

# The Wolfgang Variant

*by timestep*

Someone has made an attempt on Severus' life.

## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 3*

Someone has made an attempt on Severus' life.

This story was written for Zyra321 for the 2009 SSHG Exchange.

Prompt: AU. Hermione was Severus' apprentice. They were working on a new/alterd (you decide) potion. Severus test the potion on himself and it turned out differently than they expected. What happened? Is it reversible? This story can either be hurt/comfort, humor, action/adventure, mystery/suspense or AU. And please, Severus has to remain alive until the end. If it's not too much, I'd like happy ending too.

And I must give many, many thanks to my beta sshg316 for making this story so much better. I also must thank bambu for the inspiration for Severus' office. If you never read her story Calling Card, you have never... well, just read it.

The Wolfgang Variant

Severus woke at his usual time. As he stretched in his large four-poster bed, he silently thanked the Hogwarts house-elves for stoking his bedchamber fire. He lay in bed for a few minutes. Something didn't feel right. It wasn't that he felt badly he felt fine but something was just ... not right. Deciding it must be his imagination, he sat up and swung his legs over the side, placing his bare feet on the thin rug next to his bed. Clad in his normal black cotton pyjama bottoms, he walked across the room to the loo to relieve himself.

Walking back to the bedroom, he lay on the thin bedroom rug to do his fifty sit-ups and fifty push-ups. Although he was now in his sixties, he still felt compelled to care somewhat for his body, even if there was no one to show off for.

He was as surly as ever; he still had few close friends, preferring his solitude. Even the mirror in the loo knew better than to talk to him before he had his morning coffee, although it did take a few creative hexes before the mirror learned this lesson.

After he completed his exercises, Severus showered and dressed in his teaching robes. Finishing his morning routine, he walked to his private office to start his day.

He sat at his desk and relaxed into the fine leather chair. Most people were surprised that his desk and chair were a rich, deep brown, thinking his preference would be towards black. But he loved the warmth of the red undertones in his furniture.

His office was sparsely decorated. For many years, the walls remained bare, as Severus had nothing that he wanted to remember. But after Voldemort's death, his friendship with Lily Potter had become known, and he had decided that maybe it was worth remembering the good in his life. Slowly, he had begun to add pictures: one of him with Lily at a Quidditch match his first year and several with the other teachers at Hogwarts. He had even found a painting or two that he added to the walls. They were simple Muggle artworks, painted by little known artists, that he had acquired while visiting South Kensington area of London a few years prior.

Severus was a creature of habit. As with the way he ran his classes, all areas of his life held precision and ritual. He reached to the silver coffee set, as he did each and

every morning, first pouring some cream, followed by his coffee into his favourite coffee cup. He loved the rich smell of the dark roast, loved watching the rich coffee streaming from the spout of the coffee pot and mixing with the white cream. He wrapped his hands around the warm cup. Like his desk and his chair, this cup fit him. He loved the weight of it, the way the warmth from the cup began to seep into him from the outside in. He loved the way the first sip of coffee relaxed him before the chaos of the day began.

Severus still felt out of sorts. His morning rituals had done nothing to allay the feeling that something was not quite right. Checking his calendar, he verified that his schedule for the day was as expected, so it was not that he had forgotten anything. But the feeling left him unsettled and wary.

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He walked into the Great Hall for breakfast using the students' entrance. Usually, he could find some small infraction that he could use to extract gems from the Gryffindor hourglass, and he hoped that maybe this would set his day to rights. He walked along the student tables towards the dais at the front of the room. Just as he reached the end of the table, he saw a book bag in the walkway. Just as he opened his mouth to deduct points, he heard a small noise come from the teachers' table. Looking up, he saw the Headmistress watching him and shaking her head indicating that he may want to rethink this strategy.

Severus closed his mouth with a snap and glowered as he continued on the way to his seat. Taking his usual seat next to the Headmistress, he looked at her, his eyes widening as he attempted to speak but found himself literally speechless.

