

It Should Be Me

by ks51689

Severus Snape is enjoying his position as St. Mungo's Head Potioneer when Hermione Granger appears as one of the new Healers-In-Training. After beginning a cautious friendship with his former student, he finds himself falling for her. Unfortunately, she's already taken.

The Hospital Garden

Chapter 1 of 3

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Author's Note: Thank you to my beta justine34 for all of her encouragement and constructive criticism! I had meant for this story to be a one-shot, but I felt like it was too long, so I have split it into three chapters.

The characters belong to J.K. Rowling, and the title and story is inspired by Interpol's "C'mere."

A crash welcomed Severus Snape as he entered St. Mungo's Hospital Potions Lab. Sighing, he directed his attention to one of his hapless assistants scurrying to vanish the spilled solution from the linoleum floor, while the others suddenly became very interested in their own cauldrons. Apparently, his decision to leave Hogwarts in no way limited his exposure to dunderheads. Biting back an insult, Severus dropped his briefcase under the front counter to the left of the entrance.

It had been two years since he nearly bled to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Thankfully, Voldemort did actually die, and an unconscious Severus was found on the instructions of a very insistent Harry Potter and taken directly to St. Mungo's. Few had expected him to recover from Nagini's attack, least of all Severus himself. The blood loss was incredible and the Dark magic unheard of, but past experiences with Arthur Weasley's encounter with Nagini had left the staff better prepared. After weeks of languishing unconsciously in his hospital bed, Severus wrenched open his eyes with a start, and the shock of being alive and not chained to the bed nearly stopped his heart. Luckily, in a typical Snape manner, he was able to pull himself together enough to snipe at the gasping attending Healer that he would appreciate a glass of water, as his throat was very dry. Now, two years later, he was left with two Knut-sized imprints on the side of his neck and an occasional jolt of pain, but nothing permanently disabling.

While he was sure he had made his attending Healers' lives a living nightmare, they had been kind and conscientious over the year he'd spent recuperating, even in the face of some of his more violent barbs. Thus, Severus decided his time was better served providing his brewing services to them, rather than dealing with the clumsy imbeciles that he had been indentured to serve for the last 20 years of his life, and took the position of Head Potioneer at the hospital. As such, he oversaw the creation of every brew distributed and had the freedom to do his own personal brewing, time permitting. Although his certified team of potioneers sometimes seemed more like a band of buffoons, he truly enjoyed the work.

Sitting at a bench behind the front counter, Severus cast a glance at the team working behind him. Brewing in a neat row of five cauldrons, each member worked on their standard morning supplies, including commonly used antidotes, such as Deflating Draught (used at an amusingly high rate), Blood-Replenishing Potion, healing pastes, and Calming Draught. Eyeing the sheet of parchment tacked to the wall, he called over to his assistant for the morning report.

"Jones, what's on for today?" he asked the clumsy tech who had just botched his efforts at bottling. Looking relieved to have avoided a verbal beating, Jones pulled the list off the wall and began to read off the requests.

"Let's see here, sir, they need some more Strengthening Solution, Wound-cleaning Potion, and-"

"Several cauldrons of Calming Solution, stat," finished a female voice behind Severus. Turning, Severus was struck by the sight of Hermione Granger, smiling at him from across the counter, wearing lime green robes and a "Healer-in-Training" badge. He had heard whispers that one of his more infamous (in his opinion) former students might take a training position at the hospital, but he had hardly expected to be ambushed by her cheerfulness that morning.

Seemingly unperturbed by the presence of her former Potions master, Hermione continued, her bright smile never faltering.

"Sorry, guys. We've got a floor full of mothers in labor and half of the fathers are nearly purple in the face with anxiety."

Feeling the eyes of his assistants boring into his back and waiting for him to react, Severus turned towards them sharply. It was clear everyone in the room recognized the young woman.

"Well," he barked, "on with it, then!" Turning back to face her, he wore an impassive look despite the confused thoughts buzzing in his brain. Why wasn't she more surprised by his presence? He could barely remember their last encounter, he was dying after all, but they certainly hadn't made amends for all of his snide comments, and yes, cruel behavior. Why wasn't she a little intimidated, or even more, angry with him? He was Severus Snape, damn it! Had he really lost his touch?

"Miss Granger," he replied smoothly. "I had heard you had taken a position here. I suppose the offers for a war hero like you must be endless." He emphasized the word 'hero' as if it were unpalatable.

Not taking the bait, though her smile - he noticed with satisfaction - faltered for a millisecond, Hermione simply shook her head.

"No," she replied, meeting his stare. "I only applied to St. Mungo's. Anyway, I must get back before my superiors start looking for me." There was a glint in her eye that Severus could only define as defiant.

With that, she turned to leave, only pausing to leave a parting remark.

"Do hurry with the Draught," she said from the lab's entrance. And she was gone.

