."

"Can you recall if there was any difference in the color spectrum over his body? Was it all the same color over each body part?" She was becoming too excited by the ramifications of what he'd suggested. "Were there different colors for his limbs, torso, head?"

"No, no, it was all the same...that horrible deep red. Why do you ask?"

Triumph fluttering in her stomach, Hermione offered the confused Potions master a brilliant smile. "Nothing in particular, sir. I just needed to clarify what was written in the report. You've been a great help...thank you so much."

"You're welcome." He looked at her oddly for a moment as she turned and dashed out of the room.

Dedicated book aficionado that she was, Hermione had set about organizing her books the moment she'd moved into her flat. Fiction and other works read predominantly for pleasure were located in a large oak bookshelf in her living room; the many professional journals with which she kept abreast of news and developments were stacked neatly in the vicinity of her desk; and the elevated shelf on the back of her guest bedroom contained old textbooks and other volumes of an academic nature.

In retrospect, she'd been fortunate that Molly Weasley hadn't turned around that afternoon in Flourish & Blotts to find her happily devouring the small black volume that contained a series of Snape's published articles, including his Master's-level paper that had earned him the certification for which he'd become famous...and infamous...around Hogwarts, cementing his reputation as a highly intelligent man to be avoided at all costs. At Hogwarts, "Potions master" was synonymous with "cold bastard," and she rather suspected that he had willingly cultivated the honor.

The book contained other papers by different students; it was, as far as she'd been able to tell, a poorly bound anthology of potions research in Britain, and this particular edition was devoted to the graduating Masters of that year. Naturally, when she'd first laid eyes on his name that afternoon three years ago, she'd been unable to tear her gaze away.

She still had no conception of how many times she'd read through his work, consuming every word greedily, excitedly. Much of her fascination lay in savoring the succinct but elegant way in which he wrote, wishing that she could hear him lecture in such reverent tones in class. The chance to swap caustic criticism for a true conversation...and to hear him expand upon the theories he'd so inventively laid forth in his work as an apprentice...would have been an amazing experience to her. She'd become instantly enamored with the idea of getting to know him as a scholar, an admiration that seemed to increase exponentially each and every time she read the book.

Settling herself in the chair beside the guest bed, she placed a quick finger to his temple. His pulse throbbed softly but steadily, and she felt a slight rush of relief. His coloring did not seem to have improved since she'd given him the nourishment potion along with his usual regimen two days prior, but the sores on his body had fully healed, and his muscles had grown supple with regular kneading and massaging.

Paging through the book, she began to scan his papers for any mention of the Draught of Living Death, absently keeping a running commentary. It wasn't until she'd remarked for the seventh time, "That's just brilliant! How did you ever come up with that?" that realization hit her fully.

There was a possibility...slight, true, but extant nonetheless...that he could hear every word she said.

"I wish you could respond to me," she admitted in an almost heartbroken tone, setting the small volume down on the bed-table and crouching beside him on the bed. "I don't know how I'm ever going to get you out of this. I can't even follow all of your theories, let alone find the cure for a poison *you* likely created."

His face was unresponsive, of course. Feeling strangely disappointed, as though she'd honestly expected a reaction, she took his left hand in hers and began to run the pad of one finger gently over the ugly lines of the Dark Mark on his forearm.

"I'll never find out why you did it now." She shook her head, releasing his arm but keeping his hand within hers. It was large and cold, almost clammy. "I always used to wonder that. You never seemed like the kind of person who would care about a person's bloodline."

She snorted. "As far as I could tell, disliked everyone equally. I always thought it was intellect that mattered to you, not upbringing."

Deciding that her behavior was becoming inappropriate...he was not, after all, a close friend or confidant, and she had a responsibility to maintain a proper clinical demeanor in his presence...Hermione returned to her chair and picked up the book once again. Her mind was rife with ideas for proceeding with his physical examination, but glancing through his research had yielded no headway as far as the poison was concerned.

Resolutely deciding that she *liked* the idea that he could hear her...it gave her an illusion of control over the entire situation, of hope...she began to read aloud from his first paper, published when he was merely twenty.

Thursday night found Hermione and Susan crouched in her living room, observing the scant specimens of his life that had been brought to the hospital with Snape. Susan had come bearing gifts...a large bottle of wine and an enormous cheesecake...and the two women sipped their drinks and ate their dessert as they looked over the articles.

"Ready for the big plan tomorrow?" Susan teased her as they hunkered down on the floor, the box placed between them.

"Mmm," Hermione assented, sipping her wine. "You verified that they gave you tomorrow off, right?"

"Yes. All taken care of."

A few minutes passed in silence, the two young women vacillating between boredom and disgust. "These are all just mundane things," Hermione muttered darkly,

enlarging yet another piece of clothing, regarding it, and tossing it aside. It smelled strongly of mildew and disuse. "None of this is going to help me figure out how to cure that poison."

"You'd think they wouldn't have bothered to reduce and pack his clothes," Susan remarked with a grimace of her own. "What's the point? If he's never going to wake up again, he's hardly going to need them."

Hermione disliked taking a negative outlook on his situation, but she privately agreed that packing so many clothes had been rather fruitless on the house-elves' part. What appeared to be the entirety of Snape's wardrobe was now strewn around her living room, and it truly *wasn't* going to do him much good.

"Look at this," Susan breathed, pulling out a small silver locket. She prised it open and gasped again. "Do you think this is his mother?"

Hermione gently took the locket, draping it in her palm and studying the picture carefully: a thin, drawn woman with very dark features and a tortured expression in her gaze. There was no denying the resemblance of coloring and face structure, however, and she did appear to be an older, wearier version of the sullen young woman whose picture Hermione had found years prior.

"Yeah," she replied, surprised to find her eyes tearing up slightly. "I'm pretty sure this is Eileen."

"Eileen?" Susan repeated.

"His mother, Eileen Prince."

Susan cast her a puzzled look but said nothing, instead lifting out the next item. "Hey!" Susan exclaimed, handing Hermione the scuffed Wizarding photograph. "It's that evil Malfoy woman."

Shocked, Hermione accepted the photo and stared at it. It was indeed Narcissa Malfoy, and a much younger Narcissa at that. The photo was so old that she no longer moved much, apparently having grown lazy with time. She lay on her side swathed in sheets, the golden curtain of her hair the only feature of the photo that remained bright and illuminated. Her posture was relaxed, languorous, the smile on her full lips almost feline.

Susan stared unabashedly at the gauzy, nearly transparent sheets and the shape and suggested color of her body beneath them. "Do you really think we should be looking at this?" Her voice was a mixture of amazement and revulsion.

"No," Hermione admitted quietly. "Probably not. It's not relevant to the poison, after all." But the moment she placed it back in the box, she wondered just how far its implications reached.

Five

Chapter 5 of 8

Already facing a stressful job and an overbearing fiancé, Healer Hermione Granger adds another responsibility to her list.

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Extensive planning and preparation were two areas in which Hermione excelled, her dedicated and punctilious nature never ceasing to impress. Susan remarked upon the fact several times as the two young women carefully settled Snape's body onto the Muggle hospital stretcher.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" the Ministry driver asked casually, raising a questioning eyebrow. Hermione nodded, a combination of bald fear and sudden giddiness threatening to overtake her.

"Of course." She handed him several Galleons. "We may be in there a couple hours. Feel free to wander around for awhile."

He nodded, happily accepting the money and ambling off with a jaunty stride. He had no idea of the lengths to which she'd had to go in order to ensure Snape's safe...and covert...passage to this innocuous Muggle hospital, one of the many medical establishments in London.

"Explain to me why we're doing this again," Susan whispered, tugging at the unfamiliar Muggle blazer she'd put on over her blouse, falling into step behind Hermione, who was now briskly striding forward. Snape's prone form had been settled comfortably onto the stretcher, but she was nevertheless concerned about the excess movement causing damage. Over the past few days, his coloring had shown a remarkable improvement...an indication, she hoped, that with careful nourishment, his body might yet overcome its desperate state.

