

The End and the Beginning

by sapphire_phoenix

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The world slid in and out of focus for Severus Snape as he balanced on a sturdy tree limb. It stretched over a country road, and he was watching for his ride. From this height, he couldn't deny that part of him was aghast that he was up there at all, let alone that he had climbed the bloody fucking thing in the first place.

But there had been magic in the tree, magic that he needed. Hopefully, the roots he'd dug from the Intanzia vine coiling around the trunk would be the final ingredient in his patch-worked treatment. If he could just get his vision to focus...an unfortunate side effect of the Mingleswort he had swallowed a few weeks ago...he could go about his business.

The tricky part of the Intanzia was not that it only grew in trees, or that it was at least five metres up said trees, or that he'd fallen three times just trying to get the damned thing. No. Severus would need to boil, chop, boil, and purée the root before letting it simmer until the concoction turned jewel-toned. There was no specific information which jewel colour it should be or how long that would take.

Indeed, the tricky part was that he needed a lab, and he didn't have one of those at the moment.

He suspected where he could get one, though. Severus' luck had always been dubious at best, but there had been a bit of traffic a few days ago as he was making his initial observations of the tree. After sneaking back into the brush, Severus began to take account of all of the drivers and their vehicles when a surprising sight had caught his eye: Hermione Granger leaning her head on her fist, her elbow protruding out of the open window.

The pieces fell into place. Or at least they would if Severus could also manage one last bit of perfect timing.

Tightening his grip on the tree limb, Severus looked down at the road below, waiting for Granger to come along.

Of course, she was late.

After the initial Granger-sighting, Severus had observed her on the subsequent days. She would go one way on the road in the morning and return while the sun was low in the evening.

The sun had almost set by now. Severus was hungry, tired, and, frankly, a little dizzy from the height and his own oscillating equilibrium.

Why couldn't she be on time on the day he needed her? Why break her dreadful little routine ~~today~~?

From the corner of his eye, he saw her dreadfully old Renault speeding round the bend.

This new, aggressive pace could prove to be a problem, but the solution would be advantageous. The window of opportunity had narrowed, her car speeding closer and closer. His eyes blurred over, and Severus swore at his luck.

With all of the factors out of his hands, Severus let his body fall forward. It was nowhere near to the most terrifying thing he had ever done, but it was up there. As his body thudded onto the hood of the car and rolled to break the windshield, he hoped he landed on the right vehicle.

Things would be very complicated if he'd guessed poorly.

Screeching brakes sounded, the volume cutting through his brain. Then he heard a softer thump as his body hit the pavement. Glass showered over Severus as his body rolled a turn and a half.

Then the shock set in. Severus was so familiar with it that 'shock' hardly qualified anymore. It didn't matter: a fuzzy brown halo was in his face, and the voice that had lectured him in his classroom all those years was sneaking back into his ears. She was asking if he was okay.

She must not have recognised him yet. Was he surprised? He couldn't shave half-blind, and he was without a wand. He looked like any other bedraggled homeless man.

After a moment, Severus realised she was no longer groping him. He forced himself to groan to get her attention back.

"Don't leave me... again!" Severus said before coughing as he rolled over.

"What do you mean, 'again'? I've never met you before." She sounded shaken. Severus decided this was good. She must think *she* hit *him*. If so, the plan was successful. She would feel guilty at the very least.

"In the shack..." Severus threw his less injured arm over his eyes. Granger was backlit but he could see her.

She looked pale. And nauseous.

"Are you going to..." Severus said before a coughing fit took over. After it was done, he rolled away from her and finished his thought, "...Leave me to die?"

"Of course not, you..." Hermione's words were finished with an intelligible grunt of frustration. Then Granger stomped her foot and started swearing. From the string of colourful words that came out of her mouth, Severus suspected she'd had a bad day.

Good. He'd had nearly a thousand bad days since the war was over. He was more than happy to share the wealth.

Severus heard the sound of glass repairing. She must be taking care of the windshield.

"Can you walk? Never mind, I don't think you should try to move if you've just been hit by a car. I should call someone."