At noon, Severus was still thinking about this latest revelation. A member of the 'Golden Trio' was at St. Mungo's, and it seemed he might be forced to come into contact with her far more than he liked. It also seemed like she wasn't in the least blindsided by his presence as he was by hers. Attempting to push the thought from his mind, Severus left the lab en route to the staff tearoom. While he preferred eating alone, he found the tea served there strangely pleasant, enough that he endured the rowdiness of his fellow staff.

His ears were assaulted by a wall of voices as soon as he opened the staff room's door. The room was packed with lime-green-clad men and women seemingly trying to yell over each other while eating sandwiches of various types and drinking hot tea and coffee from ceramic mugs. Making his way to the side counter, Severus quickly poured a cup of tea from the dispenser and found a seat towards the back of the room. Well-practiced at blocking out inane noise, he settled into the blue plastic seat and pulled out a medical journal, leisurely turning the pages as he sipped the delicious tea.

"Oh, hello, Professor Snape!"

It was that high-pitched, chipper voice again. Rousing him from his deep concentration, Severus nearly spilled his tea everywhere.

"Is it your aim to have me burn myself?" he asked angrily as he steadied his cup and shot her a glare. Throwing him an apologetic look, Hermione pulled up a seat next to him.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to startle you, I just noticed you over here by yourself, and I thought I'd say hi... again," she finished, looking slightly unnerved. 'Finally,' Severus thought to himself, noting the look.

"And it didn't occur to you that I might be alone by choice?" Severus inquired, wearing one of his patented sneers.

"Well, yes," Hermione responded, her boldness returning. "But, I saw the journal you were reading, and I was hoping you might discuss an article in there. You know, the one about the uses of dragon blood?"

Seeing that he couldn't simply scare her away, he attempted a simple brush-off.

"Unfortunately, I haven't gotten that far yet, Miss Granger," he said casually, opening the journal once more and beginning to read in hopes that she would just leave.

"Oh, well, I'll wait," Hermione replied. Lowering the periodical to steal a glance at the girl, Severus realized that she would not leave until he engaged her in conversation. This had to be her revenge for years of his criticism and brushoffs. With a sigh, he placed the journal to the side, threw her an annoyed look, and gave in. Perhaps Nagini's attack really had taken something from him.

"Well, Miss Granger, let me hear your thoughts."

Hermione lit up at the invitation (and perhaps victory, but Severus would never concede to that), and Severus found himself having an enthusiastic debate, well, on her part, regarding the usefulness of dragon blood in certain remedies. Though he would hardly call the interaction enjoyable, it was quite distracting, and it was only once they noticed the exit of their colleagues that their discussion came to a close.

As they walked down the hall to their respective destinations, Hermione turned to him, looking unnerved once again.

"I really enjoyed our discussion today," she began.

"Hmm," Severus replied noncommittally.

"Well," she continued, "I was thinking that perhaps tomorrow we could go somewhere quieter." This halted Severus, who gave Hermione a questioning look. Realizing the implications of her statement, she stopped, holding her hands in front of her, as if surrendering.

"No, no," she said quickly, looking embarrassed. "What I meant was I know somewhere quieter to take our breaks. Somewhere you can read in peace." Though he had every intention of refusing the offer, Severus paused for a moment. 'A quieter place might be nice...' he considered.

"Where?" he asked bluntly.

"I'll show you tomorrow!" she said gleefully, clearly pleased with his acceptance. "It'll be a surprise. Just meet me on the third floor at break time tomorrow." Catching a glimpse of a nearby clock, she sped up her pace.

"Oh, I must be going!"

With that she rushed off to her assignment, leaving behind a very flustered Severus Snape.

"Miss Granger!" he called after her in annoyance. "I don't like surprises!"

"You'll like this one!" she called back over her shoulder from halfway down the hall.

Grunting, he began walking in the direction of the potions lab.

"We'll see about that," he muttered to himself.

Severus stood impatiently at the doors of the third floor ward. He had been waiting nearly 15 minutes for Hermione's arrival, though he ~~had~~ arrived 10 minutes early. Still, she was already five minutes late, and he felt like a fool waiting while staff and patients passed, throwing him inquisitive looks.

A minute later, she arrived, looking out of breath.

"I'm sorry, sir," she apologized. "The influx of babies to the maternity ward is running us ragged. I thought Muggle babies were a handful!" Wiping perspiration from her brow, she looked at him, as if trying to measure his level of annoyance. Standing straight with his arms folded tightly to his chest, he tried his best to give her a look that said 'Well, get on with it!' Clearly understanding the look, she gestured at him to follow her, and pushed open the doors to the ward. Silently following, Severus looked around at the patients who seemed to be suffering from all types of maladies. Some seemed to have taken on strange colors, while others' reactions were less physical and more emotional, something he noted while passing a woman laughing hysterically for no apparent reason.

Severus found himself at the opposite side of the hall when Hermione finally stopped. They stood in front of a door which simply read "Hospital Garden." Turning back to grin at Severus, Hermione opened the door and walked through, Severus following closely behind her. Once inside, he could only stare in awe.