"It's a relatively straightforward Muggle procedure that will determine the level of brain activity," Hermione replied in a brusque, recited tone, rounding the corner. All three infiltrators were covered with Concealment Charms to ward off unwanted attention. As they approached the emergency entrance, she released the charm, entering as calmly and coolly as she could manage.

The Ministry driver, believing her to be on the explicit errands of Healer Vickers, had seemed merely amused by their obvious anxiety. For her part, Healer Vickers believed her to be enjoying a much-deserved day of relaxation, perhaps a cordial visit with her parents and a few hours spent overseeing her patient's condition. Hermione disliked deceiving anyone, but she suspected that the average wizard or wizard would have deemed her idea entirely without merit, and she hadn't been willing to risk the possibility that Edwina Vickers fell into that category.

But then, as far as the average wizard or witch was concerned, Muggle methods in general were useless. They didn't consider the many advantages of the Muggle sciences, she thought derisively. They were so content to remain in their cushioned microcosm of a society that they refused, by and large, to open their minds to any other possibilities.

She admitted, however, that she was only employing the services of this Muggle hospital as a last resort; she had no means of determining magically the level of electrical activity currently taking place in his brain.

The consequences of her decision were undeniably terrifying. Even with impeccable clothing, professional demeanors and Confundus Charms at the ready, she and Susan could not honestly expect for everything to run smoothly. Hermione knew she was essentially committing identity fraud, posing as the caretaker for a comatose man whose

only remaining kin wanted a definitive answer, once and for all, as to whether or not he would pull through the trauma. When added to the unfortunate fact that she'd been forced to sneak into *another* hospital in order to acquire the appropriate clothing, dressings, and the stretcher, she had become a felon virtually overnight.

Her own boldness shocked and confused her until she looked at his face, remembering why she was so determined to prove that he was not beyond rescue. She gulped rather too loudly, squaring her shoulders. The bright, open expanse of the hallways and the sterile whiteness of her surroundings made her feel doubly exposed. Forging their way through the parting crowd to the reception desk, Hermione and Susan waited patiently for the woman's attention.

"Hello," she said with forced pleasantness, looking up to find them waiting expectantly. She was in her early to mid-forties, a nice-looking woman with a painted smile and weary eyes. "Is this an emergency?"

"No," Hermione assured her. "I actually have a prior appointment for an EEG at ten o'clock. I'm a little overwhelmed...I've never been in a hospital of this size," she gushed effusively, privately praying that her little act would earn her a harmless opinion in the receptionist's mind. "I was hoping you could direct us?"

"Of course," the woman replied, her voice becoming rather harried. Undoubtedly she did not appreciate the discourtesy of two clueless women interrupting her. She rifled through a stack of papers to her right and pulled out a colorful map of the hospital's layout, the major locations marked brightly with large arrows. "You're here at the moment, in emergency services. If you just proceed down here..."

Ten minutes later, they had reached their destination. Snape's body was turned over to the technologist, and Hermione and Susan sank into unyielding plastic chairs in a small, stuffy waiting room, both exhausted beyond measure.

"You really think anything will show up?" Susan had placed her light summer coat over her lap and was tapping on her wand, concealed beneath its folds. "What if something goes wrong and they suspect us?"

"They won't," Hermione assured her, desperately hoping that she sounded more confident than she truly felt. "I'm positive I've considered every angle. They think you're his second cousin and that he's been kept alive at your house with the help of a home aide, and you're just wondering if any advancement has been made in his condition. You contacted me because I work for a small medical clinic in your hometown, and I was able to act as the liaison in getting the ambulance.

"I even mentioned when I made the application that after your mother...his cousin...died, you were put in charge of him and weren't really sure what had happened before," she added, and though it may have been her imagination, Susan's stiff posture slackened incrementally. "They think you're just trying to become familiar with his case so you can offer him the best care possible."

"Not so far from the truth, then," Susan remarked, her anxiety having eased sufficiently so that she was able to take in her surroundings. To Hermione, the pastel walls, fake plants and purposefully cheerful décor were reminiscent of every medical office in which she'd ever set foot. Some tendencies never seemed to vary between the Wizarding and Muggle communities.

"I haven't been in a Muggle hospital in years," Susan confessed to her, tossing her long braid over her shoulder and giving the tawdry headlines of the Muggle magazines and tabloids a disdainful glance. "You know, I think this is even worse than St. Mungo's."

"I'm inclined to agree," Hermione admitted in an undertone. "Although I haven't been in a Muggle hospital in years either. Not since I was very young, actually."

"Your parents are dentists, aren't they?" Susan asked, glancing around to assure herself that they were alone before surreptitiously tucking her wand into the pocket of her coat. "I almost forgot about that. So you never wanted to give up magic and become a dentist like them?"

Hermione shook her head slowly. "No. They still tell me about their practice whenever I visit them, so in a way I keep up with the field somewhat, but I never considered giving up magic altogether."

"That's for the best. It would be such a shame if you did," Susan insisted. "They say you're one of the best Healers we've got. Even His Highness agrees that your record is getting to be very impressive."

Hermione flushed uncomfortably. "I'm sure I won't be that good for years," she demurred, a sudden noise from the hallway causing her to jump. Susan rolled her eyes but did not reply. "Besides which," she added dryly, "coming from him, that endorsement doesn't mean much."

Susan snorted inelegantly and finally broke down, reaching for a Muggle magazine.

After two hours of fidgeting in the waiting room, Hermione and Susan were once again pushing Snape's stretcher through the vast hallways of the hospital, averring to everyone who offered help or expressed concern that they had arranged for an ambulance to transport him and would be fine if left to themselves. Recasting the Concealment Charm on herself and her companions as they exited the building, Hermione led them around the block and back to the shaded street in which the Ministry vehicle awaited them.

The driver was reclining against the hood, munching contentedly on a sandwich he'd no doubt purchased with her tip. He eyed Snape's body speculatively, and Hermione wondered if he had put two and two together and realized whom she was transporting. It had become commonly circulated gossip that she'd demanded custody of his body before St. Mungo's had had the opportunity to allow his life to end. It was probably also commonly known that Narcissa Malfoy had wanted him as well, and Hermione wondered if the driver, like a large percentage of St. Mungo's staff, questioned her motives in acquiring him.

Telling herself to focus on the situation at hand rather than dwelling futilely on ridiculous gossip, she issued verbal directions as the three of them returned his body to the car. A short but tense ride later, they arrived back at her flat. Susan assisted her in returning him to the guest room but left shortly thereafter, citing a prior agreement to have lunch with a friend. Hermione thanked her gratefully for her help and saw her out the door.

She dallied a moment before returning to the room, staring blankly at the man before her. The compulsion to avoid thinking of him altogether was overwhelming, for doing so caused her mind to swim with seemingly endless concerns and possibilities, many tantalizing for personal reasons she couldn't fully explain even to herself.

The neurologist had said the results were unequivocal: despite the condition of his body, his brain was extraordinarily active. The involuntary mechanisms of his body sustained his survival, and he clearly had no conscious control over any other processes, but the baffled doctor had been adamant that he was nowhere near the point of brain death.

What she couldn't understand was why the news had seemed to precipitate such a violent reaction in her. "Will he recover?" she had asked eagerly, almost breathlessly, with Susan bouncing beside her. The poor man had regarded her with a confused expression, likely wondering why a third party, who'd allegedly had no prior contact with the patient, had invested so much emotionally into a man three years unconscious.

"The fact that there is measurable activity is not necessarily a sign that he will recover," he'd drawled evasively. Hermione, whose training had taught her this, remained hopeful nonetheless.

"But there *is* a chance?" she'd pressed on, aware that she was seeking to validate her own inexplicable desperation.

"Yes," he admitted, eyes crinkling when he noticed the twin smiles that lit their faces. "Since I'm not familiar with his case, I really cannot make an educated guess as to the probability of his recovery. I will be honest with you...it's very slim. But yes, there is a chance. There's always a chance."