Severus rolled to his hands and knees and stumbled to the passenger door. After he got it open, he threw himself in the seat.

Granger seemed slow on the uptake, and he watched her staring at the spot where his body had been in the road. Her skin was taking on that ashen quality that meant she was becoming useless to him.

"Get in the car, Granger," Severus commanded. He even went so far as to honk the horn.

She jumped and scurried to her side of the car. She got in, buckled the safety belt and gripped the wheel until her knuckles were white.

They sat there a moment until the empty road had more cars again. Severus looked at her and cleared his throat. "Let's go. Drive the car."

And then they were moving. Severus felt like a very lucky man.

The next morning Severus woke up on Granger's sofa. He had passed out on it immediately upon his arrival last night.

Part of him had thought that she would call Potter and then the Order and then the Aurors, and then the whole of the Ministry would have him at wandpoint when he was rudely awakened by their impatience to see him hanged, drawn, quartered, and everything else.

Severus didn't believe that, though. Hermione Granger was the sort of person who liked to handle things herself. She was proactive. She was stubborn. She was insatiably curious. He'd factored those traits into his plan and knew they would hold true.

The clock on the wall chimed the old-fashioned way. It was half past. Half past something. The sun was coming in through the windows, so it must be early yet. However, it was later than she usually left for work, and she was still asleep. It must be Saturday.

Pressing his toes to the end of the couch, Severus stretched his arms above his head and groaned. It had been a long time since he had slept on anything resembling a cushion. He rather liked it.

Granger appeared at his feet in the next moment.

"Well, talk about service." Severus smiled and let his limbs relax. His arms were draped over the end of the couch, and he turned to look at her.

"I am not here to... service you. I'm here to show you out of my house this minute."

Severus let his smile turn cold, although he was starting to enjoy himself. She had woken up with a fire in her belly. That gave him two advantages. First, it showed that she had been up late deliberating on the matter at hand. Second, it allowed him to see her in her natural state. This seemed to be tousled hair and an ill-fitting sleep shirt.

As a man who had been in hiding in the wild for over three years, he wasn't going to complain that his youthful steward thought she could wear a shirt two sizes too small as long as it was for sleeping.

He licked his lips. "You don't want me to leave."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you do not."

Severus folded himself up so he could manoeuvre and sit properly on the couch.

Her wand was trained on him that instant. He put up his hands in surrender, but said, "If you put me out now, you'll never get watch me prepare Intanzia root."

"You haven't got any. Get out."

Severus smiled and patted down his pockets. He had a multitude of them in the pair of pants he'd dug out of a clothing donation bin a few months prior. Finding the specimen in his left knee-side pocket, he produced it for her.

"Where'd you get that?" Granger exclaimed.

He wrapped his hand firmly around the root and returned it to his pocket. "From a tree near the road where you struck me with your motorised vehicle."

Those words bent her wand arm, and guilt flashed across her face. "I don't believe you. Intanzia doesn't grow this far north. Also, there are no Snidgets in the area. I've lived here for three years and haven't seen any."

"I require the loo," Severus said as if she'd never spoken at all. He stood and cracked his back. "Then your kitchen and then your lab."

Granger still hated to be ignored it seemed. She chewed her tongue for a moment before she gave one last bit of resistance. "Who says I have a lab?"

"Now, let's not be disingenuous, Granger. Do you want to watch or not?"

Severus was standing now, leaning forward a little. He hardly supposed that he could intimidate a grown woman considering how haggard and wretched he looked, but she had been so desperate for his knowledge at one time. It was worth an attempt.

She recoiled as his miserable odour reached her. "Loo is the first door on the left, kitchen is through there, and the lab is in the attic."

Her voice was filled with disgust, as much in herself as in him, Severus figured. However, he could hear a tremor of excitement as well. Oh yes, his luck was surely improving.

Granger's guest bathroom was serviceable and large enough for him to move about with ease.

First and foremost, Severus sat on the throne like a king. It was moments like this when he knew just how much he had missed civilisation. He had spent many nights under the sky feeling wretched, wondering how some creatures, the half-breeds, managed at all, what with wildness licking at their very bones.