It was clear that this was no ordinary room. Although logically the room must have had walls and a roof, its perimeters seemed to be charmed to appear endless, with lush greenery encompassing the expanse and an enchanted ceiling complete with fluffy clouds blocking the sun's most oppressive rays. The gravel path they stood on sloped downwards, into the heart of the garden. Mature elm trees loomed over the curved path, leading to a small pond in the garden's center. Metal benches with intricately designed backrests were placed throughout. A few visitors were in attendance, some sitting on the bank of the pond, others occupying benches or strolling towards the room's borders. It felt as if a light breeze blew. It was an actual park on the third floor of a magical hospital, hidden in Muggle London. Severus couldn't help wondering if magic would ever cease to amaze him.

It was then Severus remembered who had brought him there, looking down to see a smug Hermione smirking up at him. Grumbling, he walked over to a shady bench, settling down with his journal in hand. Sitting next to him, Hermione quietly pulled out a sandwich and her own periodical, and began to peruse it as she ate her lunch.

It was there that they spent the remainder of their lunch break, silently reading and enjoying the enchanted fresh air of the charmed hospital garden room. Severus, of course, wondered about the specific mechanics of such a place, but there was no way he would give the know-it-all the satisfaction of lecturing him about its origins. When it was time to go, they both picked up their things and walked through the door and down the hallway in silence.

"Well, what did you think?" Hermione asked as they reached the staircase. Looking down at her face, Severus couldn't help recognizing the familiar expression she wore. She always seemed eager to please, and this time was no different. Unable to think of an insult, he elected to give a simple answer.

"Thank you."

Within a week, their trips to the Hospital Garden had become routine. They would meet at the doors of the third floor, usually with Hermione out of breath due to some strange emergency, and they would then make their way to the room and select a bench upon entering. At first it was quiet, each of them keeping to themselves while they ate and read. However, after some days, Hermione ventured to ask his opinion on one thing or another, and Severus eventually found it easier not to resist conversation.

Things were cordial, some might even say friendly. Sometimes Hermione would bring him an extra sandwich, and Severus would bring some tea from the staff tearoom from time to time. In time 'Ms. Granger' became 'Hermione' and he ceased flinching as 'Severus' began to pass freely from her lips. It was in this emerging ease that he finally asked Hermione about the room's history, curiosity overcoming his own pride. The properties of the room, as he had guessed, were quite similar to those of the Great Hall, in terms of the charms placed its ceiling and walls. The plants and pond, however, were created in a typical Muggle fashion, though Severus had his doubts that no magic was involved, considering the size of the elms.

He often wondered why he had previously been unaware of this room. He had, after all, spent a considerable amount of time as a patient of the hospital and had not once been brought there. He conceded, however, that - as Hermione put it - he was not the most enjoyable patient and thus not likely to have any of his Healers eager to spend any personal time wheeling him around a garden.

As time went on, Severus also began to notice things about Hermione. Though he knew her to be an insufferable know-it-all, he was begrudgingly impressed with her abilities not only to recite facts, but to argue their importance with a quick wit. He also noticed, and attempted to ignore, that her brown eyes seemed to light up just so in the heat of an argument. She would also unconsciously bat wayward curls out of her eyes, eager to maintain eye contact with her opponent. When she completely disagreed with a point, she wrinkled her nose, her eyebrow knitted in annoyance. But, these observations were inconsequential, Severus reminded himself. He was simply sizing her up in the midst of a battle of wits.

Through their conversations, Severus also learned that Hermione had returned to Hogwarts following the Dark Lord's defeat. Having seen the casualties of war, she had determined that healing was her calling, and returned to school with the intent of achieving her NEWTs in order to gain acceptance to St. Mungo's prestigious Healer-in-Training Program. He learned that she had visited him once during his stay, a thought that annoyingly made his heart skip a beat, but it had been during the period in which he was unconscious. It seemed Potter's revelations of his war efforts had left her determined to turn over a new leaf in their previously hostile student/teacher relationship, thus her defiant cheerfulness during their first meeting. But, all was not forgiven, and they would often debate heatedly as to whether his cruel tactics were actually well-taught lessons or expressions of blind hatred. Even then, the argument usually petered out, unresolved. War, it seemed, rendered these things less significant.

The revelation that may have rattled him most, though his face was schooled into an emotionless stare, was the news that she was seeing Ronald Weasley. Only under threat of an Unforgivable might he have admitted that this left a rather hollow feeling in his stomach.

Despite their growing intimacy, Severus refused to believe that he felt anything more for Hermione than collegial friendship. She was pleasant to talk to, and far more immune to his more caustic sense of humor than his peers. She was simply growing on him. Even his mounting urge to set something on fire at the mere mention of Weasley's name wasn't enough to convince him that perhaps he was feeling something more.