"Severus, are you alright?" the Headmistress asked as she watch him try to form words that would not come.

After several attempts to speak, he finally shook his head "no," trying to keep the panic he was starting to feel from showing on his face.

"Are you feeling ok?" Minerva asked discreetly.

Severus nodded his head yes, although the movement was such that most people would not have noticed the slight motion.

"You need to see Poppy immediately. I will cancel your classes."

Severus placed his hand on her arm, a gesture that would not be viewed as out of place by anyone observing them.

"No, don't argue with me. I will make appropriate excuses, and you will head to the infirmary."

Severus ignored her as he reached for some toast and pumpkin juice.

"Fine. Do it your way," Minerva said tersely. "But as soon as you are finished eating, you **will** go see Poppy. I will be along later to see what she has learned," she added with quiet concern.

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Poppy, upon hearing the door to the hospital wing open, left her desk and walked from her office into the main room of the ward.

"Good morning, Professor Snape," she said as she quickly glanced at the beds to see if one of his Slytherins was in residence. Finding none, she continued, "What brings you here today? Are you feeling alright?"

Severus shook his head "no." He pointed at his throat and then to the room off Madam Pomfrey's office where she normally examined the faculty, giving them privacy from the students.

"Follow me," Madam Pomfrey said as she led the way to the room.

As they walked through her office, Severus stopped by her desk and pointed to a quill and a blank piece of parchment. He looked at her, attempting a questioning look and hoping she would understand that he was asking permission to take them.

"Help yourself."

Severus reached for the items and brought them into the private exam room.

Madam Pomfrey gave Severus a few minutes to change into a hospital gown before she continued into the exam room. "Now, Severus, what brings you here so early in the morning?"

*I seem to have lost my voice,* he wrote on the parchment.

"Well, let's see what we can find out." Madam Pomfrey performed a diagnostic wand scan. She was surprised to see Severus' neck glow bright red as she waved her wand over him.

Madam Pomfrey completed her exam. "Severus, did you have a potions accident in your lab yesterday?"

*No. I mainly graded papers. I did some brewing, but it was just normal potions for your supply here.*

"Maybe you ate or drank something out of the ordinary?"

*No. Breakfast and lunch in the Great Hall, dinner at the Three Broomsticks, but I eat there every Sunday evening.*

"Your vocal cords are damaged. It appears as if something has burned them. I'm surprised you didn't feel it. Until we determine what caused this, I don't have any idea how to treat it. I'm going to contact the Headmistress and have her Floo call the Aurors. I know it's been many years, but at this point, I can't say that someone didn't try to hurt you."

When Hermione Granger walked in the room with Minerva a half an hour later, Severus glared at the Headmistress. He hadn't realized Ms. Granger was still an Auror. Even in his thoughts he refused to think of her as Hermione. He knew she was a Potions mistress now, but couldn't recall what Minerva had said about her career change.

"Please try to cooperate, Severus," the Headmistress said as she put a hand on his arm. "I need to return to my office. Hermione, please come find me when you are finished talking to the professor."

While he contemplated if there could possibly be a less appealing choice to investigate his case, he realized she was asking him a question.

"Did you do anything unusual last night?" Hermione asked Severus, her eyes looking to the blank piece of parchment in front of Severus.

*Just my usual dinner out at the Three Broomsticks* he wrote on the piece of parchment.

"Was there anything different about dinner last night?"

*No, Severus wrote. I ordered my usual meal, sat at my usual table...everything was as it always is.*

"Did you see anyone who looked like they didn't belong?"

*Rosmerta did have someone new working for her. I've never seen him before.*

"Any idea who this person was?"

*No, Rosmerta didn't consult me before hiring him. I suppose a more experienced Auror might consider asking Rosmerta about him.* Severus wrote with bold strokes, clearly becoming irritated with the questions.