Severus loved everything that civilisation had to offer, including the flushing toilet.

Then he turned on the shower, inhaling the steam that soon began to rise. His nostrils perked at the sensation, and Severus felt as if the first layers of wilderness were loosening from him.

Granger stocked her guest bath with invigorating, if store-bought, brews. Severus washed his hair twice, scrubbed his body down from top to toe, and then, as the tingling of cleanliness took root, he cooled the shower spray down. The contrast made him feel as if his very nerves were percolating.

He towelled off with a soft, fluffy bit of luxury. The soothing cloth made him sigh as he put it over the webbing of his toes then around the sides of his ribs.

Severus wiped his hand over the mirror and then flicked the other switches on the wall. Soon a fan turned on, and the steam was sucked from the room. He unwrapped a cheap plastic razor and filled the sink with hot water. It struck him then that his vision was restored; he just noticed.

He smiled: a good night's sleep had done wonders for what had ailed him.

After adjusting the towel so that it rested on his hips, Severus shaved away his beard and even hacked the ends of his hair up so they rested just at his shoulders. He left a good deal of hair in the little bin beside the basin, but it felt like much more than that. It was as though he'd shed his entire shell.

His time in purgatory was drawing to a close.

Finally, Severus began brushing his teeth. As he scrubbed and scrubbed, he took inventory of himself. He was greying, though most of that had landed in the bin with the rest of his beard. Besides a smattering of silver in his hair, there were the beginnings of grey at his temples.

His father had had that. Severus pushed the thought away and spit into the sink.

"Snape?"

He responded with his mouth around the toothbrush, but she didn't seem to hear him because she started pounding on the door.

Not thinking, he pulled the door open, even laughing as her hand missed the place where she had been rapping.

Severus turned and spit. Then he looked at her and said, "Again, I have to compliment the service. I need my clothes laundered."

Without waiting for her reply, he turned the tap on and began swishing clean, cool water over his freshly brushed teeth until his mouth felt fresh. It had been months.

When he stood again, Granger was sputtering at him. Her eyes kept dropping down his body, but Severus didn't let it last. He picked up his messy bundle of clothes and pushed it into her hands.

It wasn't until he closed the door in her face that she must have regained her senses.

"Snape!"

Severus checked himself in the mirror a moment before he opened the door again.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I'm not going to bloody well do your laundry!"

"You'd prefer I brew in your guest towel?"

He smiled as her eyes flittered all over his body.

"Extra rinse, Granger. As I'm sure you've ascertained, they haven't been washed in quite some time."

Granger ground her teeth until she was a few steps away. Then she began muttering. Severus chuckled to himself and made his way to the kitchen to find himself a breakfast.

He put on his now-clean clothes after eating his breakfast (eggs and rashers with toast) and sparring with Granger (she seemed to relax more the longer he was around) and tossed the Intanzia root in a kitchen pot and set it to boiling.

Granger nearly had a fit.

She really needed to watch her blood pressure.

As he moved to the couch, she screeched at him, "I'm finding it hard to believe that you aren't going to watch the Intanzia boil. What if something goes wrong?"

"It's a boil, Granger. Nothing will go wrong," Severus said as he returned to the couch.

"That's not what you said in our lessons."

Severus closed his eyes and settled back into the cushions.

She stormed into the living room after him. "Well?" she demanded.

He opened one eye at her, taking in her flushed skin and her casual dress, and replied, "At Hogwarts, Potions classes are filled with the mediocre at best and the incompetent at worst. *Their* utmost attention was required at all times."

She looked as if she wanted to debate the point but knew she couldn't. Instead she asked, "How long does it boil?"

"Overnight."

Severus predicted the shrill tone that her voice would take, and he'd never forget it.

"Impossible! It's entirely unreasonable. Who the bloody hell do you think you are anyway?"

"Granger, it is impossible for me to leave now. If I remove the Intanzia root from the process now, it will be ruined. Additionally, it took me three days to get it, and I have no interest in starting over. I am equally uninterested in spending any more of my short time on this planet surviving in the fucking wilderness.