One afternoon Hermione suggested they relocate to under the shade of a particularly large elm tree. It was only after her liberal use of the Cushioning Charm on the ground that Severus followed. The experience was not as uncomfortable as he imagined. He appreciated the shade from the charmed sunny day as well as the firm backrest provided by the trunk of the aged elm. He might have also enjoyed the slight touch of Hermione's shoulder on his as they sat close together to share the elm's stable support, but he chose to ignore the slight tingle where they touched as best he could.

When it was time to leave, they each stood and brushed themselves off. Dropping her magazine, Hermione leaned over quickly to retrieve it at the same time as Severus also bent over. A second later, he found himself at face level with her wild hair. Usually precariously restrained in a bun, it had fallen out, curls spread loosely over her shoulders and back. He detected the slight scent of citrus, perhaps grapefruit or maybe orange, and found himself leaning forward to get a closer smell. Unfortunately, Hermione also chose this moment to straighten up once more, hitting his nose squarely with the back of her head.

"Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed, covering her mouth in horror. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Severus!"

Groaning, he covered his nose with his hand, vaguely aware of the blood that was flowing freely from it. It was not the pain of the injury which clouded his mind, however,

but the thought that it had occurred while he was sniffing Hermione Granger's hair. And he had enjoyed it.

It was then Severus realized he was in too deep, and once again, the object of his affection was taken.

The Ultimatum

Chapter 2 of 3

Severus attempts to continue the friendship, but can he handle it?

A/N: Thank you once again to my beta justine 34 for her encouragement and corrections.

The next logical step would be for Severus to avoid Hermione Granger at all costs. To end their lunches together, cease visiting the Hospital Garden, perhaps even leave her orders to be filled by one of his many bumbling assistants. She was unattainable on all levels, and any sort of pursuit on Severus' part would end in heartbreak. Alas, with his life thus far as proof, Severus was anything but logical when in love.

Thus, he found himself seated under the very same elm where he had finally acknowledged, internally, his attraction to Hermione. She was sitting much closer this afternoon, sharing her magazine as he had forgotten his own. It was only a small white lie, as he was well aware that his own magazine sat safely in the drawer of his desk, but now that he was admitting to himself that he was attracted to her, he figured he might as well enjoy her company while he could. At the moment, they were perusing a medical journal and she seemed to be quite absorbed in a study on the long term effects of Quidditch injuries.

"Quite the Quidditch fan, are you?" asked a puzzled Severus. They had been on this page now for ten minutes, and he had only skimmed the article as he had very little interest in these specific healing spells.

"Hmm?" Hermione said, jerking from a reverie. Looking down at the page, she seemed to realize the question.

"Oh, well, no, not really," she replied. "But Ron is, and well, he really isn't interested in my other work."

"I see," Severus said with a nod. "Yes, I suppose hearing about Mrs. Mayweather's bubble-producing hiccups or Mr. Andrew's poorly aimed Engorgement Charm is only entertaining to the few of us in the medical profession." Hermione laughed at his dry joke and put the journal down.

"No, no," she responded through her laughter. "He also finds those stories amusing. It's just, there are only so many of those a day, and he never wants to hear about my research interests." The last part she said rather quietly, as if she was embarrassed to even be bringing it up. Severus leaned away from her slightly, placing weight on his left hand so he could get a better look at her face. She was staring straight ahead, her brown eyes unfocused in thought.

This wasn't the first time she had hinted that she and Weasley lacked similar interests. On one occasion, she had explained that although they fought very little, it seemed their schedules kept them from even communicating in general. Their training programs were rigorous, and as she had put it, the last thing Ron was interested in hearing about during his downtime was the magical properties of certain venoms or the minutia of antidote application.

"I find your research interests quite interesting," he replied, unable to help himself. "Though, I suppose I am biased, as anything involving the venom of magical creatures would certainly relate to my own history." This caused Hermione to turn her head towards him rather suddenly. She wore a look of tender concern as her eyes drifted down his neck to the scene of the crime.

"I know you're not fond of talking about it, but does it still bother you?" she asked in a soft voice. She made a gesture as if reaching to take his hand, but her hand hesitated. This wasn't the first time she had made such movements, but Severus had convinced himself early on that the movements were only a characteristic of her bleeding heart nature.

"No, not much anymore," Severus answered, looking away slightly. Something about the look in her eye inspired an odd feeling. It wasn't as if no one had expressed concern for him before in fact, after everything was said and done, it seemed everyone had great sympathy for what he had gone through. However, the look she was giving him displayed more than the usual concern. It seemed she was taking it all quite personally.

"Honestly," he reiterated. "I've hardly felt anything since the incident." She nodded and looked away, staring ahead once more.

"You know, I really am sorry that I left you there that day," she said quietly.

"Yes," he agreed with irritation. "We've discussed this at length already, and I believe it was established that my past history as a bastard directed your actions." This caused Hermione to smile slightly.

"You have to admit, you were pretty cruel," she replied. "Though, I suppose you've mellowed out. You certainly haven't bitten my head off lately." Now she was smirking with amusement.

Wanting greatly to change the subject, Severus tried to direct it back to its beginning.