"I'm glad to see you are taking this attempt on your life seriously, Professor Snape. Now, when did you realize that something was wrong?"

*When I tried to wish the Headmistress a good morning. I've already covered this with Poppy. Maybe she can take over the questioning from here. I'm done answering questions.*

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said as she casually flicked her wand toward the parchment, which rolled up in response to the silent command.

Severus settled himself in bed and began writing notes to adjust his lesson plan to accommodate his missing voice.

Hermione picked up the parchment and began to leave the room. As she reached the door, she turned and looked at Severus. "I do have one other question," Hermione said without turning to look at him.

When she heard no response, she turned around. Severus continued to ignore her as he continued to write notes.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione continued. "How would you like me to approach teaching your class?"

Severus' quill stopped. Without answering the question, he pushed back the crisp white bedclothes, swung his legs around the bed, and stood up. While appearing outwardly calm, he reached for the teaching robes that were thrown over the nearby chair. He put them on over his gown and stormed from the hospital wing.

## Chapter 2

*Chapter 2 of 3*

The Aurors arrive to protect Severus.

A/N: As always, thanks to my wonderful beta sshg316 and to JKR for letting me take her characters out for some fun.

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Severus walked quickly through the hallways, glaring at any student who dared notice the bare feet under his billowing robes, desperately wishing he had a voice to remove House points. When he finally reached the headmistress' office, he was infuriated to find the gargoyle would not move. Pointing his wand at the stone guardian and mouthing the password seemed to convince it to allow him entrance. Once the gargoyle moved aside, Severus stepped onto the moving staircase and impatiently waited while the staircase slowly spiralled to the top.

Taking three long strides toward the headmistress' door, he slammed the door open and leaned his hands against the doorjamb.

Minerva jerked up from the paperwork on her desk when she heard the door slam open. She took note of her Potions master's dishevelled state, her eyebrows rising as she noticed the hospital gown and bare feet peeking from beneath his teaching robes.

"Is everything alright, Severus?" she asked, her voice filled with concern. "Did Poppy release you?"

Severus walked to Minerva's desk, removed the quill from her hand, and reached for a clean piece of parchment.

***That WITCH will not be entering my classroom!***

"The reason we brought Hermione in to investigate your case is that not only is she a trained Auror but she is also a Potions mistress and can help teach your classes while she provides protection to you."

*I don't need protection, and I can instruct without speaking.*

"Severus, even as talented as you are, you will need someone who can speak in your class. As for needing protection, may I remind you that you currently have no voice and what appears to be burned vocal cords, not to mention that we don't know how someone managed to hurt you?"

*I have a perfect balance of fear in my class. Even without a voice I can keep complete control of my class.*

"I know how protective you are of your space, but you don't have a say in this. Ms Granger will be with you twenty-four hours a day. She will assist you in teaching your class, and she will protect you as she works to solve the mystery of why you have lost your voice."

Minerva removed the quill from Severus' hand before he could write anything more. Putting her hands on his shoulders, she turned him towards the door as she gently said, "I promise we will make this as painless as possible for you. But," she added firmly, "I will not risk you."

Severus walked to the door, his back straight, shoulders back, refusing to allow the headmistress to see how defeated he felt.

"Severus," Minerva began when he reached the doorway. He stopped, but did not turn to face her. "I just don't want to see anything happen to you. I'd miss your surly disposition around the castle."

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Severus walked through the hallways of Hogwarts, trying to decide where to go. He truly felt it was a shame that he didn't come across any students out of their rooms. It was past curfew, and he knew it would have helped his mood had he been able to remove some House points from the other Houses. Once he decided he didn't really

want to return to the hospital wing, he started to relax some. As he continued to walk, he realized his feet were starting to feel a bit cold from walking barefoot for so long on the cool floors in the castle. Feeling confident in his decision to go back to his rooms, he decided he would return to the hospital wing to retrieve his things on the morrow.