"Since *you* are the one who left me to die in the Shrieking Shack, and *you* are the one who hit me with a car last night, I can't see how a little access to *your* kitchen and lab is asking too much."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and she stomped toward him. Her finger was pointed at him with utmost menace. "Listen here, Snape. You will not lord Dumbledore's fucking plan over me in my own bloody home!"

Severus appraised her for a minute and then leaned forward until he stood just in front of her finger. "Then don't act so fucking put out that I lived, you cow!"

Granger's jaw jutted out then, and her lip began to wobble a moment, and Severus remembered a similar moment a few years ago when he had said something insulting about her teeth.

In his head he swore and back-pedalled.

She was about to turn and storm away. Severus grabbed her hand where her finger was still pointing at him. "Miss Granger, Hermione, I apologise. I have not had the luxury of company in a great deal of time, and we can both agree that I was not pleasant, even at my best, before."

That earned him a soft snort from her, and she seemed to relax.

He held her hand with a gentle grasp and continued, "After it boils overnight, it must be cut into centimetre cubes and boiled again overnight. That much could be done anywhere, but it must go into a cauldron within sixty minutes of being puréed smooth. Monday, I will purée it and set it on low heat in your lab, and hopefully, by the time you return home, it will be changing colour. I will drink it and be out of your house at that time. You have my word."

She nodded but pulled her hand away, nonetheless. "I want access to the process."

"Of course. Watching water boil is ever so thrilling." Severus rolled his eyes and sank back down to the soft embrace of the sofa, feeling exhausted.

Without speaking another word, Granger moved toward a hall Severus hadn't noticed before.

Still, he thought as he rolled into the corner of the cushions, his luck was holding. That was the last thought he had before he succumbed to sleep again.

Severus woke with a start as something shook his foot violently.

He threw his arms up and growled at the offending thing. Then he caught it by the shoulders and pinned it to the floor.

It was the next moment that Severus realised it wasn't a something but a *someone* shaking his foot, and he immediately slackened his grip on her.

He did not, however, move from his position over her.

Certain parts of him were very agreeable to the arrangement.

Severus dropped his head and tried to catch his breath. She did the same.

As their respective breathing eased, she swallowed loudly and said, "I'm sorry. I should have known not to startle you."

Shocked at her words, Severus looked down into her eyes. Why was she just lying there? How was he not pleading for the welfare of his bits at that very moment?

The world had turned on its ear, much to his increased good fortune.

Granger cleared her throat and said, "I was going for take-away, if you're interested."

Before he could stop himself, Severus said, "I'd kill a man for chips right now."

His jaw snapped shut, and her eyes grew wide as she stared up at him.

The Mingleswort must have been mouldy. Severus had lost his bloody mind. It was all so clear now. He could even hear the hysterical laughter of his insanity. Although, it sounded much too bubbly and feminine to be his laughter.

Beneath him, Granger's body was shaking with the gales of laughter coming from her. Her eyes were squeezed shut and watering.

Severus took the opportunity to remove his person to his haven of the couch. He watched as Granger collected herself and her things before waving back at him. She left the house without looking at him again.

Severus pinched himself, but he wasn't hallucinating. Luck lived in this house, it seemed.

Hermione, as Severus had decided to call her, was a brilliant witch. She was the sort of witch who would take a man into her home, let him pass out on her couch, let him wash himself, feed himself, pass out again, and then give him a king's ransom in fish and chips and *mead*.

Severus had felt like a king that morning, but it was nothing to compare to now. There was no way that she could have known how very much Severus enjoyed his mead before, but she certainly did now. He'd had at least two drinks to each of hers.

He knew he was utterly pissed, but that was the least of his problems. Severus had other things to deal with, such as how Hermione Granger was alone in her home all day with no sign that anyone wanted to spend the weekend with her.

Not one owl. Not one mention of plans. Nothing. And Severus didn't want to think about just how Muggle things were around here. There wasn't even any Floo powder by the fireplace.

Not that he'd snooped while she was out, of course, because that would have been... uncouth.

No, he hadn't snooped a bit at all. Merely investigated the assets and limitations of the edifice he was currently occupying. The assets included a very capable lab and a witch nearly as capable. The limitations were the laboratory in the attic was the only hint at her magical nature.