She chanted his words to herself now as she approached the bed, triumphantly taking in the faint pinkish tinge that had appeared on Snape's cheeks only a couple days previously. The nourishing potion was indubitably beginning to have its desired effect: his color was returning, his entire appearance becoming less hollow and gaunt.

Extending a questioning hand, Hermione lightly pinched together the skin on his forearm, theretofore parchment-thin and weak. After a very brief moment of suspension, it sprang back lightly, indicating a gradual return to normal levels of hydration.

She found herself suddenly unable to speak while standing in his room. The night before, when her hopes had still been founded on speculation, the knowledge that he might not be cognizant of her words had led her to sit by his side for hours after Susan had left, talking about everything that crossed her mind. As she'd carefully and thoroughly washed his hair in preparation for the procedure, she'd allowed her attention to wander to their time together at Hogwarts, laughing at memories of his classes.

A mortified flush suffused her face as she recalled admitting aloud that she'd found his disciplinary methods deplorable but his instruction brilliant. She couldn't even begin to fathom what he must be thinking of her in the aftermath of that little session. The recording had left no lingering doubt. There was indeed activity taking place in his mind; but whether or not that activity included the preserved ability to process language, she had no way of knowing.

But, when taken as a sum...the unmistakably positive diagnosis of her spell, the surprising reading of his EEG, and his marked improvement over the past few days...the events displayed an evident trend. Snape was improving, and it was likely that his mind, ever active and unpredictable, was cruelly trapped within an intractable and unresponsive body.

She clapped a hand to her forehead, berating herself for her indecision and thoughtlessness. Dashing out into her living room, she scooped up a handful of CDs, all easily recognizable classical works, and dashed back into her guest bedroom. Though she did not have a stereo in that particular room, Hermione was nothing if not resourceful. She painstakingly levitated the CD player from her living room into the bedroom, settling it atop her desk and plugging it in quickly.

Truthfully, she had no idea as to Snape's personal tastes in art, music, literature...if he had any especial preferences, that was. She supposed it was entirely possible that he, like many in the Wizarding community, largely eschewed Muggle music and literature. However, she was resolutely determined to provide him with some kind of respite from the lack of stimulation. It was horrifying, really, to think that he had been isolated within his own mind for the past *three years*. She shuddered as she placed in the first CD, envisioning the many and varied curses that his temper had undoubtedly developed.

Relishing the first soothing strains that hit the air, she hurried to the kitchen and grabbed the bowl and wash rag she'd come to think of as his. Gently wringing the sudsy rag and rubbing it across his scalp, she commenced removing the sticky residue left behind by the paste the technologist had applied. Hermione watched his features closely, constantly hoping for some instinctive reaction to the music...a visible relaxation of the tension in his forehead or the fine lines at the corners of his lips.

"The neurologist insists there's a chance you'll pull out of this," she said in a conversational tone, forcefully overcoming the strange nervousness she now felt in his presence. Trapped within there was the same acerbic Potions teacher of her youth, and a part of her anticipated and feared his opinion still. "Not that I needed him to tell me...I know there's always a chance, even if it's small."

She began to lightly rinse the shampoo from his scalp, vanishing the water as it pooled on the rubber mat she'd placed beneath his head.

"I realize you probably would have trouble believing this," she continued, "but it's your attitude toward recovery that matters now. I thought it seemed absurd at first, too, but it's been substantiated time and again that a positive attitude can significantly speed recovery time in cases that were once thought hopeless."

She snapped her mouth shut, belatedly noting her thoughtless gaffe. "Not that I consider you hopeless, though," she hastened to add. "But many other people do. Professor McGonagall has all but given up hope for you, but I know it would mean the world to her if you recovered."

Having finished washing his scalp, she removed the light cotton shirt in which she'd clothed him and examined his upper body. The few deep scars that had probably marred his skin for years stubbornly persisted, but his ribs, she thought, seemed less protuberant. She placed her fingertips carefully against his temples and throat, vigilantly seeking any signs of increased swelling. He'd been running a steady and worrisome temperature since she had brought him home, but according to his file, that had been par for the course; the infection brought on by the poison had elevated his temperature more or less permanently. She quickly measured it and found that it had dropped four-tenths of a degree, results that, though they would have seemed modest at best in any other patient, positively thrilled her.

"You're definitely improving," she whispered, surprised to find herself absently running the short strands of his hair through her fingers. "I think as long as this continues, we can start paying more attention to cleaning up the rest of you."

The lack of response no longer pained her as it had in the first couple of days she'd cared for him. She envisioned him sequestered within his mind, his brain whirring madly. He was likely orchestrating the best possible way to exact revenge for the mindless chatter she was forcing him to endure, but it hardly mattered to her. Any improvement automatically sparked an enthusiastic and positive reaction from her, which he would certainly have loathed.

"I imagine you're hating this," she said with a chuckle, returning to the kitchen and placing his bowl and wash rag in the sink. She then headed for her bedroom, wondering what book he would most appreciate having read to him that evening.

Hermione was both astonished and pleased to find that after two years of struggling to maintain a constructive and healthy schedule with the hectic lifestyle brought on by St. Mungo's, Snape's presence had forced upon her life a much-needed sense of constancy. She attended to him each morning, regularly Flooed home to give him a cursory check during her lunch hour, and spent all available hours in the evening playing him music, discussing the patients she'd attended to that day, or reading to him from whatever book happened to strike her fancy.

Frequently she would find herself regretting the scarce moments when she left him. She would climb into a full bubble bath, release an initial sigh of relief, and instantly wish to return to the guest room. Lying in the tub reading silently to herself suddenly seemed unforgivably selfish when he remained behind with nothing but Vivaldi on repeat to keep him company. Thus even more of her typical activities were foregone in favor of spending casual evenings with him, a pastime she quickly grew to appreciate greatly.

Ron's rapidly increasing insensitivity irked her to no end. She had, as promised, devoted the Sunday following Snape's appointment to a raucous and thoroughly unpleasant evening at The Burrow. A well-meaning but critical Molly Weasley and the simultaneously concerned and judgmental glances of Harry and Ginny were just a few highlights of the time she'd spent there, and afterward she had expected that Ron would concede her some time to herself. Instead he insisted on popping over to her flat at all hours of the day and night, ostensibly to check on her and discuss potential plans for their wedding.

Sinking miserably into the chair beside Snape two months after bringing him home, Hermione finally acknowledged...out loud, nonetheless...the niggling truth that had been dogging her for ages, metamorphosing into fully-fledged panic.

"I don't want to marry Ron," she blurted out, eyes darting over to Snape's motionless frame. The closed eyes and relaxed lips put forth no judgment, so she continued, her panic slowly abating.

"I can't figure out why. That's the most frustrating part. I know that I love him, but it's becoming more and more clear to me that we've grossly misjudged what kind of relationship this is." She sighed, resting her chin atop one fist pensively. "I know if you were awake you'd snap at me to be an adult and just tell him and have it over with, but I can't do that. It will break his heart."

"The worst part is... I think he really *does* love me." Images of Harry and Ginny's wedding surfaced in her mind's eye, and she recalled with sickening dread the look of accusation in his eyes as they'd stood on the platform, Hermione attending the bride and Ron the groom. Ron, as he himself was quick to point out many times that evening, had proposed some time before Harry.

So why are they marrying first? his expression seemed to demand of her as Harry and Ginny were bound together before friends and family.

"I can't continue lying to him." She leaned over and turned off the CD player, finding that even the softest sounds grated on her nerves. "It's despicable of me to do it at all,

and I know it. So why do I?"

In the ensuing silence she could hear the faint, rhythmic ticking of the clock in the living room. Shaking her head derisively, she rose to her feet. "But I can't expect you to be my psychotherapist. I shouldn't bother you with this."

She retreated to the living room, abruptly anxious to avoid him. Though he hadn't the means to scold or insult her for her childishness, she imagined that he was mentally ridiculing the pathetic excuses she consistently fed herself; he, after all, had been privy to all of them over the past few weeks.