When he entered his chambers, he was not surprised to see Hermione sitting in one of his oversized side chairs. He walked to where she was sitting, removed his previously unread copy of *Potions Monthly* from her hands, and strode into his bedroom.

Hermione sighed as she watched him leave the room. Uncertain of where she should sleep, she decided the least invasive thing to do was to Transfigure the couch into a bed. She hoped that Professor Snape would be more willing to discuss the sleeping arrangements once he had a chance to become used to the plan she and the headmistress had decided on. The following day would be an early morning since she had to meet with one of the other Aurors before classes to discuss the case.

After Transfiguring the couch, she retrieved her overnight bag and brought it into the loo next to the office. Completing her evening toilet, she changed into her most comfortable flannel pyjamas. Before climbing into bed, Hermione set several wards on each of the doors in the dungeon room. One of these wards was an 'alert ward' that would notify her if someone attempted to enter the living space, although she suspected it would most likely be tripped by Severus trying to leave without her knowledge. Once she was sure that nothing unexpected could occur without her being aware, she crawled between the covers, set a wand alarm to wake her in the morning, and quickly fell asleep.

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Severus was sitting at his desk, drinking his coffee and organizing his day, when he heard a knock on the door.

"Professor Snape," he heard when he didn't answer, "I'm leaving for my meeting. Auror Brown is in your sitting room if you need anything. When I return, I'll tell you what we have learned."

Severus put his head in his hands. *Wonderful*, he thought. *More people I want nothing to do with spending time in my space.*

That afternoon found him still grousing mentally about his "guest." *I want her out of my classroom. This is my space. I can teach without her help* Severus found this mantra running through his head as he walked around the classroom with a scowl on his face and his arms crossed, irritated by the annoying presence of the witch who was preparing to speak to his class.

He had tried to convince her that he didn't care what was happening with his case, but Hermione insisted on telling him the update from her morning meeting. Thankfully, the update was brief since the interview with Rosmerta had resulted in a dead end. It seems that she knew no details about the wizard who worked in her restaurant. He had given her a first name only and asked to work for her to pay for a place to sleep. When she'd woken up the next morning, the wizard had already left, leaving only a clean room behind.

"Good morning, class," Hermione had read from a piece of parchment earlier that day to his first class. "My name is Ms Granger, and I am a Potions mistress. I will be interning in Professor Snape's classes for the next few weeks. I will be teaching the class based on Professor Snape's notes. He would like for me to remind you to treat me with the same respect you show him. He will not be speaking during this class, but if he needs you to do something, he will point to you. Since I will not have the authority to take House points away, if Professor Snape or I feel you have done something to cost or add House points, he will point to you and will indicate the number of points he is either adding or deducting."

Severus had hoped that, in this way, it would not be apparent to the students that he was unable to speak and would better explain why Ms Granger was in his classroom.

He had been surprised when Ms Granger agreed to his plan so readily. She had even complimented him on creating an idea that explained why an Auror would be at Hogwarts. He had known it would not be simple. She could not leave his speech alone and had tried to make several changes to his choice of words. He had finally acquiesced and allowed her to modify the introduction from his original wording of "Ms Granger, former know-it-all of Hogwarts." Beyond that, all her so-called rational reasons for changes had been dealt with by a simple threat to ban her from his classroom.

But that had been hours ago. Now, they were sitting in his rooms Severus was back in his favourite side chair, the one he had found Ms Granger sitting in the night before. She was now ensconced in the matching chair directly in front of him. They were in complete silence. He was seated with his elbows on the arms of the chair, his fingers steepled in front of him, watching Ms Granger as she read yet another Potions journal. He was a bit surprised at how well she dealt with both the silence and his stare. There was a time when his watching her would have made her so uncomfortable that she would have been compelled to fill the silence. Maybe her training in interrogation techniques had helped her develop patience.

When she finished reading the journal, she closed the periodical and looked at Severus.