She had got back well before he could discover much else.

Another one of Severus' current problems was that he had gone so long without liquor of any sort that he was rather out of practice at keeping his drink-loosened tongue tightly locked in his mouth. This was how he found himself uttering a terrible question, one that could certainly end the most fun he was having since he could remember.

"Where are they, Hermione?"

She froze instantly, shock at his words plain on her face. Then she pursed her lips and her teeth started grinding.

But she didn't need to talk because Severus' tongue was completely ready to talk for her.

"What, did the fame go straight to their heads? You're their friend! You stuck by them through the very worst! Not to mention you kept them from killing themselves, most of the time. The bloody tossers!"

Her chin pushed out as it usually did when she was indignant, and Severus threw back his half-filled mug of mead and squared his gaze on her.

And her breasts.

"Harry is doing a lot of self-exploration right now. And Ron is enjoying himself as anyone our age might, especially if they'd been helping to fight dark wizards since they had started school." She fiddled with the tablecloth and replied with utmost reluctance. "I am not dealing with the post-war world like the others. I work there, but nothing anyone one does, them or me, can make it..."

She pushed one of the stone cold crisps into her mouth and chewed it.

And there it was. Severus knew he'd bollixed the whole thing up. Oh, how he hated whimpering women.

Even ones as appealing as this one.

Even as the thought sprouted, he crushed it down. There would be no lusting over her! Boil, chop, boil, purée, simmer, drink, and leave. That was what Severus told himself.

If there had been one skill that had worked for him his whole life, it was knowing when to leave the room. This was one such time: she simply ate in utter apathy toward her entire existence, and Severus couldn't stand for it.

As it turned out, he couldn't stand at all. *That* thought made it out of his mouth.

Surprisingly, she seemed amused by his inability to make it from the kitchen table to the couch. A small smile graced her lips as she stood. She held out her hand, and Severus took it. He even allowed her to loop his arm over the back of his shoulders.

They walked like that to the couch. Then they sat like that on the couch.

Severus pulled his hand back so his arm would rest at his side. He didn't mean to fall over, but he did. Fortunately, his head landed on a blanket that was stacked on a pillow at the end of the couch.

Hermione stood and hoisted Severus' legs up so he was lying down. Then she gingerly pulled the blanket away so that his head wouldn't drop on the pillow too harshly. At last, she spread the blanket over him.

He thought to say 'thank you', but his body had passed out before he got the chance. His last thought was the hope that he might even manage to save face in the morning, if he was that lucky.

The next morning, Severus followed his nose into the kitchen. The intoxicating aroma of pancakes demanded his immediate attention. Thick, fluffy pancakes were cooking. They looked like the kind that would soak up all of the grease from the chips and all of the mead that was left running through his system.

Not willing to ruin breakfast as he had ruined dinner last night, Severus quietly cleared the table of grease-soaked paper bags and foil wrappers. Then he set about setting it again with all the things they'd need for pancakes.

He did peer over Hermione's shoulder at the Intanzia root as it boiled away. It looked ready to chop up after breakfast, and he told her as much.

Hermione finished putting the last round of pancakes onto the tower she had made and brought them to the table.

She sat. Severus sat. She served herself. Severus served himself.

They ate. In silence. It wasn't awkward at first, but it became that way. Severus could nearly feel her introverting. He did not want that. He wiped his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it.

"It's fine! Really. People say things when they're drunk."

The pancake on her plate certainly did not deserve to be shredded, but she kept at it anyway.

"Hermione," Severus said, looking at her carefully. "One thing you should know about me is that I am a piss poor liar when I am drunk."

She froze like a rabbit sensing a predator.

"Do I make myself clear?"

She hesitated, but said, "You said a lot of things last night."

"I am aware of that." Severus helped himself to more pancakes.

"You stared at my tits a lot, too."

Before he took his next bite, Severus said, "They're nice tits."

He felt it safe to assume that that was what she needed to hear because that small smile came back. She didn't eat anymore; she sat at the table with him until he was finished. She cleared the table as he pulled the root from the pot. He chopped while she watched. That must have pleased her for some reason because she did the dishes.