Settling on her sofa, she placed into her lap the box containing his belongings. She'd already washed his clothes; they were hanging neatly in her closet, a contrast that had made her stand back and do a double-take when she'd first placed them alongside her jumpers and slacks, unaccustomed to the sight of a man's clothing beside her own. He had been given honorary status as a second tenant, and his wardrobe now comprised the enormous black void adjacent to her favorite evening dress.

Despite this, his presence in her home still seemed half-formed at best. There was nothing about the furnishings, the décor, or the general attitude of the flat that suggested he had become a resident. Wondering it it would please him to know that she had allocated him more than simply a portion of her closet, Hermione began to draw forth the few articles that sat in the box, musing.

The photograph of Narcissa Malfoy she would most certainly not put up anywhere. She'd told herself for weeks now that its connotations bothered her simply because she disliked the woman, but in truth, it was something about the blatant intimacy, the sensuality, of the picture that got to her. Staring at it unabashedly, she wondered if he'd stolen it from Lucius Malfoy; it had to mean that he harbored illicit feelings for the woman.

Surely he hadn't taken it himself? She bent closer, her gaze sweeping over the deep, swirling blue of Narcissa's eyes, wholly at ease with her bed partner, whoever he...or she...may have been. Hermione desperately wished the picture would have retained more of its original movement, perhaps allowing her a brief glimpse of the other, mysterious occupant. Narcissa stretched, blinked, and flashed a sultry smile, all overtly seductive actions meant to show off for the camera.

It was disconcerting, really, to see such a condescending and vain woman, the epitome of aristocratic snobbishness, lying comfortably and vulnerably while glowing with the telltale suggestion of satisfying sex and favored company. What Hermione couldn't shake from her mind was the constant question of whether or not Snape was behind the camera, equally relaxed, equally sated.

Shoving the image roughly to the bottom of the box, she set the it aside, ignoring the odd fluttering in her abdomen.

Six

Chapter 6 of 8

Already facing a stressful job and an overbearing fiancé, Healer Hermione Granger adds another responsibility to her list.

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"Hermione?"

Startled, Hermione stumbled on the rungs of the ladder on which she'd been perched, nearly tumbling backward. She muttered a hasty curse and set aside the spray bottle she had been holding, wiping her hands on her jeans, already dirtied beyond even the most miraculous of magical repair.

She could hear the visitor...it had sounded distinctly like Ron...pacing on the faded wooden floor of the living room below. Tossing aside the cloth with which she'd been scrubbing at spider webs and grime coating the walls, Hermione tramped down the narrow staircase, pushing against the door at the dark bottom.

It was indeed Ron. He turned and stared in amazement as she pushed open the door, seemingly emerging from the wall of books, identical to each of the other three in the room.

"Depressing place, isn't it?" he remarked with an air of pity, glancing around at the spare, ancient furnishings.

She said nothing, merely crossing her arms and awaiting his continued response. After the fight they'd had two evenings prior, she was frankly not in the mood to be at all forthcoming with him. It was he who had lost his temper and tossed her from The Burrow, only to show up at her apartment moments later intent on instigating a true shouting match.

Sensing the anger seething in her stance, Ron hung his head momentarily, defeated. "Look," he said with a long-suffering sigh, "I came here to tell you that I'm sorry about what I said. I shouldn't have... Well, I shouldn't have accused you of anything. You were right."

"How did you know I was here?" Hermione unpinned the handkerchief with which she had restrained her hair while cleaning and gasped at the thick coating of dust and grime it had already amassed. Everything in Snape's house reeked of age and neglect.

"I ran into Susan at your flat. She was stopping by to drop off some food or something." A small smile quirked at his lips. "She's worried about you, you know. She thought you might go off the edge when they forced you to take today off."

Hermione pocketed the handkerchief and sank into a profoundly uncomfortable armchair. "I didn't think you'd want to talk to me again," she admitted quietly.

Ron followed suit, collapsing into an equally hard chair, rubbing the pads of his fingers across fatigued eyelids. She suspected that neither of them had had the benefit of much sleep the past few days. She'd gone to The Burrow with the intention of being open and honest with him, confessing that while it had been juvenile and insensitive of her to lead him on in such a manner, she simply did not believe that she possessed the sort of feelings for him that would result in a successful and mutually satisfying marriage.

Hermione had seen in his eyes the understanding...the relief, even...but something, perhaps the desire to punish her for the enormous discourtesy she'd dealt him, had compelled Ron to be an intractable prat. He'd followed her home, refusing to listen to her explanation, brushing it off as nerves. He had claimed utter ignorance when she pointed out that the two of them had not lately...and had not ever, really...enjoyed one another's company outside Harry's presence. They were completely different people for whom unusual circumstances during their formative years had created confusion, and Hermione, for one, refused to labor day after day under the condemnation of her better judgment.

Ron yawned, shaking her from her reverie. He leaned forward and faced her with open, conceding palms. "You were right," he said simply, and the tension within her melted completely. "I've known for awhile that this wasn't going to work, but... You always said it was St. Mungo's that was causing you to behave differently. I honestly thought you still wanted it."

"Were you going to tell me?" She knew she had no right to feel indignant, since she'd given him the same disservice; primarily she felt a deep-seated tiredness, resignation with surprisingly little reluctance.

"I don't know." His jaw tightened; he was probably wondering whether or not she would lash out. "I think I would have lost my nerve before we actually married. I just... I thought *you* still wanted it. Why didn't you tell me earlier?" he finished on a plaintive note, making her cringe and berate herself yet again.

"I'm sorry, Ron. I am. I thought *you* still wanted it, and I was waiting for that... Whatever we had at Hogwarts, I wanted it back. I thought maybe..."

"You just needed time?"

She nodded miserably and fought back tears. Ron rose swiftly to his feet and crossed the distance between them, sitting beside her and offering her a hug. She buried her face in his shoulder, crying softly.

He patted her back. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I really am. I didn't want things to turn out this way, but you're right... We're just too different. We've got Harry in common, and our history with him, but that's about it."

She'd told him as much the other night, asserting that they were fundamentally very different individuals. In hindsight, she couldn't have been more right, she thought, pressing her face deeply into the curve of his shoulder. Ron was a wonderful friend, and he never failed to make her laugh, but the relentless need to pander to one another's differences would have destroyed them both.

Ron drew back and winced when he noted her red, puffy eyes. She blinked, mumbling an apology.

"It's okay," he assured her, wiping away a few tears with the sleeve of his shirt. "I'm the one who should be sorry. Everything you said was exactly how I've been feeling, but I was too afraid to back out after we announced everything in front of my family."

She sniffled loudly, hating the pitiful sound that emerged. "I was too. But we can't do it, Ron. It isn't right. Like I said the other night, what happened at Hogwarts only made sense there. We were the right age, we were curious, we both found one another attractive..."

"We both wanted sex," he added with a sly smile. She chuckled.

"That too. You wanted girls and I wanted boys, and after seeing Harry and Ginny together, it only seemed to make sense. I was the only girl you'd spent any time with who *wasn't* your sister..."

"And unlike Harry, I *didn't* let you boss me around like a younger brother," he pointed out defiantly. She rolled her eyes.

"I do think of Harry in a very brotherly way," she conceded. "But everything we went through was always on his behalf. With you it was different. We were together for his sake, but it was a different kind of friendship. And it's *not* the basis of a marriage," she insisted, realizing that her tone had become unnecessarily vehement.

"I know, I *know*." He met her eyes, and his gaze held the warmth and mirth she'd appreciated so much during their years at Hogwarts. She hadn't glimpsed this Ron in months, having herself buried him beneath the weight of her own indecision.

"I'm not arguing with you," he reiterated. "Really, I'm not. You *were* the only girl I was around all that much who wasn't Ginny, and I was comfortable around you. Not like Lavender."

She snorted. "Won-Won," she mocked, and he laughed, a wonderfully unrestrained sound that brought tears to her eyes again. "Have you told your parents?" she asked, and he gave a short nod.