"What did you think of the article on the Waxman experiment?" Hermione asked, as if she discussed Potions with Severus every day.

Severus slowly separated his hands and picked up the quill and parchment from the table next to him and wrote a quick note. He then put his hands on the arms of the chair and slowly rose from his sitting position, walking towards his bedroom. As he passed Hermione, he dropped the parchment in her lap. Before he retired into his room, he heard her say, "Professor, if this journal is only read by novices, why do you have the last ten years' worth of issues in your private library?"

He paused in the doorway to his room and turned to see what Ms Granger was doing, pretending he was just closing the door. She was looking directly at him, an evil little smile gracing her lips.

*Hermione 1, Professor Snape 0*, she thought.

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 3*

Hermione becomes more comfortable teaching Severus' classes...but does Severus?

A/N: As always, many thanks to my beta, sshg316! She's wonderful.

The characters are JKR's; I just hang out in the sandbox.

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The next afternoon, in the house-consolidated seventh-year NEWTs Potions class, Severus took a seat in the back of the room. All day, Ms Granger had done an adequate job of teaching his classes. But this class was different, and he looked forward to seeing what she would do with a class that would truly challenge her abilities. These were some of the best seventh-year students Severus had ever encountered. He had found that he had to work much harder preparing lesson plans for them. The lesson plan he had given Ms Granger for the class would challenge her a bit but would not be impossible if she really knew how to teach.

Hermione approached the front of the class and pointed her wand to the board. Instantly, the instructions for preparing Swelling Solution appeared.

"Excuse me, Professor Granger," Mr Jenkins said while raising his hand, "but Professor Snape taught us this potion in second year."

Professor Snape automatically stood, walked slowly toward the front of the room stopping before him. All other students' eyes followed the Professor. He pointed at him and held up five fingers.

Mr Jenkins quickly sat on his hands.

Professor Snape walked back to his seat and looked expectantly at Ms Granger.

"First, it's Ms Granger, not Professor. And yes, Professor Snape also taught me this potion in my second year. But I would like to teach you a new cutting technique for the puffer-fish eyes that will make the preparation much easier."

From his seat behind the students, Severus quirked an eyebrow at Ms Granger. While surprised that she would deviate from his lesson plan so early in the week, he was also just a little curious as to what she would teach them.

Ignoring him, Hermione continued. "Now, if everyone would gather round the front table, I'll show you what I mean."

Hermione quickly demonstrated for the students how changing her grip of the knife altered the results of the cut. In spite of himself, Severus was surprised in the resulting class discussion of other advances in potions production. While he was impressed with the breadth of knowledge Ms Granger presented, he was equally impressed with the knowledge the students held in potions discoveries. He had known this group of students was talented, but he hadn't realized the depth of their knowledge.

That evening, after he had completed his patrol of the castle hallways, Severus walked back to his rooms with Ms Granger trailing him. He had tried to convince Ms Granger that it was unnecessary that she 'accompany' him, but she would not hear of it. Upon entering his rooms, Ms Granger curled up in one of his chairs and picked up her copy of *Potions Today*.

"Professor Snape," she asked as she put down her academic journal after reading the first half, "what do you think of the recent speculation that the Wolfgang variant of Pepperup potion is more addictive than the original?"

As he had done the night before, Severus wrote a note on a piece of parchment and handed it to Hermione as he walked to his bedroom.

*I think that anyone who doesn't research their ingredient interactions deserves what they end up with.*

As he shut the door to his bedroom, he glanced to see Ms Granger's reaction. He was disappointed to find she was just rolling her eyes at him. When she noticed him watching her, she just smiled her little smile as he slammed his bedroom door.

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The following week, Hermione called the seventh-year class to order. She was really enjoying teaching, which she was grateful for since it helped counter the feelings of frustration she was feeling over the lack of progress in the investigation to find the mystery wizard or any other details about the plot to injure Professor Snape.