"If research isn't his thing, what is it that Mr. Weasley is truly interested in?" Severus asked, finding it difficult to control the condescension in his voice.

"Mostly defense spells and the like," she said, ripping a blade of grass from the ground and carefully shredding it into slimmer and slimmer strips.

"We discuss his training to be an Auror a lot. And the future. He's quite ambitious..." She trailed off slightly. Unable to control his curiosity, Severus decided it was time to address the elephant in the room.

"And this 'future,'" Severus phrased delicately. "Is it what you want?" Releasing a small sigh, she began arranging the strips of grass in patterns on the ground before her.

"Honestly," she said, shaping the grass into a star, "I want to do great research and find lifesaving cures. I want to be known for something other than that war. As it stands, it would be... difficult to achieve those things and follow Ron's plan." Without thinking, Severus expressed his opinion.

"Your research would be brilliant," he said bluntly. This earned him an appreciative smile. Emboldened, he continued.

"It would be a waste for you not to pursue your interests. It's been established that I've been less than encouraging in the past, but it's rare that someone with such a keen

intellect actually uses it for good." In the silence that followed, it was clear they both knew who he was referring to. With a sad smile, Hermione followed through on her original plan, placing her soft, warm hand on one of his own. The spark he felt at her touch made him reckless.

"Hermione, I..." He was cut short by the appearance of a familiar red head at the garden's door. Noticing his gaze, Hermione turned her head to look. Severus felt the warmth of her hand disappear from his as she stood up.

"Ron?" she asked confused. "What are you doing here? Is something wrong?" Ron approached them, throwing Severus a quizzical glance.

"No," he said, still looking at Severus. "I finished early for the day and I thought I'd check in. Care for a stroll?"

"Um, sure," she replied hesitantly. She gave Severus an apologetic look. His face was blank.

"I need to return to the lab anyway," Severus said. "I'll see you later, Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley." And with a quick nod to each, he stalked out of the room. As he left, he vaguely heard Ron ask if it was "really Snape" she had been sitting with, but he was out of earshot before she responded.

Arriving at his lab, he sat at his desk and buried his head in his hands. He felt dizzy as his heart raced. He had been a breath away from a passionate confession. This needed to end now.

As noon rolled around the next day, Severus was resolved in his decision. His little excursions to the Hospital Garden were done. He had been foolish to indulge as he had, and now it was time to listen to the voice of reason which had pleaded with his passions from day one. Thus, it was in the tearoom where a clearly agitated Hermione found him later. It certainly didn't help that upon discovering him, she found that Severus was engaging another Healer in discussion. Truly, she had been one of his attending physicians, and they had only been catching up. Of course, she did have the flowing gold locks of a Veela and a flirty giggle which usually caught the attention of all the men in the room. Their chat had been pleasant, and he had even managed to inspire her to let out that flirty giggle a few times. All of this came to a screeching halt as the shadow of a furious-looking Hermione cast upon their table.

"Miss Granger, how are you?" Healer Daniels asked cheerfully, failing to notice the obvious ire in Hermione's stare.

"Quite well, Healer Daniels," Hermione replied brusquely. "Severus, may I have a word with you outside?" Wanting to decline, but fearing a scene, Severus reluctantly stood, bidding Healer Daniels farewell. He felt Hermione at his heels as he exited the room. Once in the hallway, she rounded on him.

"Where were you?" she asked angrily. He had never seen her livid, but he thought he might have seen her hair sparking as she glared at him. Deciding it was best to remain calm in the face of her fury, he attempted to answer as coolly as possible.

"I decided..."

"Oh, you decided," she cut him off, looking no less mollified. "You decided to fail to show up without any notice and instead leave me there waiting for you in vain while you were in the staff tearoom chatting up Healer Daniels!"

"Sorry, did you just say *chatting up*," Severus asked, his anger beginning to rise. "I wasn't chatting anyone up. I was just talking to her about my recovery. Why are you so angry?"

"I'm not angry!" she protested. "I'm just annoyed that you *decided* to skip out on our usual lunch... agreement without even telling me."

"Well, then there's no need to yell," he retorted with a glare.

"Fine!" she spat. "Just try to be a little more considerate next time!" And with that, Hermione turned on her heel and marched off, clenching her fists on either side of her torso.

Not wishing to re-enter the staff tearoom, which suddenly seemed eerily quiet, Severus walked off in the opposite direction. Returning to the lab, he threw open the door, and stalked straight into his private office. After warding the door and casting a Silencing Charm, Severus let out a growl of frustration. Without a second thought, he began systematically picking up objects in his office and throwing them against its white cinder block walls. Apparently, he hadn't mellowed at all. Had a Silencing Charm not been cast, his assistants would have heard, upon entering the lab, the sound of shattering objects, such as inkwells and ceramic mugs; flying paper, as he cleared his desk with a violent sweep of his hands, and the loud crash of a rolling office chair slamming into the door.