"I think Mum's still in denial, to be honest, but she'll recover. Dad didn't seem surprised, really. He looked like he kind of expected it."

Hermione held Arthur Weasley in great esteem and was, in turn, equally unsurprised. "Your dad always seemed like a very perceptive person. Your mom is, too...she's probably just disappointed."

"No doubt she was looking forward to having three hundred other people to harass," he muttered, and she smiled at him.

"Seriously, Ron... Is everything okay now? We understand one another?"

He rose to his feet and offered her his arm, which she accepted gratefully. Crying always deeply drained her energy physically; she came to her feet still feeling oddly off-balance.

"We're fine. And I'm sorry about... what I said the other night."

She shook her head firmly, recalling his cutting accusation that she was probably entertaining the attentions of a man at work. It was his crude suggestion that they'd been having their illicit rendezvous in her office...so she wouldn't have to leave her work, as it was, he'd claimed, more important to her than the feelings of any human being...that had offended and destroyed her more than anything. When he'd finally left her flat, she had collapsed at Snape's bedside, his usual evening bath forgotten as she sobbed for hours, mumbling incoherently every misery that rose to the surface.

"There's no need to apologize." She led him toward the dingy front door, genuinely afraid that her tears would resume if she continued to dwell on the utter mortification she'd felt when the flow had been stemmed and she'd been sitting beside Snape, who had heard everything. "I really need to get back to cleaning," she told him, hoping her tone was not suddenly too forceful.

They parted on exceptionally good terms. He bade her enjoy the remainder of her long weekend, pointing out that despite how she loathed leaving work unfinished, Susan and Healer Vickers had been right...she required, and fully deserved, a few days to gather her thoughts and regain some perspective. The sudden loss of not only a relationship, but of a fiancé, was significant enough to impair even her consummately professional abilities.

Hermione closed the door behind him and stood in Snape's living room, once again taking in the haunted, almost claustrophobic feeling that pervaded the atmosphere. She was sincerely glad that he'd had the option of spending the majority of the year at Hogwarts. Even a straw bed in the corner of Moaning Myrtle's toilet would have been preferable to the darkly oppressive dwelling in which he'd grown up; it could hardly be termed a home.

She had been wrangling all morning with the suspicion that using his kitchen to prepare herself a beverage or a meal would be an unforgivable trespass of his privacy. She was there to clean and maintain the house until he awoke, but combing through his drawers and outfitting his cabinet with food solely for her benefit would be crossing the line.

Deciding to settle for a glass of cold water, she hesitantly opened the cabinets, all of which were streaked with dust. She hadn't yet tackled the kitchen, preferring instead to start from the top and work her way down. Thus she'd turned her attention immediately to the two tiny bedrooms and minuscule bathroom upstairs.

Hermione found a glass and hastily muttered, "*Scourgify*," unwilling to make even the lightest contact with her fingers until it had been thoroughly cleaned. Having done so,

she filled it with water and leaned against the sink, sipping at it gratefully.

McGonagall had insisted that as Snape's legal custodian, she was under obligation to oversee the maintenance of his body alone; his home, her former Head of House had averred, was not her responsibility. Furthermore, it would be highly unorthodox for her to enter the house unless it became a matter of strict necessity. Hermione had stared at the yellowed, creased deed in her fingers, realizing instantly that regardless what society deemed as the logical boundary of her responsibilities for the man in question, she could not, in good conscience, ignore the maintenance of his only remaining asset. The thought of his home abandoned and falling into disrepair when she alone held the power to preserve it was unthinkable. Guilt would have eaten her alive.

And so, carrying the sparse few legal documents McGonagall had kept after cleaning out his Hogwarts quarters years prior, Hermione had penciled into her schedule, *Cleaning at Spinner's End*. An enforced mental-health break had arisen when Susan spoke to Healer Vickers on her behalf, and it seemed the logical time to complete the errand.

Now that she had finished with approximately half the necessary cleaning and repairs, Hermione wasn't entirely certain how to proceed in the forthcoming months. It would be relatively easy to pop by once or twice a month and cast the perfunctory cleaning charms, thereby ensuring that the house remained in good condition, but she wasn't sure it would assuage her conscience to simply maintain it. She felt she ought to put forth a bit more effort than that for his sake, though she couldn't understand why the thought of his home falling into dilapidation didn't just bother her. It elicited in her stomach an almost panicky feeling. It was all he had...*she* was all he had.

Telling herself she might as well get on with it, she washed her glass, returned it to the dusty cupboard, and pressed on.

She returned that evening in surprisingly high spirits. Severus had fully expected her to spend at least a week moping around her home, especially given her ill nature when she'd been sent away from her job. He'd received an earful that evening, a tirade almost equal in passion to the sobbing precipitated by Weasley's idiocy.

However, she seemed to be oddly happy. His hearing was especially acute that evening, astonishingly so. He could hear her humming from the kitchen, the soft contralto punctuated by what sounded like the gentle clanging of pots and pans being transferred and utilized. He'd known she tended to prepare her own meals...she was certainly too punctilious with her finances to waste money eating out every evening...but in the time he'd been in residence, he'd never heard such exhaustive effort put into her evening meal.

Her humming progressed to outright singing. He resisted the urge to cringe mentally. He couldn't very well begrudge her the opportunity to express her good mood, flummoxed though he was by its sudden appearance. He'd obviously been grossly mistaken in assuming that while she harbored no lingering feelings of a sexual nature for the Weasley boy, she would be devastated by the shouting match. If the delighted feminine lilting from the other room was any indication, she'd overcome her disappointment.

"Good evening," she said, her voice suddenly much louder. She'd entered his room, and he could hear the sloshing of his bathwater. He felt slightly relieved by the imminent prospect of their nightly ritual. Though few would have believed it, he cared greatly about his hygiene. He generally didn't care to entertain for long thoughts of what three years spent bedridden had done to the condition of his skin.

"Your hair is looking much better," Granger remarked. Though he couldn't feel the action, he knew instinctively that she was running her fingers through it, carefully gauging its health. "It's finally catching up with your skin and muscles.

"You're improving so much," she continued, launching into a description of what she'd been doing that day. He was flabbergasted...she'd been cleaning his ~~house~~?

"I wasn't sure what to do about the bedrooms," she trailed on. For once the sound of water running across his own skin didn't distract Severus; he was fuming. "I put all the boxes in the closets...I figured you could take care of that once you've recovered...and I stored some of the other stuff in the attic."

The impudent girl had been going through his belongings...no, not going through: *disposing of*. Never mind the fact that she'd stowed them in the attic rather than throwing them out...she still had no right to be going through his house. Minerva may have turned over the deed, but Granger been absolutely wrong in her assumption that there was any need to enter the house. It was his property, and she'd just spent an entire day violating his privacy. Any witch with a handful of brain cells could have deduced as much.

Severus was positively livid. He could feel the heat beginning to suffuse his face, a thrilling sensation of revitalization coursing through him. Nerves that had lain dormant for years sprang to life, connecting and reveling in the emotion. He felt his eyelid twitch.

"Perhaps I should bring some of your things back here." Granger wrung out the washcloth, drops pattering back into the bowl. "I thought about returning your clothes to the house, but you'll need them when you first wake up. And I doubt you'll be in any condition to move back immediately."

Severus did his utmost to feel his fists. He wanted to clench them and rail out. If he'd been able, he would have given the girl a tongue-lashing she would truly never forget. Weasley's juvenile accusations would seem the fond memories of lover's caresses in comparison. The idiotic girl. The stupid fucking *child*.

"Maybe I'll bring a few more of your books back here." She was still nattering on; he could hear the light rasp of the friction between her fingers and his skin as she examined his body with a familiarity he loathed. He hated the thought of her perusing his books; dipping her nosy fingers into his boxes; pawing at his most private belongings. Spinner's End had been his only true refuge since his parents' deaths; there were objects in that house that could thoroughly compromise even his paltry existence. His other eyelid twitched.