Severus sat in his customary seat in the back of the classroom. As the class settled down, she waved her wand towards the board. The formula for Pepperup potion appeared.

"Today, we are going to discuss Pepperup potion. This is the traditional recipe, which Professor Snape taught you. And this," Hermione added, waving her wand towards the board again, "is the Wolfgang variant of Pepperup. Has anyone heard of the Wolfgang variant?"

Several students raised their hands.

"Miss Radford, please tell us about the variant."

"The Wolfgang variant is a modification to Pepperup potion, which uses ingredients that are grown in a witch or wizard's own garden."

Miss Baddock raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Baddock?"

"Recently, St. Mungo's has reported an increase in Pepperup potion dependency. They are trying to figure out why."

"If you look at the board," Hermione said as she gestured to the board, "can you see anything that would cause a witch or wizard to become dependent on the improved potion?"

The students looked at the board. Hermione could see them trying to find the combination of ingredients that might have caused the dependency. She herself had just realized the problem that morning. She had been thinking about the issue since she had first read about it the previous week.

After a few moments, when no one had responded, Hermione modified her question.

"Just look at the ingredients, not the preparation."

Hermione watched the students' faces, letting them figure out the problem slowly.

Severus looked at the board with the students. It didn't take him long to realize what Hermione was alluding to.

After about ten minutes, Mr Li raised his hand. Hermione acknowledged him.

"Calamus is known to be addictive but only in larger amounts. The amount in this recipe is still pretty small."

"That is true," Hermione acknowledged. "How many of you have watched someone cut ingredients in a kitchen using magic?" About half the class raised their hands.

"I want you to pair up, ensuring that each pair has at least one person in the group who has seen the process of using magic to chop ingredients."

Hermione waited patiently as the class changed tables. Severus watched Hermione with interest, wondering what she was going to do next.

Once everyone was settled, Hermione handed out pieces of calamus. Some of the students picked up the knotty, yellow root wondering what Ms Granger planned to have them do.

"Now, Mr Li, what is the amount of calamus is required for this potion?"

"Five thin slices."

"I want you five groups to slice the reed using traditional potion-making methods. The rest of you I want to slice using magic. Begin."

Once the class had completed the assigned task, she had each group bring their five slices to the front of the room. Each team weighed their slices. As the team reported the weight, Hermione wrote the number on the board and indicated the method used for preparation.

"What have we observed about these samples?"

Mr Watkins raised his hand. "The five samples cut using a knife all weighed near the same amount. The weight of the sample was also fairly small. But the samples chopped by wand varied in weight. One sample was even twice the amount of the samples cut with a knife."

"And why is this relevant?"

"Because the Wolfgang variant is normally brewed at home."

"Congratulations, witches and wizards, you have now solved the problem of why the Wolfgang variant is sometimes addictive. Now, for homework, I want you each to draft a letter to the editor of *Potions Today*. In our next class, we will review the assignments and consolidate the words in your individual drafts to one letter that will be sent to the journal from the class reporting our findings. Class dismissed."

As the class filed out, Hermione gathered her belongings. She waited until Severus was ready and followed him out of the classroom. She was surprised when he went straight to his rooms but not that he did so without acknowledging her.

The NEWT class had been the last class of the day. Severus decided that he needed to lie down for a few minutes before dinner in the Great Hall. He wanted to think about what he had just observed, as well as what he had seen Ms Granger accomplish with all of his other classes over the past week. When they reached his rooms, he removed his teaching robes and laid them over his favourite chair. He sat down in his chair and removed his black boots, setting them next to his chair. Without acknowledging Ms Granger, who was still standing near the main door, he walked across the room, into his bedroom, and softly closed the door. Safely inside, he shut his eyes and leaned against the richly stained wood. Taking three deep breaths, he opened his eyes and walked to his bed. He sat down, his feet still touching the floor, then lay back on the bed, flopping an arm across his eyes.