The siren's call of the sofa brought him back to the living room. Severus pulled the blanket around him, only pausing when Hermione spoke.

"Do you mind if I sit and read in here?"

It was a ludicrous question, and he told her so. As if she should have to ask to read in her own sitting room. As if he weren't lucky she had let him in at all.

"You're cooking tonight."

At her words, Severus jumped out the deep sleep he was in and sat at attention.

Hermione was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. That smile on her face was growing. "Talk about service."

Severus snarled at her and made his way to the loo. When he was finished, dinner seemed like a very good idea. Moreover, he could certainly cook. That would put her at the cleaning up again, in his estimation. He'd done last night's dinner, after all.

When he arrived in the kitchen, a salad was already prepared, but three large potatoes sat next to a package wrapped in white butcher paper.

He ripped it open and smiled. Steaks!

Severus immediately ferreted out her spice rack and set to work. He got it all in the pan and listened to things begin to sizzle. With that underway, he took a look at the Intanzia cubes.

They were rolling with the bubbles at the right rate. He found a clean wooden spoon and pulled a cube from the water. After running it under cool water, Severus pressed it with his thumb. He needed hardly any pressure at all to compromise the shape.

They were ready to purée. Severus strained them and worked them through with a silver fork until it was smooth. The steak and potatoes finished shortly after he did.

Hermione wasn't present for dinner, though, so Severus hurried up the stairs to the attic with his bowl of purée. He took them two at a time, and as he twisted up and around the banister, he collided with Hermione.

They stumbled but Severus had a firm hand on the railing so he didn't fall. Hermione fell against his body, her arms clinging around him in the urgency of the moment.

He was no longer in danger of falling, but his heart still pounded in his chest. The bowl was steady in his outstretched hand. Severus looked down to check on Hermione and saw that she was looking back at him. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and Severus had to fight for control over himself.

He cleared his throat and said, "Dinner is ready," just as she asked, "Is that the Intanzia purée?"

Hermione smiled and stepped back up a stair, turning to lead him into the attic. Once he was up there, Severus saw that everything, even two texts on Intanzia, was ready and waiting for him. Hermione flicked her wand below the cauldron, setting a fire burning.

Severus poured the purée in and set the bowl to the side. He stared a few moments, wanting to watch it every moment, willing it to be ready. After a couple of moments, he shook his head, turned to Hermione and said, "Dinner is waiting."

She looked back at him seriously and nodded just once before preceding him out of the room.

With a final look at the cauldron, Severus hoped that his luck would hold out just a short while longer.

The world slid in and out of focus for Severus as he balanced on a sturdy lab stool. He'd been up all night watching the gentle simmering of his purée. It had changed throughout the night from a root-coloured paste to a thick black mass to a clear, almost watery substance.

He had made detailed notes. Hermione had requested he do so since she couldn't stay up to watch it. In the wee small hours, his mind had wandered to the fact that he was essentially doing homework for his ex-student, but that, like many thoughts, had fallen by the way as the night dragged on.

Now it was well after dawn, and something behind his eyes seemed to flicker like starlight. He must be moving towards delirium, he thought. He felt as if his body was melting, but then a small hand was at his back, and then an arm was around him.

"Stayed up all night, Snape?" Hermione asked. Her tone was almost sardonic, except that Severus couldn't believe something like that of her.

She moved to stand beside him where he sat on the stool, his arm over her shoulder and her fingers twined with his.

"Looks like diamonds to me."

Hermione extinguished the flame and spelled the cauldron to a cooling rack. Another flick of her wand had the cauldron tipping toward the wide mouth of a carafe. The early morning light coming in through the windows reflected on the brew as it poured. Liquid diamonds filled the carafe about two-thirds of the way. A final flick of Hermione's wand sent the cauldron to a rack by the utility sink.

"One last fry-up before you drink this, I think."

Severus had been watching in a daze, his body begging for sleep while his mind wished to guzzle the potion immediately. However, the promise of another round of eggs and rashers was enough to get Severus off the stool so he could follow Hermione, his notes, and the carafe down to the kitchen.