He heard the shifting of her clothing as Granger turned, placing the washbowl on the ground beside his bed. When she turned back, black eyes met brown, and she screamed.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 8

Already facing a stressful job and an overbearing fiancé, Healer Hermione Granger adds another responsibility to her list.

His body remained otherwise immobile, but Hermione was petrified by the sight of his eyes. They were wide and bloodshot, black depths blazing. Her mouth opened and closed ineffectively, and she realized in a sudden moment of revelatory embarrassment that she'd never truly prepared for this moment.

What was she to call him? Professor? Sir? Mr. Snape?

"Professor," she gasped, reaching out a hand and then pulling it back hastily. "Can you see me?"

The eyes narrowed malevolently. There was something distinctly alarming about the sight of a paralyzed being glaring directly, following her every move with angry, disembodied eyes. Steeling herself against the overt fury in his look, she reached frantically for the bowl of water at her feet.

"I'll be right back," she promised, dashing off to the kitchen. Once she'd deposited the bowl and wash rag in the sink, she hurried into her bathroom and threw open the medicine cabinet. She began coming through vitamins, Muggle painkillers...the many "necessities" her parents had insisted she outfit her bathroom with upon moving in.

Snatching a small bottle of Muggle eye drops, she returned to the bedroom and took a seat beside him. She was positive that if he'd been capable of moving any other portion of his face, his lips would have been curled into a grimace and he would have been growling at her. As it was, his ineffectual straining only served to make his dry, irritated eyes bulge even further out of his papery face.

"I'm going to give you some eye drops to soothe your eyes," she said in calm, measured tones. "It's just saline solution. It will take away the stinging and the shock, okay? Look directly upward and try not to flinch."

Shockingly, Snape did as he was told. He focused the deep black irises on the ceiling, and she carefully administered the eye drops, watching in relief as each eye blinked and reopened slowly, the color returning to normal, moist whiteness. Up close, his eyes were an extremely dark, cool brown, barely distinguishable from the pupils.

"There. Is that better?"

He glowered again, and she fought back a reflexive giggle. She knew it had to be absolute hell for Severus Snape to be incapable of expressing derision. He would probably have intensely preferred death.

"Okay, I assume that you would be moving any other part of your body if you could?"

She'd meant it as a question, but the eyes flickered away and focused on the opposite wall as if to say, *Your idiocy pains me.*

"Fine. From now on, blink once for yes and two times for no. Got it?"

One rapid blink followed, and she beamed at him. "This is wonderful progress. I'm going to up the amount of nutritive potion I'm giving you now that I'm certain it's having such great effects."

She bent over him slowly, somehow unable to tear her gaze away from his eyes. His blank, expressionless body had become a constant part of her normal routine, but he'd always registered primarily in her thoughts as a patient, a duty. The man before her was now unmistakably Severus Snape. Despite the nondescript gray clothing and shorter, shorn hair, he could have passed for no one other than himself. His eyes were amazingly expressive.

"Now." She placed a comforting hand on his left shoulder, and his eyes followed her intently, almost suspiciously. "Is there anything else you want? Do you want me to read to you?"

For nearly ten seconds he didn't respond. Finally he gave a slow blink of assent, and she smiled. "You can tell me no, you know. I won't keep reading to you if it bothers you. I just wanted to find a way to help you pass the time once I realized that you were probably conscious in there..."

Though she couldn't have verbalized any explanation aloud, Hermione swore that the eyes were deliberating, indecisive. They flickered back and forth slightly before losing focus and staring at the ceiling.

"So, for a second time: Do you want me to read to you?"

He blinked twice rapidly and then averted his eyes. Their expression had hardened.

Hermione felt inexplicably chastened. Finding that she was suddenly nervous, she wrung her hands slightly. She had no idea how to communicate to him the fact that she had nothing else to do that evening, and she certainly didn't want to leave him after such a momentous breakthrough.

"All right," she said slowly, endeavoring not to allow too much disappointment to seep into her tone. "Do you want me to play you some music?"

He affirmed that he did want music, and they spent a few minutes choosing the composer her preferred for the evening. Hermione left him then, wandering aimlessly into her living room and falling into a sort of stupor on the couch.

She'd spent hours hoping for his recovery, but a portion of her, much like McGonagall, had remained skeptical: the odds of a full recovery were infinitesimal, and she hadn't dared to entertain the thought that he would one day be sitting up in bed, speaking to her in his usual condescending manner as if no time had passed at all. An enormous amount of time had passed...the Wizarding community had been changed irrevocably...and she'd thought that *if* he did reawaken, she would be spending her time telling him of all that had passed. She'd anticipated running errands for him, entertaining him, helping him slowly regain a state of tolerable existence.

If she was truthful with herself, she'd simply wanted to talk to him. The fact that she would be responsible for turning him over to the proper authorities if he ever regained consciousness had weighed heavily upon her; but until she, as a Healer, deemed him fit to attend trial, he would remain in an extended limbo of partial recovery during which she would be free to converse with him and hear his side of the story. She burned to know the full details of what had happened to him three years ago, what had transpired after he fled Hogwarts and how he'd been forced to ingest a potion resulting in such bizarre malignancies.

Instead he seemed determined to avoid her at all costs. She supposed it was foolish of her to fancy that he'd *enjoyed* hearing her read these months...she was, after all, hardly an entertainer or an actress. She'd merely done her best to alleviate his pain and boredom, and while she knew it was understandable that he would want some time to himself to consider his progress, she felt stung.

Possessed by an odd desire, Hermione returned to her bedroom and opened the top drawer of her bed table. Within she'd placed the mysterious photograph of Narcissa Malfoy. She'd known at the time that it was a terrible trespass of his privacy to keep it separate from his other belongings, but she hadn't been able to restrain herself from examining it on a daily basis. She longed to ask him how he'd come into possession of a photograph that obviously had belonged to Lucius Malfoy...and one so intimate, at that.

She could no longer enumerate the times she'd sat cross-legged upon her bed, staring balefully at that photograph. Trained to diagnose and treat illnesses of the physical body, Hermione was incapable of truly examining emotions, and especially her own state of mind, with anything approaching impartiality. After months of careful self-examination, she remained unable to explain to herself why the photograph irked her so greatly. The logical portion of her brain repeatedly assured the emotional portion that Snape had simply run across the photograph at the Malfoys' manor and chosen to keep it for some reason.

Did it bother her that he'd chosen to keep it? Well, yes, it *did*, she admitted, biting her lip. What she couldn't understand was *why*. Her feelings had long ago been rent by the opposing viewpoints of Snape's character. On the one hand, he'd murdered Albus Dumbledore in cold blood; the fact that Dumbledore's memories clearly exonerated

his actions failed to alter the harsh truth of the matter. He was a man thoroughly capable of murder, and the thought alarmed Hermione.

On the other hand, he'd genuinely served the Order, and he'd suffered tremendously for his loyalties. The three years he'd spent imprisoned in his own body were merely the tip of the ice berg. He'd undoubtedly suffered countless bouts of interrogation and torture at Lord Voldemort's wand over the years, and his activities as a spy had been paramount in turning the course of the war on more than one occasion. She shuddered to imagine the type of world in which she would have found herself had Snape not willingly sacrificed his safety and sanity.

So why should it bother her that he might perhaps have carried a torch for Narcissa Malfoy? Somehow the thought left a bitter taste in her mouth. Narcissa Malfoy was precisely the type of woman Hermione despised. She'd devoted her life to blindly following a husband to whom she'd submitted all control. She was yet another mindless beauty who emerged from her polished shell only to inflict cruelty on those she considered her inferiors...which, in her case, comprised more or less everyone. Hermione suspected that providing Lucius Malfoy with Draco's pathetic, simpering presence had been her one true devotion in life. It would have amazed her to discover that the woman had expressed even the most fleeting hint of an original thought in her life. She privately thought that Narcissa Malfoy had made her bed, and she could damn well lie in it.