After thirty minutes of destroying everything he could get his hands on, he found his aggression spent, but his anger only ebbing slightly. Vanishing the mess with a single wave of his wand, he removed the wards on his office and left without a word, only one destination in mind.

Severus was sitting on one of the many metal benches and scowling at the small pond sitting at the center of the Hospital Garden when Hermione found him once again. He hadn't heard her approach as he was too busy seething.

"Severus?"

He turned to see a timid Hermione standing a couple of feet behind his bench. Her hands fiddled in front of her, and she stood rooted to the ground.

"Look," she said with a tremor in her voice as she looked anywhere but at him. "I'm sorry about earlier. It was wrong. It's none of my business who you talk to. I don't know why I overreacted."

Turning back to glare at the lake, Severus replied.

"You're right. It was none of your business who I was talking to. If I remember correctly, you are happily committed at the moment." There was no mistaking the venom in his voice, he was clearly infuriated.

"I know. I'm sorry!" she repeated, moving to step closer. "I don't know what came over me, but it won't happen again! Please, can we go back to being friends?"

"No," he answered in a steely voice. Though his back was to her, he heard her step closer behind him.

"What?" she asked with confusion. Standing, he turned to face her, only the metal bench between them. He watched her cower as he towered over her.

"I cannot be your friend, Hermione," he said, this time his voice quiet, but firm. "I am attracted to you and desire far more than friendship."

"Oh, Severus," she began, but was halted by his raised hand.

"You were right about one thing," he continued, his voice level even as adrenaline shot through his veins. "You were wrong back there in the tearoom. You had no right to burst in and jealously berate me while only the day before you had unceremoniously dropped my company for a boyfriend who you can't even talk to."

"But, but..." she stuttered, and was once more pulled up short by Severus.

"Let me finish," he commanded. "I think you feel the same way I do, but you can't have it both ways. It's either me or him. I will not sit here and listen to your complaints while we both know you might be happier with me." With this last statement, Hermione gave up all attempts to protest. Instead, she gaped at him slightly, as if reaching for

some kind of response, only to look past him to the pond.

An uncomfortable silence permeated the garden as a simulated breeze blew. Deciding it might be best to leave her to think, Severus moved to leave, but halted at the sound of her voice.

"You're right," she said, meeting his eyes once more. "I have been unfair." Though his expression was blank, wild thoughts raced through his head at those words. Could this actually be happening?

"I need to decide," she continued, suddenly looking very resolute. Stepping towards him, she reached forward with her right hand, cupping his face gently. Could she feel his heart hammering in his chest? However, as quickly as the hand grazed his face, it left.

"I need to think," was the last thing she said before giving him one more resolute glance and walking away.

Severus swayed in place slightly before finding himself sitting back on the metal bench. So that was that. She would decide. He suddenly had a sinking feeling that the ultimatum might have been a mistake. Had he already lost? As he considered this, he briefly wondered how having his heart ripped out metaphorically could possibly hurt worse than actual snake fangs tearing into the flesh of his throat.

The Decision

Chapter 3 of 3

After an agonizing wait, Severus finally receives Hermione's answer. Is it everything he was hoping for?

Severus sighed as he unlocked the door to his home on Spinner's End. It had been a week since Hermione had left him in the Hospital Garden with that resolute look in her eye. Since then, he had neither seen nor heard from her. He would be hard-pressed to admit to himself how unbearable her absence had become, but he would at least recognize the frustration he felt at being left waiting for her response.

Dropping his briefcase to the side as he entered his home, he made his way to the sitting room and collapsed into his familiar tattered armchair. He had spent the first few days following their discussion distracting himself with copious amounts of brewing at work and going straight to bed at home. After four days of that, however, he could no longer distract himself. Thus, the last few evenings he could be found slouched in his armchair and brooding for what seemed like hours. In particular, he had taken to imagining what she was doing right at that moment. Perhaps the most disturbing and yet continuous of the images was one of Hermione and Weasley, sitting on *their* bench in the Hospital Garden, her head nestled on his shoulder while they made amends and planned their future together. The thought made Severus sick, but as the days ran into one another, his hope began to ebb.

It was during one of these melancholic thoughts that he heard a soft rap at the door. Groaning, he stood up and grabbed his wand, wondering who it could possibly be. Very few people knew that Severus lived in his family home, a dilapidated two story in the midst of an abandoned mill town. Of those few, most were dead. Approaching the door, Severus imagined he would find a gang of Muggle adolescents, possibly hoping to irritate the old man in the creepy house. *Well*, he thought to himself ruefully as he gripped his wand tighter, *won't they be surprised*. However, as he peered through the peep hole of the rough, wooden door, it was he who was met with a surprise.

Standing on his doorstep was a small figure with brown curly hair sticking every which way from the top of her head. Despite his shock, Severus fixed his face with a look of intense annoyance and wrenched open the door. About to speak, he was cut off by Hermione, who pushed straight past him and into the hallway.