She was dressed for work already, and he missed the casual, unwound Hermione he'd spent the last two days with. It was a shame that she felt she had to lock herself away in black wizarding robes and a tight bun to feel safe in their world.

That was when it struck Severus that he, too, would be rejoining the world. He'd been exiled all those years ago, hiding from potential foes and nursing himself back to health. He looked like a poor Muggle, and he would continue to do so as he met with a solicitor, acquired some funds and got a wand.

He slumped into his now-regular spot at the kitchen table, exhausted by the prospects. A plate appeared before him, and he tucked in. It was delicious, and although he didn't say so, he was certain his pleased grunts conveyed that message. Soon enough, his plate was clean, and Hermione was exchanging it for a glass of his brew.

Severus looked up at her. She was hopeful and excited...he could tell by her eyebrows. It was the most like her young self she had looked since they met on Friday evening.

A part of him knew it would be just as detrimental for her if the brew were to fail as it would for him.

He also knew that it wouldn't. Severus lifted the glass and tipped it towards her in salute. Then he slid his lip over the rim of glass and tipped it up towards his mouth.

Intanzia tasted as good as it looked. Better even. Before he knew it, Severus was guzzling the last of it, only just stopping himself from licking the inside of the glass.

That was when he began to feel it. His body started to feel as though *it* was sparkling like diamonds. First in the very depths of his marrow, then throughout his bones. He felt a few ancient injuries from his youth seem to melt away. Then his blood felt hot and fresh, and his nerves tingled not unlike the first time he'd ever orgasmed. Finally, as if shedding like a snake, Severus felt his old, scarred skin break away from his body, feathering down to the floor where it was not trapped inside his clothes.

If he didn't feel absolutely immaculate, he would have been utterly repulsed.

He turned to look again at Hermione, who now stared at him in wonder and awe.

The final test, Severus reached up to touch his neck, knowing he'd find it to be soft and smooth, but not believing when his fingers confirmed that.

He swallowed and asked, "Is it...?"

Hermione reached out to touch him. Her hand shook like a leaf, tickling his neck. Their eyes locked, and Hermione blushed, finally unsettled by their closeness. Her mouth fell slack, and she nodded at him.

Then the blasted wall clocked chimed, breaking them out of the moment. Hermione shook her head and looked around. "I have to get to work," she whispered.

Severus watched as she seemed to fold back into herself. He recognized what she was doing; he'd done it himself for many years.

"Too right," he said as he stood. He'd moved intentionally into her space, hoping to bring back that moment even as she spelled away the morning mess.

Then she moved to gather her things to leave, but since Severus had nothing, he simply followed her until they were out of the house and out to the car. There, Hermione turned and looked at him.

Severus looked at her: she was as nervous as a third year looking for a date to Hogsmeade.

Feeling this great was so new to Severus that he couldn't really control himself as he put one hand on the hood of Hermione's car and leaned into her just slightly.

"I can't express enough my gratitude for your... hospitality this weekend." Her head lifted and she looked up at Severus. He could not suppress the smile that bloomed across his face. He inched closer to her and said, "I'm sure you are aware that I have a great deal to accomplish now that I am well again, but I would be honoured if you allowed me to repay your hospitality, say, this Friday evening?"

Her mouth opened and then closed, as if the words were stuck in her throat.

Severus pulled his free hand up and touched the underside of her chin, closing her mouth and then pressing his against it. It was a chaste kiss, drawn out until Severus had to pull away or deepen it. He brushed his nose, still over large and beakish but no longer crooked, over her soft cheek and said, "You won't even have to hit me with your car this time."

At last, she smiled. Her jaw worked to purse her lips as well, and Severus watched every fine movement on her face.

"I have to get to work."

"Shall I take that as a yes?"

Hermione nodded once, blinking slowly. Severus opened the door to the car, and she slid in. Neither said another word as she buckled her seat belt or when Severus closed the door. He watched her start the car and pull out of the driveway, never looking back at him.

As soon as she was out of sight, Severus turned to look at her address before Apparating away.