Hermione supposed that she'd harbored all along a preconceived idea of who Snape would be attracted to, and Narcissa Malfoy decidedly did not fit the bill. He was an abrasive teacher and a wholly unpleasant man, but he was brilliant; she'd been aware of that from practically the first moment she'd set foot in his classroom. Seven years of his tutelage had made eminently clear the fact that he would never openly display approval or favor of her, and part of her despised and resented what she'd originally seen as his cowardice and inability to stand up to House prejudices.

As she 'd grown older, though, she'd grudgingly admitted that Snape had offered her his respect in his own way. It was a subtle approach, at times backhanded and always purely, consummately Slytherin, but he had nevertheless treated her with a certain silent acceptance he'd never afforded her classmates. She in turn offered him her deference, even when his actions burned so deeply that she spent hours crouched on the floor of the shower, the rapid spray of water masking the wracking sobs.

She poked ineffectually at the photograph, willing it to disappear. Snape had made her cry more times than she could count, but he'd also made her glow. He'd made her realize time and again that the desire and acquisition of knowledge was both his ultimate goal and hers, and she idolized him for it. The thought that he would have squandered even a moment of his formidable brainpower on a tramp like Narcissa Malfoy aggravated her to no foreseeable end.

Hermione abandoned her musings and returned to the kitchen, idly fixing herself a cup of tea. Even without the photograph directly in front of her, she could mentally trace the silhouette of Narcissa's body, all long, lithe curves and shimmering flaxen hair. After meeting Fleur Delacour she'd told herself that it was useless to envy other women. It was her accomplishments and her career by which she ought to judge herself and compare herself to others, not her looks, but it was difficult to stand by that pronouncement when women like Narcissa existed. It was almost more painful to think that Snape might have fancied her purely for her looks than to imagine him seeing any indication of kindred spirit in her.

Returning to her room, Hermione caught a glance of herself in the full-length mirror fastened to the back of her bedroom door. She was tall for a girl, there was no denying that; but she was not particularly graceful or lissom, and her coloring left something to be desired. She didn't have Narcissa's delicate contrast of bright blue eyes and icy hair, and she didn't possess the porcelain complexion wizards seemed to favor so greatly in witches. Her own complexion was a nondescript, medium shade, faint hints of olive belying her mother's Spanish heritage.

She stowed the photograph of Narcissa Malfoy in her bed table drawer once again, resolutely ignoring it as she chose a book to entertain herself for the evening. If Snape wanted to be left alone with his thoughts of a woman who didn't deserve his consideration, she would damn well let him.

Eight

Chapter 8 of 8

Already facing a stressful job and an overbearing fiancé, Healer Hermione Granger adds another responsibility to her list.

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"Come in."

Granger made a barely perceptible flick of her wand in the direction of the other room, and Severus heard the faint click of the front door opening. The girl...young woman, he corrected himself, mildly amused...remained standing at the foot of the bed, her hands perched obstinately on her shapely hips. Hardly a girl at all.

She'd been antagonizing him for days now, and it was rapidly becoming unendurable. He should have known that if anyone would dismiss his repeated scorn, it would be Granger. The more frequently she demanded answers about the potion, the more he glared at her and refused to respond. They'd reached a sort of stalemate earlier that morning, and Granger had brashly declared that as it was only Saturday, she had all weekend to wait. She wasn't moving, she claimed, until he provided her with the answers she desired. Though he assured himself repeatedly that he loathed her very presence, Severus was forced to acknowledge that the sight of her in such a snit was becoming endlessly amusing.

To Severus' astonishment, Susan Bones walked into the room, her wild auburn hair windblown and her cheeks bright pink. "It's getting cold out there," she remarked cheerily, a large dish, presumably bearing some kind of food, encircled in her hands. "Autumn's definitely here. Hermione, what are you *doing*?"

Had Severus been able to speak, he could certainly have provided Miss Bones with an accurate overview of Granger's irrationality. As it was, he lay immobile in the bed, Granger having long since propped him up against an array of charmed pillows so that he was forced to look at her directly.

The chit sincerely thought she could beat him in a staring contest. If anything, she would provoke him into further progress by forcing him to laugh. Despite having not set foot outside that morning, her mousy brown hair was in a state of complete disarray, and she was flushed with the effort of arguing with an unresponsive opponent. How trying that had to be, he thought viciously, for someone so unaccustomed to simply shutting the hell up once in a while.

"I'm waiting for him to answer me," Granger replied in a surprisingly intimidating growl. Severus had to rein in a sudden spike of admiration. "He refuses to answer any of my questions about the potion that put him in this state."

"How can he possibly answer?" Miss Bones interjected. "He can't talk."

"No, but he can respond perfectly well to yes-and-no questions. Can't you, Professor?" she snapped, her hands returning to her hips. Miss Bones was eyeing her friend with a curious mixture of bemusement and worry, a combination hardly improved by Granger's scantily clad state. She'd marched into his room early that morning wearing barely more than her sleeping attire, announcing that she'd spent the entire night researching potions and was sick and tired of his stubbornness.

"Honestly, Professor, you're the most ridiculous man I've ever met," Granger declared, pointing an accusatory finger at his stationary form. "I've already told you that I'll hold anything you tell me in the strictest confidence. I'm bound by law, as your Healer and your guardian, not to divulge anything you say. You know perfectly well that it will all go toward improving your condition, if any further improvements are possible.

"Am I to surmise from this...this absurd display...that you don't want to improve?" she finished shrilly. There was no need for him to reply, really; she provided all the theatrics for him. Granger threw up her hands with a shriek of feminine frustration and stalked out of the room, Miss Bones trailing behind her. Severus thought he caught the faint sounds of her friend admonishing Granger to put on clothing.

"I'm sure it's nothing he's never seen before," Granger shot back waspishly in reference to her thin cotton shirt and pants, and Severus chuckled internally. He'd never imagined that arousing the girl's anger could be so simple.

Hermione spent a great deal of time that Saturday afternoon deliberating the best way to continue her offensive. Susan stuffed her full of a delicious casserole and then dragged her shopping for the afternoon, but it didn't require much perception on Susan's part to notice that her heart wasn't in it.

"You okay, Hermione?" Susan finally asked when they'd settled in a small Muggle café. Hermione shook her head miserably, sipping at her latté.

"I've reached a serious impasse with Snape," she explained in response to Susan's knitted brows. "This isn't just temporary stubbornness. He has serious reservations about telling me what happened with that potion or who made it. He completely refuses to react to anything I ask or say."

"Why would he fight it?" Susan bit into a biscotti, still visibly confused.

Hermione half-heartedly blew a stream of air over the filmy surface of her drink. "I don't know. I can't help but wonder if it has anything to do with Narcissa." She'd disciplined herself against staring at Snape's illicit picture of Narcissa Malfoy quite so frequently, but she still found it impossible to push her thoughts regarding the image entirely from her mind. Truthfully, the thought of the wispy blonde as the the object of Snape's affections...requited or otherwise...still set her teeth on edge.

"The Malfoy woman?"

"Yes. Maybe she *did* petition for custody of him in order to harm him... Maybe he realizes that he has something to fear from her, and he knows that answering any of my questions could only put him in more danger."

"Snape may be an unreasonable git, but surely even *he* realizes that he's safe with you," Susan argued. "What does he think, that you're going to turn him over to that Malfoy woman once you get the answers of out him?"

Hermione felt an oddly defensive streak rising in her chest. "Well, why not?" she insisted a little more heatedly. "He has that picture of her, after all. Maybe that isn't a picture that he took when he was in bed with her. Maybe it's blackmail. Maybe she threatened him in the past, and he had to use it as leverage to keep himself safe from her at one point."

Susan's lip curled, her expression assuming a look of skeptical scorn. "Not that I'm saying Snape in bed with Narcissa Malfoy is *anymore* plausible," she began, "but how would he have acquired that picture from someone other than her? He couldn't have just strolled up to her husband and *asked* for that sort of thing."