"I can't believe you have no wards around this place!" she exclaimed, looking both nervous and slightly lost. Her lime green robes were disheveled, and her "Healer-in-Training" badge hung askew. She ran a hand through her curly mane as she looked around the room. It seemed such an entrance had no immediate follow-up. Similarly unsure of what to do or say next, Severus cleared his throat.

"Now that you've invited yourself into my house, may I offer you a seat?" he asked, raising a single eyebrow and gesturing to the sitting room on the right. Blushing and ducking her head, Hermione muttered a "thank you" and meekly made her way into the room on the left. She paused to take in the room's décor before perching herself on the edge of a tattered, moss green couch.

As Hermione proceeded to examine her hands thoroughly, Severus glanced around the room. Padded in leatherbounds and furnished with old, decaying furniture, it certainly wasn't much to look at. In truth, he had never expected to have any guests in the room, much less Hermione Granger, so it had never occurred to him to make any improvements.

His reverie was interrupted by the sound of Hermione clearing her throat, her courage returning.

"You have a beautiful home," she said conversationally, looking as if she were desperately trying to hide her discomfort.

"It's my parents' home, the Snape Family Estate, if you will," he replied sardonically. "I inherited it upon their death. Very few people know of it, so you can imagine my surprise when you turned up on my door step."

"Harry told me where you live," she admitted, a look of guilt flitting across her features. "But I promised that I wouldn't reveal it to anyone, and I won't!" She said the last bit with such earnestness, Severus could almost ignore his bubbling anger towards Potter. *Well, that's what I get for trusting Potter*, he thought bitterly. Months before he had made an acquaintance with Hermione, Potter had similarly turned up at his door with a lost and nervous look. He wanted to make amends, he had said, let bygones be bygones. Before throwing him out of his house with a brief but firm acceptance, Severus had Potter swear that he would never reveal his location to anyone.

An awkward silence descended upon the room once more. Looking across the wobbly coffee table which separated them, Severus found Hermione once more making a close examination of her folded hands. Meanwhile, he felt as if he might jump out of his skin in anticipation and anxiety. Why was she prolonging this? Was it a 'no' then?

"Hermione," Severus said, persisting to keep his voice gentle despite his worry. "Why are you here?"

During his hours of armchair brooding, he had imagined several ways Hermione would announce her decision. When he was feeling optimistic, he would imagine her approaching him with a wide smile, the kind she used when they passed in the hallway or met in the garden, and she would say that she realized there could be no one else for her, except him. Would he like to join her for a glass of wine and the new edition of "Elixirs and Draughts?" Of course, there was the alternative. Approaching him with a look of pity, she would say in her most even of voices that she simply had to choose Ron, the less old, ugly, and misanthropic of the two. However, not once had he imagined what happened next.

Releasing a deep sob, Hermione hastily covered her face with her hands and began crying. Severus froze, unsure how to react or what this meant. Luckily, the crying was

short-lived, and she began wiping the tears tracking down her face. Finally able to react, Severus transfigured a scrap paper into a handkerchief and handed it to a sniffing Hermione. Taking it gratefully, she blew her nose and then met his questioning glance.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, continuing to sniffle. "I've just broken up with Ron." Instead of responding, Severus stood abruptly.

"Would you like something to drink, some tea, perhaps?" he asked hoarsely. With a slight smile, she nodded.

"Right," he responded and left for the kitchen. When he reached his destination, Severus mechanically took the rusty kettle from the stove and filled it with water from the tap, before replacing it on the burner and turning a knob to adjust the temperature. With the water set to heat, Severus leaned on a nearby kitchen counter, folded his arms in front of him, and considered the revelation of only minutes before. She had left Weasley and she was here now. Sighing, he contemplated his next move. *Should I even make a move?* The whistling of the kettle interrupted his thoughts, and he removed two mugs from an above cabinet and prepared her tea in a practiced manner.

Ready to return to the sitting room, gripping the handle of a mug with each hand, Severus took a deep breath. However, before he left, he was struck with a realization. She was there for him! All of this self-doubt was ridiculous. He was Severus Snape, Order of Merlin recipient, and a "hero" of the war. It was time he stopped approaching this like the abused teenager he had been all those years ago and started acting like the man he had become. With this new burst of confidence, Severus returned to the sitting room.

Unfortunately, this confidence was to be short-lived. Instead of perched on the couch, Severus found Hermione standing beside one of his bookcases, staring intently at the only framed picture in the house. Noticing his presence, she looked up from the photo and met his deer-in-the-headlights look from across the room.

"Is this Lily Potter, Harry's mother?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," he responded, the mugs shaking slightly in his hands. Internally, he wondered if this whole affair could somehow become any more awkward. Of course, she knew, everyone knew. *Bloody Potter*, he thought again.

"Do you still think about her?" The question left her lips in a whisper as she glanced down at the photo once more. Repressing the urge to growl in frustration, Severus walked behind where she stood and looked over her shoulder at Lily Potter. Though it was taken with a Muggle camera, it seemed as if fourteen-year-old Lily's green eyes truly were sparkling and that her dark red hair was moving in the breeze.