When he woke up, he didn't know how long he'd been asleep or what had awakened him. Lying still a few more moments, he heard a soft knock on the door.

"Professor? Are you all right in there? If we are going to make it for dinner you really need to come out."

Severus opened his mouth to respond that he would be out in a minute but quickly remembered that he was still unable to utter a sound.

Sighing, he pushed himself to a sitting position, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and ran his fingers through his hair.

He heard a slightly louder knock.

"Professor, I'm going to come in there if you don't come out."

Fearing that she would make good on her threat, Severus quickly walked across the room and opened the door.

"Oh, good, you are awake. It's time for dinner."

Severus nodded and walked to his chair to put his boots and teaching robes back on. He then walked to the door to the hallway and opened it, waiting for Ms Granger to join him.

As they walked to the Great Hall, Hermione talked to Severus about the conversation with the Auror office she'd had while he'd been asleep.

"They still haven't managed to find anyone who knows anything about the man who was working at the Leaky Cauldron that night."

At dinner, Severus sat between Ms Granger and Minerva. He listened as they chatted about current events and the activities of Ms Granger's friends. While he found the discussion of current events quite interesting, when the conversation turned to her friends, he tuned them out and instead watched the students while they ate their dinner. Most of the conversations were the droning of unintelligible words, but occasionally he could hear snippets of the expected conversations of who were and were not talking to one another, as well as complaints about homework. There was also the expected talk of upcoming Quidditch matches and Hogsmeade weekends.

Severus' attention was drawn to one group of students. They were huddled around some parchment and magazines. Some of the students were pointing to the magazine and most were arguing with the student holding the quill. All of the students were more engaged in the project in front of them than the dinner on their plates. After watching them for a few minutes, Severus realized all of them were in his seventh-year Potions class. While students occasionally sat at the table of other houses, it was still unusual enough to cause some notice.

Severus put his hand on Ms Granger's arm to get her attention. Once she looked at him, surprised by the physical contact he'd just initiated, he gestured to the group of students. She looked in the direction Severus pointed, her face scrunched in confusion as she tried to decipher what she was seeing. Suddenly, her face exploded into a smile as she realized what was happening. She looked at Severus and nodded. Minerva watched the two of them with interest.

"What are your students working on, Severus?" Minerva asked.

"We can't tell you yet, Headmistress," Hermione answered for Severus. "But I can assure you that you will approve of what Professor Snape's students have accomplished with the skills he has taught them."

Minerva looked back and forth between her two former pupils as Severus nodded in agreement with Hermione's statement.

Minerva, knowing she would never convince either to reveal the answer before they were ready, returned to the conversation she had been having with Hermione before Severus' interruption.

As Severus finished eating dinner, he thought about what had just happened. Part of him felt very jealous that Hermione had inspired his students in a way he never had. She easily could have written the letter to *Potions Today* herself, but instead, she had used it as a teaching tool. He had found that while he was teaching a little differently than he had when Hermione had been a student in his classroom, he still kept a bit of a tight rein on his classes. He did find that he gave more latitude to this particular NEWT class, as they showed talent en masse that he hadn't found before.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed the Great Hall had emptied out until Hermione tapped his shoulder.

"Shall we go?" Hermione asked softly.

Severus stood in answer and held Ms Granger's chair for her. He caught her eye and then looked at the group of students still at work. Recognizing that Severus was recommending they stop at the table, she followed him toward where the students sat, their dinners all but ignored.

"Hullo, everyone," Hermione said when she reached the table where the group of students had gathered. "Please tell me that you are not forgoing food for the pursuit of knowledge."

The students laughed at her as they pushed their books away and tucked in to their now cold food.

Still smiling, Hermione walked out of the Great Hall with Severus following. They returned to Severus' rooms, taking the chairs they had each claimed as their own and dividing the grading that needed to be completed that evening.

As Hermione was grading the last paper, a sheet of parchment landed on her lap.