"Maybe it wasn't her husband." Half-formed suspicions were beginning to solidify in Hermione's mind, surfacing and then retreating just as quickly. There were myriad ways in which Snape could have acquired the image...he was, after all, a former spy, and the concept of covert reconnaissance was hardly unknown to him...but really, the means by which he'd done it was irrelevant to her. He'd obviously done it to protect himself, but why?

"Perhaps," Susan suggested with an excited look in her eyes, "he was having an affair with her, and he had the picture because if her husband ever suspected she was being unfaithful, he could claim it was someone else. Say that he'd found proof because she'd taken dirty pictures and given them to another man, someone he knew. You can't deny that it would be just like a Slytherin to think of any possible way to save their own arse."

"No," Hermione interrupted firmly, "that's not it. He wasn't having an affair with her; she's not his type."

The patrons at a nearby table jumped, startled, at the sound of Susan's soaring laughter. "His *type*?" she echoed disbelievingly, coughing and giggling simultaneously.

"Since when are you an expert on his *type*? How do you know Snape even *has* a type?"

Hermione pursed her lips resolutely and remained silent.

Susan, noticing her friend's discomfiture, sobered immediately. "Hermione, I'm not making fun of you," she murmured, her voice softening to dissuade any further attention from the other customers. "But really, *logically*, my suggestion is just as possible as yours. You have no idea if Snape has a particular type of woman he goes after. For all you know, women aren't his type at *all*."

"I just *know*," Hermione returned, but even she could hear that the spark had gone out of her tone. "He's too smart for someone like her. He'd want to be with someone who is his equal... Not her."

"How do you know she's not just as smart as him?" Susan flagged down their waitress and requested the check, all the while glancing worriedly back and forth in Hermione's direction. Eventually Hermione found herself growing tired of squirming under her friend's gaze.

Once they'd left the building and were walking through the crisp air again, Susan restated the question in a firmer tone. "Again, I ask you, how do you know Narcissa Malfoy isn't just as smart as Snape? They're about the same age, right? They might have been at Hogwarts together. If anyone would know how intelligent she is, it would be one of her classmates, another Slytherin."

"Lucius Malfoy is five years older than Snape," Hermione replied matter-of-factly and automatically. "All their biographical details were printed in the *Prophet* after the last of the Death Eaters were incarcerated."

"That doesn't mean Narcissa is...older than him, I mean," Susan hastened to add.

Hermione drew her coat more tightly around her chest and stared at the horizon, the dozens of people milling about her falling into the blurred periphery of her vision. Autumn had arrived in full force, and the cold would only become more pronounced. Snape had been under her care for months, and before long, questions would surface regarding her progress...or lack thereof...with her infamous patient. St. Mungo's no longer housed him, to be sure, but the hospital was nevertheless funding his continued supply of potions, and she was already having difficulty paying Horace Slughorn for his regular...and absurdly overpriced...production of Snape's vitamin supplement, as it was not a procedure she had the wherewithal or the knowledge to undertake herself.

Her wages were considerable in comparison to the average witch's or wizard's, as were most Healers', but she was by no means affluent. Ever a slave to the debt she'd incurred as a student, her requisite monthly payments to Gringotts sapped a significant deal of her income. In three of four years' time, when she'd fully reimbursed the Wizarding bank for the loans she'd taken out to complete her apprenticeship, she could conceivably pay for Snape's long-term care without pronounced financial difficulty.

At the moment, however, it was questionable. Susan had offered once or twice to speak with Slughorn about possibly providing the vitamin supplement to her at a discounted rate as a St. Mungo's employee, but Hermione couldn't help but feel that while it was technically legal, being so evasive in her patient's care only underscored her desperation. Yet she knew she couldn't very well ask the neonatal Healers for a supply; she had no desire to arouse any more questions about Snape's state than she was already facing on a regular basis, both from Slughorn and from her colleagues. Really, she thought darkly, it was only a matter of time before Slughorn blabbed to someone at St. Mungo's about her alteration of Snape's care. She simply wanted to preserve the peace for as long as possible.

Her situation, all in all, was a simplistic one: it had been foolish for her to think that she was financially able to care for Snape, even if intellectually and professionally she was more than equal to the challenge.

It was rather like caring for a child as a single mother, she mused as she and Susan continued their walk. She giggled involuntarily. There were many parallels, of course...Snape was wholly dependent upon her care in all areas of life...but he was hardly a child.

Susan had glanced up at her curiously. "What's so funny?" she demanded.

"Well, for one, you've got biscotti crumbs on your chin."

Susan's fair skin disappeared behind a bright red flush as she brushed self-consciously at her chin. "Gone?" she asked, her voice squeaky with embarrassment. Hermione smiled at her and nodded.

"Gone."

"What's two?"

"What?"

"You said 'for one,' " Susan reiterated. "What's two?"

"Oh." Hermione laughed. "I was just thinking about how supporting Snape is kind of like being a single mother and supporting a child. I go to work every day and bring back the food and clothes, but all he does is stare at me and be sullen."

Susan laughed as well. "He always did strike me as temperamental," she agreed. "He probably would have bitten our heads off if we hadn't been students. Couldn't lose tenure, you know."

"Of course," Susan continued with a wicked smile, "he's hardly a little boy. The day will come when you'll have cured him so thoroughly and so well that he'll be able to get out of that bed, and I'd wager you'll be in for it then."

"For what?" Hermione demanded, startled.

"For going through his house."

Thunderstruck, Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. An old woman who'd been walking directly behind them squawked in protest as both she and her small dog nearly collided with the two girls, but Hermione was far too consumed by her own confusion.

"What are you talking about? I went over to his house to clean. No one's taken care of it in years."

"And Professor McGonagall didn't warn you against it?" Susan asked skeptically. "I'm not criticizing you, mind...I'm just surprised. I know that handling someone else's home and estate is a pretty common practice in the Muggle world, but for us, it's practically unheard of."

"She did mention that once," Hermione mumbled distractedly, recalling her conversation with the Headmistress in the back of her mind, "but I also remember very vividly that I told her I'd feel better if I went over there and did some repairs myself, and she agreed that the house could probably use it."

"But you'll notice she didn't say that Snape would be okay with it."

"I beg your pardon?" Susan was looking at her with infuriating patience and indulgence, making Hermione feel doubly stupid, like a well-meaning but impertinent child. "I was only doing what was appropriate under the circumstances. If he ever does recover, he'll require that house as living space since he's no longer employed at Hogwarts. I couldn't just let it fall into completely disrepair. No human being could possibly live there safely if I hadn't..."

Susan sighed. "I love you, Hermione, but even a decade hasn't been sufficient to teach you some things. If he'd been dead and you were going through his things to determine what would be sold, that would be different...it would be acceptable. But prolonged illnesses and comas are much more common here than for Muggles. After all, magic can keep a person alive even longer than most Muggle medical technology."

"Agreed," Hermione replied, her feet once again falling into effortless tandem with Susan's leisurely steps. "But why does that make my decision to care for his house inappropriate?"

"Wizards just don't do that," Susan explained softly, "not while the owner is still alive. Maybe Muggle notions of privacy are completely different; I really don't know. It's just one of those quirks that exists, but they never think to mention it in Muggle Studies classes."

"That's why he's so upset with me." Hermione felt the overwhelming urge to slam her head against the nearest brick wall. "How could I be so thick? Of course he's being uncooperative...I told him about everything I rearranged and cleared out. That was the night he first opened his eyes, so I completely forgot about it afterward. But if it's as inappropriate as you say, he's probably *furios* with me."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Susan agreed, refastening her long hair with an easy habitual flick of her wand. "But like I said, I'm not criticizing you. You're absolutely right: if Snape *does* recover, the day will come when he'll need to live there, and then, I imagine, he'll be grateful for all the work you've put it."

"I certainly hope so." Hermione wasn't sure whether she ought to feel indignant or ashamed. She resumed staring contemplatively at the horizon, wondering how to atone for what a man as strict and unrelenting as Snape undoubtedly considered an enormous indiscretion.