"Not as often as I used to," he confessed. Tearing her eyes from the photo, Hermione turned her head to look at him as he continued. "I suppose you never completely forget your first love. But, it can't compare to finding new love."

With a look of understanding, Hermione placed the framed photo back on a nearby shelf and followed Severus back to the couch, sitting to his left. Taking the proffered mug, she blew the steam off the top and took a sip.

"I'm really sorry for all of this," she apologized again, placing her mug on the coffee table. "I missed you all week and then finally got the courage to break up with Ron outside the hospital today. You can imagine how that went, and, well, I just wanted to be near you." Feeling the triumph he had mustered in the kitchen returning to his chest, Severus placed his mug on the table next to hers.

"And how do you feel now?" he asked softly. Instead of responding automatically, Hermione scooted closer to him on the couch. Nestling her head on his left shoulder, she gave her reply.

"Honestly, I feel sad. He's been one of my best friends forever, and now..." She trailed off. Reaching his arm around her shoulders, he pulled her closer to him and she let out a contented sigh.

"I'm also rather hopeful," she continued as she turned her head to meet his gaze, a small smile finally gracing her lips. It wasn't the wide grin he had been hoping for, but Severus would gladly hold that image in his mind for the rest of his life.

"Could we take it slow?" Hermione asked, settling her head back down on his shoulder.

"As slow as you'd like," he replied as soft curls tickled his chin. Closing his eyes, Severus could almost imagine that they were in the Hospital Garden, sitting *on their* bench, making amends and planning their future.

Severus employed all of his skill in stealth as he unlocked the door to his home on Spinner's End. It was half past midnight, and he had no desire to wake the home's other occupant. The week had been full of late-night brewing as an outbreak of a rare and extremely amusing wizard flu had the hospital jam-packed with patients, more frantic about their literal running noses than their mild fevers and aching joints. Careful to unravel his scarf and remove his heavy winter coat without so much as a creak from the floor boards, he left them on the coat rack by the door and made his way to his bed, pausing to peek into the dimmed sitting room.

The room was neat, with a soft red throw blanket covering the back of a caramel-colored leather couch at its center. The matching armchair sat naked, separated from its mate by a new, sturdy coffee table. He had been hesitant about the purchase of new furniture, but as Hermione had put it that day in the store, it was time he stopped denying himself comfort and make the house a home. Never had he felt so motivated.

Continuing his journey, Severus mounted the stairs with the lightest of strides, as if daring one of the steps to emit a squeak. Reaching the door to his bedroom at the top of the stairs, he turned the knob and pushed the door open lightly, slowly revealing his bed and a sleeping Hermione shrouded in the covers. As tired as he was, he couldn't help but lean on the door frame and admire the sleeping woman. He had agreed to take things slow, and he had for several weeks, to her great annoyance. In fact, it was in a fit of frustration during their fourth week of dating that she had caught him completely off-guard and kissed him for the first time. After that, he got the hint, and things had been progressing rather nicely over the last six months.

It was only in the last month that they hit another bump in the road. Over dinner one evening, Hermione asked if she could move in. It seemed living with your ex's sister made life endlessly awkward. He had said yes with little hesitation at the time but later that evening found himself wondering what he had gotten himself into. While he thrived in her company, he was still a very solitary man. Would he get sick of her, or worse, would she get tired of him?

Standing in the entrance of his bedroom, Severus knew more than ever that despite their disagreements, he could never get tired of Hermione Granger.

"Severus, is that you?" asked a voice buried in the covers. A ruffled Hermione pulled down the bed covers and squinted towards him.

"Sorry," Severus apologized, gesturing for her to lie back down. He sat on the edge of the bed to take off his shoes and felt little sparks along his back as Hermione ran her fingertips along his spine in a soothing manner.

"You must be exhausted," he heard her say behind him, a yawn punctuating the statement.

"Well, at least I didn't have to spend the day chasing anyone's nose," Severus replied, looking back with a small smirk. Groaning, she dropped his hand from her back.

"Don't remind me," she muttered.

Electing to skip changing and simply take off his shirt, Severus moved under the covers next to Hermione. Leaning over, she greeted him with a languid kiss before rolling to her side. Following her, he snuggled against her, her back meeting his chest.

"Goodnight, Severus," she mumbled sleepily, quickly falling back to sleep.

"Goodnight, Hermione," Severus replied as he wrapped his right arm around her torso and settled his head behind hers, her dark curls engulfing his nose. Perhaps his favorite part of having her for a roommate (okay, maybe second favorite) was the nightly privilege of being able to sniff her hair without embarrassment. His last thought before drifting to sleep that night was, *Yes, it definitely smells like grapefruit*

A/N: Thank you to my betas justine34 and lilyshadowwriter16 for their editing and encouragement. This is the concluding chapter of the story, so I hope you've enjoyed it!